BUILDING PEACE THROUGH SPORTS IN POLARISED CHRISTIAN/MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN JOS, PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Various crises that have beclouded the city of Jos have led to the death of over four thousand people, both male and female, including children, and an unquantifiable loss of properties. This has resulted in both physical and psychological trauma among the inhabitants of the highly revered peaceful city. The Muslims are predominantly of northern extraction, while the Christians are mixed from different ethnic groups, both from the south and the northern part of Nigeria. This lack of trust has gradually made people live in different environment either within the Muslim or Christian communities, without having much to do with one another based on where to reside. The height of the distrust has led to stagnation in both social and economic dimensions, as the various groups find it difficult to do things together, unlike in the past. This study adopted qualitative sources. The study observed that sport, especially football, has been used to unite people of different religions and ethnicities. The study further found that the hitherto polarized communities are beginning to relate using sports and football viewing centres, and the gap is gradually being closed. The study recommends, among others, that sport and peace research should be further expanded. The various communities should incorporate sport into their Local Action Plan to make sporting activities an integral part of their annual engagements.

Keywords: Sport, Peace, Peacebuilding, Conflict, Polarized Community

INTRODUCTION

Sports of all kinds have become a vital avenue for bringing people together, regardless of culture, religion, gender, status, boundaries, or class. They promote peace, tolerance, and understanding across divides. While sports alone cannot achieve lasting peace, they can significantly contribute to peacebuilding and the reconstruction of lost relationships, groups, and communities on a global scale. In recent years, sports have been increasingly recognized as a means to advance social development and foster peace in highly volatile contexts (Cárdenas, 2016). Sports serve as a platform where both offenders and victims can come together, often without the need for formal mediation, and share a common passion for the game. However, sports can either nurture or undermine the delicate processes of peacebuilding and development in various communities. War-

torn areas have leveraged sports as a way to rebuild lost connections, setting a new pace for interaction and rejuvenating community life. Integrating sports into peacebuilding strategies has proven effective in enabling people to coexist peacefully, despite painful histories. According to Lajtner (2014), using sports to promote mutual understanding, conflict reconciliation, and coexistence in deeply divided societies has become an increasingly important topic, especially in conflict and post-conflict regions.

This represents the intersection of sports and peacebuilding; a strategy aimed at uniting communities to prevent a relapse into violence. For instance, Jos in Plateau State has faced violent conflicts that have caused divisions within the city due to intergroup feuds. However, continuous organization of sports events, particularly football matches between the Christian and Muslim communities, has helped sustain peace. Sports have the remarkable ability to connect people and communities effectively (Cárdenas, 2013). When these communities are inclusive, they transform into vital areas for social networking, fostering collaboration (SDP International Working Group, 2008). The objectives of this study are to examine the relationship between sports and peacebuilding and to investigate sports' role in bridging the gaps in polarized communities. Additionally, the study will assess the impact of sports in fostering peace and tolerance and propose measures and strategies for incorporating sports into peace research. This study contributes to literature in area of defining sport as key component of peacebuilding in Jos polarized communities. The paper divided on the following headings: overview of Jos City, internet conceptualization, theoretical framework, analysis of intergroup relations and the path to polarized communities, role of sports in peacebuilding and concluding remarks.

METHODOLOGY

The research utilized secondary sources, including published materials like books, journals, articles, reports, and other relevant resources related to sports and peacebuilding in a polarized society.

Overview of Jos city

Jos City is located in the Jos North Local Government Area, which serves as the capital of Plateau State, Nigeria. Plateau State is situated in North Central Nigeria. Between 1985 and 1991, the government led by General Ibrahim Babangida created 11 new states and 297 local government areas across the country. One of the newly established local government areas was Jos North, which was carved from the former Jos local government area. This new area covers 291 square kilometers and includes the central city of Jos, where the former headquarters of Jos LGA, the ultramodern Main Market, the University of Jos, and other significant infrastructure can be found. In addition to being the official capital city, Jos is regarded as the economic nerve center of Plateau State (Madueke, 2019). The Jos Plateau rises to about 5,250 feet (1,600 meters) above sea level. Known for its cultural diversity, the state is home to approximately 40 ethnic groups, including the Vergam, Ankwei, Angas, Jawara (Jarauci), Birom, Mangavwul, Fulani, Hausa, and Eggen.

The polarized settlement in Jos stems from the crisis that occurred on September 7, 2001. This crisis led people to segregate based on religious affiliation, causing them to live in areas dominated by their own faith. The violence during the Jos crisis resulted in significant loss of life and property,

ultimately leading to another similar crisis in 2008. These events have damaged relationships among the community members, dividing them along religious and ethnic lines. Some communities in Jos are predominantly monolithic, meaning they are largely composed of individuals from the same religion. In contrast, mixed communities consist of people from different ethnic backgrounds but share the same religion. This polarization has resulted in people living apart within the same city, with Muslim communities situated on one side and Christian communities on the other. Elitist communities, however, tend to be more integrated, as residents there are less concerned about ethnicity and religion. This societal division remains evident, despite various peacebuilding efforts that have failed to foster unity. The focus of this study is to explore the potential of sports, particularly football, as a means to bring individuals of differing religious and ethnic backgrounds together, and to assess its impact on society. Sports serve as a crucial unifying tool for peacebuilding in the polarized Christian-Muslim communities in Jos, Nigeria. Football provides a platform that connects youth through their shared passion, encourages dialogue, and helps to dismantle religious divides. Additionally, it underscores the need for comprehensive peace strategies, such as youth empowerment, community mediation, and inclusive governance, to address the underlying ethnic and religious tensions, as well as political affiliations, in order to prevent recurrent conflicts.

Conceptualization

Sport

The definition of sport encompasses a wide range of activities suitable for individuals of all ages and abilities. At its core, sport promotes participation, inclusion, and a sense of community. It has a unique ability to engage, mobilize, and inspire individuals. The intrinsic values of sportsuch as teamwork, fairness, discipline, and respect for both opponents and the rules of the gamecan be utilized to foster solidarity, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence. As a universal language, sport serves as a powerful tool for promoting peace, tolerance, and understanding by bringing people together across boundaries, cultures, and religions.

Peace

The concept of peace is fundamental, serving as the foundation for other ideas, such as peacebuilding and reconstruction. These concepts gained prominence due to the failure to maintain lasting peace. According to Galtung, positive peace is characterized by the absence of violent conflict and structural violence, creating optimal conditions for development. Positive peacebuilding aims to assist nations in establishing more just and democratic systems, addressing and eliminating root causes of conflict such as poverty and illiteracy (Bennet, 2003).

Peacebuilding

Conceptually, there are various schools of thought regarding the meaning of peacebuilding; however, Lederach is a prominent voice in this field. Peacebuilding is a comprehensive concept that includes, generates, and sustains a full range of processes, approaches, and stages necessary to transform conflict into more sustainable and peaceful relationships activities that occur both before and after peace agreements (Lederach, 1997, p. 20). According to Lambourne (2004), post-conflict

peacebuilding refers to "strategies designed to promote a secure and stable lasting peace in which the basic human needs of the population are met, and violent conflicts do not recur."

Initiatives like Face of Peace Global utilize mixed-faith teams to foster trust, reduce prejudice, and rebuild relationships after years of ethno-religious conflict (Bivan, 2025). This organization employs sports as a means to promote peaceful cohesion in Plateau State. Additionally, other initiatives, such as the Ramadan League, are organized by Muslim groups to engage in football competitions. Notably, this league includes more Christian footballers than Muslim players, which has garnered widespread recognition and participation from the youth in the city. According to Saint (2024), football matches have helped alleviate tensions among young people and improved intergroup relations that had previously deteriorated, leading to increased engagement. These initiatives have achieved significant success, with participants reporting improved relationships and reduced tensions between communities. As a result, the Plateau State Peacebuilding Agency has acknowledged the positive impact of these efforts and recognized the role of sports in building trust and promoting peace in Plateau State. Sports have demonstrated the potential to create peace in polarized communities by leveraging its universal appeal. Organizations and communities can collaborate to promote understanding, tolerance, and reconciliation, transforming formerly violent areas into "peace zones" and fostering unity among residents in Jos and its surroundings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilized the Contact Hypothesis Theory, developed by Gordon Allport in 1954. This theory posits that positive interactions between members of opposing or different groups can significantly reduce prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. The Contact Hypothesis suggests that when groups engage in intergroup contact under specific conditions such as having equal status and cooperating prejudice can be diminished. This process may involve several phases, including decategorization, harmonious differentiation, and recategorization, which are aimed at fostering positive relationships. It indicates that cooperative, face-to-face interactions, when conducted under the right conditions, can promote empathy and dismantle negative stereotypes, thus improving intergroup relations. For example, when two conflicting parties participate in sports together, they are likely to overlook their differences and move forward without dwelling on the past. Overall, the Contact Hypothesis supports the idea of reconciliatory engagement between groups, standing in stark contrast to avoidance strategies in conflict resolution.

ANALYSIS OF INTERGROUP RELATIONS AND THE PATH TO POLARIZED COMMUNITIES

Between 2001 and 2012, the city experienced violent crises that led to significant tension, marked by killings, property destruction, and various human rights violations. During this period, the city, which had previously embraced people from all walks of life, became increasingly polarized. Residents began to form isolated communities, largely cut off from one another. The population became divided along ethnic and religious lines, primarily between two dominant groups: Christians and Muslims. These groups, who once lived together in close proximity and sometimes even in the same households, found themselves separated by the ongoing crisis. As a result, they now inhabit distinct areas and environments.

For instance, the Muslim communities include Bauchi Road, Ungwar Rogo, Rikkos, Dilimi, and Ali Kazaure, among others. These neighborhoods were once mixed communities where both Christians and Muslims lived and conducted business together without fear or distrust. The current University of Jos Main Campus is situated within the Muslim community. Up until the outbreak of the 2001 crisis, students were able to rent houses in Ungwar Rogo, whether owned by Muslims or Christians. However, the crisis led to the destruction of properties belonging to Christians, particularly those where the occupants had fled the community for safety. In some cases, if a house was not destroyed, the owner was often forced to sell it to a Muslim at a drastically reduced price, knowing that as a non-Muslim, they would be reluctant to return to the area. This marked the beginning of the community's shift towards a more monolithic nature, which has persisted since then. Although the Muslim residents of these communities share the same faith, they come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Kanuri, Hausa, Fulani, Ebira, Igala, and Yoruba, among others. There are a few non-Muslims in these neighborhoods, such as Christian Yorubas and individuals from other tribes, who have lived there for a long time and feel secure in remaining part of the community.

In various communities that are predominantly Christian, such as Angwan Rukuba, Chobe/Bussa-Buji, Rukuba Road, Jenta, and Alheri, residents initially coexisted peacefully, regardless of their religious affiliations. These communities are home to both indigenous groups, like the Berom, Afizere, Anaguta, Ngas, and Mwaghavul, as well as non-indigenous groups, including the Ibos, Irobos, Yoruba, Idomas, and other ethnicities from the South-South region. However, similar to experiences in Muslim communities, Muslims living among Christians have increasingly chosen to relocate to be with fellow Muslims. This shift has resulted in people living in segregated environments based on their religion. In the city of Jos, these are the two primary groups. Nevertheless, there are still a few Muslims from southern Nigeria who have long resided in these Christian-dominated areas. Often, these individuals possess unique traits that help them be accepted by their neighbors. Generally, as long as a Muslim is not part of the Hausa ethnic group, they may face less fear of living among non-Muslims. While these communities are largely homogenous in terms of religion, they are ethnically diverse. The tendency for homogeneity is often driven by fear; even in the absence of conflict, residents may feel uncomfortable moving freely in such environments due to the potential threat of violence.

The third type of community consists of people living together in mixed neighborhoods, such as Rayfield, GRA (Government Reserved Area), and Dadinkowa, which includes State and Federal Low-Cost housing. These communities are diverse in terms of religion and ethnicity, and they are primarily inhabited by the elites. They maintain a strong sense of unity, even during crises when other communities are experiencing tension and conflict. In order to protect their territory, they have formed their own appointed security groups to prevent individuals from other communities who might seek to instigate violence from accessing their neighborhoods.

Sport has emerged as a uniting factor that brings people together, especially the youth who often become involved in violent conflicts. This is largely due to their adventurous nature and their desire to defend their religions, even if they may not be deeply spiritually adherent. During violent outbreaks in various communities, these young individuals can be seen blocking roads and asking passersby to recite passages from either the Bible or the Quran to determine their religious affiliation. However, the youth requesting someone to recite a verse may not actually know if it is being recited correctly; they may turn to another peer for verification. In some cases, people can be physically identified as belonging to a particular faith without needing to recite verses. For

Muslims, frequent prayer or natural physical markers, such as a mark or scar on the forehead, can indicate their religious identity. Identifying Christians can be more variable; at times, their mode of dress may serve as a clue. Additionally, many Christians frequently place church stickers on their cars, which can also facilitate identification.

THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN PEACEBUILDING AND POST CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION

The cost of maintaining peace is significantly lower than the expenses associated with peacebuilding. Regardless of the strategies implemented to rebuild devastated cities, the lives of those affected by violent conflicts can never return to normal, as the dead cannot be resurrected. Sport is often utilized by peace scholars and advocates as a means to help unite people. Football, in particular, is the most popular sport and serves as a common ground for spectators. Viewing centers, where fans gather to watch football, such as matches involving national teams, local leagues, continental competitions, the Premier League, and the World Cup, play a crucial role in this unification process. Through these shared experiences, both victims and offenders have the opportunity to come together. As they watch games side by side, they begin to let go of past grievances. Football fans typically come from diverse backgrounds, including various races, cultures, clans, ethnicities, religions, and belief systems. In the realm of sport, these distinctions fade away, as it transcends segregation and primordial sentiments, particularly those commonly found in Africa.

Football is a powerful unifying force in Nigeria, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds. Young individuals are increasingly organizing intercultural and interreligious activities, such as town hall meetings and interfaith dialogues, which involve parents, community leaders, and religious groups. Sports programs serve as effective platforms for facilitating these dialogues among young people and other community members. The focus extends beyond the physical benefits of sports; it also emphasizes relationship-building and creating opportunities for healing and dialogue to address the root causes of conflict. These programs encourage peaceful interactions, foster social contracts, build friendships, and promote a shared sense of identity and belonging (Peace Initiative Network, 2013). In the city of Jos, various stakeholders, including NGOs, religious institutions, and community leaders, have organized football tournaments that feature competitions between Christian and Muslim communities. These events sometimes take the form of 5-a-side football, which is particularly suitable for communities lacking full-sized football pitches. For example, matches held in Christian communities have welcomed Muslim players and their supporters without any incidents of physical or verbal attack, and the reverse has also been true. On occasion, tournaments are hosted at Rwang Pam Stadium, a neutral venue, to further encourage unity and collaboration between the communities involved.

In Tudun Wada, a diverse community where both Muslims and Christians coexist, there is a football pitch that serves as a practice area for residents. Every morning, people from both faiths come together to play and train. Sports have become an effective platform for uniting individuals with different ideologies, contributing to the peacebuilding efforts in Jos city.

Several sports stars, including Mikel Obi, Ahmed Musa, and Onazi, have utilized their influence to unite individuals from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. They have been spotted training alongside community members on different football pitches in Jos City. These athletes often bring

sports kits to donate to the players and occasionally share food and money to support their career aspirations. Their efforts have contributed significantly to peacebuilding in the city of Jos.

There are several football tournaments currently held in Plateau State, which include the Plateau State Governor's Cup (also known as the Lalong Cup), the Security Task Force (STF) Cup, and the Jos North Local Government Chairman's Cup. The latter is typically organized by various Local Government Chairmen within their respective areas. These sports tournaments have positively influenced the restoration of hope and peace in the city of Jos. In addition to these competitions, there is the Plateau State Football Club, known as Plateau United. This club won the Nigeria Premier League championship in 2017. During tournaments, visiting teams compete against Plateau United at either Rwang Pam Stadium or Zaria Road Stadium. These events have further strengthened the bonds among people, regardless of their religion or ethnic background.

IMPACT OF SPORTS AND PEACE BUILDING IN JOS CITY

Nigeria is a diverse society with many ethnic groups, and it has utilized sports as a significant tool for promoting unity, tolerance, understanding, and development—both in sports and in peacebuilding. Communities that once lived in isolation are now coming together to engage through sports tournaments and football viewing centers, where they can play and watch both local and international leagues. Sport is not only used as a local strategy but also serves as a tool for conflict prevention and peacebuilding. This is evident in various international agreements, strategies, and treaties. A notable historical example is the Christmas Truce of 1914 during World War I, when German and English troops paused hostilities to exchange gifts and play football (Woodhouse, 2009, p. 27). Additionally, in 1993, the United Nations revived the ancient tradition of the Olympic Truce, which grants athletes from warring nations safe passage to participate in the Olympic Games. Since then, prior to every Olympics, the United Nations General Assembly has passed a symbolic resolution under the theme: "Building a Peaceful and Better World through Sport and the Olympic Ideal." All these efforts aim to bridge divides across different groups. This approach has also been reflected in the strategies implemented in the city of Jos to restore peace.

Conclusion

We have discussed the impact and role of sport in peacebuilding, particularly through football matches and viewing centers in the Jos communities that have previously experienced isolation. Sport has proven to be an effective strategy for restoring lost relationships and fostering lasting peace and tolerance among the youth, as well as promoting intercultural and interreligious cohesion within the community.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

The integration of sports as a comprehensive solution for peacebuilding should be a fundamental aspect of community local Action Plan programs. This inclusion would provide a structured framework that allows community leaders and youth to leverage sports as a dynamic tool for fostering post-conflict integration among diverse groups and varying ideologies. By organizing regular sporting events and activities, communities can create a platform for dialogue, cooperation,

and mutual respect, encouraging participants from different backgrounds to engage, build relationships, and ultimately contribute to a more harmonious society. It is essential that these programs are designed to promote inclusivity, ensuring that all members of the community, regardless of their previous affiliations or perspectives, have the opportunity to participate and benefit from the unifying power of sport.

Sports and physical education should be prioritized in the primary and secondary school curriculum, as many schools no longer have facilities for these activities. The government needs to take sports at the basic education level seriously. The curriculum should be reviewed to reflect the positive impact of sports on peace and development. Youth engagement should precede sport. Sport alone is not the solution but one of the strategies to post conflict peacebuilding.

In Nigeria, there is a need for research grounded in peacebuilding approaches that address the potential of sport as a transformative tool both at the community and state levels. There is a need for a concrete understanding of the role of sport and its opportunities and limitations as an agent of peace within Nigeria, particularly in a complex environment, which will consequently enrich the emerging field of Sport for Development and Peace. In doing this, it will reduce the incessant hatred and lack of trust among the different ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria.

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