Play Today, Thrive Tomorrow

Sport in Post-Humanitarian Crisis Contexts

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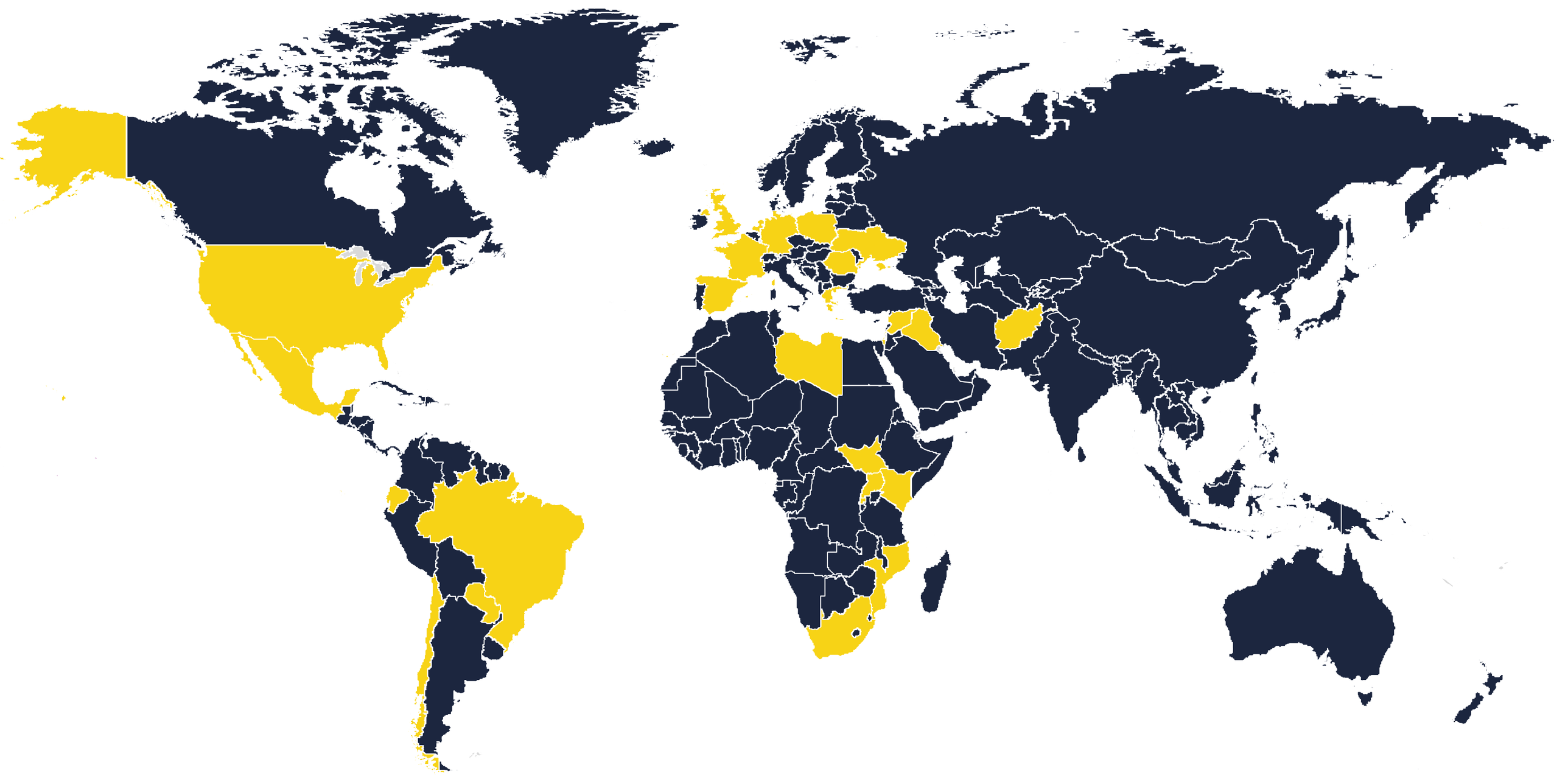
Introduction

This report summarises the study examining Sports for Development and Peace (SDP) officials, on the implementation of SDP in post-humanitarian crisis settings. The research explored role and impact of sport and movement-based interventions on young people affected by humanitarian crises, the optimal timeframe for implementation, and contextual factors influencing programmes. This research was carried out in partnership with Laureus Sport for Good. The results identified:

- Sport in post-humanitarian crisis settings has positive impacts on individual health and wellbeing as well as contributing to peacebuilding objectives.
- The implementation of sport in post-humanitarian crisis areas should begin as soon as the need is identified, provided that safe spaces and appropriately trained staff, who are both knowledgeable about and respectful of the local community, are in place.
- Contextual barriers affecting SDP programmes included political interference and a lack of sustainable participant engagement.
- Key enabling factors included partnerships with local organisations and alumni coaches.

Summarising the key findings from participants, the report outlines how sport can be effectively applied in post-humanitarian crises.



Global Crisis: The research was informed by organisations operating in the following countries:

- Afghanistan
- Brazil
- Chile
- Ecuador
- France
- Germany
- Greece
- Iraq
- Israel
- Kenya
- Libya
- Mexico
- Mozambique
- Northern Ireland
- Paraguay
- Poland
- Romania
- South Africa
- Spain
- South Sudan
- Syria
- The Netherlands
- Ukraine
- United States

Aims

This research project aims to enhance the understanding and knowledge base within the rapidly growing field of SDP in post-humanitarian crisis settings. The research seeks to inform policy and practitioners involved in designing, implementing and funding programmes by providing key insights based on three research questions:

1. What is the role and impact of sporting interventions in the peacebuilding context?
2. What are SDP officials' perceptions regarding the optimal timeframe for implementing sporting interventions in post-humanitarian crisis settings?
3. How do contextual factors and the needs of population influence the implementation of SDP interventions?

Context

- Humanitarian crises, including conflict, natural disasters and pandemics, exacerbate human-rights concerns and vulnerabilities[1].
- The frequency of humanitarian crises is increasing, with the number of forcibly displaced people reported to have reached 120 million in 2024[2].
- Sport and physical activity (PA) are increasingly used to pursue non-sporting goals and have been recognised as a potentially powerful tool to support the peacebuilding process[3].
- SDP employs sport and movement-based interventions to support humanitarian development and now responds to refugee crises, climate crises, and those affected by war and conflict globally[4].
- There has been rapid growth in organisations operating within the field of SDP[5].
- Current criticisms of the field argue that sport is not an appropriate tool as it can exacerbate social exclusion and inherent rivalry, antagonising relations between vulnerable groups, and requires access to sporting infrastructure[6].
- The insights of organisations, many of which are supported by Laureus, operating across multiple humanitarian crisis contexts, contributed significantly to shaping the contextual understanding presented in this research.

Photo credit by Team Up

Key Findings

The Role and Impact of Sport in Post-Humanitarian Crisis Settings

Sport as an Engine for Change: Participants consistently reported that sport acts as the driving force behind the positive impacts observed. The unique qualities of sport enable children to engage indirectly in peacebuilding activities. Children and young people are attracted to sports programmes, which provide opportunities to integrate valuable lessons within each training session. Importantly, sport offers individuals a sense of normality and structure, giving them a purpose. Sport allows children to practice and develop life skills that are not typically taught in a classroom but acquired through experience, making it an effective tool to maintain engagement. This universal appeal of sport was a recurring theme, with children viewing SDP programmes as opportunities to play with peers and teammates. This attraction supports long-term approaches aimed at achieving deeper levels of change. Participants emphasised that the benefits observed would not have been possible without sport creating a space for change and bringing people together.

"What sport does is it gives you a space to approach some of these issues without outwardly saying it, right without saying we're going to sit down and talk about peace."

Shaping the Individual: Individuals' vulnerabilities are heightened due to loss of home, environment or community. The data show that sport programmes provide holistic support for individual's health and wellbeing, both in the short and long-term. Beyond the well-established mental and physical health, in the short-term sport helps individuals process trauma through bodily movement offering a means to reduce emotional stress, even if temporary. Over the long-term, programmes assist individuals to adapt and thrive in new environments, foster new identities, increase self-esteem, confidence, and build resilience. Participants also highlighted career support provided through empowering young people to gain qualifications as sport coaches following sustained engagement in programmes.

"Sport becomes more than just sport for good health and fitness; it becomes a means to help individuals basically process some of their traumas."

Photo credit by Team Up

Fostering Cultures of Peace: The community impact beyond individual wellbeing was a common theme that emerged. All participants noted improvements in relationships and social cohesion; whether between refugee communities and the host society, within refugee camps, or among groups within longstanding ethnic tensions. Sport was described as a universal language and means of communication when individuals had different mother tongues. It acted as an icebreaker, initiating dialogue between different groups and providing young people opportunities to build friendships. Sport also served as a tool to reduce violence, allowing communities to unite over shared interests and commonalities. The 'ripple effect'[18], whereby the learnings from children, in the programme, extended to their parents, families, and peers at school resulted in wider communities championing peacebuilding goals.

"The children will have been doing the programme for several months. They actually go back because they have the friendships, now they're more connected with children from other ethnic groups. They return to the community and ask their parents, 'Why are we not talking to the neighbours? We can be friends.'"

"There were huge fights among the different refugee communities within the camp. Again, sport is a universal language. People that were fighting or attacking each other, or who hated each other, became best friends. Sport was the platform that actually gave us opportunity to achieve all this."

Photo credit by PeacePlayers

The Optimal Time Frame for Implementing Programmes

Get the Ball Rolling: A key objective of this research was to understand if sport is an appropriate tool in humanitarian crisis settings and when programmes should be implemented. An unexpected finding was the strong consensus among most practitioners that sport programmes should be implemented as soon as the need is recognised. The immediate effects of sport in the short-term were significant for trauma processing. The use of sport within emergency pedagogy between stage one and stage two of trauma processing, highlighted the importance of short-term impacts of programmes, with bodily movement helping to alleviate traumas. Reservations about introducing sport early were discussed; it was generally agreed that sport helps individuals manage psychological trauma even while basic needs remain unmet. One participant noted their organisation's focus on operating in protracted crisis settings, deliberately avoiding crowding the humanitarian space and prioritising basic needs and funding challenges during immediate crisis. The long-term goals of such programmes relate to achieving gender equity and changing community norms affected by crisis, meaning the focus is not always on immediate trauma response.

"They had so many necessities, from food to accommodation and everything, so I first hesitated. But, in the end, sport helped them fight the psychological trauma, build friendships and someone to share the time with, something to look forward to every day apart from the boredom and depression. "

What it Takes to Start the Game: Two key foundations necessary before programme implementation were highlighted and align with the Sport for Protection framework[16]. First is the critical importance of safe places, which reduce the risk of further harm to participants. Second is the need for appropriate staff and coaches to lead sessions. One participant noted the potential harm caused by 'wrong' staff, those who lack commitment, contextual understanding, and cultural awareness. Coaches, often seen as role models, must be carefully selected. Several participants noted limited funding availability. While this did not detract from short-term impacts, sustainable funding is essential to ensure programme longevity and lasting effects.

"I would say take as long as you possibly need to find the right people. In this work turnover can be high. We made many mistakes with the wrong people and caused a lot of damage."

"From the beginning, I see that children suffer greatly; there is an ongoing trauma and an urgent need."

Photo credit by Yoga and Sport with Refugees

Contextual Factors that Influence the Implementation of Interventions

The Influence of Local Culture: The importance of local culture and contextual needs was a recurring theme throughout the data. A common approach discussed by participants was the use of alumni coaches or working through partnerships with local organisations. Participants recognise the relatability of alumni; who had experienced programmes or similar situations. In societies where women's rights in sport are not always acknowledged, hyper-local ownership was essential. Women were more likely to engage in female-only sessions and respond to agendas led by individuals sharing their cultural backgrounds. Conversely, male refugees were noted not always to listen or acknowledge female coaches, reflecting cultural norms from some of their home countries. Religious practices also played a significant role, with several organisations adapting to individuals' observance of Ramadan. When using sport as a methodology, organisations must consider those who fast before participating in physical activity.

"Something that is such a cultural import, like running for girls, primarily in the Muslim and Islamic world, is really not something that you can push an agenda on. It has to be owned by people who are, everyday, hyper-local version of community"

Participant Sustainability: Participant sustainability presented a unique challenge, especially when working with forcibly displaced individuals and refugees who often remain in locations for indefinite periods. Long-term participation is required to organise team programmes and achieve intended goals. This not only affects participant impact but also influences programme delivery; for example, one organisation relies on hiring refugees as coaches. High turnover in refugee camps makes offering a consistent programme difficult. Attendance is further affected by environmental factors, with practitioners reporting drops during extreme heat and winter months.

"The turnover is very high because people are taking their papers very quickly so then we need to find coaches to replace those leaving. Sometimes we find, sometimes we don't."

Political Interference: A significant contextual challenge identified was navigating political interference for organisations during programme implementation. Organisations must maintain positive relationships with governments to access certain countries, while managing the potential harm governmental actors might cause. Participants highlighted challenges in accessing areas of need, such as in Syria and Libya. Organisations innovated by training staff from neighbouring countries with access, who then implemented programmes locally. Governments have limited NGOs in certain regions, revoking NGO registrations and restricting funding opportunities. Participants noted reliance on partnerships with their organisation branches, in Western countries to finance programmes. It is clear that the implementation of programmes may be hindered by local governmental agendas, requiring careful management of these relationships.

"Access is sometimes more than just having a visa. Sometimes you cannot operate. For example, we trained professionals in Turkey, who then travelled to Syria to implement the programmes."

"The political challenge is that to reach the locations, a relationship must be established between the organisation and the government. This relationship often involves political interests that harm the work with some leaders; lacking proper qualifications, which raises doubt about their true intentions to support the programmes."

Future Actions for the Sector

Recommendations for Organisations

- SDP programmes should harness the strength of local organisations by transferring methodology and working in partnership with those best placed to implement programmes effectively. This can help overcome access and political barriers, while respecting local and cultural needs.
- When designing and launching a programme, it is crucial to take the time to recruit the right coaches and staff. Coaches must understand cultural norms, earn the respect of the community, and be trusted, especially when working in dangerous contexts.
- For organisation's established methodologies, programme implementation should begin as soon a need is identified in safe spaces and with trained, hyper-local coaches.

Recommendations for Funding Bodies

- Programmes with established methodologies should be integrated into the aid response from the outset to offer short-term relief and assist trauma processing.
- SDP programmes are most effective when sustained over longer periods of time, therefore, long-term funding commitments are essential to maximise impacts.
- Programmes often prioritise different goals, so it is important to ensure that they address specific target areas or consider partnerships to achieve more effective outcomes.

Recommendations for Researchers

- Increased long-term monitoring and evaluation are needed to improve understanding of SDP on wider communities. Several practitioners noted a 'ripple effect' and community change. Yet academic research should investigate the sustainability of this effect, particularly in contexts experiencing ongoing or protracted conflict, to understand long-term change following SDP programmes.
- The findings highlight two key prerequisites before starting: safe spaces and locally trained coaches. It is important to explore how other foundational elements in the UNHCR Sport for Protection Framework contribute to effective programmes.

Methodology

UNHCR Sport for Protection Framework[17]

The research is framed around the UNHCR Sport for Protection Framework[17], which provides current recommendations and guidance for practitioners working within the field. Guided by the sport for protection theory of change[16], the framework outlines the foundational elements and enablers for programmes that support the development of life skills through sport, as well as the mid and long-term outcomes.

The framework identifies four key long-term outcomes:

- Psychosocial wellbeing
- Social inclusion
- Social cohesion
- Strengthened resilience

The overall intended outcome is to support young people's wellbeing and enhance protection, contributing to positive changes in their lives and communities, and fostering an increasingly safe, human rights-based society.

Figure 1: **UNHCR Sport for Protection Framework**

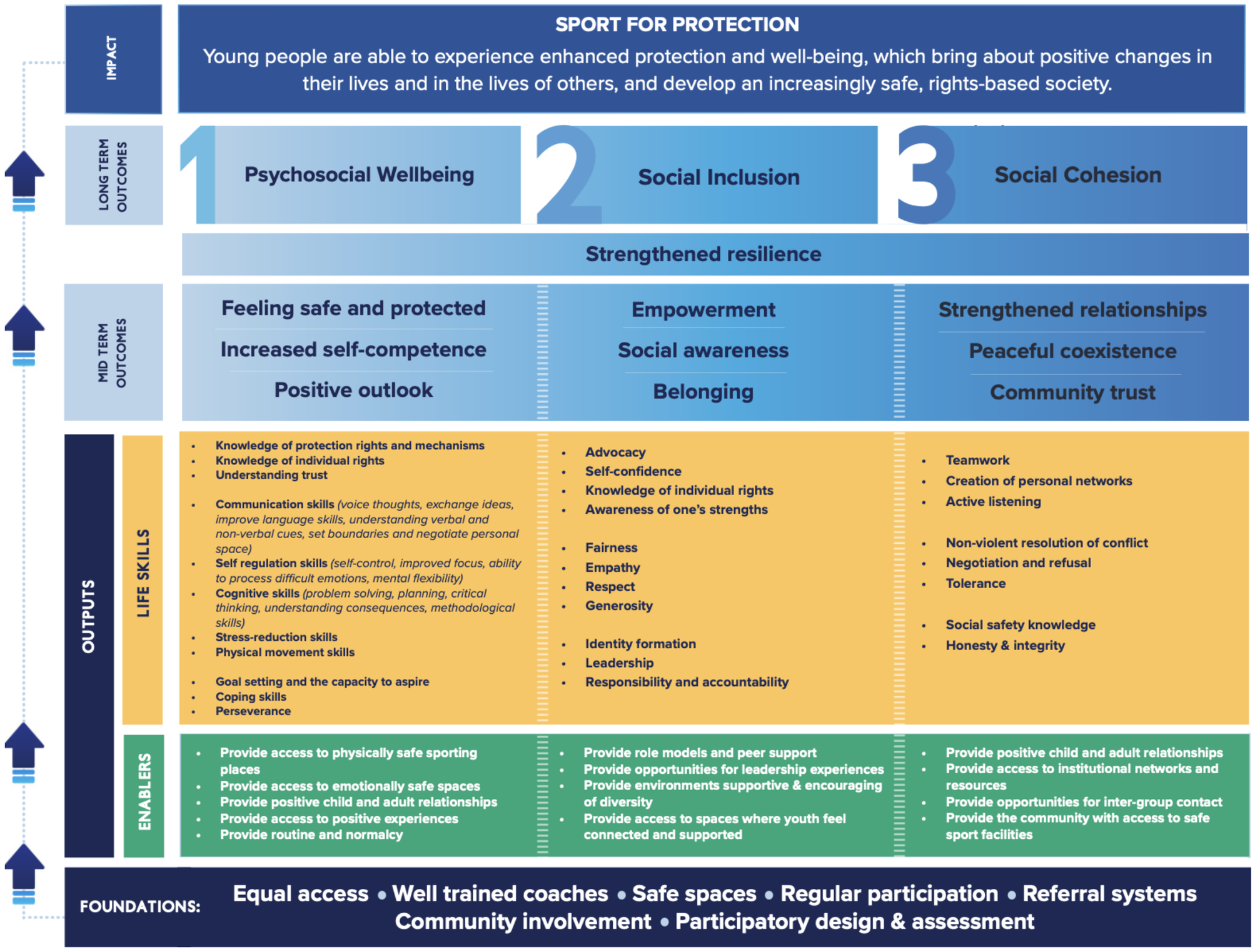


Photo credit by PeacePlayers

Data Collection

Many of the organisations and practitioners interviewed for this study have been involved in programmes supported by Laureus, offering valuable practice-based perspectives on the research themes. This research prioritised engagement with practitioners actively working in the field of SDP.

- 8 semi-structured interviews
- One online email interview
- One focus group involving three members from the same organisation working in different contexts

All participants were involved in the design and implementation of SDP programmes in post-humanitarian crisis settings. Interviews were conducted in English, though it was not necessarily the participants' first language, which may have increased the risk of potential misinterpretations. Interviews were transcribed and analysed to identify emerging themes and key findings relevant to the research objectives.

Photo credit by Free to Run

Conclusion

Play Today, Thrive Tomorrow – Sport for a Stronger Self and Community

This research has contributed to the knowledge base in the field of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) following humanitarian crises. The aims of this project were to deepen the understanding of the role sport can play in supporting young people after such conditions, to identify the optimal timeframe for implementing sport-based programmes, and to explore the contextual factors organisations should consider when implementing programmes. Sport programmes clearly target the holistic development of young people and provide evidence of achievements outlined in the Sport for Protection Framework[17]. The findings support and extend this framework by emphasising the short-term impact of sport programmes in aiding trauma processing and providing participants with structure and a sense of normality. Accordingly, once a crisis is recognised, sport programmes should be mobilised and implemented as soon as possible in safe spaces, led by staff who understand and respect community norms and needs. In the long-term, programmes support positive youth development by helping individuals create new identities, build self-confidence, and adapt to environmental changes following humanitarian crisis. They have also proven effective in fostering peacebuilding goals and enhancing social cohesion between previously divided groups. Key considerations for practitioners designing and implementing programmes have been identified and are outlined below. These include the importance of local staff leadership, safe spaces, sensitivity to cultural and gender norms, and the value of partnerships and methodological transfers as effective strategies for action.

Photo credit by PeacePlayers

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