Essay

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Football for Peace?

The role of the Football for Peace program in reconciling Jews and Arabs in Israel

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Content

Introduction

When thinking about reconciliation processes and the role that sports can play in this, the prime example that is usually given is that of the 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa. Cheered on by both black and white crowds, the South African team won the Cup final. The newly elected president, Nelson Mandela, wearing the national team's *Springbok* jersey, handed the trophy to the (white) team captain, Francois Pienaar, in a symbolic event of reconciliation. After years of *apartheid,* it seemed that rugby had brought the nation together again.[1]

It is examples such as these that have given rise to several sport projects that have the specific aim to contribute to reconciliation processes in conflict-ridden areas. An interesting example in this regard is the Football for Peace (F4P) program in Israel, which was set up by the retired Baptist minister Geoffrey Whitfield (1940-2017) in partnership with the University of Brighton.[2] F4P is a sport-based co-existence project for Jewish and Arab children that puts emphasis on a bottom-up, grassroots approach through the organization of annual football camps.[3]

Although F4P has grown significantly since its first project in 2001, the role of sports in reconciliation processes is not undisputed. George Orwell was – perhaps – the most famous sceptic and in 1945, he referred to sports as 'war minus the shooting'.[4] Orwell argued that sports divide people into separate units, whereby these units (for instance: the nation) belief in the superiority of their group over others and feel a duty to advance their interests through acquiring more power and prestige. In peacetime, (international) sport was, to Orwell, one of the most visible manifestations of groups as it promoted patriotic, competitive and aggressive attitudes.[5] There are plenty examples that seem to prove Orwell's argument.[6]

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[1] Danyel Reiche, "War Minus the Shooting? The politics of sport in Lebanon as a unique case in comparative politics", *Third World Quarterly* 32.2 (2011): 262. And: Kristine Höglund and Ralph Sundberg, "Reconciliation through sports? The case of South Africa", Third World Quarterly 29.4 (2008): 806-807.

[2] University of Brighton, "Football for Peace: History", http://www.football4peace.eu/about-us/history/, (accessed: 28-12-2017).

[3] John Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport for conflict resolution and co-existence in Israel", *International review for the sociology of sport,* 41.2 (2006): 221-222. And: University of Brighton, "Football for Peace: About us", https://www.football4peace.eu/about-us/, (accessed 08-01-2018).

[4] Peter. J Beck, "'War Minus the Shooting': George Orwell on International Sport and the Olympics", *Sport in History* 33.1 (2013): 72-73.

[5] Beck, "'War Minus the Shooting'": 78, 80, 85.

[6] The most famous example is the "soccer war" between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969: following a series of highly contested World Cup qualifying matches between these two countries (which were already in conflict over territorial and trade issues) a war broke out in which more than 30,000 people were either killed or wounded. See: John Sugden, "Critical left-realism and sport interventions in divided societies", *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 45.3 (2010): 261.

These contrasting views on the role of sports as either a dividing or a unifying instrument make clear that we need to take a closer look at whether, and if so how, sports can play a role in processes of reconciliation. This short essay discusses the F4P program in Israel and the role that it plays in attempting to unify and reconcile Jews and Arabs. I will first give a brief outline of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, as it is within this context that the F4P program has taken shape. I will then move on by describing and analyzing F4P. In this analysis, I will connect the program with the existing theories on the (possible) social effects of sports. In the final part, I will provide suggestions for further research.

Part 1 – Historical context

The state of Israel was created in 1948, which is something that can be viewed as both a major achievement for a hitherto nation-less and persecuted Jewish people, as well as a disaster for Palestinians on whose land the new state took shape.[7] After the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, around 160,000 Arabs remained in Israel, whereas the rest, some 640,000, fled. Nowadays, about 2.5 million Palestinians live in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank. Whereas the occupied territories and the Palestinian refugees generally attract most of the global attention, those Arabs who remained within the state of Israel after 1948 (around 1.6 million, 20.7 percent, in 2013) are often forgotten.[8] It is these citizens F4P focusses on, inspired by Edward Said's believe that 'co-existence, not separation, is the way forward if a lasting peace is to be achieved in Israel.'[9]

This is easier said than done: since 1948 there have been three significant wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors (1956, 1967, 1973) and two *intifadas*, or "uprisings" (1987-1993 and 2000-2005), whereby Palestinians violently opposed the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as the oppressive policies of the Israeli state in general.[10] Especially the intifadas have negatively impacted the - already fragile - Arab-Israeli relations. In several Israeli-Arab towns the Israeli security forces responded to the protests in an aggressive way, resulting in the arrests of many Arab-Israeli citizens and the deaths and serious injury of others. On the other side, the increased use of suicide bombers as a strategy

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[7] See: Said, Edward W. *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2000.
[8] Although statistics, such as these, might give the impression that the Arabs in Israel are one coherent and homogeneous group, it should be noted there are significant differences and as such we can speak of an exceedingly complex identity. The order of its wording changes depending upon the political consciousness of the individual bearing it and it is further complicated by the religious and ethnic suffixes that can be added: Muslim (both Sunni and Shiite), Christian, Druze, and so forth. Even then, we should also keep in mind there are different tribal affiliations, such as the Bedouin and Circassians, which also inform the mapping of the country's sectarian geography. Likewise, it would be wrong to see Jewish Israelis as one group. The population (over 6 million in 2013) is a mixture of migrants from different backgrounds (Europeans, Americans, Ethiopians, Russians, and so forth), whereas in terms of religious persuasion, the majority is secular and a significant minority adheres to the Hebrew faith. See: John Sugden, "Anyone for Football for Peace? The Challenges of Using Sport in the Service of Co-Existence in Israel", *Soccer & Society* 9, no. 3 (2008): 405-406. And: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, "65th Independence Day – More than 8 million Residents in the State of Israel", http://www.cbs.gov.il/www/hodaot2013n/11_13_097e.pdf, (accessed: 16-01-2018).
[9] Said argued that: ''The only way of rising beyond the endless back-and-forth violence and dehumanization is to admit the universality and integrity of the others experience and to begin to plan a common life together.' See: Edward W. Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), 208.
[10] Note that there is a key difference between the Second Intifada and other popular anti-Israeli protests, namely that it spilled out of the Palestinian Authority and drew in Palestinian Arabs living as citizens within the state of Israel. See: Sugden, "Anyone for Football for Peace?": 408. And: Laetitia Bucaille, *Growing up Palestinian: Israeli occupation and the Intifada generation*, (Princeton University Press, 2006), vii-viii. And: Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 226.

for resistance by several Palestinian extremist groups increased the cross-community mistrust and polarization.[11]

It is within this context (during the Second Intifada) that the first F4P project was initiated in Galilee (a region in the northeast of the country). Characteristic of this region is the relatively large share of Arabs (around 46 percent), of which most are Muslim.[12] Two-thirds of the Galilee's residents are at the bottom of the socio-economic scale and the unemployment rate is about 50 percent higher than the national one.[13] In the more rural areas, Jews and Arabs live in separate towns and villages, whereas in the larger urban areas (such as Acre and Haifa), the two communities live in separate enclaves. It should be noted that not only religious- and ethnic differences draw boundaries between the communities, but also socio-economic disparities. Travelling between the different enclaves, it becomes clear that the Jewish communities are generally better off than their Arab counterparts, who are faced by relatively higher unemployment- and poverty rates.[14]

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[11] Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 226.
[12] Although it should be mentioned that there is also a significant Christian minority in Galilee. See: Sugden, "Anyone for Football for Peace?": 406.
[13] Sugden, "Anyone for Football for Peace?": 406.
[14] Tamir Sorek, "Between football and martyrdom: the bi-focal localism of an Arab-Palestinian town in Israel." *The British journal of sociology* 56.4 (2005): 643. And: Sugden, "Anyone for Football for Peace?": 406.

Part 2 – The Football for Peace program in Israel

The first F4P project, which entailed the organizing of a week-long football camp, started in 2001 and 100 children (age 10-14) from the town of Ibilin participated in it. Since that time, F4P has grown significantly and in the 2005 project, around 1,000 Jewish and Arab children (from 18 different communities in northern Israel) participated in several football camps.[15] The general reasoning behind F4P is that, by letting Arab and Jewish Israeli children play football together and teaching them several values, negative stereotypes about the "other" will disappear and cross-community relations will improve. Through a so-called "ripple effect", the society at large will then be positively affected as well, as the children influence their parents and teachers, who will, in turn, influence community leaders, politicians, etc.[16] The end result will then be that Israel will be more willing to move towards a peaceful settlement with the Palestinian Authority and its neighboring Arab-dominated countries.[17] John Sugden[18], who is a co-director of F4P, underlines the importance of this bottom-up approach: 'The key dimensions of any peace plan have to be political, military and economic. However, if proposals articulating at these levels do not resonate with the feelings and aspirations of the people [..], then it is unlikely that such grand schemes can succeed. It is important therefore, that work taking place at the level of political society is matched and complemented through efforts being made within the multiple spheres of civil society and culture, including sport.'[19]

Although focused on the children, F4P takes a holistic approach and as such involves local governments in the organization of the project, involves the local community by letting them participate (e.g. as football coaches) and encourages parents to spectate the matches.[20] From the start of the football camp, the children are mixed both according to community identity and football ability, in order to ensure that not only Arab and Jewish children play alongside one another, but also that, when it comes to competition time (as every project camp ends with a tournament day), teams are evenly matched.[21] Although F4P teaches

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[15] Sugden, "Anyone for Football for Peace?": 408, 410. And: niversity of Brighton, "Football for Peace: History", http://www.football4peace.eu/about-us/history/, (accessed: 11-01-2018).
[16] Sugden, "Critical Left-Realism": 269-270.
[17] Sugden, "Critical Left-Realism": 265.
[18] Emeritus Professor of the Sociology of Sport at the University of Brighton.
[19] Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 238.
[20] To clarify: the coaching pedagogy within F4P is to carefully select physical skills and drills for the children to practice, which help to break down personal barriers and develop some social understanding between them. As such, it is the pleasures of sharing and playing football together that are promoted by F4P, whereby the emphasis is on developing mutual respect and appreciation for others who may wish to share and participate with "you". See: S. Liebmann and J. Rookwood, "Football for peace? Bringing Jews and Arabs together in Northern Israel", *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies,* no 1. (2007): 12-15.
[21] Sugden, "Anyone for Football for Peace?": 410. And: Joel Rookwood, "Soccer for Peace and Social Development", *Peace Review,* 20.4 (2008): 474.

children how to become better at football, this is not the main focus of the project.[22] Rather, the main focus is on teaching the children the basic qualities of "good citizenship", namely: respect, trust, responsibility, equality and inclusivity, by making use of a values-based teaching methodology.[23] Putting emphasis on these is important seeing that research has shown that it is not contact per se that facilitates improvement in intergroup and inter-ethnic relations. Rather, both the quality and the nature of the contact experiences are vital in determining whether community relations programs succeed or not.[24] Contact experiences that promote equal status between groups in a given situation, that promote common goals, that require co-operation, and that reward moments of cross-community intimacy have been shown to be most likely to reduce inter-group prejudice.[25]

Also a part of its holistic approach, is that the F4P football camps always take place in both an Arab town and a Jewish town. This is especially insightful for the Jewish children who get to see how the Arab children are living in Israel.[26] In this way, F4P contributes to a greater understanding of the situation of the "other". Beside this approach, F4P has tried out other so-called "off-pitch" activities as well.[27]. Some of these were recreationally based while others required more intellectual input. However, mostly due to a lack of expertise, these were not successful and in some cases even caused (more) division.[28] Because of this, it was decided to stop with most of the off-pitch activities, and rather to put more emphasis on improving cross-community relations during the "on-pitch" activities.[29] But here as well, there is the possibility to divide, rather than to unite. After all, sport is inherently about

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[23] Trust was incorporated largely through ice-breaker exercises, which involved physical problem-solving activities that required integration, team work, communication, and cooperation. A concrete example would be the exercise whereby a Jewish and an Arab boy have to hold hands and, together, have to try and keep a football in the air without letting go of each other's hand. See: Liebmann and Rookwood, "Football for peace?": 13. And: Rookwood, "Soccer for Peace": 474.

[24] See: Amir Y. "Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations." *Psychological Bulletin,* 71, no. 5 (1969): 319–42.

[25] John Sugden, "Teaching and playing": 228. For more on this discussion see: Pettigrew, Thomas F, and Linda R Tropp. "How Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Meta-Analytic Tests of Three Mediators." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 38, no. 6 (2008): 922–934.

[26] Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 230.

[27] Meaning: activities that stand apart from the values that F4P tries to inculcate "on-pitch" during the football trainings and matches.

[28] Sugden in this regard argues: 'Encouraging youngsters to play together is one thing, but placing them in situations where they had to talk about and confront some of the more sensitive features of their divided society is far more problematic.' Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 227-228.

[29] As a part of this, a manual was compiled that offers exercises that contribute most to neutrality, equity and inclusion, respect, trust, and responsibility. See: University of Brighton, "Football for Peace: Manuals", http://www.football4peace.eu/resources/manuals/, (accessed: 16-01-2018).

winning and losing and can, as such, promote an aggressively competitive attitude.[30] Even though F4P focusses on teaching social values (rather than football skills), the quest for victory can still get the overhand. In evaluating the project, it was noted that some of the coaches tended to get "too competitive" during the matches and had to be persuaded that all the children should play for an equal amount of time, regardless of football talent. Children can get too competitive as well, especially when there is the possibility to win a tournament.[31] But there are more difficulties F4P faces.

The first difficulty is that more Arab children participate in the F4P projects than Jewish children, which can be attributed to several factors. First, since a relatively large share of the Arab children in Galilee grow up in poverty, sports can function as an interesting instrument for them to escape their socio-economic situation. As such, relatively more attention and importance is attributed to sport by Israeli Arabs than by Israeli Jews.[32] Second, and connected with this, the F4P football camps (which take place during the school vacation) offer the Arab children an interesting form of entertainment. Jewish children on the other hand (who grow up in better socio-economic situations) already have more things to do in their vacation and have the facilities to do them. Thus, F4P is not as novel for them as it might be for Arab children.[33] The third reason relates to the underlying dynamic associated with power relations between the two communities. As similar situations (e.g. Northern Ireland) have shown, it tends to be easier to get the community with the least power (the Israeli Arabs) involved in cross-community projects. For the community that has the most power, projects such as these are viewed with suspicion as it is feared that these will undermine their dominant position.[34] Generally, from the perspective of the dominant group, there is little to gain. Thus, while equality is important to improve cross-community relations, persisting socio-economic disparities function as a significant obstacle.

Exemplary of the asymmetrical relation between Israeli Jews and Arabs, is the fact that the language that is generally used during the football camp is Hebrew. The football coaches (who are English and who are supported by a local Arab coach and a local Jewish

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[30] It should be noted that sport's ability to create conflict is not necessarily bad, as it can, in this way, also become a suitable environment in which people can be taught how to resolve conflict (in a non-violent matter). See: Rookwood, "Soccer for Peace": 477. And: Liebmann and Rookwood, "Football for peace?": 12.

[31] In these situations, children can get angry at a coach who substitutes the "star player" of the team for someone who is less good, "just" because everyone deserves as much playtime as the rest. Anger and disappointment can also focus on the specific child who is less good at football, because he or she might "cost" the team its victory. See: Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 234-235.

[32] Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 232-233.

[33] Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 232-233.

[34] Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 233.

coach) are assisted by an Arab and a Hebrew translator. In practice, Hebrew translators tend to translate first and in general most communication is done in Hebrew. Both can be attributed to the Israeli education system: whereas Jewish children only learn Hebrew in school, the Arab children learn both Arab and Hebrew. As such, it makes sense that Hebrew is the dominant language, but it does emphasize Israeli Jewish power.[35]

Two other issues should briefly be noted. First, to a certain extent, F4P is rather seasonal, whereby the apogee of the project takes place during the week of the actual football camp.[36] This has two disadvantages: it makes F4P vulnerable (for instance: the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006 resulted in the project having to be cancelled. As such, F4P could hardly contribute to improving cross-community relations in that year) and it prevents it from having a continuous effect. Although it is true that a sports team can be an 'excellent crucible' within which 'friendships can blossom across community divides', the long-term effects of F4P can as such be questioned.[37] Höglund and Sundberg[38] in this regard speak of the "fleeting" nature of feelings of unity, that will disappear if there are no structural socio-economic changes taking place within the given society. In this case, the gap between groups will not be bridged and the conflict will simply persist.[39] This is worth noting if we keep in mind that the significant socio-economic disparities between Israeli Arabs and Jews persists.

Second, even though F4P has grown since 2001, the relative number of children participating is still limited, something that is especially true regarding the number of girls. Although the organization tries to get girls involved, this has, so far, been rather unsuccessful due to 'strong cultural mores in both Jewish and Arab communities that militate against female participation in a sport seen traditionally as a game for men.'[40] Thus, the question can be raised whether football is the best instrument within the Israeli context.[41]

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[35] This also shows the importance of the socio-political context. After all, it is beyond F4P's reach to change the Israeli education system, but the project itself is affected by it. See: Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 234.
[36] Other holistic programs, such as the "Educational Activism" program of Acre (1995-2000), have had the advantage over F4P that they are/were not season bound, but rather take/took place throughout the year. Inherently, this improves their effectiveness. See for instance: Hertz-Lazarowitz, Rachel. "Existence and coexistence in Acre: The power of educational activism." *Journal of Social Issues,* 60.2 (2004): 357-371.
[37] Sugden, "Critical Left-Realism": 264. And: Liebmann and Rookwood, "Football for peace?": 12.
[38] Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University.
[39] Höglund and Ralph Sundberg, "Reconciliation through sports? The case of South Africa", Third World Quarterly 29.4 (2008): 815. And: Sugden, "Critical Left-Realism": 260-261.
[40] Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 233.
[41] After all, what can be argued is that F4P focusses on only about 50 percent of the children (i.e. the boys) in the areas in which the projects take place.

Conclusion

In the current research on the effects of F4P, most scholars are relatively positive, arguing that it: creates "better human citizens" through the values that it teaches, "builds bridges" that result in improved cross-community relations and even friendships, and that it is better than doing "nothing".[42]

To support these views, the authors have conducted interviews with the participating children and coaches (and to a limited degree with parents and locals). Unfortunately, the possible long-term effects have not been researched, as no interviews have been conducted at a later stage. Considering the seasonal nature of F4P, it would be well worth to interview the children again at a later moment, in order to get an idea of the impact the project may have in the long run.

Also, although Sugden supposes that F4P can have a "ripple effect", there is, as of now, no concrete research that supports this claim. Interviews with, for instance, the parents of the children at different points in time could give an idea of how much a ripple effect truly exists.

Moreover, as has been argued above, F4P faces severe difficulties when it comes to involving girls in the project, and as such focusses mainly on just fifty percent of the children (the boys) in the area that the projects are taking place. What does this mean for the girls? Are they affected by a ripple effect? Women are generally seen as being more "peaceful" than men, and as such one can argue that getting them involved in F4P is less important, but several scholars challenge this idea and highlight the (violent) role of women in both intifadas.[43] As such, there is room for more research in this field as well.

Altogether, this would provide us with more knowledge on the possible effects of football in improving cross-community relations in general, and within the Israeli context specifically. Using this knowledge can, in turn, increase the chances of grassroots, bottom-up approaches, such as F4P, making a positive contribution to the Arab-Jewish reconciliation process.

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[42] John Sugden and James Wallis, eds, *Football for peace: Teaching and playing sport for conflict resolution in the Middle East*, (Meyer & Meyer Verlag, 2007), 154. And: Liebmann and Rookwood, "Football for peace?": 16-17. And: Sugden, "Teaching and playing sport": 238.

[43] See for instance: Valentine M. Moghadam, ed. *Gender and national identity: women and politics in Muslim societies*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), 157-158. And: Miranda Alison, "Women As Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security", *Security Dialogue,* 35.4 (2004): 447-463.

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