

SPORT FOR CHANGE

SPORT FOR CHANGE RESEARCH

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document presents the key learnings from University of Bath's research investigating Comic Relief's 'Sport for Change' funding approach and its influence on the sport for development sector. The research highlights how Comic Relief's Sport for Change strategy has been instrumental in enabling sport and physical activity interventions in the UK and beyond, impacting practitioners at an organisational level and participants at an individual and community level.

This report focuses on the findings relevant to organisations seeking to enter into a partnership with Comic Relief in the sport for development sector, encapsulating Comic Relief's co-funders and funded partners' reflections on their experiences collaborating with Comic Relief. Finally, it emphasizes the need for continued efforts and investments in this sphere, given the persisting opportunities within the sector.

This document also provides an overview of the research findings of the impact of sport for change funding on participants and sport for development organisations.

[YOU CAN VIEW THE FULL REPORT ON THIS LINK](#)



RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This document 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 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

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. 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. This research highlights a collective desire across all of the featured funded partners and stakeholders for the Sport for Change strategy to continue in its efforts to be progressive in its approach and to model best practices operationally.

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:

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



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 inequality.

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.



Organisational impacts

Strategic

Sport for change funding can provide organisations with the stability to think strategically about how best they can use sport to address a range of social issues. Flexible and long-term funding allows partners to take ownership of project aims using local knowledge, enables them to develop strategically, strengthen infrastructure, develop and retain their workforce, clarify their mission, improve organisational governance, and explore broader roles 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 neighbourhoods, 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 and operational processes, especially around core costs and manageable reporting protocols, translate into benefits, ownership and positive impacts for the organisations.

REFLECTIONS ON COMIC RELIEF

From funded partners:

Sport for Change funded partners reflected on the distinctive features of Comic Relief as a funder within the sport for development sector, and findings revealed overwhelmingly positive experiences in relation to the grants, working practices of Comic Relief staff, and their relationship with funded partners.

Many organisations highlighted the flexible approach adopted by Comic Relief (compared to other funders) concerning grant allocation and spending and the ownership and implementation of project aims. The extent and duration of funding varied across funded partners, but many spoke of the support they had felt from longer-term funding arrangements.

Respondents praised Comic Relief's staff's deep understanding of the sport for development field, appreciating their active engagement in sharing expertise and learning from supported projects. Comic Relief's comprehension of the sector and its approach to impact measurement fostered trust and open communication with funded partners, leading to mutual benefits in project management and impact maximisation. Also, many organisations saw Comic Relief as an advocate, influencer, and thought-leader in the sector, as well as an important enabler of systems change.

Comic Relief's approach to communication and grant management, characterised by a "lighter touch," has been positively received. Respondents emphasised the importance of having a consistent grant manager who provides support and guidance throughout the project, a feature that sets Comic Relief apart from other grant-making bodies. Individual staff members were also praised for their responsiveness, transparency, flexibility, and passion for supporting projects in the sport for development sector.

Organisations appreciated Comic Relief's status as a 'learning organisation', prioritising understanding each organisation's process over solely capturing quantitative impact. The reporting process was seen as collaborative and facilitative rather than scrutinising, encouraging narrative accounts of impact and participant stories. The genuine interest and advocacy efforts of Comic Relief staff were acknowledged as valuable contributions to the sector.

Respondents acknowledged challenges in measuring intangible impacts, such as those that take time to manifest or occur unintentionally, recognising Comic Relief's understanding of these complexities. This acknowledgment reflected broader discussions on Comic Relief's role in funding the overarching vision and purpose of funded partners, rather than solely supporting specific project elements.

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Comic Relief allows you to live your best life because you are far less likely to get that level of funding from anywhere else. It's 'gold standard'. ... It's luxurious to have guaranteed three-year funding and income coming through the door where you know that you can build, develop. But it also gives you the capacity and the ability to make mistakes and still move forward.

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... it does feel a two-way relationship as well; it's never just, you know, "How are you, I'm supporting you". You always feel like they want to be funding us because they're learning so much from it, and they always come to us as well for advice, what do you think about this?; how does that work?; how did you find that?

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REFLECTIONS ON COMIC RELIEF

From funding partners:

Funding partners' reflections on Comic Relief as a co-funder indicated favourable opinions regarding their expertise in the sport for development sector, their credibility and status as a charity, and their exceptional learning and project management practices.

Comic Relief is recognised as a knowledgeable contributor in the sport for development sector. Comic Relief's influence has been instrumental in shifting organisational focus towards integrating social objectives, reinforcing the importance of sport for development within the wider UK and international social agenda.

Organisations noted that a partnership with Comic Relief's offered significant advantages, enhancing the credibility and visibility of supported projects. This positive perception helps garner additional financial and other forms of support, benefiting sport projects and initiatives. A notable positive of working with Comic Relief is its commitment to learning and monitoring, which is central to informing future project iterations. This approach has made Comic Relief partnerships a valuable precursor for developing further collaborations with other sport for development organisations and funders. It has also influenced outcome pathways, encouraging a broader focus on understanding current key needs rather than adhering strictly to predefined themes.

Comic Relief is recognised for its exceptional project management skills and extensive expertise in supporting partner organisations. Beyond grant management they provide substantial support and resources to local delivery organisations, understanding the specific needs of local contexts. Comic Relief's knowledgeable staff are trusted for their ability to manage grants and projects effectively, maintaining flexibility to pivot on outcomes as necessary. This adaptability, coupled with transparent communication, ensures all partners are involved in decision-making processes.

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The sport for development sector definitely wants to be more collaborative but the sector doesn't really know how to do that ... and we're all doing it in our way. Comic Relief has worked with hundreds of organisations and knows (or has a good idea of) how to collaborate effectively...

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Compared to other donors, they really understand the role of sport in our programmes ... Comic Relief are so embedded in the sport for development sector, I think that probably sets Comic Relief quite apart, they just really understand the sport for development world.

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CONCLUSIONS

Sport for Change at Comic Relief has continued to act as a catalyst for social transformation via its funding streams in recent years, despite the significant social challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In turn, it has established a foundation of experience and expertise upon which the sport for development sector can build. The stakeholders featured in this report were unequivocal in their positive assessment of the operational approach of Sport for Change and the funding processes and practices. Funded partners view Comic Relief as a sensitive, grant-making body, which is innovative and collaborative in its approach. Over time, these practices have generated a high level of 'buy-in' across stakeholder organisations in relation to shared learning and knowledge exchange, all of which has served to enhance and accelerate the delivery of their projects. The findings of this report underline that Comic Relief's Sport for Change approach continues to function as a key player on the sport for development landscape, and a key facilitator of solution-focused and holistic sport interventions.

Furthermore, the identified themes clearly align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby demonstrating a greater awareness and willingness on the part of Comic Relief to intentionally establish a greater sense of coherence in terms of wider strategic debate, and a stronger external narrative in relation to project impacts, both internationally and in the UK. This explicit alignment also provides the opportunity to further cohere the Sport for Change approach and related impacts with global policy priorities and agendas and to potentially act as a means to acquire additional funding and support from national and international organisations and governments.

Despite significant progress and growth in the sport for development sector, this work requires ongoing and sustained involvement and investment. There is still much to be done to strengthen and build the ecosystem both in the UK and internationally. Therefore, we urge our current and potential partners to recognize the pivotal role of Sport for Change investment in achieving social impact goals and ensure that this critical work is appropriately resourced to maintain and deepen its impact. We also encourage funders and partners already investing in the sport for development sector to continue advocating for the broader sport for development movement and, if possible, to become key contributors and thought leaders in enabling systems change. Finally, we urge partners to reflect on how their sport for development-funded programs align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to offer clarity and coherence between sport development and wider global political agendas and strategies.

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