

Sport powerful tool for inclusion: athletes at UNAOC forum

2016 10:55 PM



Retired French footballer Christian Karembeu (left) and Honey Thalijeh, the first-ever Palestinian female football captain, at the UNAOC Global Forum in Baku, Azerbaijan.



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Agencies/Baku, Azerbaijan

Save the Dream Ambassadors and sporting champions gathered in Baku at the 7th Global Forum of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) to call for more organisations to use sport as a tool for social integration and inclusion and to highlight the importance of promoting the positive values of sport to young people.

With countries continuing to face many social challenges, the call to action was made during a breakout session hosted by Save the Dream, a global programme which works to promote and protect the purity of sport for young people.

The session at the UNAOC Global Forum included a line-up of several influential figures including football superstar Christian Karembeu, the first-ever Palestinian female football captain Honey Thalijeh, Association of Football Federations of Azerbaijan (AFFA) secretary general Elkan Mammadov, Syrian refugee and football coach Osama Abdul Mohsen, and peace activist Nelsa Curbelo.

Taking place under the umbrella theme of Sports for Peace, Sustainable and Inclusive Development, panellists shared their experiences about how sport has transformed their lives and played an important role in enhancing society across a number of areas.

UEFA Global Ambassador Karembeu said: "Sport has a special power to change the lives of people around the world - to promote peace and to unite people beyond regions, beyond colours. Sport has no borders and is universal.

"Through sport, we can speak the same language. For me, sport is a powerful tool for integration and inclusion and more organisations should embrace sport as a positive platform that can benefit society."

Ecuadorian peace and sport activist Curbelo added: "I believe that sport is a perfect vehicle to promote social inclusion of minorities and other vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. It can also be instrumental in combating violence through community-based projects and promoting reconciliation, peace, tolerance, and co-existence.

"I have seen first-hand how sport programmes – like Fútbol Callejero en Educación para la Paz y la No-Violencia and Save the Dream – can change people and benefit society and think it is important to encourage more support for these types of programmes that promote sport and the values that they teach young people."

During the session, Mammadov highlighted that all governing bodies have a responsibility to give equal opportunities to girls and boys to play sport and that football has played an important role in breaking down cultural and social barriers and stereotypes, particularly around young women and girls.

Speaking of her experiences within football and sport, Thaljeh said: "Sport, and particularly football, has been an important vehicle to promote peace; to break down cultural, political and social barriers and to help integrate people into society. The power of sport in society really cannot be underestimated and through it, everybody speaks one language.

"This is why organisations, including FIFA's social projects and initiatives like Save the Dream, are helping to harness the power of sport to further spread its many important values and to direct young people's energy in a positive way to help prevent violence and discrimination in society."

Syrian refugee and football coach Mohsen added: "Sport has opened up many doors in my life. It has a special ability to inspire and provides an avenue of hope for millions of people around the world.

"I am thankful for the opportunities and values that sport has given me and my family and I believe it is important that all cultures and individuals should have opportunity to play sport and learn about the positive values it can teach."

Concluding the session, Save the Dream executive director Massimiliano Montanari said, "The dream of a child is the most genuine and pure form of human ambition.

"Today we have learnt from our distinguished panellists how sport can restore dignity, dialogue and mutual understanding in societies where violence, discrimination and conflicts have dramatically jeopardised the human condition.

"As a movement of people and organisations who love sport and believe that sport values can protect this dream, Save the Dream aims to provide young people with an avenue of hope for young people and use the values of sport as a bridge to promote greater understanding within society."