

How #BeActive can help draw synergies between sports and peace amid a pandemic: Q&A with Maher Nasser

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Monday, April 6 marked the UN International Day of Sport for Development and Peace. But this year, it was observed under a significantly different reality given current circumstances, where most people are locked in their own homes and in quarantine due to coronavirus fears.

The World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations and FIFA came together for the #BeActive campaign urging people to share stories about how they're staying active within the confines of their home.

WHO [recommends](#) for an adult to be engaging in 30-minute physical activities daily, and has suggested a variety of activities people can build into their schedule.

"Over the years, a group of friends among member states was created to work on promoting the synergies between sports, development and peace," Maher Nasser Director, Outreach Division at the Department of Global Communications, told IPS.

A marathoner who grew up in Ramallah in Palestine, Nasser has, over the years, raised thousands for scholarships for Palestinian women's education.

This year, the day was scheduled to have people from the sports field coming to the UN to speak about their own experience and how sports has played a role in development of communities and how sports can play a role in the future to progress towards the sustainable development goals, says Nasser. But since panic set about coronavirus, they've had to change their plans. That's when they came up with the #BeActive and #HealthyAtHome campaign.

As a symbol of solidarity, the campaign included two football players from rival groups sharing a message in a YouTube video.

"At this time, even rivals need to stick together," said football stars from rival teams Liverpool and Manchester United.

IPS caught up with Nasser on what sports and being active means at a time we're locked in our homes, and how the current situation has also prompted conversations on communities under occupation or curfews.

1. What is the mission of the #BeActive and #StayAtHome activity?

Every year, we choose a different focus. This year, we were looking at 75 years of multilaterals in the UN and how we can talk about conversations in the future. How can sports play a role in getting us to a future where the people expect not only the 2030 agenda being implemented but also what else by the age of 2040 and 2050? But everything needs to be put in the context of today's reality and that's where #BeActive came from.

#BeActive is not just about the international day of sports. This is something that we want to make clear: the need to be active needs to be done on a regular basis. People are sitting at home, many people are working from home, other people have been laid off. When you're confronting a pandemic, we don't know whether that's going to be a few weeks, or few more months -- and we pay a price for not being active. And [we mean], not only active physically but also active mentally to enable people to go through this with the least amount of long term damage to their health.

2. How do you feel about the response?

The international day was on Monday but we're continuing. People are still talking about it. We asked people to share examples of what they have been doing to stay active. I've seen colleagues skipping ropes, colleagues jumping -- I ran 5K on my balcony. For example, yoga is another example of an activity where you don't need much to do, you don't have to be outside, you can do it on a mat. Some people who have not practiced yoga think that it's just sitting there and relaxing but.. you're exercising in a very different way.

3. How can sports play a role in times of a crisis situation as we are in now?

The whole notion of the international day of sports was looking back on moments of crisis. In the early days when the olympics used to take place in Greece, warring used to stop and now. We know that competition is something that is inherent in human nature and competition in sports is a peaceful competition, You can compete, you can support different clubs, teams and at the end of the day you do it peacefully. And sports have led to massive improvements in people's lives, investments, big games have given the economy a boost.

So, sports is not only encouraging peaceful competition but also leads to development of technology in things that we use eventually in everyday lives.

In situations where there's a lot of energy among young people, sports can be a positive space for them to use that energy to build on to improve their lives.

4. As a marathoner, what does lockdown mean for you in terms of having lost access to sports and outdoor activities?

I took up running only six years ago. I never liked running. I only ran when I needed to: to catch a bus or to run from soldiers.

Running a marathon is something I always thought about doing but couldn't get around to doing it. I was introduced to the concept of fundraising through social media, and without that I probably would've never probably become a marathoner.

In 2014, I ran a race and raised \$6,000 and sent them to refugees in Gaza.

In 2015, I qualified for running the marathon, put it on Facebook to raise funds for scholarships for women in Gaza and West Bank because I know women have fewer opportunity to go to university unless their university [fees] are covered.

After the first contribution came in, then you're morally committed. You can't not do it. I can't tell you how many times I regretted doing it -- with the training having to run five times a week but eventually I raised \$26,000 and that was enough for three scholarships.

I finished and I told my wife whatever happens again, never let me run. Afterwards, I received letters from the young women who got the scholarships and I signed up again. I ran in 2016 and 2017 and raised funds for four more scholarships.

5. Do you plan to do more?

I only planned to run one, and I ran three. And I thought that was enough. I have pain now and I will have to fix that but I will probably run a marathon for sure.

Now, I haven't left the house in two weeks. That's why I ran in the balcony and went around maybe a thousand times.

6. For a lot of people, their mental health is tied to their physical activity, which has been affected. Do you have any advice for them?

So I grew up with curfews. We had weeks-long curfews stuck at home. In those days, sometimes we would break the curfew to go out and visit a friend, or just out of defiance. But now getting out isn't about yourself, it's also about the people with you and whether you want to risk bringing the virus to your loved ones. And I think the advice that we have is to stay at home and to avoid any unnecessary interaction with people outside your household so staying home is necessary until we manage to contain this virus.

Staying home can have a toll on your body and a bigger toll on your mind so I think it's important for people to create a program for themselves and [not] just let the day drag on.

7. Many are comparing this lockdown to how communities live under occupation live. As someone who grew up in Ramallah, how do you feel about that? Is it a fair comparison?

I don't think it's an issue of comparing situations. What is clear now is that the crisis has created a situation where the entire world has been shown that no matter where you live, no matter how rich you are, no matter how powerful your position is, you can get the virus and end up in the ICU. And that the most vulnerable are the ones that are probably still paying the highest price. Viruses know no borders and as such we're as strong as the weakest link in the health system in the world. So, we can get rid of the virus in Europe and the US but if the virus continues somewhere else it could mutate and it could come back.

What is important is that people can now maybe empathize more with people who have to live through curfews or with hardship but nobody needs to live like this. And what we need to do now is ensure we build better health systems, we're better prepared and the UN has an agenda for this. We can't go back to business as usual: when we go back, recovery needs to be a recovery to build better.