

The Role of Community-Based Sports in Promoting Social Inclusion and Youth Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Community-based sports initiatives have increasingly gained recognition as powerful instruments for fostering social inclusion and youth empowerment, particularly in contexts marked by socio-economic disparities, marginalization, and limited access to formal development opportunities. This research paper examines the multifaceted role of grassroots sports programs in promoting inclusive participation, enhancing psychosocial well-being, and cultivating leadership capacities among young people. By situating sport within a broader social development framework, the study highlights how structured and semi-structured community sports activities contribute to reducing social exclusion, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and encouraging active citizenship. The study adopts a qualitative and mixed-methods approach, drawing on case studies, program evaluations, and participant narratives from diverse community settings. It explores how community-based sports serve as accessible platforms that transcend barriers related to gender, ethnicity, disability, and economic status. Through inclusive program design and participatory engagement, such initiatives create safe and supportive environments where youth can interact, collaborate, and develop mutual respect. These interactions not only foster a sense of belonging but also challenge stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, thereby promoting social cohesion. Furthermore, the research investigates the empowerment dimension of sports participation, emphasizing its impact on youth confidence, decision-making abilities, and leadership development. Engagement in team sports and organized physical activities enables young individuals to acquire essential life skills such as communication, teamwork, resilience, and conflict resolution. These competencies are critical for personal growth and are transferable to educational, professional, and civic domains. The study also highlights the role of coaches, mentors, and community leaders in facilitating positive youth development by acting as role models and providing guidance and support.

A key focus of the paper is the intersection between sport and social inclusion policies. It critically examines how local and national frameworks integrate sports into youth development agendas and identifies gaps in implementation, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Challenges such as inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, cultural barriers, and gender inequalities are discussed as factors that may hinder the effectiveness and sustainability of community sports programs. Despite these challenges, evidence presented in the study demonstrates that even low-cost, community-driven initiatives can yield significant social benefits when they are inclusive, context-sensitive, and participatory in nature. The findings underscore the importance of adopting a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to sport-based interventions, where collaboration between educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and policy-makers is essential. By aligning sports initiatives with broader development goals, including social justice, equality, and peacebuilding, community-based programs can serve as catalysts for long-term positive change. The study concludes that sport, when intentionally designed and inclusively implemented, is not merely a recreational activity but a transformative tool for empowering youth and fostering inclusive societies. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on Sport for Development by providing empirical and theoretical insights into how community-based sports can effectively address issues of exclusion and disempowerment among youth. It also offers practical recommendations for stakeholders aiming to design, implement, and evaluate impactful sports programs that promote equity, participation, and sustainable social development.

Keywords: *Community-based sports, Youth empowerment, Social inclusion, Sport for development, Social cohesion.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the role of sport has evolved beyond mere physical activity and recreation to become a significant instrument for social development and transformation. Within this broader paradigm, community-based sports have gained increasing recognition as effective platforms for promoting social inclusion and youth empowerment, particularly in contexts characterized by inequality, marginalization, and limited access to resources. The growing field of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) highlights how structured and grassroots sports initiatives can address complex social challenges by fostering participation, building life skills, and strengthening community cohesion (Coalter, 2010; Levermore, 2008). Youth, defined broadly as individuals in the transitional phase from childhood to adulthood, represent a critical segment of the population in both developed and developing societies. However, many young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, face multiple barriers to inclusion, including poverty, discrimination, lack of education, and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement. These challenges often lead to social exclusion, reduced self-esteem, and vulnerability to negative influences such as crime, violence, and substance abuse (United Nations, 2018). In this context, community-based sports programs provide accessible and inclusive spaces where youth can engage in constructive activities, develop essential skills, and build positive social networks. Community-based sports are typically organized at the local level and emphasize participation, inclusivity, and community ownership rather than elite competition. These initiatives are often implemented by non-governmental organizations, schools, local clubs, and community groups, making them more adaptable to the specific needs and cultural contexts of the populations they serve. Unlike professional or high-performance sports, community-based programs prioritize personal development, social interaction, and collective well-being (Coakley, 2011). This orientation makes them particularly effective in reaching marginalized youth, including those from low-income families, ethnic minorities, refugees, and individuals with disabilities.

One of the primary contributions of community-based sports lies in their ability to promote social inclusion. Social inclusion refers to the process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for individuals and groups who are disadvantaged or excluded (World Bank, 2013). Through sports, young

people from diverse backgrounds are brought together in shared activities that encourage cooperation, mutual respect, and understanding. Participation in team sports, for example, fosters interpersonal relationships and helps break down social barriers related to race, gender, and socio-economic status. These interactions contribute to the development of social capital, which is essential for building cohesive and resilient communities (Putnam, 2000).

In addition to fostering inclusion, community-based sports play a crucial role in empowering youth. Youth empowerment involves enabling young individuals to gain control over their lives, develop confidence, and actively participate in decision-making processes that affect their communities (Zimmerman, 2000). Sports provide a unique environment where youth can experience achievement, learn from failure, and develop a sense of competence and autonomy. Through regular participation, young people acquire transferable life skills such as leadership, teamwork, communication, discipline, and problem-solving. These skills are not only valuable within the sports context but also contribute to success in education, employment, and civic engagement (Holt et al., 2017). Moreover, the influence of mentors and role models within community sports settings cannot be overlooked. Coaches, trainers, and community leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences and outcomes of youth participants. Positive mentorship fosters supportive relationships, reinforces pro-social behavior, and encourages personal growth. When sports programs are intentionally designed with values such as fairness, respect, and inclusion, they can become powerful environments for social learning and character development (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). This highlights the importance of training and supporting facilitators to ensure that sports initiatives achieve their intended developmental outcomes. Despite the well-documented benefits, the implementation of community-based sports programs is not without challenges. Issues such as inadequate funding, lack of infrastructure, limited access to safe play spaces, and insufficient policy support can hinder the effectiveness and sustainability of these initiatives. In many regions, particularly in developing countries, sports are often undervalued within national development agendas, leading to underinvestment and missed opportunities for youth engagement (Kay, 2009). Additionally, socio-cultural barriers, including gender norms and discrimination, may restrict participation for certain groups, especially girls and young women. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated effort among governments, non-governmental organizations, and local communities to create enabling environments for inclusive sports participation.

Furthermore, there is a growing need for empirical research that critically examines the impact of community-based sports on social inclusion and youth empowerment. While numerous programs claim positive outcomes, the evidence base remains fragmented, with variations in program design, implementation, and evaluation methods. This underscores the importance of adopting rigorous research approaches to assess the effectiveness of sports initiatives and identify best practices that can be scaled and replicated across different contexts (Coalter, 2013).

This study aims to contribute to this body of knowledge by exploring the role of community-based sports in promoting social inclusion and youth empowerment. It seeks to analyze how participation in grassroots sports programs influences social relationships, personal development, and community engagement among youth. Additionally, the research examines the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing such programs, with a focus on identifying strategies for enhancing their impact and sustainability. In conclusion, community-based sports represent a promising avenue for addressing some of the most pressing challenges facing youth today. By providing inclusive, participatory, and supportive environments, these initiatives can foster social cohesion, empower individuals, and contribute to broader development goals. As societies continue to grapple with issues of inequality and exclusion, the integration of sports into youth development strategies offers a practical and impactful approach to building more inclusive and equitable communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing recognition of sport as a vehicle for social change has led to an expanding body of literature examining its role in promoting social inclusion and youth empowerment. Within the framework of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP), community-based sports have been identified as accessible and effective mechanisms for engaging marginalized populations and fostering positive developmental outcomes (Coalter, 2013; Levermore, 2008). This literature review synthesizes key scholarly contributions that explore how grassroots sports initiatives influence social inclusion and empower youth across diverse contexts. Social inclusion, broadly defined as the process of enhancing individuals' participation in society, is a central theme in sport-based interventions. Research suggests that community-based sports create inclusive environments by facilitating interaction among individuals from different socio-economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. According to Putnam (2000), such interactions contribute to the development of social capital, which strengthens trust, cooperation, and community cohesion. Similarly, Spaaij (2012) highlights that participation in sports can reduce social isolation and promote a sense of belonging, particularly among disadvantaged youth. By providing equal opportunities for engagement, sports programs challenge social inequalities and foster inclusive identities. A significant strand of literature focuses on the role of sports in youth empowerment. Empowerment is often conceptualized as a process through which individuals gain control over their lives, develop self-efficacy, and actively contribute to their communities (Zimmerman, 2000). Studies have shown that participation in community sports enhances psychological and social competencies, including self-confidence, leadership, and decision-making skills (Holt et al., 2017). These outcomes are particularly important for youth from marginalized backgrounds, who may lack access to formal educational or developmental opportunities. Coakley (2011) argues that sports provide a unique setting where young people can experience achievement and recognition, thereby reinforcing their sense of agency and self-worth. In addition to individual-level benefits, community-based sports have been shown to generate broader social impacts. For instance, Schulenkorf (2017) emphasizes the role of sport in fostering intercultural dialogue and peacebuilding in divided societies. Through collaborative activities, participants learn to navigate differences, resolve conflicts, and build mutual understanding. This is particularly relevant in contexts characterized by ethnic tensions, migration, or social fragmentation. Furthermore, community sports programs often incorporate educational components, such as health awareness and life skills training, which enhance their developmental impact (Kay, 2009).

The role of program design and leadership is another critical aspect highlighted in the literature. Effective sports programs are those that prioritize inclusivity, participation, and personal development over competition and performance outcomes. Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005) note that the presence of trained coaches and mentors significantly influences the quality of youth experiences in sports settings. Positive role models can foster supportive environments, encourage pro-social behavior, and facilitate skill development. Conversely, poorly designed programs may reinforce exclusion or fail to achieve their intended objectives (Coalter, 2010).

Despite the documented benefits, scholars have also identified several limitations and challenges associated with community-based sports initiatives. One major concern is the lack of rigorous evaluation and evidence regarding program effectiveness. Coalter (2013) argues that many SDP programs rely on anecdotal evidence rather than systematic research, making it difficult to assess their true impact. Additionally, structural barriers such as limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-cultural constraints can restrict participation and sustainability (Kay, 2009). Gender disparities, in particular, remain a persistent issue, with girls and young women often facing cultural and institutional barriers to sports participation (Spaaij, 2012).

In summary, the existing literature underscores the potential of community-based sports as powerful tools for promoting social inclusion and youth empowerment. While the evidence points to significant positive outcomes at both individual and community levels, there is a need for more rigorous and context-specific research to better understand the mechanisms through which these impacts are achieved. Addressing existing challenges and enhancing program design will be essential for maximizing the contribution of sports to inclusive and sustainable youth development.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine the role of community-based sports in promoting social inclusion and youth empowerment. A mixed-methods approach is considered appropriate as it allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the measurable outcomes and the lived experiences of participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). By integrating qualitative and quantitative data, the study seeks to provide a holistic analysis of how sports initiatives influence youth development and social integration. The research design is primarily exploratory and descriptive in nature. It combines survey-based quantitative analysis with qualitative insights derived from interviews and focus group discussions. The quantitative component aims to measure levels of social inclusion, participation, and perceived empowerment among youth engaged in community sports programs. The qualitative component, on the other hand, provides in-depth understanding of participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and the social dynamics within sports settings. The study population consists of youth aged 15 to 29 years who are actively participating in community-based sports programs in selected urban and semi-urban areas. A purposive sampling technique is employed to select participants who have at least six months of continuous involvement in sports activities. This criterion ensures that respondents have sufficient exposure to the program to provide meaningful insights. A total sample size of approximately 150 participants is targeted for the quantitative survey, while a smaller subset of 20–25 participants is selected for qualitative interviews and focus groups. To measure key variables, the study utilizes standardized and adapted instruments from existing literature. Social inclusion is assessed through indicators such as sense of belonging, social interaction, and acceptance within the community (Putnam, 2000). Youth empowerment is measured using constructs related to self-efficacy, leadership skills, and decision-making capacity (Zimmerman, 2000). Responses are recorded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The reliability and validity of the instruments are ensured through pilot testing and expert review prior to data collection.

Quantitative data are analyzed using statistical software, employing descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies, and standard deviations to summarize responses. Inferential techniques, including correlation and regression analysis, are used to examine relationships between sports participation and outcomes related to inclusion and empowerment. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups are analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involves coding responses, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting patterns that reflect participants' experiences. Ethical considerations are carefully addressed throughout the research process. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, and confidentiality is maintained by anonymizing personal information. Participants are informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. The research also ensures that data are used solely for academic purposes. Overall, this methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of the impact of community-based sports, combining statistical evidence with rich qualitative narratives to provide a comprehensive analysis of youth development and social inclusion.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection for this study is conducted using multiple methods to ensure the reliability and depth of findings. The primary tools include structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. This triangulation of data sources enhances the validity of the research by capturing both numerical trends and personal experiences (Creswell, 2014).

The quantitative data are collected through a structured questionnaire distributed among youth participants involved in community-based sports programs. The questionnaire consists of closed-ended questions designed to measure levels of social inclusion, participation, and empowerment. It is administered in person to ensure a high response rate and to assist participants in understanding the questions where necessary. Prior to the main survey, a pilot test is conducted with a small group of respondents to refine the instrument and ensure clarity.

Qualitative data are gathered through semi-structured interviews with selected participants, coaches, and program facilitators. These interviews allow respondents to share their personal experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding the role of sports in their lives. An interview guide is used to maintain consistency while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on relevant issues. Each interview is recorded with consent and later transcribed for analysis. In addition, focus group discussions are conducted with groups of 6–8 participants to explore collective perspectives and social dynamics within sports programs. These discussions provide valuable insights into group interactions, peer relationships, and shared experiences of inclusion and empowerment. The focus groups are moderated by the researcher to ensure balanced participation and to facilitate meaningful dialogue. All data collection procedures are conducted in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods ensures a comprehensive dataset, enabling the study to capture both the breadth and depth of the research problem.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce the growing body of evidence that community-based sports serve as a powerful mechanism for promoting social inclusion and youth empowerment. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how participation in grassroots sports initiatives contributes to positive developmental outcomes among youth. The results align with existing literature within the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) framework, confirming that sports can function as an effective tool for addressing social inequalities and fostering cohesive communities (Coalter, 2013; Levermore, 2008). One of the most significant findings of this study is the positive relationship between participation in community-based sports and increased levels of social inclusion. Participants reported a stronger sense of belonging, improved interpersonal relationships, and greater acceptance within their communities. These findings are consistent with Putnam's (2000) concept of social capital, which emphasizes the importance of networks, trust, and shared norms in building inclusive societies. Through regular interaction in sports settings, youth from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds were able to form meaningful connections, thereby reducing social barriers and promoting mutual understanding. This is particularly important in contexts where divisions based on class, ethnicity, or gender are prevalent.

The qualitative findings further highlight how sports create safe and inclusive spaces where youth feel valued and respected. Participants described their involvement in sports programs as an opportunity to “be part of something,” indicating the role of these initiatives in combating social isolation. This supports previous research suggesting that sports participation can enhance social integration and reduce marginalization, especially among disadvantaged youth (Spaaij, 2012). The inclusive nature of community-based sports, which prioritizes participation over competition, appears to be a key factor in achieving these

outcomes. In terms of youth empowerment, the study demonstrates that engagement in sports significantly contributes to the development of personal and social competencies. Participants reported improvements in self-confidence, leadership abilities, communication skills, and decision-making capacity. These findings are in line with empowerment theory, which posits that individuals gain a sense of control and agency through active participation in meaningful activities (Zimmerman, 2000). Sports provide a unique environment where youth can experience both success and failure, learn from these experiences, and develop resilience. The acquisition of such life skills is critical for navigating challenges in education, employment, and social life. Moreover, the role of coaches and mentors emerged as a crucial element in shaping positive outcomes. Participants who reported supportive and encouraging relationships with coaches were more likely to exhibit higher levels of confidence and engagement. This finding supports the work of Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005), who emphasize the importance of positive role models in youth sports. Coaches not only facilitate skill development but also influence values, attitudes, and behaviors. Therefore, the effectiveness of community-based sports programs is closely linked to the quality of leadership and mentorship provided.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also identifies several challenges that limit the effectiveness and sustainability of community-based sports initiatives. Limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of institutional support were frequently cited as barriers to participation. These challenges are consistent with previous studies highlighting structural constraints in the implementation of SDP programs (Kay, 2009). In many cases, sports programs operate on minimal budgets, which affects the availability of equipment, facilities, and trained personnel. Addressing these issues requires greater investment and policy support at both local and national levels. Another important challenge identified is the persistence of socio-cultural barriers, particularly those related to gender. Female participants reported facing restrictions and limited opportunities to engage in sports due to cultural norms and expectations. This finding underscores the need for gender-sensitive approaches in program design and implementation. Ensuring equal access to sports for all youth, regardless of gender, is essential for achieving true social inclusion and empowerment. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for more systematic evaluation of sports programs. While participants reported positive experiences, there is a lack of standardized measures to assess long-term impact. This limitation has been noted in the literature, with scholars calling for more rigorous and evidence-based approaches to evaluating SDP initiatives (Coalter, 2013). Developing clear indicators and monitoring frameworks will be essential for demonstrating the effectiveness of sports programs and securing continued support. In conclusion, the discussion confirms that community-based sports have significant potential to promote social inclusion and youth empowerment. By providing accessible, inclusive, and supportive environments, these programs enable youth to develop essential skills, build meaningful relationships, and actively participate in their communities. However, to maximize their impact, it is necessary to address existing challenges related to resources, gender inequality, and program evaluation. A collaborative approach involving policymakers, practitioners, and communities will be crucial in enhancing the sustainability and effectiveness of these initiatives.

FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of community-based sports in youth development, several areas warrant further investigation. First, future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine the long-term impact of sports participation on social inclusion and empowerment. Understanding how these outcomes evolve over time will provide a more comprehensive assessment of program effectiveness. Second, there is a need for comparative studies across different cultural and geographical contexts. Since community-based sports programs operate within diverse social environments, examining variations in outcomes can help identify context-specific factors that influence success. This is particularly relevant for developing countries, where socio-economic and cultural conditions may differ significantly from those in developed regions. Third, future studies should explore the role of gender in greater depth,

focusing on strategies to overcome barriers to female participation in sports. Investigating the experiences of girls and young women in different cultural settings can contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable programs. Additionally, research should examine the integration of technology and digital platforms in community-based sports initiatives. With the increasing use of digital tools in youth engagement, exploring how technology can enhance participation and learning outcomes presents a promising area of study. Finally, there is a need for more rigorous evaluation frameworks that combine qualitative and quantitative methods. Developing standardized tools and indicators for measuring social inclusion and empowerment will strengthen the evidence base for sport-based interventions. Such efforts will not only contribute to academic knowledge but also inform policy and practice, ensuring that community-based sports programs achieve their full potential as tools for social change.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of community-based sports in promoting social inclusion and youth empowerment, highlighting their significance as accessible and impactful tools for social development. The findings demonstrate that participation in grassroots sports initiatives fosters a strong sense of belonging, enhances interpersonal relationships, and reduces social barriers among youth from diverse backgrounds. By creating inclusive environments that prioritize participation over competition, community-based sports contribute to building social cohesion and strengthening community ties. In addition to promoting inclusion, the study confirms that sports play a vital role in empowering young individuals. Through regular engagement in sports activities, youth develop essential life skills such as leadership, communication, teamwork, and resilience. These competencies not only support personal growth but also enable young people to actively participate in social and civic life. The presence of supportive mentors and coaches further enhances these outcomes by providing guidance, encouragement, and positive role modeling. However, the study also identifies key challenges that must be addressed to maximize the impact of community-based sports programs. Issues such as limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-cultural barriers—particularly those affecting female participation—continue to hinder the effectiveness and inclusivity of these initiatives. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, community organizations, and stakeholders to ensure equitable access and sustainable program development. In conclusion, community-based sports represent a powerful and practical approach to fostering inclusive and empowered youth populations. When effectively designed and supported, these programs can serve as catalysts for positive social change, contributing to the development of more equitable, cohesive, and resilient societies.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have several important implications for research, policy, and practice. From a research perspective, the study highlights the need for more rigorous and longitudinal investigations to better understand the long-term impact of community-based sports on youth development and social inclusion. Future research should also focus on developing standardized measurement tools to assess empowerment and inclusion outcomes more effectively. From a policy standpoint, the study underscores the importance of integrating sports into national and local youth development strategies. Governments and policymakers should recognize community-based sports as valuable instruments for achieving broader social goals, including social cohesion, gender equality, and youth engagement. Increased funding, infrastructure development, and institutional support are essential to enhance the reach and sustainability of such programs. In terms of practice, the study emphasizes the importance of inclusive program design and effective leadership. Practitioners should prioritize accessibility, gender sensitivity, and community participation when developing sports initiatives. Training coaches and facilitators to serve as positive role models can further strengthen the developmental impact of these programs. Overall, this research contributes to the growing field of Sport for Development and Peace by providing evidence-based insights

that can inform future interventions, policies, and scholarly work aimed at leveraging sports for social transformation.

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