

Martial Arts for Socially Vulnerable Youth Development: Going beyond the Heartfelt Narratives...

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Introduction

By organising the *Global Martial Arts Forum 2024*, the ‘International Centre of Martial Arts for Youth Development and Engagement’ (ICM) aims to disseminate, share and expand the role and values of traditional martial arts by enhancing their visibility and raising awareness to regard them as living heritage. More specifically, with its central theme ‘Martial Arts as Living Heritage: Its Past, Present and Future’, the forum is meant to illustrate how martial arts can contribute to addressing various issues in modern society and to promote mutual exchange and cooperation for their sustainable development.

As a researcher with a long track record on investigating the social and developmental potential of martial arts, and also as a long-time martial artist, I strongly believe in the relevance of these objectives. I am therefore honoured to have the opportunity to share some of my thoughts on these matters. For this keynote address, I have chosen to focus on one topic only, but a very important one that has received much well-deserved attention by ICM, namely ‘Martial Arts and Youth Development’. And while many studies have investigated the developmental benefits of martial arts practice to youth in general (e.g., Theeboom et al., 2009; Theeboom, 2012; van der Kooi, 2020; Vertonghen et al., 2010, 2012a-b), research has also been conducted on the effects of martial arts for so-called youth ‘at-risk’, also referred to as youth in a socially vulnerable situation (e.g., Draper et al., 2013; Harwood et al., 2017; Harwood-Gross et al., 2021; Theeboom et al., 2008). In my presentation, I will focus on this latter group.

For a better understanding, I will clarify the core concepts of this topic, starting with the specific target group I am considering here. And while there are several definitions of the concept of ‘social vulnerability’, the key assumption is that it refers to an accumulation of negative experiences and contacts with official societal institutions leading to an unfavourable societal position. In a more general sense, several factors have been described that characterise this position (e.g., level of poverty; lack or limited access to resources such as information, knowledge and technology or to political power and representation; lack or

limited social capital, including social networks and connections; vulnerable residential settings; ...) (Cutter et al., 2003).

One group of young people which fits the description of being in a socially vulnerable situation is generally referred to as (young) NEETs ('Not in Education, Employment or Training'). Although a recent report from the 'International Labour Organization' (ILO, 2024) showed that post-COVID 19 pandemic employment recovery has improved the global labour market outlook for young people in the last four years, young people in certain regions and many young women are not seeing the benefits of this recovery. For example, in the Arab States, East Asia and South-East Asia and the Pacific, youth unemployment rates were higher in 2023 than in 2019. It is stated that the number of young NEETs (15- to 24-year-olds) is concerning as they count for 20.4 % globally in 2023. It is also alarming to know that two in three of these NEETs were female. ILO cautions that the continuing high NEET rates and insufficient growth of decent jobs are causing growing anxiety among today's youth. This is in line with research reporting that social vulnerability negatively affects various aspects of a young person's quality of life (e.g., Martineli et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2021; Souza et al., 2019).

Challenges and opportunities

Looking at the United Nations 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDG's), it is clear that most of these goals are very relevant to those living in a socially vulnerable situation. At various levels claims have been made that sport can play an important role in helping to achieve the SDG's (e.g., IOC, 2021; Lemke, 2016). And like many other sports, martial arts have also been regarded to have the potential to contribute to sustainable development in general (e.g., Gabriel, 2022; Hayhurst, 2013). Over the years there has been an increase in the number of organisations and programmes, both locally and internationally, using martial arts as a means to reach out and work with young people in a socially vulnerable situation. Today, initiatives can be found in a wide variety of settings (e.g., school physical education, after-school programmes, community centres, sport clubs, social/youth work, special youth care, employment agencies, juvenile detention centres) and focusing on various developmental outcomes (e.g., physical fitness and health; moral and cultural education; social inclusion and community engagement; employability/soft skill development; emotional and psychological development including post-traumatic stress disorder treatment; academic and career support;

gender equality; intercultural dialogue; conflict resolution; substance abuse rehabilitation; prevention of radicalisation, crime, violence and sexual abuse). This is surely a positive evolution. But while the international martial arts community (i.e., practitioners and officials) has strong positive beliefs about this potential, providing convincing proof to a wider public is challenging. There is a need to go beyond anecdotal evidence with heartfelt narratives of (often personal) success stories. Moreover, although studies have reported various benefits of martial arts practice for youth in general and for those in a socially vulnerable situation (e.g., positive changes in behavior, self-esteem and emotional regulation; social skill development), various critical remarks can be made regarding the research methodologies that are used and the quality of the evidence provided. These comments are in line with those that have been pointed out by a number of scholars (e.g., Tacon, 2007; Taylor et al., 2015) relating to studies that have attempted to measure the social impact of sport in general. Among other things, the criticism relates to the use of a very generic perspective on sport with a lack of insight into differential effects of different activities and on different sub-groups of the population; a lack of clear definitions of measurable outcomes; limited duration of programmes under investigation; limited testing of causality as most studies used cross-sectional analyses; no focus on the strength and duration of the effects or on the effects of frequency, intensity and duration of the sport participation and the use of anecdotal data from unrepresentative samples instead of relying on measurements with validated scales. Critical remarks have also been made by scholars (e.g., Hermens et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017) on the reported evidence of empirical evaluation studies regarding sport's developmental value for youth in a socially vulnerable situation (such as the absence of information on the logic and rationale of programmes and interventions which were presumed to lead to the expected social outcomes). It should be noted that all of these above-mentioned factors impede robust evaluative research. I will argue that this lack of robust analysis of process and outcomes illustrates that too often the acclaimed added societal value of sport, in this case the martial arts, are regarded as 'self-evident'. According to some authors, this can also be explained because many impact studies and monitoring and evaluation strategies are primarily intended to prove the success of their own programmes (e.g., Coalter, 2010; Hartmann et al., 2011).

As this forum is meant to illustrate how martial arts can contribute to addressing various issues in modern society, we need to ask ourselves how to do this in a sound and convincing way. In order to do so, I see (at least) four challenges. And as I will explain next, most of

these challenges relate to issues of clarity and realism. Apart from discussing these issues, I will also explore opportunities how to deal with them.

Challenge 1: *“Martial arts ... are we talking about the same thing?”*

The first challenge relates to the use of the broad term ‘martial arts’. Because of the wide variety of styles, disciplines, schools, etc. (e.g., regarding geographical / cultural origin, technical or historic characteristics, basic principles, ...), using a generic term makes it difficult to always ensure a clear understanding of what is meant. Several scholars have therefore discussed and reflected on this variety, often resulting in a form of classification of various types and disciplines. However, the variation does not only relate to the type or discipline of martial arts, it can also refer to the objectives and/or formats that are used. For example, in the past I distinguished three approaches of martial arts practice: a ‘traditional’, ‘sporting’ and ‘efficiency’ approach (Theeboom et al., 1995). I argued that each approach varies with regard to the nature of interactions between teacher (or coach) and students and the kind of goals set forward. In the ‘traditional approach’, I indicated that the preservation of traditions (such as techniques and rituals) is a primary objective. In addition, I referred to the holistic characteristic of this approach having a focus on unity and coordination between internal (e.g., philosophical, spiritual, mental) and external (e.g., physical) elements in practice. In the ‘sporting approach’, I referred to martial arts primarily as sports for recreational purposes or for participation in sports competitions. The variety of fighting skills is then restricted to what is allowed according to specific competition rules. And lastly, I identified what I called an ‘efficiency approach’ which emphasises effectiveness and application of the techniques in a fight or combat. Martial arts are then mainly practised for self-defence (or military) purposes. But when looking back at the distinction between these three approaches I made many years ago, I now doubt whether it covers the whole spectrum. For example, where to position martial arts for developmental purposes? Should this be a fourth approach as it requires an adapted format? I will come back to that later on. But what about the fact that a typology of different approaches might oversimplify reality as it seems to rule out combined approaches. In fact, this also relates to the term ‘traditional martial arts’. The difficulty in defining traditional martial arts arises from their diversity, the evolution of practices over time, differing cultural interpretations, and the complex interplay of physical, philosophical, and modern elements. In other words, the term ‘traditional martial arts’ can

mean many things for many people.

So my point is that we must realise that using a broad generic term as ‘martial arts’ (or ‘traditional martial arts’) might create confusion. In fact, the same can be said for other general terms we often use, such as ‘sport’ for example. More than once, sport is regarded by many as primarily a competitive activity. After all, it is how the media often portrays it. But when looking, for example, at how the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace (2003, p1.) has defined it, a much broader perspective is uncovered. Their definition refers to sport 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*”. I am not sure that an even broader definition can be formulated than this one. And yet, ‘sport’ is a widely used term.

I therefore plea for more clarity (or nuance) when using generic terms as ‘martial arts’ and ‘traditional martial arts’ for that matter. While there might exist a consensus about the meaning of these terms within the international martial arts community (but I am not sure of that), at least it can help in the communication when addressing a broader audience.

Challenge 2: “Martial arts’ added societal value ... what is meant by that?”

A second challenge relates to what societal values are expected to result from martial arts involvement. We know that martial arts are often praised not just for their physical benefits, but also for the broader societal values they instill. But similar to my comment above regarding the term ‘(traditional) martial arts’, when referring to their added societal values, descriptions are very general and therefore open to diverse interpretations. More clarity about their actual meaning is recommended. The following questions, among others, should be asked more often, such as “*What are these added societal value(s) exactly?*” and “*What specific role can martial arts play to contribute to these values?*”.

Regarding the first question, as mentioned before, a wide range of added societal values related to martial arts practice have been reported (e.g., improved physical and mental health, discipline and self-control, respect and humility, self-confidence, conflict resolution, cultural awareness, ethical and moral development, social inclusion and community building, ...). In turn, these are all very generic terms, still leaving a lot of room for interpretation. In addition, some of these added values are interconnected, while other acclaimed outcomes relate to specific contexts or target groups. This is surely the case when claims are made in reference

to participants in a socially vulnerable situation. For example, when referring to the added value of using martial arts to improve the situation of young NEETs, the emphasis will be primarily on their level of ‘employability (soft) skills’. Examples of these skills are, among others, improved ‘perceived self-efficacy’ (i.e., the belief in one’s own ability), ‘self-esteem’ (i.e., the positive or negative orientation toward oneself), teamwork, etc. But when the added value of martial arts involvement is considered in relation to youth offenders, for example, outcomes such as discipline and self-control, respect, personal and social responsibility, conflict resolution, ethical and moral development, etc. will likely be emphasised more.

Regarding the second question, which relates to the specific role martial arts can play to contribute to these values, two different roles can be distinguished in line with literature on the use of sport in so-called ‘Sport-for-Development’ initiatives for young people in a socially vulnerable situation. In this context, Coalter (2007) identified two approaches which he labelled as ‘sport plus’ (‘sport+’) and ‘plus sport’ (‘+sport’). In the sport+ approach, sport is regarded as the primary activity and is used explicitly as an ‘experiential learning context’ aimed at producing individual developmental outcomes for participants (e.g., sport sessions intended to develop social skills, environmental awareness, etc.). In the +sport approach’, sport is used as a means to attract hard-to-reach groups (as a ‘fly paper’ or ‘hook’). Sport is then primarily used as a recreational side activity within more general developmental (social inclusion) programmes. The sport activities in this second approach can also help to facilitate positive contacts and social relationships between organisers and participants (e.g., emancipatory youth work practices using sport to connect and build relationships with youth). But the main difference between both approaches lies in the way how sport is used (in this case, martial arts) to work towards added societal values: as an ‘experiential learning context’ or as a ‘side activity’ in a larger developmental programme mainly to attract participants. It should be noted that a sport+ approach requires a specific (adapted) use of martial arts. Although ‘regular’ martial arts practices will in most cases lead to the development of added values, such as improved physical and mental health, expecting more specific social outcomes (e.g., soft skills) to occur, is simplistic - to say the least. Assuming that martial arts involvement will automatically result in these outcomes by mere participation, undermines the theoretical underpinnings of how most of these social outcomes can be developed. In most cases, there is a systematic and explicit approach necessary to ensure the development of these outcomes. This means that adaptations to martial arts

delivery (i.e., activities and guidance) are needed to facilitate learning outcomes. Using an ‘active learning by doing’ approach and reflecting on the experience facilitated by the coach or teacher, will likely be more effective. A systematic method that can be used for this purpose is Kolb’s ‘Experiential Learning Theory’ (ELT) (Kolb, website). According to ELT, it is not enough for participants to just listen to the teacher, watch demonstrations or read specific information to acquire new knowledge. Each participant should actively engage in an experience designed to illustrate a particular issue. The focus lies in drawing conclusions and learning lessons based on concrete experiences. ELT consists of a 4-step learning cycle which includes ‘Experience’, ‘Reflect’, ‘Think’ and ‘Act’. According to Kolb’s theory, this cycle is so natural that participants engage in it without being aware that they are learning.

However, the process is intentional, which means that the coach or teacher needs to create specific situations facilitating specific experiences (reactions, feelings, ...) for the students in line with (mostly) predetermined learning objectives. By afterwards reflecting on these experiences (mostly in group), then thinking more analytical about them (i.e., conceptualising and forming new ideas or altering current understanding) they are encouraged to implement their new ideas during new activities designed by the coach, resulting in new concrete experiences that can trigger the beginning of a new cycle. A general rule in learning by experience is that learning can only occur when reflection is done in a systematic way. One of the most well-known theories of reflective practice is Gibbs’ 6 stage ‘reflective cycle’, which includes ‘description’, ‘feelings’, ‘evaluation’, ‘analysis’, ‘conclusion’, and ‘action plan’ (Gibbs, website). In each of these stages specific questions will be formulated by the coach to address other issues. Again, this should all be in line with targeted learning objectives.

So, the point I want to make here is that to create an added societal value as a result of martial arts involvement, an intentional and systematic approach is required. Such an approach is labelled as ‘sport-plus’.

Challenge 3: “Martial arts added societal values ... where is the evidence?”

A third challenge relates to providing the actual evidence regarding the added societal value of martial arts practice. As earlier mentioned, while many claims have been made about the social outcomes of martial arts practice, providing concrete proof of their effectiveness is less convincing. Often, the impact of martial arts involvement is solely evidenced by the

description of personal ‘success stories’. More objective evidence is often lacking, mostly because of the assumption made by many that social impact is (too) difficult to measure. However, we should question ourselves if mere (subjective) stories to illustrate the added societal values of martial arts involvement is (or will remain) convincing enough for a wider audience. Noteworthy is that most personal developmental outcomes (e.g., soft skills) can be measured, such as through the use of (validated) psychometric scales. In one of our more recent projects, we have developed a manual to help practitioners how to measure some of these outcomes for sports-based developmental projects aimed at young NEETs (MONITOR, 2021). However, I need to point out that measuring specific outcomes is only meaningful if causality can be evidenced. In other words, there is a need to establish a direct link between the observed (measured) outcomes and a specific programme or intervention. After all, martial arts participants do not live in a social vacuum and can also be subject to other types of influence (such as through family, friends, social media, (un)expected events, ...) that can result, for example, into changes in attitudes. For this reason, having a clear understanding of what actually takes place during a programme (or intervention) is required. One way of doing this is by developing a ‘Theory of Change’ (ToC), which is a comprehensive description, illustration and explanation of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context (Centre for Theory of Change, website). A ToC maps out what a programme does (its activities or interventions), the nature of such activities and how these lead to desired outcomes being achieved. With a Theory of Change it becomes more acceptable to assume that the identified outcomes are the actual results of a programme or intervention. It will also provide more clarity to outsiders about what happens during a programme and its underlying logic (theory), and as such lays out a basis for more accountability.

Challenge 4: “Can martial arts coaches/teachers live up to the expectations?”

The fourth and final challenge relates to competences of martial arts coaches/teachers to target added societal values. Although I end this presentation with mentioning this challenge, it does not imply that it is of lesser importance. On the contrary, a lot of what has been discussed before will rely on the competences of those delivering martial arts classes and instruction. It is widely accepted that the role of a coach in sports (in this case a martial arts teacher) is crucial for having a successful effect on participants, influencing not only their

performance, but also their overall development. As a result, coaches/teachers are often expected to play a multifaceted role that combines technical instruction with personal development, leadership, and support (i.e., being a mentor, motivator, strategist, leader, psychologist, educator, manager, communicator, health and safety advocate, evaluator, ...). But can we really expect that martial arts teachers are trained to take up all (or most) of these roles? For example, dealing with developmental issues in working with young people in a socially vulnerable situation requires specific expertise. Where and how have martial arts teachers been trained to fulfil these roles in a systematic and responsible way? I have concerns that in order to live up to these expectations, coaches/teachers might go beyond the limits of their own expertise. Ideally, this challenge can be overcome by working in a multidisciplinary team (e.g., in collaboration with a trained youth worker, pedagogue, psychologist, ...), but in reality I fear that this is seldom the case. So, I see a need to provide coaches who want to target added societal values through their practice with a basic understanding of how to use a more systematic approach in delivering their (developmental) programmes. And to help them understand when and where they have to rely on others. To give at least some basic insights into how coaches can be prepared to use sport for personal development of young NEETs, we have recently developed a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) to help those that want to use a sport+ approach in their work (COACH+, website). While the MOOC can be inspirational for martial arts coaches, as it uses a general sport perspective, there is still a need to develop more specific approaches to be used in martial arts. In this context, I like to point out that we are currently in the process of building a facility for an interdisciplinary ‘Martial Arts Expertise Centre’ at our university campus to accommodate and support existing martial arts-based developmental initiatives working with youth in a socially vulnerable situation.

Concluding remark

Despite the growing number of initiatives using the martial arts as a developmental means for young people in a socially vulnerable situation and the strong claims that have been made by the international martial arts community regarding the added societal values of the martial arts, there is a need for critical reflection about these claims and the quality of the evidence that can be provided. As a martial artist, I am convinced of the positive youth developmental potential of martial arts. But as a scientist, it is my moral obligation to stay objective at all

times and only rely on strong and robust scientifically sound evidence of this potential. Using a critical perspective to legitimate the added societal value of the martial arts will not only result in a better understanding of how to design, deliver and evaluate effective developmental martial arts programmes, it will also make a stronger and more long-lasting case to convince a wider audience, including policymakers and funders. Being aware of the above-mentioned challenges and considering the opportunities I pointed out in my presentation, might be one way to proceed.

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