

Moving the Goalposts: The Impact of Soccer on the Lives and Prospects of Girls and Young Women in Rural Kenya

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Abstract

'Sport and development' is increasingly utilized as a tool for social change in Africa. However there is very little published work available on the effectiveness of this approach and it therefore remains an unproven method in mainstream development practice. This paper highlights the efforts made by a community based organization in Kenya, Moving the Goalposts Kilifi (MTGK), to provide evidence on the impact of sports in development. MTGK is a girls' football and reproductive health programme that has established a monitoring and evaluation system to measure its impact. In this paper we focus on one approach, 'girls' stories', which address both the negative and positive effects of soccer on the lives of young women. While we do not reach any definitive conclusions about the overall impact of sport, the anecdotal evidence suggests that sport is improving the lives of girls in the area.

Introduction

The popularity of ‘sport and development’ has grown tremendously over the last ten years. Although numerous sports-based initiatives have sprung up throughout the developing world, the effectiveness of these programs remains unclear. This paper highlights the efforts of Moving the Goalposts Kilifi (MTGK) to address this question, and to fill the gap in the sport and development literature. MTGK utilized multiple methods to collect data that will shed light on the effects of soccer on young women in Kilifi, Kenya. This paper addresses both the negative and positive effects of soccer on the lives of young women. However, the focus is on the “girls’ stories,” which discuss the impact of MTGK in the words of the participants themselves. While we do not reach any definitive conclusions about the overall impact of sport, the anecdotal evidence suggests that sport is improving the lives of young women in the area.

Soccer and Development – What Impact in Africa?

Organizations, projects and networks have sprung up championing the use of sport to mitigate development challenges, such as HIV/AIDS, ethnic conflict and gender inequality in developing countries. The popularity of this approach is further evidenced by the United Nations confirming its commitment to sport by declaring 2005 the International Year of Sport and Physical Education. As the 2015 deadline for meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) draws closer, many people are hoping that sport initiatives will contribute to the achievement of these internationally agreed upon development objectives.

But to what extent can sport help achieve the

MDGs? Where is the evidence that sport can positively impact the lives of disadvantaged people in developing countries? What about the less positive aspects of sport, such as aggression, or the potential to inflame conflict? The reality is that there is very little evidence in the public sphere to suggest that the link between sports and development has the power to create significant and lasting change. Many people may 'believe' sport can create positive change such as gender empowerment, and HIV prevention, but the hard facts to support these claims are not readily available.

A number of researchers and organizations are trying to fill this gap. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) initiatives have the potential to provide the data necessary to investigate the impact of sport and development programs. To this end, UK Sport's Sport in Development Monitoring and Evaluation Manual (Coalter 2006) is one of the first attempts to provide guidelines for grass roots organizations undertaking M&E initiatives. Furthermore "monitoring" and "evaluation" were the buzzwords at the recent launch of the Sport for Social Change Network (SSCN) (February 2007) in Nairobi, Kenya (sponsored by Care, USAID and Nike). While projects in Africa are often implementing innovative and locally appropriate activities, their ability to bring such information into a broader public arena is where they are found wanting. Poor communication, slow internet access, limited capacity of organizations to network and promote themselves all contribute to confining this rich information to very limited audiences.

There are, of course, a number of exceptions. Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) (www.mysakenya.org), Edusport (www.edusport.org.zm) and SCORE (www.score.org.za) receive wide coverage in

the sport and development literature. These organizations have strong local structures in place and have built good relationships with donors and other partners. However, despite their success, producing robust evidence that sports can promote the Millennium Development Goals remains a challenge for most organizations in Africa.

Moving the Goalposts Kilifi

In this review, we will focus on a smaller and less established organization, Moving the Goalposts Kilifi (MTGK (<http://mtgk.org>)). It is a girls' football (soccer) and development organization established in 2001 in Kilifi district, Kenya. Kilifi district is one of the poorest in Kenya with over 60% of the population living below the national poverty line. Gender inequality is a massive problem: Kilifi district has one of the lowest gender development index scores in the country¹. MTGK is unique within the sport and development community in that the organization was set up to promote sport for girls. Almost all sport and development projects begin with boys as the main focus, and then incorporate girls' activities as they grow.

MTGK has adopted a "sports plus" approach to tackle some of the issues affecting vulnerable young women and girls in Kilifi. This means that the organization uses sport and related activities to address broader social problems affecting young women in the area. These issues include early school drop-out, teenage pregnancies, early marriages, HIV/AIDS, poor leadership and decision-making skills, and limited economic opportunities. MTGK utilizes participation in football as a tool to improve the life skills, such as confidence, leadership, self-esteem and team work, of disadvantaged girls and young women. Through football girls can also improve their physical

well-being by being 'fit, active and strong.'² MTGK also addresses these problems through its peer education project on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and rights.

How Does Playing Football Impact the Lives of Girls?

MTGK found that playing football and being a member of the organization had both positive and negative impacts on their lives. Playing football in Kilifi can be a challenging experience for many girls. While it gives them a chance to tackle gender stereotypes and provides forums for health and rights education and discussions, it can often cause unexpected, less positive impacts. During discussions with girl footballers MTGK found that many did not attend practice very regularly. One could assume that domestic responsibilities, schoolwork (where the emphasis is heavily weighed towards academic performance) or lack of permission from parents/husbands would have the greatest impact on restricting the amount of football a girl/woman can play. However, according to the girls themselves, the main reasons for them not practicing were lack of football skills and disagreements and lack of respect among players. Some quite heated debates have been sparked off by girls discussing whether football provides social support or whether it contributes negatively to the number of disputes they have with their peers or fellow players. Some players said if they made a mistake on the pitch they would be shouted at and that football could create tension between team mates. This information garnered from the organization's M&E provides essential guidance for future program planning.

However, there are also many positive effects of girls' participation in sport. First, football is seen as a good way of getting girls together. This is especially true in a rural setting such as Kilifi where girls are either at home (usually working – cooking, collecting water/firewood, washing dishes/clothes) or at school (studying). They are not often afforded the opportunity to be out in public places. When girls come together it gives them a chance to support each other and provides an active forum for health information dissemination and discussion. Second, from a purely sporting perspective, the chance to play football has given talented girls the opportunity to realize their potential. Three players from MTGK have recently (February 2007) been recognized by the Ministry of Sports and have had their names forwarded to the Kenya Football Federation for consideration for the national Under 18 team. Finally, in addition to the benefits achieved through participation in football, there are also many positive effects associated with the 'plus sport' approach of linking football to other initiatives. Through the organization girls have accessed more information on HIV/AIDS, girl-child rights, and reproductive health.

The following stories document the positive effects that participation in MTGK has had on the lives of young women in Kilifi. These stories were written by program participants as part of an initiative that had two main aims. The first aim was to document girls' views on the impact of football and MTGK's activities on their lives. This provided the organization with rich, easily accessible information that can be presented to stakeholders such as parents, teachers, local leaders, individual supporters and donors. The second aim was to build the writing skills of girls, in both Swahili and English. Girls were encouraged to use either language. All stories were then

translated by volunteer girls into English or Swahili so that they were available for all stakeholders to read. The project participants recommended that, if the initiative were to be implemented annually, girls should be given the opportunities to tell their stories visually or orally e.g. through photographs, video, rap, songs, as well as using the written word, including poetry.

The Girls' Stories

BEATRICE MAPENZI, Peer educator and monitoring and evaluation team, Football team: Newcastle

MTG (Moving the Goalposts) is an organization which saw that many girls dropped from school in Kilifi, and they saw that football would be a good way of getting girls together. And it was true because I joined and so did many of my friends. When I joined there were not many girls who were out of school playing football but now there are many so it shows that in Kilifi district girls like football.

At first I did not have any information about child rights but through MTG I got it. I had never thought about going for a course about child rights. I also got information on HIV, STDs etc. Through this information it changed my mind towards to people who are infected with HIV/AIDS. I also attended several seminars and meetings and after the teaching on AIDS we visited football teams to discuss these issues. At the beginning I could not stand in front of players and start the discussions. But now I try and I can stand in front of players and talk with confidence. It's my hope that I will gain more confidence. Since I joined MTG I have socialized with many people and I know different areas.

FATHIME KHAMISI, Bahari division Girls' committee, coach, member of the MTGK Super team, Team: Black Mamba, selected for national under 18 team

I am 14 years, I live at Kilifi town near Bahari bar. I am a player and I play in the Black Mamba team which was the champion of Bahari open age league 2005. I am also a coach and I have two teams for under 12, Super Stars and Everton. On my first time when I joined MTGK I was not a good player, I could not kick the ball for even one meter. For me it was difficult. I was shy because it was my first time to play football and also I was thinking that football is only for boys. But I didn't give up. I continued going to the practice until the time I dribbled and passed our coach who is ROSE KONDE. I was very happy and I will never forget that day. When I am playing football I try to show all of my skills because my aim is to play in the national team. MTGK also has helped my body to be physically fit and has changed my mind in different ways. After school hours I just go to the field then I have my practice after there I am tired with no time for thinking of boys.

LEAH GANDI, MTGK Office assistant, coach, peer educator, Team: Moons FC

Before I joined MTGK I was unable to make any decisions for myself. Also I couldn't play football nor express myself in front of many people. I was told what MTGK is by my friends but it wasn't very easy for me to understand it. After a short period I started to understand this organization and what it was all about.

When I joined MTGK I started by educating myself about what HIV and AIDS is and after that I educated my friends. For sure this organization has opened up my mind until I have decided to start driving classes.

Without MTGK I would not have done all these things. I am thankful to this organization because it doesn't look at the level of my education [Leah dropped out of primary school after four years] but they always work hand in hand and support me. If it wasn't for MTGK I would probably have given birth by now without getting married. It is very difficult to find a girl of my age at 20 years who is not in school who doesn't have a baby.

LIDYA KASIWA, Peer educator, monitoring and evaluation team, Team: Black Mamba

Staying at home idle, especially after completing your O-level, sometimes sounds boring..... so? I decided to join MTG based in Kilifi. Way back when I was in high school I used to play football but not with keen interest as I had the mentality that it was only being played by men. But with MTG this mentality in me has faded away and I am now one of the best players in MTG's team. For sure girls in MTG are really doing better, until we have impressed the community and more girls are joining every year. MTG has really helped me not indulge in risky issues such as using drugs and involving myself in early marriage, this is because I am always occupied doing different activities, which keeps me very busy. MTG has really opened up my mind and has made a difference in my life because Kilifi girls have been left behind and denied our opportunities, but MTG has brought light on us in our communities in Kilifi.

This organization has made me to be more ambitious and focused as now I know I can do better thing in my life than men not as before. Through MTG I have gained confidence and organization skills because I have been given more opportunities to organize and manage different issues at hand. Honestly, I wasn't that perfect at public speaking but bravo now I am able to stand before

people, talk to them on different issues such as HIV and AIDS, reproductive health and decision making. MTG has enabled me to interact with different people, from different races and also I have traveled far and wide in the country.

Conclusion

In addition to the player stories above, MTGK is currently undertaking multiple M&E initiatives in an attempt to contribute to the efforts being made to get more robust evidence on the impact of sport in Africa. Although we cannot reach any definitive conclusions at this time about the impact that sport can make on lives of young women in Africa, the anecdotal evidence suggests that sport is improving the lives of women in Kilifi, Kenya. While girls playing football in this area was once unheard of, MTGK has made this a "normal" occurrence in Kilifi. People in the community are proud of what their daughters and sisters are achieving. Increasing local press coverage, and the growing number of people coming to watch matches are evidence of the growing support for women in sport in Kilifi. It is our hope that our current M&E initiatives will allow us to provide more definitive support for the positive effects of sport in Africa in the very near future.

Endnotes

¹ Gender development index of 0.424 (2004). Seventh lowest out of 69 districts in Kenya UNDP (2005) Fourth Kenya Human Development Report

² MTGK (2005) "Primary school tournament evaluation" unpublished: 65% of girls said that football has a positive impact on their body eg strong and active body, good health.