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EDITORIAL

Open Access Journal

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

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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ARTICLE

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Coping with Poverty and Social Exclusion: Promoting Capabilities Through Long-Term Sports Participation

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Abstract

Poverty and social exclusion (PaSE) are multifaceted challenges that affect individuals across all stages of life, manifesting as financial deprivation, health inequities, and restricted access to social and economic opportunities. Sports participation offers a promising avenue to mitigate these challenges, providing access to health benefits, social connections, and life skills. This study contributes to the limited body of research on sports programmes for adults affected by PaSE by investigating how long-term participation in a low-threshold and diverse sports programme supports them in navigating and coping with their challenges. Drawing on Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) as a theoretical framework, biographical-narrative interviews were conducted with 16 adults who participated in the sports activities of a voluntary sports club (VSC) in Southern Germany for at least one year. The thematic analysis identified three key capabilities fostered through participation: the *capability for better coping with daily life*, the *capability for group belonging and social confidence*, and the *capability to actively shape physical and mental changes*. Crucial conversion factors—such as flexible participation options, reliable programme structures, and a supportive group culture—played a pivotal role in enabling these capabilities and achieving related functionings. By identifying the mechanisms through which the sports programme fosters inclusion and well-being, this study provides deeper insights of how sports programmes can address the complex needs of individuals experiencing PaSE. These findings provide actionable insights for the design of inclusive and long-term sports programmes that empower participants to achieve meaningful and self-determined outcomes.

Keywords

capability approach; health; inclusion; social support; poverty; social exclusion; sport for development; voluntary sports club

1. Introduction

Poverty is more than financial deprivation; it encompasses social exclusion, disconnecting individuals from essential networks, resources, and opportunities, thereby limiting their societal participation, including in sports (European Parliament, 2016; Kronauer, 2010; Levitas et al., 2007). Social exclusion is not merely a byproduct of poverty but a reinforcing cycle that exacerbates marginalisation and isolation. Those affected by poverty and social exclusion (PaSE) face heightened stressors, including higher rates of physical and mental health issues (Apostu et al., 2024; Mackenbach et al., 2008). Illness is both a consequence and a cause of poverty, further deepening cycles of deprivation (Kröger et al., 2015). Unemployment, which affects a significant proportion of individuals living in poverty (Eurostat, 2024), contributes to stress, stigma, and diminished well-being. It also reduces skills, self-confidence, and social connectedness, perpetuating disadvantage (Goffman, 1986; Jahoda et al., 2021; Leonardi et al., 2018; Sen, 2001).

Sports programmes have gained recognition in policy frameworks for their potential to contribute to social inclusion by promoting health-enhancing activities, fostering social connections, and building essential life skills (Council of the European Union, 2020; European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2007; European Parliament, 2016). In the context of adults affected by PaSE, however, social inclusion is often strongly tied to employability goals, with many programmes narrowly focusing on predefined employment-related outcomes and achieving mixed success (e.g., Burnett, 2022; Inoue et al., 2013; Kreuzfeld et al., 2013; Moustakas et al., 2022; Spaaij et al., 2013). These approaches often overlook structural barriers like the labour market demand and primarily target younger participants, excluding groups such as older adults and those with disabilities (Coalter et al., 2020; Eurostat, 2024; Levitas, 1996; Spaaij et al., 2013). This narrow focus limits the broader potential of sports to address the varied needs of adults affected by PaSE.

Within the broader sports system, voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) offer a promising context for fostering inclusion, with their emphasis on social connections and long-term engagement (Breuer et al., 2017; Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2023). Yet, they often remain inaccessible to individuals affected by PaSE. Financial constraints frequently prevent access to membership fees, clothing, or equipment. Physical performance expectations and health-related challenges further restrict participation, while social stigma and fears of judgment can discourage individuals from joining (e.g., Breuer & Wicker, 2008; Collins & Kay, 2014; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Goffman, 1986; Gregg & Bedard, 2016; Oettle, 2025; Vandermeerschen et al., 2017b). These barriers highlight the need for tailored, inclusive approaches to enable meaningful participation.

To better understand these barriers and develop effective responses, a framework is needed that not only evaluates outcomes but also considers the pathways enabling these outcomes. Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) provides such a lens by focusing on the opportunities and freedoms individuals have to achieve valued functionings. Unlike existing studies, which often focus on narrow outcome indicators such as employability, this research applies the CA to analyse both the outcomes of sports participation and the factors that enable their realisation. By examining capabilities, conversion factors, and functionings, the CA provides a lens to explore how sports programmes within VSCs, which offer a set of opportunities, can address the needs of marginalised populations.

beneFit e.V. (beneFit), a VSC based in Freiburg, Southern Germany, provides the organisational structure for this investigation. The club specifically aims to reduce exclusionary barriers in traditional sports settings by

offering a low-threshold, cost-free, and supportive environment. The VSC primarily targets adults affected by PaSE, including those experiencing low income, homelessness, substance dependency, mental health challenges, disabilities, and forced migration backgrounds (beneFit e.V., 2025). Participants are not required to meet specific physical performance standards and are offered a safe space where they can engage in sports without fear of stigmatisation. The programme includes a diverse range of nine weekly sports activities, including dancing, kickboxing, and Nordic walking, alongside occasional social events. By fostering an inclusive and long-term club structure, beneFit aims to tailor its sports programmes to the complex needs of adults affected by PaSE.

This study investigates the following research question: How does long-term participation (with "long-term" defined as a minimum of one year since the first course participation) in a tailored, low-threshold, and diverse sports programme contribute to individuals' ability to navigate and cope with challenges associated with PaSE?

2. The CA as a Theoretical Framework for Evaluating Programmes Addressing PaSE

To examine how long-term sports participation impacts adults affected by PaSE, this study employs Sen's CA (Sen, 2001). The CA shifts the focus of human development from economic measures to the real freedoms individuals have to lead lives they value. By emphasising opportunities and freedoms over predefined outcomes, the CA provides an open framework for evaluating how individuals can pursue meaningful lives despite severe social exclusion. These valued aspects often include access to education, health, and social participation—critical for well-being but frequently out of reach for those experiencing PaSE. Unlike resource-oriented approaches, such as the basic needs approach (Streeten et al., 1981), which measure success by material provisions, or utilitarian frameworks that prioritise aggregate utility, the CA assesses development by exploring the transformation of resources into real achievements (functionings), such as being healthy, forming social connections, or achieving economic security. This shift in perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between individual circumstances and external opportunities. The CA has significantly influenced global development frameworks, serving as the conceptual foundation for the Human Development Index, which integrates education, life expectancy, and income to reflect multidimensional human progress (United Nations Development Programme, 2010). In recent years, this approach has also been applied occasionally in contexts aiming at social development in and through sport (Dao & Smith, 2019; Svensson & Levine, 2017; Zipp et al., 2019).

The CA's analytical framework is built on three key interconnected elements: capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors (Robeyns, 2005, 2017; Sen, 2001, 2010). Capabilities represent the set of opportunities or freedoms individuals have to achieve valuable functionings—beings and doings that they have reason to value. Functionings refer to the actual achievements individuals realise, such as being employed, participating in a community, or maintaining good health. Conversion factors mediate this relationship, influencing how resources and opportunities are transformed into achieved functionings. Unlike Martha Nussbaum's approach with its fixed list of universal capabilities, Sen's CA remains deliberately flexible, allowing for context-specific evaluations—a key strength for analysing the diverse needs of individuals affected by PaSE (Robeyns, 2005).

In this study, the capability set includes opportunities fostered through participation in a VSC. These capabilities may involve engaging in social interactions, improving physical health, or managing daily life

challenges. The extent to which these capabilities can be converted into functionings depends on conversion factors, which encompass personal, social, and environmental elements (Robeyns, 2017). For example, personal health or motivation, social factors such as supportive trainers and group dynamics, and environmental aspects like accessible facilities all could play a role in determining whether a capability is actualised. Simply providing access to resources, such as cost-free participation, does not guarantee meaningful engagement; individual circumstances and structural conditions play a pivotal role (Collins & Kay, 2014).

The CA framework underscores the importance of conversion factors, emphasising how individual contexts and circumstances shape people's abilities to achieve valuable functionings (Garcés Velástegui, 2020). This is particularly critical in VSCs, where interventions often focus solely on reducing financial barriers while overlooking the broader set of factors necessary for meaningful inclusion (Breuer, 2017; Corthouts et al., 2020; Vandermeerschen et al., 2017a). By integrating the CA, this study provides a comprehensive lens to analyse how tailored sports programmes can foster capabilities, address barriers, and illuminate the conversion factors that mediate outcomes for individuals affected by PaSE.

3. Understanding Sports Programmes Within the CA

Sport programmes aimed at enhancing the life circumstances of those affected by PaSE typically fall within sport for development (SfD; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Svensson & Woods, 2017). By applying the CA, researchers in this field aim to understand the multidimensional impacts of sports programmes, focusing on the freedoms and opportunities individuals gain through participation. Research applying the CA to SfD remains relatively sparse but offers valuable insights into how sport can foster capabilities and address barriers for marginalised groups. Studies have targeted diverse populations, from children in Vietnam (Dao & Darnell, 2021) to Indigenous communities in Australia (Rossi, 2015), and highlight the CA's flexibility in evaluating the multidimensional impacts of sports programmes (Açıkgöz et al., 2022; Jarvie & Ahrens, 2019; Ralls, 2021; Suzuki, 2017). This flexibility, while a strength, poses challenges for comparability, as researchers adopt varying interpretations of the CA.

Studies applying the CA in SfD often focus on football (Açıkgöz et al., 2022; Dao & Darnell, 2021; Jarvie & Ahrens, 2019), though there are exceptions, such as culturally relevant activities in Rossi's (2015) study of water sports for Indigenous Australians or Ralls' (2021) exploration of running programmes for Ethiopian girls. The majority of the interventions examined also include supplementary components like life skills training and health education (Açıkgöz et al., 2022; Dao & Darnell, 2021; Ralls, 2021; Suzuki, 2017).

The findings from these studies underscore the central role of social and environmental conversion factors in fostering capabilities. For example, Dao and Darnell's (2021) analysis of the Football for All Vietnam (FFAV) programme shows how stable community support and an inclusive environment can enhance emotional expression and practical reasoning. Similarly, Rossi's (2015) work highlights the importance of culturally meaningful sports, which address historical exclusion and promote healing within Indigenous communities. In another context, Jarvie and Ahrens (2019) emphasise how programmes like the Homeless World Cup foster leadership, mental health resilience, and social networks, while also addressing barriers such as stigma and fear of participation.

Across these studies, the capability to enhance physical health emerges consistently, though the pathways vary. For example, FFAV participants benefited from interactive and non-authoritarian learning environments (Dao & Darnell, 2021), while participants in the Homeless World Cup and Street Soccer Scotland programmes gained health benefits through structured team activities that fostered goal-setting and accountability (Jarvie & Ahrens, 2019). These differences underline the importance of context-specific conversion factors, such as mentorship, safety, and stable social ties, in enabling individuals to transform opportunities into tangible outcomes.

Studies highlight the importance of long-term sustainability in projects. Rossi (2015) and Suzuki (2017) argue that short-term programmes often fail to sustain social networks and skills post-intervention. Rossi's analysis shows that extended durations help participants build and maintain capabilities and connections, fostering inclusion. Similarly, Açıkgöz et al. (2022) found that short project durations in Turkish SfD programmes limited participants' ability to uphold relationships and skills, emphasising the need for ongoing support and capacity-building. Suzuki (2017) highlights the need for a diverse range of leisure activities to ensure equal levels of substantive freedom in sports programmes. In Scottish football-based programmes, core training sessions gradually shift towards recreational activities to better address participants' needs. In contrast, programmes in Basotho and Japan remain limited to football activities, which restricts flexibility and reduces the ability to cater to individual interests.

Building on this research, the present study applies the CA to an underexplored context: a long-term, low-threshold, and diverse sports programme specifically designed for adults affected by PaSE. While much of the research in the field of SfD has focused on youth populations (Schulenkorf et al., 2016), existing programmes targeting individuals affected by PaSE have predominantly emphasised employability-related outcomes (e.g., Moustakas et al., 2022; Spaaij et al., 2013). This study shifts the focus beyond employability to a broader range of life-enhancing capabilities, investigating the impact of long-term participation in a tailored sports programme for adults affected by PaSE in a German context—an area that remains largely unexplored. In contrast to the predominant emphasis on short-term interventions or employment-oriented sports initiatives, little attention has been given to the long-term engagement of adults affected by PaSE, particularly in Germany. This study helps to address this research gap by exploring how long-term participation in a tailored sports programme may foster capabilities, while considering the conversion factors that shape their development and examining the achieved functionings from the participants' perspective. By adopting this approach, the study contributes to a better understanding of how sports can address the complex challenges faced by adults affected by PaSE. Furthermore, the findings provide insights into the mechanisms that enable meaningful participation and offer valuable guidance for designing inclusive and sustainable sports programmes.

4. Research Design and Methodology

4.1. Setting

beneFit, a VSC based in Freiburg, Germany, was founded in 2022 to address the exclusionary barriers in traditional sports settings. The club adopts a low-threshold, inclusive approach guided by the sociology of poverty and inspired by the books of Spaaij et al. (2014) and Collins and Kay (2014). The primary aim is to remove barriers and provide meaningful opportunities without prescribing specific outcomes. The VSC

specifically targets adults affected by PaSE, including those experiencing low income, homelessness, substance dependency, mental health challenges, disabilities, and forced migration backgrounds (beneFit e.V., 2025). Outreach is conducted through collaborations with welfare organisations, shelters, and institutions serving low-income populations to ensure accessibility. While beneFit's primary focus is on individuals affected by PaSE, participation remains open to all adults aged 18 and older, regardless of gender or background, fostering an inclusive environment that facilitates diverse interactions.

Participation is voluntary, and while formal registration is not required, attendance is documented using participation lists. Participants can also opt to receive reminders about upcoming sessions.

During the data collection period (June 2023—April 2024), the sports programme of beneFit consisted of nine weekly sports activities, including dancing, whole-body strength training, kickboxing, street soccer, swimming, Nordic walking, jogging, cycling, and a sports course with weekly changing content. These activities were typically structured into three blocks of 13 sessions each, with short breaks in between. Additionally, the club hosted social events approximately once a month, which were not necessarily related to sports or physical activity (e.g., barbecues and communal cooking). At the time of the study, no explicit educational programmes or additional elements beyond these offerings were implemented within the club.

The sports activities are developed collaboratively with participants (e.g., through feedback sessions and surveys) to ensure alignment with their interests. Activities with strong participant support are expanded, while those with low demand are discontinued. This approach allows for an efficient allocation of resources while maintaining a diverse range of activities. The sessions are typically conducted by multiple trainers who alternate in leading the activities. In addition, project coordinators frequently accompany sessions, providing support to trainers and serving as contact points for general inquiries. At the time of the study, approximately 30 active trainers were involved in delivering the courses. Trainers primarily have backgrounds in sports science, sports education, or social work and receive specialised training to work effectively with heterogeneous groups, including individuals who are particularly vulnerable due to health, economic, or social factors. The training process is integrated into an onboarding framework: In an initial meeting of approximately 60 minutes, trainers are introduced to the club's approach, including key topics such as inclusion and diversity. They are also encouraged to observe at least one session, ideally of the same sports activity they will be leading. Depending on their professional background, additional topics are covered—for example, trainers with a social work background receive a stronger focus on sports science and health-related aspects. To ensure programme quality, ongoing feedback mechanisms are in place. In the first weeks, trainers receive direct feedback from the coordination team, and at the end of each course cycle, participants provide structured feedback on both the course and the trainers. Thus the short breaks between programme blocks serve as an opportunity for programme refinement and participant recruitment.

4.2. Participants and Data Collection

This study involved participants who had been actively engaged in beneFit's offerings for at least one year, attending sessions regularly (minimum of once per week). This criterion ensured the inclusion of individuals who had experienced sufficient time within the programme to reflect on potential developmental processes (Suzuki, 2017). Additionally, participants required proficiency in German to facilitate in-depth engagement with the interview process. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Freiburg's Ethics Committee in June 2023 (approval number 22–1024_1).

The primary researcher (LO), who was closely involved in coordinating beneFit's activities (Gieß-Stüber & Oettle, 2024), leveraged established trust with participants (Helfferich, 2011) to recruit a diverse range of individuals. Potential participants were provided with detailed study information, and participation was entirely voluntary. Sixteen individuals ultimately participated, representing diverse ages, genders, employment statuses, and lived experiences, including various physical and mental health conditions. Participants' ages ranged from 28 to 66 years, with an equal female-male gender split. Except for two individuals, none of the participants were employed (see Table 1).

Data collection employed biographical narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983), allowing participants to share their life stories with minimal constraints. This method provided insights into participants' broader life contexts and their experiences with beneFit. Interviews began with open-ended prompts, such as: "Tell me about what you have experienced in your life. Feel free to take your time, even with the details." This approach aimed to uncover participants' life trajectories, including their aspirations and challenges, as these relate to the CA framework (Sen, 2001). Follow-up questions explored participants' goals and life priorities, linking the discussion to the concept of real freedoms central to the CA. Questions such as "can you describe your own development at beneFit?" "what goals or changes have you observed in yourself since joining beneFit?" or "what aspects of the programme helped you participate?" encouraged connections between narratives and key CA components, like conversion factors and achieved functionings.

All interviews, lasting up to 55 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' consent. A short paper-pencil questionnaire collected sociodemographic information. Audio files and questionnaires were pseudonymised and content-semantically transcribed by JG following Dresing and Pehl's (2018) guidelines.

Table 1. Sociodemographic data of study participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Employment and housing status	Years of participation
Michael	Male	66	Retired	2
Andrea	Female	39	Unemployed for six years	2
Peter	Male	61	Retired	1.5
Markus	Male	29	Employed	1.5
Julian	Male	59	Unfit to work; homeless for three years	2
Sabrina	Female	59	Retired	1.5
Marion	Female	62	Unemployed for three years	1
John	Male	64	Unemployed for five years	1.5
Julia	Female	39	Unemployed for 15 years	1
Sarah	Female	28	Employed	1.5
Lila	Female	58	Unemployed for 20 years	3
Nadine	Female	54	Unemployed for over ten years; homeless for more than 18 years	3
Bernd	Male	54	Unemployed for 16 years	1.5
Stefan	Male	53	Retired	1
Angelika	Female	58	Unfit to work, retired	2.5
Thomas	Male	42	In a return-to-work programme	2.5

Notes: For illustrative purposes, the names have been replaced with pseudonyms; the number of years of participation has been rounded up to the nearest half-year.

Identifying information was anonymised during transcription, and pseudonyms were created based on age, gender, and origin for descriptive purposes in the findings section (see Table 1). Quotations were translated and grammatically corrected by the authors, with final checks by a native British English speaker. The transcribed data were imported into the software MAXQDA 24 (Release 24.6.0) for systematic organisation and coding, supporting the subsequent thematic analysis.

4.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) was used, combining an inductive exploration of participants' narratives with a deductive alignment to the CA (Sen, 2001), ensuring that the findings reflected both data-driven insights and theoretical grounding. The analysis began with a familiarisation phase, during which the researchers repeatedly read transcripts and listened to audio recordings to deeply understand participants' life trajectories, challenges, and experiences with the beneFit programme. This phase facilitated the identification of key aspects, such as valued goals and perceived outcomes, such as the role of routine, social connections, and health-related concerns in participants' lives. During this phase, initial ideas were noted to guide subsequent coding steps. Next, systematic coding was conducted independently by two researchers (LO, JG), ensuring multiple perspectives and consistent interpretation. The process involved labeling meaningful data segments to capture recurring ideas. For the theme *capability for better coping with daily life*, codes like "building routine," "finding stability," and "mutual support" emerged, reflecting aspects participants highlighted regarding everyday challenges and strategies for managing them. These codes were then grouped under the overarching theme of "managing daily life," capturing how participants navigated everyday challenges and maintained structure in their routines. This theme was further refined through the CA lens, linking it to conversion factors (e.g., programme flexibility, safety) and specific functionings, including "reducing stress."

5. Findings

To align with the theoretical framework, the findings are structured as follows: personal conversion factors, which often appear reduced among participants, are discussed first. This is followed by key personal, social, and environmental factors enabling the transformation of resources into functionings. Finally, the findings are organised under three capabilities, with connections to conversion factors and resulting functionings highlighted. Figure 1 provides an overview of the analytical structure, illustrating the relationships between conversion factors, capabilities, and achieved functionings explored in this section. It serves as a visual representation of how various factors interact within the programme, helping to contextualize the findings presented below.

5.1. Conversion Factors

Participants' narratives reveal life situations shaped by multifaceted challenges, significantly limiting their personal conversion factors. Prolonged burdens such as traumatic experiences (e.g., childhood abuse, bullying, or family crises), chronic illnesses, and mental health issues often lead to compounded difficulties. These challenges restrict opportunities for independent living and create barriers to achieving desired functionings. Health problems frequently prevent sustained employment and financial stability. One participant described the cycle of recurring surgeries and unemployment: "And then odd jobs, many

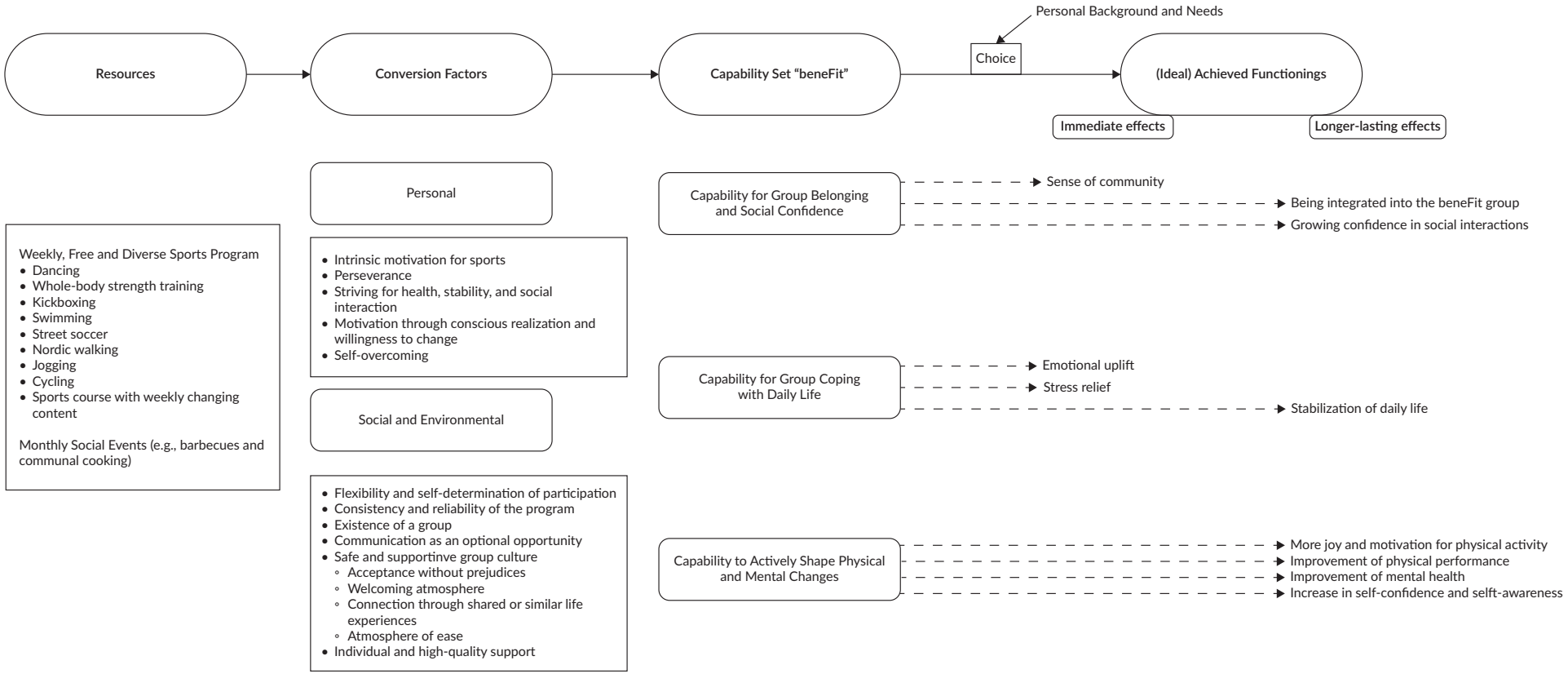

Figure 1. Application of the CA in the beneFit sports programme. Notes: This graphic is intended for illustrative purposes and does not claim absolute validity; immediate effects arise during or directly after activities, while longer-lasting effects typically emerge over weeks or months.

operations afterwards, on both knees repeatedly, then long-term unemployed, but couldn't get into work because of the operations" (Marion, 62). Similarly, Julian (59) highlighted the cumulative impact of challenges:

> I just overworked myself, and then that led to this burnout, you know. Two thousand twenty, yeah, and then the pandemic happened, you know, which made things even harder with finding housing and all that stuff, and then dealing with people who were mentally overwhelmed, overburdened….All of that dragged me down even more, and then there was also the thing with my ear, you know.

Despite diverse life situations, a recurring pattern emerges: participants' personal conversion factors seem notably reduced compared to those typically observed among members of VSCs, underscoring barriers to participation. These biographical narratives highlight the importance of social and environmental conversion factors in supporting inclusion within VSCs.

A safe and supportive group culture emerged as a crucial social conversion factor, helping participants overcome these barriers. Marion (62) explained: "It doesn't matter if I'm fat, thin, an alcoholic, a drug addict, or nothing at all; everyone is accepted as they are. That's the most important thing for me—that people are taken as they are." Similarly, Peter (61) highlighted the shared experiences among participants: "I feel comfortable and supported at beneFit because of the people who are there. Many are also living in poverty or facing similar struggles, so there is no focus on 'what you have' or 'what I have.'" Flexibility and self-determination were also crucial. Participants valued the ability to engage at their own pace, which represents both social and environmental conversion factors. Marion (62) noted:

> It's important to me that I can just be a spectator sometimes, like with kickboxing. When the structure changed and it became too much for me, I said, "I'm out for now," and that was okay too. That's what I find great.

Julian (59) emphasised the adaptability of the programme: "I can try out for myself how far I can go or not. If I'm not feeling up to it, I can step back. That's what makes it so valuable to me."

While personal conversion factors such as physical performance or health were often limited, other personal factors were critical for developing capabilities. Intrinsic motivation was a driving force for many participants. Andrea (39) shared: "My motivation to take part in the course was very high. I was genuinely excited because it's so much fun and something I really enjoy." Sustained participation, however, often required perseverance. Michael (66) reflected: "You need perseverance and commitment. These are key factors for making changes and sticking to them." Many participants tied their involvement to broader goals. Julian (59) described:

> I go there because I'm disabled, because I can't really do sports, and no doctor can give me any prognosis. They just say, "Well, it's not really possible anymore, but you might as well try." So, I go there, and for me, it's really an inner goal—to maintain as much as possible, to keep as much fitness as I can.

5.2. Capability for Better Coping With Daily Life

In addition to the overarching conversion factors described above, certain conversion factors are directly linked to specific capabilities. One such example is the *capability for better coping with daily life*, reflecting

participants' ability to manage everyday challenges more effectively. One key social conversion factor that enables the development of this capability is the consistency and reliability of the programme offerings. Year-round courses, including those held on Sundays, provide stability and support participants in developing routines. Julian (59) explained: "Since I have no daily structure, I can say, okay, Sunday evening is beneFit, so I prepare myself for it and make sure I get there."

Equally important is the safe and familiar environment that beneFit offers. Many participants appreciate the welcoming and supportive atmosphere, which allows them to engage in activities without hesitation. Julian describes it as: "It has become something familiar by now...a place where you can go without fear." This sense of familiarity provides security and encourages active participation. Within this environment, the connection with other participants in similar life situations becomes a valuable conversion factor. Interacting with people who face similar challenges fosters community and mutual support. Sabrina (59), who cares for her mother at home, describes how these exchanges help her:

> When I have an argument with my mother, I've shared it with someone, and they've comforted me. Susi has the same problem as I do; she has her father at home, who is 91. My mother is also 91, and the experiences we share—it's good to have that exchange.

While beneFit cannot directly change participants' life circumstances, these social conversion factors enhance their capability to cope with daily challenges, equipping them to manage their situations more effectively.

The achieved functionings resulting from this capability are evident in immediate impacts felt during or after activities, as well as in longer-lasting effects. Many participants describe the programme as a "vent," or a way to "breathe." The study revealed that emotional uplift and stress relief are among the immediate impacts. Participants report feeling more relaxed and balanced after activities. One participant recounts their experience with Nordic walking: "At first, I felt really bad inside, but then I somehow got into a flow. When I walked along, I could let go of all the heaviness for a bit and focus on other thoughts" (Angelika, 58). Beyond these immediate effects, longer-term impacts also emerged. Julian (59) describes how beneFit has provided him with a stabilising element in his life: "I would say that beneFit stabilises parts of my life situation as I currently experience it because it's something I go to, it's reliable, and it has a stabilising effect. It's like a small anchor, somehow."

At the same time, it should be noted that managing daily life often depends on multiple factors, and beneFit is just one part of the equation. While some participants view it as a central activity, many continue to rely on other networks and pursuits. As one participant explains her strategies for coping with everyday life: "I think it's largely the chemical cocktail I take, which I now take more regularly" (Sarah, 28). In addition to medical support, she emphasises the importance of building a broader social network: "Another pillar is that I'm building a better social network….If no one is available, there's maybe a beneFit offering or something." This perspective highlights that the improvements participants experience often result from a combination of approaches and are not solely attributable to participation in beneFit.

5.3. Capability for Group Belonging and Social Confidence

The findings reveal that the *capability for group belonging and social confidence* plays a meaningful role for participants in the beneFit programme. This capability combines two key aspects: experiencing a sense of community and developing confidence in social interactions. These are closely tied to participants' involvement in a structured yet low-pressure group sports environment. Some participants expressed a personal need for social interaction as a motivator for participation. Angelika (58) noted: "It was very important for me to get out of isolation and to have the experience again that there are nice people." The opportunity to connect with others in similar life situations was particularly valued. As one participant noted positively, it was possible to meet people "who are in similar economic situations or perhaps somehow disadvantaged due to illnesses or disabilities" (Bernd, 54). This participant also observed that substance use within the group was lower: "In my experience, there aren't many smokers. One or two people might smoke, but alcohol is not an issue. They may have a beer after beneFit, but they don't have problems with it." The sports context itself provides a social and environmental conversion factor conducive to fostering these connections. Physical activities offer a natural and informal setting for interaction, without pressuring participants to engage, where communication with others is seen as an optional opportunity. Participants can simply engage in the physical activity without feeling pressured to speak with others. As Julia (39) describes:

> You can start a conversation, but you don't have to. You can also just do your own thing, and you're not forced to talk to each other. It's not like in a support group or anywhere else, but you can talk if you want to, and I find that really pleasant.

This environmental factor, combined with the programme's long-term and consistent nature, allows individuals, particularly those who initially struggle with social insecurities, to gradually open up and connect with others. By developing this Capability, participants were able to achieve functionings of being, such as a sense of community and growing confidence in social interactions. One participant noted:

> The fact is, we miss each other when someone isn't there. Even when I wasn't there, people noticed and asked: "Where were you?" I was really surprised because at first, I wasn't there regularly. But the fact that people cared—that's something I really appreciated. (Marion, 62)

The sense of group belonging sometimes extended beyond the sessions, with participants spending leisure time together. For some participants, the programme serves as a starting point for spending time together outside of organised sessions. Peter (61) shared: "Spending leisure time has now come about through beneFit or the sports activities, and, well, it's also led to meeting up with people from the group, like going for coffee with individuals or with different people."

The findings show that participants' social confidence improves as they reflect on how the programme helps them interact with others more easily. Peter (61), who has a social phobia, described the sports activities as a kind of training ground for social interactions: "Well, I go there, and it's also a kind of training for me to deal with people in the VSC, and, uh, I've become…more relaxed as well, and I see things more calmly now, yeah."

Michael (66) observed impacts on other areas of his life: "And now it's completely different, yes, now I'm already socially integrated in many areas. And I also notice that sports—my being active in sports—contributes a lot to being sociable, yes."

5.4. Capability to Actively Shape Physical and Mental Changes

This capability emphasises participants' ability to actively engage in processes that lead to long-term improvements in their physical and psychological well-being. This capability was meaningful for many participants, enabling them to positively influence their physical and mental conditions despite challenges like obesity, depression, organ damage, or low fitness levels. For some, these conditions were exacerbated by medication side effects, such as sedation or weight gain, which participants often perceived negatively. Despite these challenges, the desire to improve their health through physical activity emerged as a central personal conversion factor. Sabrina (59) exemplified this drive:

> I want to reduce the medications I'm taking. I still have meds for my circulation because I have very high blood pressure. These medications are, of course, quite burdensome. I'm trying to wean off them bit by bit by losing weight through sport—swimming or dancing—so that I can manage my blood pressure more naturally.

This intrinsic motivation to improve health served as a key factor enabling participants to pursue physical activity despite their limitations. Building on the conversion factors discussed in Section 5.1—such as a safe and supportive group culture or perseverance and self-awareness—additional factors played a vital role in shaping this capability. The diversity of offerings at beneFit represented a key resource that provided participants with access to a wide range of physical activities. This variety ensured that participants could find activities that suited their individual needs and preferences, creating opportunities for engagement regardless of their physical limitations or personal interests. For instance, beneFit offered options such as dancing, swimming, Nordic walking, and kickboxing, which catered to diverse levels of physical ability and fitness. Sabrina (59) highlighted how the variety of activities allowed her to choose options that aligned with her physical limitations: "Since I'm handicapped due to my hip, I wasn't very good at swimming. Dancing causes fewer problems with my hip—I don't know why, but swimming movements just don't work for me." Similarly, John (64) highlighted how certain activities worked well for him while also acknowledging limitations: "Nordic walking, though, is great—it's gentle on my bones and helps build my stamina. Kickboxing has also been very beneficial, but the kicking is a bit of an issue because of my bones." For others, the programme's diversity created opportunities for progression. Michael (66) described how the availability of different activities allowed him to take incremental steps toward his fitness goals:

> I realised at some point that Nordic walking wasn't quite it anymore—it just wasn't the thing for me anymore. Jogging, though, felt like the next step. And then I thought about my schedule, and it fit in perfectly, time-wise. When I started jogging, I thought, 'Wow, this is exactly what was missing.' It's the next step for me.

The capability led to various achieved functionings. Many of these functionings were closely tied to self-defined goals, such as improving physical and mental health. For instance, some participants observed tangible improvements in their physical fitness, posture, and overall appearance, directly aligning with their

personal aspirations for better health. Julia (39), who had been inactive for years due to mental health challenges, noted the positive changes:

> Yes, so I've definitely gotten fitter, I think. I've also received feedback from others that my stature has improved….What I really do regularly is Nordic walking, so I think it's because of that. My posture has improved, my presence, and so on. Before, I would enter a room like a sack of potatoes, and now it's much better.

John (64), who had struggled with depression, described how participating in the programme helped him regain a sense of vitality:

> When I looked at a picture from a camera, I saw life coming back, yeah? I'm smiling again. I've been in a good mood for the past six months. Without the sport, it wouldn't have worked, or I'd probably still be lying around like a wet sack, yeah.

While many participants highlighted positive developments, others experienced challenges and limitations related to their physical health. For example, Julian reflected on the difficulties he faced due to the progressive loss of his balance:

> That's obviously exhausting, you know, and it happens again and again, especially during sports. Like when we were playing that, what was it called, Bounce Ball? Sometimes I get blackouts, you know….Same with sudden drops in blood sugar levels. And I realised, okay, the physical strain is increasing….So, it's a bit of a mixed feeling. On the one hand, it's great to do sports, but on the other hand, you're constantly struggling. It doesn't actually get better, and that's frustrating because, of course, you want to see progress when you're putting in the effort. It's a tough situation.

In addition to these goal-oriented outcomes, participants achieved functionings that initially seemed unrelated to their personal objectives but were nonetheless appreciated. For example, some participants discovered new interests or developed a deeper understanding of their preferences through the programme's diverse offerings. Julia (39) reflected on her newfound sense of curiosity and exploration:

> But I notice through Nordic walking that I've gained more confidence, that I can even do sports, that I'm even capable of something. And now I've gotten more interested in trying something like Qigong on YouTube. I'm learning what I like and what I don't like. I've realised that I enjoy slow, steady activities like Nordic walking. Now I've talked to Jana [trainer] about trying slow jogging. Things like that, or Qigong, or those more calm activities, I really like those. I'm not so much—I think I get the impression I'm not so much—an aerobics type of person, not really. And that's completely new for me, because before, I had absolutely no idea what I might like—I only knew all the things I didn't like.

6. Discussion of Findings

This study explored how long-term participation in a low-threshold, and diverse sports programme contributes to individuals' ability to navigate and cope with challenging life situations associated with PaSE. By applying Sen's CA, the study shifts the focus from predefined outcome measures to an exploration of how conversion factors mediate the transformation of resources into meaningful functionings.

The application of Sen's CA situates this study within a growing research area on sports programmes. Unlike outcome-driven frameworks that prioritise predefined goals like employability (Moustakas et al., 2022; Spaaij et al., 2013), the CA adopts an open, participant-centered perspective, emphasising real freedoms and opportunities for individuals to pursue valuable ways of living as they define them. Taking a broader focus, participants highlighted capabilities such as better coping with daily life, group belonging and social confidence, and actively shaping physical and mental changes as particularly meaningful. These capabilities, in turn, influence key aspects like positive health development, fostering a sense of community, and managing everyday challenges. This broader perspective ensures that the CA accommodates diverse needs and aspirations, especially for individuals facing health challenges or for whom traditional outcomes like employment are less relevant. Other studies that utilise the CA as an analytical framework and examine different target groups also confirm key findings of the present study. For instance, improvements in health and overall well-being through sports activities have been highlighted (Dao & Darnell, 2021; Jarvie & Ahrens, 2019). Furthermore, research by Dao and Darnell (2021), Jarvie and Ahrens (2019), Ralls (2021), and Rossi (2015) demonstrates that sports programmes can enhance participants' sense of belonging and self-confidence.

A strength of the beneFit sports programme is its diverse activities, engaging a wide range of individuals within the PaSE group. This included both younger and older adults, as well as women and men, all facing varied social and health challenges. This counters the criticism that SfD approaches often focus too narrowly on youth or overemphasise football as the sole activity (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Furthermore, SfD initiatives frequently prioritise men or boys, with limited inclusion of women or mixed-gender activities, as groups often train separately. Açıkgöz et al. (2022) similarly highlight this issue, calling in the limitations of their study for a greater focus on the inclusion of women and girls in future programmes. Another strength is its detailed exploration of participants' life contexts. Biographical-narrative interviews captured both immediate programme experiences and broader life circumstances, providing nuanced insights into individual progress and barriers.

A particular focus of the present study lies in examining conversion factors—elements that enable participants to develop capabilities and transform them into achieved functionings. The findings highlight the importance of a supportive group culture, flexible participation options, reliable programme structures, and participants' intrinsic motivation and perseverance in addressing diversity and providing meaningful opportunities. Flexible participation and reliable structures are closely linked to long-term programme sustainability and diverse offerings, which Suzuki (2017) identifies as prerequisites for fostering social relationships. Suzuki (2017) also emphasises the importance of a safe space, reflected in this study's supportive group culture. Furthermore, shared life experiences fostered a sense of belonging, a crucial driver of engagement. Similarly, Rossi (2015) highlights the positive impact of learning alongside peers from the same community, reinforcing the value of shared experiences in creating meaningful connections and encouraging active participation. Figure 1 provides a visualisation of these interconnections by mapping the relationships between conversion factors, capabilities, and achieved functionings within the programme. By systematically structuring these elements, this context-specific representation highlights key mechanisms that shape participants' experiences and outcomes. This visualisation not only aids in understanding how specific programme elements contribute to meaningful participation and long-term engagement but also provides a conceptual basis for analysing sports programmes within the CA. The figure illustrates that functionings do not simply result directly from participation but emerge through complex interactions between personal, social, and environmental conversion factors.

While programme design plays a crucial role in shaping participant experiences, these findings also indicate that inclusion and well-being are influenced by factors beyond sports alone. This underscores the importance of considering complementary support systems. Participants frequently relied on complementary measures, such as healthcare and social networks, to achieve meaningful improvements. Other activities and measures in their lives likely also contributed to the achieved functionings. Future programmes could benefit from integrating additional resources or partnerships with health and social services to create a more holistic support system. Research highlights the importance of practical benefits to enhance participant engagement. For example, Açıkgöz et al. (2022), Dao and Darnell (2021), and Suzuki (2017) emphasise programmes that offer pathways from volunteering to paid roles or integrate life skills activities, fostering long-term commitment and career prospects. Future studies should explore how other activities and external factors contribute to achieving functionings for adults affected by PaSE.

The application of the CA in this study entails several methodological challenges. A key difficulty lies in identifying capabilities, as these were derived from the achieved functionings and the associated conversion factors. Consequently, only realised capabilities were captured leaving hypothetical opportunities unconsidered—an issue also noted by Leßmann (2013). This limitation highlights the need for methods to better address unrealised capabilities.

Another challenge is distinguishing between types of conversion factors. Flexibility and self-determination, for example, can arise from both social relationships and structural programme design, creating overlaps. Future research should further investigate these interactions to clarify their roles in capability development. Furthermore, few environmental factors were identified, even though studies emphasise elements like transportation or spatial accessibility (Jarvie & Ahrens, 2019). This limited exploration may be due to the study's focus on programme content and the positive selection of participants. Addressing structural and geographical influences more comprehensively is crucial, as location-dependent challenges in the context of PaSE are significant (Madanipour et al., 2015).

7. Conclusion

The findings emphasise that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for addressing the diverse needs of adults affected by PaSE. Long-term, community-based sports programmes embedded in existing structures, such as VSCs, hold great potential to promote social inclusion and alleviate poverty. However, for VSCs to succeed, they must adopt more inclusive practices, such as removing performance barriers and training facilitators to address the diverse needs of participants. By utilising their established infrastructure and community reach, VSCs can play a pivotal role in fostering meaningful participation and long-term engagement in sports. This study highlights the value of moving beyond narrow outcome indicators such as employability and instead considering context-sensitive strategies that support participants pursuing the functionings they find meaningful.

For the evaluation of sports programmes, this suggests that, in addition to examining achieved outcomes, greater attention should be given to understanding the processes through which these outcomes emerge. A deeper insight into which programme elements and mechanisms facilitate meaningful change can help refine future interventions, making them more responsive to participants' needs and circumstances. This, in turn, could contribute to improving programme quality and increasing their potential for long-term impact.

Beyond contributing empirical insights, this study develops a context-specific model with the CA (Figure 1) that can inform both programme planning and further research. By structuring the relationships between conversion factors, capabilities, and achieved functionings—the three key interconnected elements of the CA—this framework can provide a systematic basis for analysing how sports programmes foster inclusion and well-being. At the same time, it offers researchers a foundation to expand upon, explore in different contexts, and refine through future studies. Investigating its applicability across various settings could help enhance its relevance for both practice and academic discourse.

Ultimately, tailored sports programmes should not only be seen as isolated interventions but as part of a broader effort to create environments that support inclusion and well-being. By fostering spaces that acknowledge and accommodate the diverse life situations of marginalised individuals, sports programmes have the potential to support social inclusion and address some of the challenges associated with poverty. These outcomes benefit not only individuals but also foster healthier and more inclusive communities. Investing in inclusive, long-term sports programmes is more than a question of social responsibility—it is a necessary step toward structural inequalities and ensuring equitable access to meaningful participation.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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There Are No Thresholds Here: Social Inclusion Among the Participants of a Community Sports Initiative

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Abstract

Community sports initiatives can promote social inclusion by facilitating low-threshold participation in physical exercise with others. Due to social and systemic barriers, persons with experiences of mental health and substance use problems often have limited access to community arenas, such as those offering physical exercise. Community sports may counteract such inequities in practice. In Bergen, Norway, the community sports initiative Psykiatrialliansen (The Psychiatric Alliance) aims to promote participation in physical exercise for anyone with an interest in being involved. On a weekly basis, they arrange a range of sports and activities in ordinary sports arenas across the city, free of charge. The purpose of the study was to explore how members and coaches experience participation, and in which ways participation contributes to experiences of social inclusion. Focus groups, paired interviews, and individual interviews were conducted with 33 participants. A two-tiered thematic analysis was conducted based on a framework for social inclusion, resulting in the main theme "experiences of social inclusion," with the following subthemes: (a) access to resources, (b) recognition through responsibilities and roles, and (c) a sense of belonging through relationships. The participants described a unique and generous arena where resources were emphasized. Furthermore, they described experiences of being acknowledged through responsibilities and positive roles. Finally, the community sports initiative was viewed as a low-threshold, inclusive community that facilitated a sense of belonging through positive relationships. The findings indicate that Psykiatrialliansen contributes to experiences of social inclusion in multiple, intersecting ways.

Keywords

citizenship; community integration; community participation; mental health; physical activity; recovery; substance use; well-being

1. Introduction

The rights to physical and mental health and social inclusion are embedded in the Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 2020; WHO, 2021b), and physical activity is inherently associated with enhanced well-being and quality of life (Buecker et al., 2021; Fancourt et al., 2021; Litwiller et al., 2017). In addition, physical activity may benefit both physical and mental health (Eather et al., 2023; Ohrnberger et al., 2017). While physical activity, broadly defined, is available to most people, opportunities for participation in physical exercise that is planned, purposeful, structured, and repetitive (Dasso, 2019) may differ between individuals and groups, and depend on intersecting psychosocial and socioeconomic factors, including mental health, physical health, income, housing, social support, marginalization, and discrimination (O'Donoghue et al., 2018). As such, access to opportunities for participation in physical exercise may be considered a matter of social inclusion (Benkwitz et al., 2024).

Persons with mental health and substance use problems tend to have limited access to opportunities for activities (Blank et al., 2015; Cogan et al., 2021). Mental health and substance use problems are often intertwined and may both stem from and cause significant disruptions and distress in everyday life, thus making community participation challenging in practice. Experiences of discrimination and internalized stigma may produce a sense of difference that alienates people from their communities (Cogan et al., 2021; Vervliet et al., 2019). In addition, relative poverty decreases the accessibility of opportunities for participation (Topor et al., 2019). By contrast, experiences of being acknowledged and viewing oneself as an appreciated, active participant in the community may facilitate social inclusion for persons with mental health and substance use problems (Davidson et al., 2008). Access to necessary material, financial, and social resources can also promote social inclusion (Hennessy, 2017).

Social inclusion refers to processes of social integration through improving the conditions for participation both for individuals and groups (WHO, 2021a, 2021b). This, in turn, may have positive implications for health and well-being. Social inclusion encompasses the right to be included, as well as opportunities for involvement in practice (Davey & Gordon, 2017). Experiences of social inclusion include intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions, and the relationship between citizens and between citizens and the state (Lister, 2007). Furthermore, experiences of social inclusion require a degree and type of participation and involvement in the community that feels sufficient and subjectively meaningful to the individual (Le Boutillier & Croucher, 2010). In addition, more objective factors such as housing, education, employment, leisure, and social support are important (Filia et al., 2019). Social inclusion is typically positioned in relation to social exclusion (O'Donnell et al., 2018; Wright & Stickley, 2013), which can be conceptualized as restricted opportunities for participation and involvement in society (WHO, 2021a, 2021b). As such, marginalization and social inequalities in health and welfare may be the result of processes of social exclusion (Wright & Stickley, 2013). Overall, social inclusion can best be promoted through systemic efforts to create welcoming communities (Snethen et al., 2021).

Rowe et al. (2012) developed a citizenship framework that we consider highly relevant for conceptualizing and promoting social inclusion. They define citizenship as community membership obtained through access to "the five Rs," namely the interrelated dimensions of rights, responsibilities, resources, relationships, and roles (Rowe et al., 2012). *Rights* concerns access to various fundamental rights, such as the right to housing and the right to healthcare. *Responsibilities* points to tasks and duties in the community, such as the social obligation

to help a neighbor or to participate in community activities. *Resources* refers to the availability of various essential material, financial, and social resources, including a reliable source of income and positive community arenas. *Relationships* refers to rewarding, reciprocal contact with others, for instance at work or with family. Finally, *roles* concerns the possibility for taking on social roles which are valued by others, such as friend or teammate. Psychologically, citizenship relies on an individual's experience of belonging and connectedness in their respective communities, and socially, citizenship involves recognition by others as an appreciated community member (Rowe et al., 2012). Citizenship and human rights are closely interrelated (WHO, 2021b), and the degree to which the dimensions are made available to people will have implications for their lived experience of being socially included or excluded (Rowe et al., 2012).

Participation in activities, including physical exercise, has been described as facilitating well-being for persons with experiences of mental health and substance use problems by promoting meaning, agency, and capability as well as a sense of belonging and opportunities for contributing and being viewed as resourceful by others (Litwiller et al., 2017). In terms of physical exercise, both individual participation and team participation have been identified as beneficial for well-being, although team participation in particular has been found to be associated with enhanced experiences of social inclusion due to creating possibilities for social interactions, connectedness, and friendships (Andersen et al., 2019; Benkwitz et al., 2024; Eather et al., 2023).

Structural factors such as facilities, equipment, personal economy, and transport may play a crucial role in affecting participation in physical exercise (Collins, 2004). Moreover, the availability of a safe and supportive environment is an essential prerequisite for positive experiences with physical exercise (Dasso, 2019). Social environments may be perceived as supportive if characterized by a flexible, reciprocal, and non-judgmental atmosphere (Litwiller et al., 2017). Efforts to promote social inclusion through physical exercise can include supporting participation in a variety of activities, facilitating meaningful social relationships, and providing the resources, facilities, and circumstances needed to nurture personal interests and abilities (Repper & Perkins, 2009; Snethen et al., 2021).

Community sports initiatives may be particularly suitable settings for promoting planned, purposeful, structured, and repetitive physical exercise within an empowering social context (Benkwitz et al., 2024; Dasso, 2019). Community sports initiatives have been defined in the following terms:

> Community sport activities are low threshold and financially accessible, and organized locally, in specific—often urban—neighborhoods. The activities are not usually high level or competitive in nature. The above aspects make the community sport setting a fitted context for meeting like-minded people in a safe and accessible manner, and potentially a powerful tool to reach socially disadvantaged groups. (Van der Veken et al., 2020a, p. 2)

Community sports may facilitate social inclusion in many ways, including through introducing and acknowledging every participant, distributing roles, establishing shared goals, and appreciating effort (Van der Veken et al., 2020a, 2020b). Community sports may further contribute to experiences of positive identity, meaning, hope, and connectedness, thereby strengthening social inclusion (Benkwitz & Healy, 2019).

Community sports initiatives are offered to various target populations across communities and countries to address social inequalities in opportunities for physical exercise (WHO, 2021a, 2021b). Some recent studies

have assessed how community sports initiatives for persons with experiences of mental health and substance use problems may facilitate social inclusion (e.g., Benkwitz & Healy, 2019; Healy et al., 2023; Ogundipe et al., 2020; Oudshoorn et al., 2022).

Benkwitz and Healy (2019) and Ogundipe et al. (2020) explored the role of street soccer in recovery and social inclusion. Healy et al. (2023) focused on the value of adding physical activity into peer support groups for enhanced social inclusion, and Oudshoorn et al. (2022) studied the role of community sports as an intervention for social inclusion for persons with experiences of housing instability. Benkwitz and Healy (2019) found that enhanced connectedness was an especially important outcome of participation in street soccer, with opportunities for valued social interactions and social support. Similarly, Ogundipe et al. (2020) found that being part of a supportive team boosted participants' sense of identity and self-worth and gave them opportunities to support others in return. These intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects were also emphasized among participants with experiences of housing instability who were involved in a community sports intervention, indicating that participation made a positive difference in their everyday lives (Oudshoorn et al., 2022). Finally, user involvement and collaboration were highlighted as important aspects in successfully promoting physical activity in peer support groups (Healy et al., 2023). Inspired by these studies, which focused on specific activities and arenas, the aim of the present study was to explore how members and coaches of a community sports initiative intended for a broader population, with a wider range of activities offered, experience participation and in which ways participation may contribute to experiences of social inclusion.

2. Methods

2.1. Setting

In Bergen, Norway, the non-hierarchical community sports initiative Psykiatrialliansen (The Psychiatric Alliance) aims to promote participation in physical exercise and social inclusion. Psykiatrialliansen served as the case for the present study. Psykiatrialliansen was initially established in 2006 as a community initiative in collaboration between specialist health services and municipal services for persons with mental health and substance use problems. Although Psykiatrialliansen aims to serve persons with past or present experiences of mental health and substance use problems, anyone in the community who is interested in participating in their activities is welcome to join and diversity is encouraged (Psykiatrialliansen, n.d.). In addition, anyone who participates in any given activity is considered a participant on the same level as everyone else. Disclosure of mental health or substance use status is not required nor is active involvement in treatment. The 31 activities currently offered by Psykiatrialliansen include running, swimming, yoga, hiking, spinning, soccer, and climbing, and all activities are organized at ordinary sports arenas across the city, free of charge. The activities are arranged nearly every day throughout the week. At present, Psykiatrialliansen has approximately 450 active participants. Their slogan is "Everyone is welcome, always."

2.2. Design

The aim of this study was addressed using qualitative methodology, with in-depth focus group interviews, paired interviews, and individual interviews. This study was part of a mixed-methods pragmatic evaluation of well-being and social inclusion among members and coaches involved in activities offered by Psykiatrialliansen

(hereby primarily referred to as "the community sports initiative") and has been developed based on a dataset which was described in a report summarizing the evaluation project in Norwegian (Karlsson et al., 2023).

2.3. Competency Group

Competency groups are established to facilitate user involvement, dialogue, and knowledge construction based on multiple perspectives in research projects (Borg et al., 2012). Relevant stakeholders (e.g., users and staff) are invited to follow the process of developing and conducting research projects alongside researchers, with the intent of representing multiple perspectives and voices (Borg et al., 2012). Competency groups themselves may function as arenas for promoting social inclusion within research by ensuring representation in knowledge production (Borg et al., 2012). In the initial stages of the evaluation project, a competency group was established, comprising two members, two coaches, two employees, and at least one of the researchers involved in the project. The intention was to use the competency group as a collaborative venue to inform and guide the research process. In total, four competency group meetings were held while developing and conducting the study.

2.4. Recruitment and Sample

Over a period of five days in January 2022, members and coaches involved with the community sports initiative were invited to participate in the study. Recruitment was carried out by two of the researchers (MB and BK), or other members of the competency group, directly before or after a physical exercise session. Anyone who participated in activities offered, whether a member or a coach, was considered within the target population, in accordance with the community initiative's general principles. There were no specified exclusion criteria. In total, 33 participants and coaches participated in the interviews (14 women, 19 men), several with experience in both roles. The duration and frequency of their involvement with the community sports initiative were not recorded, but several participants mentioned being involved for a prolonged period and regularly participating.

2.5. Data Collection

A total of five focus group interviews, two paired interviews, and two individual interviews were carried out. The focus group interviews were scheduled to take place following various physical activity sessions over the course of a week. In seeking to accommodate all prospective participants who expressed interest in the study, we set up additional interviews, paired and individual. All interviews were conducted in Norwegian. The focus groups consisted of between three and eight participants each and were conducted by two of the authors (MB and BK) and a member of the competency group. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour with some variation in duration between interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to address experiences related to participation. The interview guide included questions such as:

- What are your experiences with participating in this community sports initiative?
- What makes you keep coming back?
- How has participation influenced your everyday life?
- What is beneficial about participating?
- What is not beneficial about participating?

Participants were asked to provide concrete examples when possible. The same interview guide was used as the basis for both the focus group interviews as well as the individual interviews.

2.6. Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim (see Acknowledgments) and resulted in data material consisting of 103 written pages in Norwegian. The analytic strategy was two-tiered. Initially, two of the authors (MB, professor and occupational therapist; and BK, professor and nurse) engaged in thematic content analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) to identify a range of meaningful themes in the transcribed data material, which were summarized in the initial evaluation report in Norwegian. This process involved the following: naïve readings of each interview to identify similarities and differences; preliminary interpretations organized into meaningful units which were compared and contrasted; comparisons of the analyses; and an overall analysis, in which individual themes and subthemes were identified (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Next, a deductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to reanalyze the material with particular emphasis on issues related to social inclusion. The analysis was based on the citizenship framework developed by Rowe et al. (2012), which is operationalized as access to rights, responsibilities, resources, relationships, and roles, in addition to recognition by others and a sense of belonging. The application of this conceptual framework for the purpose of qualitative data analysis represents a novel approach. The material was reread in its entirety by the first author (LN, researcher and psychologist) before initial codes were generated. These codes were then grouped into preliminary subthemes, and these subthemes were later thoroughly reviewed and revised, resulting in a final outline (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All quotes touching on issues related to social inclusion were translated into English by the first author, with an emphasis on attempting to provide translations that were as literal as possible, without compromising the meaning of the statements, and preserving the formulations of the participants. This two-tiered approach enabled the personal and interdisciplinary perspectives of all three authors to inform the final analysis.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

The study was notified to and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (project number 873036). Participants received written and oral information about the purpose of the study and provided written informed consent. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study and the right to withdraw. At the end of each interview, participants were asked for feedback on their experience of being interviewed. When writing up the findings, identifying information was removed, and each participant was provided with a pseudonym to further ensure anonymity.

3. Findings

3.1. Experiences of Social Inclusion

Through our analysis, we developed one main theme related to social inclusion, which was named "experiences of social inclusion." Based on the citizenship framework (Rowe et al., 2012), we further developed three subthemes which encompassed four of the "five Rs," as well as recognition and sense of

belonging. These subthemes were linked with experiences of social inclusion: (a) access to resources, (b) recognition through responsibilities and roles, and (c) a sense of belonging through relationships (see Figure 1). Each of these are described in greater detail below.

Figure 1. Illustration of the main theme and subthemes.

3.1.1. Access to Resources

During the interviews, several participants directly or indirectly referred to *resources* as important for experiences of social inclusion. Some participants talked about physical exercise itself being a resource in their personal journeys, as exemplified by the following quote made by Oscar: "Kayaking has helped me have a life that I have managed, even if it has looked dark at times." In a similar vein, Thomas explained how physical exercise had had a surprising, positive impact on changing things up in life: "For me it was climbing that helped when I was ill….I have a fear of heights and didn't need that kind of exercise at all, or that's what I thought. But for that to be the turning point."

In addition to physical exercise being a direct resource in the participants' lives, the community sports initiative was also perceived as a resource in a broader sense. Kasper stated it this way:

> I don't know, I was, I did have some problems with substance use and stuff before, so if it wasn't for Psykiatrialliansen I would have probably been stuck on that today. And probably worse as well, I think, but I can't say for sure. But it has at least helped me out of it. Having somewhere to be.

For many, the community sports initiative was an organizing resource, adding structure and meaning to their everyday lives: "Going out the door and having somewhere to be" (Maria). Lars expanded on the value of having somewhere to be: "The emphasis that Psykiatrialliansen has on people, and not necessarily the activity itself. The activity is an excuse to give people a better day, or structure." Indeed, several participants highlighted a wish for activities during the evenings and weekends, given that most activities took place in the daytime and during weekdays. The physical exercises organized by the community sports initiative further functioned as a source of predictability and stability in participants' everyday lives:

> I've heard that thing about having something to look forward to. Several people have said that, that it's nice to have some structure during the week. It is difficult to fit in with the rest of society. That's probably a bit too challenging for some, me included. Having some structure, on Mondays it's circuit training, on Tuesdays it's soccer, to have a planned week. Some expectations for the week, or….Predictability was the word I was looking for. (Andrea)

The community sports initiative was also seen as a material resource that facilitated physical exercise. The initiative sometimes contributed with workout equipment, such as shoes, and made sure to not require any fees. This reflected an important principal value for the initiative, keeping the thresholds for participation low to ensure accessibility. Another participant referred to how the community sports initiative facilitated physical exercise, stating that: "I wouldn't have worked out otherwise. First of all, it's very expensive. And I'm not that good. So….I would feel a bit uneasy at a regular fitness center" (Lisa).

Most widely and explicitly described, however, was the experience of the community sports initiative acknowledging and promoting the individual's personal resources:

> I joined the running group and was viewed as a resource. So, then you can start working here….Here I have been able to show that I can be good at a sport, and I can actually be a resource for others. (Nils)

Through being viewed as a resource, participants could view themselves as resourceful. This recognition made the experience of ability available to participants, and the roles of member and coach became fluid rather than fixed. Correspondingly, a coach expressed that:

> We notice at all our workouts, right, we notice that people start doing better. And then we think that okay, we probably play a role in that, right. But we think that it's the person who starts doing better….And people start using their own resources and discover them. And some people take some time, but they [the resources] always, always start showing. And I think that's because we don't look for the stuff that doesn't work. We look for what works. (Alexander)

One participant, Maria, gave an example of what this supportive approach, or "looking for what works," facilitated for her: "When you struggle with social anxiety and this and that, then it's not that easy to go to an activity with a bunch of people you've never met before." She described still facing similar mental health struggles, but she felt welcomed and comfortable joining the activities provided by the community sports initiative and she gained confidence through participating.

Individual personal resources were cultivated through the team atmosphere, but also revealed themselves directly through participation in activities. One participant, Oscar, used kayaking as a metaphor for life. Facing the big waves at sea made him realize that he was able to tackle a challenge and cope with risk and fear. Other participants told similar stories of becoming and viewing themselves as capable. Nils described how his perception of himself in relation to physical exercise had changed since becoming a member:

> I was one of those who was picked last in physical education as a kid. At school and stuff. And I made an effort, but I wasn't good, ability-wise. But then I joined a training session with some people who were collaborating with Psykiatrialliansen and got in better shape and stuff, and I had the joy of becoming good at a sport.

3.1.2. Recognition Through Responsibilities and Roles

In several interviews, participants talked about *responsibilities* and *roles*, and these dimensions often intersected, connecting both personal and relational aspects of social inclusion. In terms of responsibilities,

one participant said: “There are expectations, not that you need to come, but that people are happy if you come, and that is probably what gets a lot of people out the door” (Lars). This highlights the decision to come to workouts as a flexible social responsibility. An important aspect of the responsibility to show up, however, was the personal choice and agency involved in doing so: “And you make the choice yourself. You yourself show up. And it’s up to you” (Karl). Some illustrated the collective responsibility in empowering each other to join in, which had a positive impact on the rest of the day or even on the next: “We try to enhance each other’s strengths. Enhance each other’s moods and empower each other. Good experiences that we can bring with us” (Benjamin).

Responsibilities were distributed in an inclusive manner:

> It’s not such a big deal why you’re here, or what diagnosis, as long as they can see that you can behave. As long as they can see that you are a kind person, they trust that you can contribute. (Lars)

Sometimes, however, being able to show up to activities without having formal responsibilities created the space to just participate and be present, which was perceived as more relaxing and enjoyable. Overall, however, being involved gave the participants an opportunity to give back and to feel valued through contributing.

An important aspect of becoming involved with the community sports initiative was gaining access to socially valued roles, as seen in the narrative of a participant who started playing floorball and had struggled at first, but then experienced a shift:

> But then my self-confidence increased, and then I started getting into it [the sport]. And after a while I became the one who attended the most activities. I went to activities from Monday to Friday, often twice per day. And then later I became a coach….I have seen new things. Seen how people are and have a new perspective on life. (Kasper)

While some had the role of members and others had the role of coaches, and some had both, everybody was seen as equally welcome: “It’s not just the coaches that are nice and say hi and support you and stuff like that. It’s the participants, too” (Andrea). Some expressed that they had been supported in taking on new roles within the community sports initiative, and how this, in turn, functioned as a first step to other valued roles in mainstream society: “And I was probably a member for a few years before I started being a coach. And for me, being a coach for Psykiatrialliansen was probably the first step into employment. And it was a very important step” (Ole). It also promoted a positive sense of self and a sense of being part of something bigger than oneself. One participant, Silje, talked about how she had experienced growth through learning new skills within a social context. Furthermore, getting to know other people and their life stories made her feel less lonely: “Here, nobody’s perfect. You are simply yourself” (Silje). Correspondingly, Ole stated: “It’s as fun for me with the social aspects of the workouts, and that you also get to coach others and benefit from those tasks. And yeah, it’s fun to see growth in the people you coach, as well.”

Coaches had an important role in promoting social inclusion. When reflecting on the motto of Psykiatrialliansen (“Everybody is welcome, always”), which was actively used, a coach said the following: “Because it says something about how you meet everyone, right. You need to create space; you need to create meaning. And you need to see people, and you should use each person’s name. You should validate

identity" (Alexander). The ability to make a difference for others and to empower them to take on positive roles was highly valued:

> Especially this one time when we took some people climbing, then we took [public transport] to the climbing center. And it was difficult to get the conversation going. And it was me and two others. And I tried to talk and tried to involve [them], and there was no conversation. But then on the way back I couldn't get a word in. That mastery, and they wanted to post pictures on Facebook, and I had taken pictures of them. And they were calling people, and they talked to me, and they were in a totally different place. (Emil)

The way the community sports initiative was defined provided members and coaches alike with a community that facilitated physical exercise outside of the mental health system and on equal terms, which made a difference in terms of roles:

> We're not going to a treatment service, we're going spinning. And it's low threshold. You take it easy if you like. And then you give it all if you like. And nobody is any better than anyone else, or above anybody. (Karl)

Furthermore, the activities gave people valued sport-related roles, regardless of ability. Ida, who had started playing soccer as an adult, put it this way: "I'm no soccer player by nature, but at the same time I do function as a soccer player on the field." This was in contrast to how, in the past and in other contexts, being a person with mental health and substance use problems had played a defining role, impacting one's sense of identity:

> You need to get some time off from being ill. Because that is a small part of you, but it takes over every part of you. If you are constantly reminded of how ill you are and how little you are able to do, as is the case in the real world, where if you are somewhat different, or don't fit in at times, or are sick….You have to explain yourself, maybe. Then it's so nice to just come here. You're there to play soccer, that's what you're there for. (Daniel)

Finally, through being part of the initiative, the participants experienced a broader recognition by others, not only in particular roles, but also simply as a person in the world:

> I live just on the other side of the road. Just walking through the underground tunnel and seeing people who are attending or have attended a workout, seeing that joy, or that smile that I get just for being human, and then I know what I have been like for 20 years and what I've been doing. I wouldn't even dare smile to myself. I can't really describe….It is hard to put into words how much that means. (Fredrik)

3.1.3. A Sense of Belonging Through Relationships

In interviews, participants described the importance of *relationships* and connectedness in facilitating a sense of belonging with the initiative, and experiencing a sense of belonging was a deeply relational process. In addition to making resources, roles, and responsibilities available to members and coaches, the initiative had an inclusive atmosphere that was described by one participant in the following terms: "Everybody's included, and everybody's welcome. And that's what I like best" (Jonas). Similarly, another participant

described the experience of stepping into a new community without the need to explain oneself: "I think it is the openness. Being met….There is no judgement, no stigmatization, and no questions, like who are you, where are you from, and who referred you here" (Karl). This approach contributed to the sense of being part of an inclusive community:

> It means a lot to me and others that none of the coaches ask, "Why are you here?" Or that nobody asks, "What is your diagnosis? Are you hospitalized?" Or something along those lines. They just say, "Come join us." (Karl)

This was perhaps linked with shared lived experiences of personal struggles or of being next-of-kin to someone who had had such struggles in life: "Everybody knows that we are struggling with our own stuff or have struggled with stuff. And then I think that yeah, then people feel that the thresholds are lower, that here people understand" (Emil). Many participants gave similar accounts of feeling welcomed.

This inclusive atmosphere appeared to be related to the team spirit that characterized the various activities: "Here we play together like a team" (Ida). Similarly, Emil stated that the essence of the community sports initiative was in doing things together: "It's about showing up. About showing up and doing something with others. And everything that an organized activity represents." Lars also referred to the team spirit: "I had not expected it [participation] to be such a good experience. And the reason was that the thresholds were so low. No one expects anything from you, but everyone wants you to…have a good experience." The initiative was described as always accessible due to the absence of thresholds. Further, being part of an accessible community created a sense of belonging that did not rely on mental health or require well-being:

> For me it has been important to be part of something. A community, in a simple way, that I can go to regardless of how I feel. I mean, if I'm in poor mental shape, then it's hard to be social, and it's hard to work, and it's difficult to have responsibilities and stuff. But going to a workout, that's always possible, regardless of how I feel. (Julie)

The community sports initiative was also an arena for establishing friendships with others: "So then I straight up needed to make new friends. And then this was a good way to make friends" (Ida). For many, the initiative was an important venue for facilitating a broader connectedness: "I have gained more friends in this community, or network, than ever before in my life" (Sara). One participant, Henrik, elaborated on the value of making friends through the community sports initiative and the joy he found in being able to make a difference both for himself and for others. Some participants even described the people involved with Psykiatrialliansen as a family:

> It's more like a family, to put it that way. Everybody takes care of each other. If anybody sees that anybody's sad, there's always cheering up. There's no, like, "Look at that person," right? There's no exclusion. Everybody gets to play. (Silje)

Recognition from others and recognizing others were important aspects of feeling connected to the initiative as a community, both during activities and outside of the realm of the activities:

> When I'm out and about, after working out, I sometimes run into people I have attended an activity with. And it's not like we always say hi and bye, but we maybe nod to each other. Or, like….A gesture.

> And, because it's like….That's what it's about, I think, being seen….And that's one of the reasons I keep returning, week after week. (Ida)

Subsequently, through involvement with the community sports initiative, the participants got to know others and to be known, thus promoting relationships and a sense of belonging: "The groups are quite small, so that if you join several times then you become a group of people who meet and talk. It's very nice when someone says 'Hi! There you are. Where were you last time?' " (Viktor). This represented a new type of experience for some.

The community sports initiative further became a welcoming community by facilitating playfulness and accepting people regardless of ability. Some talked about the importance of being accepted even if they were clumsy. This contributed to creating a unique community where connectedness was valued over ability:

> I see that new people are well received. It is a unique community. And this one guy, he was extremely happy because he had scored a goal. And then some other woman said, "Yeah, but he scored a goal for the other team." Oh well, but it was still a goal. And they just cheered him on. (Camilla)

The community sports initiative was sometimes described in contrast to mainstream society, which was perceived by some as not particularly welcoming. Instead of valuing status and external factors, the shared goals and experiences were seen as essential: "Here all status symbols and your education and job and your money, that doesn't matter here….You can start talking about where you're hiking and where you're going and what you've done" (Oscar).

One participant wished he had known about the initiative sooner, as it could have served as a welcome break from the substance-using community and compensated for the lack of other social networks following a period of inpatient treatment: "But when I was standing there with two empty hands, and the only place I knew I could get social contact was in the substance-using community, at that point [the initiative] would have been golden'' (Karl).

Involvement with the community sports initiative also served as a bridge to mainstream society, and thus to social inclusion in a broader sense. One participant described it in the following way: "You have to start somewhere. Like, that's what Psykiatrialliansen has meant to me, to put it that way. Stepping out into the community, society" (Maria). Another participant told a similar story of how the team bridged relationships with mainstream society:

> And like a lot of people say, they start at our [lived experience] café, and then they start going to cafés with friends. And kind of, I mean, regular cafés. And the same with [the community sports initiative], that they start climbing with them, and then they join a regular climbing community, or a different climbing community, right. It can be a stepping stone or something like that, into regular life. (Camilla)

While several participants had experienced staff within the mental health system informing them of the community sports initiative and thus connecting them with opportunities for participation in physical exercise, the experience of joining the initiative also contrasted with physical exercise initiatives within mental health systems:

> Everywhere you go, physical exercise within mental health [services], you have to fill out forms. You have to be registered as a user, and….But here it's not like that. You don't need that here. You can bring people. If you for instance want to bring a support contact, or….Whoever. Parents or anyone at all. You can bring anyone to a workout, and they are all welcome. (Ole)

4. Discussion

In this study, we explored experiences of social inclusion among members and coaches involved with Psykiatrialliansen in Bergen, Norway through a conceptual framework for citizenship, thus identifying specific experiences related to resources, responsibilities and roles, and relationships. Each of these three dimensions pertaining to experiences of social inclusion will be discussed below.

First, among the participants, experiences of social inclusion related to *resources*. Overall, the community sports initiative facilitated access to tangible opportunities for physical exercise and fitness, but involvement also facilitated access to positive connections. Access is an essential dimension within inclusive citizenship frameworks, highlighting the role of society and community in making opportunities available for people (Lister, 2007). Indeed, the stories shared by the participants emphasized their experiences of how community sports provided them with a place for social inclusion and opportunities that would otherwise be perceived as out of reach due to barriers such as cost and fitness. Further, involvement added meaningful activities, structure, and routines in everyday life by giving the participants somewhere to be, which has also been described as valuable in previous research on community sports initiatives (Oudshoorn et al., 2022; Van der Veken et al., 2020b). The need to participate in activities is deeply existential and access to activities may contribute to a sense of community, which can counter previous experiences of exclusion (Benkwitz & Healy, 2019; Doroud et al., 2018). This may be the case particularly when feeling welcomed by others (Snethen et al., 2021). The community sports initiative explored here actively worked to make people feel welcomed, through supporting participants in cultivating their interests and skills. This effort positively changed how the participants viewed themselves and their relationships with others. A similar focus on emphasizing resources has also been described in other community sports initiatives, where participation has been reported to help people develop skills, self-confidence, and rewarding relationships (Benkwitz & Healy, 2019; Oudshoorn et al., 2022).

Second, experiences of social inclusion depended on *responsibilities* and *roles*. This intersected with the participants seeing themselves and being seen by others as resourceful. Through recognition within a supportive and flexible atmosphere, the participants felt empowered to take on positive responsibilities and roles, such as soccer player, teammate, member, and coach. Being given opportunities to take on responsibilities was perceived as different from being presented with expectations or demands and was associated with having a variety of opportunities for contributing. Furthermore, the roles of member and coach both had valuable qualities. Furthermore, they were intersecting and fluid, and the responsibilities that came with each role were flexible and up to each person to define for themselves. This is important as many persons who have a history of mental health and substance use problems have experienced prolonged disengagement from activities in everyday life. Many may therefore lack opportunities to be regarded as active citizens and to hold responsibilities and valued roles (Blank et al., 2015; Sutton et al., 2012). However, being recognized and seen as a resourceful contributor is important for personal and social identity and is deeply connected to well-being and social inclusion (Nordaunet & Sælør, 2018; Van der Veken et al., 2020b).

Accessing new responsibilities can therefore be an important part of building or rebuilding positive identity and self-confidence as a community member (Van der Veken et al., 2020b; Vervliet et al., 2019).

Third, experiences of social inclusion relied on *relationships*, encompassing relationships with other people as well as with society (Lister, 2007). The participants described how they had gained friendships through the community sports initiative. Some even compared their relationships with other members and coaches with family relationships, indicating the significance of the relationships acquired through involvement. Social inclusion is a relational process, and embedded in this is both the process of making friends and building a social network (Eather et al., 2023). Establishing new friendships while struggling with mental health or substance use problems can nevertheless be challenging, in part due to experiences of exclusion from everyday responsibilities and roles over time, and a subsequent sense of being different from others and being viewed by others as different (Cogan et al., 2021; Vigdal et al., 2024). Although the process of building social networks can be lengthy and demanding, especially if lacking arenas for relating to others, access to arenas such as community sports initiatives can facilitate a sense of belonging (Benkwitz & Healy, 2019; Oudshoorn et al., 2022). Social arenas that offer contact within a structured format can provide safety and predictability, which is valuable in making it easier for people to relax and join in as they are (Vigdal et al., 2023). Interestingly, the participants in this study described experiences of being immediately included when joining the community sports initiative, as if they had been involved for years. While the value of returning and prolonged participation was emphasized, it also seemed as though the temporal dimension involved in building social networks was at least partially lifted by the inclusive team spirit. For some, the community sports initiative was a welcoming community separate from society, built on common ground, and for others it served as a bridge to mainstream society. This points to the capacity of community sports to promote a sense of belonging both within specific communities and on the broader societal level (Litwiller et al., 2017).

Overall, our analysis indicates that the multidimensional citizenship framework developed by Rowe et al. (2012) appears relevant in understanding how participation in community sports can contribute to social inclusion. More specifically, the subthemes of resources, responsibilities and roles, and relationships appear to be overlapping. We found responsibilities and roles to be so closely connected in the material that they were better understood in combination than independently. Additionally, each subtheme contained qualities which tapped into other dimensions. This was for instance seen in how there was an emphasis on multiple forms of resources both in relation to responsibilities and roles, as well as relationships. Interestingly, however, we did not identify the dimension *rights* in our material. One potential explanation for this is that within the Norwegian context, relational aspects of citizenship appear to be somewhat distinct from formal rights (Nesse et al., 2022). Likewise, community sports initiatives may have greater potential to address relational citizenship than formal aspects of citizenship in practice.

The citizenship framework applied in this study was originally developed based on a mixed-methods collaborative approach, which resulted in a quantitative measure (Rowe et al., 2012) and inspired similar projects (MacIntyre et al., 2019). The quantitative measure has been used as the basis for qualitative studies about treatment providers' perspectives on promoting citizenship (Clayton et al., 2020; Ponce et al., 2016), but has not previously been applied as an analytical framework with participants with mental health and substance use problems within a community sports context. By utilizing a concrete, conceptual framework for social inclusion, we argue that we have been able to identify and expand on some core dimensions with significance for community sports. Subsequently, we argue that the study provides important insights into

social inclusion within community sports initiatives. It also adds to the literature by utilizing a community sports initiative with a broader range of available activities as a case for exploring this topic. Interestingly, the findings of our study mirror aspects that have been highlighted in studies of community sports initiatives which focus on one specific sport (e.g., Benkwitz & Healy, 2019; Ogundipe et al., 2020), especially regarding participation as a pathway to experiencing a sense of belonging in the community.

Although this study is based on the voices of multiple members and coaches, some perspectives may be less represented, as the community sports initiative currently has several hundred members and coaches. In addition, it may be more challenging for participants to bring up more critical perspectives in in-depth interviews, perhaps particularly in focus groups. However, we found the themes related to experiences of social inclusion to be consistently present and emphasized across interviews, indicating the trustworthiness of the findings.

5. Conclusions and Implications for Practice and Further Research

In this study, the community sports initiative Psykiatrialliansen was described by members and coaches as a community that promoted social inclusion through access to various personal and social resources, recognition as community members through responsibilities and valued social roles, and the development of a sense of belonging through relationships. Overall, participation contributed to experiences of social inclusion which were multifaceted and intertwined. Through its atmosphere, team spirit, flexibility, and low thresholds, the community sports initiative was more than just an arena for physical exercise. This study indicates that community sports initiatives may function as venues for social inclusion both by serving as welcoming, low-threshold communities separate from and within society as well as by connecting people with themselves, others, everyday life, and society at large through participation and involvement. The study implies that person-centered and strengths-based approaches are vital in promoting social inclusion in such settings in practice. Given that the addressed citizenship dimensions appear to be central indicators of social inclusion, future studies could continue to explore how these, and other, dimensions may be strengthened through community sports. This includes the dimension related to rights, which was not identified in this study.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data are not publicly available to protect the privacy of the participants.

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Field Study: How Are Vulnerable Children in China Developing Through Sport-Based Social Projects?

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Abstract

According to a UNICEF report, there are 65.17 million children living in poverty-stricken areas of China, accounting for 21.9% of the national child population. Authorities focus on economic aid and basic safety protection for vulnerable children but lack support in psychological, emotional, and social areas. While international scholars have recognized sports-based social projects (SBSPs) as an effective tool for promoting child development, there is limited research on the role of SBSPs in advancing vulnerable children's development in China. To provide empirical data on the outcomes of SBSPs in China and discuss their mechanisms and conditions, the author conducted a field study of a project called "Angel" in the suburbs of Beijing. Through 101 hours of observation and 17 hours of in-depth interviews, the thematic analysis revealed five core themes: initial backgrounds, developmental challenges, collective life, sport activities, and growth. The study found that these children, with backgrounds of poor education, isolation, and poverty, exhibited Developmental Challenges such as weak social skills, cognitive limitations, and low psychological capital. However, through collective life, social interactions, educational management, independent living experiences, and sports opportunities, they showed improvements in responsibility, social skills, and optimism. The study also explored the fulfillment of basic psychological needs in sports and collective life, offering theoretical support for the role of SBSPs in promoting child development.

Keywords

basic psychological needs; child development; sport-based social projects; thematic analysis; vulnerable children

1. Introduction

Although China has not reported the exact number of vulnerable children over the past five years, the 2020 *China Child Population Status: Facts and Data* (The National Bureau of Statistics of China et al., 2021), based on the most recent national census, shows 65.17 million children in formerly impoverished areas, representing 21.9% of the national child population. Among them, 57.8 % live in rural areas with concerning survival and development conditions. These children suffer multidimensional deprivation—poorer health, schooling, and living conditions than their peers. Early marriage and early childbirth among adolescents are also relatively common. The authorities define vulnerable children as those facing difficulties in daily life, medical care, education, and more due to family poverty, those who face difficulties in rehabilitation, care, and social integration due to disabilities, and children whose personal safety is threatened or violated due to abuse, neglect, accidental injury, or illegal harm resulting from the absence or improper custody of guardians (The State Council of China, 2016). These children show significant vulnerabilities in terms of risk resistance, asset endowment, and social adaptation (X. Chen, 2023). They face higher psychological risks, and the accumulation of multiple adversities increases the likelihood of depression and suicidal thoughts (Wang et al., 2024). The authorities provide economic assistance and safety net protection for vulnerable children but lack developmental support, especially programs focusing on emotional support, social interaction, and other aspects, which fail to meet the deep and multifaceted needs of these children (Xie, 2023).

To address this issue, international scholars have pointed out that sports can significantly promote the welfare and mental health of vulnerable children (Bruner et al., 2023; Holt, 2008). In China, social forces, as pioneers in aiding vulnerable children, have already realized the urgency of addressing the multifaceted developmental needs of vulnerable children (F. Liu & Yu, 2015). Although there are some Sports-Based Projects already exist in China, they lack detailed academic exploration regarding their role in promoting the development of vulnerable children. International literature on child development involves a wide range of areas, including self-confidence, prosocial behavior, self-esteem, self-discipline, and more (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2013). Therefore, this study will conduct a field study of sports-based projects to explore the experiences of vulnerable children and clarify which specific aspects of personal development are created for them by sports-based social projects (SBSPs) in China. Additionally, over the past decade, more and more scholars have called for an examination of the mechanisms behind project outcomes (Coalter, 2015). This study will also delve into the positive conditions brought about by Sports-Based Projects for the development of vulnerable children in China, along with factors that may influence these outcomes, such as the children's backgrounds, coaches, and social culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Vulnerable Children

Internationally, according to UNICEF (2016) data, vulnerable children are defined as those who lack the necessary support systems to ensure their well-being and development. This broad definition often emphasizes child protection, healthcare, and survival. They face higher risks of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Gilbert et al., 2009). Malnutrition, chronic illness, and mental health issues are also common due to poor healthcare and stress (WHO, 2017). Children in poverty often lack food, shelter, and medical care (UNICEF, 2016).

In China, the responsibility for child protection was previously dispersed among various government departments, such as civil affairs, women's federations, and public security, leading to fragmented systems, inconsistent definitions, and difficulty in distributing work outcomes (Xu, 2021). However, in 2019, the State Council approved the establishment of the Ministry of Civil Affairs' Children's Welfare Department, which reduced such criticisms (X. Chen, 2023), and China has eased vulnerable children's basic survival issues through economic assistance and healthcare as emphasized in its poverty combat over the past decade. (Xie, 2023).

Compared to issues faced by children in other countries—such as street gangs (Loeffelholz et al., 2012), armed conflict (Kashfi et al., 2020), or drug trafficking (Charles, 2024)—China is particularly notable for its large population of left-behind children caused by massive rural-to-urban migration under the urban-rural dual structure and the inadequacies of the social security system (Fan et al., 2015). Within the vulnerable children population, there are a significant number of ethnic minority groups distinct from the Han Chinese. For example, in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, one of China's largest ethnic autonomous regions, over four million people, more than 50% of the population, are Yi (Sichuan Provincial Statistics Bureau, 2022). The region is mountainous, with poor transportation and relative isolation from the outside world, and its economy is weak. It has also developed unique social and cultural dynamics and developmental challenges (Ming & Wang, 2019), such as potential language barriers. In Liangshan, the first language children learn is Yi (Bi et al., 2024). According to a 2020 survey by Chinese scholar Shi (2021) in multiple counties, 48.2% of locals use Mandarin, while 77.0% speak their ethnic language. Although the Chinese government promotes Mandarin as the official language and encourages its widespread use (Adamson & Feng, 2022), there is a lack of adaptation to local cultural characteristics and rigid teaching methods, leading to many students feeling apprehensive and unmotivated to learn Mandarin (Ma, 2017). The lack of mainstream communication skills and environments makes it difficult for these children to integrate into society in the future. Another factor is the influence of marriage customs. Chinese scholars (J. Chen & Pan, 2023) have pointed out that rural women often lack control over their destiny under the bride price culture. In the past, arranged marriages were more common in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, and early marriage was widespread. Typically, boys and girls were matched by their parents through intermediaries when they were very young, and during this process, women were treated as commodities. A woman's marriage was viewed as selling herself in exchange for a bride price from the male family (Yan & Li, 2005).

2.2. Child Development

Child development refers to the biological, psychological, and emotional changes that occur between birth and adolescence. It involves a continuous and dynamic process of growth and maturation in various domains, including physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development (Fleer, 2018; Shaw, 2012; Souza & Veríssimo, 2015). One significant perspective in contemporary research is Positive Youth Development (PYD), which emphasizes the potential of children and adolescents in terms of their resources, strengths, and interests, rather than focusing on their problems and deficiencies (Damon, 2004). For instance, the concept of psychological capital highlights individuals' internal positive psychological traits and resources that can enhance growth, development, and adaptability. Its core components include self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007). Chinese scholars such as Fan et al. (2015) further advanced this concept by developing a psychological capital scale tailored to the specific characteristics of rural left-behind children in China, notably adding a unique dimension—*understanding and gratitude*, which reflects the influence of

Confucianism. Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2012) is also frequently applied in the context of child development. It proposes an influential mini-theory that is based on psychological needs, including three essential needs for children's well-being and mental health: autonomy, referring to the individual's capacity for self-determination and control over one's actions and life goals; competence, the perception of one's abilities and skills, leading to a sense of achievement and confidence; and relatedness, the need to feel connected to and supported by others. Of particular relevance is the internalization mechanism within SDT (Al-Hoorie et al., 2022; Deci & Ryan, 2012), which explains how external rules and values can be integrated into a child's internal psychological structure. This process ranges from externally regulated behaviors (e.g., driven by rewards or punishments) to fully internalized actions aligned with one's personal values.

Among the many means to support child development, sport has been regarded as a particularly effective approach (Holt et al., 2012; Super et al., 2014). For example, Morgan et al. (2019) found that weekly boxing sessions helped enhance the psychological capital of marginalized youth and fostered social inclusion. Similarly, Simón-Piqueras et al. (2024) reported that a 36-session sports education program significantly improved the satisfaction of psychological needs among children from socially vulnerable backgrounds. The fulfillment of basic psychological needs is considered crucial for achieving positive developmental outcomes in sports-based interventions for children (Inoue et al., 2015; Nascimento Junior et al., 2021).

2.3. SBSPs

Scholars generally define SBSP around their functions. Sherry and Coalter (2009) provided a functional definition of SBSP as "intentionally using sports to achieve non-sports outcomes, such as social cohesion, health promotion, or crime reduction." Although subsequent scholars have defined it differently in scope and focus (Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012; Whitley et al., 2019), the definitions converge on using sports to achieve social good.

In China, due to the unique understanding of the term "social," SBSPs are often distinguished from official power, emphasizing mass participation and stressing that they are initiated and participated by various social organizations or individuals, i.e., bottom-up initiatives (National Sports College Textbook Committee, 1989). Therefore, they are more aligned with actual needs. Social projects, particularly concerning children's welfare, have played a pioneering and innovative role, becoming more aware of the diverse needs of vulnerable children (F. Liu & Yu, 2015), and have led to the creation of projects using sports as a foundation for child development. This adds a unique significance to SBSPs in China.

The "positive developmental" outcomes of SBSPs have been shown to vary widely across different studies, reflecting the diversity of project types and target populations. For instance, Beaulac et al. (2011) examined a community recreational center that offered weekly free dance classes to youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods. These socially oriented, structured, and accessible activities were found to enhance participants' mood, self-confidence, and respect for diversity. Similarly, Hasanpour et al. (2014) reported that a pseudo-family center providing 24 aerobic exercise sessions over two months to orphaned girls significantly improved their self-esteem. In another case, Riley and Anderson-Butcher (2012) described a 19-day summer camp that included three hours of daily sports instruction, which fostered greater proactivity and self-discipline among youth from impoverished areas.

The view of an SBSP as a powerful tool for promoting the development of vulnerable children has been widely studied in regions such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Hermens et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2019). However, there is still a lack of sufficient empirical data on SBSPs' impact in China, especially in terms of the detailed exploration of participants' experiences. The results of positive development are significantly influenced by factors such as the type of sports program, implementation methods, project personnel, participation modes, and the social background of the participants (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2013, 2015). Therefore, the implementation of SBSPs in China, given its different conditions, also deserves further investigation.

3. Method

The author employed a field study approach (Chipchase, 2018) and, beginning on July 7, 2024, lived for three weeks in the teacher's dormitory of the "Angel" project as a photographer, sharing daily life and meals with the participants.

3.1. Settings

Established in 2015 by civil society members, the "Angel" project aims to cultivate sports skills in vulnerable children while addressing basic living needs. It seeks to foster well-rounded and independent character development, enabling children to overcome adversity, better integrate into society, and ultimately pursue future career opportunities. It created China's first public welfare baseball team and added artistic gymnastics in year two, making it pioneering and representative. The project has since accumulated data—including growth records, training results, competition outcomes, and media coverage—offering empirical support for research. It is located in the suburbs of Beijing and is registered under a 5A-level foundation approved by the Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau and operates through public donations. As a legally qualified social sports initiative with public recruitment capacity, it offers a practical model.

At the time of entry, the project's beneficiaries are vulnerable children aged 7–9, including those from impoverished families, orphans, de facto orphans, and children of incarcerated parents. During the research period, more than 80 children aged 7–14 were residing at the base. They came from nine provinces and cities across China and represented six ethnic groups, with ethnic minorities accounting for 75% of the total. The recruitment process for the "Angel" project involves the following steps: (a) selecting suitable children from lists provided by local governments and institutions, followed by on-site verification of family poverty status; (b) conducting physical examinations to ensure the absence of infectious or hereditary diseases; (c) assessing basic physical fitness through tests such as running, jumping, and throwing; (d) transferring selected children to the Beijing base for a three-month adaptation—those unable to adjust are returned; (e) those who stay sign a training and support agreement with their legal guardians.

Children complete China's nine-year compulsory education at nearby schools while receiving specialized sports training at the project base. They formed baseball and artistic gymnastics teams to participate in various sports competitions. As children grow—based on development, performance, and academics—they may enter vocational schools, universities, pro teams, or become grassroots coaches—gaining career direction and job prospects.

3.2. Participants

Participants were purposefully sampled from students over 12 years of age who had been living at the base for more than three years. The sampling was based on initial observations and preliminary analysis (see Table 1), with the requirement that participants should be able to clearly express their thoughts and emotions, enabling the author to gather rich, in-depth information. Participants needed to have a certain level of self-expression and understanding, a strong interest in participating, and honesty.

Table 1. Basic information of participants, all from the boys' baseball team and girls' gymnastics teams of the project "Angel."

ID	Age (year)	How long in the Project (year)	Hometown	Ethnicity	Gender
P1	13	5	Yunnan, Baoshan	Han	Male
P2	13	4.5	Sichuan, Liangshan	Yi	Male
P3	13	4.5	Yunnan, Baoshan	Han	Male
P4	13	5	Sichuan, Liangshan	Yi	Male
P5	12	4	Sichuan, Liangshan	Yi	Male
P6	14	5.5	Sichuan, Liangshan	Yi	Female
P7	13	4.5	Sichuan, Liangshan	Yi	Female
P8	13	5	Sichuan, Liangshan	Yi	Female
P9	13	5	Sichuan, Liangshan	Yi	Female
P10	13	4.5	Hebei, Langfang	Han	Female

3.3. Data Collection

Non-participant observation was conducted at different locations (see Table 2) and results were recorded through video and field notes.

Table 2. Non-participant observation time and location records.

Days of observation	Gymnastics Gym (hours of observation)	Baseball Field (hours of observation)	Yard of the project base (hours of observation)	Cafeteria (meals together)
Monday	16	10	3	5
Tuesday	9.5	9	2.5	5
Wednesday	7.5	8	3	4
Thursday	6	7	2	6
Friday	7	9	1.5	2
Total Time	46 (45.54%)	43 (42.57%)	12 (11.88%)	22

Note: Informal interviews were driven by real-time observations, asking questions about observed events and behaviors, and attempting to interpret the motivations and meanings behind the actions.

Formal in-depth interviews were conducted individually in a quiet, undisturbed setting, each lasting 40–60 minutes, totaling 17 hours. The author built rapport with the children beforehand through daily interactions and some informal interviews, adopting a "least-adult membership" approach (Danby et al.,

2011) to reduce authority, making the interview feel more like a regular conversation. Open-ended questions were used to reduce any presuppositions about the children's responses, and refreshments were provided during the interviews to make the environment more natural.

After each interview, the author transcribed the recordings, documenting key information until two consecutive interviews with new participants failed to provide additional topics, signaling data saturation.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Physical Education at Hangzhou Normal University and monitored by the National Social Science Fund of China to ensure compliance with the Ethical Guidelines for Social Science and Humanities (European Commission, 2021).

Fieldwork began after signing an agreement with "Angel" project leaders, obtaining informed consent from the children's entrusted guardians. Children's consent was also crucial. The author regularly explained the research to ensure their understanding, clarifying they could withdraw at any time without consequences. Data collection started only after confirming their willingness to participate.

To protect participant privacy, names were replaced with codes, place and project names were anonymized, and all data was presented after project approval and securely stored on the author's password-protected computer, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (European Parliament, 2016).

3.5. Data Analysis

Following the guidance of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) for thematic analysis—a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data—the author transcribed the interview recordings verbatim. The materials were repeatedly read, and after verifying the accuracy of the transcriptions, they were imported into MaxQDA2020 software along with field notes and images for coding.

Table 3 presents the coding content across three stages, and an inductive and iterative approach guided the data analysis. First, raw data were labeled and condensed into 832 nodes. Conceptual codes were then developed to capture key ideas related to how sports support vulnerable children's development, continuing until code saturation. Similar codes were grouped into subthemes, and a theme map was constructed following the suggestions of Braun and Clarke (2006). Core themes were refined based on internal consistency and external distinction. Invalid or overlapping themes were removed or merged. Each theme was evaluated for clarity and coherence, ensuring alignment with the dataset and research goals to achieve meaning saturation.

Table 3. Core themes, subthemes, and codes.

Core themes	Subthemes	Codes
Initial Backgrounds	Isolation Lacking education Poverty Family	Want to see what it's like outside the mountains. Have never been out of Liangshan, the farthest I've been is to the town, and I've had very little contact with people from other places. Peers dropped out of school after high school, lacked family education, and lacked social education. Walking on mountain roads to school, reluctant to wear socks, low income, no toilet, no bathing. Single-parent families, parents divorced, mother remarried, disability, multiple children, arranged marriages.
Developmental Challenges	Social and Emotional problems Limited Cognition and Misconduct Weak Psychological Capital	Poor Mandarin, distrust of others, lack of empathy, selfishness, lack of role models, poorly educated, bad temper. Don't know what to do with their life, lack ambition, first exposure to external society with strong material desires, stealing things, lying. Lack of confidence, easily frustrated.
Collective Life	Building Relatedness Ideological Education and Management Independent Living	Building trust with peers, functional roles in sports, and off-field social circles. Taking on daily chores, learning to admit mistakes, coaches emphasizing ideological education, management must not slack off. A more convenient life, the challenge of independent living, controlling desires, developing a regular routine and diet, role models among peers, missing family, and receiving encouragement from family.
Sport Activities	A Big collective ritual Opportunities in Sports Activities Improvement of Lacking Ambition	Gaining a sense of collective belonging and identity after a big game, infighting is strictly forbidden. Speaking Mandarin, making more friends, experiencing difficulties never experienced before, learning to overcome difficulties, not giving up, emotional management in competitions, discipline and execution in competitions, courage in competitions. Expanding cognitive horizons, the contradiction between material desires and actual capabilities, improvement of lack of ambition, setting goals such as becoming a first-class athlete and winning competitions.
Growth	Confidence and Social Skills Sense of Responsibility Expectation of the Future	Becoming confident, learning to resolve conflicts, learning to reflect and apologize. A sense of collective responsibility, social responsibility, gratitude, and understanding. Emphasis on personal growth, aspirations for the future, and the desire for independence.

3.6. Validity and Reliability

During the data collection process, to ensure the reliability and completeness of the data and improve the interpretability of the research questions, the author supplemented the study with in-depth interviews with three coaches (C1, C2, C3) and two volunteers (V1, V2):

C1: Head coach of the men's baseball team, started coaching baseball in the early 1970s.

C2: Men's baseball coach, project leader, former captain of the Chinese national baseball team.

C3: Head coach of the women's artistic gymnastics team, former captain of the Chinese national women's artistic gymnastics team.

V1: University volunteer, has served at the base for 3 months.

V2: High school volunteer, has served at the base for 1 year.

By combining the obtained data with the author's observations and interviews with participants, a triangulation of multiple data sources was formed to ensure cross-validation of the data.

During data analysis, the author repeatedly proofread materials and regularly shared results with participants to assess whether they accurately reflected participants' descriptions. In addition, the author also regularly consulted with a research team consisting of one psychology professor, one sports professor, and two PhDs specializing in qualitative research methods in sports to ensure research plan rigor and review emerging categories and themes.

The author used the classification consistency index to assess coding reliability. Specifically, the proportion of consistent labeling classifications by multiple coders for the same materials was calculated using the formula: $CA = (T1 \cap T2 + T2 \cap T3 + T1 \cap T3)/(T1 \cup T2 \cup T3)$. T1 is the number of labels coded by Coder 1, T2 is the number of labels coded by Coder 2, and T3 is the number of labels coded by Coder 3. Two trained researchers, together with the author, coded 25% of the materials. The calculated classification consistency index $CA1 = 0.77$ indicates good coding consistency in this study.

4. Results

Data analysis of the field study revealed five core themes: Initial Backgrounds, Developmental Challenges, Collective Life, Sport Activities, and Growth (see Figure 1).

4.1. Initial Backgrounds

Participants described their initial environments in interviews, highlighting challenging factors and constraints. After reviewing field photos of the initial environments and cross-referencing with coaches, the author identified four subthemes: isolation, lacking education, poverty, and family.

4.1.1. Isolation

Participants P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, and P9 mentioned the isolation of their original environment, their longing for a life beyond Liangshan, and limited mobility due to rare contact with outsiders. For example:

> I really wanted to see what's beyond the mountains. Before C1 picked me up for this project, I had never been outside of Liangshan. (P2)

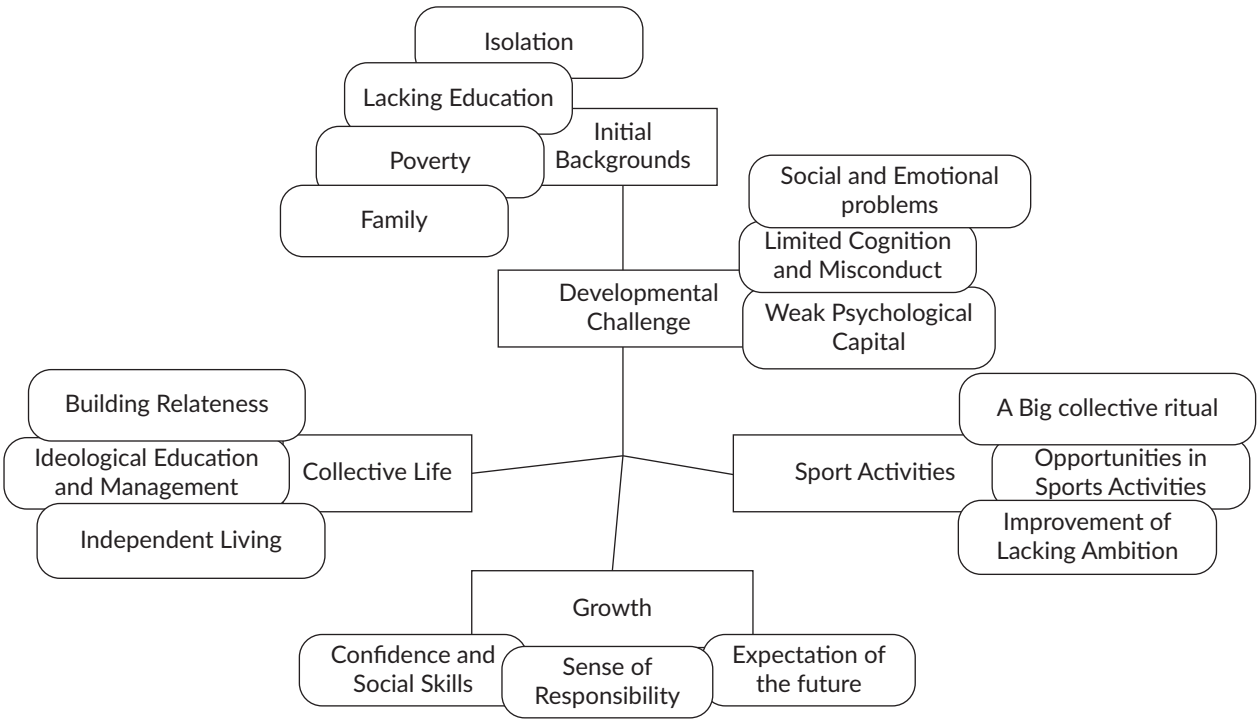

Figure 1. Theme map of five core themes and 16 subthemes.

> The farthest we will go is to the town, and we basically don't come into contact with people from outside. (P8)

4.1.2. Lacking Education

P2, P5, P8, and P9 mentioned difficulty accessing schooling; P4 and P10 also noted the lack of family education:

> Many people drop out of high school and go home to work. (P2)

> I used to be rude because I learned bad language at home from my brother. (P10)

Due to limited resources, Liangshan children have little access to social educational facilities such as museums, libraries, youth centers, or cultural activities. C1, C2, and C3 also mentioned their lack of social education:

> These children lack school education, lack family education, and social education is completely absent. (C1)

4.1.3. Poverty

Economic poverty was also mentioned, along with poor local infrastructure. Several participants P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, and P9 walked over 40 minutes on unpaved roads to reach school:

> It's not a cement road…it takes a long time, usually 40–50 minutes. If I run, it's a bit faster. (P5)

> It's horrible when it rains; the mountain roads turn to mud, and I get all messy. I never wanted to go to school, so I'm really glad I don't have to suffer this anymore. (P8)

One Liangshan child defecated in the hallway on his first night in the project—seemingly absurd, but explained by the absence of toilets back home and unfamiliarity with using restrooms. When asked, the participants confirmed this:

> There are no toilets, we just go to places where there's no one to poop. (P4)

> In the Liangshan mountains, it's like that…we hardly ever bathe, maybe once or twice a year. (P6)

P4, P5, P7, and P8 reported low family income, mostly from farming. Some relatively better-off families raised livestock to supplement income. Additionally, the author observed that many children did not wear socks during training. Initially perceived as poor hygiene, participants later explained they avoided wearing their limited socks during training.

4.1.4. Family

Many children have disadvantaged family backgrounds. More than half came from single-parent families, with one or both parents absent or working away, leading to a lack of education and supervision at home. This results in limited education and supervision. Causes included paternal abandonment, divorce, disability, remarriage, imprisonment, or death. One child mentioned:

> After my dad left, my mom remarried, and we don't really stay in touch. My grandparents take care of me. (P5)

Some also faced pressure from traditional marriage expectations. P6, P7, P8, and P9 expressed powerlessness about their future, with families arranging marriages to unwanted partners:

> If I were still in Liangshan, I would just get married, and my dowry would be given to my brother to marry a wife. (P7)

> If I hadn't come here, I would have been married off to someone…someone my family chose, probably someone I didn't like. (P9)

4.2. Developmental Challenges

Due to adverse initial backgrounds, these vulnerable children exhibit developmental challenges. Based on observations and interview summaries, three subthemes were identified: social and emotional problems, limited cognition and misconduct, and weak psychological capital.

4.2.1. Social and Emotional Problems

Some children from ethnic minorities encountered language barriers when they first arrived at the base. Field observations showed they struggled to speak Mandarin fluently with teachers and donors. Participants stated:

> Back in Liangshan, we mostly spoke Yi, there was no environment for speaking Mandarin. (P7)

Many participants also reported emotional issues: poor tempers, impulsiveness, and difficulty trusting others:

> I had a bad temper at first and often fought with teammates over trivial matters. We even fought a few times. (P2, P4)

> At first, I didn't trust others, always felt like no one would really be kind to me. (P10)

Before gymnastics and C3's introduction, the project had already started supporting girls' basic living needs, and they trained in baseball alongside boys to exercise. Male coaches adopted the stereotyped child-rearing notion in China of "raising sons poor, daughters rich," and assigned the best resources to girls. This led to overindulgence; P6, P8, and P9 recalled being self-centered, believing they deserved the best, and lacking female role models:

> We used to be self-centered, and when we first started gymnastics, we'd sabotage each other, throwing equipment and blaming others for receiving it. We didn't reflect on ourselves. (P7)

> We were a bit rude to the boys at the base…because we didn't know how to behave like girls. It was only after C3 came that we learned what it meant to be a girl. (P6)

C3 added:

> Originally, these kids were selfish. Before the girls' project officially started, we gave them the best resources, which spoiled them. They lacked discipline, girl's manners, and were hard to manage. I nearly gave up on them during the first six months. (C3)

4.2.2. Limited Cognition and Misconduct

At first, most children did not know what they wanted, lacked goals, and had limited cognition with no ambitions:

> I didn't know what I wanted to do. They told me to study hard, but I didn't know what I was studying for. The best I could do was work in the town. (P2)

> I just passed time at school. I used to think baseball and tennis were the same thing. (P8)

They were also weak at resisting desires, aiming for materialistic goals upon first contact with society. In observations of lunch breaks, younger children often asked the author about phones, cars, or becoming

internet celebrities. Half of the participants also shared experiences of stealing items or lying, not fully understanding the concept of ownership:

> I didn't understand back then. I just wanted it, so I stole my summer camp mate's toothpaste. (P10)

> I used to lie about winning a chess game, and even fought with my teammate because of it. (P5)

4.2.3. Weak Psychological Capital

Initially, participants believed they had very weak psychological capital. For example, participants P4, P7, P8, and the author mentioned that they lacked confidence, and P1, P2, and P7 also mentioned that they were easily frustrated:

> When I first came to the project, I was afraid I would be looked down upon. I was not confident and didn't like talking to others. (P1)

> In the first year at the project, I didn't perform well in some activities, and I became very negative and down for quite a while. (P7)

4.3. Collective Life

Another frequently mentioned aspect was collective life: living together, facing peer friction, receiving coach guidance, and adapting to independent living and labor responsibilities. This theme includes three subthemes: building relatedness, ideological education management, and independent living.

4.3.1. Building Relatedness

P1, P3, P4, and P7 noted that building daily-life connections with teammates helped improve cooperation on the field:

> Definitely more interaction in daily life, like playing games together, chatting, talking about anything. (P3)

Author observations showed field roles often mirrored off-field social circles, such as infielders or rhythmic gymnasts practicing the same routine.

4.3.2. Ideological Education and Management

The project's management of participants' daily lives differs from regular schools. The author observed that children in the project often took on various tasks within their capabilities, such as serving food in the cafeteria, cleaning dishes, or sweeping the yard. C1, C2, and V1 stated this setup aimed to prevent dependency on aid:

> Coming here for help is not about pampering, comfort, or enjoyment; it's about making them self-reliant and strong. We hope that through their practical contributions, they understand that they must create

> labor outcomes with their own hands. That's why we also let children lay the turf on the field and set up their own dormitories. (C1)

The coaches placed great emphasis on ideological education. The author observed that codes of conduct for daily life, athletes, and coaches were prominently posted in visible areas such as the cafeteria and classrooms (see Figure 2). Almost every participant mentioned that when they first arrived, the education they received was not centered on sports training but on moral development. For example:

> Don't waste food, don't use foul language, greet teachers—these are things C2 taught us. He said at the beginning that the first thing we need to learn in sports is how to be a person. (P1)

> At first, I only handled training, but gradually got involved in daily management and ideological education. They must learn how to be good people before learning to play sports. These kids lacked basic education and had bad habits. As a coach, I helped correct that. (C3)

Figure 2. Written in the canteen training requirements, rules of life and even coach requirements emphasize standards of ethics and behavior.

Some children made mistakes due to their past environments and limited cognition, such as the aforementioned defecation incident. Once this happened, coaches did not choose to reprimand or punish them but instead encouraged them to admit their mistakes and used the opportunity for responsibility education. C2 explained:

> I don't investigate. From an ideological education perspective, I want them to admit their mistakes on their own because they didn't know at first. Mistakes like this can be forgiven. What's more important is whether they have the courage to admit their mistakes. That's more important than the defecation mistake.

4.3.3. Independent Living

Though the "Angel" project provides structure and convenience, children face independent living challenges. Participants reported learning to control desires, build routines, and eat healthily. Peer role models and weekly family calls were helpful:

> I used to stay up late gaming, especially during a time when I skipped sleep to rank up, which left me exhausted in training. After moving in with P1, I saw how disciplined he was—sleeping on time and doing extra morning practice. I felt that indulging myself seemed weak, so I gradually fixed my routine. My training quality improved, and as a result, my appetite got better too—I stopped being picky and everything tasted good after intense practice. (P5)

> Getting up in winter or early summer was tough. I wanted to slack off and missed home. However, weekly calls with my mom encouraged me to cherish this rare opportunity. (P9)

4.4. Sports Activities

Through sports activities, participants gained a sense of collective identity and formed friendships. This section includes three subthemes: a big collective ritual, opportunities in sports activities, and improvement of lacking ambition.

4.4.1. A Big Collective Ritual

P1, P2, P4, P6, P7, and P9 recalled a strong sense of identity and belonging formed during a big game or training camp.

> Since my first competition, my teammate and I realized: "Oh, I'm a baseball player now." We began to really recognize the teammates had gone through a hard battle together and developed a sense of collective belonging. (P2, P4)

Coaches maintained unity, discouraged negative emotions, and strictly prohibited internal conflicts:

> Before one competition, we hadn't practiced well and started arguing. C3 lectured us very strictly: "Whatever happens, our fights are not within the team. Anyone who criticizes a teammate will be told to leave." (P6)

4.4.2. Opportunities in Sports Activities

Sports provided key opportunities. The longer minority children stayed, the more their Mandarin improved. P2, P5, P6, and P8 said communicating with referees and teammates in sports pushed them to use Mandarin more fluently:

> Every time we went to a city for a game, everyone spoke Mandarin, the referees spoke Mandarin, and we had Han teammates, so we used more Mandarin. Eventually, speaking it just became easier. (P6)

P4, P5, P7, P8, and P9 said sports interactions helped them make friends and overcome introversion:

> I met more friends here. I used to be introverted, but in training, you have to interact with teammates, and the more you interact, the better the relationships get, especially with the infield players. (P4)

P1, P2, P3, P4, and P7 said sports challenges helped them grow emotionally and become more resilient:

> The first time I achieved a result was hard. C3 made it our phone wallpaper and told us to remember that joy in hard times. (P7)

> "I was totally unprepared for my first match. I rushed my throws and we lost. For the next month, I didn't want to play anymore. C1 gave me special training, simulating high-pressure moments with three players on base. He said, 'Haste makes waste,' and now I'm a calm player. (P2)

Participants credited their ability to overcome difficulties to personalized, patient coaching:

> C1 fulfills his duty. When P2 withdrew after a loss, he got training and motivational talks. P4 was arrogant after losing and didn't see his flaws—you have to humble him. Every child is different. (V1)

P1, P3, P4, P5, and the author noted competitions built discipline and courage, as each decision directly affected team outcomes. Athletes learned to take responsibility, face failure, and make bold decisions:

> There's definitely pressure, like deciding whether to go for first or second base. You can't act impulsively, if you make the wrong decision, the team can lose and you will take the blame. Even though no one will blame you, you still feel the responsibility. (P1)

4.4.3. Improvement of Lacking Ambition

P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, and P9 said sports competitions took them to places like Hainan, Zhejiang, and Shenzhen, broadening their horizons. However, they also experienced a conflict between material desires and practical abilities. From the coaches' perspective, although their goals after engaging with society need guidance:

> They have difficulties, they're not wealthy. Coming to this project, they can now dream of a better future, set clear goals, and work toward them. Right now, they easily say they want an iPhone, branded shoes, or nice clothes, but before they're able to be self-sufficient and support themselves well, their goal should be self-reliance and self-improvement. (C3)

With proper guidance, coaches help improve ambition and develop a sense of control over life, especially for girls from Liangshan:

> Their values haven't yet become inner wealth, but after traveling for competitions, they've seen more and gained reference points. They've encountered excellent people. These experiences become teaching moments—while others watch TV and eat chips, I'm training; while others rest, I'm still training. By putting in more effort, I'll gain more. Gradually, they'll clarify what they want. (C1)

> For instance, I would let them choose what to start training with, such as rope or clubs, because I intend to encourage their sense of autonomy by allowing them to make their own decisions. (C3)

All participants shared short-term goals in interviews, like improving fitness, increasing pitching speed, winning competitions, or attaining first-class athlete status. For example:

> Whenever I feel lazy, I remind myself that I need to become a first-grade athlete. (P6)

> I haven't chosen between coach and player—I'll go step by step. Achieving my last little goal was rewarding. Now, I aim to increase pitching speed. (P1)

4.5. Growth

Based on the interviews with participants, combined with the author's observations and coaches' evaluations, it is clear that the participants mainly developed confidence, social skills, a sense of responsibility, and an expectation of their future.

4.5.1. Confidence and Social Skills

P1, P6, P7, and P8 all mentioned to the author that they have become more confident:

> I feel that I have gained a more direct sense of achievement, and I am full of confidence in every aspect of my life because I've put in a lot of effort and feel that I'm not worse than others. (P1)

> Before, I felt a little inferior when compared to peers from big cities, but coming here, C2 taught us, and now I feel that my temperament is completely different from before. (P7)

P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P8, and P10 mentioned that their ability to resolve conflicts has improved. When conflicts arise, they have learned to think from others' perspectives or make appropriate compromises, for example:

> There are inevitably some conflicts, and then we make some compromises. Arguing doesn't solve anything, and it just hurts feelings. (P8)

> What's different now is that when there's an argument, I'll calm down and try to understand things from the other person's point of view. I also realize when I'm wrong and have learned to apologize to my teammates. In the end, everything's fine. (P2, P3)

4.5.2. Sense of Responsibility

Some participants also showed concern for others and demonstrated a collective sense of responsibility, especially P6, P7, P9, and P10, who mentioned that during the most challenging times in artistic gymnastics training, they didn't choose to quit or give up because they didn't want to abandon their teammates:

> If I quit, it would be very irresponsible to the team because if I left, they wouldn't be able to complete a set routine in time for the competition….It wouldn't be fair to my teammates. (P10)

Additionally, in interviews with P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, and P10, they mentioned a sense of gratitude and social responsibility:

> I hope to achieve good results in competitions, which would live up to society's expectations and the coach's training. (P1)

> If I earn money in the future, I want to buy a house for my family, treat the coach to a meal, and start a project to help children in need in society. (P8)

4.5.3. Expectation of the Future

Every participant demonstrated a strong focus on personal growth, a vision for the future, and a sense of independence:

> I work hard because I think this is a golden stage, and also because I have nothing at the moment. I need to use my own hands and bat to build my future. (P1)

> Before, I felt like I had no control over my life, and I thought I'd just grow up and get married. Now I have a goal and feel fulfilled every day, trying to make myself stronger. What I do in the future will depend on myself. (P3)

> I felt like I didn't know anything. But now, I've made great progress in sports. I feel that by training hard, I can at least become a coach in the future and earn my own living. (P8)

5. Discussion

Based on our findings from the subjective experiences of vulnerable children, the author's field observations, and the coaches' evaluations, vulnerable children faced many disadvantages due to their background, which led to various challenges. After entering the project, they grew through the support and opportunities offered by collective life and sports activities.

5.1. Background of the Children

The seven ethnic minority children from Liangshan, Sichuan, differed notably from the three Han children, mainly due to their backgrounds. Liangshan is the largest ethnic Yi autonomous region in China. Due to multiple factors such as geography, history, and culture, the environment in which these children grew up was relatively isolated. In interviews, they said they had never left Liangshan and viewed Mandarin as a "useless foreign language," lacking real-life contexts to support learning—leading to weak proficiency upon joining the project. Although Mandarin is the official language of China (Adamson & Feng, 2022), its promotion has been ineffective in adapting to the practical scenarios of ethnic minorities (Ma, 2017). However, the children in the "Angel" project frequently needed to use Mandarin during sports activities, which gradually helped them acquire and improve this communication skill. The development of communication skills is beneficial for these children to integrate into mainstream society in the future, reducing their social vulnerability (Haudenhuyse et al., 2014).

Moreover, the social circle of the seven Yi children lacked interaction with the outside world. Having never left Liangshan, the children had little exposure to people from different backgrounds, limiting their social abilities (Bi et al., 2024). The children's cognitive framework, shaped by their upbringing, also limited their ambitions due to a lack of vision (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Upon joining the project, these children gained more interaction opportunities through sports activities, overcoming their personality barriers, and making more friends. This aligns with previous studies, which show that sports programs provide vulnerable youth with more positive social opportunities, thereby promoting the development of social skills (Son & Berdychevsky, 2022). Furthermore, as these children were exposed to broader societal experiences through the "Angel" project, their goals became clearer and their perspectives expanded, as scholars have noted that exposure broadens one's vision and enhances aspirations and future goals (Gore et al., 2015).

However, the development of communication skills, overcoming personality barriers, making more friends, and improving lack of ambition were not mentioned in the interviews of the three non-minority children. This is because these issues did not exist in their original backgrounds. Most of the Han children in the base had lost parental custody due to one parent being imprisoned or experiencing family disruptions, and their backgrounds were not different from those of children in general. They did not face issues of lacking social interaction, exposure, or basic education.

5.2. Supportive Conditions in Collective Life and Sports Activities

The collective life and sports activities in the "Angel" project visibly created supportive conditions for fulfilling children's basic psychological needs, which are crucial to their well-being and mental health (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

Regarding autonomy, female participants expressed concerns about lacking life choices. Particularly, under traditional Yi marriage customs, their futures were often pre-arranged—to be married off at a young age and assume domestic responsibilities in another household. This aligns with prior studies that highlight how rural women under the bride-price culture often lack control over their destiny (J. Chen & Pan, 2023; Yan & Li, 2005). These conditions deprive them of life self-direction and undermine autonomy—a basic psychological need. In contrast, within the core theme of sports activities, Coach C3 intentionally gave the girls options when choosing routines, aiming to challenge this sense of powerlessness and restore a sense of control. The importance of autonomy also lies in its role in the internalization of positive qualities. According to SDT, internalization is the motivational shift from avoiding punishment to guilt-based behavior, and finally to voluntary action based on internalized values (Al-Hoorie et al., 2022; Deci & Ryan, 2012). This mechanism emphasizes that controlling environments—those relying on pressure or punishment—can obstruct internalization. Conversely, autonomy-supportive environments facilitate it, thereby enhancing the long-term sustainability of positive traits. In this regard, Coach C2's approach to handling mistakes—encouraging children to acknowledge rather than be punished for their errors—reflects an autonomy-supportive practice. It helps foster children's sense of responsibility by guiding them to correct behavior through self-reflection rather than blame-shifting.

Second, the project also supported relatedness, which refers to the need to establish close, trusting, and caring relationships with others (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Within the project's collective living environment, children developed meaningful bonds with peers. For instance, P5 mentioned that living with

a disciplined roommate helped him change his own lifestyle—he stopped staying up late playing games and adopted a more regular routine. Prior research has emphasized the strong influence of peer environments on youth development (Salvy et al., 2012). Positive peer interactions are associated with prosocial behavior and academic engagement (Gifford-Smith et al., 2005), and encouragement from peers has been shown to positively influence adolescents' behavior and motivation (Husain et al., 2024; Padilla-Walker & Bean, 2009). Although separated from their original families, the children were still emotionally supported. As observed in the field and confirmed by P9, the project encouraged regular weekly phone calls home, which helped maintain family connection and emotional stability. Earlier research also supports the psychological benefit of family contact for children living away from home (Itskowitz et al., 1990). Additionally, through sports activities, children made new friends and experienced a strong sense of collective belonging, especially during group rituals. In the "growth" theme, they described transformation—from being irritable, impulsive, and difficult to get along with, to learning conflict resolution and self-reflection. The fulfillment of relatedness reflects the human need for connection and belonging, which is essential not only for emotional stability but also for preparing vulnerable children for future societal integration and improved mental health (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

Finally, in terms of competence, the children were given age-appropriate work in daily life—such as cleaning or helping in the cafeteria—which helped reduce their dependence on aid and simultaneously strengthened their sense of capability (Penha-Lopes, 2006). Within sports activities, they also learned to set small, incremental goals, helping them build a sense of mastery. A notable example is P2, whose coach simulated high-pressure game scenarios during training. This experience helped him gradually develop the ability to stay composed during real competitions. Through this process, the children not only improved their athletic skills, but also built self-confidence, developed hope for the future, and cultivated the resilience to face challenges without giving up (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020; White & Bennie, 2015).

5.3. Remaining Conditions Influencing Positive Outcomes

Participants' understanding of responsibility varied by sports program, aligning with Coalter's (2015) perspective. Male participants emphasized discipline and courage, as baseball—more open-ended than artistic gymnastics—requires proactive decisions during dynamic play, offering more decision-making opportunities. The rigid routines and the substitute mechanism in artistic gymnastics do not apply to baseball, so female participants in artistic gymnastics mentioned that their departure from the team would have a significant negative impact.

Additionally, we discussed the growth of social responsibility and a sense of gratitude. As this is a charity-based project, the children were fully aware that they were being supported by compassionate individuals in society. Furthermore, Chinese education is influenced by Confucian principles such as "benevolence" and "filial piety" (Bahtilla & Xu, 2021), and Chinese scholars have identified "gratitude" as a localized form of psychological capital, particularly in studies of rural left-behind children (Fan et al., 2015). Therefore, the positive outcomes observed in these children were influenced by both the SBSPs' attributes and the broader social culture.

Moreover, the project took care of the children's living arrangements, and collective living became a central theme in the outcomes. This condition is not present in many social sports programs in other countries, such as those relying on community centers or schools to offer regular sports courses (Beaulac et al., 2011; Holt

et al., 2012). In collective living, children had more opportunities to build trust with their peers and interact with daily partners, which facilitated emotional regulation (Karcher & Fischer, 2004). In the "Angel" project case, the children received more ideological education, adopted more disciplined behaviors, and prepared for challenges in independent living.

Some scholars have mentioned that while sports-based social programs are intended to promote social inclusion, some children who lack access to sports opportunities are still overlooked by these programs (Vandermeerschen et al., 2015). However, the project mitigates this issue by selectively recruiting children, ensuring that those typically excluded from sports activities due to family economic conditions, educational background, or single-parent households are included.

C1–C3, V1, and V2, as corroborative sources, informed the author that these children had poor resistance to material temptations and were easily influenced. Scholars have also noted that children living in poverty, due to unstable family conditions and a lack of educational resources, experience a diminished ability to delay gratification and control their desires, and lack the ability to set internal goals (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). Therefore, as managers of the sports program, coaches need to maintain oversight and ensure attention to these issues. Furthermore, coaches should guide children with material goals, as discussed in the results section, helping students achieve independence through extrinsic material goals while also fostering intrinsic personal growth goals. Overemphasis on external goals may lead to neglecting psychological needs, resulting in higher levels of anxiety, depression, and mental health issues. In contrast, focusing on personal growth and future aspirations can enhance well-being and mental health (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

Finally, the coaching staff's gender structure deserves attention. C3 mentioned that before female coaches were introduced, misguided parenting philosophies led to excessive pampering, which caused female participants to become selfish and unruly. Scholars have criticized the traditional Chinese notion of "raising sons poor and daughters rich," which can reinforce self-centered behaviors in children (B. Liu & Xuhe, 2024). Therefore, introducing and prioritizing female coaches in programs with female participants is crucial. A lack of gender perspective can lead to a lack of female role models, targeted resource design, and communication barriers (Lockwood, 2006; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

6. Conclusion

Fieldwork was conducted based on the "Angel" project, a Chinese sports-based social project, to explore the experiences of vulnerable children, the developmental outcomes they achieved, how these developments occurred, and the influencing factors. Five core themes are presented: initial backgrounds, developmental challenges, collective life, sport activities, and growth.

This study offers first-hand empirical insights into how vulnerable children in China develop through sports-based projects and explores mechanisms and conditions driving positive outcomes by examining their lived experiences. Practically, the study highlights the potential of such projects to promote development but stresses the need for careful project design, coach awareness, consideration of children's backgrounds, and social conditions. Coaches are expected to fulfill certain high standards in meeting basic psychological needs, managing moral education, and helping children overcome difficulties. Special attention should be

given to ethnic minority children by addressing the social barriers they face. Ensuring coach gender diversity is also vital to address female children's needs for role models, privacy, hygiene, and communication.

There are some limitations to this study. First, the research focused only on a mature and relatively well-resourced sport-based social project in Beijing, which limits its applicability to smaller-scale or rural projects. Second, the three-week fieldwork may be insufficient to capture long-term changes. Third, participant selection favored children with strong expressive abilities, which, while aiding data quality, could introduce bias. The absence of baseline data also complicates causal inference. Finally, the sample's homogeneity (mainly Yi children) limits generalizability to other marginalized groups. Therefore, this study calls for further expansion of the research scope. Future studies should examine SBSPs across different regions (e.g., urban-rural comparisons) and among diverse populations (e.g., children with disabilities, migrant children). Longitudinal designs are encouraged to better establish causality and track development post-project, assessing long-term outcome sustainability. An in-depth study of children's formative environments is also warranted to understand how socio-cultural conditions shape developmental differences. Future studies can take advantage of Chinese scholars' macro-level strengths to examine the scalability of such projects and the role of national policy in shaping effectiveness. Together, these directions deepen understanding of how sport transcends physical activity to catalyze social change—empowering vulnerable children to face adversity and shape their futures within China's context.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Data collected at the "Angel" project during this study are not fully publicly available due to privacy and ethical considerations. Access to the data may be granted by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with permission from the institution.

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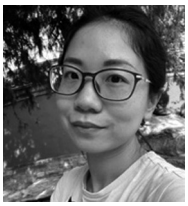

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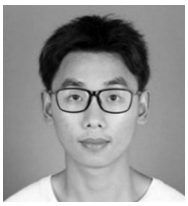

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Promoting Social Inclusion Through Sport: A Case Study of Uyghur Youth in China

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Abstract

This study examines the role of sports as a means of promoting social inclusion among Uyghur youth in China, drawing upon social inclusion theory. Utilizing a qualitative case study methodology, we explored the perspectives of Uyghur youth athletes to gain insight into the challenges they face in achieving social inclusion without feeling "othered" or excluded. Data analysis followed an inductive grounded theory approach, identifying first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions. Our findings reveal that social inclusion of Uyghur youth through sports participation is influenced by multiple factors, including language barriers, stereotypes, cultural differences, high expectations, and government policies. Despite these challenges, engaging in sports has enabled Uyghur youth to foster friendships, build confidence, and adapt more effectively to new environments, highlighting the potential of sports as a powerful tool for promoting social inclusion among marginalized groups.

Keywords

China; minorities; social inclusion; sport; Uyghur

1. Introduction

Social inclusion is a complex and context-dependent concept that is frequently used interchangeably with social integration (Kelly, 2011; Rodriguez & Garro-Gil, 2015). This concept is critical in understanding the dynamics of social cohesion and integration within diverse societies. Drawing from social inclusion theory,

this study aims to explore the multifaceted nature of inclusion, particularly in the context of sports participation among ethnic minority groups.

Sports is often viewed as a "universal language," and it can also be a vehicle for individuals to gain a sense of belonging (Kelly, 2011). In the realm of sports, research has consistently shown a positive correlation between sports participation and social inclusion (Bailey, 2005; Suzuki, 2017). Sports can serve as a powerful tool for social inclusion, particularly at the micro-level of society, by fostering a sense of community and promoting shared values and experiences (Marivoet, 2014). However, the complex interplay between personal identity, athletic pursuits, and societal pressures can pose significant challenges to the social inclusion of ethnic minority athletes.

In China, the Han ethnic group forms the majority of the population, accounting for approximately 92% of the total, while ethnic minorities like the Uyghurs contribute to the country's rich diversity. In general, the Han ethnic group, notably, does not adhere to a particular religion. The Uyghur population, exceeding 10 million and constituting China's fifth-largest ethnic minority, predominantly resides in Xinjiang, a border region located in the northwestern part of China. In Xinjiang, the majority of Uyghurs are Muslims who predominantly practice Islam, and they have a rich cultural heritage and a long history in the Xinjiang region, with their roots tracing back centuries. Over time, the Uyghurs have developed a unique blend of traditions, languages, and customs that set them apart while also contributing to the diverse tapestry of Chinese culture. However, like many ethnic minorities, the Uyghur population has faced various social, economic, and political challenges that have impacted their integration into broader Chinese society. Due to historical and geopolitical problems, this region has witnessed inter-ethnic relations being further complicated by separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism. As a result, interactions between the Han and Uyghur communities have faced difficulties (Huang et al., 2020). Therefore, the relationship between Uyghur and Han in China has received much attention. Addressing the challenges faced by Uyghur youth in achieving social inclusion through sports participation is thus essential for promoting a more harmonious and cohesive society in China.

Many studies have focused on the social identity of Uyghur youths in non-Xinjiang places in China. For instance, Feng (2018) found that the social identity of Uyghur youths living in Guangzhou included hometown and Guangzhou identities, and there was a preference for their own cultural environment. Bilingual proficiency impacted their social identification, with slower Chinese processing indicating less familiarity, which affected their Guangzhou social recognition. In addition, X. Zhang et al. (2017) found that Uyghur's national identity faces challenges from international Islamic fundamentalism and religious-nationalistic separatism instigated by Central Asian extremists, and adhering to Sinicization and localization, and actively adapting to society is the future of Islam in Xinjiang, China. Moreover, Su (2018) found that Muslim female immigrants' social adjustment to Chinese metropolitan areas is heavily influenced by ethnic and regional factors, as well as Xinjiang's social changes, with many facing barriers to independent urban living and opting for traditional roles due to employment discrimination, ethnic prejudice, and gender inequality.

Drawing from social inclusion theory, this study aims to understand the various factors that influence the social inclusion of Uyghur youth in China. It explores the challenges they encounter in the process of achieving social inclusion and the strategies and actions they employ to navigate and complete this process.

By doing so, this study contributes to the broader literature on social inclusion and ethnic minority sports participation, providing valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars seeking to promote more inclusive societies.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Inclusion Theory

Social inclusion theory suggests a multidimensional framework for inclusivity that encompasses individuals who are deemed "different" within society. This theoretical framework serves as the foundation of the present study, which explores the varying degrees of inclusion (Gidley et al., 2010). The concept of social inclusion, also known as social exclusion, when considered from its opposite perspective, encompasses four distinct dimensions: spatial, relational, functional, and power (Bailey, 2005; Donnelly, 1996). These dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the various factors that contribute to an individual's sense of belonging and acceptance within society.

The spatial dimension addresses the physical proximity and the bridging of social and economic disparities. The relational dimension, on the other hand, defines social inclusion as "a sense of belonging and acceptance" within a given community (Bailey, 2005). The functional dimension emphasizes the enhancement of knowledge, skills, and understanding, while the power dimension refers to a transformation in the locus of control (Bailey, 2005). Furthermore, Gidley et al. (2010) have identified three distinct levels of social inclusion: access, participation, and empowerment. Access refers to the financial means to engage in activities such as sports, participation denotes the ability to actively take part in such activities, and empowerment signifies the maximization of potential for each individual involved (Gidley et al., 2010).

Numerous researchers have sought to identify the indicators that promote social inclusion. Oxoby (2009) highlighted identity and attitude as two broad concepts intricately linked to social inclusion and concluded that fostering a common identity among citizens could facilitate social inclusion, with a particular focus on individuals' cognitive processes. Atkinson (2002) outlined a set of common indicators adopted by the European Union for social inclusion, encompassing health, income, education, and employment. Additionally, researchers have also examined the impact of housing forms (e.g., renting or owning), labor market conditions, and social networks on the inclusion and exclusion experienced by minorities, individuals with disabilities, and other disadvantaged groups (McGregor, 2000; Till, 2005). Furthermore, Ginsburgh and Weber (2005) emphasized the importance of maintaining linguistic diversity in mitigating social exclusion among European citizens.

In summary, social inclusion theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the varying degrees of inclusiveness within society. By examining the spatial, relational, functional, and power dimensions, as well as the indicators that promote social inclusion, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to social inclusion and exclusion. This theoretical foundation offers valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars seeking to promote more inclusive societies.

2.2. Application of Social Inclusion Theory in the Sports Domain

Extensive research has been conducted on the relationship between sports participation and social inclusion, with most studies indicating a positive correlation (Bailey, 2005; Suzuki, 2017). Some scholars have delved into the essence of "social inclusion through sport." Sherry (2010) and Haudenhuyse et al. (2013) defined this concept as the development of personal, social, motor, or other skills, emphasizing good practices that promote formative sport. These practices prioritize ethical principles and sport-related values in children and young people, particularly those at risk of discrimination.

Furthermore, research has shown that sports can serve as a powerful tool for social inclusion, particularly at the micro level of society (Marivoet, 2014). However, Suzuki (2017) argued that micro-, meso-, and macro-level social processes all contribute to improving an individual's capability for social inclusion, with meso-level processes primarily determining the extent of the impact. Additionally, Morgan et al. (2019) found that sports participation can enhance the psychological capital of young people from disadvantaged groups. Eitle and Eitle (2002) also noted that athletic team participation can help build Black youths' cultural capital, thereby reducing feelings of exclusion in other life areas, such as poor academic performance. However, despite these positive findings, there is still a lack of clear evidence to support the notion that sports and physical education (PE) can contribute to social inclusion (Dagkas, 2018).

2.3. Social Capital and Social Inclusion in Sport

The concept of social capital is often used in research on social inclusion. Putnam et al. (1993) outlined that social capital encompasses trust, mutual assistance, cooperative norms, civic participation, and social networks. In their study, social capital possesses both individual and collective dimensions. On the one hand, it refers to the resources, such as networks, trust, and shared values, that individuals can draw upon to achieve their goals (Bourdieu, 2011). On the other hand, it also refers to the shared resources and social cohesion that exist within communities or groups (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

Previous studies have emphasized the significance of developing social capital and networks for communities and democratic systems (Putnam, 2000; Putnam et al., 1993, 2004), as well as for an individual's feeling of belonging within a community (Morrow, 2004). In addition, Putnam (2000) also categorized social capital into two forms: bridging and bonding. Bridging involves getting to know people from different backgrounds, like those of another ethnic group. Bonding refers to maintaining relationships with similar individuals.

Multiple studies have explored the interplay between sport and social capital enhancement. For instance, Walseth (2008) revealed that young women with immigrant backgrounds can leverage sport clubs to build both bridging and bonding social capital, albeit certain barriers exist. Similarly, other researchers also found that participating and volunteering in sport clubs interacts with various social normative structures—shared values, beliefs, expectations, and behavioral patterns that guide and constrain individual behavior within the social context of the club. These interactions foster social capital at both individual and community levels (Peachey et al., 2013; Walseth, 2008).

In professional sport, Rosso and McGrath (2012) found that a player's personal social capital can both help and hinder their initial success in joining a professional football club. Social capital provides access to resources

like emotional support, cultural norms, mentorship, skill development opportunities, and logistical/financial assistance, which in turn affect their self-confidence, motivation, sense of belonging, and skills, and also offer necessary transportation and funds. On the other hand, if a player's personal network includes peers or family members who are critical of their football abilities or discourage them from pursuing a professional career, this negative social capital can undermine their self-belief and determination, thereby impeding their initial success in securing a place in a professional club.

2.4. Uyghur Sports in China

Since the late 2010s, numerous professional basketball and football clubs in China have begun to include Uyghur players in their rosters, with these players often exhibiting a dominant performance during gameplay. Furthermore, a significant number of Uyghur athletes have been selected for the national basketball and football teams of China, where they have made impressive performances. Additionally, many Uyghur athletes have been chosen to represent China in the 2020 and 2024 Olympic Games.

Previous studies found that the Uyghur people possess a character of daring to take risks, being fearless of hardships, perseverance, and never giving up, which are the fundamental personality traits required of athletes in all competitive sports, since they lead to better performance (K. Zhang et al., 2004). However, research also found that when comparing youth Uyghur athletes with the youth Han athletes, it is evident that the former do not exhibit superiority in the majority of measures related to physical fitness, bodily morphology, and functional attributes (Li, 2018).

Using social inclusion theory (Gidley et al., 2010), one focus of this study was to understand the power that participating in sports may have on teen Uyghur in China as they strive to belong within their new community without feeling as though they are being "othered," or excluded. Therefore, our research questions are:

- What are the challenges encountered by Uyghur youths in the process of achieving social inclusion?
- And how did participation in sports facilitate Uyghur youth individuals' navigation and successful completion of the social inclusion process in China?

3. Methodology

A qualitative case study was applied, and multiple data collection strategies were employed. The primary data were gathered from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 13 Uyghur youth athletes ranging in age from 17 to 21 (M = 18.85 years, SD = 1.3), residing both in their home city in the Xinjiang province and in other cities across China. The sample comprised five participants residing in Xinjiang (M = 17.8 years, SD = 0.75) and eight residing in other cities such as Beijing, Harbin, Lanzhou, and Zhengzhou (M = 19.46 years, SD = 1.2). This geographical diversity allowed for a nuanced exploration of how different environments and experiences might influence the perspectives and behaviors of Uyghur youth athletes. It is acknowledged that interviewees living outside Xinjiang may have been influenced by their new social and cultural contexts, potentially shaping their responses and opinions (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). For instance, they might have adopted values, beliefs, or behaviors that diverge from those prevalent in Xinjiang.

The interview questions were aimed at exploring the experiences and perspectives of Uyghur youth athletes, and cover a wide range of topics, including personal backgrounds (e.g., Can you describe your age, ethnical background, and your family? How did these factors impact your decision to be a youth athlete?), sports participation (e.g., As a Uyghur athlete, what do you think your advantages are in sports? Have you encountered any challenges?), inter-ethnic relationships within sports teams (e.g., Could you talk about your current teammates? What ethnic groups do they come from? Do you have any barriers when playing with them?), and the influence of sports on identity and social inclusion (e.g., When you compete on behalf of your school, region, or country, do you realize that your ethnic identity can have some influence on the entire team?). These questions are designed to elicit in-depth responses that will provide insights into how sports contribute to the social integration of Uyghur youth athletes within Chinese society, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face in this context.

Interviews were conducted over the phone in Chinese during 2024, and they lasted from 29 to 63 min with an average length of 38 min. These interviews were audio-recorded, subsequently transcribed, and then translated by a certified translator. To ensure accuracy, a native speaker reviewed the translations, and any discrepancies in interpretation were discussed and resolved. Secondary data were collected via numerous archived documents. We focused on the role sports and the sporting environment play in the inclusion of these ethnic minority youths into their new society. Data analysis followed the inductive grounded theory approach, wherein we identified first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions (Gioia et al., 2012). Data triangulation was employed by integrating data from diverse sources, peer debriefing, and member checking. First, data from multiple sources including interviews with participants from different places, documentaries, and websites were collected to further enhance the credibility of data analysis. In addition, peer debriefing with other sport researchers was conducted to ensure the validity of the emerging results. Moreover, the participants were presented with the data analyses, along with the primary interpretations and conclusions, which they believed to be accurate and credible.

4. Findings

Our findings reveal that upon moving to other places, Uyghur youths saw their play activities become "sportified," meaning that their leisure activities now have become areas of competition, rules, and nationalism. Similarly, the teenagers also stated the PE teachers, while focused on ensuring they have fun, also concentrated on developing the skill set of athletes, allowing them to participate more frequently in sporting activities.

4.1. Challenges for Ethnic Integration

4.1.1. Language Barriers

Language barriers have been identified as a prevalent obstacle to social inclusion (Ginsburgh & Weber, 2005). A substantial portion of the participants reported encountering integration challenges upon relocating to their current urban residences. As Micheal, a football player, shared, "Despite initiating Mandarin language learning at a young age, my proficiency does not match that of the Han population, occasionally leading to communication difficulties with those around me, which has posed certain challenges."

Echoing this sentiment, Henry, another football player, emphasized the language barrier as a hindrance to the social inclusion of Uyghurs, stating, "While reading is manageable, some of my Uyghur peers struggle with speaking Mandarin proficiently, complicating their adjustment to life here."

These cases illustrate that language barriers can pose significant challenges to the social inclusion of Uyghur youth in China. Furthermore, Uyghur youth may harbor fears of ridicule or judgment due to their linguistic differences, as exemplified by one participant who said, "Our Mandarin carries an accent, and it's a distinct language….I fear being judged, even though I haven't personally experienced such incidents….Our fluency is limited, so sometimes others don't fully understand us, necessitating repetition" (Sophia, a snowboarding player).

Conversely, several participants highlighted the benefits of speaking a common language for their social inclusion. Robert, a football player, shared, "My proficiency in Mandarin, which surpasses most of my peers, I believe, has facilitated my engagement with individuals from other ethnic groups." Another football player, Jack, stated, "I make a concerted effort to speak Mandarin in public to ensure others, especially the Han population, can understand me. Playing football accelerated my Mandarin learning, as communication with teammates, coaches, and occasionally opponents was essential."

Overall, these findings underscore the crucial role of language proficiency in facilitating social inclusion among Uyghur youth in China and highlight the potential consequences of linguistic barriers.

4.1.2. Stereotypes

Stereotypes surrounding the Uyghur people in China have been documented. Often, individuals lack understanding of the daily lives of Uyghur people in Xinjiang, leading to perceptions that they lead vastly different existences. In this study, participants shared their personal encounters with these stereotypes and misconceptions, particularly those related to their hometown in Xinjiang. As Eric, a basketball player, remarked, "There is a misconception that we are easily irritable, which is inaccurate. In my hometown, people are generally polite, and it is only those with limited education who may become easily tempered."

Furthermore, stereotypes persist that associate Uyghur people with underdeveloped regions. Some participants discussed this issue, with John, a football player, stating the following:

> A few of my classmates assumed I came from a poor family because I am from Xinjiang, which is not true….In fact, my family's status is probably better than most of my classmates', and I am currently able to work part-time to earn money.

Regarding living conditions, some individuals even hold the mistaken belief that Uyghur youth reside in rural areas: "I recall my teammates asking if I rode horses to school….I found it quite absurd" (Jessica, a skier).

These data highlight the prevalence of stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding the Uyghur people in China, particularly in relation to their hometown of Xinjiang, and underscore the need for greater understanding and awareness to dispel such misconceptions.

4.1.3. Cultural Differences

In China, a significant portion of the population does not adhere to any religion, whereas religion holds substantial importance in the lives of the Uyghur community. Consequently, cultural disparities, encompassing facets such as lifestyle, religious beliefs, and dietary preferences, represent a crucial factor influencing the social integration of Uyghur youth. This was exemplified in the following two quotes:

> Occasionally, after our training sessions, we tend to select our own dining spots because some of their food choices do not align with our tastes, and, due to our religious convictions, we don't eat pork at all. This occasionally leads to challenges for us. (Jack)

> We uphold our unique traditions, which differ significantly from the customs of the Han people, yet this is acceptable….As the majority of us are Muslim, it is imperative that we maintain our traditions. Sometimes, individuals here perceive our practices as unusual. (William, a basketball player)

Moreover, another participant reflected on their cultural adaptation experience: "When I was in Xinjiang, I felt fully immersed in our own culture. However, upon arriving in Beijing and gaining exposure to the cultures of other ethnicities, I came to realize the existence of numerous diverse cultures" (Micheal).

Notably, these cultural differences can be mitigated through participating in sports, as shown in the following quote:

> When we first arrived, it was not always easy for us to integrate. We spoke different languages and did not have meals together….Even during training and games, they perceived us as reluctant to pass the ball. However, after some time, these issues dissipated as we became more familiar with each other, and they recognized our playing abilities. (Jack)

These testimonies highlight the impact of cultural differences, particularly religious and dietary practices, on the social integration of Uyghur youth. They also underscore the potential of shared experiences, such as sports, to facilitate cultural understanding and promote harmonious coexistence among diverse ethnic groups.

4.1.4. Higher Expectations

Many participants reported that high expectations were placed on their sports performance, with nearly all interviewees indicating that they were anticipated to become professional athletes. This phenomenon underscores the intense pressure and high-stakes environment in which these athletes find themselves, as illustrated here:

> I could say that those professional clubs and the local sport bureau paid more attention to us when we were training. The Han students may receive training just for fun, but when compared to them, I [as a Uyghur student] feel that there's a higher expectation that we should become professional athletes. Nowadays we see more coaches and clubs start to recruit youth players back to Xinjiang. (Henry, a football player)

> When I am training, I just feel that I am an athlete, I don't always think about my ethnicity, so no matter who we are, we are just a member of the team, and I just want to be a sportsman. It seems that people around us would also like to perceive us as professional athletes. (Frank, a football player)

These interviews illustrate how athletes strive to transcend ethnic boundaries within the competitive sphere, focusing on their shared identity as athletes rather than their ethnic backgrounds. However, the pressure to perform at a high level remains a constant presence in their lives.

Moreover, the dynamics within teams were also examined, with John commenting on the differing playing styles between Uyghur and Han athletes:

> Regarding interactions with teammates, I perceive that they tend to favor passing the ball, whereas we have a greater preference for dribbling. I believe that we are innately inclined towards competition, and this instills a sense of satisfaction within me. Occasionally, miscommunications arise, yet as long as I contribute to the team's goal-scoring efforts, I am not held accountable, so sometimes I am stressed but it's okay.

4.1.5. Exclusion

The integration and acceptance of athletes from diverse ethnic backgrounds is a critical issue that has garnered significant attention. Henry offered a nuanced perspective on the acceptance of Uyghur athletes within Chinese sports: "I do not believe that Uyghur players are fully accepted, as I feel there are numerous exceptional athletes, yet they are not recruited adequately for the national teams." This statement underscores the perceived lack of adequate representation and opportunities for Uyghur athletes at the national level.

4.2. Athletic Performance and Career Prospects

4.2.1. Sport Activities

Sports participation has the potential to augment the social capital of Uyghur youth by fostering self-confidence. Numerous participants have articulated that engaging in sports activities facilitated their integration with new acquaintances in unfamiliar locales. The following statements of two football players are examples:

> I perceive that we possess greater vitality than our Han counterparts, which is why we are frequently assigned more physical and athletic endeavors. Boys engage in sports, whereas girls participate in artistic pursuits such as dance competitions. Although there are a few girls who play football, their numbers are not substantial. (Monica, a football player)

> Even in my hometown, there has been a surge in formal matches compared to the past. Presently, there are numerous amateur tournaments that evoke tremendous excitement. My brother represented our village in my hometown, and he expressed his aspiration to become a professional athlete and play for clubs in Beijing or other cities. (William)

In certain regions, sport activities serve as a catalyst for breaking the ice when individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds converge for the first time, particularly at the commencement of school semesters. Jack gave an example of this situation:

> I recall that during my youth, whenever there was an event such as the opening ceremony of our school, we would engage in inter-school football matches. Typically, the teammates comprised a mix of ethnicities, and we would play together. During training and gameplay, we would communicate in Mandarin to ensure mutual understanding.

Even in Xinjiang, some educational institutions organize sports activities to facilitate interactions among students from Uyghur and other ethnic groups. As Steven, a basketball player, mentioned, "When I was in Xinjiang, we participated in sports activities alongside other ethnicities, so there was already a sense of integration. I did not perceive any significant issues."

Another participant echoed this sentiment by stating, "Reflecting on my time in Xinjiang, I believe that most of the sports games and activities organized by the schools were aimed at promoting social inclusion and ethnic unity. We had become accustomed to this theme" (Jessica).

Participants' narratives highlight the role of sports in promoting their integration, particularly in diverse ethnic settings. In various regions, including Xinjiang, sports activities are organized to encourage interactions among students from different ethnic groups, fostering a sense of integration and unity.

4.2.2. Educational and Career Development

Another significant theme emerging from the study is the impact of sports participation on the Uyghurs' educational development and subsequent career development. Most participants reported that engaging in sports and pursuing amateur or professional athletic careers had positively influenced their further education as well as career development, and most of the participants expressed a desire to choose a career that related to sport in the future. For instance, Smith, a basketball player, highlighted the existence of policies aimed at supporting minority groups, stating, "There are policies in place that afford us [minority groups] certain advantages, such as additional points on the College Entrance Exams. Consequently, as student-athletes, our path to higher education becomes less challenging."

Another participant shared her personal experience, stating the following:

> I began receiving athletic training at a very young age, which has proven immensely beneficial. My involvement in sports facilitated my admission to a reputable middle school, and my prowess in skiing secured my place in university. Presently, I am able to pursue a dual career as both an athlete and a coach. (Jessica)

Moreover, the study revealed a notable trend of Uyghur individuals occupying coaching and PE teacher positions, both in Xinjiang and elsewhere. This observation suggests that sports can serve as a viable avenue for securing stable employment opportunities, as Robert illustrated: "Regardless of whether I am in Xinjiang or elsewhere, I have noticed an increased presence of Uyghur coaches and PE teachers. This indicates that sports can indeed assist us in finding respectable jobs."

Financial benefits were also highlighted as a significant advantage of sports participation, as reflected in this quote:

> Playing football has augmented my income. Currently, I work as a part-time coach, and the remuneration is quite satisfactory. Additionally, I occasionally play for a local club, which provides me with additional earnings after matches. Thus, not only do I possess the necessary skills, but I also enjoy a steady income, which is quite advantageous. (Micheal)

These testimonies highlight the positive impact of sports participation on Uyghur youth's educational and career development, with many participants pursuing sports-related careers. The trend of Uyghur individuals securing coaching and PE teacher positions underscores sports as a viable pathway to stable employment. Lastly, the financial benefits derived from sports participation were emphasized as a significant advantage.

4.3. Social Support and Social Capital

4.3.1. Coaches and PE Teachers

In the context of exploring social support among Uyghur youth athletes, several participants reported receiving multifaceted assistance in initiating their involvement in sports. Sophia notably expressed, "My coach serves as a beacon of reliability…his presence, whether during training, competitions, or personal moments, instills a profound sense of security in me." This sentiment underscores the role that coaches play in providing emotional and practical support for the Uyghur youth athletes.

Another topic common to most participants was the experience of receiving social support in both their hometown and subsequent cities. Usually, during their formative years in their hometown, coaches tended to prioritize the athletes' overall well-being over skill development. Conversely, upon relocating to new environments, advanced coaches placed greater emphasis on performance. Steven commented, "In my junior team, the coach's focus was more on our lives than our athletic performance." Similarly, Eric recalled his hometown coach, stating, "At a young age, our coach was very strict and instructed us not only in sport skills but also in character development and ethical conduct. I felt it was very useful."

For athletes who lacked a dedicated coach during childhood, PE teachers emerged as significant sources of support. As Micheal noticed, "My elementary school PE teacher introduced me to football and emphasized its potential to transform my social standing and facilitate dream pursuit. Indeed, I believe it has, as evidenced by my current residence in Beijing."

Participants discussed the varying experiences of social support received in their hometowns and subsequent cities, with coaches playing a pivotal role in providing emotional and practical support. For athletes lacking a dedicated coach, PE teachers emerged as significant sources of support, introducing them to sports and emphasizing their potential to transform social standing and facilitate dream pursuit.

4.3.2. Family Support

Family support was also recognized as a crucial factor influencing the athletic journey of Uyghur youth. Some participants highlighted positive family dynamics, with Jack stating, "My parents are incredibly supportive; they never interfere when I'm playing football." However, not all athletes enjoyed unwavering familial backing. Frank disclosed a divide within his family, noting, "While my father supports me, my mother is concerned that excessive training might hinder my academic performance."

Furthermore, several participants described initial resistance from their parents towards their athletic pursuits, as articulated by Eric:

> My parents didn't support my sport training initially….They believed that only academically challenged students became athletes. Consequently, I didn't receive much encouragement during my early years….Nevertheless, I persisted, and when they witnessed my admission to university, their perspective shifted, and they accepted my choice.

These narratives highlight the complex interplay of support systems and their evolving nature throughout the athletes' careers.

4.3.3. Physical Advantages

The personalities of Uyghur youth athletes are of utmost importance in enabling them to achieve a sense of pride and facilitating their social inclusion in unfamiliar settings. This study highlights how these factors contribute to their overall athletic experience and societal integration. As Jack shared, "I feel that I can exert a significant influence on my teammates, possibly due to my Uyghur identity and my personality, which I believe is one of my best assets."

Furthermore, another participant expressed that he needed to adopt some strategies to make people understand the Uyghur culture:

> I am proud to be a Uyghur, and I am aware that many people have limited knowledge about our culture. Therefore, I strive to introduce Xinjiang to those around me, helping them gain a better understanding of us. At times, I share our traditional snacks with my teammates or opponents during matches. Nowadays, whenever I participate in tournaments, I make sure to bring some of these snacks with me. After receiving my snacks, people tend to accept me more quickly. (Micheal)

This was echoed by Robert: "When I was younger, many people commented on my strength and resilience, although I don't feel much different from the Han people."

A participant also stated the following:

> Of course, as children, our [Uyghurs'] physical fitness was exceptional. I'm not sure why, but it could be due to our unique dietary habits. We are more tenacious, and even in recreational sports matches, we give it our all…we simply cannot bear the feeling of losing. (Henry)

Participants' narratives illustrated the strategies employed to promote cultural understanding and acceptance, such as sharing traditional snacks and emphasizing unique strengths and resilience associated with their Uyghur identity. Additionally, participants' reflections on their physical fitness and tenacity highlight potential cultural factors influencing their athletic performance and mindset.

4.3.4. Social Capital

Almost all participants reported that engaging in and being excellent at sporting activities augmented their social capital, facilitating smoother and more rapid integration with others. As Micheal said:

> Due to my proficiency in sports, I have been selected as a member of the university's frisbee team. We recently won the championship in the city's tournament, and one of our teammates has been recruited by the national team, and we are proud of it!

Furthermore, two football players emphasized that athletic prowess presented an opportunity to reveal their personality and reshape the perceptions of those around them regarding Uyghurs. They elaborated:

> I take pride in being a Uyghur, despite the lack of knowledge about our culture among many people here. Maybe some Uyghurs have done bad things before, leading to stigmatization….Nevertheless, when I engage in football with others, I socialize with them in a friendly way, enabling them to recognize our inherent amiability. (Jack)

> During my formative years, I experienced feelings of inadequacy due to my academic struggles. However, engaging in football has bolstered my confidence and led me to believe that I am on the correct path, even if a professional athletic career may not be attainable. (Frank)

Therefore, engaging in and excelling at sports enhances Uyghur youth athletes' social capital, facilitates integration, reshapes perceptions of Uyghurs, and bolsters confidence, as illustrated by participants' experiences.

4.3.5. Social Acceptance

The inclusion of Uyghur players in a team significantly enhances its overall strength, as evidenced by the observation that some amateur teams consist entirely of Uyghur starting players, leading to a higher success rate:

> Indeed, the team's prowess is augmented when I participate, and I have observed that there exist amateur teams that field exclusively Uyghur starting players, leading to a greater number of victories. (Eric)

Likewise, Smith stated, "During organized matches, provided that we have Uyghur players on our roster, they are prioritized for play due to their enhanced strength."

Moreover, numerous participants emphasized their positive integration experiences through engaging in sports activities within their new communities. For instance:

> Within the realm of sports, I perceive a heightened sense of acceptance as a Uyghur individual, accompanied by a prevailing sentiment of respect. For instance, during meals with my teammates, they inquire about my dietary preferences to ensure our communal dining experiences are inclusive. (Jessica)

Another participant also noted that engaging in sports led to receiving respect from individuals in their new locality: While pork consumption is common among Han individuals, my friends respect my cultural traditions and refrain from consuming it during our communal dining experiences" (William).

4.3.6. Cultural Identification

The issue of ethnic identity and inclusivity in sports is complex, particularly in a diverse country like China. In this context, the perceptions and aspirations of athletes from different ethnic backgrounds play a crucial role in shaping the sports landscape. Eric expressed a sense of unity and admiration for Uyghur athletes, stating the following:

> Of course, we feel that we are Chinese, and sometimes we see those Uyghur athletes playing football games on the national team, and we see them as our heroes. I know there are quite a few Uyghur players in the national basketball and football teams. I hope one day I can be like them.

This statement highlights the potential for positive perceptions and aspirations among Chinese individuals towards Uyghur athletes, recognizing their contributions and successes.

Another participant, Frank, expressed his own athletic aspirations, stating, "I played for the provincial team, and I would like to become a member of the national team if I am good enough. And I am looking forward to it!" This reflects the shared goal of athletes to excel and contribute to their nation's sports achievements, regardless of their ethnic background.

However, the focus on athletic ability and performance, rather than ethnicity, is a crucial aspect of promoting a shared identity in sports. William emphasized this point:

> I don't care about the ethnicities when I am playing basketball, and I just want to be better and be recognized by people around us. For those basketball stars, as long as they are good, they are my role models. So that's why I like Yi Jianlian and Yao Ming a lot. If they can become good in such a system, so can I.

This underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing athletes based on their skills and accomplishments, rather than their ethnic background, in order to foster a shared identity.

Despite the potential for inclusivity and unity in sports, the issue of ethnic identity and cultural pride remains a complex and personal one. In this context, Sophia expressed her pride in her Uyghur identity and culture, stating the following:

> I will always see myself as a Uyghur and it will never change, and although I don't plan to go back to Xinjiang, I am proud of my culture. Maybe in the future, my next generation will change, I don't know.

This statement highlights the importance of respecting and acknowledging the diverse cultural identities of athletes, while also recognizing the potential for change and evolution over time.

4.4. Government Policies and Initiatives

In recent years, the Chinese central and local governments have implemented numerous policies aimed at fostering sports development in Xinjiang, particularly among Uyghur youth. These initiatives have significantly contributed to the engagement of children and adolescents in popular sports activities, including football, basketball, and winter sports. As an illustrative example, the General Administration of Sport of China unveiled the Three-Year Action Plan for Sports Aid to Xinjiang (2024–2026) to ensure the successful execution of various sport-related programs, encompassing sport-for-all initiatives, the construction of sports facilities, and the identification of athletic talents. These programs and policies in Xinjiang not only promote sports development, particularly among Uyghur youth, and ensure equal access to sports resources and opportunities for all ethnic groups, but also foster civic engagement and harmony through organized sports events and inter-ethnic exchanges. By integrating different kinds of sports into school curricula and community events, they celebrate cultural diversity and adopt a holistic approach that goes beyond physical fitness. Ultimately, these initiatives aim to build a more inclusive, cohesive, and harmonious society, using sports as a bridge to connect individuals and communities, transcend differences, and foster a shared sense of purpose and belonging.

The implementation of these policies has not only enhanced sports participation but also provided tangible benefits to Uyghur students. As Jessica said, "Indeed, we possess certain advantages over others. Due to these policies, I was able to gain admission to reputable universities with a lower score on the National College Entrance Examination." This statement underscores the positive impact of such policies on educational opportunities for Uyghur youth.

The support from local governments has played a crucial role in facilitating the transition of Uyghur students to higher education. As shared by Robert:

> When I was admitted to my current university, the local government in my hometown organized a prize-award ceremony and granted me a scholarship to support my life here. This made me feel deeply connected to my hometown and aided my adjustment to university life.

This anecdote highlights the emotional and financial support provided by local authorities, which contributes to a sense of belonging to their new town and academic success among Uyghur students.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the social inclusion of Uyghur youth through sports participation in China. By examining the various factors influencing their integration, we can better understand the complex interplay between personal identity, athletic pursuits, and societal pressures.

Firstly, the "sportification" of play activities upon moving to other places highlights the shift from leisure to competition, rules, and nationalism, mostly because of those Uyghur youths' transformation into athletes.

In this study, many of the participants started their collegiate athlete career or professional athlete career when they moved to the new location. This transformation not only reflects the increasing professionalism of sports but also underscores the potential for sports to serve as a bridge for cultural exchange and understanding. The emphasis on skill development by PE teachers further indicates the dual role of sports in fostering both athletic prowess and social integration.

Language barriers, however, pose significant challenges to the social inclusion of Uyghur youth. The cases presented illustrate the difficulties faced by Uyghur youth in communicating with their Han counterparts, leading to feelings of isolation and fear of judgment. Conversely, proficiency in Mandarin is seen as a facilitator of social inclusion, highlighting the importance of language education in promoting cross-cultural understanding.

Stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding the Uyghur people in China also hinder their social integration. Participants' personal encounters with these stereotypes reveal the need for greater awareness and understanding to dispel such misconceptions. Sports, in this context, can serve as a platform for breaking down stereotypes and fostering mutual respect and understanding.

Cultural differences, particularly religious and dietary practices, further complicate the social integration of Uyghur youth. However, the study also highlights the potential of shared experiences, such as sports, to facilitate cultural understanding and promote harmonious coexistence among diverse ethnic groups. By participating in sports together, Uyghur and Han youth can transcend cultural boundaries and build friendships based on shared interests and goals.

The high expectations placed on Uyghur athletes to become professionals reflect the intense pressure and high-stakes environment in which they find themselves. While this pressure can be a source of motivation, it can also lead to feelings of inadequacy and exclusion if not met. The perceived lack of adequate representation and opportunities for Uyghur athletes at the national level further underscores the need for more inclusive and equitable policies in sports.

Sports participation has the potential to augment the social capital of Uyghur youth by fostering self-confidence and facilitating integration with new acquaintances. Social capital, as defined by Putnam et al. (1993), encompasses trust, mutual assistance, cooperative norms, civic participation, and social networks. On the individual level, engaging in sports fosters self-confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging among Uyghur youth athletes. As participants expressed, they develop a strong network of support from coaches, peers, and even opponents, which enhances their individual social capital. On the collective level, sports participation promotes the development of bridging and bonding social capital among Uyghur youth. Bridging social capital involves connections with individuals from different social backgrounds, such as Han athletes, coaches, and community members. These connections broaden the social network of Uyghur youth and expose them to diverse perspectives and experiences. This, in turn, fosters mutual understanding and respect, reducing inter-ethnic tensions and promoting social cohesion. Sports participation provides a platform for Uyghur youth to come together, celebrate their cultural heritage, and reinforce their sense of community. These shared experiences help build trust and cooperation within the Uyghur community, fostering a sense of collective identity and belonging.

Furthermore, sports participation positively influences the educational and career development of Uyghur youth. Policies aimed at supporting minority groups, such as additional points on the College Entrance Exams, facilitate their path to higher education. The trend of Uyghur individuals occupying coaching and PE teacher positions, both in Xinjiang and elsewhere, suggests that sports can serve as a viable avenue for securing stable employment opportunities. These achievements not only reflect the personal growth and development of Uyghur youth but also contribute to their social capital by enhancing their social status and networks.

Social support, particularly from coaches, PE teachers, and families, plays a crucial role in the athletic journey of Uyghur youth. The evolving nature of support systems throughout their careers highlights the need for continuous and multifaceted assistance to ensure their success and well-being. This support system, which includes emotional, practical, and informational resources, constitutes another form of social capital for Uyghur youth.

The physical advantages of Uyghur youth athletes, such as strength and resilience, contribute to their overall athletic experience and societal integration. By excelling in sports, they can reveal their personality and reshape the perceptions of those around them regarding Uyghurs. Additionally, their social capital was enhanced by the improvement of their social reputation and status.

Lastly, the inclusion of Uyghur players enhances the team's overall performance and leads to a higher success rate. The positive integration experiences of participants through engaging in sports activities within their new communities underscore the potential of sports to promote social acceptance and respect. These experiences not only contribute to the personal growth and development of Uyghur youth but also enhance their social capital by fostering trust and mutual respect within the community.

5.1. Limitations

This study provided insights into understanding the challenges that the Uyghur youth athletes faced when they moved to new places, and it also helped understand how the Uyghur youth athletes navigated the situation to achieve social inclusion. However, there are also some limitations to this study. First, the sample size is relatively small. Despite attempts to expand the participant pool, unforeseen circumstances precluded the inclusion of a larger number of Uyghur youth athletes. Consequently, future research should delve deeper into the social inclusion of Uyghur youth athletes in China, employing a more extensive sample size to enhance the robustness of the findings.

Secondly, the study's scope is potentially constrained by its exclusive focus on Uyghur participants within China, which may introduce bias. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding, future research would benefit from exploring the perspectives of other ethnic minorities residing in China.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that only three participants in this study were female athletes. Given the gender-specific nature of sport participation and its impact on social inclusion, future research should investigate how sport engagement facilitates social inclusion among different genders within minority groups. Such an investigation would significantly contribute to advancing the current knowledge in this field.

6. Conclusions

The social inclusion of Uyghur youth through sports participation in China is influenced by various factors, including language barriers, stereotypes, cultural differences, high expectations, and government policies. The process of "sportification" experienced by Uyghur youth upon relocating to new environments highlights the transformation of leisure activities into competitive, rule-bound, and nationalistic endeavors. Despite these challenges, the Uyghur youth have devised strategies to successfully integrate into their new communities. Sports participation has proven to be instrumental in the educational and career development of Uyghur youth, providing them with opportunities to showcase their talents and reshape societal perceptions of their culture. It has also served as a medium for receiving social acceptance and enhancing their social capital. By engaging in sports, Uyghur youth have been able to foster friendships, build confidence, and adapt to new environments more effectively. To foster a more inclusive and equitable society for all, it is imperative to address the challenges faced by Uyghur youth and leverage the potential of sports to bridge cultural divides and promote mutual understanding. This includes improving language education to overcome communication barriers, dispelling stereotypes through awareness campaigns, and implementing inclusive policies that ensure equitable opportunities for Uyghur athletes at the national level. By doing so, we can harness the power of sports to contribute to the harmonious coexistence of diverse ethnic groups in China.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Physical Activity and Sport to Fight Social Isolation Among Houseless People in "Northtown" (France)

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Abstract

This article examines the impacts of a physical activity program on individuals in extreme poverty and facing social isolation in a French city we called Northtown. The findings are based on an ethnographic approach conducted between 2022 and 2023: Forty-three session observations, twelve biographical interviews, and four structured interviews were conducted. The article first identifies the mechanisms leading to social destabilization or breakdown among the participants. Their life trajectories are analyzed to understand the construction of their social isolation, highlighting the impact of life experiences and social conditions on this situation. Due to their difficult pasts, participants are anchored in the present and find bodily engagement in physical activity sessions. These moments provide temporary escape and a form of recognition but the effects are ephemeral. After the sessions, they return to their reality marked by isolation and persistent difficulties. Physical activities offer momentary security, distraction, and relief but they cannot compensate for the lasting impacts of their life experiences as they do not address the underlying issues of their isolation and distress.

Keywords

France; houselessness; life trajectory; physical activities; precarity; social isolation; sports

1. Introduction

Physical and sports activities are known to preserve physical health, improve mental well-being (Aquatias et al., 2008), aid in self-reconstruction, and help individuals learn social roles through the learning of rules

and participation in collective life (Mignon, 2000). According to the French Ministry of Sports, they can also foster social integration and reintegration, potentially restoring broken social bonds (Paugam, 2008). This article explores how a physical activity and sports program can alleviate social isolation for houseless individuals. In France, the Foundation for Housing Disadvantaged People estimated there were around 300,000 houseless people in the early 2020s. The French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies considers people without a house in the physical sense (unlike a home). It distinguishes between unsheltered individuals, who live in places not meant for habitation (around 10% of the houseless population), and those using emergency services or temporary shelters. In this study, we use the term "houseless" to align with the majority of relevant research and our own study, as it includes individuals who frequent emergency centers but still may have a sense of home. The houseless individuals in our study belong to the most economically and culturally disadvantaged groups (Marpsat & Firdion, 1996) and are highly vulnerable to social isolation (Paugam, 2015). The risk of losing social connections increases in situations of unemployment, financial insecurity, and lower education levels (Pan Ké Shon, 2003), all of which define the individuals in our study.

Our objective is to demonstrate that the effects of physical activities on social isolation among houseless individuals are neither automatic nor straightforward but rather shaped by each person's life path, confirming the impact of precarious life trajectories on their relationship with the world (Bahr & Caplow, 1968). Using an ethnographic approach, our findings reveal the mechanisms that have led to the weakening or breakdown of social bonds among the individuals studied. By analyzing their life trajectories, we aim to understand what keeps them socially isolated. We emphasize that the effects on isolation are temporary. Their life paths and social conditions compel them to live in the present, making it difficult to look towards the future. While the activities create opportunities to form weak ties—whose significance is well-established (Granovetter, 1973)—these ties remain unused and unexploited due to their life circumstances and isolation.

2. The Development of Care for the Houseless

2.1. Characteristics of Houseless Populations

By explaining the precariousness of the least experienced, least skilled, and lowest-paid workers, Anderson (1923/2013) provided insights that will serve as the basis for discussing the French case examined in this article. He identified various profiles of houseless individuals, such as "the hobo and the tramp" or "the home guard and the bum" (pp. 393–394). Thus, houseless people do not constitute a homogeneous social group, though they do share some common characteristics (Marpsat & Firdion, 1996). In France, the most recent quantitative survey (Yaouancq & Duée, 2014) reveals that the houseless are mostly young men (62%, more than 75% under 49 years old), a group strongly represented in collective shelters but also among rough sleepers (15% of men compared to 2% of women). Nearly 50% of French-speaking houseless individuals lack formal qualifications, a critical factor influencing access to the labor market. This low level of education exacerbates professional integration difficulties, compounded by associated challenges—about one-third struggle with reading, writing, or arithmetic. Economically, one in three houseless individuals lives on less than EUR 300 per month, while 50% earn between EUR 300 and EUR 900 monthly. Although 25% are employed, they are primarily laborers or low-skilled workers (93%), with most holding temporary contracts (40%, compared to 22% with no contract).

Houselessness trajectories are diverse (Besozzi, 2020; Damon, 2003). Sociologists agree that houselessness affects no specific population category (Choppin & Gardella, 2013; Pichon, 1998), though individuals from working-class backgrounds are overrepresented. Factors such as parental absence, trauma (violence, migration, war), and foreign birth increase vulnerability. These characteristics, combined with socioeconomic factors, heighten the likelihood of becoming houseless. Anderson (1923/2013) demonstrated the impact of job insecurity on an entire life. In the 1980s, "new poor" populations emerged due to the precarization of employment and work (Castel, 1994). In a society where employment is central to social integration, its absence leads to social disqualification and impoverishment (Paugam, 2007). The erosion of the labor market, coupled with reduced social protections, amplifies the risk of transitioning from vulnerability to social disaffiliation (Castel, 1994). It should be emphasized that we are indeed talking about risks as it has been known for several decades that downward social mobility does not affect the most vulnerable uniformly, largely because life stories and their characteristics influence the disaffiliating nature of "social descent" (Bahr & Caplow, 1968). The entry into the "career of survival" (Pichon, 2010) results from accumulated difficulties leading to cumulative ruptures (Paugam, 2008), which weaken individuals.

Finally, as Anderson (1923/2013) also demonstrated, several sociologists agree that houselessness is not merely a condition. There are norms, values, and rules that socially, relationally, and morally structure the world of the street (Besozzi, 2021). Scientific studies have shown that far from being desocialized, they share public spaces, invest in certain locations, adapt to street life, organize their daily lives through resourcefulness, frequent assistance services, interact with one another, and develop a value system that regulates their interactions. Thus, while houselessness initially leads to some degree of desocialization, it is followed by resocialization into street life (Simmel, 1908/1999).

Under a single term, which has evolved over time, a variety of people, situations, experiences, and realities are grouped together. When focusing on a shelter, there are immigrants, isolated individuals temporarily experiencing houselessness, or those who are familiar with assistance networks. This heterogeneity has led to difficulties in defining this population, which is reflected today in the multitude of assistance actors and structures.

2.2. The Care of Houseless Individuals Through Social Reintegration Programs

While vagrancy and begging—to use the terms of French law—were subject to repression until the implementation of the new Penal Code in March 1994, assistance and care for the houseless have now emerged as a societal response.

Social reintegration often prioritizes housing (Damon, 2012) or employment (Lacoste, 2023), but health is equally crucial. Extreme street conditions take a heavy toll on houseless individuals, fostering a distinct relationship with their bodies, health, and suffering while heightening risks. Studies reveal precarious populations prioritize curative care over prevention (Nicaise et al., 2020), as immediate survival needs overshadow long-term health planning. Despite available support systems, houseless individuals seldom utilize them, even in times of need, worsening health challenges. Street culture, influenced by the "culture of the poor," often valorizes physical resilience over healthcare. Extreme poverty further diminishes the ability to plan for the future or adopt health-promoting behaviors (Millet & Thin, 2005). Consequently, these individuals focus on basic needs like hunger, thirst, and sleep, living in survival mode. Societal invisibility also

leads to body neglect. Identity formation, shaped by self-perception and societal attribution (Dubar, 2000), fosters a degraded self-image due to the lack of recognition from others, reinforcing physical and psychological fragility. Besozzi's (2023) study highlights the transformative potential of socio-aesthetic programs, which provide health and psychological benefits while restoring body perception and self-esteem. By fulfilling utilitarian, educational, and well-being needs, they enhance self-worth and social recognition, offering new reintegration pathways.

Aesthetic care and bodywork contribute to physical, psychological, and social recovery, but physical and sports activities also promote overall health. Their benefits for physical health—such as improved cognitive functions, chronic disease prevention, and combating obesity—and mental health—such as reducing anxiety and depression—are well-documented. Physical activities are seen as educational and social tools, frequently used in integration policies (Bloomfield, 2003; Coaffee, 2008; Gasparini, 2008; Green, 2006). They support physical revitalization, psychological reconstruction, and social connection, which explains their use in various initiatives: re-energizing the bodies of long-term unemployed individuals (Le Yondre, 2012), engaging youth from disadvantaged neighborhoods (Charrier & Jourdan, 2015), educating young people under judicial supervision (Le Yondre & Sempé, 2024), or preventing delinquency (Lessard, 2017). However, the link between sports and integration is more based on beliefs than on objective evidence (Gasparini, 2012; Koebel, 2010). Intense sports involvement can cause disengagement from school (Bertrand, 2008) or even social isolation (Forté, 2006). The positive effects of programs may fade if participants stop attending (Cohen et al., 2019). Sometimes, efforts to promote participation can backfire; for instance, neighborhood sports facilities may reinforce exclusion (Bodin et al., 2007). Participation effects are thus conditional on context, population characteristics, actions implemented, and the meanings attributed to them (McNulty Eitle & Eitle, 2002).

If the sociology of sport has explored the use of these activities for certain categories of people, there are few, if any, studies in France regarding their application to houseless individuals. However, the Anglo-Saxon literature has examined the impact of sports events, particularly football-related ones like the Homeless World Cup (HWC), highlighting its potential to foster the development of social capital (Sherry, 2010), self-esteem, and motivation (Magee, 2011). These effects are only made possible when these activities are not isolated and are connected to the surrounding society (Höglund & Bruhn, 2022; Sherry, 2010). As Weiss (1993) notes, many social interventions fail when limited to fragmented programs disconnected from individuals' lifestyles. Nevertheless, the effects of these initiatives are also ambivalent. Football does not attract all houseless individuals, and degraded physical conditions often pose a major obstacle for many participants. Furthermore, the competitive nature of the HWC can create exclusionary dynamics. Defeats or poor performances can reinforce feelings of failure in individuals who have already experienced traumatic setbacks in their life journeys (Magee & Jeanes, 2013). Thus, while sports can aid social inclusion, they can also become a negative space for participants when they contradict the latter's emotional needs (Segura et al., 2017).

Similarly, data on the conditionality of observed effects remains limited. What enables the creation of the three types of social capital—bonding, bridging, and linking—mentioned by Sherry (2010)? What about the transferability of these effects beyond sports? And those who trained but weren't selected for the HWC? These questions justify evaluating the effects of a socio-sports program on social isolation. This will show whether and how the proposed physical activities influence isolation, considering the houseless population's

characteristics, living conditions, and what is offered to them. Do they foster social bonds, meaning protection and recognition? Do they help participants integrate into cohesive, protective social groups? What are the immediate effects during and outside sessions? Addressing these questions requires close engagement with the field and its people. However, the characteristics of socially excluded individuals prevent researchers from imposing themselves without extensive time in the field. As conducting research in this social world presents a challenge, ethnographic methods allow us to gather insights from individuals in an unfamiliar environment.

3. A Story of Trust in Distrust: Methodology and Methods

Since 2021, the city of Northtown (the name of the city has been changed to protect the anonymity of individuals and structures)—a mid-sized French city with a population of about 45,000—implemented initiatives to support the reintegration of individuals in situations of extreme vulnerability. While the aim was not to replace the existing well-established social reintegration programs in the area, the goal was to contribute by offering physical and sports activities to these groups. This work was part of a broader, long-term research initiative. Jointly funded by the urban community of this city and the French Red Cross Foundation, our fieldwork was conducted in two six-month phases between January 2022 and June 2023 across various facilities for houseless individuals (a daytime shelter, a transitional housing center, and hostels for young workers). The first phase focused on understanding the underlying dynamics shaping (non)participation in physical activity sessions among different groups. The second phase aimed to examine whether, and under what conditions, the practice of physical activities could help combat social isolation.

The activities offered, supervised by a sports educator qualified in sports training, varied depending on the structures and periods. Sessions are adapted to participants based on their age and health conditions, offering either sports or adapted physical activities (Table 1). While the choice of activities is intended to reflect participants' preferences, several factors influenced this offering. First, the physical environment: Depending on the structure, sessions took place in a shared living room, which limited space and the types of activities that could be performed. Additionally, outdoor activities were contingent on weather conditions, which was why they are primarily offered during the spring. Participation in these activities was voluntary and varied significantly between structures. While most activities were conducted in groups, they could be either individual or collective, with the sports educator using certain sessions to foster teamwork and collaboration among participants.

Table 1. Activities offered and frequency.

	Phase 1		Phase 2	
Day center	Table tennis, soccer, basketball, and adapted physical activities (soft strength training, yoga)	1h30 twice a week	adapted physical activities (soft strength training, seated soccer, basketball initiation, yoga)	1h00 once a week
Transitional housing	adapted physical activities (table tennis, soft strength training, yoga); Mölkky	1h00 twice a week	—	1h00 twice a week
Youth worker's hostel	—	—	Cross-training, boxing, Soccer	1h00 once a week

An ethnographically inspired approach was prioritized to establish trust with both participants and non-participants and to capture their perceptions. It entailed immersion in the field (Céfaï, 2010) through detailed observations of physical activity sessions, focusing on the nature and intensity of practices, the configuration and use of space, the social composition of participant groups, their attendance patterns, and their interactions, including those with sports educators. In addition to numerous informal exchanges, biographical interviews (seven in the transitional housing center, three in the daytime shelter) and structured interviews (two in the daytime shelter, four in the young workers' hostels) were conducted. These interviews, recorded and sometimes secured through direct negotiation after several months of immersion or with the help of mediators from the field, lasted between eighteen minutes and nearly four hours. They explored dimensions such as social isolation and disaffiliation, while also testing several sociological hypotheses concerning our participants. This includes the relationship between sociability levels and cultural practices (Gire et al., 2007; Héran, 1988), the importance of strong ties, and the absence of weak ties as one descends the social hierarchy (Granovetter, 1973). We also examined participants' trajectories—covering their primary socialization, educational, professional, and athletic paths—to identify the mechanisms behind the weakening or severing of social bonds. These trajectories were cross-referenced with current living conditions to analyze the factors contributing to social isolation.

The implementation of this methodology faced a dual preliminary obstacle related to building trust between the researcher and the participants. The first obstacle involved gaining access to intimate spaces and discourses (Besozzi, 2022) with individuals who are socially disqualified (Paugam, 2009) and stigmatized, often bearing the marks of profound biographical ruptures (Yaouancq & Duée, 2014). Participants' mistrust could be amplified by the presence of a researcher perceived as an intrusive outsider (Pétonnet, 1968/2017). The second obstacle lay in the subjectivity of the researcher, shaped by social representations of houselessness that combine various stigmas, such as poor health, addictions, and uncertain level of hygiene (Eysermann, 2005). A preparatory reading of prior works (Declerck, 2001) likely reinforced a conflicted relationship with the field and disrupted the easier establishment of a connection, but there is more to consider. An initial interview with the social inclusion officer, exploring the causes of houselessness—such as relationship breakdowns, job loss, but also experiences of domestic or sexual violence—intensified the researcher's initial caution. This wariness, further amplified by her position as a woman navigating predominantly male environments, required the development of adaptive strategies with a dual focus: ensuring acceptance in the field and maintaining personal safety. These strategies were shaped by a context in which houseless women are particularly vulnerable to violence, especially sexual violence, affecting 2.1% of women compared to 0.2% of men (Girard et al., 2009). Consequently, the researcher adopted a posture of heightened vigilance, aiming to overcome both relational and symbolic barriers.

To avoid gender-based stigmatization, the researcher adjusted her physical appearance, particularly through her choice of clothing. As Clair's (2012) work highlighted, masculine domination often manifests in the control of female sexuality through markers such as clothing, categorizing women according to social norms ("good girls" or "whores"). Drawing on Bizeul's (1998) reflections, she adopted loose-fitting clothing and minimized markers of femininity—a strategy similar to that employed by houseless women themselves (Girard et al., 2009)—to ease her integration into the field. The researcher also organized her presence according to specific temporal and spatial criteria: She prioritized mornings to avoid the effects of problematic substance use (alcohol, psychotropics) and chose open spaces to avoid being isolated with participants. However, she had to balance maintaining the privacy of participants—essential for conducting

biographical interviews—with the need to ensure her own safety by remaining visible. An accompaniment strategy was also implemented, involving support figures such as the sports educator and the social inclusion officer, to legitimize her presence and facilitate integration, particularly at the daytime shelter. Over time, her integration deepened through regular observation of physical activity sessions and informal exchanges, particularly with Jean, a houseless person who became a key ally. His presence proved critical to the research: His trust-based relationships with other participants significantly influenced and facilitated access to several individuals.

This fieldwork experience underscores the central role of male figures, often enlisted to facilitate access to so-called "difficult" research settings. These men embodied a form of protection that aligns with the conceptual framework of the "big brother" (Clair, 2012), extending beyond fraternal bonds to encompass social control. In this sense, these male figures were not only allies but also guarantors of legitimacy and physical integrity in the field. Just as houseless women navigate hypermasculine dynamics by associating with male figures perceived as protective (Lanzarini, 2000), the researcher's trajectory in the field reveals a similar dynamic. It demonstrates how she, too, became embedded in relations of domination by adapting her behavior and appearance, and by relying on male figures to secure her access to the daytime shelter. These strategic choices, however, restricted access to certain dimensions of the research. The decision to frequent the field at specific times limited the researcher's holistic understanding of the daytime shelter. The "raw life" of this space—marked by tensions, conflicts, or unexpected acts of solidarity—remained partially out of reach. Furthermore, conducting interviews in public spaces may have constrained participants' freedom of expression, while the researcher's position as a woman interviewing men potentially influenced their narratives, limiting disclosures about intimate experiences.

The data analysis required the use of classical methodological tools (Beaud & Weber, 2003): documenting facts through writing, keeping a field journal, transcribing interviews in full, reading each document critically to decode implicit meanings and contradictions, and organizing the materials by deconstructing and reorganizing them. Observations showed that participants' involvement was influenced by various factors, and the effectiveness of the intervention varied across different structures. To understand these variations, we thematized the collected data, considering aspects such as the atmosphere, security, living conditions, physical activity sessions offered, and the modes of practice. The materials were categorized according to these themes, which helped identify interpretive pathways and better understand the underlying dynamics. Furthermore, we cross-referenced this data with the interview results, comparing lived experiences, behaviors during the sessions, and participant testimonies. The biographical interviews were analyzed in two stages: The first stage explored participants' life trajectories (school, work, sports, emotions, family, etc.) chronologically, while the second examined them thematically and transversally, to move beyond the uniqueness of each individual story. This analysis allowed us to explore the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, their trajectories, current living situations, and housing histories. We also analyzed their living conditions by examining discourses related to income, expenses, health, potential future projects, and health status. Finally, drawing on Paugam's (2008) typology of social ties, we classified the data into four categories—kinship ties, elective participation ties, organic participation ties, and citizenship ties—and assessed the quantity and quality of social connections.

In this research, as in most qualitative studies, researchers are more often confronted with the validity of their materials than their colleagues who use quantitative techniques. There are three reasons for this: the

lack of generalizability due to the small sample size, the time constraints, and the presumed importance of researcher subjectivity in data analysis. In our case, a fourth issue emerged, related to our personal and conflicted relationship with the field, our sensitivity to the personal problems of the participants, and their characteristics. We were simultaneously embarrassed, apprehensive, and, in a way, aware that we were entering these people's lives as if by intrusion (especially since the participants were already being asked to join the physical activity sessions). This was, of course, corrected as we progressed in the study, but honestly, we cannot claim that these feelings didn't matter or that they disappeared completely.

One might therefore argue that our data holds little value because of all this, especially since we neither employed member-checking techniques nor used triangulation, precisely because of this sense of intrusion, even though we recognize the benefits of such approaches (McKim, 2023; Touraine et al., 1980). We could not systematically present our transcripts to participants or any of them, nor set up focus groups or provide feedback on the findings. Instead, we preferred to engage each newly met or revisited participant—even in a less formal way than during the initial interview—as someone capable of hearing our progress from the previous interviews. While this undoubtedly adds less value to our materials than if we had treated the participants as potential experts able to respond to McKim's (2023) four ideal questions, our approach seemed more suitable and, nonetheless, useful for controlling our data.

4. Socialized to Isolate?

4.1. Difficult Beginnings

At the transitional housing facility, Sophie and John never knew their biological parents. Sophie was adopted at three months old. She describes her adoptive family as upper-middle class: frequent vacations, a large house, multiple gardens, and cars. However, her childhood memories are marked by domestic chores—cleaning the house, the cars, tending to the gardens and animals—and the prohibition of play: "She raised me but for that [she mimics money]. I never had a mother's love." John lived in children's homes and later in shelters for young workers. He regrets never having had any information about his parents or any potential siblings:

> That's why I've always managed on my own…you know, it's not easy. I don't know how I manage to hold on…you really have to have something very solid to make it to the end. I wouldn't be here if I had fallen into alcohol or something. That's what happens when you don't have parents.

The link of parentage, whether biological or adoptive, contributes to an individual's balance by providing protection and recognition (Paugam, 2008). In both cases presented, this link has been weakened: For Sophie, it was compromised by adoptive filiation and the way she was treated, while for John, it never existed, as abandonment severed the bond. Neither grew up in a family environment conducive to their personal development, self-confidence, identity, or balance.

Even for those who knew their parents, the family environment was no better. Nadine experienced physical violence from her father, who struggled with alcohol addiction. At 14, she left home and lived on the streets for more than twenty years:

> Yeah, that's why I left. There was also….They fought with knives and all….I defended her, I stood in the middle, but it was useless to stand in the middle, my father had a knife! So, I separated them and every time I separated them, it started again. I gave up.

Suzie dropped out of school at 12 due to a pregnancy. Although she doesn't mention any violence or abuse, it is revealed that her daughter passed away at eleven months. Damien grew up in an economically favorable environment but experienced a distant and demeaning relationship with his father:

> To get a kind word from him, you have to wake up early. I was always a bit treated like a worthless person….It started when I was very young….When I was on school holidays, I tell you, even though I didn't like school, I preferred to be at school. He used to tell me: "You'll never do anything with your life, you're just a…you're going to end up in the trash." So, that really shocked me.

The results obtained from the other structures surveyed are similar. Seven out of the nine people interviewed grew up in difficult family environments marked by separations, violence or mistreatment, and addiction issues. These experiences led the majority of this population to live in one or more collective institutions.

At the time of the survey, two individuals from the youth workers' residence were in contact with a parent. Of the sixteen people surveyed, eleven have siblings, six of whom maintain more or less distant relationships. Six participants have children, but only two have regular contact, without maintaining relationships with all of their children. The ruptures or weakening of familial bonds in adulthood are related to the death of parents (especially for the older individuals), deep disagreements, or the desire not to be perceived in their current living conditions.

The majority of our sample (13/16) experienced precarious trajectories from childhood, marked by ruptures in the filial bond. These experiences have further weakened these individuals, particularly due to the lack of material and relational resources to cope with difficulties. Coming mostly from working-class backgrounds, their initial vulnerability has exacerbated the obstacles to adapting to dominant social norms and building a stable professional and social trajectory. These elements reflect what we discussed regarding the findings of Bahr and Caplow's (1968) sociology of social ties, particularly the life story characteristics that make downward social mobility or precarity even more destructive.

4.2. Deprived of Traditional Professional and Marital Lives?

4.2.1. Chaotic Career Paths

The trajectories of the respondents did not allow them to follow the "classic" path of social integration through work, starting with obtaining a diploma. School, being a key element in integration (Emmanuelli & Frémontier, 2002), plays a crucial role, and the lack of qualifications complicates access to the labor market. In 2021, 44.6% of active individuals without a diploma who had completed their education within one to four years were unemployed, compared to 8.9% of those with a two-year college degree or higher (Yaouancq & Duée, 2014). While this refers to the possession of cultural capital and its use, we also saw earlier that such a weakness impacts the acquisition of weak ties, which are so crucial.

No resident at the shelter has had a linear career (Table 2). Damien, who holds a school diploma with a vocational focus in secretarial, had a relatively stable career until health issues forced him to switch sectors and eventually stop working permanently. Danny, with a vocational certificate in agricultural mechanics (unobtained diploma), worked as a transporter for 17 years but was fired due to chronic alcohol abuse. He then went through a series of temporary contracts until he could no longer work. Sophie, a vocational certificate holder in public services, juggled several part-time and temporary jobs. Following her divorce, she alternated between unemployment and work, accumulating debt until being evicted from her home. Nadine and Suzie, who are both without diplomas and have had little or no professional experience, face difficulties in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Nadine left school at 14, while Suzie dropped out at 12 to focus on domestic and family tasks under her husband's control.

Table 2. Profile of individuals in transitional housing, day centers, and the youth worker's hostel.

Name	Age	Diploma	Employment	Professional career	Relationship status	Social background
			Transitional housing			
Danny	51	—	—	Transporter for 17 years then dismissal	Single	Mother: housewife Father: truck driver
Sophie	60	Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC): public services	—	Multiple part-time temporary cleaning jobs and unemployment	In a relationship	Mother: childminder Father: employee in a sorting center
Fanny	55	—	—	Baker for 11 years	In a relationship	Mother: secretary in a law firm Father: factory manager
John	58	CPC: painter	—	Multiple temporary jobs as a painter Unemployed since 2013	Single	—
Nadine	57	—	—	—	Single	Mother: housewife Father: garbage collector
Suzie	65	—	Retired	—	In a relationship	Mother: housewife Father: manual worker
Damien	52	CPC: hairdressing Vocational diploma: secretarial	—	Hairdresser for eight years Secretary in an association for 14 years Unemployed since 2014	Single	Parents: independent butchers

Table 2. (Cont.) Profile of individuals in transitional housing, day centers, and the youth worker's hostel.

Name	Age	Diploma	Employment	Professional career	Relationship status	Social background
			Day center			
Jean	44	Vocational diploma: masonry	—	Mason	Single	—
Lola	18	—	—	—	In a relationship	—
Amelie	45	CPC: public services	—	Chambermaid	In a relationship	Mother: housekeeper Father: municipal employee
Geoffrey	20	—	—	Cook	Single	Mother: housekeeper Father: truck driver
Serge	31	—	—	Order picker	Single	Mother: housekeeper Father: school monitor
			Youth worker's hostel			
Timeo	18	CPC: masonry	–	Interior renovation	In a relationship	Mother: care assistant Father: security officer
Yanis	26	–	Temporarily order picker	–	Single	Mother: unemployed Father: lawyer
Lana	18	–	–	–	In a relationship	Mother: hairdresser Father: truck driver
Julien	20	CPC: Engineering	–	–	Single	Mother: housekeeper Father: construction worker

At the day center and the youth worker's housing, only Yanis holds a temporary job as an order picker. In terms of diplomas, Jean has a vocational diploma in masonry and Julien, Amélie, and Timéo each have a vocational certificate, while the remaining five participants have no qualifications. All have been, and continue to be, largely disconnected from the labor market. Their professional trajectories, marked by precarious and temporary contracts, reflect unstable and uncertain integration, and in most cases, exclusion. The absence of employment for individuals in the three structures results in a lack of protection regarding both their future and present circumstances, as well as a lack of recognition, as they rely on social assistance.

The misalignment of the respondents with the dominant social integration norm through work is also reflected in their personal lives, particularly in their relationships.

4.2.2. Romantic Relationships: Violence and Separations

The residents of the transitional housing have faced one or more separations and sometimes abusive relationships. This is the case for Suzie, Damien, and John. Suzie was beaten by her second partner (she had divorced once) "with a cane, with a knife!" After this event, she fled the marital home. Damien was no luckier. When he remarried (he had been married for twenty-five years), his relationship with his wife quickly deteriorated. While "at first, when I met her, it was perfect," their relationship declined after their marriage, and he became the scapegoat of his wife:

> And it even happened that…well, I'll tell you, but I was subjected to violence by her….I didn't dare to retaliate either, already, I couldn't because of my arm and then on crutches, and then, I thought about it, I said to myself, I have to defend myself because, with knives to the throat and everything, you know…And if I had retaliated, they would have said I was the one beating my wife….I try to dodge because she would hit me where I had been operated, you had to see, she was like a boxer…she would hit from the side and then….Pah! Pah! Pah!

John was never married. Although he shared his life with two people, both relationships ended in failure. The first relationship was the one that traumatized him. He talks about the abuse suffered by his partner's son. He left after eight years of living together with this person. Each, for different reasons, had to leave or even flee the marital home. Today, they all live alone in their housing at the transitional home, although some are in relationships (4/7).

The data collected at the day center and the age of the young workers do not allow us to trace their marital relationships. However, we do know that Jean considers himself houseless today because of a marital breakup.

4.2.3. A Daily Life of Isolation

At the transitional housing, social interactions are centered around this living space and its surroundings. All participants live alone in modestly priced studio apartments. In these homes, visits are rare. Sometimes, the residents' children or their spouse visit them, but the place is not suitable for larger gatherings. While Damien owns a car and John and Danny occasionally use their bikes, the transitional housing remains the main place they frequent. Outings are limited to necessities, such as shopping or medical appointments. Residents spend a lot of time at home, sleeping, watching television, or doing household chores. Some regularly gather at the entrance, especially the smokers. However, Suzie stands out with her desire for freedom after a life of isolation: "I just want to go out." She visits cabarets and attends shows with her sisters, also enjoying the markets, always accompanied by them.

At the day center, activities are limited, and there is a sense of waiting. During an informal conversation with four young people, one of them expressed feeling trapped. Most of them spend their time watching television or checking their phones. When the weather permits, they gather outside near the day center, where they talk while smoking "soft" drugs and cigarettes. They rarely stay far from the facility. Fights are frequent, and

the atmosphere is tense. The feeling of insecurity is shared by most of those surveyed, which hinders the formation of bonds within the center. This contrasts with the youth workers' residence, where the four young people surveyed feel safe, even quite safe.

Without focusing on the causes of their current situation, we can consider that this population shares common characteristics: experiences of painful events, low education levels, dependence on social aid, lack of employment, housing, and social isolation. However, an analysis of their family, marital, and professional trajectories, as well as their daily lives, reveals a certain heterogeneity, as confirmed by the literature. Beyond sociodemographic factors such as age or gender, our results show nuances: The events they have experienced are varied and more or less traumatic, and the level of support they receive varies, confirming the explanatory weight of differences in life paths. They do not frequent the same structures, and their prior socialization experiences affected, in different ways, their ability to create or maintain social connections. Some have lost all their connections, while others experience a weakening of their social ties. This heterogeneity proves to be a challenge for interpreting the results as it prevents a straightforward answer to a simple question: What are the effects of the program on social isolation in this population? To answer this question, it was necessary to consider this heterogeneity and provide levels of precision, as the effects will depend on the social characteristics of the participants and these famous differences in life stories popularized by Bahr and Caplow (1968).

5. The Effects of Physical Activities

5.1. The Conditions of Participation in Physical Activities

As mentioned, one of the first conclusions was that individuals' participation in physical activity sessions was influenced by various factors, including the structure that accommodates these people. Participants at the transitional housing are fewer in number but more regular in their attendance compared to other survey sites. On the other hand, more people at the day center have participated, albeit very occasionally. Why? Our results revealed that many people mentioned a "time famine." The pressure of immediate needs reduces the possibility of planning for the future, thus affecting the very idea of temporal strategies. The most precarious individuals, who live with a sense of social decline, are placed, by their living conditions, in an objective inability to project into the future, both because day-to-day life prevents this projection and because the future, in light of the past and present, is worrying (Millet & Thin, 2005). This may explain why people at the day center, at the beginning of their care, prefer autonomous sports activities because they can engage in them when their primary needs are or will be met. Participation in the proposed activities can only be considered when the present is secure, particularly in terms of economic subsistence (Vieille Marchiset, 2019). Our results confirm this: The more stability the housing structures offer, the more regular the participants are.

5.2. Athletic Paths and Social Contexts

Here, we will focus on the residents of the transitional housing studied, which is the only site of the investigation where the participants demonstrate regularity. Three distinct athletic profiles emerge among the participants. Two of the seven individuals only mention physical activities related to the school environment, such as physical education classes or recess games. The majority ($n = 4$), however, engaged in physical activities outside of school, either in organized clubs ($n = 3$) or informally and independently ($n = 3$). Finally, one person reports never having participated in physical activity during their youth.

The analysis reveals that the absence of physical activity outside of school primarily affects women (Nadine, Sophie, and Suzie). The men, on the other hand, seem to have been more active in their youth, as was Fanny, from a privileged background, who practiced both organized sports (swimming) and informal activities (cross-country running). However, these gender differences do not fully explain the diversity of sports trajectories in adulthood. The narratives show that childhood sports experiences do not necessarily carry over into adulthood. These trajectories are shaped by social, cultural, personal, and sometimes biographical factors that go far beyond physical practices themselves. For example, Sophie, who was forbidden to play sports in her childhood, engaged in walking, swimming, and weightlifting in adulthood before stopping due to early-onset Parkinson's disease. In contrast, Fanny, who was socialized into sports during her childhood, gradually ceased all physical activity as she grew older, influenced by personal choices and life constraints.

The narratives also reveal the influence of the family context on sports paths. Three families stand out because they have members who participated in physical activities. Danny's father and brothers played football, although his mother and sisters did not practice any sport. Damien mentions regular weekends by the sea, where his father and brother engaged in activities like hunting and clay shooting. Fanny, on the other hand, describes parents who were professionally invested but occasionally practiced walking. These are also the families where children participated in sports activities outside of school, in organized clubs.

Finally, a correlation seems to emerge between social background and the diversity of sports practices. Fanny and Damien, from middle or upper-class backgrounds, experimented with a variety of physical activities in their childhood, reflecting the concept of sports omnivorousness typical of privileged social classes (Lefèvre & Ohl, 2007). However, their precarious professional paths and traumatic events partly explain the decline, even abandonment, of physical activities in adulthood.

Given the diversity of profiles, socializations, backgrounds, and experiences, it is difficult to determine whether these sports practices truly lead to the creation of social bonds. While these practices may sometimes encourage interactions, it remains uncertain to what extent they contribute to the formation of lasting connections, which we will now discuss.

5.3. Physical Activities—A Cathartic Moment and Their Ephemeral Social Impact

Observations and statements collected at the transitional housing reveal both positive and negative effects. The sessions occur twice a week for an hour in the communal lounge of the transitional housing. The ability to go somewhere alone is often a skill developed through past social experiences. Since residents do not face this challenge, their participation is easier. The sessions first allow physical proximity of participants in the same place. This would probably not have happened otherwise. Their trajectories have led them to live in this structure and they are forced to cohabit, sharing common spaces with people they did not choose, do not necessarily appreciate, and with whom they do not wish to interact: "Here, you have residents….I can't adapt. Some smell of alcohol, ugh, I can't" (Sophie), "I am a loner. I like being alone. Other people's lives don't interest me much, already my own…" (Danny). This leads us to consider that the physical activities sessions could be perceived as a tolerated and forced co-presence with others (Marcellini, 2021). Nevertheless, the proximity becomes inevitably social in that there are verbal exchanges between them and the educator. One hears applause, grumbling, laughter. They tease each other. Some make jokes. When activities are team-based, they encourage each other and also develop strategies to win. There is also a form of solidarity among participants.

In table tennis, the ball is picked up for Damien who cannot bend down, and when Suzie hurts herself during a session (cramp), they stop and express concern.

Participants have an instrumental perception of the sessions, which are unanimously seen as an opportunity to "not stay in their corner" and to "pass the time" to "fill" the void or solitude imposed by their living conditions, while using these moments as opportunities to escape the monotony of their daily lives. Participation in these activities can be seen as a time management strategy (Goifman, 2002). It allows them to see people, "do something" (six out of seven participants explain that, outside of the sessions, nothing is offered) and to distract themselves from their anxieties and past traumas. Like the prisoners studied by Müller (2024), the sessions offered to participants provide an opportunity to reconnect with pleasant memories from the past and mentally escape their current situation, particularly that of living in precarity. This process of mental escape, as expressed by John ("reviving childhood memories") and Damien ("my mind gets a break"), creates a temporary space for respite. However, this engagement can also reveal tensions, particularly when certain activities, such as yoga, conflict with past traumas. These traumas intensify the emotions experienced and may lead to non-participation (Fanny) or adjustments in involvement: This is the case for Nadine, for whom closing her eyes during a relaxation session is a challenge. It reminds her of her past on the streets when she faced danger during the nights spent outside.

The desire "to occupy themselves," "to fill the time" gives them the chance to belong to a group called "the sportspeople of the transitional housing." If identity is the result of a process of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1986), participation in the sessions, for people whose positive self-appraisal has been weakened, involves identity issues: a change in how they view themselves ("even, I even heard myself say, um…well, you see, for someone who is in pain, it's okay, you're still managing somehow," "it's the mind that reacts. I want to prove to myself that I can do it") and how others view them (Dubar, 2000). This belonging appears as an opportunity to exist and be socially recognized. Thus, if one of them misses a session, other residents and the sports educator inquire. Often, specialized educators even go to find them in their studio, making them visible to others.

Given these results, is there, however, a creation of social bonds? In this article, based on our empirical materials and elements from the scientific literature, we have attempted to highlight how the life stories and singularities of the respondents impact their current social living conditions. We aimed to illustrate how tumultuous, if not injury-laden, trajectories produce their share of traumas, which undoubtedly mark the respondents' capital. Economically, culturally, and socially, these individuals are not only vulnerable or made vulnerable: They are primarily significantly and durably weakened. Thus, it is surprising to note that physical activity sessions have had effects in terms of recognition. How is this possible? How can such social careers still allow for the potential benefits of physical and sports activities? We hypothesize that these same trajectories have anchored the subjects in the present, in a course of existence fixed on physical events in which the respondents are personally involved. Physical and sports activity sessions offer this advantage. They are designed to engage the subject in a "doing" or participation that physically and concretely involves them. Thus, during a gathering, respondents experience "something" and seem to be marked by it. But this mark fades once the session is over, as the marks of life trajectories take their place again. Outside the sessions, which provide them with respite, valorize them, and offer recognition, they are again faced with their isolation and even solitude for some. Indeed, having little regard for one another, they do not interact outside the proposed activities:

Interviewer: But otherwise, coming to be with people, chatting…

Fanny: No, no, there's no point, no. I'd rather stay at home.

The distance each person has from the dominant norms of social integration does not, mechanically, lead to affinities or closeness among participants (Bordiec, 2018). Moreover, they are mostly devoid of social links, whatever they may be. If they no longer think about their problems, sadness, or anxieties during the suspended time of the session, those are not permanently forgotten. Many of them sleep little, poorly, experience regular anxiety attacks, are depressed, relapse regularly and some find comfort in a nightlight. The physical activities sessions offered, like any institution, take up a portion of the participants' time and attention, creating a specific environment that tends to envelop them (Goffman, 1968). This implies that, even though they do not fundamentally alter the social dispositions of the participants, they produce effects that would likely not occur without such activities: significant moments for the participants—such as amusement, escape, or time occupation—whose regular attendance attests to their importance. These activities also allow for the development or rediscovery of skills such as group integration, respect for rules, identity reconstruction, and emotional management. However, they remain powerless, at the time of the study, in the face of the weight of prior socializations marked by social isolation or solitude, and cannot erase the traumas of the past. Thus, a contrast persists between the pleasant moments experienced during the sessions and the difficulties encountered in the daily lives of the participants.

How can one be surprised by such a finding? Indeed, life trajectories have placed respondents in events that have profoundly affected, injured them, and especially structurally impacted their practical living conditions. One should not be surprised to find that the suspended time provided by physical activity sessions brings a range of effects. Even if ephemeral, they illustrate the cathartic function of sports (Elias & Dunning, 1986) precisely because it anchors those who practice it in the unfolding moment. Such a benefit is due to physical engagement. But it does not resist the weight of disrupted life trajectories and their conditions make them more or less destructive. At best, the sessions are an interruption of social breaks that may make their isolation more bearable (Bordiec, 2018). An ephemeral social bond will always have less strength than strong or weak ties, when they exist. And it will likely produce effects as ephemeral as itself.

We are aware that our results remain limited. Even though we have gradually worked through our personal biases, it is likely that this still depends on our initial and conflicted relationship with the participants. Why hide this, knowing that previous studies we personally conducted never triggered such discomfort (Duflos, 2021)? It is also possible that this stems from our empirical knowledge associated with the moderate benefits of physical activity programs aimed at individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Decorte et al., 2024; Ternoy et al., 2021). Indeed, while we are convinced of the value of using physical activity to improve the social living conditions of individuals, we remain cautious when it comes to concluding that this can be sustained in the lives of individuals facing clear vulnerabilities or undeniable precarities. For the houseless participants in our study, as for other profiles, the meaning and impact of physical activities are intimately linked to the relationships individuals have with space and time—specifically, the conditions under which physical activity is offered. We might dare to compare our participants to prisoners who are offered physical activity during their incarceration as part of social reintegration efforts. In this regard, it is known that such benefits cannot be realized before these prisoners have come to terms with the loss of their freedom and life projects, and have overcome the shock of incarceration marked by deprivation and lack (Gras, 2003). The houseless individuals

in our study likely share some characteristics with prisoners in that their precarious living conditions dominate and dictate the course of events in which they seemingly participate, but perhaps not fully. The fact that they experience a relative improvement in their lifestyles does not necessarily guarantee a more profound benefit from physical activity, especially because past painful biographical experiences continue to overshadow their relationship with time and events. Just as formerly incarcerated individuals may carry a prison habitus that prevents them from fully engaging in physical activity (such as yoga) due to various mismatches (Norman, 2020), our participants bear the weight of their past and repeated precarities. So, what can be done? What does this qualitative research, conducted with a modest sample of houseless individuals and under conditions that quantitative researchers would easily criticize, reveal, even if imperceptibly? According to Norman (2020), it appears that the success of reintegration programs utilizing the benefits of leisure activities depends on the continuation, outside the walls, of the social circles formed within the prison environment. What worked for the women in the study mentioned by Norman could very well work with the houseless participants in our study: Didn't the physical activity programs they experienced even temporarily generate sociability? It is important to encourage their establishment over time, creating the conditions for them to become a moment that fosters social relationships, without which nothing is possible.

6. Conclusion

This article provides insight into the effects of a physical activity program offered to people in extreme poverty. The implementation of an extensive ethnographic approach allowed us to engage closely with those benefiting from the program and, consequently, to identify some of the effects it produced. Firstly, we highlighted the impact of the participants' life trajectories on their current circumstances and the positions they hold in the social sphere. Their difficult early lives, marked by the absence or fragility of familial ties, significantly influenced their paths. The participants experienced what Paugam (2008) describes as forms of contempt, ranging from violations of their physical integrity to social devaluation, and sometimes even legal exclusion, all while accumulating ruptures and/or vulnerabilities.

These life experiences led these individuals to varying degrees of social isolation. As a result, the effects of the program offered in this city cannot be the same for everyone. The diversity of situations made it impossible to simply answer our initial question, forcing us to generalize rather than define the effects according to each individual's trajectory. Overall, the sessions address a unanimous need for occupation and, indirectly, for social contact. They allow participants to be in the presence of others, to share a moment, to engage in social interactions, and most importantly, to belong to a group, offering them a form of recognition…at least during the session. Indeed, all of this stops once the session ends. It seems as though this "suspended time" momentarily interrupts their social isolation, only for them to return to it afterward. The effects are thus rooted in the present moment, much like the lives of those who participate.

Although housed and potentially feeling the fragile breeze of a better life on the horizon, houseless individuals may struggle to derive lasting benefits from physical activity programs due to their life trajectories. This limits the impact of the activities offered and fails to bring about structural or lasting changes in their circumstances. As a result, the act of "passing time" remains a central goal for participants, without leading to profound or enduring transformations in their social relationships or living conditions (Goifman, 2002). Previously, we dared to compare the houseless individuals in this study to incarcerated persons. Clearly, we do not believe that the lives of our participants constitute prisons, and one should not

casually label all forms of hardship as imprisonment, since prison has its own specificities and refers to a wide heterogeneity of conditions of incarceration (Moran et al., 2017). Yet, in many respects, houseless individuals bear the stigmas of the incarcerated, with lives marked by deprivation, lack, and suffering. These stigmas, deeply and durably ingrained, shape a powerful habitus that likely generates conflicted relationships even with well-intentioned initiatives.

But can we venture an interpretation (Lahire, 1996)? Could one of the effects outside the sessions, driven by their return to social isolation, be a reinforcement of their status as isolated individuals? In the end, does this program cause more harm than good outside of the sessions? While it may interrupt their isolation temporarily, the effect remains short-lived. The narratives of their daily lives reveal a stark contrast between the moments of physical activity, which foster forms of sociability and security through induced social contacts, and the loneliness and insecurity they feel in their harsh lives marked by past traumas.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The analyzed data are available from the authors on request.

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ARTICLE

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"People Have Nowhere to Go": Stakeholder Perceptions on Sustainability of Funded Community Sport Programmes

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Abstract

Overstated promises of hosting the Olympic Games to deliver sustainable participation legacies have been a common occurrence, and a lesson that the UK did not learn from London 2012. Despite this, schemes like Sportivate that sought to distribute public funds to community intervention initiatives have emerged to promote long-term engagement in physical activity and sports. This research aims to build further understanding on sport programme/intervention sustainability. Stakeholders of recipient organisations of Sportivate funding through London Sport offered insights on aspects that aid sustainability of their programmes. Semi-structured interviews took place with 33 board chairs, board members, CEOs, project officers, and coaches positioned at 12 different Sportivate-funded organisations. For analysis purposes, the organisations that these individuals represented were categorised into Target Achieved and Target Not Achieved to indicate success in meeting Sportivate key performance indicators. Analysis suggests the relevance of policy remodelling, capacity, funding, programme fit, leadership, communication, and social bonds as key areas in achieving sport programme sustainability. However, Target Achieving organisations portray signs of strength in some of these sustainability areas, unlike Target Not Achieving organisations. The complexities of sustainability as a multi-layered construct provide a starting point for further study, while recognising the relevance of organisation type, capacity, and staff roles in influencing sustainability perceptions.

Keywords

community intervention programmes; participation; physical activity; public funding; sustainability

1. Introduction

Community sport programmes are often used to increase mass participation levels, and to achieve sustainable benefits for the recipients, whilst the longevity of such programmes is an indicator of their success (Berg, 2016; Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012). An example of such a scheme is Sportivate, which was created to encourage sedentary youth to embrace sport and physical activity (PA) following the London 2012 Games (Thomas et al., 2018). Sportivate, as one of Sport England's flagship Olympic legacy projects, commenced in April 2011 securing a national funding allocation of £56 million over a six-year period until March 2017. Sport England channelled National Lottery money to local communities via 45 County Sports Partnerships, or Active Partnerships as they are now known, across the country (Sport England, 2014). While initially directed at inactive individuals aged 14–25 years, the scheme evolved to focus on inactive young people between 11–25 years of age, women and girls, and disabled youth (Sport England, 2014).

By focussing on these traditionally hard-to-engage groups, programmes like Sportivate aimed to actively address participation issues, while emphasising the significance of age and other demographic factors towards sustainable outcomes (Seefeldt et al., 2002). In so doing, and similar to Belgium's approach (Theeboom et al., 2010), a range of providers including voluntary sport organisations (VSOs) were encouraged to apply for Sportivate funding to run programmes and stimulate effective participation interventions amongst difficult-to-engage target groups in sports (Ikramullah et al., 2018). As has been successful in other nations, to stimulate sport participation demand, correct market failure, and support the role of sport as a public good, expanding the range of organisations that meet public funding criteria can aid in the development of sustainable community PA interventions in the UK (Theeboom et al., 2010).

Unlike Sportivate, which awarded funding to organisations delivering 12 weeks of activity, Sport England has since been able to manifest this approach through Satellite Clubs, which provided funding for 30 weeks of programme delivery. This scheme has also concluded in 2022, which was 12 months later than anticipated due to the Covid-19 disruption. However, despite changes in policy-dictated programme delivery, which as Berg (2016) recognises can positively influence the sustainability of community-level programmes, there is still a need to understand how different programmes influence perceptions of sustainability amongst stakeholders at organisations tasked with their delivery. Indeed, those in charge of implementing these interventions highlighted programme termination as one of the key reasons for failing to meet sustainable outcomes, especially when the issue they aim to address persists (Pluye et al., 2004; Schulenkorf, 2017).

Despite this consensus, programme sustainability is underpinned by multiple underlying dimensions, with varying importance depending on the context. Scholars have argued for the relevance of factors that include project design and implementation, innovation, context, processes, the broader community environment, resilience and the urban commons, leadership, staff involvement, community understanding and participant empowerment, political support, developing partnerships, and programme adaptability in understanding the sustainability of community intervention programmes (Edwards & Rowe, 2019; Koutrou & Kohe, 2024a; Mancini & Marek, 2004; Schulenkorf, 2017; Whitley et al., 2015; Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012).

While acknowledging the complexities of prior research on community programme sustainability, this study aims to ascertain stakeholder perceptions on the elements influencing the sustainability of community intervention programmes targeting youth in sport after their funding cycle has ceased. To achieve this,

semi-structured interviews with strategic and delivery staff from organisations that received Sport England's Sportivate funding in London to run sport and PA interventions in 2015–2016 (year 5) were conducted to inform this case study. Understanding the elements that may influence the sustainability of community sport programmes following a mega-sport event could aid future host cities in determining leveraging strategies and funding priorities in an effort to achieve sustainable, long-lasting sport participation legacies, while at the same time ensuring that such interventions both meet their objectives and are long-lasting.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The UK Context and the Emergence of Sportivate

The strategy of leveraging major events like the Olympics seeks to foster long-term community outcomes by engaging stakeholders (Chalip, 2018). The London 2012 bid promised ambitious sport participation legacies; however, these expectations may have been overstated (Bloyce & Smith, 2010; Reis et al., 2017). Sportivate, which was run between 2011 and 2017, played a specific role as an Olympic legacy funding scheme designed to promote activities for inactive young people and encourage a lifestyle of sport and PA, despite past Olympic failures in fulfilling legacy claims (Thomas et al., 2018).

Importantly, lessons from previous Olympic games suggest that successful funding schemes like Sportivate must create genuine community engagement opportunities, addressing facility inadequacies and other obstacles that hinder youth participation in sports (Bauman et al., 2013). Ultimately, while social impacts from improved facilities are vital in driving behavioural change among inactive populations, a lack of local stakeholder involvement in policymaking undermines the potential of event legacy schemes like Sportivate to effectively address the specific needs of communities in London and the UK (Dowling, 2024; Preuss, 2007). This gap indicates a critical need for policy coherence by aligning local strategies with national policies to ensure sustainable sport participation legacies post-Olympics (Dowling, 2024; Girginov et al., 2017). Indeed, four key components were identified as instrumental for the sustainability of Sportivate-funded projects and as necessary to be included within each application: investment in exit routes, club memberships, relationships with sport and PA providers, and local insights to understand community demands for PA provisions (Ikramullah et al., 2018). Recent data suggest that children and youth PA levels in the UK are unchanged from 2021–2022 and pre-pandemic levels (2018–2019) with 47% or 2.3 million of youth engaging in 60 minutes or more of PA daily ("Children's activity levels hold firm," 2023). This has prompted an ongoing need for community intervention programmes to secure funding and address inactivity in young people (Owen et al., 2024). But what does the broader literature on community programme sustainability highlight as the essential elements that underpin their longevity?

2.2. Programme Sustainability

Programme sustainability has been defined as the continuation of activities after the input, funding, and resources originally provided to create a programme have subsided (Scheirer, 2005). As a multi-dimensional framework, research has attempted to identify and clarify its underlying components. Systematic research on the maintenance of PA/sport programmes after their funding period ends is still in its infancy (Blom et al., 2015). Indeed, programme termination appears to be ineffective when proposed interventions fail to

address persistent or recurring problems (Schulenkorf, 2017). Regardless, programmes may be effective in meeting their objectives yet unable to ensure their longevity (Lindsey, 2008).

Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) identify four main areas that influence programme sustainability including innovation, organisational context, processes, and internal/external organisational capacity. Shediac-Rizkallah and Bone (1998) proposed that programme sustainability depends on elements related to project design and implementation, the organisational setting, and the broader community environment. Mancini and Marek (2004), in the context of family-related community intervention programmes, developed the Programme Sustainability Index. This Index is a three-dimensional framework that includes seven sustainability components: leadership competence, effective collaborations, community understanding, strategic funding, programme responsivity, staff involvement and integration, and demonstrating programme results. When these components are present, middle-range programme outcomes like effective sustainability planning, assurance of programme survival, satisfaction of participants' needs, and ultimately programme sustainability are achieved. Mancini and Marek (2004) emphasise that sustainability elements are within the control of leaders and stakeholders and can directly lead to programme sustainability; however, contextual factors including funding cuts and the introduction of new interventions may affect the programme's longevity.

Mancini and Marek (2004) refer to leadership competence as an important factor that could affect programme sustainability. Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) also highlighted leadership competence in relation to the broader context as influencing programme sustainability. Mancini and Marek (2004) point to the role and responsibilities of leaders to develop a programme vision and ensure all supporting activities are appropriately delivered for those helping meet sustainable outcomes. Shediac-Rizkallah and Bone (1998) also emphasise the role of a programme champion from a mid to upper level of managerial position within organisations working towards delivering sustainable programmes. Interestingly, Shilbury and Ferkins (2011) also found that CEO–board dynamics were crucial in enhancing strategic capability in the pursuit of rational management objectives for sporting organisations.

Effective collaborations are also integral to programme sustainability (Mancini & Marek, 2004). Effective leaders are essential in fostering relationships, particularly in organisations dedicated to sustaining new practices (Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012). Mansfield et al. (2015), in their evaluation of the Health and Sport Engagement intervention, further underscore the necessity of cross-sector collaborations. These collaborations within community interventions play a crucial role in cultivating a social environment that enhances participant benefits (Dearing, 2003). However, Misener and Doherty (2012) argue that the effectiveness and longevity of community sport club partnerships in meeting organisational objectives is contingent upon the nature of the participating organisations, which often demand diverse partners, resources, and services.

Another aspect that contributes to programme sustainability and interacts with other sustainability elements is understanding the community who participate in intervention programmes (Mancini & Marek, 2004). Schulenkorf (2017) suggests that contextual understanding facilitates the development and execution of more culturally relevant health interventions. Similarly, Whitley et al. (2015) note that effective sport/PA interventions are culturally sensitive and incorporate community and contextual knowledge. This can be achieved through empowering programme beneficiaries to take charge of their creation, execution, and

evaluation. Shediac-Rizkallah and Bone (1998) advocate for a collective partnership approach to gain insight into participants to deliver interventions that are tailored to their needs. However, Mancini and Marek (2004) specify that understanding the community encompasses not only programme participants but also the socio-economic and political background of stakeholders. Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) affirm this by highlighting the importance of maintaining core elements of community intervention programmes once initial support has ceased, suggesting partnerships and understanding the community are congruent objectives in achieving sustainability.

Measuring the success of community intervention programmes poses significant challenges but remains crucial for overall effectiveness (Mancini & Marek, 2004). These programmes necessitate evaluations that address both processes and outcomes, in addition to a thorough examination of how organisations define success (Poulin et al., 2000). Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) assert that the ability to achieve and measure programme outcomes relies on indicators such as implementation fidelity, decision-making functionality, and coordination among stakeholders. This further illustrates the interactivity of latent constructs that make up the framework of sustainability (Mancini & Marek, 2004). Strategic funding emerges as a critical factor in programme sustainability, particularly for smaller organisations engaged in collaborative agreements with larger entities, as it requires considerations of potential cutbacks, policy changes, realistic cost identification, funding stream diversification, and service variety (Mancini & Marek, 2004; Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998; Whitley et al., 2015). To ensure programme longevity, organisations must cultivate relationships within their communities to diversify funding and sources of support. This calls for flexibility by matching program objectives to the mission, values, strategic focus, and capacity of possible partners while maintaining the programme's integrity (Whitley et al., 2015). Nonetheless, funding strategies must be tailored to organisational types, as smaller organisations face greater risks over larger entities to maintain programme control. Harris and Houlihan (2016) caution that partnership strategies can result in intricate patterns of resource dependency and might reflect a culture externally imposed and controlled by the government.

Scholars further argue that staff integration and involvement in decision-making and implementation is integral to sustainable programmes and reflects an organisational culture that values positive internal relationships, strengthens an organisational sense of belonging, and encourages human resources to take ownership of programmes (Mancini & Marek, 2004; Whitley et al., 2015). However, others note that staff attributes reflect workforce stability and are more closely related to capacity rather than organisational culture (Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998; Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012). Indeed, fostering capacity building for all programme partners through training, education, and leadership development so that they can take charge of the initiative could aid in meeting programme objectives and guaranteeing sustainability (Ooms et al., 2019; Whitley et al., 2015).

Another element of sustainable community interventions is programme responsivity. This refers to the extent an intervention programme could be modified to address the changing needs of the recipient community, while considering the underlying social structures and the programme's beneficiaries (Akerlund, 2000; Whitley et al., 2015). However, Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) expand on this concept, suggesting that responsivity is just one aspect of programme innovation characteristics, which also include suitability and effectiveness.

In considering the sustainability of expanded delivery networks, it is crucial to examine the impact at policy, strategy, and delivery levels. Policymakers play a significant role in influencing PA participation programmes

(Berg, 2016). Johnson et al. (2004) emphasise the importance of building administrative policies and procedures to sustain programme innovations. However, challenges can arise when policymakers do not ensure policy coherence by consulting and involving local stakeholders in the design of policies, do not provide substantial ongoing delivery support, or fail to consider the context of delivery and the potential mechanisms for change, as exemplified by the Sport Action Zones programme, which sought to promote social inclusion in areas of socio-economic deprivation in the UK (Houlihan & Lindsey, 2013).

Regardless of variations in terminology, there appears to be consensus among scholars on the elements that underpin programme sustainability across different community settings. By examining the insights of key stakeholders involved in the delivery of Sportivate-funded programmes/interventions in London, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring the unique characteristics of sport and PA programmes and identifying elements perceived as essential for achieving sustainability beyond their initial funding cycle.

3. Methodology

The research employed purposive sampling by inviting strategically positioned individuals within the setting from 12 separate organisations that were identified as receiving funding for Sportivate programmes. From the 12 organisations, five were selected as "Target Achieved" (TA) organisations and another seven selected as "Target Not Achieved" (TNA) in the 5th year of the Sportivate funding scheme. This is largely due to data accessibility provided by London Sport for the last complete set of participation data for a full year of Sportivate, at the time of research. Categories for TA and TNA groups were made from secondary data supplied by London Sport which highlighted every organisation that had received funding for the 5th year of Sportivate, and either met (TA) or missed (TNA) their programme's participation targets. Three members of each organisation were targeted for interview across the strategic levels of the organisation: the board chair (BC), a board member (BM), and the CEO. Two additional interviews were sought amongst the delivery level of the targeted organisation: project officers (PO) and coaches (COA). There were no differences in the questions posed to each level of an organisation. By addressing the strategic and delivery aspects of organisations, further insight was offered into the varying influences on sustainability. From the shortlisted organisations, 33 interviews were conducted with 18 individuals from TA organisations and 15 from TNA organisations. The decision to include organisations that were not meeting their participation goals would offer a greater understanding of organisations benefiting from receiving funding for the delivery of their community intervention programmes (Mansfield et al., 2015). Furthermore, this aided the study's credibility through the triangulation of data sources from a range of organisations that met the Sportivate case study criteria (Yin, 2009).

The authors' affiliated institution at the time provided ethics clearance to conduct the study. The interviews were conducted by the lead author in person over a period of five months and ranged from 30 to 49 minutes depending on the amount of explanation offered by participants. Semi-structured interview questions comprised themes relating to the benefits of being part of the Sportivate programme, intra- and inter-organisational relationships, the climate surrounding organisational capacity for intervention programme delivery, individual autonomy, national and regional sport policy, and evaluation and feedback measures. The interviews were digitally audio-recorded and later transcribed manually by the lead author. Interview responses were then triangulated with London Sport Sportivate-related data and programme

sustainability literature to allow for relevant themes' interpretation that accurately captured broader sentiments in relation to the theoretical framework around sustainability. Once the interviews were completed, codes were assigned to each participant to anonymise the collected data, in addition to omitting information related to the nature of the programmes that the interviewees run. This is considered important for data anonymisation as responses can sometimes lead to the disclosure of an interviewee's identity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Transcriptions were inductively analysed, and thematic analysis was employed to identify relevant themes, whereby the authors undertook a process of thematic coding, organisation, and evaluation using intra-coder reliability and inter-coder consistency checks to develop a consensus on the conceptual coding framework and data interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2013; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

To analyse the data, information was broken down into three stages of coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These three stages were: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This process not only aided the familiarisation of data transcripts, which allows researchers to be more aware of repeated themes within the data, but also ensured that relevant data were not overlooked (Sobh & Perry, 2006). Nonetheless, the emergence of certain themes aligned with the previously reviewed theoretical framework of sustainability.

Initially, the data were inductively coded line by line to generate as many ideas and codes as possible based on ideas, phrases, and words repeated by multiple participants (Murchison, 2010). The initial coding process produced first-level codes that emerged for not only the theme of sustainability but also the themes of formulation, implementation, evaluation, and perceptions of the PA programmes. With the assistance of two independent researchers, the codes were grouped or categorised to identify important issues and determine whether the data were saturated (Royse et al., 2015). Each transcript, regardless of TA or TNA category, was coded in the same manner to ensure consistency in the approach. This was important as the themes aligned with the previously reviewed understanding of sustainability.

Such member-checking increases validity by asking colleagues or participants to look at preliminary results and offers suggestions or ideas that might have been missed before accurate conclusions can be drawn (Goulding, 2002). The codes were then blended into broader themes and, finally, the most relevant materials and themes were identified (Draper & Coalter, 2016; Ringuet-Riot et al., 2014). Additionally, as data analysis was carried out by the researchers, thematic saturation was met from the 33 interviews, where no new themes emerged (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024), particularly where these themes aligned with themes reviewed in the theoretical framework of sustainability. These more specific themes are presented below.

4. Results

Findings indicated six overarching themes and related subthemes that were developed inductively from the data, and they are presented in the following section: policy remodelling, resources, programme adaptability, appropriate partnerships, strong leadership, and rapport and two-way communication. These themes represent those areas participants identified as crucial to influencing the sustainability of Sportivate-funded community sport/PA interventions and they are discussed below in detail accompanied by exemplar data quotations.

4.1. Policy Remodelling Impedes Programme Delivery

Stakeholders from both TA and TNA organisations expressed concerns that the favoured top-down approach of policy implementation and funding distribution lacks consideration for smaller organisations and community intervention programme delivery. As noted by one interviewee:

> It gets rather confusing. Policy changes but then the delivery needs have not changed that much. Whatever the name of a policy or funding scheme, the short-term measures to get a certain number of people through the door in limited time remains. (TA-CEO5, VSO)

Representatives from smaller organisations also expressed discontent with top-down policy implementation since it places those working with fewer resources at a disadvantage:

> Policy creates too many hoops to jump through. Big money tends to go to more established organisations, but more money should go to smaller organisations working on the ground who do far more to engage local communities. (TA-BC5, VSO)

Equally, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the increased administrative requirements that follow the introduction of new policies and impede access to funding to support programme delivery. In their words:

> The amount of work involved in monitoring requirements seems non-worthwhile. Most definitely there was a lot of bureaucracy thanks to modern-day policy for added workload. (TNA-CEO7, VSO)

> Policy can change but how much does it really help? We still suffer. Times are uncertain and public funding is becoming scarcer due to political measures in place. (TNA-BM6, VSO)

As such, representatives from both TA and TNA organisations emphasise that a one-size-fits-all approach to policy fails to take into consideration the various organisations that work towards sustainable sport and PA participation.

4.2. Resources Integral to Programme Delivery and Organisational Viability

4.2.1. Funding Issues

From a managerial standpoint, to ensure that a programme is sustainable there needs to be sufficient financial and human resources and sustainable administrative processes in place. Indeed, concurring with Whitley et al. (2015), participants stressed the importance of securing funding to ensure sustainable engagement of participants and the longevity of programmes. One participant commented on how funding allocation impedes programme growth:

> We get an allocation from the NGB [National Governing Body] and if they cut back then we will suffer. We had a cutback of 9% of our workforce grant which severely limits the development of our programmes. (TA-BM3, Regional Governing Body [RGB])

The lack of funding has been more prominent with interviewees who operated at TNA organisations. Clearly, TAs have also suffered with funding cuts; however, the difficulties stated by TNA organisations can point to how some organisations struggle to deal with a loss of funding. The following quotations vividly capture the impacts of funding loss for the community sport sector:

> We have actually just lost a large amount of funding, so the reality is that we have not got that money from the public purse, so it's at the forefront of what stops us developing new programmes and continuing existing ones. (TNA-BC4, NGB)

> The money is reduced and reducing still from the government. Over the last few years, the corporate support has lessened too. The market has shrunk since the financial crash and it's organisations like us that suffer. (TNA-BC6, VSO)

4.2.2. Staff Capacity

Echoing past research from Girginov et al. (2017), staff capacity and time stretches were highlighted as a significant burden, which potentially damages an organisation's approach to programme delivery and subsequent organisational growth:

> We would need to find volunteers to go out and run programmes so there is a balance that's needed because it's no good having that money but no real capability to spend it. (TA-BM1, RGB)

Other participants commented about the nature of projects that require temporary/short-term contracts and staff having to undertake more than one role, which impedes longevity:

> We can only bring on specific people for a specific funding delivery. We're agile in what we do. There's no person hanging around just not doing much. We wouldn't be able to afford it. (TNA-BM6, VSO)

> I have to manage programmes even though as a CEO I shouldn't [have to]. I even cover sessions if I must because a coach may not show [up] or fall ill. It's a capacity issue more than anything. (TA-CEO5, VSO)

Representatives from both TA and TNA organisations also alluded to the strength of people on the ground when it comes to the delivery of community intervention programmes and the need for the strategic level of the organisation to further support their work to meet organisational delivery objectives:

> One is the strength of our people on the ground. The knowledge and enthusiasm of our staff across their specific roles is huge. The other aspect is the fact that the board can get behind these people and assist them. (TA-BC3, RGB)

Another participant summarises this point by noting:

> The people really drive the benefits for the participants. We give up a lot of free time to make it happen. The effort from the start has to be there, the knowledge to know where we can go play, and develop relationships too. (TA-BM2, VSO)

Others also emphasised the importance of their volunteer workforce in delivering and sustaining their sport programmes:

> Volunteers are brilliant. They are the lifeblood of the sport, and they are essential to the success of any grassroots participation. (TNA-PO1, NGB)

This recognition by both TA and TNA respondents of the invaluable role ground-level staff plays in ensuring the delivery of programmes and sustainable engagement of beneficiaries has also been explored by past research (Koutrou et al., 2024; Ooms et al., 2019). Furthermore, in line with Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012), interviewees emphasised the need for the strategic level of organisations to support the work of delivery staff in meeting organisational objectives. Equally, funding dependency and the diversification of funding sources to ensure longevity were also acknowledged as issues that impede programme delivery and sustainability (Mancini & Marek, 2004; Whitley et al., 2015; Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012).

4.3. Adapting Programmes for Sustainable Outcomes

A short-term mindset about Sportivate was apparent in participants' responses, with some respondents lacking foresight towards opportunities to foster long-term and consistent participation through the Sportivate scheme. In their words:

> Sportivate's programme was just too short and could only be an introductory thing. Especially if we're trying to promote a healthy lifestyle. Six to eight weeks just isn't long enough unless there is a follow-up somewhere along the line. (TA-BM2, VSO)

> It doesn't have an end date and is an immediate mechanism to get people playing, but beyond that you cannot really do much. (TNA-BC4, NGB)

Another participant recognised the lack of exit routes for participants following the intervention, which inhibits sustainable sport engagement:

> It's no good telling people go play sport for a number of weeks and have nowhere to go after. (TNA-BC6, VSO)

However, it was apparent that some organisations, particularly from TA groups, recognised the need to adapt their projects to ensure longevity:

> We didn't always have the same project. It was adapted according to the needs of the audience and how to get them participating long-term. (TA-PO4, NGB)

There are some minor differences between TA and TNA respondents, indicating that TA organisations prioritised long-term objectives from the outset by proactively tailoring programmes to the needs of their beneficiaries and the context, rather than concentrating solely on the project's short-term nature.

4.4. Appropriate Partnerships in the Delivery of Programmes

The forging of strong relationships with community partners for programme sustainability was highlighted by individuals in TA organisations echoing past research (Ooms et al., 2019; Schulenkorf, 2017):

> Our role in that respect is to assist our partners to meet the requirements to obtain funding. We have done that fairly successfully over a long period of time. It comes back to having strong relationships. (TA-BM3, RGB)

In line with Schulenkorf (2017), who emphasises that managerial know-how and effective collaborations are critical towards sustainable outcomes for sport for health programmes, interviewees commented:

> It's about sharing resources and being efficient. Also, we get to share ideas and build common platforms to expand the impact of our programmes, helping them to become more sustainable. (TA-BM4, NGB)

> Having those initial links with our partners helped us tick over the initial stages into this long-term project which is now still running here today. (TA-COA3, RGB)

In some instances, relationships were formed to cover an area towards sustainability that TA organisations could not fulfil by themselves. One participant suggests:

> I think from our perspective we will work with anybody that allows us to work in a capacity towards the sustainable goals we want to achieve. (TA-BC5, VSO)

Another participant highlighted the value of effective collaborations towards longevity:

> Partnership work is massive. Without facilities, without activators, without volunteers, without coaches we just wouldn't have sessions. We have to share that burden to succeed with long-term plans. (TA-COA3, RGB)

Another participant stated:

> We can't do all of that ourselves so it helps us to meet targets when we can work with organisations that have already accessed funding, and we help support the delivery of their programmes with our expertise. (TA-PO3, RGB)

Individuals in strategic roles at TNA organisations pointed out instances in which their desire for sustainable outcomes had been hampered by incompatible values with their collaborators/partners:

> Well, there are plenty of networking opportunities organised by UK Sport and Sport England where they do workshops or lunches with other chairs and CEOs, but sometimes it feels everyone is out for themselves. (TNA-BC4, NGB)

TNA participants were sceptical about collaborations that compromised their autonomy or programme and sport control echoing past research (Harris & Houlihan, 2016; Misener & Doherty, 2012). As one interviewee notes:

> We have no particular hang-up about working with others. Where we have a hang-up, I suppose is where others appear to be taking over the work we do. And once the independence of an organisation is compromised then people will walk out. (TNA-BM1, NGB)

The above suggests that effective collaborations are integral towards sustainable programmes and are an element that seems to differentiate TA and TNA organisations in their ability to initiate, develop, and maintain strong relationships with their partners to benefit their programmes and participants.

4.5. Strong Leadership a Necessity

On a strategic level, both TA and TNA organisation representatives expressed consensus that the board take the lead, whereas on a delivery level leadership would sit with the CEO. Interviewees note:

> That would be with the chairman for the strategic direction of the organisation but the overall leadership for the delivery of the strategy sits with me. (TNA-CEO1, NGB)

> The leadership on delivery is definitely with the CEO. They direct the ground-level staff on what is expected from the programmes they develop. (TA-BC5, VSO)

By recruiting a CEO from within the organisation, it was generally believed that a greater understanding of the role, alignment with the organisation's values and objectives, and sustainable programme delivery could be achieved. Both TA and TNA representatives note:

> Most of that comes from the CEO. We have had quite a recent change in CEO who has worked from the development officer level right through the ranks to the top, which helps as they understand the work needed for our delivery to be sustainable. (TA-PO3, RGB)

> It would probably come to me and the sports director to see if the programme was compatible with our aims and objectives for the organisation. It helps that I used to be a coach and project officer here before being CEO. (TNA-CEO3, NGB)

Interviewees also emphasised that instances where there was a lack of understanding by leaders on the role of delivery staff impeded their efforts to fulfil sustainable objectives. In their words:

> Some of the work is quite difficult because the board aren't fully aware of everything that goes on. Some of them come from business backgrounds where it's all about profit, but our services are about growing the sport, not the finances. (TNA-CEO3, NGB)

> There is a huge gap between a project starting and setting out to meet sustainable outcomes. Sometimes the board don't understand what it takes, but they dictate what the CEO can and can't do which affects my work down the line. (TA-COA, RGB)

There was also consensus on the need for better communication and joint decision-making for different leadership strands to minimise the negative effects on delivery staff's efforts to meet sustainable objectives through community intervention programmes:

> For me, it has to be a kind of partnership between the board and myself. Everyone needs to know their roles and their function. Perhaps the board have to take the overall lead as they hire me, but really, it's a joint leadership. (TNA-CEO3, NGB)

> Broadly speaking it's the CEO that needs to be supported by the chair and board. That's why we have multiple management committees, so areas of responsibility have their own expertise and leadership. (TA-BM3, RGB)

> Sometimes it feels like it's me. But I feed the organisation's performances into the board who hold me accountable. I don't mind that, because there's a sense of joint responsibility to lead the organisation to sustainable success. (TA-CEO5, VSO)

Concurring with past research (Mancini & Marek, 2004; Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011), participants asserted the need for dual leadership with clearly designated areas of focus according to expertise. At the same time, it was emphasised that better internal communications between the strategic and delivery strands of leadership would facilitate sustainable outcomes.

4.6. Rapport and Two-Way Communication Important for Work Efficiency

TA respondents acknowledged the importance of rapport and two-way communication as a characteristic of more successful groups. In their words:

> I don't feel confused and there is a clear direction. If anything changes, we are always aware of it quite quickly from management. We meet regularly and are quite open to conversation about life in general. (TA-COA1, RGB)

> I speak to my manager most days on the phone for a catch-up. Sometimes it's just a social call. But at least I know, if I ever need anything, I can rely on management for support. (TA-COA4, NGB)

Positive internal relationships, clear communication, and leadership were also noted as integral in fostering an environment conducive to effective and sustainable delivery of community programmes:

> We are fed reports from everyone monthly, and it's fair to say we are very happy with the general direction we are heading in. Plus, the meetings feel like a bit of a social event at times as it's nice to get together and catch up. Our strength comes from that. (TA-BM3, RGB)

Interviewees also acknowledged the value of a positive internal environment in knowledge exchange and cross-over of expertise to ensure effective programme delivery:

> So now in the development team we had people covering different areas, but they would cross over. To get a session set up, we would need to communicate and cross over. (TA-PO3, RGB)

Ultimately, the perspectives here illustrate appreciation for an interplay of elements that contribute towards the sustainability of community sport/PA funded programmes in London. In doing so, participants' experiences point to ways in which this conceptual multitude may also contribute to organisational longevity and viability.

5. Discussion

This research aimed to identify the determinants of the sustainability of community sport programmes delivered by Sportivate-funded organisations in London. Interviews with the strategic and delivery levels of funded organisations infer six key elements of sustainability. These themes highlight the remodelling of policy, resource sufficiency, programme adaptability, the use of partnerships, strong leadership, and rapport and two-way communication within the organisation. Findings suggest that the sustainability of community intervention programmes is complex and involves input, negotiation, and interaction between stakeholders (Hill & Varone, 2021). While the administration of funding is important, the ability for ground-level project planners to adapt to community needs is also considered a necessity for programme sustainability (Koutrou et al., 2024; Whitley et al., 2015). Concurring with Dearing (2003), our results demonstrate that organisations responsible for delivering community intervention programmes must adopt a socially engaging approach to strengthening internal (trust and leadership) and external (partnerships) relations.

Policymakers' positions in the UK are subject to frequent changes due to successive UK Government cycles. As such, policy for enhancing PA is periodically redesigned, given their influence over community sport programmes (Dowling, 2024). Findings, however, indicate that individuals at funded organisations believe this dynamic political landscape may be harmful to sustainability. Interviewees emphasised administrative and bureaucratic challenges facing smaller organisations that hinder their ability to offer input on future policy, despite research that highlights the need to develop administrative policies to support the sustainability of community PA programmes (Johnson et al., 2004). Although the notion of enhanced administration was intended to promote sustainability, participants alluded to this creating a hurdle for smaller organisations to operate since programme delivery is less emphasised. Interviewees further stated that "policy creates too many hoops to jump through" (TA-BC5, VSO), concurring with Bloyce and Smith (2010) who argued that 2012 Olympic legacy commitments were exaggerated when attempting to satisfy sustainability objectives. Furthermore, since a thorough understanding of delivery needs is important for programme implementation, Dowling (2024) also emphasised the need for policy coherence between local- and national-level strategies, as community sport programmes can create hype and help leverage mega sport events for wider benefits.

Nonetheless, the load this creates on organisations may be connected to a lack of ground-level capability. Respondents expressed concerns that regardless of funding, there are still issues with staff availability to support sustained delivery of programmes. Respondents further underlined the relationship between increased administration and staff capacity since they have limited time to engage with added loads of bureaucracy. These findings support Whitley et al. (2015) who highlight the necessity of allocating funds for staffing resources. Most importantly, for Sportivate-funded organisations, one of the key strengths of their programmes was the staff who engaged with their delivery. Strategic-level staff from both TA and TNA organisations frequently emphasised the qualities of project officers and coaches, referring to ground-level staff as "the lifeblood of the sport…essential to the success of any grassroots participation" (TNA-PO1,

NGB). This concurs with Shediac-Rizkallah and Bone (1998), who claim that organisations led by individuals who appreciate the work of delivery-level staff can achieve effective and sustainable results. Echoing Mancini and Marek (2004), respondents also noted that staff involvement needs to be combined with skills and attitudes to make sustainability objectives more attainable.

Reiterating the idea that leadership is responsible for organisational culture, Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) indicated that effective leaders are more inclined to encourage partnership models to maintain new practices. TA groups stress the value of appropriate collaborations as the sharing of resources and expertise has allowed the sustainable delivery of their programmes. This success can partly be attributed to organisations' readiness to establish long-term partnerships that grow over time, as opposed to forming fast collaborations to secure funds for short-term projects. Indeed, scholars argue that successful collaborations for programme implementation require a positive social climate (Edwards & Rowe, 2019). This cannot always be the case, though, as short-term collaborations and initiatives are still common in community sport. TNA groups highlight this by mentioning how certain collaborations lack the necessary resources or experience, making it more difficult to accomplish their sustainability goals. This is caused, in part, by the desperate need for funds, which promotes partnerships based on a culture of freedom regulated by the government (Harris & Houlihan, 2016). This implies a connection between policy, capacity, and partnerships, all of which, when appropriately utilised, may result in sustainable outcomes. However, TNA groups have found it difficult to recognise the usefulness of partnerships towards increasing the sustainability of their community interventions when these are not created to suit community needs.

Another concern with policy relates to the implementation of community programmes that should be realised by focusing on both short-term impacts and long-term legacies (Preuss, 2007). According to respondents, Sportivate encouraged quick-fix solutions, which deters young people from engaging in sustained PA (Sport England, 2014). Additionally, this lack of sustained engagement deviates from the priorities of the funder (London Sport), which emphasised the need to identify activity exit routes as a crucial step in the funding application process. Echoing Schulenkorf (2017), participants emphasised the importance of meeting local community needs as integral to any programme's creation and sustainability. However, interviewees expressed that programmes like Sportivate are "immediate mechanisms to get people playing, but beyond that you cannot really do much" (TNA-BC4, NGB). Similarly, Pluye et al. (2004) contend that one of the main causes of participants' dropping retention rates is the termination of an intervention. Coalter et al. (2020) emphasise the value of long-term sport-plus programmes in achieving wider social externalities beyond sport. Therefore, when a programme is completed and people "*have nowhere to go after*" (TNA-BC6, VSO), the suggestion to modify community projects to support ongoing local needs becomes obsolete (Akerlund, 2000; Koutrou et al., 2024).

Since programme implementation depends on ground-level staff, funding cuts have made it more difficult for both TA and TNA organisations to satisfy sustainability goals, particularly in relation to "developing new programmes and continuing existing ones" (TNA-BC4, NGB). Wiltsey Stirman et al. (2012) point out how funds for staffing requirements can be creatively allocated; therefore, cuts will inevitably have a detrimental effect on programme growth since staff will have limited ability to meet community demands. TNA organisations discussed the failure of several collaborations created to mitigate the impact of budget reductions, which is consistent with Warner and Sullivan (2017), who found that the loss of programme control outweighs the benefits that may be obtained from collaborative interventions. The relationship

between funding and capacity implies that smaller organisations have joined forces due to their need for resources, underscoring their significance as a sustainability element (Harris & Houlihan, 2016).

Both TA and TNA stakeholders further recommended the appointment of leaders from inside the organisation to enhance sustainability. Appointing CEOs who have developed through the ranks and have experience with programme delivery, understand their communities, and adapt delivery to meet their needs can ensure that programmes align with the strategic objectives of the organisation (Koutrou et al., 2024; Whitley et al., 2015). Regardless, while sport has been recognised as fostering experiential learning and soft skill development (Coalter et al., 2020; Koutrou & Kohe, 2024b) and such opportunities are important for staff commitment and identification, scholars argue that organisations need to invest in upskilling their workforce through provision of training, mentoring, and provision of clear pathways for leadership development to ensure programme goals are met and human resource legitimacy and longevity (Coalter et al., 2020; Koutrou et al., 2024; Ooms et al., 2019).

Some interviewees also felt conflicted between the board and CEO on who had greater influence in steering towards meeting sustainable goals, which indicates situations in which leadership was not evident. Organisational stakeholders that perform better in this area note that having clearly identifiable leaders for the strategic and delivery sides improved the accomplishments of sustainability objectives. This supports Mancini and Marek (2004) who note that leaders' responsibilities include establishing a vision and warranting appropriate delivery of supporting actions. Respondents' accounts evidence the appointment of different leaders for the strategy and delivery aspects of their organisation. The board predominately assumed responsibility for the strategic vision, whilst the CEO undertook "overall leadership for the delivery of the strategy" (TNA-CEO1, NGB). This dual leadership, whilst complex, designates a leader for specific components of running funded programmes, indicating the necessity for a programme champion at the organisation's mid to upper level of management to align delivery to strategic objectives (Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998). However, there were a few cases where the TNA joint-leadership declarations clearly differed from the TA organisations' strategies. For instance, unlikely TNA respondents, TA stakeholders acknowledged the positive role of internal collaborations and the appointment of individuals with clear areas of expertise to lead on programme implementation. This confirms the idea that in trying to comprehend the dynamics between the CEO and the board, strategic capabilities and rational delivery targets should be highlighted (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011).

Rapport and two-way communication, as one of the sustainability components that emerged out of this research, acknowledges the complexity of relationships within the social structures that hold an organisation that runs community sport interventions together. Koutrou and Kohe (2024a) emphasised the importance of the social environment in forming partnerships and fostering relationships. TA organisations highlighted how improved communication and clear leadership have made information sharing possible and supported ongoing delivery initiatives. This is especially pertinent when adjustments are needed, as "if anything changes, we are always aware of it quickly from management" (TA-COA1, RGB). This refers, in part, to the focus on establishing supportive settings within the work environment, in meetings and formal conversations. As TA stakeholders also note, a positive social environment also helped individuals to "communicate and cross over" (TA-PO3, RGB). This implies a level of readiness to go beyond their workload to fulfil tasks within the organisation. This supports Johnson et al.'s (2004) assertions that cultivating a positive work environment among staff is essential, as planning, delivering, and evaluating community

programmes necessitates a collective workforce. Thus, the role of leadership in encouraging clear and open communication and a positive work environment can enhance staff motivation and performance.

6. Conclusion

This study offers insights into the perceptions of key informants surrounding the concept of sustainability in community sport and PA programmes. Interviewees from 33 TA and TNA organisations who received Sportivate funding highlighted factors relevant to their interactions and how each one can play a role in understanding programme sustainability. This is one of the few studies that compared organisations that differed in their ability to meet community sport programme targets in order to determine the elements that contribute to their sustainability. Our findings suggest that policy remodelling and the shifting priorities of successive governments limit the sustainability of funded community sport/PA programmes, particularly when failing to integrate the perspectives of ground-level implementers in policymaking. Furthermore, despite the evident consensus in participants' voices, TA organisational representatives portray certain elements of their programmes as signs of strength in meeting sustainable outcomes, whereas TNA organisations acknowledge certain elements as hindering their ability to achieve their own organisational and programme objectives. This differing level of emphasis placed on sustainability components suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to funding, resource allocation, and evaluation of success is not appropriate for implementing organisations. However, lessons can be learnt from both TA and TNA organisations and their efforts, albeit of varying success, to align their organisational objectives to meet programme sustainability targets.

Echoing previous studies (Edwards & Rowe, 2019; Koutrou et al., 2024; Mancini & Marek, 2004; Schulenkorf, 2017; Wiltsey Stirman et al., 2012), this research contributes to our understanding of the determinants of sport/PA programme sustainability and identifies similar elements that underpin it. Nonetheless, given the complexity of the interaction between these key themes within community sport and PA interventions, future research could explore how differences within the context, dynamics, and sociodemographic make-up of organisations may also influence how stakeholders at all levels of the organisation perceive sustainability. Such variables of interest include organisation type, organisation size, and staff role, which a qualitative approach could not experimentally determine. Furthermore, in addition to understanding how these demographic disparities affect sustainability variables, further investigation and validation of the sustainability determinants that emerge from this research can be helpful. Subsequent studies may also seek to draw insights on both implementers and participants' perceptions of the sustainability elements that support community sport initiatives run by their organisations.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Leave No One Behind? Analysing Sport Inclusion Policy-Implementation for Persons With Disabilities in Ghana

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Abstract

Sport inclusion policies for persons with disabilities are prevalent in many countries; however, actual support in local communities is lacking or inadequately addressed. In this article, we analyse the implementation of sport inclusion policies and the extent to which they exclude or include disabled sport associations in Ghana's District Sports Units. Using document analysis, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews, we collected data from representatives of state and non-state organisations, drawing theoretical insights from ableism and policy networks to analyse the implementation of sport inclusion policies. The findings reveal that despite inclusion provisions at the local level, the policy implementation process presents challenges for District Sports Units. These challenges include the lack of funding, conflicts among network actors, deliberate disregard, membership gaps, and the absence of an integrated programme for disabled sport associations. These findings further inform our understanding of collaborative alliances, local autonomy, and the implication of ableism for policy networks.

Keywords

ableism; disability sport; District Sports Units; Ghana; policy implementation; sustainable development

1. Introduction

In recent years, disability issues have been mainstreamed into the global policy agenda, as evidenced in the 2016 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and associated with the slogans "no one will be left behind" and "make sure the furthest behind are reached first" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The two slogans have been central to Ghana's development policy as well as the implementation of its sport policy

(National Development Planning Commission, 2019). It is evident from the Ministry of Youth and Sport's (herein referred to as sport ministry) Medium-Term Expenditure Framework from 2016 to 2021 that the provision for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in sport is being implemented, albeit with limited details. The mainstreaming of disability sport at both the government and NGO levels has been described in studies from several countries (Hammond, 2019; Kitchin et al., 2019; Sørensen & Kahrs, 2006), but few have examined how disability mainstreaming is implemented in practice at the community or district levels. To date, no study has addressed the implementation of sport inclusion policies in Ghanaian communities for persons with disabilities.

A key component of community implementation of the sport inclusion policies is the strategic partnership between government agencies and NGOs (National Development Planning Commission, 2019). It is in light of this that District Sports Units (DSUs) in Ghana play a crucial role in implementing sport inclusion policies for persons with disabilities and associated groups. DSUs function as service delivery mechanisms at the grassroots level, interpreting and implementing government sport policies. They do this while fostering partnerships, navigating cultural and religious barriers, and influencing broader policy analysis and development.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the implementation of sport inclusion policies at the DSUs and the extent to which they exclude or include disabled sport associations (DSAs) in Ghana. In so doing, the study seeks answers to whether the quest for "no one will be left behind" reflects genuine social concern and has a real impact on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in sport. Ableism helps to explain how DSAs or related groups are considered in the DSUs. Moreover, policy network theory as inclusive governance provides the analytical framework to analyse the degree of membership, integration, resource distribution, and power balance when implementing the sport inclusion policies of Ghana's sport ministry. Forming the empirical basis of this research is a textual analysis of sport policies and other relevant documents, a focus group discussion (FGD) with representatives from 15 DSUs and three DSAs, and semi-structured interviews with three regional sport directors.

2. DSUs and Sport Policy Implementation

DSUs in Ghana translate sport policies into action and foster partnerships at the metropolitan, municipal, and district levels (herein referred to as district assemblies). There are 261 DSUs, created under the Sports Act 934 of 2016, which require inter-ministerial cooperation between the sport ministry, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development. Consequently, DSU leadership includes members from these ministries. Funding and resources for DSUs come from both sport ministry, which provides human resources and sport equipment through its regional offices, and the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, which supports DSUs through the District Assembly Common Fund (DACF). The DACF's sport funding is allocated at the discretion of politically appointed district chief executives (Charway et al., 2022).

Additionally, NGOs like the Association of Sports for the Disabled (ASD) and the National Paralympic Committee of Ghana play key roles. The National Paralympic Committee of Ghana focuses on the Paralympic Games and national DSAs under the International Paralympic Committee. The ASD has a wider brief and is crucial for the broader development and implementation of sport policy within communities.

The Ghana Sports Act 934 of 2016 mainstreams disability sport, integrating ASD representatives into the National Sports Authority's governing board and recognising them through the sport ministry (Charway & Houlihan, 2020). ASD members comprise the Ghana Amputee Football Association, Ghana Blind Sports Association, Ghana Deaf Sports Federation, and Ghana Dwarf Sports Association (National Sports Authority, n.d.). Most associations have offices across nearly all regions and districts.

With inclusion and partnership being central to implementing the SDGs in Ghanaian communities, analysing how DSUs collaborate with DSAs is essential. One of the policy objectives of the sport ministry is to "attain the SDGs through youth development, empowerment and promotion of sports" (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2016, p. 1). As a result, the sport ministry mentions in its 2016–2021 Medium-Term Expenditure Framework the success and continued effort to support DSAs in local communities. Such support includes providing disability-friendly facilities for sport in communities, ensuring the capacity and skill development of youth with disabilities, and ensuring collaboration with disability groups in local communities. Despite these commitments, there is a lack of documentation on how DSUs or local communities implement and govern inclusive practices.

Following Ghana's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, the Persons With Disabilities Act 715 of 2006 guarantees the right of persons with disabilities to sport and physical education. According to the Act, district assemblies (through DSUs) must ensure access to sport and cultural events for persons with disabilities and provide necessary support. Despite these legal protections, Ocran (2019) argues that the social, political, and economic rights of persons with disabilities remain inadequately protected. Studies on the experiences of persons with disabilities in Ghana, focusing on health, employment, discrimination, and begging, reveal persistent stigma, social exclusion, and discrimination, influenced by unspoken African norms and myths (Agyei-Okyere et al., 2019; Avoke, 2002; Naami, 2015; Naami & Hayashi, 2012). Although these studies have not focused wholly on sport, they reveal that persons with disabilities continue to face stigma, social exclusion, and discrimination, and continue to be defined by unspoken African norms and myths.

3. Theoretical Insights: Inclusive Policy Implementation

Policy implementation is inherently fragmented, involving complex networks of relationships among various actors, including government and non-governmental organisations, bureaucracies, and civil society groups (Rhodes, 2006). These networks facilitate the interplay of interdependent state and non-state actors, shaping policy outcomes through collective efforts and shared beliefs. In this study, we employ a meso-level analysis using policy network theory (Carlsson, 2000; Rhodes & Marsh, 1992) to examine the implementation of sport policies by DSUs in conjunction with DSAs in Ghana.

Originating in the Global North, policy network theory emerged alongside the rise of pluralism—the shift from government to governance—and the increasing interaction between state and non-state organisations. In the context of African studies, this theory is particularly relevant due to the advent of neoliberal policies and the institutionalisation of SDGs in many African countries including Ghana (Banda, 2017). In Ghana—including the sport sector—the implementation of the SDGs emphasises a pluralistic approach, multi-sectoral collaboration, and the involvement of diverse actors, including state and non-state organisations (Charway et al., 2022; National Development Planning Commission, 2019).

Policy network theory conceptualises policy implementation as a series of formal and informal linkages between government and other actors with vested interests (Rhodes, 2006). Inclusive governance, as described by Hickey (2015), promotes inclusion as a benchmark for institutional performance. This inclusive approach is crucial for implementing sport policies that avoid ableism and promote equitable participation for persons with disabilities. In such networks, there is an "exchange of information, expertise, trust and other policy resources" (Boumans & Ferry, 2019, p. 413). Rhodes and Marsh's (1992) typology of policy networks suggests a continuum between policy communities and issues networks. This is done in relation to the extent to which DSUs' implementation of sport inclusion policies excludes or includes national DSAs in Ghana. Characteristically, the two types of policy network differ in the degree of membership, integration, resource distribution, and power (see Table 1).

The DSUs' role in implementing inclusive sport policies in collaboration with relevant stakeholders underscores the appropriateness of policy network theory for this research. Inclusion is characterised by equitable and participatory experiences. Christiaens and Brittain (2023) identify three types of inclusion: full inclusion, parallel inclusion, and inclusive choice. Full inclusion occurs when persons with disabilities participate equally alongside non-disabled individuals, and often initiated by the persons with disabilities themselves due to the lack of strategies or competencies within community sport organisations to engage them. Parallel inclusion allows participation in the same setting but not the same activities. Inclusive choice emphasises freedom and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities to engage in community sport programmes.

Furthermore, policy network as inclusive governance highlights the importance of addressing ableism, a systemic bias and social oppression that disadvantages persons with disabilities (Beratan, 2006; Ives et al., 2021). The ableist system of dividing practices that is commonly referred to as institutional ableism privileges ability over disability, leading to exclusion and lack of support for persons with disabilities (Campbell, 2019; Lyons, 2013). Studies about ableism also illustrate how inclusive practice and implementation governance (Jeanes et al., 2018) for persons with disabilities "ha[ve] been used by various social groups to justify their

Table 1. Characteristics of policy communities and issue networks.

Dimension	Policy communities	Issue networks
Membership	Very limited number with some groups consciously excluded	Large
Integration	Frequent and high-quality interaction	Limited interaction
	Share basic values and there is continuity over time	Limited access and continuity
	Accept legitimacy of outcome	A measure of agreement exists, but conflict is never present
Resource distribution	All participants have resources	Limited distribution of resources
	Basic relationship is an exchange relationship	Exchange relationship is consultative
Power	Balance of power between members although one group may dominate	Unequal powers reflect unequal resources and unequal access

Source: Adapted from Rhodes and Marsh (1992).

elevated level of rights and status" (Wolbring, 2008, p. 253). This is essential for DSUs that are in a strategic position to implement inclusive sport policies while balancing cooperation with district assemblies, following government objectives, and engaging relevant disability groups or organisations.

This study examines the sport inclusion policies implemented by DSUs, focusing on providing equal opportunities and participatory experiences for DSAs. We use Rhodes and Marsh's (1992) policy network dimensions—membership, integration, resource distribution, and power dynamics—as analytical tools to understand the inclusiveness of DSU programmes in Ghanaian communities. This analysis helps to identify the extent to which DSUs' implementation of inclusive sport policies includes or excludes national DSAs in Ghana, thereby contributing to a more equitable and empowering environment for disabled individuals in sport.

4. Research Design and Methods

The case study approach was used to collect and analyse qualitative data from coordinators within DSUs and DSAs in Ghana. A combination of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and FGDs was employed in the data collection process which took place between 2020 and 2021. Access to research participants was made possible by gatekeepers/mediators the first author has known, both as a sport administrator and researcher in Ghana over the past 10 years. A consent form was also given to each participant prior to the data collection.

Data were purposefully collected from two groups. The first group was from DSUs located in the northern, middle, and southern regions of Ghana. A total of five DSUs were considered for the interviews in each region. It is worth mentioning that Ghana had 10 regions until 2019. Currently, there are 16 regions, but the additional six have limited structures. Accordingly, the research used sport organisations from the previous 10 regions of Ghana. The selection of regions was designed to ensure a balance of data sources in terms of urbanisation, wealth, population density, and culture. The second group from which data were collected involved three DSAs that are formally structured and recognised by the sport ministry. Here, a total of three senior officials and 12 district representatives were interviewed.

4.1. Data Collection

Document analysis included policy documents that aided the implementation of inclusion provisions. Some of the documents were requested from the interviewees, while others were downloaded from the internet (see Table 2). To avoid selective bias, the documents were painstakingly selected and examined based on the study's objectives (Yin, 2009).

The semi-structured interview was used in order to understand implementation from the perspective of key DSU officials (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The semi-structured interviews, unlike FGDs, allowed participants to share in greater depth personal information and experiences that may have been difficult to express in a group setting (Frisina, 2018; see Table 3). Among the key questions were awareness of inclusion as a key policy area for the sport ministry, resource distribution, partnerships, as well as the inclusion of persons with disabilities and DSAs in DSUs' planning and implementation of sport policies. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in accordance with the Covid-19 health and safety protocols in Ghana. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

Table 2. Sourced documents.

Documents	Publishing source (year)
Voluntary National Review Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	National Development Planning Commission (2019)
Sport ministry: Medium-Term Expenditure Framework	Ministry of Finance (2016–2021)
Formula for Sharing the District Assemblies Common Fund—Allocation Statement	Parliament of Ghana Library Repository (2016–2020)
Sports Act 934 of 2016	National Sport Authority/Sport ministry
Persons With Disability Act 715 of 2006	Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection
Local Governance Act 936 of 2016	Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development
Reports, minutes, and publications	DSUs and DSAs (2016–2022)

The purpose of the FGD was to assess whether the sport policy implementation had been inclusive and reflected the characteristics of the policy community or issues network or both. Unlike semi-structured interviews, we were able to gather and analyse a variety of narratives and perspectives simultaneously due to the possibility given to participants to speak freely (Frisina, 2018; Krueger, 2014). Unlike many FGDs where participants are more guarded in what they say, the participants in this study spoke freely without being reticent. An explanation for this is that the FGDs was conducted in a negotiated space/environment conducive to the participants' comfort and where they did not feel the pressure to express themselves. The duration of the FGDs was from 70 to 90 minutes. Participant details are presented in Table 3.

Overall, six FGDs, comprising DSU and DSA coordinators/representatives, provided insights into the communities where they worked (Bryman, 2012). Additionally, given the political nature and the hierarchical order of the district assemblies (where DSUs are located), a neutral location for each of the three FGDs was selected to allow participants to speak more freely (Elwood & Martin, 2000). The FGDs were aided by an interview guide with similar objectives as the semi-structured interviews. The FGDs took the form of face-to-face discussions and we followed Covid-19 health and safety protocols in Ghana, which included

Table 3. Participants for semi-structured interviews and FGDs.

Empirical categories	Semi-structured interviews	FGDs	Participants	Number of persons with disabilities
Regional sport directors	3	—	3	—
DSUs	—	3 (5 DSUs in each)	15	—
DSAs	3	3 (4 DSAs in each)	15 (from DSAs represented in regions/districts)	13
Total	6	6	33	13

wearing a mask and maintaining a minimum distance of one meter (Government of Ghana, 2020; Kenu et al., 2020).

4.2. Reflexivity

As a whole, the research was enriched by the diverse cultural backgrounds of the authors. The first two authors' experiences as Ghanaians and former sport administrators in Ghana offer both opportunities and challenges for data collection and analysis. As Floyd and Arthur (2012, p. 172) state, there are often "deeper level ethical and moral dilemmas that insider researchers have to deal with." This leads us to draw insights from Olmos-Vega et al.'s (2022) intertwined reflexivity approach, which integrates personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual reflexivity. We exercised *personal reflexivity* in order to consider the possibility of interlocutor projection bias in the analysis of the research data and interviews. In this instance, the third author provided outsider insights into the data analysis. In addition, personal reflexivity enabled us to anticipate and avoid being influenced by participants who may wish to discuss personal matters during interviews. Our *interpersonal reflexivity* helped us to examine how our strengths and weaknesses could complement each other. For instance, the first and third authors' experiences in sport policy implementation and management complemented the second author's expertise in disability studies. By doing so, we were able to thoroughly discuss and choose the appropriate theoretical lenses for the research. Through *methodological reflexivity* we were able to, from the outset, "[align] methodological choices with the theoretical framework" of the research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022, p. 245). The participants gave their informed consent. We used pseudonyms to avoid victimisation and job loss among DSU participants and to protect the identity of DSA participants. In addition, we considered the different capabilities of the participants and negotiated interview locations that were appropriate, conducive, and safe for the collection of data. Our *familiarity with the context* gained us the participants' trust and gave us an "easier entrée, a head start" (Berger, 2015, p. 223). Furthermore, our familiarity with the cultural context enabled us to closely attend to non-verbal cues and seek clarification during the interviews (Mapitsa & Ngwato, 2020; Patton, 2014; Yin, 2009).

4.3. Data Processing and Analysis

The data analysed comprised the identified documents, FGDs, and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were manually and digitally analysed. The data processing began with the researchers familiarising themselves with the data by thoroughly reading and re-reading the data, making notes, and forming ideas about coding. By using MAXQDA Plus 2022, researchers extracted initial codes through the open coding method. The extracted codes were then linked together through axial coding to form meaningful organised categories (Gratton & Jones, 2010). The organised categories were downloaded in Excel format for manual analysis to generate main themes and sub-themes where necessary. Further probing and feedback from peer debriefing helped to generate credible themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data analysis was undertaken both inductively and theoretically. First, by using the inductive approach, we engaged in data immersion, pattern matching, and explanation building to generate common themes from the data (Yin, 2009). The data from the document analysis were inductively analysed to extract inclusive provisions from DSU sport policies. The theoretical approach, as the name denotes, adopted the coding strategy based on the theoretical lens used for the research. As a result, the following themes emerged: (a) evidence of sport inclusion policies for persons with disabilities;

(b) composition and membership of DSUs; (c) decision-making and planning of district programmes; (d) distribution of funds and sharing of resources; and (e) conflicts. These five themes are analysed in the next section.

5. Findings

5.1. Evidence of Inclusive Policy Provisions for Persons With Disabilities

At the national or ministerial level are provisions to implement disability policies through sport at the district level. These provisions can be found in the sport, education, and local government ministries that provide joint support for the DSUs.

The DSUs are created under provision 25 of the Sports Act 934 of 2016 and, among other functions, have the responsibility to assist in the formulation and implementation of (inclusive) sport policies, programmes, and activities (25a); advise district assembly authorities on inclusive sport facilities, programmes, and budgetary allocations (25b); organise and promote parasport in districts (25d); and facilitate the work of and provide equipment to sport organisations in the districts (25m).

Specifically, under the core functions of the Sports Act 934 of 2016, provision 3 references inclusive policies even though persons with disabilities are not mentioned (Government of Ghana, 2016a):

> To provide a conducive and enabling environment for national sport associations as well as promote, encourage and secure the adoption of policies of equal opportunity and access to sports. (provision 3)

Furthermore, the Local Governance Act 936 of 2016 which outlines, defines, and regulates all the activities and programmes of district assemblies makes special provisions relating to inclusion (Government of Ghana, 2016b). Among other things, provision 48 of the Act requires district assemblies to include and integrate marginalised groups regardless of their identity. Concerning social and cultural practices such as sport and physical activity, district assemblies (with all its units like DSUs) shall ensure:

> Equal treatment, social protection and promotion of effective participation of marginalised groups in public life. (provision 48)

Moreover, the Persons With Disabilities Act 715 of 2006, which encompasses the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development (DSWCD) as well as the sport ministry, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, among others, promotes equal access to district sporting events, facilities, and programmes (Government of Ghana, 2006):

> The ministry responsible for education and sports [and] the district assemblies…shall as far as practicable ensure, [through] the provision of adequate facilities, programmes and incentives, that persons with disability have access to sports and cultural events. (provision 38)

The above-mentioned policy provisions form the basis for an inclusive policy network in which the DSUs in the local districts play a crucial role. This type of network aims to ensure that its members are representative and

that the network facilitates the sharing of resources and collaboration, integrates disabilities programmes, and maintains frequent interaction among key stakeholders. In spite of the inter-ministerial approach to support DSUs, there is no detailed individual or joint policy guideline from the ministries that defines the inclusion of persons with disability in community sport or allows the DSUs to implement pragmatic inclusive policies that include and complement key partners like DSAs/groups (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992). Having no such policy guideline may reinforce deeply rooted preferences and discretionary practices among DSUs, which may create an environment conducive to ableist tendencies and behaviours (Campbell, 2019). Additionally, the "degree of freedom in interpreting what constitutes inclusion…may have major implications for the experiences of [persons with disabilities]" and DSAs (Christiaens & Brittain, 2023, p. 1049). In the subsequent findings, we will elaborate on this further.

5.2. Composition and Membership of DSUs

In accordance with the Sports Act 934 of 2016, the composition of DSUs is fixed and legitimised. The composition of a DSU consists of a DSU leader nominated by the National Sport Authority through the regional director, two representatives from the sport and education regional offices, and four nominees by the district chief executive. According to the 15 DSU members that we interviewed, the membership as highlighted in the Sports Act does not reflect what happens on the ground. They reported that DSUs are very limited in terms of their actual composition and membership:

> The catchment area of some districts is huge with different sport associations. How can three or four people work well if they have more than 30,000 people to deal with? You cannot do this if you don't have the right expertise and human resources. Besides we are under-resourced. (northern DSU member)

To buttress this, one regional director mentioned:

> Although we involve [persons with disabilities] in many ways, I think we have not done enough to have them instituted as core members in both the regional sport offices (RSOs) and DSUs. At the RSOs we don't have special coaches to support the DSUs. (southern RSO director)

The lack of community coaches with special coaching competencies illustrates a kind of "full inclusion" where the DSUs are willing, but they lack the personnel and appropriate coaching skills (Christiaens & Brittain, 2023). Following our audit of the Sports Act of 934 2016 and discussions with DSU participants, we noticed that neither the DSWCD (which operates in all district assemblies) nor the DSAs were represented in the DSUs. The DSWCD was established by a government legal instrument in 1961 to mainstream persons with disabilities programmes and to assist district assemblies in formulating and implementing social protection and inclusion policies. The DSWCD also provides support services to DSAs. During our visit to DSWCD's headquarters, we noticed that nearly all of the DSAs are housed within their premises. With aims for fostering strategic partnerships and implementing inclusive sport policies (National Development Planning Commission, 2019), excluding DSAs or actors from DSU membership undermines community development and neglects their concerns.

5.3. Planning and Integration of Disability Programmes

Ideally, the planning, budgeting, and implementation of inclusive community sport programmes are done by the DSUs in consultation with the district assemblies and with support from the RSOs. Here we asked members of DSUs, DSAs, and also regional sport directors about inclusive planning of district sport programmes, particularly how they integrate disabled programmes into their implementation plan. The DSUs acknowledge the presence of the DSAs in various districts, but they cannot support them due to budgetary constraints and resource limitations. Instead, they prioritise other "abled" sport programmes—which they think are popular in the community—at the expense of the disabled sport programmes. One DSU member said:

> Let me confess, they come to us and we see them in the communities, but we deliberately ignore them from our programmes. Our hands are tied financially and so we have to prioritise. (southern DSU member)

A similar comment was made by another DSU member:

> There are not many [persons with disabilities] in the districts and so sometimes we forget about them. Also, it is difficult and demanding dealing with them. (northern DSU member)

In response to why it is difficult to deal with persons with disabilities, the DSU member explained that the needs of persons with disabilities are numerous, complex, and require special attention which they cannot give due to financial and human resource constraints. During one of the discussions, DSUs shared the view that DSAs are resilient and persistent in the face of challenges. In addition, interviewees stated that once a decision is made to include persons with disabilities, they begin to request more.

The DSA members interviewed mentioned that their exclusion from the DSU programmes and sport sector as a whole is not a surprise. They said that at the national level, although the government professes to be committed to their programmes, DSAs are constantly ignored when it comes to actual or real support. They provided their reasoning as to why inclusive disability programmes have not been considered by DSUs and the sport sector as a whole:

> We feel that they only involve us as a formality and for the books to fulfil their own goals. But when it comes to implementation at any level, we are completely neglected even though we are present everywhere. (DSA member)

Our analysis of the sport ministry's 2016–2021 Medium-Term Expenditure Framework showed a track record of how disabled sport programmes organised in the various local communities have been prominently featured and prioritised. Unfortunately, and as shown in the interviews, this is the opposite of what happens at the DSU level. Even though DSUs are somewhat responsible for not including DSAs in their programmes, district assembly directors are more culpable since they make final decisions regarding funding for DSUs. Essentially, the deliberate omission of programmes for persons with disabilities and DSAs from the planning process to give preference to "abled" sport programmes illustrates how "ableism privileges ability over disability" (Lyons, 2013, p. 240).

5.4. Distribution of Funds and Sharing of Resources

Here, we analysed DACF distributions and support from RSOs. In addition, we asked DSU participants how they use funds received from district assemblies to implement programmes for persons with disabilities and how they share resources through collaboration with other DSAs.

5.4.1. Distribution of Funds

Both funding and provision of disability-friendly sport facilities in districts and communities come from DACF distributions with support from the sport ministry through the National Sport Authority and RSOs. In Charway et al.'s (2022) analysis of the parliamentary annual authorised "formula for sharing the DACF" from 2016 to 2020, sport and disability are two of the five components under social services through which fund allocations are made that support persons with disabilities in the districts. It is important to note that all fund allocations except sport are mandatory. Also, while the sport allocations are meant for the DSUs, the disability component is used by the district assemblies to provide social welfare and protection services to persons with disabilities within the districts in general.

Against this backdrop, we asked DSU participants how often they receive funds or use funds received from district assemblies or RSOs to support and implement programmes for persons with disabilities in their communities. There was some dissatisfaction among DSU participants due to the limited or non-existent financial support for their programmes. They further claimed that even when they receive support from the DACF, it is woefully insufficient:

> We are involved in the budgeting for the sport programmes, but when it comes to distribution, we are mostly neglected until we insist. And then if we are lucky, we are given peanuts which we have to decide what to do with it. (mid-Ghana DSU member)

Regarding support from the RSOs, a member from another DSU mentioned:

> They support us with the regional sporting facilities, but in terms of funding, they don't give us anything. (southern DSU member)

5.4.2. Sharing of Resources

The DSAs lamented the lack of resource sharing. They mentioned that the RSOs provide them with sport facilities for their community programmes, but they do not receive any collaboration or support from the DSUs:

> We know the DSUs are there in the communities, but they don't support or collaborate with us. In fact, they don't complement our efforts in the communities. (DSA member)

In a nutshell, the absence of a government legal instrument requiring sport funds to be mandatory indicates institutional neglect (Campbell, 2019). Additionally, this undermines the government's Persons With Disabilities Act 715 of 2006 and other well-intended provisions in the Sports Act and the Local Governance Act. This also causes structural challenges that neglect persons with disabilities initiatives/programmes and

further discrimination against persons with disabilities groups (Beratan, 2006). For example, prioritising or using discretion to make decisions due to limited resources may result in what Chouinard and Grant (1995) noted as the "othering" of disabled people.

5.5. Conflicts

The members of the DSUs discussed two types of conflicts arising from the discretion exercised by the district assembly chief executives or authorities when it comes to organising sport programmes for persons with disabilities: conflicts of interest and conflicts with DSAs. They further mentioned that the latter is a consequence of the former.

5.5.1. Conflicts of Interest

According to DSU members, conflicts of interest occur due to the political interests of the district authorities in planning and organising sport programmes for persons with disabilities in the communities. DSU members commented that they are generally not involved in such sport programmes for persons with disabilities; sometimes they are not even aware of them until they are arranged and organised. While their non-involvement is not surprising to them, they cautiously stated the following:

> Sometimes we are handicapped due to politics, which affects our sport programmes and when you challenge the district authorities you can lose your job. (southern DSU member)

Another member made a similar comment:

> This [referring to politics] happens all the time, especially during election year. By the time we realise, the [district] assembly directors are organising, particularly, amputee football tournaments, or making donations to them. (mid-Ghana DSU member)

One DSU member noted that focusing on amputee football, for instance, would undermine the efforts of the DSAs in districts with a variety of disability sport disciplines. These groups include the Ghana Deaf and Dumb Federation and the Ghana Blind Sport Association. According to the DSU members, the political actions of the district assembly authorities make DSUs the target of misconceptions about their work and of conflicts with DSAs. When we asked how they intend to resolve or mitigate the conflict, the DSU participants spoke about the need for a collective and relentless effort by all DSU officials in Ghana to appeal to the sport ministry to provide them with local autonomy free of political interference.

5.5.2. Conflict With the Various DSAs

The DSA members lamented that the DSUs, like the sport ministry, tend to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting disability sport:

> I always feel that they see disability sport to be one sport. For example, when they support physically challenged sport then they will report that they supported all the disab[ility] sport. (DSA member)

Further, the DSAs remarked that there are several disability sport disciplines, including blind sport, physically challenged sport, deaf and dumb sport, para-cycling and para-lifting, among others. One DSA member remarked that collaboration is undermined due to the lack of engagement and consultation to understand their plight in the districts, "resulting in many persons with disabilities remaining idle." In such a policy network, "the absence of consensus and the presence of conflict" is inevitable (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992, p. 184). In light of the conflicts, the DSA participants, in general, were indignant at being neglected and marginalised. One member said, "Sometimes I feel they use us for their political gains and pretend they care." When asked about what steps can be taken to mitigate the neglect, they revealed that the leadership of the ASD has recently held a series of meetings with all the DSAs in Ghana and relevant stakeholders to approach the sport ministry. They intend to do so as a united front and well-composed group. According to them, such an approach will increase awareness of their community sport services and differentiate them from other organisations with a focus on national sport events, such as the National Paralympic Committee of Ghana.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The study aimed to analyse the extent to which DSAs are included in the implementation of inclusive sport policies at DSUs. Using the policy network analytical framework, we found that the policy implementation process presented challenges, despite the inclusion of provisions at the local level. Among the challenges are decision-making at district assemblies, conflicts among network actors, representation gaps, a lack of funding, a lack of partnership opportunities, and an absence of an integrated programme for DSAs. Generally, the findings show that persons with disabilities have been neglected, discriminated against, and left "behind" in DSU programmes. Furthermore, the findings indicate that a policy community exists, but one that excludes disability sport. The decision-making at the district level seems to exhibit many of the characteristics of Rhodes and Marsh's (1992) definition of the policy community, including "limited members with some groups consciously excluded" and "shar[ing] basic values and…continuity over time" (p. 187). In light of this, the discussion concentrates on the collaborative alliance, local autonomy for DSUs, and implications of ableism for policy networks. Lastly, we discuss the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

To address complex societal issues and achieve common objectives, collaborative alliances are formed among a variety of stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit organisations, community groups, and other relevant actors (Ansell & Gash, 2008). These alliances often transcend traditional bureaucratic boundaries and foster innovative solutions to complex policy implementation challenges by promoting information sharing, mutual learning, and collective problem-solving (Emerson et al., 2012). At the local level, DSUs occupy a strategic position to look beyond the bureaucracy (district assembly) and initiate an alliance process with members of the DSAs, the DSWCD, and RSOs. Regrettably, as indicated by the findings, the DSUs have remained inactive, attributing blame to the district assembly authorities, despite their potential to establish an alliance crucial for shaping policy outcomes and advancing social inclusion. Collaborative alliances are closely intertwined with the principles of inclusion, as they emphasise the active participation and representation of all relevant stakeholders, particularly marginalised or underrepresented groups, in decision-making processes (Hendriks, 2007). By fostering partnerships between DSAs, government agencies, and other stakeholders, policy networks can facilitate the exchange of knowledge and resources, build lasting social capital, and influence legislation governing sport funds distribution to DSUs (Peachey et al., 2018; Vail, 2007).

As the core of the policy network, DSUs must have autonomy to govern, implement, and ensure community participation. As the findings demonstrate, DSUs are largely controlled by the district assembly authorities and therefore lack autonomy. The lack thereof, as the findings showed, results in the neglect or underfunding of DSUs and non-prioritisation of sport inclusion policy implementation and DSAs. Although the establishment of the DSUs signifies the sport ministry's decentralised sport policy implementation at the local level, there are, as Olowu (2003, p. 41) states in his review of majority of African local institutions, "considerable institutional and political challenges involved in making it a reality." In addition, this illustrates the challenges associated with "implementation in dispersed governance" where policies do not necessarily align with local delivery (Hudson et al., 2019, p. 3). Furthermore, the lack of autonomy as well as detailed and defined policy guidelines for DSUs leaves the implementation of sport programmes for persons with disabilities in the hands of the bureaucracy (district assemblies). In light of this, the district assembly authorities exercise delegated discretionary authority to make decisions, ultimately resulting in bureaucratic politics (Smith, 2022). As shown in the findings and in accordance with Bach's (2022, p. 11) description of bureaucratic politics, district assembly authorities "pursue distinct or [their own] interests" by organising sport programmes for persons with disabilities without necessarily consulting the DSUs. The result is what Matland (1995) described as political implementation, where certain disabled sport disciplines under some DSAs are favoured over others. As can be seen in the findings, amputee football-related activities (under the Ghana Amputee Football Association) are often organised by the district assemblies at the expense of other disability sport disciplines (under several DSAs). Furthermore, this may lead to conflicts between district assemblies, DSUs, and DSAs that feel overlooked. As a preventative measure, it is essential to have a clearly defined disability sport policy where autonomy, distribution of funds, and actual implementation are backed by government legislation.

The implications of ableism for policy networks in this study are significant. In contexts where power dynamics are often influenced by politics and resource availability, ableism can exacerbate existing exclusion and further marginalise DSAs (Christiaens & Brittain, 2023). For instance, ableism influences policy implementation priorities and deepens exclusionary practices, reinforcing structural discrimination (Campbell, 2009). District assembly directors, as shown in the study findings, use their political position to influence disability sport priorities in ways that align with their interests. This reinforces discriminatory practices that limit opportunities for DSUs and disabled sport groups. This may lead to systemic discrimination against persons with disabilities and DSAs and their inclusion in policy making and implementation processes. As mentioned by the DSA participants, their non-integration and non-involvement leave them with a sense of being used or exploited (Wolbring, 2008), thus undermining the national development agenda for "no one will be left behind" in communities, which is core to achieving the United Nations SDGs. Overall, addressing ableism within policy networks is crucial for promoting inclusive policy communities characterised by shared values, equitable decision-making, and resource distribution. This requires challenging existing power dynamics, amplifying the voices of persons with disabilities, and ensuring that policies and practices are informed by principles of accessibility, equity, and social justice (Christiaens & Brittain, 2023).

Even though the policy network provided valuable theoretical insights into the challenges in the implementation process and the interdependencies among key stakeholders, it provided limited insights into how the challenges may prompt policy change (Sabatier, 1993). As Rhodes (2006) stated, "policy network analysis…does not, and cannot, explain change…[instead it] stresses how networks limit participation." In this

light, drawing on additional theories such as advocacy coalitions may offer a deeper understanding of how power or dominance (of district assembly authorities) and negotiations among and between DSUs and DSAs affect policy outcomes and thus lead to the maintenance of ableist policy and obstruct policy change. Furthermore, the focus on DSUs as the unit of analysis limits the emphasis placed on other relevant actors in the implementation of persons with disabilities sport policies at the community level. This may include the media, non-sport-based NGOs, as well as the private sector. In the policy network, these actors may not be core but are significant in ways that "define, shape, interpret and reinterpret policy outcomes" (Evans, 2001, p. 543).

Despite the limitations, the study provides a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by DSUs when implementing persons with disabilities sport policies in Ghana. Since there has been no empirical research on sport inclusion policies for persons with disabilities in Ghana, the design of this study could be pertinent for analysing the intersectional—structural and sociocultural—challenges persons with disabilities face when participating in community-based sport. Furthermore, this research underscores the significance of transparent and inclusive processes that prioritise the voices, lived experiences, and expertise of persons with disabilities and DSAs. By fostering such transparent and inclusive engagement, the research recommends policies that are not only responsive to the diverse needs of the disability community but also grounded in principles of equity, accountability, and sustainability. Finally, the research opens a window for agenda-setting and policy learning that considers the practical needs of persons with disabilities and DSAs in communities.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the sensitive nature of participant data, which could risk victimisation and job loss for state employees within the DSU, and to protect the identities of DSA participants, the data for this study are not publicly available.

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Factors Facilitating the Sustainable Implementation of Social Sports Programmes: A Multiple-Case Study

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Abstract

Participation in social sports programmes can benefit people in socially vulnerable positions. In this study, social sports programmes are defined as sports programmes which are designed with the specific aim to support these people. However, the continuity of social sports programmes appears problematic. This study aimed to identify factors that facilitate the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes in a local setting. For this purpose, an exploratory multiple-case study was conducted in six cities in the Netherlands. In each city, a programme called Life Goals was implemented, offering a range of sports activities for people in a socially vulnerable position. Twenty stakeholders, including programme coordinators, social sports coaches, policy officers of the municipality, social workers, and managers of social work organisations participated in an individual interview using a timelining method. The results of these interviews were subsequently explored during a focus group discussion with seven coordinators, four of whom had also participated in an interview. Five themes facilitating the sustainable implementation of local social sports programmes were identified: (a) employment of the coordinator; (b) funding of the social sports programme; (c) adopting an evidence-based method; (d) building and maintaining a partnership; and (e) sports-minded stakeholders. In addition, two overarching themes emerged as a common thread across the five themes: broad commitment and the role of the coordinator. Practical tips for the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes are given, which can be used by professionals and managers in the social work and sports fields.

Keywords

community sports programmes; local policy; sport as a means; vulnerable adults

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, around 10% of adults are in a socially vulnerable position (de Klerk et al., 2023). These adults face difficulties, such as low education, addiction, mental illness, and low income (Hede et al., 2019). The number of people in a socially vulnerable position is likely to increase due to various developments, such as the aftereffects of Covid-19 (de Klerk et al., 2023). To cope with everyday difficulties, people may rely on personal resources, such as self-esteem, resilience, and a social network (Super, 2017). Participation in sports can help adults to (further) develop these resources. Sports participation is, for example, positively related to good mental health (Friedrich & Mason, 2017; Marlier et al., 2015), increases in self-esteem (Friedrich & Mason, 2017), a broadened social network (Van der Veken et al., 2020b), and improved life skills (Hermens, Super, et al., 2017; ter Harmsel-Nieuwenhuis et al., 2022). However, people in socially vulnerable positions have fewer opportunities to participate in sports than their average peers, hence sports participation among this group is relatively low (Hoogendoorn & de Hollander, 2016; van Stam & van den Dool, 2021). For example, in the Netherlands, only 21% of people in a low socioeconomic position participate in sports weekly, compared to 74% of people in a high socioeconomic position (van Stam & van den Dool, 2021).

Social sports programmes have been developed to increase opportunities for sports participation among people in vulnerable positions. These programmes, also referred to as sport-for-development programmes, social sports practices, or community-based sports programmes, are sports programmes specifically developed for people in a socially vulnerable position in which the sports activity is used as a setting that facilitates positive personal experiences and development (Van der Veken et al., 2020a, 2020b). In contrast to regular sports clubs, these programmes take geographical, financial, and socio-cultural barriers into account, and hence are often organised locally, financially accessible, and not high-level or focused on competition (Van der Veken et al., 2020a, 2020b). Additionally, the sports coaches of social sports programmes are often trained to be sensitive to the challenges that the participants experience and to support participants as best as possible (Super et al., 2016). The programmes commonly involve collaboration between social work organisations and the sports sector (Hermens et al., 2019). The social work sector, including organisations for homeless people and mental health care organisations, plays an important role in the recruitment of programme participants since they are often in contact with the target group (Hermens, 2018). Involvement of the sports sector, on the other hand, is needed to organise and provide the sports activities. They usually bring in the sports facilities, equipment, and coaches.

Social sports programmes must remain sustainable over time (Skinner et al., 2008; Whitley et al., 2015). Sustainability refers to "what extent an evidence-based intervention can deliver its intended benefits over an extended period after external support from the donor agency is terminated" (Rabin et al., 2008, p. 118). These intended benefits may be associated with various sustainability outcomes, such as participants' benefits, continuing the programme activities, and maintaining partnerships and organisational policies (Scheirer & Dearing, 2011). However, the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes has proven difficult (Skinner et al., 2008; Whitley et al., 2015). A lack of long-term funding and challenges concerning the collaboration between a variety of partners appear to play an important role herein (Skinner et al., 2008; Whitley et al., 2015). Herbert-Maul et al. (2020) investigated the transfer and sustainability of a project promoting physical activity amongst socially disadvantaged women, the Bewegung als Investition in Gesundheit (BIG) project. The original BIG project was transferred to 16 other communities; however, 10 of these BIG projects were not sustainable over time and were discontinued (on average after 4.2 years). A few

projects ceased because of a lack of financial resources and funding; however, their discontinuation was primarily connected to the local project coordinator. For instance, due to an insufficient number of qualified and relevant stakeholders within their network, five coordinators were not able to build strong partnerships (Herbert-Maul et al., 2020).

1.1. Aim

The present study investigates the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes in the Netherlands. Given the unique organisational context (i.e., partnerships including social and sports sectors) and target group (i.e., adults in a socially vulnerable position) of social sports programmes, factors facilitating the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes may differ from more general physical activity programmes. Past research on the implementation of social sports programmes in the Netherlands has focused on the collaboration between sports and other sectors (Hermens et al., 2019; Leenaars et al., 2018). To our knowledge, research on the implementation process and sustainability of social sports programmes is scarce. Therefore, we aim to provide an in-depth picture of how social sports programmes are funded and how partnerships are established in local settings. By doing so, we aim to identify the facilitators for sustainable implementation. A broader and deeper understanding of facilitators that support the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes contributes to better implementation strategies that can be adopted by professionals and managers in the social work and sports fields who want to implement social sports programmes sustainably.

2. Methods

2.1. Context and Selection of Cases

This qualitative multiple-case study is part of a larger research project called Life Experience Through Sports (LETS), which aims to investigate and enhance the societal impact of sports programmes for adults in a socially vulnerable position. The cases involved six cities in the Netherlands that offered a social sports programme based on the Life Goals (LG) method, an evidence-based method (van der Kooi & de Jager, 2021) that at the time of the research was running at 30 locations in the Netherlands. These LG programmes involve collaboration between local sports and social work organisations. The sports activities are coordinated by a local LG coordinator who manages the local collaborations and the funding of the programme. These local coordinators do not provide the sports activities themselves but are responsible for deploying the social sports coaches who supervise the sports activities in the LG programmes. These social sports coaches are trained in dealing with the target group, directing personal development and offering sports activities. The six cities were selected to maximise variation in geographical location, sports programme activities, living environments, and local policies. The content of the social sports programme varies by city in terms of the type and number of activities offered each week. This variation was deliberately chosen to help us understand actions and strategies that support the implementation of social sports programmes in different contexts, providing practical recommendations that benefit the implementation of a diverse range of sports programmes. Table 1 presents an overview of the social sports programmes in the six selected cities (October 2022). This study focused primarily on activities provided by the local LG programme (one programme in each city). However, we acknowledge that other social

Table 1. Overview of types of sports activities and partners in the six cities.

City	Activities	Partners
City A	Bootcamp, soccer, kickboxing, walking football, cycling, mixed activities	A forensic social work organisation, two social work organisations, a sports club, and the municipality
City B	Badminton, basketball, beach volleyball, (kick)boxing, bootcamp, fitness, jeu de boules, paddle, fishing, soccer, walking/running, swimming, mixed activities	Three forensic social work organisations, four social work organisations, a local sports service organisation, and the municipality
City C	Soccer, bootcamp, fitness, mixed activities	Three social work organisations and the municipality
City D	Soccer, mixed activities	Two social work organisations, professional sports club, educational organisation, the local sports service organisation, and the municipality.
City E	Bootcamp, kickboxing, soccer, mixed activities	Three social work organisations, a local sports service organisation, two sports clubs, and the municipality.
City F	Zumba, soccer	The collaboration ended; the activities are now offered by single organisations (social work organisations)

programmes may also be available within the cities. In City F the LG programme ended, but two of the activities are still provided by two of the partners.

In all six cities, the activities were organised for a broad group of socially vulnerable people, including people with a substance use disorder, people with mental illness, ex-convicts, people with long-term unemployment, refugees or immigrants, and homeless people. Although some activities are more targeted to a specific group, most activities within a local social sports programme are open to a wide range of adults in socially vulnerable positions. In most of the cities involved, the social sports programmes were developed through partnerships, usually consisting of one or more social work organisations, a local sports service organisation (i.e., the executive sports organisation of the municipality), and/or the municipality (see Table 1).

2.2. Data Collection and Procedures

Interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted with multiple stakeholders. In doing so, both data and methodological triangulation were employed to increase the credibility and validity of the findings (Noble & Heale, 2019). The interviews were conducted with stakeholders actively involved in the implementation of the social sports programmes in the six cities. These stakeholders were acting on the provider (i.e., social sports coaches and social workers), organisational (i.e., coordinators and managers, social work organisation), or policy level (i.e., policy officers of the municipality). The stakeholders were selected through the snowballing method. First, the local coordinators of the six social sports programmes were informed about this research and asked to participate in an interview, to which they all agreed. In four of the six cities, two coordinators were employed. In two of these cities, we interviewed both coordinators. At the end of each interview, we asked the coordinators which other stakeholders (e.g., municipal policy officer, manager or professional within a social work organisation) played an important role in the implementation of the LG programme. These stakeholders were invited for an interview as well. All invited stakeholders accepted the invitation and, in total, 20 were

Table 2. Stakeholders interviewed in the six cities. Between brackets the researcher(s) who conducted the interview.

City	Stakeholders	#persons interviewed
City A	Coordinator LG programme (NH, DJ), municipal policy officer (sports domain; NH), social work organisation (NH)	3
City B	Coordinator LG programme (NH, LH), social sports coach (NH, LH), manager of social work organisation (NH), ex-manager of social work organisation (NH)	4
City C	Coordinators (two persons) LG programme (DJ, LH), manager at the social work organisation (DJ)	3
City D	Coordinator LG programme (LH, NH), municipal policy officer (sports domain; LH), social sports coach in the social work organisation (LH)	3
City E	Coordinators (two persons) LG programme (DJ, NH), municipal policy officer (sports domain; DJ), municipal policy officer (participation domain; DJ)	4
City F	Former coordinator in the LG programme (LH, NH), sports coach in the social work organisation (LH), social worker (LH)	3

interviewed, of which three were social sports coaches, two social workers, eight coordinators, three managers of a social work organisation, and four policy offers of the municipality (see Table 2). The interviews with the coordinators lasted between 69 and 87 minutes. The interviews with the other stakeholders were shorter, ranging from 29 to 57 minutes.

After the interviews, we organised a focus group discussion. Since the interviews revealed that coordinators had the best understanding of the complete implementation process—the other stakeholders were often only involved in part of the implementation—we decided to invite the coordinators of all 30 LG programmes running in the Netherlands. This included eight coordinators who had already been interviewed. Ultimately, seven coordinators participated in the focus group discussion. Four of the seven coordinators that participated in the focus group also participated in the interviews and three were from LG programmes in other cities and had not been interviewed before. The focus group discussion lasted 58 minutes.

Before the interviews and focus group discussion, the researcher(s) provided information about the research to the participants, informed them that the interview/focus group discussion would be audio-recorded, that the participant could stop the interview/focus group discussions at any moment, and that their data would be anonymised. Finally, they were asked for their informed consent.

The interviews with the coordinators were conducted by adopting a timelining method. The interview began with a request for the coordinators to describe the current state of the social sports programme concerning its sports activities, finances, partnerships, and policy. Then, a line was drawn on an A3-size paper and the interviewees were asked to mark the start of their social sports programme and to fill in the timeline by indicating key moments and events in the implementation of the social sports programme. After drawing the timeline, we asked additional questions to understand key events (e.g., Why was this an important event? What was the impact on the social sports programme? Which people were important? What was your role in that event?).

In the interviews with the other stakeholders (e.g., municipal policy officer, manager or professional within a social work organisation), the interviewees were asked to draw a timeline from the moment they became involved in the social sports programme until the moment of the interview. They were also asked to indicate key events on the timeline. During the interview, we discussed the similarities and differences between the interviewee's and the coordinator's timelines. Three researchers (LH, DJ, and NH) were responsible for conducting the interviews with the coordinators and other stakeholders. The interviews with the coordinators were carried out by two of the three researchers, and the interviews with the other stakeholders were carried out by one of the researchers (see Table 2). For continuity, a single researcher was involved in all interviews conducted at each location.

After analysing the interview data, we organised the focus group discussion. The focus group discussion aimed to review and enrich the data obtained during the interviews. The analysis of the interviews revealed seven themes (see Section 2.3), which were presented and discussed during the focus group discussion. The interactive presentation software Mentimeter (n.d.) was used to support the focus group and to obtain the coordinators' initial responses. The initial responses were used to ask additional questions to gather more detailed information. The focus group was led by NH, and supported by LH and DJ.

2.3. Data Analysis

All interviews, as well as the focus group discussion, were audio-recorded. The researcher who attended all of the interviews within a specific city was responsible for establishing a timeline and narrative of the respective city. The drawn timelines of the local coordinator and other stakeholders were combined into one timeline for each city. Based on the recordings and timelines, a narrative on how the social sports programme was implemented was written for each city. The narratives ranged from five to six pages.

Data were analysed using the six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These six steps included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three researchers (LH, DJ, and NH) familiarised themselves with the data by thoroughly reading the six narratives and timelines. The six narratives were independently analysed by the three researchers (LH, DJ, and NH) to identify overarching themes that are important in the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. Afterwards, they discussed the themes to find consensus. This process initially yielded seven themes.

After the first three steps of thematic analysis, the focus group took place. The focus group was organised to review the initial themes and consequently define the final themes and hence was an additional step within our data analysis. A five-page report was prepared summarising the focus group discussion. This report included the initial responses to the questions asked via Mentimeter, supplemented by the explanations given during the focus group discussion. The report was shared with the participants of the focus group discussion for review. No comments were received. First, the seven themes, distilled from the interview data, were enriched with the data obtained in the focus group discussion. Subsequently, the seven themes were subjected to a comprehensive review and underwent a process of re-definition and renaming. To complete this process, three researchers (LH, DJ, and NH) discussed the seven themes in detail. Ultimately, themes were combined and given more appropriate names that accurately reflect their content. Finally, five themes were exposed, which will be presented in the results section. After writing the results section, the three researchers (LH, DJ, and NH)

discussed their findings. In discussing the results, they identified two overarching themes that are discussed in more detail in the discussion section.

3. Results

The six timelines of each city are summarised in Table 3, showing the key events that led to (a more) sustainable implementation of the social sports programmes. The data revealed five themes that were experienced as important in the sustainable implementation of a social sports programme: (a) employment of the coordinator; (b) funding of the social sports programme; (c) adopting an evidence-based method; (d) building and maintaining partnerships; and (e) sports-minded stakeholders.

3.1. Employment of the Coordinator

The coordinators in the six cities had different employers (i.e., a self-established foundation, a local sport service organisation, the municipality, and/or social work organisations; see Table 4), which, according to the coordinators, had their advantages and disadvantages. The coordinators who worked for a self-established foundation were quite autonomous, for example, in making their choices and writing their funding applications. The downside, according to these coordinators, was that it took a lot of time and effort to start the self-established foundation. Coordinators working for the municipality faced challenges in gaining full autonomy over their plans but appreciated being reimbursed for their working hours. One of the coordinators said:

> Within the municipality, it is easier to claim hours for coordination….In a foundation, everything had to be covered. Within the municipality, they can declare the hours within regular budgets. (City C)

In the focus group discussion, it was mentioned that coordinators employed at a local sport service organisation or a social work organisation have easier access to the target group and to sports organisations where the activities can take place than coordinators that are employed at a self-established foundation or in a municipality. On the other hand, coordinators employed at a local sport service or social work organisation faced challenges in getting enough time for the project compared to other work-related activities. The participants of the focus group discussion (FG) concluded that, for the implementation of the programmes, there is no ideal way to shape the coordinator's employment, because it depends on the local situation (e.g., the presence of a local sports service or local policy):

> A local sports service is not always available, nor is some other form of service in some cases. So, it might have to be from the municipality. (FG)

Interviewees indicated that coordinators often had a broad range of tasks requiring different competencies. These tasks were carried out on two levels: an executed level and a policy level. In some cities, therefore, the coordinators' position was split between a policy coordinator and an executive coordinator. The coordinator of City C explained:

> The coordinator role is divided, and we both do what we are good at….They require different skills. If you can do one, you often can't do another task as well. You are excellent at networking with the municipality or working with participants. (City C)

Table 3. Timelines of the six cities.

	<2017	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
City A	Occasional sports activities for socially vulnerable adults. Participation in Dutch Street League Cup.	Cooperation with LGF. Appointment of local coordinator. Building a coalition.	Establishment of local LGF. Signing of letter of intent by all the coalition partners. Training social sports coaches. Kick-off event. Allocation of Oranje Fonds grant and a local (pilot) fund.	City Cup (local event). First allocation of local grant—social domain (from then on, requested annually). Allocation of grant Sportimpuls.	Allocation of local grant for undocumented people.	Deployment of two coordinators (i.e., executive and policy).	Expansion to national projects (LG youth).
City B	Start pilot project for socially vulnerable youth (funded by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport; 2000). End of pilot, municipality continues the pilot for 3 years (2003). Building a coalition (2003). End of funding by the municipality (2006). Start Homeless Cup (2007). Salvation Army received a grant from the municipality for offering sports activities (2007). Participants were trained to become social sports coach (2007). Establishment of local sports organisation (2012).	—	Cooperation with LGF. Collaboration between Salvation Army and social care organisation. Allocation of grant to form a sports coalition.	—	Deployment of two coordinators.	Formalising coalition. Start coalition. Kick-off event.	—

Table 3. (Cont.) Timelines of the six cities.

	<2017	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
City C	Grant application Sportimpuls rejected (2014). Pioneering opportunities for collaboration with (social work) partners.	Cooperation with LGF.	Start LG-programme. External foundation continues LG programme.	Municipality continues LG programme. New sport policy. More activities with different social care organisations. Kick-off event.	—	Expansion to national projects (LG youth).	Deployment of two coordinators (i.e., executive and policy).
City D	Local Salvation Army participates in the Dutch Street Cup (2013/2014). Cooperation with LGF (license fee paid by local Salvation Army; 2015/2016).	Establishment of local sport service organisation. License fee of LG paid by local sport service organisation and Salvation Army.	International tournament.	Two LG events.	Local sports service organisation is asked to continue the LG programmes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Local sports service organisation employer of social sports coaches.	Municipality extends partnership with LGF for 3 years. Expansion to national projects (LG youth).	New local sports policy, with defined mission, including continuation of local LG programme.

Table 3. (Cont.) Timelines of the six cities.

	<2017	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
City E	—	Current coordinator assigned to coordinator of inclusive sports. Building and formalising coalition. Cooperation with LGF.	Kick-off LG programme. Allocation of the grant Oranje Fonds.	Expansion to national projects. Involvement in other domains within the municipality.	Deployment of two coordinators (i.e., executive and policy).	New policy officer of sports within municipality.	—
City F	Investigation of the current sports activities in the community. Result: lack of activities for socially vulnerable groups (2012). Building a coalition (2014). Allocation of Sportimpuls—GALM-project grant (2015).	Start social sports programme.	Allocation of Sportimpuls grant. Cooperation with LGF. More activities for socially vulnerable adults.	—	End of cooperation with LGF. Continuing with one activity by the Salvation Army and one activity by a social work organisation.	—	—

Note: LGF = Life Goals Foundation.

3.2. Funding of the Social Sports Programme

The funding of the social sports programme was a central theme in all six cities. Table 4 shows an overview of how the six social sports programmes were funded. Our data revealed that the social sports programmes were financed in four ways. The programmes were (partly) funded by national grants, municipality budgets, social work budgets, or by the participants themselves (see Table 4). According to the coordinators, combining these funding methods is the most ideal approach for sustainable implementation.

Table 4. Employment of the local coordinator and funding of the social sports programmes at the time of the interview.

City	Funding				Employment of the local coordinator
	Municipality	Social work	National grants	Participants	
City A	Local grant—social domain Local grant for undocumented people	In-kind hours of social work organisations	Set Your LG grant Welcome to the Sport grant	—	One coordinator Self-established foundation
City B	Local grant—social domain BRC funding	In-kind hours of social work organisations	LG Event grant	—	Two coordinators Social work organisation Social work organisation
City C	Fund—sports domain Small funds—several domains (e.g., mental health, neighbourhoods) BRC funding	In-kind hours of social work organisations	Grant from the Ministry of Justice and Security	—	Two coordinators Municipality Social work organisation
City D	Fund—sports domain BRC funding	In-kind hours of social work organisations Financing sports activities	Set Your LG grant Youth LG grant	Participant's fee	Two coordinators Local sport service organisation Social work organisation
City E	Fund—sports domain BRC funding	—	Set Your LG grant Youth LG grant	—	Two coordinators Local sport service organisation Local sport service organisation
City F	BRC funding (when the programme was still running)	In-kind hours of social work organisations	—	Participant's fee Personal care budget clients	One (former) coordinator Local sport service organisation

Note: BRC stands for Brede Regeling Combinatiefuncties fund.

3.2.1. National Grants

According to the coordinators, national grants (i.e., grants provided by the national government or national organisations, but which can be used in local settings) are essential for the implementation of social sports programmes. In most cities, a national grant was used as a start-up for a new social sports programme, and eventually for creating a consortium to implement the social sports programme for a longer period. The grant ensured the time (i.e., hours for the coordinator) and resources that were needed for building a partnership and setting up the (pilot) project quickly. The interviewees realised that if the (pilot) project was running, coordinators would be able to show and tell stakeholders about the positive impact of the (pilot) project and start conversations with stakeholders about future funding and embedding. At the time of the interviews, national grants were still used to partly fund the social sports programmes in five of the six cities. One of the participants in the focus group discussion explained:

> We used it [i.e., the pilot] as a kind of travelling circus, to show that it helped….We invited them [i.e., stakeholders] to participate in Life Goals activities, and that made them think more quickly, "This is something for our target group, who have multiple problems." And we couldn't do it otherwise [i.e., without a pilot project]. (FG)

3.2.2. Municipal Funding

In multiple cities, the social sports programme was funded by the municipality (e.g., sports or social domain). Inclusive sports were an important theme in the local sports policies of three cities. To give substance to this policy, funds had been made available for the implementation of social sports programmes. In City D, the social sports programme was even mentioned by name in the local municipal sports policy document. Additionally, all municipalities in the Netherlands can apply for the Brede Regeling Combinatiefuncties fund to receive co-financing from the state for deploying community sports coaches (*buurtsportcoaches*). Coordinators and/or social sports coaches were paid from this subsidy in five of the cities. Finally, in two cities, they used local grants provided by the municipality. According to the interviewees, the downside to these local grants is the short-term character and (bi)annual application of the funds that took a lot of time and effort.

3.2.3. Social Work Funding

In most cities, social work organisations provided some of the funding by embedding the social sports programme in the daily work and policy of the social work organisation(s). Under this funding model, the coordinators made agreements with social work organisations concerning the hours that social work professionals contribute to the social sports programmes (in-kind investments). In all cities, for example, social work professionals are trained and employed as social sports coaches:

> The agreement at the beginning was that social work organisations would take care of the counselling of their clients, at their own expense, and that the sports activities would be provided by the sports organisation. (City C)

In one city, the social work organisation even financed part of the project by paying for the sports activities.

3.2.4. Participant Funding

Finally, in two cities, participants paid a small fee to participate in some of the activities in the programme. This fee was used to fund the local activities. For one of the activities, participants decided for themselves how much they wanted to contribute based on their financial situation. For another activity, the clients' personal care budgets were used to finance the activity. A personal care budget is a subsidy from the government that allows people to purchase the care they need, like day-care activities, for example. In one of the cities, the LG activity was integrated into a day-care activity, in which participants in socially vulnerable positions engage in voluntary work at the sports club.

In addition, some of the programme participants were encouraged by their coach to assume the role of social sports coaches themselves. Social sports coaches demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of their programme participants, enabling them to discern which programme participants are suited and receptive to the role of social sports coach. In almost all of the cities, several programme participants were trained and subsequently deployed as social sports coaches. Interviewees felt that this reduced the reliance on professionals, so training programme participants as sports coaches seemed to be a useful strategy for the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. The coordinator of City A explained:

> This [training participants in becoming coaches] ensures that the social sports programme is less dependent on the social work and sports professionals and that there is enough capacity to scale up, but also to ensure that activities continue if the coach is indisposed. (City A)

3.3. An Evidence-Based Method

Some coordinators and other stakeholders mentioned that being part of a nationally recognised evidence-based programme (i.e., LG) and network helped them gain support and financial resources for implementing the social sports programme in their city:

> Life Goals methodology is important because it is an intervention that you stand behind and is proven. You then start linking things to it rather than figuring it out yourself and setting up new projects. (City C)

The added value of an evidence-based method was discussed in more detail during the focus group discussion. The coordinators who participated in the focus group discussion mentioned that using an evidence-based method with a well-known name strengthened the content of the "story" they could tell stakeholders, making it easier to engage them in the project. Besides that, the coordinators mentioned that LG had a back-office and a large network of partners working on sports programmes for vulnerable people, which made it possible for the coordinators to share knowledge and experiences.

3.4. Building a Partnership

The coordinators from all six cities mentioned that building a strong partnership was essential to implementing the social sports programme. The interviewees viewed central coordinators as an important condition to build and maintain such a partnership. One of the stakeholders said:

> You need a leader who will continue to put it on the agenda, maintain the collaboration, and look for new sports activities. (City B)

The coordinators explored opportunities to implement the social sports programme, constantly looked for relevant partners, and had (exploratory) talks with them. During the interviews, the coordinators often called this "pioneering" and mentioned that it requires structural attention and a personalised approach:

> These were mostly open conversations where everyone could say what they had to say. Especially about the dream we are pursuing. What and who are needed and who pays for what? (City D)

According to all coordinators, it was important to make agreements within the partnership. They all mentioned that it helped when they took the lead in making agreements on responsibilities, finances, and in-kind investments (i.e., the contribution of professionals). In City C, for example, they agreed that social work organisations arrange the supervision of the participants (i.e., their clients) and sports organisations provide the sports activities. Besides agreements, the coordinator of City A believed it was important that all partners felt responsible for the social sports programme. In City A they assumed equal cooperation and all partners organised activities. In this way, they were all involved and felt responsible for the weekly schedule of the social sports programme.

Based on their own experiences, coordinators mentioned that in this phase of "pioneering" and making agreements, it was important to gain support from the various layers within an organisation, from the execution level (recruiting enthusiastic professionals) to the management level (making agreements on finances), to achieve broad support for the project. Furthermore, some of the coordinators recommended a single contact person at the social work organisations. However, finding and maintaining this contact person was difficult due to the workload of social work professionals.

3.4.1. Formalising the Partnership

In multiple cities, the agreements on responsibilities, finances, and in-kind investments were presented in a covenant or a letter of commitment. In City A, the covenant was also used to show that the partnership and the social sports programme itself are supported by multiple stakeholders, which helped the coordinator in gaining new grants. In City B, all social work organisations signed the official covenant. This covenant includes clear agreements on roles and tasks, which facilitated the funding from the municipality (i.e., one grant instead of separate grants). However, not all managers/directors signed the covenant initially, some fearing the loss of autonomy over their "own" sports activities, additional costs, and that it would take a lot of their staff's time. Therefore, the coordinators in City B decided to start with a small number of organisations. By the time of the interview, all the social work organisations had signed the covenant.

3.4.2. Maintaining the Partnership

According to the coordinators, it is important to structurally invest in the partnership. To be successful and keep the partnership together, the coordinators invited all partners to evaluation meetings. During these meetings, the relationship between the partners and their input was discussed. The extent and structure of these meetings varied from city to city. In some cities, the meetings were structured and planned, and took place from every four weeks to annually. In other cities, the meetings took place organically. For example,

City B created a formal partnership and had an online gathering every four weeks. In this meeting, they discussed the sports activities held by every organisation and the roles they all played within the partnership. In City C, the coordinator evaluated the progress of the social sports program and the collaboration between the partners once or twice a year with all the partners. He wished to structure these meetings and have them more often so that the collaboration would run more smoothly.

3.5. "Sports-Minded" Stakeholders

The interviewees mentioned that stakeholders who can influence or determine the content of the local policy (e.g., policy officers and aldermen [the aldermen, together with the mayor, bear responsibility for the day-to-day management of municipalities]) or the policy of the social work organisation (e.g., social work managers and professionals) are crucial for the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. To gain support for these initiatives, coordinators explained that it is important for these stakeholders to be sports-minded and to recognise the added value of sports for adults in a socially vulnerable position. As a result, they are more likely to participate in the social sports programme and to provide financial resources or in-kind contributions. Moreover, some coordinators indicated that aldermen may have influenced stakeholders (e.g., social work managers and professionals) or their own policy officers due to their public function (e.g., opening an event, newspaper article). So, their support for the social sports programme may be extra valuable. The coordinator of City A explained:

> It's easier to talk to policy officers if the alderman is involved, is in the picture and says, "This is important." Then policy officers will come to you, too. (City A)

3.5.1. Influencing "Sports-Minded" Stakeholders

The interviews revealed that stakeholders can be influenced to be more "sports-minded" by creating visibility of the social sports programme (activities) and showing them the added value of the social sports programmes (i.e., the impact). According to the participants of the focus group discussion, coordinators focused on this at certain key moments, such as the end of a grant, a new alderman or a new policy, or during special weeks (e.g., national sports week).

To increase the visibility of the sports programme, coordinators invited stakeholders to sports activities or events to inspire them. Events, such as a kick-off or tournament, were held in all six cities, and coordinators explained that by inviting external stakeholders and media, the visibility of the social sports programme increased:

> This created an image and something tangible. Two hundred participants were standing in the sports hall, and this created the image that "In [name of city] we are organising something magnificent for adults in a socially vulnerable position," both in stakeholders and media as well as internally [i.e., local sport service organisation]. (City D)

Some coordinators indicated that showing the impact of the social sports programme was important to influence stakeholders. Results of the LG monitor, an online tool which monitors the personal development of the participants, helped coordinators substantiate their story in conversations with stakeholders:

> The conversations with other domains [i.e., domains within the municipality] are mainly about the impact and what to achieve, which indicates the importance of filling in the monitor. (City C)

Finally, the coordinator could indirectly influence the stakeholders through the social sports coaches. Interviewees mentioned that social sports coaches were important. They were the key to a successful and sustainable social sports programme. This is reflected, for example, in the satisfaction and enthusiasm of participants, which were noticed by stakeholders, who, in turn, recognised the added value of social sports programmes. Coordinators could partly influence this by hiring appropriate social sports coaches and managing them in a way that positively influences the quality of the programmes, as explained by one of the coordinators:

> You also depend on your coaches. You must find suitable people for the social sports programmes….In this, we have taken a step forward. That we have suitable people in the right places. (City C)

4. Discussion

4.1. Main Findings

The aim of this study was to gain insights into how the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes for socially vulnerable adults evolves in local settings and to identify factors facilitating a sustainable implementation. We identified five themes related to the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes in a local setting: (a) employment of the coordinator; (b) funding of the social sports programme; (c) adopting an evidence-based method; (d) building and maintaining a partnership; and (e) sports-minded stakeholders. A deeper analysis of the five themes that play a role in the local implementation of social sports programmes reveals two overarching themes: broad commitment towards the social sports programme and the complex role of the coordinator.

4.1.1. Broad Commitment

Our study shows that (a) financial resources from multiple sources, (b) formalised partnerships, and (c) sports-minded stakeholders, are crucial for the sustainable implementation of local social sports programmes. Our interpretation is that these three aspects are all linked to the concept of commitment, which can be defined as the willingness to exert efforts on behalf of the relationship (Lucidarme et al., 2014, p. 57). This confirms findings from previous studies that broad commitment is needed for the implementation of these social sports programmes (Gipson et al., 2018; Hermens et al., 2019). Our findings indicate that commitment may be affected by the personal attitudes (e.g., personal interests, priorities) of stakeholders towards the social sports programme. This is in line with a previous study, which revealed that the success of intersectoral action (i.e., youth-care and sports sector) was influenced by personal elements, including the attitude, beliefs, knowledge, and skills of the stakeholders, type of relationships between the stakeholders, and the extent to which the stakeholders believe they can effect change in the intersectoral action (Hermens, de Langen, et al., 2017).

Moreover, our study revealed that in order to acquire commitment, coordinators aspire to influence the stakeholders' attitudes towards social sports programmes by adopting a personalised approach (e.g.,

one-to-one conversations in which shared objectives were discussed) towards stakeholders and making them more sports-minded by creating visibility of the activities and their impact. This finding concurs with Koelen et al. (2008), who explained that for intersectoral action in health, creating visibility may help garner political and financial support and may stimulate stakeholders to continue their work in a partnership. Furthermore, it is conceivable that sports-minded stakeholders within the social sector may be of particular significance in the implementation of social sports programmes. Socially vulnerable people experience more barriers to sports participation (e.g., financial restrictions, low motivation, and anxiety) than the general population (Brooke et al., 2020; Pedersen et al., 2021). As social workers are familiar with the target group and aware of their needs, they may be important intermediaries in recruiting participants and reducing the barriers to participation (Hermens, 2018; Smith & Wightman, 2019). However, more research is needed to better understand the role that social professionals can play in overcoming the barriers to sports participation together with the target group.

4.1.2. Role of the Coordinator

The second overarching theme is the role of the coordinator, who appeared crucial in the sustainable implementation of the local social sports programme. Our study revealed that coordinators operate at a dual level (i.e., policy and executive level) and carry out a variety of tasks. This requires them to have a broad set of skills and competencies. This is in line with the findings of Hermens (2018), who concluded that to embed a youth sports programme in local social policy, the coordinator needs to act at two levels: managing the collaboration between youth care and sports professionals at the operational level and building connections at the political, policy, and managerial levels.

We found that, on the executive level, the coordinator should possess very practical competencies, such as hiring and managing social sports coaches, optimising cooperation with social work professionals, organising local events, monitoring the results of the programme, and making the programme visible through public relations and communication. In addition to these competencies, we found that on the policy level, the coordinator should be able to pioneer, build, formalise, and maintain a partnership to find and apply for funding and to put the social sports programme on the agenda with the municipality. The role of the coordinators on the policy level corresponds to that of so-called boundary spanners. Boundary spanners act as a bridge between organisations representing different sectors (e.g., sport, social work) in a partnership (Williams, 2013) and "have a particular set of partnership skills that enable partnerships to function more effectively" (Jones & Barry, 2011, p. 410), such as good interpersonal, entrepreneurial, communication, and coordination skills (Williams, 2013).

4.2. Practical Implications

In order to facilitate the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes, some practical recommendations can be derived from the findings of our study. First, coordinators and social sports coaches are of critical importance in the implementation process of social sports programmes. Therefore, concerning the employment of coordinators and social sports coaches, it is recommended to (a) appoint coordinators who can fulfil the role of a boundary spanner; (b) give coordinators a permanent position and sufficient time to carry out their extensive range of tasks; (c) consider splitting the position of coordinator—one coordinator acting on the policy level and one coordinator acting on the executive level; (d) provide

coordinators with the time and resources needed to develop their skills and competencies through education; and (e) deploy coaches who are suitable to fulfil the role of social sports coach. As posited by Alarslan et al. (2024), social sports coaches should listen to their participants, be engaged, set clear rules, and provide activities with appropriate intensity. In addition, social sports coaches should strive to achieve a balance between setting clear boundaries and discipline and allow participants the freedom and autonomy to make their own decisions.

Secondly, to ensure the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes, it is advised that a considerable investment be made in creating a broad commitment amongst stakeholders. A broad commitment can be fostered by increasing visibility and providing support for social sports programmes. Coordinators can accomplish this by (a) using a national grant to start a pilot; (b) inviting (potential) stakeholders for a kick-off event or other programme activities (visibility of activities); (c) monitoring the social sports programme and demonstrating its impact to stakeholders (visibility of impact); (d) investing time to build and maintain relationships through a personalised approach; and (e) formalising the partnerships in a covenant.

4.3. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is not without limitations. First, considering the context of this study, it is uncertain whether the findings are generalisable to social sports programmes in other countries. This study was conducted in six Dutch cities offering social sports programmes based on the LG method, which contains specific elements, such as trained social sports coaches, trained LG coordinators, and an online monitoring tool. In addition, the Dutch sports sector is organised in a specific way: Approximately 22,000 sports clubs offer the majority of the sports activities in the Netherlands (NOC*NSF, 2022; van der Roest, 2015; Waardenburg & van Bottenburg, 2013). Whereas in many Western European and Scandinavian countries, and in Australia, sports clubs are also the primary provider of sports (Ooms et al., 2015; van der Roest, 2015), this is not common in other countries such as the United States (van Bottenburg, 2011). Hence, our practical implications may be relevant for social sport programmes in countries with a similar sports landscape to the Netherlands, but it is debatable as to whether these are useful for social sports programmes in countries where the sport sector is organised differently.

Secondly, several models and frameworks can be used to investigate the (sustainable) implementation of (sports) programmes, such as the framework of Public Health Programme Capacity for Sustainability of Schell et al. (2013), the normalisation process theory (May & Finch, 2009), the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (Damschroder et al., 2009), and RE-AIM (Glasgow et al., 1999). As the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes is still an unexplored area, we decided to conduct an exploratory multiple-case study and not to be directed by a theoretical model or framework. By doing so, it was more challenging to compare our results with earlier research investigating the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes and to examine whether it differs from that of other (sports) programmes. Therefore, for follow-up research, it is recommended to use a commonly used theory or model explaining the sustainable implementation of (social sports) programmes. For example, Helsper et al. (2023) adjusted the well-recognised conceptual framework of Schell et al. (2013), which describes core domains affecting a programme's capacity for sustainability. An alternative is to use the normalisation process theory in future research, as this study revealed that sports-minded stakeholders are important for the sustainable

implementation of social sports programmes. The normalisation process theory is a social process theory which can support future research to understand how and why the cognitive and social processes of individuals within their system are essential for the implementation of social sports programmes (Schroeder et al., 2022).

This study aimed to identify factors facilitating the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. An important factor is the funding of the social sports programme. Our data revealed different forms of funding. However, the retrieved data did not allow for a more in-depth analysis of sustainable funding. The remaining questions include: What steps are involved in the transition from a national start-up subsidy to other (local) forms of funding? And how long does it take for a social sports programme to become self-sustaining? It is, therefore, recommended that future research should aim to gain a deeper insight into the question of sustainable funding.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a deeper understanding of the factors that facilitate the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. Five themes which facilitated the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes in a local setting are evident from the data: the employment of the coordinator, the funding method, adopting an evidence-based method, the process of building and maintaining a partnership, and sports-minded stakeholders seemingly influencing the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. Additionally, a broad commitment to social sports programmes, integrated across various themes, is essential for building and maintaining partnerships and securing funding. Further, within all five themes, the coordinator plays an important role and is a key person in the implementation process. The results of this study can be used by professionals and managers in the social work and sports fields who want to implement social sports programmes sustainably. For instance, to gain broad commitment to the social sports programme, coordinators are encouraged to increase visibility by showing the programme's impact and making the activities more visible (e.g., inviting stakeholders to activities). Future research is recommended to further explore whether the revealed factors are also applicable to social sports programmes in other countries and to gain a deeper understanding of sustainable funding. In addition, for future research, it is advised to use a theoretical model or framework such as the normalisation process theory (Schroeder et al., 2022).

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Conflict of Interests

One of the researchers was an embedded scientist, in the sense that he was employed as a researcher by Wageningen University, but was also working within the foundation offering the sports programmes, namely the Life Goals Foundation. At all times during the research, the researchers adhered to the Dutch Code of

Conduct for Research Integrity to avoid potential conflicts of interest. In our opinion, the use of the embedded scientist had a negligible impact on the results.

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Social-Sportive Work and Local Policy: Reflections From the Flemish Case

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Abstract

Social-sportive work (SSW) in Flanders operates at the intersection of sport, welfare, and youth work, aiming to enhance accessibility and social inclusion through alternative sporting initiatives. Despite its growing prominence, SSW faces challenges in gaining recognition within local policy structures, which often remain rigid and compartmentalised. This study explores the perspectives of local government officials on the relationship between SSW and local policy. Drawing on a qualitative case study approach, the research was conducted across two Flemish cities between November 2021 and April 2022. The findings support previous research on the tension between the hybrid nature of SSW and the rigid nature of policy structures. Furthermore, the study sheds light on the role of personal affinities, professional backgrounds, and political mandates of local government officials in determining the extent of support for SSW as well as the need for a broader discussion on creating transversal local policy cultures, next to local policy structures.

Keywords

Flanders; local policy; qualitative research; social-sportive work; sport-for-all

1. From Sport-for-All Policy in Europe to Social-Sportive Work in Flanders

1.1. Sport-for-All Policy in Europe

Sport-for-all has a long-standing history in European policy. Between 1963 and 1969, the first lobbying efforts were undertaken on a European scale to promote a sport-for-all policy. Under the leadership of Armand Lams (Director-General of the Flemish Administration of Physical Education, Sport, and Outdoor Recreation [BLOSO]), the first seeds were planted. This materialised in a planning bureau that would outline

the key principles of the sport-for-all policy in Europe (Delheye, 2004). As a result of the efforts of the planning bureau and the establishment of structures for information sharing and research, the European Charter for sport-for-all was signed in Brussels on 20 March 1975 (Delheye, 2004).

The charter marked a shift from focusing on sports performance to encouraging participation among all citizens, particularly those who are "disadvantaged or disabled" (Theeboom et al., 2010, p. 1392). Additionally, it aimed to include individuals who are often excluded from mainstream facilities, such as traditional sports clubs. Such groups are commonly referred to as "socially vulnerable" (Crabbe, 2007). The charter also played a key role in recognising sport as an autonomous domain by establishing the European Committee for the Development of Sport. Furthermore, it facilitated the redistribution of financial resources from elite sports to initiatives that promote the democratisation of sports (Delheye, 2004).

This movement for the democratisation of sport received favourable attention and was further implemented outside the EU by international agencies such as UNESCO and UNICEF. Striking examples of this widespread implementation of the sport-for-all philosophy can be found in the 1978 International Charter of Physical Education and Sport, the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon. This evolution (further) stimulated the efforts on European and national levels to promote widespread physical activity and participation in sports.

1.2. Flanders: A Pioneer in European Sport-for-All Policy

Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) can be regarded as one of the pioneers (Theeboom et al., 2010) in implementing the European sport-for-all policy. This assertion is supported, firstly, by the fact that BLOSO played a leading role in shaping the core principles of the European sport-for-all policy (Delheye, 2004). Secondly, Flanders has a long-established tradition of promoting this policy, with initiatives dating back to the first promotional campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s (Theeboom et al., 2010, 2015).

1.2.1. From Street Football to Community Sport

In the 1980s and 90s, sport-for-all initiatives in Flanders were employed for a plethora of objectives, ranging from the socio-cultural integration of young people with migrant backgrounds (f.e., children of unemployed miners in the post-war period; see Haudenhuyse et al., 2018; Theeboom et al., 2015) to providing accessible sport for women, elderly people, and people with disabilities (Theeboom et al., 2010). Initiatives such as *straatvoetbal* (street football [1989]), *buurtvoetbal* (neighbourhood football [1992]), and *buurtbal* (neighbourhood ball [1994]; see De Knop et al., 1999; Theeboom et al., 2015) were established.

In 2000, the Youth and Sport Division of the Ministry of the Flemish community took over the funding of the *buurtbal* campaign and launched the term *buurtsport* (community sport). Community sport in Flanders is defined as:

> A method of neighbourhood oriented initiatives departing from a broad understanding of sport, which can be given form through sport and exercise activities or guiding people to sport and support initiatives. Community sport is characterised by the terms unconditionality, low threshold, mildly organised and outreaching. (Van Poppel, as cited and translated in Sabbe, 2019, p. 42)

Community sport initiatives became especially focused on making sports more accessible for unprivileged youth between the ages of 6 and 16 (Theeboom et al., 2010, 2015). The urgency to increase access to sport for disadvantaged youth originated from the broader observation in Western society that groups with lower socio-economic status (such as vulnerable young people) are underrepresented in traditional sports clubs, and that white, highly educated, heterosexual, male groups are overrepresented in traditional sports clubs (Crabbe, 2007; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Hylton & Totten, 2008). Community sport aimed to provide a countermovement to the exclusionary nature of traditional sports clubs (Hylton & Totten, 2008).

Community sport is far from homogeneous; instead, it varies in terms of organisational identity and structure, networks of partners, target groups, and facilities (Theeboom & De Maesschalck, 2006). Consequently, it has been described as a patchwork of practices (Theeboom et al., 2015).

In Flanders, alternatively organised sports (such as community sports) were mainly given form by non-traditional sport providers such as "the youth sector, education, integration, social affairs, prevention" (Theeboom et al., 2010, p. 1396). In fact, scholars have argued that the traditional sport sector in Flanders has historically played a limited role in providing sport opportunities for vulnerable groups, including underprivileged youth (Theeboom et al., 2010). Additionally, there is scepticism regarding whether traditional sports clubs are genuinely capable of adapting to societal challenges and transitions (Scheerder et al., 2013; Theeboom & Haudenhuyse, 2014). This has led to an ongoing call for the de-traditionalisation of sport in Flanders (Theeboom et al., 2010).

1.2.2. The Emergence of a New Lexicon: Social-Sportive Work

In recent years, the range of sport-for-all initiatives has grown more diverse. These initiatives are increasingly innovative and experimental, combining both sporting and social elements (Smets, 2019).

Examples from the Flemish context include initiatives that integrate language learning opportunities into sport for non-native newcomers, dance setups in public spaces to highlight the positive effects of physical movement for citizens, and projects that strengthen young people's identity through the "skateboarding lifestyle." Other initiatives include a basketball club that provides safe spaces for girls and allows them to take on a high level of engagement within the organisation, sports in detention contexts fostering connections to the outside world, low-threshold movement initiatives organised by associations where individuals experiencing poverty have a voice, and employment-focused initiatives leveraging sport as a pathway to labour market integration. Moreover, some initiatives operate within strong collaborative frameworks, for example, within a network of sports clubs, through supra-local cooperation between youth care organisations, or within an inter-municipal welfare association (Delheye et al., 2021).

This small selection from an already vast and growing field highlights the diversity of initiatives. Furthermore, such initiatives continually adapt to societal needs and complex challenges—such as diversity, poverty, and inequality—in Flemish cities and municipalities (Withaeckx et al., 2019). The diversification of available offerings may be motivated by the observation that sport in Flanders remains "far from democratised" (Theeboom et al., 2010, p. 1394). Specifically, sport-for-all policies in Flanders have not succeeded in ensuring accessibility regardless of participants' backgrounds (Haudenhuyse, 2018), thereby underscoring the need for alternative initiatives.

The growth of innovative and experimental initiatives has led to the observation that many of these practices do not fit within dominant labels. Flemish sport-for-all initiatives in the past decade have been confronted with a proliferation of terms and labels such as "Sport+ (Sport-plus)," "+Sport," "Community Sport," "Sport for Development (and Peace)," and "Sport for (Social) Change" (Delheye et al., 2021). In recent years, however, scholars have argued that such labels "have led to terminological hair-splitting. Such divisions sometimes detract from the rich and complex reality" (Delheye et al., 2021, p. 10, translated by the authors), prompting the need for new terminology and language to describe these innovative initiatives. As Smets (2019, p. 94) describes in his interactions with practitioners: "The search for more precise terminology to capture their work is important to them in order to distinguish their social efforts from sports clubs and organisations that are less committed to advancing social ambitions" (translated by the authors).

Such a new lexicon has emerged in recent years in Flanders, with terms such as *sociaal-sportieve praktijken* (social-sportive practices) and *sociaal-sportief werk* (social-sportive work [SSW]) gaining prominence in academia and practice. The first reference to a social-sportive project appeared in the study by Delheye et al. (2016) on the social potential of a football club transformed by world-famous football player Vincent Kompany. Delheye et al. (2016) describe the club as a potential *sociaal-sportief utopia* (social-sportive utopia), due to its social mission, including social development support for young players and low registration fees.

Later, in 2019, Smets further developed the concept of *sociaal-sportieve praktijken* (social-sportive practices) to provide a language for the under-recognised movement of innovative practices in urban sports landscapes. Smets (2019, p. 21) introduced the term specifically to move away from a restrictive focus on "organisational forms" (translated by the authors) and towards the acknowledgement of a broad range of initiatives that take up an explicit societal role (Withaeckx et al., 2019). Smets (2019) defined social-sportive practices as hybrid organisational forms that blend elements of sports clubs with (experimental or adapted) forms of social work. Building on Smets' (2019) work, the Flemish *sociaal sportief platform* (social sportive platform) was established later that year under the umbrella of Demos (a nonprofit organisation focusing on policy and practice development in culture, youth work, and sports) and Sport Vlaanderen (the Flemish Sports Agency). This platform seeks to connect social-sportive practices, strengthen their collective impact, and influence policy.

Additionally, in 2021, Redig (under the umbrella of Demos) formulated a definition of "*sociale sportinitiatieven*" (social sport initiatives) based on six key characteristics, identifying common ground among these diverse practices. Redig (2021) emphasised that while variation exists between initiatives, these differences are often based on specific choices and areas of expertise.

Later, in 2021, a practice guide for *sociaal-sportief werk* (SSW) was published, featuring 125 testimonials from Flemish social-sportive protagonists (Delheye et al., 2021). The authors deliberately chose the term SSW to further distance themselves from restrictive institutional interpretations. The hyphen between "social" and "sportive" symbolises the intersection between three policy sectors: sport, welfare, and work. By introducing this term, the authors sought to move beyond an institutional perspective and instead advocate for an inclusive approach that emphasises activities rather than organisations. As such, the term SSW encompasses all initiatives that integrate sportive and social elements—including community sports, sports clubs with social ambitions, youth work, social work, and health care work, which uses sport as a tool.

2. SSW and Local Policy in Flanders: A Challenging Relationship

2.1. Municipal Sports Policies as Key Regulators

Regarding the impact of local policy on SSW, the local (municipal) policy level in Flanders has a significant influence on the existence, organisation, and recognition of SSW.

For example, the Flemish Sport-for-All Decree (2007) marked an important step towards the professionalisation of local sports services as local sports departments were required to develop a local sports policy plan in order to receive subsidies (Smets, 2019). In addition to that, the 2008 Participation Decree led to the development of five pilot projects with a sports-oriented approach, some of which prioritised the social benefits of sport (Smets, 2019). Further on, the Decree on Local Sports Policy (2012) stipulated that 10% of municipal sports budgets should be allocated to reducing barriers for disadvantaged groups. This decree also required municipalities to dedicate 20% of their sports expenditure to alternative forms of non-traditional sports (Smets, 2019). These policy trends between 2007 and 2012 not only provided a significant impetus to the field (more specifically in the development of community sport) but also further stimulated the broader societal role of organised sports providers.

In January 2016, based on an amending Decree of July 3rd, 2015, the 2012 Decree on Local Sports Policy was repealed, as its associated funding was integrated into the *Gemeentefonds* (municipal fund). This specifically meant that various Flemish sectoral funds were integrated into this municipal fund. One of the objectives of this shift was to encourage a more transversal approach across different policy domains, fostering the dismantling of siloed policy objectives at the local level (Smets, 2019). Moreover, as a result of this integration, municipalities were no longer required to report to the Flemish government, granting them greater financial autonomy in determining their strategic priorities.

The integration of Flemish sectoral funds into the municipal fund was part of a wider movement towards increased autonomy for local governments. The introduction of the Decree on Local Governance in 2017 exemplified this trend, as it provided local governments with greater organisational autonomy. This broader shift towards local autonomy reinforced the role of municipal sports policy services as the principal regulators of local sports governance, enhancing their authority in shaping the local sports landscape (Smets, 2019; Theeboom et al., 2010).

While this movement towards greater autonomy may be perceived as a positive development, it is noteworthy that this broader decentralisation coincided with a measurable decline in *buurtsport* (community sport) as a structured concept in Flanders. During this period, several initiatives ceased operations or underwent structural transformations (Delheye et al., 2021). Although further empirical research is needed to establish a direct causal link, this is a noteworthy observation that merits attention.

2.2. Hybridity vs. Rigidity

As explained above, municipal governments in Flanders have high levels of autonomy to determine local subsidy systems, including the type of subsidy, amount, procedures, and registration requirements. Many Flemish initiatives in SSW rely on these subsidies; however, only a small number of privileged initiatives gain

visibility within local policy. Many initiatives (and their complex work) remain invisible leading to little (long-term) to no recognition or support (Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019). As Withaeckx et al. (2019, p. 122) describe: "There is often no shortage of project calls for social-sportive practices, but many practices indicate that the support is usually temporary, whilst the challenges that must be tackled require a long-term approach" (translated by the authors).

This lack of recognition partially stems from the often difficult relationship between SSW and policy (Delheye et al., 2021; Demos, 2019; Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019). A core tension in this relationship lies in the clash between the hybrid nature of SSW and the rigid, institutional logic of policy structures (Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019). In what follows, we further describe this tension.

Regarding the hybrid nature of SSW, SSW incorporates a variety of didactic, pedagogical, and sports technical approaches, methods, and techniques while pursuing objectives at the individual, group, and societal levels. SSW operates in diverse and complex contexts, including those affected by urbanisation challenges such as (super-)diversity, poverty, inequality, and lack of space (Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019). It also engages with a wide range of marginalised groups, such as children and young people in socially vulnerable situations, LGBTQI+ individuals, people with disabilities, detainees, and the homeless (Delheye et al., 2021). Positioned at the intersection of multiple policy domains (Demos, 2019), SSW is inherently diverse and adaptable. This diversity is an asset, as it enables highly accessible activities for different groups and provides a countermovement against the rigidity of traditional sports initiatives. Smets (2019) highlights that such initiatives are often better suited to the needs of urban participants.

Conversely, the rigid nature of (local and supralocal) policy structures is evident in the way Flemish policy domains operate with little to no exchange or alignment across sectors. On this issue, the 2019 memorandum of the Flemish social sportive platform states:

> The daily reality of our practices intersects with areas such as the welfare sector, employment, education, integration, and youth assistance. This gives us a multifaceted identity, which requires tailored policy support. We request the Flemish Minister of Sport to take the lead in developing appropriate support for social-sportive practices in collaboration with ministers from other policy areas. (Demos, 2019, translated by the authors)

Since SSW in Flanders transcends the compartmentalisation of policy domains, it does not fit neatly within a single policy sector. As a result, many initiatives fall through the cracks when it comes to recognition, support, and funding (Delheye et al., 2021; Demos, 2023). One testimony from someone who started in practice and now holds a position in public administration (Deduytsche, quoted in Delheye et al., 2021) describes this reality:

> Work is often done with children and young people, but it is not [perceived as] youth work. Attention is given to matters beyond the sporting aspect, but it is not [perceived as] social work. Sports are played, but usually not within a sports club. Although governments are trying to break down barriers between policy domains, policies, training, and organisations, [they] are still somewhat siloed. This somewhat hinders the recognition and development of social-sporting practices. (translated by the authors)

It is fair to state that the evolving lexicon of SSW, its inclusive nature, and its emphasis on the connection between social and sportive elements have not been fully adopted or integrated into Flemish policy (language and structures).

This dynamic in Flanders regarding the tense relationship between policy and practice mirrors broader international trends in sport-for-development, making Flanders an exemplary case. Scholars have argued that sport-for-development programs often operate under policy-driven, top-down mandates that fail to fully integrate the realities of grassroots organisations (Coalter, 2013). The dominance of top-down structures in sport-for-development has been widely critiqued, with calls for localised, bottom-up strategies to be better recognised and valued (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012). Black (2017) highlights how global development praxis in sport-for-development has long been characterised by a tension between top-down and bottom-up orientations, with the former often dominating the latter in policy and practice. This pattern is evident in Flanders, where policy frameworks struggle to adapt to the evolving needs of grassroots social-sportive initiatives, much like the broader sport-for-development landscape (Theeboom et al., 2010).

2.3. In Search of the Lived Experiences of Local Government Officials

On an international scale, scholars have argued the need to better understand the tension between top-down policies and bottom-up initiatives (Black, 2017) and the power dynamics between policy and practice (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012) in the field of sport-for-development. Furthermore, understanding how local actors interpret and implement policy (Lindsey & Darby, 2019) has been deemed important to build a more effective relationship between policy and practice.

Our contribution aims to explore this relationship between policy and practice in the specific context of Flanders. We particularly aim to explore this from the lived experiences of local government officials, focussing on their beliefs, perspectives, and experiences in relation to SSW. As an early adopter and innovator, Flanders offers a rich context to look at this relationship between policy and practice. Insights gained from Flanders might not only highlight effective practices and potential pitfalls in this relationship but also foster a comparative dialogue that can inform and enrich policy-making for sport-for-development programmes or other grassroots initiatives internationally.

The central research questions we aim to answer in this contribution are: How do local government officials perceive the role and position of SSW in their municipality? How does SSW fit within or challenge existing local policy structures, according to local government officials? How do local policy structures, dynamics and choices influence support for SSW, according to local government officials?

3. Method

3.1. Research Context and Objectives

The overarching research project on which this contribution is based is part of the Flemish research centre eCO-CITY (Collaboratory for Sustainable and Socially Just Urbanisation) at HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts. The research conducts practice-oriented research on various issues in urbanising contexts together with citizens, professionals, policymakers, and students.

The research project as a whole (October 2020–2023) explored accessibility in SSW, focusing on the role of relationships between SSW, local policy, and civil society, their impact, and ways to enhance accessibility for vulnerable groups.

Within this contribution, we focus on one specific sub-study, an in-depth study of local government officials' perspectives on the relationship between SSW and local policy. This particular study was conducted between November 2021 and April 2022.

The research project followed a case study approach. Two cases were selected based on three indicators: (a) the presence of diverse initiatives combining social and sportive approaches, (b) varied dynamics between SSW and local policy, and (c) the willingness of local stakeholders to engage in the research project. Insights from previous research conducted by the first author informed the selection of these case studies, providing a foundational understanding of certain local dynamics.

Based on these criteria, two Flemish cases were selected. Both have a rich history in SSW and a broad social-sportive landscape in terms of target groups, objectives, and formats. The selected cities are two of the 13 core cities of Flanders and vary in size—one being medium-sized and the other large—yet both share a distinctly urban character. The scale of these cities, combined with the additional societal challenges of a metropolitan area—such as space constraints, (super)diversity, and poverty (Smets, 2019)—results in a high number of initiatives in both cases. This diversity of initiatives was essential, as it allowed us to capture a wide range of insights.

To ensure that the research remained closely connected to local realities, a local steering group was established for each case. These groups consisted of representatives from local policy and practice who provided input on key aspects such as relevant initiatives, important stakeholders, and potential respondents. Additionally, they played an active role in shaping the research phases, offering guidance, and ensuring that the study aligned with the specific challenges and opportunities present in each local context.

3.2. Data Collection

In 2021, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with local government officials in both cases (n = 10). Interviewees were selected from both the political sphere (those who formulate policy) and the administrative apparatus (those who implement policy) across diverse policy domains, including sport, welfare, youth, and local social policy. Purposeful sampling was used to maximise the richness of the data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), with the selection of interviewees informed by input from the local steering groups.

The interview questions with local government officials focused on four key topics:

1. The profile of the local government official;
2. The role and significance of SSW within local policy;
3. The relationship and connection between local policy, the respective official, and SSW;
4. Reflections on the current and future local policy framework in relation to SSW.

3.3. Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author conducted a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to examine the transcripts. This predominantly inductive approach allowed codes and categories to develop naturally from the data rather than being predetermined. A coding tree was used to organise the data into categories, which the first author then reviewed to identify overlaps and explore connections between them. Through this process, clusters of categories or themes emerged. For this article, we focused on specific subcategories and themes that provided insight into the relationship between local policy and SSW. The NVivo software program was used to assist with the analysis.

Rather than comparing data across the two cases or explicitly analysing contextual differences and variations, the analysis aimed to identify common patterns. This required a substantial and diverse sample to ensure meaningful patterns could be discerned. Moreover, dividing the data into strictly comparable parts would have resulted in insufficient data per group, making a reliable comparative analysis infeasible.

The study adhered to the ethics guidelines of HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts. A data management plan was developed to specify the implementation of these guidelines, including informed consent, anonymisation of transcripts, and secure data management within the research project. This plan was reviewed and adjusted based on input from the institution's data protection officer. Throughout the project, it served as a guiding framework for ethical research and facilitated critical reflection on research ethics.

4. Findings

In the following section, we highlight some of the lived experiences of local government officials regarding SSW in their local contexts. The first section addresses the key challenge of defining, positioning, and monitoring SSW. The second section explores respondents' perspectives on overcoming these challenges, as well as the current and future opportunities and strategies they identify in their local contexts to address these issues.

In the quotes underpinning the findings, respondents are referred to as local government officials (e.g., local government official 1). To ensure anonymity, we do not explicitly distinguish between respondents from the political and administrative spheres in these quotes.

4.1. The Multilevel and Intertwined Challenge of Defining, Positioning and Monitoring SSW

4.1.1. In the Practice of Politics, It Clashes

The first main challenge identified by local government officials is how to position and define SSW within local policy structures. Respondents noted that initiatives in SSW are innovative and, as a result, are not firmly embedded within a specific policy domain (e.g., municipal youth services, welfare services, sports services, or education services). In contrast, youth work or traditional sports initiatives have a more clearly defined place within the youth policy domain and sports policy domain. These perspectives of local government officials align with the observation of the tension between the hybrid nature of SSW and the rigid structure of local policy (Delheye et al., 2021; Demos, 2019; Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019).

Regarding the specific role of the sports policy domain, the findings indicate that most respondents recognise the importance and necessity of actively acknowledging and supporting SSW. Some respondents reflect on past transitions, noting that they previously redirected certain social-sportive-related queries to other policy services. For instance, a request from an initiative involving participants with a migrant background would have been referred to integration services. However, according to some respondents, local sports policy increasingly recognises its responsibility to support such initiatives, working in collaboration with other services rather than fully redirecting these matters elsewhere.

Building upon this evolving approach of collaboration, most respondents share the conviction that SSW should have a place within or across multiple policy domains in a way that transcends traditional boundaries (Demos, 2019). However, the daily reality for local government officials reveals tensions not only regarding where SSW should be embedded but also how it should be understood. One respondent highlighted the local tension between sportive and social interpretations of SSW:

> The discussion about whether SSW resides under sport or welfare is present in our policy context. I find this a difficult discussion. In our context, such initiatives reside under the sport domain, but, if I may put it in black-and-white terms, our alderman for sport [local government official who is part of the municipal council] does not have much affinity with the topic. For this alderman, sport is about performance and competition. And they do say things like, "It's also great because you gain a lot of social skills," but the focus remains on being the best….Whereas in the welfare domain, and especially from a vulnerability perspective, we say that sport is just as important for belonging, for getting opportunities, for developing talents. It should be highly complementary, but in the practice of politics, it clashes. (local government official 2)

As illustrated by the quote, when SSW falls under the sports domain, it may be approached primarily through a lens of performance and competition, whereas in the welfare domain, it is often seen as a tool for social inclusion, empowerment, and personal development. Thus, these lived experiences of local government officials underpin the challenge that SSW is often constrained by sectoral boundaries (Delheye et al., 2021; Demos, 2023).

4.1.2. Personal Affinity and Mandate

As illustrated in the quote above on the tension between the sportive and social interpretations of SSW, the positioning of SSW within local policy is influenced not only by sectoral boundaries but also by personal affinities within the political and administrative apparatus. The findings show that the placement of SSW can depend on which alderman has the strongest connection or affinity with SSW, how and by which policymakers they are inspired, and how the political mandate for developing social sport policy aligns with other domains or responsibilities within the same mandate.

Additionally, personal affinities and experiences within the administrative apparatus can play a crucial role (both positively and negatively) in determining whether and how SSW is integrated into local policy. Key influences within the administrative structure, according to the respondents, include the willingness of the head of a local government department to champion SSW and the specific educational or personal background and preferences of policy officers. The following four quotes provide further insight into these personal influences:

> I think it has a lot to do with your head of service. The previous government service head wasn't concerned with social-sportive initiatives. It was seen as something that had to be done, but it didn't really interest them. (local government official 7)

> Because I'm still from the "old school." When I completed my physical education training, social-sportive work didn't even exist. My education was 99% focused on physical education and sports clubs. I feel like that's sometimes forgotten. Now, we're expected to work on and implement these new topics as well. But to be honest, that's why I asked my colleague: "Am I really the right person for this?" (local government official 4)

> For me, it's about putting the target group first and moving beyond categorisation. It's about understanding what people need and ensuring we meet those needs. I might be a bit too much of an activist civil servant—I'm often called out on it—but that is my mission. (local government official 5)

> That is also the difference, as I always say, when bachelor-level physical education instructors give sports lessons, they are highly structured: warm-up, this, that, and so on. However, I am also aware that when youth workers organise activities, the approach is entirely different—much more flexible. Should it be so rigid? Perhaps not, but I do consider it an advantage of sport that it is more structured, precise, and follows clear guidelines. (local government official 1)

It is important to note that the responsibility for developing social-sportive (support) policy in the two cases is assigned to a single local government official or a small group of officials, such as a participation officer or liaison figure. These officials typically already have a connection to SSW, either through their professional background or personal experiences. As key figures within the policy framework, they play a crucial role in staying closely attuned to the needs in the field and identifying opportunities for support.

However, some respondents highlighted an unexpected challenge: They sometimes encounter resistance within their own team, particularly when there is insufficient (political) support to implement social-sportive policies. This lack of backing makes it especially difficult—if not impossible—to establish a strong support framework and foster a broad culture of support for SSW within the policy administration. As one respondent explained: "There are always supporters and opponents, but if the colleague that is responsible for the subsidy regulation doesn't want to go along with it, you hit a dead end" (local government official 3).

4.1.3. Context of Scarcity

In addition to personal affinities and experiences, the broader contextual conditions in which local government officials operate further complicate the integration of SSW into policy. The findings indicate that austerity measures within (Flemish) local governments contribute to a sense of powerlessness among officials, leading them to believe they have limited capacity to make a meaningful impact on SSW. While some respondents expressed a strong willingness to support SSW, they also highlighted the challenges of addressing requests from the field of practice they are unable to fulfil. These requests, for example, entail securing operational funding or providing access to free facilities.

Given this context of austerity, some respondents contend that it is neither practical nor desirable for each policy domain to sustain an additional set of initiatives, such as SSW. They argue that when new initiatives seek financial support without an increase in the overall subsidy budget, resources must inevitably be redistributed—often at the expense of existing initiatives, such as traditional sports clubs, that are already reliant on public funding.

As one respondent explained: "If there is a new influx of initiatives, which gives initiatives in SSW the right to subsidies, and the subsidy pot is not increased, then it is at the expense of everyone who already receives subsidies" (local government official 3).

Some respondents described this situation as reflecting a protectionist reflex, driven by concerns that the recognition and subsidisation of SSW could lead to reduced funding for established initiatives, such as traditional sports clubs.

4.1.4. Applying Traditional Sports Club Standards to SSW

Beyond concerns over funding distribution, these discussions also highlight deeper questions about the relationship between SSW and traditional sports clubs. The findings indicate that most respondents struggle to define the position of SSW within the existing sports landscape.

Some of the respondents argued that SSW should ideally be fully integrated into the traditional sports system, particularly in terms of recognition, monitoring, and evaluation. One respondent explains: "For me, it would be good if it were aligned with the recognition requirements of the traditional associations, if it were somewhat consistent with those" (local government official 1).

These respondents express enthusiasm towards the established systems for traditional sports clubs, as the recognition requirements—and the subsequent support provided—are perceived as clear and straightforward. Local government official 4 explains:

> If you are recognised as a sports club, that immediately gives you an advantage in terms of the rate you pay when renting sports halls….Secondly, if you obtain additional recognition for youth or G-sports—by meeting a few extra conditions—you automatically receive operational subsidies as well.

For this group of respondents, applying the same recognition and monitoring systems to both SSW and traditional sports clubs could help mitigate concerns—emanating from the protectionist reflex described above—that informal groups might exploit the flexibility of certain easier systems, gaining access to facilities without adhering to the rigorous criteria imposed on traditional sports clubs.

Other respondents, while also sharing frustrations over the lack of clarity, transparency, and consistency in the recognition and monitoring systems for SSW, argue that integrating SSW into the existing monitoring framework of traditional sports clubs is neither feasible nor appropriate. They contend that current monitoring systems—such as those used to assess traditional sports initiatives—are predominantly based on quantitative indicators (e.g., number of participants, trained supervisors, activities, trajectories, hours worked). These indicators primarily measure short-term outputs and capture the linear effects of individual

initiatives or actions, which do not necessarily align with the core objectives and holistic approach of SSW. As one respondent explains:

> In social-sportive work, it's much less about those quantifiable things, and that makes it difficult. So, what you now have in your regulations systems are questions such as: "How many participants do you have?" "How many trainers do you have?" "How many trainers with a recognised diploma do you have?" That's hard to pin down. (local government official 6)

This group of respondents argues that strict regulatory systems often rely on controlling dynamics, making it harder for SSW to meet imposed standards. An example of a specific concern is the inconsistent enforcement of rules, for example, regarding the primary language used in the initiative. While SSW is closely monitored for Dutch language use to receive subsidies, traditional clubs in bilingual regions often face little oversight. One respondent notes that this creates tensions:

> I have had a discussion recently with some initiatives about how the sports department strictly monitors the use of Dutch—if Dutch is not spoken, organisations do not receive subsidies. However, in other traditional sports clubs, the sports department does not apply such monitoring, only to social-sportive initiatives….At times, it appears as though they [local government officials] are unsure how to handle the situation. In some cases, they even make things more complicated or impose stricter controls on social-sportive initiatives than traditional clubs, which may also predominantly use French. (local government official 2)

In other words, existing monitoring systems—primarily designed for traditional sports clubs—tend to emphasise whether SSW is "doing things right" (Biesta, 2007), such as enforcing Dutch as the official language simply because it is a formal policy requirement, rather than "doing the right thing" (Biesta, 2007), which would prioritise social inclusion and accessibility through more flexible language use. As local government official 3 critically puts it: "The first question asked by the City from initiatives is: 'What is your structure?' Only then followed by the question: 'What does your association do?'"

These lived experiences tie into the broader discussion on how such initiatives, often set up for failure within the current monitoring and evaluation systems, risk being pushed to the margins or the shadows of local policy (Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019).

4.2. Opportunities and Strategies

In the following section, we outline the perspectives proposed by respondents to address the aforementioned challenges. Additionally, we examine the specific opportunities, strategies, and potential limitations they identify within their local context for implementing these approaches.

4.2.1. Transversal Policy and Subsidy Systems

The first strategy highlighted by respondents is the integration of SSW within transversal policy. The findings indicate a strong plea for strengthening connections between various policy domains and sectors. This approach aims to reflect and acknowledge the transversality of SSW while fostering

complementarity—an aspect that is sometimes already present to some extent in practice but remains underdeveloped in local policy.

According to some respondents, transversal systems for recognising, monitoring, and funding SSW can be implemented through mechanisms such as cocktail subsidies or cloverleaf subsidies. Local government official 7 elaborates on this specific strategy within their local context: "A group approached the authorities, presenting a dossier outlining their activities and need for funding. In response, funding was provided from three different sources: financial means from the welfare budget, from the youth sector, and sport."

Many respondents were generally positive about the concept of cocktail subsidies or a shared financial pool sourced from multiple policy domains. They highlighted potential benefits such as enhanced sustainability, increased trust in SSW, and greater opportunities for professionalisation. In this regard, respondents reinforced the importance of such funding models; an argument also put forward by Smets (2019, p. 200), who stated:

> Providing co-financing models for subsidies, i.e., cocktail subsidies or cloverleaf subsidies, where other sectors are involved, is therefore essential for the future sustainability of sport for all policy. Only in this way can we succeed in valorising the pioneering role of socio-sportive practices as knowledge centres and laboratories for future sports policy. (translated by the authors)

Although many respondents were generally positive about the concept of cocktail subsidies in their local context, they also highlighted certain limitations that temper their perceived success.

First, respondents noted that while these systems effectively promote cross-domain policy collaboration, they do not (yet) provide structural or long-term financial support for all initiatives in SSW. Funding is often reserved for larger, more established initiatives, leaving smaller or emerging projects struggling to secure adequate resources. As local government official 8 explains: "Those covenants [tailored-made contracts between initiatives and city], I have the feeling those are only used for those large social-sportive initiatives."

Second, respondents raised concerns about the arbitrary nature of these funding mechanisms, linking back to the earlier discussion on the influence of personal affinities. They pointed out that a lack of clear, standardised criteria for subsidy allocation can lead to frustration and perceptions of unequal treatment. The absence of transparent guidelines creates uncertainty and inconsistency, making it difficult for all initiatives to access support on an equal basis. As one respondent explained:

> Our alderman knows the people who are involved in that initiative, and then a budget gets thrown together. Those aren't the ideal examples because that's a politician making promises. But that's not the kind of politics we want to practice. (local government official 2)

Another respondent emphasises the need for consistency in policy application, stating: "If you do it for one, you have to do it for the others as well. You have to develop a policy with clear criteria, rather than making promises and leaving others out in the cold" (local government official 1).

In practice, smaller initiatives often depend on short-term project subsidies for funding. While this approach allows local policymakers to experiment with and support a broad range of projects, it also limits initiatives to

temporary financial support, raising concerns about their long-term sustainability. As local government official 4 questions: "Can such organisations suddenly continue without support? That won't be so straightforward."

Although respondents acknowledge that systems like cocktail subsidies are beneficial for certain social-sportive initiatives and create opportunities, they highlight a major issue: These systems are not equally accessible to all initiatives and remain too dependent on individual decision-making.

Finally, another key challenge is that these systems often result in ad hoc discussions about funding distribution between different policy sectors. As one local government official points out: "The proportion each sector—such as Sport and Youth—should contribute to this fund remains an ongoing debate" (local government official 1).

4.2.2. A Solid Framework With Flexible Options That Serve the Target Group

In response to the inconsistent decision-making processes regarding the funding of SSW and the limitations of cloverleaf financing, some respondents argued that establishing a clear definition of SSW—and distinguishing what it is and what it is not—would facilitate more consistent and transparent funding decisions.

As previously mentioned, one group of respondents supports aligning the definition and monitoring of SSW with the systems used for traditional sports. They believe that such alignment could also foster greater transversality, as it would encourage the traditional sports sector to integrate more social-sportive ambitions into its framework.

Other respondents, however, argue that future funding and monitoring systems should strike a balance between clarity and flexibility. While providing clear direction is essential, they emphasise that overly rigid frameworks may hinder the adaptive and community-driven nature of SSW. Instead of imposing result-oriented expectations, future systems should focus on stimulating engagement and participation, ensuring that initiatives can develop organically while maintaining policy accountability:

> And that's precisely why it's so dangerous to have a strict framework. Those needs, and especially those initiatives that meet those needs, are constantly changing. What they should build in, in my opinion, is a kind of constant platform for flexible social-sportive work. A sort of structure with a large amount of adaptability within that structure….At the very least, there is a commitment agreement. Naturally, the extent of this commitment depends on circumstances and certain conditions, but one must be willing to engage to some degree….For me, it's important that they are supported. The way in which this is done doesn't really matter. You need to meet their needs, and the framework for support is secondary to that. (local government official 7)

In addition to "meeting their needs" (local government official 7), respondents emphasised that the needs of SSW are inherently linked to the needs of its target group, a crucial aspect often overlooked in discussions about systems and structures. As a result, respondents argue that the target group and the impact on them should become the focal point of policy dialogue, ensuring that funding and monitoring frameworks are designed to support the social and participatory objectives of SSW rather than merely adhering to administrative or structural requirements:

> Perhaps it's time to think about how to deal with an organisation that doesn't fit into any particular structure, but is still valuable, and how you handle that, as well as what aspects you actually want to reward within their operations. Don't start from a reward system you already have, but look at their operations: What is valuable? (local government official 3)

In other words, some respondents argue that the focus should shift towards questions such as: What works for whom? Do SSW initiatives create meaningful change? How has the general well-being of participants improved through their participation in SSW? In which life domains have participants experienced positive influence? What opportunities have been created in terms of accessibility? How has their position and perception in society evolved?

Rather than prioritising rigid systems and categorisation, these respondents advocate for placing the experiences and outcomes of the target group at the forefront of policy discussions. As one respondent concludes: "The target group should always come first, regardless of categorisation or political realities" (local government official 5).

5. Concluding Reflections and Recommendations for Future Research

5.1. Concluding Reflections

The findings of this study largely corroborate earlier research into the intricate interplay between local policy and SSW in Flanders. Notably, our results underpin the enduring tension between the hybrid, dynamic, and innovative nature of SSW and the rigid, compartmentalised structure of policy, which often results in the limited recognition of SSW (Smets, 2019; Withaeckx el al., 2019). These observations align with the internationally debated tensions between top-down and bottom-up approaches within sport-for-development (Black, 2017; Coalter, 2013).

However, this study offers further insights into the specific mechanisms that drive the misalignment between SSW and policy, as well as potential solutions for fostering a more constructive relationship between SSW and local policy. In the final section of this article, we present concluding reflections that emphasise the significance of the personal beliefs, backgrounds, and priorities of local government officials and the need for a broader discussion—one that moves beyond merely establishing a structure for SSW towards fostering a policy culture that supports it.

5.1.1. A Matter of Personal Beliefs, Background, and Priorities

A key insight emerging from the findings is that the positioning of SSW within local policy often depends on the personal priorities and interests of key figures on the political and administrative levels. The degree of commitment from aldermen, the sources of inspiration for policymakers, and the alignment of different mandates can all influence whether SSW receives institutional backing. At the administrative level, individual experiences and professional backgrounds also shape the prioritisation and implementation of SSW. In particular, the willingness of department heads to advocate for SSW, as well as the expertise and perspectives of government officials, significantly impact the extent to which these initiatives are integrated into local policy frameworks.

These findings align with existing research (e.g., Evans & Harris, 2004; Lipsky, 1980) on the discretionary power of civil servants in policy implementation, which suggests that bureaucratic actors do not merely enforce top-down decisions but actively shape policy based on their own experiences and professional interpretations.

A notable challenge identified in this study is the reliance on a small number of government officials to shape SSW policy and support such initiatives. In both cases, the responsibility for SSW within local services is assigned to a single officer or a small team, often individuals who already have a professional or personal connection to the field. While this ensures a degree of expertise and commitment, it also creates vulnerabilities. In cases where these individuals encounter resistance within their departments or lack institutional backing, progress can be hindered. Moreover, when policy implementation is highly dependent on personal motivation, there is a risk that shifts in personnel or administrative priorities will lead to inconsistency.

This highlights a broader issue: If support for SSW remains contingent on the enthusiasm, beliefs, and experiences of few individuals, there is a risk of discontinuity and fragmentation in policy efforts.

5.1.2. Towards a Transversal Policy Culture

While an institutionalised approach may provide greater stability, the findings suggest that neither a purely structural focus nor a reliance on individual agency is sufficient to ensure the long-term integration of SSW within local policy. Rather than framing these perspectives as oppositional, a more effective approach would be to acknowledge their interdependence. Such an approach would facilitate the recognition of both the formal structures necessary for embedding SSW—such as more structural and permanent forms of cloverleaf financing—and the discretionary space required for policymakers to respond to local needs and opportunities, thereby ensuring the flexibility that some respondents of this study identified as essential.

This integrative approach could be realised through the cultivation of a distinctive culture—one that emerges from the interplay between explicit formal structures; implicit dynamics such as individual agency, norms, beliefs, values, social interactions; and local contextual dynamics. Moreover, it is imperative that this culture be developed and examined in a co-creative manner with participants. Facilitated and studied by researchers, such a co-creative framework would not only provide a shared space for dialogue but also foster more inclusive and participatory policy development. This aligns with the work of Smets (2019) and Skille (2008), who argue that collaborative policy-making can lead to more responsive and sustainable social-sportive policies.

Moreover, specifically within the Flemish context, a broader reading of policy trends suggests that developing a transversal policy culture involves considerations of power-sharing and fostering shared commitments between practice and policy. The integration of Flemish sectoral funds into the *Gemeentefonds* (municipal fund) granted municipalities significant financial autonomy, yet this shift coincided with a changing role for *buurtsport* (community sport) as a structured concept (Delheye et al., 2021). While no direct causal link can be established, this observation raises questions about the potential unintended consequences of increased local autonomy, particularly in terms of how responsibilities are redistributed. These reflections underline the importance of establishing co-governance cultures and long-term commitments between local governments, practitioners, and citizens.

A promising finding of this study is that, despite long-standing concerns about the limited role of the traditional sports sector (Scheerder et al., 2013; Theeboom & Haudenhuyse, 2014; Theeboom et al., 2010), local sports policy in Flanders is increasingly contributing to the development of a supportive culture for SSW. Our data indicate a gradual shift in local sports policy, where an increasing recognition of responsibility is leading to stronger collaboration with other sectors rather than the delegation of these matters elsewhere. Moreover, such cross-sectoral efforts might offer a means to address concerns regarding the perceived competition for subsidies between SSW and traditional sports clubs by promoting a shared vision that integrates both sectors into a more cohesive and complementary policy framework. These findings offer grounds for optimism, as they indicate a growing openness towards collaborative approaches between the traditional sports sector and other policy domains. The recent development of learning platforms and networks on SSW in Flanders—such as those established in the city of Antwerp (Delheye et al., 2024)—where knowledge, information, experiences, and uncertainties can be exchanged across sectors—reinforce this optimistic outlook.

5.2. Recommendations for Future Research

5.2.1. Examining the Long-Term and Comparative Effects of Local Policy on SSW Sustainability

The first limitation of this study is that it does not fully capture the long-term sustainability of different funding models or the ways in which policy choices impact SSW over time. This is partly due to the fluid nature of SSW itself, as well as the fact that a significant proportion of local funding remains project-based and short-term. Additionally, the limited research timeframe constrains the ability to assess these dynamics over a prolonged period. Further research is needed to better understand how these shifts in governance structures have shaped the landscape of community sport and cross-sectoral collaboration. A longitudinal approach would be particularly valuable in identifying barriers and enabling factors related to structural funding mechanisms (e.g., cloverleaf subsidies, structural funding pools spanning multiple policy sectors), personal dynamics (e.g., the impact of staff turnover within local policy teams), and cross-sectoral policy cultures, as well as their effects on the field.

The second limitation of this study is its lack of a comparative design. The research did not include case comparisons given that the key objective of the project was to identify overarching patterns rather than to contrast specific contexts. Moreover, the study did not systematically contrast the perspectives of practitioners or participants with those of policymakers, which could have provided deeper insights into the interplay between policy frameworks and on-the-ground implementation. A larger multi-city comparison that integrates the perspectives of diverse stakeholders could offer valuable insights into which policy cultures foster more effective SSW recognition and support, while also accounting for context-specific challenges, such as the differing needs of rural versus urban settings.

5.2.2. Research as a Facilitator for co-Creating: Aligning Policy, Practice, and Participants

In discussing ways to overcome the challenges in the tense relationship between policy and practice, respondents emphasised the importance of placing participants' needs at the centre of conversations and decision-making regarding SSW support.

From a practice-oriented research perspective, an action-oriented design—in which action and theory formation are intertwined—can establish co-creative environments where policymakers, practitioners, and

participants collaboratively develop policy, implementation, monitoring, and research strategies. This approach ensures that expectations, needs, and accountability mechanisms are collectively defined, fostering more responsive and sustainable social-sportive policies. As mentioned earlier, this co-creative framework provides a shared space for dialogue and aligns with the arguments of Smets (2019) and Skille (2008).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the need to protect participant anonymity, the data underpinning this study are not publicly accessible.

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The Power of Intangible Resources for Cause Champions in Sport-For-Development: A Singapore Case Study

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Abstract

Cause champions are recognised to play a meaningful role in supporting the delivery and impact of sport-for-development (SFD) programmes. They are individuals who emerge from a programme's target community and assume a leadership role to advocate for social change. However, there remains limited empirical inquiry on the factors that enable cause champions to thrive. Therefore, this study explored the most essential resources needed for cause champions to succeed in SportCares, an SFD organisation in Singapore. In total, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members, coaches, and cause champions. Three essential resources were identified: sustained tangible resources (i.e., funding and physical infrastructure), invested human capital (i.e., staff and coaches' efforts), and organisational capital of emotional authenticity (i.e., sincerity through communication). The findings demonstrated that the interaction of these resources fostered a culture of care that supported the champion's ability to advocate for social change. These results urge monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) practices to focus more on intangible and relational processes such as co-creation sessions and authentic storytelling.

Keywords

cause champions; co-creation; intangible resource; monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices; resources; sport-for-development; storytelling

1. Introduction

Cause champions in sport-for-development (SFD) are defined as individuals who emerge from a programme's target community and assume a leadership role to advocate for social change (Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015). These individuals use their experiences, knowledge, and social networks to develop innovative solutions to various social problems (Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015; L. M. Hayhurst, 2013; Hoekman et al., 2019). Cause champions are common to the realm of SFD as their expertise has become instrumental in the creation of safe spaces (Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015; Hoekman et al., 2019). Their role as cultural experts and role models in SFD programmes can act as a gateway for practitioners to learn more about their programme's local context and recipients, which are crucial conditions to achieve success (Hoekman et al., 2019; Marlier, 2022). Despite their positive involvement, there are ongoing calls to understand how cause champions' expertise can be further leveraged in programme design, delivery, and development (Holmes et al., 2015; Schulenkorf, 2010). Moreover, there remains limited empirical enquiry around supporting factors that are needed for cause champions to foster meaningful impact (Hoekman et al., 2019). This study aims to address this gap by examining the resources necessary for cause champions to thrive.

While cause champions play a crucial role in driving social change, their contributions remain difficult to capture using conventional monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) practices. MEL in SFD remains heavily outcome-driven and continues to prioritise predefined metrics over lived experiences. This creates challenges for monitoring and evaluating social outcomes, which are often intangible and unobservable. As a result, such contributions have often been met with scepticism, oversight, and undervaluation by funders and partners (Lee et al., 2013). To better understand how these intangible contributions can be recognised and leveraged, this study is theoretically underpinned by Barney's (1991) resource-based view (RBV), which recognises how critical resources interact to enhance an organisation's competitive advantage. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What resources are needed to support cause champions?
- How do these resources interact to provide support for cause champions?
- What implications do our results have for MEL practices in an SFD programme?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cause Champions in SFD

SFD programmes have an intentional focus on leveraging sports to achieve non-sport-related social change, and have been shown to have a positive influence on public health, on the socialisation of children, youths, and adults, on the social inclusion of disadvantaged people, and more (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). In SFD, sports can be leveraged in two distinct approaches, "sport-plus" and "plus-sport" (Coalter & Taylor, 2010). The sport-plus approach, to put it briefly, positions sports as the primary activity to be engaged in by individuals, with different social outcomes being integrated alongside it. In contrast, plus-sport programmes prioritise development outcomes, using sports primarily as a tool to attract and engage participants.

Operating within resource-constrained environments, SFDs are increasingly tasked with finding creative ways to address complex social issues to sustain their operations. In this context, cause champions have

emerged as a promising social innovation strategy for SFD programmes. Unlike social entrepreneurs, who create structured ventures for social impact (Cardella et al., 2021; Constantin et al., 2020) or change agents who facilitate community participation and network-building (Schulenkorf, 2010), cause champions draw on their lived experiences to mentor, advocate for, and inspire others within their communities. This distinction was evident in our case study, where their active engagement played a crucial part in both programme delivery and participant support.

Scholarly work in SFD has focused on the positive impact of cause champions. Hoekman et al. (2019) identified re-engaged participants as key drivers of organisational success. They served as programme culture experts, role models, and mentors. By drawing on their local knowledge, lived experiences and cultural understanding, these individuals were able to represent their communities meaningfully (Hoekman et al., 2019). They also contributed to creating a "family feel" within an SFD programme by offering social support that extended beyond sporting participation, which aligns with previous research on the benefits of familial environments in SFD. For instance, Keane et al. (2021) suggested that proactively identifying and utilising key champions can serve as a mechanism for translating the integration of SFD outcomes into "on the ground" practice. However, there remains limited empirical inquiry into the resources needed to sustain support for cause champions to thrive. Certain elements such as time and face-to-face contact have enabled the building of rapport and communication channels with stakeholders (Hoekman et al., 2019; Keane et al., 2021). Yet, it remains unclear what socio-managerial factors, such as interpersonal dynamics between stakeholders and resource management, can provide greater support for the implementation of cause champions in programmes (Barreira et al., 2022; Hoekman et al., 2019). Broader literature on peer leadership in community sports programmes suggests that providing education in both technical skills and practical knowledge can enhance an individual's sense of leadership (Christensen et al., 2022). Other studies have identified that parents and programme staff can facilitate the transfer and learning of social skills (Newman et al., 2020) and establish opportunities that can foster positive relationships and responsibility for a long-term impact on intervention participants (Crisp, 2020). Furthermore, valuing and recognising adolescents, along with supporting informal and experiential learning, is crucial in engaging cause champions (Vertonghen et al., 2017). In our case study, we aim to identify the resources that support cause champions and offer MEL practices that both value their contributions and enhance organisational learning.

2.2. MEL Practices for SFD

MEL practices are systematic approaches that assess progress, evaluate outcomes, and facilitate continuous improvement (Coalter, 2009). Monitoring often refers to regular, systematic collection and analysis of information, whereas evaluation is the process of undertaking a systematic and objective examination of the monitored information (Coalter, 2009). Both monitoring and evaluation processes are often seen as accountability processes (Kay, 2016), with the learning component often less emphasised. Without a strong learning component, SFD programmes are vulnerable to missed opportunities to evolve and navigate contextual complexities (Levermore, 2011).

MEL in SFD has been a critically discussed research area with growing calls for more practical, robust, and diverse evaluative approaches (Engelhardt, 2018; Sherry et al., 2024). Most SFD programmes are monitored and evaluated to accommodate the requirements of funders and ensure accountability. However, many MEL frameworks are often developed from the Global North and/or top-down perspectives (Harris, 2018;

LeCrom & Dwyer, 2015; Nicholls et al., 2011). Jeanes and Lindsey (2014) acknowledged the influence of power dynamics between the Global North and South on MEL practices in SFD. Global North donors often prioritise quantifiable metrics and top-down evaluation models, which may not align with the lived experiences of SFD staff and participants. As a result, SFD staff may fear negative consequences if results do not align with funders' expectations (Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014). Furthermore, short and externally driven evaluators also fail to capture community-driven insights, hindering opportunities for authentic learning and programme adaptations.

In response, SFD researchers have shifted towards alternative methodologies that emphasise a bottom-up approach and place practitioners and/or participants at the centre of evaluation frameworks. Various studies have adopted activist (Luguetti, 2024) and/or participatory action research (Burnett, 2008; L. M. Hayhurst, 2020; McSweeney, 2023; Rivard & Mitchell, 2013; R. Smith et al., 2021). This includes qualitative methods of interviews, observations, and visual methods through photography or video. Ahmad (2021) challenges these power imbalances and advances co-constructed MEL approaches involving multiple stakeholders. They conducted workshops to equip staff with the knowledge and skills necessary to develop MEL systems within their organisation. This collaborative decision-making process can enable empowerment and value staff efforts. Building on this perspective, our study extends this focus to cause champions, exploring how their voices can be centred in evaluation processes to enhance organisational learning.

2.3. Theoretical Framework: Barney's RBV

This study is theoretically underpinned by Barney's (1991) RBV approach, which assumes organisations within an industry possess diverse resources. These resources are unique to each organisation, not uniformly distributed, and are not easily transferable or replicated. These resources can provide organisations with a sustainable competitive advantage over other organisations in the same field, depending on the extent to which a resource is valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable.

Barney (1991) described as encompassing the various assets, capabilities, organisational processes, organisation attributes, information and knowledge that an organisation controls and use to implement strategies aimed at enhancing its efficiency and effectiveness. Such resources can be broadly categorised into three types: physical resources (i.e., physical infrastructures, raw materials), human capital resources (i.e., knowledge and experience of staff), and organisational capital resources (i.e., organisational culture, trust, and relationships). These resources can also be classified based on their tangibility. Tangible resources include all physical items an organisation possesses, whereas intangible resources are non-physical assets. The RBV provides a theoretical perspective for managers to understand the flow of their resources, their interactions, and how these interactions can impact the outcomes of the organisation (see also Babiak & Willem, 2016; L. Lindsey, 2008; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2015; Vail, 2007). This study aims to identify the resources needed to support cause champions and to understand how such resources interact to provide support for cause champions to thrive.

As SFD organisations become increasingly institutionalised and professionalised (McSweeney et al., 2021), competition for critical resources such as funding, skilled staff, and partnerships has also intensified (Hambrick et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2018). Choi et al. (2023) highlighted that SFD nonprofits experience chronic resource deficiency, which limits their ability to deliver long-term organisational impact. For instance, MacIntosh et al. (2015) noted that funding and human resources are major challenges in sustaining and

achieving programme outcomes. Thus, resource procurement and prioritisation are important for organisational sustainability, especially for early-stage SFD organisations (Choi et al., 2023). In the broader literature, intangible resources are considered more valuable for organisational success (Won & Chelladurai, 2016). Intangible assets in nonprofit organisations include knowledge, positive relationships between the organisation and participants, loyalty, and commitment (Buonomo et al., 2020). Effective management of intangible assets not only enhances an organisation's competitive advantage but also fosters greater commitment and productivity (Buonomo et al., 2020). The RBV acts as a valuable framework to explore the various resources that support cause champions. Further, the RBV emphasises the importance of unobservable factors, as inimitable and non-substitutable resources are more likely to be sources of competitive advantage, as they can act as barriers to other competitors (Barney, 1991).

3. Methodology

3.1. SportCares, Singapore

SportCares was selected as an interesting case study due to its maturity as a well-established organisation operating for over a decade, its sustained funding, and its innovative approach of including cause champions as a programmatic feature. Established in 2012, SportCares is dedicated to leveraging sport as a force for social good. The philanthropic arm of Sport Singapore offers various sport-related programmes and initiatives to at-risk communities to promote inclusivity, resilience, and holistic development to foster positive social outcomes for a more cohesive society (SportCares, n.d.-a). Their initiatives focus on building values through sport to promote life-skill development and community engagement with volunteering opportunities. All youth programmes under SportCares are targeted towards youth aged 13–21.

This study focused on the SportCares Champions Leadership Programme (SCLP)—a plus-sport initiative that offers a leadership track in parallel to SportCares' regular programme of sporting activities. The programme recruits approximately 30 prospects a year. The champions are selected based on their active participation in an existing SportCares sporting programme and demonstrate qualities, including the willingness to learn, a heart to serve, and a strong commitment to the programme (SportCares, n.d.-b). For SportCares, the role of a champion is to organise, manage, and facilitate projects of social causes of their choice (SportCares, n.d.-b). Champions also serve as volunteer leaders at various social events throughout the year and can take up additional roles, for example, acting as an emcee for specific events. In addition to the SCLP, SportCares offer similar youth development programmes including the Youth Coaching Development Programme, Mentoring Programme, and Industry Traineeship.

3.2. Positionality and Ethics

The positionality of the research team also influenced both data collection and analysis. Author 1, with Southeast Asian roots and a Western academic background, conducted interviews that enabled horizontal openness and the ability to engage with participants in local dialects and jargon that supported rapport-building. Author 3 acted as our Singapore-based expert who supported data analysis by providing contextual insights and validated findings. Authors 2, 4, and 5 are active researchers in sport management with expertise across varied methodologies and research domains, including nonprofit sport organisations and innovation and resource management.

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the first author's University. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees and stored confidentially. Prior to analysis, data were pseudonymised.

4. Data Collection

4.1. Sampling

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with SportCares' cause champions ($n = 8$), staff members ($n = 7$), and coaches ($n = 3$). Cause champions were active participants in a SportCares sporting programme who assumed a leadership role to assist with social engagements and volunteer initiatives. Cause champions are primarily guided by SportCares staff who support them in carrying out their responsibilities. SportCares coaches work closely with cause champions in the sporting programmes, providing both technical coaching and leadership mentorship as part of the SLCP. Given their involvement with cause champions, they were selected for the interviews to gain a deeper understanding and insights into the support systems that enabled cause champions to thrive. SportCares was instructed to select the most essential cause champions and coaches based on their level of engagement and involvement with the SCLP. Table 1 outlines the participants' characteristics.

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

Sample	Number of samples	Involvement level in the SCLP	Role in the SCLP
Cause champions	8	High	Participant: organises, manages, and facilitates a social project
Staff members	7	Medium/High	Oversees overall programme operations and provides guidance, support, and coordination to cause champions
Coaches	3	Medium	Offers mentorship in technical skills and leadership development

4.2. Interviews

The semi-structured interview was conducted by Author 1 during their one-month research stay at SportCares (Singapore) in August 2023. The interviews were conducted in English. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, Author 1's field notes from their observations and informal conversations with various SportCares stakeholders also supported the data analysis process. All interviewees were asked a general question regarding key success factors of the SportCares SCLP programme. The interview focus varied depending on the interviewee's role. For instance, cause champions were asked what resources and/or support they needed to effectively fulfil their responsibilities (i.e.: What helps you carry out your duties?). Meanwhile, staff members and coaches were asked about fostering engagement and building rapport with cause champions and the strategies they employ (i.e.: What strategies do you use to create a safe and supportive environment for cause champions?). Interviewees were also asked to share their perspective on monitoring and evaluating approaches (i.e.: In what ways can cause champions to be more involved?). The average duration of interviews was 75 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, except for one coach interview, as the raw file was corrupted. Field notes were used as a substitute. The in-depth interviews allowed for probing to deepen the understanding of the processes

that helped to understand the resources that supported the cause champions to fill out their role in the best possible way.

4.3. Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were inputted into NVivo for data organisation. Clarke and Braun's (2017) six-step thematic analysis was adopted for this study to emphasise the subjectivity of the researchers and their engagement with the data during interpretation. First, Author 1 became familiar with the data by re-reading the interview transcripts. Author 1's field notes also supported this step to assist with recollection. Second, transcripts were deductively coded through the RBV framework (Barney, 1991). During this step, the various resources that supported cause champions were identified. Third, themes that emerged inductively based on the research questions were coded as subthemes. Fourth, Author 1 and Author 2 reviewed the themes to either confirm or revise to ensure coherency. Fifth, Author 3 acted as a "critical friend" (B. Smith & McGannon, 2018) to ensure the quality of the coding process. Lastly, appropriate quotes were selected to support each theme. SportCares staff were invited to check and verify the analysis results. Table 2 outlines the themes, subthemes, and key quotations.

Table 2. Overview of thematic analysis with supporting quotes.

Resources	Main Theme	Quotes
Physical tangible	Sustained physical resources	"I'm not worried at all; it doesn't matter to me because the funding is always there and there are always [physical] resources for us to use to benefit the youths' lives" (Staff 2).
Human intangible	Invested human capital	"She would know how our [cause champion] body language changes, and then she would come straight to us and be with us…she is always there for us" (Champion 2). "You really need to balance and get to know them…it's not always focused on the training. It starts from the week itself, how you [as a coach] engage them [cause champions], how you [as a coach] would text them [cause champions] in a group chat or even reach out with them personally or individually" (Coach 1). "The fact that she gathers the [cause champions] together, socialises with them…get [cause champions] thoughts and feedback around volunteering, what are their [cause champions] passion or interest…that is a lot of motivating factors behind why they end up doing what they [cause champions] are doing" (Staff 3).

Table 2. (Cont.) Overview of thematic analysis with supporting quotes.

Resources	Main Theme	Quotes
Organisation intangible	Emotional authenticity	"Sincerity is important because if you [cause champion] are not sincere, then there's no point for you [prospect] to volunteer" (Champion 3).
		"I think a key factor for success with the participants is sincerity, because if they [cause champion] can realise that the coach is sincere in what he [coach] does or what's right with him [coach]…but of course it takes time, it takes trust, it takes respect…and I also want to add that the push and pull factor is very important. So, you can't be that guy [a sincere coach] all the time. You really need to balance" (Coach 1).
		"I think what works to create a safe space is the conversations we have" (Coach 2).
Interaction of resources	Sub-themes	
Culture of care	Boundary-spanning	"[cause champion] might look at us as a father figure or a brother figure that they can perhaps share the most intimate details or whatever do you want to share…and then we [coaches] can possibly maybe help them in a way" (Coach 1).
	Social learning	"I would just try to let them communicate about whatever they're going through, and then if I understand, you know I'll try to help" (Champion 1).
		"When we [staff] do things here, we [staff] always put the participants [including cause champions], the youth and the children at the forefront of everything" (Staff 1).
		"We [staff and coaches] share the same vision as well as the objectives of the programme, which is to first and foremost to build their [champions and participants] character" (Staff 2).
	Shared vision	"I would like to see eventually 1 or 2 [cause champions] to be able to be part of the board of governance" (Staff 1).

5. Results and Discussion

Our analysis identified various resources necessary to support cause champions. This included sustained physical resources, invested human capital, and emotional authenticity in the organisation. The most frequently discussed resources for our study were human and organisational capital, both intangible. Tangible resources were identified—but not elaborated—by interviewees as they were effectively sustained by the organisation. The interaction of these resources cultivated a culture of care. These findings propose alternative MEL practices that focus on intangible and relational processes. Figure 1 depicts the main findings of this study.

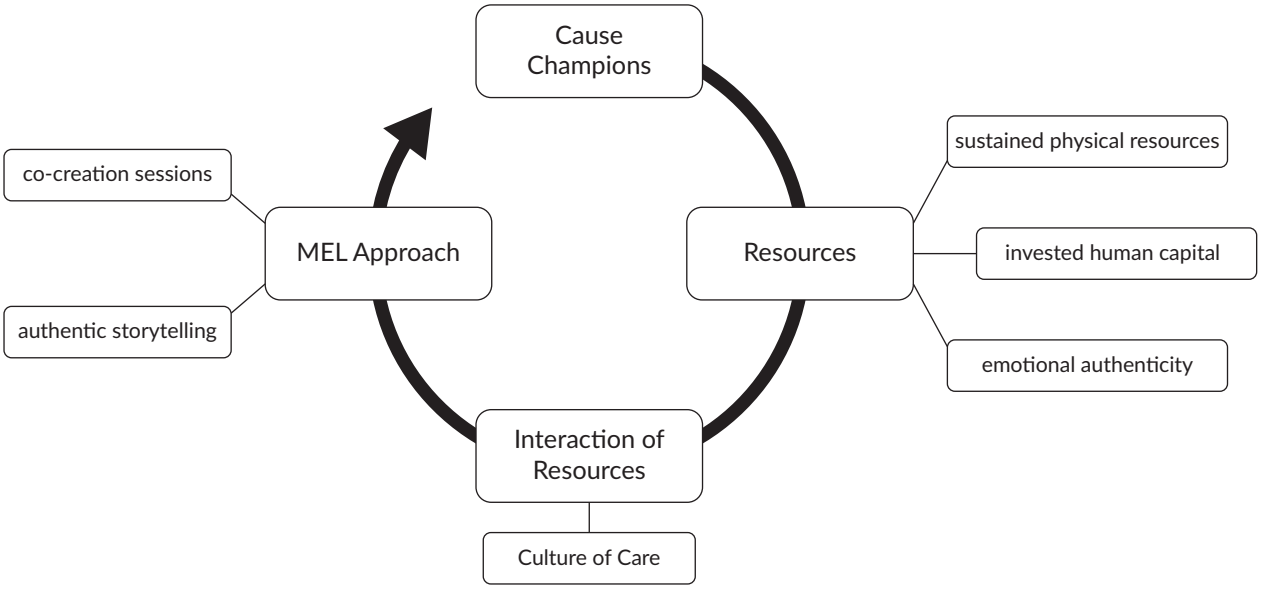

Figure 1. Identified resources, interaction of resources, and informed MEL approach.

In the following, we ask: What resources support cause champions?

5.1. Tangible Resource: Sustained Physical Resources

SportCares staff expressed that tangible resources such as monetary funding and accessible facilities were not deemed as a primary issue for the organisation. "I am not worried at all; it does not matter to me because the funding is always there and there are always [physical] resources for us to use to benefit the youths' lives" (Staff 2). This sustained supply of tangible resources has enabled SportCares as an organisation to shift its focus towards other organisational processes, such as positive relation-building with cause champions and ensuring positive and safe environments. Our findings differed from existing SFD literature, which demonstrated the regular struggle SFD programmes face with sustaining funding and/or infrastructure due to the growing resource competition (Choi et al., 2023; MacIntosh et al., 2015; Welty Peachey et al., 2020). In line with the RBV, although tangible resources are essential for operational stability, they are not necessarily rare, inimitable, or non-substitutable, and therefore may not provide a sustainable competitive advantage (Won & Chelladurai, 2023). Thus, our study recognises that by alleviating such critical challenges, SFD organisations can re-prioritise and focus on positive relation-building, which was highlighted as a critical success factor for the creation of safe spaces (Freitas et al., 2024; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014).

5.2. Human Resource: Invested Human Capital

Human capital refers to the knowledge and experience of staff within an organisation (Barney, 1991). Cause champions viewed staff and coaches as essential support systems, with their influence dependent on the extent they invested in them. Staff members acknowledged that it is important to put the cause champion at the forefront of everything they do: "When we [staff] do things here, we [staff] always put the participants [including cause champions], the youth and the children at the forefront of everything" (Staff 1). Staff members also describe the efforts that other colleagues may invest in cause champions.

> The fact that she gathers the [cause champions] together, socialises with them…get [cause champions] thoughts and feedback around volunteering, what are their [cause champions] passion or interest…that is a lot of motivating factors behind why they end up doing what they [cause champions] are doing. (Staff 3)

Similarly, coaches also exhibited efforts that stem beyond technical sports skills and create opportunities for life-skill development. For instance, one coach described:

> You really need to balance and get to know them…it's not always that we focus on our training. It starts from the week itself, how you [coach] engage them [cause champions], how you [coach] can text them [cause champions] in a group chat or even need to reach out to them personally or individually. (Coach 1)

Here, we recognise that efforts exerted by human capital extend beyond their role description. These efforts are recognised by cause champions: "She would know how our [cause champion] body language changes, and then she would come straight to us and be with us…she is always there for us" (Champion 2). The extent of their efforts facilitates the creation of safe spaces for cause champions to comfortably execute their responsibilities. This aligns with existing SFD literature, which emphasises the need for staff support (Newman et al., 2020) and rapport-building as a predictor for positive youth development (McDonough et al., 2013).

5.3. Organisational Resource: Emotional Authenticity

An important organisational resource that was exhibited throughout the ecosystem of SportCares was sincerity and/or a culture of emotional authenticity. Cause champions noted that sincerity expressed by themselves was important for them to execute their role: "Sincerity is important because if you [champions] are not sincere, then there's no point for you [prospects] to volunteer" (Champion 3). This was also echoed by coaches:

> I think a key factor for success with the participants is sincerity, because if they [champions] can realise that the coach is sincere in what he [coach] does or what's right with him [coach]…but of course it takes time, it takes trust, it takes respect…and I also want to add that the push and pull factor is very important. So, you can't be the guy [a sincere coach] all the way. You really need to balance. (Coach 1)

This aligns with scholarly work that has recognised that youth workers and community sports coaches can foster stability and socially cohesive environments through the projection of their authentic selves (Crisp, 2024). The care they express and putting the interest of youth at the heart of their work can create positive and meaningful relations (Crisp, 2024).

In the following, we ask: How do these resources interact to impact cause champions?

Various resources were identified, but the intangible resources were shown to be the most influential to support cause champions. The way the resources interacted cultivated a culture of care, exhibited across the ecosystem of SportCares. These interactions extended beyond the provision of basic needs, fostering an emotional and relational support network that contributed to cause champions' sense of belonging, security,

and personal growth. As described: "We [staff and coaches] share the same vision as well as the objectives of the programme, which is to first and foremost to build their [champions and participants] character" (Staff 2).

The culture of care is sustained by the interactions between staff, coaches and champions. Effective communication between the individuals was fundamental in cultivating trust and emotional support. A coach emphasised: "I think what works to create a safe space is the conversations we [coaches] have [with participants and champions]" (Coach 2). Such conversations are consistent and open dialogue, which reinforces positive rapport-building. This illustrated the interconnected nature of resources, shaping a supportive environment for cause champions. The ability of staff and coaches to engage with cause champions on a deeper and personal level helped ensure that their challenges beyond the programme were acknowledged and addressed. Similarly, cause champions frequently viewed coaches as figures of guidance and support, in a familial manner. A coach described:

> [Cause champions] might look at us as a father figure or a brother figure that they can perhaps share the most intimate details or whatever do you want to share…and then we [coaches] can possibly maybe help them in a way. (Coach 1)

This relation reflects the boundary-spanning role coaches play within SportCares. This aligns with existing literature, which recognises that coaches can act as cultural bridges (Jeanes et al., 2019; Miller, 2008) that facilitate supportive relations between young people in the programme and wider communities. Coaches at SportCares are not just instructive but also offer the emotional warmth and mentorship that enables a cause champion to feel recognised and valued (Jeanes et al., 2019; Whittaker, 2010). It is the emotional security between coaches and cause champions that can be a crucial factor for personal growth and development (Van der Veken et al., 2022).

More importantly, the culture of care is reinforced through social learning. The valued behaviours demonstrated by coaches are learnt, positively reinforced, and imitated by cause champions. This aligns with the social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977, pp. 141–154) that suggests behaviours are observed, reinforced, and imitated within social contexts. A champion demonstrated: "I would just try to let them communicate about whatever they're going through and then if I understand, you know, I'll try to help" (Champion 1). As representatives of their communities, cause champions to draw upon their own experiences to relate and create connections with participants, often offering the care they once lacked. This interaction fosters social capital that can build stronger, positive, helpful social networks (Coalter, 2007; Crisp, 2020).

In the following, we ask: What are the implications for MEL?

Our findings recognised that certain crucial resources support cause champions, and impact emerges through their interactions. This raises a critical question for MEL practices: How do we track and assess these resources, particularly those of an intangible nature, to continuously support cause champions? Monitoring and evaluating social outcomes have always been considered a challenge, often due to being intangible and unobservable (Lee et al., 2013). As a result, these outcomes can be met with scepticism or even overlooked, and thus undervalued and underleveraged to sponsors, partners, or investors (Lee et al., 2013). Further, government and distant bodies can impose unrealistic policy targets and goals that reflect

very little of the practitioner and targeted sample (Collins, 2010; Nicholls et al., 2011). Although the evaluation of social outcomes has typically been qualitative, attempts have been made to quantify, standardise, and systematise measures (Lee et al., 2013). However, we argue that this can also take away the potential for progressive organisational learning.

As discussed, such social learning is demonstrated by cause champions. Staff and coaches instil values in cause champions, who in turn share those values with participants. However, this also reflects a one-directional influence. To create a more holistic, bottom-up, and human-centric programme, SportCares can leverage the role of cause champions as representatives of their communities by integrating their input into programme designs. This is particularly relevant in contexts where the target community has had limited involvement in the initial programme design. Keane et al. (2021) emphasises that translating a development plan into effective on-the-ground practice requires investment in face-to-face engagement, rapport-building with local stakeholders, and reduced staff turnover. In this regard, cause champions can serve as communicative bridges that help validate and redesign the programme to align with community aspirations.

In our study, we recognise that learning can occur throughout a programme's life cycle, rather than only at given time points. Concrete methods in SFD that are recognised but not widely adopted include co-creation sessions (Horne et al., 2023; Maenhout et al., 2023; Morgan & Parker, 2023) and digital storytelling (L. M. Hayhurst, 2020; R. Smith et al., 2021; Wijnen & Wildschut, 2015). Co-creation sessions are deemed a more acceptable, contextually appropriate, and effective strategy for programme development (Maenhout et al., 2023). Individuals from vulnerable, disadvantaged, and/or at-risk populations are often not invited to express their perspectives, with other significant figures typically representing them instead. However, our interviewees emphasised the value of amplifying the voices of cause champions: "I would like to see eventually one or two [cause champions] to be able to be part of the board of governance" (Staff 1). The involvement of young leaders in sports organisations has gained increased attention in scholarly work (Strittmatter et al., 2021). Involving young people in decision-making processes within sport organisations can help build both instrumental and relational networks, enabling them to translate their experiences into collective action (I. Lindsey et al., 2023). Thus, co-creation aims to put the participant at the centre of evaluation and creates opportunities for learning from the participant's perspective.

Similarly, some SFD programmes have adopted digital storytelling techniques (L. M. Hayhurst, 2020). For instance, through methods like photovoice, which involves visual narratives that create a compelling account of experience (Gubrium & Harper, 2009) or podcasts, which are digitally produced as audio, video, and/or text files and often a series of downloadable episodes (R. Smith et al., 2021). These methods have enabled greater engagement of socially diverse stakeholders, fostered more authentic relationships, and encouraged the expression of alternative voices (J. G. Hayhurst, 2017). From a MEL standpoint, this also brings authenticity to the stories told and shared, contributing to more rigorous qualitative data (R. Smith et al., 2021). By centralising the voices of the targeted community in the storytelling process, programmes can cultivate more authentic narratives and foster a sense of ownership among the participants (R. Smith et al., 2021; Stewart-Withers et al., 2017). SFD programmes among Indigenous communities have pioneered culturally appropriate approaches. This includes *Talanoa*, a traditional Pacific practice of open, face-to-face discussion grounded in embodiment, emotions, and empathy (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Stewart-Withers et al., 2017) and/or *hui or wānanga* within Māori communities, which are collective gatherings for sharing knowledge, experiences, and making decisions together (Lewis & Crombie, 2008).

Nevertheless, researchers in SFD have encountered challenges with such approaches, including navigating sensitive issues of trust and rapport building (Luguetti et al., 2023), inequitable access to digital technologies (Gubrium et al., 2016), and questions around research positionality (R. Smith et al., 2021). However, SportCares has maintained the necessary resources to help counter these challenges and should therefore be leveraged.

6. Strengths and Limitations

This study highlighted the strategic importance of intangible resources such as care, authenticity, and invested human capital to foster organisational learning and cultivate safe and relational spaces. Through RBV, the study demonstrated how internal and intangible assets can be valuable towards programme effectiveness and sustainability. The study also introduces the concept of a *culture of care* as a meaningful intangible asset to understand how safe spaces are internally created and sustained. This study contributes to the growing call for MEL practices to evolve beyond a tool for accountability towards more learning-centred and participatory approaches. By advocating for methods such as storytelling and co-creation, this can authentically capture lived experiences, strengthen feedback loops, and foster a greater sense of ownership among relevant stakeholders. These participatory approaches place the participant at the centre of evaluation and promote collaborative decision-making that empowers and values the contribution of all stakeholders, cause champions, staff, and coaches. By adopting more inclusive and reflexive MEL frameworks, SFD organisation can ensure that learning is integrated into their programmes, strengthen their competitive advantage, and strive for long-term impact.

However, this research is not without limitations. As a single case study conducted within a mature and well-resourced SFD organisation in Singapore, the findings may not be fully generalisable to other organisational contexts. For instance, SportCares benefits from a reliable stream of physical resources, allowing it to prioritise relational and community development. This may not be a common reality for SFD organisations, as we understand many organisations, particularly within the Global South, face chronic resource deficiencies (Choi et al., 2023). Moreover, the role of cause champions emerged in a context where the target community had limited input into the programme design. Thus, their function may differ in more bottom-up and co-design SFD initiatives.

While the RBV framework highlighted the value of intangible resources and their interaction, theoretical integration with models that are more focused on programme design, such as Programme Theory (Coalter, 2013), could offer a deeper understanding of the impact pathways. Therefore, we encourage future research to explore such theoretical intersections. Nevertheless, this study advances the conversation on how MEL frameworks can benefit from recognising and leveraging intangible resources. If these resources are not effectively leveraged, organisations may miss valuable learning opportunities that could be integrated to improve programme design and delivery. Thus, by placing organisational learning at the core of evaluative practices, SFD organisations can become more adaptive, inclusive, and grounded in the communities they serve.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Ripple Effects Mapping Within a Process Evaluation of Sport for Development Provision in England

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Abstract

Evaluating the impact of sport for development is fraught with practical and methodological challenges. The evaluator is often presented with complex and messy social realities compounded by ill-defined interventions with hard-to-follow outcomes. Further, those subject to an impact evaluation can feel under the spotlight with little contribution to the research programme, which complicates the potentially informative learning and developmental processes of the evaluation. This article provides an introduction to ripple effects mapping (REM) as an evaluation technique and draws on the case study of a community-based, physical-activity intervention within the UK. This article will demonstrate the utility of REM as a co-productive technique for exploring programme outcomes but also as a tool to capture and understand the impact of the programme on participants. Through the presentation and analysis of the example REM, produced collaboratively with programme participants and stakeholders, the discussion illustrates the suitability and potential of REM as a process evaluation tool. The article presents REM in the context of evaluating sport for development practices and provides a critique and reflection about the refinement of REM as a robust evaluation tool.

Keywords

community engagement; evaluation; impact; participatory methods; physical activity; ripple effects mapping; sport for development

1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises sport as an important enabler of sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). A priority area identified by the UN General Assembly is the

promotion and facilitation of research, monitoring, and evaluation in sports for development and peace (United Nations, 2022). This priority reflects the need to better understand the potential outcomes and impacts of community sport-based programmes, but also why such changes occur and under what circumstances. However, understanding the "impact" of sport for development and what counts as "evidence" remains a pressing issue (Adams & Harris, 2023; Coalter, 2013; Daniels et al., 2018; Harris & Adams, 2016). This article presents a novel approach to understanding impact through the application of ripple effects mapping (REM) within the evaluation of a national sport for development programme in England. Given the range of potential outcomes sought through sport-based programmes for change, it comes as no surprise that impact evaluation continues to be fraught with a number of challenges. The focus of this article is to reflect upon and discuss the utility of REM within an evaluation setting and critically assess the strengths and limitations of the technique. REM workshop results are presented and analysed to give examples of how outputs may appear and how they can be interpreted, yet also what further methods can be applied to triangulate findings and add depth. The following section outlines several of these common challenges, before introducing REM as a technique. The purpose here is not to suggest REM is a straightforward panacea to remedy the trials and tribulations of conducting robust evaluation, but rather to demonstrate both its evaluative potential and current limitations. This article is therefore guided by the following two research questions: How can REM be used to understand the *pathways to impact* of sport for development programmes? What are the limitations of REM and how can the technique be further refined to address these limitations?

2. Literature Review

Evidencing the outcomes and impact of sport for development remains a challenging task. To begin with, the enduring belief of some practitioners and policymakers in the view of sport as "unambiguously wholesome and healthy activity in both a physical and moral sense" (Smith & Waddington, 2004, p. 281) is often seen to negate the need for robust evaluation and evidence. Furthermore, such programmes are interventions in a *messy* social context (Daniels et al., 2018), often with "ill-defined with hard-to-follow outcomes" (Coalter, 2007, p. 552). Even when organisations do publicly present their impact, it is common to find that reporting is characterised by vague programme aims and objectives, limited details on the measurement tools used, and an over-reliance on anecdotal and self-reported evidence (Brazier et al., 2024). Even when the reporting of evidence is more robust and systematic, in multi-faceted social interventions it remains difficult to attribute any measured change to a single programme component (Coalter, 2013) or isolate factors with sufficient dexterity to prove the direct impact of sport-based approaches (Lindsey & Chapman, 2017).

Furthermore, the desire for more evidence has often been entrenched within positivist paradigms that dismiss alternative forms of knowledge and instead promote the desire to generate stronger statistical data (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012; Piggin et al., 2009). A preoccupation with positivist methodologies in evaluating sport-based social programmes has been, in part, according to Kay (2009), a product of the political desire for evidence-based policy and increased accountability which encourages the use of measuring methods. So even with resounding calls for more evidence, in the context of such wide-ranging, amorphous, and often contested definitions it is not wholly clear what would constitute proof of success (Coalter, 2013).

However, all is not lost. Those calling for a paradigm shift in evaluating the social impact of sport for development programmes who want to enable richer interpretations using qualitative participatory methods

alongside quantitative measures (Levermore, 2011) would likely be encouraged by the burgeoning body of work that draws upon theory-based evaluation methodologies. This work aims not only understand *if* a programme works, but *why*, *for whom*, *and in what circumstances* (Coalter, 2012; Daniels et al., 2018; Harris, 2018; Verkooijen et al., 2020). The emerging generation of insights around the social processes and relationships within sport for development programmes has coincided with more critical questions about the role of the evaluator. There is a recognition that the exertion of power pervades all aspects of the evaluation process including the production and dissemination of knowledge (Adams & Harris, 2014; Kay, 2012; Lindsey & Jeanes, 2023). As such, approaches that enable greater collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and participants throughout the evaluation have been advocated on the basis that they provide a fertile basis for evaluation-as-learning (Brazier et al., 2024; Harris, 2018; Mansfield, 2016; Shulha et al., 2016). The following section outlines the innovative and participatory REM technique adopted within the evaluation of a nationwide sport for development programme. This technique enabled the collection of rich insight into essential programme processes and indicative outcome pathways, whilst also remaining sensitised to how evaluation exercises are influenced by different stakeholders' perspectives about the purpose and utilisation of evidence.

REM has recently gained popularity among those seeking to understand the impacts of complex social interventions. REM has been used to explore intended and unexpected programme impacts within the fields of health promotion (Nobles et al., 2022b; Washburn et al., 2020), education (Peterson & Skolits, 2019), inequality and poverty alleviation (Welborn et al., 2016), community development (Sadeghzadeh et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2020), and physical activity provision (Nobles et al., 2022a; Rodriguez Espinosa et al., 2023). While there are variations as to how the method is employed, especially in the analytical stages (see Chazdon et al., 2017; Nobles et al., 2022b), the cornerstone of the technique is participatory workshops with stakeholders who have had significant engagement and experience of the programme. REM explores programme implementation from multiple perspectives, and as such typically aligns with interpretivist social research (Taylor et al., 2020). REM, according to Chazdon et al. (2017), is highly influenced by appreciative inquiry. Early approaches to REM have typically included peer-to-peer interviews at the start of the session where participants (in pairs) are given an interview guide and take turns interviewing one another. This allows participants to share their perspectives of how a programme has impacted them, a meaningful experience, or indicate changes that they have viewed or experienced as a result of the programme. These stories are then relayed back to the entire group as the evaluator/facilitator supports respondents to co-produce a visual map illustrating the development and interconnection of these stories. However, not all REM workshops follow the peer-to-peer approach, especially those that involve the ongoing maintenance of a map over weeks and months (see Nobles et al., 2022b). Chazdon et al. (2017) advise facilitators to provide an interview schedule for participants and in some instances detail how an initial "set-up" presentation at the beginning of a REM workshop can be used to coach novice interviewers on the basics of qualitative interviewing. Further details on peer-to-peer interviewing will be discussed in the methodology section.

Chazdon et al. (2017) outlined three mapping approaches (web mapping, in-depth rippling, and theming and rippling) and utilises the community capitals framework as a primary framework for analysis (see Sadeghzadeh et al., 2022; Welborn et al., 2016). Recently, Nobles et al. (2022b) added a fourth timeline approach which they argue is more familiar to practitioners and helps to outline impact pathways over time. In many cases REM workshops are performed retrospectively, however, Nobles et al. (2022b) argue that mapping activities should run concurrently at regular intervals adding a prospective element rather than

being purely retrospective. This is in part due to feedback by REM participants that sessions have acted as a reflective tool helping them to identify impactful aspects of their work. As Taylor et al. (2020) note, REM sessions aided participants in unpacking and sharing the intricacies of their work, building a sense of collective understanding, and coalescing around programme goals. To date, the pairing of REM with traditional qualitative methods has yet to be explored by sport for development researchers. Conducting REM workshops in combination with in-depth qualitative work can help to unpack the nuance of decision-making and experience which may not always be surfaced during a REM session. Utilising REM to explore the programme's impacts (retrospectively and prospectively) can support an analysis of contribution as researchers can examine the context that programme impacts occur within. This can help to produce a rich and informative picture of the intervention's impact that is readily communicable to other stakeholders and funders.

3. Methodology

3.1. Case Study Selection

The case is a national physical activity programme that aims to increase physical activity levels in deprived communities in England. The overarching management structure of the national programme consists of 25 local project areas which are managed locally by a consortium. Within the consortia is one lead organisation (LO) where the two main job roles are housed—the strategic lead (who oversees the general trend and vision of the project) and the project lead (PL), who does the day-to-day engagement and coordination of the project. Nationally, the programme has adopted a place-based approach which can be understood as part of the general trend towards localism within developmental approaches at the national level of policy (Weck et al., 2021). Place-based approaches signify a reliance upon key local actors (place-partnerships), specific place-based regeneration strategies (utilising the facets of culture as pro-development tools, for example), local level empowerment, and adopting strategies that are contextualised to the socio-cultural, geographical environment in which they are meant to perform. The above-noted strategies are all meant to combat social exclusion to work strategically with localities on the basis of their strengths and weaknesses (Weck et al., 2021).

At the national level, there was originally a strategic preference for football-focused activities, though in practice this is very loosely applied at a local project level. After 18 months of delivery, the national programme had delivered over 10,000 sessions and had a total of 118,000 attendances with 8,800 unique individuals, 71% of whom lived in England's most deprived wards (defined by a high Indices of Multiple Deprivation score). The purpose of this evaluation was to capture reported programme outcomes and impacts and understand how and why these occurred at a local project level. Not all project areas were selected for in-depth REM case study work. Local projects were selected on the basis that they (a) showed a commitment to community engagement, often through innovative practice, (b) demonstrated success in engaging typically 'hard to reach' groups in physical activity, and (c) the degree to which the project contributed towards the national strategic outcomes.

This article presents the findings from a project we will call here Active Ladies (AL). Within the AL project, over 85% of participants are from Global Majority backgrounds (e.g., Black/Caribbean, Pakistani, Bengali, Arab, Indian, and "other Asian backgrounds"). The AL project was alone responsible for 30% of all participation

from Global Majority women across the entirety of the 25 national programmes (as of September 2023 data). Furthermore, AL is the only project to hire a Muslim woman for the pivotal job role of PL. This was identified as significant because it reflected the place-based approach and ethos of the national programme in working with predominantly Muslim women, but also marked a change from the systemic issue of underrepresentation in sports development recruitment (Whitley & Welty Peachey, 2020). So this case was not selected on the basis of being representative of national provision; that is to say that the AL project was selected "not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something" (Eysenck, 1979, p. 9).

3.2. Recruitment

Sampling protocol for REM sessions suggests that participants should have *high involvement* with the project either as managers, participants, or wider stakeholders (see Chazdon et al., 2017). In retrospective impact mapping, a varied sample of project stakeholders is preferred (see Chazdon et al., 2017) while in concurrent timeline mapping (see Nobles et al., 2022b), smaller managerially focused groups are suggested. Following Chazdon et al. (2017), this evaluation included a range of stakeholders to capture a holistic snapshot of the AL project (see Table 1). The lead researcher developed a REM participant information sheet and relied upon the PL to disseminate this and recruit participants. The PL acted as the gatekeeper for participant recruitment and worked with the research team to finalise the range, experience, and background of desired participants. Prior to beginning fieldwork the evaluation research was granted ethical approval through their university ethics process. All evaluation participants were given an information sheet outlining the evaluation, their right to withdraw and how to do so, and details on how information would be used. It is worth noting that participation in the evaluation for the AL project is part of the contractual obligations for local projects in direct receipt of programme funding. However, the inclusion of all others (e.g., session participants) was entirely voluntary.

Table 1. REM session participants.

Stakeholder group	Number	Position/role/experience	Rationale
LO	5	PL and consortium members	Understanding planning and project development
National leadership team	1	Programme manager	Key relationship manager between project and national team
Project participants & volunteers	8	Project attendees	Understanding beneficial project actions and impact on participants
Local voluntary, community and social enterprises	5	Representatives from partner community organisations	Understanding relationships and impacts

3.3. Conducting a REM Workshop

The REM workshop explored here lasted approximately two hours and began with peer-to-peer interviewing, followed by the main participatory mapping exercise, and then ended with a reflection activity to identify key impact pathways. The lead researcher began the workshop with a ten-minute presentation about the workshop's goals and agenda. Participants were then put into pairs and provided with a peer-to-peer interview schedule for quality assurance. The schedule had one leading question and follow-up prompts:

- Can you think of an event or an experience related to your involvement with the project that you are really proud of?
  - What happened, what did you or others do?
  - Who was involved/impacted? What was their response?
  - Are you doing anything different now as a result of this?
  - What surprised you about this?
  - If you could summarize, what is the main point of learning in this story?

Participants were instructed to find an interview partner they hadn't worked with recently and given 7–8 minutes each to interview one another. They were asked to listen "with purpose," take detailed notes, and ask follow-up questions. Stories were then relayed back to the whole group with the lead researcher acting as facilitator during the radiant mind mapping exercise. Following Nobles et al. (2022b), key events were mapped along a timeline during the REM workshop and the researcher facilitated a group discussion that explored the story of the AL project from a multitude of perspectives. The researcher recorded events but also included qualitative comments where further context was needed, or to highlight significance. Participants, towards the end of the REM session, were asked as a group: What is the central, or most significant part of this story? Time was given to explore their responses. The result of the above process was the production of a REM vignette that explores not just *what* or *how* something was done, but *why* those activities were significant in the eyes of the participants. Hence, the approach contributes to the ongoing evolution of REM as an approach but also aligns with Taylor et al.'s (2020) claims of REM's power as an interpretivist tool to explore meanings within a given context (for further comprehensive practical guidance on conducting a REM workshop see Chazdon et al., 2017; for specifics on the timeline approach adopted here see Nobles et al., 2022b). Finally, the facilitator endeavored to adopt a reflexive approach, interrogating one's privilege and positionality which are identified as essential in utilising REM within this evaluation of sport for development, enabling the researchers to be sensitised to evaluator-respondent power relations.

3.4. Additional Data Collection and Analysis

A digitised version of the hand-captured REM output was created using Miro, a free mind-mapping software programme, which was preferred over other options (Vensim or XMind) due to its ease of use. As discussed above, the workshop recorded not just events, but participants comments and interpretations of these events (although not verbatim). Analytically, the research process embedded into its approach the *most significant change* (see Chazdon et al., 2017) approach which highlights the central or most important thematic construct of the REM workshop. In this article, the researchers have not veered from this theme of *the right person* (see Figure 3 and Section 4.2.2) as this was viewed as the agreed central aspect the REM map and was a thematic construct co-produced with those present.

The REM output and its findings (impact pathways) were then the focus of follow-up qualitative fieldwork, thereby adding a greater degree of rigour and robustness to the evaluation through the triangulation of methods (Tracy, 2010). A two-day follow-up site visit included eight formal semi-structured interviews with other programme staff and participants, and four site visits to observe key project delivery spaces and sessions—which also entailed ad hoc informal conversations about the programme with those in attendance. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim while field notes were taken by hand and also transcribed. Predominantly, and for the purposes of this article, qualitative materials were process-coded to

understand where on the timeline the comments fit. Important qualitative comments were selected to be included on the map in Miro based on the criteria of adding important context or significance. For example, Figure 2 is a timeline adaptation of interview material with the director of the LO which tells the story of the initial consultation period and how the findings underpinned approaches taken within the project (thus adding both context and significance to later temporal events). The purpose of this tranche of fieldwork was to rigourise and establish the credibility of the key impact pathways identified through the REM session, whilst also adding a richer understanding of the impact and value of the programme for participants and other stakeholders. Crucially, follow-up fieldwork enabled the evaluation team to add further details to the digitised map, strengthening and enriching the value of the map as an interpretive impact assessment tool.

4. Findings

4.1. Participant Experiences of REM

Participant reflections indicated that the session generated significant enthusiasm, a sense of momentum and pride in the project's efforts. For example, the PL described that the REM workshop helped validated her approach:

> The mapping exercise, bringing everyone together, was very impactful. I think it validated how I'm talking about the project…to know the feelings of other people really did validate for me that actually I'm on the right track. (PL)

Project participants also reflected positively. Given their evident feelings of affinity and connection to the AL project and the impact it has had on their lives, REM provided a space for them to speak openly about their experience and for it to be valued. For example, the participant comment below, shared among the group and reiterated during an audio-recorded interview, indicated how motivated she was to speak on the project's behalf.

> For me, this project gave me the first step to change my life. It was the first step in a new virtuous cycle for me. That is what I want to say and coming here to say it to everyone today, it is my joy.

From a strategic perspective, the REM workshop helped to solidify perspectives about *how* the project was having an impact. As the project's strategic leader described:

> I think it's taught us a lot of lessons. Like me personally, the team, but also organisationally as a whole. I've got absolute faith in the way that the project works, but I think the workshop has just helped to solidify that perspective.

In all, REM was viewed favourably by participants and especially by the project's leadership team who identified its capacity to stimulate learning and reflection and to solidify perspectives about what has worked well thus far and why.

4.2. REM as a Process Evaluation Tool

The REM workshop provided a thorough insight into the perceived project processes and key impact pathways. The REM output is demonstrated in Figure 1—provided here not to offer any specific reading, but rather to illustrate the volume and nature of the information generated. The timeline can be identified running horizontally through the center of the map, with multiple ripples coming off with additional details.

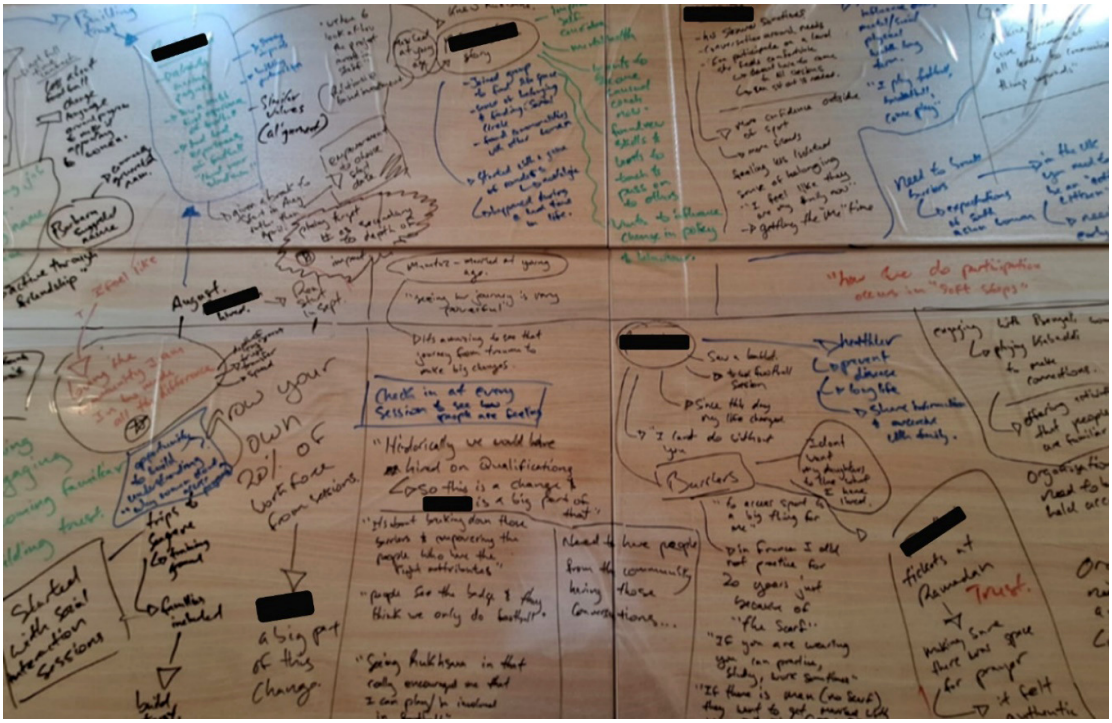

Figure 1. Picture of anonymised ripple effects map produced during the research workshop.

Ripples indicated that where outputs and outcomes were achieved, this was often due to a process of building stronger relationships with trusted community organisations and utilising familiar and trusted community spaces for delivery; making activities more accessible and reducing perceived cultural barriers. This finding is consistent with other examples of community-based physical activity programming (Bates & Hylton, 2021). The map also illustrated a key impact pathway: recruiting staff who "represents the community" with lived experience of social, cultural, and gendered barriers to participation. The AL project helped the LO to realise the benefit of adopting a "grow your own" policy which now sees the LO committed to hiring 20% of staff from within the target community. The reason for this was participants' emphasis on important processes such as having "staff that represents the community," "working around prayer times or caring duties," "focus on inclusivity," and "increased control and choice about how and how often to participate." The overarching finding from the REM workshop was that the participants trusted the programme and felt a connection to it. One of the primary project inputs that have led to this was identified as the "culturally appropriate" PL who implicitly understood their needs and could shape the programme accordingly. As such, the following section details two impact pathway ripples central to impact: (a) the project's initial community engagement processes and (b) the project's successful recruitment of an appropriate candidate into the PL role.

4.2.1. Community Engagement Processes

Interviews conducted with other project participants following the REM workshop strengthened the original findings of the ripple effects map. The lived realities of local women were often characterised by high rates of social isolation, domestic violence, mental health issues, and the resulting low physical activity rates due to feeling unsafe doing activities outside the home and the stigma attached to women's exercise. Building trusting relationships was therefore essential, as the director of the LO explains:

> The City Council was keen to bring in external consultation to do the in-depth consultation research, I was totally against that. I wanted the funding to make a difference rather than just paying someone to parachute in and take the money….So we gave the funds to food banks to restock their stores; in return they would complete the in-depth community research for us. We knew that our target audience were utilising food banks, and because these are trusted organisations, they were able to do a really detailed consultation report….Positive outcomes from this process were that we were able to support food banks, we got high-quality consultation that we are still using today, [and] the process helped us to become the leading organisation for the project.

This key impact pathway and the associated outcomes are represented in Figure 2. Giving directly to food banks for a quid pro quo exchange while cutting out external consultants, demonstrated a commitment to a trust-building process in the eyes of local individuals and organisations. This unconventional community engagement led to a second impact pathway (Figure 3) and the creation of a women's only project, sensitised to the cultural and social needs of the community (e.g., breaks for prayer, working around caring duties), and led by a local Muslim woman with a professional background in counselling and social work.

4.2.2. Recruiting the "Right Person"

Figure 3 illustrates the recruitment process and chain of events leading to the successful launch of the AL project (red timeline), the significance of which cannot be understood without recognising the processes leading to it. The appointment of a PL with no prior professional experience in the field of community sport was unconventional, but given the challenge of engaging this target group in the past, the director of the LO and the strategic leadership team made a choice to hire based upon the consultation results rather than conventional wisdom (e.g., an essential requirement of sports qualifications and/or football-based experience):

> Previously, we haven't had much visibility among Muslim audiences so we've had a difficult time reaching them. Historically we would have hired based on qualifications, so this is a big change and we wanted to break down the barriers to employment and empower the person who had the right attributes. (strategic lead)

However, as the appointed PL described during the REM workshop, she "already felt a barrier" when the director initially attempted to recruit her (blue timeline). Growing up near a Premier League football club stadium had meant traumatic memories of football-based violence; as a Muslim she associated football with feelings of fear and exclusion. However, AL community engagement processes and their focus on trust building helped her to see their authentic community-centered intentions. This ripple illustrates the importance of the

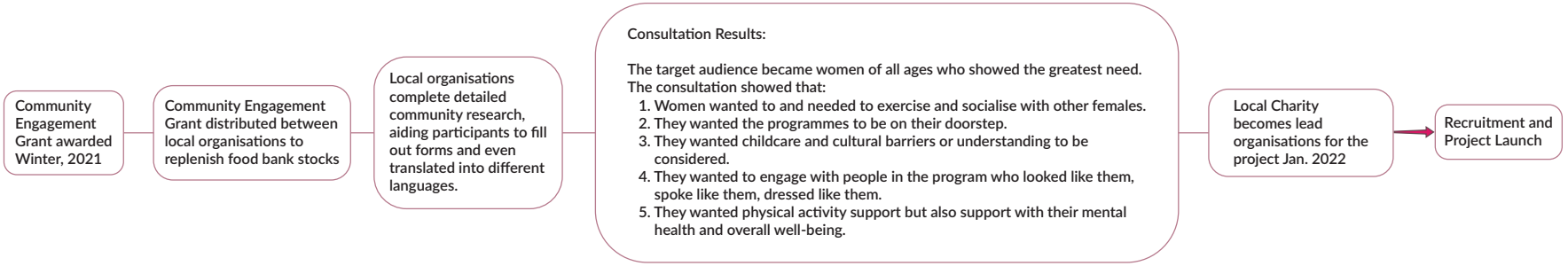

Figure 2. Community engagement impact ripple.

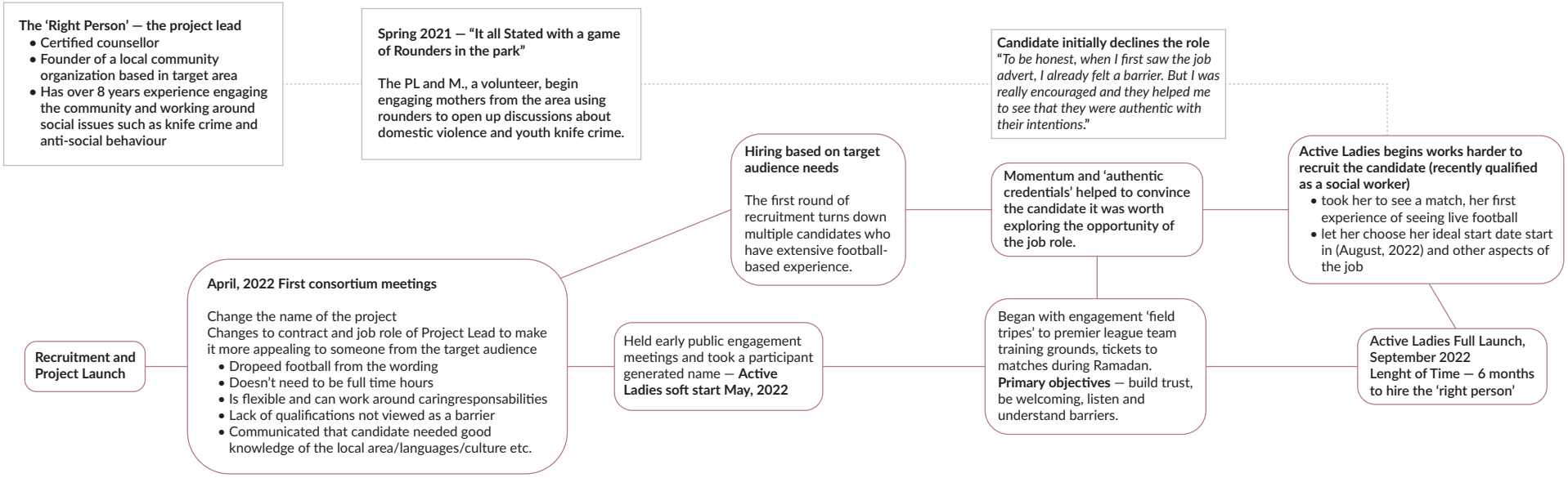

Figure 3. PL recruitment impact ripple.

lived experience and cultural knowledge that the PL brough into the project, without which it remains to be seen how the AL would have engaged the target community, and produced the outcomes and impact that it has today. Crucially, REM enabled the evaluation team to understand the *messy* recruitment process that contributed to the project's outcomes; a key impact pathway that could easily be omitted by more narrow outcome-focused evaluation methods.

5. Discussion

Participation in the REM workshops often stimulated a deeper reflection among participants about the core purpose of their project, about which activities were impactful, and how collectively the group of stakeholders valued some outcomes over others. The sessions also generated excitement through a heightened sense of the project's impacts seen from multiple perspectives. These are common reflections that others who have employed REM also report (Chazdon et al., 2017; Nobles et al., 2022b; Peterson & Skolits, 2019; Washburn et al., 2020). As Taylor et al. (2020) have argued, REM fits well within an interpretivist paradigm given its ability to incorporate multiple perspectives on an intervention. However, there is also a risk in presenting these processes in an overly pragmatic way; an attribution-focused timeline or the reduction of reported outcomes to a logical nodal structure would omit important contextual information which enables a thorough understanding of how and why any programme may generate impact. Therefore, combining the REM workshop with further in-depth qualitative work was essential to triangulate details, fact check, and rigourise the ripple effects map. For example, Figure 3 indicates that it took the LO six months to hire "the right person." While this important point was captured during the REM workshop, the follow-up research added details that were not recorded or reported during the initial REM workshop, including (a) trust building as a primary objective during recruitment and (b) knowledge of mental health needs as a central recruitment criteria. These insights helped to demonstrate the significance of the LO's actions and how pertinent it was for them to remain true to the original consultation and wait for the right person. Furthermore, fieldwork clearly captured how the LO managed to recruit a reluctant person in the first place by being flexible about job roles and working arrangements, making it more appealing to someone from the target audience, and heightening the importance of cultural and local knowledge as key parameters for recruitment.

There are temporal challenges with REM. Through the timeline approach specific outcomes (e.g., the launch of the project after delays) were identified and unpacked to reveal their significance. During the mapping process, this required a temporal sliding backwards and forwards to understand the *messyness* leading to the outcome. Existing iterations of REM seem to suggest mapping as a somewhat straightforward exercise. For example, Chazdon et al.'s (2017) field guide utilises short-, medium-, and long-term changes of a project and the leading to salient outcomes being recorded. However, as part of the national-level evaluation research, it was found that much of the national programmes results had been achieved through local projects revisiting and interrogating their organisational structures and preferences (e.g., employment contracts, or the need for qualifications). Furthermore, the meaningful experiences involved in participant stories often did not involve identifiable outcomes—rather, session participants identified a sense of emotional connection and togetherness which grew over time as being central to the successes of the AL project.

Participants also shared opinions and ideas that had no specific moment but were clearly relevant to the impact of AL. For example, what they learned over the project (personally or professionally) and how that

may affect their lives or work in the future. This mix of timeline outcomes, stories, opinions, and reflections drove the evaluation and enabled a rich understanding of the project's impacts over time. As such, future REM work could be combined with a theory-based evaluation framework (Weiss, 1995) to generate findings with greater transferability and resonance beyond single cases. Future applications of REM may find it productive to use the map and key impact pathways produced during the REM workshop to aid in the refinement of an underpinning programme theory detailing what works, for whom, why, and in what circumstances (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Verkooijen et al., 2020).

More critically, debates about power within REM have not been fully explored and are often overlooked within evaluation research (Adams & Harris, 2014; Kay, 2012; Lindsey & Jeanes, 2023). As Kay (2012, p. 892) notes, the process of specifying which knowledge and data to record means that, "[monitoring and evaluation] systems define knowledge on the basis of external client understandings and requirements that not only have limited local meaning but also suppress the potential for local alternatives to be expressed." With this in mind, the evaluation framework adopted here ensured stakeholders were able to participate in the REM workshop and subsequent data collection and share their rich and meaningful experiences of the project and its impact on their lives. The use of REM and subsequent fieldwork enabled the centering of local knowledge, social connections, and professional practices within the evaluation of impact. While it is not feasible to include all the contextual information within which a project is situated from one REM workshop, the gathering of additional qualitative data around key impact pathways was a vital component in establishing a contextual richness to the timeline outcomes to help stakeholders build a deeper and more robust understanding impact.

6. Conclusion

This article illustrates the application of REM to a process evaluation of a sport for development programme in England and considers its utility as an evaluation tool. Specifically, the article has examined how REM can be utilised to identify pathways to impact, provided a reflection on the process of conducting REM workshops, and illustrated the value of REM as a participatory process. We have further considered the strengths and limitations of REM and provided approaches for researchers to apply additional, supplementary methods. This research therefore demonstrates that REM, when utilised within a flexible and reflexive evaluation framework, offers a participatory impact assessment technique suitable for producing rigorous research and sensitised to power relations in the production of evidence. The blending of REM with other evaluation-orientated methods is a novel approach to evaluation, with limited exploration within existing REM research. REM workshops are an informative way of gathering rich insights into how programmes function, and crucially, which activities and processes make the greatest contribution to the achievement of specific outcomes. The approach used here reflects the concerns of others who have highlighted the challenge of identifying single programme components that lead directly to outcomes (Coalter, 2013; Lindsey & Chapman, 2017). Instead, this article advocates an approach that (a) enables the researcher to work collaboratively with those who know the programme best and from different perspectives, (b) grasps the complex and interconnected web of factors that coalesce to generate impact over time, and (c) directs their fieldwork towards establishing the veracity of those ripple effects and outcomes. It is argued therefore that REM provides both researchers and practitioners with an accessible and informative evaluation technique for demonstrating and understanding impact, whilst also creating a basis for organisational reflection and learning.

The REM example presented in this article illustrates the centrality of recruiting "the right person." Rather than the established recruitment practice of prioritising sport qualifications and experience, a mix of similar social and cultural lived experience was identified through community engagement as essential for engaging the target community. The REM workshop helped to uncover nuanced details around this recruitment process, which project participants and practitioners both agreed was a fundamental pathway to impact in the project, and which was confirmed through the further triangulation of fieldwork methods. Such findings are consistent with existing research that highlights the importance of culturally appropriate and empathetic programme leadership (Alarslan et al., 2024; Coalter, 2012).

The output of the REM map can be useful to organisations both as an internal and external reporting tool. Internally the REM output can help to evidence key performance measures, especially those that are more nuanced. For example, the community director of the LO explained to the lead author that "sense of belonging" for staff and participants is the core aspect of their new strategy and how "moving forward, we need to evidence that." The REM output explored here gives strong evidence that staying committed to the original community engagement results, adjusting internal policies to realise these, and hiring a culturally and professionally appropriate person has led to a strong response by participants and local organisations who harbour feelings of trust and emotional connection to the AL project. As such, for external audiences, the REM output can demonstrate the LO's level of accountability to the consultation results which clearly outlines the organisation's capacity to deliver place-based projects by highlighting meaningful adjustments made to stay committed to the consultation. This, in turn, can aid in the process of bidding for future work which follows similar principles. Finally, as an external communication tool, the REM output can be utilised as evidence to influence external partners who are reluctant to buy into more unstructured and flexible approaches to sports development and who may need convincing. Interjecting targeted results from the REM workshop into this context can provide a powerful justification in support of more flexible, localist approaches to sports development.

Existing evaluation in sport for development has often been criticised for prioritising measuring methods that do not capture the crucial but elusive social processes central to understanding change (Kay, 2012; Long & Sanderson, 2001), or over-claiming programme impact based on wishful thinking, anecdotal evidence and personal testimonies (Coalter, 2013; Hartman & Kwauk, 2011). In response, theory-based evaluation approaches have been increasingly advocated to better explain how, why, for whom, and in what circumstances outcome occur (Coalter, 2013; Harris, 2018; Verkooijen et al., 2020). With such critique in mind, REM could be refined further for use within theory-based evaluation methodology, enabling researchers to capture the key components, relationships, mechanisms, and sequences that are identified within and across pathways to impact. This article has demonstrated how REM can provide a rich and robust visual aid to prompt such investigation of how and why a combination of activities and processes generated anticipated (or unanticipated!) impacts. Crucially, this article presents the first application of REM to understanding the processes leading to outcomes and wider community impact within sport for development research and evaluation. It is hoped that this article may initiate the beginnings of a methodological ripple of its own for those interested in further refining evaluation techniques in the pursuit of a better understanding of sport for development practices, processes, and impacts.

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How Can Gender-Related SDP Programmes Enhance Gender Inclusion? A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Since the emergence of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) programmes in the early 21st century, these initiatives have become a global effort to leverage sport in addressing social challenges and advancing the SDGs, with the promotion of gender equality (Goal 5) being one of their key objectives. In male-dominated sports environments, both women and sexual and gender minorities (SGM) face persistent barriers such as gender stereotypes, exclusion, inequitable regulations, and discrimination, highlighting the critical need for interventions that promote gender inclusivity. While some studies have examined the role of SDP programmes in promoting gender inclusion, the field remains fragmented and largely overlooks SGM. There is also a lack of systematic analysis of how SDP programmes specifically impact the inclusion of women and SGM. To address this gap, we conducted a scoping review of 18 academic articles on SDP programmes that focus on gender inclusivity, employing thematic analysis to categorise findings based on research contexts, contents, methods, and outcomes. By synthesising existing literature, this article seeks to map the development of this emerging field, identify existing contributions and ongoing challenges, and provide insights to enhance the effectiveness of future SDP initiatives in promoting gender inclusion. Findings suggest that while some SDP programmes can empower women and SGM, their effectiveness is often constrained by structural inequalities and varying programme designs. Our review also identifies gaps in long-term evaluation and inclusivity for diverse gender identities.

Keywords

females in sports; gender; gender in sports; LGBTQ+; social inclusion; Sport for Development and Peace

1. Introduction

Women and sexual and gender minorities (SGM) have long faced exclusion and discriminatory practices in sport environments, creating multiple structural barriers shaped by historical, cultural, economic, and media factors (McKay, 2020). Against this backdrop, initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality through sports face significant challenges (Patil & Doherty, 2023). Messner (1988, 2002) highlighted that modern sport has been heavily influenced by male-dominated cultural norms since the late 19th century, evolving as a practice to "express masculinity." The rules of sports and programme designs, which often prioritise male physical advantages, have relegated women to subordinate positions (Burstyn, 1999). Hargreaves (2002) further analysed how gender stereotypes and the systemic devaluation of women's physical abilities in patriarchal societies have led to women's sport being viewed as "unnatural" or "inconsistent with femininity." Additionally, studies by Cooky et al. (2015) and Schmidt (2013) reveal that women receive minimal coverage in sports media, with reporting often focusing on appearance or personal lives rather than athletic performance. This lack of representation reinforces gender stereotypes and undermines the social legitimacy of women's sports.

Economic resource disparities further exacerbate this marginalisation. Deaner (2012) found that male sports teams and events attract most sponsorships and resource support, while women and SGM often face financial shortages due to perceived lower market value, leading to disadvantages in professional development and infrastructure. Furthermore, Travers (2008) highlighted that men overwhelmingly dominate coaching, management, and decision-making roles in sports, leaving women and SGM largely absent from policy-making and organisational leadership. This lack of representation hinders the implementation of inclusive policies. Overall, male dominance in sports is the result of multifaceted factors, including historical, media, economic, and professional dimensions. This dominance not only limits the participation and development of women and SGM in sports, but also reinforces broader societal gender inequalities. Scholars have called for policy interventions, media reforms, and resource redistribution to dismantle these structural barriers. Such efforts aim to create a more equitable and inclusive sports environment where women and SGM can fully experience the physical, psychological, and social benefits of participation in sports (Joy, 2019; Richman & Shaffer, 2000).

Participating in sports has shown numerous benefits, including improved physical health, prevention of chronic diseases (Joy, 2019), reduced risk of depression (Jay, 1997), enhanced self-esteem (Richman & Shaffer, 2000), greater self-confidence, and improved social skills and leadership abilities (Huggins & Randell, 2007). However, these benefits remain largely inaccessible to women and SGM, who are significantly excluded due to systemic barriers. The exclusionary nature of sports environments fosters discrimination (Doull et al., 2018), unwelcoming rules and policies (Emmonds et al., 2019), and cultures of sexual harassment and homophobia (Calzo et al., 2014). These factors not only hinder the active participation of women and SGM but often lead many to abandon the possibility of engaging in sports altogether. This persistent exclusion highlights the urgent need to address the systemic factors that hinder women's and SGM's involvement in sport. By challenging entrenched biases, adopting inclusive approaches, and fostering supportive sports environments, it is possible to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to experience the transformative power of sports.

SDP is an international movement centred on ensuring the right of all members of society to participate in sports and recreational activities while emphasising development goals and inclusivity (Youker, 2013).

Promoting gender equality is one of the key principles of SDP, aiming to create more opportunities for women and SGM to engage in sports and to foster a more inclusive and supportive sports environment (Beutler, 2008; Chong et al., 2022). Despite some positive outcomes, particularly through specific projects that have successfully brought some positive effects to women and SGM, their credibility and scalability remain insufficiently validated, and there is a pressing need to further explore their effectiveness in achieving gender inclusivity (Collison et al., 2016). In addition, before applying sports values more widely to promote gender inclusion, the progress and challenges of this approach should be clarified, and the mechanism for cultivating a sports culture that welcomes all genders should be more deeply explored and understood (Harmon, 2020). This understanding is crucial to removing the deeply rooted male domination and heterosexual structures in the sport environment and creating a fairer and more inclusive future for all participants, regardless of their gender or sexual identity.

1.1. Research Design and Aim

Based on the background above, this study aims to examine the existing literature on the contribution of SDP programmes that explicitly focus on promoting gender inclusion. Specifically, we seek to:

1. Analyse how current studies investigate the role of these SDP programmes in fostering gender inclusion and the key themes they explore (RQ 1);
2. Identify the research methods used in studying how such SDP programmes promote gender inclusion and their main findings (RQ 2);
3. Evaluate the impact and effectiveness of such programmes in enhancing the inclusion of women and SGM, while highlighting key limitations and directions for future research (RQ 3).

To address these questions, this study adopts a scoping review approach, which is suitable for emerging fields or research areas where the scope and focus are not yet well-defined. It requires broad and exploratory research questions and is well-suited for complex, interdisciplinary topics. This method enables the identification and clarification of research progress within a given field, mapping existing studies, identifying research gaps, and providing guidance on future research directions. The decision to use a scoping review in this study is based on the fact that the relationship between the impact of SDP programmes on women and SGM remains highly complex and insufficiently explored in existing academic research. A deeper and more systematic investigation is needed to provide a clearer picture of the current state of knowledge. By conducting a scoping review, this study aims to analyse how on-the-ground SDP programmes could influence women and SGM while identifying key challenges that require further attention. From a broader societal perspective, the findings of this study will contribute to a better understanding of the effectiveness of real-world SDP initiatives, ultimately supporting the development of more impactful programmes aimed at promoting gender equality. From a scientific perspective, this study will help identify key research themes and existing gaps in the relationship between SDP and gender inclusion, thereby providing insights to encourage further academic engagement in this field.

From a more specific theoretical framework perspective, this study follows the framework established by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). Through an in-depth review of the selected studies, a thematic analysis is conducted to categorise research contexts, contents, methods, and key findings. This approach helps to systematically address RQ 1 and RQ 2, while a critical discussion of the results further informs

RQ 3. The study concludes with recommendations to achieve the research aim and invites further scholarly discussion.

This review aims to systematically examine the current state of research on SDP programmes with a specific focus on gender inclusion, identifying key themes, methodological characteristics, and research outcomes. The study selection criteria are designed to align directly with the research questions, with SDP and gender as the core focus. To ensure comprehensive coverage, the search strategy includes expanded synonyms for SDP and gender-related terms across three major academic databases. However, given that terms like "SDP" and "SFD" (sport for development) have multiple meanings beyond sport-based initiatives, the initial search yielded an extensive number of studies. Through the first round of relevance-based filtering, 40 key articles directly addressing SDP and gender were selected. Following Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) iterative approach, further inclusion and exclusion criteria were continuously refined throughout the selection process to ensure alignment with the research questions. The specific selection criteria will be elaborated in the following section.

2. Methodology

2.1. Literature Review Procedure

To conduct a thorough exploration of the literature related to gender within the framework of SDP, we meticulously devised a search strategy. We targeted three prominent databases—Web of Science, EBSCO, and Proquest—employing a range of key terms. Specifically, we used the following formula as "searching words":

> ("sport for development" OR SFD OR S4D OR SDP OR "sport for development and peace") AND ("sexual minority" OR gender OR female OR girl OR LGBT OR "non-binary" OR women)

This approach was aimed at capturing a wide array of relevant materials. The search for this study was conducted up to September 2024 to capture the most recent and relevant research in the field. The initial search across three databases yielded 25,559 results—9,654 from Web of Science, 6,697 from EBSCO, and 9,208 from ProQuest.

To refine the selection process, relevance sorting was applied within each database, followed by a review of titles and abstracts, initially identifying 41 articles that met the basic criteria of focusing on SDP projects and discussing gender inclusion. After organising and removing duplicates, the number was reduced to 40. Then, in the process of continuous familiarisation with this literature, the following series of strict inclusion standards have been gradually formed to ensure the quality and relevance of the analysis:

1. Only articles examining specific SDP projects or organisations were included to gain deeper insights into practical applications rather than broader theoretical discussions within the SDP field;
2. Studies that targeted the promotion of inclusion for women or SGM were selected to align with the study's focus on gender issues;
3. Emphasis was placed on recreational sport rather than elite sport;
4. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were considered to maintain academic rigour;

5. Articles in English with international relevance were included for accessibility and ease of analysis;
6. Only open-access, full-text articles were selected to facilitate a comprehensive literature review.

The first two criteria establish the thematic relevance of the included articles, ensuring the included literature can directly and practically illustrate how SDP projects enhance the inclusivity of women and SGM, rather than discussing broad topics about sport and gender. The third criterion, based on the fundamental differences between professional sports and recreational sports as well as the development goals of SDP projects, excludes articles related to elite sports. The fourth criterion guarantees the quality of the included articles, preventing the introduction of unreviewed information. The fifth criterion prevents geographical and linguistic biases from influencing the understanding of the article content. The sixth criterion ensures a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the articles. We did not set any restrictions on research types and research methodologies. In addition, we welcome all types of research and methodologies, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, to ensure that multi-level evidence is obtained to fully understand the impact and effectiveness of SDP.

Furthermore, it is important to note the distinction between elite sports and recreational sports regarding their target audiences and social values (Collins, 2010). While the former emphasises competition, performance, and national prestige—catering to a small group of elite participants (Houlihan & Green, 2007, pp. 1–25)—the latter focuses on accessibility, community engagement, and individual well-being, prioritising social inclusion and grassroots development (Eichberg, 2015). As SDP initiatives primarily align with recreational and community-based sports, this study centres on grassroots sports within the SDP framework to explore its potential in promoting gender inclusion and achieving broader social development goals. After clarifying all the filter criteria, we then conducted two rounds of detailed screening, reaching a consensus on articles where inclusion was uncertain. Finally, out of the 40 articles, 15 were ultimately confirmed to meet all inclusion criteria. During the review of 15 selected articles, three additional studies meeting all inclusion criteria were identified through snowballing. Ultimately, 18 articles were confirmed to meet the inclusion criteria. These articles form the core dataset for analysis, providing valuable insights and practical implications for research at the intersection of gender and SDP. The research topics and key findings of these articles are presented in the following appendix.

2.2. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely utilised qualitative research method designed to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns within data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). It is regarded as an effective and accessible qualitative tool (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This method was chosen for our study because discussions on gender in the context of SDP are relatively fragmented and lack a cohesive academic framework (Kidd, 2008). Moreover, the marginalisation of women and SGM in sports arises from a complex interplay of historical, social, cultural, and economic factors. This complexity often complicates clear analysis of gender dynamics and outcomes in the literature (Reeves, 2012). By adopting thematic analysis, we aim to clarify the current development of the field of SDP and gender inclusion, provide a clearer view of the current progress and challenges, and offer a basis for more effectively advancing the role of sport in promoting gender inclusion.

In this study, we strictly follow the logic of developing themes in the scoping review mentioned in Arksey and O'Malley (2005). First, we applied an Excel table to create a data charting form and extract the

article's key information. We then collated the data while familiarising ourselves with the literature, initially classifying different topics and subsequently summarising the data to form four final topics: (a) research contexts, (b) research contents, (c) research methods, and (d) research findings. This method allows systematic classification and analysis of data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research progress of gender-related SDP programmes. These four identified topics summarise the core elements of the research and provide a clear perspective for explaining the complexity of gender inclusion in sport-related development plans, which is conducive to the effective development of further practice and research.

3. Results

3.1. Research Contexts

Our review examines SDP projects across diverse geographical and cultural contexts, highlighting their global impact. These projects include initiatives in developed countries, such as the Netherlands (Smits & Knoppers, 2022), Australia (Hayhurst et al., 2016; Rich et al., 2022), the United Kingdom (Caudwell, 2021), and Canada (Hayhurst et al., 2016), as well as in developing regions like Colombia (Oxford, 2019; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018; Oxford & Spaaij, 2019), Brazil (Moura, 2021; Válková, 2021), Afghanistan (Burnett, 2022; Thorpe et al., 2018), Cambodia (Thorpe & Chawansky, 2017; Thorpe et al., 2018), and South Africa (Burnett, 2022; Thorpe & Chawansky, 2017; Thorpe et al., 2018). Notably, research often reflects the institutional locations of the researchers, i.e., Dutch researchers usually study projects in Utrecht (Smits & Knoppers, 2022) as Canadian and Australian researchers analyse local projects in Vancouver and Perth (Hayhurst et al., 2016). However, there are also instances of cross-regional research, with scholars from the Global North exploring projects in the Global South, such as the study on marginalised Muslim women in Pakistan by Hussain and Cunningham (2021), on skateboarding initiatives in Afghanistan and Cambodia by Thorpe et al. (2018), and on community football projects in Tanzania (Johnston et al., 2019). These cases underscore the potential for cultural exchange and analytical bias. The varied contexts demonstrate the multifaceted role of sport in addressing gender inequality, reflecting the interplay between local and global dynamics in SDP research. Furthermore, the research mainly focused on people from impoverished regions, specifically girls and young women—aged 8–12 (Farmer et al., 2020), 10–12 (Smits & Knoppers, 2022), 12–15 (Burnett, 2022), and 12–17 (Zipp, 2020)—as well as LGBTQ+ groups (Válková, 2021). These studies explore the limitations and achievements of gender inclusion through the experiences of these participants in SDP programmes. Among the studies that explicitly mention participants' ages, the youngest is eight years old, with no participants over 20. In addition to focusing on participants' experiences, one study examines the roles and challenges faced by men in promoting gender inclusion in SDP programmes from a male perspective (Moura, 2021). Another study addresses the ethical risks of directly promoting sports participation for young girls in the Global South (Thorpe et al., 2018).

3.2. Research Contents

Although the current body of research on SDP programmes aimed at promoting gender inclusion is limited, the 18 selected studies discuss nearly 10 different sports. These studies cover not only common sports such as football (Farmer et al., 2020; Hayhurst & del Socorro Cruz Centeno, 2019; Moura, 2021; Oxford, 2019; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018; Oxford & Spaaij, 2019; Zipp, 2020) and basketball (Hayhurst et al., 2016; Johnston et al.,

2019), but also martial arts (Hayhurst, 2013), swimming (Caudwell, 2021), longboarding (Smits & Knoppers, 2022), and outdoor activities like stand-up paddleboarding (Rich et al., 2022).

The research highlights that many SDP projects adopt a "sport plus" model, integrating education, personal development, and employability enhancement for women to extend the value of sports programmes. For instance, Sarah Oxford analysed the VIDA programme in Colombia, which combines football with health education to help girls integrate into society and challenge traditional gender norms (Oxford, 2019; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018; Oxford & Spaaij, 2019). Similarly, Smits and Knoppers (2022) examined the "U on Board" project, which pairs longboarding with group discussions to build resilience among girls. Hayhurst and del Socorro Cruz Centeno (2019) explored various initiatives, including football and health education programmes promoting women's sexual and reproductive health rights and basketball and martial arts programmes that provide career guidance and self-defence skills to enhance employability (Hayhurst, 2013; Hayhurst et al., 2016). Thorpe et al. (2018) focused on a skateboarding programme and showed how combining sports with education and leadership training helps street children return to school. Caudwell's (2021) research focused on the inclusion of often marginalised groups in swimming activities, assessing the concept of "queering" in indoor recreational swimming. Last but certainly not least, Rich et al. (2022) highlighted a surfing programme that overcame barriers to women's participation by providing flexible modes, reducing costs, and offering community-based childcare solutions.

3.3. Research Methods

The diverse research methods employed in the current literature provide a rich perspective on understanding the impact of SDP on gender inclusion. A few researchers have used quantitative approaches, such as Farmer et al.'s (2020) non-randomised pre-post control design to evaluate changes in physical activity, sports skills, and mental health among 120 participants. Burnett (2022) applied mixed methods, combining interviews and custom questionnaires to assess the effectiveness of the project in addressing youth employment.

Most studies primarily used qualitative methods. Ethnographic fieldwork was widely applied (Moura, 2021; Válková, 2021) alongside some common qualitative methods like observation (Hayhurst, 2013; Moura, 2021; Oxford, 2019; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018; Smits & Knoppers, 2022; Válková, 2021), focus group discussions (Burnett, 2022; Caudwell, 2021; Hayhurst et al., 2016; Smits & Knoppers, 2022; Válková, 2021; Zipp, 2020), document analysis (Hayhurst, 2013; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018), and semi-structured in-depth interviews (Caudwell, 2021; Hayhurst, 2013; Hussain & Cunningham, 2021; Moura, 2021; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018; Rich et al., 2022; Thorpe & Chawansky, 2017; Válková, 2021). In addition, some studies also incorporated visual research methods. For instance, Smits and Knoppers (2022) collected 230 minutes of video footage captured by 49 disadvantaged girls using GoPros, providing a novel perspective for observation and allowing the girls to express their experiences through video. Caudwell (2021) used drawing methods to analyse the meaning of sport participation for queer groups by collecting their drawings of experiences before and after participating in activities. Hayhurst and del Socorro Cruz Centeno (2019) employed photography, equipping participants with cameras to tell their stories through photos or videos, expressing their views on SDP projects.

Researchers have not only innovated in methods but also participant selection. Besides focusing on project participants (Burnett, 2022; Hayhurst & del Socorro Cruz Centeno, 2019; Oxford, 2019), some studies included project organisers, staff, and volunteers (Burnett, 2022; Rich et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2018).

Other studies examined both project staff and sports participants (Hayhurst, 2013; Hayhurst et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2019; Rich et al., 2022), and some even involved participants' parents (Oxford, 2019). Introducing more external perspectives for in-depth discussion may be an effective way to comprehensively understand the impact of sports projects on promoting gender inclusion (Válková, 2021).

3.4. Research Findings

Based on different goals and target participants, researchers have reached diverse findings. Some studies have explicitly shown the positive impacts of SDP on gender inclusion. For instance, Smits and Knoppers (2022) proposed that SFD holds practical potential in reshaping traditional gender roles, Burnett (2022) found that SDP projects had positive effects on employability and life skills, Johnston et al. (2019) found that sports activities designed based on the PYD model can effectively promote girls' connections with their social environment and are especially crucial for marginalised groups, Caudwell (2021) observed that queer groups experienced joy, freedom, and a sense of well-being through activities, and Farmer et al. (2020) reported that the projects significantly improved girls' levels of physical activity and mental health.

However, more studies suggest that the effectiveness of SDP projects in promoting gender inclusion is not entirely optimistic. Oxford and McLachlan (2018) pointed out that, although women felt a certain degree of autonomy in SDP activities and created a "new" normal within their social circles, traditional social structures still maintained the existing gender status quo. In this environment, power is controlled and organised by men, and it seems to have little impact on the broader patriarchal or class structures. Specifically, Hayhurst et al. (2022) highlighted the dual impact of cycling on gender equality, noting its risk of reinforcing women's caregiving roles. With access to bicycles, women and girls gain greater mobility, yet they will be expected to complete tasks more efficiently. In addition to bearing caregiving and financial responsibilities within the family, they also need to fulfil the traditional domestic roles assigned by society, thereby further reinforcing their burden as primary caregivers. More dramatically, Hayhurst and del Socorro Cruz Centeno (2019) suggested that women often bear marginal and undesirable tasks. In the processes of environmental degradation and climate change, women are frequently required to take on labour related to environmental restoration, while those who are most responsible for these consequences, such as large industrial factories, continue to intensify these harmful practices and have no real intention of preventing them. Furthermore, Zipp (2020) found that while single-gender sports projects enhanced self-efficacy and peer relationships among women, mixed-gender football activities had limitations in challenging gender stereotypes and promoting physical competence regarding body image.

For LGBTQ+ groups, Válková (2021) highlighted that indoor swimming projects provided supportive environments and relatively safe spaces, yet there were complexities in inclusivity, with some non-heterosexual beneficiaries reporting experiences of exclusion and alienation, including misunderstanding, scepticism, and rejection. Thorpe et al. (2018) revealed ethical challenges that women in the Global South might face due to the portrayal of female sports participation, while Moura (2021) uniquely discussed the role and value of men in gender-inclusive SDP projects, finding that male participants played diverse roles in promoting gender inclusion but also faced challenges from traditional masculinity concepts, which hindered their full support and contribution to the gender inclusion process.

4. Discussion

4.1. Embrace Global South and More People

Current research spans a wide range of global regions but often overlooks the Global South. There is a notable lack of contributions from local scholars in these regions, which results in a significant imbalance in the perspectives and findings presented. This imbalance is compounded by the economic and educational inequalities between the Global North and South, further exacerbating the development gap between these regions (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Scholars from the Global North, who typically dominate the research field, often lack a deep understanding of the local contexts in underdeveloped areas, leading to biases, misinterpretations, and oversimplifications concerning the challenges and needs specific to these regions (Connell, 2020, pp. 69–86). Moreover, many SDP projects tend to focus primarily on young women and overlook age groups who face entirely different conditions. For example, menopausal, older women, and those in other age demographics face distinct challenges in terms of physical health, social inclusion, and empowerment (Pilgaard, 2013). By narrowing the focus exclusively on young women, these articles may miss an opportunity to address the broader spectrum of gender-related needs, which can limit the overall effectiveness of SDP initiatives in promoting gender inclusion and equality (Appleby & Foster, 2013).

Furthermore, current research tends to approach gender as a binary concept—male and female—without adequately addressing the experiences and needs of SGM, whose challenges in sports participation and social inclusion can be vastly different (Kabeer, 2005). Gender is a spectrum, and fostering gender inclusion requires collective efforts from all gender groups within society (Odera & Mulusa, 2020). Unfortunately, the existing research often neglects these broader and more complex dimensions of gender identity, which can lead to a skewed understanding of the impact of SDP projects on marginalised communities. This suggests the need for expanding its scope beyond traditional, narrow views of gender, incorporating a more inclusive perspective in different cultural and socio-economic contexts. Addressing the specific needs of SGM, as well as considering the diverse age and demographic groups, is essential for creating a more comprehensive and equitable understanding of how SDP initiatives can contribute to gender inclusion and broader social change.

4.2. The "Sport Plus" and "Plus Sport" Models

In recent years, an increasing number of SDP projects have integrated a wide range of social, cultural, and educational elements to reach broader aims. These initiatives can be referred to as the "Sport Plus" model, which centres around sport and combines other elements, leveraging the direct influence of sport to achieve goals such as gender inclusion. However, the effectiveness of the Sport Plus model still needs further and deeper evaluation. Giulianotti et al. (2019) pointed out that sports are not inherently inclusive and every sport-centred intervention requires a systematic and critical assessment to clarify how and through which specific mechanisms to reach the aim. Such an assessment not only helps to avoid general assumptions about the effectiveness of sports projects but also reveals the real impact of sports in promoting gender inclusion. Against this backdrop, future research should delve deeply into the key role of sports. In particular, it should explore the core values of sports, such as teamwork, respect, and fair play to uncover the essential value of sports in challenging and reshaping traditional gender norms (Eastman & Billings, 2001; Thorpe, 2016). Meanwhile, Coakley (2002, 2011) reminded us that the positive impacts of sports are not universally

applicable to all groups. Especially in marginalised communities, socio-economic, cultural, and historical contexts profoundly influence the practice of gender inclusion for SGM. Only by fully recognising and addressing these structural barriers, such as unequal access to resources, social stigma, or institutional discrimination, can the goal of gender inclusion be truly achieved (Elling & Knoppers, 2005; Storr et al., 2022). Therefore, when applying SDP to promote gender inclusion, it is necessary to consider the inherent values of sports and conduct an in-depth exploration of the more essential sports values to explain the value of sport in this process. Moreover, the characteristics of the environment should be fully taken into account. As Quinton et al. (2021) expressed in their research, increasing the role of baseline research in project design to gain a deep understanding of the environment and the characteristics of the population can minimise conflicts and dissatisfaction, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and satisfaction of the projects.

In addition, some SDP programmes also adopt the "Plus Sport" model, which emphasises incorporating sports elements into other social issues to promote broader social goals and endows sport with more supportive roles and possibilities. Different from the Sport Plus model, the Plus Sport model promotes the achievement of goals through cooperation with other social projects, resource integration, and flexible participation methods (such as reducing participation costs and expanding social networks). In the issue of promoting gender inclusion, this cross-sectoral cooperation can provide more participation opportunities for women and SGM, reduce the barriers they face in participating in sport, and promote gender equality by sharing social responsibilities (Rich et al., 2022). Currently, attention and practice in this area are still very limited. In this scoping review, no content can be fully understood as the Plus Sport model, which restricts the realisation of some sports values. Therefore, the flexible Plus Sport model deserves further attention as a means to expand the possibilities of sport-related projects.

4.3. Long-Term and Diverse Data

Current research predominantly uses qualitative methods, employing diverse approaches such as surveys, interviews, portraits, and videos to collect rich, multifaceted data. While these methods provide valuable insights, their appropriateness for addressing specific issues still requires further exploration (Bryman, 2016). The adaptability of these methods should be assessed based on the specific needs and context of the research to ensure the effectiveness and relevance of the data. Long-term studies are crucial for capturing the dynamic changes of projects over time and uncovering their deeper social impacts and mechanisms. Presently, researchers tend to focus on whether SDP projects generate positive individual changes in the short term, such as improved sport skills and challenges to gender roles, but doubts remain about their potential to bring about long-term social transformation. The longest follow-up study in the current literature spans 11 months (Moura, 2021); the impact of SDP on gender inclusion is not instantaneous: It requires long-term tracking to systematically and critically discuss the relationships involved (Levermore, 2011). Most research lacks systematic long-term tracking, hindering a comprehensive evaluation of the long-term impact of sport on gender inclusion in various contexts. This reflects a significant gap in research, which calls for more longitudinal studies to capture the sustained effects of these initiatives. Continuous tracking and assessment of these development programmes will provide a more objective and accurate verification of how sport influences gender inclusion. Longitudinal studies following participants over time can offer valuable insights into the enduring impact of sport on individual lives and community dynamics (Reiner et al., 2013). Such studies should measure not only direct outcomes like skill development and confidence but also consider the broader social changes that sustained participation in these programmes

may bring. It is crucial to ensure that participants' voices are central to research, as this enhances the ability of stakeholders to make informed decisions (Meadmore et al., 2014).

Furthermore, engaging participants in feedback mechanisms and participatory research methods allows a deeper understanding of their experiences. By incorporating their perspectives, more effective interventions can be developed that resonate with their needs and aspirations (Greenwood et al., 2016). This participant-centred approach can also empower women and girls, involving them in shaping the projects designed to serve them. Therefore, to fully understand the long-term impact of SDP projects, extended follow-up or ethnographic studies are essential. In current research, qualitative methods are widely used, which can be seen as a reflection of the project's priorities, especially during the exploratory phase (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). However, integrating quantitative methods can also help capture broader societal perspectives and gather a wider range of viewpoints (Bamberger, 2000), providing researchers with a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between SDP and gender inclusion through multi-angle analysis frameworks and data support.

4.4. Expand the Positive Social Bubble

The current research highlights the positive impact of a wide range of SDP projects on gender inclusion, offering women and SGM engaging in sport-related activities valuable experiences. For young women in particular, these studies illustrate how SDP programmes genuinely empower them (Burnett, 2022), enhance their self-efficacy (Smits & Knoppers, 2022), and help them confront societal norms that often restrict their roles and opportunities (Oxford & McLachlan, 2018). As previously mentioned, gender issues are complex and multifaceted, and the inherent value of sport is not universally positive. Therefore, researchers must maintain a critical perspective, objectively evaluating the implementation of current sports programmes in promoting gender inclusion, identifying potential issues and challenges, and exploring more effective methods to leverage sports programmes in advancing gender equality (Coakley, 2002). Future research should focus more on the specific implementation strategies and impact mechanisms of these programmes to ensure that diverse groups with different backgrounds and needs truly benefit from them (Giulianotti et al., 2019).

Moreover, understanding the actual circumstances and needs of the participants, and carefully designing programmes to avoid potential negative impacts, is a crucial part of the research process. Currently, much of the research concentrates on how sport promotes physical development and social integration. However, the value orientation of SDP projects encompasses broader social values, and the challenges of gender participation stem from various structural factors, including historical, economic, social and cultural dimensions. An essential aspect of this discussion revolves around the potential of social development projects to create equitable, inclusive, and welcoming environments for all genders. Only through systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of these projects and strategic adjustments based on the needs of the communities they serve can this transformative potential be realised (Hussey & Flannery, 2007). By investigating the specific factors that contribute to the success of social development projects, researchers can distil best practices that can be applied in different contexts. Therefore, future research should adopt a broader social perspective, integrating the value of sport into the social environment, addressing complex gender and wider social issues, and fully harnessing the value of sport (Coalter, 2010), thus expanding our imagination of the value of sport (Darnell, 2010).

5. Conclusion

Through a scoping review method, this article systematically analyses the effectiveness and challenges of gender-related SDP programmes in promoting gender inclusion. It reveals the current research's insufficient attention to gender inclusion, particularly the gap concerning SGM. Additionally, the study emphasises the complex structural challenges, calling for more attention and in-depth exploration. Furthermore, this study also finds that empirical research remains very limited, especially with a lack of voices and stories from the Global South. Therefore, we hope that more scholars will be able to apply gender inclusion perspectives to evaluate SDP programmes and call for greater attention to the Global South, particularly through empirical methods to explore gender inclusion issues.

This scoping review analyses 18 studies on how SDP programmes that focus on gender inclusion can impact gender inclusion. Utilising the thematic analysis method, the research provides a comprehensive assessment and draws on a wealth of literature that covers both successful outcomes and the challenges faced. Consequently, the review highlights the potential of SDP programmes to challenge gender norms, empower women and sexual minorities and promote social inclusion while offering critical reflections on the research design and implications.

Firstly, although many SDP programmes aim to promote gender equality through sport, their effectiveness is often influenced by the complexity of gender norms and social structures. Additionally, most of these studies employ qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observations, and visual and video studies, with a few using quantitative analysis. While qualitative research captures participants' subjective experiences deeply, the relative lack of long-term longitudinal studies and large-scale quantitative research limits a comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact of SDP programmes. Therefore, it suggests the necessity to gain a more holistic understanding of the long-term impact of SDP programmes on gender inclusion. In terms of results, the research finds that SDP programmes have certain positive effects in raising gender awareness, boosting confidence, and challenging traditional gender roles. However, due to the complexity and deep-rooted nature of gender issues, SDP programmes face multiple challenges in achieving gender inclusion goals, including insufficient exploration of broader structural societal issues, lack of sensitivity to local cultures, insufficient attention to the sexual minority groups, and limited discussion on the intrinsic value of sport in promoting gender inclusion. Finally, to achieve broader and more profound impacts, researchers need to pay more attention to the structural gender issues in society, consider the diverse needs of participants and local cultures, adopt more inclusive and sensitive strategies, critically evaluate the value of sport, and integrate long-term tracking and assessment.

6. Reflexive Limitations

Based on the current research, several limitations need consideration. Firstly, the data primarily comes from three databases—Web of Science, EBSCO, and ProQuest—focusing on English journal articles while excluding conferences, books, and grey literature. As an international initiative, SDP projects also generate substantial output through non-academic channels like news articles and reports, which researchers may have overlooked, leading to incomplete data. This highlights the importance of expanding data sources for a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable development projects and their impacts. Additionally, some SDP-related practices in China have yielded significant results, such as the Yao Foundation, which aims

to promote basketball participation among rural children, Project Hope, which builds sports facilities for rural primary schools, and Nike China's "Play for Fun" programme, which promotes sports participation among girls in marginalised areas. However, these initiatives have yet to receive sufficient attention in the academic field, and the effectiveness of their social value through sport remains unclear. Therefore, including these findings in future research would enhance discussions by integrating Eastern and Western perspectives, improving the generalisability of the research, and deepening our understanding of SDP's global impact and application. To address these limitations, future research should diversify data sources to include news reports, reports, and social media posts. Collaborating with SDP practitioners from China and other Global South regions could also provide diverse data from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. These strategies would offer a more comprehensive, inclusive, and globally representative understanding of SDP's role in promoting gender inclusion and other development goals.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

All data generated or analysed in this study are included in the Supplementary File.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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