

Sport As a Platform for Diplomacy and Dialogue

White Paper

Consolidated Outcomes of the World Cup Diplomacy Summit 2026: A Global Dialogue

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ALIGNED WITH THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Sport As a Platform for Diplomacy and Dialogue

Consolidated outcomes of the World Cup Diplomacy Summit 2026: A Global Dialogue, convened by UNITAR at United Nations Headquarters, New York, on 4-5 June 2026 and developed with participating stakeholders.

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FOREWORD

The United Nations, UNITAR and Sport Diplomacy

Sport has long been recognised within the United Nations (UN) as a means to advance education, health, development, peace and human dignity, a recognition that has matured over three decades into a settled place within multilateral practices across global affairs. The Context and Purpose section that follows sets out that record.

UNITAR's mandate, conferred by the General Assembly in 1963 and operational since 1965, is to strengthen multilateral diplomacy through practical training; its Division for Multilateral Diplomacy now sustains dedicated work in sport diplomacy, including an Executive Diploma in Sport Diplomacy. In that spirit, and without seeking to restate or pronounce on existing United Nations positions, the participants in the World Cup Diplomacy Summit 2026 offer this Sport Diplomacy White Paper, and the shared, non-binding pledge it contains. It is intended as the first output of a process that will continue beyond the Summit and contribute to future discourse in this area.

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1. Executive Summary

UNITAR convened the World Cup Diplomacy Summit 2026 in New York on 4-5 June 2026, bringing together diplomats, international civil servants, sport governing bodies, clubs, academics, technology partners and civil society. This White Paper sets out the consolidated outcome of the Summit: a practical, non-binding framework for sport as a platform for diplomacy and dialogue.

In this paper, sport diplomacy means the use of sport as a structured entry-point for dialogue, relationship-building, representation and cooperation across borders and communities. The actors engaging in this diplomacy include states, cities, governing bodies, clubs, athletes, civil society and international institutions.

Sport is one of the world's most powerful shared social platforms, reaching across borders, identities, generations and economic circumstances, resonating with communities globally. The Summit's central conclusion is nevertheless clear: reach is not impact. Sport's diplomatic qualities contribute to the way it is governed, measured and delivered, and depend on the judgement and capability of those who represent and lead it.

The Paper identifies four priorities: sport diplomacy; legacy and community inclusion; artificial intelligence, data and fan engagement; and the sport, culture and entertainment nexus. These are translated into practical, non-binding actions and placed within a cross-cutting governance framework. Inclusion, including women and girls, people with disabilities, and displaced and divided communities, is treated throughout as a test of credibility rather than a separate aspiration.

Framed considering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sport is treated as a practical means of advancing agreed public priorities, not only as culture or commerce. The framework is non-binding and intended to guide collaboration, pilots and policy development beyond the Summit and guide future practitioners.

The next practical step is to recognize and support sport diplomacy as a professional capability. Diplomats, international officials and those who represent and practice sport would benefit from structured training and a clear competency framework, building on UNITAR's established work in multilateral diplomacy. This is proposed as an area for follow-on collaboration, not as a fixed institutional commitment.

This White Paper reflects the themes addressed at the Summit and does not claim to offer a comprehensive understanding of sport diplomacy in full. Further areas such as sport and climate, sport law, and sport and health are just some of many more priorities for future work.

2. Context and Purpose

The United Nations and Sport: A Record of Engagement

The United Nations' engagement with sport is neither new nor incidental. From the General Assembly's revival of the Olympic Truce in 1993, through the appointment of the first Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace and the creation of a dedicated UN office in 2001, to the formation of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace in 2002 and the General Assembly's now biannual resolutions on sport, the United Nations has progressively recognised sport as a practical instrument of development, peace and human dignity. The proclamation of 2005 as the International Year of Sport and Physical Education, and the decision in 2009 to grant the International Olympic Committee Permanent Observer status, marked sport's movement from the margins to a recognised place within multilateral practice.

A normative architecture matured alongside that recognition. The General Assembly proclaimed 6 April as the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace in 2013; the 2030 Agenda affirmed sport as an important enabler of sustainable development in 2015; UNESCO's Kazan Action Plan in 2017 and the UN Action Plan on Sport for Development and Peace linked sport policy directly to the SDGs and to the integrity of sport. Across the system, agencies have embedded sport in their mandates: UNESCO in physical education, anti-doping and integrity; UNHCR in the inclusion and protection of displaced people; UNODC in the prevention of crime and corruption; the WHO in physical activity; and UN Women in gender equality, to name a few.

Sport's own institutions have moved closer to this agenda, including through the IOC and FIFA's partnerships with UN bodies on development, integrity and safeguarding. UNITAR offers dedicated work in sport diplomacy, delivering tailored institutional-level capacity-building projects designed to strengthen organizations' engagement with the field. This White Paper builds on that record.

Purpose

The FIFA Men's World Cup 2026™ cycle provided a pivotal inflection point. Football, and sport, is understood as far more than a spectacle; it is also a platform for different levels of diplomacy, including city-to-city engagement, public representation and people-to-people exchange. The question is therefore not whether sport matters, but how sport diplomacy can be used and governed credibly.

Participants at the Summit recognised the field has an image problem. Too often, sport diplomacy is misconstrued in discussions or policy as falling outside of an organization's mandate or purview, or associated with symbolism, short-term visibility or even "sportswashing". This White Paper aims to shift sport diplomacy from perception to practice: from soft messaging to tangible outcomes.

As convener, UNITAR and the wider UN system works with partners to align sport initiatives with recognised policy frameworks, including the SDGs. This role is not regulatory. The UN does not govern sport; it helps align initiatives, build capacity and connect institutions that may not otherwise work together. This White Paper is therefore an expression of this mandate.

The White Paper posits that alignment alone is not enough. Three questions should govern any sport diplomacy initiative: what value is being claimed, who is responsible for delivering it, and how will outcomes be tracked over time? The shift from advocacy to implementation is the decisive test.

Initiatives pursued for visibility rather than substance can erode the credibility they seek to create. The Summit's conclusion is that mega events and sport engagements should be judged by substance, accountability and measurable outcomes, not by profile alone.

Central to the White Paper and the Summit outcomes is the importance of women's participation. Women's sport should be understood as a core indicator of inclusivity. The same is true for people with disabilities, displaced communities, and other marginalized groups, where sport's convening value is often greatest.

3. Sport Diplomacy: Dialogue Between Peoples and Nations

Sport is increasingly recognised by governments as a deliberate instrument of foreign policy as well as development. Governments are using sporting assets – leagues, athletes, and competitions – to build soft power, open diplomatic channels, project national identity and support wider goals on trade, development, security and human rights [SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions]. Dedicated sport diplomacy strategies position sport as a coordinated tool of external action, aligning sporting exchanges with national objectives.

Sport is neither inherently good nor bad. It can enable cooperation, inclusion and mutual understanding, or, if poorly governed, exclusion and misuse. Sport's diplomatic value lies in its application of the fundamental qualities of diplomacy: representation, communication and negotiation. From there, it offers common ground in politically complex environments and a shared language for youth engagement, diaspora relations, city-to-city cooperation and confidence-building. That potential is realised only through credible design, governance and delivery.

CASE STUDY · Asia-Pacific: Sport Diplomacy as National Strategy

Australia and New Zealand have set out dedicated sport diplomacy strategies that locate sport within their international relationships, pairing sporting ties with development, trade and people-to-people objectives, particularly across the Asia-Pacific. This illustrates how a state can move the field from *ad hoc* initiatives to a structured, resourced and accountable part of diplomatic practice.

A newer strand of practice goes further, treating sport as part of commercial statecraft: a vehicle not only for goodwill and cultural exchange, but also for trade promotion, investment attraction and long-term economic partnership around global sporting cycles. In this emerging commercial approach, dialogue between governments increasingly travels alongside structured business missions, investment platforms and long-term sector partnerships linked to tournaments and event cycles, with success measured not just in visibility but in agreements signed and projects delivered [SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth].

Sport diplomacy may most effectively be built on legitimate partnerships, realistic objectives and local ownership, with youth, diaspora, women and under-represented groups involved from the outset [SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities]. Symbolism is not enough. Engagement must be substantive, impartial, accountable and capable of being measured, and that accountability needs to cover both social outcomes – inclusion, protection, participation – and economic outcomes – trade, investment and decent work.

Some of the most durable sport diplomacy operates below the state level. People-to-people, city-to-city, and club-to-club engagement offers a dynamic complement to formal diplomacy, rooted in shared heritage, fan identity and people-to-people relationships. Such partnerships can open pathways into trade, investment, education and cultural exchange that formal channels may reach more slowly [SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals]. Cities and regions that approach this systematically are emerging as “sport diplomacy hubs” (Barcelona, Boston and Manchester in particular were noted during the Summit): investing early in relationships with future host cities, creating permanent platforms for visiting delegations, and using sport as an organising frame for innovation, education and tourism exchanges. This kind of para-diplomacy is currently operating at Games-to-Games scale, notably between Los Angeles 2028 and Brisbane 2032, spanning collaboration between the two organising

committees, the cities of Los Angeles and Brisbane, and the state governments of California and Queensland.

Diaspora communities are among the strongest channels for this work. They are not simply audiences for sport diplomacy; they are co-designers of it, linking host and home societies through language, family and culture. Trade missions now routinely involve diaspora entrepreneurs, clubs and civic leaders as part of official delegations, turning identity ties into concrete social, cultural and commercial partnerships rather than one-off fan moments.

Much of this work begins at community level. Grassroots initiatives can create spaces of trust and coexistence where communities are displaced, divided or under strain. Impact depends on intentional design, trained local facilitators and continuity over time, not one-off events. The FIFA Men's World Cup 2026™ offers a live test of whether host-city and federation programmes can turn sporting affinity into durable people-to-people and economic ties. Treating that moment as a starting point for multi-year exchange – rather than as an end in itself – is the difference between symbolic outreach and sustained diplomacy.

To endure, sport diplomacy needs dedicated institutions that outlast individual events and administrations. A standing, non-partisan office at national, regional, or city level, anchored across civic institutions, clubs, universities and sponsors, can shape decisions over value and accountability, while cutting “red tape” to coordinate swiftly and autonomously across stakeholders. The most effective models should operate as public-private platforms rather than single public offices: structurally non-partisan, insulated from budget cycles, and mandated to steward the entire local sport ecosystem – youth development, elite performance, community programmes, technology, and international exchange – between event cycles.

4. Sport as a Legacy Tool: Advancing Development, Peacebuilding, and Sustainable, Inclusive Community Impact

Sport diplomacy and sport for development are mutually reinforcing. The same investments that make sport a vehicle for development – infrastructure, community clubs, trained facilitators, gender-responsive pathways and protection from violence – also make it a credible platform for dialogue, representation and partnership. When communities see concrete social, educational and health benefits from sport, international engagement around tournaments, exchanges or branding rests on real public value rather than symbolism. In that sense, sport for development is not adjunct to sport diplomacy; it is one of its main delivery channels, grounding foreign policy narratives in lived local outcomes.

Mega-events sit at the visible tip of this system. In discussions of major events, the language of “legacy” is routine, but too often remains undefined or unmeasured. For sport diplomacy to be credible, legacy must be treated as a governance issue, not a branding exercise. Its real measure is what remains for the fans, athletes, volunteers, workers and host communities who make sport possible, not the infrastructure alone.

Current evaluation practice privileges economic indicators – visitor numbers, revenues, transport and hospitality income – while giving far less attention to social outcomes such as inclusion, safety, participation and environmental quality [SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being]. Developing robust KPIs that capture the Social Return on Investment (SROI) dimensions, such as health, participation, environmental outcomes, athlete transition and continuity of facilities and programmes, is therefore an essential metric in legacy planning for sport, and especially mega-events.

Practice shows that legacy depends less on whether structures are permanent than on how they are planned. Single-use venues with no afterlife can become liabilities. What matters most is that legacy is prioritised at the outset of a major event, not as an afterthought, connecting investment to community needs and creating structures for local accountability. Communities should be engaged from “minute zero” in defining priorities, outcomes and success, so that legacy is community-led rather than imposed [SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities]. If sport diplomacy is to be more than symbolic, legacy must be one of its principal proof points: the means by which claims of dialogue, inclusion and shared benefit are tested over time.

The same principles should guide everyday sport beyond the mega-event cycle. Global frameworks, including the Kazan Action Plan, the UN Action Plan on Sport for Development and Peace, the Commonwealth Secretariat’s Global Sport and Sustainable Development Goals Baseline and Initial Impact Report, and the World Economic Forum’s Sports for People and Planet publication provide the grounding for everyday sport initiatives. They position sport as part of core social infrastructure rather than as a standalone events industry.

CASE STUDY · Football and Displacement – UNHCR

The UNHCR-UEFA Unity Euro Cup brings refugee and local amateur players together, while a symbolic team of players with displacement backgrounds, unveiled ahead of the FIFA Men’s World Cup 2026™, keeps refugee inclusion visible on the global sporting agenda. Both show football’s reach as a platform for protection, belonging and advocacy.

Contributed by UNHCR

For organisations working on the front line, sport for development is first and foremost about everyday safety, cohesion and opportunity. Peace and Sport's experience shows that carefully designed, facilitated and evaluated sport activities can create spaces of "micro-peace" in communities affected by violence or division, provided they are embedded in long-term educational and social objectives rather than short-term events. UNHCR's Sport for Protection approach likewise frames sport and play as part of child protection and community-based protection systems, offering displaced young people safe spaces, trusted adults, psychosocial support and pathways into education and services. These models reframe community sport from optional recreation to an essential social service.

CASE STUDY · Colombia: Youth, Sport and Social Cohesion

In communities affected by violence, sport-based educational programmes have helped create protective environments for young people, strengthen social ties and offer alternatives to exclusion. It is a reminder that legacy includes social resilience, and that impact depends on sustained, well-facilitated programmes rather than one-off events.

Contributed by Peace and Sport

International federations are also beginning to hard-wire community value into how they plan and certify facilities. The International Canoe Federation's "triple-pillar" venue model treats economic viability, social impact and environmental responsibility as equal requirements, positioning safe access to water as a public good that supports recreation, community sport, environmental stewardship and even emergency-services training alongside elite competition. This approach illustrates how sport infrastructure can function as everyday social and resilience infrastructure, not just event-driven capital.

If sport is presented as a platform for diplomacy and dialogue, what communities gain after the event is part of how that claim will be judged. Legacy should therefore be planned before an event, measured in terms communities recognise, and sustained for years rather than weeks. Inclusive access to sport, particularly for women and girls, should be designed in from the start, and the everyday performance of local sport systems – who participates, who feels safe and included, and what life chances are created – should be treated as a standing indicator of whether sport is genuinely serving development and diplomacy goals [SDG 5: Gender Equality].

5. Sport, Culture and Entertainment

Football is one of the world's most powerful cultural and entertainment platforms, but the principle extends across all sports. Major competitions, global broadcast moments, athletes' voices, iconic venues and fan communities all help shape international perceptions, forge emotional connections and project soft power in ways that traditional diplomatic channels rarely achieve.

The FIFA Men's World Cup 2026™ demonstrates the scale of this convergence between sport, culture and entertainment. The tournament's official multi-artist global music album has already generated hundreds of millions of streams across major platforms, while football will stage its first-ever World Cup Final Half-Time Show. The performance at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey on 19 July 2026 – featuring an international compilation of artists – is a testament to how sport, music and live broadcasting is united into a single global cultural moment, reaching audiences at scale. This cultural pull gives sport diplomacy convening power, public resonance, and fan engagement value.

Culture is the meaning sport carries; entertainment is the experience it delivers. Competitions and broadcasts shape how nations, cities and communities are seen. Players, ambassadors, coaches, fans and broadcasters are carriers of soft power, and their reach must be matched by authenticity, inclusion and substance.

Sport also sits within a wider creative economy, intersecting with music, film and television, visual arts, fashion and design, history, literature, landscape and language. This connective power increasingly plays out through digital and social media, streaming platforms and the creator economy. Storytelling formats, from podcasts and broadcast documentaries to long-form digital and streaming content, increasingly shape how athletes, clubs and nations are understood internationally, often reaching audiences that traditional diplomatic or cultural channels do not reach.

CASE STUDY · City-Level Sport Diplomacy: Newport County & Athletic Club Bilbao

A fan-driven shirt collaboration, rooted in the 1937 arrival of Basque child refugees in the Newport area, grew into a lasting connection between two communities and helped catalyse a broadened Welsh-Basque Memorandum of Understanding.

Athletes, clubs and federations in particular leverage this effectively, reaching global fan communities directly through first-person storytelling. Online fan communities, including supporters who follow clubs and national teams from abroad, are themselves a form of everyday digital sport diplomacy, sustaining belonging and identity between major tournaments. Used responsibly, with attention to authenticity and the risk of commercialised or manipulated narratives, these channels extend cultural diplomacy's reach well beyond official communications, especially when sporting connections are woven through these cultural strands and shared through digital and social media.

A compelling example is the global success of the “Welcome to Wrexham” docuseries. While documenting the extraordinary rise of Welsh club Wrexham AFC through the English football pyramid, the series has simultaneously become an effective instrument of cultural diplomacy. By introducing global audiences to Wales' people, language (*Cymraeg*), heritage and stunning landscapes, it demonstrates how sport, storytelling and entertainment can combine to strengthen national branding, tourism interest and international soft power.

Major events increasingly use the host environment itself, not only the competition, as a cultural canvas. Heritage sites and emblematic public spaces can be activated strategically to frame sport

within a wider narrative of place, memory and identity. In this sense, major events do more than showcase athletic performance: they draw on architecture, landscape, design, music, visual culture and local traditions to create a richer diplomatic and cultural effect. Endurance and road events achieve a comparable effect through motion rather than staging: aerial and drone coverage of the Tour de France – filmed continuously across three weeks of racing – functions as a moving showcase of regions, towns and landscapes, reaching an estimated audience of hundreds of millions and projecting culture, heritage and place to international audiences who might otherwise never encounter them.

Both models point to the same lesson for sport diplomacy: where an event is staged, and how it is filmed, can carry as much cultural and diplomatic value as who takes part.

CASE STUDY · The Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games

Sport was woven directly into Paris' historic fabric: beach volleyball beneath the Eiffel Tower, fencing and taekwondo inside the nineteenth-century Grand Palais, equestrian and modern pentathlon events in the gardens of the Château de Versailles, and an Opening Ceremony staged along the Seine past Notre-Dame and the Louvre. The effect was to present Paris itself, the “City of Light,” as the Olympic stage, with heritage and place doing as much cultural and diplomatic work as sport.

At its core, sport's cultural and entertainment power lies in its capacity to bring people together. Shared cultural experiences around sport, whether in a stadium, a public fan zone or on a shared screen, create moments of connection, belonging and dialogue that cut across social divisions, within and between communities, cities and countries [SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions]. UNESCO's 2025 World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development reaffirmed culture's role in peacebuilding and social cohesion as a matter of multilateral priority; sport, as a universally legible cultural form, offers one of the most accessible routes into that agenda.

The cultural landscape is also widening. E-sports, competitive gaming and gaming culture more broadly are emerging channels for people-to-people engagement and storytelling, particularly among younger and more digitally native audiences. Their diplomatic potential and governance implications, highlighted by the International Olympic Committee's continued exploration of Olympic-recognised e-sports formats, merit dedicated research.

Sport's cultural and entertainment dimension is an asset to be mobilised, but also governed, and not just enjoyed: its central value lies in the logic of inclusion, authenticity and long-term relationship-building that underpins credible diplomacy elsewhere in this paper.

6. Artificial Intelligence, Data and Fan Engagement

Artificial intelligence and digitalisation now run through almost every part of sport: how clubs and competitions engage fans, scout and assess performance, run operations, safeguard integrity and make commercial decisions. Although fan engagement gives this section its name, AI's footprint in sport is far wider – reaching scouting and talent identification, performance and player development, integrity and day-to-day operations – and the diplomatic stakes attach to all of it. Few technologies have moved from curiosity to boardroom priority as quickly. For sport diplomacy, this matters because digital engagement, representation, trust, and access increasingly determine how sport connects communities across borders, and how credible that connection appears. Used responsibly, these tools deepen engagement, sharpen analysis, widen access and strengthen security and human dignity; used poorly, they deepen inequalities, reduce transparency, entrench bias and erode trust.

Fan engagement is not only monetisation. Sustainable engagement depends on credibility, belonging, and transparency regarding how data is used, how digital communities are shaped, and what supporters receive in return. Handled with care, data-led engagement is itself a positive force for sport diplomacy. It can connect diaspora audiences to home and host societies, surface and celebrate underserved communities and athletes, and turn passive audiences into participating communities. Personalisation that helps a supporter in one country follow a club, an athlete or a women's competition in another is, in miniature, the people-to-people connection that sport diplomacy seeks to build at scale. The same principles apply offline, where sport's social value is most directly experienced by communities, local institutions and broader social systems.

SPOTLIGHT · Democratizing Access: Community Connection and Talent Visibility

AI-assisted capture and content tools are extending high-quality analysis and visibility to athletes and communities that previously went unseen. Automated cameras and individualized highlight reels allow grassroots clubs, school programmes and under-funded women's competitions to give every athlete a record of their performance and the opportunity to be seen through online platforms on a global digital stage by scouts and recruiters – historically a privilege of well-resourced elite teams. Used with human oversight, informed consent and impact assessment, these tools bridge the gap for distant families, deepen belonging for fans and families and create new, locally rooted commercial value that feeds back into the organization. The diplomatic dividend is access: technology that helps sport reach, recognize and connect communities it once overlooked.

Contributed by Hudl

Despite the rapid integration of AI into fan engagement, AI carries distinctive risks, including entrenching bias, unequal access, and the erosion of trust. AI systems learn from the data they are given; where that data is partial, the model reproduces and amplifies its gaps – including through the way systems are prompted and instructed, not only how they are trained. Much commercial, scouting, performance and fan technology is trained on data drawn from where the cameras, budgets and audiences already are: disproportionately wealthier, men's competitions and Western markets. The result is that women's sport, smaller nations and athletes from under-represented regions are represented less faithfully. Left unchecked, AI tools can quietly entrench discrimination and the very exclusions that sport diplomacy exists to overcome [SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities].

There is also an issue of access. The cost, data and expertise that advanced AI requires threaten to widen the gap between well-resourced clubs, federations and nations, and everyone else. If the benefits of AI accrue only to those who can already pay, sport's digital divide will track and deepen its

existing inequalities. Making tools, knowledge and literacy accessible and affordable across all levels of sport – from grassroots and community programmes to national federations – is therefore not an act of charity but a governance priority and a condition of credibility [SDG 4: Quality Education].

Similarly, opaque data use can lead to an erosion of trust. Supporters, athletes and communities are increasingly asked to share data – biometric, behavioural and personal – without clear visibility of how it is collected, used or protected. AI also fails in ways that are easy to miss: systems can produce confident output that is partly fabricated, and a recommendation that is roughly right but quietly wrong is more corrosive to trust than an obvious error. Where data flows are opaque and outputs unaccountable, the legitimacy on which sport diplomacy depends is the first casualty.

At the same time, AI and data are not only governance challenges within sport; they are becoming instruments of sport diplomacy in their own right. The same platforms that create risk can map fan and diaspora conversations across borders, show where engagement is building or eroding, make insight digestible for practitioners who are not data specialists, and lower the cost of analysis for organizations that could not previously afford it. Building the bridge between human expertise and modern technology – and ensuring people actually cross it – is where the opportunity lies. AI is, therefore, both something to be governed and a capability to be used well, and sport diplomacy is unusually well placed to define what “used well” should mean.

SPOTLIGHT · Talent Identification: When Data Leaves People Out

The risks are equally concrete. Scouting and talent-identification systems trained predominantly on data from Western, well-funded, men’s sport can systematically under-rate or overlook athletes from under-represented regions. Recruitment tools relying on open-web sources have also been shown to generate confident but fabricated outputs, undermining the trust they were meant to build. The lesson is not to abandon the technology but to govern it: representative data, transparent auditing of who is and is not seen, and a human kept firmly in the loop on consequential decisions.

Contributed by the Centre for Sport & Human Rights

What responsible use should look like in practice can be stated plainly. Supporters and athletes should be able to understand how data about them is collected, used and shared, and how AI-assisted decisions are reached. Those deploying higher-impact systems should set and report targets for who their data includes, and audit for bias in both directions, since crude over-correction introduces unfairness of its own. AI should assist rather than decide where impacts are significant, with an accountable person responsible for consequential calls on selection, wellbeing and integrity. Data should be collected with informed consent – especially for children and young people – handled securely, and owned within clear governance structures. These expectations align with the cross-cutting principles set out in Section 8 and with established instruments, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct. They are also being translated into sport-specific guidance: Australia’s Guide for Responsible AI in Sport, developed by the Australian Sports Commission with CSIRO, adapts a national AI safety standard to the realities of community and high-performance sport and offers a practical model that others can build on.

Approached this way – focusing on the rights of athletes, fans and communities, and treating inclusion, literacy, democratization and access as the test of credibility – AI becomes not a threat to sport’s diplomatic value but one of its strongest enablers, helping sport reach further and, crucially, think deeper, not just faster.

7. Building Sport Diplomacy Capability: Athletes, Officials and Institutions

Each of the preceding agendas depends on people who can act effectively across sporting, diplomatic, commercial and cultural settings. Yet many of sport's most visible international representatives, athletes, coaches, administrators and governance professionals, operate on the world stage with little formal preparation for the diplomatic and cross-cultural dimensions of their roles. Capability is what makes this framework deliverable.

A priority is to embed sport diplomacy within the training of diplomats and international officials, which naturally falls within UNITAR's mandate as the training arm of the United Nations, building on its multilateral diplomacy training and customized sport diplomacy work [SDG 4: Quality Education].

In this spirit, future work should look towards the development of a UN-aligned competency framework to address the breadth and depth of the actors from the elite realm of diplomacy and sport to the grassroots. This could define recognised skills, competencies and foundational knowledge domains for sport diplomats, supporting the professionalisation of the field [SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth]. In addition to practical abilities such as negotiation, communication and representation, sport diplomacy actors need a grounding in core domains including history, politics, economics, international relations, sport governance, human rights, gender equity, cultural agility, and AI and data literacy. Current and former athletes and coaches who bring a clear sense of purpose, integrity and drive emerge as sport diplomats in the making when they combine lived sporting experience with this broader understanding of the contexts in which they operate.

SPOTLIGHT – Athletes as Sport Diplomats: Building Capacity for Lasting Impact

Athletes possess a unique combination of visibility, performance-based credibility and lived experience that enables them to influence sporting, diplomatic, commercial and cultural arenas while maintaining a powerful connection to communities. Athletes who are willing to engage in sport diplomacy are increasingly calling for tailored mentoring to help them navigate this role effectively. Realising their potential requires such support throughout their careers, alongside meaningful opportunities for engagement and partnerships with civil society and the private sector. When supported by enabling systems, athletes can translate sporting excellence into trust-building and lasting social impact.

Contributed by Peace and Sport

Capability is institutional as well as individual: governments (especially Ministries of Foreign Affairs), federations and leagues should consider dedicated sport diplomacy positions and portfolios so that capability is institutional and sport diplomacy projects are designed and owned autonomously [SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals]. Where these actors lack the capacity to design, fund and deliver development projects, trusted intermediaries can bridge sport bodies, governments and communities. Many of those who participated in the Summit represent organizations that are global reference points in this field; well-placed as implementing partners for sport diplomacy initiatives.

8. Cross-Cutting Governance and Integrity Framework

Sport's diplomatic, developmental, commercial and technological functions are interconnected. The task is to increase mutual awareness and align them under a framework that supports legitimacy, inclusion, measurable impact and responsible innovation.

Relevant reference points include the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct, particularly where commercial actors and technology are involved.

The following cross-cutting governance and integrity principles are proposed:

Legitimacy by design. Sport-linked initiatives should be designed with credible partners, local participation and clear public value.

Shared responsibility. Governments, international organisations, governing bodies, clubs, practitioners and commercial partners should understand and accept their distinct responsibilities.

Transparency and trust. Stakeholders should be able to understand how decisions, benefits and data flows operate across sport-linked initiatives.

Measurable impact. Policy commitments and programmes should include proportionate indicators and follow-up mechanisms.

Long-term stewardship. Event-linked initiatives should be governed beyond the tournament cycle and supported by practical continuity structures.

Responsible innovation. AI and data use in sport should be fair, accountable and subject to human oversight where impacts are significant.

Capability and people. Sustainable practice depends on developing the skills of those who represent and govern sport internationally.

Inclusion and portability. Projects should be inclusive, responsive to cultural sensitivities as well as gender, age, disability and other intersecting forms of inequality, and globally portable.

9. Action Framework and Stakeholder Roles

Principles must be distinguished from actions. The items below are follow-on steps, chosen for their deliverability and alignment with the paper's focus.

Priority Action 1 · Develop a Sport Diplomacy Competency Framework and training pathway

Action	Develop, building on UNITAR's Executive Diploma in Sport Diplomacy, a UN-aligned Sport Diplomacy Competency Framework and voluntary training pathway for diplomats, officials, federations, leagues, athletes and other representatives of sport.
Related principle	Capability and people
Key stakeholders · indicator of completion	Key stakeholders: government ministries, federations, leagues, player unions, academia and relevant partners · Indicator of completion: framework published and a first training or accreditation cohort piloted.

Priority Action 2 · Produce a diplomatic legacy planning roadmap for sporting events

Action	Produce a Diplomatic Legacy Planning Roadmap and Checklist to help organisers, federations and host authorities plan, deliver and measure the long-term community and diplomatic legacy of sporting events from the earliest stages, supported by associated training activities.
Related principle	Long-term stewardship
Key stakeholders · indicator of completion	Key stakeholders: organising committees, federations, governments, host authorities, universities and communities · Indicator of completion: a published roadmap piloted and trained on.

Priority Action 3 · Develop inclusive digital and AI literacy and access support

Action	Develop inclusive digital and AI literacy and access support where technology affects trust, representation, participation and the credibility of sport's public and cross-border engagement.
Related principle	Responsible innovation
Key stakeholders · indicator of completion	Key stakeholders: sport bodies, clubs, confederations, player organisations, technology partners and civil society · Indicator of completion: guidance or modules published and initial access-support activity delivered.

Priority Action 4 · Establish a sport diplomacy coordination mechanism

Action	Establish a coordination mechanism for sport diplomacy activity and impact, supported in the first instance through recurring global convening and light-touch follow-on working structures.
Related principle	Measurable impact
Key stakeholders · indicator of completion	Key stakeholders: governments, governing bodies, cities, universities and civil society · Indicator of completion: convening(s) held and a proportionate reporting mechanism agreed. Funding and accountability model to be developed.

Priority Action 5 · Establish a legacy and sustainable impact award and benchmarking mechanism

Action	Establish a Legacy and Sustainable Impact Award and benchmarking mechanism to identify, assess and recognise strong practice in how sport delivers lasting social, environmental, economic and community benefits.
Related principle	Measurable impact
Key stakeholders · indicator of completion	Key stakeholders: organising committees, federations, host authorities, governments, universities, civil society and community representatives · Indicator of completion: assessment criteria agreed and a first award and benchmarking cycle launched.

Priority Action 6 · Pilot a host-city sport diplomacy network

Action	Pilot a host-city sport diplomacy network for future mega-sporting events, testing the standing, non-partisan public-private model described in §3 across two or three host cities paired with international counterpart cities. The aim is to steward sporting relationships beyond tournaments and to convert host-city and technical engagement into durable people-to-people, cultural and economic ties.
Related principle	Legitimacy by design; long-term stewardship
Key stakeholders · indicator of completion	Key stakeholders: host cities and counterpart cities, clubs, universities, sponsors, diaspora organisations and civil society · Indicator of completion: establishment of host-city partnerships, each with a light shared-governance arrangement and a defined work programme.

10. Non-Binding Pledge

Participants in the World Cup Diplomacy Summit recognise sport's power to convene communities, institutions and nations, and affirm a shared intention to support continued collaboration across sport diplomacy, inclusion, community engagement and the capability of those who represent and govern sport. Participants support practical follow-on work to strengthen governance, measurable impact and the responsible use of technology. They regard this White Paper as the first iteration of a continuing process, to be carried forward through dialogue, refinement and future editions, workshops and impact case studies.

11. Conclusion

Sport's power lies not only in its global popularity, but in its ability to bring institutions, communities and individuals into dialogue around shared experience and common purpose. That power carries responsibility.

This White Paper proposes a practical, principle-based approach. With credible governance, capable people, measurable actions and sustained working structures, sport can contribute meaningfully to dialogue, diplomacy and inclusion in a rapidly changing world. It is offered as a first step and a foundation for continued collaboration, not as a final word.