

MHPSS & Sport for Protection

Middle East & Horn of Africa Led Methodology



GENEVA
GRADUATE
INSTITUTE

INSTITUT DE HAUTES
ETUDES INTERNATIONALES
ET DU DEVELOPPEMENT
GRADUATE INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL AND
DEVELOPMENT STUDIES



Olympic Refugee
Foundation



ARP Partner:

Olympic Refugee Foundation

Kathleen Latimer | Senior Impact Manager | kathleen.latimer@olympic.org

Andi Jacobs | Impact Officer | andi.jacobs@olympic.org

Maria Bray | Think Tank Member | maria.bray@tdh.org

Jadranka Stikovac Clark | Think Tank Member | jadranka.clark@fiba.basketball

Insherah Mousa | Think Tank Member | imousa@freetorun.org

Academic Supervisor:

Graduate Institute

Valerio Simoni | valerio.simoni@graduateinstitute.ch

Authors:

Graduate Institute

Caroline Dang | caroline.dang@graduateinstitute.ch

Jessica Blatchford | jessica.blatchford@graduateinstitute.ch

Elsa Alnebeck | elsa.alnebeck@graduateinstitute.ch

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Executive Summary

This report examines how programming involving Sport for Protection and MHPSS in displacement-affected settings can provide sustainable psychosocial achievements for youth, only when grounded in the societal realities of the context in which the program is located. Findings indicate that sports programs support emotional recovery, routine and inclusion, when locally led and gender responsive. Safe spaces, mentorship, and community trust are key to these programs' success. Persistent barriers include security concerns, social norms, and limited funding. Find below in Table 1 an overview of recommendations detailed in the report.

Table 1: Recommendations at a glance, authors elaboration

Recommendations at a Glance		
Area	Actor	Actions
Funding & Sustainability	International Organisations	Support local organisations in developing or acquiring physical spaces for sports activities.
		Promote the visibility of grassroots organisations to raise awareness about different approaches to MHPSS and highlight their work to potential donors or investors.
	Local Organisations	Diversify activities to generate income and move towards sustainability.
		Focus on visibility on social media as it appears a promising avenue to self-raise funds.
Shifting the Perspective	International Organisations	Leverage local knowledge and define goals according to on-the-ground realities.
		Prioritise local and cultural norms to improve girl's access to sport in displacement-affected settings.

Acronyms:

IASC:	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDP:	Internally Displaced People
MHPSS:	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
S4P:	Sport for Protection
YSU:	Youth Sport Uganda

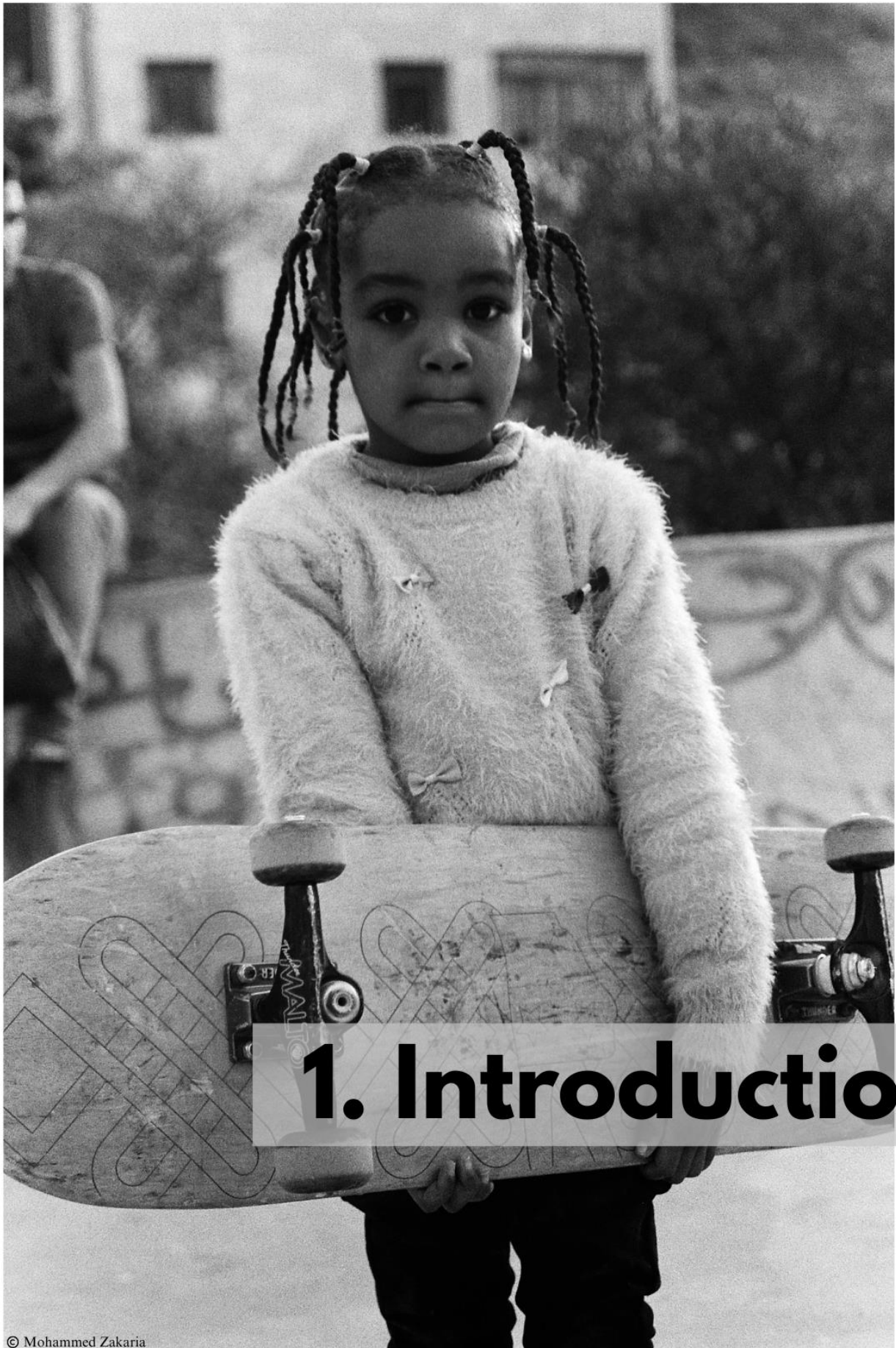
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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	9
.....	11
2. Literature Review.....	12
2.1 Definitions.....	12
2.1.1 Sport for Protection and MHPSS.....	12
2.2 MHPSS in Sport and Displacement Contexts	13
2.2.1 Trauma-Informed Approaches.....	14
2.3 Key Themes	14
2.3.1 Community	15
2.3.2 Gender.....	15
2.3.3 Resources and Infrastructure.....	17
2.4 Research gaps	17
3. Methodology.....	20
3.1 Case Selection and Interview Sampling	20
3.2 Interview Design.....	24
3.3 Data Collection and Analysis	25
.....	27
4. Key Findings.....	28
4.1 MHPSS Approach to Sport	28
4.1.1 Mental Health Context	28
4.1.2 Layers of MHPSS	29
4.1.3 Sport as a Platform	29
4.1.4 MHPSS Reframed.....	30
4.2 Local Leadership and Community Integration.....	31
4.2.1 Role Model and Community Leaders.....	31
4.2.2 Family and Community-Based Engagement.....	32
4.2.3 Sport as a Bridge Between Local and Displaced Communities	33
4.3 Gender Inclusive Programming.....	34
4.3.1 Gender Norms and Local Realities.....	35
4.3.2 Trust-Based Leadership and Community Engagement	35
4.3.3 Shifting Social Norms through Connection and Care	35
4.4 Public and Safe Space.....	36
4.4.1 Restrictions on the Use of Public Space.....	37
4.4.2 Solutions	37
.....	39
5. Transversal Challenges.....	40

5.1 Security.....	40
5.1.1 Conflict affected contexts and political instability	40
5.2 Funding	42
.....	44
6. Conclusions and Recommendations.....	45
6.1 Conclusions.....	45
6.2 Recommendations	46
7. References.....	49
Appendix.....	53



1. Introduction

In displacement-affected settings, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) remains a vital yet frequently under-prioritised dimension of protection programming, particularly for children and young people. While international responses often prioritise physical security and the provision of basic needs, the psychosocial and emotional dimensions of wellbeing are essential to processes of individual recovery and social reconstruction (UNHCR, 2022). This report investigates the role of sport as a modality for advancing MHPSS outcomes, with particular attention to the practices of community-based organisations operating in the Middle East and Horn of Africa. The analysis is guided by two interrelated research questions:

1. What good practices do Middle East and Horn of Africa-based actors use to achieve Sport for Protection (S4P) and MHPSS outcomes?
2. What challenges do Middle East and Horn of Africa-based actors face while implementing sports activities?
 - a. What enabling factors would assist in overcoming these?

Although sport is increasingly recognised within global policy frameworks as a tool for protection, peacebuilding, and social inclusion, its integration with MHPSS is dependent on local conditions. Drawing on qualitative interviews with eight grassroots organisations across Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Somaliland, Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya, this report examines how sport is being used to respond to mental health and psychosocial needs and promote broader S4P outcomes as outlined in section 2.1.1.

By centring the knowledge of local actors, this report underscores the value of contextually grounded approaches that reflect local understandings of mental health, protection, and community resilience. Key thematic findings include the layered functions of sport within MHPSS frameworks; the importance of local leadership and community integration; gender-responsive and culturally sensitive programme design; the creation and protection of inclusive, accessible spaces for young people; and the security and funding constraints that organisations must navigate to sustain their work.

The sections that follow begin with an overview of the organisations featured in this study (Section 1), followed by a review of literature and conceptual frameworks (Section 2), an outline of our methodology (Section 3). We present findings thematically across four core areas (Section 4), with a discussion of transversal challenges (Section 5), and final conclusions and recommendations (Section 6). Key findings highlight the layered ways sports support psychosocial well-being, the centrality of

trust-based local leadership, how to best encourage female participation, and the constraints posed by security issues funding.

Rather than proposing a uniform model, the report draws attention to the adaptive strategies and context-specific innovations developed by local practitioners in response to intersecting social, political, and material challenges. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the growing evidence base on S4P, by highlighting local insights from the Middle East and Horn of Africa. This can inform future efforts to strengthen MHPSS provision in displacement-affected contexts through long-term, flexible, and locally led approaches.



2. Literature Review

2. Literature Review

The literature review formed the basis for the research project and underpins our data collection design process. In it, we define key concepts, provide an overview of approaches to MHPSS to sport and discuss the role of community, gender and infrastructure and resources. We highlight the importance of gender sensitive programming and community-based approaches whilst touching on the infrastructure and resource challenges local organisations can face. There is considerable literature focused on the role sport can play in MHPSS, however, research focused on regional specific challenges and solutions is limited, with most drawing on examples from Global-North based actors.

2.1 Definitions

2.1.1 Sport for Protection and MHPSS

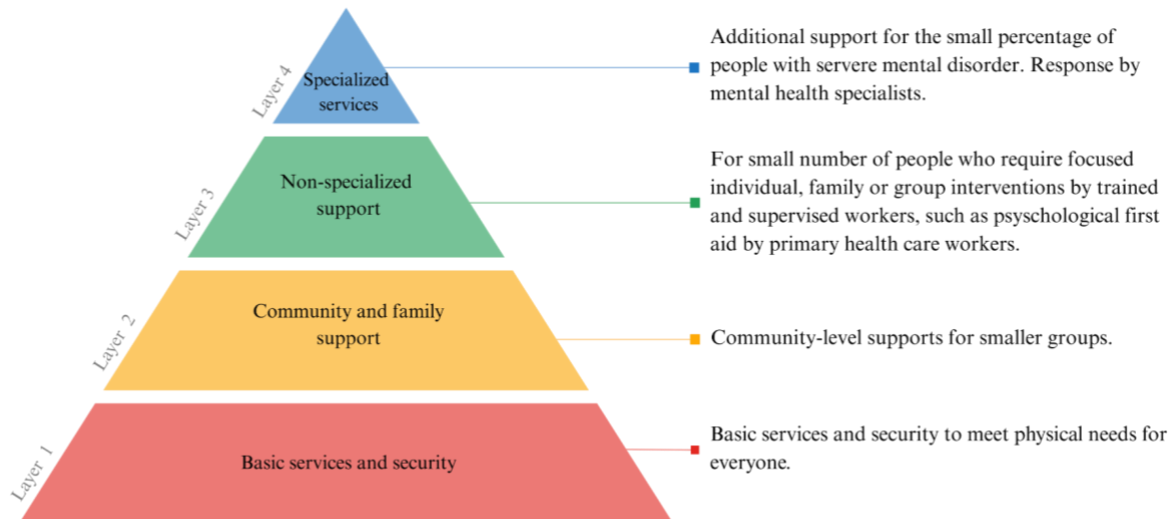
S4P and MHPSS are related but distinct concepts that are central to the report. MHPSS is embedded within humanitarian and development responses from international organisations. It was developed to integrate clinical mental health responses to crisis and more informal community-based support (IASC, 2007). The concept of S4P was formulated more recently and builds on the earlier work of Sport for Development and Peace, but with a greater focus on protection (Castrataro et al., 2017).

S4P is made up of the three sectors of child protection, youth empowerment and sport for development and peace, with a specific focus on refugees and internally displaced people. S4P has three key protection outcomes: social inclusion ‘the process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for people who are disadvantaged through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights, social cohesion and psychosocial well-being’; social cohesion ‘the ties which hold people together within a community’; and psychosocial well-being ‘the positive state in which individuals thrive’ (Castrataro et al., 2017).

There are four approaches to S4P, one of which is MHPSS. The MHPSS approach supports psychosocial well-being by coordinating actors to provide the full range of support for young people. (Castrataro et al., 2017).

MHPSS use is broader than its application to S4P alone, and includes education, health and child protection. It is a cross-cutting issue that can be integrated into programmes across various sectors. MHPSS can be visualised as made up of a four-layered pyramid. Figure 1 illustrates the layers below.

Figure 1: MHPSS Intervention Pyramid, Authors elaboration, adapted from IASC Guidelines 2007 & WHO MHPSS Intervention



2.2 MHPSS in Sport and Displacement Contexts

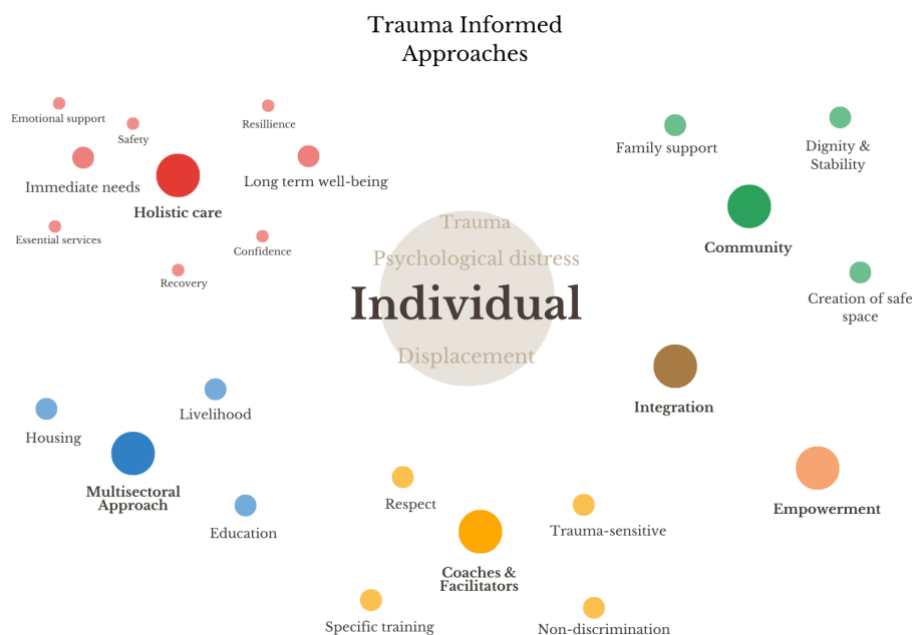
The potential of sport programming to incorporate MHPSS is addressed in depth in the literature. Henley considers the role of sport in providing psychosocial support in post-conflict settings (Henley, 2005) and Wessells (2009) looks more generally at community-based approaches to MHPSS including through sport. In addition to these academic articles, toolkits and handbooks offer recommendations for implementing MHPSS through sport in practice, such as the S4P Toolkit (Castrataro et al., 2017), IASC guidelines (IASC, 2007) and UNICEF's operational guidelines for community approaches to MHPSS which includes an analysis of the role of Sport (UNICEF, 2019). These reports are useful for understanding what is involved in the programming. However, they underscore a central gap in the literature stemming from the lack of research highlighting regional specificities or coming from Global South perspectives.

In practice, when implementing sport with an MHPSS focus, the literature demonstrates there are challenges for programs experiencing a disconnect with the groups they seek to support, having limited trained personnel and a lack of insufficient long-term funding. The Multi-Sectoral MHPSS Toolkit for Field Testing highlights the importance of adapting programs to local contexts, to avoid alienation of participants (IASC, 2024b). Similarly, the UNHCR Sport Strategy 2022-26 emphasises the need of contextualisation, whilst also advocating for the integration of mental health programs into larger, broader goals of protection (UNHCR, 2024). The latter point is paramount to solidify the longevity of these programs, as mental health is a long-term project.

2.2.1 Trauma-Informed Approaches

Trauma-informed care is a widely used framework for addressing psychosocial distress. Displacement often results in severe psychosocial distress for individuals and communities. A trauma-informed approach prioritizes the prevention of re-traumatization and the creation of a safe environment for affected populations (Wiedemann et al., 2014). Without proper awareness of trauma-sensitive practices, well-intended interventions risk exacerbating individuals' psychological suffering rather than alleviating it. Trauma-informed approaches (see Figure 2) tend to provide support through multiple sectors aiming for holistic care. Below is a visual representation of what the main focuses of the Trauma-informed approaches are, including training of coaches, community, integration, empowerment. This mind-map draws on information from the MHPSS International Movement Hub (Wiedemann et al., 2014) and provides a summary of the different concepts involved.

Figure 2: Trauma Informed Approaches Representation. Authors elaboration, based on (Wiedemann et al., 2014, p.136)



2.3 Key Themes

In this section, we discuss three thematic areas present in the literature: community, gender and infrastructure and resources. We selected these thematic areas from a desk review of over 30 articles in which they emerged as the aspects most discussed regarding good practices and challenges for organisations using sport and MHPSS programming. This section will also begin to highlight the research gaps, which we address explicitly in section 2.6.

2.3.1 Community

The literature suggests that sports programs can help marginalized youth better integrate within their communities. They do this by strengthening social connections, which can in turn increase one's sense of belonging within the community. This integration can occur through partnerships with other community initiatives or individuals, as well as through the broader positive impacts that sports programs can have, such as improving educational and employment opportunities for community members. IASC (2024a) demonstrates this through examples of programmes which encourage participants to connect with parents, teachers and community members in Lebanon and engage local youth volunteers in Kenya.

An additional way social connections can be cultivated is through a focus on skill development beyond physical competencies. For instance, the Sport for Inclusion Network (2012) and Bertram and colleagues (2016) refer to the role sport can play in developing the social skills necessary to enhance one's social integration within a community. Similarly, Bader (2018) references the importance of 'life skills' for the same purpose, and Wessels (2008) discusses the importance of education in development programmes, especially in African contexts. This is reflected more broadly in IASC's (2020) advocacy for an MHPSS approach in combination with skills programming and educational opportunities. Finally, Tandon and Saxena (2022) note that skill development can improve future opportunities for youth, which can help them to contribute more to the communities in which they live.

The literature suggests that these benefits can be best realised when the sports programmes are led by members of the community in which they operate. When children build stable relationships with coaches, they can help foster resilience in the child. Tandon and Saxena (2022) highlight the work of the Bhutesi Pride Foundation in Malawi where one of the coaches explained: 'if they see me playing rugby, they see me as a teacher, they will also try their best to do well in school. They can even be doctors... So, they can do well when they see female rugby teachers and female coaches' (p.6). Therefore, sport programmes can help facilitate better community integrations through encouraging participants to connect with community members and developing life skills. The benefits can be maximised when the programmes are community led.

2.3.2 Gender

The need for gender specific considerations is also emphasised. Girls and women are more likely to face violence, exploitation and discrimination (Amman & Matuska, 2014; IASC, 2024b). Thus, it is important to take into account the traumatic experiences of women and girls who have faced sexual

violence, forced displacement, and exclusion from educational and economic opportunities (Wessells, 2008).

For women and girls to benefit from sport programming, it is important to ensure the programmes are adapted to their socio-cultural environment, including norms and values. For instance, sports activities may take into consideration respect for the local culture and religion. Some practitioners in Europe have pointed out that reaching girls and women could be a challenge as sports clubs are often male-dominated structures and lack female instructors. Furthermore, women may be unwilling to join an activity in the presence of men for cultural, religious or previous trauma reasons (Schwenzer, 2017). Therefore, actors must take into account the environment of the beneficiaries, with possibly gendered groups, or sports that can be suitable with gendered attire, for example, wearing a hijab in Islamic contexts or simply scheduling the training sessions that allow women to participate (Castrataro et al., 2017; SPIN, 2012).

In addition to women and girl's needs, the theory of change, a method used by development actors for program designing and implementation, refers to various minority groups such as LGBTIQ+ who are facing a high level of stigmatisation and who need specific attention regarding inclusion (IOC et al., 2018; UNHCR, 2022). Different approaches may also be required to target MHPSS towards men as they may have a different appreciation of mental health issues and be less likely to seek help (IASC, 2024b). This demonstrates that distinct approaches to each group are crucial to address their concerns efficiently. This has prompted the development of male-specific interventions to address this issue, such as Man Therapy, an interactive mental health campaign targeting working-age men.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that sport can also be used to reduce gendered divides. Learning from the Women on the Move Programme in Sudan (Wiedemann et al. 2014), discuss how sport and play can bridge social, racial, religious and gender divides, leading to a positive impact on confidence, body image and communication skills.

Whilst aspects of gender sensitive programming are highlighted in the literature, research considering the impact of local specificities is limited. Different contexts have different gender norms and therefore, to facilitate accessible programming, it is important to adapt each programme to the context. Our research seeks to consider gender through this angle in the context of the Middle East and Horn of Africa as we discuss gender related best practice with local organisations.

2.3.3 Resources and Infrastructure

A more context-dependent finding in the literature is that the number of practitioners and hospitals specialised in mental illnesses is lower in lower income and middle income countries than high income ones (Sankoh et al., 2018; Sewilam et al., 2015; Hamilton et al., 2016; WHO, 2013). Moreover, practitioners' capacities may be limited regarding trauma awareness (Amman & Matuska, 2014; Elshamy et al., 2023) and sport methodology related to MHPSS (IASC, 2024a). As coaches and facilitators are the main protagonists for the successful implementation of a S4P activity, recruiting adequate and locally based actors might be a clear advantage (Castrataro et al., 2017; Henley et al., 2008). Furthermore, it is difficult to hire coaches who are skilled both in sport and in providing psychosocial support.

Geographical barriers should also be highlighted, as the cost of travel to access sports activities might be too expensive for participants (Elshamy et al., 2023). In addition, practitioners must take into consideration the volatility of the land, the difficulty of reaching community members living in remote areas, or simply that state actors can perceive S4P activities related to 'peacebuilding' as a threat (IASC, 2024a). Indeed, conservative governments may perceive sport-related peace-building activities as running counter to the values they uphold, whether in relation to religious cultural norms or related to the dominance of a particular ethnic group. Finally, displaced people are by nature diverse, and language can be an additional barrier (Dickson et al., 2024).

A further challenge is the lack of long-term and flexible funding. While donors are more likely to provide funding if tangible results are observed, there is a lack of data and effective tools to measure social change (IASC, 2024a; UNHCR, 2022). In programmes financed by international organisations or Global North actors, funding is often temporary and it can threaten the long-term existence of a program (Bertram et al., 2016). Moreover, S4P activities are normally not the priority in precarious contexts and areas, and humanitarian actors may focus on other priorities such as food, shelter and health (UNHCR, 2022). Therefore, finding sustainable financing solutions is an important aspect shown in the literature.

2.4 Research gaps

There is a significant amount of existing research on MHPSS and sport, with recent research such as the S4P Toolkit. (Castrataro et al., 2017). However, most of this research comes from international organisations based in the Global North. In this context, there is a research gap surrounding how these frameworks can be adapted to local contexts and further, how local organisations shape them.

Whilst global-south actors are mentioned, they are limited in number and are not the central focus of reports. This is demonstrated in the existing repository on Sport and MHPSS (Olympic Refugee Foundation Think Tank, 2024) where the majority of the resources are centred around actors in the Global North. As a result, our research aims to uncover local actors in the Middle East and Horn of Africa interact with these frameworks. In doing so, research can further develop the concept of S4P and contribute towards a more context-sensitive understanding of the role sport plays in MHPSS.



3. Methodology

3. Methodology

The methodology for this research is qualitative, using a desk review of secondary literature and semi-structured online and in person interviews to collect primary data (see table 2). This approach best accommodates the project's core objective of highlighting expertise from local actors utilising sport in the Middle East and Horn of Africa region. In speaking to those working on the ground, we were able to consider in depth the individual good practices, challenges and enabling factors regarding the implementation of programmes with S4P and MHPSS outcomes, far more than would have been possible through quantitative means. Furthermore, it ensured we were able to take account of unique factors for each local context.

Table 2 : Methodology Summary, author's elaboration

Methodology Summary		
Research phase	Method	Detailed information
Defining the scope of the study	Literature review Desk research	• Repository from ORF • Reports / toolkit from main NGO and IOs • Collecting information on organisations that could potentially be interviewed • MHPSS literature • Sport for Protection literature
Primary data collection	Semi-structured interviews	• Criteria definition • Case selection • Defining interview template • 8 semi-structured interviews (30'-45' each) • Verbatim transcription
Data analysis	Qualitative data analysis	• Using a table of indicators to classify and highlight each relevant response systematically • Qualitative interpretation work to ensure accurate and relevant findings • Highlight key-quotes to sort through the mass of data

3.1 Case Selection and Interview Sampling

Initially, the project concerned 'Global South-led methodology' as a whole, however, we decided to narrow the geographical focus to the Middle East and Horn of Africa region for several reasons. Firstly, it was not feasible to interview an unlimited number of organisations within the time constraints of the project. Interviewing eight organisations from the Middle East and Horn of Africa enabled us to go into more detail as to these regions' specific features.

Moreover, as we wanted to address S4P in displacement settings, the Middle East and Horn of Africa appear to be relevant regions for our study as they sit at the intersection of complex migration dynamics

being both transit and destination countries. We employed a broad definition of the Horn of Africa which encompasses Uganda and Kenya as this scope best accounts for displacement dynamics in the region (IOM, 2022) that are relevant to our study. Whilst unique to each location, these challenges appeared prevalent in many local contexts in the region. Focusing on actors in these areas, allowed us to further consider these aspects.

To ensure we focused on grassroots, local perspectives, we required that interviewees were involved in either the program design, implementation or evaluation in the country concerned. Moreover, for communication purposes, we had a strong preference for interviewees who could communicate in French or English in order to avoid potential complications with translation. We anticipated incorporating flexibility on the second criterion and perhaps asking questions in a written format with translation, however, it was not necessary in the end.

Having narrowed the regional focus, we used deliberate case selection to identify organisations to speak with. We developed the following selection criteria for inclusion in the project:

1. The organisation is based in either the Middle East or Horn of Africa.
2. The organisation utilises sport or play activities.
3. Participants involve youth (under 24) and displaced persons.
4. The program has been active for at least one year.

In addition, we employed convenience sampling to ensure participation from organisations for which contact details were available, particularly through the Olympic Refugee Foundation's network. It's important to note that this method of sampling contributes to a potential bias in our findings as it meant most of the participants were already familiar with ORF's work. The eight organisations we interviewed can be seen in the boxes below. Each organisation operates locally and is founded or co-founded by members of the local community. Further information about their work can be found in the appendix.

Figure 3: Summary of Participating Organisations, Author's Elaboration



Free to Run

Country: Iraq

Sports: Running, Hiking, Yoga, Camping, Football, Cycling

Demographics: Girls and young women aged 10–24. Includes Syrian refugees, Iraqi IDPs, Kurds, Arabs, Yazidis, Sunnis, Shi'as.

Palestine: Sport for Life

Country: Palestine

Sports: Football and modified games of netball and volleyball

Demographics: 6-25 y.o. in and out of school. Refugees, IDPs, local hosting communities.

7 Hills

Country: Jordan

Spors: Skateboarding and basketball.

Demographics: Local, Syrian, Iraqi, Yemeni, Ethiopian, Philipino and Sudanese Children

Reclaim Childhood

Country: Jordan

Spors: Various Team Sports and Self Defence

Demographic: Girls up to 18 years old.



Kumekucha Quest x Samba Sports

Country: Kenya

Sports: Mostly football but also other team sport.

Demographics: Boys and Girls 10-24 years,

Sport for Change

Country: Ethiopia

Sports: Football and other sports.

Demographics: Young people, refugees, IDPs

Youth Sport Uganda

Country: Uganda

Sports: Football, Volleyball and Netball.

Demographics: 6-25 year olds, refugees, IDPs, hosting communities.

Qantara

Country: Somaliland

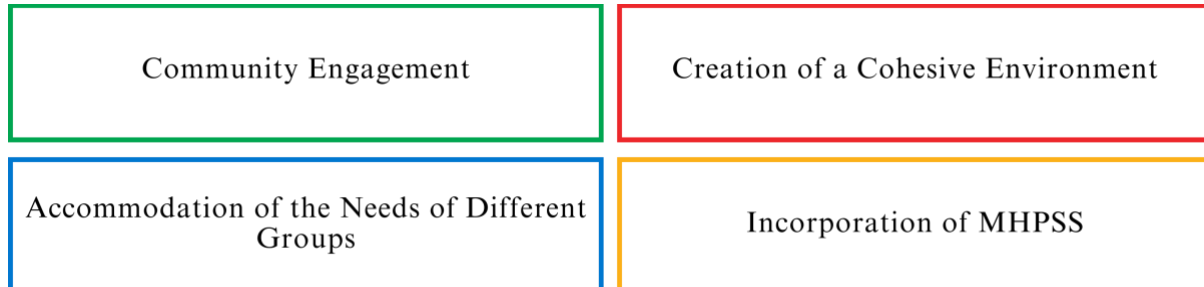
Sports: Thai boxing

Demographics: Young people, specific target on Young girls.

3.2 Interview Design

When designing our data collection, we prioritised balancing the accommodation of interviewees' individual programs, contexts and stories with the need to incorporate comparative analysis between organisations. To do this, we developed four key indicators from which to measure the combined incorporation of S4P and MHPSS. Namely, **community engagement**, **accommodation of the needs of different groups**, **creation of a cohesive environment** and the **incorporation of psychosocial support** (see Figure 4). When selecting these, we broke down the overlapping aspects of S4P and MHPSS and selected areas that we could qualitatively assess for each organisation. This meant that instead of asking what they are doing with S4P and MHPSS, we could be more specific by looking at their work through these indicators. We aimed to consider each one in the interview through the lens of good practice, challenges and enabling factors to maintain the project's focus on implementation (see Table 3).

Figure 4 - Indicators, author's elaboration



The interview template consisted of two tools to be used in conjunction with one another. The first was a list of four open interview questions to encourage the use of storytelling methodology and minimise our bias as interviewers in influencing the content the interviewees chose to share. These included asking how and for what purpose the organisation uses sport and what are the main challenges they are facing. We did not plan specific wording for the follow-up questions so that we could tailor them during the interview to the individual project and the language use of the interviewee. This also allowed us to incorporate the use of ordinary language within the interview and for the interviewees to explain their programmes in their terms.

List of open interview questions:

- *Could you tell us a bit about your organisation and the program you are running?*
- *Can you explain how you use sport and what you would like to achieve with it?*
- *Are you facing any challenges with implementing the programme?*
- *What would help you overcome the challenges you have mentioned?*

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Each interview, with a duration of approximately 45 minutes, was audio recorded with the informed consent of participants, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. We then carried out a systematic qualitative analysis of the collected data, identifying salient themes and meaningful insights from the interviews, which were then categorised within a synopsis chart. Table 3 shows an example of how we proceeded with each organisation. As the semi-structured interviews leave a relatively wide margin for participants to express their views, some indicators may not have been covered punctually. However, as the interviews progressed, we ensured that we collected responses that exhaustively represented all the indicators previously identified. Finally, this systematic approach gave us an overall view by indicators and helped us identify common practices, but also individual challenges and characteristics.

Table 3 - Data collection, Author's elaboration

Data Collection Table		
Indicators	Youth Sport Uganda https://www.facebook.com/youthsportuganda/ @youthsportuganda	
Type of Sport	Football as it's the cheapest sport in Uganda. Modified sports, volleyball, netball.	
Background Informations	Locally founded association (2006), using sport for the improvement of the life of the young people in Uganda, for IDPs and refugees. 4 programs: Health, education, livelihood, water sanitation & hygiene. Training of coaches, community leaders, peer leaders to run these programs.	
Participant Demographics	6-25 y.o, in and out of school. Refugees, IDPs, local hosting communities	
Community involvement and support	Good Practices	Role models and peer leaders are sometimes hired by the organisation after they participate in the programs. They become role models within the community.
	Challenges	Problem of acceptance at household level. Sport in Uganda is seen as a leisure activity. Parents ask for monetary value and for something tangible because of poverty. Acquisition of soft skills is not valued.
	Enabling Factors	Role models can convince parents, as they are good examples of success within the community. When parents witness the transformation of their children and the benefits on their well-being, they will push siblings or neighbours to join the program.
Facilitation of the Needs of Different Groups	Good Practices	YSU is trying to have 50/50 of Boys/Girls participants. Adapting games to the clothes, if they join with long skirts, then instead of football, they switch the game into a sort of netball, so they don't need to kick the ball, but throw it.
	Challenges	Boys find it easier to enrol in sport activities than girls, because of cultural norms, mostly in the afternoon girls are working for the household. Moreover, parents don't want girls to be exposed to boys.
	Enabling Factors	Playfield at proximity, so girls can join easily without walking too long. Using role models to convince parents, especially with female participants.
Creation of a Cohesive Environment	Good Practices	YSU teaches Refugees and local communities about creating a sense of belonging and an inclusive environment for everyone.
	Challenges	Stereotypes regarding refugees in the host communities.
	Enabling Factors	For refugees: learning the language of the local community and developing a sense of belonging. Playing matches with local communities and refugees = building bridges. Helping and learning from each other = help to decrease the stereotypes.
Incorporation of MHPSS	Good Practices	Teaching life skills within different programs.
	Challenges	Anxiety related to school, poverty, lack of food. Depression is more frequently severe among refugee communities.
	Enabling Factors	Regular cohort, every 6 months.
Additional Relevant Information	Funding is 70% international and 30% local. High demand.	



4. Key Findings

4. Key Findings

The four thematic areas were established from the literature review and then solidified through transcription analysis and creating a data collection table. Having MHPSS as its own section, allows for an explicit discussion of how each organisation interacts with the approach and incorporates it within sport. Local integration and community integration alongside gender inclusive programming are essential areas of good programming and highlight the ways organisations do this in line with local contexts. Finally, public and safe space also emerged in the interviews as interacting with the other themes and showcasing organisations innovation in responding to challenges.

4.1 MHPSS Approach to Sport

All organisations included in the study use sport to achieve Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) outcomes. However, there are notable differences in how sport is applied, illustrating the breadth of its potential. Beyond the inherent mental health benefits of physical activity, the interviews revealed that sport can serve as a platform for supporting various layers of MHPSS provision. In this section, we highlight key mental health contexts, provide an overview of the MHPSS layers addressed, and demonstrate how sport functions both as a tool to bring people together and as a complementary activity alongside other skills-based MHPSS interventions.

4.1.1 Mental Health Context

Many organisations highlighted the mental health challenges facing youth in their specific contexts. Interviewees from Sport for Life Palestine and Sport for Change Ethiopia pointed to the impact of trauma related to conflict, with Sport for Life Palestine specifically referencing the increasingly dire humanitarian situation since October 2023. In this case, the need for mental health support far exceeds what is currently available to young people. Both Sport for Change Ethiopia and Samba Sports Kenya also spoke about how a lack of opportunities contributes to poor mental health outcomes among youth. Samba Sports Kenya described adolescence as a 'very dynamic and sensitive transition,' noting that if it's 'not handled well,' young people can easily become 'overwhelmed with all that changes.' This, they explained, can result in harmful outcomes such as substance abuse, early sexual activity, or violence. Across the interviews, a need for accessible and effective MHPSS was consistently highlighted.

4.1.2 Layers of MHPSS

In general, interviewees discussed layer 2 of the MHPSS pyramid the most due to their focus on community engagement (see Figure 2 and Section 4.2) with layers 1 and 3 also touched on. Samba Sports targeted layer 1, basic needs by providing breakfast to those participating in sports activities. Given that Samba Sports Kenya operates in contexts where poverty and malnutrition is prevalent, the interviewees emphasised that this is essential to ensure participants have energy throughout the day. Furthermore, it provided an additional incentive to join the activities. Other organisations had parallel programmes to Sport which appeared to address this layer. For example, Youth Sport Uganda runs a WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) initiative to address the lack of basic facilities in areas of the country affected by poverty.

All organisations addressed layer 2, as sport was consistently used to strengthen community ties, a theme that will be explored further in Section 5. Layer 3 was also evident in several cases. Palestine Sport for Life, for instance, integrates targeted MHPSS sessions alongside its sports programming. Other organisations, such as Sport for Change Ethiopia, Reclaim Childhood Jordan, and Free to Run Iraq, offer separate ‘skills sessions’ that incorporate psychosocial support tools and techniques.

4.1.3 Sport as a Platform

In many cases, sport was described as a way of bringing people together, thus facilitating social cohesion and the possibility of improvement in physical and mental wellbeing. When explaining why Samba Sports Kenya uses sport as a means of tackling challenges young people face, the interviewee emphasised the excitement that sport brings to young people from all backgrounds. Furthermore, they choose most often to use football because it is the most popular sport in Kenya and is therefore the most exciting activity for many young people. In this instance, sport is used as an incentive for young people to participate in group activities. This sentiment was echoed by other organisations. For instance, the representative from Sport for Change Ethiopia explained how in the north of Ethiopia, sport is used as a means to bring people together to facilitate peacebuilding dialogue, stating that here ‘it’s more about reconciliation, about using sport for peace and trying to use sport for dialogue’.

Moreover, sport was shown to be frequently used in conjunction with ‘life skills’ programmes. For some organisations, this was embedded in the sporting activity. For example, Youth Sport Uganda uses sport to teach employment skills, emphasising how attributes such as leadership could be developed directly through sport. Samba Sports Kenya operates whole day programmes which alternate sports with other activities. This involves dialogue-based activities ranging from group discussions on topics

such as conflict management, to panel discussions with figures from the local community, such as policemen and women, judges and social workers. Here, the scheduling of activities is important as the interviewee highlighted how they would schedule the ‘most exciting’ sports game for the end of the day. This meant that participants would stay for other components of the programme, such as the panel discussion so that they could take part in the final game of the day.

Reclaim Childhood Jordan has a separate programme to promote life skills for specific cohorts of girls. According to the interviewee, this allows for more focused sessions with smaller group sizes and for specific topics to be covered. These took place at different times from the sporting activities. However, aspects of the sporting activities would complement the skills being taught in the separate sessions. These skills sessions, and the discussions and group work that other organisations use with sport, facilitate MHPSS. The participants have a space to discuss their feelings related to different topics and learn skills which promote positive practices for mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. For instance, Free to Run Iraq teaches their participants yoga, which they could then each use themselves when experiencing stress. This demonstrates how sport is used as a platform for further MHPSS support in the form of capacity development to manage stress.

Finally, two organisations also discussed running mental health campaigns alongside their programmes to tackle mental health stigma. Sport for Change Ethiopia ran a one-month-long campaign on digital platforms with prominent health professionals raising awareness about mental health issues and highlighting how people can support one another. Free to Run Iraq has also run different campaigns such as celebrating mental health awareness month. This demonstrates that for some organisations, encouraging participants to discuss mental health through campaigns is an important component of their work, and that their initial sports programme gave them the platform to do so.

4.1.4 MHPSS Reframed

Further takeaways regarding MHPSS are centred around different conceptions of mental health. One example of this was positively framing mental health. For instance, the representative from 7 Hills Jordan questioned the benefit of labelling someone as ‘mentally sick’, suggesting that if someone is constantly described as ‘sick’, they are more likely to be ‘sick’. Whilst acknowledging that the organisation was providing MHPSS, the representative emphasised that they never referred to it as that, instead they always refer to their activities as ‘skating’, thus moving away from focusing on mental health challenges but on what skateboarding can bring to communities.

Another notable framing of MHPSS in the interviews was that multiple organisations focus on collective rather than individual support. This is seen in the group environments for sessions and in views on mental health. For instance, Kumekucha Quest Kenya refers to their programmes as using ‘community-based healing’ to respond to the mental health challenges outlined in 4.1.1. This refers to an idea that the well-being of the individual is strongly connected to the well-being of the community and suggests local views of wellbeing are important to inform the MHPSS response.

Finally, the limitations of MHPSS were brought to attention in the interview with Palestine Sport for Life. When referencing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the representative explained that ‘no MHPSS in the world can get them through this. But at least we partially support them and let them have this emotional expression to talk about this, to relieve themselves from all this pain, to talk about it, to share their stories, to share their pain’. This shows that while MHPSS is of great importance, there are limitations to what it can achieve in such difficult settings.

4.2 Local Leadership and Community Integration

As mentioned above, MHPSS approaches can be differentiated into 4 different layers (see Figure 2) of which layer 2 was undoubtedly the most prominent dimension in the interviewee’s sport’s programs, with a clear emphasis on community support and inclusion. Organisations include local communities in diverse ways, from engaging role models and community leaders directly from the alumni, or involving parents in several ways so that they can support their children and participate in the construction of a safe space that is necessary for their well-being. More broadly, the activities can include members of the local community such as spiritual leaders, elders, friends and help to create a cohesive environment. Finally, sport also acts as a bridge, connecting local communities with displaced populations including refugees and IDPs.

4.2.1 Role Model and Community Leaders

Several organisations ask former participants to become peer leaders and coaches. This approach enables young people to develop in a professional and empowering way. On the one hand, by becoming an instructor, they are enrolled as staff members and become community leaders, which is a rewarding and empowering process. On the other hand, students in future cohorts can identify more concretely with someone like them, and to draw inspiration from their success. Free to Run Iraq uses the concept of ‘community development leaders’, they are ‘alumni from the previous cycle who are now joining the team to facilitate conducting the session, along with the program officers and the program team

inside their own communities’. One of the collateral effects of this approach is to strengthen the sustainability of the programme. As Free to Run Iraq points out: ‘we are working on their leadership from the community itself for the sustainability of the program. So, once they graduate and are alumni, they can start implementing the sessions by themselves’. The process is therefore both inspiring for new participants and empowering for previous ones who gain skills and grow from being pupils to leaders, or teachers.

The interviews also show that sport activities are not always well received by families. The poverty and fragile context tend to push families and parents to think that enrolling their children to sport activities won't bring anything tangible to the household. Therefore, role models can help to convince parents of the benefits, both in terms of the children's well-being and the acquisition of soft skills.

4.2.2 Family and Community-Based Engagement

Mothers and Families

Another key element of community-based support is the role of the family, with particular emphasis on engaging mothers. Free to Run Iraq, for instance, conducts ‘monthly community engagement sessions’ that involve both mothers and their daughters. These include specific mother-daughter sessions designed to build trust and foster acceptance of participation in such activities. In Palestine, Sport for Life integrates mothers into its MHPSS-focused programming, emphasizing that ‘they need to be mentally supported as well to be able to hold up the family’. While not all initiatives involving mothers are sport-focused, the goal is to promote a holistic approach that includes them, recognizing their central role in supporting their children's mental health and emotional balance. For example, Reclaim Childhood in Jordan organises Mother's Day events where coaches hold awareness sessions on the importance of sports, allowing mothers to witness the positive impact firsthand.

Some organisations also report challenges in convincing parents to allow their children to participate in sports activities. Hesitation often arises from the perception that the benefits of sport are not immediately tangible to the household. The gender dimension is an important component as well and will be developed in more detail below. One response to this was to provide something material to participants as is shown in Samba Sport Kenya’s provision of breakfast to their participants. Moreover, the involvement of ‘community leaders’ plays a crucial role, as their influence is rooted in the community itself. As noted by Sport for Change Ethiopia, ‘in the end, what students learn on the sports ground, they will bring it home to their families. It continues in daily life, and this is how we reach out

to the whole community as well'. This perspective illustrates how supporting young people through sports activities has indirect repercussions for the home, the family and the community.

Members of the Community

The interviews also demonstrated that community inclusion can be broader than the family circle and involve both informal and formal aspects. For instance, Qantara Association Somaliland involved an elderly gentleman from the community, a highly respected figure in the neighbourhood, to help them with the administrative and operational procedures. The involvement of such a prominent community figure from the outset illustrates how early and intentional community inclusion can serve as an enabling factor for successful program implementation.

An example of the more informal way to include the community is well illustrated by 7 Hills Jordan in Amman. They provided a mobile picnic table which could be accessible to all members of the community. This initiative fostered a dynamic use of the public space, 'if it was next to the skate park then the kids were hanging out smoking cigarettes together, if it was under a tree, it was for the lovers and families, and if it was next to the children playground then you had a whole different usership'. As the skatepark area is a public space, they also noticed that the whole community was coming: 'the kids would go skateboarding, the moms would come to the park and hang out with other mums. There were some barbecues going on, and there was a microeconomy going on with the mums coming and selling stuff to other mums'.

As discussed further in 4.1.3 in Kenya, Samba Sport and Kumekucha Quest implement sports tournaments that integrate specific moments for discussion and learning. These may include 'panel discussions featuring 'someone from the police, someone from the court, a lawyer, an advocate for human rights [...] different offices that can serve the youth'. Following the presentation, children are invited to ask questions, and it could be that 'in their life, they never had an opportunity to talk to a police officer in a safe environment'. Both organisations emphasize the importance of the sequence of game and dialogue as a method for addressing complex social issues, processing trauma, or learning how to manage conflicts.

4.2.3 Sport as a Bridge Between Local and Displaced Communities

From a broader perspective, the community also includes refugees and IDPs residing within the same geographic areas as host populations. Some project managers identify them as 'refugee communities' as opposed to 'local communities'. In Ethiopia and Uganda, where international aid plays a significant

role in supporting displaced populations, perceptions of inequitable resource distribution can give rise to local resentment. Sport for Change Ethiopia discussed how some locals perceive ‘refugees as a threat because they have more benefits than the host community in some camps’. Nonetheless, both Sport for Change Ethiopia and Youth Sport Uganda emphasize the role of sport as a valuable platform to promote dialogue, ‘this allows to create bridges between the communities, to help them to know each other’. Often, resources are limited in terms of sports grounds and materials so if everybody wants to play, they need to cooperate to share the resources. As 7 Hills Jordan mentions ‘scarcity forces the people to get together and then there are 2 solutions: we fight for the resource, or we collaborate, and we share the resource’. This shows that lack of resources can encourage cooperation.

At the personal level, the ‘peer-to-peer system of teaching’ is an effective way for breaking the boundaries. As an example, at the skatepark, when ‘kids are teaching to other kids coming from rich areas, there is a flip in their mentality, because they are no longer refugees, no longer [viewed as] weak’. In Uganda, where the program focuses on mental health and social well-being, the goal is ‘to teach refugees and local communities about creating a sense of belonging and an inclusive environment for everyone’. Similarly in Iraq, where diverse ethnic groups, IDPs, and refugees coexist, Free to Run Iraq intentionally targets different backgrounds in their programs. As stated by the organisation, ‘we intentionally bring them together to spend time with each other and build resilience as part of the social cohesion we are promoting’.

In displacement-affected contexts, sport serves as a meaningful tool for fostering interaction and mutual understanding between host communities, refugees, and IDPs. By facilitating shared experiences and promoting cooperation over limited resources, sport-based interventions contribute to social cohesion and the reduction of tensions. As such, they represent a valuable component within broader strategies aimed at enhancing community resilience and MHPSS.

4.3 Gender Inclusive Programming

This section highlights how grassroots organisations approach gender inclusion as an iterative process. Religious beliefs and norms often shape the social terrain in which sport and MHPSS programmes are developed and delivered. In many of these contexts, religion significantly influences gender roles, the interpretation of trauma, and the cultural legitimacy of public participation, factors that directly affect both the design and the implementation of sport-based interventions.

4.3.1 Gender Norms and Local Realities

In Somaliland, the Qantara Association established the first professional Thai boxing facility in the country to provide structured opportunities for young people. The organisation uses Thai boxing to challenge perceptions and offer girls a new form of physical and social empowerment. The interviewee explained that barriers to participation are often less about prohibition and more about a lack of accessible spaces and infrastructure. In Uganda, Youth Sport Uganda uses flexible scheduling to account for household or caretaking responsibilities.

4.3.2 Trust-Based Leadership and Community Engagement

In Iraq, Free to Run Iraq implements a year-long program which integrates life skills, community dialogue and physical activity. Running, yoga, and hiking are introduced, often in collaboration with caregivers. Several participants have gone on to participate in international events. In Ethiopia, Sport for Change Ethiopia has invested in training female coaches and organising inclusive public events, such as a 5k women's run involving 60,000 participants, embedded in the local civil society networks. By engaging religious leaders, parents, youth in dialogue, the organisation fosters gender inclusion which is sustainable.

As aforementioned, the effectiveness of MHPSS programming is deeply shaped by broader socio-cultural dynamics, including religion, community engagement, and the presence of local role models. Religious and cultural norms often influence perceptions of mental health, acceptable forms of public participation, and gendered access to sport and mobility, requiring organisations to navigate these factors with sensitivity and care. Free to Run in Iraq provides a compelling example of this dynamic. Rather than importing facilitators, the organisation invests in training local women to serve as mentors, guides, and role models. Girls often enter the programme quietly and with hesitation, yet over time grow into leadership roles, organising hikes, mentoring peers, and speaking publicly about issues such as gender-based violence. This gradual, trust-based process fosters both personal empowerment and broader community acceptance, strengthening the programme's impact and sustainability. By embedding leadership within the community and responding to local social and religious dynamics, initiatives like Free to Run Iraq illustrate how sport-based MHPSS interventions can become catalysts for inclusive, long-term change.

4.3.3 Shifting Social Norms through Connection and Care

In Jordan, 7 Hills noticed an increase in girls using their public skatepark and began offering girls-only classes in collaboration with local partners. These sessions provided a dedicated space while remaining

open to informal integration. One founder shared that boys often joined the girls' sessions uninvited, which helped normalize mixed-gender participation and reduce social barriers without strict regulation.

Leadership development is a key strategy across all programs. At Qantara Association Somaliland, a young girl, both a basketball player and Taekwondo black belt, eventually took on coaching responsibilities. In both Free to Run Iraq and Youth Sport Uganda, peer mentorship is encouraged to build intergenerational trust. One Youth Sport Uganda staff member noted that when parents are hesitant, former participants often serve as advocates by sharing their positive experiences. Rather than working in isolation, these initiatives collaborate closely with families and communities.

At 7 Hills Jordan, leaders reject narrow categories and instead promote community-wide inclusion. As the representative said, 'You cannot target women without targeting the source of the problem - the men. The community is a fabric made of different parts.'

Sensitivity to dress, interaction, and modesty is consistently reflected across programming. Rather than viewing these norms as obstacles, organisations design around them. The most profound transformations occur in the realm of social connection. Participants who begin shy or reluctant often develop confidence, set personal goals, and build networks of support. One 7 Hills Jordan founder described how skateboarding reshaped social relations: 'Your ego is shattered but it does not matter. Everyone is helping each other. Suddenly, religion does not matter. Race does not matter. Gender does not matter. You are just trying to land a trick, and everyone is cheering for you.'

These programs show that gender inclusion is not a technical fix, but a negotiated process shaped by trust, flexibility, and belonging. Their success rests on understanding gender as fluid and relational, and on creating spaces where change emerges organically from within the community.

4.4 Public and Safe Space

The use of space was a recurrent theme throughout the interviews and is important for both community involvement and gender inclusive programming. For this section, we will distinguish between two components of the use of space. Firstly, the challenges and opportunities associated with public spaces and secondly, the need for safe spaces. In this section, we will cover restrictions regarding practicing sport in public spaces and solutions including the repurposing of public spaces and the creation of safe spaces.

4.4.1 Restrictions on the Use of Public Space

The lack of available public spaces to practice sport was raised as a barrier to implementing activities. The representative from 7 Hills Jordan discussed that the lack of public space prevented social cohesion on a broader level. Where Amman is diverse with different cultures, including displaced people, the lack of public spaces made it difficult for different cultural groups to interact. This, therefore, enables divisions within society where people associate overall with others like to them.

In some contexts, despite public spaces existing, restrictions on their use by women presented as a challenge when it came to implementing gender inclusive programming. In Iraq, the interviewee from Free to Run Iraq highlighted that in some areas, such as Mosul, local traditions and norms restricted women and girl's presence outside. This hindered the organisations' ability to implement their running and hiking activities as it limits the places in which they can train. Reclaim Childhood Jordan also highlighted that in some areas of Jordan, girls are not expected to be on the street again hindering their ability to run outdoor activities.

4.4.2 Solutions

Given this context, an important part of the programming for multiple organisations was the creation of places in which young people could practice sport. This was echoed by the interviewee from Qantara Association Somaliland, stating that the centre they had built 'gives them (girls) access to a safe place to practice sport'. Sport for Life Palestine described their temporary learning centres where their MHPSS activities took place as 'the safe spaces that they need and that. (the participants see) as the only safe space', whilst acknowledging that 'it's not really safe' but that they view it as this. Reclaim Childhood Jordan also referenced the importance of safe spaces where the participants can 'just be girls'. These examples suggest that organisations, in some cases, were able to respond to challenges regarding lack of accessible public space by creating their own safe spaces. These exist in the form of both temporary spaces and permanent centres.

Other organisations reframed the discussion of safe spaces by repurposing public spaces. 7 Hills Jordan provided insight here on how the public space became the space around the skatepark. Furthermore, in public spaces outside the skate park, skateboarding continued to play a role in making them more inclusive. If someone was practising a trick and finally achieved it, everybody around who understood skateboarding would be happy, even if they were from different backgrounds who otherwise would not have the reason to interact. In addition, the example of the picnic table shown in 4.4.2, demonstrates that even small additions to public spaces could make them more inclusive.

When discussing his future vision of 7 Hills Jordan, the representative envisioned Amman as a city of ‘pockets of public space’ to bring people together without the need to have the financial means to travel a long distance. For organisations that did not possess a permanent space of their own to practice sport, their future aspirations centred around the acquisition of one. For instance, a representative from Samba Sport Kenya stated that they have a ‘dream of having our own summer sports complex where we’ll have a full football pitch, full rugby pitch, seven-a-side pitch, swimming pool, basketball court, volleyball court, tennis court’. Similarly, the interviewee from Free to Run Iraq, referred to a dream of having their own spaces in targeted areas to address the girls’ need for safe spaces. This demonstrates how restrictions on and the use of space are central to each organisation’s operations and their ability to facilitate safe environments which bring people together for their activities.



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5. Transversal Challenges

5. Transversal Challenges

5.1 Security

For the organisations interviewed, security, broadly defined to encompass physical safety, political instability, and social or cultural risk, is a critical determinant of sport-based mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programming. Although the specific threats differ across settings, all eight grassroots organisations develop their approaches to protect participants and maintain continuity in volatile environments. This section explores how local actors navigate layered insecurities, ranging from armed conflict to gendered norms, in ways that are contextually grounded, relational, and highly adaptive.

5.1.1 Conflict affected contexts and political instability

In conflict affected and politically unstable settings, security challenges are often acute and dynamic. Organisations working in these environments must contend with movement restrictions, recurrent violence, displacement, and disruption of essential services, all the while ensuring the physical and emotional safety of participants.

In Ethiopia, Sport for Change modifies its programming in response to regional instability, particularly in the conflict-affected north. Travel restrictions and safety threats limit access to certain communities, which necessitates the delegation of activities to trusted local actors. The organisation's peacebuilding efforts rely on partnerships with elders and spiritual leaders to establish credibility, ensure cultural sensitivity, and reduce the risk of political backlash. Despite the well-documented psychosocial benefits of sport, such initiatives often remain marginal within humanitarian response frameworks where donor priorities are focused elsewhere.

In Iraq, Free to Run operates in areas marked by sectarian tensions, restricted mobility, and the threat of cross-border violence. Its locally led model navigates these constraints by training female coaches, providing safe transportation, and building family and community support. These measures reduce risk while fostering trust and belonging.

In Palestine, Sport for Life sports-based organisation functions under some of the most precarious conditions of any initiative examined. Since the escalation of violence in Gaza in late 2023, the humanitarian situation has deteriorated dramatically. In response, the organisation has established temporary learning centres that also serve as spaces for sport and MHPSS programming. One

programme lead described these centres as ‘the only safe space’ participants feel they have access to, despite the omnipresence of violence. Staff acknowledged the limits of psychosocial programming under siege, stating that no MHPSS system can fully support children through such circumstances. However, they emphasised the importance of creating space for emotional expression, storytelling, and temporary relief. Sport in this setting offers a consistent, practical outlet for coping and a sense of control in an otherwise volatile environment.

5.1.2 Gendered and Social Dimensions of Security

In other contexts, the most pressing security concerns are not related to armed conflict but are instead shaped by social norms, gender expectations, and the regulation of public space. In these cases, security is relational and moralised. Risk is defined not only by physical danger but also by reputational harm, community backlash, and transgression of accepted gender roles.

Youth Sport Uganda mitigates these risks by locating activities close to participants’ homes, using familiar and accepted public spaces. In Muslim-majority regions, the organisation further modifies the types of games played to align with local expectations regarding dress and gender interaction. These adjustments ensure that girls can participate safely and consistently.

In Somaliland, Qantara Association Somaliland intentionally avoids the label of an international NGO and operates through respected community members who can liaise with local authorities and navigate administrative processes. As described by the interviewee, trust is considered the primary condition for safety in such environments.

Where 7 Hill’s programme makes substantive use of public space, the visibility from this can result in scrutiny or tension. Staff are highly attuned to these dynamics and engage in ongoing negotiation to ensure the park remains inclusive. Their experience illustrates how shared spaces can be simultaneously sites of vulnerability and resilience, depending on how they are managed and perceived.

Across all cases, security is conceptualised not simply as the absence of violence but as the presence of trust, care, and protective infrastructure, whether formal, such as safe transportation or informal, such as community relationships. Whether navigating conflict zones or gendered constraints in everyday life, organisations consistently prioritise relationship-building, local accountability, and adaptable programming. These findings underscore the need for flexible, context-sensitive support for sport-based MHPSS initiatives that are responsive to the complex and intersecting forms of insecurity that grassroots actors manage daily.

5.2 Funding

During the different interviews, we identified a variety of funding sources. These range from local fundraising to international funding. This raises the issue of sustainability, but also of dependency, which is particularly sensitive at a time when international aid budgets are being cut in many countries in the global North.

A range of good practices were identified, including diversifying the activities to become self-sufficient. Qantara Association Somaliland includes a cafeteria and can generate some income in this way; renting out the sports hall at certain times also helps to cover costs. 7 Hills Jordan provides a Makerspace (woodworking, digital design, T-shirt and hoodie design), which generates some income that is reinvested in the organisation. In addition, a future project to set up a skateboard workshop is underway. This will also enable the Middle East region to have a local producer so that skates don't have to be imported from Canada or China. Others, such as Sport for Change Ethiopia, explain that they use the 'Sport Academy approach', with some trainees paying for training sessions. Having some people paying for the training and the coaches, when they can afford it, is an interesting system to grant free access for young people who need it.

Several organisations rely on international funds, making them dependent on external resources. With the current political situation and countries redirecting aid, the allocation of these resources remains uncertain. Programmes most vulnerable to this instability are those dependent on external financial support. For example, 7 Hills Jordan lucidly explained that Western donors often provide funding with the expectation that specific initiatives will be implemented in alignment with their own vision or priorities. However, they explained that such an approach 'doesn't work in Jordan', suggesting that the local community seeks to avoid dependency on foreign actors, but also that local organizations may not share the same vision as Western donors.

To build the first skate park in Amman, the organisation raised \$23'000 through an online crowdfunding. Following this, 'the volunteers came to Amman to build the skate park, in collaboration with the local communities'. In Kenya, Samba Sport explained that staff and board members were recruited on a voluntary basis. They explained that 'people are very willing to engage in it', even if, at times, 'it's difficult to find the good people'. Both examples show that volunteer recruitment is feasible, even if challenges may arise, yet it still provides a way to operate with limited financial resources.

In the various contexts, the organisations are unanimous in pointing out that the need for MHPSS is very high. This was underlined by Sport for Life in the current crisis context of Palestine, but also by all the interviewees when they pointed out that there was a strong demand from local communities for them to come and implement their sports programmes. Consequently, the question of funding often represents a limit to the development of sports activities and their implementation on a larger scale in the region.

The sustainability of these programs can be addressed by different means. We already mentioned how alumni who became instructors can act as agents of social cohesion, serving as role models and community leaders. Beyond that, working directly with former participants can help ensure the implementation of the programs at the grassroots level, thereby promoting long-term stability. Moreover, what these “community leaders” seek to achieve through their participation in the programs is not necessarily monetary gain, but rather social recognition and self-fulfilment.

In conclusion, several organisations are successfully adopting sustainable practices such as income-generating activities or crowdfunding to reduce reliance on unstable international funding and focus on the community resources themselves. These approaches, alongside strong individual and community engagement, highlight effective models for expanding sports and MHPSS programmes despite financial challenges.



6. Conclusions & Recommendations

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

In this research we aimed to examine the implementation of sport-based interventions, with a particular emphasis on the intersection of S4P and MHPSS, as carried out by actors based in the Global South. While the practices of organisations from the Global North are relatively well-documented and critically examined in existing literature, there appears to be a notable gap in research focusing on grassroots initiatives led by Global South actors. The decision to focus on the Middle East and the Horn of Africa was guided by two main considerations: to delimit the study to a manageable yet rich sample, and to concentrate on a region where research-relevant dynamics converge. Both regions are marked by complex migration patterns and diverse socio-cultural contexts, offering particularly relevant cases shaped by structural and economic disparities, as well as shared challenges and approaches.

Drawing on eight semi-structured interviews and subsequent qualitative analysis, several key thematic issues emerged. Local actors demonstrated a clear awareness of mental health concerns and some of them directly mentioned the broader framework of MHPSS. However, grassroots-level practitioners tend to adapt both the framework and terminology to local norms and contexts, given that mental health, as highlighted in the literature review and by interviewees, remains a sensitive topic that is not often addressed publicly. Sport was used as a platform for further MHPSS support by bringing people together and facilitating the dialogue.

Regarding local leadership and community inclusion, many of the organisations adopted the strategic use of ‘role models’ or ‘community leaders’ in the delivery of sport activities. This approach empowers alumni, strengthens trust within the community, and supports the sustainability of the programs. Moreover, mothers were frequently involved as key actors due to their central role in the well-being of both their children and the family unit. Finally, shared participation in sport creates an inclusive space where youth from host and displaced communities can interact as equals, helping to break down social barriers and foster mutual understanding.

To address the gender dimension, concerted efforts are being made to encourage girls’ participation in sport-based activities. However, inclusion often requires alignment with prevailing cultural norms, particularly in contexts where such participation is not widely supported. The creation of safe spaces, as well as the reappropriation of public spaces, appeared to be essential conditions to girls’ empowerment.

Finally, two cross-cutting challenges were identified. The first is related to security considerations, which underscored the necessity of organising transportation for participants and ensuring that coaches could access areas affected by conflict or political instability. The second is related to funding structures. Some organisations emphasised activity diversification as a strategy for programme sustainability. This included income-generating components and the mobilisation of community volunteers, both of which contributed to enhancing solidarity and social cohesion, while also reducing reliance on international funding sources.

In conclusion, S4P strategies aimed at addressing MHPSS are defined by the eight organisations through a multitude of best practices. They adopt a holistic, community-based approach to mental health, embedding psychosocial support within broader social and cultural frameworks. Their interventions are notably context-sensitive, shaped by the specific socio-economic and cultural realities in which they operate. Although intervention's conceptual frameworks may vary across contexts, elements such as sport, play, and fair play seem to have global resonance. These components can serve as particularly effective tools in strengthening children's mental health and supporting their development toward greater personal autonomy and resilience.

6.2 Recommendations

Building on interviews with eight grassroots organisations across the Middle East and Horn of Africa, this report identifies context-specific practices that advance MHPSS through sport-based programming in displacement-affected settings. The following recommendations aim to support local actors, donors, and potential partners in strengthening S4P initiatives through sustainable, inclusive, and locally grounded approaches.

Future research should ask participating organisations what forms of support they most need from international organisations, and whether they know of smaller, less-visible groups doing similar work. This would help map informal networks, amplify underrepresented actors, and inform more inclusive and responsive international engagement strategies. Expanding the geographic scope beyond the Middle East and Horn of Africa to include other regions affected by displacement would also enrich comparative insights and broaden the applicability of findings.

1. Funding & Sustainability

1.1 Addressed to local organisations : Diversification & Visibility

- Encourage local organisations to **diversify their activities** to generate income and move toward sustainability, this goal must account for the time and resources that not all organisations can access.



- Encourage **good practices** that can help local organisations to **operate with less resources**.



- Enhance **visibility on social media** as it appears to be a promising avenue for moving toward autonomy and raising funds independently.



Good practices (non-exhaustive) :

- Sport academy approach
- Crowdfunding
- Merchandising
- Cafeteria
- Engaging community support on a voluntary basis.
- Including alumni in the implementation loop
- Expansion of partnership with Global North & Global South actors.



1.2 Addressed to international actors : Strong partnerships to create safe spaces

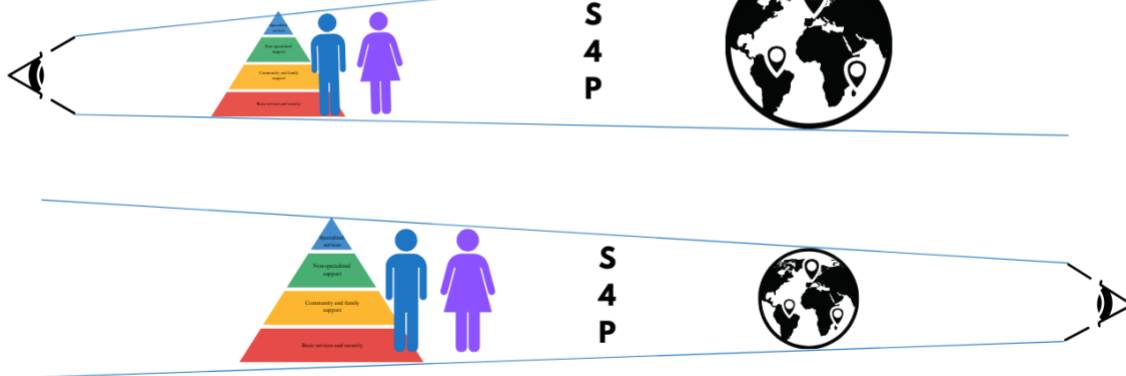
- **Support local organisations** in developing or acquiring physical spaces for sports activities. Consider these infrastructures as long-term assets that can support:
 - a. Continuity of programming.
 - b. Community ownership and identity.
 - c. Income generation (e.g., venue rental, events).
- Where feasible, utilise and **repurpose public space** to bring together diverse groups and foster social cohesion.
- Where public access is limited, invest in the creation of dedicated, safe, and inclusive sport spaces.

1.3 Addressed to international actors : Support visibility

- **Enhance the visibility of grassroots organisations** in order to raise awareness about different interactions with and approaches to MHPSS and **highlight their work to potential donors or investors**.
- Support local organisations in **leveraging their social media platforms**, as they are key for to the visibility. (Sharing knowledge, networking)

2. Shifting the Perspective

Avoid imposing formatted concepts



2.1 Toward more horizontal partnerships

➔ **International collaboration remains crucial in addressing local challenges.**

- Donors and partners need to shift their perspective to ensure a **horizontal cooperation** and context-relevant solutions
- **Leverage local knowledge** and define goals according to on-the-ground realities.
- Allow local norms and values define what's realistically achievable in terms of project.
- Avoid implementing Global North frameworks which are not locally rooted (e.g., MHPSS pyramid, gender norms).

2.2 Supporting the gender dimension

- Prioritise local and cultural norms to **enhance girls' access to sport** in displacement-affected contexts.
- **Engage and invest entire communities** to ensure sustainable and lasting change.
- Exercise caution with norms promoted by Global North actors, as they may be perceived as misaligned with local realities despite having worthy goals.
- Avoid imposing external frameworks without adequate contextual understanding, as this can hinder their effectiveness and provoke resistance.

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Appendix

Data Collection Table		
Indicators	Youth Sport Uganda https://www.facebook.com/youthsportuganda/ @youthsportuganda	
Type of Sport	Football as it's the cheapest in Uganda. Modified sports, volleyball, netball.	
Background Informations	Locally founded association (2006), using sport for the improvement of the life of the young people in Uganda, for IDPs and refugees. 4 programs: Health, education, livelihood, water sanitation & hygiene. Training of coaches, community leaders, peer leaders to run these programs.	
Participant Demographics	6-25 y.o. in and out of school. Refugees, IDPs, local hosting communities	
Community involvement and support	Good Practices	Role models and peer leaders are sometimes hired by the organisation after they participate in the programs. They become role models within the community.
	Challenges	Problem of acceptance at household level. Sport in Uganda is seen as a leisure activity. Parents asking for monetary value and for something tangible because of poverty. Acquisition of soft skills is not valued.
	Enabling Factors	Role models can convince parents, as they are good examples of success within the community. When parents witness the transformation of their children and the benefits on their well-being, they will push siblings or neighbours to join the program.
Accommodation of the Needs of Different Groups	Good Practices	YSU is trying to have 50/50 of Boys/Girls participants. Adapting games to the clothes, if they join with long skirts, then instead of football, they switch the game into a sort of netball, so they don't need to kick the ball, but throw it.
	Challenges	Boys find it easier to enrol in sport activities than girls, because of cultural norms, mostly in the afternoon girls are working for the household. Moreover, parents don't want girls to be exposed to boys.
	Enabling Factors	Playfield at proximity, so girls can join easily without walking too long. Using role models to convince parents, especially with female participants.
Creation of a Cohesive Environment	Good Practices	YSU teaches Refugees and local communities about creating a sense of belonging and an inclusive environment for everyone.
	Challenges	Stereotypes regarding refugees in the host communities.
	Enabling Factors	For refugees: learning the language of the local community and developing a sense of belonging. Playing matches with local communities and refugees = building bridges. Helping and learning from each other = help to decrease the stereotypes.
Incorporation of MHPSS	Good Practices	Teaching life skills within different programs.
	Challenges	Anxiety related to school, poverty, lack of food. Depression is more frequently severe among refugee communities.
	Enabling Factors	Regular cohort, every 6 months.
Additional Relevant Information	Funding is 70% international and 30% local. High demand.	

Data Collection Table		
Indicators	Qantara Association Somaliland https://www.qantara-association.org/	
Type of Sport	Thai Boxing	
Background Informations	Founded by two Switzerland-based individuals in 2023: one from Hargeisa (Somaliland), the other half Palestinian, half Swiss. The center includes a music studio and a cafeteria.	
Participant Demographics	Young people, but focus on young girls.	
Community involvement and support	Good Practices	All coaches are locals.
	Challenges	Very clan-based society.
	Enabling Factors	An old man, a friend from the family, is helping as a volunteer, for administrative procedures and for the operational part. Renting the center for community events.
Accommodation of the Needs of Different Groups	Good Practices	Providing a safe space for women and girls to practice sport. Giving the skills to girls to defend themselves in the public space.
	Challenges	Thai boxing is quite a masculine sport. Lack of infrastructures.
	Enabling Factors	Different schedules for different groups (adults, girls etc.).
Creation of a Cohesive Environment	Good Practices	Proposing IDPs to join
	Challenges	Quite homogenous society, but a lot of IDPs in the area.
	Enabling Factors	The cafeteria allows people to meet.
Incorporation of MHPSS	Good Practices	Center is promoting professional skills for the population.
	Challenges	Lack of professional perspectives.
	Enabling Factors	Set goals, like creating a team to join the olympics in the future.
Additional Relevant Information	Raising funds by the association in Switzerland. But the idea of having a self-sufficient center then with the different activities.	

Data Collection Table		
Indicators	7 Hills Jordan https://www.7hillspark.com/ @7hillspark	
Type of Sport	Skateboarding	
Background Informations	Founded in 2014 with a skatepark, the neighbourhood program started in 2016, registered as a non-profit in 2019.	
Participant Demographics	Jordanian, Sudanese, Syrian, Iraqi, Yemeni, Ethiopian and Filipino children and families.	
Community involvement and support	Good Practices	Public park transformed into a shared community space. The shared community space created a micro-economy for mothers selling food and crafts. Organisation emphasises community-led governance: “I am the community.”
	Challenges	Entitlement: initial efforts to distribute free skateboards created a sense of entitlement among some youth and sparked the emergence of a resale black market.
	Enabling Factors	Locally embedded leadership, trust and familiarity with the community.
Accommodation of the Needs of Different Groups	Good Practices	Gender-responsive programming, collaborations, and dedicated sessions to other marginalised groups.
	Challenges	At first the team wasn’t aware of the number or needs of various refugee and migrant communities (eg. Sudanese, Yemeni, Filipino) present in the area.
	Enabling Factors	Programming based on observed participation.
Creation of a Cohesive Environment	Good Practices	Enforced inclusive rules (eg. kids told to leave if they excluded others.)
	Challenges	Amman’s public space was described as riddled with social bubbles shaped by class and race.
	Enabling Factors	Scarcity fostered cooperation (e.g. time-sharing the skatepark)
Incorporation of MHPSS	Good Practices	Programs build confidence, belonging and social skills. Skateboarding used as indirect psychosocial support.
	Challenges	The team deliberately avoids mental health labels, recognising that clinical language can be alienating or stigmatising in their context.
	Enabling Factors	Youth empowerment through skills-based progression and rewards. Reframing the narrative: “If you keep telling someone they’re sick, they’re going to be sick.”
Additional Relevant Information	Funded through a combination of crowdfunding campaigns, partnerships with international organisations and collaborations with local municipalities (information from website)	

Data Collection Table		
Indicators	Sport for Change Ethiopia https://www.facebook.com/sportforchangeethiopia/	
Type of Sport	Football and sport in General	
Background Informations	Civil society organization based Addis Abeba. Active these last 4 years.	
Participant Demographics	Young people, girls and refugees and IDPs	
Community involvement and support	Good Practices	Including the community (elders, spiritual leaders, influential individuals)
	Challenges	Shortage of material. Regional interests may vary. Coaches have different backgrounds.
	Enabling Factors	Good community support. Good contact with local authorities.
Accommodation of the Needs of Different Groups	Good Practices	Using sport to reduce gender inequity. Using favorable sports to promote girls participation (ex. catchball). Coaching workshop for females,
	Challenges	Gender equality. Disabled persons. Lots of IDPs in the North.
	Enabling Factors	Coaches are trained on social cohesion (in context of IDPs). Mixing groups to have a balanced amount of girls and boys in a group (they are also encouraging each other on other topics like sanitary or education).
Creation of a Cohesive Environment	Good Practices	Sport is used for peace building and creating dialogue in Northern territory.
	Challenges	Difficulty for coaches to operate in Northern territories because of travel bans. Security challenges.
	Enabling Factors	Coaches are trained on social cohesion. Workshop focused on conflict resorption mechanisms (including community & spiritual leaders, influential individuals). Share resources among local and refugee communities.
Incorporation of MHPSS	Good Practices	Integration of life skills through sport. Creating groups where people can freely talk.
	Challenges	Idleness is a main concern in the refugee camps (people have lost everything and are experiencing trauma). Kids trauma related to conflicts. People are reluctant to speak about their mental health. Lack of MHPSS knowledge.
	Enabling Factors	Sport helps to build positive behaviour and problem solving skills. 1 month campaign to promote mental health and well being.
Additional Relevant Information	Voluntary based activity (staff and board). No international funds. Integrating sport academy approach (some trainees are paying).	

Data Collection Table		
Indicators	Palestine Sport for Life https://ps4l.org/ @ps4lorg	
Type of Sport	Recreational Sports and Games. Team Games and Movement: relay races, cooperative tasks, games with embedded life lessons. Football	
Background Informations	Founded in 2010. Active in Gaza, West Bank and East Jerusalem. Works through local teachers and counselors in partnership with UNRWA and the Ministry of Education	
Participant Demographics	Palestinian youth (80% girls) , caregivers and teachers. In refugee camps, displacement settings and low-resource communities.	
Community involvement and support	Good Practices	Operates through trusted teachers and female trainers in the community. Engages mothers in psychosocial programming and emotional support sessions.
	Challenges	Current humanitarian crisis due to military occupation. Emotional exhaustion.
	Enabling Factors	Embedded relationships with schools, and trainers being from within the community.
Accommodation of the Needs of Different Groups	Good Practices	80% female participation; with female only spaces. Inclusive of children from cities, villages, refugee camps, and different ability levels.
	Challenges	Societal stigma about girls' participation in sport. Movement restrictions and risk zones limit girls' participation.
	Enabling Factors	Flexibility to deliver sessions in homes, on rooftops, or via Zoom during siege or curfew.
Creation of a Cohesive Environment	Good Practices	Temporary learning spaces and peer support emphasised in group games.
	Challenges	Trauma from displacement creates psychological fragmentation. Loos or routine disrupts children's sense of safety.
	Enabling Factors	Sport can create structure and a sense of belonging. Reflection-based activities help children build social bonds.
Incorporation of MHPSS	Good Practices	Uses trauma-informed methods
	Challenges	Vast psychosocial needs exceed the amount of resources available. Many participants are experiencing deep traumatisations, and movement restrictions make access inconsistent.
	Enabling Factors	Counselors observe and offer one on one follow up as needed. Sport is reframed as a tool of resilience.
Additional Relevant Information	Funded with European Union Funds (Skills4Sports project), Qatar-Based Organisations (Qatar Fund for Development, Qatar Charity, and the Generation Amazing Foundation), Swiss Funding through Frida, FIFA Foundation, UNRWA and Palestinian Ministry of Education, and public donations (information from website)	

Data Collection Table		
Indicators	Reclaim Childhood Jordan https://www.reclaimchildhood.org/ @reclaimchildhood	
Type of Sport	Different team sports.	
Background Informations	Reclaim Childhood was registered as a U.S. nonprofit in 2008. Between 2008 and 2017, its programs primarily took the form of summer camps. In 2017, the organization shifted to a more consistent model of an after-school program in Amman and Zarqa. Today, they work with 500 girls and employ 20 coaches.	
Participant Demographics	Girls from different backgrounds and ethnicities up to 18 years.	
Community involvement and support	Good Practices	Their programs bring together youth from many different nationalities and all coaches come from the same communities as participants. Coaches each recruit participants from their own neighbourhoods. At 18 participants phase out of the programme but stay in touch. When a new vacancy is published, the alumni are always consulted first. 4 out of the 20 current coaches are alumni.
	Challenges	It can be difficult to convince families to let their children play football.
	Enabling Factors	They gain trust in the communities they work with and have existed for a while. They do separate mother's sessions and awareness sessions about the importance of sport.
Accommodation of the Needs of Different Groups	Good Practices	They run a specific life skills programme for 13-17 years old to target this age group. All their activities are for girls only.
	Challenges	Girls are not allowed to play sports in Jordan the same way that boys are and they are expected to not be on the street. Lack of indoor spacing is a big problem
	Enabling Factors	They create a space where the participants can 'just be girls' and learn new skills. They have role models and specific objectives for each session. They bring the girls to the activities by transport so families know that they are safe.
Creation of a Cohesive Environment	Good Practices	Coaches represent the community in which they teach e.g. if it is mostly Iraqis, then the coach will likely be from Iraq..
	Challenges	Sometimes there is racism, for instance towards Sudanese refugees.
	Enabling Factors	They sort out issues through simple practices like holding two girls hands and then encouraging them to hold each others hands
Incorporation of MHPSS	Good Practices	Coaches receive training on MHPSS which they then incorporate through play.
	Challenges	Mental health can be taboo to discuss.
	Enabling Factors	They do sessions on how to express your emotions through art as well as self defence sessions.
Additional Relevant Information	They rely principally on international funds as can be difficult to get private sponsors in Jordan.	

Data Collection Table		
Indicators	Free to Run Iraq https://freetorun.org/ @freeturunngo	
Type of Sport	Running, Hiking, Yoga, Camping, Football, Cycling.	
Background Informations	Established in Iraq in 2019 (founded in 2014). Initially began with small cohorts, now aiming for 900 participants / year across three locations (Erbil, Duhok, Sinjar).	
Participant Demographics	Young girls and women 10-24 years old. Includes Syrian refugees, Iraqi IDPs, Kurds, Arabs, Yazidis, Sunnis, Shi'as.	
Community involvement and support	Good Practices	Community Development Leaders return to lead future cohorts. They organise monthly engagement sessions with families. Trainers are from the communities they work with.
	Challenges	They lack physical spaces for activities.
	Enabling Factors	They build trust through local female trainers, transportation, individual meetings and mother-daughter sessions.
Accommodation of the Needs of Different Groups	Good Practices	They use curriculums based on play with sport activities for the mental health benefits. The focus is on leadership, mental resilience and community cohesion.
	Challenges	Gender norms limit the mobility for girls in some communities (for example, Mosul).
	Enabling Factors	They use female coaches, have local partnerships and tailor engagement per community.
Creation of a Cohesive Environment	Good Practices	They encourage cross-community bonding through shared goals such as by training together for a race.
	Challenges	There are ethnic/ religious tensions at the start of each cycle.
	Enabling Factors	Shared goals, team identity building and exposure to different communities.
Incorporation of MHPSS	Good Practices	MHPSS through sport, play-based learning, campaigns and international awareness event, flexibility to adjust programming to community needs. Flexibility to adjust programming to community needs.
	Challenges	Security issues and mental health stigma. Differences in understanding mental health across communities.
	Enabling Factors	Safe spaces, community led discussions, partnerships.
Additional Relevant Information	They are working towards long-term sustainability and scaling through alumni, Community Development Leaders and international partnerships. They face funding challenges and challenges regarding lack of physical spaces to practice their sports.	

Data Collection Table		
Indicators	Samba Sport (SS) x Kumekucha Quest (KQ) https://www.green-string.org/programs/kumekuchaquest https://www.sambasports.org/ @sambasports4youth @greenstringnetwork	
Type of Sport	Mostly football but other sports as well.	
Background Informations	KQ is a social movement. Programme is built around socio and emotional skills. KQ uses sport (with Samba Sports) and art and theatre. SS and KQ have worked together for a long time.	
Participant Demographics	Boys and girls 10-24 years old.	
Community involvement and support	Good Practices	Provides breakfast at the start of the day which motivates people to join and also encourages parents to let them know.. They give the children something to go home with and show their families. In addition, they organise family fun days with local games.
	Challenges	Difficult to motivate people to volunteer.
	Enabling Factors	They organise a panel discussion including people from the community such as policy, judges and social workers. It's a space where young people can ask any questions.
Accommodation of the Needs of Different Groups	Good Practices	They organise girl power days where they tackle sexual and gender based violence through games (chachawiza model).
	Challenges	Different cultural and religious backgrounds.
	Enabling Factors	Having parents exposed to the activities and providing the girls with role models. E.g. 'youth empowerment and non-beauty project' to encourage more focus on inner wellness over external beauty'.
Creation of a Cohesive Environment	Good Practices	Does not target any community/ group in particular to avoid predisposing them to divides but instead encompassing the whole community.
	Challenges	Problems with youth going down a bad path.
	Enabling Factors	Brings people together through the use of sport.
Incorporation of MHPSS	Good Practices	Uses a schedule of alternating sports with skills sessions. For example, they may talk about conflict management for 20 minutes in between sport activities. Sport acts as a stress relief.
	Challenges	It can be difficult for people to talk about conflicts and personal issues.
	Enabling Factors	They mix group work and discussions on particular topics with exciting activities like sport.
Additional Relevant Information	One challenge is having too much demand. Funding can also be difficult. The local government is more involved than the national one.	