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Sport for Development and Peace in Divided Societies: Examining The Role of Sport in Social Cohesion, Conflict Prevention, and Sustainable Peacebuilding

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ABSTRACT

Sport has increasingly been recognized within international development and peacebuilding agendas as a potential mechanism for strengthening social relationships, promoting intercultural dialogue, and addressing divisions within communities affected by conflict, displacement, inequality, and political or ethnic tensions. However, the assumption that sport inherently produces peace remains insufficiently examined, particularly in relation to the social and institutional conditions under which sport-based interventions can generate meaningful and sustainable outcomes. This study examines the role of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) in divided societies, with particular attention to the interconnected processes of social cohesion, conflict prevention, reconciliation, and sustainable peacebuilding. Drawing on international scholarship in sport-for-development, peace studies, social capital, intergroup relations, and development policy, the study develops a multidimensional analytical framework for understanding how sport participation can influence relationships between individuals and groups experiencing social or political divisions. The framework proposes that appropriately designed sport-based interventions can facilitate repeated and meaningful intergroup contact, strengthen interpersonal trust, develop social networks, encourage empathy and mutual understanding, and create opportunities for dialogue and cooperation. These mechanisms may subsequently contribute to stronger social cohesion and enhanced capacities for conflict prevention and peaceful coexistence. At the same time, the study recognizes that the peacebuilding potential of sport is highly context-dependent and can be constrained by exclusion, unequal access, political instrumentalization, discrimination, inadequate safeguarding, weak institutional capacity, and short-term project design. An international comparative perspective is therefore adopted to examine how sport-based initiatives operate across diverse divided and conflict-affected contexts and how differences in governance, community participation, program design, and sociopolitical environments shape their outcomes. The study argues that the contribution of sport to peace should be evaluated not simply through participation rates or short-term behavioral changes, but through longer-term indicators including social trust, intergroup relationships, inclusion, community resilience, dialogue, and institutional cooperation. The analysis further highlights the importance of integrating local communities, marginalized populations, civil society organizations, governments, and international sport institutions into the design and evaluation of SDP initiatives. By connecting sport participation with broader processes of social capital formation and positive peacebuilding, the study contributes to the emerging interdisciplinary literature on sport, development, and peace. It proposes that sport can function as a supportive platform for peacebuilding when embedded within inclusive, rights-based, locally informed, and institutionally sustainable strategies. The study concludes by identifying implications for policymakers, sport organizations, development agencies, and peacebuilding practitioners seeking to strengthen the long-term contribution of sport to social cohesion and sustainable peace in divided societies.

Introduction

Sport has increasingly moved beyond its traditional function as a form of physical activity, recreation, and competitive performance to become an important instrument within international development, social policy, diplomacy, and peacebuilding. In societies characterized by ethnic, religious, political, socioeconomic, or historical divisions, sport provides structured spaces in which individuals and communities can interact around shared activities and identities. International institutions have consequently recognized sport as a potential contributor to sustainable development and peace. The United Nations has identified sport as an enabler of sustainable development because of its capacity to promote tolerance, respect, social inclusion, youth and women's empowerment, health, and education. More specifically, international policy frameworks have encouraged the integration of sport into conflict-prevention and peacebuilding initiatives (United Nations, 2016, 2018). The 2024 United Nations General Assembly resolution on sport as an enabler of sustainable development further demonstrates the continuing institutional relevance of sport within global development and peace agendas.

The growing international interest in Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) reflects the recognition that sport possesses distinctive social characteristics that can facilitate interaction across cultural and social boundaries. Participation in organized sport can create opportunities for communication, cooperation, shared goals, and interpersonal relationships that may otherwise be difficult to establish in divided communities. Sport-based programs can also provide young people with structured environments in which they develop leadership, teamwork, empathy, and social skills. From this perspective, sport may contribute to peace not merely because people participate in physical activities together, but because carefully designed programs can create social processes through which individuals encounter difference, negotiate relationships, and develop forms of trust and mutual recognition. Research applying intergroup contact theory to sport-for-development has similarly emphasized that meaningful interaction between groups can be an important mechanism through which sport interventions influence intergroup relationships (Schulenkorf & Sherry, 2021). Social cohesion is particularly important within this discussion because sustainable peace requires more than the temporary absence of direct violence. Divided societies frequently experience persistent mistrust, social exclusion, unequal opportunities, collective memories of violence, and weak relationships between communities. Sport may provide a platform for addressing some of these challenges by creating shared experiences and networks that cross existing social boundaries. A growing body of sport-for-development scholarship identifies social cohesion as a central objective of sport-based interventions, while also emphasizing that the concept has multiple dimensions and requires clearer theoretical and empirical specification (Burnett et al., 2023). Recent conceptual work has consequently sought to connect sport-program practices with specific mechanisms and measurable social-cohesion outcomes rather than treating sport participation itself as evidence of social transformation. The potential relationship between sport and peacebuilding can also be understood through the development of social capital. Repeated participation in inclusive sporting environments can facilitate interpersonal networks, reciprocal relationships, trust, and a sense of belonging. These outcomes may strengthen both bonding social capital within communities and bridging social capital between groups that have historically remained separated. In conflict-affected settings, such relationships can contribute to dialogue and cooperation and may create conditions that support longer-term reconciliation. However, the relationship between sport and peace should not be conceptualized as automatic or universally positive. Sport organizations and sporting environments can themselves reproduce discrimination, exclusion, nationalism, gender inequalities, and social hierarchies. Competitive sport may reinforce existing antagonisms when programs are poorly designed or politically manipulated. Consequently, the peacebuilding potential of sport depends substantially on program structure, institutional governance, inclusiveness, leadership, safeguarding, community ownership, and the wider political and social environment.

This contextual dimension represents an important issue in the international SDP literature. Evidence from sport-for-development research demonstrates that program outcomes vary according to the characteristics of participants, communities, institutions, and implementation environments. For example, research examining an inner-city youth sport-for-development program found that positive intergroup contact was influenced by program design, opportunities to understand different perspectives, committed youth-development leaders, and adequate human, financial, and partnership resources (Schulenkorf et al., 2020). Similarly, systematic evidence from sport-for-development interventions across global cities has identified limitations in methodological rigor and emphasized the need for stronger evaluation and more systematic evidence regarding program effectiveness (Burnett et al., 2019). These findings indicate that understanding *how* sport contributes to peace may be more important than simply establishing whether sport participation has positive outcomes. An international perspective is therefore essential. Divided societies differ considerably in their histories of conflict, political institutions, cultural identities, socioeconomic conditions, and relationships between communities. A sport intervention that contributes to reconciliation in one setting may produce different outcomes in another. International SDP policy consequently emphasizes sustainable investment, partnerships, evidence-based programming, monitoring, evaluation, and attention to cross-cutting issues such as human rights, gender, disability, integrity, transparency, and

inclusion (United Nations, 2018). This suggests that sport-based peacebuilding should be understood as part of a broader development and governance ecosystem rather than as an independent solution to complex political conflicts. Against this background, the present study examines **Sport for Development and Peace in divided societies**, focusing specifically on the relationship between sport participation, social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable peacebuilding. The study conceptualizes sport as a potential facilitating mechanism whose effects are mediated by intergroup contact, trust, social capital, empathy, dialogue, and shared community experiences. It also recognizes the importance of contextual and institutional conditions in determining whether these mechanisms produce meaningful outcomes. The study therefore moves beyond the generalized assumption that sport is inherently peaceful and instead asks under what conditions, through which mechanisms, and with what limitations sport can contribute to peacebuilding. This approach is consistent with the United Nations' continuing emphasis on evidence, monitoring, evaluation, and stronger knowledge regarding the contribution of sport to development and peace. By connecting sport-for-development scholarship with peacebuilding, social cohesion, and intergroup relations, this study seeks to contribute to an interdisciplinary understanding of sport as a potential instrument of social transformation. Its international orientation provides a basis for examining diverse divided and conflict-affected contexts while identifying common mechanisms and contextual differences. Ultimately, the study argues that the value of sport for peace should be assessed not simply through participation numbers or short-term behavioral outcomes, but through its capacity to strengthen inclusive relationships, social trust, dialogue, community resilience, and sustainable forms of peaceful coexistence. Such an approach can inform governments, international organizations, sport federations, development agencies, civil-society organizations, and SDP practitioners seeking to design sport-based interventions that are inclusive, locally grounded, evidence-informed, and capable of contributing to longer-term peacebuilding processes.

Literature Review

Sport for Development and Peace as an International Field

Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) has developed into an interdisciplinary field connecting sport with international development, social inclusion, education, community development, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding. The central premise of SDP is that sport can provide a socially accessible platform through which development objectives can be pursued, particularly among young people and communities experiencing marginalization or conflict. International policy institutions have increasingly incorporated sport into broader development and peace agendas, while scholarly research has examined its potential contribution to social change. The United Nations has continued to recognize sport as a contributor to sustainable development and peace, emphasizing its potential to promote inclusion, tolerance, cooperation, and social development.

However, the development of SDP scholarship has also generated questions about whether sport itself produces social transformation or whether positive outcomes depend on the design and implementation of accompanying interventions. Earlier scholarship established sport as a potential “hook” for engaging communities in broader developmental processes, including social inclusion, cultural cohesion, reconciliation, and peacebuilding (Sherry et al., 2015). More recent theoretical reviews indicate that although SDP research has expanded considerably, theoretical fragmentation and limited empirical testing remain important challenges (Svensson & Woods, 2017; Schulenkorf et al., 2020).

Sport and Social Cohesion

Social cohesion has become one of the most frequently identified outcomes within SDP research. Sport creates opportunities for individuals from different social, cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds to interact within a structured environment characterized by shared activities and objectives. Such interactions may encourage interpersonal relationships, trust, communication, belonging, and community participation. Research on community capacity similarly suggests that intentionally designed sport programs can strengthen social networks, community dialogue, leadership, civic participation, and social cohesion (Misener & Mason, 2006).

Nevertheless, social cohesion remains conceptually contested. A systematic scoping review of 35 studies found substantial variation in how social cohesion was defined and measured in sport programs, making comparisons between interventions difficult (Moustakas et al., 2023). More recent conceptual work consequently emphasizes connecting specific sport-program practices with identifiable mechanisms and measurable social-cohesion outcomes (Moustakas, 2024). This suggests that future SDP research should move beyond broad claims that sport “brings people together” and instead investigate the processes through which participation generates meaningful social relationships.

Intergroup Contact and Conflict Prevention

Intergroup contact provides an important theoretical explanation for how sport might contribute to peacebuilding. Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis proposes that interaction between members of different groups can reduce prejudice under favorable conditions. In sport settings, repeated interaction around shared goals may create opportunities for participants to challenge stereotypes, develop empathy, and recognize common identities. Schulenkorf and Sherry (2021) specifically demonstrate the relevance of Intergroup Contact Theory to SDP interventions, arguing that appropriately designed sport programs can create opportunities for meaningful interaction in contexts characterized by intergroup tensions.

Empirical research provides further support for this mechanism. In an inner-city youth SDP program, positive intergroup contact was associated with factors including appropriate programming, opportunities to understand other perspectives, supportive leadership, and adequate financial and partnership resources. The resulting relationships were linked to greater trust, behavioral changes, and community pride (Schulenkorf et al., 2020). Thus, sport's contribution to conflict prevention may operate indirectly through interpersonal relationships and social learning rather than through participation alone.

Sport, Social Capital, and Peacebuilding

Social Capital Theory provides another useful perspective. Sport participation can create networks of trust, reciprocity, cooperation, and mutual support. These networks may generate **bonding social capital** within communities while simultaneously creating **bridging social capital** between groups that have historically remained socially separated. Such relationships can contribute to dialogue and collective action, which are important components of community-level peacebuilding.

Evidence from conflict-affected settings also illustrates this potential. Research in Colombia, for example, has examined community sport experiences in territories affected by armed conflict and identified connections between sport, community capabilities, governance, peace, and reconciliation. These findings support the argument that sport can contribute to peacebuilding when embedded within broader community processes rather than treated as an isolated recreational activity.

Critical Perspectives and Research Limitations

Despite these positive possibilities, the literature cautions against portraying sport as inherently peaceful. Sport can reproduce social inequalities, exclusion, nationalism, discrimination, and existing power relationships. Recent research has also highlighted concerns regarding the historical and institutional assumptions embedded in SDP discourse, particularly in programs involving marginalized and migrant communities. Furthermore, a systematic review of SDP interventions across six global cities identified limited methodological detail and generally weak evidence quality, emphasizing the need for more rigorous evaluation. These limitations are particularly significant for divided societies, where historical grievances, political identities, unequal power relations, and institutional mistrust can shape program outcomes. Consequently, sport should be understood as a **potential mechanism for peacebuilding rather than an automatic producer of peace**. Program inclusiveness, cultural relevance, local ownership, leadership, institutional support, safeguarding, and long-term sustainability may determine whether sporting encounters generate meaningful social transformation.

Overall, the literature demonstrates a promising but still incomplete relationship between sport, social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable peacebuilding. Existing research provides evidence for intergroup contact, social capital, community capacity, and dialogue as possible mechanisms, yet these mechanisms are rarely integrated into a single international analytical framework. Moreover, systematic comparative evidence across different divided societies remains limited. The present study addresses this gap by conceptualizing sport as part of a broader peacebuilding process in which **sport participation can facilitate intergroup contact, trust, empathy, and social capital, which may subsequently strengthen social cohesion and contribute to conflict prevention and sustainable peacebuilding**. This framework provides the foundation for examining not merely whether sport contributes to peace, but **how and under what conditions such contributions become possible**.

Theoretical Framework

The relationship between sport, social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable peacebuilding requires a theoretical framework capable of explaining both individual-level changes and broader community-level processes. Sport participation does not automatically generate peaceful outcomes; rather, its potential contribution to peace is likely to depend on the quality of social interaction, institutional environment, program design, and the relationships developed through participation. Accordingly, this

study integrates **Intergroup Contact Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Positive Peace Theory** to explain the pathways through which Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) initiatives may contribute to peaceful social transformation in divided societies.

Intergroup Contact Theory

Intergroup Contact Theory provides the first theoretical foundation for this study. Originally developed by Allport (1954), the theory proposes that interaction between members of different social groups can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations when contact occurs under favorable conditions. Later developments emphasized factors such as equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support as important conditions for effective contact (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Sport provides a potentially valuable environment for such contact because participants can work toward shared objectives, cooperate within structured activities, and develop interpersonal relationships across existing social boundaries.

In divided societies, sport may therefore provide opportunities for individuals from different ethnic, religious, national, socioeconomic, or political groups to encounter one another in relatively structured environments. Through repeated interaction, participants may challenge stereotypes, develop empathy, and recognize shared identities. However, the theory also suggests that mere physical proximity is insufficient. If sport programs reproduce unequal status, exclusion, discrimination, or hostile competition, contact may fail to reduce prejudice. Therefore, this study conceptualizes **meaningful intergroup contact** rather than simple sport participation as a central mechanism linking sport interventions to social cohesion.

Social Capital Theory

The second theoretical foundation is Social Capital Theory. Social capital refers broadly to the networks, trust, norms, and relationships that facilitate cooperation and collective action (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Sport participation can generate social capital by creating repeated opportunities for people to communicate, cooperate, establish friendships, and develop reciprocal relationships.

Two forms of social capital are particularly relevant. **Bonding social capital** strengthens relationships within relatively similar groups, while **bridging social capital** connects people across social, cultural, or institutional boundaries (Putnam, 2000). For divided societies, bridging social capital is particularly important because peacebuilding requires relationships between groups that may have experienced mistrust or conflict. Sport programs that deliberately bring diverse communities together may therefore create social networks that extend beyond the sporting environment into schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, and community organizations. Within this framework, trust, empathy, social connectedness, and networks are viewed as potential mechanisms through which sport participation may contribute to social cohesion. The theory also highlights the importance of institutional and community structures. Sport organizations, coaches, schools, civil-society organizations, and government agencies can influence whether relationships generated through sport become sustainable forms of community cooperation.

Positive Peace Theory

The third theoretical foundation is the concept of **positive peace**, associated particularly with Galtung's (1969) distinction between negative and positive peace. Negative peace refers primarily to the absence of direct violence, whereas positive peace concerns the presence of justice, equality, cooperation, social inclusion, and relationships capable of addressing conflict constructively.

This distinction is essential because sustainable peacebuilding cannot be reduced to preventing immediate violence. In divided societies, long-term peace requires addressing social exclusion, mistrust, discrimination, inequality, and weak relationships between communities. Sport may contribute to positive peace when programs provide inclusive spaces for dialogue, cooperation, mutual understanding, leadership, and participation.

Positive Peace Theory therefore provides the macro-level outcome dimension of this framework. While Intergroup Contact Theory explains **how relationships between groups may change**, and Social Capital Theory explains **how networks and trust may develop**, Positive Peace Theory explains why these changes matter for broader peacebuilding processes.

Integration of the Three Theories

The three theories complement one another. Intergroup Contact Theory explains the interpersonal mechanism; Social Capital Theory explains the relational and community mechanism; and Positive Peace Theory provides the broader peacebuilding outcome.

The theoretical sequence can therefore be represented as:

Sport-Based Interventions → Meaningful Intergroup Contact → Trust, Empathy and Social Capital → Social Cohesion → Conflict Prevention and Reconciliation → Sustainable Peace

The relationship is expected to be influenced by contextual factors including inclusive governance, program quality, local ownership, gender equality, human rights, institutional support, and long-term sustainability.

This integrated framework recognizes that sport is neither inherently peaceful nor universally transformative. Instead, its contribution depends on whether sporting environments create meaningful interaction, develop bridging relationships, and connect these relationships to wider processes of inclusion and peaceful cooperation. The framework consequently provides a theoretically grounded basis for examining the conditions under which sport can contribute to social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable peacebuilding across divided societies.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study translates the theoretical arguments into an integrated model explaining how Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) interventions may contribute to social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable peacebuilding in divided societies. The framework is based on the proposition that sport participation alone is unlikely to produce sustainable peace. Instead, sport can function as a platform through which specific social and psychological mechanisms are activated. The model therefore identifies **sport-based interventions as the principal independent construct**, **intergroup contact, trust, empathy, and social capital as mediating mechanisms**, **social cohesion as an intermediate outcome**, and **conflict prevention and sustainable peacebuilding as broader outcomes**.

Sport-Based Interventions

The starting point of the model is the quality and characteristics of sport-based interventions. These may include community sport, youth sport, school-based programs, inclusive recreational activities, sport-for-peace initiatives, and programs implemented through partnerships among governments, sport organizations, international development agencies, and civil-society organizations. The framework emphasizes that participation must be meaningful, inclusive, safe, and sustained.

Key characteristics include accessibility, inclusive participation, cooperative activities, trained leadership, safeguarding, community ownership, and opportunities for interaction between socially divided groups. Consequently, the study treats **quality of sport programming**, rather than participation alone, as an important component of the independent construct.

Intergroup Contact as a Mediating Mechanism

The first proposed mediator is meaningful intergroup contact. When sport programs intentionally bring individuals from different groups together, participants may develop opportunities to communicate, cooperate, and challenge stereotypes. Repeated interaction around shared goals can create conditions for improved perceptions of other groups.

However, contact is expected to be effective only when supported by appropriate program conditions. Equal participation, cooperative objectives, institutional support, and respectful interaction are therefore important characteristics of meaningful contact. The conceptual model consequently proposes that sport interventions influence social cohesion partly through increased and improved intergroup contact.

Trust, Empathy, and Social Capital

The second stage of the framework focuses on interpersonal and relational outcomes. Meaningful contact may increase **trust and empathy**, while repeated cooperation may contribute to stronger social networks and social capital. Trust reduces uncertainty between groups, while empathy can facilitate greater understanding of different experiences and perspectives.

Social capital provides the broader relational dimension. Sport can generate bonding relationships within groups but, more importantly for divided societies, can generate **bridging social capital** between groups. These bridging relationships may provide channels for communication and cooperation beyond the sporting environment.

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion represents the central intermediate outcome of the model. It encompasses dimensions such as interpersonal trust, belonging, inclusion, cooperation, acceptance of diversity, community connectedness, and willingness to engage with members of

other groups. The framework proposes that stronger intergroup contact, trust, empathy, and bridging social capital contribute to improved social cohesion.

Importantly, social cohesion is not conceptualized as complete agreement or the elimination of social differences. A cohesive society can contain different identities and viewpoints while maintaining mechanisms for peaceful interaction, cooperation, and conflict management.

Conflict Prevention and Sustainable Peacebuilding

The final part of the conceptual framework connects social cohesion to conflict prevention and sustainable peacebuilding. Stronger relationships between groups may increase opportunities for dialogue and reduce social distance, potentially strengthening communities' capacity to manage disagreements without violence. In this sense, sport may contribute to conflict prevention indirectly through strengthened relationships and social cohesion.

Sustainable peacebuilding represents the longer-term outcome. It involves more than the absence of violence and includes inclusive relationships, cooperation, social justice, participation, resilience, and institutional capacities that support peaceful coexistence. The framework therefore positions sustainable peacebuilding as a cumulative outcome emerging from interconnected individual, interpersonal, community, and institutional processes.

Moderating and Contextual Factors

The model also incorporates contextual factors that may strengthen or weaken the relationships between the main variables. These include **inclusive governance, local ownership, gender equality, human rights protection, program quality, institutional capacity, political context, cultural sensitivity, and sustainability of funding**.

For example, a well-designed sport program may fail to improve social cohesion if participation remains unequal or if political actors use sport to reinforce existing divisions. Conversely, programs that involve local communities, provide equitable access, use trained facilitators, and maintain long-term institutional support may create stronger opportunities for peacebuilding.

Proposed Conceptual Pathway

The framework can therefore be summarized as:

Sport-Based Interventions

↓

Meaningful Intergroup Contact

↓

Trust + Empathy + Bridging Social Capital

↓

Social Cohesion

↓

Conflict Prevention & Reconciliation

↓

Sustainable Peacebuilding

With:

Inclusive Governance + Local Ownership + Gender Equality + Human Rights + Program Quality + Institutional Support

Acting as contextual or moderating factors throughout the pathway

This conceptual framework contributes to SDP scholarship by shifting attention from the simple question of whether sport promotes peace toward the more analytically important questions of **how sport produces social change, through which mechanisms, and under what conditions**. It also provides a foundation for developing measurable research variables, hypotheses, comparative case analysis, and policy recommendations. Most importantly, the framework recognizes sport as a potential contributor to peacebuilding rather than an automatic solution to conflict, thereby providing a balanced basis for international research across diverse divided societies.

Research Questions

The present study investigates how Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) initiatives may contribute to social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable peacebuilding in divided societies. Building on Intergroup Contact Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Positive Peace Theory, the study focuses on the mechanisms through which sport-based interventions may generate social and relational outcomes. The research questions are designed to move beyond the assumption that sport is inherently peaceful and instead examine the conditions and processes through which sport may contribute to peacebuilding.

- **RQ1:** How do Sport for Development and Peace interventions contribute to social cohesion in divided and conflict-affected societies?
- **RQ2:** To what extent does meaningful intergroup contact generated through sport contribute to improved relationships between socially, ethnically, culturally, or politically divided groups?
- **RQ3:** How do trust, empathy, and bridging social capital mediate the relationship between sport participation and social cohesion?
- **RQ4:** To what extent is increased social cohesion associated with conflict-prevention attitudes, peaceful conflict resolution, and reconciliation?
- **RQ5:** How do sport-based interventions contribute to longer-term sustainable peacebuilding beyond immediate participation and short-term behavioral outcomes?
- **RQ6:** How do contextual factors, including inclusive governance, local ownership, gender equality, human rights, program quality, institutional support, and sustainability, influence the peacebuilding outcomes of sport interventions?
- **RQ7:** What similarities and differences can be identified across international sport-for-peace initiatives operating in diverse divided or conflict-affected societies?

Research Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to examine the role of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) in promoting social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable peacebuilding in divided societies from an international perspective. The objectives are derived from the integrated theoretical framework combining Intergroup Contact Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Positive Peace Theory.

General Objective

To examine the mechanisms and contextual conditions through which sport-based interventions contribute to social cohesion, conflict prevention, reconciliation, and sustainable peacebuilding in divided and conflict-affected societies.

Specific Objectives

- **RO1:** To examine the contribution of Sport for Development and Peace interventions to social cohesion among communities experiencing social, ethnic, cultural, political, or historical divisions.
- **RO2:** To assess the role of meaningful intergroup contact in strengthening relationships between participants from different social or identity groups.
- **RO3:** To investigate whether sport participation contributes to interpersonal trust, empathy, social connectedness, and bridging social capital.

- **RO4:** To examine the mediating role of trust, empathy, and bridging social capital in the relationship between sport-based interventions and social cohesion.
- **RO5:** To assess the relationship between social cohesion and conflict-prevention outcomes, including peaceful conflict management, dialogue, cooperation, and reconciliation.
- **RO6:** To examine the contribution of sport-based interventions to longer-term dimensions of sustainable peacebuilding, including inclusion, community resilience, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence.
- **RO7:** To identify contextual and institutional factors that strengthen or constrain the peacebuilding potential of sport, including inclusive governance, local ownership, gender equality, human rights, program quality, institutional capacity, and sustainability.
- **RO8:** To compare international experiences of sport-for-peace initiatives in different divided or conflict-affected contexts and identify common mechanisms and context-specific differences.
- **RO9:** To develop an integrated conceptual understanding of how sport participation can contribute to peace through intergroup contact, social capital, social cohesion, and conflict-prevention processes.
- **RO10:** To formulate evidence-informed recommendations for governments, international sport organizations, development agencies, civil-society organizations, and sport practitioners seeking to design more inclusive and sustainable sport-for-peace interventions.

Research Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework and conceptual model, the study proposes a set of hypotheses describing the expected relationships among sport-based interventions, intergroup contact, psychosocial mechanisms, social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable peacebuilding. The hypotheses are designed for empirical testing using quantitative or mixed-method research.

H1: Sport-based interventions are positively associated with social cohesion.

This hypothesis proposes that participation in inclusive and appropriately designed sport programs is associated with stronger perceptions of community belonging, interpersonal trust, cooperation, inclusion, and acceptance of diversity.

H2: Sport-based interventions are positively associated with meaningful intergroup contact.

This hypothesis proposes that sport programs intentionally bringing individuals from different social groups together increase opportunities for communication, cooperation, shared experiences, and interpersonal interaction.

H3: Meaningful intergroup contact is positively associated with trust and empathy between divided groups.

This hypothesis follows Intergroup Contact Theory and proposes that constructive interaction can reduce social distance and strengthen participants' understanding and acceptance of members of other groups.

H4: Meaningful intergroup contact mediates the relationship between sport-based interventions and social cohesion.

This hypothesis proposes that sport contributes to social cohesion partly because it creates opportunities for meaningful interaction between individuals from different groups.

H5: Trust, empathy, and bridging social capital mediate the relationship between meaningful intergroup contact and social cohesion.

This hypothesis proposes that interpersonal and relational mechanisms help explain how interaction within sport programs translates into broader community-level cohesion.

H6: Social cohesion is positively associated with conflict-prevention outcomes.

Higher levels of social cohesion are expected to be associated with greater support for dialogue, peaceful conflict management, cooperation, and reconciliation.

H7: Social cohesion is positively associated with sustainable peacebuilding.

This hypothesis proposes that stronger community relationships and inclusive social networks contribute to longer-term capacities for peaceful coexistence, community resilience, and cooperative problem-solving.

H8: Inclusive governance positively moderates the relationship between sport-based interventions and social cohesion.

Sport programs characterized by transparent, inclusive, participatory, and accountable governance are expected to generate stronger social-cohesion outcomes than programs with weaker governance arrangements.

H9: Local ownership positively moderates the relationship between sport-based interventions and peacebuilding outcomes.

Programs incorporating local communities, leaders, and organizations into planning and implementation are expected to demonstrate stronger and more sustainable peacebuilding outcomes.

H10: Program quality and institutional support positively influence the relationship between sport participation and sustainable peacebuilding.

This hypothesis proposes that trained leadership, safeguarding, adequate resources, institutional partnerships, continuity, and long-term program design strengthen the potential contribution of sport to sustainable peace.

Taken together, these hypotheses represent a **mechanism-based model** rather than a simple assumption that sport automatically creates peace. They allow empirical examination of both direct and indirect relationships and provide a clear basis for statistical testing, mediation analysis, moderation analysis, or mixed-method investigation across international contexts 100%

Conceptual Model: Sport for Development and Peace

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	MEDIATING MECHANISMS	OUTCOMES
Sport-Based Interventions • Inclusive participation • Cooperative activities • Trained leadership • Safeguarding • Community ownership	Meaningful Intergroup Contact ↓ Trust + Empathy ↓ Bridging Social Capital	Social Cohesion ↓ Conflict Prevention & Reconciliation ↓ Sustainable Peacebuilding
CONTEXTUAL / MODERATING FACTORS	**CONTEXTUAL / MODERATING FACTORS**	**CONTEXTUAL / MODERATING FACTORS**
Inclusive governance Local ownership Gender equality	Human rights Program quality Institutional support	Political/social context Cultural sensitivity Long-term sustainability

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model for the study

Methodology

This study will employ a mixed-method, comparative research design to examine how Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) interventions contribute to social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable peacebuilding in divided societies. A mixed-method approach is appropriate because the research addresses both measurable relationships among the constructs and the contextual mechanisms through which sport-based initiatives operate. Quantitative evidence can assess the hypothesized relationships, while qualitative evidence can explain how participants and stakeholders experience intergroup contact, trust, inclusion, and peacebuilding. The comparative international orientation further enables examination of similarities and differences across distinct sociopolitical settings.

The study will use a purposive, multi-stage sampling strategy. International cases will be selected according to four criteria: evidence of social or political division, an identifiable sport-for-development or sport-for-peace intervention, an explicit social-cohesion or peacebuilding objective, and sufficient documentary or participant evidence for analysis. Approximately three to four contrasting cases may be selected from different geographical regions. Within each case, participants may include young people or community members involved in SDP programs, coaches and program facilitators, local organizations, and institutional stakeholders. For a quantitative component, a target sample of approximately 300–500 participants across cases would provide a

useful basis for testing the proposed relationships, subject to feasibility and formal power analysis. Data will be collected through a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire will operationalize sport-program exposure and quality, meaningful intergroup contact, trust, empathy, bridging social capital, social cohesion, conflict-prevention attitudes, and perceived peacebuilding outcomes. Established measurement instruments will be used where appropriate and carefully adapted to the SDP context. Items will primarily use five-point Likert-type scales. Before full administration, the instrument will undergo expert review and pilot testing to assess clarity, cultural appropriateness, reliability, and construct validity. Interviews will explore participants' experiences of cross-group interaction, changes in relationships, perceived barriers, community effects, and conditions supporting or constraining peacebuilding. Quantitative analysis will begin with descriptive statistics and reliability testing. Exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis may be used to assess the measurement structure, depending on sample size and instrument development. Correlation and regression analyses will examine associations among the major variables. Mediation analysis will test whether meaningful intergroup contact, trust, empathy, and bridging social capital help explain the relationship between sport-based interventions and social cohesion. Further analysis may examine whether inclusive governance, local ownership, program quality, and institutional support moderate key relationships. Structural equation modeling may be considered if the final sample and measurement model meet appropriate statistical requirements.

Qualitative interview data will be analyzed using thematic analysis. Initial coding will identify recurring evidence relating to intergroup contact, trust, empathy, social networks, inclusion, conflict management, reconciliation, and sustainability. Themes will then be compared across international cases to identify common mechanisms and context-specific differences. Documentary evidence, including program reports, evaluation documents, policy frameworks, and organizational materials, will be used for triangulation where available. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings will occur at the interpretation stage, allowing statistical patterns to be compared with participant experiences and case-level contextual evidence. Ethical standards will be central to the study because research involving divided or conflict-affected communities can involve sensitive experiences and power relationships. Participation will be voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants will be informed of the study purpose, their right to withdraw, confidentiality arrangements, and the intended use of the data. Personal identifiers will be removed from the research dataset, and particular care will be taken when working with potentially vulnerable participants or young people. Where minors are included, appropriate parental or guardian consent and participant assent procedures will be followed. The study will also avoid questions that unnecessarily expose participants to political, security, or psychological risks.

Methodological rigor will be strengthened through triangulation, transparent case-selection criteria, pilot testing, reliability and validity assessment, researcher reflexivity, and systematic documentation of analytical decisions. Cross-case comparison will be used cautiously because social, political, cultural, and institutional conditions differ substantially across countries. The study will therefore avoid assuming that findings from one setting are automatically transferable to another. Instead, it will identify recurring mechanisms alongside context-dependent outcomes. This approach is consistent with the conceptual framework: sport may contribute to peacebuilding, but the strength and sustainability of that contribution depend on the quality of interaction, social mechanisms, governance arrangements, and wider contextual conditions.

Methodological Model

Sport-Based Interventions → Meaningful Intergroup Contact → Trust / Empathy / Bridging Social Capital → Social Cohesion → Conflict Prevention & Reconciliation → Sustainable Peacebuilding

Contextual factors: Inclusive governance, local ownership, gender equality, human rights, program quality, institutional support, political/social context, cultural sensitivity, and long-term sustainability.

Discussion

This study conceptualizes Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) as a potential social mechanism through which divided communities can develop stronger relationships, greater trust, and capacities for peaceful interaction. The central argument emerging from the proposed framework is that sport should not be understood as an automatic producer of peace. Rather, its contribution depends on the social processes created through participation and the institutional and contextual conditions surrounding sport-based interventions. This interpretation is consistent with the study's integration of Intergroup Contact Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Positive Peace Theory, which together explain how sport can connect individual experiences with broader processes of social cohesion and sustainable peacebuilding.

The first important implication concerns the relationship between sport participation and social cohesion. Sport creates structured environments in which individuals can share activities, pursue common goals, communicate, and develop interpersonal relationships. In divided societies, these opportunities may be particularly significant because everyday social interaction can be restricted by ethnic, religious, political, geographical, or historical divisions. However, participation alone does not guarantee cohesion. The discussion therefore emphasizes the quality of interaction. Cooperative activities, equitable participation, trained coaches, safeguarding, and opportunities for meaningful communication are more consequential than participation numbers alone. This supports a shift in SDP research from measuring participation as an end in itself toward examining the relational outcomes generated through participation. Intergroup Contact Theory provides a strong explanation for this pathway. When participants from different groups interact under supportive conditions, sport can provide opportunities to challenge stereotypes and develop more complex understandings of members of other communities. Shared goals and cooperative activities can create a basis for recognizing common interests and identities. The implication is that SDP programs should deliberately structure opportunities for positive contact rather than simply place different groups in the same sporting space. Equal status, institutional support, cooperation, and repeated interaction are therefore important design considerations. Where these conditions are absent, sport may have limited effects or may even reproduce existing divisions.

A second major finding of the framework concerns trust, empathy, and social capital. Repeated interaction can generate interpersonal familiarity, while shared experiences may strengthen empathy and reduce social distance. Over time, these processes can produce bridging social capital connecting groups that previously had limited relationships. This is particularly important for peacebuilding because sustainable peace requires networks through which communities can communicate and cooperate when disagreements emerge. Sport may therefore function as a social infrastructure for peace by creating relationships that extend beyond the playing field into schools, neighborhoods, community organizations, and other civic settings.

Figure 2. Integrated Discussion Model: From Sport Participation to Sustainable Peacebuilding

SPORT-BASED INTERVENTIONS	**SOCIAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS**	**PEACEBUILDING OUTCOMES**
Inclusive sport participation	Meaningful intergroup contact	Social cohesion
Cooperative activities	Trust & empathy	Dialogue & reconciliation
Trained coaches	Bridging social capital	Conflict prevention
Safeguarding	Shared identity	Sustainable peace
Local ownership		
↓	↓	↓
ENABLING CONDITIONS	**CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS**	**RISK CONDITIONS**
Inclusive governance	Human rights	Exclusion
Equal access	Institutional support	Political instrumentalization
Gender equality	Program quality	Short-term programming
SUSTAINABLE PEACEBUILDING IS CONDITIONAL ON QUALITY, CONTEXT, AND LONG-TERM COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP		

The relationship between social cohesion and conflict prevention also requires careful interpretation. Stronger social relationships do not eliminate structural causes of conflict, political grievances, economic inequalities, or institutional discrimination. Nevertheless, cohesive communities may possess greater capacity for dialogue, communication, collective problem-solving, and peaceful management of disagreements. Sport can contribute to these capacities by strengthening relationships and creating repeated experiences of cooperation. Consequently, the contribution of sport to conflict prevention should be understood as indirect and complementary to political, institutional, and community-based peacebuilding processes rather than as a substitute for them.

The framework also reinforces the distinction between negative and positive peace. Preventing immediate violence is important, but sustainable peace requires more durable conditions of inclusion, justice, participation, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence. Sport-based programs may contribute to positive peace when they create inclusive spaces in which marginalized groups can participate, develop leadership, and interact across social boundaries. This means that evaluation should include longer-term indicators such as trust, belonging, community resilience, intergroup cooperation, dialogue, and willingness to resolve disputes peacefully rather than relying solely on short-term attendance or behavioral measures.

Another important implication concerns governance and local ownership. Sport-for-peace programs are embedded within institutional environments, and their outcomes can be affected by the quality of leadership, resource allocation, accountability, safeguarding, and community participation. Programs designed without meaningful local involvement may struggle to respond to local histories and social dynamics. By contrast, local ownership can improve cultural relevance, legitimacy, and sustainability.

Inclusive governance is therefore not simply an administrative issue; it can be a substantive component of peacebuilding because participants need to experience fairness and voice within the programs intended to bring communities together.

The international perspective further indicates that SDP outcomes should not be assumed to be identical across countries. Divided societies differ in the origins of conflict, identity structures, political institutions, economic conditions, and relationships between communities. A sport intervention that is effective in one context may require substantial adaptation elsewhere. International organizations and sport federations should therefore avoid one-size-fits-all approaches. Comparative evaluation should identify recurring mechanisms while recognizing context-specific pathways. This supports a model of evidence-informed adaptation in which international principles are combined with locally grounded program design. The discussion also requires recognition of the risks associated with sport. Sporting institutions can reproduce exclusion, gender inequality, nationalism, discrimination, and unequal access. Competitive structures may reinforce antagonistic identities when programs are poorly designed or politically instrumentalized. Consequently, the peacebuilding potential of sport depends partly on whether programs actively address these risks. Human rights, gender equality, accessibility, safeguarding, transparent governance, and non-discrimination should therefore be treated as core program requirements rather than secondary considerations. This perspective strengthens the study by acknowledging that sport can have both integrative and divisive effects depending on how it is organized. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that governments, international organizations, sport federations, development agencies, and civil-society organizations should design SDP initiatives around clearly specified mechanisms and measurable outcomes. Programs should establish baseline measures of social trust and cohesion, monitor intergroup experiences, evaluate changes over time, and include community members in assessment. Long-term partnerships and stable institutional support are also important because peacebuilding is a gradual process. Investment should therefore extend beyond events and short-term participation campaigns toward sustained community programs, coach education, safeguarding systems, and local capacity building. Overall, the discussion supports a conditional model of sport and peacebuilding. Sport can create valuable opportunities for social interaction, but meaningful peacebuilding is more likely when participation produces constructive intergroup contact, trust, empathy, bridging social capital, and stronger social cohesion within an enabling institutional environment. The principal theoretical contribution is therefore the integration of interpersonal, relational, community, and peacebuilding levels into one explanatory pathway. The practical contribution is the identification of program quality, local ownership, inclusive governance, human rights, and sustainability as essential conditions. Future empirical research should test these relationships across multiple countries using longitudinal and mixed-method designs so that the field can distinguish short-term participation effects from durable changes in peaceful social relations.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the international comparative nature of the research creates challenges concerning **contextual comparability**. Divided societies differ substantially in their historical experiences, political institutions, ethnic and cultural structures, socioeconomic conditions, and forms of conflict. Consequently, mechanisms identified in one setting may not operate with the same intensity or in the same manner in another. Although comparative analysis can identify common patterns, it cannot assume that all sport-for-peace interventions are universally transferable.

Second, the proposed mixed-method design may face limitations associated with **sampling and representation**. Participants in sport-based programs are not necessarily representative of the wider population. Individuals who voluntarily participate in SDP initiatives may already possess greater interest in social interaction, community engagement, or peaceful cooperation. This creates the possibility of self-selection bias. Similarly, access to participants in conflict-affected or politically sensitive environments may be restricted, potentially resulting in samples that do not fully represent marginalized, excluded, or less accessible groups. Third, the study's reliance on participant perceptions may introduce **self-report and social desirability bias**. Participants may provide responses that reflect socially acceptable views regarding tolerance, inclusion, peace, and intergroup cooperation rather than their actual attitudes or behaviors. This limitation is particularly relevant when research addresses sensitive issues such as ethnicity, political identity, conflict, discrimination, or reconciliation. The use of multiple data sources, validated measures, interviews, and documentary evidence can reduce—but cannot completely eliminate—this problem.

Fourth, establishing **causal relationships** between sport participation and peacebuilding outcomes is challenging. Improvements in trust, social cohesion, or intergroup relations may result from factors other than sport, including education, economic opportunities, community organizations, government programs, religious institutions, or broader political developments. A cross-

sectional assessment may therefore identify associations without establishing whether sport directly caused observed changes. Longitudinal designs and comparison groups would provide stronger evidence of causality.

Fifth, measuring concepts such as **social cohesion, reconciliation, conflict prevention, and sustainable peacebuilding** presents methodological difficulties. These concepts are multidimensional and can be interpreted differently across cultures and communities. A standardized questionnaire may not capture all dimensions of locally experienced peace or social relationships. Measurement equivalence across countries is therefore an important concern, particularly when instruments are translated or culturally adapted.

Sixth, the study may be affected by **unequal availability and quality of international evidence**. Some sport-for-peace programs have extensive evaluation reports and academic documentation, whereas others have limited publicly available information. This can create differences in the depth of evidence available across cases. Program organizations may also emphasize successful outcomes in their reporting, creating the possibility of positive reporting bias. Independent evaluations and multiple documentary sources should therefore be incorporated wherever possible.

Seventh, the study recognizes that sport itself can produce **negative or unintended outcomes**. Sporting environments may reproduce gender inequality, discrimination, nationalism, exclusion, unequal access, or antagonistic group identities. The framework acknowledges these possibilities, but their measurement may be difficult because negative outcomes are sometimes underreported. Consequently, the study should avoid interpreting the existence of a sport program as evidence of positive peacebuilding.

Finally, the proposed research cannot fully capture the **long-term sustainability of peacebuilding outcomes** within a single study period. Changes in trust, relationships, and social cohesion may require years to become institutionalized, and short-term improvements may not necessarily translate into durable peaceful relations. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal approaches, repeated measurements, and extended comparative observation to determine whether changes associated with sport participation persist after programs conclude.

Future Research

Future research should strengthen the empirical understanding of how Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) contributes to social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable peacebuilding by moving beyond short-term assessments and broad assumptions about the positive effects of sport. The present conceptual framework identifies intergroup contact, trust, empathy, bridging social capital, and social cohesion as potential mechanisms connecting sport-based interventions with peacebuilding outcomes. Future studies should empirically test these pathways across diverse international contexts.

First, **longitudinal research designs** are needed to determine whether changes associated with sport participation are sustained over time. Many SDP interventions are evaluated shortly after implementation, making it difficult to determine whether improvements in trust, social connectedness, or intergroup attitudes persist. Future studies could collect baseline, intermediate, and post-intervention data and conduct follow-up assessments after programs end. Such designs would provide stronger evidence regarding the durability of sport-related peacebuilding outcomes.

Second, future research should employ **cross-national comparative designs** involving divided societies with different historical, cultural, political, and institutional characteristics. Comparative research could examine whether the proposed pathway from sport participation to intergroup contact, social capital, social cohesion, and peacebuilding operates consistently across regions. Rather than assuming universal effects, researchers should identify both common mechanisms and context-specific pathways. This would strengthen the international theoretical development of SDP research.

Third, researchers should increasingly use **experimental and quasi-experimental methodologies** where ethically and practically feasible. Randomized controlled trials, matched comparison groups, natural experiments, and difference-in-differences designs could help determine whether observed changes are attributable to sport interventions rather than to broader social or development programs. Such approaches would address one of the major challenges in SDP scholarship: distinguishing correlation from causation.

Fourth, future research should investigate the **mediating and moderating mechanisms** proposed in this study. Structural equation modeling, mediation analysis, and multilevel modeling could examine whether intergroup contact, trust, empathy, and bridging social capital explain the relationship between sport participation and social cohesion. Researchers should also examine whether

local ownership, inclusive governance, gender equality, human rights, institutional support, program quality, and political context strengthen or weaken these relationships.

Fifth, greater attention should be given to **gender, disability, migration, socioeconomic inequality, and other dimensions of inclusion**. Future studies should investigate whether SDP programs provide equivalent benefits to different population groups or whether existing inequalities affect access and outcomes. Research involving girls and women, refugees and displaced populations, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and economically marginalized communities could provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive peacebuilding through sport.

Sixth, future research should examine **digital and hybrid forms of sport-based peacebuilding**. Digital platforms, online communities, esports, virtual exchanges, and technology-supported sport programs increasingly create opportunities for interaction across geographical boundaries. Research could investigate whether these environments can generate meaningful intergroup contact and social capital comparable to face-to-face sport participation, while also considering risks such as online harassment, exclusion, misinformation, and unequal digital access.

Seventh, researchers should investigate the **governance dimension of SDP more systematically**. Future studies could examine how accountability, transparency, safeguarding, leadership, funding structures, and stakeholder participation influence peacebuilding outcomes. Particular attention should be given to partnerships among governments, international sport organizations, national federations, schools, NGOs, community organizations, and local leaders. This would connect SDP scholarship more closely with sport governance and public administration

Conclusion

Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) has emerged as an important interdisciplinary approach through which sport can contribute to broader objectives of social inclusion, community development, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding. This study examined the potential role of sport in divided societies by focusing on the interconnected processes of social cohesion, intergroup relations, conflict prevention, reconciliation, and sustainable peacebuilding. The central argument developed throughout the study is that sport should not be understood as an automatic or independent solution to conflict. Rather, its contribution to peace depends on the social mechanisms generated through participation and the institutional, cultural, and political conditions in which sport-based interventions operate. The theoretical framework integrating Intergroup Contact Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Positive Peace Theory provides a multidimensional explanation of this relationship. Intergroup Contact Theory highlights the importance of meaningful interaction between individuals from different social groups, particularly when participation involves cooperation, relatively equal status, shared objectives, and institutional support. Social Capital Theory further explains how repeated interaction can generate trust, empathy, networks, reciprocity, and bridging relationships across divided communities. Positive Peace Theory extends this perspective by emphasizing that sustainable peace involves more than the absence of direct violence; it also requires inclusion, cooperation, social justice, participation, and constructive relationships between communities. The conceptual framework developed in this study consequently proposes a pathway from **sport-based interventions to meaningful intergroup contact, trust, empathy, and bridging social capital; from these mechanisms to social cohesion; and subsequently toward conflict prevention, reconciliation, and sustainable peacebuilding**. This pathway also recognizes the importance of contextual conditions such as inclusive governance, local ownership, gender equality, human rights, program quality, institutional support, cultural sensitivity, and long-term sustainability. The framework therefore offers a more cautious and analytically grounded understanding of the relationship between sport and peace.

An important conclusion is that the value of SDP should not be evaluated primarily through participation numbers, sporting achievements, or short-term behavioral changes. More meaningful indicators include changes in interpersonal trust, social connectedness, acceptance of diversity, intergroup communication, community cooperation, conflict-management capacity, and longer-term peaceful coexistence. This requires stronger evaluation systems capable of identifying both intended and unintended consequences. Sport can provide opportunities for positive interaction, but those opportunities must be deliberately structured and connected to wider community and institutional processes. The international perspective further demonstrates that there can be no universal model of sport-based peacebuilding. Divided societies differ in their histories, identities, institutions, socioeconomic conditions, and forms of conflict. Consequently, effective SDP strategies should combine international principles with local knowledge, community ownership, cultural sensitivity, and context-specific program design. Governments, international organizations, sport federations, development agencies, and civil-society organizations therefore have important roles in creating environments in which sport can contribute constructively to social relationships and peacebuilding. Ultimately, this study contributes to the Sport for Development and Peace literature by shifting attention from the broad proposition that **“sport**

promotes peace" toward a more precise question: **how, under what conditions, for whom, and through which mechanisms can sport contribute to sustainable peace?** Sport cannot resolve structural inequalities, political grievances, or armed conflicts by itself. However, when embedded within inclusive, rights-based, locally grounded, well-governed, and sustainable interventions, it can provide meaningful spaces for interaction, dialogue, trust-building, cooperation, and social connection. The future of SDP research should therefore focus on rigorous international comparative and longitudinal evidence capable of identifying when these possibilities become durable outcomes. In this way, sport can be understood not as a substitute for formal peacebuilding, but as a potentially valuable component of broader strategies for building more inclusive, cohesive, resilient, and peaceful societies.

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