

# Impact Evaluation of Community Sport Programmes and “Sport Social Work Practices”

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## Abstract

Initiatives that employ sport as a means to achieve social objectives span a broad spectrum—from those primarily centred on sporting activities to those closely aligned with principles of social work. This thematic issue, titled “Impact Evaluation of Community Sport Programmes and ‘Sport Social Work Practices,’” reflects this diversity in both terminology and approach. It brings together twelve original contributions that critically examine the design, implementation, and evaluation of such initiatives. Drawing on case studies, literature reviews, and conceptual analyses from a range of global contexts, the issue offers a multifaceted perspective on the role of sport as a catalyst for social change. Particular attention is given to how the impacts of these initiatives can be more effectively understood, assessed, and sustained. The wide range of research questions, programme types, methodological approaches, and target populations underscores the complexity and scope of this interdisciplinary field. Collectively, the contributions demonstrate the potential of sport to serve as a meaningful vehicle for personal and social development, particularly when initiatives or interventions are locally embedded, relationally oriented, and grounded in the lived experiences of participants.

## Keywords

community engagement; evaluation and learning; monitoring; social change; social return on investment (SROI); sustainability; terminology

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## 1. What’s in a Name?

A characteristic feature of innovative initiatives, such as those that are the focus of this issue, is the introduction of new terminology to describe the initiative itself. This tendency is particularly evident in

hybrid initiatives, which connect and combine elements from two (or more) existing sectors or policy domains. Such initiatives are often labelled with compound terms that reflect their dual (or multiple) core characteristics, with the final component of the label typically indicating the sector from which the initiative originated. For example, “community sport” generally has its roots in the field of sport, whereas “sport social work” reflects a social work perspective (for a chronological overview of relevant terminology in Flanders/Belgium, see the contribution by Shana Sabbe and colleagues in this thematic issue).

Whether the intended impact of an initiative can be inferred from its dominant framing—ranging from primarily sportive objectives to predominantly social goals (see also Delheye et al., 2024)—remains an open question. One might also ask whether the proliferation of labels indicates an underlying conceptual ambiguity regarding the aims and impact of this evolving, hybrid policy domain. Although such terminological diversity may pose little difficulty for those embedded in the field, it can be disadvantageous in policy contexts, particularly when funding decisions must be made during times of governmental austerity and geopolitical uncertainty, often in competition with more traditionally prioritised (“hard”) sectors.

In the title of this issue we have intentionally included both “community sport” programmes and “sport social work” practices to illustrate the divergent conceptual foundations and disciplinary entry points these terms represent. While these programmes and practices vary in their structure and context, they commonly depend on the efforts of socially committed staff, volunteers, and increasingly, peer leaders drawn from within the communities they serve. Moreover, what unites them is a shared belief in sport’s capacity to build social capital and foster well-being and personal growth. Despite the shared belief, however, research on the (sustainable) impact—and the necessary conditions for impact—is lagging behind.

For this thematic issue, we therefore invited scholars and sport/social workers around the world to submit articles that increase our insight into impact evaluation. As editors, we have deliberately adopted an inclusive approach, welcoming contributions irrespective of content or methodology, to capture the broad diversity of perspectives and approaches that characterize this field of research.

## 2. Themes and Contributions

After a careful peer review, twelve articles were selected for this issue: one international scoping review and eleven empirical studies conducted in nine different countries (i.e., Belgium, China, France, Germany, Ghana, the Netherlands, Norway, Singapore, and the United Kingdom). The articles cover marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities, sexual and gender minorities, people with disabilities, and houseless individuals. The research approaches that are used are diverse as well. Below, we introduce the contributions of these articles based on five overarching themes found in those articles.

### 2.1. Examples of (Un)Successful Initiatives

Several articles in this thematic issue provide examples of sport initiatives that proved successful in promoting personal and social change through sports. For instance, both Oettle and Greiner (2025) and Nesse et al. (2025) found that participation in a community sports initiative fostered social inclusion and wellbeing among adults affected by poverty and social exclusion (Oettle & Greiner, 2025) and mental health and substance use problems (Nesse et al., 2025). Additionally, both Zhuang et al. (2025) and Li et al. (2025)

observed improvements in personal outcomes among marginalized Chinese youth as a result of their participation in a sport-based social programme. A sense of group belonging and improved self-confidence were shown to be important outcomes of these successful programmes. However, other contributions cast a more critical light on the success of community sport programmes and sport social work practices. For example, Duflos and Nuytens (2025) found in their ethnographic study that weekly physical activities offered to houseless individuals in a French town provided participants with only momentary relief. Furthermore, the study by Ikramullah and Koutrou (2025) exposes that far from all social sports programmes prove capable of meeting their participation targets.

## ***2.2. Addressing Root Causes of Social Exclusion***

Notwithstanding the reported programme successes, many articles highlight the importance of addressing the root causes of poverty and social exclusion to effectively promote social inclusion through sport, and caution against the idea of “sports as an easy or magical fix for everything.” For instance, in the above-mentioned contribution by Duflos and Nuytens (2025), the authors claim that the physical activities did not have a lasting impact because they do not address the underlying issues of isolation and distress among houseless individuals. In addition, Zhang et al. (2025) conclude from their scoping review on gender-related sport for development and peace (SDP) programmes that while some SDP programmes can empower women and sexual and gender minorities, their effectiveness is often constrained by structural gender inequalities.

## ***2.3. Conditions for Success: Inclusive Practices***

Another recurring theme is the mechanisms and conditions for programme success. Several articles in this issue aim to identify these mechanisms, using different frameworks to do so. For instance, Oettle and Greiner (2025) applied the capability approach of Sen (2001) to investigate how long-term participation in a low-threshold sports programme may support adults living in poverty and social exclusion in coping with their challenges. Zhuang et al. (2025) draw, among others, on the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) to better understand the role of sports-based social projects in child development. Nesse et al. (2025) conducted a thematic analysis on their interview data using the Citizenship Framework developed by Rowe et al. (2012) to explore how participation in a community sports initiative contributes to experiences of social inclusion. Finally, Harith et al. (2025) focused on one specific element that can play a pivotal role in programme success, namely, cause champions. From these studies, we can conclude that, on the programme level, conditions for success include the need for inclusive practices, accessibility, and community engagement when promoting social change through sports.

## ***2.4. Conditions for Success: Partnerships and Collaboration***

Other articles examined conditions for success on a policy and organizational level. These highlight the importance of long-term impact, capacity building, and institutional support. For example, Sabbe et al. (2025) studied how local policies and initiatives can be effective in promoting social inclusion through sport in Flanders (Belgium). Their article stresses the importance of collaboration between community organizations, government agencies, and other stakeholders to create sustainable solutions. Ter Harmsel-Nieuwenhuis et al. (2025) studied factors facilitating the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes at the municipal level in the Netherlands and found similar factors of importance. At the national level, Charway

et al. (2025) studied the implementation of sport inclusion policies for persons with disabilities in Ghana. The findings reveal significant disconnects between national strategies and implementation practices. Finally, Ikramullah and Koutrou (2025) aimed to ascertain perceptions on the sustainability of community sport programmes among stakeholders from organisations that received funding in the UK. They found that the sustainability of funded programmes was limited by policy remodelling and the shifting priorities of successive governments. Overall, the articles call for better alignment between grassroots practice and formal policy frameworks.

### **2.5. Evaluation and Assessment**

Across this thematic issue, there is a shared call to rethink how to evaluate impact. While funders and policymakers often prioritise quantifiable outcomes, the contributors argue that qualitative methods—such as participatory action research, photovoice, ripple effects mapping, and digital storytelling—offer more nuanced insights into how sport-based programmes influence lives and communities. These methods appear better suited to capture the intangible, iterative, and often relational nature of social change through sport, as claimed, for instance, by Harith et al. (2025), who studied the resources that enable cause champions to thrive. The contribution of Wilson and Bates (2025) is especially helpful to scholars and practitioners in need of hands-on advice related to impact evaluation. The authors provide an introduction to ripple effects mapping (REM) as an evaluation technique and draw on the case study of a community-based physical-activity intervention within the UK. Finally, both Harith et al. (2025) and Wilson and Bates (2025), as well as other contributors to this thematic issue, emphasize that programme evaluation should not be viewed solely as a means to measure outcomes to justify funding. Instead, they advocate for using evaluation as a learning tool for all those involved to better understand both the implementation process and the outcomes for participants.

## **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this thematic issue highlights the great promise—but also the complexity—of using sport as a vehicle for personal and social change. It reminds us that sustainable impact arises not just from resources, but from relationships; not just from participation numbers, but from participation narratives. Whether through ripple mapping, storytelling, photovoice, or participatory evaluation, the contributors advocate for more holistic and inclusive approaches that value both process and outcome, both voice and vision. As such, the contributions here provide timely guidance for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers committed to making sport not just available, but truly inclusive, empowering, and transformative.

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### **Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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