



### RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

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### Abstract

**Background:** There is growing acknowledgement of sport and physical education as a means of fostering peace, 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, sports officials, coaches, community elders, and sports administrators from across the five regions of Sierra Leone. Data was collected by administering questionnaires to respondents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents, while observations were done during peace and cohesion sports tournaments. Quantitative data collected from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics using SPSS (Version 27). Qualitative data was thematically analyzed to explore participant's perspectives on peace promotion, socio-economic empowerment and inclusivity.

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**Results:** Findings revealed that respondents overwhelmingly agreed that sports fostered peace and national cohesion (100%) and contributed to socio-economic development through employment, revenue creation, and youth empowerment. Sports was 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 concluded 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.

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

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

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

**Research objectives: -****The study considered the following objectives:**

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

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

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

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

**Methodology: -**

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

**Population and Sample:**

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

**Instrumentation:**

The tools utilized in this research consisted of the following: questionnaires, interview guide, and observation check list. The tools were validated. Both the Likert scale questionnaire type and the interview guide were designed and administered after evaluating both instruments' validity and reliability through a Cronbach Alpha's reliability testing which returned a reliability test rate of 0.84 and 0.78 respectively.

**Data Collection procedures:**

Data collection occurred via completed questionnaires. The questionnaires were returned to the researchers via hard copy or electronic means at a pre-arranged time and date by the researchers and the respondents. Periodic data from observation was collected as the researchers observed arranged peace and national cohesion tournaments by Sports Associations, in the five regions, across the country with the use of an observation check list. The researchers drew from qualified independent national sports observers from across the country who used the checklist for their observations. Interviews were conducted using semi structured interview guide at a pre-arranged time and place deemed appropriate 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%
<b>Total</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

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

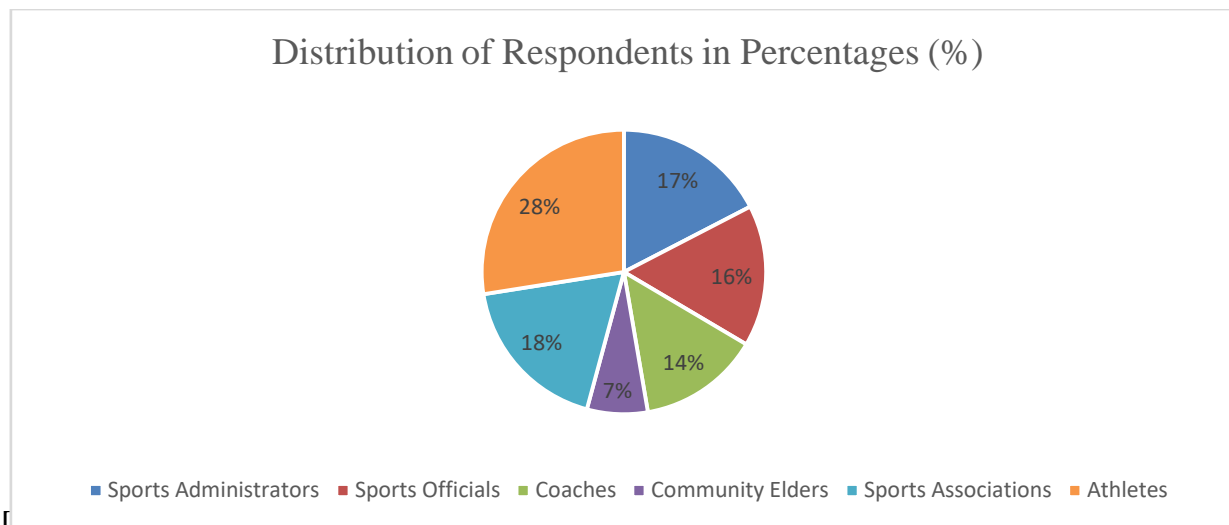
**Figure 1: Pie-chart showing distribution of respondents (N = 218)****Key Observations: -**

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

**Respondents Perceptions on the perceptions of respondents on the Role, Challenges, Socioeconomic contributions and Strategies of Sports Associations**

, along with requisite hurdles and strategies for its development. The distribution of responses across the six groups of respondents is illustrated in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Shows perceptions of respondents on the Role, Challenges, Socio-economic contributions and Strategies of Sports Associations (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 shows that respondents either strongly agreed 109 (50.0%) or agreed 109 (50.0%) that sports can unite communities and promote peace. Similarly with respect to the socio-economic value of sport, respondents who agreed were 112 (51.4%) and strongly agreed were 106 (48.6%). Responses regarding challenges were more strident, with 147 (67.4%) of respondents 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; respondents were more evenly split with 109 (50%) strongly agreeing and 50% agreeing it was a good approach to organize sport and have community engagements.

#### **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, socioeconomic development, and national cohesion in Sierra Leone. Respondents noted the following about sports:

- Supporting peaceful coexistence among multiple ethnic and religious groups
- Providing opportunities for youth engagement, decreases boredom and reduces the risk of political manipulation and/or violence
- Supporting social inclusion that bridges regional, cultural, and political divides
- Inspiring both permanent and transferable values, such as teamwork, discipline, respect, and tolerance.

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

#### **Socio-Economic Contributions of Sports**

Participants consistently noted sports as resulting in the advancement of socioeconomic development as thus:

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

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

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

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

#### **Challenges Identified: -**

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

Political interference in sport governance undermines neutrality and often creates division; politicization of sport identities, where team or hall colors are aligned with political parties, in some cases, inevitably cause tensions.

inadequate funding,

infrastructure and equipment

gender inequities and limited female participation in leadership roles;

weak institutional frameworks and a lack of robust policy linking sports and sports associations to peacebuilding;

#### **Key Findings: -**

The study found out that Physical Education (PE) and Sports Associations in Sierra Leone contribute to peace-building, socio-economic development, and national cohesion in several ways.

- Sports were viewed as a means of bringing people together, cutting across different interest groups,
- Sports can transmit values to enrich community life, and creating economic empowerment through jobs, income generation and infrastructural development.
- Potential structures needed to be fixed on an urgent basis. These include political interference, insufficient funding, fragile governance structures, gender inequity, and the politicization of sports identity.
- There was need for sustainable investment, transparent governance, meaningful participation, and a development-driven community
- More strategies needed to make sports a meaningful and viable vehicle for peace building and national development in Sierra Leone.

**Discussion: -**

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

The findings corroborate earlier studies suggesting that sport can foster reconciliation, trust-building, and intercultural understanding in post-conflict contexts [8]; [13]. In Sierra Leone, where divisions persist after an 11-year civil war and the Ebola crisis, sport emerges as one of the few neutral spaces for collective identity formation. For example, national pride around the Leone Stars highlights how sport can generate a sense of belonging and shared purpose, consistent with [19] argument on the role of football in uniting fragile African states. This echoes [10] theory of the “3Rs” — reconstruction, reconciliation, and resolution — where sport may contribute to reconciliation by rebuilding relationships among divided groups. However, as scholars emphasize, sport cannot independently resolve conflict; it must be embedded in broader peacebuilding frameworks [12]; [15].

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

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

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

The study reinforces the argument that for sport to fulfill its peacebuilding and developmental potential, there must be deliberate policy frameworks, sustainable investment, and transparent governance structures [2]; [20]. The establishment of the Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion [17] presents an opportunity to formally integrate sports associations into peacebuilding and cohesion strategies. Evidence from other contexts shows that embedding sport within national policy frameworks enhances its capacity to contribute to sustainable development and social cohesion [3]; [24].

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

Policymakers like the Ministry of Sports (MOS), Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), Ministry of Technical and Higher Education (MTHE) should institutionalize sports within Sierra Leone’s national

peacebuilding and development strategies aligning it with priorities in youth engagement. These ministries can also help integrate Physical Health Education Sports Associations into national peace building frameworks.

Sports associations require strengthened governance structures to ensure transparency, autonomy, and reduced political interference, thereby enhancing credibility and trust. Sustainable funding mechanisms, including public-private partnerships and donor engagement, are essential to scale grassroots programs and ensure long-term impact. 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 sports initiatives and inter-regional tournaments if well-organized can foster intercultural dialogue, trust-building, and youth empowerment. Training and professional development for coaches, administrators, and officials should integrate peacebuilding competencies alongside technical sports skills for capacity building

**Limitations and Future Directions: -**

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

**Conclusion: -**

The study concluded that Physical Health Education and Sports Associations in Sierra Leone contribute significantly to peacebuilding, socio-economic development, and national cohesion. Sports were found to transcend ethnic, religious, and political divides, creating inclusive spaces that foster trust, reconciliation, and shared national identity. Beyond their symbolic value, sports associations also generate tangible socio-economic benefits,

Nonetheless, the study highlights structural barriers that constrained the potential of sports as a peacebuilding tool. Political interference, inadequate funding, gender inequities, and weak institutional frameworks continued to undermine the credibility and effectiveness of sports associations.

These challenges mirrored global findings that emphasized the importance of embedding sports within broader peace and development frameworks rather than treating them as stand-alone interventions [1]; [15]. Finally, for Sierra Leone, integrating sports into state-led policy initiatives and providing institutional support remain critical for leveraging its full potential in post-conflict recovery and national cohesion.

**Recommendation: -**

Enforce accountability frameworks in communities and sports associations to reduce political interference and ensure fair administration. Expand sports facilities and secure sustainable financing through government, private sector, and international partnerships. Create equitable opportunities for women in sports leadership and empower youth through training, scholarships, and employment pathways.

Integrate and enforce peace education and conflict resolution programs into sports initiatives and learning institutions. Involve community leaders, Non-Governmental Organizations, and civil society in using sports as a tool for cultural tolerance, social cohesion, and socio-economic development.

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**Conflict of interest:**

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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