

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 organisations leveraging the intentional use of sport as a cross-cutting tool to respond to social issues, i.e., sport for development organisations.

The insights speak to the critical success factors and considerations when designing sport-based interventions, namely:



Creating a 'safe space' for community engagement and development.



Recognising the importance of a key figure, role model/mentor or change agent.



Having a collaborative and co-creative approach to designing the desired development outcome.



Transferring responsibility of programme delivery and design to local communities and individuals with 'lived experience'.



Providing wider learning and development opportunities for programme participants.



Working in partnership with trusted, strategic partner organisations to provide wider support to participants.



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.

KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESSFUL SPORT FOR CHANGE ORGANISATIONS

Academic literature has shown that there are a number of factors that are common within effective sport-based interventions.

The importance of a key figure, role model/mentor, or change agent

Research demonstrates that sport-based programmes are more likely to support social outcomes when positive relationships are constructed between 'leaders' and 'participants' that:

1. Are based upon trust and mutual respect
2. Promote programme leaders as role models who understand and appreciate the challenges that participants encounter in their everyday lives.
3. Enable participants to feel valued or that recognise the abilities and contribution that the young person can bring to the relationship.

Relationships built upon trust and mutual respect are critical to facilitating behaviour change. In cases where educational, social, or economic exclusion has led to young people engaging in 'negative cycles of behaviour,' such as crime, antisocial behaviour, and/or substance misuse, the establishment and development of trusting relationships is a vital part of these programmes. Informal structures of recognition such as verbal praise has proved to be of great relevance. Also, there is a need for the leaders of sport-based programmes to possess a strong awareness of the local communities' issues, and appreciate how these impact the lives of individuals within those communities.

A sustained and long-term commitment to funding, supporting, and transferring responsibility to local communities by funders and practitioners

A major challenge to achieving long-term social change through sport-based programmes is ensuring that programmes are sustained in terms of resource allocation and continued organisational/policy commitments. Funders can increase an organisation's chance of success by providing longer-term funding and resources. A further, critical, aspect of sustainable sport-based interventions is for practitioners or delivery organisations to intentionally facilitate the transfer of the programme's responsibility to local actors and communities. Research indicates that this transfer of responsibility has the potential to increase sustainability, social inclusion, engagement of local stakeholders throughout the life of the programme, and the ability to respond more effectively to local challenges.

The creation of a 'safe space' for community engagement and development

Sports-based programmes or interventions should take place in environments where participants feel safe, and this has long been argued as central to facilitating positive engagement in programmes designed to support development through sport. These environments should ideally offer a neutral space where participants feel able to express themselves with confidence, and develop at their own pace. Recent research has advocated for the inclusion of trauma-aware training to create a safe environment.

Five principles that inform trauma-aware or trauma-informed practice are:

1. Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of participants
2. Establishing routines and structures with programme delivery
3. Developing and sustaining positive relationships that foster a sense of belonging
4. Facilitating and responding to youth voice
5. Promoting strengths and self-belief

A collaborative and co-creative approach to designing the desired development outcome

A major criticism of sports-based social interventions is that they are often characterised by a lack of clarity in their design which leads to the creation of hard-to-follow or vague outcomes. Using a 'theory of change' approach helps capture the 'programme logic' on which a sports-based intervention is based, and systematically map the mechanisms or processes that connect programme inputs with intended programme outcomes to understand the conditions under which an intervention is likely to work. Also, using a participatory and 'strengths-based' approach allows to focus on the specific 'strengths' that individuals or communities possess, which accentuate the lived experiences, visions, values, and hopes of programme participants for the intervention.

BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

For Sport For Development Organisations

The following best practice principles relate to the design of programmes, the inclusion of opportunities for wider learning and personal development among participants, and the benefits of partnership working.

Programme design

It is vital to establish an intentional methodology and systematic design for the desired development outcome(s) that a programme aims to achieve.

This may be accomplished by:



Offering a varied menu of sport and physical activity opportunities to programme participants, which help to support multiple levels of engagement.



Creating an inclusive environment where participants feel safe to express themselves physically and which provides a setting to enhance their sense of belonging with their local communities and feel socially connected beyond the intervention itself.



Using this “safe space” to raise the participants’ awareness about the boundaries of healthy risk-taking and give participants a ‘voice’ to express their personal perspectives, empowering them to be advocates for their communities (especially women and girls).



Engaging other family members, carers, and broader community stakeholders within the sport activities where possible, to develop more cohesive community bonds.



Transitioning the ownership of programme design and delivery to local communities and stakeholders.



Incorporating individuals with ‘lived experience’ of the programme and/or the issues being addressed by the programme within the project personnel.



Wider learning and development opportunities for participants

Providing opportunities for participants to engage in wider learning and development opportunities within programmes has been shown to better support programme outcomes. Sport is a very good tool to engage participants and act as a ‘hook’ and it should be paired with opportunities to take courses, obtain qualifications, meet new people, encounter new experiences, and build self-confidence, resilience and aspirations. If possible, offer opportunities for participants to transition from being a “beneficiary” to being more deeply involved in the design, delivery, and evaluation of the programme. This might include operational roles, such as volunteering, coaching, or marketing of the programme, or undertaking strategic roles, like becoming a Board member. It may also be possible to offer formal or informal engagement and employment avenues, where “participants” transition to becoming paid “staff members” of the programme.

Partnership working

Working in partnership with trusted, strategic partner organisations and service providers can contribute to providing wider support to participants (e.g., mental health support). Working collaboratively can have multiple benefits for organisations, including the opportunity to share resources, pool expertise, and enhance the profile of the project. Partner organisations may be able to provide critical services to enhance the overall impact of a programme, such as access to role models, mentors or change agents. Partnerships can be a particularly effective method to develop participant referral pathways to ensure that recruitment to programmes is targeted and specific, making certain that vulnerable populations get to engage with these projects. These partnerships may also help to provide clear exit trajectories for participants “post-project” towards opportunities for further education, training or employment.

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.



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