



The healing powers of sport for youths in post-conflict Northern Uganda.

There is limited access to sports programs in northern Uganda, a region still affected by the long conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army. Most sports programs are centred in the Ugandan capital, Kampala. Research has shown that sport brings many benefits, including entertainment, boosts to the economy, reductions in stress, exposure to local talent, employment opportunities for youths, and the ability to build relationships with communities from other parts of the country. Youths in northern Uganda have tremendous talent that does not have an outlet and access to sports programs could help them continue to heal from post-war trauma.

Key audience: the Minister of Sports and Education, Uganda.

Recommendations

Invest additional funds in sports programs, in particular football, in northern Uganda, to facilitate the following;

- Create a network of community football teams.
- Employ professional trainers/coaches and also bring in experts as visiting trainers on regular occasions to improve the players' skills.
- Provide sponsorship/scholarship programs to school-going youths.

The community loves football passionately and, given the benefits of the game, funding invested in this area will reap high social returns.

Background

Youths in northern Uganda were involved in the LRA conflict, both as victims and as perpetrators of violence. In the aftermath of the war, many individuals fell into both categories in the eyes of their communities and possibly in their self-perceptions. These youths are steadily healing from post-war trauma, and find themselves without direction.

Many of these youths have tremendous talent in football, and their livelihood could change if they had access to football programs. Research in northern Uganda on post-conflict and community reconciliation undertaken in 2010 [1] as well as research in other countries [2] has shown sport to leave an important legacy, manifested in leadership skills, gender equality, and locally-owned activities promoting youth engagement. These benefits seem to have been achieved through careful engagement with existing community organisations. Athletes for Africa (A4A) tried to help alleviate this problem, but ended abruptly in 2011 due to lack of funding, and Football for Good (FFG) subsequently formed an academy but have left the region for Kampala whose youths already have access to many similar opportunities, leaving no such interventions in the north at present.

Method

Field work was conducted in Lamwo district in November 2018 with funding from the London School of Economics (LSE) through the Centre for Public Authority and International Development (CPAID) under the Trajectories of Displacement grant, looking into peace/youth interventions after the war using sports. A4A being one of the projects present during the period, Focus Group Discussions were carried out with youth groups formed during the period, as well as with a few football clubs that



emerged from those youth groups. Structured key informant interviews were also carried out with key informants in Lamwo District, including the District Sports Officer, Chairperson District Football Association, Speaker Lamwo Town Council, and Local Council Three (LCIII) Chairperson Agoro Sub County.

Key Findings

The research showed that sport can achieve great social benefits. A comparison of research done in 2010 [1] nearly a decade ago, with the research carried out, shows that these benefits are long-term.

- With mentorship/character development in place, great leaders can be built. This is demonstrated through the extraordinary proportion of local leaders who are alumni of the A4A project, including over 10 chairpersons, one of whom is a higher ranked LCIII Chairperson, emerging from the recent elections. With these alumni in decision-making roles, a lot of support can be given for gender equality, hence creating a unifying environment.
- It helped the youths by diverting them from criminal activities, such as alcohol and drug abuse in the community.
- It provided healthy and challenging activities that occupied the youths, countering boredom.
- Stigmatization was reduced, with tournaments organised that brought different groups together socially. For instance, there were claims that certain people who were “in the bush” from one sub-county had tortured others of different sub-counties. Sport enabled these two sub-counties to come together and play, creating avenues for interactions and relationship/friendship-building, promoting or building peace within these communities.

Conclusion

Through the recommended interventions, the northern Uganda youths can have a healthy future as leaders as well as potentially becoming professional football players, if football is promoted in the region.

References:

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2. Dyck, Christopher B (2010) Football and post-war Reintegration: exploring the role of sport in DDR processes in Sierra Leone. *Third World Quarterly* 32(3):395-415

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