



Sports for Lebanese Children Affected by Conflict

Executive Summary

Studies have recently shown that children and youth who were directly exposed to war-related events during the Lebanese civil war in the 1980's still suffer from anxiety and depression disorders today. During the war commotion in the summer of 2006 old wounds were reopened and the risk of a new civil war has substantially increased. Aside from this, the every day life of children and youth was seriously unsettled. Interventions to alleviate the stress and trauma are greatly needed. Children and young people are especially susceptible to emotional stress and trauma. Frustration, combined with a lack of reference points and opportunities, creates fertile ground for violence, radical ideologies and instability, and makes them vulnerable to risky behaviour, including substance abuse.

Sport and play are a meaningful leisure activity that can help overcome emotional injury, channel frustration and aggression, promote physical and mental well-being, impart important basic rules for peaceful co-existence, encourage confidence, friendships and relationships based on trust and promote social integration. Sport and play can also be combined with informational and educational work (e.g. drug and AIDS prevention).

The Swiss Academy for Development (SAD) launched the pilot project *Sports for Lebanese Children Affected by Conflict* in cooperation with the Lebanese NGO Oum el Nour in October 2006. Despite the challenging political and social environment in Lebanon the project has been successfully implemented since the beginning of 2007.

The objective of the project is to help overcome emotional stress and enhance the psychosocial rehabilitation of children and youth affected by conflict through guided sport activities. By means of sport and other game-based interventions, children and youth are provided with leisure time structures that help to channel emotions, frustration and aggression, improve mental and social wellbeing, promote values such as teamwork and fair-play as well as provide orientation. Team sport activities are an especially attractive tool to create and foster team spirit and social cohesion, to strengthen mutual trust, to accept rules and discipline, and to promote social integration. An important aspect of the project is the incorporation of children and youth from different religious backgrounds with the aim of fostering inter-religious exchange and dialogue. Two other projects implemented by SAD (in Bam/Iran and Sri Lanka) have served as examples to show how effective and meaningful such sports projects are in terms of conflict transformation and inter-religious dialogue through the development of friendship and trust.

The primary goals of the project in Lebanon are the following:

- To support stress and trauma management, and to strengthen mental and physical well-being.
- To provide useful leisure time activities that also promote norms and behaviours, which are important for coping with every day life.
- To impart values of peaceful and respectful co-existence such as team work, fair play, respect for others, tolerance, acceptance of rules, and peaceful confrontation (life skills education).

- To improve the integration of children and young people from different sectarian and social groups.
- To raise awareness on safety and health-related topics such as drug abuse, HIV/ AIDS, violence, etc.
- To provide capacity-building and empowerment for the local project team and coaches.
- To monitor, evaluate and measure psychosocial impacts of the programme, with the objective of drafting 'lessons learnt' and 'best practices'.

The project has a planned duration of two years (January 1st 2007-December 31st 2008). After a pilot phase of two years the project shall be handed over to local structures in order to ensure sustainable continuation of the project.

1. Activities

Location:

Activities have been implemented in the Southern suburbs of Beirut, in the region of Dahieh. This region has always been in the centre of internal conflicts in Lebanon and was also very much affected by the war during summer 2006. Three public schools (two female schools and one male school) as well as children from a nearby Palestinian refugee camp (boys and girls) were chosen for the extra-curricular sport activities. The infrastructure of the partner schools is used in order to implement the sport and play activities. In addition to the physical education classes, the project coaches carry out extra-curricular sport and play activities twice a week in each of the partner schools.

Coaches:

The activities are conducted and carried out by young and greatly committed local coaches. The selection of the coaches was based on their skills but also to ensure equal representation based on gender and religious background. At the moment, there are five female coaches and five male coaches, of which there are also three Palestinians. All of the coaches possess many years of experience in voluntary youth work. Some of the coaches had already organised a private initiative, conducting sport activities for boys.

With the aim of preparing the coaches for their vital role in the project and to provide them with important knowledge and expertise concerning the use of sport as a tool for social and behavioural change, a first workshop on psychosocial and sport didactics was held successfully between February 12 and 16, 2007. 30 participants attended the workshop. Besides the project coaches, other NGO staff who were interested in the topic of sports as a means for development and conflict transformation, participated in the workshop.

Implementation of the sport and play activities:

A total of 200 children participated so far regularly at the activities. Not only students from the partner schools participate in the activities, also children and youth from the neighbourhood benefit from and participate in the extra curricula activities. In order to conduct the activities, different groups were formed, according to age, sex and favourite sport activity. According to the wish of the participants, activities such as football, volleyball, basketball, handball, gymnastics and Taekwondo are offered. The objective of the activities and games is to combine sport and play with the learning of social competences. The participants learn to integrate weaker players, to cope with their aggressions, to follow rules and to fight the opponent in a playful manner.

The participants partially create new rules and define the 'punishment' or consequences of not following the rules. This encourages the participants to become personally involved in the project and to take responsibility for how the sports activities are carried out. It also offers the possibility for dialogue to find solutions when there are differences of opinion. A health education component has been added to the project, including e.g. courses about drug- and HIV/AIDS- prevention.

2. Monitoring and Evaluation

The project is being scientifically monitored by a comprehensive Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) programme that uses quantitative and qualitative methods. By using different methodological tools, the study aims to assess the impact of the sport and play programme on resilience of the participant children and youth.

In addition, a participatory photo monitoring technique has been introduced. The participants regularly get the chance to document the progress in the activities from their own perspectives with the help of a photo camera. This tool has turned out to be very valuable pedagogically since the children carry responsibility and at the same time it offers an important insight into the activities from the participants' point of view. It also points out difficulties and problems and helps the coaches and the project management formulate the necessary response to negative aspects.

In June 2006 the pictures and stories of the project were exposed to the public in Beirut. The purpose of this event was to inform the public about the mixed-religious activities and bring participants and parents from different social and religious background together.

3. First findings and results

A summary of the results and findings, which were gained through the monitoring and evaluation programme, are provided below:

Children and Youth:

- The project meets the need of young people from socially and economically underprivileged families for organised extra curricula and leisure time activities. Children and young people participate with great enthusiasm in the activities and enjoy it very much. The programme has become an important part in their every day lives. In case of postponement or cancellation of the activities due to security reasons, the participants are not only disappointed but they ask that activities are compensated at a later stage. The same applies to activities which started with delay- the participants demand that these days are made up the end of the activities.
- The four locations in which the activities are carried out are geographically close to one another but the socio-cultural differences between the participants are enormous. The reasons for the children and young people to participate in the activities are equally different as their socio-cultural backgrounds. Responding to the different needs of the participants is a great challenge for the coaches. The activities must be adapted to the respective context as well as to the participants. The coaches handle this with great care, sensibility and empathy as well as with flexibility.

Coaches:

- Congruent to the experiences and outcomes of similar projects, the findings of this programme once again emphasises the central position of the coaches for the success of the psychosocial sports activities. In the beginning, the coaches were treated like teachers but the relationship between them and the participants developed progressively into

friendship. The coaches became role models to whom the participants are now closely attached and whom they can trust. The participants even share their intimate and private problems with their coaches. Problems within the family and difficulties at school are the major issues discussed and talked about with the coaches. At the end of each activity unit talks about health, drugs, respect for each other, solving of conflicts, fair-play etc. became an integral part of the programme. In the beginning of these scheduled discussions, the participants faced difficulties in expressing their thoughts. Yet over the time they have become more open and now actively take part in the talks and integrate their own subjects they like to discuss. Another example which demonstrates the important position of the coaches are the pictures taken during the photo monitoring: most of the pictures taken through the participants show the coaches.

- The reports and feedback show that the coaches are also attached to the children and youth participating in the programme. The coaches take the problems of the participants very seriously and try as well as they can, to help and to support them. Due to the deepened relationship with the participants, the coaches identify more than before with the project. It also positively influenced the coaches and helped them to work independently.
- As the coaches themselves are mentally burdened to some extent through the difficulties they face during the activities efforts were made to provide the coaches with the professional support they need to cope with the situation from the start. Additional to the one week workshop at the beginning of the project, there were smaller workshops for capacity building organised on a regular basis. These workshops cover psychosocial issues.

4. Broad effects and the future of the project

Based on the results of the monitoring and evaluation programme 'best practices' and 'lessons learnt' will be defined and analysed. They will then be made accessible for other NGOs working in the region and other people and organisations involved and interested.

Right from the start it was planned to transfer the project to local structures after the two years of the pilot phase. Through the cooperation with the Lebanese Ministry of Education, the municipality of Shiah and the involvement of coaches from a private initiative in the activities, the first milestone for a sustainable handing over into local structures was established.

The success of the project during the first year of the pilot phase and the positive feedback of the participants, together with the findings and results of the M&E programme, encourage us to continue with the plans of handing it over to local structures. The need for activities which provide meaningful leisure time structure and orientation for children of families with few financial means has been confirmed through the findings of the M&E programme. During the second year of the pilot phase, the necessary requirements for the handover to local structures have to be faced (infrastructure, capacity building project team, creating of networks etc.). To have the programme entirely integrated into local structures by the end of 2008 is the overall goal of the second year of the pilot phase.