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**UNDERSTANDING THE CONDITIONS TO PROMOTE SOCIAL  
INCLUSION THROUGH SPORT: LEARNINGS FROM THE DIALOGIC  
EVALUATION OF A SPORT-BASED PROGRAMME IN ITALY FOR  
SOCIALY VULNERABLE YOUTH**

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## Abstract

Under certain circumstances, sport has the potential to offer an environment through which vulnerable youngsters might experience social inclusion. Since the understanding of such circumstances remains under-researched, the dissertation provides some insights into this topic by showing the outcomes of the dialogic evaluation of a sport-based programme implemented by an NGO in Italy. Sixty-six participants (21 youth, 15 parents, 9 sports coaches, 21 NGO workers ) were involved in interviews and focus groups to understand such circumstances. The qualitative material was analysed by an inductive thematic analysis.

The results shows that:

- I. Promoting access to sport through subsidised sports fees, inclusive bureaucracy services and transport are fundamental preconditions to introducing youth to the sports environment; however, such conditions are necessary but not sufficient to guarantee social inclusion since this outcome requires distinctive mechanisms to be achieved within the sports context.
- II. Introducing professionals who bridge the gap between local sports clubs and diverse agencies dealing with vulnerable youth (community and health services, families, schools and so on) is a fundamental condition that provides increased emotional and social resources to youngsters. Especially when families manifest situations of serious social vulnerability, the involvement of other actors that orbit around the youths is an important source of support.
- III. Involving local sports clubs in intensive training aimed at enhancing their capacity to be an inclusive environment is a meaningful condition to consider since some sports workers perceive “competition” and “inclusion” as opposite poles that can hardly be integrated into their work with youth.
- IV. The experience of inclusion through sport is strongly connected to sport self-efficacy and the interest of youth toward certain sports activities. If youth don’t feel comfortable with sport or they don’t show interest in sports activities, sport will fail to promote social inclusion. This suggests that the promotion of social inclusion through sport is driven also by individual dimensions that can hardly be subjected to external control. It is thus important to put the “right” youth in the “right” sports environment.

The work also discusses the role of dialogic processes in the translation of scientific knowledge to practice and vice versa. All these results provide action-oriented evidence that contributes to the growth of sport for development and peace-sector planning, management and research.

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## Acronyms

A.C.S.I. = Association of Italian Sports Centres (Association of Culture, Sport and Leisure)

A.I.C.S. = Italian Cultural and Sports Association

A.S.C. = Confederate Sports Activities

A.S.I. = Italian Social Sports Associations

C.N.S. Libertas = Libertas National Sports Centre

C.S.A.IN. = Industrial Corporate Sports Centres

C.S.E.N. = National Educational Sports Centre

C.S.I. = Italian Sports Centre

C.U.S.I. = Italian Sports University Centre

CAC = Coaches across Continents

CIDA= Canadian International Development Agency

CONI = Italian National Olympic Committee

CSR = Corporate Social Responsibility

DIFD= UK's Department for International Development

E.N.D.A.S. = Democratic National Social Action Body

FFH= Football for Hope

FIBA= International Basketball Federation

FIFA= International Federation of Association Football

FIG = Italian Football Federation (FIGC)

IHRB= Institute For Human Rights and Business

ILO= International Labour Organisation

INGOs= International non-governmental organisations

IO= Intergovernmental organisations

IOC = International Olympic Committee

ISTAT = Italian National Institute of Statistics

M.S.P. = Popular Italian Sports Movement

NGO = Non-governmental organisation

NORAD= Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation

O.P.E.S. = Organisation for Sports Education

P.G.S. = Salesian Youth Sports Clubs

PYD = Positive Youth Development

S4D= The Sport-for-Development framework

SD = Sport Development

SDP = Sport for development and Peace

SDP IWG= Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group

SFD = Sport for Development

SFDT = Sport-for-Development Theory

SID = Sport-in-Development

SIDA = Swedish International Development of Cooperation Agencies

U.I.S.P. = Italian Sports Union for All

U.S. A.C.L.I. = Sport Union of Christian Association of Italian Workers

UE= European Union

UEFA= Union of European Football Association

UN= United Nations

UNESCO = United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF= United Nations Children's Fund

UNOSDP= United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace

WHO= World Health Organisation

## INTRODUCTION

On the evening of 25 May 2000, on stage at the inaugural Laureus World Sports Awards, Nelson Mandela delivered a speech that prominently affected the rhetoric around the societal role of sports. “Sport has the power to change the world”, he said (Laureus World Sports Awards, 2000). If we look at the history of Mandela and his country, that inspiring sentence effectively synthesises the impact of sport in South Africa post-apartheid. In 1995, the victory of South Africa at the Rugby World Championship really resulted in a reinforced sense of belonging among South African citizens. In that year and in that national context, rugby became the object onto which people projected the need and desire for a new union of the country (Booth, 1996).

Over time, however, that sentence has been repeated by many people to enunciate the presumed prodigious powers of sport. This led some academics to debate about “evangelists of sport” who are strictly convinced, without scientific proof, that sport can positively and miraculously impact our society (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2015; Collinson et al., 2019; Giulianotti, 2004). There are, however, several examples that demonstrate that sport, on the contrary, can also enhance negative dynamics (Bean et al., 2014).

In the Italian Soccer League (Serie A – TIM), for instance, the case of Balotelli highlighted the attention of the media in terms of racism. In 2013, during Milan vs Rome, the public started making the sound of the monkey to insult the player for the colour of his skin. More recently, in 2019, during Inter vs Naples, something similar happened to the player Koulibaly, who was subjected to several racial insults during the match. In this regard, the campaign of FIFA related to “Respect” testifies to the need to sensitise the public in the stadium to the topic of racism and fair play.

Only few weeks before submitting my final thesis, a young boy, Willy Monteiro, was killed by four people who practised MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) outside a nightclub in the Province of Rome. The case roused the attention of media and several people on social networks contested the violence of MMA. Other people defended the discipline by affirming that MMA teaches self-control and that the problem with the case of Willy was the practitioners who wrongly used their strength and bodies, and it was not the martial art per se. This episode is particularly relevant because it shows how, under certain circumstances, sport may be used in the most negative and violent way.

Of course, there are also examples of the positive impact of sport. Beside the case of South Africa, it is possible to cite, for instance, the handshake between North and South Korean leaders during the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, in 2018. That gesture has been entered in the history since never before has a member of the Kim family entered South Korea and shaken hands with a South Korean president. The Olympic Games became for the

leaders the occasion to open the enemy country and show the first sign of peace between the two nations.

What reality shows us then is that sport is a vehicle for both positive and negative social dynamics. From a scientific point of view, it is important to not cede to the temptation of rhetoric and, as suggested by several authors (Bailey, 2005; Coalter, 2001), pose this question: under which conditions does sport enhance positive social outcomes?

Understanding the conditions that allow the promotion of social development through sport has become prominently relevant especially for what concerns social inclusion. Bailey (2005), in particular, was one of the authors who put this construct under the magnifying glass of research, arguing the need to understand in greater depth under what conditions sport could actually be a tool for developing social inclusion. This author, more than ten years ago, noted that there was little evidence to support the connection between sport and inclusion, and called for more field work on this issue.

As pointed out by Dagkas (2018, p. 69), the question still remains unresolved:

Even though (...) there has been globally a wealth of anecdotal evidence of the panacea of sport for social inclusion there is still a need to discuss the role of sport and physical activity in promoting social inclusion for specific groups in society like those from disadvantaged backgrounds and black and ethnic minority young people.

My work aims to provide a contribute in this fields by addressing this specific question:

“Under which conditions is it possible to promote social inclusion for socially vulnerable youth through sport?”

The thesis seeks to give an answer to this demand through the study of a sport-based programme implemented in Italy by an NGO that promote social inclusion through sport for socially vulnerable youth.

The programme works in three cities across the country: Milan, Rome and Naples. The general aim of the programme is to promote sport access and social inclusion of youth in fragile conditions.

The social vulnerability of youth and children participating in the NGO activities is very diverse. Children involved in the programme may have different degrees of vulnerability. They range from situations of mild vulnerability - which take the form of being unable to pay their fees or sports equipment - to increasing levels of deprivation such as living in squatted houses, coming from families with psychiatric or abusive problems.

Through the creation of social bonds on several levels - between the youths and the micro-sports contest, between the parents and the NGO workers, between the parents and the sports contest or the extended social contest - the programme seeks to promote some psycho-social changes in young people through sports that can then be useful for them in facing the social challenges of their growth path.

In these terms, the NGO acts as an activator of resources and social capital in the participants involved in order to increase their social inclusion within the community.

In the light of the experience of this NGO, the dissertation provides insights into the conditions under which sport can serve as a tool to foster social inclusion.

The central thesis of my dissertation is that, under certain circumstances, sports and related activities can offer an environment through which vulnerable youngsters might experience social inclusion. In doing so, the thesis has the following structure:

- Chapter 1 introduces readers to the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) movement. SDP indeed provides a framework through which the psycho-social role of sport can be conceptualised. The chapter analyses in detail the origins and development of this global movement at international, European, and national levels in Italy.
- Chapter 2 discusses three themes that have prominently characterised the scientific debate in SDP and seem to be significant when studying this field: sport-based programme planning and management, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and collaborative research. These issues will function as a foundation with which to frame the topic of sport for the socially vulnerable and for social inclusion.
- Chapter 3 analyses the concept of social inclusion and provides an overview of the main studies in the field of sport related to socially vulnerable youth. The chapter highlights the need for research to understand the conditions that permit the promotion of social inclusion through sport for socially vulnerable youth. The chapter also frames the concept of social inclusion through a systemic-relational perspective (Bateson, 1972,1979; Cigoli & Scabini, 2007) that integrates contemporary theories on social inclusion (Cordier et al., 2017) and literature from the SDP field (Bailey, 2005;2008; Jeanes et al., 2019). In line with such wide contributions, social inclusion is understood as a complex and multidimensional concept that cross-cuts different systems that characterise people's life environment: the participation to social activities, the sense of belonging and the extension of social networks, and the sense of citizenship (Cordier et al., 2017).
- Chapter 4 focuses on the methodology upon which my dissertation is grounded, dialogic evaluation (Green, 2001). Within this collaborative methodology, evaluative knowledge is co-

built in dialogue with diverse stakeholders and voices surrounding a certain programme (Greene, 2001).

- Chapter 5 is centred on the results of my research.
- Chapter 6 will discuss the findings of the research in light of SDP and social inclusion literature previously discussed in Chapter 3.

