# Building Community Through Sports in South African Townships:

## Playing Towards Substantive Transition


ABSTRACT

Despite the success of South Africa's political transition away from apartheid, racial tensions persist. Moreover, many non-white South Africans still live in conditions of extreme economic inequality. This paper proposes a policy approach that implements sports education and direct investment in publicly financed, community-managed facilities to facilitate reconciliation across racial lines in South Africa's Townships and encourage community development.



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**Community and Sports Investment in South African Townships: Playing Towards Substantive Transition**

## Introduction

Between 1990 and 1994 South Africa transitioned from a racially segregated political system dominated by a white minority, to a democratic republic with a constitution that, at least on paper, guarantees equal rights across racial lines. (Inman and Rubinfeld, 2013, pp. 1-3). Following this transition, from 1995 to 1998, the new South African government led by Nelson Mandela established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to investigate human rights violations linked to the previous government's system of Apartheid and the political struggle against it (Hayner, 2011, pp. 27-28).

Despite such efforts for political transition, racial tensions persist (Cowell, 2016). While South Africa's TRC may have uncovered a substantial portion of the Truth regarding apartheid-era human rights violations, reconciliation has yet to be achieved. Moreover, many non-white South Africans still live in conditions of extreme socio-economic inequality (Goodman, 2017). This inequality is heavily racialized and especially evident in areas known as "Townships": shanty towns established during Apartheid to segregate the households of black South Africans away from other racial groups. (ibidem). Such material inequality is intrinsically linked to and fostered by persisting racial tensions that have outlived the end of apartheid (ibidem, Cowell 2016).

This paper proposes a policy approach that implements sports education and direct investment in publicly financed, community-managed facilities to facilitate reconciliation across

racial lines in South Africa's Townships and encourage community development. Through the establishment of sports training programs which combine access to equipment, education and leadership training for local communities while fostering relationships across the racial divide, this policy aims to jointly target the origin of inequality (racial bias) as well as its most urgent consequences (lack of access to infrastructure and economic opportunities).

## The Challenge

Two decades after the end of Apartheid, 65% of South Africa's wealth was still concentrated in the hands of 10% of its population. (Lannegren & Ito, 2017). More than 80% (approximately 40 million, according to Statistics South Africa, 2011) of South Africa's population is black, yet 80% of the nation's top economical 5% is white (Lannegren & Ito, 2017). Similarly, the unemployment rate among black South Africans is 28.8%, compared to 5.9% among whites. (Cowell, 2016). South Africa's Gini coefficient reached 0.65 in 2014 (World Bank, 2017).

Moreover, 55% of black adults in South Africa lived in townships as of 2007, with little change observed since this 2007 measurement and the date at which this paper is being written (Findley and Ogbu, 2011). Many of these areas are characterized by a lack of access to electrical power, clean water and flushing toilets. (Wainwright, 2014).

Townships were designed during the apartheid era to be distantly located and hard to access from South Africa's main cities, rendering economic opportunities hard to access for employable individuals within townships (ibidem). This, in turn, has led to the development of informal township economies ruled by gang-related violent crime and black markets (ibidem).

The origin of such inequalities can be traced to the explicit segregation systems established under apartheid between 1945 and 1991 (Lannegren & Ito, 2017). However, their persistence cannot: Racial tensions continue to plague South Africa's socio-economic reality, betraying a need for true reconciliation. Recent outbursts around the pronouncements of a bank analyst and a real estate agent (both white) have sparked a heated conversation that evidenced that racial stereotyping in South Africa is still alive and capable of influencing decisions by top-rank employers (most of which are white) (Cowell, 2016).

In this sense, South Africa faces the challenge of achieving significant redistribution in the context of strong racial biases which keep the wealthier sectors of the population form agreeing to such redistribution. In order to reduce structural inequality South Africa must overcome the racial biases that keep the divide in place. At the same time, the persistence of material inequality reinforces perceptions of racial difference by separating the lived experiences of people at opposite ends of the racial spectrum. For this reason, I am introducing a policy that combines reconciliatory practices (through sports programs) with direct community improvement projects.

## Theory Background

Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov (2004, p. 72) defines reconciliation as the process of "transforming the relations between rival sides from hostility and resentment to friendly and harmonious relations." Nevin T. Aitken (2004, p. 188) adopts this definition in developing his Social Learning model of reconciliation and puts it in conversation with social psychology's "contact hypothesis", whish sustains that active positive contact between groups can foster

positive relationships between their members. For Aitken, reconciliation must combine "instrumental, socioemotional and distributive forms of 'social learning' among former enemies" (idem, p. 287). In other words, Aitken sustains that for successful reconciliation to take place, opposite sides of the conflict must learn to reshape their views of each other (and the actions shaped by those views). For this reshaping to take place, Aitken sustains, both groups must engage in sustained cooperative interaction (instrumental learning), develop a shared perception of history (socioemotional learning) and reduce structural inequality between members of both groups (distributive learning) (idem, pp. 287-288). In this sense, Aitken's theory highlights how redistribution and challenges to existing racial biases are not separate developments but rather elements of the same process.

Similarly, Hutchinson and Blaker highlight how the emotional content generated by traumatic processes such as apartheid and the transition to democracy "tend to perpetuate existing antagonisms" (2008, p. 385). These authors' research offers further evidence of the way emotional perceptions regarding other groups influence the way people act towards one another and their larger context. (idem, p. 393). In order to encourage emotional reconciliation, Hutchinson and Blaker suggest that the establishment of "humane connections" through positive interactions. (idem, p. 394).

Focusing specifically on the South African case, Gready notes how community and economic relationships were dimensions not addressed by the TRC. (2010, p. 195) He highlights both relational and economic restructurings of everyday life as necessary elements in reconciliation and transitional justice. Moreover, Gready is in line with the aforementioned authors in suggesting that reconciliation requires personal encounters between opposing sides

of a conflict (idem, p. 196). In making this argument, Gready enumerates five human rights principles that must be embedded in a successful reconciliatory approach: “equality, non-discrimination, participation, accountability, [and] empowerment”. (idem, p. 197).

Finally, Sigsworth and Valji highlight that gender identity alters the way specific individuals experience trauma and the consequences on conflict (2012, pp. 115-116). This is so because women and men are often victims of different (albeit overlapping) crimes and subject to discrepant social rules (ibidem). In their research, these authors have found that violence against women is a pervasive problem in South Africa to date, and that women tend to be granted reduced access to public services and protections, suggesting that gender concerns must also be addressed by any restorative policies implemented (idem, p. 118).

## Relevant Precedents

Sports programs have a track record of success in facilitating reconciliation and shaping South Africans’ perceptions. In the 1970’s, a Boycott campaign against South Africa’s all-white cricket national team was successfully implemented under the “Stop the Seventy Tour” campaign. (Nixon, 2006, p. 68). By preventing some of the most widely followed national teams from competing in international tournaments, anti-apartheid activists managed to capture the attention of large section of South African population that would otherwise not have been involved in national identity struggles (idem, pp. 68-69). At the same time, the campaign allowed the 70s boycotters to attract attention and garner support from international allies, which led to many countries to ban South Africa form competing in some of its most popular sports’ as long as racial inequalities within its sports teams remained unaddressed (idem, p. 70).

At the same time, sports fields served as a highly visible and relatable environment in which to challenge the idea that entirely white and male groups may be considered capable of representing the country as a whole (ibidem).

In this sense, sports have already proved to be a fertile ground for politically relevant action in South Africa, while at the same time being able to reach a wider audience than purely political campaigns would. Recent arguments over the representation of different racial groups in South Africa's sports teams further suggest that these conversations remain relevant today (Campbell, 2016). Furthermore, current day examples in South Africa's Kwa-Zulu Natal, Colombia and Uganda have proved that sports participation can become a viable road to reconciliation and community development.

In the city of Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Peace Player's *Bridging Divides* program brings together children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to participate in basketball games together (Peace Players International, 2017). The goal of this program is to reduce racial biases among the children who participate. This program is implemented in coordination with local schools and includes both boys and girls ages 10 and above. The program brings together children of Durban and surrounding communities, including two townships (Lamontville and Umlazi). Established in 2001, this program reaches approximately 500 youth and includes, as well as basketball training and tournaments, community service and coach training projects (ibidem). Peace Players conducts yearly assessments, which have proved that Bridging Divides has been effective in reducing racial bias among participating children and that sports training is an attractive incentive to participation by youth (Botes and Pelser, 2005). However, they have also found that Bridging Divides' efficiency in reducing discrimination has not been

accompanied by a consistent capacity to reduce inequality (Peace Players International -South Africa, 2016).

In Colombia, the network of organizations Gol Y Paz is implementing two-phase project "Fútbol, Paz y Reconciliación" to address reconciliation regarding the conflict between FARC, the government, and civilians, in coordination with a victims' organization, international charitable foundations, the Colombian and German governments, and the UN (Gol Y Paz, 2017a). This project is being simultaneously implemented across seven Colombian cities and will bring together ex-combatants in the conflict as well as victims to build reconciliation through playing soccer in traditional all-male teams, youth "sub-20" teams and female teams (ibidem). The program is also implementing leadership training for community members who participate in the soccer games. Importantly, this program enrolls community leaders to administer its soccer games and provides pre- and post- program surveys to participants in order to incorporate community feedback (Gol Y Paz, 2017b).

In Kampala, Uganda, Soccer Without Border's "Playing for Change" program empowers youth 5 through 23 years old who are refugees of violent conflict by providing soccer training, tournaments, community events, English Language acquisition, academic support and coach formation (Soccer Without Borders, 2017). Like the programs in Colombia and South Africa, Playing for Change involves many girls (41%) who are usually underserved regarding athletic and educational opportunities (ibidem). Similarly, in Northern Uganda the Whitaker foundation is combining sponsorship from electronics firm Ericsson is conducting a project that educates ex-combatant local youth to be peace leaders and lead reconciliation efforts, including the

implementation of soccer teams among the students which help raise awareness and generate interest in youth education (Whitaker Peace & Development Initiative, 2017).

## Policy Recommendation

In consideration of the research and programs presented, I propose a policy that combines community-leadership, government-provided funding and NGO coordination in building sports facilities and implementing sports training programs in South African townships. The goal of such policy is to build reconciliation across racial lines at the same time as new infrastructure, training and opportunities are provided for township residents.

The implementation of this policy would be divided into four phases: two are based on the provision of infrastructure (phases one and four), the other two pertain to equipment provision (phase two) and building of human capital (phase three). The latter includes the day-to-day operation of this facilities.

Phase one would involve research and development of community sports facilities in select South African townships. The location of these facilities should be established through consultations with local communities to establish a subset of townships in which to implement the program as a first trial. As the program grows, new townships will be added. The initial rate should reach about 10% of township residents across all 9 provinces of South Africa, and expansion should be regulated according to the success of the first 10%, with funding provided by the federal government from community development and reconciliation budgets, coordinating at the local and national level.

The facilities should be designed with the needs of the community in mind, including spaces necessary for practicing sports (gym equipment, training space, multiple-purpose rooms), classrooms, an office, enough bathrooms and locker rooms, water fountains and a recreational space. Other services can be added as recommended by local community spokespeople or user feedback.

Phase two involves the provision of equipment for the practice of sports. Often, underserved communities have access to minimal-equipment sports only – for instance, soccer can be played so long as there is access to an open field and one ball, whilst sports like swimming and tennis require specific equipment and spaces (pool, racket, court, balls, swimsuits, etc.). Following the example of the Whitaker foundation's partnership with Nike, agreements may be settled with sports equipment providers and non-profit sports organizations for assistance in providing quality equipment. National teams may also sponsor the provision of sports apparel and equipment. It is important that these facilities provide elements for the practice of investment-intensive sports and not only to the sports that township residents could access without assistance to increase access to opportunity. The selection of specific sports can be discussed with local residents and may also be determined based on the expertise of available coaches.

Phase three involves the running of these spaces. A board should be established with local residents and a maximum of two outside-the-community experts. Sports programs should be established – with local coaches whenever possible – to provide sports education to children, youth-at-risk, and women form the community and from neighboring communities of a different racial and socioeconomic status. The facility should be open to all so long as users

maintain acceptable behavior within the premises. Participants and coaches of the sports programs should also be enrolled in education programs that further their academic and work opportunities as well as human rights education to further reconciliatory goals. Security needs should be addressed through a community-owned process where the space is seen as a, inclusive community asset communally owned and protected rather than a patrolled and therefore exclusive space. Whenever possible, the facilities should operate in as many languages as are spoken in the region where they are located.

Finally, participants in the sports programs and coaches should be involved in fundraising and community service efforts to build better infrastructure for the township at large. Similarly, sports tournaments, exhibitions and other events can be run at these facilities to fundraise for the township's development.

## Discussion

The proposed policy aims to generate positive, reconciliatory interactions between township residents and members of contrasting neighboring communities (for instance, by bringing together residents of Cape Town's affluent neighborhoods and township residents in nearby Khayelitsha). At the same time, the sports program can serve as an incentive to enroll participants in educational programs that empower township residents and teach South Africans about human rights.

To reach this goal, it is important that the facilities are constructed with the users' needs in mind, making them attractive and functional but without unnecessary expenses. Similarly, transportation and incentives (such as tax reductions and the possibility to access new

educational opportunities) should be provided for residents to participate. Additionally, special attention should be devoted to facilitating the participation of women and minority groups.

Finally, the management structure of these spaces should be flat in nature and develop the skills of community leaders through training and the creation of new opportunities, rather than implementing a top-down structure of authority. Ideally, as the program develops enough local leaders will be trained that no outsiders are required in running these spaces after a few years. However, the government and sponsoring organizations should remain involved to support maintenance costs if fundraising efforts are not sufficient. Periodic surveys of users should also be implemented to maintain the spaces and programs responsive to community needs.

## Conclusion

To summarize, using quality sports facilities and training as incentives for positive interactions, South Africa can foster reconciliation across its pronounced racial divides. Moreover, the development of sports training – in combination with education and community development programs – can encourage the improvement of currently underserved and intensely segregated communities as are the Townships. Such programs are ambitious and holistic, but there is precedent from programs in Kwa-Zulu Natal, Uganda and Colombia that suggest that these approaches can be successful at reducing racial biases and empowering communities.

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