SDP and Forced Displacement

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Introduction

Being involved in football, even as a spectator, helped me settle as an immigrant and in fact helped me assimilate. I also believe that football has played a similar role in other refugees’ stories. As I mingle with the old-timers who came here as refugees and with the new arrivals from Africa, the Middle East and Asia; together they bring football in their baggage and use it as a tool of survival. (Murray, 2014)

People with refugee backgrounds have long been actively involved in sport from the grassroots to the elite level. Les Murray’s journey to becoming the face of football (soccer) in Australia is a case in point. His journey began as an 11-year-old boy fleeing with his family from their home near Budapest, Hungary, in 1956. Murray (then known as László Ürge) and his family fled across the Austrian border and spent the next six months in refugee camps. The family would eventually resettle in Australia. He recalls how adjustment to life in Australia was not easy for his family – the challenges of starting again in a new country, learning a new language, and understanding and adjusting to different social expectations and attitudes (Murray, 2006).

In Australia, Murray continued his love for the game he had played as a child in Hungary; a game that, at the time, was a minority sport in Australia. He has played a major role in popularizing football in Australia as a media commentator, presenter and producer. He was appointed SBS Television’s Head of Sport in 1996 and served in this role until 2006, when he returned to sports journalism to become SBS Sport’s editorial chief.

Les Murray’s opening quote reflects his passionate commitment to football as a positive force in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers. He argues that “for many young asylum seekers and refugees, football is a source of hope and a way for them to start healing from the traumas of the refugee experience. It helps give them a sense of purpose and belonging, as well as an opportunity to practice English and socialize with other children” (Murray, 2014). This
belief resonates with the language of organizations and activists in the sport for development and peace (SDP) sector that have been delivering projects to refugees in conflict zones and refugee camps as well as in countries of resettlement. For example, in recent years global stakeholders in sport, such as the International Olympic Committee and FIFA, have been convening with leaders in the development sector and settlement services, as well as with multinational corporations, to identify how sport can be better used to support refugees and other displaced persons around the world. These initiatives come at a time when forced displacement is at a record high. By the end of 2015, 65.3 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence or human rights violations (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2016).

Critically, Murray’s experience illustrates how refugees’ private troubles are, to paraphrase C. Wright Mills, divisive public issues. Murray’s biography points to the multi-level barriers that people with refugee backgrounds may face both in sport and in the resettlement process more broadly; issues which are well documented in recent academic research (Correa-Velez et al., 2013; Spaaij, 2013, 2015). As Warren St John’s (2007, 2009) critically acclaimed account of the Fugees football team in Clarkston, Atlanta, vividly demonstrates, refugees find both hope and hostility on the sports field, including resentment and vitriol levelled at them by some opposing teams and local residents (see also Dukic, McDonald, & Spaaij, 2017). These accounts suggest that, as former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon observes, the “refugee crisis” is “not just a crisis of numbers; it is also a crisis of solidarity” (United Nations, 2016).

Recent manifestations of the politicized and divisive nature of the “refugee crisis” are manifold, ranging from Europe’s attempts to regulate the mass movement of more than one million refugees and migrants across its borders, to U.S. President Donald Trump’s executive order blocking refugees from entering the United States, and Australia’s controversial offshore detention policy (e.g. Farrell, 2016). In the Australian context, Murray (2014) confesses feeling “bewildered and disenchanted by how my fellow refugees are being treated today. Current policies and attitudes are so far-removed from the welcome I remember receiving […] and certainly don’t reflect the generous spirit of most Australians whom I’ve come to know.” He believes that “current rhetoric and policies [only] cultivate fear and xenophobia,” and that “it’s time to intervene.” Murray further signals his dissatisfaction with the dominant representation of refugees as problematic subjects of a policy encouraging conformity and assimilation (Leach & Zamora, 2006). He instead portrays refugees as agents with potential who make vital social, cultural and economic contributions to their countries of resettlement. Murray (2014) notes that
“we can all play a part in this by first understanding that refugees are not a threat and that, on the contrary, they enrich our culture and build our nation, as so much historical evidence shows.”

The life stories of Les Murray, members of the Fugees, and other people with refugee backgrounds who participate in and contribute to sport, raise important questions for SDP research, policy and practice. What participation opportunities does the SDP sector provide to refugees and other displaced persons? What are the assumptions that underpin these initiatives? To what extent, and how, does the SDP sector succeed in addressing barriers and facilitators to refugee participation and wellbeing? This chapter will critically examine contemporary SDP programs and research in this area to address these questions. In order to achieve this objective, we will draw upon multiple sources including biographical accounts such as Murray’s, contemporary academic literature, and our own primary research on the intersections of sport and forced displacement in Global North and Global South settings (see also Dukic, McDonald, & Spaaij, 2017; Oxford, in press; Oxford & Spaaij, 2017; Spaaij, 2012, 2013, 2015).

We recognize that the SDP sector’s engagement with refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) is not confined to the Global South. Rather, it also incorporates myriad “sport/exercise for inclusion” and refugee settlement initiatives in Global North settings (Amara et al., 2004; Guerin et al., 2003; Ha & Lyras, 2013; Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011; Jeanes et al., 2015; Nathan et al., 2013; Olliff, 2008; Whitley et al., 2016). We define “refugee” as someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of nationality owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCR, 2010). Internally displaced persons are those who are forced to flee their homes but who remain within their country’s borders.

This chapter first provides an overview of SDP initiatives that work with refugees and IDPs. It then critically examines existing SDP initiatives in relation to the aforementioned questions. Following this discussion, we present an illustrative case study based on the second author’s ethnographic fieldwork with a development program in Colombia that seeks to engage IDPs through sport. In the final section, we reflect on the main themes and findings, and propose issues for future research on SDP and forced displacement.

Mapping the field
This research, although not exhaustive, provides an exploratory synopsis of the diverse and numerous SDP initiatives catering to refugees and IDPs. Two websites were used to map and take stock of SDP initiatives that explicitly aim to engage this target group: the International Platform for Sport and Development (www.sportanddev.org) and Beyond Sport (www.beyondsport.org). Both online platforms provide a virtual space for the SDP community to network and share resources. The first has 532 registered organizations and the latter 2,158 registered projects. From this sample of SDP organizations and projects, we identified 29 organizations and projects that explicitly focused on refugees and IDPs. The websites of these SDP initiatives were thematically analyzed for variables including geographical location, donor location, target population, primary objective, sports offered, educational focus and descriptive language.

Figure 1: Map of SDP initiatives working with refugees and IDPs (May 2017)

Figure 1 shows the countries and contested territories where the 29 refugee-focused SDP initiatives operated at the time of writing (May 2017). The initiatives are diverse in size, structure and application. Fourteen organizations work in multiple locations. For example, Capoeira4refugees operate across 200 refugee camps and communities in 21 countries, and Right to Play work with more than one million children in 20 countries. Ten initiatives employ programs in Western nations. This number may reflect staff access to the English language and/or technology enabling their inclusion on the two examined websites, rather than a dominance of Western-based initiatives. Two initiatives include corporations that collaborate with UN agencies to fundraise and provide equipment. Last, there are seven grassroots NGOs
established by individuals who experienced conflict personally as either an aid worker or displaced person. Examples of these programs include the Tegla Loroupe Peace Foundation in Kenya, a circus and arts program in Cambodia, and Reclaim Childhood in Jordan.

The locations of the SDP initiatives listed expose where major humanitarian crises have occurred or are ongoing. For example, many organizations operate in multiple locations in Jordan, Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, reflecting the large numbers of people fleeing Syria, but also the long-term refugee status of many Palestinians (UNRWA, 2016). The primary stated objectives of the initiatives in this region include providing a fun activity, social networking, building life skills, teaching resilience and empowerment. In addition, there are relatively large numbers of both refugee camps and SDP initiatives in Central and Eastern Africa – a repercussion of the conflict in the Central African Republic, the ongoing conflict in and rebuilding of South Sudan, and the long-term instability affecting inhabitants of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia. SDP initiatives in these areas seek to promote peace/healing, social integration, teamwork and leadership, as well as overcoming boredom. Initiatives in the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden, Germany and the United States created in response to the arrival of refugees who have fled predominantly Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan promote anti-racism, community integration and social inclusion programs, as well as scholastic support.

Although most of the SDP initiatives’ stated objectives are fairly generic, it is possible to discern thematic groupings. More than one-third of the listed programs prioritize education and life skills, with almost the same number (and perhaps many of the same organizations) also working towards peacebuilding and community development. Subsequent themes include health and well-being, recreation and play, and intercultural exchange and tolerance. Additionally, a few Western-located initiatives work to tackle xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment among the host population. Sports associated with educational themes include capoeira, football, climbing, cricket, basketball, table tennis, taekwondo, play/games, and circus/arts.

Akin to the SDP sector in general, the website descriptions of the 29 SDP initiatives are mostly framed by fashionable positive terms that focus on the initiatives’ transformative goals, such as empowerment, resilience and social integration. In contrast, a few initiatives market their work with grave words and phrases describing the participants such as trauma, poor, misery, suffering, at-risk. This language use appears to reflect the aforementioned dominant representation of refugees as problematic subjects including cultural misrecognition associated with an equation of refugee difference and marginality with deficit and lack. The problematic
nature of this deficit discourse is well documented in various fields of study, including refugee studies (Horst, 2006), education (Roy & Roxas, 2011; Keddie, 2012), and increasingly in SDP research (e.g. Spaaij, 2011; Schulenkorf & Spaaij, 2015). For example, educational research shows that the discourse employed by educators toward refugee families is often grounded in a deficit-based paradigm that creates missed opportunities for connecting with parents and students by blaming them rather than evaluating the lack of education provided to refugee families in how to “do school” in their new country (Roy & Roxas, 2011). In SDP research, it has been argued that this deficit model can lead practitioners to try to identify and fix problems and solve issues for, rather than with, participants. There have been calls for an alternative paradigm, that of asset-based development, where communities are supported to design programs around their own needs, strengths, resources and autonomy (Misener & Schulenkorf, 2016; Schulenkorf & Spaaij, 2015). Within this context, Govindasamy and Rose (2011) argue that it is critical that any initiatives to address refugees’ (re)settlement needs and difficulties are sustainable and aim to empower participants and “promote their existing strengths and resilience techniques” (p. 107). There is thus an opportunity for the SDP sector and researchers to learn from refugees and IDPs about how they perform these qualities (Evers, 2010).

A limitation of the methodology we used to take stock of SDP initiatives that cater to refugees and IDPs, namely thematic analysis of two online SDP platforms, is that it does not indicate how the objectives and framing of initiatives evolve over time. A noteworthy trend is the growth in sport-based programs whose objectives include the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism, within the context of growing concerns about the impact of refugee arrivals on national security, such as the belief that terrorists may gain entry to Western nations disguised as refugees. This trend suggests the othering of refugees not just in terms of deficit and lack, but in terms of threat and security risk. For example, in Belgium, the Netherlands, Australia and elsewhere, martial arts and football programs have been introduced to assist Muslim immigrants and refugees in fostering positive social relationships and a sense of belonging which, it is believed, will build resilience against risks of radicalization and violent extremism (e.g. Johns et al., 2014; Rutter, 2016).

The need for community-based programs focused on sports, the arts and music in order to promote resilience to violent extremism is frequently flagged (Grossman et al., 2016). Moreover, sports are now being used in a few prison-based de-radicalization programs as a platform for engagement and rehabilitation through personal growth and mutual trust (Barkindo & Bryans, 2016). Within this context, the rise of anti-radicalization on the SDP agenda may present an opportunity for SDP organizations to attract public funding and
visibility; yet, it risks dehumanization of refugees in the process, potentially adding to the creation of “suspect communities” (Breen-Smyth, 2014; Kundnani, 2014). Furthermore, it could exacerbate ideological and practical tensions between SDP organizations and donors (Oxford & Spaaij, in press). The former’s desire to contribute to human and social development can be at odds with the national security agenda of donors such as law enforcement or criminal justice agencies. We have personally observed this tension in our conversations with existing projects in this area. In at least two instances (in the Netherlands and in Australia), the organizers were reluctant to brand their program as an anti-radicalization intervention due to fear of community backlash and because they believed it would turn away the target population. For this reason, the projects are publicly promoted as initiatives that focus on empowerment, resilience, education, employability and social integration, even though they are funded by government agencies with the specific purpose of contributing to the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism. The forms of regulation and social control that operate in these programs are thus strategically and discursively concealed from public view.

In the remainder of this chapter, we move beyond this broad overview of SDP initiatives targeting refugees and IDPs to present an illustrative case study of a development program in Colombia. This case study is based on ethnographic research conducted by the second author in 2015 and 2016.

**Supporting IDPs in Colombia through sport and play**

Lasting nearly 60 years, Colombia’s internal conflict, which included government forces, guerrillas and paramilitary groups, was the longest running armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere. Since 1985, more than 5.5 million Colombians have registered with the national government as victims of conflict (Revista Semana, 2016). Most internally displaced Colombians fled from rural to urban environments in search of two things: “the security of being anonymous to avoid being targeted again; and access to public services that are inaccessible in their home municipalities” (COHA, 2015). The trauma experienced by these citizens coupled with their stigmatization has resulted in IDPs choosing anonymity, leading the UNHCR to dub Colombia’s forced displacement an “invisible crisis.” In a joint evaluation, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Food Programme found IDP living conditions to be harsh: “the average monthly income of an internally displaced family represents a little over 41 percent of the official minimum wage, equivalent to US$63 dollars. Of this amount, displaced people spend 58 percent on food, 6 percent on health, and just three
percent on education” (WFP, 2015). Many IDPs therefore rely heavily on local assistance provided by NGOs and the Catholic Church (Vidal Lopez et al., 2011).

The SDP organization VIDA (a pseudonym) works in marginalized communities throughout Colombia – neighborhoods where sexual and domestic violence and teen pregnancy are critical issues that assist in reproducing poverty, and where residents live in insecure and overcrowded housing and commonly experience chronic stress leading to high levels of depression (Pallitto & O’Campo, 2005). VIDA does not explicitly note that they work with refugees and IDPs in its reports; however, the communities in which they work have high proportions of IDPs as residents. VIDA manages sport-based development community programs throughout Colombia. Responding to the diversity of Colombia’s geography and people, VIDA draws from multiple methodologies to create their own pedagogical approach. In VIDA children play together on a regular basis (two days a week) and are taught values such as tolerance and respect. Sport is applied as a strategy to recruit participants, but also to encourage ludic play in their routine schedule. A variety of sports or games are offered at each location depending on what is popular, socially acceptable, and suggested by participants. Sometimes players are organized by gender or age, but often, players are integrated. VIDA hires coaches, social workers, and psychologists to support participants on and off the field. Parents are required to register their children, but VIDA does not regulate attendance. By design it rewards participants for being self-motivated and attending on their own accord.

VIDA aims to improve children’s lives and to transform vulnerable communities through sports/play, education and health. Prominent themes in its projects are combatting violence, promoting tolerance and encouraging social inclusion. A key component of its mission is enrolling and supporting children in education. Young participants have access to after-school tutoring led by youth leaders, and after one year of engagement, participants qualify to participate in a school support program that includes educational supplies (e.g. notebooks, book bag) and academic scholarships. Selected participants are also provided with opportunities to experience life outside of their enclave through national and international travel to sports-based festivals, science-focused competitions, SDP/NGO conferences and professional football games (e.g., FIFA World Cup, Premier League).

Daniela is an 18-year-old leader who has taken advantage of VIDA’s programs and was identified as a “model leader” by staff members. Born in Venezuela, at a young age she fled with her family to Panama before settling in Colombia. She credits VIDA for her current self-discipline, academic success and positive attitude:
A large part of my life was changed through football. When I arrived at the foundation, I got here and they made me a part [of the organization]. They put new ideas in my mind, they put new concepts and life projects and everything started to change. From that time, I didn’t see the world like before. Before I was a really violent child, from the street. I didn’t spend time at home. I didn’t want to study and so I arrived here and they gave me a new concept of what life was and what my future would hold. And well, at that time, I began to understand and I began to study. I am well behaved with everything that I have to do.

Yuliza, an 18-year-old female leader made a similar statement, recognizing behavioural changes in relation to her commitment to VIDA: “My experience has been very good because since I joined the foundation I learned a lot because I used to be one of the girls who fought all the time. I treated everyone badly, they couldn’t even look at me because I would hit them and here they helped me, I’m not like that anymore.” Both quotations display proclamation of personal transformation and an active embodiment of VIDA’s values.

VIDA seeks to create a supportive community for residents who have experienced trauma. Participants commonly endorsed VIDA as their family and a positive community resource. Due to VIDA’s stability in relation to the local context and extensive community networks, it lends itself to support the community in a variety of ways beyond their stated mission. For example, parents are invited and encouraged to attend monthly seminars that relate to the topics children are studying. VIDA hosts medical specialists and affordable clothing sales. And, basic infrastructure (e.g. phone lines, field) is maintained and updated. Staff member, Julio, spoke about VIDA’s efforts to support the community: “Before we trained on a field where VIDA made necessary adjustments to make it work. There was a mountain in front and sewage drained onto the field, so we flattened the earth to open ditches around the field…That space was recovered for the community not only for VIDA.”

It is recognized that VIDA’s efforts are influential in the community, but the common rhetoric of self-change coupled with values, as captured in Daniela and Yuliza’s quotations, is potentially problematic. In what seemed to be automated and cursory responses, VIDA employees and participants alike proudly asserted that VIDA impacts the community because of values. All 22 interlocutors directly associated with VIDA mentioned the word “values” a total of 73 times in their interviews. Underpinning these statements is a conceptual dichotomy between good and bad behaviour and an assumption that following the “good” path will result in opportunity, if not a life-changing trajectory. This is seen again with Daniela when
comparing children inside the program to those outside:

Children in the street do not have the support, they do not have that person to tell them, “Don’t say this, don’t say that.” Children come here and they are influenced with values like respect, honesty, all those types of values. And I think that through that they are educated and they are being better people.

In a similar vein, Yuliza considers integration and opportunity through assimilation to be connected to success: “Here [in the program] you can learn values, you pass your free time instead of being in the street, doing things like taking drugs or robbing people.” Thus, we see here further illustrations of the forms of regulation and social control that operate in SDP initiatives (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Spaaij, 2009). Only when discussing personal and sometimes painful experiences did interlocutors bypass the argument that values remedy social inequalities such as racism, sexism and classism to address the double standards and social stigma frequently accepted as normal.

A common concern when analyzing VIDA and other SDP organizations is the underpinning assumption of the deficit-based paradigm – that children and young people must first change themselves or be changed in order to assimilate into a specific non-threatening mould accepted by society (or those in power) before they can then become change-makers. Terms signifying regulation and social control, such as “empowered,” “good citizen,” “healed,” “leaders,” and “confident,” are commonly found on the websites of the 29 listed organizations. But when participants adopt specific values and embody qualities of the “good, active citizen,” we must ask: will they then be capable and equipped to change the oppressive and intersectional structures (e.g., patriarchy, class system, structural racism, poor educational system) that caused them to need to participate in the program to begin with?

This is not to argue that VIDA is unneeded, but rather to highlight the limitations of the program, and to call attention to the fact that the most stigmatized and marginalized in society are not being applauded for their resilience and creativity, but rather are being identified as “deficit citizens” and then socialized and taught to conform to the dominant culture that oppresses them. In VIDA there were a few exemplar cases of participants who became leaders and not only assimilated into the “good citizen” promoted by VIDA, but who have taken advantage of the organization’s offerings. At each location, leaders spoke proudly of their travel opportunities and some had even begun attending university or a work-focused tertiary
program. Leaders who reaped these rewards were the exception, and not the rule, and it is too early to know the extent of their benefit. Other participants benefited from having cultivated a local social support system and taking advantage of access to supportive employees, but even when they subscribed to VIDA’s value system, their life varied little from their parents’ because of the structures that shape their lives, such as the government enforced class system, the Catholic church and local gangs and paramilitary groups. Single mother of a previous player and IDP, Daniela Maria, appreciated VIDA for the “new atmosphere in the community” and for the support they had provided her and her daughter over the last decade, but she did not connect VIDA to macro-social change. When asked if she believed her daughter’s life is different from her own or if the social inequalities such as sexism, had changed since VIDA’s inception, she replied, “No.”

Conclusion

The global attention on refugees and internally displaced persons in politics, media and civil society is reflected in the SPD sector’s variegated attempts to engage and support this target population through its programs. Existing initiatives are geographically dispersed and diverse in their objectives and approaches. They have been providing tangible outcomes for refugees and IDPs in areas such as access to sport and play, education, health and wellbeing, life skills and community capacity building. In this chapter, we have discussed some of the underlying assumptions on which SDP initiatives that work with refugees and IDPs are built, with specific reference to the existence of a deficit-based paradigm that associates refugee difference and marginality with deficit and lack, as well as threat and security risk. The latter is reflected in, for instance, the emergence of SDP initiatives whose objectives include the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism, within the context of growing concerns about the impact of refugee arrivals and immigrants on national security.

Many of the SDP initiatives addressed in this chapter operate in volatile and resource-scarce settings where daily challenges can become dire and troubleshooting the norm. Although for participants and staff daily programming may feel isolated from macro-structures, this is not the case. SDP organizations are embedded within the broader fields of business, politics and development. Moreover, it is vital that these organizations compete for funding. In this position, they are encouraged – potentially at the cost of discontinuation – to adapt to the prevailing and dominant discourse. The game of survival is not then limited to the refugee alone, but includes the SDP initiative. Flexible wording and marketing that targets wealthier,
donor audiences may appear distant from on-the-ground programming, albeit when words and labels are connected to marginalized individuals and groups, a risk of (re)confirming social stigmas and (re)producing negative stereotypes is created. The implications of this risk are limitless as social identifiers such as race, religion and class can be embedded within these words and images, creating a multi-pronged socially constructed barrier that challenges the participant’s agency. There is a need for critical reflection on the implications of this issue, for example in relation to risks to the (perceived) legitimacy of SDP initiatives and the potential dehumanization of refugees. More broadly, this chapter suggests the need for a philosophical shift in SDP programs from a deficit-based model to an asset-based approach that recognizes, values and supports refugees and IDPs’ strengths and resources as well as the social, cultural and economic contributions they make to society.

From the analysis presented in this chapter, a number of questions for future research can be identified. How might an asset-based approach to SDP and forced displacement be conceived and fostered? How can the needs and aspirations of refugees be met and community resilience be strengthened without resorting to deficit-based or threat-based approaches? And, how can the SDP sector and researchers learn from, and accommodate, refugees and IDPs’ intimate knowledge of resilience, independence and autonomy (Evers, 2010)? These questions, we argue, have applicability beyond initiatives that work specifically with refugees and IDPs. They are, indeed, vital to the future development of the SDP sector more broadly and to its capacity to contribute to the kinds of human and social development that Les Murray has been a passionate advocate for.

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