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– Written by Mirjana Prljevic, Switzerland

Sport is a potential unifier in a growingly disconnected world. Uniquely a human activity, sport holds a long but varied history across both Eastern and Western cultures and civilizations. In contemporary society, sport continues to reach out to those in developed and developing countries, and in many ways reflects social values, norms and change within individual nations throughout the world.

The United Nations (UN) General Assembly has recognised the influential capacity of sport. In 2003, the assembly adopted the resolution *Sport as a Means to Promote Education, Health, Development and Peace*¹ and subsequently declared 2005 as the International Year of Sport and Physical Education². Additionally, the UN Secretary – General Ban Ki-moon states:

“Sport is increasingly recognised as an important tool in helping the United Nations achieve its objectives, in particular the Millennium Development Goals. By including sport in development and peace programmes in a more systematic way, the United Nations can make full use of this cost-effective tool to help us create a better world”².

The UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) supports the UN objectives through adopting sport as a tool that can be used to work towards development and peace³. Specifically, the

UNOSDP’s objectives (as originally outlined in a 2011 report³) can be summarised as follows:

- **Education:** Sport has the potential to facilitate the education of individuals and communities, especially through the integration of physical education into both the primary and secondary school curriculum. Participation in physical education has been found to increase in academic performance and improve school attendance, in addition to providing a valuable opportunity to develop social skills such as respect, confidence and tolerance.
- **Health:** Both sport and physical education have the capacity to contribute to the physical and social health of populations, resulting in financial benefits such as decreased health-care costs and an improvement in productivity. Sport can also be used as a conduit for important public health messages, such as disease prevention measures.
- **Empowerment and inclusion:** Sport, through its popularity, provides a vehicle for the promotion of gender equality, and inclusion and the means to combat racism. Increasing access and opportunities for women and girls to participate in sport assists to develop confidence, and provides a

valuable platform to challenge gender stereotypes. Sport is also inclusive of persons with disabilities, providing social, psychological and physiological benefits.

- **Peace:** Sport, as a universal language, can cross national and geographical borders, promoting peace, tolerance and social cohesion. Sport brings people together from around the world, uniting those with different socio-cultural and religious backgrounds.

Globally, organisations and individuals are actively promoting the philosophy of “sport for development and peace” and are a driving force for social change. By no means exhaustive, those who are working on the ground include, for example, the UN, government and non-government organisations, sporting organisations and federations, academic institutions, the media, armed forces and international peacekeepers.

In December 2011, the IV World Forum of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations was held in Doha, Qatar. The forum provided insight into UNOSDP activities that aimed to achieve the UN’s eight Millennium Development Goals by involving sporting and non-government organisations around the world. A topic debated at the forum was “Sport’s role in promoting intercultural dialogue and



Inset: The IV World Forum of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, Doha, Qatar

Image credit: UNAOC FORUM/ Agence Publics/Qatar Committee

understanding". Participants included HRH Prince Faisal bin Al Hussein (FIFA Asia), Mr Wilfried Lemke (Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace to the UN Secretary-General) and Ms Beatrice Faumuina (Food and Agriculture Organization Goodwill Ambassador).

Attendees at the forum were presented with the example of the Horn of Africa Development Initiative. Launched in 2003 in Northern Kenya, the initiative organised football games on the border of Kenya

and Somalia – an area of extreme conflict. During the games, children as young as 10 who had previously been trained to use weapons and violent combat against each other played "football for peace". The experience led to the creation of the Horn of Africa Development Initiative's Peace Center for 1000 Children in Marsabit and, most recently, a training camp for junior players where young people are coached in professional football skills.

Others to present at the forum included



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Mirjana Prljevic

Adviser for Strategic
positioning

Peace and Crises Management
Foundation, Switzerland

Contact : www.prljevic.com

former Olympic discus thrower Ms Beatrice Faumuina who presented experiences from New Zealand where, in co-operation with the local university, formal and informal education is delivered on "winning and sport spirit". Ms Auma Obama from CARE USA's Sports for Social Change detailed her experiences promoting sport values in the United States. She discussed the challenges of gender equality and described how CARE USA has used baseball to address the challenges, forming 30 clubs comprising 160 boys and girls. Attendees also learnt about an initiative in the Balkans, a region of conflict on the borders of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, where

a local bishop of the Orthodox Church has collaborated with famous Serbian basketballer Dejan Bodiroga to found a basketball camp for young people. The camp, which has been running for 10 years, includes boys from 22 countries.

The unique nature of sport positions it as a powerful catalyst for change. This change has far reaching potential across whole societies and among smaller communities. Within the developed and developing world there are many examples where sport has been used to promote education, health, inclusion and peace, all of which contribute to long-term prosperity and development of the world in which we all share.

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