



## Politics of Grassroot Sports Diplomacy in National Cohesion

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**ABSTRACT:** The current international relations system is quite dynamic, forcing many state governments to turn to sports as the most efficient soft power tool. Sports is perceived as an integral element of national identity more so, for a country that internationally has a good reputation in sports. Values of sports diplomacy include competition, teamwork and fair play. This form of diplomacy has the potential to inform, engage and influence key actors, especially youth, emerging leaders and women and girls. However, sports, as a diplomatic tool has been always associated with mega-sport events, elite sports and professional athletes, neglecting sports at the grassroots level, where the organizations, interventions and stakeholders are considered irrelevant for state-led public diplomacy. Yet, grassroots sport-based interventions have the capability of strengthening people-to-people relations, hence contributing to national cohesion. By developing grassroots sports, the objective is to grow elite sports men and women who will eventually form teams that will compete favorably on the international arena. This paper hence discusses the politics of grassroots sports diplomacy towards national cohesion. It specifically addresses three objectives; First, it examines actors in grassroots sports diplomacy; Secondly, it Assesses tools used to promote grassroots sports and lastly it interrogates the discourse on grassroots sports diplomacy towards national cohesion. . A descriptive research design enabled primary and secondary data to be collected. The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The paper concludes that grassroots sport diplomacy creates cooperative relations among citizens hence addressing the national unity crisis that most countries are faced with. Recommendations in relation to grassroots sports diplomacy as a tool for national cohesion have also been included.

**KEY WORDS:** Diplomacy, Diplomatic tool, Grassroots sports, National cohesion

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Grassroots sports diplomacy is a new concept describing a traditional practice. It has the power to bring together people, nations, and communities through a shared love of physical pursuits. The power of grassroots sports is quite vital in this 21st century due to the prevalent broken relations among members of different communities.

Grassroots sports also known as sport for all, refers to all non-professional sport activities (European Commission Report, 2016). According to Tu (2009), grassroots sports are those that exist in citizens' daily life without high levels of organization, institutionalization or specialization; they can be traditional and non-traditional, depending on how old they are. As noted by Guo, et. al. (2010), the universality, accessibility and casual nature of grassroots sports generally attract high rates of participation and support. Recently, grassroots sports events have gained popularity internationally due to citizens' growing awareness of the importance of physical exercise.

It is perceived as a citizen-to-citizen engagement that takes place in the community and contributes to cooperative relations between community members especially this time when we are currently going through what seems like a national unity crisis. Grassroots sports events are attractive to participants because of their universality, accessibility, and casual nature. Through them, we are reminded that we have more in common hence the need to shun differences, and create more inclusion within a society. Engaging members in grassroots sports from across communities create mutual understanding and a sense of belonging and connectedness, therefore, bringing to an end the mentality of "us" versus "them".

Grassroots sports is often facilitated by small clubs and sports organizations whose staff mainly comprises of volunteers. The intention is to develop future players of future and also give something back to their community by allowing them to enjoy sports participation. Young people often organize themselves in order to engage in these sports. However, in other instances, parents, teachers and other local stakeholders may get together and arrange small league games for them. Physical education programs in institutions are also foundational in terms of developing an interest in sports and this provides a gateway to participation. Grassroots sports events usually have a greater need for community members' involvement and support due to less financial resources. This form of diplomacy increases and creates lasting dialogue and cultural understanding; This in turn facilitate transfer of knowledge



between the grassroots sport sector and relevant actors ,including other grassroots sports organizations, States, NGOs, civil society, or even individuals.

Grassroots events are unlikely to leave any direct physical legacy. Being small, they are usually organised more frequently and with greater community involvement and participation than large-scale events. Consequently, community contributions and involvement are more likely to result in community cohesion (Tzetziz et. al, 2014) and feel-good factors (Bull, Lovell, 2007). The success of any given grassroots event depends largely on grassroots actors' support (Gursoy et. al, 2006, 2017). Research shows that this support is critical for three reasons. First, support creates a friendly atmosphere for the event. Secondly, community involvement is likely to prolong the positive impacts and help foster positive legacies such as cooperative relations and finally, support mitigates community members' perceptions of the possible negative impacts of an event, such as the disruption of their local lifestyles (Gursoy et. al, 2006).

## 2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by the nationalist theory, which states that the process of nationalism induces nations to existence or self-determination. It involves national symbols such as flags and anthems and sports athletes are considered heroes who represent the country. In sports, nationalism is important because it brings out a sense of patriotism in nations, and gives states a sense of identity internationally.

## 3.0 ACTORS IN GRASSROOTS SPORTS DIPLOMACY

These actors are directly or indirectly involved in grassroots sports based on the roles they play. Data collected from the field outlined six main actors, namely the local government, community sports organizations, security agents, teachers from local institutions, Community health workers, community members.

### 3.1 Local government in grassroots sports

Sports activities cannot take place if there is no sports ground. It is the duty of the local government to identify and reserve an area for various sports activities. Besides, since sports arenas are public to the society, the local government must ensure the availability of law enforcement agents to maintain order for the safety of community members. This is done by regulating schedules, providing permits, and setting boundaries as to when, where, and under what circumstances sports can be played.

Besides, the local government can provide sponsorship of the local teams through funding. Teams are funded in order to participate in intercommunity; inter regional or even national sporting activities or competitions. The local government can also avail sportswear for the local teams. They can nurture the local talents through recognition or awards to the best team or participants. Provision of educational scholarships to bright and talented sportsmen and women towards the advancement or in support of their education is also an aspect of nurturing talents within the community.

### 3.2 Community Sports Organizations

These organizations are independent and they are involved in an array of activities. First, they are involved in sponsoring teams through funding activities such as funding for competitions. They also provide sportswear for teams. Sometimes, they organize sporting activities to enhance unity especially in situations of intercommunity conflicts. They use the inter community sports as a forum to educate the communities on the importance of interactions since such activities ease tension. During such moments, speakers can talk to the teams and community members present on various subjects related to peacebuilding, peacemaking and the importance of maintaining peace. According to these organizations, inter community grassroots sports have the ability of changing the behavior of young people by helping them break the vicious cycle of violence, hence leading to cohesion. They further informed that youths during the sports events share ideas and some youths talk to their peers to desist from acts of violence. The community sports organizations affirm that grassroots sports can be a useful entry point for social change since they represent a tool to mobilize empower and engage young people. Moreover, grassroots sports teach people about conflict resolution, fair play and communication leadership.

### 3.3 Law enforcement agents

They work closely with the local government to ensure there is order during grassroots inter sport activities. They also arrest any criminals who cause violence during the sporting activities.



### 3.4 Community health workers

They provide first aid services in case of injuries during the sporting events

### 3.5 Teachers in local institutions

Their task is mainly to train and nurture talents and this is done during Physical Education programmes. Physical education is important since it helps a child stay fit and healthy and boosts their self-esteem through enjoying games together so that they get exercise and learn how to play cooperatively. Everything from small words of encouragement from the coach to scoring a winning goal for their team can help build the child's confidence. Strong self-esteem is a vital character trait for children to build relations with others. In addition, physical education helps in stress reduction since exercise releases endorphins in the brain, which are key feel-good transmitters for the mind and body. It is also one of the best ways of forgetting about any external troubles. Stress is one factor that can make impact negatively on peaceful coexistence. Sport focuses children's mind on the task, allowing them to relax and forget about other worries. Physical education improves sleep because after using up all that energy running around the sports field during the day, their bodies and minds tire in the evening. Sleep is a vital part of maintaining their overall health and wellbeing and plays an important role in their mood and performance during the day. Moreover, sleep reduces stress and anxiety, improves their mood and boosts their ability to concentrate. This in turn makes them relate well with others. The children also have the ability of developing team and leadership skills. It should be noted that any successful team is made up of individuals who can work with others. Teamwork is a vital skill in the working world, and social cohesion and physical education is often the earliest exposure children have to it. The child is able to contribute to a team environment and see first-hand how important it is to succeed. As they develop, they might also be exposed to a leadership position, such as the team captain. Decision-making is key to being a good leader. Sports are an excellent channel for improving this skill, with decisions having to be made and communicated regularly to other team members, hence improving cohesion. Lastly, physical education instills patience, discipline and perseverance. Failure is an undervalued part of sport. It takes perseverance and hard work to succeed in life, and sport is one of the best channels to display these virtues. The simplistic nature of sport, where there are identifiable winners and losers, leads to natural highs and lows, something that children need to be prepared for later in life. Sport is a great way to display how hard work pays. Perseverance and a never-give-up attitude is needed to succeed in life and promote unity. Through sports, the child will learn the benefits of working hard to achieve their goals.

Some institutions have sports departments and have in place a student-sports leadership council. The council acts as sports ambassadors, who visit institutions within their locality in order to teach life skills and ultimately foster important relationships with the youth in the community

### 3.6 Community members

According to the study, it is from this group of actors that sportsmen and women are drawn. They also help in nurturing the talent through various channels. First, without permission and moral support from parents, the children will not participate in the grassroots sports. They give them moral support by giving encouraging comments, consoling them in their low moments, especially after losses during intercommunity competition. Some even accompany their children to the sportsground to watch them play and cheer them. In case of injuries while playing, they ensure the children get medical attention. They also counsel their children so that they do not find themselves on the wrong side of the law.

Community members are also active in cheering their teams since a win for the team is considered a win for the entire community, leading to recognition and prestige for the community. Recognition allows other community members to identify a community with sports, especially if there is prestige tied to it since this community is held in high esteem. Community members sometimes come together and raise funds to purchase sportswear for the grassroots teams, award participants or even sponsor the teams to participate in either intercommunity, inter regional or even national sports activities. In case a team member is harassed or dismissed unfairly from the sport, the community members always come to the defense of their community participant. They also provide counsel and tips to participants of various grassroots sports on how to win.

## 4.0 TOOLS FOR THE PROMOTION OF GRASSROOTS SPORTS

Many grassroots sports teams and participants fail to be recognized nationally and even internationally due to lack of promotion tools. However, promotion of such events can be done by engaging tools such as social media; use of local media, a catchy event



name; event posters; influencers; an event website or page, a simple but catchy hashtag can do this, intercommunity contests, teaser contests and sponsors.

#### 4.1 Social media

Promotional campaigns on the main social media sites will expose a community's grassroots sports event to a broad audience. Social media is a platform in which grassroots teams can create awareness. They can post results, highlights, promote upcoming events, share sports, and program successes. The teams can also let people know when they are raising money for charitable events.

Social media is hence changing the way grassroots teams interact with each other, from live-tweeting games, creating snarky memes and cheerleading. Spectators are no longer simply watching sports, and fans can often get news, insights and commentary straight from the source. The instantaneous, intimate and interactive nature of social and mobile technologies make them perfect platforms to promote grassroots sports.

#### 4.2 Local media

The local media may not be able to attend every event, but can air information and share stories about the team or events. This can draw great attention of the audience.

#### 4.3 A catchy event name

When organizing a grassroots event, your event promotion should begin with the event name since this is the first interaction potential participants will have with your event. You need to choose a name that is both catchy and gives a hint of what your event is about. This therefore calls for brainstorming with all team members or sponsors to come up with a list of potential names and should be kept simple.

#### 4.4 Use of event posters

Posters are still among the most effective ways of advertising grass roots sports events since they are cheaper than many other forms of printed adverts. In addition, due to their striking visual nature, posters leave a lasting impression and they will continue promoting the event as long as they are not tampered with. The key is to place posters in the right spots to attract relevant audience, such as stadiums, playgrounds or any public place that will attract the attention of the public.

#### 4.5 Influencers

.For a grassroots sports event, influencers can be local players, coaches, sport reporters, and even notable fans. The role of influencers is to boost your reach to the national and even international audience. They need to have accurate information and can reach the grassroots team quickly for clarification.

#### 4.6 An event website or page

It is the main platform to promote the event and interact with the team's audience .It also allows one to post customized advertisements on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

#### 4.7 A simple catchy hashtag

Hashtags create buzz and make it easier to track conversations about the event. They must be sports-related hashtags like: #sports

#### 4.8 Intercommunity contests

In order to boost attendance and get people discussing your event, the team or sponsor can give away branded merchandise, such as sportswear, water bottles, fitness bands, etc. with the event logo on them.

#### 4.9 Posting teaser content

This tool builds anticipation and some of the content can include a photograph of the grassroots team, interview with key participants. This can be posted on any convenient social media platform. The local media can also help in airing the content.

#### 4.10 Independent promotion by sponsors.

Sponsors can also run promotional campaigns to popularize the event before the main day. Typical sponsors are actually very good at creating a buzz around events and promoting their own brand. Sponsors can be effective when promoting sports events. They can also decide to create their own independent promotion strategy.



## 5.0 DISCOURSE ON GRASSROOTS SPORTS DIPLOMACY AND NATIONAL COHESION

National cohesion is increasingly present and prioritized on the political agenda of many countries and is considered the 'glue' that binds communities together. Due to its interactive nature and universality, sports has the capability of fostering cohesion globally. According to findings of this study, grassroots sports can unite communities and have the ability to break racial barriers. In communities that are deeply polarized, through grassroots sports, young people can remain focused, engage in productive activities and boost their self-esteem. This in turn leads to a reduction in the involvement of harmful social influences especially with the ever-increasing rates of unemployment in most countries in the world. Grassroots sports have been utilized by some countries such as Ivory Coast and Liberia to forge peace and development in their countries.

Grassroots sports contribute to many of the factors which build national cohesion, such as better physical and mental health, high educational attainment, reducing crime and antisocial behaviour, creating better employment opportunities and earning potential, and ensuring a fit and healthy workforce. Generally, social exclusion emerges from unequal opportunities and existing inequalities in societies; this can be addressed through grassroots sports. This in turn leads to a safe environment, and gives members an opportunity to develop skill and demonstrate competence, something lacking in the lives of those who are socially excluded. Hence, grassroots sports create hope for the future.

At the grassroots level, sports create an environment in which people can come together in order to work towards the same goal, show respect for others and share space and equipment. All these aspects are crucial to cohesion. For instance, in South Africa, the programme 'bridging divides' uses basketball at the grassroots level to bring children and communities together. An assessment of the programme shows that the majority of participants expressed fewer racial stereotypes and less racism compared to children who were not part of the programme. Many participants were in favour of racial integration and further inter-racial socialisation than other children.

Grassroots sports being a non-verbal means of communication engages participants in collective experience through direct physical contact hence, transcending class divisions.

Grassroots sports provide a positive image of the nation to the international community. For instance, intercommunity sports promotes inter community interactions hence resolving the underlying conflicts. As a result, this positively contributes to strengthening national pride and forming a cohesive national identity. For example, during the civil conflict in Liberia, football tournaments were considered the only occasions that produced a sense of national unity, since football is considered a common cultural property, which cannot be spoiled by war. They are also considered as a vehicle for tolerance and a means of raising awareness and lessening the cultural divide. Through these sports, key societal issues can be addressed. Grassroots participants can put on sportswear that promotes fairness and condemns an injustice in the society such as; life is sacred, Women power. Stop social injustices, and so on. They are therefore an excellent common denominator for tackling cultural barriers in societies since even those with disabilities are given an opportunity to participate. The gender issue is also addressed because no gender is marginalized from participating in sports.

Nevertheless, critiques are of the opinion that grassroots sports do not contribute to national cohesion since this is a small-scale event, which only involves a limited number of a country's citizens; therefore, its impact cannot be felt nationally. Moreover, the main objective of these sports is leisure. Critiques are also of the view that certain utterances made during such events cannot encourage cohesion. Offensive utterances such as the use of abusive and demeaning language encourages divisions among community members. There are instances when referees of certain sports such as football make unfair and biased decisions against teams. They fail to take into account the impact of such actions. Without interventions from stakeholders, this can create hatred and resentment among team members and community members. If not checked, divisions might arise hence, establishing a negative implication on national cohesion.

Clashes do arise on sports fields. A participant can intentionally injure the opponent in order to stop or deny a win. Supporters of each team normally come to the defense of their participants. Failure to address such an issue in an amicable manner may lead to divisions, thereby, inhibiting cohesion. Besides, selfish behavior among sportsmen and women is a hindrance to cohesion. Sports is an interactive activity that creates cooperative relations. However, when sportsmen and women isolate themselves, refusing to exchange ideas, appreciating opponents as partners and not enemies, cohesion becomes quite elusive.



## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Grassroots sports is a powerful tool for social integration and inclusion; it has the power to unite people in challenging times, and as such, foreign policymakers and thinkers should use grassroots sports as a policy for cohesion around the world.

Diplomatic actions should not only pay attention to the elite sports which is evident when nations are seen marching together at Olympic Games and headlines worldwide are obsessed with “ping pong diplomacy”. However, diplomatic gestures, people-to-people dialogue, partnerships and cross-border exchanges that happen in mass participation sports at the grassroots every week, away from the media spotlight should be given much focus. Grassroots sports encompasses many people regardless of their gender, age, physical ability and ethnic background, yet it is an aspect of sport that is often overlooked. There are still barriers to participation in some countries, yet, this is where the exchange of ideas and good practices among grassroots sports organizations across local, national and international borders can be powerful. The soft power of these exchanges opens more doors for people to participate and ultimately lead to more inclusion in sports and physical activity, while promoting cohesion and wider policy objectives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Grassroots sports diplomacy aims at increasing or creating lasting dialogue and cultural understanding. In addition, it facilitates the transfer of knowledge between the grassroots sport sector and relevant actors; hence standing out as the best diplomatic tool towards a cohesive nation. It is hence recommended that governments embrace this tool in the realization of a peaceful and cohesive world order.

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