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Introduction to Sports Diplomacy: From Concept to Practice

A Webinar Co-hosted by Josoor Institute, UNESCO, the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy

Josoor Institute jointly hosted a webinar exploring the nexus between the sporting and diplomatic realms with the UNESCO office for the Gulf States and Yemen, the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy and Generation Amazing on 14 October 2020. *Introduction to Sports Diplomacy: From Concept to Practice* was a platform for sharing a global perspective on how to exploit the nexus to advance universal principles such as gender equality, inclusion and non-discrimination, the 2030 Agenda and national goals.

Attended by more than 240 viewers from around from the world, and with a depth of global representation, the webinar featured high-level speakers, heads of states, ministers, diplomats and sports figures. Discussions recognised the role and value of sports diplomacy and how it is used around the world, with speakers giving in-depth insights into the power of sport in developing nations, and in nation branding.

Dr. Simon Rofe, inaugural director of the Global Diplomacy Masters programme at the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy, SOAS, University of London, moderated Session 1, comprising a high-level panel sharing their expertise and experience in implementing sports diplomacy principles.

Opening the webinar, **His Excellency Hassan Al-Thawadi, Secretary-General of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy**, noted that the SC's vision is for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™ to be acknowledged as the most transformative sporting event in modern history, with its overarching and ultimate legacy being people-to-people diplomacy. Ensuring that the event transforms how the region and its people are viewed and truly enhances cultural understanding is the driving force behind everything Qatar has committed to.

Qatar is committed to using football as a tool of youth development and community cohesion through Generation Amazing, harnessing the World Cup as a catalyst for economic opportunity and a platform for innovation. The SC is providing the necessary resources to develop the human capital required to power a thriving sports events and hospitality industry in the region through Josoor Institute.

He considered the World Cup 2022, particularly at this juncture in history and because of its location, as a critical antidote to the continuing trends of populism and division. Qatar wants to deepen understanding and share knowledge and best practices while using global collaboration to maximize the power of sports to improve lives. While sports is part of the fabric in the highest levels of government, its transformative potential is still, in his opinion, underestimated and underutilized, a challenge to be rectified.

UNESCO Assistant Director-General for the Social and Human Sciences, Gabriela Ramos, pointed to opportunities to use sports to help build more resilient societies that would not be as vulnerable as they are in the current contexts. The IMF's most recent economic outlook confirms the enormous toll of COVID-19 is without precedent. The impact on the sports sector has also been high and that makes 2022 important. There is a responsibility to put sports higher on the agenda and invest in sports not only as a tool for bringing societies closer but also as a tool for recovery. Massive



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fiscal packages should also have sports at the centre and invest in sports facilities, the athletes, coaches and the systems for the promotion of sports and diplomacy.

At the same time, sports should be an antidote for the current pandemic of hate speech and discrimination that has been so patent during COVID-19. UNESCO is an institution called to foster investment in sports and cooperation in sports and a strong agenda to build a common good for humanity. There are important opportunities to make sports count in the current situation and post-COVID recovery.

During the keynote talk, **His Excellency Hamad Bin Abdulaziz Al-Kuwari, Minister of State, and President of Qatar National Library**, explored the strong links between cultural diplomacy and sports in a fast-changing world. He noted Qatar's progress in achieving a high status for sports along with the advancement of other sectors and Josoor Institute as a building block for individuals and societies alike.

He stressed the strategic role of cultural diplomacy in bringing peace among people. Thanks to its universal appeal, sports can quickly contribute to the rapprochement between people. Qatar presents a unique model of cultural diplomacy, one that has transformed sports into an ideal means for rapprochement between nations. An example is a recent project in Rwanda: the SC in cooperation with Ministry of Culture and Sports in Qatar built a stadium in Rwanda, which can serve as a model of cultural and sports diplomacy.

HE Mamadou Tangara, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Gambia, spoke on the importance of sports and cultural diplomacy and education work as drivers for social development when faced with populism and xenophobia. Some great sportsmen have done more than diplomats, enabling their countries to have far reach.

More emphasis should be put on cultural and sports diplomacy because it is a people-to-people diplomacy. Sports diplomacy has recorded many successes, regionally, internationally and internationally. In 2022, Qatar will become the capital of the world because everybody will focus on Qatar and it is an opportunity to promote its culture. He referred to Qatar as a force to be reckoned with in terms of diplomacy, at the UN level and in the international arena in resolving some very critical crises and adding to that sports and culture, it will bring people together.

HE Ahmed Isse Awad, Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic of Somalia, said the value of sports for society is immense. In the case of Somalia, the country has been depressed for a long time and its health has been measured by the absence of sports. Now it is mushrooming in all places and people are going back to stadiums, a sign that Somalia is getting healthier. Sports is becoming an important weapon even for defeating violent extremism and terrorism, and making its communities interconnected.

In Mogadishu and any corner of Somalia, young people carry the jerseys of Neymar, Akram Afif, Messi, Ibrahimovitch. Though never exposed to the outside world, that shows the value of sports – connecting people. In Somalia's case, it is even more so for domestic purposes, for peace and reconciliation and defeating terrorism and extremism. For a society that is mostly young but who lack educational and career opportunities and jobs, they are finding a solace in sports.

That was followed by *Soft Power, Nation Branding and Sports Diplomacy* by **Simon Anholt, National Branding Expert**, who recently published *The Good Country Index*. He noted that it's a recent and



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uncommon phenomenon to talk about hosting a major sports events in terms of its potential to do good for others especially those less privileged. He pointed to the Nation Brands Index, a survey that has shown a major event is among the few actions that can have an impact on the country's overall image.

He argued that purely hosting a successful event does not in itself brand a country or improve its image because the people who attend expect them to be well-managed. The event opens a dialogue with the world and what matters is how you use the event to prove things about your country during that brief period when the world is paying attention. It is about starting an action-based dialogue with the world as a first step, proving and demonstrating not showcasing what you are doing to make the world a better place. All the evidence shows this is what will result in an improved image.

Q2022 will be one of the first major sporting events that really show how it can have an impact in terms of making the world a better place and in turn improving the host country's image.

Nabeel Goheer, Deputy Secretary General of the Commonwealth, speaking on *The Commonwealth Sport Diplomacy Project*, said that sports has a universal appeal with its own language. Respect and understanding contribute to peace. The Commonwealth engages in sports diplomacy because sports is an established way of projecting soft power by nation states. For a value-based organization like the Commonwealth it is smart diplomacy. The Commonwealth is in the business of building sustainable peace and is aware sports promotes respect and understanding, fundamental Commonwealth values along with tolerance.

To have a sustainable impact, the Commonwealth uses a systemic, systematic manner with institutions and organisations within the Commonwealth and Secretariat that take the mission forward. They work at different levels, the global level and the pan-Commonwealth level, with the Commonwealth Games held every four years, and at country level, helping member states develop policies and frameworks and have also initiated projects that promote interfaith harmony. The Commonwealth is a very small player but with a very big impact.

Session 2 focused on global practices in sports diplomacy and brought in different country perspectives. Moderated by **Professor Simon Chadwick, Director of the Eurasian Sport Emlyon Business School (Paris and Shanghai)**, the session kicked off with **HE Felix Ulloa, Vice President, El Salvador**, speaking on *Sports and Gang Violence Reduction in El Salvador* and the role of sports in combatting crime and building social cohesion.

The country's leadership who took office in 2019 have established plans to use sports as a tool to intervene in territories taken by gangs. El Salvador is perceived as a violent country and its leaders are trying to change that. Sports is an important tool to create a new image of the country abroad and improve the life of society as a whole, using sports as a tool for development. Looking to international frameworks, and the Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030, the country uses sports diplomacy to bring harmony and peace to communities and promote the country's athletes in international competitions, making sports diplomacy part of the general plan of the new government.

Argentina a Nation of Sports Diplomacy by **Mattias Lammens, Minister of Sports and Tourism, Argentina**, pointed out that sports works as a cohesive element for countries at a domestic level, allowing them to overcome political, geographical and cultural differences, and to promote the sentiment of belonging to a nation. At an international level, although competitions exist, they are within a friendly, relaxed environment in which respect towards the rules of the game and the opponent are fundamental.



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The development of sports and sports events is an element of international standardization that creates a common language that is widely accepted. It results in an immediate space for coexistence. With its long history and tradition in sports, Argentina has a key role on the American continent, and sports can be one of the best instruments to improve its international positioning. Players like Messi, Maradona and Gabriella Sabatini are true ambassadors for Argentina. As a minister, he has initiated a path for sports to be an instrument for social change and inclusion.

Kenya, Where Sport Reigns as a Tool for Soft Power was presented by **Amina Mohamed, Minister for Sports and Culture, Kenya**. Kenya's latest sports diplomacy strategy 2018-2022 affirms that sports is an integral part of Kenya's foreign policy under the cultural diplomacy pillar.

Countries have always used the Olympic Games – which chooses competition as an instrument for global cohesion - as a platform to send strong peaceful diplomatic messages. Now this is less common because nations have developed stronger institutions to harness bilateral and multilateral relations. The formation and fortification of official sports governing bodies has deepened sports diplomacy by bringing nations together around competitive sports. Today these organizations have become co-partners with states and non-state actors and act as avenues of mutual cooperation and dialogue, harnessing a country's international presence. Sports diplomacy has also become more institutionalized in Kenya, and UNESCO is taking a leading role in bringing in ministers of sports through fora such as MINEPS. Kenya has successfully used sports to create cohesion within the country and with countries in the subregion and hosts international sporting events to showcase cultural heritage and boost tourism while enhancing pride. Kenya has also created a hub for attitude training and athletes come from all over the world.

In his address on *Caribbean Sports Diplomacy*, **HE Paul Chett Greene, Foreign Minister Antigua and Barbuda**, explained that while sports diplomacy is underrated, it is a powerful tool. The relationship between the UN and international sporting bodies is a clear indication of the soft power of sports within the construct of global relations. By its very appeal, sports is a very potent force in several areas; the economic side, social aspect as well as social cohesion. Sports is an important tool for nations to build global peace. In the Caribbean, athletes like Usain Bolt enjoy a level of iconic reverence to the extent that diplomacy for Caribbean nations is often tied to sports. Hosting sporting and other events such as conferences in niche sporting areas like nutrition etc., are also very important when considering sports as a tool for diplomacy.

He noted the economic losses that come from cancellation of major events during the pandemic and expressed the hope sports could return to its rightful place as a powerful global tool after the pandemic. He encouraged an even stronger build out of a platform to support sports diplomacy in the face of the pandemic while the coarsening of rhetoric shows a need for even more sports diplomacy to bring a degree of stability to some regions and to global peace and security.

Karina LeBlanc, retired Canadian Olympic soccer player and UNICEF Ambassador, is Head of Women's Football at CONCACAF, where her role is to show that football can change lives. It is important for her to help be a voice for the power of football especially for girls and women. She shared a very personal perspective and spoke about the benefits of playing professionally. With most youth playing recreationally, CONCACAF implements grassroots programmes to give girls access to the game, break stigmas about the game, and build skills such as leadership skills, with chances to be surrounded by likeminded people who aspire to success. She concluded that one of the big priorities for women in sport was to keep having the conversation and giving them opportunities. Conversations



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with organisations like Generation Amazing were important to emphasise that sports is the answer to breaking barriers, for girls and boys. It's also about giving women the capacity and learning to help grow the game.

Rounding off the webinar, **Tim Cahill, all-time leading goal scorer for Australia and Qatar 2022 Ambassador**, said one of the important opportunities for him when growing up was to travel overseas and he wants the youth to realise they can have the same opportunity. To be a part of that in Qatar and having a relationship with the country of over a decade, Generation Amazing is an opportunity to teach fundamental skills and inspire youth. The role of sportsmen and women is to be ambassadors to lay the foundations. He has authored books for children as a result of his grassroots work in Australia. His dream has been to give kids the opportunity to take part and be included, showing and teaching equality and other main attributes. Therefore, his job as a father is to be a mentor to his own children but also to every child he can reach all around the world, through his books, grassroots programmes, and the game of football.

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