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HEALING THROUGH MOVEMENT: THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION IN AFRICA

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Image: Football pitch. Source: Pexels

INTRODUCTION

Sport is often spoken of as leisure; an opportunity to unwind, wear team colours, and lose oneself in the collective excitement of a game. Across Africa, major tournaments regularly reveal something much deeper about the social power of sport. Anyone who watched the CHAN 2024 Pamoja Tournament can understand this collective euphoria, especially the unforgettable Uganda vs. South Africa game of 18 August 2025 at Mandela National Stadium.

Hours before kick-off, the stadium was already brimming with people from every walk of life, different regions, identities, and backgrounds, gathered not because they shared the same politics, class, or life experiences, but because they shared a moment of anticipation and collective energy. For those few hours, differences in class, ethnicity, gender, age or political affiliation simply dissolved.

The dramatic comeback that unfolded on the pitch only heightened this shared experience. Spectators celebrated together, strangers exchanged reactions, and supporters from rival clubs found themselves united in the emotion of the moment. Instances like these, common across many sporting contexts on the continent, illustrate sport's unique capacity to create spaces where social divisions soften, even if briefly. As former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan observed, *"sport is a universal language... it can bring people together, no matter their origin, background or economic status"*.^[1]

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[1] Annan, K. (2004) Universal language of sport brings people together, teaches teamwork, tolerance – remarks by the Secretary-General at a Headquarters press event to launch the International Year of Sport and Physical Education, 5 November 2004. Press Release SG/SM/9579, New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, p. 1. Available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2004/sgsm9579.doc.htm> (Accessed: 3 November 2025).

The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace defines sport as all forms of physical activity that promote physical fitness, mental well-being and social interaction.[2] It is this inherently social, communal nature of sport that has made it a powerful tool for rebuilding societies fractured by violence.

Sport and Transitional Justice: Remembering, Rebuilding and Reimagining Community



Image: Traditional Wrestling. Source: Pexels



Image: Ugandan Rugby Team Source: Pexels

For millennia, sport has played a crucial role in shaping identity, fostering belonging and created spaces where communities meet as equals. From ancient Greek athletics to indigenous games, sport has always functioned as a powerful social glue. One that becomes even more critical in times of conflict and reconstruction. In Uganda, for example, Baganda men historically participated in Ekigwo e’Kiganda (traditional wrestling)[3], while today the Masaza Cup continues that communal tradition by uniting football teams from the 18 counties of the Buganda Kingdom.[4] These activities are more than games, they are rituals of memory, solidarity, and shared identity.

In the field of Transitional Justice (TJ) which blends formal mechanisms like trials and truth commissions with informal practices that support healing,[5] sport is increasingly recognised as an essential tool. While often overlooked, sport contributes meaningfully to reintegration, reconciliation, truth-telling, and the rebuilding of social bonds in societies recovering from mass atrocities.

This understanding becomes even clearer when we look beyond individual nations to the continental stage. Tournaments like the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) demonstrate how sport can nurture continental solidarity in ways political processes often cannot.

[2] U Sports Think Tank (n.d.) Sport for international development and peace, p. 3. [PDF] Available at: <https://www.sportsthinktank.com/uploads/sport-for-international-devt.pdf> (Accessed: 14 October 2025).

[3] Basudde, E. (2025) ‘Ekigwo: The old sport regains its lost round’, New Vision, [online] Available at: <https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1178998/ekigwo-sport-regains-lost-round> (Accessed: 8 December 2025).

[4] UgandaFootball.com (n.d.) Masaza Cup Tournament Overview. Available at <https://www.ugandafootball.com/tournament.php?u=ftn0354>

[5] African Union Transitional Justice Policy (2019).

Every two years, AFCON unites Africans across borders and the diaspora, transforming stadiums and living rooms into shared spaces of identity and pride. Senegal’s historic 2021 victory,[6] Côte d’Ivoire’s emotional 2024 comeback as hosts,[7] and Cameroon’s electrifying 2022[8] tournament all show how sport generates collective healing and hope.



Image: Rugby game. Source: Pexels

Crucially, Africa’s sporting impact and its TJ potential extends well beyond football:

- The Basketball Africa League (BAL) has become a platform for youth empowerment and post-conflict engagement, particularly in Rwanda and Angola.
- Athletics, especially long-distance running in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda, inspires values of resilience, dignity, discipline, and global pride.
- Rugby, symbolised by South Africa’s Springboks, embodies reconciliation[9]; meanwhile, Kenya and Namibia use rugby sevens to foster community cohesion.
- Indigenous sports from Senegalese traditional wrestling[10] to Ethiopian stick-fighting,[11] preserve cultural memory and reinforce identity after conflict.

[6] Confederation of African Football (CAF) (2022) 2021 Africa Cup of Nations – Senegal champion of Africa [online]. Available at: <https://www.cafonline.com/afcon2025/archive/2021/> (Accessed: 8 December 2025).

[7] Confederation of African Football (CAF) (2024) 2023 Africa Cup of Nations – Côte d’Ivoire 2023 Archive [online]. Available at: <https://www.cafonline.com/afcon2025/archive/2023/> (Accessed: 8 December 2025).

[8] BBC Sport (2022) ‘AFCON 2022: Burkina Faso 3-3 Cameroon: Hosts win 5-3 on penalties’, BBC Sport, 5 February. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/60186277> (Accessed: 8 December 2025).

[9] SA Rugby Magazine (2013) ‘How Mandela saved the Springbok’, SA Rugby Magazine [online]. Available at: <https://www.sarugbymag.co.za/how-mandela-saved-the-springbok/> (Accessed: 8 December 2025). (sarugbymag.co.za)

[10] Ba, O. (2023) ‘Traditional wrestling in Senegal – much more than a sport, it keeps culture alive’, The Conversation, [online]. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/traditional-wrestling-in-senegal-much-more-than-a-sport-it-keeps-culture-alive-201049> (Accessed: 8 December 2025).

[11] TraditionalSports.org (n.d.) ‘Donga (Ethiopia)’, Traditional Sports [online]. Available at: <https://www.traditionalsports.org/traditional-sports/africa/donga-ethiopia.html> (Accessed: 8 December 2025). (traditionalsports.org)

Together, these sporting traditions and innovations demonstrate that sport should not be treated as an afterthought. Rather, it is a core pillar of communal healing, a medium through which societies remember, rebuild, and reimagine themselves in the aftermath of violence.

Rwanda: Football as the First Public Act of Healing



Image: Amahoro Stadium. Source: Pexels

In Rwanda, the 1994 genocide shattered the social fabric of the nation. More than 800,000 people were killed in a matter of weeks, and the inter-ethnic wounds ran deep. Alongside formal and informal mechanisms such as Gacaca courts, Rwanda turned to tools that transcend identity, sport being at the forefront.

As former Rayon Sports goalkeeper and genocide survivor Eric Murangwa recounts, the first major public gathering after the genocide was a football match: Rayon Sports vs. Kiyovu FC.[12] People emerged from hiding not only to watch football, but to reclaim a sense of community. It was a symbolic message that despite the violence, something still existed that united Rwandans.

Years later, Rwanda continues to use sport and stadiums as sites of remembrance. Amahoro Stadium, once a UN-protected refuge for more than 10,000 internally displaced people, now serves as a venue for annual Genocide Memorial events,[13] including national candle-light vigils. This transformation from shelter to memorial underscores the capacity of sport spaces to carry memory, healing, and hope.

[12] Karuhanga, J. (2019) 'Eugene Murangwa: How a Genocide Survivor is Using Football for Social Development', The New Times. Available at: <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/165539/Sports/eugene-murangwa-how-a-genocide-survivor-is-using-football-as-a-tool-for-social-development> (Accessed: 3 November 2025)

[13] United Nations (n.d.) Amahoro Stadium as a UNAMIR Protection Site. Available at: <https://www.dar.com/work/project/amahoro-stadium> (Accessed: 4 December 2025)

Reintegrating Child Soldiers: The Power of Purpose and Play



Image: Photo of child soldier. Source: Chris Hondros/Getty

Across the continent, the recruitment of children into armed groups remains a deeply troubling feature of armed conflict. Sudan's SPLA reportedly enlisted more than 20,000 minors during the 1985–2005 civil war;^[14] Liberia faced similarly widespread child recruitment during its two devastating conflicts; factions of the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC) in Angola engaged extensively in this practice; while Senegal's Movement of Democratic Forces in the Casamance (MFDC) involved children occasionally and largely in supportive roles. Taken together, these statistics reveal the grim but uneven reality of child soldiering in Africa and underscore the need for context-specific approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration.^[15]

In these contexts, reintegration remains a profound challenge. Former child soldiers often grapple with trauma, stigma, disrupted childhoods, and fractured community ties. In Sudan, for example, the Don Bosco Center in partnership with UNICEF, has used sport as one of several tools to support the reintegration of war-affected youth. Through organised recreational activities, football training, safe communal spaces and counselling, young people reconnect with peers, restore confidence, and gradually

[14] Achvarina, V. (2010) *Child Soldiers in Intrastate Conflicts: Causes, Consequences and Implications for Policy*. PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, p. 1. Available at: https://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/8034/1/ETD_Achvarina.pdf (Accessed: 4 November 2025).

[15] Ibid

rebuild trust within their communities.[16] These programmes demonstrate how structured play and movement can complement psychosocial support, offering young people pathways toward healing, belonging, and renewed purpose.

Similarly, in Northern Uganda, following two decades of conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army, sports initiatives by local organisations such as The Acholi Cultural Institution (Ker Kwaro Acholi)[17] became vital tools for dialogue, psychosocial healing, and reintegration. Football matches helped former abductees reconnect with communities that often viewed them with suspicion, reminding everyone that the children were victims as well as perpetrators and therefore still part of the social fabric.

Sport as a New National Identity: The Case of Post-Apartheid South Africa



Image: Excited children football supporters. Source: Pexels

When apartheid crumbled, South Africa faced the challenge of building a shared national identity. Sport became central to this reconstruction.[18] The re-entry of South Africa into international sport, and the formation of a racially inclusive national team "Bafana Bafana" symbolised the beginning of a new, democratic identity. Their matches, especially early fixtures like those against Cameroon[19], were moments where the country saw itself reflected in a way that transcended the pain of the past.

[16] <https://www.infoans.org/en/sections/special-reports/item/2926-sudan-they-all-appreciate-the-services-offered-by-don-bosco-to-the-young> (Accessed: 3 November 2025)

[17] Uganda Radio Network (URN) (2022) 'Acholi Cultural Institution turns to sports to address negative effects of LRA war', Uganda Radio Network, 05 October. Available at: <https://ugandaradionetwork.net/story/acholi-cultural-institution-turns-to-sports-to-address-negative-effects-of-lra-war> (Accessed: 8 December 2025).

[18] Livia G. (2022) Fighting Apartheid Through Sports (2022) Available at: <https://daily.jstor.org/fighting-apartheid-with-sports/> (Accessed: 8 December 2025)

[19] Embassy of the Republic of South Africa (2009) 'Bafana Bafana: a quick history', South African Embassy (Berlin) News Archive, 29 May. Available at: https://www.suedafrika.org/newsarchiv/newsarchiv-details?tx_ttnews%5Bday%5D=29&tx_ttnews%5Bmonth%5D=05&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=631&tx_ttnews%5Byear%5D=2009&type=98&cHash=ccc31dd217a2cb89c69ca6fb8e4e6d17 (Accessed: 8 December 2025).

CONCLUSION



Image: Nigerian Supporter. Source: Pexels



Image: Ghanaian Supporter Source: Pexels

Across Africa, from Kigali to Monrovia, Gulu to Cape Town, sport has acted as a subtle yet transformative instrument of healing. It rebuilds trust, creates shared memories, restores dignity, and provides a non-verbal language for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Sport freezes time long enough for people to remember their shared humanity. It restores identity. It strengthens weakened social bonds. It opens spaces for dialogue. As global institutions like FIFA, the UN, and regional organisations increasingly recognise the peacebuilding potential of sports, it is time for post-conflict societies and transitional justice practitioners to integrate sport deliberately into reconstruction strategies.

Because through movement, play and shared joy, societies can learn not only to remember, but to heal. It is recovery, memory, unity and hope in motion.



Image: Race Track. Source: Unsplash

RECOMMENDATIONS

Continental Framework (African Union / Regional Bodies)

- Institutionalise sport-for-peace programmes within AU Transitional Justice Policy implementation.
- Establish a dedicated “Sport for Peace and Social Cohesion” window within the AU Peace Fund to finance sporting initiatives that advance reconciliation and healing in post-conflict countries.
- Promote cross-border sporting exchanges for youth in fragile and conflict-affected regions.



Image: Boxers. Source: Pexels

National-Level Governments

- Include sport in national Transitional Justice and peacebuilding strategies.
- Convert selected stadiums in post-conflict states into dual-purpose memorial and community-reintegration sites.
- Invest in community sporting infrastructure in regions affected by conflict.
- Partner with ministries of youth, sport and education to embed sport in psychosocial recovery programmes.

Civil Society Actors

- Develop sport-based trauma-healing and reintegration programmes for youth, victims, and ex-combatants.
- Use sport to facilitate inclusive dialogues between divided communities.
- Partner with sporting federations and clubs to expand outreach to marginalised groups.
- Document and evaluate the long-term impact of sport interventions on social cohesion.



Image: Football supporters. Source: Pexels

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ABOUT YORJA

The Youth Organisation for Research and Justice Advocacy (YORJA) is youth-led organisation committed to advancing justice, accountability, and inclusive governance across Africa. Established to amplify youth perspectives in peacebuilding and transitional justice, YORJA works at the intersection of research, policy advocacy, and community empowerment.

As a multidisciplinary organisation, YORJA engages in rigorous research, evidence-based advocacy, and capacity-building initiatives that support societies recovering from conflict, repression, or historical injustice. We collaborate with young people, survivors, civil society actors, and regional institutions to strengthen participation in transitional justice processes, promote human rights, and foster resilient, peaceful communities.

Through our publications, policy dialogues, and grassroots engagement, YORJA seeks to deepen public understanding of justice issues, expand youth leadership in continental and national processes, and contribute to sustainable peace and social transformation across Africa.

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