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## Original Research

## Building Bridges in the Mediterranean: Circular Cooperation and Sport for Development and Peace for Refugees in Italy

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the utility of circular cooperation for the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) field. Circular cooperation is a *modus operandi* used to address the Central Mediterranean refugee crises. This methodology is currently employed between Sicily, The Gambia, Senegal, and Mali. It relies on rehabilitating asylum-seekers crossing the Mediterranean, to then provide training towards a return to their country of origin. Returnees then establish start-ups that are functional in addressing the needs of their community of origin, while keeping a cyclical supportive partnership with their country of departure. In doing so, returning migrants can tap into the resources of the host country while also autonomously leading developmental efforts in their original community, by transferring their acquired skills from the country of relocation.

Circular cooperation is a vehicle for SDP to cooperate with other developmental fields, ensure the autonomy of initiatives and meaningfully address the necessities of user groups. The adoption of circular cooperation in SDP directly safeguards and improves the livelihood of forcibly migrating populations. Moreover, the adoption of a circular cooperation methodology could challenge neocolonial tendencies in SDP.

### Building Bridges in the Mediterranean: Circular Cooperation and Sport for Development and Peace for Refugees in Italy

The Central Mediterranean Route is considered one of the most dangerous routes that asylum-seekers undertake to reach Europe. The migratory route involves irregularly

crossing the desert to reach either Libya or Tunisia, then boarding makeshift boats to attempt to land into Italian shores. Boats mainly aim to reach Sicily, the southernmost Italian region. Since 2014, around 19,500 people have been reported dead or missing at sea while undertaking the crossing (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2023a). Many other atrocities concerning the land route remain numerically unaccounted for (UNHCR, 2018). The risks that asylum-seekers encounter are multifaceted. First, these relate to terrestrial and climatic conditions, such as traveling not only across the desert and sea but also across mountains and rivers, especially in winter, with very few resources. Second, there are human traffickers who force asylum-seekers to undertake the journey due to their own interests. Third, asylum-seekers risk being abused by state authorities across Africa and Europe. Survivors have reported different forms of abuse, such as kidnapping and physical torture, sexual abuse, and forced starvation, with the frequent intent of extortion (McMahon & Sigona, 2018; UNHCR, 2018).

Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) currently operate within the Northern African states, the Mediterranean Sea and Sicily, directly addressing the situation (Cusumano, 2018), as a direct response to minimize deaths (Esperti, 2020). On land, several organizations operate within refugee camps or interested areas, targeting different aspects of refugee well-being through different interventions. Central to these differing operations is the necessity to provide safer options for border-crossing to the asylum-seeking populations.

Within this multiplicity of interventions, sport is being used by various organizations to contribute to achieving

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broader goals of development (see Associazione Don Bosco 2000, nd; Liberi Nantes, nd). Namely, these NGOs are primarily addressing the necessity of providing safety and well-being, along with many interrelated global goals, such as reducing inequalities, promoting justice and peace, and reducing hunger (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The value of sport is harnessed in an attempt to address these developmental trajectories, aligning with the concept of ‘Sport for Development and Peace’ (SDP) (Kidd, 2008).

SDP ranges from being a movement to a proper occupational environment, with an ongoing professionalization of the sector continuously occurring across the globe, especially within NGOs and academic settings (Kidd, 2008; McSweeney et al, 2021). SDP is defined as “the intentional use of sport and physical activity as a tool to contribute to the development and peace goals, including the Commonwealth goals of democracy and development” (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2015, p. v).

The multidisciplinary of SDP research represents both a challenge and an advantage (Massey & Whitley, 2018). On one hand, finding a common ground is problematic when many disciplinary lenses are involved, thus generating exceptionally valid but isolated findings (Massey & Whitley, 2018; Whitley et al, 2022). On the other hand, such multidisciplinary means that the SDP sector can tap relevantly into numerous fields of inquiry (Massey & Whitley, 2018; Giulianotti et al, 2019). Scholars argue that SDP is now a distinct field of international development, working within familiar networks and echo chambers that may deter the growth of the field (Giulianotti et al, 2019; Whitley et al, 2022). Innovations in SDP are thus necessary to advance the field, especially when recognized that innovations are shaped by external stakeholders and intraorganizational conditions (Svensson & Hambrick, 2019; Svensson & Mahoney, 2020). Therefore, scholars are advocating for an outward-looking approach, that goes beyond narrow SDP networks, but includes new stakeholders, and engagement with the wider development sector (Giulianotti et al, 2019).

Following such an approach, this contribution provides insights to advance forward knowledge and practice in SDP, through a collaborative effort between the academic and organizational sectors. It combines the theoretical expertise of the academic author with the practical knowledge of the organization in the field, to co-propose a direction for the SDP sector working with refugee populations. First, it presents an under-explored SDP scenario, through the presentation of contextually unique characteristics of Mediterranean forced migration. As a border zone, with processes involving cooperation between Global North and South, it is a situation and model that can

inform the debate surrounding North-South relationships in SDP. Second, it connects SDP practices with developmental practices in the agricultural sector, innovating the field through multidisciplinary contribution (Whitley et al, 2022). It confronts SDP with the agricultural sector, showing what can be learned from the field and the successful pairing of work and leisure for the development sector. Lastly, it combines the theoretical expertise of the academic author with the practical knowledge of the actors in the field, to co-propose a direction for the SDP sector working with refugee populations. It does so by proposing a work methodology, circular cooperation, that challenges neocolonial tendencies in SDP.

This paper is structured as follows. First, it explains the concept of ‘circular cooperation’ as practiced by Associazione Don Bosco 2000 in Sicily, The Gambia, Senegal, and Mali, and examines the topic through a transdisciplinary developmental perspective. Second, it critically addresses the value of football for the interested population of Central Mediterranean asylum-seekers. Third, in bringing together the two preceding sections, the paper proposes how SDP initiatives intersect with the methodology of circular cooperation. Finally, it concludes by addressing the effectiveness of the circular cooperation model in preventing dangerous crossings in the Mediterranean, thus the potential of SDP initiatives to generate outstanding livelihood outcomes for the interested population through innovative, multidisciplinary, and intersectoral cooperation.

### **Circular Cooperation and Achieving Livelihood**

This section defines and explains circular cooperation, as theorized and operationalized by Associazione Don Bosco 2000.

Based in Sicily, Associazione Don Bosco 2000 was founded in 1998 with the objective to “promote the integral formation of man by paying particular attention to young people and to the emergencies of our time” (AssociazioneDon Bosco 2000, 2022). Their work, in relation to Central Mediterranean refugees, concerns specific initiatives to provide legal assistance, rehabilitative and psychological support, health-related services, and education, to support their resettlement. Within this offer, Associazione Don Bosco 2000 promotes diverse sport activities aimed to facilitate the provision of these diverse services. Associazione Don Bosco 2000 provides football-based activities with community-based youth teams, a multi-ethnic men’s team and a women’s team. In the past, missionaries following the Salesian philosophy of Don Giovanni Bosco, have provided football for children in

war-torn Liberia, in an attempt to provide a different career pathway to the militia, offering a social alternative to violence and criminal practices (Armstrong, 2004; Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2011).

The concept of circular cooperation is central to this contribution. Circular cooperation is rooted in the notion of circular migration. Circular migration, at its core, can be defined as “the process of leaving and then returning to one’s place of origin” (Newland, 2009, p.6), often related to employment, livelihood, and life-cycles (Newland, 2009). The concept overlaps with the ultimate goal of seeking refuge: receiving protection until you are able to return safely (Crisp, 2000). Indeed, for successful returns to happen, individuals need to be economically and psychologically ready, something that needs to be fostered and prepared during their time under refuge (Crisp, 2000; Carr, 2014). Moreover, return does not necessarily mean the end of the migration of an individual (Carr, 2014).

Instead, within circular cooperation, circularity presumes the continuous movement of resources between the North and South. Circular migrants are first hosted by the NGO, after being rescued from the Mediterranean. Here they are provided with psychological and legal support, to properly settle in the Italian system. After this initial support they are provided with education, training, and leisure to facilitate their inclusion in the local community. The objective of the NGO is to enable the individual to find a job and be self-sufficient during their stay. Ultimately, once it is safe to do so and if the former refugee decides to go back home, the NGO provides further training and support towards repatriation. Refugees are assisted in setting up start-up activities that directly address the needs of the community of origin. For example, they set up vegetable gardens and chicken coops. Leading these initiatives, circular migrants provide work opportunities and means of sustainment for their communities. They then cyclically return to Sicily, to continue their training and share empirical knowledge with the NGOs, cooperating in identifying further elements of positive development for their communities of origin. The concept of circular cooperation thus changes the subject of the movement from a ‘migrant’ to a ‘co-operator’. La Cara & Sella (2022), define the circular co-operator as a Central Mediterranean migrant who, after being welcomed in the reception centre in Sicily, decides to go back to their own country of origin. They are being informed of and trained on development opportunities, to create start-up activities that generate economic growth in their community of origin, thus providing an alternative to forced migration. They are then allowed to cyclically come back to Italy, to continue training and report processes and outcomes, therefore contributing to better provision and circulation of

best practices (La Cara & Sella, 2022).

For example, Alex<sup>1</sup> is a current circular co-operator of Associazione Don Bosco 2000. Alex was rescued in the Mediterranean in 2016, and was then transferred to the reception centre of Aidone, where Associazione Don Bosco 2000 operates. In 2018, Alex was able to return to his home country for the first time and reunite with his family. With the help of Associazione Don Bosco 2000, he had set up a farm in the village, to feed the community and provide jobs. He now cyclically comes back to Italy, where he receives training and support for the ongoing care of the farm.

This project has been developed by co-operators since 2016, when the first returnee returned to his village of origin in Senegal. There, the former asylum-seeker became a mediator for Associazione Don Bosco 2000 and the local representatives of their Senegalese village of origin, who eventually co-operated to create three agricultural start-ups in three under-resourced villages, directly addressing hunger within the area. Two years later, the project was repeated in the Gambia, where further vegetable gardens are created. Currently, the same agricultural start-ups are under development in Mali.

It is possible, in this case, to see how the success of circular cooperation intersects deeply with the field of agriculture. The domains of agriculture and development are profoundly interconnected, with the existence of an ‘agriculture for development’ (AFD) movement since the early 1970s (Byerlee et al, 2009), in similar fashion to SDP. Indeed, agriculture has the power to trigger economic growth, reduce poverty, provide food security, and address environmental issues (Byerlee et al, 2009). Nonetheless, while SDP has seen steady growth over the years (Schulenkorf et al, 2016; Suzuki, 2018), researchers have argued for an underutilization of agriculture to harness development, in contrast with ongoing processes of urbanization (Byerlee et al, 2009). The potential of AFD in sub-Saharan Africa is currently unrealized, yet provides a clear direction for reducing poverty and ensuring food security (Conceição et al, 2016). Indeed, poverty reduction has proven to be more effective through increased productivity in agricultural and rural areas rather than transformative urbanization of such areas (Christiaensen & Todo, 2014; De Janvry & Sadoulet, 2020).

There is much overlap and complementarity between what aspects of development are addressed by SDP and AFD. AFD literature focuses mostly on the economic aspects of development, due to the ability to directly address hunger and poverty. Among the thematic areas of SDP commonly identified, hunger and poverty are connected to the ‘Sport

and Livelihoods' thematic areas, where financial independence and its associated benefits play a key role (Schulenkorf et al, 2016; Svensson & Woods, 2017). Nonetheless, research on SDP and livelihoods is limited (Schulenkorf et al, 2016; Schulenkorf, 2017), even if more studies have been conducted in recent years (see McSweeney et al, 2020). Particularly, few studies have directly analyzed SDP programs with an intended outcome of increasing employability (Whitley et al, 2017; Warner et al, 2020). The role of sport towards migrant resettlement has been questioned, as acculturation through sport does not necessarily lead to increased livelihood (Smart et al, 2020).

Therefore, we would like to frame the discussion within the 'Livelihoods' theme. The reason lies in the enabling nature that safety possesses for wider discussions on livelihoods, as a basic need to achieve "job skills, training, employability, rehabilitation and the creation of social enterprises" (Schulenkorf et al, 2016, p.34).

Circular cooperation in AFD addresses all the elements mentioned above by Schulenkorf and colleagues (2016). As seen in the work of Associazione Don Bosco 2000, asylum-seekers are rehabilitated in Sicily after their journey. Then, they are provided with training that will enhance their job skills and employability, wherever they desire it to be (within Sicily or back to their home country). Once they are ready and willing to go back, they create agricultural start-ups, further contributing to their own livelihoods and the livelihood of their community.

### The Football Dream – Realization of the Self

We now present the value of football for forced migrants in the Mediterranean. While exceptions occur, for many male refugees in Sicily football represents a dream, and has been a key factor in choosing to flee towards Europe. As expressed by a refugee rescued by Associazione Don Bosco 2000: "That's why I came in Europe, because there are opportunities about football. I start well here, I am doing my best. [...] That's my dream." (Musa, 19, The Gambia)

Here we see how the motivations to flee intersect with the personal interest and the *opportunities* that are found in Europe. In order to grab these opportunities, the refugee has undertaken the Central Mediterranean Route, risking his life. The opportunity here is represented by the level of development that football has reached in Europe, and the dream to become a footballer within this scenario (Esson, 2015).

The problem that this posits is properly explained by the extensive research conducted by Darby et al. (2022) on

football in Africa. Drivers of the football dream can be seen in a desire for upward social mobility in a process of 'becoming a somebody', which is perceived to be better achieved through migration (Darby et al, 2022). Indeed, rescued refugees who also play for the local team of the reception centre, indicate the support of fans as one of the most positive elements associated with football. Albeit the small size of the town and the developmental nature of the team, the warmth of the local citizens is an element of fandom that feeds into a process of self-realization and perceived inclusion:

*[Football] It gave me a lot. Like the fans... every time I go outside, they tell me "how are you? Let's take a picture!". It is a beautiful thing. [...] Yes, I am an idol for children (laughs). Every time I go outside they ask me to take a picture (Samba, 21, The Gambia)*

Many young boys focus on their football career in spite of formal education. They perceive traditional education as an obstacle to their football career. While the arguments made by young refugees seem to be counter-developmental, contextually it must be noted that football represents to them a matter of identity, and Europe is perceived as a scenario where their identities can be realized, fulfilled, and recognized (Esson, 2015). This realization positively affects their well-being, as they undertake the journey to fulfil their dreams, providing them with a strong motivation to move forward. Nonetheless, football is a closed system, and for many that achieve this dream and its associated realization, there are many more who are left behind in a phase of involuntary immobility and very little resources (Agergaard & Ungruhe, 2016; Darby et al, 2022).

Development is perceived by African males as freedom through spatial mobility (Esson, 2013, 2015). Such an idea of development is reinforced by the frequent portrayal of successful African footballers in the media, where the depiction of their European success reinforces the necessity of mobility to achieve the realization of the self (Ungruhe & Esson, 2017).

Moreover, there is little evidence that supports the efficacy of SDP in Africa (Langer, 2015). The caution that such absence implies, combined with the effects that football has in fostering irregular migration, suggests that football may not be the best sport for SDP agencies to utilize in Africa.

Yet, the fact that football represents a dream for many young boys in the continent cannot be ignored, especially considering the frequently advocated necessity to include user-group voices in SDP provision (Collison & Marchesseault, 2018). The application of football for SDP

In Africa should therefore be informed by the underlying reasons for young African males to take part in the sport. Where the aim is safeguarding, football should be tailored and framed within the premises that its 'value' can be used for the development of livelihoods.

### **Proposing Circular Cooperation in Sport for Development and Peace**

In this section, we bring forward the use of circular cooperation in SDP. Bringing together the case of Associazione Don Bosco 2000 and the value of football for forced migrants in Sicily, we demonstrate the use of circular cooperation to provide a way for football to be a vehicle of development, fully harnessing the meaning that the sport has for young people in the African continent.

### **Agriculture for Development and Circular Cooperation**

As mentioned in the earlier section, agriculture for development and circular cooperation are particularly apt for achieving livelihood for returning refugees and their communities. Agriculture provides a fundamental approach for livelihood obtainment, ensuring that basic necessities such as food security can be achieved (Conceição et al, 2016). Meanwhile, the agricultural start-ups also provide employment in the community, once again addressing livelihoods at a baseline level by fighting widespread poverty (Byerlee, 2009).

In this context, the centrality of returning refugees lies in their value as advocates and experts of the cause they are undertaking. This cause is not brought forward by European agents, nor by any distant governmental organization (see Ungruhe & Esson, 2017; Darby et al., 2018), but by a member of the same community, increasing the proximity and reliability of the source (Collison & Marchesseault, 2018). Returning refugees are able to address these issues that have been identified by themselves, gaining centrality both in planning and application of the interventions.

Nonetheless, this does not preclude other members of the at-risk community from traveling to Europe, yet it presents different possibilities for them to do so. Traveling can be done through training with Associazione Don Bosco 2000, and can be done through traditional methods, without undertaking the Central Mediterranean Route. The ultimate aim of Associazione Don Bosco 2000 and the circular cooperation method is to 'build bridges' by providing safer options for asylum-seekers and populations in need. This aim has recently achieved an important milestone, with the first-ever Senegalese having received a temporary visa to undergo co-operative training in Italy at their headquarters.

Associazione Don Bosco 2000 has built through circular cooperation, setting an important precedent for future endeavors. Indeed, mainstreaming such a model would allow forced migrants to understand the risks involved in crossing the Mediterranean, attempting to provide alternatives that are less dangerous and less traumatic. For instance, in the last 10 years, Associazione Don Bosco 2000 has rescued and lodged more than 10,000 forced migrants that have crossed the Mediterranean. With many others losing their lives at sea, frequently in anonymity, the NGO works to construct these cultural corridors and bridges to safeguard refugees and to empower their agency through the provision of safer options for migration.

The application of agricultural practices through circular cooperation has, in this sense, proven to be an effective methodology. Nonetheless, the exclusive use of AFD may not be sufficient to prevent unsafe crossings, especially when these crossings are motivated by ambitions of self-realization that go beyond poverty and hunger (Esson, 2013; Ungruhe & Esson, 2017; Darby et al, 2022). Circular cooperation could then replicate SDP programmes and initiatives that occur in Europe, and bring these to interested areas by the co-operators, paralleling and imitating the agricultural approach.

### **Agriculture and Sport for Development**

As we have argued, SDP possesses a transdisciplinary nature, yet it seems that the field has not been able to use this characteristic to its fullest advantage (Giulianotti et al, 2019; Whitley et al, 2022). Framed within the frequent calls for SDP to open up its disciplinary borders, we propose the cooperation of the field of SDP with AFD. Moreover, we propose this as a practical and applied cooperation, other than just disciplinary. Such activities engage with a new disciplinary area and have a unique, applied ethos.

Overall, the complementarity of AFD and SDP should be considered as a holistic strategy, comprising work and leisure, to create or rebuild safe spaces for the interested populations. While AFD provides fundamental sustainment outcomes, the role of SDP is to tackle misleading ambitions of self-realization that young people seek through the dangerous European journey.

Asylum-seekers have highlighted the differences between football in Italy and Africa. These differences revolve around the opportunities to play, the level of play, and the fact that in Italy you can get paid to play. However, refugees have noted that these pre-departure motivations are then considered highly problematic upon arrival. The opportunities to formally play are limited by the lack of

Italian citizenship. The Italian style of play relies on tactics and the ability to cover a position on the pitch, something that participants have rarely had the opportunity to practice. The money made through football is often not sufficient for sustenance.

Indeed, the concept of ‘money’ has been recognized as a polluter of football by some of the most experienced refugees (see also Pannenburg, 2012). For example, an experienced refugee, who arrived in Sicily more than five years ago, shared his idea of organizing a football tournament, highlighting money as a big constraint:

*Yes, the tournament can be done. But the problem is that to make the tournament you need many things, you have to have authorizations, the field, the shirts. [...] You want to do it for fun, but they will do it because they want to make money from it. [...] If I want to have fun with my friends in a field of eleven, I have to go and pay. That is not right. (Yao, 22, Ivory Coast)*

He has also explained how these Italian constraints are not present in his country of origin. However, nor, at the same time, are there opportunities to formally play. In contrast, another refugee has explained how football matches are organized in his village:

*The elder would start looking for opportunities for us to go, to open our wings. He would start to contact other leagues, other cities, other towns, to have a friendly match with them, and so on. So sometimes we would go on bicycles, on foot if it isn't far, or with a car. And we go play football and come back. There we play with passion, with a lot of passion. The professionalism is not there, but a lot of passion, a lot of passion. (Cherno, 21, The Gambia)*

We can see how the two statements contrast. In Italy, it seems that much more needs to be in place to organize football, especially because of the professional and the monetary aspect related to the game. In the Gambian village instead, the actors involved in football go to a great extent to participate in footballing efforts that involve very little monetary effort. The sport is done with passion, and each opportunity to play is treasured. These opportunities are central in the involvement of people in football, yet people seek Europe to enhance the quality of these opportunities to play (Darby et al, 2022). The equipment (shirt and football shoes), the training sessions, the appropriate pitch to play, the away games, and the overall competitive element, are key aspects of football that are currently missing from the villages where refugees in Sicily come from.

Another important element, that reflects the necessity of realization of the self for these

young males, is the presence of a media-based representation of their effort. Refugees have addressed how with social media it was now possible to show their talented skills through videos or even improvised live broadcasts. The representation in video form is of key importance for them, finding in these recordings further means to represent their realized identities through football. It is very common for enthusiast refugees to show with pride video recordings of their goals or their plays.

Building on these lived experiences, the key driver for choosing Europe as a destination, was the (perceived) opportunity to play ‘better’ football. The desire of refugees for frequent play, competition, and structure in football remained often unmet in their Italian experiences. On the contrary, refugees have then revalued their experiences of football in Africa, providing clear directions on what needs to be done to expand the opportunity to play: the formation of teams, the provision of equipment, a better quality of training sessions, an element of competition and visibility for the people involved.

This rationale reinforces the idea that meeting basic needs of sustainment may still not prevent at-risk populations to undertake dangerous journeys. Here we see the complementarity of AFD and SDP, where both needs can be addressed, from fundamental necessities of survival addressed through agriculture, to safeguarding and protection enacted by an informed and better equipped provision of football programmes that fulfil the needs and desires of the community.

While the association between AFD and SDP is intended towards complementarity in this model, the possibility for combining the two fields should not be downplayed (Giulianotti, 2021). SDP initiatives have recently taken interest towards environmental issues and climate change, advancing questions on how sport can be a tool to achieve environmental goals. As sustainable technologies are central towards the enactment of AFD and widely used in practice by Associazione Don Bosco 2000, we see in SDP initiatives the possibility to increase awareness and education towards sustainable practices in agriculture (Pingali, 2010; Giulianotti et al, 2018). Such combination should also lead to ‘greener’ SDP initiatives, that take into account the environmental impact of sport practice, particularly in a context of coexistence with agricultural initiatives (Giulianotti, 2021). Moreover, a targeted use of sport for environmental advocacy and protection could also be beneficial, as a propeller for environmental messages to be shared in the target community, supporting the importance of agricultural practices for development (Amann & Doidge, 2023).

To sum up, while AFD takes care of developmental objectives such as reducing poverty and hunger, increasing employability, and providing a specific set of skills, SDP addresses good health, well-being, education, and inclusivity. Overall, the complementarity of AFD and SDP provides an all-round approach to increasing livelihood in at risk communities, offering an example of a proper bridge-building partnership (Svensson & Loat, 2019). While we have focused on complementarity, the potential for combination of AFD and SDP practices should not be downplayed.

### **Circular Cooperation in Sport for Development and Peace**

The third and final pillar focuses on the importance and benefits of circular cooperation in the shaping and delivery of SDP initiatives.

The same training that asylum-seekers undertake in the context of AFD can be replicated in an SDP scenario. Indeed, Associazione Don Bosco 2000 supports football initiatives through its co-operators in the African continent, providing continuity to their Sicilian SDP methodology and contextual adaptation. It is through circular co-operators that football initiatives come to life and are put forward, in order to provide an opportunity for leisure and development in the interested communities. We have however explained that the importance of football for the interested community goes beyond the leasurable dimension, and can even lead to undertaking the Mediterranean crossing, giving added importance for such football initiatives.

The training that co-operators undergo in Sicily in the context of AFD can be replicated in SDP, addressing the specific needs of participants. In the context of The Gambia, Senegal, and Mali, the direction we posit for the development of functional SDP through circular cooperation lies in the connectedness of a newly established football team with the agricultural start-up.

Indeed, an important argument that is made in the narrative of protecting African young boys from trafficking and dangerous routes in football, is that the efforts made lack context and credibility. The frequent use of testimonies by football idols against football-related trafficking has not been successful because these players represent the self that the young boys are trying to achieve (Ungruhe & Esson, 2017). Here lies the importance of the circular co-operator example, who has willingly decided to go back and to establish himself in the country he has fled, becoming a direct trustworthy source.

The co-operator carries first-hand experiences of the

dangerous journey, returning home with the aim to prevent other people from undergoing the same traumatic experiences. Instead of the African football superstars represented in the media, the returning migrant provides the example of a migrant that has experienced Europe first-hand and, by returning home, sends an implied or explicit message to their community. Very relevantly, the multi-ethnic football team of Associazione Don Bosco 2000 in Aidone is chaired by a former asylum-seeker, now being employed as a circular co-operator in The Gambia.

First, the formation of a team by the start-up provides an alignment of values, where the core business value of safeguarding from dangerous crossing is transferred into the provision of football leisure. At the same time, it provides the fundamental opportunity to play and train for the community already benefiting from the agricultural start-up.

Second, football-based initiatives would benefit from a much-desired European quality of football and training, enhancing the opportunity for young players to feel on par with their international counterparts. Leveraging such engagement opportunities, through circular cooperation returning refugees will be able to provide higher quality training sessions, yet oriented towards play and safeguarding, as per replicating and readapting SDP practices learned in the receiving country.

Third, the application of easily accessible media technologies could help replicate the sense of self-realization that young males strive to achieve through football. The use of social media in SDP organizations in Africa indeed represents an opportunity (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Slater, 2021). The recurring coverage of matches and the filming of training sessions could interestingly provide further development of media or filmmaking-related skills for asylum-seekers. Meanwhile, it would provide the possibility for highly motivated youth a chance to showcase their talent through social media, leveraging on the sense of self-realization that social media recreates.

Lastly, while we see the concentration on agricultural start-ups in this specific context, it is important to note that circular cooperation in SDP opens up opportunities for cooperation with further disciplines and applied practices. What can be replicated is the methodology of circular cooperation. Indeed, their lived experiences guide the intervention that is necessary to rebuild their community. While specifically identifying agriculture as a critical aspect for their home villages in The Gambia, Senegal, or Mali, refugees from other parts of the world may find other



critical issues that need addressing. Refugees from the Russian-Ukrainian war or from Afghanistan, who have seen two of the most recent refugee crises, may benefit from assistance through circular cooperation, yet not necessarily in the field of agriculture or SDP. The cooperative role of asylum-seekers thus becomes key in preventing neo-colonial practices, tapping into the wider resources that are available for them in their host country, and leading the intervention to achieve an autonomous and community-led development (Saavedra, 2018).

## Conclusion

To conclude, this contribution advocates the use of circular cooperation to structure and inform SDP practices. Circular cooperation is defined as the recurring cooperation between a former asylum-seeker, who has come back to their country of origin, and the NGO that provided support during refuge, to tap into resources that facilitate the development of the migrant's own community. Developmental efforts are independently led in both planning and implementation by the former refugee, that identifies ways to safeguard and improve the livelihoods of their community of origin. Circular cooperation has the advantage of immediately supporting the needs of individuals at risk, who see their livelihoods hindered by a specific situation that has caused them to flee to a new country. Meanwhile, it also covers the root of the crises that have led the individual to flee, working toward achieving radical social change that can improve livelihoods at a community level. This individual-to-community approach is aimed to ensure a direct, user-centered approach that is non-intrusive but relies on lived experiences and community-indicated necessities.

Limitations of the circular cooperation model in SDP lie in the fact that, in the Sicilian context, male refugees are often the most interested in the sportive element, while female refugees are often indifferent to the sportive leisure elements. This warrants consideration of the gendered dimension of SDP, and how the initiatives emerging from circular cooperation models need to ensure benefits towards all members of interested populations, and not just young males. The Mediterranean context presents criticalities predominantly concerning young male populations, and their desire of self-realization in football (Darby et al, 2022). Indeed, most of the individuals undertaking the journey are identified as men (76.2%) as opposed to women (6.1%) (UNHCR, 2023a). However other contexts of crises (e.g. Ukraine) severely affect women populations (UNHCR, 2023b).

SDP needs to critically address its role in refugee

crises, going to their root causes (Giulianotti et al, 2019). We can see that football as an industry has motivated the migration of many asylum-seekers through extremely dangerous routes, such as the Central Mediterranean. By addressing this need for self-realization through football, which many young males experience in the African continent (Darby et al, 2022), SDP can make an impact in preventing football-related crossings that would put lives in danger.

The circular cooperation model can bring SDP practices that integrate with existing circular start-ups, harnessing positive cooperation between fields to enlarge the range of developmental objectives addressed. In this contribution, we have seen the complementarity of agriculture and sport, to address different yet complementary needs of the community.

The model also relies on augmenting the resources of the addressed community, providing training that will be functional to the co-operator in going back to their own village and first-hand improving living conditions. The representation of the returning co-operator is a significant symbol for their community, as they can retell their own lived experiences and provide pathways that would lead young males to safer options, in opposition to the Central Mediterranean Route.

Knowing first-hand the drivers and necessities of the interested population, co-operators can bring forward SDP practices that can be both welcomed by the community and functional towards increasing livelihoods. In the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, SDP programs could use circular cooperation to provide practices aiming at safely satisfying the need of self-realization of young African males.

Finally, SDP should use cooperation methodologies to meaningfully address refugee crises. First, SDP needs to explore ways in which sport can cooperate with other fields concerned with global development. Second, officials should think of strategies to appropriately include user groups in programming initiatives. Third, leaders should implement developmental agendas that are led by the receiving and returning communities, preventing neocolonialities. Through these guiding principles, the SDP field can appropriately and contextually address the root causes of community crises, aiming to achieve long-term and positive social change.

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