

Leveraging sports as a vehicle for youth employment and economic empowerment: A sports for Kenyan youth employment case study

Ronnie Murungu

International Youth Foundation, Zimbabwe.
Corresponding author: r.murungu@iyfglobal.org

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Abstract: In recent years, sport has garnered significant attention as a potent vehicle for fostering positive youth development, driving employability, and stimulating economic growth. With its unparalleled ability to engage and empower young people, sport-based interventions have emerged as a viable solution to address the burgeoning global youth unemployment crisis. International Youth Foundation (IYF) has recognized this potential and implemented a series of sport-based initiatives aimed at nurturing critical life skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork. These competencies are universally sought by employers across a diverse range of sectors, rendering sport an effective means of facilitating workforce integration for young people. This paper presents an in-depth analysis of the transformative power of sport in promoting positive youth development and enhancing employability. Through a case study of the IYF's sport-based initiative in Kenya, this research delves into the impact of such programs on skill development and the employment prospects of participating youth. Employing a rigorous methodological approach, the study draws upon a rich corpus of academic literature and practical experiences to elucidate the multifaceted benefits of sport as a catalyst for change. In addition to evaluating the effectiveness of IYF's interventions, the paper identifies key success factors and potential challenges that may influence the scalability and sustainability of sport-based initiatives for youth employment. By doing so, the study offers valuable insights and strategic recommendations for policymakers, educators, and industry stakeholders, enabling them to optimize the impact of sport in nurturing a resilient and inclusive workforce.

Keywords: Employability, Positive Youth Development, Skill Development, Sport-based Initiatives

Introduction

The profound impact of sport on positive youth development has been widely acknowledged in both academic and policy circles (Coalter, 2007; Lerner et al., 2005). As a universally accessible and engaging medium, sport has the potential to serve as a powerful tool in promoting not only physical health, but also mental well-being, social cohesion, and skill development among young people (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). International Youth Foundation (IYF) recognizes the strategic value of sport in addressing the challenges faced by the 1.8 billion young people aged 15-29 worldwide, particularly in terms of enhancing employability and reducing poverty (United Nations, 2020). Research has demonstrated that sport can contribute significantly to fostering essential life skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork (Camiré et al., 2012). These work-relevant skills are highly valued by employers across industries and have been shown to correlate with better employment outcomes and overall economic growth (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). By engaging young people through sport, IYF's initiatives aim to cultivate these competencies and create opportunities for personal growth and skill development, ultimately empowering young people to overcome barriers to employability and contribute to their communities' sustainable development (International Youth Foundation, n.d.). This paper seeks to explore the role of sport in promoting positive youth development, with a particular focus on the work of the International Youth Foundation. By drawing upon academic literature and practical experiences from IYF's sport-based initiatives, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the potential of sport as a catalyst for skill development and youth employability. Furthermore, the paper will offer strategic recommendations for policymakers, educators, and industry stakeholders

to optimize the impact of sport in fostering a resilient and inclusive workforce, ultimately unlocking the untapped potential of the world's youth.

Sports for Development, often abbreviated as S4D, is an interdisciplinary and multifaceted approach that leverages the power of sport to address a wide range of social, educational, and health-related issues, ultimately contributing to the sustainable development of communities and individuals (Levermore & Beacom, 2009; United Nations, 2003). Rooted in the understanding that sport transcends cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic barriers, S4D initiatives harness the potential of physical activity, play, and organized sports to promote values such as teamwork, fair play, discipline, and perseverance, while simultaneously fostering social cohesion, gender equality, and conflict resolution (Coalter, 2010; Donnelly et al., 2011). By integrating sport within broader development agendas, S4D initiatives can facilitate the achievement of various United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including those related to education, health, gender equality, and poverty reduction (Schulenkorf & Adair, 2014; United Nations, 2015). In essence, Sports for Development represents a holistic approach to leveraging sport as a tool for social change and sustainable development across diverse contexts and populations.

International Youth Foundation's (IYF) Sport for Development (S4D) model stands out from other S4D models in several key aspects. While many S4D models adopt a "sports-plus" approach, where the primary focus is on sports and secondary outcomes are addressed tangentially, IYF's methodology is "plus-sports," which emphasizes work-readiness skill-building as the primary outcome. IYF's S4D programs employ experiential learning techniques, allowing young people to transfer skills acquired on the sports field to off-field contexts, including workplace environments. For instance, a young soccer player who has learned the value of effective communication when coordinating with teammates can apply this skill to providing and receiving instructions in their professional life.

By prioritizing work-readiness skill development and emphasizing the transferability of skills learned through sports, IYF's S4D approach fosters a more comprehensive understanding of the potential benefits of sports engagement for youth. This unique perspective enables IYF's S4D model to effectively address not only the physical and mental aspects of sports participation but also the development of essential life skills that prepare young people for success in their careers and personal lives.

Why Integrate Sports in development programs

The Integration of sports in development initiatives has emerged as a powerful and multifaceted strategy for addressing a wide range of societal challenges and fostering positive change. This approach has gained traction as it effectively tackles five key areas that contribute to holistic human development and social progress: (1) Skills Development, where sports serve as a unique platform for individuals to acquire and hone essential life skills such as decision-making, leadership, teamwork, and stress management (Coalter, 2013; Lyras & Peachey, 2011); (2) Social Connection, by creating opportunities for engagement and fostering community cohesion through teamwork, collaboration, and shared experiences (Putnam, 2000; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014); (3) Mobilization and Advocacy, leveraging the popularity and universality of sports to engage stakeholders, policymakers, and hard-to-reach groups, while disseminating messages on challenging issues (Kidd, 2008; Sugden, 2010); (4) Challenging Stereotypes, as sports can dismantle harmful preconceptions and discriminatory attitudes towards various marginalized groups, such as women, girls, and individuals with disabilities (Cunningham, 2012; Hayhurst, 2014); and (5) Mental Health, where participation in sports has been linked to numerous psychological benefits, including reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression, improved self-esteem, and enhanced cognitive functioning (Biddle & Asare, 2011; Rebar et al., 2015). By addressing these crucial aspects, sports-based development initiatives have the potential to create transformative and sustainable impact on individuals and communities alike.

Skills Development:

Skills development is a crucial reason for integrating sports into development programs, as it presents a unique opportunity for individuals of varying abilities to acquire and enhance skills, consequently boosting their confidence in other aspects of their lives (Coalter, 2007). Sports activities have the potential to reinforce essential life skills that are highly valued in various settings, such as decision-making, leadership, teamwork, and stress management (Levermore, 2008). By engaging in sports, participants can develop transferable skills that contribute to personal growth and success in different areas, including education, employment, and interpersonal relationships (Gould & Carson, 2008).

Sport, as a platform for skills development, offers a dynamic and inclusive environment where individuals can learn and practice key life skills through direct experience, experimentation, and reflection (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012). For instance, team sports promote collaboration, communication, and problem-solving, as players are required

to strategize and coordinate their efforts to achieve a common goal (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013). Moreover, participation in sports often involves coping with challenges, setbacks, and pressure, thereby fostering resilience, adaptability, and stress management skills among athletes (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).

The impact of sports on skills development is further amplified when coupled with deliberate and structured interventions, such as life skills training, mentorship, and coaching, which aim to enhance the transferability of skills learned in sports to other life domains (Gould & Carson, 2008). By embedding skills development within sports programs, practitioners and organizations can maximize the potential of sports to empower individuals and facilitate their personal, social, and economic development (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). Hence, the integration of sports in development initiatives plays a crucial role in fostering well-rounded, skilled, and confident individuals, better equipped to navigate the complexities of life and contribute positively to their communities (Coakley, 2011).

Social Connection

Social connection is a crucial aspect of sports, providing individuals with the opportunity to become part of a larger collective, transcending generational or geographical boundaries (Coakley, 2011; Putnam, 2001). Engaging in sports activities facilitates teamwork and cultivates relationships, fostering a sense of belonging and unity among participants (Seippel et al., 2011; Bailey, 2005). Through these connections, sports serve as an effective medium to strengthen community cohesion and nurture social bonds, contributing to the overall well-being of individuals and communities alike (Bailey et al., 2009; Coalter, 2007).

Furthermore, the shared experiences and common goals intrinsic to sports participation create a platform for enhanced social interaction and mutual understanding among diverse groups (Spaaij, 2012; Schulenkorf, 2012). By bridging cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic divides, sports can contribute to the development of social capital, fostering a sense of trust, reciprocity, and cooperation within and across communities (Putnam, 2001; Skinner et al., 2008). Thus, sports not only facilitate personal growth and skill development but also play a vital role in promoting social inclusion, solidarity, and harmonious coexistence among people from various backgrounds.

Mobilization and Advocacy

Sport possesses the unique ability to unify people from diverse cultural, linguistic, gender, and social backgrounds, transcending barriers that often segregate communities (Coalter, 2007; Spaaij, 2012). Given its widespread appeal and universal nature, sport serves as an effective medium to connect with socially isolated or hard-to-reach groups, enabling engagement and communication across various strata of society (Schulenkorf, 2012; Donnelly et al., 2011). As a result, sport functions as a powerful tool for mobilizing communities and creating a collective platform where stakeholders and policymakers can come together to address pressing social issues.

Furthermore, sport offers a non-threatening environment where sensitive topics and challenging issues can be discussed more openly, facilitating dialogue and fostering mutual understanding among participants (Lyras & Peachey, 2011; Levermore, 2008). By utilizing the influence and reach of sport, advocates can effectively disseminate vital messages and raise awareness on matters that might otherwise be avoided or overlooked (Giulianotti, 2011; Kidd, 2008). This capacity to engage and inform diverse audiences underscores the vital role of sport in promoting social change, empowering individuals and communities to tackle difficult issues, and driving positive, lasting impact.

Challenging and Dismantling Harmful stereotypes

Sport has the potential to serve as a formidable agent of change, capable of challenging and dismantling harmful stereotypes that persist across various societies and cultures (Cunningham, 2012; Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014). By providing an inclusive environment where individuals from diverse backgrounds can participate and interact, sport can foster mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's unique qualities, thereby breaking down preconceived notions and discriminatory attitudes (Jeanes et al., 2019; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). For instance, sport can be used to confront cultural expectations and traditional gender roles that restrict the opportunities and aspirations of women and girls, empowering them to assert their independence and self-worth (Chawansky, 2016; Hayhurst, 2014). Moreover, sport offers a platform for individuals with disabilities to challenge the stigmas and misconceptions associated with their conditions, demonstrating their abilities and resilience to a wider audience (Darcy et al., 2017; Misener & Darcy, 2014). By showcasing the capabilities of people with disabilities and promoting their active participation in sports, society's attitudes towards them can be gradually transformed, fostering greater inclusivity and acceptance (Brittain, 2016; DePauw & Gavron, 2005). Thus, sport serves as a powerful catalyst for dismantling stereotypes, promoting inclusivity, and creating more equitable and just societies.

Mental Health and Well Being

Participation in sports has been widely acknowledged for its numerous benefits on mental health and wellbeing (Eime et al., 2013; Lubans et al., 2016). Engaging in physical activity through sports can lead to increased fitness levels and improved mobility, which in turn, positively impact an individual's psychological state and overall quality of life (Biddle & Asare, 2011; Mammen & Faulkner, 2013). For instance, regular exercise has been associated with reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression, increased self-esteem, and enhanced cognitive functioning (Rebar et al., 2015; Rosenbaum et al., 2014). Furthermore, certain sports that involve repetitive actions or routines can be particularly beneficial for individuals who have experienced trauma, as the structured nature of these activities provides a sense of stability and predictability (Gould et al., 2018; Penedo & Dahn, 2005). The therapeutic effects of engaging in such sports can facilitate the healing process by helping individuals regain a sense of control over their lives, promoting emotional regulation, and fostering social connections with others who share similar experiences (Caddick et al., 2015; Van der Kolk, 2014). In this context, sports play a crucial role in promoting mental health and resilience, contributing to the overall well-being of individuals and communities.

S4D IYF model and Experience

In IYF's Sport for Development (S4D) initiatives, the power of sport is harnessed as an engaging and effective medium for delivering work-readiness programs, mirroring the quality and impact of their non-sports-based interventions. The activities implemented within the S4D framework utilize the language of sport as a means of translating essential skills acquired on the field into valuable workplace competencies, thereby bridging the gap between athletic pursuits and professional success (Coalter, 2013; Lyras & Peachey, 2011).

To achieve this objective, IYF employs its flagship life skills curriculum, Passport to Success® (PTS), a proven and widely recognized program that has catered to the diverse needs of youth, employers, youth-serving organizations, and other key stakeholders in over 50 countries since 2004 (IYF, 2020). By incorporating PTS within their S4D projects, IYF ensures that participants not only develop the necessary skills for employability but also benefit from a holistic and well-rounded approach to personal and professional development, ultimately empowering them to thrive in the competitive global job market (IYF, 2020)

Partnering with Sports

IYF's strategy for implementing Sport for Development (S4D) projects revolves around collaborating with local youth-serving partner organizations to ensure that the programming is contextually relevant, locally owned, and sustainable, thus promoting scalability and long-lasting impact. For each S4D initiative, IYF carefully selects a sports partner that is deeply embedded and trusted within the community, possessing a broad network of youth connections that can facilitate participant recruitment for the project. To further bolster the effectiveness and reach of their S4D programs, IYF employs a comprehensive suite of capacity assessments, workshops, curricula, and tools to strengthen the ability of their partner organizations to deliver high-quality livelihood training and services to young people (Lyras & Peachey, 2011; IYF, 2020). This capacity-building process often involves training of trainers (TOT) sessions, focusing on the delivery of the Passport to Success life skills curriculum. Sports coaches have been found to excel as PTS trainers, primarily due to their familiarity with activity-based pedagogy and their ability to engage youth effectively in experiential learning (IYF, 2020; Coalter, 2013). By harnessing the power of local partnerships and integrating sports into their programming, IYF can create a lasting positive impact on the lives of young people, equipping them with the skills and opportunities needed for success in work and life.

Skills development with Sports.

IYF's Passport To Success (PTS) program includes 10 specialized sport lessons that offer comprehensive, step-by-step instructions, empowering trainers to facilitate activities effectively using the provided materials (IYF, 2020). During the four-day PTS Training of Trainers (TOT), the sports component is seamlessly integrated, enabling new PTS trainers to apply the program's pedagogy both on the sports field and in the classroom (Coalter, 2013). For participants who are athletes, IYF trains the facilitators to contextualize lessons by incorporating relevant sports examples throughout the PTS classroom sessions, thereby enhancing the learning experience (IYF, 2020).

To further support trainers, IYF provides a PTS Sport Trainer's Manual supplement, which delivers in-depth explanations and guidelines for preparing and facilitating field lessons (IYF, 2020). Following the conclusion of an S4D program, participants receive additional support in securing employment, launching their own businesses, or engaging in community initiatives. IYF leverages its extensive experience collaborating with partners across various sectors, particularly the private sector, to create valuable connections for sports organizations that can contribute to

the long-term benefit of their young participants (Lyras & Peachey, 2011; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). Through this comprehensive approach, IYF ensures the continued success and impact of its S4D programs on youth development and employability.

The Sport for Kenyan Youth Employment (SKYE) project, implemented between 2015 and 2017, was an innovative initiative that utilized sports to address youth unemployment and skill development in Nairobi, Kenya. Focused on disadvantaged and at-risk youth living in informal settlements in Eastlands, Nairobi, SKYE integrated football (soccer) into a dynamic training model that prepared over 3,100 out-of-school and unemployed young people for work in the country's rapidly expanding construction sector (IYF, 2017). The SKYE project employed IYF's Passport to Success® life skills curriculum, which was adapted to build on competencies gained through sports such as leadership, discipline, communication, teamwork, and responsibility (IYF, 2020). A total of 527 youth underwent intensive on-site technical training and received national certification in demand-driven construction trades such as masonry, tiling, and electrical work, equipping them with the necessary skills to secure employment on construction sites (IYF, 2017).

In addition to the life skills and technical training, 2,646 participants received essential financial skills training, empowering them to manage their finances effectively. As a result of the SKYE project, 75% of the trained youth found employment or continued their education and training, while 21% of working graduates experienced a pay raise and/or a promotion within six months (IYF, 2017). The average weekly income for working graduates increased from \$7.85 at the start of the project to \$25.93, and the percentage of youth with bank accounts rose from 26% to 60% (IYF, 2017). This case study demonstrates the transformative impact that integrating sports into youth development and employability programs can have on young people's lives and livelihoods.

Conclusion

In conclusion, sports programs play a pivotal role in promoting youth employability by fostering the development of essential life skills, enhancing social connections, and providing avenues for personal and professional growth. As demonstrated by the International Youth Foundation (IYF), the strategic integration of sports into development initiatives has the potential to unlock the potential of millions of young people globally, driving economic growth and reducing poverty. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the value of sports in fostering youth employability and invest in programs that leverage the power of sports to create positive change.

To ensure the effectiveness of sports programs in promoting youth employability, stakeholders must prioritize key facets such as safeguarding, collaborative and transformative partnerships, consultative program design and inclusion, and robust MERL systems and processes. By adopting a comprehensive, evidence-based, and contextually sensitive approach, sports programs can maximize their impact on young people's lives, empowering them to seize opportunities and contribute to the socio-economic development of their communities.

Lastly, the recommendations outlined above offer a roadmap for stakeholders to enhance the impact of sports on youth employability. By integrating life skills training, forging partnerships, prioritizing inclusivity, implementing robust MERL systems, and advocating for policy support and investment, sports programs can drive sustainable change and create lasting benefits for young people and their communities. The transformative power of sports in the lives of young people should not be underestimated, and continued efforts must be made to harness this potential for the betterment of society as a whole.

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About the author:

Ronnie Murungu is a development and humanitarian professional with international experience in Africa and Middle East. Currently Regional Director – Africa and Middle East with International Youth Foundation. e-mail: r.murungu@iyfglobal.org

