



# **Sport for Development and Peace in the United Nations: An Empirical Study on the Development of the Role of SDP in the UN in the Context of the Closure of the UNOSDP<sup>1</sup>**


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## Abstract

In 2017, it was decided that the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) is to be closed. This qualitative study aims to analyse the reasons for the closure as well as its effects on Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) in the United Nations. Against the background of the systems theory, we conducted interviews with participants from relevant organisations. It is shown that the way the UNOSDP worked underwent a substantial change and that the new tasks as well as their fulfilment were viewed controversially. Additionally, broader changes in development policy set a new frame for SDP.

**Keywords:** sport for development and peace, United Nations, systems theory, United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace, organisational structures

## **Sport na rzecz rozwoju i pokoju w Organizacji Narodów Zjednoczonych Empiryczne badanie poświęcone rozwojowi roli sportu na rzecz rozwoju w ONZ w kontekście zamknięcia Biura NZ ds. Sportu na rzecz Rozwoju i Pokoju**

## Abstrakt

W 2017 r. podjęto decyzję o zamknięciu Biura Narodów Zjednoczonych ds. Sportu na rzecz Rozwoju i Pokoju (UNOSDP). Niniejsze badanie jakościowe ma na celu przeanalizowanie przyczyn zamknięcia, a także jego wpływu na rolę sportu w aspekcie rozwoju i pokoju w Organizacji Narodów Zjednoczonych. Opierając się na teorii systemów, przeprowadziliśmy wywiady z uczestnikami z odpowiednich organizacji. Wykazano, że Biuro NZ

ds. Sportu na rzecz Rozwoju i Pokoju zmieniło tryb pracy, a nowo wyznaczone zadania, jak również ich realizacja, wzbudzały kontrowersje. Ponadto, szerzej zakrojone zmiany w polityce rozwojowej wytyczyły nowe ramy dla krzewienia idei sportu na rzecz rozwoju i pokoju.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sport na rzecz rozwoju i pokoju, Organizacja Narodów Zjednoczonych, teoria systemów, Biuro ONZ ds. Sportu na rzecz Rozwoju i Pokoju, struktury organizacyjne

## Introduction

For almost 20 years, sport has increasingly been used as an instrument in international development policy projects (Kidd; Peachey *et al.*; Svensson and Levine; Lindsey and Grattan; for a comprehensive and detailed insight into the use of sport for development and peace, see Collison *et al.*). Projects of this kind pursue developmental goals such as furthering peace, gender equality, and health improvement (Giulianotti; Sherry *et al.*; Schulenkorf and Spaaij; Schulenkorf, Sugden, and Burdsey), and SDP projects have been implemented in different contexts and countries (see, for example, Tinaz and Knott for case studies from emerging countries and for thoughts on how sport and a country's development are related). In 2001, Kofi Annan, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), appointed the first special advisor on the topic of "Sport for Development and Peace" (SDP) in the UN and, in order to support him, inaugurated the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP). The purpose of these measures was to assist government organisations and other stakeholders in taking advantage of sport as an instrument of development policy and overseeing its deployment as well as establishing relevant partnerships and monitoring and accompanying global policy developments (UNOSDP). In May 2017, the newly appointed UN Secretary-General António Guterres decided to close the UNOSDP.

The consequences of this closure for SDP in the UN are not clear at the moment, nor is it possible to judge the extent to which this development may be interpreted as a sharp weakening of the use of sport as a development instrument at the UN. The present study, therefore, examines the question of how the role and relevance of SDP has developed in the wake of the closure of the UNOSDP. For this, a qualitative interview study is conducted to analyse the reasons based on which the decision for the closure was made as well as the effects of the closure on SDP within the UN.

## SDP in the context of the UN

The state of research reveals that sport was anchored in the UN development policy during the late 1990s (Coalter 301), with the SDP section being formally recognised approximately fifteen years ago (Collison *et al.*, *Sport for Social Change and Development: Sustaining Transnational Partnerships and Adapting International Curriculums to Local Contexts in Rwanda* 1689). In 2001, a Special Advisor was appointed for this area by the UN Secretary-General, and the UNOSDP was established to support his work. The position of Special Advisor was first entrusted to Adolf Ogi, who was succeeded by Wilfried Lemke in 2008 (*Secretary-General appoints Wilfried Lemke of Germany as special adviser on sport for development and peace*, UN). The duties of the Special Advisor included not only international advocacy and representation, but also facilitation (UNOSDP 7). Presently, SDP is employed by a variety of UN agencies: the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). In addition, sport is explicitly referred to in UN Resolution 70/1 (UN General Assembly).

In the wake of growing doubts about the effectiveness and usefulness of many traditional development policy activities, sport above all was discovered as a new and innovative instrument (Levermore and Beacom 125; Beutler). Coalter draws the conclusion that the “dramatic increase in interest [in sport as a development tool, authors' note] reflects broader changes in the aid paradigm, reflecting perceived failures of top-down economic aid and increased concern with issues of human and social capital, as well as the strengthening of civil society organisations” (295). Especially in respect of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the UN appeared to put increasing trust in sport since sport seemed to offer a broad range of solutions for various development policy problems (Coalter 295) and was “considered [by the UN] as a ‘low-cost, high-impact’ tool to help achieve development goals” (Beutler 361).

However, some problems arose in connection with the UN and the UNOSDP: Kidd argues that the UN provided a great deal of symbolical and rhetorical support for the SDP sector, including wide-ranging information about SDP. Yet, they largely relied on other stakeholders for staff and resources when executing tasks, such as implementing SDP projects. Furthermore, Bardocz-Bencsik and Doczi, who analysed the SDP field using Bourdieu's field theory, describe the UNOSDP as having undoubtedly become an important stakeholder in the SDP field and as being provided with institutionalised forms of symbolic capital. Even though the closure of the UNOSDP was not the specific focus of their study and, consequently, was not systematically examined, Bardocz-Bencsik and Doczi infer that “a reason for

the closure might ... [have been] that the UNOSDP's influence on decision-making processes and strategic leadership in the field was unclear" (7). If this is true and the UNOSDP had too little influence on decision-making processes, and if its leadership role had not been fulfilled sufficiently, this would mean that the UNOSDP had not accomplished its tasks.

On the whole, then, it is clear that the use of sport in development policy has been closely connected with changing paradigms of aid in international development policy (Coalter; Beutler; Levermore and Beacom). At the same time, both structural and conceptual problems associated with the endeavours of the UNOSDP emerged. What has not been taken into sufficient consideration in the previous research is the development of the role of sport in the UN, particularly against the backdrop of the closure of the UNOSDP. Thus far, there has been a lack of empirical analysis of how the role and relevance of SDP developed within the UN as well as the reasons for closing such an important organisation for the SDP sector. Thus, it remains unclear whether the closure of the UNOSDP has to be seen as a symptom of a broader change in the role of SDP in the UN.

## Theoretical background

The development of the role of SDP and the reasons for the closure are analysed using an approach based on Niklas Luhmann's organisational sociology and systems theory. This makes it possible to explain how organisations are constituted and how such structural changes may be induced. By applying related organisational sociological concepts proposed by Thiel as well as Köhl, it is possible then not only to observe organisational changes but also to reconstruct the reasons behind wide-ranging structural decisions, such as those surrounding the closure of the UNOSDP.

From the systems theory perspective, organisations are construed as systems which operate on the basis of decision-making (Luhmann 245). Against this background, the UN is seen as a decision-making body whose primary purpose is oriented towards furthering world peace and whose essential organisational structures are bound to this purpose anchored in the UN Charter. Decisions on decisions are considered here to be organisational structures (Luhmann, *Die Politik der Gesellschaft*). The analysis of organisations with a focus on decisions is increasingly being applied in research on sports organisations (Thiel and Tangen; Wagner, Storm, and Hoberman; Thiel and Mayer).

According to Köhl, such structural changes of organisations may be viewed, in quite general terms, from a formal side, an informal side, and a presentation side. Here, the formal side comprises the fixed and formally anchored structures of an organisation and its conditions of membership. In the UN, such formally established structures are to be seen, for example, in the hierarchical position of

the office of the Secretary-General or the Special Advisor for Sport and Development. Discernible on the informal side are expectations “which are not (or cannot be) formulated with reference to membership status” (Kühl 115). Among such informal expectations, for example, personal agreements between the Special Advisor and the Secretary-General, which bypass the official channels normally used, are to be found. To a certain extent, the presentation side displays an image of the organisation that is shown to the outside but which does not necessarily reflect fully the actual processes taking place inside the organisation (Kühl 137ff).

Structural changes may be observed at three different levels: the normative, strategic, and operative (Thiel 57). At the normative level, changes become visible in the fundamental values and long-term objectives of the organisation, such as those formulated in the UN Charter. The strategic level comprises more concrete objectives, such as the ways in which overarching goals are to be implemented in the medium term. The operative level consists of detailed, short-term implementation plans and programmes to be put into operation in order to achieve the envisaged goals (Thiel; Thiel, Seiberth, and Mayer). Accordingly, structural changes regarding the use of SDP within the UN framework can be found, in principle, at all three levels.

By which means, then, can far-reaching structural changes be triggered in an organisation? Social systems, and thus also organisational systems such as the UN, are autopoietic, self-referential, and operatively closed (Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme* 58ff). Internal system processes can, therefore, only be directly influenced when relevant influences from the environment are processed and incorporated into the existing organisational structures. However, organisations need to ensure their resources and legitimacy; with an insufficient inflow of resources and a lack of legitimacy, organisations may endanger their chances of survival (Walgenbach; Borggreffe, Cachay, and Riedl). With regard to the UNOSDP, then, the question arises as to the expectations that various governmental organisations or NGOs had from the UNOSDP and the extent to which its continued existence was secured by their payments.

Based on these considerations, the general research question is answered using three sub-questions:

1. How did the role and use of SDP within the UNOSDP develop from the UNOSDP's founding to its closure at the normative, strategic, and operative levels?
2. What reasons can be identified for the decision to close the UNOSDP on the formal, informal, and presentation sides, and how did the factors of “legitimacy” and “resource inflow” particularly influence this decision?
3. How can the use of SDP in the UN be characterised today and what effect did the UNOSDP's closure have on the use?

## Methods

To answer these questions, we implemented a qualitative research design. Between October 2018 and July 2019, we conducted 13 guided interviews (Gläser und Laudel) with representatives of a national government organisation, a state-funded implementation organisation, an international sports federation, and two regional sports federations along with five former staff members of the UNOSDP (including two former Special Advisors on Sport for Development and Peace) and two staff members of two UN agencies. Two of the interviewees (each a former/present staff member of two of the surveyed organisations) were, thus, able to report from the perspectives of the organisations they worked for. The literal transcribed interviews were analysed by means of qualitative content analysis based on Mayring, with adjustments proposed by Gläser and Laudel and with the help of the MaxQDA software.

## Results

### **The development of the role of SDP from the creation of the UNOSDP to its closure**

When the first Special Advisor on SPD was appointed at the UN in 2001, he laid the foundations both for his work and that of the UNOSDP. As reported by one of our interview partners (IP), the then Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, believed that in order to achieve the objectives of the MDGs, there was a need for the involvement of politicians, economic leaders, and scientists as well as religious and spiritual leaders (UA-1-13, 212ff).

And at the end of 2000 he realised: ‘There is a link missing in the chain. And this link is the world of sport and that means young people. The young people of today’, he said ‘are the leaders of tomorrow. In all areas of politics, in finance and industry, in sciences, in religion, in journalism, in sport, everywhere. And we need this additional link youth and sport’ (UA-1-13, 220ff).

Accordingly, at the normative level, the UNOSDP was founded for the purpose of catching young peoples’ interest and promoting this idea externally as well as internally, meaning in the UN itself (UA-1-13, 610ff).

A key role in achieving this overriding purpose was played at the strategic level by UN Resolution 58/5: “Sport as a means of furthering education, health, development and peace”. Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2003, it seemed from the very start to be indispensable to the then Special Advisor and, in retrospect, “the decisive

breakthrough” (UA-1-13, 1123). As a strategic objective of this resolution, IP13 stated the following: “That sport is given a foundation within the UN, and I can point to this foundation and say, ‘It is now accredited by the UN General Assembly, and now you [the person addressed in conversation, authors’ note] must accept it” (UA-1-13, 388ff). Resolution 58/5 should, thus, convince the UN member states as well as form the basis for the use of SDP.

Especially with the appointment of the second Special Advisor in 2008, changes of emphasis were made in the use of SDP and the work of the UNOSDP. The main objectives at the normative level were now focused, above all, on promoting youth and especially furthering sport-for-all and disabled sport in the struggle for development and peace in the world (UA-1-8, 813ff). Additionally, cooperation between the UN and large sports organisations was to be intensified.

At the strategic level, these objectives were mainly put into effect with the so-called “Youth Leadership Camp”, which was planned for young, disadvantaged people (UA-1-8, 165ff). In this project, people came together in order “to support deserving young community workers with basic education levels and limited resources, by providing them with access to theoretical and practical training on how sport can be better used to effect positive change in their communities” (Third UNOSDP Youth Leadership Camp (YLC), Sportanddev.org). Additionally, the UNOSDP tried to function as a multiplier by bundling the differing approaches and areas of focus of all stakeholders of the SDP sector (e.g. national government organisations or sports organisations) in programmes within the UNOSDP (UA-1-8, 1459). The intention was to form a mutual alliance of institutions which would work together, although they had different core concerns and strategies. and whose cooperation, it was hoped, would generate certain synergies in order to achieve development policy goals.

In general, both special advisors had close ties with the Secretary-General in office and could count on his support. However, both Special Advisors on SDP implemented different strategies and set different priorities.

## **Reasons for the decision to close the UNOSDP**

Different reasons to close the UNOSDP can be identified on the formal, informal, and presentation sides. While on the presentation side, especially a new cooperation with the IOC was named as such, the formal and informal sides reveal various additional reasons. From this point of view, the most important aspects for the closure can be found in processes of delegitimisation of the role of the UNOSDP as well as in the strategy pursued until then with SDP. No evidence showing that the lack of resource inflow was a direct reason for the closure can be found.



The closure of the UNOSDP was officially announced for 30 April, 2017. The office of the spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General stated the following in its notification of the UNOSDP's closure:

The Secretary-General has agreed with the President of the International Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach, to establish a direct partnership between the United Nations and the International Olympic Committee.

Accordingly, it was decided to close the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP), effective 30 April 2017 (Office of the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General).

However, a closer look at the formal and informal sides of the organisation reveals several discrepancies concerning the account given on the representation side.

On the informal side, from the time when the second Special Advisor left the office until the decision to close the UNOSDP was announced, there was uncertainty for the staff of UNOSDP as to how the office would be further managed, "i.e. no one really knew anything" (UA-1-8, 945). One UN official reported that he "assumed from conversations that the IOC was, in principle, to take over the activities of the UNOSDP to some extent" (UA-1-8, 1032ff). IP<sub>3</sub>, himself an official of a UN agency, also stated that the IOC "[had] partly officially, partly unofficially, explicitly and implicitly taken on the function of the former UNOSDP" (UA-2-3, 140ff).

On the formal side, however, it can be seen that the vacant post of Special Advisor was not going to be filled again initially, and subsequently that "the Secretary-General decided not to appoint him or her and, following the decision, he decided to close the Office of Sport for Development" (UA-3-5, 22f). In this regard, our IPs reported that the new direct partnership between the IOC and the UN had never existed in this form. According to them, the IOC had worked together with the UN and various UN agencies for quite some time (SF-2-12, 461ff). However, since May 2017, the cooperation between the IOC and the UN has continued under a new paradigm and less in the context of a completely new partnership according to a staff member of a sports organisation (SF-2-12, 140ff).

On the whole, then, it is apparent that the formal and the representation sides of the UN differ when it comes to explaining the closure of the UNOSDP. In fact, the reasons for the closure of the UNOSDP seem to be found in missing legitimacy, firstly, of the UNOSDP and, secondly, of the strategy pursued with SDP until then.

First, the failing legitimacy of the UNOSP that it once had was visible in two ways: on the one hand, the new Secretary-General appeared to have a strong will to reform the UN. According to IP<sub>12</sub>, this agenda for reform was also reflected in the decision to close the UNOSDP (SF-2-12, 358ff). Thus, in the opinion of our IPs, the new Secretary-General did not seem to accord any great degree of legitimacy to the UNOSDP. On the other hand, it was not only the Secretary-General but

also many staff members at the UN and its agencies who seemed to have doubts about the legitimacy and relevance of SDP and the UNOSDP. A number of IPs remarked that the role of the UNOSDP, its work, and peoples' interactions with it were considered controversial at times. IP1, for example, said that on account of its constitution, it was a "somewhat unorthodox organisation ... which then perhaps also ...[came] up with some innovative ideas which, at first ... [were] quite difficult to put into context" (GO-1-1, 968ff) and which, as a result of their design, required a large amount of effort to be put into them. Several IPs, thus, regarded the work of the UNOSDP and the way it was carried out quite sceptically in some phases.

Second, several UN officials saw the necessity for new strategic approaches in the area of SDP on account of changed (political) conditions. According to IP5, a staff member of a UN agency, the UNOSDP enabled a bilateral approach as well as an "administrative approach" (UA-3-5, 214) through which, for example, a distinct partner was available for sports organisations whom they could ask for support and certain services (UA-3-5, 207f). IP5 assumed, however, that it was an approach that had once met the requirements of the times but was now outdated (UA-3-5, 615ff). Hence, a "different approach" (UA-3-5, 510) was needed as well as "flexible arrangements which will respond to the ... needs of the people out there" (UA-3-5, 36f).

The need for a new approach was largely justified with reference to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in effect since 2016 as a new global agenda of development objectives:

MDGs were only eight; they were not so holistically articulated; they were covering only part of the global agenda. Today, we have a more global agenda, [which] is more articulated [and] is more interactive; it brings more constituency and partners together. It is no longer a UN-driven agenda, but it is driven by the actors and on the work. And it is no longer a north-south agenda; it is a global agenda. So, we are part of a new movement then, part of a new situation globally that will affect us and perhaps asks to be more creative in the way it addresses some of the issues (UA-3-5, 99ff).

Accordingly, the SDGs required new, creative, and multi-stakeholder approaches. The old SDP approach was not able to fulfil the new needs of the SDGs and, in the view of those involved, overlooked a number of issues that had become quite significant in the meantime, such as human rights (see e.g. UA-3-5, 615ff). There was a need, therefore, for new perspectives and new approaches (UA-3-5, 438).

In summary, the interviews show that the formal decision to close the UNOSDP is accompanied by attributed processes of delegitimisation and an ascribed failure of the strategy at that time to adapt to changing global parameters in development policy. From this point of view, it can be said that changing global parameters in development policy required a different approach, for which the UNOSDP was not needed or helpful.

## Today's role and the relevance of SDP in the UN – sport as a fragile but important strategic instrument

The closure of the UNOSDP had different consequences for the use of SDP in the UN. Regarding the use of SDP, it becomes apparent that it is not of great strategic importance in the UN as a whole. Moreover, SDP is partly trivialised. The closure initially left many questions and a vacuum. However, some influential organisations within the UN still support and advocate the use of SDP.

At the strategic level, it becomes apparent that compared with other instruments, SDP generally plays “no great role” (UA-2-3, 44) as a developmental tool for (or rather within) the UN. During the interviews, the following was described:

Everything [is] more important than sport—almost everything. First and foremost, there are humanitarian obligations. When human beings are at stake, there's no demand for sport. What is important here is water supply, energy supply, hunger, migration, education, technology. All this comes first, and then sport comes afterwards (UA-2-3, 21ff).

Thus, sport only comes into play when everything necessary for survival (e.g. water and energy) is provided. Until all these things are made accessible and available, sport takes a back seat and is considered to be of no great relevance. In this regard, sport is called a “fragile issue” (UA-1-10, 1131).

This minor strategic role is also evident with regard to the inclusion of sport in the Agenda 2030. According to IP12, a sports organisation official, sport was initially not even mentioned in the zero draft of the Agenda 2030, for example as a tool or means with regard to the topic of health, to which sport could contribute. Consequently, the mention of sport in Agenda 2030, which was much celebrated in the sports world, was never planned when the zero draft was written, and it was only taken up after the intervention of the Group of Friends (SF-2-12, 259ff). This means that the naming of sport in Agenda 2030 only came about retrospectively through this intervention and was originally not planned at all.

Although sport is mentioned in § 37 of Agenda 2030, no specific reference to it is made in the SDGs. For IP12, it was very disappointing from a sporting perspective that sport is only one article among many others and not a component of a catalogue of objectives or a component of the means to achieve the objectives. In his opinion, it would be necessary to name sport in the objectives or as one of the instruments to be employed for it to be given its undisputed recognition as a development policy instrument that can effectively bring about change.

In accordance with this, a former UNOSDP official said: “Perhaps with other development policy topics, there would have been greater reservations about closing something down, or there might have been a greater interest for national governments to become involved” (UA-1-10, 1136ff). Hence, the closure of the UNOSDP today is

taken as a sign that in the view of some of those engaged in development policy, sport is a dispensable instrument of little strategic value.

At the operative level, this subordinate role is first seen in the scarcity of financial resources when compared with governance, agriculture, or climate agendas (GO-2-6, 776ff). Especially the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), which is officially responsible for sport at the UN since the UNOSDP's closure, was described to be inadequately equipped financially: "UN DESA doesn't have the means. UN DESA would be the normal place to coordinate the whole United Nations system. Sport simply doesn't play any great role; there's no re-investment" (UA-2-3, 307ff). Thus, our IPs described that the member organisations provide too little funding to allow SDP to become a priority (UA-2-3, 315ff). This is particularly evident, according to a UN agency official, in the talks which took place in the Intergovernmental Committee for Physical Education and Sport (CIGEPS)<sup>2</sup>; not a single member was willing to make the suggestions discussed workable through better funding (UA-2-3, 321ff).

Second, the closure of the UNOSDP seemed to be an obstacle to the growing significance of SDP. The closure of the UNOSDP caused a vacuum and, in some way, a gap (SF-2-12, 109), especially with regard to the essential element of coordination. Surprisingly, a staff member of a sports organisation remarked that even the IOC, which is often assumed – in the SDP field in general as well as by some of our interviewees – to have taken over the role of the UNOSDP, is still looking for a leader in the field of SDP (SF-2-12, 317f). This assumption may also be based on the announcement of the Office of the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General, which directly links the closure of the UNOSDP to the partnership between the UN and the IOC (Office of the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General). Following one of our interview partners, there was simply nobody at the moment that could have replaced the UNOSDP; furthermore, this area now strongly bore the imprint of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the IOC, and a number of other actors who were furthering the use of SDP. The interviewee concluded that many SDP stakeholders changed their approaches due to the UNOSDP's closure and the resulting space (SF-2-12, 329).

Nevertheless, although the strategic value of SDP appears to have little significance to the UN as a whole, there are specific UN agencies which support and forge ahead with the use of SDP and for which SDP is, accordingly, an important tool. Here, UNESCO, ILO, and the Group of Friends are especially active. This is scarcely surprising in the case of the first of these agencies, since UNESCO was already active in promoting sport as early as the 1970s (UA-1-10, 741ff) and continues to play a leading role in the International Conference of Ministers and Senior Officials Responsible for Physical Education and Sport (MINEPS) as well as CIGEPS (UA-3-5, 69ff). These

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<sup>2</sup> "CIPEGS is comprised of expert representatives in the field of physical education and sport from 18 UNESCO Member States, each elected for a four-year term" (UNESCO).

are currently undergoing great change and, thus, reacting to new developments. A UN official emphasised that since the closure of the UNOSDP, “the issue of Sport for Development has clearly found its way into UNESCO’s political programming” (UA-1-10, 848f). A similar tendency is to be observed at the UN member state level, since according to IP3, “more and more member states are discovering that sport can be very useful in a number of missions which have to do with more important development priorities” (UA-2-3, 38ff).

To sum up, a contrary trend can be observed: on the one hand, SDP has little strategic relevance at the UN level; on the other hand, some organisations for which SDP is an important developmental instrument are pushing the use of SDP.

## Discussion and conclusion

The present study examined the question of how the role and relevance of SDP has developed in the wake of the closure of the UNOSDP. With the decision to close the UNOSDP in 2017, SDP lost an important stakeholder (Bardocz-Bencsik and Doczi) and a central point of coordination at the UN. Although the so-called Kazan Action Plan functions as a kind of strategic guideline, it is expected that those who (wish to) use sport must themselves seek an exchange with others and organise the work on their own.

Considering the reasons behind the decision to close the UNOSDP, it can be seen that the interviewees regarded the UNOSDP in general as an important player in the SDP field, but viewed its tasks as well as their accomplishment controversially. This is consistent with the observations of Bardocz-Bencsik and Doczi, who stated that the UNOSDP’s (strategic) role remained unclear. Beyond this, we were able to identify another cause of the UNOSDP’s closure: the UNOSDP and the strategy pursued until then with SDP had run into legitimacy-related difficulties. Thus, “broader changes in the aid paradigm” (Coalter 295) led, in this case as well, to a break-up of the established structures of SDP at the UN. Thus, it seems that it was not so much a specific dissatisfaction with individual projects that was the reason for the closure of the UNOSDP. However, further work is needed to find out to what extent members of the UN and other governmental organisations are at all familiar with the results (and related criticism) achieved by SDP projects and, based on this, what relevance they attribute to SDP in international development policy. Considering the organisational changes divided into the formal, informal, and representation sides of the organisation (Kühl), one can see that the changes in the formal structure (the closure of the UNOSDP) did not correspond to those on the representation side. On the informal side, the decision to close the UNOSDP led to great uncertainty. A number of developments on the formal and representation sides even seemed to contradict one another, not only with regard to the reasons for

the closure of the UNOSDP, but also with regard to the partnership with and the role of the IOC. Although the “direct partnership” (*Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*, UN) with the IOC was referred to on the representation side in the course of closing the UNOSDP, no reference was made to the concrete terms of this partnership on the formal side.

Caution is advised if the UN cooperates even more intensively with large sports organisations, such as the IOC, or even transfers tasks. There needs to be a clear demarcation from the IOC in terms of the tasks and responsibilities to be fulfilled, but also in terms of the services to be provided in the partnership. In the political system, the UN has a completely different status and higher recognition than the IOC has. The UN should be aware that “national governmental and intergovernmental organisations are key players in ‘universalising’ SDP work and in shaping the sector’s principal policy focus on meeting fundamental needs and targeting MDGs” (Giulianotti 769) and the SDGs, respectively. In other words, as desirable and positive as a strong involvement of NGOs or large sports organisations, such as FIFA or the IOC, may be seen, the UN must not neglect its role as a ‘policy guard’, much less hand it over to other (sports) organisations. While this may simplify UN structures in individual cases, it will damage the UN’s role in the long run. At the same time, careful consideration must be given to which (sports) organisations are to be cooperated with, so that, for example, not only large organisations are linked and thus gain influence (Lindsey). Hence, further research should keep an eye on partnerships between the UN and large sports organisations (see, e.g., van Luijk) in order to find out, for instance, to what extent negative criticism about mega sports events can affect the cooperations.

Although the extensive and detailed interviews with important decision-makers proved to be fruitful for answering our questions, one could argue that a limitation of our study is the lack of interview material from the two (former) UN Secretary-Generals and IOC Presidents, who might have provided alternative perspectives on the decision to close the UNOSDP. Against the background of the danger that only the communication of the organisational presentation side would be repeated, we chose to interview the employees who were likely to have a lesser interest in specifically serving the representations of the organisation’s presentation side. As all of our interviewees are closely associated with the use of SDP, this might have implicitly contributed to the fact that the significance of SDP appeared in a more positive light than it would have in the case of other actors with no sporting connections.

Further studies on sport’s relevance in development policy should include the relevant work of additional UN organs and agencies such as UNDP, ILO, UNICEF, WHO, and UNESCO in order to gain more insights into how SDP is used and for which objectives. In this respect, a closer look should be taken especially at the Kazan Action Plan and the WHO’s Global Action Plan on Physical Education.

SDP practitioners should note that the role and capability of SDP seems not to be accepted by all stakeholders in development policy. The UNOSDP no longer exists to do persuasion work, so it is up to the SDP field and participating organisations to build consensus on what SDP can and should contribute to development policy, and what it cannot. Moreover, this needs to be made transparent.

### Ethical approval

The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Bielefeld University.

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