

SPORT FOR CHANGE

SPORT FOR CHANGE RESEARCH

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the key learnings from University of Bath's research investigating Comic Relief's 'Sport for Change' funding approach and, more generally, the impact of the sport for development sector. This report focuses on the findings relevant to funders seeking to support organisations using sport as a tool for development.

The insights speak to the critical success factors and considerations when funding sport for development organisations, namely:



Providing funded organisations with greater autonomy and flexibility for funding allocations, decision-making, and adaptations to projects.



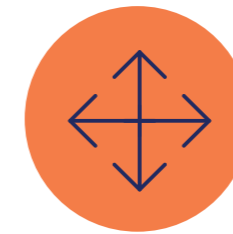
Providing longer-term funding, which can be allocated to support wider organisational operations rather than specific projects costs.



Implementing a Funder+ model which incorporates a package of support and sector guidance that exceeds financial support for funded partners.



Enabling funded organisations to support other smaller or less established organisations and advocate for them in the wider sport for development sector.



Being conscious of the changing and emerging issues in the sport for development sector.



This document also provides an overview of the research findings of the impact of sport for change funding on participants and organisations, and of the challenges and opportunities that the sport for development sector face.

YOU CAN VIEW THE FULL REPORT ON THIS LINK

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This report presents the findings of University of Bath's research which examined Comic Relief's 'Sport for Change' funding approach.

It explores the operationalisation and impact of this approach which, since 2002, has invested £80 million into projects in the UK and internationally. During that time over 500 projects have been funded which have used a variety of sports, including skateboarding, surfing, football, martial arts, yoga and boxing, to promote education, employment, mental health, gender equality, and social inclusion. The report focuses on the range of Sport for Change work that Comic Relief has funded since 2016 with the specific intention of providing an in-depth understanding of the impact of that funding on the organisations involved. 27 organisations, both UK and international, took part in the investigation.

Also known as 'sport for development', or 'sport for good', the approach of sport for change goes beyond simply providing people with the opportunity to take part in sport and physical activity but in addition uses their participation as a platform to address specific personal and social objectives. However, to maximise any impacts of these programmes, the sport/physical activity provision needs to be accompanied by specialist non-sport support that has been intentionally designed to respond to social need and enhance social outcomes. Therefore, at the heart of sport for change is a focus on understanding diversity, and intentionally addressing barriers to inclusion by creating safe spaces for people to build friendships and connections, engage in important conversations, and access specialist support through sport.

Despite the fact that there is little definitive evidence to suggest that sport on its own provides a comprehensive remedy to various social ills, it is well documented that sport can be an effective means through which to engage individuals in activities that may promote broader personal and social outcomes. Sport has the potential to disrupt cycles of anti-social and criminal behaviours. Exposure to sporting experiences can also positively impact marginalised young people by promoting re/engagement with education, training and work. In turn, engagement with sport-based interventions can serve as a powerful tool via which to address issues concerning personal and social education and active citizenship.



FINDINGS

Sport for Change investment has had a positive impact on the organisations and participants of supported programmes, projects, and interventions.

A wide range of benefits were reported in connection with a number of important individual outcomes.

Sport for Change investment has helped to support organisations, both in the UK and internationally, to facilitate the enhancement of:

- ★ Social capital
- ★ Social cohesion
- ★ Physical and mental wellbeing
- ★ Belonging and social connection
- ★ Personal confidence and resilience
- ★ Individual and organisational identity
- ★ Trusting relationships between individuals and organisations



Participant impacts

The most significant impact of sport for change on the lives of participants was in supporting mental health outcomes. Additionally, it also promoted positive physical health through body positivity, healthy choices, and personal improvement.

Sports are a catalyst for social change, 'hooking' or engaging participants and facilitating connections leading to broader support services and care provision within the interventions.

Sport-based interventions offer a 'safe space', where participants feel secure to share information about themselves and develop a sense of belonging with their local communities and other participants. This is especially important for young people who are stigmatized because of their mental health or disabilities.

International organisations noted how sport interventions had been key to empower young people to have 'choice' in relation to their aspirations and ambitions, especially in projects that focused on gender equality.

Interventions sometimes led to employment and training opportunities as well as to more sustained access to formal education. Occasionally, participants transitioned from 'programme participant' to 'staff member' within the organisations which also brings additional lived experience of the issues to the work.



Organisational impacts

Strategic

Sport for change funding provided organisations with the stability to think strategically about how best they could use sport to address a range of social issues. Flexible and long-term funding enabled partners to develop strategically, clarify their mission, take ownership of project aims using local knowledge, improve organisational governance, strengthen infrastructure, develop and retain their workforce, and become a key contributor in the sport for development sector.

Reputational

Respondents highlighted how sport for change investment had not only helped them promote their services widely and build a strong reputation as an effective delivery organisation but also enabled deeper community integration, increased credibility within their neighbourhood, and elevated their status as sector leaders.

Learning

Participants noted that sport for change funding facilitated organisational learning, particularly in monitoring, evaluation, and learning. Many funded partners benefited from collective learning forums and access to platforms for shared learning with other organisations, indicating a desire for more learning opportunities within the sport for development sector.

Partnership

The research indicated that sport for change investment fostered the establishment of new partnerships (nationally and internationally) and strengthened existing ones, broadening working networks to access local authorities and services, facilitating strategic partnerships with policymakers and sector leaders, and creating platforms to advocate for the societal benefits of sports, influencing political decision-making.

Sector leadership

Sport for change investment contributed to sector leadership by facilitating partnership generation and strengthening, as well as enabling smaller organisations to build capacity, while larger organisations acted as advocates for smaller ones within wider sector conversations and debates.

Operational flexibility

Flexible funding, especially around core costs, translated into benefits, ownership and positive impacts for the organisations.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In the sport for development sector

First, and foremost, UK respondents noted that they were, on the whole, experiencing increased demand for their services, especially from young people, with a growing number of referral partners and service providers recognising the value of sport as an intervention tool. Internationally, respondents spoke of the significant levels of stigma that still existed in the Global South in relation to mental health issues, and the resultant challenges which this creates around societal acceptance of mental health disorders and the availability of support services and treatment options for such conditions.

Both internationally and in the UK, access to funding was identified as a major challenge.

Respondents observed that they had experienced reductions in the size of grant allocations and that they were having to apply for funding more frequently, which increased competition for investment and negatively impacted the sustainability of their work. UK participants revealed how the current economic climate and increased sense of financial uncertainty had seen a reduction in the number of funding opportunities available through corporate organisations, including less access to unrestricted sources of funding. International respondents noted that many funders preferred to provide short-term, project focused grants, which limited the extent to which interventions could be embedded and sustained, often leading to the withdrawal of interventions (and organisations) from project locations.

As a consequence of short-term funding, the necessity to continually make grant applications and develop new and innovative projects was highlighted as an organisational challenge. Many respondents reflected that the requirement to be repeatedly making grant applications not only drained organisational resources, but also had a negative effect on staff motivation and wellbeing which, in turn, negatively impacted project delivery. Also, there are practical challenges of attempting to deliver on multiple outcomes from multiple funders, which were rarely aligned.

Financial uncertainty had also negatively impacted the sport for development workforce, including staff and volunteer turnover and the difficulties of retaining experienced and highly effective staff.

Given the critical importance of employing high-quality, frontline staff to deliver sport for development interventions, and the centrality of mentoring relationships between staff and participants as a key mechanism of effective programming, staff instability had begun to affect the depth and quality of their offer. These insights present an important consideration for the sport for development sector, not only in relation to staff retention, but also in regard to the adequacy of training and professional development opportunities available to the current workforce to upskill and support career progression towards leadership and management roles.

A final challenge reported by respondents was the longstanding problem of trying to connect, engage and influence at the policy level.

Many of the comments on this theme related to the potential of sport for development to offer a 'cross-cutting' policy tool, but that accurate and impactful messaging across government departments was still lacking. Respondents indicated that clearer definitions and articulations of the work of the 'sport for development' sector were required, and that there was a need for an organisation (or coalition of organisations) to lead on engagement with policymakers. Also, international respondents mentioned the challenge of having to adapt to changes in government or fluctuations in political priorities by those in power.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS, POLICYMAKERS AND COMMISSIONERS IN THE SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

Provide funded organisations with greater autonomy and flexibility for funding allocations, decision-making, and adaptations to projects.

Organisations that intentionally use sport to tackle social issues often face significant and prolonged external challenges which not only impede the scale and depth of the impact of their programmes, but also threaten organisational survival (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). Providing organisations with additional flexibility in relation to objective-setting, decision-making, and responding to local need is essential. Granting flexibility over the allocation of funding, and allowing the organisations to have ownership of project aims and intentions, will empower them to utilise their local knowledge and community experience to deliver maximum impact in the short-term, but also enable a focus on strategic priorities in the longer-term.

Provide longer-term funding, which can be allocated to support wider organisational operations rather than specific projects costs.

Granting longer-term (minimum 3-5 year) funding provides numerous benefits and creates stronger opportunities for organisations to develop and sustain in terms of both infrastructure and delivery. Core funding is highly appreciated by funded partners. It supports investment into the professional development of staff, supports career progression, and addresses challenges pertaining to staff retention.



Enable funded organisations to support other smaller or less established organisations and advocate for them in the wider sport for development sector.

Enabling more established organisations in the sector to act as advocates for less established organisations (and resourcing them appropriately to undertake this task) will enhance delivery, streamline funding (and other resources), and help to co-ordinate the sector around collective messaging regarding the potential of sport to support social change.

Grant-making bodies, non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), and policymakers need to be conscious of the changing and emerging issues in the sport for development sector.

The sport for development sector is dynamic, complex, and highly nuanced, which means that funders (and associated organisations) must remain vigilant in understanding the most pressing issues facing both the sector and wider society. Working in partnership with expert organisations (such as Comic Relief) is key to understanding the changing nature of the sector, as is showing a genuine interest in funded projects. Generating impact through a sport-based project often takes time and can be difficult to capture tangibly, therefore demonstrating that a flexible approach to the method and frequency of impact measurement is essential. In addition, a commitment to learning about the process mechanisms that 'work' within sport for development projects should supersede a focus on simply capturing quantitative impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Implement a Funder+ model which incorporates a package of support and sector guidance that exceeds financial support for funded partners.

Organisations benefit significantly from the funding that they are awarded, but equally valuable is the package of support that the awarding organisation can offer alongside financial assistance.

Additional support could include:

- 1** Helping funded partners improve their organisational governance
- 2** Informing funded partners on safeguarding policies and good practice
- 3** Providing reflective learning opportunities where organisations can consider the effectiveness of their delivery systems and processes (e.g. approach to monitoring and evaluation)
- 4** Offering collective learning opportunities (in-person or online) involving workshops or networking opportunities and creating access to online platforms to share learning and discuss issues pertinent to the sector
- 5** Facilitating opportunities to connect with the wider sport for development sector so that organisations can gain valuable access to key partners and to establish strategic partnerships with policymakers and sector leaders
- 6** Connecting funded partners with other funding organisations to create opportunities to explore additional/future funding



Comic Relief is a major British charity that aims to bring about positive change and tackle poverty and social injustice in the UK and around the world. We believe that those closest to the issues have the best solutions, so we partner with amazing projects and organisations that tackle some of the biggest challenges faced by society today, such as homelessness, mental health, education, and gender justice. As a progressive funder, one of our funding approaches is using Sport for Change.

Sport for Change, also known as sport for development or sport for good is defined as a project/intervention that is intentional in its use of sport and physical activity to achieve specific social objectives. Taking part in sport or physical activity has many benefits, but will not on its own automatically bring about social change. To have the greatest impact, sport/physical activity needs to be accompanied by specialist non-sport support that has been intentionally designed to respond to social needs and enhance social outcomes.

For more than two decades, Comic Relief's Sport for Change strategy has been instrumental in enabling sport and physical activity interventions in the UK and beyond, funding over 500 projects. Since 2016, this strategy has been consolidated and accelerated as a consequence of a more intentional approach to the funding of a wider variety of projects and programmes.



YOUNG LEADER