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## **Sport and Peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine**

### **Abstract**

Those working in the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) sector often claim that sport can, and does, make a difference. This article assesses this claim in the context of the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. Attention is given to the ‘peace’ component within the SDP initialism and on what ‘peace’ means in this conflict. An assessment is made of the work of thirteen organisations engaged in peacebuilding in this region. The article identifies that many of the sport-for-peace schemes involve Israelis and Palestinians/Arabs within Israel with few schemes seeking to involve Palestinians who live in the West Bank, in Gaza or in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. It is concluded that sport is not an appropriate vehicle for peacebuilding between Israelis and Palestinians because there is no peace – a necessary precursor for reconciliation. Realpolitik, in the form of Israeli territorial expansion and the Palestinian struggle for basic human rights, leaves sport-for-peace schemes attempting to build a bridge too far.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Many of those involved in Sport for Development and Peace work claim that sport can, and does, make a difference in regions that have experienced conflict. One region in which Sport for Development and Peace (hereafter, SDP) organisations have been active is Israel/Palestine. However, in 2017 Jibril Rajoub (head of the Palestinian Football Association), criticised those who were seeking to build bridges between the Palestinians and Israelis, stating, “any activity of normalization in sports with the Zionist enemy is a crime against humanity” and urged “all individuals and institutions [to] distance themselves from such activities” (Warshaw, 2017; **see also Ber, Yarchi & Galily, 2017; Galily, 2018**). **Rajoub’s calls for sports organisations to distance themselves from attempts at normalisation is part of a wider narrative led and coordinated by the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions movement (Bakan and Abu-Laban, 2009; Barghouti, 2011; Lim 2012). Taking inspiration from the South African anti-apartheid movement, the Palestinian-led Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) global movement maintains that Palestinians are entitled to the same rights as the rest of humanity until Israel complies with international law.**

In 2015, a letter was published in the British *Guardian* newspaper arguing against a proposed boycott of Israel and for greater dialogue. The letter contained many of the tropes used by bridge-builders and claimed that dialogue would develop greater coexistence between the Israelis and Palestinians and “through such understanding and acceptance [...] movement can be made towards a resolution of the conflict” (Rowling, et al, 2015). The letter echoed the position of those who were against a boycott of Apartheid South Africa and were calling instead for greater dialogue and ‘bridge-building’ with the South African government and its sporting organisations in the hope that it would bring gradual and peaceful change (Booth, 2016; Keech and Houlihan, 1999; Merrett, 2010). Comparisons between Apartheid South Africa and Israel should be used with caution, but some parallels have been drawn (Dart, 2017; Di Stefano and Henway, 2014; MacLean, 2014). During the Apartheid era, few international organisations were engaged in SDP work designed to bring the different ethnic communities together and it was, arguably, only after the collapse of the Apartheid state that SDP made a meaningful contribution.

This article will offer a comprehensive assessment of the role of ‘sport-for-peace’ schemes associated with the Israel/Palestine conflict. **It is positioned as a critical and politically**

**grounded analysis to the notion of sport-for-peace in the highly contested regions of Israel and the Occupied Territories. It is recognised that this is not a wholly ‘objective’ study but is a response to the orthodoxy within current sport-for-peace literature.<sup>2</sup> The article is a critical assessment of the extent to which there is a de-historicization and/or de-politicization within SDP research. It will critique the current state of sport-for-peace initiatives and practices, and, from the data presented, conclude that because SDP organizations are deliberately ‘avoiding politics’, their projects are unlikely to be successful.** Despite the duration and high profile of this conflict, it has received relatively little attention beyond the University of Brighton’s ‘Football for Peace’ project.

This article identifies thirteen NGOs operating under the SDP umbrella in a region experiencing conflict and where nearly everything is politicised. I discuss what ‘peace’ means in the context of the Israel/Palestine conflict and consider the extent to which these organisations are able to use sport to bridge significant territorial, ethnic, economic, cultural, and religious divides. Massey, et al, (2016) have highlighted the value in re-examining SDP initiatives through a framework that connects the specific programming structures and micro, meso and macro level outcomes. Similarly, Schulenkorf and Spaaij’s (2016, p.72) have suggested that “any SDP project should to be underpinned by robust theory of change: a comprehensive description of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context”. This article assesses what ‘peace’ means in the context of ‘sport-for-peace’ and what other criteria are used by those attempting to bridge divides and create sustainable peace in communities experiencing conflict. I discuss the nomenclature of SDP, what constitutes ‘peace’ and the extent to which ‘bridge-building’ does, according to Rajoub, legitimise the systematic and structural oppression of the Palestinian people.

### **The Never-Ending Conflict**

It is not possible here to offer a full explanation of the complex relationship between the Israeli state and the Palestinians. As Sugden (2008, 2010) suggests, it is necessary to summarise those socio-political and demographic features that pertain to the topic under discussion with **Reychler (2006) stating that ‘contextual judgement is more important than knowledge of the ten best peacebuilding practices in other situations’.** Immediately following the UN Resolution 181 (II) in 1948, the State of Israel was established in an area hitherto known as Palestine and a civil war began (Morris, 2001). A ceasefire was declared in 1949 but Palestinian

refugees continued to be displaced to neighbouring countries, the Gaza Strip and to the area to the west of the River Jordan (i.e. the West Bank), which was annexed by the Jordanian Kingdom in 1950; this claim was relinquished in 1988. Palestinians who fled at this time remain unable to return to their homes (Pappe 2007), with the 1967 ('Six-Day') war resulting in greater oppression of Palestinian population (Bregman, 2014; Zertal and Eldar, 2007).

It is important to distinguish between various Palestinian groups: those living in Israel; in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip (the Occupied Palestinian Territories); in refugee camps in neighbouring countries; and in a global Palestinian diaspora. The Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) and Palestinian Authority (PA) estimate that between 1.5 and 1.8 million Israeli Arabs live in Israel (forming between 17% and 20% of Israel's population). Although they have equal legal rights, this segment of the Palestinian population has been subject to discrimination in terms of education, employment, health and housing. Their experiences are unlikely to improve given the introduction of legislation that defines the Israeli state as belonging exclusively to the 'Jewish people' (Beaumont, 2018). A further 4.9 million Palestinians live in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (hereafter, OPT): 3 million in the West Bank and 1.9 million in the Gaza Strip (Berger and Khoury, 2018). Palestinians living in the OPTs<sup>3</sup> are subject to collective punishments, house/village/community demolitions, travel restrictions, state torture, detention without trial, assassination, mass unemployment, subsistence wages, poor living conditions, inadequate health services, sub-standard transport, housing shortages and inferior educational opportunities (Pappé, 2017). Oxfam (n.d.) have reported that nearly one in three working age Palestinians under 29 are unemployed, with many Palestinians working in 'illegal' Israeli settlement factories and farms that are part-funded by the Israeli government. A further two million Palestinians are refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Despite identifying these different segments, it is important not to fragment the Palestinian population and thus endorse the Israeli state's practice of 'divide and rule', most notably by their intermittent willingness to work with the Palestinian Authority (in the West Bank) but not with Hamas (based in Gaza) who Israel regards as a terrorist organisation.

The Israelis and Palestinians began negotiating in 1991 with much of the 'peace process' conducted under the auspices of the United States government. While peaceful relations have been established between Israel and some of its neighbours (including Egypt and Jordan), a meaningful peace with the Palestinians has failed to materialise; reasons cited include the oppressions and indignities cited in the previous paragraph, a rightward shift in the Israeli

electorate shifting (since 1977) and the Palestinians being politically divided between the Hamas and Fatah political factions. At the heart of the conflict is land/territory with the 'two-state' solution becoming increasingly irrelevant as Israel occupies more of the West Bank, land that was previously seen as a possible territory for a Palestinian state; the illegal Israeli settlements are widely cited in political discourse as 'facts on the ground'. According to Thrall (2017), the lack of a meaningful resolution is because the current status quo is preferable to the Israelis than any peace that involves conceding land. Discussion of peace necessarily involves the (illegal) occupation and settlements on the West Bank, Israeli concerns over security and the construction (between 1994 and 2014) of the 'Peace Wall/ Barrier', the millions of refugees in the OPTs (and their 'right of return'), and the status of Jerusalem (Kelman, Mattar & Caplan, 2018; Ozerdem, Thiessen & Qassoum, 2016).

### **Peacebuilding, Conflict Resolution and Sport for Peace**

**Proposing a precise definition of peacebuilding is not a straight-forward task. Reyhler (2010) has noted that in academic discourse, 'peacebuilding' is increasingly used to "cover all activities undertaken before, during, or after a violent conflict to prevent, end, and/or transform violent conflicts and to create the necessary conditions for sustainable peace". Many of the aims of peacebuilding intersect with those associated with peacemaking and peacekeeping processes. Whereas peacemaking involves stopping an ongoing conflict, peacebuilding activities can occur either before a conflict starts or after it has ended and concerns itself with addressing the root causes of violence, be these territorial, economic, social and/or political in origin. Peacebuilding is also concerned with preventing any return to direct violence and often develops partnerships between different actors including grassroots organisations, national and international NGOs, and national governments.**

**In their study on the peacebuilding work of the United Nations, Lambourne and Herro (2008) identify how peacekeeping theory and ideas about best practice by those involved in sustainable peacebuilding were given a boost in 2005 with the creation of the UN Peacebuilding Commission. For Reyhler and Stellamans (2005) sustainable peace is characterised by the absence of physical violence; the eradication of unacceptable forms of political, economic and cultural discrimination; self-sustainability; a high level of internal and external legitimacy or approval; and constructive management and transformation of conflicts. Doyle and Sambanis (2006) identified seven stages required**

**for successful peacebuilding and developing a self-sustaining peace: national security; regional security; ‘quick wins’; the rule of law and constitutional consent; right to property; democracy or wider participation; and genuine moral and psychological reconciliation; none of these can be found in the context of the Israel/Palestine conflict. For Lambourne and Herro (2008) the cessation of open, armed conflict and a mechanism for reducing threats of further violence are essential for building peace, with Lederach (1997) suggesting that peacebuilding involves not only the ending of violence but also a transformation in the relationships among those affected.’ Whilst there is not currently open military fighting, the Israel/Palestine conflict is, after 70 years, the longest in modern history. In such circumstances, it would be more useful if the term peacebuilding was limited a situation of *post-conflict*.**

The term ‘Sport for Development and Peace’ was readily adopted by international sport federations, international and national non-governmental organizations, national governments and local organisations who saw it as an attractive, low-cost, interventionist tool to foster social cohesion, prevent and reduce conflict and build peace (Burnett, 2015; Darnell and Hayhurst, 2012; Giulianotti, 2011; Lindsey, 2017; Lindsey & Darby, 2018; Lindsey and Grattan 2012; Schulenkorf and Adair, 2013; Svensson & Levine, 2017). The SDP sector is dominated by the ‘development’ element with ‘peace’ research focused on those countries in a post-conflict phase and where different communities are seeking greater integration and reconciliation (Gasser & Levinsen, 2004; Giulianotti, 2011; Rookwood & Palmer, 2011; Schulenkorf, 2010; Sterchele, 2013). Popular press reporting on sport-for-peace initiatives often adopt a positive tone with similarly positive language found in the marketing and promotional publications of non-governmental organizations, sport federations and clubs, and business corporations. However, the term ‘bridge-building’ rarely features in the academic literature on SDP. One exception is MacLean (2014) who identified how governments in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, in the 1960s, were committed to ‘bridge-building’ with the Apartheid South African government and sports organisations. However, such policies of ‘constructive engagement’ were replaced by international boycotts and isolation with academics continuing to debate the role of sport in contributing to the end of Apartheid (Booth, 2016; Morgan, 2017; Hoglund and Sundberg, 2008; Vahed and Desai, 2016).

The SDP sector has (had to) become better at monitoring and evaluation and identify how they are ‘making a difference’ (Darnell, 2013; Donnelly, et al, 2011; Harris, 2018; Harris & Adams,

2016; Levermore, 2011; Nicholls, Giles & Sethna, 2010; Webb & Richelieu, 2016). However, for those working on ‘sport-for-peace’ initiatives there is a lack of consensus on what ‘peace’ is and how to evaluate it. Where there have been attempts to engage in the evaluation of ‘peace’ schemes linked to the Israel/Palestine conflict, organisations have conducted a survey of participants’ pre- and post-camp attitudes. Accepting that they were unlikely to be able to affect the wider conditions, they have tended to claim that their work contributed to less negative stereotypes of the ‘enemy/others’ (Galily, Leitner and Shimon, 2013; Leitner, Galily, and Shimon, 2012; 2014).

It is important to note the significant role of the *Football 4 Peace International* organisation, not least because of its high profile within SDP literature. Sugden (2010) explains how Football4Peace International originated in Northern Ireland’s sectarian ‘troubles’ of the 1970s and 1980s (Sugden, 2008; 2010; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2017). **In 2001 the Football for Peace initiative (which developed out of the World Sports Peace Project) began to work in Northern Israel by establishing rudimentary football coaching camps for Arab/Palestinian and Jewish children. Subsequently Football for Peace (hereafter F4P) worked with various partners, including the World Sports Peace Project, the German Sports University (Cologne), the British Council, the English and Irish Football Associations, the Israeli Sports Authority and the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sport. During 2010-2012, they received a EU Partnership for Peace Grant (‘Playing for Peace: Strengthening Community Relations through Football’) in partnership with the German Sports University. Their project work informed several ‘key outputs’ (Caudwell, 2007; Schulenkorf, Sugden and Burdsey, 2014; Sugden, 2005; 2008, 2010; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2017; Sugden and Wallis, 2007).<sup>4</sup> In 2012, F4P and the Israeli Sports Authority decided that host communities would run the programmes independently within their communities (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2017). Since then F4P has used football to help resolve conflict between communities in The Gambia, Jordan, Northern and Republic of Ireland, South Africa and South Korea.**

F4P adopts a grass-roots, bottom-up, ripple and sustainable approach to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in its work in Israel/Palestine (Schulenkorf, et al, 2014). Much of the F4P activity took place in the Galilee region, home to a large number of Palestinians who refused to leave (or resisted forcible removal) when the State of Israel was created in 1948. F4P clearly recognises the sensitivity of the relationship between sport and politics in Israel/Palestine. F4P



founder University of Brighton, Professor John Sugden, has argued that their approach is neither idealistic nor simplistic, and in an attempt to pre-empt criticism of the F4P activity in the Israel/Palestine conflict, suggests that F4P fully accounts for “the local context; engages with and empowers local actors and partners; and connects with wider national and regional policy processes” (Sugden, 2010:119). However, it is important to note that F4P works with Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs located within Israel but not with Palestinians in/from the OPTs. F4P did attempt to operate in the West Bank but security concerns cited by the Israeli military led them to leave. While recognising the asymmetrical relationship between the Israeli Jews and Israeli Palestinians/Arabs, Sugden repeatedly responded to criticisms that their work was normalising the situation and that their presence was undermining the principles of passive resistance to the occupation. In seeking to build bridges between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews *inside* Israel, F4P claimed to be making a modest contribution to the peace process and helping to create ripples that might contribute towards better community relations and any future peace deal (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2017). Underpinning Sugden’s SDP work is the statement attributed to the 18th-century political philosopher Edmund Burke that ‘the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.’ But to what extent do these ripples generated by F4P affect the wider realpolitik and to what extent do sport-for-peace schemes operating in Israel/Palestine privilege certain parties and (de facto) legitimate an unjust situation? The danger is that F4P has become part of the problem and is not part of the solution.

## **Method**

**The aim of this study was to identify and include all the schemes that operated in the region and that could be identified as working under the ‘sport-for-peace’ umbrella. The necessity for organisations to have a public ‘online presence’ meant it was possible to use an internet search engine to construct the sampling frame. Using a range of ‘key words/search terms’ thirteen non-governmental organisations were identified. Organisations/initiatives that used sport solely within Palestinian communities was omitted on the grounds it did not seek to engage both Palestinians and Israelis in ‘peace-building’ (for example, the Gaza parkour project discussed in Thorpe and Ahmad’s 2015 study). Given that online content frequently changes, it is necessary to state that the search was conducted between December 2016 and July 2018.**

**It is recognised that the use of a search engine is likely to generate ‘results’ that are non-random (Fricker, 2017); however, this was avoided by using the entire ‘population of interest’, specifically those schemes/initiative that use sport for ‘peace and reconciliation’ purposes in the context of the Israel/Palestine conflict. It is noted that the potentially large volume of online material, its dynamic nature and with the content of a site often differing (Zeller, 2017), conspire against the construction of an objective sampling frame. The criteria for inclusion was that the scheme had to adopt an explicitly sport-for-peace ‘bridge-building’ approach that involved both Palestinians and Israelis and that sport needed to be a central feature of the organisation’s stated purpose, strategy and activities. Schemes that sought to bring together Palestinians and Israelis in a non-sport setting were excluded.<sup>5</sup> The original intention was to interview representatives from these SDP organisations with the organisations subsequently contacted via email with a request for interview. Despite repeated efforts to contact the organisations, few responded; possible reasons for are the limited resources of the organisations, an unwillingness to subject themselves to external scrutiny, and/or their having checked my online profile and publications that showed a critical sensibility towards the Israeli state. Their lack of response does however mean I am able to circumvent ethical issues linked to anonymity and can identify the organisation and draw on their publicly available material.**

#### **‘Sport for Peace’ organisation active in Israel/Palestine**

1. *Football 4 Peace International (F4P)*
2. *Ultimate Peace*
3. *Mifalot Education and Society Enterprises*
4. *Peres Centre for Peace*
5. *Laureus World Sports Academy*
6. *Peace and Sport*
7. *PeacePlayers International*
8. *Right to Play*
9. *Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE)*
10. *Generations for Peace*
11. *Oxfam International*
12. *Football Beyond Borders (FBB)*
13. *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)*

As anticipated by Levermore and Beacom (2012) there is a broad range of organisations and programmes that operate under the SDP umbrella. What is readily apparent is their use of a shared language that promotes the ‘power of sport’ in creating social change and encouraging co-operation, bridging social division and uniting communities. Sport is seen as an instrument for bringing peace, promoting mutual respect and tolerance, creating a positive environment between the different communities, humanising the ‘other’ and helping to create a sense of normality. **This study is positioned, in part, as a response to this orthodoxy which dominates much of the sport-for-peace literature; it is also an assessment of the extent to which there is a de-historicization and de-politicization within SDP schemes linked to the Israel/Palestine conflict.**

**There is on-going debate as to when researchers should define their coding/analytical categories (Silverman, 2014). The identification and definition of the units of analysis for web-based content presents a challenge given the combined multiple media forms (Kim and Kuljis, 2010). The units of analysis selected were the organisations web-sites (the ‘home page’ or opening screen of the website, and all material publicly available therein). All the publicly available web-based material that pertained to these organisations/schemes was examined. These included: annual reports, case studies, testimonials, programme descriptions, FAQs, marketing and promotional publications/materials, ‘news’ pages, and blogs written by current and former staff and participants. Popular press artefacts (e.g. newspaper reports) that were identified on the organization’s websites were also reviewed. These units were chosen in order to examine the extent to which ‘bridge-building through sport’, according to Rajoub, legitimises the systematic and structural oppression of the Palestinian people. A thematic analysis was undertaken with a close reading of all the available content accessed via the organisations’ ‘homepage’. The *a priori* themes used to review the organisations’ claims included the delivery of activities, the organisations’ stated motivation (including any stated attempts at ‘bridge-building’), whether they sought to evaluate their ‘impact’ (including ‘successes’ in contributing to ‘peace’), and their stated position on the wider politics of the conflict.**

## **Discussion**

**There are several issues that arise in assessing the role of sport-for-peace schemes in the context of the Israel/Palestine conflict. This section discusses three of the issues considered**

to be fundamental. The first relates to the logistics of the organisation and their motivation, specifically the content, the participants, the staff, the venues and partnerships. The avoidance of mixing sport and politics is then considered before assessing the extent to which the schemes ‘measure success’. Partnership working is discussed before concluding with an assessment on the extent to which the organisations acknowledge wider political structures.

### **The Logistics of Sport-for-Peace Schemes in Israel/Palestine**

In terms of the participants, most of the schemes identified involved Israeli Jews and Palestinians (Israeli Arabs) in an attempt to improve community relations between those living *inside* Israel. *PeacePlayers International* did attempt to twin basketball clubs in Israel and the West Bank and sought to build capacity and sporting infrastructure in the West Bank, as well as Arab towns in Israel. *Generations for Peace* also worked within the Palestinian population in the West Bank and focused on sport for development (not for peace). What was notable, however, was the minimal number of other initiatives that involved Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza. There was no evidence found of initiatives that sought to build bridges between the Israelis and the millions of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and/or refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

A similar pattern was identified when reviewing the staffing of these schemes. The vast majority of staff were Israeli or from overseas, with Palestinian staffing limited to those living within Israel: Palestinian staff representation from the OPTs was negligible. Again, such SDP work needs to be viewed as concerned only with ‘bridge building’ *within* Israel – and not across the wider Palestinian population. The Palestinian Arabs living within Israel experience very different living conditions from those living in the OPTs. The absence of the millions of Palestinians living in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip from sports-themed bridge-building schemes is highly significant. **This absence was compounded when noting that Mifalot had sent football coaches to Nepal as part of a project sponsored by the German Federal Foreign Office and coordinated with Streetfootballworld. The aim of this project was to promote education-through-sport, particularly football, as a means of teaching skills (i.e. teamwork, leadership and comradeship), that could be generalized to the everyday lives of the young participants.**

Most of the activities take place in Israel with some sport-for-development work operating exclusively in the West Bank. This is because of the extensive security checks and significant delays for Palestinians seeking to leave the OPTs. Free travel in and out of the West Bank (for Palestinians) is not possible due to the ‘security/peace wall’ that encircles it and which requires people to use Israeli military checkpoints. The travel restrictions imposed on Palestinians extend to sports teams, including its Olympic athletes, with travel permits required by those seeking to travel outside the West Bank. In Gaza, travel is more restricted with a perimeter fence surrounding the area, regular border closures, and an Israeli blockade which has been imposed since 2007.

Claims of bringing together the Israelis and Palestinians could be viewed as misleading as they usually refer to the Palestinian Arabs living in Israel proper and not to those in the OPTs or in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Thus, while the SDP work might promote better community relations within Israel, it could also be construed as dividing the Palestinians into different constituencies. No SDP scheme could be found that sought to build bridges between Israelis and Palestinians living in refugee camps in neighbouring countries with possible reasons as to why such a limited remit/focus discussed later in the article.

### **‘Just let the kids play’ (On Not Mixing Sport and Politics)**

Few of the schemes reviewed discussed the wider political dimensions of their work. Some did state that they wanted their participants to leave politics at the door – consciously wanting to present their work as apolitical. For example, *Ultimate Peace* identified that “political discussion and solution finding” were deliberately avoided. Instead, they focused on the creation of “magical moments ... with no awareness of or care about any one person’s culture or religion or nationality”.

Tropes and clichés feature regularly in the SDP organisations’ materials with, at times, an almost evangelical belief in the power of sport to resolve the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. The most persistent message identified in the organisations’ publicity materials was the desire to ‘make a difference’. Typically, the organisations expressed this in their mission statement and in their expressed intention to bring ‘social change’ by ‘bridging divides’, creating ‘co-existence programmes and ‘cohesive communities’ (*Mifalot*). Others sought to be ‘Uniting communities in conflict through sport’ (*PeacePlayers International*), and ‘to empower youth to lead and cascade sustainable change in communities experiencing

conflict' (*Generations for Peace*). Some focused on creating 'leaders of tomorrow' to help 'change perceptions' and focused on getting women and girls into sport. *Right to Play* first entered the Palestinian Territories (West Bank and Gaza) in 2003 with the ambition of using the 'power of play to educate and empower children to overcome the effects of poverty, conflict and disease in disadvantaged communities'. The *Peres Centre for Peace* <sup>6</sup> viewed sport as a vehicle to offer a safe, fun and educational way to bring together Israelis and Palestinians who might otherwise not meet.

One of the most ambitious statements was made by *Laureus World Sports Academy* who, while recognising that "Sport will not – by itself - solve or prevent conflicts", viewed sport as a vital part of peace building strategies which address the 'underlying causes of conflict'. Although they cite one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals ('Peaceful Society: resolving conflict'), it was not clear how sport can address the underlying causes of the Israel/Palestine conflict (including land ownership). The *Peace and Sport* organisation operates in a range of *post-conflict* zones and in what they view as 'lawless areas' (such as Jerusalem). Using sports stars as role models and 'Champions for Peace', they claim to have made political leaders and governments aware of how sport can be a genuine and effective mechanism for peace. Again, it is not explained how ex-athletes have changed Israeli politicians' behaviour.

There was evidence of a more traditional sport development approach taken by *Ultimate Peace* (Frisbee) and *PeacePlayers International* (lacrosse). FC Barcelona and Real Madrid each sought to involve themselves in the conflict; FC Barcelona with a 'peace tour' (de-San-Eugenio, Ginesta & Xifra, 2017) and Real Madrid contributing to soccer camps. Between 2011 and 2016, FC Real Madrid worked with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), to send football coaches to West Bank refugee camps. However, in 2016 a workshop designed for Palestinian coaches from the OPTs was limited to those based in the West Bank, when coaches from the Gaza Strip were refused travel permits by the Israeli authorities (AFP, 2016).

Some organisations engaged in more traditional sport for community development. *Mifalot* uses 'sports as a platform for social change' and to 'learn life skills' and groups its programs into themes based on '**youth and community development, female empowerment, special needs, civil service and employability, and coexistence and shared society**'. Similarly, the *Laureus World Sport Academy* cited the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, the *Peace and Sport* organisation used "sport to tackle social issues", while *Generations for Peace* delivered

programmes that teach “Youth Leadership, Community Empowerment, Active Tolerance and Responsible Citizenship”. The sport-for-development approach was also evidenced in *Right to Play*’s work that aimed to improve children’s positive associations with schools and school attendance through weekly educational games. Likewise, *Oxfam International* were engaged in sport-for-development although much of their work was focused on emergency and primary health, education, protection of civilians, and the rights of women.

The *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East* (UNRWA) are also involved in more traditional sport-for-development work. Established in 1949 with the task of providing assistance and protection for the (then) 600,000 displaced Palestinians (Pappe, 2007), it is the largest agency within the United Nations. It provides education, health care and social services to some of the 5 million Palestine refugees in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza (Natil, 2014; 2016). The UNRWA and UNOSDP (before its closure in 2017) worked in camps across the region using sport to promote education and vocational training, social inclusion, and mutual understanding. Various schemes and partnerships were developed including the UNOSDP Youth Leadership Programme that provided Israeli and Palestinian youngsters with shared recreational experiences. The UNRWA organised football tournaments for young Palestinians unable to leave the OPTs and partnered with Manchester City FC to provide Lebanese students and Palestinian youth, from refugee camps in Lebanon, to meet each other in a recreational setting (UNRWA, 2012). The UNRWA also acted as a conduit for the donation of English Premier League football strips to forcibly displaced Bedouin Palestinians; the UNRWA also partnered with the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup Bid Committee to install a football pitch in Yarmouk refugee Camp in Damascus. The UNRWA Relief and Social Services Programme in Gaza has organized recreational activities for 1,000 children who lost parents during the 2014 conflict (UNRWA, 2016), and in one press release, stated that “the refreshing sight of children playing football in the midst of difficult times brings hope that although homes can be demolished, spirits cannot” (UNRWA, 2014). However, the UNRWA cancelled its summer camps in 2012 and 2014 due to a lack of funding, and in 2013 called off its annual Gaza marathon in response to Hamas’ efforts to restrict women’s participation in sport. UNRWA sport-themes activities were criticised by Hamas for corrupting the morals of Palestinian youth, with both Hamas and Islamic Jihad offering alternative summer activities for young people in the Gaza Strip in an attempt to secure control of the camps (Sherwood, 2010). Whilst the UNRWA ‘Summer Fun’

activities do not seek to normalise the situation, they can be seen as an attempt to make life, at least temporarily, slightly more bearable for those living in refugee camps.

### **Monitoring and evaluation: How does one measure ‘peace’?**

In recent years, there have been increasing calls for better measuring, monitoring and evaluation of SDP activity. Much of this evaluation has been at a local level, measuring the attitudinal changes of participants directly involved in the scheme/s, with claims that it is beyond the scope of specific SDP interventions to ‘measure’ wider impact. The SDP examples identified all celebrate the potential of sport and use language replete with claims of how sport can bring communities together. **Mifalot used soccer in projects that included Palestinians and Jordanians, claiming a ‘passion for playing soccer is what unites the Israeli and Palestinians’. In their evaluation of the effects of participation in this program Galily, Leitner & Shimon (2013) reported positive changes from the pretest to the post-test in the areas of trust, hatred, and perceived level of hatred of the other group.** Occasionally, the limits of sport are acknowledged, but there is an emphasis on individual testimonies and individual inspirational stories, often linked to creating future leaders and/or ‘empowering girls and young women’ (*PeacePlayers*). In a reflection of their 2016 Camp, *Ultimate Peace* posted the following,

**One night in the dining room we all realized the extent of the impact of the UP program. The campers, losing all inhibition, formed a conga line and ended up on stage singing with passion while they waved their painted team flags. How does it come to be that 100 Arab, Jewish, and Palestinian youth can co-create a magical moment like this, with no awareness of or care about any one person’s culture or religion or nationality?<sup>7</sup>**

**In its 2016 annual report Right to Play identify their use of ‘play to build peaceful communities’ and that ‘through child-centered games, sports and activities’ they teach ‘acceptance, bridge differences, foster understanding’ and ‘challenge the negative perception and attitudes that can exist between refugee groups and host communities.’ The annual report concludes with a financial spreadsheet, a list of those who made financial donations (including corporations, governments, NGOs and individuals), and individual testimonies (‘Succeeding Through Play’) from a young man based in Uganda and young woman in Pakistan.**



Given the political beatification that followed his release from prison in 1990 it might be viewed as blasphemous to criticise African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela's (hyperbolic) statement that 'sport has the power to change the world' and to bridge divided communities. However, in the context of the Israel/Palestine conflict, it is not clear what model of 'peace' the SDP organisations are working towards. Sport-for-peace organisations that are seeking to build bridges between the Israelis and Palestinians could be argued to be failing to recognise 'the elephant in the room'. The sport-for-peace schemes need to identify their response to the decision by the Israeli state, in June 2018, to define itself as a Jewish (only) state, to increase (illegal) settlements in the West Bank, increase house demolitions, non-freedom of movement, arrests and detention without trial (including of children), and to continue its eleven-year blockade of Gaza. Against this background, it is suggested that, by permitting these SDP schemes, the Israeli government is using sport-for-peace activity to create political capital and provide a veneer of normalisation to its brutal, settler-colonial and racist policies and allowing the two-state solution to become increasingly unviable.

Under such circumstances much of the SDP activity reviewed was aimed at getting the Palestinian Arabs living in Israel to integrate – with little being done with (or for) the other displaced Palestinians. All the schemes discussed in this article are working with the *symptom* and are making little to no impact on the *cause*. However well-meaning the majority of the sport-for-peace activity might be it is having no impact on the repressive policies of the Israeli government. It is not clear from the schemes reviewed how they are using 'sport' to 'bring the two communities together'. However, what is evident is that the term 'two communities' does not include all the Palestinians, but only those who stayed behind in 1947. Thus, these schemes must respond to Coalter's (2007) call for the identification of what is claimed as an outcome and to more clearly articulate what they understand by the term 'peace'.

### **Partnerships**

While seeking to avoid the politics of the conflict, working in partnership was an essential element in all SDP work in the region (**Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016**); as Sugden and Tomlinson (2017) have recognised, no-one can operate in Israel and the OPTs without the permission of the Israeli government, including its military. *Right to Play* states that it works in partnership with other organisations, but that they do not work with political organisations; however, they must work with the Israeli state otherwise they would not get access to the OPTs. *Ultimate Peace* have a collaborative partnership with the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sport

and identify how their relationship with the Israeli Ministry of Education allows them to leverage their status as “one of the most respected model summer camps in the country”. **Partnerships were also being developed outside Israel as part of the country’s ‘soft power’ agenda (Dart, 2016; Nye, 2008). *Mifalot* partnered with Israel’s Agency for International Development Cooperation (part of its Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and had sent coaches to Myanmar, India, Colombia and Vietnam, with plans to visit Botswana, Uruguay, Paraguay, Macedonia and the Philippines.**

Any SDP partnership with the Israel Football Association (hereafter, IFA) is viewed here as being ‘morally bankrupt’ given the IFA’s support for the Israeli clubs based in illegal settlements who play in the official league of the IFA. The presence of these teams is a clear violation of FIFA’s own statutes (Ahren, 2018) and a violation of international law (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Securing the approval/permission of the Israeli state will be harder for some SDP activists in light of the Israeli government’s introduction of legislation that prevents entry to anyone critical of the Israeli state, including anyone linked to the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions movement (Rehman, 2018). Clearly, the ‘ripple model’ advocated by the F4P organisation has not reached the IFA or Israeli government and thus raises a more fundamental question on the extent to which the ripples extend beyond the immediate participants. Arguably, what is needed is greater cognisance of the Palestinian-led Boycott, Disinvestment Sanctions movement and Rajoub’s statement (included at the start of this article) arguing against any activity that attempts to normalise sport in Israel. As Giulianotti (2011, p.22) has explained ‘local communities are understood as best equipped to identify their needs, clarify the nature and sources of conflict and choose appropriate strategies and responses’.

Of all the schemes identified in this article, Football Beyond Borders (FBB) was unique in adopting and explicitly identifying a political position that supported the Palestinians in their struggle for human rights. In their work FBB engaged with Palestinian students, local communities and NGOs and used football to challenge dominant narratives of the conflict and what they viewed as unfair representation of Arabs and Palestinians in much of the Western mainstream media. Critical of what they viewed as Britain’s unconditional support for Israel at the expense of the Palestinian people, FBB identified their support the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions campaign and the Red Card Israeli Racism group and were amongst those calling for UEFA to move their U21 tournament away from Israel in 2013 (Dart, 2017).

**This section has focused on the issues of the schemes' logistics, their stated aims, how they evaluate 'success', and the extent to which they acknowledge wider political structures. Underpinning this discussion has the theme of 'bridge-building' efforts between Israelis and Palestinians *within* ('greater') Israel as opposed to Palestinians living outside of Israel. There was clear evidence that these schemes were seeking to utilize sports and other recreational activities to generate peaceful relations and foster coexistence amongst those living inside Israel's 'green line'.<sup>8</sup> I now move to discuss why such 'sport-for-peace' activities are not appropriate at this time.**

### **Bridge-Building and Structural Failure**

Spaaij and Jeanes (2013) have suggested that many SDP initiatives simply reproduce the status quo, with Darnell, et al, (2016, p.7) calling for theoretical approaches that “explicitly politicise SDP practice and research, and that ask questions that draw attention to the roots of inequality”. Similarly, Silk et al (2014) have argued that those studying SDP activity need to situate it in relation to broader social and political forces. **This article has proposed that the direct factors underpinning the Israel/Palestine conflict must be addressed before any attempts are made to use sport to build bridges between the two communities. Any attempts at peacebuilding need not only to be coherent but also to be tailored to specific setting of this conflict. As Pugh (2000: 121) has noted ‘the ownership of peacebuilding needs to be embedded in local communities’. SDP organizations and initiatives that avoid engaging with the *realpolitik*, and which fail to have ‘local’ ownership are unlikely to result in legitimate and sustainable outcomes (Barnes, 2006; de Coning, 2016).**

The central issue is that sport-for-peace initiatives are legitimising, intentionally or otherwise, a political situation in which the Israeli state continues to move towards the absorption of the West Bank by expanding settlements and thus prevent the creation of a Palestinian state. Sport-for-peace schemes that purport to build bridges between the two communities are failing to recognise the unequal power relations. They fail to address the everyday reality faced by Palestinians in the OPTs whose first priority is access to a regular supply of clean water, electricity, healthcare, education, employment, and freedom of movement. What is significant is that there are no Palestinian-led joint initiatives seeking to build bridges with the Israelis – all the traffic is one-way.

Acknowledging the best of intentions of sport-for-peace activity linked to this conflict is only ever going to be appropriate where there are some signs of ‘peace’, or at least a conception of a just peace (be this based on a one or two-state solution). There are no signs of this. There is no suggestion of how ‘peace talks’ will progress with an increasingly right-wing Israeli government and a divided Palestinian people and a political structure split between Fatah and Hamas; even if the two Palestinian governments were able to work together, the Israelis have stated they would not negotiate with Hamas. This situation confirms Coalter’s (2007) thesis of overly ambitious non-sporting agendas that confuse micro-level, limited interventions and individual outcomes with broader community macro-level outcomes and which ignore the wider socio-political context. As Brazilian educator Paulo Freire explained (cited in Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013, p. 451), education is not neutral and that “it either reproduces structures of domination or is used to promote freedom and social change.”

More clarity is needed when citing sport-for-peace schemes linked to this conflict and of ‘building bridges’ between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Most of the reporting of SDP work in the context of Israel/Palestine is not subtle enough to distinguish between the different Palestinian groups/populations. Most of the academic focus has been on the work of F4P but, as this article has argued, this only involved Israeli Palestinians, with few observers able to recognise that this segment of the Palestinian population occupies a different position to the millions of Palestinians living in the OPTs or as refugees in neighbouring countries. This article endorses the suggestion made by Giulianotti, et al, (2017, p.13) that “from a critical standpoint, the greatest challenge faced by SDP agencies involves the micro-macro divide, in terms of upscaling their impacts at everyday level in order to influence the larger political and societal levels where major conflicts are played out.”

Before any convincing model of peacebuilding can be applied there needs to be a clearer sense of what ‘peace’ means and a recognition of the primary concerns of the Palestinians in securing their basic human rights. This will necessarily entail a re-examination by SDP organisations of their current resolve to avoid ‘politics’. Given the volatility in the relationship between the Israelis and Palestinians, any localised grass-roots ‘successes’ generated by a SDP scheme is likely to be temporary when Israeli security (or settlement) concerns assert themselves. There should also be more engagement with Giulianotti, et al’s, (2017, p.13) identification of the *realpolitik* and of the political and economic roots of power relations and the struggle for

recognition by marginalised communities; in the context of Israel and Palestine, between the colonisers and colonised.

## Conclusion

**This article has presented a critique of the current state of sport-for-peace initiatives and practices in the Israel/Palestine context and has** problematized the, at times, hyperbole and exaggerated claims made by the ‘bridge-builders’ to use sport to resolve a deep-rooted political divide. **It has not commented on wider claims about what might be a more effective way to do this kind of work. The approach of Football Beyond Borders (FBB) and other grassroots initiatives (Hadley, 2017; Simpson, 2015; Totten, 2015), which clearly identifies its politics and challenges dominant narratives is the author’s preferred approach.** Sport-for-peace work that currently takes place in context of the Israel/Palestine conflict should be viewed as akin to the situation during the Apartheid era in South Africa rather than post-apartheid. Despite those who dismiss the arguments for/against the role of sport-for-peace as being largely rhetorical, there are significant issues that must be addressed. Of these, arguably the most significant, is that there can be no reconstruction, reconciliation, or resolution unless and until there is a political solution. Palestinians who live under Israeli occupation are likely to view sport as only ever playing a minimal role.

While various sport-for-peace activities take place, ‘facts’ (in the form of illegal settlements) continue to be built throughout the OPTs. The motivations of those involved in SDP work are undoubtedly well-intentioned but it is not evident that there has been sufficient consideration of the political consequences (and interpretations) of their work. Their attempts at building bridges through sport are misguided and misleading and, in effect, are normalising an illegal occupation and an unjust situation. **If one limits one’s focus to sport, there is clear evidence that Palestinian athletes are typically refused travel permits, that the Israeli state has deliberately targeted the (sporting) infrastructure and restricted the importation of resources that would improve the sport and recreational facilities in the OPTs.** In such circumstances, some might advocate that ‘doing something is better than doing nothing’, but those schemes which do not engage with the fundamentals of the conflict, and which do not identify clear, objective criteria for evaluation, and instead claim a position of ‘neutrality’, will ensure they remain part of the problem, not the solution.

Finally, SDP researchers and practitioners should avoid eliding the terms sport for ‘*development*’ and sport for ‘*peace*’ in the context of Israel's occupation of Palestine which is the longest running military occupation in modern history. Acknowledging the statements by Howard Zinn (2002) and Desmond Tutu (cited in Younge, 2009) on neutrality, it is, ultimately, a matter of personal conscience on how to resolve the ‘Palestinian Question’. In response to Sugden’s advocacy of Burke’s statement on ‘good men and evil’, I prefer Hannah Arendt’s statement that “most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil”. While illegal settlements continue to be built by successive Israeli governments who show no signs of engaging in meaningful peace talks, most sport-for-peace activity is little more than a smokescreen and propaganda tool for the Israeli government in their continued systematic subjection of the Palestinian people. Those interested in bringing about genuine change should avoid sport-for-peace activity because, when the games are over, Palestinian participants will return home to lives of occupation and oppression, while Israeli youngsters to a future as occupier.

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<sup>1</sup> The expression ‘a bridge too far’ was first used in connection to the Israel/Palestine conflict by Sugden and Tomlinson (2017).

<sup>2</sup> **During the peer review stage of this article, it was suggested that because this was a critical response to the orthodoxy of sport-for-peace in the current literature, I should explain why I was drawn to this topic and to what extent my identity or positionality features into or influenced the analysis: I spent part of my youth living in Israel.**

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘Occupied Palestinian Territories’ is used to describe the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip – all controlled by Israel. The Israeli government prefers either Judea and Samaria or the ‘disputed territories’ (Pappé, 2007; Morris, 2001; Zertal and Eldar, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> **A further grant of c. €19,000 was awarded in 2013-2014.**

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of non-sport related conflict resolution schemes include Beckles Willson, (2009); Colman, (2006); Maoz, (2004); Shani and Boehnke, (2017).

<sup>6</sup> Established by Shimon Peres, a ‘founding father’ of the Israeli state who later served as President, Prime Minister and Defence Minister.

<sup>7</sup> The full account of their 2016 Camp is available at <http://www.ultimatepeace.org/campup/>

<sup>8</sup> **The ‘green line’ refers to the border that emerged between Israel and its neighbours in the aftermath of the 1948 War of Independence / Al Nakba.**