THE COFFEES OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

Mel Young

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Bringing New Perspectives to the OECD
Short Bio
Mel Young

The President of the **Homeless World Cup**, Mel Young, is recognised as one of the world’s leading social entrepreneurs by the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship and is a Schwab Fellow of the World Economic Forum. He was named a Senior Fellow by the Ashoka Foundation in 2014.

Mel previously worked as a journalist and co-founded The Big Issue in Scotland in 1993. He also co-founded Senscot (Social Entrepreneurs Network Scotland) and is the former President and Honorary President of INSP (International Network of Street Papers).

He also set up City Lynx magazine and New Consumer Magazine, and worked on a community newspaper in Wester Hailes in Edinburgh in the 1990s.

He is currently the President of the Homeless World Cup which he co-founded in 2003. He is also a non-executive director on the boards of Sportscotland and Glasgow Life, and a member of the World Economic Forum Sports Agenda Council.

He has been awarded three honorary degrees from Scottish universities. He is a lifelong supporter of Hibernian FC and the author of **GOAL! The story of the Homeless World Cup**.

**Twitter:** @homelesswrldcup

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Thank you. It is always a pleasure to come to an Organisation such as the OECD, meet the Secretary-General and then play football in the garden. Despite that fact that the world is innovative and very successful, there is still a huge number of people who are completely excluded and homeless. The United Nations have figures of one billion people who are homeless, I use a figure of 100 million. Whatever the number is, it is far too many, it is dangerous and it is in every country in the world. If you go the US, the richest country in the world, in every major city’s centre you will see people in the streets. This is a real problem and I do not see any reason why in this day and age, with our ingenuity and economic smartness, we should have homelessness at all, why we have created a system in the world where people end up in the streets is completely baffling to me.

So what can we do about this? How on earth can we act in the face of such a daunting figure? My mantra is that if we all do something – one thing – we can create change. So what we decided to do is to create the Homeless World Cup. We currently work with 74 countries around the world and we have one partner in each country. We initially focused on including men, as it was extremely hard to get them off the streets. Now however we also have a very successful women’s tournament as well.

The way we work is we go to the streets where homeless people are, and we ask them if they want to play football. The beauty of football is that it is really simple, anybody can play it and everyone understands it. So when we approach homeless people and ask them if they
want to have a game, they usually say yes. Of course they are all at different levels, some can hardly stand up, but it doesn’t matter, we involve them in the game. Then we ask them to come back the next day at the same time; what we are trying to do – because they live in chaotic lives – is to give them some kind of structure through football. Homeless people’s self-esteem is rock bottom, so we never talk about their state or their situation, we only ask them to play and join a team and we build from that point onwards. We then find out what problems they are facing such as housing, employment, drug abuse, family issues and we start working with them, always using football as a mechanism to go forward.

Once a year we have the annual tournament giving people the chance to represent their own country, our partners also regularly organise neighbourhood and city tournaments. In total, we have over 100 thousand homeless people playing in these leagues every year – and we have worked with over 1 million since we started in 2003. To us, it is critical that this work is about impact. Whilst football is important, it is just an entrée; at the end of the day it is about using football to change people’s lives.

We use a number of catalysts to promote this change. For example, we focus on changing the perceptions of the general public and destroying stereotypes about homeless people; the media is very important in this respect. We also focus on social mobility, so it is critical for us to identify potential leaders among the homeless people themselves. These leaders are often selected as the team captains and they are given a certain amount of responsibility.

Our annual Homeless World Cup last year took place in Glasgow. In fact in the women’s tournament in one of the early games Mexico played against Greece. It was quite a mismatched game in the sense that the Mexican team had a very good skill level while the Greek team was quite the opposite. We decided it would be a good idea to swap the goalkeepers around, it is not something that is normally allowed but we thought it would not matter and in any case Mexico won the game. But the idea behind it was to get the two teams to bond. The players from the two teams did not speak the same language, they had
only just met each other, but by the end of the game they had become very close and had communicated through football.

We often have professional referees volunteering for a week; but in certain cases we also have referees who are former homeless people. In fact, we found out that there are not enough referees in the world. We therefore decided to train a number of homeless people who would be interested in refereeing matches and provided them with referee certificates. By refereeing three matches per week they are able to have a job, some stability and receive a minimum wage. Some of them have even progressed to become full-time referees and they often come back to referee the annual Homeless World Cup. This is a great example showing how football has helped homeless people come out of their negative situation and then come back as leaders to the Homeless World Cup. Our football matches are now also being broadcast live as more and more people around the world are interested in watching them.

We recently had independent research conducted by a company called ProSocial. They focused on the value of our social capital. During the Homeless World Cup in Glasgow in 2016, over the course of one week, our social capital was valued at 13 million US dollars; and at 364 million US dollars over the course of one year. These are astonishing figures for us coming from an independent research company that has a long track record in measuring sponsorship deals in the commercial sector. We have hundreds of stories about players changing their lives. Although many people often say that these may be anecdotal stories, this research shows us the real value of our impact. In New York for example, research shows that one homeless person costs society 40 thousand US dollars per year. If we are able to have an impact on 100,000 homeless people per year around the world then that is a very big amount being saved for society. And we are using a football to create this change.
The Homeless World Cup has been all around the world and cities now bid to host it. The first one was held in Graz, Austria, in 2003. We usually hold the games in small courts, rather than on full-sized football pitches, mainly due to the fact that the players are not physically fit. In addition, homeless people are usually situated near the centre of cities and it would be challenging to transfer them to football pitches, the smaller courts can be created anywhere. We therefore aim to always play in city centres. We have 8-player teams with 4 playing and 4 substitutes, and 7 minutes each half, so a total of 14-minute games. When the teams are good, it is a very fast game, I have seen teams leading by 3 goals in the last 30 seconds of the game, and they concede 4 goals and lose the game. Everyone is playing for the top cup but at the end of the day everyone gets a medal – it is both competitive but also inclusive.

When we began we were not sure whether this project would be a success and many people thought we were quite mad to be doing this, to be taking homeless people around the world on football matches. But three things happened at our first event in Graz in terms of change. Firstly, the players themselves changed. Homeless people are usually looking down, they have very little self-esteem and self-respect. At our event they were looking up and singing their national anthems with huge pride. I often say that these players perhaps should not be singing about their countries, because of the way their countries have been treating them, but they are very proud to wear their national costume and to represent their country. A second change that took place is people came to watch and their views of homeless people changed significantly. Whilst in the beginning of the tournament spectators would be reluctant to approach the players, by the end of the tournament they were asking for autographs – they will never look at homeless people again in the same way. The third change was the media; the world’s media turned up and gave us 100% positive coverage. Normally, media coverage vis-a-vis homelessness is quite negative, but in this case they were portrayed as heroes. But public perception has changed as well. When we visited Cape Town we were saluted by the then President Mbeki. In 2012, we were in Mexico City and in the space of one week, 168,000 people came to see the tournament and Mexico won the final.
So our project is growing around the world and more people are volunteering to come and, crucially, our ex-players are now becoming leaders in this field. David Duke is one of these success stories, he was a homeless man in the streets of Glasgow before joining the Homeless World Cup Scottish team in 2004. He was very inspired by that experience that he decided to get his coaching certificate. That was followed by a community education certificate and then he started to come back as a volunteer before becoming the Scottish team’s manager. Today, he is the CEO of our Scottish social partner and he employs 20 people. He has completely changed his life around and he is an inspiration to everyone around him.

In Mexico City we provided the opportunity for some of the players with the most disadvantaged and troublesome backgrounds to meet and speak with the then first lady as well as Mexico’s richest man. It is these kinds of opportunities that we aim to create and to promote. We try to break down barriers and create connections which can lead to change through football. We simply use football as a mechanism to create understanding rather than a world of silos where marginalised people are not connected. This is how we connect people and it is really quite simple to do. Homelessness and extreme poverty are very complicated processes, but that does not mean that the solutions also have to be complicated.

Sometimes people ask me what our vision is, what our future is. I say that the purpose of our organisation is not to exist because there shouldn’t be any homelessness in the first place. But given the fact that homelessness is a reality, we want to involve more countries, grow, get more sponsors, be more impactful, and to tell the story. Ultimately we want to build an understanding in which we can end homelessness forever. I now pass the ball back to you to ask questions and to do something. Because if each one of us does one little thing, we can change the world.

Thank you.
Question and Answer Session.

**Question 1.** I work for a programme called Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED). Over the past ten years I have worked with many cities around the world, which have used global events – and sporting events in particular – to leverage local benefits. We know bad stories, we are surrounded by them, but the good stories do not actually come out often enough. The opportunity to build a global legacy really is quite meaningful. Last year we worked with the ten cities hosting the Euro 2016 here in France. One of the things that was quite impressive was the social dimension to their approach. However, I never heard homelessness being discussed. Your ideas today provide us with additional information on how we, as the OECD, can leverage our convening power when working with cities and to get them to think about different things, to actually connect with this really important agenda.

**Mel Young.** The whole issue of legacy and sporting events is controversial because some people do not see it as such. I think there are legacies around these events, but I think that some of the measurements in terms of impact could be challenged. For example, how do we quantify the economic benefits? And do they filter down?

**Question 2.** Have you encountered resistance in any countries where you have wanted to hold the tournament? Are the teams mixed or do men and women play separately?

**Mel Young:** When we started out we were mainly focusing on young men, as they were the most difficult to get off the streets. At the time, only about 10% of women would participate so we did have some mixed teams. A few years later we decided to create a women’s event and have women only teams. However some countries still bring mixed teams where 1 or 2 players are women and we allow it. In my experience, some of the women’s games, particularly the finals, are often much more interesting to watch than the men’s games. Also we have noticed that women are much better than men when reintegrating into society; they tend to adopt a collective approach and they support each other better than men do.
Regarding challenges, we encounter them all the time. There are always people who do not want to support us. However, we have also experienced that once people start following the tournament and the matches, they like it; their interest increases and their fears and prejudices disappear. When we began, we spent a long time trying to get an international definition for homelessness but we finally gave up. The way we see it is ‘you are homeless as defined by your country’, so in England you can be homeless in a homeless shelter; but in some African countries, if you have any kind of shelter over your head, then you are not homeless. Some countries completely deny that homelessness exists in their country, they do not even have a definition for it. We have a team from Hong Kong but not one from China because the Chinese government tells us that there are no homeless people in China. And in some countries, police are horrendous against the homeless, in some cases actually killing them.

**Question 3.** How did the idea of setting up the tournament first come up? How did it evolve into a World Cup?

**Mel Young:** I had been working with homeless people since 1993, I started a street paper in Scotland which became successful and we created a network of street papers around the world. In 2001, I was participating in a street paper conference in South Africa, on the last night myself and an Austrian colleague were having a beer and we thought that the conference was a success but it lacked the presence of homeless people, the participants were mostly editors and directors. So we thought that a number of our street paper sellers in our countries actually play football and we could organise them into teams and play some games. We therefore decided to organise a game Scotland vs Austria, so that is where the initial idea came from and next morning at breakfast we decided to take the idea forward.

**Question 4.** The work you are doing is wonderful. It is very important to take these young people off the streets and to give them a purpose in life. But what is the rate of your success? How many of those thousands of homeless people stay in their new lives and how many go back to the streets?
Mel Young. From our measurements, we have a success rate of 80%. A significant number of these people therefore find jobs, housing, quit drugs, go to college and change their lives completely. When we first got these figures it was almost incredible because I know very well what the challenges are. These figures relate to the international events; for the national events they are slightly lower at about 70% success rate, but still very high. But it is often a difficult measure to quantify, it is never linear and it is often two steps forward and one step back. It is also difficult to measure because many people also often hide their stories; they do not want to disclose that they were once homeless, they see it is a dark part of their life. But amazingly we also have hundreds of success stories, many have become professional footballers, others drive buses, others are referees, one player in Brazil became a top chef and recently published a cooking book.

Question 5. I would like to conclude with one question in one word. Why?

Mel Young: First of all, I’m a social entrepreneur. Also, I come from a background in Scotland where we were brought up believing in fairness and in the community. I think the world is grossly unfair and the more I became involved, the more I saw that we have solutions. I am very driven and passionate by this, my DNA is based on practical answers.

All OECD event photos: OECD/Julien Daniel
The Coffees of the Secretary-General is delighted to present:

**Mel Young**

Co-founder and President of the Homeless World Cup

“Homeless World Cup: How Football Can Change the World”