

Sport (County Meet) as a Unifying Force but a Miscalculated Prescription for Reconciliation in Liberia: A Meticulous Sociological Analysis

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Abstract: Judging from the caption, this article, using the qualitative research approach, interrogates an interesting social phenomenon that the global community may not easily accept. The data collection sourced from relevant literature review comprised of articles, books, journals, and the web paged.

From the structural-functionalist or functionalism, and the conflict perspective termed as the theoretical frameworks, this paper doubts not the efficacy of sports, precisely the County Meet observed in Liberia as a unifying force bringing together but a miscalculated prescription for reconciliation in Liberia. It sees sports as an emotional strategy or intervention but unrelated to the root causes of conflict that does not remove the semblances underlying the causes of the very conflict.

The paper argues that, as a context-driven concept, reconciliation is dictated by a society based on the nature, gravity, or complexity of the conflict. In the case of Liberia, this article argues that evidenced by the demand for justice, the Liberian society does not place a premium on sports (County Meet) as a pillar and strategy for reconciliation.

Judging from other societies that are still struggling with the ugly legacy and semblances of violent conflict despite the observance of sports as a tool for reconciliation, the paper concluded that although the Liberian society embraced the County Meet as a unifier but does not see it as a durable solution because it has nothing to do with the root causes of the 14 years of civil war. In other words, the civil war was not about the denial of sports. So, why use it as a strategy or invention to reconcile Liberia? Instead, the war was also about the issue of justice.

Finally, the paper through recommendation called upon practitioners and experts in the theater of peace and conflict studies to rethink sports as a unifying force to reconcile society emerging from violent conflict.

Key Words: Liberia, County Meet, Justice, Reconciliation, Sports

I. Introduction

Inarguably viewed as the only sport that translates to the entire world, a universal language, soccer, or football has been historically sanctioned as a unifying tool for reconciliation, especially in a post-conflict society. For example, during the 2007 African Union conference in Addis Ababa that coincided with the year of the African Soccer Cup of Nations, former South African president Thabo Mbeki recommended that soccer be part of a continental strategy for post-conflict reconstruction and development (PCRD). To translate Mbeki's recommendation into practice, South Africa was mandated to chair the AU committee on PCRD for Sudan and was involved in several other initiatives in countries emerging from conflict (Oxche, 2008). Despite the initiatives, Sudan is still facing the challenges of reconciliation.

Similarly, the Special Adviser to former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, on Sport for Development and Peace introduced under the leadership of Kofi Annan in 2001, Adolf Ogi remarks "an essential tool for creating peace, national reconciliation, and harmony". Being a universal language that crosses all boundaries, sport provides a neutral ground for people to come together, it provides communities with the opportunity to reconcile, and it teaches important values such as respect, tolerance, solidarity, teamwork, and fairness" (Oxche, 2008). With the conviction in Ogi's assertion, a Sport for Peace Taskforce led by UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was formed in Liberia in 2007 to identify effective and practical ways for the short, medium, and long-term development of sports in the interest of peace. Members include representatives of Liberia's Ministry of Youth and Sports, its National Olympic Committee, national sports federations, youth groups, and non-government organizations (NGOs). Through the assistance of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Liberian authorities and the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) received a container-load of sporting goods and equipment valued at over \$76,000 for the organization of the five-week long programme in football, kickball, and volleyball to be held throughout Liberia's 15 counties (UN News Centre, 2007).

Interestingly, the Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace Adolf Ogi ahead of the official launch at the Antoinette Tubman Stadium in Monrovia, the capital encouraged Liberians to play sports not war with an emphasis “I would like to spread out the message of sports as an essential tool for creating peace, national reconciliation and harmony” (UN News Centre, 2007).

Since that time, sports, precisely the county meet have been observed as a perceived unifying force to reconcile the ugly and indelible legacy of the 14 years of civil war.

Despite the observance of the County Meets as a unifying force or tool, the issues of reconciliation as embedded in both the African Union and United Nations strategies for peace and development unequivocally remain a challenge or questionable. This is evidenced by a strategic roundtable meeting organized or hosted by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva that brought together senior Liberian officials, UN representatives and diplomats intended to add fresh impetus to the transitional justice and reconciliation process that is vital to the rebuilding of Africa’s oldest republic. The outcome of the meeting advanced by the delegates recommended that a National Reconciliation Conference should take place in 2023 before the elections in October (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2022).

Without being prejudiced to the fact of the issues, the recommendation proffered by the delegation to some extent suggests a fundamental problem with sport (county meet) as a strategy to help foster reconciliation in Liberia that requires a sober reflection.

Against this premise, as it relates to Liberia, this paper interrogates county meet as a unifying force but a miscalculated prescription to reconcile Liberia. In other words, this paper makes the case why sport, precisely the county meet though considered a unifying force cannot reconcile the ugly and indelible legacy of the 14 years of civil war.

In the interrogation from a sociological lens, this paper is structured into four segments. The first segment which is always a research imperative layout the conceptual analysis or clarifications and theoretical framework necessary to guide the discussion in the paper. It theorizes sport as a tool for reconciliation from a global perspective. For the benefit of non-Liberian, it put the county meet into context, and finally analyses reconciliation from a peace and conflict perspective. The second segment briefly examines the root causes of the Liberia civil war so as to establish the nexus between the root causes and sport. This is because for sports to be used as a tool for reconciliation, it suggests a relationship or connection to the conflict. The third segment of the paper makes the case about why the county meet is a miscalculated prescription or strategy to reconcile Liberia. And finally, the fourth segment concludes the paper.

II. Materials and Methods

As a way of providing deeper insights into the topic or caption under interrogation, this paper adopted a qualitative approach. Precisely, it employs a content analysis method based on a review of existing secondary sources relevant to sport as a tool for reconciliation. The reviewed sources included policy documents, scholarly publications, and opinion pieces, such as newspaper articles from the internet through the Google Scholar Search Engine and Bielefeld Academic Search Engine. The paper also makes use of the American Psychological Association style of referencing.

Theoretical Framework

Before diving into the theoretical framework, it is equally important to consider the definition of sport.

According to 2003, the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace, sport is defined as all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being, and social interaction, such as play, recreation, organized or competitive sport, and indigenous sports and games.” Similarly, the Sports Charter (2001) defined “sport as all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming relationships or obtaining results in competitions at all levels.” Example of physical activity includes soccer, cricket, volleyball, basketball, rugby, table tennis, etc.

No doubt these definitions reflect a sociological context termed the “Sociology of Sport” that examines sport as an academic field of study. It sees sport as a social phenomenon involving the behavior of not only the players of different skill levels, coaches and players, and players of different races but also the spectators as well (Liden, 2022). More importantly, sport is now considered one of the social institutions because it embodies one of the defining characteristics or elements of social institutions. That is, it is regulated by regulations and rules of behavior, spatial and time constraints, and has governing bodies such as the Federation of International Football (FIFA), National Basketball Association (NBA) Confederation of African Football (CAF), Liberia Football Association (LFA), Ghana Football Association (GFA), etc.

Theories of Sport

As an academic discipline, sociologists have theorized the impact sports have on society. Precisely, this paper adopts two traditional theories namely the Structural functionalist or functionalism, and the conflict perspective. Elaboration of these theories is important.

The Structural functionalist or functionalism

Proponents and subscribers to structural functionalism see society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. Sport as one of the social institutions is essentially one of the complex systems of society that promote solidarity and stability. In other words, the theory focuses on the positive outcomes of sports for both individuals and society at large (Coakley 2001).

Existing literature on sports considered a tool for bringing people, societies, or countries together regardless of their differences speaks to the practical application of this theory. According to an article by the Sport and Development organization, “at the grassroots or community level, sport provides a useful way of creating an environment in which people can come together to: work towards the same goal, show respect for others and share space and equipment. All these aspects are crucial to peace-building processes.” Through sports, the collective experience that all participating groups are a part of can help in forging long-lasting and peaceful relationships between individuals. Participation in sports is one of the sure ways that people have learned to put aside their differences in the pursuit of a common agenda (Defyhatenow, 2020).

For example, sport was used as the intervention strategy to foster reconciliation and Truman healing in the Rift valley of Kenya, following post-election violence (Serena, 2008). In Nigeria, having identified sport as a unifying force, it has been observed in different states (Pulse, 2019). Following the Political Agreement that was signed on 4 March 2007 in Côte d'Ivoire, Football, volleyball, and basketball programs (along with local sports, games and artistic activities), have been implemented in order to help children, youth and adult community overcome their traumatic experiences rooted in the civil conflicts of that country (Serena, 2008). In South Africa, PeacePlayers International — South Africa (PPI-SA) established the Bridging Divides Program to break down racial barriers. The program brings together children and youth from different backgrounds to play basketball and forge positive relationships that transcend race, culture, and religion (Serena, 2008).

Common to almost all theories in social sciences, the functionalist view of sport has one shortcoming identified by Sugden (2010) that seems to be a caution.

“Although sport may have the potential to contribute positively to feelings of social connectivity, sport cannot and should not be considered a “natural” and universally applicable remedy for social problems”.

From a sociological perspective, a social problem as mentioned by Sugden is a generic term describing any condition that affects a substantial number of people in society. It can even be defined as a prolonged civil war, corruption, natural disaster, etc. Therefore, using sports as the tool to address any of these conditions defining a social problem would be a miscalculation. This is simply because sport in any category is unrelated to the problem that society wants to reconcile. To buttress this assertion, reflect on the following practical examples.

Take the case of Football 4 Peace (F4P) which used sport culture at the grassroots level to intervene between Israel and Palestine. Despite its observance, the conflict continues. Also, review the case of South Africa (PPI-SA) established by the Bridging Divides Program to break down racial barriers. Despite its observance, the legacy of apartheid still lives on. For example, most blacks live in townships where you hardly find whites. This speaks to a high level of social disintegration. One would have thought of social integration at the township level not only in urban communities. In fact, the number of blacks that can afford to live in urban areas is very minimal compared to the whites who are economically potent because of the legacy of the apartheid.

Examine or ponder the Nigerian society in which sports have been observed as a tool for reconciliation. Despite the observance of sports, religious conflict, and worst of all, Boko Haram remains a serious predicament.

Finally, despite the continuity of cricket between India and Pakistan, relations have often been afflicted by cross-border terrorism, ceasefire violations, territorial disputes, etc. In 2019, the bilateral relationship was rocked by several tense events like the Pulwama terror attack, the Balakot airstrike, the scrapping of Jammu and Kashmir's special status, etc. Improving bilateral ties is vital for both sides, as it would mean the stabilization of South Asia and the improvement of the economies of both nations. However, the political will to mend the current relationship seems absent on both sides (ISA Expresses, 2022).

In all these examples, the conditions continue simply because their causes have nothing to do with sports. Put in other words, sport is not the root cause(s) of the conflicts or conditions. So, why use it as a strategic intervention to address a social problem?

The Conflict Theory

Drawing on the work of Karl Marx considered the progenitor of the theory, proponents see conflict as a permanent feature that characterizes society due to competition among groups within society over limited resources (Hayes, 2022). In the context of sports, sociologists are interested in violence in sports which can be understood as an effective way of bringing about victory. This, in other words, suggests that because of the competitive nature of the game, the tendency for conflict between the players from both sides, and spectators from both sides questions the application of the functionalist view supporting sport as a unifying force or tool for reconciliation. For instance, (Elias & Dunning, 2008) admitted to the proclivity of sports to unify people to come together but also maintained that the process has been uneven and incomplete for many sports, with various forms of resistance throughout history producing new variations and fragmentations. Similarly, in the context of sports encounters, Collins (1990), also highlights the significance of maintaining team solidarity to maintain emotional dominance that has the implication for conflict. Breaks in the solidarity of one side provide opportunities for the other. Emotional domination by one side leads to the demoralization of the other. As such emotional domination and submission follow a relational dynamic, which cannot be reduced to mere physical strength and stamina. The feeling of gaining the upper hand (dominance) charges up collective energy and saps the energy of the opposing group. Though Collins is not restricting these processes to sports, he argues that they are equally applicable to sporting activities. In fact, the effects of emotional domination and submission are perhaps more obvious in sports. The history of sports violence is so replete and documented.

Dating far back to the 1800s, in Australia, at the Sydney Cricket Ground, there was a serious outbreak of violence during a cricket match against England as long ago as 1879. It was reported that 2,000 people invaded the ground, holding up play for 20 minutes and that a spectator assaulted the English Captain, Lord Harris (Brian, 2020). Moreover, in their recent research publication, (Marwat, et al., 2022) summarized the amount of violence in sports recorded under different dispensations from a global perspective. Here is a paraphrase of how they presented the summary. From 1960-2000, a total of 4959 deaths and 4656 injured in 15 recorded incidents. And, from 2000-2020, a total of 391 deaths and 3263 injured in 23 recorded incidents.

The above incidents of sports violence raise the question of using sports that have implications for violence that explains conflict to unite or reconcile a divided group of people. In closing, ponder the logic or rationale behind this scenario or questions. Assuming the existence of a conflict that needs to be reconciled through sports. Should the games turn into a violent conflict because of emotions that may have developed from the misapplication of a rule, will it not deepen the already existing animosity between the groups? What becomes the outcome of the event? Will it not defeat the purpose it seeks to serve?

The Concept Reconciliation

The term “reconciliation” is derived from the Latin expression “conciliatus” which means coming together. According to Wendy Lambourne, the concept of reconciliation has its origins in Christian theology and has only recently entered the political discourse (Penal Reform International).

In the opinion of the United State Institute for Peace, reconciliation is conceptualized as a long-term process by which the parties to a violent dispute build trust, learn to live cooperatively and create a stable peace. It can happen at the individual level, the community level, and the national level. At the individual and community level, reconciliation is a micro-social phenomenon. For this article, attention is placed on reconciliation at the national level. At this level, a violent dispute which is also a macro social phenomenon can also be equated to civil war, political instability, post-election violence that threatens the stability of the state, and so on. As a process, reconciliation at both levels may involve dialogue, admissions of guilt, judicial processes, truth commissions, ritual forgiveness, and sulha (a traditional Arabic form of ritual forgiveness and restitution).

Louis Kriesberg provides a detailed definition of reconciliation. According to Kriesberg:

“Reconciliation refers to the process by which parties that have experienced an oppressive relationship or a destructive conflict with each other move to attain or to restore a relationship that they believe to be minimally acceptable.

Reconciliation is also about healing, truth, justice, forgiveness, and looking en route for a shared and peaceful future (Serena, 2008).

From the above definitions, it is easily inferred that the aim of reconciliation is to foster a stable peace by addressing the root cause(s) of whatsoever conflict that fragmented or disarticulated a group or society. On the other hand, restoring a relationship suggests addressing the root causes that fragmented the relationship. The definitions also imply that the aim of whatever program or initiative society calculates to create a stable peace must be related to the cause(s) of the dispute. For example, if the dispute is caused by ethnic prejudice that disarticulated the society, it would mean that the prescription should address both institutional and individual sources of prejudice and discrimination in the contexts and situations in which the participants in the program or activity learn, work, and live. If the dispute is caused by the mismanagement of state resources that destabilized the peace, equitable resource distribution would be the workable prescription to stabilize the peace.

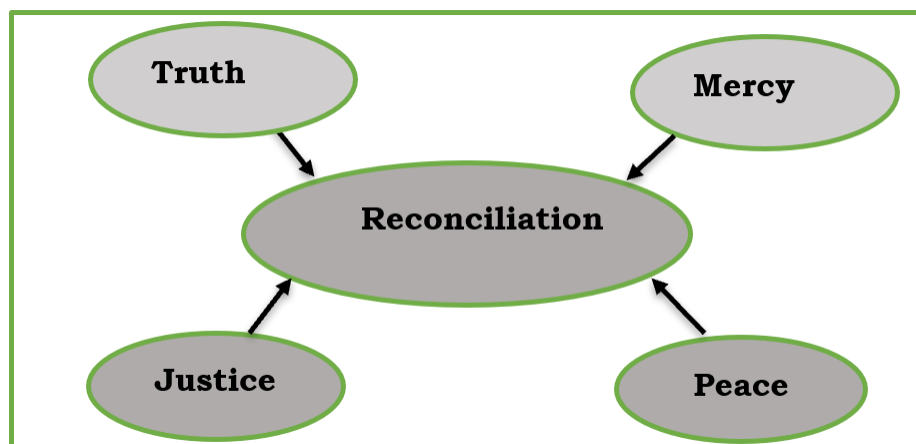
From Peace and Conflict Studies as an academic discipline, reconciliation is often a highly complex or controversial, vague concept and there is no consensus as to what it means exactly. As a result, it gives rise to different understandings and approaches that is context driven. Seils explains the complexity when he asserts “The type of violence a society is emerging from can determine the role reconciliation plays in its transitional process. For instance, post-conflict societies may emphasize reconciliation as it pertains to coexistence, whereas fragile states with weak institutions may seek reconciliation as a means towards resilience (ICTJ, 2017). In other words, what dictates the context of reconciliation derives from these fundamental questions such as: how do societies that have been wracked by violent conflict reconcile themselves to their recent history and lay the foundations for a peaceful, stable future; how do they deal with the impulse for revenge; what should be done with those responsible for acts of state violence under a previous regime; how can individuals and communities best be helped to cope with the aftermath of national trauma; and how to deal with the quest for reconciliation? The processes or approaches that characterized reconciliation may be employed to address these fundamental questions. The processes or approaches include dialogue, admissions of guilt, judicial processes, truth commissions, ritual forgiveness, etc. Societies affected by violent conflict, gross human rights abuses, or post-conflict societies may adopt any of the approaches or processes. For example, the South African Truth and Reconciliation granted amnesty to perpetrators who confessed their crimes truthfully and completely to the commission (Thompson, 2003).

Mozambique, which experienced several years of intense strife, chose not to engage in criminal trials or pursue reconciliation without "Truth" (Obarrio, n.d.). Another society may employ retributive justice as a form of the judicial process to hold certain people accountable for the harm afflicted upon society. For example, Rwanda which experienced a well-organized and calculated genocide that shocked the moral conscience of humanity, it firmly placed justice as the key pillar upon which reconciliation rests (Molenaar, 2005).

Reconciliation and Justice

To begin with, it is important to lay the premise with a focus on John Paul Lederach’s concept of reconciliation.

Interestingly, Justice is among the four essential elements of reconciliation graphically postulated by John Paul Lederach, a prolific writer of peace and conflict studies. These elements are Truth, Mercy, Justice, and Peace. Lederach argues that all elements of reconciliation, although they sometimes seem contradictory, should never be viewed in isolation. All the elements are interdependent, and to neglect one of them can undermine the reconciliation process as a whole. For instance, truth without justice is unacceptable for victims of severe human rights violations and gives them a sense of vulnerability about future recurrences because the perpetrators are not held accountable for their deeds. At the same time, justice without truth is also undesirable, if not dangerous. Justice without truth is unacceptable because it creates historical amnesia and revisionism, which may very well result in the reopening of hostilities in the future. The same goes for mercy. Mercy is meaningless if it is not combined with some sense of acknowledgment and justice. The need for mercy may never be equated with a culture of impunity, in which perpetrators are not held responsible for their deeds. Without peace and security, finally, it is impossible for the population to focus on building new peaceful relationships. Lederach has placed these four elements in one diagram that reproduces the concept of reconciliation graphically shown below or next page.



Now coming back to justice. Since its inception, there has been a debate about the relationship between justice and reconciliation. Till now, no consensus has been reached to settle the debate on side. Some gurus separate reconciliation and justice and argue that reconciliation presents too soft an approach in dealing with atrocities. They reason that reconciliation is no more than a covered amnesty for criminal offenders and that justice, meaning the punishment of offenders, should precede reconciliation. According to

others in the affirmative, an attempt for reconciliation without addressing issues of justice is indeed a mockery and a belittling of the sufferings of the survivors. In their opinion, justice should not be separated from reconciliation but treated as a core element of reconciliation (Montville, n.d.). Subscriber to the approach of judicial process as key pillar of reconciliation believed that the process serves as a deterrence for would be perpetrators of gross human rights abuses or atrocities. Those who opposed by separating justice from reconciliation believed that punishing perpetrators is nothing but vengeance that will not heal the wounds or address the root causes of the atrocities.

The good thing about the debate lies in the context or purview of a given society. For example, as earlier mentioned, Rwanda placed a premium on the justice system traditionally referred to as Gacaca, as the key pillar upon which reconciliation rests (Molenaar, 2005). South Africa granted amnesty to perpetrators for admission of guilt or true confession (Thompson, 2003)

III. Analysis of Sport – A Perceived Tool for Reconciliation

No doubt about the examples of the different kinds of sport as a tool for reconciliation. However, judging from the arguments proffered by the two theoretical frameworks, the possibility for sport be it in any kind to reconcile a post-conflict society especially to address the root causes of the conflict remains questionable for the following reasons.

1. Even though it is a strategy or intervention that has the power to bring divided people together. But it is not related to the root cause(s) of the conflict. Therefore, how does it resolve or address the ugly legacy of the conflict? This could be one of the reasons why Sugden (2010) dealing with the critical social function of sport argued or cautioned that although sport may have the potential to contribute positively to feelings of social connectivity, sport cannot and should not be considered a “natural” and universally applicable remedy for social problems.
2. Even though sports as defined in the paper have the power to bring people with differences together. It is not a durable solution for national reconciliation. This is because sport is also an emotional moment for the players and spectators. It means, at that moment, or during the game, bitter feelings are temporarily forgotten and so, it is easy for people to come together. The possibility for that same bitter feelings to resurface in the minds of the divided people is very high. This is because the game did not address the causes of the bitter feelings. The bitter feelings resurface because of the semblance(s) of the conflict to which the bitter feelings are connected. For example, if the conflict is deeply rooted in ethnic stratification in which certain ethnic groups are favored in political positions, the bitterness will resurface in the minds of the affected group. Unless the game changes the narrative or phenomenon of ethnic stratification manifested by appointment reflecting geographical balance to some extent.

The case of Liberia

This segment represents the crux of the paper. It begins with a summary of the root causes of the 14 years of Liberia civil war for which reconciliation is needed.

The root causes of the Liberian civil war are a notorious fact deeply rooted in the foundation and governance of the Liberian society. In a nutshell, Liberian scholars offer a range of explanations for the years of conflict including ethnic divisions, predatory elites who abused power, a corrupt political system, and economic disparities. Approximately, the conflict claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands, and many more were affected by the extreme violence that ravaged the country (Vinck, Pham & Kreutzer, 2011). These causes also married the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report pertaining to the causes of the war. According to the TRC, poverty, greed, corruption, limited access to education, economic, social, civil and political inequalities; identity conflict; land tenure and distribution; the lack of reliable and appropriate mechanisms for the settlement of disputes; as well as the “duality of the Liberian political, social and legal systems which polarizes and widens the disparities between the Liberian peoples – a chasm between settler Liberia and indigenous Liberia (Consolidated Final Report, Vol. II, p. 16).”

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

To help address the wounds of war, in compliance with Part Six, Article XIII of the Accra Peace Accord signed August 18, 2003, in Accra, Ghana, the government through Liberian Transitional Legislative Assembly enacted the Truth and Reconciliation on 12 May 2005 to investigate the causes of the war and recommend steps to address the issue of accountability.

Mandate

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act tasks the TRC “to promote national peace, security, unity and reconciliation” by investigating gross human rights violations and violations of humanitarian law, sexual violations, and economic crimes that occurred between January 1979 and October 2003. The commission may explore the period before 1979 as needed, and it is mandated to determine whether abuses were isolated incidents or part of a systematic pattern, establish the antecedents, circumstances, factors and context of such violations and abuses, and determine those responsible for the commission of the violations, their motives as

well as the impact of the abuses on victims. In addition, the commission is mandated to provide a forum against impunity, establish the record of the past and compile a public report with findings and recommendations (United States Institute of Peace, 2006)

IV. Recommendations

- The TRC advised for the establishment of an Extraordinary Criminal Tribunal for Liberia and named individuals, corporations and institutions recommended for prosecution or, in some cases, for further investigation.
- The commission also included a list of individuals recommended to be barred from holding public office for thirty years (including President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf).
- The commission urged the Government of Liberia to guarantee the full enjoyment of social, economic, and cultural rights, in addition to civil and political rights.
- The TRC's report called for the establishment of a National Palava Hut Forum as a complementary tool for justice and national reconciliation. The commission recommended that the Palava Hut process be based on traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. Persons recommended for prosecution in the TRC Report for the commission of international crimes would not be entitled to be pardoned through the Palava Hut process.
- The TRC recommended that the Government of Liberia assumes its full responsibility under international law to provide reparations for all those individuals and communities victimized by the years of instability and war, especially women and children. The commission recommended a reparation program of approximately US\$500m over 30 years. The commission recommended general amnesty for children, and amnesty for lesser crimes in an effort to foster national healing and reconciliation if individuals admit their wrongs and express remorse.
- The commission recommended that institutional reform must be implemented to promote good governance and human rights, and to prevent the recurrence of abuses.
- The TRC recommended to the international community continue its engagement with Liberia and the sub region.

V. Analysis

The report implementation of the report recommendation has been seriously controversial. Implementers of the report are some of the very key players listed for prosecution and barred from holding public office for thirty years (including former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and some lawmakers).

From the TRC recommendations, it is clear from all indications that it did not adopt the South African TRC approach that granted amnesty to perpetrators that confessed their wrongdoings. Instead, the Liberian TRC flagged the need for retributive justice through the extraordinary criminal tribunal for certain key players bearing greater responsibilities for gross human rights abuses and atrocities committed. In other words, Liberia TRC copying the example of Rwanda placed a premium on justice as a key pillar of reconciliation.

Interestingly, these perpetrators are excluded from the National Palava Hut Forum as a complementary tool for justice and national reconciliation.

Finally, the reluctance or inability of the government to implement the recommendations of the report in no way eliminates the provision for retributive justice that most Liberians are demanding. This is evidenced by different references reflecting the views across Liberia. for example, (Human Right Watch, 2018), (Keppler, 2018), and (Krippahl, 2018).

In conclusion, Liberia's approach to reconciliation validates the argument earlier flagged that reconciliation is dictated by the context of the conflict.

Using Sport as a Strategic Intervention to reconcile Liberia

Drawing from the experience of other post-conflict societies that identified and employed sports as the tool of reconciliation to foster social integration or social cohesion, Liberia has replicated and customized sports as the strategic intervention tool to deal with the ugly legacy of the 14 years of civil war. To this end, there have been a series of sporting events including the restoration of the county meet first organized in 1956 as a means of promoting peace and reconciliation in the country. The County Meet is Liberia's biggest sporting event popularly comprised of men's soccer (football), Kickball, and Basketball observed as a competition among the fifteen (15) Counties in Liberia. For the 2022 edition, the government of Liberia through the Ministry of Youth and Sport gave each County US\$17,000 to prepare for the tournament (LINA, 2022)

Doubtlessly, the County Meet has always brought together Liberians from different sociopolitical backgrounds. However, it is argued that reconciliation remains questionable in absence of justice. This is evidenced by the continuous clamors from many Liberians manifested by protests, and petitions, especially from the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) as the major forceful opposition party demanding the establishment of a war crime court.

Interestingly, prior to his presidency, George Manneh Weah consented to the appointment from former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as a peace ambassador to lead Liberia's National Reconciliation (Butty, 2012). Ironically, Amb. Weah organized a series of soccer tournaments intended to reconcile Liberia at the same time his party the CDC was busy demanding justice to reconcile Liberia (The News, 2012), and (The New Dawn, 2022). Whether aware or unaware, the CDC demand for justice suggests a realization that sport despite its potential to bring Liberians together was not a viable pathway to reconciliation. Evidence by their support, Liberians in their numbers appreciate the observance of the County Meet. But have not lost sight of justice. Moreover, Human rights groups despite the recognition of sport have repeatedly called for the establishment of a war crimes court to hold individuals accountable for atrocities. In their minds, it is believed that this form (Justice) of reconciliation will send a message of deterrence to prevent another circle of violence. Therefore, no amount of resources invested in sports (County Meet) will reconcile Liberia. The reason is very simple. It has nothing to do with the root causes of Liberia's 14 years of civil war. On occasions, the very sport intended to bring Liberians together became a tool of animosity between counties. The case of Nimba and Grand Kru County during the 2019-2020 National County Sports Meet is one of the contemporary pieces of evidence. It can be recalled that during the county meet finals at the SKD Sports Complex in Paynesville, the entire Nimba County soccer team walk off the field when a penalty was awarded to its rival Grand Kru County. Nimba County soccer team was fined US\$1,500 and suspended the team head coach Murta Fofana and manager Musa Kroma from all sporting activities for two years for "unruly behavior" exhibited during the finals on 26 January 2020 (LINA, 2020).

As a driven context, Liberian society has remained very emphatic about justice, not sport to reconcile Liberia. Sports or County Meet will not remove the semblances of the root causes of the civil war.

VI. Conclusion

With close reference to the theoretical frameworks, this paper sees sports to be a miscalculated prescription to reconcile a post-conflict society as in Liberia. It highlighted several examples in which sports have been designed to bring people affected by deadly conflict together but failed to address the root causes of the conflict. This does not necessarily mean that sports should be downplayed. Of course not, it is an integral social phenomenon of humanity serving social functions in society. However, it is about time practitioners in their theater of peace and conflict studies ponder the argument proffered in this paper concerning sport as a unifying force to reconcile society emerging from violent conflict.

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