

Born in the Alleys: Informal Football as a Peace Commons in Karachi's "Mini Brazil"

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Abstract

Lyari is the oldest neighbourhood in Karachi and in Pakistan known by the name of "Mini Brazil" for its footballing fanaticism. During the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the area was thrust into the national spotlight, while investment in the sport was starting to take shape. This article would pose the question as to how Lyari's football culture is produced and what does the production of football culture at Lyari contribute to peace? It combines an integrative review of skill acquisition and peace research with secondary analysis of public demographic and violence data and a reflexive field observation. There are 949,878 people in Lyari who live on approximately 6 km² giving them approximately 6m² per person compared to 62 – 325m² per person in formal match formats. Thus the alley becomes the core sporting facility of the neighborhood. Theories underlying Brazilian pelada and theories concerning deliberate play facilitate understanding of how these settings develop skill and motivation, and how cooperative sport contact (CASC) form real but constrained, social bonds. The article introduces the notion of a peace commons to characterize a form of open, self-governed and productive play that yields skill and attachment, as well as peace in everyday life. It suggests that sport for development initiatives must respect this commons as they develop formal pathways, and provides an outline of a framework for protective formalisation and a research agenda that is testable.

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Introduction

During the June 2026 FIFA World Cup, thousands of people sat together to watch the match between Brazil and Japan at the Lyari International Football Stadium in Karachi (Dada, 2026). Mayor of Karachi attended the screening and during most of the match, the giant screen was the only source of light as power was suspended (Jamal, 2026). The fans erupted into jubilation when Brazil netted the match-winning goal in the dying moments of the match (Jamal, 2026). The photograph depicts two points about Lyari that are not often brought together in scholarship: Despite the lack of material wealth, the neighborhood still boasts one of the strongest football cultures in South Asia, long described by the citizens and media as "Mini Brazil" (Dada, 2026; Hasan, 2026).

In Pakistan, Lyari is more associated with violence than football. According to police records, between 2011 and 2017 1,076 persons were killed in Lyari, mostly youths, in targeted killings and police encounters (Rehman, 2023). Scholars of urban politics have written extensively about the gang conflict of those years (Gayer, 2014; Kalia, 2016). In December 2025 it was released in an Indian film Dhurandhar, which garnered a public response from the government

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of Sindh (Images Staff, 2025; Noor, 2025). But Lyari's football culture dates back before this battle and it has outlasted it. An under-15 team, mostly local to Lyari and Malir, won their category in the Norway Cup, a youth tournament with a participation of over 2,000 teams, in August 2025 (Goheer, 2025).

The two streams of literature have no conversation with one another in Lyari. Studies of the neighborhood have focused on gangs and the politics of urban order (Gayer, 2014; Kalia, 2016). Sport for development and peace (SDP) research suggests that a sport's culture should be identified and leveraged as a resource by SDP programs (Coalter, 2013; Schulenkorf, 2012). Both literatures have neglected to ask the question of how such a football culture is produced in the first place and what production of such a culture contributes to peace.

This question is now pertinent due to the speed with which Lyari's football is being formalized. Kakri Ground, being the primary open area of the neighbourhood, provides a continuous open space for recreation and the use of natural light for a very long time. It was rebuilt under the program of the Sindh government and World Bank, and has stands to accommodate 6,000 to 7,000 people and artificial turf is imported (Khan, 2023). It is now known as Lyari International Football Stadium (Dada, 2026). The neighbourhood's most talented children are also recruited into structured pathways in academies and NGO's (Adil, 2023; Goheer, 2025). Such investments not only provide security and legitimation, but also can exclude informal play that has given rise to the culture they wish to foster.

This article first asks the question of how Lyari's spatial and social conditions creates its football culture. It next inquires as to what this process brings to the peace of everyday life and what formalization might do to enhance or diminish this contribution. It is the contention of this article that the football culture of Lyari is an emergent formation of the spatial constraint, and self-organized play and the alley is a peace commons. Peace commons are open, self-governed spaces of repeated play which generate technical skill and attachment to the game, along with everyday peace. Thus, if this argument is valid, sport for development practice in Lyari needs to defend the commons in the process of building formal pathways.

The paper contributes to the literature of SDPs in three ways. It places in dialogue research on skill acquisition with peace studies, the literature of which it rarely engages. It generates new quantitative indicators of the spatial and developmental conditions in Lyari based on public data. It also suggests a model of the peace commons, and a formalization framework with measurable indicators. The article outlines the theoretical framework and method of the case after the background and introduction, and then presents the findings and implications for practice and research.

Lyari Between Violence and Football

Place and People

According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS] (2023b) and Dada (2026), Lyari is the oldest and most densely populated subdivision of Karachi. The 2023 census recorded 949,878 residents on 6 km² of land, up from 661,926 in 2017 (PBS, 2023b). The resultant gross density of approximately 158,000 persons per km² is 27 times the average for Karachi Division and eight times the average of Karachi South District where Lyari is located (PBS, 2023a, 2023b).

The actual density could be anywhere between approximately 146,000 and 173,000 persons/km², depending on the area of the subdivision, as indicated in the census tables. The significant growth since 2017 might also be partly attributable to changes in enumeration; however, neither of these caveats affect the order of magnitude.

In 2010 approximately 70% of the urbanized area in Lyari was dedicated to housing and approximately half of that housing area was katchi abadi, or informal settlement (Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA], 2012). The population is young and linguistically plural, with in 2023 one-third of the population under 15 years and no single mother tongue accounting for more than 27% of the population. Balochi and Sindhi were the largest language groups at 26.3% and 25.0% respectively. The literacy rate for the residents age 10 and above was 68.4% while for the whole of Karachi South District it was 78.6% (Brinkhoff,).

Football in Lyari

History has it that Lyari's connection with seafaring people and the Sheedi, an African-origin community, whose passion for football is deeply rooted in the neighborhood, is responsible for the spread of football in Lyari (AFP, 2026; Ahsan, 2010). According to Dawn, during the period of 1958-1970, half of Pakistan's national team were from Lyari (Dada, 2026). Today, the municipal commissioner of the neighborhood estimates that there are over 170 professional and amateur clubs in Lyari, nearly a dozen of them for girls (Dada, 2026). Residents speak highly of their attachment; a student said that “for us, football is addiction” (AFP, 2026). However, the formal channels have not matched with this vitality as per view of a former chairman of Lyari Municipal Chairman, no player from Lyari is currently playing in the National team (Dada, 2026).

Violence and the Making of Negative Peace

The national reputation of the area of Lyari is due to the gang conflict which erupted in late 2000s and early 2010s (Gayer, 2014). The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) recorded 3251 cases of violent deaths in Karachi during 2013, marking the highest number of such deaths since it began monitoring in 2003, and blamed over 100 of these deaths on the Lyari gang war (“Death Toll Rises,” 2014). Recorded violence decreased following the commencement of a paramilitary operation in September 2013, led by the Sindh Rangers, in which the army and police assisted the operation (Rehman, 2023). The HRCP counted 2,909 violent deaths in 2014, of which 87 occurred in the Lyari gang warfare (“78 Children Among,” 2015). The number of targeted killings reported by the Rangers declined from 965 in 2013 to 9 in 2018 (South Asia Terrorism Portal [SATP], 2020) and according to the Citizens-Police Liaison Committee (CPLC) 363 murders occurred in the entire city in 2019 (Ali, 2021). These series are plotted in Figure 1 along with the milestones in national football governance and in Lyari's football.

This reduction has largely been accomplished with the aid of coercion and in 2014 alone the HRCP identified 594 suspects killed by police and Rangers in Karachi (“78 Children Among,” 2015). The CPLC then saw a surge in murders in 2023 to 645 (Ali, 2024). In Galtung's (1969) words, Karachi experienced a negative peace means that the level of direct violence was

drastically reduced, but the pre-existing structural conditions were for the most part unchanged.

Formalization and Its Fragility

In Lyari, the situation of formal football infrastructure is mixed. There is a letter to Dawn that mentions the construction of the People's Football Stadium in 1996, which took the four training pitches, and that over 20 clubs lost their space (Shahmir, 2023). The same letter expresses worries that community clubs would not be included in the rebuilt Kakri complex if it has to be a membership club. The national governing body has been even more unstable. The Pakistan Football Federation has been banned by FIFA three times for governance failures and third-party interference in 2017, 2018 and 2025 (Al Jazeera, 2022; Geo News, 2025; Inside World Football, 2018). In total, these suspensions were for roughly 21 months, and in April 2026 Pakistan's men's team, with 203rd rank out of 211, was in the middle of the pack of the 211 FIFA nations (Shah, 2026). It is a fact that most of the time there is lack of access to formal facilities all over the country, and according to national human development report 93% of Pakistanis aged 15-29 years have no access to any sports facility (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018). These indicators are summarised in Table 1.

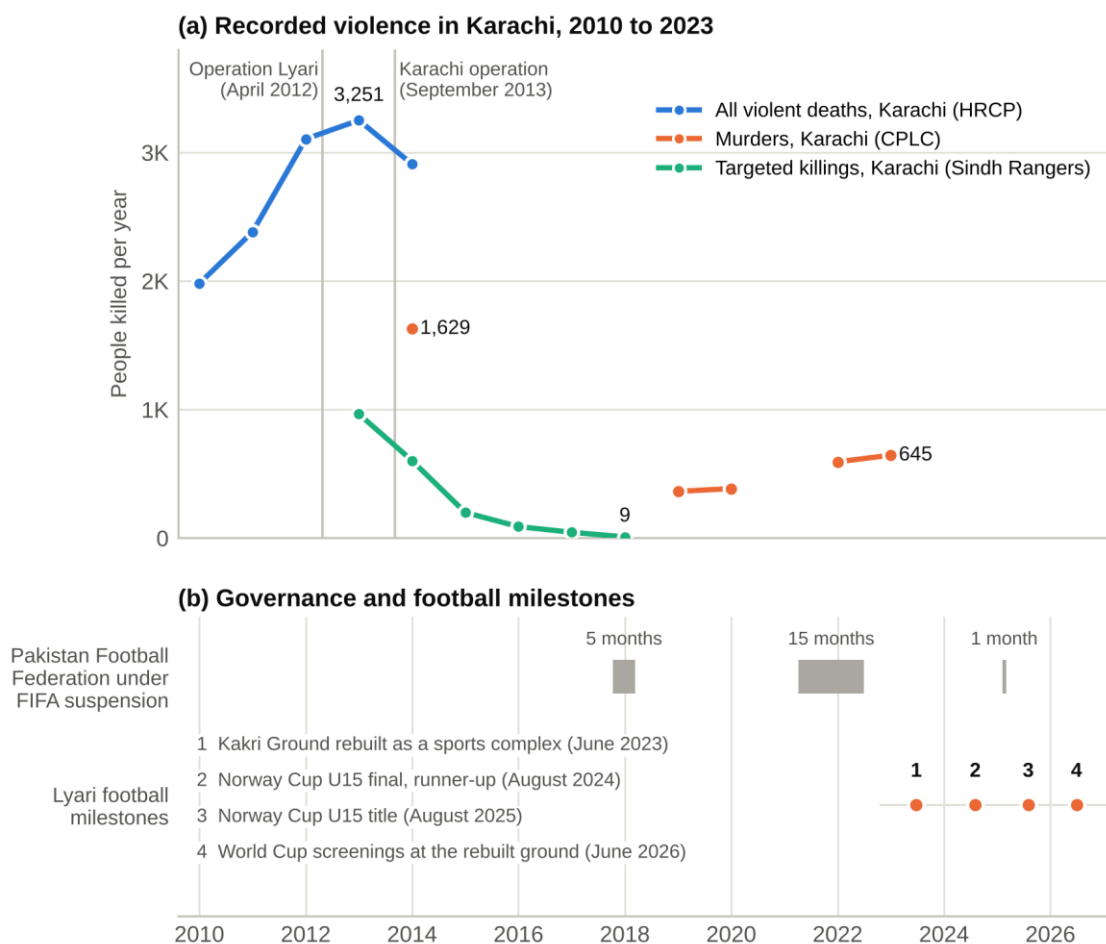


Figure 1. Recorded violence in Karachi and milestones in football governance and in Lyari football, 2010 to 2026

Note. Panel a combines three series with different definitions that should not be read as one time series. HRCP counts of all violent deaths in Karachi are from “Death Toll Rises” (2014) and “78 Children Among” (2015). CPLC murder counts are from Ali (2021, 2024). Targeted killings reported by the Sindh Rangers are from SATP (2020). Vertical

lines mark the police operation in Lyari in April 2012 (Adil, 2023) and the paramilitary operation launched in September 2013 (Rehman, 2023). Panel b shows the periods in which FIFA suspended the Pakistan Football Federation (Al Jazeera, 2022; Geo News, 2025; Inside World Football, 2018) and four milestones in Lyari football (Dada, 2026; Goheer, 2025; Jamal, 2026; Khan, 2023).

Table 1. *Demographic, spatial, violence and football indicators for Lyari*

Indicator	Lyari	Comparator	Source
Population, 2017 and 2023	661,926 and 949,878	Karachi South District 1,769,230 and 2,329,764; Karachi Division 20,382,881 in 2023	PBS (2017, 2023a, 2023b)
Land area	6 km ²	Karachi South District 122 km ² ; Karachi Division 3,527 km ²	PBS (2023a, 2023b)
Gross population density	158,313 per km ²	Karachi South District 19,096; Karachi Division 5,779	PBS (2023a, 2023b)
Land per resident, all uses	6.3 m ²	Karachi South District 52.4 m ² ; Karachi Division 173.0 m ²	Calculated
Residential share of urbanized land, 2010	About 70%, half of it katchi abadi	n/a	JICA (2012)
Road network, 2010	153.7 km, 85% local streets	n/a	JICA (2012)
Residents younger than 15	33.6%	Karachi South District 31.8%	Brinkhoff (n.d.-a, n.d.-b)
Literacy, age 10 and above	68.4%	Karachi South District 78.6%	Brinkhoff (n.d.-a, n.d.-b)
Largest mother tongues	Balochi 26.3%; Sindhi 25.0%	n/a	Brinkhoff (n.d.-a)
Deaths in targeted killings and police encounters, 2011 to 2017	1,076, mainly young people	n/a	Rehman (2023)
Deaths in the Lyari gang war, 2013 and 2014	More than 100; 87	All violent deaths in Karachi 3,251; 2,909	“Death Toll Rises” (2014); “78 Children Among” (2015)
Football clubs	More than 170, about 12 for girls	n/a	Dada (2026)
Youth without access to a sports facility	n/a	Pakistan, ages 15 to 29: 93%	UNDP (2018)
Men’s national team, FIFA ranking, April 2026	n/a	Pakistan 203rd of 211	Shah (2026)
Federation under FIFA suspension, 2017 to 2025	n/a	About 21 months in three periods	Al Jazeera (2022); Geo News (2025); Inside World Football (2018)

Note. Land per resident is total area divided by population and includes all land uses. PBS reports subdivision area in whole square kilometers, so Lyari’s density may range from about 146,000 to 173,000 persons per km². The growth from 2017 to 2023 may partly reflect changes in enumeration. n/a = not applicable or not available. PBS = Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. JICA = Japan International Cooperation Agency. UNDP = United Nations Development Programme.

Theoretical Framework

The Alley as a Task Constraint

Ecological dynamics considers skill as something that happens as a result of the interaction between the performers and their task and environment (Araújo et al., 2010; Newell, 1986). Here constraints not only constrain performance but also focus exploration on specific solutions. In this tradition, practice design then involves the manipulation of space and/or

number of players rather than the imposition of technique (Renshaw et al., 2019). Araújo et al. (2010) championed the idea of expertise, demonstrating that it can be achieved in an unstructured and, in some cases, an aversive environment - that it does not need to be the product of a structured programme.

Uehara et al. (2018) investigated this claim using Brazil's informal pick-up football, *pelada*. Based on participant observation and interviews with 13 individuals with extensive experience of football in Brazil, they describe a game, which is organized by the players themselves on streets and makeshift fields. Teams are formed as per the 'no rules' principle and all-age mixing, with whoever that turns up being part of the team. The ethic of the street was encapsulated in one interviewee's rule: "if you don't see blood there is no foul" (Uehara et al., 2018, p. 171). The authors suggest that these conditions have contributed to the development of the skills for which Brazilian football is renowned, but warn that *pelada* is only one of the restrictions and it may also have negative affordances for less able players.

Small sided games controlled studies suggest the same mechanism. According to the results of a systematic review of 37 studies, the reduction of the format and relative area per player leads to a greater increase in most technical actions (Clemente & Sarmiento, 2020). In one training study, smaller sided players (aged around 13) playing on a 25 × 15 m surface made more short passes and dribbles than larger sided players who played on a 40 × 30 m surface. They also increased the number of tackles and goals scored (Katis & Kellis, 2009).

Deliberate Play and Its Limits

The Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP) clearly differentiates between deliberate play and deliberate practice (Côté et al., 2009). Deliberate play is play which children have organised and managed for themselves and for the sake of the play itself. Deliberate Practice: It is systematic, intentional, and hard work that a coach plans to enhance performance. The model suggests that during the sampling years, between 6 and 12 years of age, when the amount of deliberate play is high, intrinsic motivation is developed and participation is sustained (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). The early engagement hypothesis was developed following the discovery by Ford et al. (2009) that those who played football in the elite youth system who eventually went on to play professionally had more football playing experience in the age range of 6-12 years.

The evidence associating either type of activity to elite performance is, however, mixed. A metaanalysis of 34 studies showed that deliberate practice accounted for 18% of the variance in overall sports performance, but only 1% of the variance in the sports performance of elite athletes (Macnamara et al., 2016). In a subsequent meta-analysis of 6,096 athletes, top international athletes were shown to have engaged in more childhood multisport participation and less early sport-specific training than those who were nationally ranked. The same study revealed that play led by youth had little to no impact on performance across all ages (Güllich et al., 2022). A case for informal play can therefore not rely on talent production alone and is more firmly grounded on participation and motivation as well as personal and social development, which the DMSP considers to be outcomes in themselves (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014).

Self-Governed Play as Civic Practice

In a third group of work, the self-regulated games of children are seen as a school of social order. When Piaget (1932/1965) observed children at their play with marbles, he discovered that older children developed the understanding that rules were agreements that could be modified by mutual agreement. Devereux (1976) compared backyard baseball to formal play in the Little League and insisted that the loss of the responsibility for negotiating rules and resolving disputes inherent in informal play impoverished children's baseball when played in the formal setting of the Little League. In the Robbers Cave experiment, Sherif et al (1961) demonstrated how competition between established groups of boys created hostility and how cooperation in achieving mutual goals decreased hostility.

Ostrom (1990) demonstrated that communities are able to govern shared resources in a sustainable manner when they are able to create their own rules, and when they have the ability to enforce them. Alley game may be read as a small commons of this type. The common resource is a limited amount of public space and a limited amount of time – before the traffic starts or the night sets in. Institutions, rules that players agree to and enforce among players.

Everyday Peace and Collective Effervescence

Galtung (1969) distinguished negative peace – which is absence of direct violence – from positive peace – which is absence of structural violence. In contrast, Mac Ginty (2014) focuses on “everyday peace” – the mundane patterns of avoidance and “bearable” relations that divide people, without day-to-day conflict. This is because of the familiarity and harmlessness of the practice. Looking at the bottom-up, Firchow and Mac Ginty (2017) contend that this type of peace should be gauged using indicators that the communities themselves define.

Contact theory provides one mechanism by which play can lead to peace. Allport (1954) suggested that prejudice can be decreased by intergroup contact, and a meta-analysis of 515 studies later a strong relationship between contact and prejudice reduction has been found (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Sport is a familiar context for such contact, but the impact will vary depending on the form of contact (Lowe, 2021; Mousa, 2020).

Collective ritual provides another mechanism. Páez et al. (2015) tested the concept of collective effervescence in four studies of collective gatherings, as described in Durkheim (1912/1995). Participation led to an increase in collective identity, social integration, positive affect and collective efficacy; this was mediated by the perceived emotional synchrony among participants.

The Peace Commons

These literatures refer to a concept that is not named. In this article, I argue that a peace commons is an open, self-governed space of repeated play that yields both technical skill and love for the game, and everyday peace. There are three properties that characterize such a commons. All of this is accessible, membership is fluid, rules are drawn up and enforced by the players and behaviour is repeated and largely cooperative between age-classes and generations. Where these properties are present, the nature of the activity that teaches a child about first touch also teaches him or her how to negotiate with near strangers and learn how

to lose at something without complaining. Given that the three are joint products of one activity, if a programme captures one of the goods it may lose the other two.

Method

Design

The study adopts a convergent design that involves three sources of evidence. The first is an integrative review of research about skill acquisition and about sport and peace (Torraco, 2005). The second is a secondary analysis of public data from Lyari and Karachi and the third is a reflexive field observation of the lead author (Anderson, 2006). The review provides mechanisms and the secondary data provide the situation within which these mechanisms would function in Lyari. The observation provides a contextually based verification of the interpretation.

Literature

Studies were selected purposively and not picked up through a systematic search. Randomized experiments and natural experiments were given preference, as were meta-analyses, given their ability to make the strongest causal inferences. The skill acquisition strand was based on research on pelada and the DMSP and controlled research of small sided games. The peace strand was based on the contact theory and field experiments in divided or post-conflict contexts. Findings that contradict the argument are deliberately sought and recorded with supporting evidence and the findings of the peace strand are summarised in Table 2.

Secondary Data

Demographic indicators come from the census tables of 2017 and 2023 (PBS, 2017, 2023a, 2023b) and from a compilation of the 2023 census results (Brinkhoff, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Data on land use was obtained from a transport master plan drawn up for the city (JICA, 2012). Violence indicators are based on HRCP tabulations of violent deaths reported in the national press and CPLC tabulations of murders. The data on targeted killings is taken from a regional conflict database (SATP, 2020), while the death toll in Lyari is based on police records of the deaths (Rehman, 2023). Note that the violence series are not continuous, and should not be read in this way, as they are defined differently. Data on governance is derived from FIFA's decisions as communicated in the press and data on access of young people to sport is collected from the national human development report (UNDP, 2018).

The following two indicators were developed for this study. The term “Land per resident” refers to the area of an administrative unit divided by its population and “relative area per player” is the area of a pitch divided by the number of players on it. Relative area per player was determined for a regulation sized pitch (105 × 68 m) as well as the two small sided formats employed by Katis & Kellis (2009). To make the comparison, a futsal court measuring 40 x 20 m was added. The proportion of football hours spent in play was calculated from the group means presented by Ford et al. (2012).

Field Observation

In June 2026, the lead author was a spectator for a public World Cup viewing in Lyari. He did not conduct any formal interviews and did not record any information which would identify any individual. The observation is interpreted as an evidence of reflexivity that can be used to illustrate and question the argument but not establish it. The lead author is a doctoral student from outside of Karachi, who had developed a mostly mediated notion of Lyari's violence. This stance determined what he saw, and it is recorded in such a way that readers may be able to assess it.

Ethics

The study used only publicly available data and the observation of a public event, and no personal data were collected.

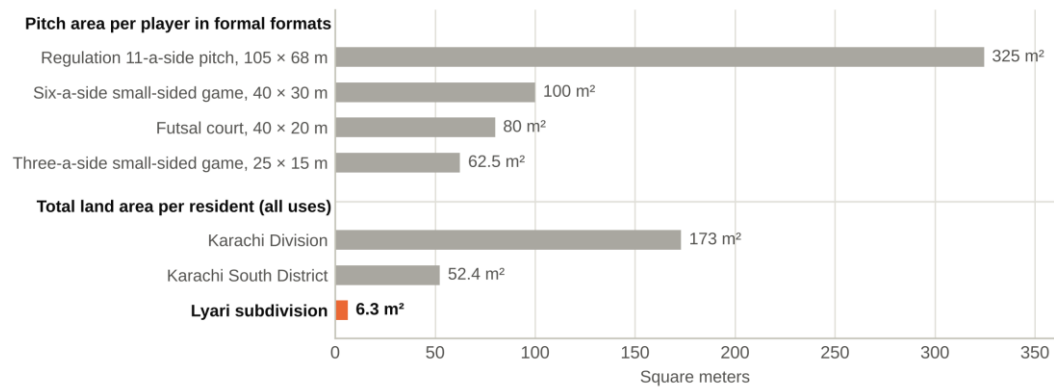
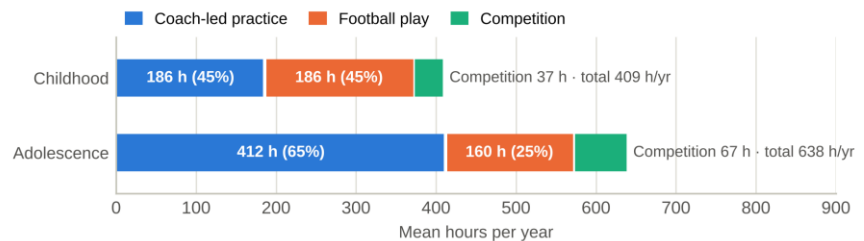
Findings

Space: The Alley as Sporting Infrastructure

The land is in high demand in Lyari. If the total area of the subdivision is divided by the population in 2023, it results in an average of 6.3 m² per person for housing, roads, markets, etc. In comparison, the corresponding values for Karachi South District and Karachi Division are approximately 52 m² and 173 m², respectively (Table 1). Formal football demands much more space as the regulation pitch has a surface area of 105 × 68 m (or approximately 325 m² per player) and even the three-a-side variant studied by Katis and Kellis (2009) provides 62.5 m² per player. So the total area per person in Lyari is approximately one tenth of that of the smallest of these formats that is to be provided for each player (Figure 2a). Only a small proportion of this land is open, so the play space is much smaller.

This shortage has two implications. The first is that the street rather than the pitch is Lyari's main sporting infrastructure. The subdivision is crisscrossed by a road network of 153.7 km with 85% being local streets (JICA, 2012). These lanes are used by children for play, as well as any open ground in corners. Young boys were seen by a reporter playing in the corners of the stadium with 'kickabouts' even at the World Cup screening of 2026 (Dada, 2026). The second consequence is that the street puts the kind of spatial restriction that research relating to small sided games links to a high technical action density (Clemente & Sarmiento, 2020). Local accounts also make the connection between narrow lanes and a little passing and dribbling (Hasan, 2026).

The situation is not only local, but also national, as 93% of young people in Pakistan do not have access to a sports facility (UNDP, 2018). Thus, for most of the children of Lyari, the alley is not alternative to a formal facility, it is the only facility they are provided with. This discovery is not a proof of more skilled players in Lyari as yet no research has been conducted to measure the skill in Lyari. What it does is to define the mechanism as plausible in this context and what measurement would be required to test it.

(a) Space available per player or per resident**(b) Developmental activities of 328 elite under-16 players from seven countries****Figure 2.** *Space and time in the formation of Lyari's football culture*

Note. Panel a compares pitch area per player in formal match formats with total land area per resident in Lyari subdivision, Karachi South District and Karachi Division. Pitch dimensions are a regulation 105 × 68 m pitch, the small-sided formats of Katis and Kellis (2009) and a 40 × 20 m futsal court. Land per resident is total area divided by the 2023 census population and includes all land uses (PBS, 2023a, 2023b). Panel b shows mean hours per year of coach-led practice, football play and competition reported by 328 elite under-16 players from Brazil, England, France, Ghana, Mexico, Portugal and Sweden in childhood and in adolescence (Ford et al., 2012). These players began football at about age 5 and entered elite academies at about 11 or 12.

Time: Play and Practice in the Academy Transition

Ford et al. (2012) documented developmental activities of 328 under-16 elite players from seven different countries including Brazil and Ghana. These players reported playing football at home for as much time as they spent in coachled practice, with a mean of 186.0 hours per year and 185.7 hours per year respectively, during childhood. During adolescence, once the majority had progressed to elite academies at the age of 11 or 12 years, the amount of practice increased to 411.9 hours per year and the amount of play decreased to 159.7 hours per year. This reduced the percentage of football time in play from approximately 45% to 25% (Figure 2b).

This change is the hallmark of formalization and it is now touching Lyari. Better Future Pakistan scouts in Karachi and select the players through background check and trials (Goheer, 2025). Karachi United has 11 community centres in the city, the majority of which are located in low-income neighbourhoods like Lyari and Malir. Twenty-two of the 26 boys in its under-11 and under-12 squads on a recent tour to Qatar came from these two areas (Adil, 2023). There are tangible gains in these programmes as Karachi United has tried to keep its players in school and one such instance was when a boy (Adil) from Lyari was taken in by a drugs dealer and the team moved the boy and his mother to the hostel.

The danger is not coaching, but the time and extent of formal training. The lane was an incubator for talent that the pathway may simply be eating up as academy hours take over

from the times spent in the lane. This evidence described above indicates that the impact would be lower on elite performance as compared to broad participation and to the social learning that informal play offers (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014; Güllich et al., 2022).

Peace: What Self-Governed Play Adds

Table 2 summarizes the strongest available evidence on sport and peace, and three findings stand out from it.

Cooperative sport contact transforms attitudes towards those with whom one plays a game or sport. Following the defeat of IS, Moua (2020) randomly chose some Muslim players and put them into Christian amateur football teams in northern Iraq. When it came to giving an award for 'sportmanship', Christian players with Muslim teammates were 26 percentage points more likely to vote for a Muslim player from the opposition. After six months the likelihood that they were training with Muslims increased by 49 percentage points. Most activities outside football and general attitudes toward Muslims were not affected by these impacts.

Secondly, sport can unite or divide, depending on the structure of contact. Lowe (2021) conducted a 1,261-player field experiment in Uttar Pradesh where some teams were mixed and others were homogeneous by caste. The cross-caste friendships rose by roughly a third when players played on mixed-caste teams, but fell when players were forced to play with random opponents from other castes.

Thirdly, shared spectatorship can expand the scope of identification beyond a descent group. Interviews with survey respondents in sub-Saharan Africa just after a key national team win found they were 37% less likely to identify primarily with their ethnic group than respondents who were interviewed just before a key national team win. They were also more likely by 30% to trust people from other ethnic groups. Depetris-Chauvin et al. (2020) found that the countries with teams that narrowly made the Africa Cup of Nations had 9% fewer conflict episodes in the months after the tournament than did countries whose teams narrowly missed out.

The findings from the meta-analysis are nonetheless cautionary. Overall, there is no association between participation in sport and juvenile delinquency (Spruit et al., 2016), but designed sport programs are moderately associated with crime outcomes, with high levels of heterogeneity between studies (Jugl et al., 2023). Sport is thus not protective, per se, but can be protective in its organisation.

That's why the organization of alley football is important; this evidence helps to explain. If the game in Lyari's lanes is like pelada, teams are made up of participants and today's adversary is the next team. The adversarial contact of a single match would then be set in the context of collaborative contact in various matches, in Lowe's (2021) words. Real-life disputes would also be decided without referees, the pedagogy that football³ by design reproduces. The Football³ project is a result of the Football by Peace movement in Medellín, Colombia, which began following the death of Colombian defender Andrés Escobar in 1994 (sportanddev, 2022). They have no referee as players agree upon rules in advance and mediators are only involved when players are unable to resolve their own disputes (Gannett et al., 2014). There is an indigenous and unrecognized version of Alley Football in Lyari.

The built environment is intrinsically important for peace. In Medellín the reduction in homicide rates was 66% higher in areas with the cable car and public spending than in similar comparison areas (Cerdá et al., 2012). That investment extended its reach to entire neighbourhoods through new public spaces and lighting, transport, as well as formal investment in Lyari, which has so far been focused on a single enclosed complex.

Table 2. *Experimental, quasi-experimental and meta-analytic evidence on sport, contact and peace*

Study	Setting and design	Main findings	Relevance to Lyari
Mousa (2020)	Northern Iraq after ISIS. Muslim players randomly assigned to Christian amateur football teams in a two-month league.	Christians with Muslim teammates were 26 percentage points more likely to vote for a Muslim player from another team for a sportsmanship award and 49 points more likely to train with Muslims six months later. Little effect outside football.	Contact builds trust within the game. Spillover beyond it needs deliberate design.
Lowe (2021)	Uttar Pradesh, India. Field experiment with 1,261 men aged 14 to 30 in cricket leagues with random team composition and opponents.	Mixed-caste teams raised cross-caste friendships by about a third. Adversarial matches against other castes reduced them.	Team composition decides whether sport bonds or divides. Rotating teams favor cooperation.
Depetris-Chauvin et al. (2020)	Sub-Saharan Africa. Surveys before and after national team matches and a comparison of narrowly qualifying with narrowly failing countries.	After key victories respondents were 37% less likely to identify primarily by ethnicity and 30% more likely to trust other ethnicities. Narrow qualifiers had 9% fewer conflict episodes.	Shared spectatorship can widen identification beyond descent groups.
Cerdá et al. (2012)	Medellín, Colombia. Natural experiment comparing 25 intervention and 23 matched neighborhoods between 2003 and 2008.	The decline in homicide was 66% greater in intervention neighborhoods. Resident reports of violence fell 75% more.	Investment in public space and connectivity can reduce violence at neighborhood scale.
Jugl et al. (2023)	Meta-analysis of 13 controlled evaluations of sport programs.	Moderate effect on crime outcomes ($d = 0.36$) and a larger effect on psychological outcomes ($d = 0.87$) with high heterogeneity.	Designed programs help. Design and context drive results.
Spruit et al. (2016)	Meta-analysis of 51 studies covering 132,366 adolescents.	No overall association between sport participation and delinquency.	Sport is not protective by default.
Páez et al. (2015)	Four studies of collective gatherings including folkloric marches and demonstrations.	Participation strengthened collective identity and social integration and raised positive affect and collective efficacy. Perceived emotional synchrony mediated these effects.	Public screenings can build social integration as well as entertain.

Note. Effects are reported as stated by the original authors relative to their comparison groups. d = standardized mean difference. ISIS = Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

The Screening: A Reflexive Observation

The lead author was present at screening of World Cup in Lyari during June 2026. He was alert and guarded due to the image of the neighborhood he had developed through 10 years of reporting on gang violence. What he found was a crowd which wasn't so much for its numbers but for the people. The kids ran to and fro among the grown-ups, who were engrossed in the game, and the old men who had been playing since their days played stories, as old acquaintances. The screen was almost ancillary to the sociability surrounding the goal as

strangers embraced each other like it was their own. The neighborhood seemed proud and proud of itself, in a manner the author hadn't read about Lyari.

There are two readings of the above literature. As viewed from Páez et al. (2015), it exhibited the perceived emotional synchrony that would make a gathering a place of social integration and collective efficacy. It showed, through the prism of Depetris-Chauvin et al. (2020), identification with a shared object, which transcends lines of descent. The second reading is significant in a community where no single language is spoken by more than a quarter of residents.

There are two bounds that need to be made explicit. This observation is one evening witnessed by one visitor and cannot be taken as an evidence of a general pattern. The event was also male-dominated and a journalist at the same stadium during the tournament described women's presence as "almost entirely absent" (Dada, 2026). There are approximately 12 clubs that the girls play in Lyari and in 2021, national women's championship games were held in the neighbourhood (Anadolu Agency, 2021; Dada, 2026). In South Asian cities, women's access to public spaces is curtailed by concerns of risk and respectability, as shown in the Mumbai research (Phadke et al., 2011). Thus the alley commons is a space with gender, and a common without women is an incomplete common.

Discussion

The Peace Commons Model

The results are summarized in the model shown in Figure 3, which is a representation of the alley commons. The model is based upon three conditions. The lack of adult authority continues deliberate play and intrinsic motivation and spatial scarcity increases the density of ball actions. Intergenerational open joining transforms competition into ongoing co-operation. The products of these processes are technical expertise and love of the game but also peace every day in the form of cross-cutting ties and shared celebration. Goods are joint in that they are produced simultaneously. The third good is ratified by the public screening of the films, which transforms private devotion into a collective identification.

The Formalization Paradox

The Lyari case shows a paradox in that the formal system is the less resilient of the two. From 2017 to 2025, the national federation was under FIFA suspension and the men's team's ranking in 2026 was 203rd out of 211 teams (Shah, 2026). None of these institutions exist in the informal game which has continued through the years of gang conflict – the density of clubs and the World Cup culture of today bear witness (Dada, 2026; Hasan, 2026). So formal investment, which views the informal layer as raw material, is a misreading of the relation because the alley is the infrastructure and the academy is a superstructure which relies on the alley.

This reading also helps to refine a key idea in SDP research. Coalter (2013) and Schulenkorf (2012) consider local embeddedness in culture as a factor that must be analysed and leveraged by programs. The Lyari case indicates that embeddedness is more aptly conceptualized as an ongoing process that identifiable conditions continually create and that the programs in turn

can undermine. This is the most obvious such threat: enclosure of open ground, as happened in the 1990s with the People's Football Stadium and also the Kakri complex rebuilt today.

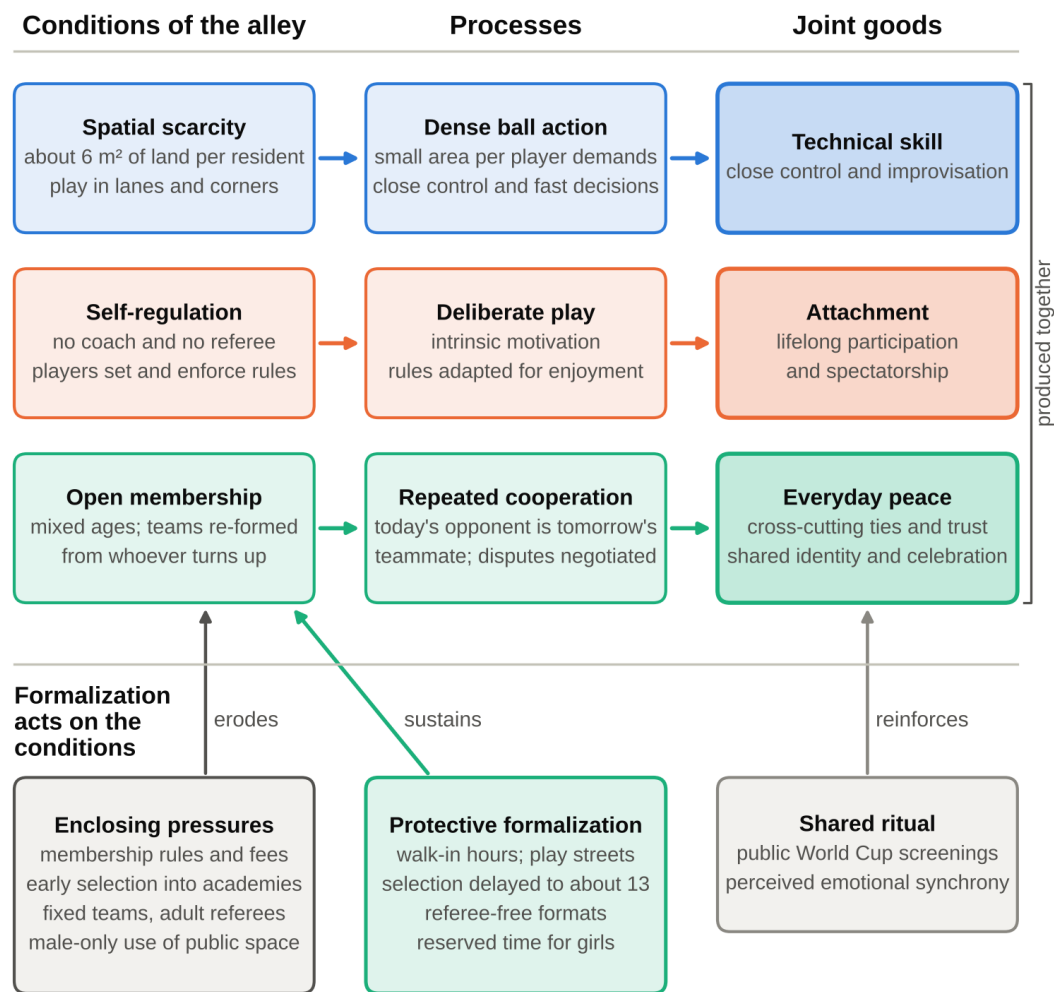


Figure 3. *The alley peace commons model*

Note. The model is a conceptual synthesis of the evidence reviewed in this article. Each row shows how one condition of informal alley football in Lyari drives a process that yields one of three joint goods. The lower band shows how formalization can erode or sustain these conditions. Arrows indicate hypothesized relations to be tested rather than estimated effects.

Protective Formalization

Protective formalization," as this article calls it, is formal investment meant to maintain the conditions that generated the culture it supports. Five principles are presented in Table 3, along with practices and indicators. The first is open access to formal facilities with time set aside for walk-ins. The second one is safe streets - consider lanes as play area, traffic calming and lighting. The third is late selection, which delays selective academy pathways until about age 13 in line with the sampling years of the DMSP (Côté et al., 2009). The fourth is self-governance, the development of referee-free formats and trained young mediators into programmes in the style of football3 (Gannett et al., 2014). Fifth is equal access, setting aside time on the facilities and coaching for girls. For each principle there is a measurable indicator, which can be used to hold programs accountable.

Table 3. *Principles of protective formalization with practices and indicators*

Principle	Risk addressed	Practice	Indicator
Open access	Enclosure of open ground through membership rules, fees or fixed bookings	Reserve free walk-in hours at formal facilities such as the Lyari International Football Stadium	Weekly walk-in hours; unregistered users per week
Safe streets	Loss of street play to traffic danger or to its criminalization	Traffic calming, lighting and designated play streets in residential lanes	Lanes with play-street status; child pedestrian injuries
Late selection	Early specialization that displaces unstructured play	No selective academy contracts before about age 13 and limits on structured hours for younger children	Ratio of unstructured to structured football hours by age from activity diaries
Self-governance	Loss of negotiation and dispute resolution skills under adult refereeing	Referee-free formats with player-agreed rules and trained youth mediators	Share of sessions with player-agreed rules; mediator interventions per match
Equal access	Exclusion of girls and women from public play space	Reserved facility hours for girls, women coaches and safe transport	Girls' share of registered players and of facility hours

Note. The indicators are designed for routine monitoring by program staff. They should be read alongside Everyday Peace Indicators defined by residents themselves, including women and girls (Firchow & Mac Ginty, 2017).

All of this is in line with the 2030 Agenda, which acknowledges sport's role as a key enabler of sustainable development and peace (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). They also react to the Kazan Action Plan on which governments are asked to link sport policy with the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2017). In neighbourhoods where sport has a presence, protective formalization provides a tangible path towards that alignment.

Implications for Peacebuilding in Karachi

The reduction in violence in Karachi from 2013 was largely the result of coercive operations and was in the negative sense of peace as envisioned by Galtung (1969). Increased numbers of murders since 2020 indicates that this peace has been tenuous in the absence of positive underpinning (Ali, 2024). In all subdivisions of Karachi, homicide is associated with male illiteracy and unemployment (Hamza et al., 2021). Football is not able to fix these structural conditions, but the peace commons can provide something that security operations cannot. Establishes daily and voluntary contact, interage/descent, and provides residents with common celebration rituals, and a valued public identity (by the residents). The commons should therefore be viewed as civic infrastructure and be protected as such.

Limitations and Research Agenda

There are five major limitations in the study. All its quantitative evidence is secondary and descriptive and the area of Lyari is given only in whole square kilometers in census tables and so its density and land figures are only approximate. The population increase between 2017 and 2023 could be due to the change in enumeration. The violence series are from various monitors and have different definitions, and the field observation is from one observer. These are the boundaries for future research, and five testable propositions emerge from the argument.

1. Spatial constraint. Lane games in Lyari result in greater number of ball contacts and decisions per player per minute than coached games on formal pitches. This hypothesis could be tested with video analysis or with wearable sensors.
2. Rotating composition. Players in daily re-formed team games are more likely to have cross-group friendships than players in fixed team games. This proposition can be tested using social network surveys, similar to those conducted by Lowe (2021).
3. Displacement. Kids will spend less time playing when they join an academy. This can be tested by retrospective and prospective activity diaries similar to those used by Ford et al. (2012).
4. Open access. Formal walk-in hours keep children not picked for academies engaged. This proposition can be tested by comparing the facilities which have such hours with those which do not.
5. Everyday peace. Positive signs of peace in everyday life emerge in the areas where the commons is safeguarded. This proposition can be tested by Everyday Peace Indicators co-designed with residents which include women and girls (Firchow & Mac Ginty, 2017).

Conclusion

Like Brazil, who gained its footballing fame in the countless hours of free play in too small a football arena, Lyari got its nickname this way. In this article, we have identified and measured the conditions that underlie that culture, and we have seen that they are weak and fragile. The average land per person in Lyari is 6 m², the children play in lanes not on pitches and the players resolve their own conflicts, change teams daily. These conditions generate skill and attachment and in the light of the evidence examined here they also generate the commonality of ordinary experience and commonality of celebration from which peace is built.

This culture was given a national platform in the 2026 World Cup and alongside that formal investment that has the potential to either protect or enclose the commons. The challenge for sport for development practice is to create pathways out of the alley without emptying the alley. That June night in 2026 was a night on which the neighborhood was comfortable with itself—a rare occurrence in the country. Whether that ease will persist may hinge on where and when decisions are made in regard to participants.

Conflicts of Interest

None.

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