



Sudan Women's Football Team mid-fielder and UN Volunteer Azhar Sholgami (left) and UNDP Sudan's Resident Representative Yuri Afanasiev (right).

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Opinion: Sudan's sports passion - a unique tool for peace

Sudan is a nation passionate about sports. Marking the 2022 International Day of Sport for Development and Peace, Sudan Women's Football Team mid-fielder and UN Volunteer Azhar Sholgami and UNDP Sudan's Resident Representative Yuri Afanasiev highlight the vital role sport can play in bringing communities together and breaking barriers.

Azhar Sholgami, Mid-fielder of Al-Diffa Team / UN Volunteer with UNDP Sudan

To me, there is no greater feeling than winning a tournament. The cheering fans, your teammates, friends, and family in the crowd. It brings people together like nothing else.

I see this in my team and our opposition. With players from Darfur, the East and Khartoum,

from different parts of society, ethnicities, professions– when we walk onto the pitch, we are all the same. We’re a team, we understand one another, and as women, we are here to fight the same cause of making sport a more accessible and safer practice for women.

That’s the magical thing about sports. It doesn’t matter who you are, your gender or where you’re from – the shared passion and cause for the game is something all can have in common.

I see this regularly in my work, which is why I enjoy it. On a recent trip to Gedaref, relations between a local community and a nearby refugee community were strained. We asked what the community’s pressing needs were, expecting them to raise issues of employment or shelter.

Instead, they requested a football pitch for their children – giving them, and those from the camp, a chance to come together. For them, this was important.

In Nyala, as part of UNDP’s Sports for Peace efforts, we recently opened a renovated sports pitch, providing young women and men from local communities and IDP camps a chance to connect and have some fun.

On both occasions, when I saw their happiness, eagerness, and hope, it really hit me – sport is about so much more than football, or volleyball, or whatever your passion. It is a life-changing experience. It is a way to come together. The conversations that start on the pitch, on the side-lines, and in the stadium provide a starting point, even for people with different opinions.

Just a few years ago, I gave away my only pair of football boots. Culturally and politically, I was made to feel like sport wasn’t an option for me or any woman in Sudan. I felt I couldn’t play. To lose your passion because of your gender, it’s a horrible feeling.

But now, walking onto a pitch in my team’s jersey, nothing can stop me – and I hope other women and girls feel the same.

Today, women’s sport in Sudan is going from strength to strength. In 2019, we held our first national women’s football tournament. This year Sudan’s newly established female football team qualified for their first international tournaments - the 2021 Arab Women’s Cup as well as the African Women’s Cup. As a player, these women have been an inspiration to me, and to so many others.

Yes, this has been a huge transition in a short time. It is challenging, it is different. But that progress means a lot to the young women of Sudan. It feels hopeful.

Sport is for everyone. It opens doors, it starts discussions – whether between communities, or about the role of women in society – but most importantly it brings people together and

gives us a chance to heal, whatever the challenges in the past.

Yuri Afanasiev, Resident Representative for UNDP Sudan - with a 32-year global development career

If you want people to talk, find something impossible to disagree on. Cuisine, culture, and sports are things that unify any nation, and – even as a Russian – I am yet to see a country more obsessed with football than Sudan.

Working with Azhar, and visiting many of Sudan’s states, I have seen first-hand the passion for sports that unifies communities and provides opportunities for young men and women on and off the field.

Practically, as a peacebuilding tool, sport is a common language. For UNDP, peace is our number one priority in Sudan. We devote much of our time and resources to supporting peacebuilding nationwide, and assisting hundreds of communities with conflict resolution, job creation, and infrastructure to ensure stability.

But sometimes, what we would call a ‘soft peacebuilding mechanism’ is required. Combined with Sudan’s passion for the game, and its mostly youthful population, sport offers a unique pathway to peace.

At present, we support tens of thousands of players from local communities and IDP and refugee camps in hundreds of football and volleyball teams across Darfur, Blue Nile, South Kordofan and Gedaref.

For the players themselves, the young women and men around the country, sport may just be something to look forward to amid particularly challenging times, or a chance to be healthier, build discipline, or spend time with friends.

But it can be so much more – not just as a peacebuilding tool, but as Azhar and her teammates show, a chance to break barriers, take a positive path, and create opportunities.

As UNDP, we are planning to significantly expand our Sports for Peace programme, giving young people across the country a chance to do what they love, with good equipment and good facilities – and give their communities a chance to connect over a great match, and pave the way to address deeper disagreements.

Sport isn’t a magic solution for peace; it is just one of many pathways that we and others are supporting. But in a nation like Sudan, the opportunity to use sports for peace is too great to ignore - and we welcome any partners interested in joining the conversation.

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