

Participating university: The Graduate Institute Geneva.

Project title: Sport for Peace and Friendship: Preparing Youths at Risk for Peace through Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.

Designated project leader name: Raphael Schapira.

Date range of project execution: May to August 2019.

Country where project will be performed: Brazil.

Summary

One of the main reasons for disadvantaged children and teenagers of Rio de Janeiro's periphery to seek employment in the drug business is the lack of alternatives to acquire symbolic status. The project "Sport for Peace and Friendship: Preparing Youths at Risk for Peace through Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu", which has been developed with local stakeholders, tackles this problem by giving them the opportunity to develop symbolic status and self-esteem through martial arts practice and by including them into the local Brazilian jiu-jitsu community. Another violence creating factor is the imposition of a "friend" or "foe" logic by the drug cartels upon communities controlled by them, making neighboring communities see each other as enemies. The project aims to contribute to conflict prevention by bringing children and teenagers from different communities controlled by enemy drug cartels together so that they can develop bonds of friendship through Brazilian jiu-jitsu. It will engage 60 children and teenagers from Rio de Janeiro's North Zone in regular BJJ classes during May and August 2019 in which they learn the corporeal and ethical aspects of the sport centered on non-violent conflict solution and friendship-making.

Introduction

Doing research for my Ph.D. in anthropology on the social significance of the martial art Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, I observed firsthand the important work of a network of Brazilian jiu-jitsu teachers implementing sport for peace projects in Rio de Janeiro's periphery and shantytowns. These coaches have proven through their work that teaching martial arts to youths at risk is an effective way to show them the importance of resolving conflicts peacefully and developing a perspective for the future. By experiencing themselves as successful in BJJ children and teenagers become motivated to thrive in life, school, and other aspects of their lives, too. Out of my personal encounter with this local BJJ culture grew my strong motivation to develop a grassroots North-South sport for peace and development project striving for a positive social impact on deprived communities by giving new opportunities to their youths.

Social context

Many children and teenagers growing up in Rio de Janeiro's northern periphery are extremely vulnerable to become recruited as child soldiers and drug traffickers. Besides the economic and social hardship many of these youths experience, it is the symbolic exclusion they experience as marginalized inhabitants of the periphery and of shantytowns which makes the acquisition of social status through illicit activities attractive to them. The high mortality of gang members as a result of gang wars and the War on Drugs is likely to intensify during the coming years due to the law and order politics of the recently elected government on the state and the national level. There is, therefore, a feeling of urgency in providing poor and disadvantaged youths with an alternative to the drug trade. Sport for Development and Peace projects have proven highly successful in providing children and teenagers with an alternative to build their identity as important members of society and to acquire self-esteem. In Rio de Janeiro, martial arts teachers working in deprived neighborhoods have an enormous impact on the lives of their students by means of socializing them into a martial arts community that enables them to become respected members of their neighborhoods. In some cases, these projects offer the only alternative activity for children and teenagers in areas devoid of state authority where the drug cartels have established themselves as the only power in charge.

Sports context

The local BJJ teachers belonging to this project form part of an informal network of Brazilian jiu-jitsu teachers called "Fadda jiu-jitsu". This loose network unites BJJ teachers who strongly believe in the transformative power of their sport. For them, educating children and teenagers to become BJJ athletes involves not only corporeal aspects but also ethics of martial arts emblemized in their slogan "Respect, Discipline, and Hierarchy". This ethic is understood as permeating all aspects of everyday life, making its adherents form a community of mutual support which goes as far as providing needy members with groceries. An important part of the group's identity is the idea of sharing a martial art lineage which was founded by Oswaldo Fadda in the 1940s in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro¹. He envisioned BJJ as socially inclusive, opening his martial arts school also to poor and handicapped athletes. This vision continuous today, albeit under new and difficult circumstances, through his disciples and their students who maintain sport for peace and development projects throughout Rio de Janeiro.

¹ The North Zone is identified as the workers part of town in contrast to the rich South Zone with its famous beaches.

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Project description

Who:

The project will involve 60 socially vulnerable children and teenagers aged six to seventeen, one junior teacher under the supervision of a head coach, and the applicant. The participants of the project live in or nearby the district Guadalupe in the northern periphery of Rio de Janeiro. The junior teacher is an advanced BJJ student who has participated in anterior social projects and is being formed as a multiplicator which will allow him or her to have a BJJ group in the near future. The experienced head coach will direct the local project and give the BJJ classes. The applicant will supervise the project, diffuse its progress through written texts and pictures in social networks and on a blog, and accompany it scientifically, measuring its impact through participant observation and questionnaires. As a scholar seeking positive social change through research, this project will give him the opportunity for civic engagement.

Where:

The project will be implemented at the community center “Lona Cultural Terra Guadalupe”. This strategically situated community center allows participants from the area and the surrounding shanty towns to meet, get to know each other and make new friends. The community center is considered “neutral grounds” so that inhabitants of shanty towns controlled by enemy drug fractions can meet there, who are, otherwise, impeded to enter the “enemy” (according to the drug cartel’s logic) neighborhood.

What and how:

The participants will be offered Brazilian jiu-jitsu classes in the community center “Lona Cultural Terra Guadalupe” two times per week over four months between May 2019 and August 2019. Participants are introduced to the corporeal and ethical aspects of the sport through regular training sessions. These sessions involve general sportive exercises and BJJ specific exercises. They are complemented by an introduction to the history and ethics of BJJ centered around the concepts of respect, discipline, and hierarchy aiming at creating peaceful coexistence in society through non-violent conflict resolution. During self-defense training sessions participants will reflect on what violence is, how and in which situations it arises, and how violent situations can be solved in a non-violent way. The idea here is to have the participants reflect for themselves rather than providing them with ready-made answers. The creation of strong bonds of friendship among the participants which will be facilitated through participation in training and competitions. The competitions will also serve the goal of breaking the social-spatial isolation of many of the participants by taking them to parts of Rio de Janeiro which they rarely have the chance to get to know, like the arenas built for the Olympics, where BJJ competitions take place nowadays.

Outcome of the project:

- 60 participants have acquired knowledge of the corporeal and ethical aspects of BJJ.
- 60 participants have acquired knowledge about non-violent conflict resolution through self-defense training.
- 60 participants from different neighborhoods have created strong bonds of friendship.
- 60 participants have participated in at least one official BJJ competition.
- 1 junior teacher has acquired advanced knowledge of how to act as a multiplicator of BJJ.
- 1 public presentation will be held at The Graduate Institute Geneva upon completion of the project by the applicant.
- The project will be presented with photos, videos, and testimonials in social media networks and blogs.

Prospects for future impact

The financial and institutional support provided will allow establishing a new training center which will continue working after the project ends. To give sustainability to the project, upon its completion the acquired equipment will continue being used for BJJ classes at the same location. The participants will have the opportunity to continue the classes with the junior BJJ teacher with the prospect of becoming BJJ coaches themselves. Also, new children and teenagers will be encouraged to participate and to become multiplicators. Becoming part of the BJJ community will allow the participants to develop an alternative vision of the world in which they acquire status and self-esteem through Brazilian jiu-jitsu. By experiencing themselves as successful in BJJ children and teenagers become motivated to thrive in life, school, and other aspects of their lives, too. Their example will serve as a motivation for other members of their communities, this way contributing to conflict prevention and promoting peace through sports as an alternative to drugs and violence.