

# Young People in the Fight Against Violent Extremism through Sport for Change (S4C): Literature Review and Practical Experience

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## **ACRONYMS**

ARPP Advancing Reconciliation and Promoting Peace

BRiKS Building Resilience in Kayes & Sikasso

ENJECCOP Engager les Jeunes à Construire des communautés Pacifiques

S4C Sport for Change

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

UNODC United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

USAID United States Agency for International Development

WHO World Health Organization

### Introduction

Approaches to countering violent extremism have evolved significantly in recent years, especially as the violent extremist threat itself has become multifaceted. The ideologies that underlie extremism are at the same time religious, nationalist, political or anarchist with equally varied modes of operation. Thus, the responses are now intended to be broader, more structural and focus more on prevention with a holistic perspective.

Approaches to the prevention of violent extremism, in the Sahel in particular, place young people, who represent more than 60% of the population, at the heart of their strategy. One of the approaches for mobilizing young people in the prevention of violent extremism remains through sport. The use of sport in the service of development and peace has evolved considerably in recent years. In addition to being considered a means of contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Sport considers it essential for development and peace.

Sport in the prevention of extremism has several meanings that require clarification. Whether it is sport for development, sport for change or crime prevention through sport, the nomenclature varies according to the objectives sought. There is no agreement on a formal definition among these terms, however all definitions share a commonality which is sport. As part of this reflection, we will retain the definition of the United Nations which considers sport as all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being, and social interaction. This definition includes games, recreation, sports competitions, or indigenous games (United Nations, 2003). Along the same lines, Save the Children and the MNE Forum, in their life skills development manual, extend sport to movement, exercise, play, recreation, and the arts. These activities may or may not be structured (Sandra Smolovic et al. 2011).

The meaning of the concept of "Sport for Change" relies on the principle of intentionality as demonstrated in the definition of the Robertson Trust which recalls that this notion is invoked when one intentionally resorts to sports activities to produce positive social impacts and fight against inequalities. Meanwhile, Comic Relief highlights the social change produced by Sport for Change and defines it as a tool for social change that helps communities achieve their goals and realize their full potential. These two definitions overlap in the definition adopted by Mercy Corps in the implementation of Sport for Change (S4C) activities which it defines as the use of sports and leisure activities as an avenue to induce positive change through the development of life skills of young people and the promotion of the values of inclusion and peace. This approach of using sport as a means of engaging young people is the subject of several publications, the essentials of which are summarized below.

### Sport for Change and Prevention of Violent Extremism: Literature Review

There is an abundance of publications, studies and reports, admittedly of unequal value, on the issue of young people and sport, **but** this quantity dwindles when we refine the question by bringing it back to sport for change and the fight against violent extremism.

### On the Conceptualization of the Approach and its Methodological Validity

As Weiss states, the question of the development of young people through sport is like "an old wine in a new bottle" all the more so the problem is old and has just been brought up to date with the birth of the concept of "positive youth development". The legal foundations of this approach date back to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1979 followed by a series of texts including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its article 312 and the International Charter

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Weiss MR. Old wine in a new bottle. In: Holt NL, editor. Positive Youth Development through Sport. 2 ed. Abingdon: Routledge; 2016, p. 7-20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> L'article 31 de la Convention relative aux droits de l'enfant reconnaît le droit de l'enfant au repos et aux loisirs, ainsi qu'au jeu et à des activités récréatives appropriées à son âge.

of Physical Education and Sport<sup>3</sup>. The logic underlying the approach of the United Nations was to make sports a tool for development and to include peace among common sports values along with fair play, tolerance, sharing, team spirit, cooperation and resilience.

In terms of positive youth development theory, one of the most cited comes from the 5C model (Lerner et al. 2002) with reference to the outcomes of the approach namely competence, character, connection, confidence, and compassion. To these five Cs, we could add a sixth which would be the outcome of the five: young people can better contribute to their own development and that of their environment through positive youth development (Lerner et al., 2005).

Another theory relates to the 40 development skills (Benson, 2006) divided into two main categories. The first, that of external skills includes support, empowerment, limits and expectations and finally the constructive use of time. The second category relates to internal skills including commitment to learning, positive values, social skills, and a positive identity. Other more recent works (Harwood & Minniti, 2013) highlight a greater number of positive results of sport among young people. Among these results are teamwork, goal setting, time management, emotional management, communication or conflict resolution, social skills and self-esteem.

Some research has explored the links between sport and the prevention of crime and delinquency (Hartmann & Depro, 2006, Theeboom et al, 2006, McMahin & Belur, 2013) and concluded that sport has undeniable positive effects on juvenile delinquency, violence and promotes social ties. However, it is necessary that the use of sport to achieve these positive changes be intentional. Thus, we distinguish the implicit approach from the explicit one. In the implicit approach, efforts focus only on sports activities; there are no deliberate efforts to develop life skills. In contrast, in the explicit approach, the approach is to use sport intentionally to develop the skills useful for the positive participation of young people in their daily lives. This explicit approach also prevails when it comes to using sport to prevent violent extremism.

### **Sport and the Prevention of Violent Extremism**

Much of the work on the relationship between sport and the prevention of violent extremism comes to one conclusion: sport promotes certain values that are valuable in the context of peace education and conflict prevention.<sup>4</sup> These include values such as communication, cooperation, ethics, respect, integrity, sense of belonging, team spirit, tolerance<sup>5</sup>. For specific targets such as refugees, displaced persons or ex-combatants, sport offers them a space of expression to begin their process of community reintegration. This has been clearly observed in the context of S4C activities in the Kayes region of Mali. This region is the scene of cultural practices of slavery by descent which promotes lines of division between an aristocracy considered noble and certain people of a caste considered as slaves. As such, the latter could not participate in certain activities on the same basis as the "nobles". Sports activities have been a way to break down these dividing lines among the young people of these communities by offering a unique space for plural expression that has ended up overcoming these cultural considerations.

Sport can serve as a platform to address not only ideologies but also the root causes of violent extremism by providing the conditions for learning, social participation and positive youth engagement. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), based on the Preventing Violent Extremism Action Plan and other resolutions, has listed five focus areas where sport can be effective in preventing violent extremism. These include safe spaces, social inclusion, education, resilience, and empowerment. These areas of sports intervention respond perfectly to the main factors that attract young people to violent extremism, which are, among others, the lack of life skills, the absence of education and employment opportunities, the feeling and the belief that life is unfair and the lack of a supportive environment. In doing so, sport is proving to be an effective means of preventing violent

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> On peut allonger la liste à la convention sur l'élimination de toutes formes de discrimination à l'égard des femmes, l'article 39 de la convention relative aux droits de l'enfant.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> United Nations, Sport for development and peace: toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals, 2003

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> http://www.unodc.org/SPORTS. Leveraging sport to prevent violent extremism

extremism. However, it should be noted that the studies only confirm the effectiveness of sport in preventive actions and not in de-radicalization or disengagement. The promotion of inclusion, social cohesion and tolerance is much more a matter of preventing violent extremism and we agree with the UNODC that "preventing violent extremism through sport relies on sport's unique ability to actively and meaningfully engage young people, and access young people who are often difficult to reach through other more formal interventions."

Several programs using sport as a means of preventing violence and crime or promoting inclusion have achieved results that confirm the effectiveness of this approach. This is the case with the Do Kadam barabi Ki ore project.<sup>6</sup>, of the Line Up Live Up project in different countries of Africa, Central Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>7</sup>, or the experiences of UNICEF and UNESCO in Somalia, of Sport Hartford in the United States<sup>8</sup>.

In its range of programs in Mali, Mercy Corps used the S4C approach from 2016 to 2022 to prevent youth recruitment by violent extremist groups.

# How Mercy Corps is Mobilizing Youth in the Fight Against Violent Extremism in Mali through S4C

The S4C approach was originally forged from the experience of humanitarian crises due to both natural disasters (earthquake in Peru in 2007) and political violence (electoral violence in Kenya in 2007). In response to these events, there was a joint and multidisciplinary initiative led by the Mercy Corps consortium, Care International and the Nike Foundation to develop responses in the form of post-disaster and post-violence psychosocial support to victim communities and young people in particular. The initiative built on previous work by the World Health Organization (WHO) which identified four relevant and effective skills across cultures and contexts to provide and ensure psychosocial support to victims of disasters or violence. These are self-esteem, resilience, constructive communication and teamwork.

Between 2016 and 2022, Mercy Corps used the Sport for Change approach in several projects (Advancing Reconciliation and Promoting Peace (ARPP), 2016-2018, Engaging Youth in Building Peaceful Communities (ENJECCOP) 2017-2019, Lafia 2019-2021, Building Resilience in Kayes & Sikasso (BRiKS) 2021-2023) and in the northern regions (Timbuktu, Gao, Ménaka), South (Sikasso, District of Bamako) and South-West (Kayes) in Mali.

### **Description of the Approach**

The "Sport for Change" (S4C) approach, as integrated into Mercy Corps programs, occupies a place in its own right. S4C uses sport as an entry point to reach and bring young people of various ethnicities, ages and genders in conflict-affected areas together. The approach builds on the experiences of previous programs and adapts it each time it is implemented in another context.

Although implied by its name, S4C is not just about sports. Around sports sessions and matches, an educational program is set up on life skills: 16 modules in 16 weeks or more. Generally, the education program modules revolve around the elements necessary for leadership and conflict management, teamwork, social responsibility, self-esteem, stress management, resilience and skills easily linked to good sportsmanship. The young people follow the training within multi-ethnic teams, or support groups, which each having one or two coaches from their community.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The Do Kadam Barabari Ki Ore project aimed to promote gender-egalitarian attitudes and aversion to violence against women and girls among adolescent and young male members of youth clubs. It was implemented in rural areas of Patna district, India between 2011 and 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Line Up Live Up is a sport-based UNODC program designed as a unique tool that transfers expertise accumulated by the United Nations and other United Nations and other partners in the implementation of life for the prevention of crime and substance abuse in sport. For more information, see <a href="https://www.unodc.org/dohadeclaration/en/sports/countries.html">https://www.unodc.org/dohadeclaration/en/sports/countries.html</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Jennifer E. Bruening & Al. Sport-Based Youth Development in Practice: The Long-Term Impacts of an Urban After-School Program for Girls, 2015

Long before S4C activities begin, communities conduct an analysis of conflict dynamics, the results of which are shared and discussed in local conflict analysis workshops.

The selection of communities is carried out with the participation of community leaders and local authorities. The program team meets with local chiefs, other respected members of the community, leaders of youth and women's associations and councils and these groups help shape the intervention through the following elements:

- Identification of sports disciplines that are important for young people. These disciplines are not just classic sports (football, basketball, or handball); they can also be leisure activities such as dance, theater or traditional wrestling, the most important thing being that young people are interested in the activity and choose it for themselves.
- The identification of coaches who are an essential link in the implementation approach. They are identified in the communities by young people and community leaders on the basis of criteria previously adopted by the stakeholders. The identification of coaches is a crucial phase of the process given that they play a central role as positive role models for young people and above all as guarantors of safeguarding measures for all young people. The age of the coaches varies between 26 and 30 years old while the members of the clubs are between 15 and 24 years old. Coaches can read and write well, have experience in a sport that interests them, have the respect of the community, possess certain leadership qualities and are able to manage conflict. The members of the clubs are mainly young people at risk; either demobilized or non-demobilized ex-combatants, or at risk of being involved in violence, unemployed or in a chronic state of poverty.
- The creation or revitalization of existing clubs with a maximum number of 25 to 30 members per club. Clubs can be mixed or unisex depending on local cultural realities.

The teaching program delivered by the coaches comprises a series of 16-week sessions with a 16-module curriculum focusing on life skills, conflict management and resilience.

Depending on the nature of the project, which incorporates the S4C approach, this activity is associated with other socio-professional reintegration initiatives, which may be internship programs, grants for starting small businesses and a support plan. This is the case with the programs Advancing Reconciliation and Promoting Peace (ARPP), Engaging Youth in Building Peaceful Communities (ENJECCOP) and Building Resilience in Kayes & Sikasso (BRiKS).

Sports meetings, games and practices are accompanied by discussion sessions on community issues and community service activities such as repairing a community center or building a seawall and preparing to participate in decision-making.

In total, through the various programs implemented from 2016 to 2022, the S4C approach has made it possible to mobilize approximately 5,000 young people from various regions of Mali and to offer them positive alternatives to engaging in acts of violence and in violent extremist groups.

For the Sport for Change approach to produce the expected results, the approach must be supported by certain methodological precautions.

### **Methodological Considerations**

The first of the methodological considerations lies in intentionality (Bean & al., 2018). S4C activities, from the design stage, should be structured with the intention of developing young people's life skills and preventing their involvement in violent extremism. With an intentional approach the results of the program will be greater than if the sports activities are practiced without specific development objectives/intentions.

In addition to an intentional approach, the implementation of the approach must be done with a good knowledge of the local contexts, in particular the endogenous dynamics of violence, the actors, the cultural practices, the place granted to young people, their relations with other members of the

community, etc. The implementation must be preceded by a good knowledge of the needs of the communities, and this is linked to the need to have an inclusive and multi-stakeholder approach. In particular, young people must be at the heart of the process, so that they make their own choices and all actors, in this case the coaches, the parents, the community, the local authorities and the local administration must understand the determinants and the methods of the approach and adhere to it.

The Mercy Corps experience in Mali has shown that including S4C elements along with other activities provides increases the likelihood of achieving the objective of preventing violent extremism. Indeed, when interventions are carried out in extremely fragile contexts, such as certain regions of Mali, an intervention as soft as that of S4C remains very limited. This is why the initiative must be accompanied by other types of activities. In Mercy Corps' experience in Mali, young people from sports clubs, after the training curriculum, were engaged in economic reintegration activities of their choice, which could be vocational training courses, grants for micro-projects, or activities of community interest for the benefit of the community -- a way of re-establishing links between young people at risk and their communities to facilitate their social reintegration.

Another methodological consideration is the meticulous choice of sports club coaches and close monitoring. Coaches are indeed an essential link in the approach, which is based on relationships with a caring adult (the coach). The latter will not only serve as a positive role model for young people, but above all he will engage in constructive communication with young people to enable them to express themselves with confidence and thus improve their self-esteem and their leadership. Coaches are also the guarantor of measures to protect young people in sports clubs, respect for their dignity and must ensure that each member of the club benefits from optimal safety and security conditions for their development. The coach is the first actor in monitoring sport activities for change, even if other levels of monitoring are important to monitor the interaction of young people with each other, that of young people with the coach and with the entire community.

### By Way of Conclusion... Impacts and Lessons Learned

In light of the research work carried out on S4C, the contribution of sport to the prevention of violent extremism is undeniable. From the initiatives of the United Nations, the various resolutions that establish sport as an indispensable tool in the fight against crime and violent extremism, to the experiences of the various organizations mentioned above, the constant is the crucial role of sport when working with young people. Admittedly, the use of sport must be supported by certain precautions required by the nature of the intervention and the specificity of the target population, in this case youth. Preventing violent extremism requires promoting inclusion and social cohesion, and sport can play a unique role in this by generating social capital and helping to mobilize communities and promote social inclusion and solidarity. Sport can serve as a tool to overcome conflicts and social tensions and "promote peace, tolerance and understanding by bringing people together across borders, cultures and religions".

In the case of Mali, S4C has proven to be effective on several levels. Evaluations of the different programs concluded that S4C activities have been the greatest contributor to violence reduction and the socio-economic reintegration of young people. S4C has enabled a positive change in the perceptions of the communities vis-à-vis young people in that the participants agree that the organization of activities around sport has brought the communities together and opened up the possibility of frank discussions. A large proportion of older men appreciate the contribution of S4C youth to local governance. As local management is dominated by older men, this could be interpreted as encouraging greater involvement of young people in the decision-making process.

Evaluations of these programs have also revealed a positive influence of S4C activities on violence resulting from rivalries between groups of young people. Sport brought them together around the values of peace, tolerance and positive communication. Gradually these rival groups were able to air their respective grievances and engage in virtuous communication thus reducing tensions and violence.

In addition, in the Kayes region, S4C has achieved better results with young people by increasing their participation in social activities and promoting inclusion. For example, in the village of Krémis, circle

of Yelimane (Kayes), young people considered as slaves were excluded from collective sport activities. As part of S4C activities, coaches understood the S4C goal and approach, and included these previously excluded young people in activities. This has resulted in an end to caste-based discrimination among young people in this community. The spaces for constructive discussions opened up through S4C have proven to be important spaces for inclusion beyond ethnic and social considerations.

It must however be recognized that sports activities, as is often the case, can cause acts of violence because of the pressure and the challenge of competitions especially in juvenile environments. It is necessary to take into account this difficulty and to accentuate the work of communication and awareness in order to attenuate any tensions when the time for interclub competitions arrives. In addition, the sustainability dimension of such an approach is to be questioned, especially since the positive dynamics of S4C can fade after project support ends. Finally, at the methodological level, it is always difficult to prove and document the direct link that there may be between the S4C and the prevention of violent extremism.

Mercy Corps' experiences in Mali enrich the reflection with three major lessons. The first relates to the deconstruction of prejudices forged around young people. This mental attitude is a necessity for the implementation of humanitarian or development programs. Once stripped of all kinds of prejudices and engaged in relationships of trust with young people, the latter turn out to be relevant interlocutors to better understand their needs and key players in the development of responses.

The second lesson is linked to the first and complements it. It focuses on the need to create an adequate, safe and secure environment to allow young people the freedom to express their ideas, apply them and demonstrate their capacities for resilience. Finally, sport for change, despite the unfavorable prejudices about young girls in terms of sport, appeared to be a relevant means of deconstructing these stereotypes and a space for young girls to express themselves in environments where they do not necessarily have access to public space to share their ideas. In fact, in the various experiences in Mali, the program has been able to involve young girls as club coaches. This was one of the requirements to ensure that the gender issue will not be an obstacle to the participation of young girls. This strategy has paid off, especially since it has led to better community support and has enabled female coaches to build relationships of trust with parents. In some cases, the relationship between parents and female coaches has allowed some young girls to return to the school they had abandoned. Better still, the intervention of these coaches has often made it possible to repair the relationships between the young girls and their parents.

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