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ROLE OF PHYSICAL HEALTH EDUCATION AND SPORTS ASSOCIATIONS IN FOSTERING PEACE, SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND NATIONAL COHESION-THESIERRA LEONE EXPERIENCE

Abstract

Background: There is growing acknowledgement of sport and physical education as a means of fostering peaceable, social cohesion, and socio-economic development in post-conflict contexts. In Sierra Leone, after decades of conflict, disease, and unstable governance, sport has been one of the only neutral spaces that develops national unity and community resilience. However, much remains under-theorized around the role of Physical Health Education and Sports Association in peace and development. This paper examines the role of Physical Health Education and Sports Associations in promoting peace, socio-economic benefit, and national cohesion in Sierra Leone.

Method: In this study, a survey design using a descriptive mixed-method design was used with 218 respondents comprising supportive associations, athletes, stakeholders (i.e. officials, coaches, and community elders), and sports administrators from across the five regions of Sierra Leone. Data were collected by using questionnaires of the relevant actors, semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders, and observation of peace and cohesion tournaments. Quantitative data collected from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics using SPSS (Version 27), while qualitative data were thematically analyzed to explore participant perspectives on peace promotion and elite socio-economic empowerment and inclusivity.

Results: Findings revealed that respondents overwhelmingly agreed that sports foster peace and national cohesion (100%) and contribute to socio-economic development through employment, revenue creation, and youth empowerment. Sports were perceived as promoting intercultural dialogue, collective identity, and conflict resolution. However, systemic challenges were identified, including political interference (67.4%), inadequate funding, gender inequities, weak institutional frameworks, and politicization of sports identities. Despite these obstacles, sports associations were acknowledged as critical platforms for promoting trust, reconciliation, and social inclusion.

Conclusion: The study concludes that Physical Health Education and Sports Associations significantly contribute to peacebuilding and socio-economic development in Sierra Leone, yet their impact is

constrained by structural and institutional barriers. Embedding sports into national peacebuilding and development frameworks, strengthening governance, advancing gender equity, and ensuring sustainable funding are essential for maximizing their potential as vehicles for cohesion and post-conflict recovery.

Keywords: Sport for development; peacebuilding; social cohesion; Physical Health Education; sports associations; Sierra Leone; post-conflict societies; socio-economic development

Introduction

Sport and physical education have increasingly been recognized as powerful vehicles for peacebuilding, social cohesion, and socio-economic development across the globe [1]; [2]; [3]. International organizations such as the United Nations and UNESCO highlight sport as a universal language capable of bridging divides across race, religion, culture, and political affiliation, making it a vital tool for promoting inclusion and fostering reconciliation in divided societies [4]; [5]. Beyond its recreational value, sport contributes to community development by promoting health, instilling discipline, strengthening social capital, and providing opportunities for education and employment [6]; [7]. Major sporting events and grassroots programs alike have demonstrated their ability to create spaces for intercultural dialogue, national pride, and collective identity, which are essential elements of social cohesion [8]; [9].

In post-conflict societies, sport is increasingly viewed as a mechanism for rebuilding fractured relationships, addressing trauma, and cultivating trust among previously antagonistic groups [10]; [11]. The reestablishment of the Olympic Truce and its modern applications provide symbolic and practical illustrations of sport's peace-promoting potential [12]. Empirical studies further indicate that structured sporting interventions can reduce prejudice, enhance intercultural understanding, and promote reconciliation in fragile and divided contexts [13]; [14]. Despite these promising insights, scholars caution that sport alone cannot end conflict but should be integrated into broader peacebuilding strategies that address root causes of violence and inequality [10]; [15].

Sierra Leone, a country that has experienced an 11-year civil war (1991-2002), the Ebola epidemic (2014-2016), and ongoing political and socio-economic challenges, is a unique case for exploring the

18 56 implications of sport as a tool for peace and national cohesion. The civil war killed over 50,000 people,
57 displaced 2.5 million people, and left in its wake debilitating distrust and weak civic institutions. [16];
58 [17]. While peacebuilding initiatives supported by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund and national
59 institutions have sought to restore stability, divisions along ethnic, regional, and political lines remain
60 a significant barrier to sustainable peace [18]. In this fragile context, sport has emerged as one of the
61 few social spaces where Sierra Leoneans transcend ethnic, religious, and political affiliations,
62 particularly during national team competitions, which often generate unity and collective pride [19].

63 Despite this potential, Physical Health Education and Sports Associations in Sierra Leone have
64 received limited recognition in state-led peacebuilding policies and strategies. These associations play
65 vital roles in developing and regulating sports, training athletes and administrators, organizing
66 competitions, and facilitating community-level participation [2]. They also have the capacity to act as
67 focal points for peace promotion by instilling values of teamwork, discipline, and mutual respect. Yet,
68 the integration of sports into formal peace and national cohesion frameworks remains underexplored
69 and underutilized [20]; [21].

1 70 This study, therefore, seeks to explore the role of Physical Health Education and Sports Associations
71 in fostering peace, socio-economic development, and national cohesion in Sierra Leone. It contributes
3 72 to the growing literature on sport and peacebuilding by situating the Sierra Leone experience within
73 broader global debates while also highlighting the contextual opportunities and challenges. By doing
74 so, it addresses a critical knowledge gap on how sports-based institutions can be strategically engaged
75 to complement national peace and development agendas in post-conflict societies.

76 **Research objectives**

77 The study considered the following objectives:

1 78 To investigate the role of Physical Health Education and Sports Associations in promoting
79 peace, socio-economic development, and national cohesion.

80 To identify factors for engaging sporting association in promoting peace and national cohesion through
81 sports in communities.

82 To identify approaches of sporting associations in promoting peace socio-economic development
83 and national cohesion.

84 To identify the challenges to promote peace, socio-economic development and national cohesion by
85 Physical Health Education and Sports Associations in Sierra Leone.

86 **Methodology**

87 This research is a descriptive survey mixed method study that engaged youth athletes, sports
88 institutions, community elders, sports agencies and physical health education and sports associations as
1 89 the study population within Sierra Leone. The study examined the role of the physical health education
90 and sports associations in promoting peace and national cohesion. This involved a quantitative and
91 qualitative approach with a descriptive survey design which represents a systematic and applied
92 investigation in which the researchers do not have direct control over the independent variables. The
93 rationale for the use of this design is based upon the in-depth nature of issues as well as the capability
94 to describe or report attitudes, opinion or view of respondents, and behaviour patterns.

95 **Population and Sample:**

96 The population for this study comprised 500 stakeholders in sport. A sample of two hundred and
5 97 eighteen (218) was derived with 95 confidence level and 5% margin of error using the Raosoft
98 software sample size calculator, and selected through simple random sampling as follows: Athletes 60,
99 Sports administrators 38, Community elders 15, Physical Health Education and Sports Associations
4 100 (40), Coaches 30 and Officials 35. They were sampled from the five geographical regions of Sierra
4 101 Leone based on their majority involvement in sport and peace keeping activities in the communities in
102 the five geographical regions of Sierra Leone.

103 **Instrumentation**

104 The tools utilized in this research consisted of the following: questionnaires, interview guide, and
105 observation check list. The tools were validated. Both the Likert scale questionnaire type and the
106 interview guide were designed in five scale and were administered having evaluated both instruments'

validity and reliability through a Cronbach Alpha's reliability testing returning a reliability test rate of 0.84 rate.

Data Collection procedures

Data collection occurred via questionnaires, completed and returned to researchers, either via hard copy or via electronic means – to a pre-arranged time and date by the researchers and by the respondents. Periodic data from observation was collected as the researchers observed arranged peace and national cohesion tournaments by Sports Associations, in five regions, across the country with the use of a observation check list tool. The researchers drew from qualified independent national sports observers from across the country, using the checklist for their observations. Interviews were completed using semi structured interview guide at a pre-arranged time and place deemed reasonable by the respondents. Given the busy schedule of some of the respondents, some interviews were done online.

Data Analysis

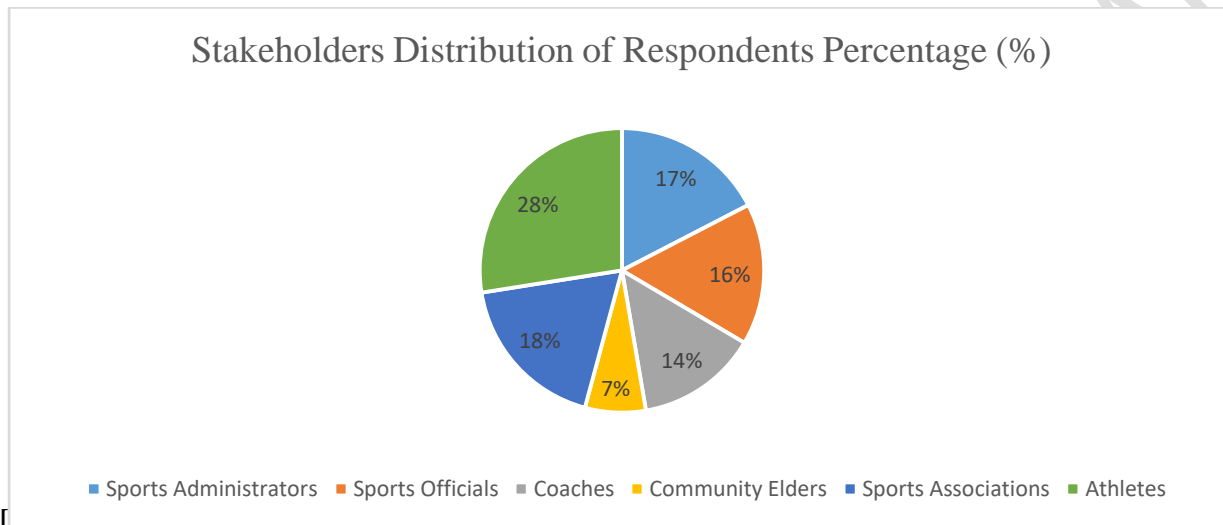
Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, cross-tabulations) with SPSS (Version 27) which presented summaries of demographics and stakeholder representation. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed thematically highlighting themes of peace promotion, socio-economic empowerment, national identity, and challenges to inclusivity, which corresponded to the quantitative data.

Results

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents (N = 218)

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	127	58.3%
Female	91	41.7%
Total	218	100.0%

10 127 Table 1: It is indicated that male participants (58.3%) outnumber female participants (41.7%). This
128 exemplifies a greater cultural and structural disadvantage for women in sporting governance roles in
129 Sierra Leone [21]. However, the relatively high level of female participation would suggest that slow
130 progress has been made toward achieving inclusivity, and to the extent this aligns with global calls for
131 gender equity in sport [5]; [23].



132 [Figure 1: Stakeholders distribution of respondents (N = 218)

134 Key Observations:

135 Figure 1: Indicates that athletes represent the largest stakeholder group (27.5%), highlighting their
136 importance in sports development. Sports associations (18.3%), administrators (17.4%), officials
137 (16.1%), and coaches (13.8%) represent aspects of governance and technical know-how, while
138 community elders (6.9%) help emphasize cultural aspects. The relatively balanced representation of
139 stakeholders enhances the study's validity and helps support an understanding of sports development
140 and social cohesion in Sierra Leone.

141 Stakeholder Perceptions on the Role, Challenges, and Strategies of Sports

142 The examination of stakeholder responses indicated a considerable agreement on the contributions of
143 sports in promoting peace, state unity, and socio-economic development, along with requisite hurdles
144 and strategies for its development. The distribution of responses across the six stakeholder groups is
145 illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Stakeholder Perceptions on the Role, Challenges, and Strategies of Sports (N = 218)

Variables	Strongly Agree (n, %)	Agree (n, %)	Total (N)
Sports fosters peace & national cohesion	109 (50.0%)	109 (50.0%)	218
Sports' socio-economic contributions	112 (51.4%)	106 (48.6%)	218
Challenges include funding and political interference	147 (67.4%)	71 (32.6%)	218
Reasons for intervention: preserve PE & promote sports	150 (68.8%)	68 (31.2%)	218
Strategies: organizing sports & community engagement	109(50.0%)	109 (50.0%)	218

Table 2: The data showed that respondents either strongly agreed 109 (50.0%) or agreed 109 (50.0%) that sports can unite the two communities and promote peace. Similarly with respect to the socio-economic value of sport, respondents agreed 112 (51.4%) or strongly agreed 106 (48.6%).

Responses regarding challenges were more strident, with 147 (67.4%) of stakeholders strongly agreeing that funding and political influence were concerns, with only 71 (32.6%) agreeing. A similar balance can be observed related to the reasons for intervention, with participants claiming it is needed for the preservation of Physical Education and participation in sport; 66.7% strongly agreed and 31.2% agreed. When asked about approaches to address the challenges; participants were more evenly split with 109 (50%) strongly agreeing and 50% agreeing it was a good approach to organize sport and community engagements.

2 Perceptions on the Role of Sports in Fostering Peace and National Cohesion

As indicated by survey responses, stakeholders clearly accepted sports as a critical vehicle for peace, socio-economic development, and national unity in Sierra Leone. Respondents noted the following about sports:

- Supporting peaceful coexistence among multiple ethnic and religious groups
- Providing opportunities for youth engagement, which decreases boredom and reduces the risk of political manipulation and/or violence

- 165 • Supporting social inclusion that bridges regional, cultural, and political divides
- 166 • Inspiring both permanent and transferable values, such as teamwork, discipline, respect, and
- 167 tolerance

168 Athletes and sports associations noted sports as an alternative vehicle for conflict resolution, while
169 community elders noted sports ability to rebuild trust and communities in the post-conflict and post-
170 Ebola context.

171 **Socio-Economic Contributions of Sports**

172 Participants frequently noted sports resulting in the advancement of socio-economic development.
173 Contributions included:

174 Employment creation from coaching, officiating, administration, and managing venues.

175 Revenue creation from ticket sales, tournaments, and sports tourism.

176 Youth empowerment by opening up pathways for a professional career in sports locally and
177 internationally.

178 Community development projects, such as the Southern Arena in Bo City were reported as key for
179 growing sports participation and local economic activity.

180 **Challenges Identified**

181 Although these associations have transformative power, the respondents also noted systemic issues
182 that limit their efficacy related to promoting peace and cohesion:

183 Political interference in sport governance undermines neutrality and often creates division; inadequate
184 funding, infrastructure and equipment relieves meaningful program reach and sustainability; gender
185 inequities and limited female participation in leadership roles; weak institutional frameworks and a
186 lack of robust policy linking sport to peacebuilding; politicization of sport identities, where team or
187 hall colors are aligned with political parties, in some cases, inevitably cause tensions.

188 Key Findings

189 The study found that Physical Education (PE) and Sports Associations in Sierra Leone contribute to
190 peace-building, socio-economic development, and national cohesion in several ways. Sports were
191 viewed as a means of bringing people together, cutting across different interest groups," reducing
192 political leverage among young people, and transmitting values to enrich community life. Sports were
193 also viewed as a means of creating economic empowerment through jobs, income, and infrastructure
194 development.

195 However, for the sport to achieve that potential, structures need to be fixed on an urgent basis. These
196 include political interference, insufficient funding, fragile governance structures, gender inequity, and
197 the politicization of sports identity.

198 The study emphasizes the need for sustainable investment, transparent governance, meaningful
199 participation, and development-driven community strategies to make sports a meaningful and viable
200 vehicle for peace building and national development in Sierra Leone.

201 Discussion

19 202 The findings of this study confirm that Physical Health Education and Sports Associations play a
203 crucial role in fostering peace, socio-economic development, and national cohesion in Sierra Leone.
204 Respondents strongly acknowledged that sports can unite diverse communities, create socio-economic
205 opportunities, and provide a platform for youth engagement, which aligns with global literature on
206 sport as a tool for peacebuilding and social inclusion [24]; [2]; [7]. The consensus among stakeholders
207 that sport supports peaceful coexistence across ethnic and religious lines reflects the universal
208 recognition of sport as a unifying force capable of transcending societal barriers [4]; [5].

209 The findings corroborate earlier studies suggesting that sport can foster reconciliation, trust-building,
210 and intercultural understanding in post-conflict contexts [8]; [13]. In Sierra Leone, where divisions
211 persist after an 11-year civil war and the Ebola crisis, sport emerges as one of the few neutral spaces
212 for collective identity formation. For example, national pride around the Leone Stars highlights how
213 sport can generate a sense of belonging and shared purpose, consistent with [19] argument on the role

214 of football in uniting fragile African states. This echoes [10] theory of the “3Rs” — reconstruction,
215 reconciliation, and resolution — where sport may contribute to reconciliation by rebuilding
216 relationships among divided groups. However, as scholars emphasize, sport cannot independently
217 resolve conflict; it must be embedded in broader peacebuilding frameworks [12]; [15].

218 This research findings also demonstrates the socio-economic value of sport in terms of job creation,
219 generation of revenue, as well as youth empowerment and community development initiatives, for
220 example, the Southern Arena in Bo City . Their findings align with findings that indicate sport
221 contributes to economic growth through employment creation and tourism development [25]; [26].
222 The implications of empowering youth with respect to sports pathways aligns with [6], who found
223 psychosocial and professional benefits of organized sport programs for youth. Sierra Leone is an
224 unstable economic environment where unemployment prevails, and sport can provide an alternative
225 pathway to economic engagement and upliftment of the community, therefore linking grassroots
226 development in sport to wider Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDG 8 (decent work
227 and economic growth) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) [4].

228 Despite these positive contributions, respondents underscored systemic challenges, including political
229 interference, inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, gender inequities, and the politicization of sports
230 identity. Political interference in sports governance reflects broader concerns about weak institutions
231 and fragile democratic practices in Sierra Leone, echoing [16] critique of post-conflict governance in
232 West Africa. The alignment of team or house colors with political parties illustrates how sport can be
233 co-opted for divisive purposes, a phenomenon observed elsewhere in Africa where politics and sport
234 intersect [27].

235 Gender disparities in leadership positions also highlight structural inequalities, consistent with [22] and
236 [23], which report global underrepresentation of women in sports governance. While this study noted a
237 relatively high level of female participation (41.7%), challenges remain in ensuring equitable access to
238 leadership roles. Without addressing these structural barriers, the transformative potential of sport for
239 inclusivity and empowerment may remain underutilized.

240 The study reinforces the argument that for sport to fulfill its peacebuilding and developmental
241 potential, there must be deliberate policy frameworks, sustainable investment, and transparent

6 242 governance structures [2]; [20]. The establishment of the Independent Commission for Peace and
243 National Cohesion [17] presents an opportunity to formally integrate sports associations into
244 peacebuilding and cohesion strategies. Evidence from other contexts shows that embedding sport
245 within national policy frameworks enhances its capacity to contribute to sustainable development and
246 social cohesion [3]; [24].

247 Furthermore, the recognition of sports as an inclusive space for youth engagement emphasizes its
248 preventative role against political manipulation and violence. As [7] notes, providing young people
249 with safe, structured sports opportunities reduces marginalization and promotes empowerment. By
250 fostering intercultural dialogue and community solidarity, Sierra Leone's sports associations could
251 strategically complement ongoing peacebuilding initiatives and strengthen national cohesion.

252 Limitations and Future Directions

253 While this research is useful, some limitations was recognized. The use of self-reported information
254 can generate bias, and the cross-sectional nature restricts the determination of long-term effects of
255 sports initiatives on peacebuilding. Future studies might use longitudinal or experimental methods to
256 address the causal link between sports interventions and outcomes of community cohesion.
257 Comparative works across post-conflict African nations also can place the Sierra Leonean experience
258 in a more comprehensive regional framework.

259 Conclusion

1 260 The findings of this study revealed that Physical Health Education and Sports Associations in Sierra
261 Leone contribute significantly to peacebuilding, socio-economic development, and national cohesion.
262 Sports were found to transcend ethnic, religious, and political divides, creating inclusive spaces that
263 foster trust, reconciliation, and shared national identity. Beyond their symbolic value, sports
264 associations also generate tangible socio-economic benefits through employment, revenue creation,
265 and community development initiatives.

266 Nonetheless, the study highlights structural barriers that constrain the potential of sports as a
267 peacebuilding tool. Political interference, inadequate funding, gender inequities, and weak institutional

frameworks continue to undermine the credibility and effectiveness of sports associations. These challenges mirror global findings that emphasize the importance of embedding sports within broader peace and development frameworks rather than treating them as stand-alone interventions [1]; [15]. For Sierra Leone, integrating sports into state-led policy initiatives and providing institutional support remain critical for leveraging their full potential in post-conflict recovery and national cohesion.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Policy Mainstreaming: Policymakers should institutionalize sport within Sierra Leone's national peacebuilding and development strategies, aligning it with priorities in youth engagement, reconciliation, and social cohesion.

Strengthening Governance: Sports associations require strengthened governance structures to ensure transparency, autonomy, and reduced political interference, thereby enhancing credibility and trust.

Resource Mobilization: Sustainable funding mechanisms, including public-private partnerships and donor engagement, are essential to scale grassroots programs and ensure long-term impact.

Advancing Gender Equity: Policies and targeted interventions should increase women's participation in both sports activities and leadership roles, in line with international gender equality commitments [5]; [22].

Community-Level Peacebuilding: Expanding community sports initiatives and inter-regional tournaments can foster intercultural dialogue, trust-building, and youth empowerment.

Capacity Development: Training and professional development for coaches, administrators, and officials should integrate peacebuilding competencies alongside technical sports skills.

Recommendation

Strengthen Governance and Transparency: Enforce accountability frameworks in communities and sports associations to reduce political interference and ensure fair administration.

Invest in Infrastructure and Funding: Expand sports facilities and secure sustainable financing through government, private sector, and international partnerships.

Promote Gender and Youth Inclusion: Create equitable opportunities for women in sports leadership and empower youth through training, scholarships, and employment pathways.

Leverage Sports for Peacebuilding: Integrate peace education and conflict resolution programs into sports initiatives and learning institutions to foster unity and reconciliation.

Enhance Community and Stakeholder Engagement: Involve community leaders, NGOs, and civil society in using sports as a tool for cultural tolerance, social cohesion, and development.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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