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Original Research

Building Bridges in the Mediterranean: Circular Cooperation and Sport for Development and Peace for Refugees in Italy

Alessio Norrito[1], Roberta La Cara[2], Agostino Sella[2], Richard Giulianotti[1] and Carolynne Mason[1]

[1]Loughborough University, United Kingdom
[2]Associazione Don Bosco 2000, Italy

Corresponding author email: a.norrito@lboro.ac.uk, a.norrito@mmu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the utility of circular cooperation for the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) field. Circular cooperation is a modus operandi used to address the Central Mediterranean refugee crises. This methodology is currently employed between Sicily, The Gambia, Senegal, and Mali. It relies on rehabilitating asylum-seekers crossing the Mediterranean, to then provide training towards a return to their country of origin. Returnees then establish start-ups that are functional in addressing the needs of their community of origin, while keeping a cyclical supportive partnership with their country of departure. In doing so, returning migrants can tap into the resources of the host country while also autonomously leading developmental efforts in their original community, by transferring their acquired skills from the country of relocation.

Circular cooperation is a vehicle for SDP to cooperate with other developmental fields, ensure the autonomy of initiatives and meaningfully address the necessities of user groups. The adoption of circular cooperation in SDP directly safeguards and improves the livelihood of forcibly migrating populations. Moreover, the adoption of a circular cooperation methodology could challenge neocolonial tendencies in SDP.

Building Bridges in the Mediterranean: Circular Cooperation and Sport for Development and Peace for Refugees in Italy

The Central Mediterranean Route is considered one of the most dangerous routes that asylum-seekers undertake to reach Europe. The migratory route involves irregularly crossing the desert to reach either Libya or Tunisia, then boarding makeshift boats to attempt to land into Italian shores. Boats mainly aim to reach Sicily, the southernmost Italian region. Since 2014, around 19,500 people have been reported dead or missing at sea while undertaking the crossing (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2023a). Many other atrocities concerning the land route remain numerically unaccounted for (UNHCR, 2018). The risks that asylum-seekers encounter are multifaceted. First, these relate to terrestrial and climactic conditions, such as traveling not only across the desert and sea but also across mountains and rivers, especially in winter, with very few resources. Second, there are human traffickers who force asylum-seekers to undertake the journey due to their own interests. Third, asylum-seekers risk being abused by state authorities across Africa and Europe. Survivors have reported different forms of abuse, such as kidnapping and physical torture, sexual abuse, and forced starvation, with the frequent intent of extortion (McMahon & Sigona, 2018; UNHCR, 2018).

Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) currently operate within the Northern African states, the Mediterranean Sea and Sicily, directly addressing the situation (Cusumano, 2018), as a direct response to minimize deaths (Esperti, 2020). On land, several organizations operate within refugee camps or interested areas, targeting different aspects of refugee well-being through different interventions. Central to these differing operations is the necessity to provide safer options for border-crossing to the asylum-seeking populations.

Within this multiplicity of interventions, sport is being used by various organizations to contribute to achieving

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broader goals of development (see Associazione Don Bosco 2000, nd; Liberi Nantes, nd). Namely, these NGOs are primarily addressing the necessity of providing safety and well-being, along with many interrelated global goals, such as reducing inequalities, promoting justice and peace, and reducing hunger (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The value of sport is harnessed in an attempt to address these developmental trajectories, aligning with the concept of 'Sport for Development and Peace' (SDP) (Kidd, 2008).

SDP ranges from being a movement to a proper occupational environment, with an ongoing professionalization of the sector continuously occurring across the globe, especially within NGOs and academic settings (Kidd, 2008; McSweeney et al, 2021). SDP is defined as "the intentional use of sport and physical activity as a tool to contribute to the development and peace goals, including the Commonwealth goals of democracy and development" (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2015, p. v).

The multidisciplinarity of SDP research represents both a challenge and an advantage (Massey & Whitley, 2018). On one hand, finding a common ground is problematic when many disciplinary lenses are involved, thus generating exceptionally valid but isolated findings (Massey & Whitley, 2018; Whitley et al, 2022). On the other hand, such multidisciplinarity means that the SDP sector can tap relevantly into numerous fields of inquiry (Massey & Whitley, 2018; Giulianotti et al, 2019). Scholars argue that SDP is now a distinct field of international development, working within familiar networks and echo chambers that may deter the growth of the field (Giulianotti et al, 2019; Whitley et al, 2022). Innovations in SDP are thus necessary to advance the field, especially when recognized that innovations are shaped by external stakeholders and intraorganizational conditions (Svensson & Hambrick, 2019; Svensson & Mahoney, 2020). Therefore, scholars are advocating for an outward-looking approach, that goes beyond narrow SDP networks, but includes new stakeholders, and engagement with the wider development sector (Giulianotti et al, 2019).

Following such an approach, this contribution provides insights to advance forward knowledge and practice in SDP, through a collaborative effort between the academic and organizational sectors. It combines the theoretical expertise of the academic author with the practical knowledge of the organization in the field, to co-propose a direction for the SDP sector working with refugee populations. First, it presents an under-explored SDP scenario, through the presentation of contextually unique characteristics of Mediterranean forced migration. As a border zone, with processes involving cooperation between Global North and South, it is a situation and model that can inform the debate surrounding North-South relationships in SDP. Second, it connects SDP practices with developmental practices in the agricultural sector, innovating the field through multidisciplinary contribution (Whitley et al, 2022). It confronts SDP with the agricultural sector, showing what can be learned from the field and the successful pairing of work and leisure for the development sector. Lastly, it combines the theoretical expertise of the academic author with the practical knowledge of the actors in the field, to co-propose a direction for the SDP sector working with refugee populations. It does so by proposing a work methodology, circular cooperation, that challenges neocolonial tendencies in SDP.

This paper is structured as follows. First, it explains the concept of 'circular cooperation' as practiced by Associazione Don Bosco 2000 in Sicily, The Gambia, Senegal, and Mali, and examines the topic through a transdisciplinary developmental perspective. Second, it critically addresses the value of football for the interested population of Central Mediterranean asylum-seekers. Third, in bringing together the two preceding sections, the paper proposes how SDP initiatives intersect with the methodology of circular cooperation. Finally, it concludes by addressing the effectiveness of the circular cooperation model in preventing dangerous crossings in the Mediterranean, thus the potential of SDP initiatives to generate outstanding livelihood outcomes for the interested population through innovative, multidisciplinary, and intersectoral cooperation.

Circular Cooperation and Achieving Livelihood

This section defines and explains circular cooperation, as theorized and operationalized by Associazione Don Bosco 2000.

Based in Sicily, Associazione Don Bosco 2000 was founded in 1998 with the objective to "promote the integral formation of man by paying particular attention to young people and to the emergencies of our time" (AssociazioneDon Bosco 2000, 2022). Their work, in relation to Central Mediterranean refugees, concerns specific initiatives to provide legal assistance, rehabilitative and psychological support, health-related services, and education, to support their resettlement. Within this offer, Associazione Don Bosco 2000 promotes diverse sport activities aimed to facilitate the provision of these diverse services. Associazione Don Bosco 2000 provides football-based activities with community-based youth teams, a multi-ethnic men's team and a women's team. In the past, missionaries following the Salesian philosophy of Don Giovanni Bosco, have provided football for children in

war-torn Liberia, in an attempt to provide a different career pathway to the militia, offering a social alternative to violence and criminal practices (Armstrong, 2004; Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2011).

The concept of circular cooperation is central to this contribution. Circular cooperation is rooted in the notion of circular migration. Circular migration, at its core, can be defined as "the process of leaving and then returning to one's place of origin" (Newland, 2009, p.6), often related to employment, livelihood, and life-cycles (Newland, 2009). The concept overlaps with the ultimate goal of seeking refuge: receiving protection until you are able to return safely (Crisp, 2000). Indeed, for successful returns to happen, individuals need to be economically and psychologically ready, something that needs to be fostered and prepared during their time under refuge (Crisp, 2000; Carr, 2014). Moreover, return does not necessarily mean the end of the migration of an individual (Carr, 2014).

Instead, within circular cooperation, circularity presumes the continuous movement of resources between the North and South. Circular migrants are first hosted by the NGO, after being rescued from the Mediterranean. Here they are provided with psychological and legal support, to properly settle in the Italian system. After this initial support they are provided with education, training, and leisure to facilitate their inclusion in the local community. The objective of the NGO is to enable the individual to find a job and be self-sufficient during their stay. Ultimately, once it is safe to do so and if the former refugee decides to go back home, the NGO provides further training and support towards repatriation. Refugees are assisted in setting up start-up activities that directly address the needs of the community of origin. For example, they set up vegetable gardens and chicken coops. Leading these initiatives, circular migrants provide work opportunities and means of sustainment for their communities. They then cyclically return to Sicily, to continue their training and share empirical knowledge with the NGOs, cooperating in identifying further elements of positive development for their communities of origin. The concept of circular cooperation thus changes the subject of the movement from a 'migrant' to a 'co-operator'. La Cara & Sella (2022), define the circular co-operator as a Central Mediterranean migrant who, after being welcomed in the reception centre in Sicily, decides to go back to their own country of origin. They are being informed of and trained on development opportunities, to create start-up activities that generate economic growth in their community of origin, thus providing an alternative to forced migration. They are then allowed to cyclically come back to Italy, to continue training and report processes and outcomes, therefore contributing to better provision and circulation of best practices (La Cara & Sella, 2022).

For example, Alex[1] is a current circular co-operator of Associazione Don Bosco 2000. Alex was rescued in the Mediterranean in 2016, and was then transferred to the reception centre of Aidone, where Associazione Don Bosco 2000 operates. In 2018, Alex was able to return to his home country for the first time and reunite with his family. With the help of Associazione Don Bosco 2000, he had set up a farm in the village, to feed the community and provide jobs. He now cyclically comes back to Italy, where he receives training and support for the ongoing care of the farm.

This project has been developed by co-operators since 2016, when the first returnee returned to his village of origin in Senegal. There, the former asylum-seeker became a mediator for Associazione Don Bosco 2000 and the local representatives of their Senegalese village of origin, who eventually co-operated to create three agricultural start-ups in three under-resourced villages, directly addressing hunger within the area. Two years later, the project was repeated in the Gambia, where further vegetable gardens are created. Currently, the same agricultural start-ups are under development in Mali.

It is possible, in this case, to see how the success of circular cooperation intersects deeply with the field of agriculture. The domains of agriculture and development are profoundly interconnected, with the existence of an 'agriculture for development' (AFD) movement since the early 1970s (Byerlee et al, 2009), in similar fashion to SDP. Indeed, agriculture has the power to trigger economic growth, reduce poverty, provide food security, and address environmental issues (Byerlee et al, 2009). Nonetheless, while SDP has seen steady growth over the years (Schulenkorf et al, 2016; Suzuki, 2018), researchers have argued for an underutilization of agriculture to harness development, in contrast with ongoing processes of urbanization (Byerlee et al, 2009). The potential of AFD in sub-Saharan Africa is currently unrealized, yet provides a clear direction for reducing poverty and ensuring food security (Conceição et al, 2016). Indeed, poverty reduction has proven to be more effective through increased productivity in agricultural and rural areas rather than transformative urbanization of such areas (Christiaensen & Todo, 2014; De Janvry & Sadoulet, 2020).

There is much overlap and complementarity between what aspects of development are addressed by SDP and AFD. AFD literature focuses mostly on the economic aspects of development, due to the ability to directly address hunger and poverty. Among the thematic areas of SDP commonly identified, hunger and poverty are connected to the 'Sport

and Livelihoods' thematic areas, where financial independence and its associated benefits play a key role (Schulenkorf et al, 2016; Svensson & Woods, 2017). Nonetheless, research on SDP and livelihoods is limited (Schulenkorf et al, 2016; Schulenkorf, 2017), even if more studies have been conducted in recent years (see McSweeney et al, 2020). Particularly, few studies have directly analyzed SDP programs with an intended outcome of increasing employability (Whitley et al, 2017; Warner et al, 2020). The role of sport towards migrant resettlement has been questioned, as acculturation through sport does not necessarily lead to increased livelihood (Smart et al, 2020).

Therefore, we would like to frame the discussion within the 'Livelihoods' theme. The reason lies in the enabling nature that safety possesses for wider discussions on livelihoods, as a basic need to achieve "job skills, training, employability, rehabilitation and the creation of social enterprises" (Schulenkorf et al, 2016, p.34).

Circular cooperation in AFD addresses all the elements mentioned above by Schulenkorf and colleagues (2016). As seen in the work of Associazione Don Bosco 2000, asylum-seekers are rehabilitated in Sicily after their journey. Then, they are provided with training that will enhance their job skills and employability, wherever they desire it to be (within Sicily or back to their home country). Once they are ready and willing to go back, they create agricultural start-ups, further contributing to their own livelihoods and the livelihood of their community.

The Football Dream – Realization of the Self

We now present the value of football for forced migrants in the Mediterranean. While exceptions occur, for many male refugees in Sicily football represents a dream, and has been a key factor in choosing to flee towards Europe. As expressed by a refugee rescued by Associazione Don Bosco 2000: "That's why I came in Europe, because there are opportunities about football. I start well here, I am doing my best. […] That's my dream." (Musa, 19, The Gambia)

Here we see how the motivations to flee intersect with the personal interest and the *opportunities* that are found in Europe. In order to grab these opportunities, the refugee has undertaken the Central Mediterranean Route, risking his life. The opportunity here is represented by the level of development that football has reached in Europe, and the dream to become a footballer within this scenario (Esson, 2015).

The problem that this posits is properly explained by the extensive research conducted by Darby et al. (2022) on football in Africa. Drivers of the football dream can be seen in a desire for upward social mobility in a process of 'becoming a somebody', which is perceived to be better achieved through migration (Darby et al, 2022). Indeed, rescued refugees who also play for the local team of the reception centre, indicate the support of fans as one of the most positive elements associated with football. Albeit the small size of the town and the developmental nature of the team, the warmth of the local citizens is an element of fandom that feeds into a process of self-realization and perceived inclusion:

[Football] It gave me a lot. Like the fans... every time I go outside, they tell me "how are you? Let's take a picture!". It is a beautiful thing. […] Yes, I am an idol for children (laughs). Every time I go outside they ask me to take a picture (Samba, 21, The Gambia)

Many young boys focus on their football career in spite of formal education. They perceive traditional education as an obstacle to their football career. While the arguments made by young refugees seem to be counter-developmental, contextually it must be noted that football represents to them a matter of identity, and Europe is perceived as a scenario where their identities can be realized, fulfilled, and recognized (Esson, 2015). This realization positively affects their well-being, as they undertake the journey to fulfil their dreams, providing them with a strong motivation to move forward. Nonetheless, football is a closed system, and for many that achieve this dream and its associated realization, there are many more who are left behind in a phase of involuntary immobility and very little resources (Agergaard & Ungruhe, 2016; Darby et al, 2022).

Development is perceived by African males as freedom through spatial mobility (Esson, 2013, 2015). Such an idea of development is reinforced by the frequent portrayal of successful African footballers in the media, where the depiction of their European success reinforces the necessity of mobility to achieve the realization of the self (Ungruhe & Esson, 2017).

Moreover, there is little evidence that supports the efficacy of SDP in Africa (Langer, 2015). The caution that such absence implies, combined with the effects that football has in fostering irregular migration, suggests that football may not be the best sport for SDP agencies to utilize in Africa.

Yet, the fact that football represents a dream for many young boys in the continent cannot be ignored, especially considering the frequently advocated necessity to include user-group voices in SDP provision (Collison & Marchesseault, 2018). The application of football for SDP

In Africa should therefore be informed by the underlying reasons for young African males to take part in the sport. Where the aim is safeguarding, football should be tailored and framed within the premises that its 'value' can be used for the development of livelihoods.

Proposing Circular Cooperation in Sport for Development and Peace

In this section, we bring forward the use of circular cooperation in SDP. Bringing together the case of Associazione Don Bosco 2000 and the value of football for forced migrants in Sicily, we demonstrate the use of circular cooperation to provide a way for football to be a vehicle of development, fully harnessing the meaning that the sport has for young people in the African continent.

Agriculture for Development and Circular Cooperation

As mentioned in the earlier section, agriculture for development and circular cooperation are particularly apt for achieving livelihood for returning refugees and their communities. Agriculture provides a fundamental approach for livelihood obtainment, ensuring that basic necessities such as food security can be achieved (Conceição et al, 2016). Meanwhile, the agricultural start-ups also provide employment in the community, once again addressing livelihoods at a baseline level by fighting widespread poverty (Byerlee, 2009).

In this context, the centrality of returning refugees lies in their value as advocates and experts of the cause they are undertaking. This cause is not brought forward by European agents, nor by any distant governmental organization (see Ungruhe & Esson, 2017; Darby et al., 2018), but by a member of the same community, increasing the proximity and reliability of the source (Collison & Marchesseault, 2018). Returning refugees are able to address these issues that have been identified by themselves, gaining centrality both in planning and application of the interventions.

Nonetheless, this does not preclude other members of the at-risk community from traveling to Europe, yet it presents different possibilities for them to do so. Traveling can be done through training with Associazione Don Bosco 2000, and can be done through traditional methods, without undertaking the Central Mediterranean Route. The ultimate aim of Associazione Don Bosco 2000 and the circular cooperation method is to 'build bridges' by providing safer options for asylum-seekers and populations in need. This aim has recently achieved an important milestone, with the first-ever Senegalese having received a temporary visa to undergo co-operative training in Italy at their headquarters. Associazione Don Bosco 2000 has built through circular cooperation, setting an important precedent for future endeavors. Indeed, mainstreaming such a model would allow forced migrants to understand the risks involved in crossing the Mediterranean, attempting to provide alternatives that are less dangerous and less traumatic. For instance, in the last 10 years, Associazione Don Bosco 2000 has rescued and lodged more than 10,000 forced migrants that have crossed the Mediterranean. With many others losing their lives at sea, frequently in anonymity, the NGO works to construct these cultural corridors and bridges to safeguard refugees and to empower their agency through the provision of safer options for migration.

The application of agricultural practices through circular cooperation has, in this sense, proven to be an effective methodology. Nonetheless, the exclusive use of AFD may not be sufficient to prevent unsafe crossings, especially when these crossings are motivated by ambitions of self-realization that go beyond poverty and hunger (Esson, 2013; Ungruhe & Esson, 2017; Darby et al, 2022). Circular cooperation could then replicate SDP programmes and initiatives that occur in Europe, and bring these to interested areas by the co-operators, paralleling and imitating the agricultural approach.

Agriculture and Sport for Development

As we have argued, SDP possesses a transdisciplinary nature, yet it seems that the field has not been able to use this characteristic to its fullest advantage (Giulianotti et al, 2019; Whitley et al, 2022). Framed within the frequent calls for SDP to open up its disciplinary borders, we propose the cooperation of the field of SDP with AFD. Moreover, we propose this as a practical and applied cooperation, other than just disciplinary. Such activities engage with a new disciplinary area and have a unique, applied ethos.

Overall, the complementarity of AFD and SDP should be considered as a holistic strategy, comprising work and leisure, to create or rebuild safe spaces for the interested populations. While AFD provides fundamental sustainment outcomes, the role of SDP is to tackle misleading ambitions of self-realization that young people seek through the dangerous European journey.

Asylum-seekers have highlighted the differences between football in Italy and Africa. These differences revolve around the opportunities to play, the level of play, and the fact that in Italy you can get paid to play. However, refugees have noted that these pre-departure motivations are then considered highly problematic upon arrival. The opportunities to formally play are limited by the lack of

Italian citizenship. The Italian style of play relies on tactics and the ability to cover a position on the pitch, something that participants have rarely had the opportunity to practice. The money made through football is often not sufficient for sustenance.

Indeed, the concept of 'money' has been recognized as a polluter of football by some of the most experienced refugees (see also Pannenborg, 2012). For example, an experienced refugee, who arrived in Sicily more than five years ago, shared his idea of organizing a football tournament, highlighting money as a big constraint:

Yes, the tournament can be done. But the problem is that to make the tournament you need many things, you have to have authorizations, the field, the shirts. […] You want to do it for fun, but they will do it because they want to make money from it. […] If I want to have fun with my friends in a field of eleven, I have to go and pay. That is not right. (Yao, 22, Ivory Coast)

He has also explained how these Italian constraints are not present in his country of origin. However, nor, at the same time, are there opportunities to formally play. In contrast, another refugee has explained how football matches are organized in his village:

The elder would start looking for opportunities for us to go, to open our wings. He would start to contact other leagues, other cities, other towns, to have a friendly match with them, and so on. So sometimes we would go on bicycles, on foot if it isn't far, or with a car. And we go play football and come back. There we play with passion, with a lot of passion. The professionalism is not there, but a lot of passion, a lot of passion. (Cherno, 21, The Gambia)

We can see how the two statements contrast. In Italy, it seems that much more needs to be in place to organize football, especially because of the professional and the monetary aspect related to the game. In the Gambian village instead, the actors involved in football go to a great extent to participate in footballing efforts that involve very little monetary effort. The sport is done with passion, and each opportunity to play is treasured. These opportunities are central in the involvement of people in football, yet people seek Europe to enhance the quality of these opportunities to play (Darby et al, 2022). The equipment (shirt and football shoes), the training sessions, the appropriate pitch to play, the away games, and the overall competitive element, are key aspects of football that are currently missing from the villages where refugees in Sicily come from.

Another important element, that reflects the necessity of realization of the self for these young males, is the presence of a media-based representation of their effort. Refugees have addressed how with social media it was now possible to show their talented skills through videos or even improvised live broadcasts. The representation in video form is of key importance for them, finding in these recordings further means to represent their realized identities through football. It is very common for enthusiast refugees to show with pride video recordings of their goals or their plays.

Building on these lived experiences, the key driver for choosing Europe as a destination, was the (perceived) opportunity to play 'better' football. The desire of refugees for frequent play, competition, and structure in football remained often unmet in their Italian experiences. On the contrary, refugees have then revalued their experiences of football in Africa, providing clear directions on what needs to be done to expand the opportunity to play: the formation of teams, the provision of equipment, a better quality of training sessions, an element of competition and visibility for the people involved.

This rationale reinforces the idea that meeting basic needs of sustainment may still not prevent at-risk populations to undertake dangerous journeys. Here we see the complementarity of AFD and SDP, where both needs can be addressed, from fundamental necessities of survival addressed through agriculture, to safeguarding and protection enacted by an informed and better equipped provision of football programmes that fulfil the needs and desires of the community.

While the association between AFD and SDP is intended towards complementarity in this model, the possibility for combining the two fields should not be downplayed (Giulianotti, 2021). SDP initiatives have recently taken interest towards environmental issues and climate change, advancing questions on how sport can be a tool to achieve environmental goals. As sustainable technologies are central towards the enactment of AFD and widely used in practice by Associazione Don Bosco 2000, we see in SDP initiatives the possibility to increase awareness and education towards sustainable practices in agriculture (Pingali, 2010; Giulianotti et al, 2018). Such combination should also lead to 'greener' SDP initiatives, that take into account the environmental impact of sport practice, particularly in a context of coexistence with agricultural initiatives (Giulianotti, 2021). Moreover, a targeted use of sport for environmental advocacy and protection could also be beneficial, as a propeller for environmental messages to be shared in the target community, supporting the importance of agricultural practices for development (Amann & Doidge, 2023).

To sum up, while AFD takes care of developmental objectives such as reducing poverty and hunger, increasing employability, and providing a specific set of skills, SDP addresses good health, well-being, education, and inclusivity. Overall, the complementarity of AFD and SDP provides an all-round approach to increasing livelihood in at risk communities, offering an example of a proper bridge-building partnership (Svensson & Loat, 2019). While we have focused on complementarity, the potential for combination of AFD and SDP practices should not be downplayed.

Circular Cooperation in Sport for Development and Peace

The third and final pillar focuses on the importance and benefits of circular cooperation in the shaping and delivery of SDP initiatives.

The same training that asylum-seekers undertake in the context of AFD can be replicated in an SDP scenario. Indeed, Associazione Don Bosco 2000 supports football initiatives through its co-operators in the African continent, providing continuity to their Sicilian SDP methodology and contextual adaptation. It is through circular co-operators that football initiatives come to life and are put forward, in order to provide an opportunity for leisure and development in the interested communities. We have however explained that the importance of football for the interested community goes beyond the leisurable dimension, and can even lead to undertaking the Mediterranean crossing, giving added importance for such football initiatives.

The training that co-operators undergo in Sicily in the context of AFD can be replicated in SDP, addressing the specific needs of participants. In the context of The Gambia, Senegal, and Mali, the direction we posit for the development of functional SDP through circular cooperation lies in the connectedness of a newly established football team with the agricultural start-up.

Indeed, an important argument that is made in the narrative of protecting African young boys from trafficking and dangerous routes in football, is that the efforts made lack context and credibility. The frequent use of testimonies by football idols against football-related trafficking has not been successful because these players represent the self that the young boys are trying to achieve (Ungruhe & Esson, 2017). Here lies the importance of the circular co-operator example, who has willingly decided to go back and to establish himself in the country he has fled, becoming a direct trustworthy source.

The co-operator carries first-hand experiences of the dangerous journey, returning home with the aim to prevent other people from undergoing the same traumatic experiences. Instead of the African football superstars represented in the media, the returning migrant provides the example of a migrant that has experienced Europe first-hand and, by returning home, sends an implied or explicit message to their community. Very relevantly, the multi-ethnic football team of Associazione Don Bosco 2000 in Aidone is chaired by a former asylum-seeker, now being employed as a circular co-operator in The Gambia.

First, the formation of a team by the start-up provides an alignment of values, where the core business value of safeguarding from dangerous crossing is transferred into the provision of football leisure. At the same time, it provides the fundamental opportunity to play and train for the community already benefiting from the agricultural start-up.

Second, football-based initiatives would benefit from a much-desired European quality of football and training, enhancing the opportunity for young players to feel on par with their international counterparts. Leveraging such engagement opportunities, through circular cooperation returning refugees will be able to provide higher quality training sessions, yet oriented towards play and safeguarding, as per replicating and readapting SDP practices learned in the receiving country.

Third, the application of easily accessible media technologies could help replicate the sense of self-realization that young males strive to achieve through football. The use of social media in SDP organizations in Africa indeed represents an opportunity (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Slater, 2021). The recurring coverage of matches and the filming of training sessions could interestingly provide further development of media or filmmaking-related skills for asylum-seekers. Meanwhile, it would provide the possibility for highly motivated youth a chance to showcase their talent through social media, leveraging on the sense of self-realization that social media recreates.

Lastly, while we see the concentration on agricultural start-ups in this specific context, it is important to note that circular cooperation in SDP opens up opportunities for cooperation with further disciplines and applied practices. What can be replicated is the methodology of circular cooperation. Indeed, their lived experiences guide the intervention that is necessary to rebuild their community. While specifically identifying agriculture as a critical aspect for their home villages in The Gambia, Senegal, or Mali, refugees from other parts of the world may find other

critical issues that need addressing. Refugees from the Russian-Ukrainian war or from Afghanistan, who have seen two of the most recent refugee crises, may benefit from assistance through circular cooperation, yet not necessarily in the field of agriculture or SDP. The cooperative role of asylum-seekers thus becomes key in preventing neo-colonial practices, tapping into the wider resources that are available for them in their host country, and leading the intervention to achieve an autonomous and community-led development (Saavedra, 2018).

Conclusion

To conclude, this contribution advocates the use of circular cooperation to structure and inform SDP practices. Circular cooperation is defined as the recurring cooperation between a former asylum-seeker, who has come back to their country of origin, and the NGO that provided support during refuge, to tap into resources that facilitate the development of the migrant's own community. Developmental efforts are independently led in both planning and implementation by the former refugee, that identifies ways to safeguard and improve the livelihoods of their community of origin. Circular cooperation has the advantage of immediately supporting the needs of individuals at risk, who see their livelihoods hindered by a specific situation that has caused them to flee to a new country. Meanwhile, it also covers the root of the crises that have led the individual to flee, working toward achieving radical social change that can improve livelihoods at a community level. This individual-to-community approach is aimed to ensure a direct, user-centered approach that is non-intrusive but relies on lived experiences and community-indicated necessities.

Limitations of the circular cooperation model in SDP lie in the fact that, in the Sicilian context, male refugees are often the most interested in the sportive element, while female refugees are often indifferent to the sportive leisure elements. This warrants consideration of the gendered dimension of SDP, and how the initiatives emerging from circular cooperation models need to ensure benefits towards all members of interested populations, and not just young males. The Mediterranean context presents criticalities predominantly concerning young male populations, and their desire of self-realization in football (Darby et al, 2022). Indeed, most of the individuals undertaking the journey are identified as men (76.2%) as opposed to women (6.1%) (UNHCR, 2023a). However other contexts of crises (e.g. Ukraine) severely affect women populations (UNHCR, 2023b).

SDP needs to critically address its role in refugee crises, going to their root causes (Giulianotti et al, 2019). We can see that football as an industry has motivated the migration of many asylum-seekers through extremely dangerous routes, such as the Central Mediterranean. By addressing this need for self-realization through football, which many young males experience in the African continent (Darby et al, 2022), SDP can make an impact in preventing football-related crossings that would put lives in danger.

The circular cooperation model can bring SDP practices that integrate with existing circular start-ups, harnessing positive cooperation between fields to enlarge the range of developmental objectives addressed. In this contribution, we have seen the complementarity of agriculture and sport, to address different yet complementary needs of the community.

The model also relies on augmenting the resources of the addressed community, providing training that will be functional to the co-operator in going back to their own village and first-hand improving living conditions. The representation of the returning co-operator is a significant symbol for their community, as they can retell their own lived experiences and provide pathways that would lead young males to safer options, in opposition to the Central Mediterranean Route.

Knowing first-hand the drivers and necessities of the interested population, co-operators can bring forward SDP practices that can be both welcomed by the community and functional towards increasing livelihoods. In the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, SDP programs could use circular cooperation to provide practices aiming at safely satisfying the need of self-realization of young African males.

Finally, SDP should use cooperation methodologies to meaningfully address refugee crises. First, SDP needs to explore ways in which sport can cooperate with other fields concerned with global development. Second, officials should think of strategies to appropriately include user groups in programming initiatives. Third, leaders should implement developmental agendas that are led by the receiving and returning communities, preventing neocolonialities. Through these guiding principles, the SDP field can appropriately and contextually address the root causes of community crises, aiming to achieve long-term and positive social change.

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Original Research

Gender Distribution in Sport for Development and Peace Organizations: A Critical Mass of Women in Leadership and Governance Positions?

Lucy V. Piggott[1], Ingar Mehus[1] & Johanna Adriaanse[2]

[1]Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway
[2] University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Corresponding author email: lucy.piggott@ntnu.no

ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, a plethora of studies have investigated gender distribution on the boards of national and international sport organizations. However, none of these have focused on sport for development and peace (SDP) organizations. The purpose of this paper was to examine gender distribution across the leadership and governance teams of SDP organizations, and the degree to which they have achieved a critical mass of women (a minimum of 30%). We used a quantitative survey in which 118 SDP organizations participated that were diverse in structure and geographic location. On average, the boards and senior leadership teams of the SDP organizations were gender balanced, with 47.71% and 48.92% female representation, respectively. Most organizations had a critical mass of women across their boards, leadership teams, and staff, and there were few differences in gender distribution across continental groupings. Drawing on critical mass theory, the findings imply that women influence legislation, policy, and decision-making within SDP organizations. Furthermore, gender balanced leadership and governance teams likely have a positive impact on SDP organizations' culture and performance. However, we call for qualitative research to further explore whether women with a seat at the table have a voice to make change within SDP.

Gender Distribution in Sport for Development and Peace Organizations: A Critical Mass of Women in Leadership and Governance Positions?

The sport for development and peace (SDP) sector has developed significantly since the 1990s and has become institutionalized through the establishment and development of distinctive policies, programs, organizations funding systems, and partnerships across the world (Collison et al., 2019). SDP is now a key player in the international development sector and there are many hundreds of organizations implementing SDP programmes across more than 125 countries (Giulianotti et al., 2016; Herasimovich & Alzua-Sozabal, 2021). The earliest organizations with a sole focus on SDP were predominantly developed by athletes, physical educators, and sports leaders to either advance peacebuilding and intercultural communication in regions of conflict, or to use sport and physical activity to contribute to achieving the United Nations' (UN) Millennium Development Goals[1] (MDGs) (Kidd, 2008). This means that sport culture, values, and leadership have considerably influenced the development of SDP organizations over time.

Significant diversity exists in the type and structure of SDP organizations, and fully mapping the relations of stakeholders within the field is a challenging and complex task. This is because relations among and between stakeholders lack consistent, linear characteristics and greatly differ in terms of their (in)formality, type, and geographical scope (Herasimovich & Alzua-Sozabal, 2021; Straume, 2019). Additionally, there are no established borders or criteria for organizations to be a part of the SDP sector, but rather the sector is open to all organizations who identify themselves with the aims of SDP (Giulianotti et al., 2016; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). Furthermore, SDP organizations are continuously changing and developing in line with political, economic, environmental, and technological structures and developments (Hayhurst et al., 2011). The pace of growth of the SDP sector makes it challenging to keep track of stakeholders within it (Darnell et al., 2019).

Keywords: sport for development and peace, gender, leadership, sport governance, critical mass

Perhaps due to the lack of existing knowledge on stakeholder relations within the sector, there has been an absence of research examining the decision-making structures of SDP organizations, as well as the demographics of individuals occupying decision-making positions within these structures. This includes an absence of research exploring gender distribution across the governance and leadership teams of SDP organizations. This is somewhat surprising due to the rapid growth of research and applied work being undertaken on this topic within the sport sector. For example, recent research has found a continued and severe underrepresentation of women across the leadership and governance teams and positions of international sport organizations (Matthews & Piggott, 2021). Despite sampling challenges related to such a diverse, expanding, and changing sector, we believe it is important to take the first step in forming an understanding of the extent to which SDP organizations are demonstrating gender inclusion in their leadership and governance structures. This is particularly important when gender equality is placed as one of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and is also identified as one of eight key development goals of SDP by the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group (The International Platform on Sport and Development, 2021).

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to be the first known study to present and discuss data on gender distribution across the leadership and governance teams of a diverse sample of SDP organizations. In doing so, we address three research questions:

1. What is the gender distribution of the leadership and governance teams and positions of SDP organizations?
2. To what degree do the leadership and governance teams of SDP organizations have a critical mass of women (a minimum of 30%)?
3. What is the impact of the geographical location of the headquarters of SDP organizations (split by continent) on gender distribution on their leadership and governance teams?

Our research questions align with Elling's (2015) argument of the importance of 'hard figures' to numerically examine and monitor gender inclusion across different sporting positions and sectors, and in turn inform the design and development of in-depth research. We believe this is particularly relevant to examine within the SDP field due to its work aiming to make gender equality a lived reality in and through sport (UN Women, 2020). To inform our discussions on gender representation we critically draw upon critical mass theory to both categorize and discuss the implications of our findings in relation to organizational gender power relations (Kanter, 1977).

A note on terminology

It is important to clarify the key terminology used throughout this article as there are some differences in the terminology, roles, and structures of SDP leadership and governance teams compared to those of sport organizations (as outlined by Gaston et al., 2020; Piggott & Matthews, 2021; and others). First, we define SDP organizations as those that intentionally use sport and/or physical activity to engage people in projects that have an overarching aim of achieving social, cultural, physical, economic, or health-related outcomes. The leadership team(s) of an SDP organization forms part of its (part- or full-time) paid administrative hierarchy to oversee different geographic branches or operational areas/departments of the organization. Unlike national sport organizations that typically have one executive leadership team across the whole organization (Piggott & Matthews, 2021), SDP organizations that operate in more than one region or country often have leadership teams overseeing each regional or national branch of the organization. The titles of these teams can vary, including, for example, (senior) management teams, executive teams, leadership teams, co-founders, and operations teams. Leadership teams are usually led by a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or equivalent at either the national or organizational level to make operational decisions on the delivery of the organization's strategy.

The governance team(s) of an SDP organization, typically the board, is a part-time voluntary body that is concerned with strategic and financial decisions related to the performance and sustainability of the organization. Some SDP organizations have governance structures that align with those of national sport organizations, where the board is the highest decision-making body of the organization (Piggott & Matthews, 2021). However, not all SDP organizations have a board and, when they do, they sometimes have advisory rather than decision-making responsibilities. Additionally, as with leadership teams, some SDP organizations have numerous boards that tend to govern the different regional or national branches of the organization.

Literature Review

Accompanying the growth of SDP activity over the past two decades has been a significant increase in the volume of research and scholarship conducted in this field. Little research has focused on decision-making structures and positions within SDP organizations, however, and even less has focused on the relationship between gender, leadership, and governance. This is despite a growing body of

research on this topic in the sport sector.

Gender, Leadership, and Governance in Sport Organizations

A considerable body of research has been conducted on the topic of gender, leadership, and governance in sport organizations. Within sport governance literature, it has been well documented that there are gender disparities in favor of men at all levels of leadership across sport organizations worldwide (Burton, 2015; Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2019; Evans & Pfister, 2021). For example, Matthews and Piggott (2021) recently found that average female representation across the boards of Olympic and Paralympic international federations was just 22%, whilst 21% of the highest leadership positions were occupied by women, and just 5% of the highest governance positions (e.g., chair or president). Such an underrepresentation of women leaders has been found to be the result of a combination of factors at the macro-, meso, and micro-levels, including organizational structure and policy, discrimination, gender stereotyping, gendered organizational culture, and gendered expectations, styles, and behaviors of leaders (Burton, 2015; Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2019; Evans & Pfister, 2021).

It has previously been found that geographic variations exist in gender distribution across national and continental contexts. For example, Elling, Knoppers and Hovden (2019) found that Northern European countries such as Norway and Sweden considerably outperformed Southern and Eastern European countries such as Turkey, Poland, and Hungary in terms of mean female representation across the boards of national federations. National politics and culture reportedly played a key role in such variances (Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2019). Additionally, Adriaanse (2016) found continental differences in gender distribution across national federations, with Asian organizations having the lowest average female representation across boards, chairs, and chief executives compared to other continental groupings. Additionally, Asia, Europe, and the Americas all had lower than global average female representation across the boards of national federations. Conversely, Oceania was the only continent to have above-global average female representation across all three categories: board, chairs, and chief executives (Adriaanse, 2016).

SDP Governance and Leadership

Governance is concerned with a purposeful effort to guide, steer, direct, control, manage, or regulate the elements of an organization, sector, or society (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Kooiman, 1993).There has been a distinct lack of consideration given to governance within the SDP sector both in applied work and academic literature (Lindsey, 2017). Where literature has discussed SDP governance, the primary focus has been at the macro-level, including stakeholder group relations (Straume, 2019) and SDP governance within particular national contexts (e.g., Lindsey, 2017). At this level of analysis, the influence of international politics, power, policies, and patronage on different stakeholders in the SDP sector have been discussed and critiqued (Giulianotti et al., 2016; Straume, 2019). A small body of work has also focused on SDP governance at the organizational level of analysis. For example, researchers have examined the representation and application of organizational values (MacIntosh & Spence, 2012), motivations of internal stakeholders (Welty Peachey & Burton, 2017), different legal and structural forms (Svensson, 2017), and organizational capacity (Clutterbuck & Doherty, 2019; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016; Svensson et al., 2017). Importantly, these studies have started to explore the influence of governance on the achievement of desired organizational (and sectoral) goals and objectives within the SDP sector.

A key element of SDP governance that has received little attention is governance teams and processes, including the practice, effectiveness, or composition of the boards (or equivalent) of SDP organizations. Boards of SDP organizations often (but not always) lead decision-making on the strategic and financial development and direction of the organization, albeit to different extents across different organizations. Therefore, the ways in which these bodies govern, as well as who is governing them, are important to examine. Clutterbuck & Doherty (2019) found that valued skills and competencies are critical for SDP boards, including relevant educational and professional experience, and expertise in areas such as marketing, communications, financial management, and fundraising. Yet, whilst several studies have looked at the extent to which SDP programming leads to inclusion, there is an absence of research looking inwardly at the extent to which SDP organizations themselves are inclusive spaces that foster diversity within their own decision-making structures. Our study aims to be a starting point for such research in exploring gender distribution across leadership and governance positions of SDP organizations.

In addition to SDP governance, a small body of work has explored leadership and how it is applied within the SDP context. Leadership has many meanings and can encompass, for example, leadership styles, processes, and positions. Within this article, we are interested in leadership in relation to an individualor group having influence over others through social interactions (Western, 2008). Kang

and Svensson (2019) highlight the importance of acknowledging environmental and contextual factors when examining leadership within SDP organizations. This is because of the complex and challenging environments in which SDP organizations operate, with SDP programmes often operating in low- and middle-income countries or within poor areas of high-income countries that face particular social, economic, or health-related challenges. SDP organizations also often face environmental challenges, such as resource deficiencies, entrenched social divides, and limited human capital, all of which influence the implementation of leadership strategies (Jones et al., 2018). Therefore, those working within SDP organizations are required to adopt multiple roles to not only implement sport programmes in an instructional capacity, but also address complex social issues (Kang & Svensson, 2019).

In light of such challenges, Welty Peachey and Burton (2017) argue that the style of leadership needed to effectively run SDP organizations may be different to that of sport organizations. This is because the aims and goals of SDP organizations are very different to those of other sport organizations, such as centring around helping marginalized individuals or building trust between groups in conflict (Welty Peachey & Burton, 2017). Such unique leadership challenges within the SDP sector have led to calls for more inclusive leadership to include participants, their families, and broader community members within the decision-making processes of SDP organizations and programmes (Kay & Spaaij, 2012). Researchers have argued that such 'power-with'/shared leadership approaches are essential for the development of effective and sustainable programmes by allowing for shifts in authority and responsibility, and encouraging community engagement (Jones et al., 2018; Ponic et al., 2010). Overall, this existing literature highlights the unique complexities, paradoxes, and tensions that characterize the governance and leadership of SDP organizations.

Gender and SDP organizations

There is a growing body of research focusing on sport, gender, and development (SGD). This research has included investigations on the gendered experiences of women and girls participating in SDP programmes and initiatives (Caudwell, 2007; Oxford & McLachlan, 2017), case studies of SDP programmes aimed at women and girls (Saavedra, 2009), the use of female role models in SDP programmes (Meier & Saavedra, 2009), and theoretical scholarship examining how gender is represented within the SDP literature (Chawansky, 2011). Scholars have also written about the 'girling' of SDP, with SGD initiatives that position girls as the focal points of development increasingly being perceived as 'trendy' in international development (Hayhurst, 2011; Hayhurst et al., 2021). Hayhurst et al. (2021) importantly highlight the complex contradictions of SGD in offering tools for empowering women and girls and challenging gender norms, whilst simultaneously having the ability, in some contexts, to act as a catalyst for the subordination, discrimination, and abuse of women and girls.

Only one known study has explicitly analyzed the influence of gendered organizational processes and practices on the experiences of women working in SDP organizations. Thorpe and Chawansky (2017) explored management issues experienced by female transmigrant staff working for the non-governmental organization (NGO) Skateistan in Afghanistan. They found that organizational practices and policies could have positive impacts on gender inclusivity, such as mentoring and gender balance policy, yet highly gendered arrangements of work and leisure spaces was likely a symptom of organizational inadequacy that marginalizes the unique needs and challenges of female employees living and working in a patriarchal society. The isolated nature of this study demonstrates the need for more research on gendered organizational processes and practices within the SDP sector across different cultures and contexts. Furthermore, there remains a clear gap in understanding gender relations in decision making positions in SDP organizations, with no known studies discussing the relationship between gender, power, and decision-making authority in SDP organizations. Our study contributes to this under-researched area of SDP by presenting data on the representation of women within senior leadership and governance teams and positions of SDP organizations.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Mass Theory

The theoretical framework for this study is critical mass theory. 'Critical mass' is a concept that has been developed to explain the required relative representation from a minority group on the board of an organization to affect organizational behavior and culture. The basis for critical mass theory is that numbers matter, and women and minority groups are not likely to impact and influence legislation, policy, and decision-making unless their representation grows from a few token individuals into a considerable proportion of decision-makers (Dahlerup, 1988; Konrad et al., 2008).

One of the pioneering authors in developing critical mass theory was Rosabeth Moss Kanter. Her early work focused on the importance of relative numbers of men and women in terms of interaction and influence in organizations (Kanter, 1987). This led her to develop four group types to categorize

varying proportional compositions within organizations: uniform, skewed, tilted, and balanced. *Uniform* groups are those that have members who are (visibly) homogenous and share the same 'external master statuses' such as sex, race, or ethnicity. In the case of gender, these are groups made up entirely of men or women. *Skewed* groups are those in which one 'type' is numerically dominant and controls the group and its culture. A male-dominated skewed group is composed of less than 20% women. A *tilted* group in favor of men has between 20-40% women, meaning that women can begin to affect the culture of the group and can form alliances and coalitions. Finally, gender *balanced* groups are comprised of a minimum of 40% and maximum of 60% men and women, and the culture of the groups reflect this balance. There is no majority or minority within balanced groups, but the potential for sub-groups to form within and across type-based identifications.

Kanter and others (e.g., Joecks et al., 2013; Konrad et al., 2008; Kramer et al., 2006) have suggested that the threshold, or critical mass, for women to influence the culture of an organization is approximately one third of the board. This is because one or two women on a board are often scrutinized or become hyper visible, and members of dominant groups (i.e., 70% representation or over) can easily marginalize minority group members. On the contrary, when female representation on the board rises to three women or 30%, organizational culture tends to change so that gender is no longer a barrier to acceptance and influence. In these cases, research has found that most (but not all) women tend to feel more comfortable raising issues broader than so-called 'women's issues' (Joecks et al., 2013; Konrad et al., 2008; Torchia et al., 2011). Furthermore, when female representation meets a critical mass, it has been found to have a positive impact on board and organizational culture and performance (Joecks et al., 2013; Konrad et al., 2008; Torchia et al., 2011). For example, Joecks et al. (2013) found that tilted boards outperformed skewed boards across 151 listed German companies over a five-year period (2000-2005). Additionally, Konrad et al. (2008) found that board dynamics shifted to become more collaborative and less contentious when there was a minimum of three women. Furthermore, Torchia et al. (2011) reported that reaching a critical mass of female representation on boards had a positive impact on organizational innovation across 317 Norwegian corporate companies. These findings indicate that it is only after a critical mass is reached that advantages of a more diverse board are experienced, both in terms of organizational culture and performance. Within this paper we critically draw upon critical mass theory to help categorize and analyse our findings in relation to our three research questions.

METHODS

To gather data on the representation of women across the leadership and governance teams of a diversity of SDP organizations, we used a quantitative electronic survey to allow organizational representatives to self-report gender composition as well as information on several other organizational characteristics.

Sample and recruitment

An email list was created of individuals representing 539 different SDP organizations from a database developed by The International Platform on Sport and Development (sportanddev), as well as professional contacts of the first author who represented a further 16 SDP organizations. Sportanddev is "the leading global hub for those using sport to achieve social, economic and environmental objectives" (The International Platform on Sport and Development, 2023, para. 1). It operates an online platform that shares news, information, and resources in the sport for development field, as well as supporting and coordinating events, advocacy, and other initiatives (The International Platform on Sport and Development, 2023). Sportanddev developed their database of SDP organizations to collate information on all organizations registered on the sportanddev online platform (sportandev representative, personal communication, November 19, 2020). The contacts for organizations in the sportanddev database mostly occupy the role of founder or CEO, but some occupy other leadership or administrative roles. The first author's professional contacts held different leadership roles within their organizations.

Initial emails inviting the 555 organizations to participate in the electronic survey were distributed via mail merge. 108 of these emails were undeliverable, meaning 447 organizations were contacted via email. A second reminder email was distributed to organizations who had not yet participated in the survey two weeks after the initial email was sent. In addition to the invitation emails, a call for participation was also distributed via the social media channels of sportanddev, Beyond Sport, the Sport for Development Coalition, and the first author, as well as via articles on the sportanddev and Sport for Development Coalition websites, and via the Sport for Development Coalition newsletter. A total of 121 organizations participated in the survey, but only 118 of these could be included in the final data set due to missing or incomplete data. Due to the open call for participation in addition to the mailing list, the response rate is unknown.

The selection criterion for the survey was simply that respondents must represent an SDP organization to participate in the research. Specifically, an SDP organization was defined as an organization that intentionally uses sport and/or physical activity to engage people in projects that have an overarching aim of achieving social, cultural, physical, economic, or health-related outcomes. At the start of the survey there was a compulsory question asking respondents to confirm that the organization they were representing met this description. The responses were checked thoroughly to ensure that no duplicate responses were submitted by different individuals from the same organization.

The survey sample was diverse in terms of the locations and characteristics of organizations included. Six continents were represented: Africa (n=26), Asia (n=22), Europe (n=44), North America (n=15), Oceania (N=3), and South America (n=8). Some key characteristics of our sample related to organizational structure are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Key characteristics of sport for development and peace organizations (N=118)

	N	M(SD)	Min-Max
Number of boards	118	1.19 (.94)	0-7
Number of paid leadership teams	118	.86 (.96)	0-6
Number of paid staff	101[a]	26.44 (72.52)	1-677
Number of countries with projects[b]	118	3.47 (3.43)	1-10
Number of countries with office	118	1.72 (1.67)	1-12

[a] N is lower for this category as not all organisations had paid staff
[b] Organizations with projects in more than 9 countries are collapsed into a 10+ category

As shown in Table 1, the organizational characteristics of the SDP organizations that formed our sample are extremely diverse. For example, the paid workforces of the organizations ranged from one to 677 employees, the number of countries within which projects are operated ranged from one to over 10, and the number of countries within which organizational offices are located ranged from one to 12. Similarly, the leadership and governance structures of SDP organizations are extremely varied, with the number of boards ranging from zero to seven, and the number of leadership teams ranging from zero to six. The diversity of our sample reflects the diversity and complexity of the broader SDP sector and was a key reason for an electronic survey being our method of choice for this study. This is because there is no exhaustive list or database of SDP organizations to track or monitor, as is the case within the sport sector with distinct organizational groups such as national or international federations. Additionally, there are no uniform leadership and governance structures of SDP organizations, as is the case with most sporting bodies. Furthermore, the information provided on the websites of SDP organizations (such as the individuals who comprise their workforces and leadership and governance teams) is extremely varied. Therefore, without self-reporting, it is challenging to identify and name the leadership and governance teams of SDP organizations, let alone their gender distribution.

Instrumentation

The electronic survey consisted of 17 compulsory questions that included a focus on the following organizational characteristics: age, location of the headquarters, offices and projects, number of countries that projects are operated in, annual income, number of paid staff, number of boards and leadership teams[2], and gender composition of the board(s), leadership team(s), chair of the board(s), and most powerful leadership position on the leadership team(s). Decisions on the relevance and importance of the organizational characteristics included in the survey were based on the literature and discussions with experts in the field.

After being asked to report on whether their organization has at least one board or leadership team and, if so, how many boards/leadership teams they have, the organizational representatives were asked to provide the name/title of the board(s), leadership team(s), and most powerful position on each leadership team before inputting the gender composition of these teams and positions. This was firstly to ensure understanding from the respondents on the information they were being asked to provide, and secondly to gain an understanding of the different roles and titles of these teams and positions across different organizations. The titles and roles of boards included boards of trustees, advisory boards, boards of directors, executive boards, international boards, and national boards. Additionally, the titles and roles of the leadership teams included (senior) management teams, strategy teams, executive teams, leadership teams, co-founders, and operations teams. Finally, the most common titles for the most powerful leadership positions were Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Executive Director, General Manager, Director, and Managing Director. This again shows how diverse SDP organizations are in their organizational terminology and structures.

There was a particular focus on collecting compositional data across leadership teams, powerful leadership positions, boards, and chairs of boards due to these teams and positions holding substantial leadership, managerial, and/or

decision-making influence within their organizations. We were, therefore, interested to understand the extent to which the teams and positions with most strategic, financial, and operational influence within SDP organizations were gender balanced.

Quality of the research

To increase the quality of the research, prior to the design of the survey, informal conversations were held with 11 individuals (four women and seven men) working within the sector across a range of roles to better understand the sector, its structure, and its challenges. Additionally, before the survey 'went live', a draft of the survey questions was distributed to four experts (two women and two men) within the SDP field, who included two academics who had also previously worked within SDP organizations, a practitioner currently working for an SDP network, and a practitioner currently working for an SDP NGO. These individuals had expertise and experience of working with organizations across all continents. The purpose of this exercise was to obtain feedback on the language/key terms used within the survey to ensure that it would be understandable and relevant to all respondents regardless of their location, as well as the content of the survey to ensure that the organizational characteristics being explored were most relevant for the sector. The survey was re-drafted multiple times based on the feedback and suggestions of these individuals.

Whilst steps were taken to increase the quality of the research, there were still some limitations to the approaches taken. As already mentioned, we relied on the sportanddev platform for the main source of our sample. This platform has previously been reported to be dominated by organizations from the Global North (Herasimovich & Alzua-Sozabal, 2021) and sportanddev themselves recognise that some regions (e.g., East/Southern Africa, Europe, and South Asia) are better represented than others (e.g., Latin America and West Africa) (sportanddev representative, personal communication, November 19, 2020). This may, therefore, have had an impact on the organizations that formed our sample. Our final dataset was, however, completely balanced across the Global North and Global South (n=59 for each category). A further factor that may have skewed our sample was the combination of this platform operating in English as well as the survey being written in English. This could have excluded some organizations whose staff work in non-English languages. The self-reporting nature of the study should also be noted, with potential for bias amongst the respondents if organizations with poor female representation felt less inclined to participate in the study.

We decided not to gather information on other social characteristics of SDP decision-makers such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability status, and age. We recognize that the absence of such data provides a one-dimensional picture of gender representation across SDP organizations (failing to account for intersectional differences), but it was deemed unreasonable to expect survey respondents to know or spend time inputting this information on behalf of all those occupying decision-making positions within their organizations. This is because many social identity markers such as sexual identity, ethnicity, social class, and some forms of disability are not visible and so may not be known by the respondent. Finally, it should also be noted that gender-related data was reported according to the gender that respondents either knew or perceived individuals in their organization to identify with. Therefore, there could have been some examples of misgendering if respondents were not aware of transgender or non-binary identities amongst colleagues within their organization.

RESULTS

Table 2 presents percentages of women across the leadership and governance teams and positions of the 118 SDP organizations that form our sample. It is important to note that the category 'female' includes all of those who were known or perceived to identity as female or a woman (including both cisgender and transgender women). Across the paid employees of all 118 organizations (n=3896), only three individuals were reported as being non-binary (0.0008%). Furthermore, there were no non-binary individuals reported to be on the boards or leadership teams of the organizations included in our sample. This demonstrates an overall lack of gender diversity outside of the male-female binary across SDP organizations and highlights a topic that deserves attention in future research.

Data presented within Table 2 are split by continent. As highlighted in our literature review, the geographic location of an organization has been found to have significant influence on both gender distribution and organizational culture in the sport sector (Adriaanse, 2016; Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2019). We were, therefore, interested to see if such geographic trends extend to gender distribution across the leadership and governance teams of SDP organizations.

Table 2

Percentage (%) of female representation in board, leadership, and staff positions in sport for development and peace organizations by continents

	N	Africa		Asia		Europe		N-America		Oceania		S-America		Total	
		M(SD)	Min-Max	M(SD)	Min-Max	M(SD)	Min-Max	M(SD)	Min-Max	M(SD)	Min-Max	M(SD)	Min-Max	M(SD)	Min-Max
Female board representation	102	48.41 (15.47)	20-80	50.89 (26.23)	14-100	47.44 (26.46)	0-100	42.33 (18.19)	18-76	59.88 (2.68)	57-63	42.44 (8.37)	33-53	47.71 (22.09)	0-100
Female leadership team representation	76	57.37 (18.01)	25-100	38.33 (24.40)	0-67	45.21 (31.91)	0-100	57.80 (16.12)	40-100	52.22 (13.47)	40-67	55.40 (20.46)	20-100	48.92 (25.21)	0-100
Female chairs	103	34.85 (43.92)	0-100	36.67 (48.24)	0-100	38.28 (47.90)	0-100	45.83 (45.02)	0-100	33.33 (57.74)	0-100	19.05 (37.80)	0-100	36.33 (45.68)	0-100
Female representation in most powerful positions	76	25.0 (44.72)	0-100	31.25 (47.87)	0-100	30.77 (47.07	0-100	68.33 (34.87)	0-100	33.33 (57.74)	0-100	73.33 (43.46)	0-100	37.50 (46.93)	0-100
Female paid staff	101	46.98 (15.14)	17-79	49.76 (18.51)	24-87	52.26 (26.31)	0-100	59.48 (19.22)	40-100	59.83 (11.84)	46-67	43.93 (21.21)	0-75	51.18 (21.39)	0-100

Findings in Table 2 demonstrate that overall, on average, the SDP organizations in our sample are gender balanced across both their boards and senior leadership teams (47.71% and 48.92% female representation, respectively). These figures are slightly lower than average female representation across the paid workforces of the organizations (51.18%). It is notable that the standard deviation of female representation across the boards and leadership teams were high (22.09 and 25.21, respectively), showing diversity in female representation on the boards and leadership teams of different SDP organizations. Additionally, the range of female representation across the governance and leadership teams of the organizations was very extreme, ranging from 0% to 100% across both categories. This means that some SDP organizations have uniform boards and leadership teams that are either completely made up of men or completely made up of women. Ten organizations had uniform representation across their boards, and all these organizations had just one board. Of these 10 organizations, seven organizations were uniform in favor of women (100% female representation) and three organizations were uniform in favor of men (100% male representation). Fourteen organizations had uniform representation across their leadership teams, and again all these organizations had just one leadership team. Of these 14 organizations, six were uniform in favor of women (100% female representation) and eight were uniform in favor of men (100% male representation).

On average, the organizations are tilted in favor of men in terms of gender distribution across both chairs of the board and the most powerful leadership positions (36.33% and 37.50% female representation, respectively). The standard deviation and range across these categories were high (45.68 and 46.93, respectively) due to the nature of these positions either being occupied by a woman (100% women, 0% men) or a man (100% men, 0% women). Vertical gender segregation can be seen here, with average female representation reducing by over 10% when moving from general board or leadership positions to the most powerful positions on these teams.

When examining female representation across continental groups, some geographic trends can be seen. For example, the leading continent for female representation was either North America or Oceania across every variable presented. That said, North American organizations had the lowest average female representation on boards out of the continental groupings (42.33%). Additionally, whilst organizations from Oceania had high female representation across variables related to groups or teams, there was a significant reduction (of between approximately 19-26%) in female representation relating to individual positions of power (Chair and most powerful leadership position), demonstrating vertical gender segregation. Organizations from South and North America had particularly high female representation across the most powerful leadership positions (73.33% and 68.33%, respectively) compared to the other continental groups which were all below 38%.

No continental groups had low female representation across multiple variables, but two individual results stand out as particularly low female representation in relation to a single variable. First, there was only 25% female representation across the most powerful leadership positions of the African organizations that formed our sample. Second, there was only 19.05% female representation across the Chairs of organizations located in South America. It is notable that both of these variables relate to the most powerful positions within the organizations, aligning with research

that has found a significant underrepresentation of Presidents, Chairs, and CEOs (or equivalent) across sport organizations worldwide (Adriaanse, 2016; Matthews & Piggott, 2021). It is also observable that Europe was the only continent to have examples of organizations with no women on their paid workforce, board(s), and/or leadership team(s).

Table 3 shows the number and percentage of organizations that have a critical mass of women across their board(s), leadership team(s), and overall paid workforce. Chairs and most powerful leadership positions are not included as they relate to just one position within an organization, rather than a team/group.

Table 3

Number and percentage (%) of sport for development and peace organizations reaching critical mass (30%) of female representation

	N	Africa		Asia		Europe		N-America		Oceania		S-America		Total	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Female board representation	102	20/22	90.91	14/19	73.68	31/39	79.49	8/12	66.67	3/3	100	7/7	100	83/102	81.37
Female leadership team representation	76	15/16	93.75	11/16	68.75	18/26	69.23	10/10	100	3/3	100	4/5	80	61/76	80.26
Female paid staff	101	20/22	90.91	15/17	88.24	32/38	84.21	13/13	100	3/3	100	7/8	87.5	88/101	89.11

Most of the SDP organizations had a critical mass of women across their paid workforce, leadership team(s), and board(s). Slight vertical gender segregation can be seen here, with a higher proportion of organizations having a critical mass across their whole paid workforce compared to their boards and leadership teams. Some geographic trends are visible when examining the number and percentage of organizations reaching critical mass across different continental groups. Notably, Oceania was the only continent where all organizations had a critical mass of women across their paid staff, boards, and leadership teams. This aligns with findings in the sport sector, as outlined in our literature review (Adriaanse, 2016). The small sample size of organizations in Oceania (n=3) should be considered, however. Additionally, a high proportion of African organizations achieved a critical mass of women, with over 90% of organizations achieving critical mass across all three variables. There were no notably low results according to continental grouping, with every continent having over 66% of organizations achieving critical mass across all variables.

DISCUSSION

Overall, our findings present a positive picture of gender representation across the leadership and governance teams of SDP organizations. The boards and leadership teams across our sample were, on average, gender balanced. Additionally, most organizations had a critical mass of women across their workforce, board(s), and leadership team(s). Furthermore, there were few notable organizations. There were some isolated examples of continental groups having particularly high or low female representation relative to other continents across *some* variables, but no continents had consistently and significantly higher or lower female representation across all variables. Within this section, we critically draw on existing literature and critical mass theory to discuss two key themes in relation to these findings:1) differences in gender distribution trends across the SDP and sport sectors, and 2) the impact of our findings for real world practice across the SDP sector.

SDP vs Sport: Exploring Differences in Gender Distribution

The overall high proportion of women across the boards and leadership teams of SDP organizations is in stark contrast to recent findings of continued low female representation across the boards and leadership teams of sport organizations (Matthews & Piggott, 2021). This is particularly interesting when there has been a notable increase in recent decades in the implementation of policy and actions to increase the representation of women on the boards of sport organizations at the national and international levels. Such policy has typically been implemented by national sport councils, international federations, or international governing bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and International Paralympic Committee (IPC) that hold governing power over other organizations (e.g., IOC, 2018; IPC, 2017; Sport England & UK Sport, 2016). Conversely, due to a lack of overarching organizations within the SDP sector that hold governing power over other SDP organizations, there has been a lack of sectoral- or regional-level policy related to gender representation in SDP leadership and governance. Some international SDP funding organizations, such as Laureus, require organizational gender representation statistics to be presented within funding applications, but applications are not accepted or rejected based on this. Instead, advice and guidance are provided to organizations with poor gender representation (Laureus employee, personal communication, January 15, 2021).

Within this context, the question is raised of *why* our sample of SDP organizations have considerably higher female representation compared to sport organizations. Drawing on literature across SDP and sport leadership/governance, we argue that a key influencer could be differences in the aims, values, and structures of organizations across these sectors. For example, sport organizations such as national and international federations measure much of their organizational success on results and performance within their sport, particularly at the highest level. The receipt of public funding or sponsorship is also largely based on sporting performance and the resultant public popularity. Such formal, organized sport participation and competition has, since the very beginning of sport codification, been based on gender binary classifications that have developed an essentialized differentiation between women and men (Pape, 2020). Although leadership positions in sport are purportedly not based on physical sporting qualities, qualifications for positions of sport leadership often require the applicant to have a sport history (Knoppers et al., 2021). Such factors have led to the argument that "images and discourses associated with management and leadership in sport are infused with masculine traits and characteristics such as toughness, sport playing experience, and instrumentality" (Schull et al., 2013, p. 59). As discussed within the literature review, a significant body of research has reported that processes and practices of sport organizations have created barriers and challenges for women leaders within the sector at the macro, meso, and micro levels, including structural, cultural, and individual factors.

Contrastingly, the purpose of SDP organizations is to use sport as an intervention tool to achieve goals that are wider than sport and sporting objectives (Giulianotti et al., 2016). Within our project, we have defined SDP organizations as those that use sport and/or physical activity to engage people in projects that have an overarching aim of achieving social, cultural, physical, economic, or health-related outcomes. This means that the goals of these organizations are very different to those of other sport organizations, such as centring around helping marginalized individuals, building trust between groups in conflict, and achieving social change (Welty Peachey & Burton, 2017). Furthermore, many SDP organizations explicitly work to make gender equality a lived reality through sport-related programmes, particularly in working towards the UN's fifth sustainable development goal: gender equality (UN Women, 2020). This can include programmes working to address gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health education and rights, and female educational and economic empowerment (e.g., Women Win, 2022). SDP organizations operate within complex and challenging environments, and so those working within SDP organizations are required to adopt multiple and diverse roles that cross the boundaries of leadership, project management, people management, education, and mediation (Kang & Svensson, 2019). This range of factors indicates that so-called 'feminine traits' such as emotional intelligence, empathy, and care, are more congruent with the leadership requirements of SDP organizations compared to the so-called 'masculine traits' that sport organizations have been aligned with (Schull et al., 2013). Furthermore, due to the aims and goals of SDP organizations, it would be expected that most of those working in, and leading, SDP organizations place high value on inclusivity, equity, and social change. The cultures and structures of SDP organizations are, therefore, more likely to be inclusive, equitable, and dynamic compared to the sport sector, and so more conducive to gender balanced and equitable leadership and governance teams.

Another notable factor that has been discussed in the sport governance literature is the substantial prestige, as well social and economic benefits, that are attached to sport leadership and governance positions (Gal & Foldesi, 2019; Hovden, 2010; Piggott & Matthews, 2021). Research on sport organizations has found that the proportion of women decreases as power and prestige increase, either in terms of position or organization (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Piggott & Matthews, 2021). Notably, the two organizations widely regarded as the most prestigious sport organizations – the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and FIFA – have never been led by a woman. Additionally, in many cases female representation is lower in more prestigious international federations compared to national federations (Adriaanse, 2016; Matthews & Piggott, 2021). Furthermore, low female representation in the most senior and respected sport leadership positions has led to a gender pay gap within some national contexts (e.g. Velija, 2022). Conversely, most SDP organizations are relatively unknown on the global or even national scale, meaning that leadership and governance positions within most SDP organizations hold limited prestige. Therefore, the lack of opportunity for SDP leadership and governance positions to wield capital in the forms of prestige and wealth may be a further factor in more gender balanced and inclusive organizations.

Finally, the lack of notable geographic differences in gender distribution across continental variables is also in contrast to what has previously been observed within the sport sector (Adriaanse, 2016). Across national sport organizations, political and cultural differences have resulted in varying levels of gender distribution and equity (Elling, Hovden & Knoppers, 2019). However, unlike most national sport organizations, SDP organizations tend to have an international focus and position. For example, many SDP

organizations have international workforces, particularly with regard to volunteers (which has been a topic of critical scholarship in the field) (van Luijk et al., 2019). Additionally, most SDP organizations are working to internationally set agendas (e.g. the UN's SDGs), many organizations in our sample are working across multiple nations both in terms of their offices and programmes, and SDP organizations receive funding from geographically diverse funding organizations and bodies (Straume, 2019). The implication of this international context of SDP is likely that the influence of national politics and culture becomes somewhat diluted within SDP organizations compared to national sport organizations where nationalism still plays a particular role in the performance and traditions of national sporting teams. We argue, therefore, that this is a potential factor in fewer geographic variances in gender distribution across SDP organizations than has been seen within the national sport context.

Beyond the Numbers: Impact for Real World Practice

Critical mass theorists argue that numbers matter when considering organizational culture, dynamics, and performance (Dahlerup, 1988; Konrad et al., 2008). The overall gender balanced nature of SDP boards and leadership teams across our sample indicates that women impact and influence legislation, policy, and decision-making within SDP organizations due to them making up a considerable proportion of overall decision-makers (Dahlerup, 1988; Joecks et al., 2013; Konrad et al., 2008; Kramer et al., 2006). That said, our findings lack insight on *which* women (and other gender identities) are represented within SDP leadership and governance in terms of both their intersecting social identities and inclinations. This highlights the need for intersectional research to explore whether our findings reflect the representation of a diversity of women or just the most privileged. In doing so, it will be important to develop a multi-level understanding of inclusion within the leadership and governance of SDP organizations, including institutional structures and systems, organizational cultures, and individual empowerment. This is particularly important to explore within a sector that works to empower marginalized social groups.

In addition to a need for understanding which women have influence, there is also a need to understand the *nature* of their influence within their organizations. According to existing critical mass scholarship, the prevalence of a critical mass of women across the boards and leadership teams of most SDP organizations is likely (but not guaranteed) to result in cultures of collaborative discussion where women feel able to raise issues and difficult questions (Konrad et al., 2008). Considering our findings of overall gender balance across SDP organizations, this is positive and important for the empowerment of women leaders in the sector. An important question to further explore, however, is *which* issues and questions are being raised by these women and how this influences practice within the sector. For example, gender and politics scholars have critiqued the extent to which a substantive representation of women legislators benefits women as a group (Childs, 2004; Sawer et al., 2006). This is because critical mass theory "does not speak to the question of whether or not female legislators will seek to 'act for' women" (Childs & Krook, 2008, p. 728). Therefore, we believe that it is important and interesting for future research to explore whether a critical mass of women on the leadership and governance teams of SDP organizations actually results in the advancement of sport for gender equity: one of the core aims of the sector (Petry & Kroner, 2019).

In relation to this core sectoral aim of sport for gender equity, many SDP organizations work with vulnerable and marginalized girls and women on female-specific topics, such as female empowerment, gender-based violence, forced marriage, reproductive or sexual health, and female genital mutilation. Whilst previous research in sport has warned against the ghettoising of so-called 'women's issues' to only female decision-making (Piggott & Matthews, 2021), within the SDP sector there is a duty of care and safeguarding is of the upmost importance. Additionally, some programme topics are so sensitive that female-only spaces are the only way to create safe spaces. Therefore, it is vitally important for SDP organizations to have collaborative environments where women leaders feel safe and able to raise sensitive topics and issues that impact women and girls in local communities, as well as influence over the design and development of related programmes. Our findings indicate that gender ratios across our organizational sample are conducive to such collaborative and inclusive cultures, but more exploration is required to understand if this is a reality within the sector.

Diverse perspectives within the boardroom have also been found to result in enhanced performance and innovation (e.g. Joecks et al., 2013). Again, there is a particular need for SDP organizations to be high-performing and highly innovative to respond to the dynamic nature of the real-world issues and challenges that they are working with. For example, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, SDP organizations had to demonstrate considerable agility in their decision-making to meet the rapidly changing needs of the individuals and communities that they serve (Dixon et al., 2020). Whilst some challenges were similar to those faced by sport organizations during the pandemic, such as facility closures and activity/event cancellations, some SDP organizations took on additional

responsibilities such as educational advancement and the provision of essential supplies (Dixon et al., 2020).Whilst critical mass theory indicates that the mostly gender balanced nature of SDP leadership and governance teams will have a positive impact on the performance and innovation of SDP organizations, the prevalence and impact of wider diversity needs to be further explored. This is because 'diverse perspectives' encompass more than solely gender parity, and so a greater understanding is required on the extent to which individuals from diverse social backgrounds have an equal opportunity to impact and influence policy and decision-making within the SDP sector. This is particularly salient when SDP programmes and organizations are working with a wide range of diverse social groups and identities.

CONCLUSION

This paper is the first known study to present and discuss data on gender distribution across the leadership and governance teams and positions of SDP organizations. This quantitative examination is instrumental to assess the current state of play, enable the opportunity for monitoring, and inform the design and development of future research. Overall, the boards and leadership teams of the 118 diverse SDP organizations that formed our sample were gender balanced, whilst the composition of chairs and most powerful leadership positions were gender tilted in favor of men. There were few notable geographic differences in gender distribution across continental groupings. Drawing on existing literature, we demonstrate how these findings contrast with recent reports of a continued underrepresentation of women across national and international sport organizations, as well as national/continental variations in gender distribution across organizations in the sport sector. We argue that such contrasting findings are related to organizational differences between the two sectors in: aims, values, and structures; opportunities to accumulate prestige and economic and social benefit; and national and international political and cultural contexts. We suggest that these variances can have differing implications on the conduciveness of sport and SDP organizations to be gender balanced and inclusive.

Drawing on critical mass theory, overall our findings suggest that women occupy a considerable proportion of decision-makers within SDP organizations and so have the opportunity to impact and influence legislation, policy, and decision-making (Dahlerup, 1988). Furthermore, findings from existing critical mass theory scholarship suggest that the majority of SDP organizations in our sample that have a critical mass of women across their workforce, leadership teams, and boards are more likely to be high performing and innovative than those without a critical mass of women (Joecks et al., 2013). We argue that the presence of female voices and highly innovative working are particularly important for SDP organizations that often work with marginalized and vulnerable women on female-specific topics, as well as within dynamic environments that require agility in decision-making teams and structures.

Whilst the findings present an overall positive picture, there were significant variances in female representation across SDP boards and leadership teams. For example, some SDP organizations operated with uniform or skewed boards and leadership teams. This means that these organizations are characterized by homogeneity and majority/minority sub-groups that can be significant in shaping interaction and decision-making dynamics (Kanter, 1977). Furthermore, even within gender balanced teams, Kanter (1977) suggests that there is the potential for sub-groups to develop, which can impact the extent to which different individuals within the group have power or voice to influence decision-making. Therefore, to truly understand group dynamics across decision-making teams of SDP organizations, we call for qualitative research to explore where decision-making power is actually located within dynamic SDP organizations, the extent to which women and other historically marginalized groups have power to influence decision-making, and the nature of the influence of these individuals. This is important to distinguish between women having a seat at the table and having a voice to make change. If qualitative research provides further evidence that the SDP sector is a mostly gender inclusive sector, this could importantly provide insight on good practice and key learnings to inform the practice of organizations within less inclusive sectors, such as the sport sector.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest to report with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Original Research

Short-Term International Sport for Development and Peace Programs: A Retrospective Analysis and Critique Informed by Stakeholders' Perspectives in a Two-Year Follow-Up

Adam Hansell[1], Dana K. Voelker[1], Lindsey Blom[2], Sofia España-Pérez[1], Andrea Patton[1], Jack C. Watson[1], Cheyenne Luzynski[3], Kristin Dieffenbach[4]

[1]West Virginia University, Department of Sport, Exercise, & Performance Psychology
[2] Ball State University, Department of Sport & Exercise Psychology
[3]West Virginia University, Department of Leadership Studies
[4] West Virginia University, Center for Applied Coaching and Sport Sciences

Corresponding author email: Adam.Hansell33@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

SDP scholars have identified critical shortcomings related to neoliberalist tendencies from the Global North to the Global South. Deporte y Cambio Social was a short-term SDP program established through partnership between American and Mexican constituent groups aiming to empower girls and women through soccer. Through semi-structured, two-year retrospective interviews, the purpose of the present study was to explore cross-cultural understandings of power and intercultural power relations from the voices of Mexican and American stakeholders to offer reflective critique of, and generate participant-informed strategies for improving, the design and implementation SDP programs broadly. Using thematic analysis from a critical constructivist orientation, the meanings generated from the data showed that Mexican and American participants similarly defined power and acknowledged power imbalances informed by a limiting project framework and a sociocultural-informed deference to Americans as experts. Strong, positive intercultural experiences between Mexican and American constituent groups were reported amid often unseen social biases that can be experienced abroad and perpetuated in SDP programs. Critical reflexivity, prolonged cultural preparation, longer-term engagement, and careful construction of SDP leadership teams and program participants were among the strategies informed by the data that were further interpreted to account for the complex realities of SDP programs.

Short-Term International Sport for Development and Peace Programs: A Retrospective Analysis and Critique Informed by Stakeholders' Perspectives in a Two-Year Follow-Up

Scholars across disciplines have highlighted critical directions for sport for development and peace (SDP) programs (Darnell et al., 2018; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Welty Peachey et al., 2019). These include moving beyond outcome-based approaches that measure short-term, transactional 'impact' (e.g., pre- and post-tests) toward deeper reflection of how traditional SDP approaches, intended to empower participants, may counterintuitively reinforce dominant ideologies throughout program development, implementation, evaluation, and funding processes (Hayhurst et al., 2021a). In international settings, SDP programs are often implemented in low- and middle-income communities in the Global South but are typically funded, designed, and evaluated by Global North stakeholders (Darnell et al., 2018). Critics assert that such international SDP programming is often grounded in neoliberalist beliefs (i.e., that disadvantaged nations would benefit from adopting Western systems, values, and institutions) and, in turn, reinforces a power hierarchy that subordinates and disempowers Global South cultures (Brown, 2019; Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012).

In contrast to neoliberalist notions, the careful and intentional involvement of local, non-dominant voices would offer the best opportunity for positive experience, development of meaningful intercultural relationships, and productive change as defined by local communities (Oatley & Harris, 2020; Svensson & Loat, 2019). Transforming

Keywords: Sport diplomacy, power, culture, citizen diplomacy, intercultural exchange

approaches to international SDP programming in the future requires careful analysis of power, including how and why dominant power structures have been upheld and how they might be reconstructed in SDP programming involving stakeholders from the Global North and the Global South (Darnell, 2010). Toward this purpose, the present study sought to retrospectively critique a short-term international SDP program with respect to cross-cultural understandings of power and intercultural power relations.

Review of Literature: Understandings of Power and Power Relations

Power has been discussed extensively across multiple academic domains. Although an exhaustive review of the literature on power and power relations is beyond the scope of the present paper, sample conceptualizations of power generally and the role of power in SDP work specifically are important to discuss. Within the SDP literature, power has been understood and explored from postcolonial feminist (e.g., Hayhurst, 2014), critical pedagogical (e.g., Spaaij et al., 2016), and critical feminist perspectives (e.g., Oxford & McLachlan, 2018). Power has also been considered within a hegemonic framework, which views power as created by repeated interactions between individuals identified as possessing authority and individuals who ultimately consent to that authority within and across cultures (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012; Darnell et al., 2018; Hayhurst et al., 2021b). Other SDP scholars (e.g., Harris & Adams, 2016) have explored Foucauldian (1979) conceptualizations that acknowledge power as a relational force that is inherently connected to knowledge, influence, and meaning, which are monitored and controlled by people and/or institutions both within and across cultures (Harris & Adams, 2016). Of particular relevance to international SDP programming, anthropological scholars have critiqued the use of rigid definitions of power to describe international collaborations and encouraged conceptualizations that increasingly consider complexity, fluidity, culture, and context (Adler & Aycan, 2018).

Given the dynamic, mercurial nature of power and the multitude of ways it can operate within and across contexts, Goodwill et al. (2021) acknowledged that social power structures that operate between governments, nations, and other social institutions often manifest in person-to-person interactions. Abizadeh (2023) differentiated structural power (i.e., a passive form of social power connected to social standing that reinforces relationships in which one group has 'power over' another group; e.g., citizenship) and agential power (i.e., power facilitated through interpersonal interactions that are characterized by groups sharing 'power with' one another). Scholars suggest that when structural forms of power operate unchecked, status quo power hierarchies are reinforced; however, intentionally prioritizing agential power in person-to-person interactions can disrupt power imbalances at an individual level, which informs shifts in societal power hierarchies as well (Abizadeh, 2023; Hess et al., 2022). Yet, without proactive reflexivity to facilitate a concrete understanding of the roles, rules, and norms that consider power within and across all stakeholders and their relationships to each other, social power hierarchies are likely to be reproduced within the intercultural relationships developed between members of Global North and the Global South in SDP programming (McSweeney et al., 2022). Such hegemonic relationships, in which power and dominance are reinforced in both subtle and overt ways, can occur irrespective of intention (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012; McSweeney et al., 2019).

Researchers have attributed the perpetuation of hegemonic relationships in SDP programs, in part, to programmatic structure, flow of resources, and organization (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012; McSweeney et al., 2019). Nicholls et al. (2010), for example, highlighted the problematic nature of seeking positivist evidence of SDP program impact to demonstrate success and instead advocated for co-creating knowledge with local voices at the grassroots level. Further, although SDP partners can share power through respect and open communication, the very funding structure (i.e., characterized by a relationship between a partner who has received, and will control, funding to conduct SDP programming and a partner without the same privileges) remains polarizing (McSweeney et al., 2022; Nicholls et al., 2010). Accordingly, SDP partnerships between the Global North and the Global South are inherently built upon a pre-existing power imbalance defined, in part, by capital resources and further complicated by the short-term nature of a corresponding program without guarantee of appropriate preparation or longer-term sustainability. Researchers and practitioners must critically evaluate their current and former SDP endeavors, through reflective practice and data, toward improved intercultural connection (Darnell, 2010). Such data-driven explorations are needed in the nuanced context of short-term international SDP programs developed in response to short-term grant funding.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to retrospectively critique a short-term international SDP program between the United States and Mexico, Deporte y Cambio Social, with respect to cross-cultural understandings of power and

intercultural power relations from the voices of varied Mexican and American stakeholders involved in the program's development and implementation. In addition to outcomes-based assessment of the program at the behest of the program's funder (España-Pérez et al., 2021), Hansell et al. (in press) explored a subsample of Mexican participants' impressions of the U.S. and Americans after the program's phase in Mexico. Participants reported feeling connected to Americans in realizing they experience some of the same struggles and shared optimism in forming future intercultural partnerships. However, participants also described deference to American expertise in sport-related professions and idealized sport training and resources in the U.S., Hansell et al. (in press) purported that, in an experience meant to be a shared intercultural exchange, the mere structure contributed to an imbalanced, hegemonic power dynamic that was not fully contemplated by American and Mexican stakeholders. In consideration of a broad range of conceptualizations of power within and beyond the SDP literature, the present study sought to explore these power imbalances more deeply, and with data, to meaningfully inform participant-driven strategies that support sustained engagement and shared ownership in increasingly power-balanced SDP partnerships.

METHOD

The Setting: Deporte y Cambio Social

Deporte y Cambio Social was a one-time, bi-directional international SDP initiative developed upon receipt of a sub-award received from a larger grant funded by the U.S. Department of State. The grant stipulated the awarded institution would use sport to engage at-risk youth in relation to empowering girls and women, people affected by violence, and/or indigenous populations. Thus, the primary program goals were to promote empowerment and leadership development for girls and women through soccer and to facilitate citizen diplomacy objectives between American and Mexican citizens. Academic professionals, graduate students, and community coaches affiliated with two public universities in the U.S. and Mexico developed and implemented the program from scratch using a train-the-trainer model designed for current and future sport coaches of girls and women based on the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (SCM) – a values-based model that views leadership development and social change as a dynamic process within individual, group, and community domains (HERI, 1996). None of the stakeholders involved had significant experience with SDP program design or implementation prior to this experience. Details on specific program activities, objectives, and experiences are outlined by Hansell et al. (in press).

The American organizers included faculty members, graduate students, and community coaches who were native U.S. citizens or originally from regions of the Global South, including Mexico. This group selected the guiding theoretical framework, managed the budget, coordinated travel, designed the program in consultation with members of the partnering institution in Mexico, recruited American program participants, and facilitated workshops. The Mexican organizers included faculty members at a Mexican university who procured facilities and supplies, recruited Mexican program participants, and facilitated workshops in a supporting role for the programming in Mexico (e.g., providing directions, explaining activities). Program participants were current and future sport coaches of girls and women who were predominantly Mexican in addition to a small sample of Americans in similar coaching or student roles. The program involved two exchange training phases with 56 days in between: the first in Mexico for seven days and the second in the U.S. for 13 days.

Research Design & Positionality

A critical constructivist epistemological framework, which acknowledges the influential role of culture, context, and power, both hidden and overt, across human social interactions (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Levers, 2013; McCabe & Holmes, 2009), was used to frame this qualitative study. Scholars within and beyond SDP have highlighted the importance of adopting a critical lens to challenge societal status quos by questioning, untangling, and reevaluating entrenched ideologies, beliefs, values, and assumptions (Coalter, 2010; Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012; Denzin & Giardina, 2016). Thus, a critical lens not only welcomes diversity and disagreement, but views them as essential components of the research process to garner new theoretical insights and explanations. Qualitative researchers have highlighted the philosophical similarities between constructivism and critical theory (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998). Both are rooted in ontological relativism, which posits reality is constructed through individuals' unique interpretations of their environment, context, and identity (De Ronde & Mouján, 2019).

Participants

Participants (n = 6; M_{age} = 41.5 years; SD = 10.4 years) were a purposive sample of self-identified Mexican and American citizens (n = 3 women; n = 3 men) involved in both program phases (e.g., in Mexico and the U.S.) as program organizers, program participants, and program implementers. Just as identities are intersectional, so too is power (Goodwill et al., 2021). Accordingly, maximum variation sampling was used to select

participants using variables that influence or are influenced by power to garner multiple stakeholders' perspectives. The sample included two Mexican university students who were current or future coaches who participated in the program, three members of the organizing group who developed and implemented the program (two Mexican faculty members, one American faculty member), and one American practitioner who assisted in program implementation.

Procedures

Following IRB approval, eligible participants were contacted via digital communication and invited to participate with information on the study purpose, tasks involved in participating, and an opportunity to ask questions via video call. All eligible individuals responded to the initial inquiry; participants who opted out cited personal events. Six participants agreed to participate through electronic return of a signed consent form and background questionnaire and scheduled their virtual interview, which occurred approximately two years after the program ended. Each interview, ranging from 28 to 60 minutes (M = 45 minutes), was conducted collaboratively by two interviewers via Zoom.

Recent SDP scholarship has emphasized the importance of reflexivity among SDP researchers, their identities, knowledge, privileges, and ways they contribute to powerful systems (Hill & Dao, 2020); thus, insider/outsider roles are not fixed and are subject to change over time as researchers navigate different roles, experiences, and environments (McSweeney, 2019). The first interviewer was an American citizen and doctoral student at an American university who identifies as a White man. He has been passionate about the potential role of sport in promoting positive social change through his soccer career and continued non-profit work in Ghana. He viewed and acknowledged his role as predominantly a cultural outsider (i.e., an individual conducting research with a social group they are perceived *not* to personally belong based on fewer shared characteristics) (Liu & Barnett, 2022), given his limited immersion in Mexican cultures, customs, and traditions. At times, however, he operated as a cultural insider (i.e., an individual conducting research with a social group they are perceived to personally belong based on more shared characteristics) (Liu & Barnett, 2022), due to his ability to speak Spanish fluently. The second interviewer was a Mexican citizen who completed her doctoral degree at an American university and identifies as a Latina woman. Born and raised in Mexico for 18 years before attending university in the U.S. as a student-athlete, she had personal experience with gender inequity in Mexico both within and outside sport. She acknowledged her role as primarily a cultural insider given her lived experience as a Mexican woman but also recognized the outsider influence of her position as part of the American contingent in the current SDP experience. Each interviewer was involved in the program development and implementation across both phases of Deporte y Cambio Social as primary workshop facilitators and translators.

Prior to the start of the study, the interviewers were in regular contact with many Mexican and American representatives who were involved in Deporte y Cambio Social since the program ended, which included the participants in this study. Forming sustained relationships beyond SDP participation, known as friendship potential, is a common outcome of SDP programs (Dixon et al., 2019). Further, scholars have noted that pre-existing relationships between researchers and participants can alleviate perceived power imbalances, enhance vulnerability and honesty, and foster more meaningful discussions during qualitative interviews (e.g., Råheim et al., 2016). For example, Day (2012) asserted that role conflicts for qualitative researchers are not inherently problematic, as long as the researchers engage in a robust reflexive process to understand how and when they alternate between multiple, and sometimes conflicting, roles. Within the present study, both interviewers kept ongoing analytic memos and engaged in regular processing discussions, preparations, and debriefs, including continual reflection on their intersectional identities and program roles.

The interviewers conducted semi-structured individual interviews with questions developed to prompt critical reflection related to participants' experiences in the program (e.g., describe your experience in Deporte y Cambio Social); understandings of power (e.g., what does power mean to you?); perceptions of power within the program (e.g., tell us when you perceived a power balance/imbalance); and hypothetical prompts related to intergroup power dynamics (e.g., would you ever consider coming/returning to the U.S./Mexico to deliver a similar program?). The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English by a professional editor fluent in Spanish and English. Participants were then contacted to complete a virtual, individual member reflection (Smith & McGannon, 2018) in which the interviewers provided participants with a case summary of initial interview interpretations and encouraged them to contemplate, question, clarify, and/or expand. All participants engaged in member reflections, ranging from 10 to 17 minutes (M = 13 minutes), which were also transcribed and analyzed as data (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Data Analysis

The analysis team included the interviewers and two critical friends, both of whom are American citizens who identify as White women. In qualitative research, the role of a critical friend is to provide space to explore and challenge philosophical assumptions and positionality, the research process, and data interpretations through alternative lenses that lead to a diverse and comprehensive analysis (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Wolcott, 1994). In the present study, neither critical friend was involved in the design or delivery of Deporte y Cambio Social and were well-positioned to offer perspectives external to direct programmatic experiences. Prior to data collection, team members initiated a thorough reflexive process where they discussed their role in the program, identity, philosophical assumptions, and positionality (Attia & Edge, 2017) and additionally responded to written prompts related to their understandings of power and views on SDP. During data analysis, team members used journaling and critical discussions to elucidate unconscious biases that could influence their interactions with the data (Day, 2012). For example, informed by the critical friends prior to reading transcripts, the team established norms, roles, and expectations for coding that were subsequently revisited at the start of each meeting, which included time for processing (e.g., what emerged for you as you read the data?); invitations to dissent (e.g., how does your identity inform your perspective?); and acknowledging insights from each team member regardless of role (e.g., what perspectives have not been shared?). Given the variability in the conceptualizations of power within and beyond SDP, a broad range of interpretations were considered in the context of existing literature while allowing space to explore novel dimensions of power relevant to the data.

The data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2020). Importantly, Braun and Clarke (2020) asserted their guidance is not meant to be followed rigidly, as the process should be fluid, recursive, and flexible. Each analysis team member reviewed the data individually and pre-coded, one transcript at a time, using open coding (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2006) and an analytic memo to document impressions before discussing as a group. Together, the team deductively organized codes according to the study purposes and then inductively according to meanings generated that considered participants' experiences as they told them and analysis of power using a critical constructivist lens. Over several months, the organization of codes, drafted in text form and via conceptual mapping, were iteratively revised, refined, and re-defined as new transcripts were read via constant comparison (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Revision and refinement continued throughout the writing of the study in which all authors were consulted for clarity, interpretation, and context based on their unique roles in the research process.

RESULTS

To understand intercultural power structure and relations involved in a short-term SDP program, the results section begins with an overview of participants' understandings of power that informed their experience. Participants' views on how power manifested within the structure of a short-term SDP program are then explored, followed by participants' views on power within the intercultural, person-to-person relationships that developed. Participants' names were replaced with randomly generated pseudonyms to protect confidentiality (i.e., Mexican participants were Fran, Guillermo, Mariana, and Miguel; American participants were Jennifer and Jeremy). See Table 1 for a results summary with a list of themes and descriptive subthemes.

Table 1
Research Theme List

Higher order themes	Sub themes
Power relations with the short-term SDP experience	*Mexican and American participants acknowledged that SDP programs involving a partnership between a country from the Global North, like the U.S., and a developing country, like Mexico, are inherently built upon a pre-existing power imbalance.* *Mexican participants, however, did not perceive the control that Americans had over the program and its implementation as problematic, demonstrating consent through hegemony.* *The structure of the funding opportunity and its associated demands were believed to significantly complicate the ability to engage with the Mexican stakeholders more meaningfully around the program structure and itinerary.*
Manifestations of power within person-to-person intercultural interactions	*Mexican participants reported they were treated as equals by the American constituent, which strengthened their cultural perceptions.* *Despite positive interpersonal connections with the American contingent in the program, Mexican participants also candidly described, with expectation and acceptance, experiences of racial discrimination while in the U.S.* *Specific to sex and gender, Mexican and American participants observed when biases were perpetuated, and at other times challenged, amid program execution. Women participants across cultures recommended considerable attention to understandings of sex and gender and the intentional construction of representative leadership teams.*
Understandings of power and power relations with the short-term SDP experience	*Mexican and American participants described power as a paradoxical concept.* *Mexican and American participants acknowledged that SDP programs involving a partnership between a Global North country, like the U.S., and a developing country, like Mexico, are inherently built upon a pre-existing power imbalance.* *Mexican participants, however, did not perceive the control that Americans had over the program and its implementation as problematic.* *Mexican participants reported they were treated as equals by the American contingent, which strengthened their cultural perceptions.* *Despite positive interpersonal connections with the American contingent in the program, Mexican participants also candidly described, with almost expectation and acceptance, other experiences of racial discrimination while in the U.S.* *Specific to sex and gender, Mexican and American participants observed when biases were perpetuated, and at other times challenged, amid program execution.*

Participants' General Understandings of Power

Overall, both Mexican and American participants described enjoying and valuing their experience in the program and expressing gratitude for their involvement. These findings align with responses shared by Hansell et al. (in press) where Mexican participants spoke highly of the relationships they developed with the American participants by identifying points of shared experience and optimism for future intercultural connection. Such positive reflections of participants' overall experience were consistent with those reported from similar SDP programs conducted between the U.S. and, for example, China (LeCrom & Dwyer, 2013), Jordan and Tajikistan (Blom et al., 2019), and Latin American countries and the Caribbean (Baker et al., 2018). When asked about power specifically, however, both Mexican and American participants described it as a paradoxical concept. Guillermo reported:

If you want to know a person, you give them power. It's going to give us the best of themselves or it's going to give us the worst of themselves. Power…is a great responsibility that can lead us to a positive or negative side with a very thin line.

Mexican and American participants further described power as involving the "capacity to influence others," a "basic need" that "defines our safety overall," and a "tool" that can "break barriers and help other[s] grow alongside you," allow one to "do things for others…or society," and "reach your goals." Participants' insights align with Foucault's (1979) assertion that power is primarily a relational force that is not inherently good or bad, and when framed and used appropriately, it can be used as a positive influence at both individual and societal levels.

Two participants, both of whom were Mexican women, described power as "a strong word that we should all have in our minds as a value" that can lead to "more educational and economic opportunities." Thus, participants' awareness that power is closely associated with knowledge, influence, and control further aligns with Foucault's (1979) conceptualization of power. Although acknowledged by everyone, only Mexican men participants elaborated on the negative potential of power in a Mexican context "…in Mexico, power means to do what you want whether it is right or wrong…Many powerful people do things only for them and their family and not their community. I think it's wrong" and "power in the Mexican context can be elaboration of corruptive power in the U.S. could suggest limited awareness of, or perceived inappropriateness to acknowledge, similar experiences that can and do occur in dominant nations like the U.S., which may further reflect deference to an idealized American culture as identified by Hansell et al. (in press).

Power Within the Structure of the Short-Term SDP Program

Data indicated that power dynamics can be represented in short-term SDP programs through an inherent power structure based on Global North status, stakeholders from the Global South consenting to the normative power structure, and cultural implications of the itinerary and program structure. Foundationally, both Mexican and American participants acknowledged that SDP programs involving a partnership between a Global North country, like the U.S., and a Global South country, like Mexico, are inherently built upon a pre-existing relational power imbalance representative of hegemony. Jeremy shared: "I think the imbalance of power started from day 1...you're an American university, so you are automatically considered good." Jeremy's statement aligns with previous research suggesting academics and development groups from the Global North have been the primary agents who have shaped the SDP landscape (Nicholls et al., 2010), and therefore hold significant relational and cultural power over, rather than with, partners from the Global South. Miguel explained:

Maybe I'm a little biased because personally I'm a big fan of American culture. I can say that I grew up with their philosophy that I learned through their movies, through their sports, their leagues, but I think that the university issue is amazing; how they live, how they get to campus, how doors are opened for people to be able to be in these institutions of such high prestige.

In the present study, Jeremy shared: "I think we sort of like were dictating the program…the program was in our, the ball was on our side." Mariana observed: "I noticed Americans had a lot of power."

Mexican participants, however, did not always perceive the control that Americans had over the program and its implementation as problematic, which reflects how the Mexican contingent was complicit within the hegemonic partnership with American stakeholders. Mariana noted: "I did not notice any [power imbalance]. It was more like [Americans] reached an agreement, you talked about it and told us, and we had to do it no matter what. It was like an

option." Fran similarly acknowledged the American contingent as the leaders who arrived to "present" while Mexicans "participate." Fran observed power imbalances between Americans who could and could not speak Spanish: "When [Americans] came [to Mexico], you were the ones who were organizing everything. So, it could be a number one imbalance, the language, because [American stakeholder] spoke Spanish and English and had more decision-making power on that side." Jennifer reflected upon her experience as an English-speaking American in Mexico, which serves as an example of the type of critical reflection that is warranted throughout the SDP experience:

I was in the middle of a group, and I suddenly could not remember anything in Spanish. I had been speaking in Spanish, I mean not well, but at least enough that the group understood me. And as I kept talking, I was like yeah…I don't know anymore (laughter). It's just this silly example but in that moment, I felt a distinct shift in how much power I had and how much I could help. I pretty much felt worthless to the group and to the project.

She added: "This expectation that we went there and didn't have to speak Spanish speaks so much to our power and privilege. People wanting to learn from us regardless of if they can understand us is pretty amazing."

The mere structure of the funding opportunity and its associated demands were also believed to significantly complicate the ability to engage with the Mexican stakeholders more meaningfully around the program structure and itinerary. Jeremy explained: "It's a little bit artificial…when you create this positive feeling. And by creating these positive feelings, I think you are achieving in a certain way the [funder's] purposes..." He elaborated: "…They require a lot of time and involvement into setting up the programs with all these demands, but sometimes you lose focus of what is the core problem."

Within the noted logistical constraints, participants also explained they had limited clarity regarding their designated role within the program as a participant or an organizer. For example, Jennifer said, "I feel like if [my role] was a test question, I would probably not get it correct," and Mariana reported, "I believe that knowledge, to know what we were going to do and why, would have facilitated everything that happened." Jeremy added:

…it was not a program that I would say was totally built with them…at the very beginning, we talked about we need to build this program with them, so it's going to be more inclusive…I think it was more a logistics issue…I think we had the intentions to build something with them, but it was so complicated to really have a clear idea of what we want to do...we were moving, right? Because of the logistics, because of the time…

Despite Deporte y Cambio Social being generally "well-designed" and "super well-organized," participants felt "…it was just too much to fit into a week" [Jennifer] and that "…everything was in a hurry" [Mariana]. Mexican participants' observations of the program itinerary, which largely aligned with American cultural norms on productivity and punctuality, are one example of the problematic discordance between meeting the demands of a grant originating from the Global North and local cultural norms in many Global South communities (Hayhurst et al., 2021c; McSweeney et al., 2019; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018). This discordance reflects a lack of power and agency within the Mexican contingent representative of cultural hegemony within the program.

Accordingly, participants offered recommendations toward SDP programs' central purposes to support meaningful intercultural engagement while fostering culturally relevant learning reflective of important social issues. Among these recommendations, members of the Mexican contingent suggested SDP programs be longer in duration and that the experiences across countries be increasingly parallel. Fran explained:

I saw how an American family lived. I realized the great differences. Maybe if you had stayed with a family when you came to Mexico, you would have also realized it too. You would not only have seen it from the outside…I would not change anything more than to see the way that, when you come, you could stay in the house of Mexicans and not in a hotel because it is very different.

Guillermo similarly reported:

[I wish] that Americans had more time in our country, that it was at least balanced. Because we stayed two weeks and it seems to me that you were only six or seven days. Then I would like it to be the same time so that it was wider, be calmer, and we could enjoy it a little more, and that this opportunity could be used to present more things about our country…of its people who are wonderful, that you could live it in a better way…

Other Mexican participants added, "…it would have been better if it would have been more days, obviously. I know it is not simple to be accepted one month" (Mariana) and "at least four weeks instead of two"

(Miguel). Fran explained: "Since we came back, 80% of participants asked if there was going to be something similar and if they could volunteer for another program or another visit...We told them, we did not bring the program, it isn't ours." These sentiments highlight the imbalance toward the U.S. within the program, due in part because they were more closely associated with the funding source and therefore held more power (McSweeney et al., 2019; Nicholls et al., 2010). Additionally, participants' responses highlight how SDP program itineraries and duration can be complicit in reproducing relational power imbalances that, via limited time, inhibit the ability to fully immerse in intercultural interaction, sharing, and growth.

Manifestations of Power within Person-to-Person Intercultural Interactions

Diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Mexico improved significantly since 2000, yet the relationship has become more turbulent in recent years in relation to conflicting views and policies related to immigration and drug trafficking (Seelke, 2023). Within Deporte y Cambio Social specifically, power dynamics between Mexican and American stakeholders were informed by a complex intersection of privileges rooted in culture, race, sex, and gender. Mexican participants reported times when they felt they were treated as equals by the American contingent, which strengthened their cultural perceptions. Feelings of equality were observed most when Mexicans and Americans were jointly engaged in the program's functions. For example, Mariana said, "when we were doing the activities in the field I believe that was more of a power balance," and Miguel commented "…in all the activities, those that were done in classrooms, when you shared a talk with us, when we had practices on the fields, when we were in the camp." Fran reflected positively on Mexicans' homestay experiences during the program phase in the U.S., which she believed were met with equality, respect, and consideration:

I told them that we Mexicans must eat together at least once a day, and what they did was invite their son to dinner so that I wouldn't feel so out of my house. They told me we have dinner together on a few occasions, but we are inviting him for you to see what a family dinner is like because we do not really have them often.

Despite positive interpersonal connections with the American contingent in the program, Mexican participants also candidly described, with almost expectation and acceptance, experiences of racial discrimination while in the U.S. Guillermo explained:

…when we were at [name] airport, there was a dark-skinned policeman who just noticed that we were Mexicans and threw our bags. Then I said, I will do it and put it up. He saw what I did, returned it, and threw it back again. It seems to me that there was an abuse of power from an authority there. He wanted to show, here I command…However, I insist, we are in the process of social development, and we must be tolerant of this type of action and just understand the reasons why these things occur, only that. But I'm not talking about a generality, it was simply an isolated event that that occurred on that trip, but at least in Deporte y Cambio Social we were treated wonderfully.

Fran shared:

…we have an idea of the profile of the nationalities in Mexico. Unfortunately many times we see racism, that you are not being loved, that they don't see you as equal, but we see that in this type of program, it was super good, and this perception was not in it…this paradigm that many people have was changed...Many Mexicans think that Americans are not interested in us. But, they were quite interested in knowing our culture, in knowing our food, how we thought and how we interacted with each other. I saw it as a good thing…I see that in this type of program, nationality does not matter, the important thing is people...

Thus, while intercultural interactions within the insulated SDP context are often positive, they may also serve as barriers to meaningfully identifying, discussing, and disrupting authentic intercultural conflict in real world settings. Aligned with Foucault's (1979) conceptualization, participants' sentiments further emphasize power as a relational force that manifests organically through person-to-person interactions.

Specific to sex and gender, Mexican and American participants observed when biases were perpetuated, and at other times challenged, amid program execution. Women participants across cultures recommended considerable attention to understandings of sex and gender and the intentional construction of representative SDP leadership teams. Specifically, Mexican and American women participants discussed the prominent role of women within the project but wished more were involved given the program's emphasis on women's empowerment. Fran shared:

I saw when you visited Mexico that most of the visitors were women; both the girls who coached soccer, the organizers, and many of the researchers who came were women, so I think it was already focused on women's empowerment

and all the activities that were done were usually led by women.

Mariana added:

I would have liked more women teachers and not as many men teachers. Also, more people from the sports arena, because if your goal is to use sport and empower women through that sport, more sport professionals should have been [involved]…there were teachers that had nothing to do with that sport and they were men. I don't mean that only women should be included, but I think that if we want to empower girls, [the Mexican contingent] should have taken more women teachers.

Reflecting on an event in Mexico that was canceled by an American member during the phase in Mexico, Jennifer

shared:

…sexism showed up in the management of our trip in that it was too hot for the women's event to happen, so we didn't get to connect with just women only…It's like we're here for [women's empowerment] and you're telling a bunch of women that it's too hot for us to play instead of asking us if we want to do it.

In observation of the American contingent group, Mariana reported: "In the case of [American woman], who was with us a lot, she would say something and then later it was changed to what [American man] wanted; then yes, I saw two unequal powers." From a critical feminist perspective, favoring the values, perspectives, and interests of a dominant, versus non-dominant group, contribute to power disparities that undermine the SDP experience for individuals the programming is intended to serve (e.g., Chawansky, 2015; del Socorro Cruz Centeno, 2021).

Parallel to these types of experiences, however, were other instances in which sex and gender disparities were contemplated and challenged. Mariana explained how, in response to a training received in the U.S., the Mexican girls reflected on differences in societal norms regarding legal protections of girls and women:

…the girls were saying, so, here [in the U.S.], if somebody turns to see you, it is almost a felony, if somebody touches your hair, it is a felony. They didn't know that. Some had the openness to tell me some very strong things that happened in their community [in Mexico], and I think [the violence] doesn't happen here in the United States, not even half of it, because you would be taken to jail or arrested...

Although becoming aware of institutional protections for girls and women in the U.S. was inspiring for Mexican girls, these protections are also limited.

Collectively, participants' responses suggest aspects of the SDP program reflected a balance of power that enhanced the quality of their experience and at other times an imbalance of power that diminished the quality of their experience. Participants' recommendations (e.g., prolonged engagement, representation) both echo, and inform expansion of, necessary reconstructions of the SDP experience. These reconstructions are further explored amid the challenges and opportunities characteristic of short-term, international, grant-based programs.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study underscore, with data, the importance of engaging in critical and constructive reflection with respect to cross-cultural understandings of power and intercultural power relations for all SDP stakeholders. It is easy to perceive the observed challenges as unique to Deporte y Cambio Social, and given that this study was done retrospectively, we acknowledge the program had shortcomings inherently connected to disparate power structures. The alignment of the present data with a preponderance of recent conceptual critiques of SDP work (e.g., Darnell et al., 2018; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Hayhurst et al., 2021a; Whitley et al., 2018) suggest the conclusions are relevant to a larger body of SDP programs, particularly those that are short-term and grant based. Indeed, the purpose of this study was not to dismiss the important potential of SDP programs and positive experiences that have been described here and in other literature (e.g., Baker et al., 2018; Blom et al., 2015; LeCrom & Dwyer, 2013), but rather to suggest that the broad-stroke, outcome-oriented impressions of SDP programs capture only one chapter of a longer and more nuanced story that will meaningfully inform the future of SDP work, if told.

Broadly, power was viewed by participants as being closely tied to knowledge, influence, and control both within and outside the program, which Foucault (1979) suggests represents the diffuse, versus concentrated, nature of power. Notions that 'power is everywhere' (Foucault, 1979), versus tied solely to a specific person or structure, speaks to the inevitability of exploring, reflecting, interrogating, and intervening with respect to power in SDP programs. Participants' responses also reflected cultural and relational hegemonic power structures suggesting that American members had more power and influence over the program, of which Mexican members were aware but complicit in. Deference to Americans and other Global North actors is

well-documented in the SDP literature (i.e., Dao & Chin, 2021; Hansell et al., in press; Hayhurst et al., 2021d; McSweeney et al., 2019). Such deference fuels a foundational power imbalance on which SDP programs are often developed that, despite intentions to facilitate equitable partnerships, reproduces Global North stakeholders having power over, versus power with, Global South partners (Abizadeh, 2023; Dao & Chin, 2021; Harris, 2018). Within Deporte y Cambio Social, the present data suggest Mexican participants expected Americans to serve as deliverers of expertise and experience, mostly in English, which reflects the larger cultural and relational hegemonic power disparities upon which this and other SDP programs are built.

SDP scholars have also described how often unseen biases, specifically related to race, sex, and gender that are deeply entrenched in our sociocultural worlds, still manifest in SDP program execution (Oxford, 2019; Válkova, 2021). From a critical feminist theory perspective, the differential experience, perceptions, and observations by women participants reflected how cultural structures and practices reproduced within SDP programs can inequitably shape the experiences of individuals of varied groups defined by, for example, sex, gender, and race. del Socorro Cruz Centeno (2021) similarly reflected on ways an SDP program targeting gender equity and environmental stewardship in Nicaragua reinforced existing gender norms in the local context; women participants assumed cleaning and organizational tasks (traditionally feminine) while men played soccer (traditionally masculine). Chawansky (2015) used autoethnographic vignettes to reflect on ways her identity as an American White woman influenced her experience and interactions as a Global North SDP researcher; specifically, she recounted experiences of gender bias and sexualization while aiming to empower girls and women in a Global South context. Participants in the present study recounted events or aspects of the program structure that similarly reinforced both gender bias and an experience of racial discrimination beyond the context of the program while traveling. Such deleterious experiences will continue in short-term, grand-funded programs without acknowledgement and intervention.

Approaching SDP work differently in order to address issues of power is largely dependent upon a significant transformation of the strategic priorities of SDP researchers and practitioners along with the structure of dominant funding mechanisms. Other researchers (e.g., McSweeney et al., 2022; Oatley & Harris, 2020) have utilized participatory approaches, which have been implemented in partnerships with existing SDP organizations. However, such immersive endeavors are a unique challenge for short-term SDP programs, particularly when researchers are tasked with different roles related to the program and the research. In considering power as a relational force, significant time is needed to organically develop and nurture relationships within cross-cultural SDP partnerships that prioritize agential, rather than structural power through intentional shared experiences, cultural learning, and discourse. Further, significant time is needed to adequately prepare stakeholders and participants who may have little prior SDP experience. The present findings therefore suggest that time, in addition to culture, inform relational power structures that influence participants' experiences in short-term SDP programs. However, the mere structure of short-term programming is a significant barrier to addressing these concerns.

Among the possible solutions, the present findings suggest a truly parallel experience in the partnering countries would support perceptions of deeper and increasingly equal cross-cultural engagement and intercultural learning. Further, intentional involvement of experienced SDP professionals or organizations with expertise in meaningful intercultural engagement would benefit less experienced stakeholders in adequately preparing for and improving experiences that are short-term. Relevant training in local culture, language, self-assessment, and introspection related to effective intercultural engagement, cultural humility, competence, and empathy should be an embedded requirement of the funding mechanism toward facilitating explicit discussions of power structures both within and across cultural groups as part of the relationship-building and familiarization process. Importantly, given many SDP professionals from the Global North are affiliated with institutions of higher education with competing job responsibilities (Schulenkorf et al., 2016), administrators must provide workload space to fully engage in the preparation and relationship-building required for SDP programs to be done well. SDP programs originating in the Global North that operate in the Global South are often marketed as volunteer opportunities to local college students and young adults to build their resume and develop a sense of global responsibility and citizenship that can be personally rewarding and boost future employment prospects (Dao & Chin, 2021; Giulianotti et al., 2021; LeCrom et al., 2022). Such marketing, however, can position Global North volunteers as the primary benefactors of the SDP experience, supporting hegemonic power structures and creating conflict with program objectives within the local context where the program operates (Clarke & Norman, 2021; Darnell, 2007). Thus, critical SDP scholars have cautioned against on relying on Global North volunteers to implement programs to ensure that

the program is locally managed and operated (Hayhurst, 2014). We echo this assertion, and further advocate for the importance of, or even requirement for, Global North SDP volunteers to be thoroughly trained in program objectives as well as engage in a thorough reflexive process (e.g., journaling) throughout the entirety of their SDP experience.

The use of conceptual frameworks would be helpful to guide intercultural interactions and behaviors across the short-term SDP experience. Appreciative inquiry, for example, offers a strengths-based approach for co-creating intercultural knowledge and programming within a balanced power dynamic (Nel, 2012). Relational cultural theory is a useful framework for emphasizing relational, versus individual, resilience through growth-fostering relationships built upon mutual empathy and empowerment (Miller, 1986). Growth-fostering relationships lead to, and are characterized by, zest (i.e., energy and vitality for both individuals/groups), worth (i.e., derived from using oneself to foster mutual growth), clarity (i.e., clear understanding of self, another person/group, and the relationship), productivity (i.e., taking meaningful and mutually beneficial action in the relationship), and further connection (i.e., desire to develop the relationship beyond the initial connection) (Jordan, 2018; Miller, 1986). Relational cultural theory provides a process for healthy interpersonal and intercultural relationship development that recognizes power inequities and diversity as inevitable, but prioritizes mutual over self-serving interests toward agential, versus passive structural, power.

Collectively, the findings of this study support and deepen many of the understandings, reflections, and conceptual critiques from other scholars published in the SDP literature through data-driven inquiry that explored diverse participants' voices in a nuanced short-term international, grant-funded SDP context. In considering variable conceptualizations in the literature, the findings of this study further demonstrate the complexity and fluidity of cross-cultural understandings of power and intercultural power relations, namely that power operates in multi-dimensional ways and can be explained by multiple and diverse conceptual and theoretical understandings. Among the key insights from this study, both time and culture inform relational power structures that can influence participants' experiences in short-term SDP programs that may serve as the basis for targeted solutions, many of which the participants in this study described. Importantly, insights into power dynamics within Deporte y Cambio Social may not have been identified without the present study, as research to determine the effectiveness of the program. Accordingly, we encourage similar critical reflection of other SDP programs and experiences.

Limitations

Given the nature of the present study, much of the meaning derived from participants' responses involved retrofitting recommendations two years after the program ended, which could be viewed as a limitation. Additionally, despite efforts to promote candid responses by welcoming insight on programmatic critique in addition to strengths, and co-conducting interviews in Spanish with a native Mexican woman along with the primary author, it is still possible not all experiences were shared. Response bias and social desirability may have influenced participants' responses, particularly given their pre-existing relationships with both interviewers. Although some response bias is inevitable, establishing intercultural, transdisciplinary research teams that are solely focused on evaluation efforts and have equitable representation across cultures could help mitigate the potential for response bias during program evaluations (Whitley et al., 2022). In addition, incorporating qualitative methodological approaches such as observation and/or document analysis could yield additional insights not captured in interviews alone. Finally, while recruitment was limited to a small pool of eligible participants, we nonetheless encourage garnering perspectives from an even broader and more culturally diverse group of stakeholders, including those affiliated with the funding source.

Conclusion

This study qualitatively explored power from the voices of various stakeholders in a short-term international SDP program two years after the program. Within this nuanced context, our findings further demonstrate how SDP work is not insulated from societal imbalances of power and hegemony, and stakeholders should be proactive in acknowledging and exploring such imbalances by engaging in a robust reflexive process throughout their SDP experience to better identify and disrupt existing power imbalances that can be easily reproduced. Such reflexivity would benefit all stakeholders in helping them examine their own identities and biases that may influence their own and others' experience. This is particularly relevant for Global North stakeholders working in Global South contexts, as neoliberal tendencies are a known critique within the SDP landscape.

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Thought Leadership From the Field

Evaluating the Impact of Sport for Development Activities on Children through Observational and Visual Data Collection and a Guiding Framework

Tom Vahid[1], Tanya Rütti[1], Zinette Bergman[2], Manfred Max Bergman[2,3]

[1]Scort Foundation
[2]Department of Social Sciences, University of Basel
[3]Department of Family Medicine, University of Michigan

Corresponding author email: tom.vahid@scort.ch

ABSTRACT

In this paper we explore the extent to which visual data collection methods, such as drawings and videos, can contribute to studying how vulnerable children benefit from participating in sport for development (SFD) activities. We first highlight the limitations of traditional data collection methods (e.g., surveys and interviews) in assessing the potential impact of activities on the well-being of children participating in SFD and then explore opportunities arising from integrating digital data formats that facilitate data collection methods for monitoring, evaluation, and research. In this context, we present a framework to illustrate how visual methods could be applied to collect and analyze the impact of an intervention. By capturing individual, relational, and institutional benefits that children gain from attending sports activities, this framework provides one example of how the positive impact of such activities can be systematized in a way that provides empirical evidence to support the multidimensional effectiveness of using sport as a tool for development. While recognizing their advantages, the paper also acknowledges areas of caution and potential limitations associated with visual data collection methods. The aim of our paper is to illustrate the potential of a tool that SFD practitioners can use to systematically collect and analyze visual data for assessing the impact of an intervention.

Evaluating the Impact of Sport for Development Activities on Children through Observational and Visual Data Collection and a Guiding Framework

The past two decades have witnessed an increased recognition of the positive contribution sport can make in a development context (Collison et al., 2019; Darnell, 2012; Kidd, 2008; Levermore & Beacom, 2009; Morgan et al., 2021; Schulenkorf et al.,

Keywords: Evaluation, sport, children, videos, drawings

2016). Effectively organized sport activities create an environment where, apart from obvious health benefits, children can learn, play, and interact in ways that positively contribute to their physical, emotional, and social development. However, providing evidence for such multidimensional impacts can be challenging. Consequently, the increased recognition of sport for development (SFD) has been accompanied by calls for greater evidence regarding the impact of these interventions (Adams & Harris, 2014; Coalter, 2007; Whitley et al., 2020), which, in turn, has generated an increasing focus on monitoring and evaluation (M&E) methods that may achieve this.

Numerous stakeholders, including researchers, policymakers, government officials, businesses, educational institutions, development agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)/Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs), and civil society have employed M&E to gather evidence on how initiatives function and to better understand their impact (UN, 2021). Within the field of SFD, the United Nations (UN) provides a useful framework for defining the scope, purpose, and usefulness of M&E. In their *Sport for Development and Peace Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkit* (2021), the UN differentiates monitoring from evaluation. Monitoring refers to "the regular, systematic, collection and analysis of information related to a planned and agreed program or action [to provide] evidence of the extent to which the program is being delivered as intended" (UN, 2021, pg. 7). Evaluation in contrast refers to

a systematic assessment with a high level of impartiality (avoiding conflict of interest and biases) of an activity, project, program, strategy, policy, theme, operational area of institutional performance, amongst others. [To] provide information that is credible, reliable and useful […] to determine the relevance and fulfillment of objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, [and] impact (UN, 2021, pg. 8).

Accordingly, evaluating empirically the multidimensional impact of a sports-based intervention focusing on vulnerable children in a development cooperation context requires a four-step approach: conceptualizing a context-specific and culture-sensitive data collection procedure; rigorous data collection that captures in multiple ways and across multiple events the program impacts; systematic analyses of the collected data that are suitable for the program, evaluation, and data collected; and a synthesis of the data analysis that reveals the program's relevance, fulfillment of objectives, efficiency, and effectiveness (UN, 2021).

M&E Approaches to Collect and Analyze SFD Data

Traditional M&E approaches are usually divided into two types: quantitative methods, which typically employ various kinds of surveys and quasi-experiments, and qualitative methods, mainly based on interviews but sometimes combined with non-participant observations. Most M&E approaches, especially those employing qualitative research methods, rely on experiential reports from stakeholders involved directly or indirectly in the SFD program. Stakeholders providing experiential data include program beneficiaries as well as family members or care providers, intervention or program coordinators or administrators, and community members who are in some way involved with or impacted by the program. Methods used to collect experiential (self-)reports include informal conversations, formal one-to-one or group interviews, focus groups, or open-ended written responses, including experiential or reflection diaries or essays (UN, 2021).

Numerous challenges are associated with experiential (self-)reports, specifically if the intervention beneficiaries are children (Caqueo-Urízar et al., 2022; Datta & Pettigrew, 2013; Hunleth et al., 2022; Kooijman et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2015; Nixon et al., 2022). First, experiential or behavioral reports from beneficiaries or significant others tend to be subjective and prone to bias (Caqueo-Urízar et al., 2022; Kooijman et al., 2022). Second, children's development is influenced by external factors beyond the scope of the program, which complicates assessment of a program's impact (Moore et al., 2015). Third, the heterogeneity among program participants and the variability in degree and type of participation, especially in a development cooperation context, makes it difficult to define or assess reliably baseline, intervention conditions, and outcome measures (Datta & Pettigrew, 2013; Hunleth et al., 2022). Finally, the power relations between data collectors and intervention beneficiaries, especially between adults and children, introduces data collection and data quality limitations (Hunleth et al., 2022; Nixon et al., 2022). For example, when conducting interviews with children, efforts can be made to make the data collection procedure less intimidating, such as integrating a trusted third party into the interview situation, building rapport with the child, reducing formalisms, integrating props, or adapting body language and language register (Hunleth et al., 2022). However, even if these strategies have created an interview situation where children are able and willing to participate narratively, they may still seek to please the adult by saying what they think the adult wants to hear (Kutroavatz, 2017; Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019). Finally, it is unlikely that a child would be able to communicate the effectiveness of a program as it relates to relational, institutional, or other such abstract levels. Adult-child power relations may be exacerbated further when the adult is an outgroup member or external to the SFD activity. For instance, what a child shares with someone they are familiar with (a care provider, peer, or program coordinator) may differ significantly from what they might say to someone they are less familiar with – irrespective of the efforts made to build trust and rapport within a short interview period.

Quantitative approaches aim to overcome some of the biases and power dynamics associated with qualitative approaches. They tend to rely on a range of performance measures, standardized assessment tools, and surveys. Interventions that are less focused on the physiological benefits of an intervention frequently employ surveys, which may include quasi-experimental designs or baseline/pre-intervention and post-intervention measures, as well as field experiments (UN, 2021). Often designed to assess concrete development and program targets, these methods are valued for their ability to identify and measure change among SFD beneficiaries. If validated instruments, such as Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale or Smith et al.'s (2008) survey about resilience are employed, they may provide cost-effective, reliable, and often cross-culturally validated evidence of intervention success from a large number of respondents. While there are clear benefits in using established scales and surveys, they are not free from bias. Established scales, for example, require the focus of an intervention to be on what the scale was designed to measure. In addition, and like interviews, surveys are self-reports and can lead children (or adults) to knowingly or unknowingly misrepresent their knowledge, skills, and abilities (Dang et al., 2020). If an intervention aims at behavior or behavioral change, then most scales and surveys are limited to assessing behavioral reports, which diverge considerably from behaviors in many evaluation contexts. Finally, fundamental assumptions associated with survey research are that the items in the questionnaire pertain to the focus associated with the intervention, and that all respondents understand the questionnaire items,

have the information required to respond to the items, are able and willing to respond to them truthfully, and do not differ significantly in how they decode the questions, irrespective of social group, developmental stage, religious affiliation and faith-based practices, etc. (i.e. respondents need to decode the questionnaire items the way the researcher intended them to be decoded, which assures that all respondents receive the same 'stimuli'). Although efforts can be made to reduce potential biases associated with surveys (e.g., by using established scales or developing a valid instrument, training data collectors in data collection methods, establishing rapport and trust, reiterating the importance of honest feedback, granting anonymity and confidentiality, etc.), no data collection method is free of bias. Moreover, surveys require a certain level of literacy and degree of abstraction to understand and respond to a questionnaire, especially if it is designed to assess the impact of an intervention. Even if Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI), Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), or Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) is used to assist respondents with lower literacy levels, this approach can be time-consuming and might not be appropriate otherwise, depending on the characteristics of the SFD beneficiaries, the intervention, or the intervention context. Especially when self-reporting the effectiveness of an intervention by a beneficiary, such reports may tap into a subjective assessment or affective reaction, rather than reliable data pertaining to intervention outcomes.

Most of these challenges associated with traditional data collection methods are recognized within the SFD community (Levermore, 2011) and the broader non-profit sector (Innovation Network, 2016). Unsurprisingly, authors like Engelhardt (2019) have called on researchers and practitioners to be more open, and to experiment with different methods and tools (e.g., community mapping, drawings, storytelling, videos) to collect data that may be more effective in observing, evaluating, or monitoring the impact of SFD activities in a systematic and useful manner. We concur with Engelhardt, and a central component of this paper is to expand the repertoire of data collection methods to include observational and visual data for the evaluation of SFD activities for vulnerable children. The aim of our paper is to illustrate to SFD practitioners the potential of using these tools to systematically collect and analyze visual data for assessing the impact of an intervention.

Observational Methods and Visual Data Collection Methods in SFD

Participant or non-participant observational methods, conducted by an intervention coordinator or an external researcher, refer to a group of research methods that are based on data that, first, can be directly observed or experienced by a data collector and, second, that will be systematically analyzed and interpreted in line with what was observed and experienced (Ciesielska et al., 2017). Observational methods are much less frequently employed in M&E (Abbato, 2023; Borg, 2021), yet they are especially attractive because they have the potential to provide a direct way of assessing the impact of a program and its benefits. While relying heavily on the interpretation of the observed behavior, interviews and surveys are equally burdened by interpretation, as such data also has to be analyzed and interpreted. Observational methods may be as time and resource intensive as more conventional data collection methods, such as interviews (Westbrook & Woods, 2009). Resource constraints often limit the time spent in the field, which in turn restricts the scope and reliability of observational data. According to Boyko (2013), this delimits the contribution of observational methods as observational 'snapshots' are insufficient to assess the association between SFD program activities and goals. The ability to directly observe SFD activities from various angles before, during, and after an intervention nevertheless provides immense opportunities to capture nuances of SFD programs that are difficult to match through (self-)reports. Given the different advantages and disadvantages of experiential reports and observations, a combination of observational methods and experiential reports when studying the impact of an SFD intervention improves on the limits imposed by any single data collection method (Christensen et al., 2022; Holtrop et al., 2022; Gamarel et al., 2021; Odendaal et al., 2016).

Visual data collection methods, sometimes also referred to as art-based methods (McMahon, 2017), include methods that employ drawings, posters, maps, photos, and videos (Phoenix, 2010). While these methods have remained at the margins of social science for decades, they have become more popular (Jewitt, 2012; Phoenix, 2010) due to the so-called visual turn in the social sciences, the rise of social media, and advances in the analysis of non-numeric and non-textual data. Numerous studies have begun to explore the potential of using these methods in SFD: Kuhn (2003) and Noonan et al. (2016), for example, used drawings to explore children's perceptions around physical activity, while van Ingen (2016) used paintings accompanied by text to explore the thoughts and experiences of survivors of gender-based violence during a boxing and art-based project. Sobotová et al. (2016) used participatory mapping to explore perceptions of security in relation to spaces where sport and art-based activities take place. Numerous studies integrate photography to capture

and encourage individuals to express their thoughts and experiences of participating in sport-based activities (Hayhurst, 2017; McSweeney et al., 2022; Strachan & Davies, 2015), explore the barriers to participating in physical activity (Rivard, 2013), or document changes in children's nutritional behavior (Bush et al., 2018). Video-based data has been used to collect and showcase stories from participants (Asadullah & Muñiz, 2015). Furthermore, Bean et al. (2018) assessed program quality in youth sport and recommended that future studies might also benefit from the recording of videos to support the observational process. Our work builds on this growing body of practices. We showcase the potential of two data collection methods that have shown significant promise in expanding the scope of M&E to monitor the impact of SFD activities and highlight the benefits for participating children.

Drawing as an M&E Data Collection Technique

Drawings provide children with a medium to express their thoughts and feelings (Kuhn, 2003; Moskal, 2017; Noonan et al., 2016). When evaluating the impact of SFD activities, children's drawings can offer valuable insights into the reasons why children participate, what they like or dislike, and how they integrate intervention activities into their thought patterns. For instance, at the end of an activity, children can be encouraged to draw what they liked most about it. Subsequent conversations about their drawings, known as episodic interviewing, help clarify aspects of the activity that elicit the children's interests and why they are interested in specific aspects. Such data can not only be used to study the impact of an activity but also how to improve this activity. Using drawings as a visual method has many advantages, particularly when working with children, as this method helps reduce power imbalances encountered in traditional interviews, especially because the child uses as their reference point the drawing, rather than the question by the interviewer (Søndergaard & Reventlow, 2019). Furthermore, the child at least partially replicates in their narrative associated with the drawing some thoughts and emotions they had while drawing the picture, rather than having to produce thoughts and emotions as an answer to an interview question (Rose, 2022; Water et al., 2018). Using a drawing as the focal point of a discussion is a child-friendly way to reduce potential stressors, helping to minimize the formality of capturing children's thoughts, emotions, and experiences (Rose, 2022). Allowing children to explain their drawings in their own words can, furthermore, help to avoid misinterpretations (Kuhn, 2003; Noonan et al., 2016) and provides in-depth data for analyzing the impact of SFD activities. Additionally, utilizing children's drawings safeguards the child's perspective from being lost or taken out of context during the analysis process (Merriman & Guerin, 2012; Søndergaard & Reventlow, 2019). Apart from drawings as a visual data collection tool, we now turn to the utility of collecting video data for M&E.

Videos as an M&E Data Collection Technique

The widespread proliferation of smartphones and social media across the globe presents a unique opportunity for introducing visual methods of data collection for M&E of SFD programs and activities (Shaw et al., 2021). The ubiquity of smartphones has normalized the practice of taking pictures and making videos in everyday life, thus replacing traditional debates that emphasized the invasiveness and potential bias associated with this kind of data (Asan & Montague, 2014; Nassauer & Legewie, 2019; Robson, 2011). We have observed this in our own M&E activities. Despite initial concerns that video recording with a smartphone during SFD activities would influence the children's behavior, their attention was quickly recaptured by the SFD activities, even in extreme field contexts such as orphanages and refugee camps. This could be due in part to the continuous presence of smartphones in the lives of children and the ability to collect high-quality video data using appropriately equipped smartphones, rather than employing bulky camera equipment. Rosenstein (2002) also notes that, through her experience of using video, both adults and children respond in a similar way if there is an in-person observation taking place: They are initially self-conscious of the camera or observer, but they soon forget that they are being observed. Video-based observations are even less distracting and intimidating if they are conducted by someone familiar to the child, which highlights the potential for involving SFD practitioners or coordinators in the data collection process (Asan & Montague, 2014). Our own fieldwork confirmed that almost all people involved in SFD activities, such as staff, coordinators, or coaches, use smartphones, which means that SFD staff could support data collection efforts alongside their SFD program roles. While this required training in data collection, it yielded greater buy-in to the M&E process, empowered staff, and improved the scope and quality of the data for the evaluation of the program.

When collecting video data involving children, ethical considerations deserve detailed discussion. It is important to acknowledge, for example, that there are several risks associated with digitalizing observational data (Facca et al., 2020; Rutanen et al., 2018). Video-based observations create a visual record of activities that cannot fully obscure individual identities, locations, and behaviors, even when findings are reported in a way that do not connect the individual to the evaluation and report (Facca et al., 2020;

Rutanen et al., 2018). Therefore, obtaining consent is essential for any video data collection, which has its own set of challenges in a development cooperation context and with children (Facca et al., 2020). Additionally, because visual data can be easily copied and shared (Mok et al., 2015), organizations, practitioners, and researchers must take rigorous measures to protect the data, including the use of secure servers (Rutanen et al., 2018). Staff or volunteers supporting the data collection process should be well-trained in handling data to ensure privacy and data protection rights (Rutanen et al., 2018). This becomes even more crucial when working with vulnerable groups or on sensitive topics because disclosing data or revealing identities could jeopardize the participant's safety and welfare (Rutanen et al., 2018).

In addition to data protection and privacy concerns, it is essential to consider the cultural appropriateness of collecting visual data, such as videos or photos (Schulenkorf et al., 2020). Ethical data collection requires embedding methods within the local context and cultural norms (Facca et al., 2020). This applies to all methods of data collection, but arguably more so when it comes to visual representations of people, behaviors, and personal or community spaces, which usually reveal much more than a simple tick on a questionnaire (Facca et al., 2020). This reveals an advantage of the method because culturally sensitive data collection requires a systematic and in-depth exploration of the 'inside view' to ensure interpretations are grounded in local cultures and embedded in participants' perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Schulenkorf et al., 2020). Collecting visual data, especially using videos, allows us to move beyond isolated snapshot-observations. While not free from a culturally-biased gaze, they nevertheless allow us to more systematically study the cultural and contextual embeddedness of participants.

Another area of caution relates to the analysis process, which might have contributed to the limited use of videos in the context of M&E. Quick and easy video recording on smartphones often leads to the temptation of capturing numerous or lengthy videos to cover everything comprehensively. However, managing large amounts of unfocused data becomes time-consuming, requires substantial storage space, and can be expensive to review and analyze, while coding and analyzing video data can be challenging, necessitating training and expertise (Dash et al., 2019; Fan et al., 2014).

Drawing from our experiences, incorporating ethical data collection approaches, such as using video, audio, drawing, and storytelling with children for M&E of SFD programs, can significantly enhance the observation and evaluation process within the SFD context. Especially when expanding observational methods to include different visual data collection methods in SFD, there is the potential to overcome some of the limitations outlined earlier. Unlike most observational methods during field visits, which are often constrained in time and scope, video data allows for recording entire SFD activities across different sites and observation periods. Instead of reducing observations to field notes or predetermined observation grids, videos capture children's participation in SFD activities as natural occurrences, providing insight into the child within their context, social interactions between the child and others (including other participating and non-participating children, care providers, intervention coordinators, community members, etc.), and the context within which the activity is taking place. This has multiple benefits, including overcoming the restricted scope of one-off field visits without requiring a substantial increase in time and resource investments. Multi-site, prolonged, and repeated visits could assist in observing changes, establish systematic connections between SFD activities and program goals, and mitigate researcher bias through collaborative reviews of video data by a combination of multiple researchers. Video data can also be reviewed and discussed in a participatory manner with practitioners and participants of the SFD program (Borg, 2021; Rosenstein, 2002). This approach helps to address potential misinterpretation by outsiders, while also fostering ownership, buy-in, making the M&E process more inclusive, and generating ideas for program improvement.

In sum, the need to observe, evaluate, and monitor the impact of SFD activities in a systematic and useful manner is growing. Traditional qualitative and quantitative approaches in M&E, such as interviews and surveys, face numerous challenges when applied in SFD programs involving children, especially in a development cooperation context. While observational methods offer a more direct way to assess the impact of SFD activities on children, they are frequently limited in time, scope, and necessity to interpret observations by outsiders. To address this, and in line with Engelhardt's appeal to widen the scope of data collection methods in SFD (2019), we propose expanding the repertoire of M&E methods to include a toolkit that integrates visual and observational data collection methods as a complement to traditional evaluation methods, particularly in SFD contexts involving vulnerable children.

Frameworks to Assess the Impact of SFD Activities

Thus far, we have focused on the first component of M&E: the collection and analysis of data to observe, evaluate, and monitor the impact of SFD activities. This section is

dedicated to exploring the second component of M&E, which relates to evaluation. As outlined earlier, the goal of evaluation is to employ a framework to assess the impact of SFD activities in relation to program goals in a way that is systematic, credible, reliable, and useful. In most instances, a clear line exists between the intended objectives and goals of a program and its activities, making an evaluation framework a natural outcome of clearly articulating and assessing this connection (Bao et al., 2015; Kusek & Rist, 2004).

Various frameworks have captured the wider benefits of SFD activities. For example, the Human Capital Model (Bailey et al., 2013; Whitehead et al., 2012) provided a valuable overview of physical, emotional, individual, social, financial, and intellectual benefits associated with physical activity, sports, and physical education. The UK based Sport for Development Coalition (2015) presented The Outcomes Model which identified four areas of outcomes associated with SFD activities i.e. social, emotional and cognitive capabilities; individual achievements and behaviors; interpersonal relationships; and benefits to society. Furthermore, the Commonwealth Secretariat (2020) developed a toolkit to measure the benefits of sport by creating direct links to the global Sustainable Development Goals. The above frameworks reinforce the desire and rationale within the SFD community to better capture the wider benefits of sport both at a local and international level.

The remainder of this paper will present an evaluation framework developed by Bergman & Bergman (2020) which complements the above models. This framework was designed using observational and visual methods. The goal was to better understand the expansive benefits children gain from SFD activities, and to support practitioners and researchers with a practical tool to collect and analyze these benefits.

Development and Application of the IRI-Framework

The Scort Foundation is a non-profit organization based in Switzerland that implements SFD programs in crisis and former conflict regions. Scort, together with local and international partners, train young adults (referred to as Young Coaches) in their respective countries who then deliver SFD activities for vulnerable children. Although Scort already assessed how Young Coaches benefit from this training (referred to as the Young Coach Education Program), there was a need to better understand how children benefit from the SFD activities delivered by these trained coaches. Although the positive impact of the SFD activities on children seemed obvious to Scort and other stakeholders, it was difficult to evidence the presumed benefits due to several challenges: First, Scort's focus lies in training and assessing Young Coaches, with children being the indirect beneficiaries. Second, part of the data collection on the benefits children gain from Young Coaches SFD activities would need to be conducted through partner organizations or Young Coaches. Third, the involvement of various stakeholders globally (through partner organizations and Young Coaches) made standardized data collection impossible, given the sometimes weekly changes of intervention context within and between sites. Fourth, carrying out SFD programs in various crisis and former conflict regions introduces cultural and contextual dynamics that profoundly impact the form and function of each program. While the program's adaptability to changing dynamics is one of its strengths, conducting a systematic M&E across different settings to understand its impact is challenging. Fifth, the composition of the participants change based on gender, migration background, ability, ambition, disability status, religious and cultural practices, etc. These changes differ not only between sites but also within sites and between sessions. To better understand how children benefit from participating in SFD activities, Scort needed an evaluation framework that could accommodate a wide variety of parameters while concurrently conceptualizing and assessing a broad set of possible benefits.

As a response to this set of requirements, the IRI-Framework was developed between 2018 and 2020 (Bergman & Bergman, 2020), and funded by Fondation Botnar. The development of the IRI-Framework began as a systematic review of the academic literature on intervention studies that use modern, non-conventional, non-survey-based evaluation methods, tools, and instruments when working with children in various development cooperation contexts or a combination thereof. Examples of non-conventional approaches that were reviewed include ethnographic studies, sociological life-world analyses, psychological studies on interactions with and between children, and systematic, direct observations (e.g., Ager et al., 2014; Barrios, 2014; Bell & Bell, 2017; Ben-Arieh, 2006; Johnston, 2008; Kuhn, 2003; Pfadenhauer, 2005; Sleijpen et al., 2016). A specific emphasis was placed on reviewing approaches that employ writing and drawing exercises, narrative and self-report measures, as well as projective techniques as data collection methods to explore the potential of developing episodic interviewing with children (for example, Backet-Milburn & McKie, 1999; Bland, 2018; Chorney et al., 2015; Deighton et al., 2014; Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Evans & Reilly, 1996; Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016; Noonan et al., 2016). Behavioral observation strategies from the fields of education, child, social, and personality psychology were incorporated, along with measurement methods used in applied developmental

psychology, pedagogy, ethnography, and needs and risk assessment approaches in community and refugee studies (see, for example, Ben-Arieh et al., 2001; Campbell et al., 2016; Gifford et al., 2007; Hart, 2009; Robinson et al., 2014; Tol et al., 2011; Volpe et al., 2005). Finally, reviews of studies in the field of sports sciences that use novel approaches to understanding how participation in sports benefits children and adolescents physically, psychologically, and socially (such as Eime et al., 2013; Holt et al., 2011; Whitley et al., 2016) completed this phase of framework development (see Bergman & Bergman, 2020 for a more detailed description of this phase). In a second step, the initial, literature-based framework was complemented with site visits to the Young Coaches' activities to identify which aspects of child well-being could be observed in situ. The site visits were significant to the development of the evaluation because they allowed the initial IRI-Framework to be tested and refined in a variety of geographic, cultural, and national contexts. In total, local and international collaborators collected data during 27 observation periods in India, Mexico, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. While the first third of observation periods were used to supplement the evaluation scope of the IRI-Framework in terms of range, appropriateness, and usefulness, subsequent data collection periods, which included observational, visual, and interview data, were used to evaluate the benefits associated with the Young Coaches' regular activities with children. Ultimately, the benefits captured by the IRI-Framework were consistently observable during SFD activities, irrespective of the local context within which they took place. The following is a summative overview of the IRI-Framework:

Individual benefits	Relational benefits	Institutional benefits
Individual benefits are directly related to the individual child and their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.	Relational benefits are associated with interactions and exchanges with peers and/or adults.	Institutional benefits are associated with children's sense of belonging within groups and communities, as well as learning positive values.
Cognitive	Socialization	Community
Planning & organizing	Recognize and respond to social cues	Community building
Attention		Local ownership
Learning	Learning social skills	
Task completion/ accomplishment		Norms and values
Competition	Co-operation	Discipline
Escapism (distraction)	Relation with peers	Learning (norms & values)
	Relations with adults	
Emotional	Social problem-solving	Identity (collective)
Emotional expression	Integration	Group/cultural identity
Emotional regulation	Integration of non-participants/community	
Emotional understanding	Treating peers fairly	Language
		Communication and vocabulary
Physical		
Physical fitness and coordination	Play	Risk avoidance
	Structured activity	Temporary safety
	Safe environment	Prevention
Identity (individual)	Competitive	
Positive sense of self	Fun	

Table 1

IRI-Framework Overview

The IRI-Framework identifies three core levels of benefits for children that relate to individual (e.g., cognitive, skills), relational (e.g., communication between peers, turn-taking, cooperation), and institutional (e.g., social norms, cultural values) benefits. Each of these are formed of at least four sub-categories as illustrated in Table 1. The benefits associated with each level can overlap, as can the benefits between the levels. At times, clear distinctions were made for conceptual, illustrative, and analytic purposes, despite the frequent interrelations between benefits. This also helps ensure that benefits may be explored separately and more systematically from different disciplinary or need-based perspectives in the future.

As the IRI-Framework presents a variety of observable benefits in SFD activities for children, it provides a useful tool that can support researchers and practitioners in systematically building, structuring, and refining their evaluation of SFD organizations. Below, we highlight several strategies of how this can be done.

The IRI-Framework to Guide and Complement Data Collection

Especially in combination with visual data collection, the IRI-Framework can be used to develop a focus for research, evaluation, monitoring, or implementation, and, accordingly, select and structure the data collection and analysis process. This can help reduce the amount of video recordings, given a clear focus between intention, data collection, and data analysis, thus streamlining a specific project. For example, a SFD program aiming to evaluate how a specific activity or coach impacts the children can use the IRI-Framework to select focal topics, such as how socialization and cooperation connect to relational benefits (Table 1, Column 2). Based on this focus, they can collect observational data by making short videos of the coach interacting with children, as well as interactions between peers. The IRI-Framework can then guide the analysis. Specifically, the researcher or practitioner can review the videos using sample questions, detailed in Table 2 of the IRI-Framework below (see Column 5, Rows 5 to 8) to prompt their analysis. Accordingly, questions such as: “How do the children support each other?” and “How do the children interact with the coach and with each other respectfully?” can be used to focus and structure the analysis. Equally, if a researcher or practitioner wanted to study individual benefits to the children (as listed in Column 1 of Table 1), they may decide to focus on cognitive and affective benefits by collecting video data similar to the process outlined above. In this case, their analysis would be guided by questions such as “What focuses or distracts children’s attention during activities?”, “Who or what refocuses children’s attention to the tasks?”, or “How do children internalize acquired knowledge or practices, and how do they disseminate this effectively to their peers?” (as shown in Table 2, Row 1, Column 5).

Table 2

Selected Examples from the IRI-Framework

Type of benefit	Construct	Example of behaviors	When and how to observe?	What questions to ask when analysing data?	Examples
Cognitive	Attention	Ability to listen and respond to instructions	During and after exercise instructions	Are the children focused during activities?	e.g. through videos you can observe that a child is able to listen and follow instructions given by the coach.
	Learning	Ability to recall prior knowledge or exercises	During exercises or group discussions	Do the children learn new skills?	
Emotional	Emotional regulation	Ability to manage one's own feelings	Timely resolution of anger, sadness, and anxiety	How do the children respond to challenges/ setbacks?	e.g. through videos you can see how children react to conceding a goal or not being first in an exercise. Or how they react when another child is injured.
	Emotional understanding	Ability to understand others feelings	Compassion, cooperation, and inclusiveness	How do they respond when other children face challenges/setbacks?	

Socialization	Recognize and respond to social cues	Respond to praise and feedback	Interaction between coach and child during exercise	How do children respond when they are not succeeding, being corrected or being praised?	e.g. through the videos you can see how children look up to certain peers or how peers inspire each other or are inspired by the coach.
	Learning (knowledge & skills)	Learn by imitating peers or coach	Group exercises, coach-led demonstrations	Do the children look up to certain peers or try to imitate their coach?	
Cooperation	Relation with peers	Interact positively with peers (cooperation)	Interactions between children during exercises	How do the children support each other?	e.g. this can be seen through videos and direct interactions but also through conversations where a child talks positively about their coach.
	Relation with adults	Interact positively with adults (cooperation with coach)	Interactions between children and coach	Do the children interact with the coach and with each other respectfully?	

Norms & values	Discipline	Following rules	During games, exercises, and social interactions	Do the children listen and follow rules correctly?	e.g. through videos it is possible to see how children respect
	Learning (norms & values)	Apply rules (self-correction)	Interactions of peers during activities	Do the children apply fairness and justice, even if you do not enforce it?	rules that have been put in place, and how they correct each other when they break the rules.
Identity (collective)	Group / cultural identity	Sense of belonging generated through activities	Activities which promote an inclusive environment and shared identities	Do children feel a valued member of the team?	e.g. responses from children "I like being part of the team because…"

The IRI-Framework to Identify New or Unexpected Impact

While defining specific focal points a priori to guide data collection and analysis focuses a conventional evaluation, such a priories also narrow the scope, potentially missing unexpected elements that emerge during SFD activities. And it is not only new discoveries that make this form of assessment interesting. It is also well-known benefits, such as learning turn-taking, that can be studied in situ, for example as the establishment of justice over strength as a norm (institutional benefit) that leads to the practice and monitoring of turn-taking among peers (relational benefit). The IRI-Framework can also be used to explore the overall impact of an SFD program by assisting researchers and practitioners in identifying unanticipated benefits arising from a program's activities or by adapting the program or practice to enhance certain benefits. During the evaluation of the Scort program, the IRI-Framework revealed several unexpected findings. These included the cascading positive impact on Young Coaches and the larger community, indicating that the benefits experienced by the children extended to bring about advantages for others as well. Established SFD activities within a communal space create an ecosystem that fosters inclusion by temporarily suspending differences in skill levels, ambition, age, gender, disability status, religious and cultural orientation, or social background among participants. This dynamic spilled over into the immediate environment, where older children congregated to watch the activities, parents and other care providers intermingled and coordinated future activities, and, at many SFD activity sites, small venders

set up market stalls that attracted many members of the community just before, during, and just after the SFD activity. These examples illustrate how a broader application of the framework can help articulate more abstract and difficult-to-observe impacts, such as those related to institutional benefits, including language, norms, values, and community building.

The IRI-Framework to Enable Internal Learning

The framework can support the internal learning processes of a SFD program by using the video-based observations to understand how improvements could be made in its delivery. Building on the previous example of cognitive benefits relating to attention (Table 2, Row 1), researchers or practitioners could assess how a child's experience and learning could be enhanced. A review of pertinent video material on attention could improve the design of the program itself, it could be used to assess and improve on how coaches deliver instructions and monitor specific activities, and it could help coaches through self-reflection to improve their own practice on developing attention in a group that diverges considerably in age, psychological development, ambition, ability, etc.

Using the IRI-Framework to Raise Awareness and Disseminate Findings

The IRI-Framework can also assist in selecting video scenes that not only add value to the collection and analysis of data but that can be used to raise awareness about SFD activities. In particular, videos provide a visual experience, bringing activities to life, and can more effectively convince parents, teachers, and funders of the associated benefits. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, video-based activities brought SFD activities into the homes of families around the world. One of our partners explained that *"parents have been feeding back that they didn't realize that the activities were so much more than* [playing] *football"*. Furthermore, selected scenes can help disseminate findings about the benefits associated with activities to a wider audience. Written reports that often follow in-person observations, surveys, or interview findings, are not always accessible to audiences with low literacy levels, may not be translated into the local language, or could be inaccessible due to jargon. Thus, the use of videos can be engaging and informative and the IRI-Framework can help select which scenes could best reveal visible benefits, understandable to all.

The IRI-Framework to Make Explicit Connections between Monitoring, Evaluation, and Dissemination

The IRI-Framework is useful at all stages for video-based observations in a SFD context, including the selection of focal points, collection of data or selecting a subset from existing data that relates to the selected focal points, analyzing the data in relation to the focal points, and disseminating findings to different stakeholders, including funders, care providers, participating or not-yet participating children, NGOs/NPOs, or researchers. Furthermore, it can easily integrate visual methods such as children's drawings. For instance, when analyzing the drawings and corresponding conversations with children, the framework can help associate observational, visual, and verbal data with specific benefits. When asked to draw what they liked most about that day's activity, children participating in the activities delivered by Young Coaches often drew or talked about specific exercises, the skills they learned associated with the exercises, and how this helped them do well in the practice. Children thus highlight the learning impact of an activity (Table 2, Row 1), and this relates to a number of benefits, including retention, recall, awareness of accomplishment, awareness of the benefits of learning, and pride in accomplishment. When children draw players and explain that they enjoyed being a member of a team, even of a team that did not do well in a set of exercises on that day, the IRI-Framework can help reveal how children benefit from the activity in terms of peer-to-peer cooperation and friendship bonds, as indicated in Table 1, Column 2 and Table 2, Row F. Children often drew their team jersey or badge, and during conversations about their picture reinforced the sense of belonging and team aspiration that was fostered by team activities. This can be associated with a positive group identity and its benefits, as shown in Table 1, Column 3 and Table 2, bottom row.

In the analysis process, the IRI-Framework can help establish themes in drawings and conversations and relate them to associated benefits outlined in the framework. The effort of decoding and describing the impact of the activities can contribute to disseminating the benefits of an SFD program, including any communication to specific stakeholder groups or a wider public. For example, in a report, pairing a drawing with a key quote from the child can help explain the benefits the child enjoyed as part of their participation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Most people involved in SFD programs are well aware of the immediate and overall benefit of participation. However, it is quite challenging to assess or communicate to relevant stakeholders the multidimensional nature of these benefits, especially with vulnerable children in a development cooperation context. This paper presents some of the limitations associated with traditional forms of data collection employed in M&E of SFD programs, such as surveys and interviews, and explores the potential of including more creative methods, such as visual and video-based observation methods. Specifically, we discuss how visual data collection methods, such as drawings and videos, could complement existing data collection methods in SFD contexts, especially when involving vulnerable children. The widespread proliferation of smartphones and social media presents a unique opportunity to introduce video-based observational methods. Similarly, the ubiquity of children's enjoyment of drawing presents an excellent opportunity to include visual methods in M&E of SFD programs. As demonstrated in this paper, these methods are highly versatile and adaptable to data collection, analysis, and reporting in complex evaluation contexts. The integration of these approaches has the potential of researching new phenomena or new aspects of established phenomena, reach new audiences, strengthen research, evaluation, monitoring, and practices, and strengthen the understanding of the efficiency and effectiveness of sports for development well beyond the Global South or vulnerable populations. The employment of alternative methodological approaches has also proven to be effective in reducing the power relations between adults and children, which otherwise hinders the collection of reliable data.

Furthermore, the IRI-Framework, which explicitly identifies and helps to provide evidence for the multidimensional benefits of a complex SFD program, serves as a useful tool to achieve this. Beyond its immediate application, the IRI-Framework may serve as a guide for the conceptualization, data collection, and data analysis on how children and significant others may benefit from participating in SFD activities at intrapersonal, relational, and institutional levels. When used alongside visual or more conventional data collection methods, such as one-to-one or group interviews, focus groups, or surveys, the IRI-Framework has illustrated its potential to systematically gather evidence of the wide range of benefits that SFD activities have. Considering the scope of the IRI-Framework, it would be quite easy to adapt, pilot, and apply the framework to other target groups, including different age cohorts, psychological or physical disabilities, religious or cultural groups, etc. Furthermore, the IRI-Framework may also be a useful starting-point to explore programs and interventions beyond sports.

Overall, the IRI-Framework can help identify a study, intervention, evaluation, or monitoring activity, focus the data collection and analysis process based on this focus and activity, loosen conceptual limitations, sharpen observation skills, and structure dissemination and communication elements of a project.

The paper also makes an argument for the utilization of digital tools when presenting and reporting on a project. We are living in a highly visual and visualized world. Accordingly, observational and visual methods can make findings more appealing, accessible, and memorable to a wider audience. Visualizations in the form of exemplars or findings can raise awareness of SFD program successes, advocate for support, and promote coordination and networking between stakeholders and partners. Our fieldwork has also clearly demonstrated that visual evidence is highly effective with SFD participants, program staff, and program coordinators. Collecting, displaying, and illustrating findings visually provided information and feedback to program coordinators, staff, and participants in ways that are very difficult to achieve with tables, figures, and statistical coefficients.

However, we fully acknowledged that there are additional challenges when collecting and analyzing data beyond well-established scales and quasi-experimental designs. Beyond ethical concerns relating to consent, privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, and data protection, the obvious limitations of non-standardized procedures include difficulty of replication and well-trodden paths associated with validity concerns. This is not the place to rehearse yet again the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative versus quantitative research and evaluation designs. Instead, we hope to have made an important contribution to the qualitative evaluation of ambitious and complex SFD programs, and we hope that future M&E projects either explore the extensions proposed here or, going a step further, reflect on the relatively unchartered territory of mixed methods design, specifically to integrate in SFD programs and their evaluation video-based observations and visual methods. It is our hope that this paper will inspire ideas and foster debates about how individuals and organizations, even those with limited M&E expertise, can approach the evaluation of their activities or projects. We strongly advocate for the value of incorporating observational and visual data collection methods. By doing so, we believe that a broader range of stakeholders, especially practitioners, can better assess the impact and benefits of programs and initiatives.

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Research Note

"Listen To Us": Sport for Development Practitioners' Insights for Funders

Per G. Svensson[1], Ashlyn Hardie[2],

[1]Louisiana State University, School of Kinesiology
[2] Clemson University, Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management

Corresponding author email: psvensson@lsu.edu

ABSTRACT

As sport for development and peace (SDP) initiatives have become more prominent, external stakeholders have adopted unrealistic expectations for program outcomes and funding models. Organizations are often left competing with other grassroots SDP organizations for grants with resource-affluent funders since funding streams have not kept pace with the growth of the field. Although some funders have begun adjusting their approaches, the purpose of this research note was to further explore how practitioners themselves perceive that funders can better support SDP efforts. Open-ended survey responses from grassroots leaders (n=122) highlight a need for long-term funding opportunities, investment in capacity building and overhead expenses, consideration of local contexts, strategic approaches to innovation and entrepreneurial pursuits, and improvement regarding trust and power dynamics.

"Listen To Us": Sport for Development Practitioners' Insights for Funders

One consequence of the unequivocal embrace of sport as a viable tool for social change by the United Nations was that many stakeholders adopted idealistic (and thus unrealistic) expectations that sport-based programs provide a simple solution to complex social issues (Darnell et al., 2019). The research is clear, however, that even well-intentioned programs have unintended outcomes (Burnett, 2015) and sport has a deeply rooted history of being used for both positive and negative outcomes (Darnell et al., 2019). For many years, sport for development and peace (SDP) scholars have therefore argued for the realization that the extent to which organizations deliver desired outcomes depend on the structure and management of SDP efforts (Schulenkorf, 2017; Welty Peachey, 2019). In other words, "sport *organisations*, rather than simply sport, are the true agents of social change" (Gardam et al., 2017, p. 548, *italics* in original text).

Important advancements have been made in terms of research on program design, external partnerships, leadership, and innovation, as well as how SDP managers manage the growing pressures and paradoxes associated with emerging hybrid organizational forms (McSweeney et al., 2022; Raw et al., 2022; Svensson & Cohen, 2020; Welty Peachey et al., 2018b), among several other topics. Yet, few studies have directly explored how practitioners themselves view funding relationships in SDP. The purpose of this research note, therefore, is to begin to address the existing knowledge gap in practitioner perspectives on funders' resource needs and resource mobilization in SDP. Specially, we are guided by the research question: how do SDP practitioners believe that funders could support future SDP efforts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

For this research note, a funder is defined as an entity providing financial resources to support grassroots nonprofits operating SDP programs. The SDP field has undergone significant growth and now involves a broad range of stakeholders in the development, funding, and implementation of sport for social change programs in communities around the world (Whitley et al., 2019, 2020). The funding mechanisms of development agencies and community-based nonprofits in general continue to evolve. These changes have had a trickle-down effect on local SDP organizations, which continue to modify their funding models in hopes of securing financial stability (Svensson & Seifried, 2017), as the SDP field becomes increasingly institutionalized and professionalized (McSweeney et al.,

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2022). The funding mechanisms within SDP are increasingly dynamic and complex. For example, in some contexts, international bilateral development agencies are providing scaled funding for projects (e.g., Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Germany's Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, and France's Agence Française de Développement [AFD]; see Sherry & Schulenkorf, 2016). Relatedly, during the 2020 Finance in Common Summit, a set of public development banks co-created the Coalition of Development Banks for Sport for Sustainable Development. State actors are indeed involved in a variety of partnerships with SDP organizations (Lindsey et al., 2020), however, government funding in SDP remains limited to certain countries (LeCrom & Svensson, 2022), and does not (yet) represent a primary funding source for the majority of community-based nonprofits implementing SDP programs (Svensson et al., 2018). In other contexts, the introduction of SDP discourses within national policy frameworks is enabling more substantial domestic funding opportunities while sport government bodies are also investing in different SDP priorities within certain contexts (e.g., FIFA, IOC, Norges Idrettsforbund [NIF], Sport Canada, Sport England; See Darnell et al., 2019).

The evolution of the SDP field has included a significant increase in grassroots organizations involved in the operation of SDP initiatives. Historically, these organizations have been financed through a diverse range of sources including foreign embassies, bilateral development agencies, sport federations, foundations, individual donations, earned revenues, and intergovernmental agencies (Banda, 2017; Lindsey et al., 2020; McSweeney et al., 2023; Straume, 2019). Insight from global benchmark studies of capacity levels suggests that the majority of SDP nonprofits depend on foundation funding as their primary source of financial support (Svensson et al., 2018). The number of funders, particularly foundations, dedicated to financing SDP efforts, however, has not kept pace with the growth of the sector. As a result, many organizations compete for similar resources. Additionally, unbalanced growth among funders and implementing organizations have created asymmetrical power structures where SDP organizations are heavily dependent on select few funding agencies or even a single funder (Millington et al., 2019). The significant influence of external funders is also seen with younger emerging SDP organizations, which in some cases have gone as far as to shift their mission to what practitioners perceive is more attractive to external funders (Dixon & Svensson, 2019). SDP leaders have for many years expressed pressure of ensuring an organization is perceived to have measurable and scalable programs (Hayhurst et al., 2018).

Historically, how SDP organizations spend their financial resources has largely been focused on addressing the desired goals and outcomes of the funding agencies (Whitley et al., 2020). The issues at hand are also compounded by the history of the local communities, which in several cases were previously colonized by the same country or similar countries to the ones providing funding for SDP programs (Darnell et al., 2019). Yet, here again, it is important to avoid generalizations about SDP funders given the diverse range of actors providing financial support in this space. There are examples of SDP funders transforming their funding priorities and grant programs based on feedback from practitioners. Comic Relief, for example, learned they needed to adapt their funding strategies to better align with the needs of the local SDP agencies tasked with implementing sport for social change programs (Svensson & Loat, 2019). Likewise, Women Win recently developed ONSIDE Fund, an unrestricted funding initiative driven by a global practitioner advisory panel.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also ushered in unprecedented change not only among SDP organizations and their immediate financial needs but also among funding agencies. For example, in May 2020 Beyond Sport, Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, Comic Relief, LA84 Foundation, and several other SDP funding agencies joined forces to create the Sport for Good Relief Fund as a joint effort to provide immediate support to SDP organizations around the world facing significant financial hardships. Over the next 12 months, the program distributed roughly $1.6 million USD across more than 100 organizations. Additionally, a network of more than three dozen agencies was mobilized to provide in-kind support through consultancy and training opportunities, focused on key topics such as fundraising (Chalat & Fraser, 2021).

Researchers have suggested that a critical paradigm shift is needed among funders from existing models centered around evidence of outputs to new models focused on understanding if more meaningful and sustainable investments and resource allocations are to become a reality in SDP (Whitley et al., 2020). Indeed, the historical emphasis on evidence is why many practitioners have reported a sense of obligation to quantify every aspect of their programs and push for scaling up quickly out of fear of losing out on future funding if funders' demands for quantifiable evidence are not met. These practices have remained common in the SDP field since reporting program failures or unintended outcomes can "have a detrimental effect on project funding, even when these limitations are the result of broader structural issues beyond the [nonprofit's] control" (Jeanes & Lindsey,

2014, p. 209). The aim of this study was therefore to explore the voices of practitioners to understand their perspectives on how funders work with grassroots organizations as well as their current organizational needs.

METHODS

We draw on open-ended survey responses from leaders of SDP nonprofits from across a broad range of geographical locations, which were collected as part of a larger global survey on resource management in SDP. A sampling frame was established by identifying community-based SDP organizations through a systematic review of the directories of SDP-specific networks (e.g., Beyond Sport, sportanddev, Common Goal [streetfootballworld]). Invitation emails were sent to a total of 966 organizational leaders. Of these survey invitations, a total of 228 survey responses were recorded, which represents a cooperation ratio of 23.6%. Upon a review of responses, incomplete responses to the open-ended question were removed for a final sample of 122. The sample is representative of the diverse program and geographic foci of the SDP field (Welty Peachey et al., 2020). The most common geographical locations (some organizations operated in more than one region) were Africa (n=51), North America (n=28), Asia, (n=23), Europe (n=23), and Latin America (n=15). The median budget size and staff size for respondents' organizations were $190,080 USD and 9 staff members. The most common thematic areas included Health, Education, and Gender, representative of prior reports of the SDP field (cf. Svensson & Woods, 2017). The majority of organizations in this study were also founded by someone from the same region as where they were currently operating programming.

Data Collection and Analysis

The scope of the study presented in this research note focused on data recorded through open-ended responses to a global survey of SDP leaders, where practitioners were broadly asked, "what do you want to tell Sport for Development funders in terms of how they could change or improve to better support future sport for development efforts?" The qualitative data from the open-ended survey responses were coded through a two-cycle inductive coding process (Saldaña, 2021). Both researchers independently read all responses and completed an initial round of coding. Those initial interpretations were compared and discussed before a second cycle of coding was completed to refine the data analysis through more focused coding. Analytical notes were also maintained for reflexivity throughout the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Both researchers are native to and currently conduct their research in the global North. However, both researchers have lived experiences and personal connections from consulting and practice within the global South. These experiences helped to inform the research questions and design process, although reflexivity was a top priority throughout the research process - particularly during data analysis. Specifically, we were intentional about challenging ourselves to critically reflect on whether our interpretations throughout the coding and analysis process to ensure practitioners' voices were prioritized. The first author has extensive experience in studying and consulting SDP organizations on resource mobilization around the world. The second author has extensive experience in working with grassroots SDP organizations across more than a dozen countries and conducts research in SDP.

FINDINGS

The findings revealed several themes regarding how practitioners perceived SDP funders need to change.

Increase Funding Scope

Funding issues have long been recognized as a critical challenge for the SDP field (Kidd, 2008), and the field is in desperate need of transforming historical funding models and funding cycles to be more effective and sustainable (Svensson & Loat, 2019; Whitley et al., 2020). The findings from our analysis underscore that the most prominent concerns for practitioners are the need for longer funding cycles as well as an increase in the size, scope, and diversity of funding opportunities.

Extend Funding Cycles

The most salient of the concerns was the need for longer, multi-year funding cycles. For example, participants expressed their "request to funders in Sport for Development is to support the initiatives over multi-year(s) to ensure there is a sustainability and it ensures the local team to effectively achieve the planned impact as circumstances at times on-ground are not so welcoming" (Respondent 10), and "To get better results the program funded should be consistent [rather] than for just one time" (Respondent 91). One of the most common aspects emphasized related to multi-year funding was that "it is necessary to establish a long-term relationship" (Respondent 78) for meaningful change and sustainable impact to be realized in the SDP field. Developing more long-term relationships would provide one strategy for starting to overcome the significant power imbalances within existing funding relationships and the pressures that many practitioners feel of having to deliver immediate results in the SDP space. In other words, "long-term and substantial funding is required to achieve social change"

(Respondent 95).

The perspectives shared by respondents indicate that practitioners are acutely aware that the short funding cycles commonly found in SDP present significant obstacles to realizing any meaningful change. Providing longer funding cycles would allow for better sustainability for SDP organizations and doing so would also allow for the development of more in-depth evaluations and learning opportunities for what works and what does not work as planned over time. As Whitley et al. (2020, par. 22) stated creating environments grounded in learning "in which null and negative findings are viewed as an opportunity for honest, critical reflection over longer funding cycles can lead to meaningful change."

Increase Funding Opportunities

Participants also expressed a need for more sufficient funding opportunities, and greater diversity in the types of initiatives that can be funded. Many participants spoke to the lack of available funding opportunities in comparison to the number of active SDP organizations, which extends the literature on the competition for similar resources within the field (Welty Peachey et al., 2018a). For example, Respondent 38 stated that funders need to "be generous, so many organizations are doing great work and lack of funds seems to be the biggest hindrance." At the same time, these findings indicate that grassroots practitioners may not recognize or be aware of the increasingly diverse range of funding options available within SDP. As Whitley et al.'s (2020) reported, practitioners could benefit from improved education on funding options. In addition, there was a shared belief that there remains a need to diversify the funding provided. One participant stated, "sport for development funders should avoid selective funding to only one organization several times in one region" (Respondent 69).

While increased funding amounts and longer funding cycles are a clear desire for nonprofit organizations, it was improved consistency and utility of funding that was primarily identified as critical for the betterment of the SDP field. Interestingly, while the need for multi-year funding cycles was the most salient concern, in practice it is antithetical to the participants' desire for greater diversity and quantity of organizations who receive funding. Participants' lived experiences likely catalyze a predisposition to be more concerned with one more so than the other; nevertheless, if funders are limited in available resources, these findings highlight a tension between prioritizing long-term partnerships with a smaller number of nonprofits or diversifying funding recipients with shorter funding cycles. One possible option could be for local SDP organizations to go after scaled funding through place-based solutions such as citywide collaboratives (Svensson & Loat, 2019; Whitley & Welty Peachey, 2022). Because organizations all endure different circumstances, which render divergent financial needs, it appears that offering diversity in funding amount, type, and duration is a key practical implication for funders to consider when posting calls for proposals or other funding collaboration processes.

Invest in Capacity Building and Overhead Expenses

Another area emphasized was the perceived need for funders to "support organizational capacity" building (Respondent 68). Several researchers during the last ten years have examined the nature of organizational capacity in the SDP space. A common thread in prior studies has been the conclusion that capacity building is needed to help many of the nonprofits tasked with implementing SDP initiatives in local communities (Svensson et al., 2018; Wegner et al., 2023; Welty Peachey, 2019). Respondents in this study emphasized that "for the organization to implement new initiatives and focus on impact-oriented initiatives, staff are key and hence [we] request the funders to also support the capacity-building of the organization as it eventually ensures achieving the set goals" (Respondent 10).

Several respondents asked for funders to "be more open to capacity building proposals" (Respondent 110) across a range of different needs. For example, "[w]ith the increasing needs of space and infrastructure within [sport for development], funders along with financial support could also provide platforms/spaces/access to such infrastructure for the needs of the programme and its beneficiaries" (Respondent 16). These statements align with discussions during recent years of exploring the possibilities of shared spaces and administrative services (cf. Eisinger & Vinokur-Kaplan, 2019). Likewise, another way that respondents indicated funders can better support SDP organizations was to more intentionally fund professional development and "training for staff" (Respondent 35). To this point, funders were called on to "empower the organizations with proper training to work [in] more professional ways" (Respondent 59), in response to the professionalization of the SDP field (McSweeney et al., 2022). We would argue that future consideration should be given to how funders can support training on readiness for capacity-building, which is often lacking for local organizations to fully benefit from capacity-building initiatives (Wegner et al., 2023).

Several respondents also emphasized the need for better support for smaller, start-up organizations whether that is by "pay[ing] attention to the newer organizations and what can be done to help them improve or become successful"

(Respondent 54) or to "make [the] funding application processes simpler for small organizations (Respondent 53).

Here, funders could explore the use of place-based accelerator programs that combine funding and operational support for selected organizations (Whitley & Welty Peachey, 2022). For example, "make smaller pots available to small organisations to allow them to take gradual steps towards growth" (Respondent 61) and "reduce the stringent requirements to accommodate upcoming sport for development organizations" (Respondent 118). Thus, respondents in several cases pleaded for funders to improve "supporting small organisations such as ours with funding and technical assistance" (Respondent 56).

These findings warrant future research on the formative stages of nonprofits within the SDP field, which could draw inspiration from an emerging body of scholarship on nascent nonprofits (e.g., Andersson, 2016). As Respondent 64 stated, "remember it's often the small [organizations] that understand the grassroots issues and can deliver for you. Setting a minimum turnover at 100K reduces your access to grassroots." To this point, Respondent 108 suggested that "[w]hen we apply, we are up against the large NGOs who receive support based on their name, not on the effectiveness or sustainability of their programs. Can there be blind applications where programs are judged on outcomes and not the NGO's name?"

Relatedly, others wished that funders would reduce the burden placed on staff when receiving grants, which effectively would help increase their capacity levels. For example, some suggested that funders should "reduce the reporting requirements so that staff can focus on delivery rather than reporting" (Respondent 55). Similarly, Respondent 117 pleaded for funders to "simplify the reporting process please. Rely more on qualitative reporting." In other words, there was an emphasis that there should be "no clunky data collection" (Respondent 105) tied to existing grant programs.

These findings demonstrate that nonprofit organizations are eager to learn more, develop professional skills, and build the capacity of their personnel as it relates to knowledge and ability. While funders could consider providing financial support for capacity building and skill development, they may also consider incorporating capacity building initiatives that help organizations fulfill their reporting requirements with the help of a trained professional. This not only helps ensure that funding organizations get accurate and reliable reports, but helps develops organizational personnel capacity for designing, evaluating, and reporting that may assist with future proposals and partnerships.

Consideration of Local Contexts

Another theme identified from our analysis was a clear emphasis among SDP leaders on the importance for funders to better recognize, understand, and support local contexts when making funding decisions. Local agency has been positioned as a critical factor in existing theoretical advancements in SDP (Schulenkorf, 2012; Welty Peachey et al., 2020). In this study, respondents argued that funders "need to understand the operating environments of each organization [and that] the funding should be direct [to local organizations] (Respondent 16). More specifically, several respondents expressed the need for "prioritisation of local needs as opposed to the funders' needs and expectations" (Respondent 122).

There was an emphasis among respondents on the need for funders to pursue "close engagement with local sport for development organizations" (Respondent 30) rather than funders' agendas or standardized goals across all grantees. Some participants, therefore, argued that more funding is needed for local implementing organizations, "all funders should provide local implementing organisations with more core funding - local partners really need this and funders don't prioritize it. They just want programmes implemented on the ground without enough consideration of local partners staff costs and ongoing operational costs" (Respondent 56). The desire for greater consideration of local contexts was reinforced by a desire for funders to "allow organizations to report on the outcomes that most align with their programming" (Respondent 18). It is unfortunately well-documented that practitioners often feel that they have to frame their work around whatever priority areas funders have set or have to communicate different messages to funders compared to local stakeholders out of fear of losing funding that those organizations depend on (Raw et al., 2019; Svensson, 2017).

Likewise, some respondents noted the importance for funders to consider underrepresented regions and/or groups, "reach out to organisations in Asia and look at underserved groups like foreign domestic workers/migrant workers (Respondent 26). Several respondents emphasized that they were not advocating for shifting funding away from existing grantees, rather funders "should also expand their funding areas and regions of the world" (Respondent 45). That said, respondents also expressed concerns about their own experiences with funding agencies in that many funding decisions were made by managers and executives

abroad without little to no knowledge of the local context or vetting of the grant applicants. These concerns were succinctly summarized by Respondent 40 who argued that funders should:

only fund organizations you either have visited in the field before or are visiting in the decision making process. Don´t decide based on a word document and a few pictures. Now I feel many funding decisions are taken as if we would decide who to marry with based on social media profiles.

There are both financial and geographical barriers for funders which often prevent site visits before determining a beneficiary for a funding initiative. The necessary resources to travel to investigate applicants could alternatively be used to fund a separate initiative for an additional organization - which previously discussed findings suggest that participants would support. Thus, participants' desire for funders to make more locally informed and investigative decisions, is at tension with their desire for expanding opportunities to underrepresented groups and regions of the world. As a result, two key practical implications need to be recognized. First, this speaks to the need for more inclusive and holistic funding applications that can convey and demonstrate program delivery and organizational culture (e.g., video footage). Second, these tensions highlight the benefits of regional funding initiatives, which increase the awareness of a funder within a local context/culture, as well as their familiarity and accessibility to local organizations. In light of the diverse and complex funding mechanisms within the SDP space, one possibility could be for local, regional, and sport-specific SDP networks (e.g., Goodpush Alliance; SOMOS Network in Latin America; Uganda Sport for Development Network) to collate and share existing funding options of relevance in their specific context, or even go after joint funding applications (Kang & Svensson, 2023**).**

Innovation and Entrepreneurship

In recent years we have witnessed significant growth in the attention given to innovation and entrepreneurship within SDP (Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015; McSweeney et al., 2022; Svensson et al., 2020; Whitley, 2019). Some funding agencies have created innovation-specific funding programs to help support ideas, which may not easily receive funding elsewhere (e.g., Laureus' Sport for Development Innovation Fund). Yet, respondents in our study had conflicting opinions on whether funders should support innovation and entrepreneurship.

Some respondents argued that there is a significant need for "more innovative financing" (Respondent 75), and that funders should "support more entrepreneurial activity within the sector" (Respondent 3), which reinforces arguments made by practitioners who have successfully embraced innovative behavior (cf. Svensson & Mahoney, 2020). Others argued for more specific emphasis among funders in that "they should support income generating activities to enhance sustainability" (Respondent 159), which would also help address pressing capacity challenges within the SDP field. Those sharing such perspectives argued that funders should "seek to invest in innovation instead of 'like for like' products and services just to save money" (Respondent 104) while others called for agencies to fund "more innovative ideas to improve on the lives of disadvantage communities" (Respondent 30).

However, a few participants raised concerns about the growing push for innovation and programs for the sake of being innovative. For example, "please support staff costs and programs that are proven to work, not only new innovations that may be unproven" (Respondent 11). The concern raised by a group of respondents centered around innovation-specific funding unintentionally forcing organizations to develop new programs and models for the sake of securing funding rather than continuing to sustain existing, successful programs. This is consistent with respondents' concerns regarding a need for funders to invest in core costs, overhead expenses, capacity building, and the institution of SDP itself.

The evidence here suggests that funding innovation and entrepreneurship can create more inclusive funding opportunities, as well as enhance organizational sustainability (e.g., income-generating activities) for some nonprofits. However, re-emphasizing the importance of having different types of funding opportunities, these findings highlight that a constant push for innovation can prevent capacity building, sustainability, and the overall impact of nonprofit organizations. Thus, a practical consideration for funding entities is to reconceptualize the ultimate desired outcome of funding initiatives to be neither capacity building nor innovation, but sustainability and impact. For nonprofit organizations, this emphasizes the need for leaders/managers to make strategic decisions regarding which funding opportunities are worth pursuing within the complex funding landscape associated with SDP, given their organizations needs and capacities.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The findings from this study allow for the identification of ways to advance SDP funding. Respondent 22 synthesized many of the key themes identified by stating that from their perspective, funders need to:

Prioritise (a) multi-year funding (b) which supports programs as well as core organisational costs and capacity development; and (c) supports participatory approaches to program design, monitoring and evaluation in which indicators/metrics are determined by community members themselves.

Funding entities need to prioritize creating more sustainable collaborative processes and systems with nonprofit beneficiaries. This can be done by creating more diverse, inclusive, bottom-up, and flexible funding opportunities. Throughout this process, funders should practice reflexivity and consider the local context of the organization and their geographic and cultural affiliations to build trust and mutually respectful communication pathways. The findings from our study build on prior reports of the perceived importance among practitioners of more inclusive funding dynamics within the SDP field (Whitley et al., 2019). In closing, as Spaaij and Jeanes (2013, p. 452) argued, funders:

need to assume some responsibility to alter the mechanisms through which they provide support. Idealistically, where such a relationship is absent or where it imposes unfair priorities or conditionalities, it may be preferable to reject funding from a donor institution. However, the challenges for local NGOs to reject funding and potentially reduce their organizations' chances of survival must be acknowledged.

The findings presented in this research note allow for the identification of how funders, particularly SDP-focused foundations, can begin to alter such mechanisms to better support the needs of SDP organizations while creating more meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships. The main limitation of our research note is that these perspectives only represent the viewpoints of leaders of community-based SDP organizations. Therefore, we call on future researchers to explore the perspectives of existing SDP funders related to the concerns and suggestions raised by practitioners. We also encourage researchers to draw on literature from other disciplines to form a theoretical basis for future analyses in order to advance the body of knowledge within SDP (Giulianotti et al., 2019; Schulenkorf & Spaaij, 2016). Additionally, how practitioners engage in fundraising and revenue generation remains a significant knowledge gap in the current SDP literature, which also warrants future research.

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Commentary

What's sport got to do with it? A reflection on methodologies in Sport for Development from a German perspective

Katrin Bauer, Freelance Researcher

Corresponding email: mail@katrin-bauer.net

STARTING POINT

In the context of Sport for Development (SFD), researchers have primarily examined the concept of *development* (Black, 2017). However, little attention has been given to the concept of *sport*, which is expected to be the differentiating factor. Within SFD, the term *sport* is defined as "a generic term, comprising sport for all, physical play, recreation, dance, organized, casual, competitive, traditional and indigenous sports and games in their diverse forms" (UNESCO, 2017, p. 9). Simply put, this encompasses all kinds of sports and physical activities that one can conceive.

It is common for the question of which sport is being referred to in the context of SFD to arise. This includes whether we are discussing school, mass, or recreational sports, as well as whether games and dance are included. This issue often arises in discussions between colleagues. Nevertheless, this matter is seldom addressed in research. Instead, diverse kinds of sport are haphazardly enumerated or summarized using vague collective terms, like "general physical activity" or "multiple sports" (Schulenkorf et al., 2016, p. 31; Svensson & Woods, 2017, p.37). This is surprising, given that sport is considered to be *the tool* that initiates development processes. However, it remains unclear which methodological-didactic implementation of sport could be responsible for this effect. Is simply playing football sufficient, or does the modification of the game, such as adding a third half as in the methodology of football3 (Fox et al., 2013), make the difference?

In general, various SFD activity guidelines and methodologies have been created and implemented in various countries and settings. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Society for International Cooperation) (GIZ), as the main German development agency, has compiled approximately 100 manuals on the SFD Resource Toolkit Homepage. The manuals, which were developed in the context of GIZ-funded programs in various countries, serve as blueprints for how sport can address specific development issues, such as gender equality or climate action, through exercises and games, with most of them centered on football (S4D Resource Toolkit, n.d).

Prompted by imprecise definitions and terms, never-ending discussions about which sport is being referred to, as well as the flood of manuals that raise questions about pedagogically valuable and effective sport-based methodologies, this commentary highlights three perspectives to approach the important role of sport-based methodologies in SFD: (1) concepts of sport in sport sciences, (2) pedagogical perspectives with a focus on experiential learning and (3) team sports. Although this reflection is focused only on the SFD approaches of one German actor, it illuminates the research gap related to sport-based methodologies and can serve as a stepping stone for future research.

SPORT – THEORETICAL CONCEPTS FROM SPORT SCIENCES

In sport sciences, there are ongoing efforts to clearly define the concept of sport. It is apparent that the understanding of this term has evolved alongside social changes, such as shifts in movement culture, demographic changes, and associated value change. The understanding of sport is reflected in diverse theoretical models: The original pyramid model, symbolizing competitive and elite sport at the top and mass sport at the base, was replaced in the 1980s by the two-column theory. This dual model distinguishes between competitive and leisure/recreational sports. The latter splits into result-focused mass sports, socio-cultural experiential sports, and alternative experiential sports. These terms denote broader categories such as fitness, health, and

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adventure sports, which all fall under the umbrella of experiential sports. The term recreational sport encompasses activities accessible to all individuals (*sport for all*). In Germany, the concept of *sport for all* was first introduced by the German Sports Federation (DSB). In 1959, the DSB chose a new strategy to make sports accessible to as many people as possible, especially those who had been marginalized in the past. The term *sport for all* is often used interchangeably with *mass sport* and is now globally recognized, including in international agreements that promote universal inclusion (Wopp & Dieckert, 2002).

Through its SFD programs and projects, German development cooperation aims to provide marginalized groups with access to sports. Examples of these groups include young girls and women in Afghanistan, children and youth with disabilities in Uganda, and refugees in Jordan and Iraq (e.g., GIZ, 2017). As such, SFD projects are based on the principle of *sports for all*.

In line with social changes and the evolving understanding of sport, the role of sport in the scope of German development cooperation has transformed. Utilizing a broad interpretation of sport and following the dual model, SFD could be categorized as a type of recreational sports focused on promoting socio-cultural experiences through mass sports with a results-driven perspective (experiential sports). In the past, sport was utilized solely for its inherent functions in relation to individuals and systems in the context of development cooperation (Giebenhain, 1990). However, currently, sport embraces a 'pedagogical mission'. This incorporates modifying rules and movement tasks, alongside contemplating experiences made during game and drills, to guarantee long-term changes in attitudes and behavior that can be applicable to daily life.

PEDAGOGY COMES INTO PLAY

To fully understand the pedagogical factors that impact SFD methodologies, it is crucial to examine sub-disciplines of pedagogy, including sport pedagogy and the pedagogy of experiential education. Sport pedagogy covers education both *in* and *through* sport, with a primary focus on schools and kindergartens, as well as extracurricular sports settings such as clubs and leisure activities. The adoption of the competence-based curriculum in German schools circa 2011 has significantly impacted physical education (PE), placing importance on education and development *through* movement, play, and sports (Zeuner, 2015).

In certain partner countries of the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ), national PE curricula were co-designed or supplemented, such as in Mozambique (UP Maputo, 2019). Through the development of holistic PE activities, an effort has been made to contribute to education *in* and *through* sports. GIZ has contributed to curricula in various ways. The approaches can be non-sport-specific, such as the child-centered and inclusive PE curriculum developed in the SFD project in Afghanistan. Other approaches focus solely on one sport, such as making football part of a nationwide character-building program in Indonesian schools. Furthermore, competence-based learning is a key aspect of GIZ's SFD approach. The SFD Competence Frameworks, which are grounded in the Curriculum Framework Education for Sustainable Development (Schreiber & Siege, 2016), serve as standards in GIZ's projects and programs. The frameworks include a series of personal, social, and strategic competences in the sequence "Recognizing - Assessing - Acting" (Schreiber & Siege, 2016, p. 18) that young people can acquire by participating in SFD training and activities.

Another important aspect of SFD methodologies is the pedagogy of experiential education, which emphasizes learning through experience. Through reflective processes, participants share and discuss experiences gained during playing games and sport activities. The knowledge constructed from these experiences is supplemented with expert instruction (coach), leading to insights that can be applied to everyday life (Kolb, 1984; Michl, 2009). This same functional logic applies in SFD. Reflect, connect, and apply is the reflective process employed by Right to Play, one of the most established SFD organizations. Additionally, GIZ has introduced a fourth step: action. During the training session, the 'apply' step requires consideration of how to transfer learned skills to daily life, while the 'action' step involves committing to specific actions to implement before the next session (GIZ & DSHS Köln, 2021).

Michl (2009) contends that the deployment of carefully selected reflection techniques is essential for translating acquired knowledge into everyday life practices. Despite the pivotal role of reflection, most SFD manuals or training courses provide a limited discussion of diverse reflection methodologies.

Experiential education primarily involves sport- or play-based activities. This is exemplified in German literature through various collections of games and practical examples (e.g. Reiners, 2007). The games that Reiners (2007) refers to as *interaction games* with the aim of developing personal and social competences can be found

in numerous SFD manuals of the GIZ (e.g. Steinbach & O'Rourke, 2017). Commonly labeled as *small or fun games*, they do not pertain to any specific sport. For instance, experiential education literature and GIZ's SFD manuals include games such as Spider Web, Poison River, Human Knot, and Robot Game. The manuals exhibit that a consultancy firm, composed of experts in experiential education, contributed to the development of SFD methodologies in the Western Balkans, Indonesia, and the Palestinian Territories (e.g., Steinbach & O'Rourke, 2017).

TEAM SPORTS – ALL ABOUT FOOTBALL?

Team sports, especially football, feature prominently in SFD (Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Svensson & Woods, 2017), as well as in GIZ's projects and programs (Schreiner et al., 2020). This may be due to the fact that team sports are generally linked with positive social learning results such as respect, fair play, tolerance, and teamwork (Glöckner, 2010). Biester et al. (2009) emphasize football's potential for promoting global learning and education. Sugden and Haasner (2010) highlight football fields' role as a site for interaction and how sports can serve as a catalyst for communication, contact, and reconciliation in post-conflict societies. However, SFD research overlooks the reason why a cricket pitch was not selected instead of a football field. As other sports such as cricket, netball or rugby are more popular in some regions and may therefore provide better access to different target groups, the choice of sport in general and the dominance of football in SFD projects in particular should be questioned.

Thorpe (2016) was the pioneer in emphasizing the added value of action sports such as streetball, skateboarding, and parkour. However, only a limited number of SFD organizations integrate these sports into their programs (Svensson & Woods, 2017). As streetball, skateboarding, and parkour are typically non-competitive, self-organized, and self-refereed, they provide unique opportunities for developing personal and social skills, such as self-confidence, creativity, responsibility, and autonomy. Furthermore, the culture of urban sports provides easily accessible opportunities due to its flexible spatial and temporal nature. It can also shape one's identity as it is frequently linked with a particular way of life (Bauer et al., 2020; Thorpe, 2016).

In various SFD manuals published by GIZ, conventional training sequences for team sports (comprising warm-up, main part, cool-down) are described. These routines aim both the development of sporting skills (techniques, tactics) and non-sporting skills (social and personal skills) while also being linked to specific topics such as gender equality or environmental awareness. Exercises and games are modified either to provide knowledge (e.g., by dribbling a ball while addressing gender stereotypes) or designed in a competence-oriented manner (e.g., a dribbling activity with a partner exercise to enhance cooperation skills) (e.g. GIZ, 2019).

Additionally, the SFD teaching and learning materials from GIZ include concepts from both national and international federations, such as the Heidelberger Ballschule (Roth & Kröger, 2015). This concept was developed in cooperation with the German Football Association (DFB) and is highlighted in the Mozambique manual (UP Maputo, 2019). Furthermore, sports are implemented with modified rules as seen in football3 or the Crazy Soccer Tournament (Steinbach & O'Rourke, 2017). As previously noted by Schreiner and colleagues (2020), German sports organizations, including the DFB as GIZ's primary sports partner, exert influence on the operational level through their experts. These associations significantly influence the conceptual and content-related design of SFD projects and programs, as well as the SFD methodologies.

Regarding football3, a frequently utilized methodology among SFD organizations, some qualitative studies of events utilizing the methodology have determined that football3 generally promotes positive experiences regarding relationship building (Gannett et al., 2014; Segura Millan Trejo et al., 2018). Since these studies were conducted in a specific short-term event context and do not provide a comparison with other sport-based methodologies used in SFD, they alone do not provide enough information to fully comprehend the role or effectiveness of football3.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This commentary aims to draw attention to *the tool* in SFD, its significance, and a major research gap. First, it is important to gain a better understanding of the tools offered by sports in the form of methodological approaches and to think about them in terms of impact mechanisms, as they constitute the *main mechanism* in SFD. What do impact studies actually say if *the tool* intended to initiate development processes and achieve impacts, is not properly understood?

Second, it is necessary to question the suitability and the pedagogical value of the tools currently used in SFD projects for specific regions, contexts, target audiences, and age groups, or if other sports and sport-based methodologies would lead to more positive outcomes.

The highlighted aspects (sport, pedagogy, and team sports) underscore that there are different ways to approach the important role of sport-based methodologies in SFD, and surely, many more exist. Though this reflection on German SFD methodologies in light of broad concepts from sport sciences and pedagogy as well as more focused perspectives from team sports and experiential education, it becomes obvious, that the range of the German SFD activities is very broad. In summary, GIZ's SFD methodologies mostly involve traditional team sports, where exercises and games are modified in a thematic or skill-based way, and/or small games from experiential education, and that they target marginalized groups, who otherwise have little or no access to sport, in line with the principle of *sport for all*.

This initial classification could serve as a starting point for further considerations in SFD research with a focus on methodologies. For instance, it could be used to modify the well-tried *SportPlus-PlusSport* model, which distinguishes whether sport-related aspects predominate in SFD initiatives or organizations, or whether development goals are more prominent (see Coalter & Taylor, 2010). The knowledge of certain initiatives leads to the assumption that the dual model may not cover all projects designated as SFD projects, and one can legitimately ask 'how much development is there in SFD projects at all?'. SFD projects and programs, such as those of the GIZ or other actors, could be analyzed according to the original model and determining if and what kind of development-specific content they contain or if the focus is more on promoting (grassroots) sport based on the *sport-for-all* principle and expanding infrastructure.

Regarding perspectives from team sports and experiential education, it becomes evident that collaborating with other German sports actors or experts with a background in experiential education, significantly affected the SFD methodologies used in the partner countries. At this point it is not possible to understand, if and to what extend a participatory design process with local partner organizations took place or if the question of 'cultural export' could be further discussed (Giebenhain, 1990). In this context, it would be desirable to conduct an in-depth analysis of SFD methodologies of and manuals published by governmental and non-governmental actors that have a longstanding tradition in SFD; they could be compared, differences and similarities highlighted, set against the background of 'national cultural exports'. In addition to the sports, sport- and game-based methodologies presented in the manuals, further analytical aspects to consider include the region and contexts in which they are used, the target and age groups, and the actors involved in the publications. Furthermore, instead of analyzing individual methodologies during short-term events, studies should be conducted during the day-to-day training process of SFD projects and organizations, ideally comparing different methodologies.

Understanding why certain sports and methodologies work better or worse in specific regions, contexts, and with particular target and age groups is crucial. This knowledge can lead to more effective and tailored SFD projects, benefiting organizations, beneficiaries, and their communities. Focusing on *the tool* in SFD research would provide answers to the central question, 'What sport or play-based methodologies make a difference?" and ultimately unleash and exploit the full potential of SFD projects and programs.

Conflict of Interest

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Original Research

It's about choice: Evaluating a transformative sport for development program for young racialized girls

Megan C. Piché[1], Shannon Kerwin[1], Michael L. Naraine[1], Anna Wojtis[1], Emerald Bandoles[2]

[1]Brock University, Canada
[2]Regent, Visions of Science

Correspondence Email: skerwin@brocku.ca

ABSTRACT

Research has identified barriers to sport participation among girls and women from systemically oppressed groups (e.g., Black, Indigenous, low-socioeconomic status). However, relatively little is known about the effectiveness of programs designed to ameliorate or remove those barriers and influence girls' attitudes and behaviors toward participation. To address this complexity and context-specific factors, Marra's theory (2015) suggests exploring participant experiences by focusing on how participants discuss program features related to interdependence, adaptation, and self-direction. Through focus group data collection, 30 participants from under-resourced, urban settings were asked to discuss their experiences within sport-for-development 9-week programs. Several overarching themes framed their experience within this development program. Participants expressed a desire to be consulted on program choices and see their choices come to life within the program (adaptation). Racialized coaching staff were identified as an important element of programming when creating relationships with and between participants, but an element that must be effectively managed (interdependence). Participants identified a need to clearly define role parameters and sufficient training regarding program deliverables related to life skills (self-direction). Findings indicate that program administration should consider investment in preparation, coaching, and incorporating participant feedback into programming to maintain sustainability.

Determinants of Sport Participation for Girls and Women

Recent participation trends among women and girls in sport activities are linked to several socioecological determinants. Key factors in participation are enjoyment (intrapersonal), motivation by peers and playing with friends (interpersonal), and barriers to such enjoyment that hinder the opportunities for girls and women to engage in activities (organizational/environmental) (Eime et al., 2020). At the individual level, enjoyment and overall health and fitness motivate children to participate in sport (Hull et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2018). However, Eime et al. (2020) posited that perceived and/or actual lack of skills or competency is a common barrier to participation. As girls grow and develop both physically and mentally, many become more self-aware of their competencies and body image, which can pose obstacles to continuing to participate in sport programming (Newland et al., 2020). Moreover, these obstacles to participation become increasingly prominent for girls who identify as members of historically oppressed groups (e.g., Black, LGBTQ+, a person living with a disability) (Trussell et al., 2023).

To address obstacles and attempt to breakdown participation barriers, sport programs have developed across the globe to provide more inclusive opportunities for girls (e.g., Keeping Girls in Sport [Canada], Girls Just Wanna Have Fun (GJWHF) [Canada], Girls Active [United States], Women Leaders in Sport (WLIS) [Australia], and gIRLS [Canada]). These programs are designed to increase and maintain

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participation in sport and affect important outcomes (Bean, Forneris, & Fortier, 2015); however, relatively little is known about the factors for which the program is evaluated and whether program outcomes are achieved related to these factors.

Within Canada, Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment Partnership (MLSE) owns and operates professional sport teams in Toronto, Ontario. Under the MLSE umbrella, MLSE LaunchPad (MLSE LP) was developed to create sport participation opportunities for youth within underserved populations of the city. MLSE LP operates out of downtown Toronto, with a leadership staff of four senior members who 1) coordinate the development of programs, 2) hire and train staff and volunteers who deliver the programs, and 3) evaluate the programs (and staff) on an annual basis. Within the development of programs, the senior staff members consistently analyze trends in the local Toronto community to determine which demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) are underserved and would benefit from increased access to sport opportunities. Specifically, one of the main foci of MLSE LP is to develop sport programs for racialized girls. Moreover, the programs are structured around four pillars: "Healthy Body, Healthy Mind, Ready for Work, and Ready for School" (MLSE LP, 2023a). Senior staff develop programs around these features and understand programs must include components of choice, healthy relationships, role models, and physical literacy to be successful in their goal to increase participation. However, to mark success, programs must be evaluated in an effective way (Bean, Kendellen, et al., 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to evaluate the MLSE LP sport for development (SFD) program developed to increase retention for girls in sport marginalized by their racial identity and socioeconomic status (i.e., gIRL).

Determinants of Participation at the Intersection of Race and SES

To understand the effectiveness of a program, it is important to understand the participants who engage with the program and the program itself. The following literature review outlines a summary of research related to sport participants who identify as racialized or experience low socioeconomic status. This review is followed by a summary of the literature pertaining to evaluation of programs designed to target increased participation and application of theory to program evaluation.

In sport, there are certain groups who have been oppressed and excluded from participation in programs. This oppression is particularly poignant for individuals with low socioeconomic status (SES), and those who identify as Black or Indigenous (Raw, 2020; Stronach & Maxwell, 2020). SFD programming has the capacity to play a substantial part in communities and the social lives of the individuals within them. This form of sport programming offers opportunities to participants to develop physical competency, gain valuable life skills, and connect with peers (Raw, 2020). Despite the positive outcomes associated with sport programming, girls and women still face many barriers to participating in such activities, particularly those with low SES (LaVoi, 2018). SES comprises several indicators of a community or individuals, notably education, income and occupation (Baker, 2014). Intersectionality also occupies a critical role in SES as women and girls can belong to several societal groups. Those living in regional communities and living in poverty can have limited access to sport programming (Raw, 2020). These traditionally oppressed communities are frequently excluded from sport participation, and people with low SES are less likely to be engaged in recreational activities (Eime et al., 2013).

Along this vein, Raw (2020) highlighted the three influences on physical activity among women with low SES: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental. Research has suggested that several intrapersonal and socioecological factors can influence sport participation, including employment status (Casper et al., 2011), level of education (Powers et al., 2020), and income (LaVoi, 2018). Among adolescent girls, perceived lack of competence and self-esteem are also salient to their participation in sport. Girls may feel more self-conscious while engaging in activities, particularly in co-ed programming (Eime et al., 2015). Interpersonal influences include the education level and income of family. Findings from Eime et al.'s (2015) work indicated that increased engagement in sport programming was associated with parental involvement, assistance, and support. More broadly, environmental factors such as the community's income and access to sporting facilities are critical in girls' capacity to participate in programming (Casper et al., 2011). Populations experiencing historical and current discrimination face numerous barriers to participating in sport activities. Those with various intersectional identities are disproportionately excluded from sport and physical activity due to sociocultural factors that research has identified as a key future focus (i.e., McGovern, 2021; Raw, 2020).

In addition to those with low SES, individuals who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color frequently experience obstacles to participating in sport (Stronach &

Maxwell, 2020). For instance, many of these individuals who live in low-income communities and attend high-minority schools may not have access to entry-level sporting opportunities and are limited by the increase in pay-to-play sport systems such that they may not have the means to join (McGovern, 2021; Powers et al., 2020). In general, sport has often been considered as a vehicle for confronting racism across various cultures and societies, and SFD programming can assist in mitigating economic barriers (Sherry & Rowe, 2020). However, the intersecting challenges of SES, race, and gender persist as sport opportunities are not as available and accessible to those not from traditionally white, privileged backgrounds (Maxwell & Stronach, 2020).

Significant cultural and institutional constraints limit the access for traditionally oppressed individuals (e.g., Black or Indigenous) as the legacy of colonialization often remains integrated into program design (Burnette et al., 2014), thus limiting these individuals from receiving equitable opportunities. Further, within some under-resourced communities (i.e., religious and/or ethnic minorities), cultural identity is especially salient as characteristics of gender and their relation to sport are deeply intertwined, placing constraints on the degree to which women and girls can participate in physical activities (McGovern, 2021; Sherry & Rowe, 2020). While racialized girls face many of the same barriers that all women face, low-income and multi-generational families also encounter some unique challenges with respect to sport participation. McGovern (2021) highlighted that in many immigrant families, traditional and cultural gender ideologies also impede engagement as young girls may be less encouraged or supported to join sport programs. Thus, the combination of historical oppression and exclusionary social systems lead women and girls with intersectional backgrounds to be even more disadvantaged to engage in sport (Stronach & Maxwell, 2020). Consequently, it is critical that SFD programming continue to address the many institutional constraints that limit sport participation among racialized and historically oppressed communities (Stronach & Maxwell, 2020).

Sport Programs to Address Barriers

Despite the challenges that women and girls from various intersectional backgrounds continue to face, Eime et al. (2020) highlighted recommendations that could reduce barriers and practices that could improve participation. To retain participants, SFD programming should continue to increase social aspects within the design and delivery so that participants may create connections that would improve their attendance levels (Whitley et al., 2019). Similarly, by keeping these friendship groups together within programming, retention may increase due to participants wanting to continue being active with their peers. Strategies to improve sport participation for historically oppressed groups include prioritizing programming that is community-oriented and involved, increasing the opportunities for role models, and providing safe (and brave) spaces where participants feel comfortable to be themselves (Stronach & Maxwell, 2020).

SFD facilities and programs should also provide women and girls-only sessions to promote inclusivity and a space in which individuals feel confident to participate (Eime et al., 2020). Further, Newland et al. (2020) suggested that to increase the retention of girl participants, sports programs should promote athletic prowess and improve girls' confidence and self-esteem. There is value in reconsidering traditionally co-ed program models as the primary way of including girls in sport and that a "one size fits all" design may not be as effective (Hull et al., 2021). Girl-centered programming can help address the challenges that many girls experience in co-ed activities while also providing a more psychologically and physically safe environment where girls can express their voices, develop their sense of self, and connect with peers and adult staff (LaVoi, 2018). Despite these findings, relatively little is known about the effective structures associated with programs designed to increase girls' participation.

The research exploring the effectiveness of programs and interventions addressing girls' sport participation is limited. Eime et al. (2020) outlined that few studies exist in this space. In the UK, a systematic review reported mostly positive participation outcomes and identified the importance of consulting with girls about the aspects of their sport participation, such as who is a key factor in the enjoyment, the need for role models, attendance behaviors and program design (Allison et al., 2017). Moreover, Veldman et al. (2017) found that girls who participated for the entirety of the nine-week duration of a program experienced a gain in skills and resulted in increased perceived competence. Although specific programming offers many opportunities to girls that may previously have been inaccessible, LaVoi (2018) argued they are not without critique. While these girl-centered sport programs encourage confidence, life skill development, and individual-level empowerment, they can also be strengthened by consulting with families and communities to develop more culturally relevant programming that addresses more complex dimensions of girls' lives (Rauscher & Cooky, 2016). These studies emphasize the significance of continued research in SFD programming's reach to marginalized populations and the efficacy of these activities on participation rates and other program design outcomes (i.e., life skill development).

Evaluating Programs Related to Gender Equity

To serve the purpose of the study and align with the LP program goals of choice, relationships, role modelling, and physical literacy, Marra's (2015) dimensions for evaluating programs related to gender equity were adopted. Specifically, the evaluation of the MLSE LP program goals was defined in relation to adaptation, self-organization, interdependencies, emergence, and embeddedness (Marra, 2015).

Adaptation refers to the diverse complexities that individuals can learn, self-organize, and co-evolve with their social surroundings in non-linear ways (Marra, 2015). Within these complex adaptive systems, an organic social order can emerge from interactions, thus suggesting that progress does not need to be imposed by internal or external pressures. Marra (2015) further suggests that any intervention will always be locked into different social and institutional systems and individuals need to understand how these systems facilitate causal chains. Evaluation approaches utilizing the complexity lens of adaptation lend themselves to exploring how interpersonal relationships and organizational structures are influenced by the context around the program. As highlighted by Kerwin and Leberman (2022), the context where a program exists will alter how the program is delivered and received by participants. As an example, in program evaluation with respect to marginalized communities, it is adopting a critical understanding of racialized norms that need to be addressed for girls to feel welcome in the program.

Self-organization recognizes that individuals and groups need to have the capacity to engage in programming. This dimension promotes understanding and constructive management of environmental systems in local contexts. Patterns of self-organization expose how people are influenced by structures and their capacities to accomplish given tasks (Marra, 2015). Evaluation from this lens is particularly relevant in understanding and observing organizational processes in various contexts. Whitley et al., (2019) outlined that within programs that allow for self-organization, youth are more likely to have enhanced personal relationships with those who run the programming. When making an evaluation an inclusive process, it is important to consider self-organization patterns and structures that offer individuals opportunities to engage with each other. By prioritizing collaborative opportunities in the design framework and/or the evaluation itself, participants may gain agency to share their opinions on the program being assessed with staff or role models with whom they feel comfortable. Further, including staff and those delivering the program in the evaluation design may also add value as they may offer insights on the types of questions that should be asked, for different age groups, and specific areas of focus.

Interdependencies highlight that multiple individuals contribute to the outcomes that are desired. This dimension is comprised of the processes and social structures through which individuals and groups can interact, exchange information and interpret observations (Marra, 2015). By focusing on social norms and institutional processes, interdependencies can be assessed to determine the operational effectiveness of cooperation. The connections that are produced when creating programs related to gender equity allow organizations to share resources and enhance their capacity to offer quality programs (Kerwin & Leberman, 2022). Marra (2015) outlines the applicability of this dimension in the evaluation concerned with gender equity as it can assist in uncovering the social, political, and socioeconomic processes and imbalances that impose constraints on oppressed groups, such as youth girls and women.

Finally, emergence and embeddedness outline that programs require complex and recursive processes where sustained change (i.e., continued sport engagement) must be continually monitored and evaluated (Marra, 2015). Emergence highlights that existing components in systems can be combined to produce new components and thus, continually change the environment. Similarly, Marra (2015) highlights that it may also lead to change and produce new processes and systems so that institutions and organizations can engage in complexity and cooperation. Programs not only work to change behavior within the systems but also the conditions that made them initially effective. Evaluation of such processes promotes the understanding of how social interaction and engagement within systems can exhibit control over the expected or desired outcomes.

Embeddedness refers to the role of relationships in generating trust and sustaining desired behaviors in the contextual environment. The key piece discussed by Marra (2015) is that individuals choose to cooperate in anticipation of the choices of others and consequently, concrete social interactions and relations are integral in influencing their actions. From this perspective and the research context, it is important to critically explore how gender intersects with other points of identification to ensure that sustained change within a program is feasible.

Accordingly, guided by Marra's (2015) dimensions of complexity related to gender equity as well as MLSE LP's

program goals and strategic focus, four research questions (RQ) guided our evaluation:

RQ_1. How does choice (adaptation, self-organization) within a sport participation program influence girls' attitudes and behaviors towards sport participation?
RQ_2. How do established relationships (interdependencies) within a sport participation program influence girls' attitudes and behaviors towards sport participation?
RQ_3. How do role models (interdependencies) within a sport participation program influence girls' attitudes and behaviors towards sport participation?
RQ_4. How does physical literacy (self-organization) within a sport participation program influence girls' attitudes and behaviors towards sport participation?

METHODOLOGY

The authors sought to evaluate an SFD program developed by MLSE LP senior staff members designed to increase sport retention among young girls who face one or multiple barriers to positive development. To engage in this evaluation, we operationalized a pragmatic approach (Saunders et al., 2012) where program outcomes were the focus of the design, set in a case study (Yin, 2009) to capture the depth of the program elements related to participation and emphasize the importance of this particular case on sport participation for girls facing barriers. Specifically, the study focused on the MLSE LP and their "Girls In Real Life" (gIRL) program. This program and its program components were developed based on an internal MLSE LP, 2023a research and development team strategy that includes a commitment to choice, building relationships, fostering role modelling, and developing physical literacy. The research team was not involved in the development of the program itself; however, the authors were invited to engage in an evaluation of the program as a tool to increase sport participation.

Sampling and Recruitment

The gIRL program consisted of three 9-week cycles of programming designed to increase sport retention in the target population (i.e., underserved girls). Activities aligned with the MLSE LP's high standards of excellence in program design, implementation, and evaluation, which support physical and psychological safety for program participants. The three consecutive 9-week program cycles began in January 2022, with the participants engaging through a new program shaped by direct participant input designed to build social competence through sport, deepen interpersonal relationships and connectedness to sport, introduce a wide variety of sport activities, and refine fundamental movement skills. Interestingly, the program ran immediately following the lockdowns and reopening due to COVID-19, highlighting back to play protocol.

The gIRL program consisted of participants from the local community recruited through word-of-mouth, targeted outreach in schools, and referrals from agencies serving diverse youth. This program occurred every Monday night during the MLSE LP programming cycles and was delivered by an only women staff (this includes one lead program staff member). The senior staff members developed the program, then hired and trained the staff and volunteers who delivered the program on the ground. One senior staff member was frequently present at the MLSE LP during programming and others checked in with the lead program staff member each week. Many of the staff used to be participants themselves.

We invited all participants in the gIRL program (total population of 37) to be part of the sample population. Based on historical experience at the MLSE LP, we anticipated substantial participation in the evaluation. The opportunity to participate was made available to all girls in the target population as defined above. To ensure participants felt comfortable within the focus group method of collection, a youth administrator research assistant (RA) from MLSE LP joined the RAs from the research institution in the data collection process. The two institution RAs identify as white women and, the MLSE LP RA identifies as a racialized woman and is connected to the racialized girls in the program through her staff position. Further, trained staff sought and obtained informed parental consent for each participant and assent from each participant, guided by the researchers' institutional ethical clearance.

Participants

The MLSE LP serves a multitude of youth facing barriers. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of its members are born outside Canada, 56% have a parent born outside Canada, 87% are racialized, and 35% are Black (MLSE LP, 2023b). Those who utilize the MLSE LP facility face one or multiple intersecting barriers to positive development and experience early life factors that negatively impact their sport trajectories. Variables present at ages 8-10 predict sport dropout. Those who utilize the MLSE LP facility face one or multiple intersecting barriers to positive development and experience early life factors that negatively impact their sport trajectories. Variables present at ages 8-10 predict sport dropout. Social factors such as family dysfunction and parental attitudes also increase the risk of sport dropout

among girls (McGovern, 2021). Facility staff observe these phenomena regularly; girls who attend a 9-week sport program cycle are less likely than boys to register for subsequent cycles. Participation drops off considerably around ages 11-12. Girls are much more likely to leave programming during adolescence than boys with nearly identical demographic features outside of gender.

The staff members who were involved in the case were individuals who were paid or volunteering to help administer the sport program. A few of the paid staff members were labelled as "coaches" and led the activities within the program sessions. All program staff and volunteers were on the court and in program with the girls each week. They were involved in debrief sessions with the lead staff member of their program team and outside of program leads, as well as having limited personal contact with the senior staff members who were responsible for developing the program and requirements.

Data Collection

We collected data to understand Marra's (2015) five dimensions of complexity related to evaluating the SFD program. In relation to the evaluation, research questions, and themes presented here, we collected focus group and observational data to capture the research concepts and assess the complexities of the factors within the program. Further, we explored the factors in relation to their influence on participation and retention. 23 youth participated across two focus group interviews. The three RAs conducted the focus groups on the last night of the final 9-week cycle, during the scheduled program time. Given the lack of time that parents could provide for youth to be engaged with the program beyond the program hours, it was determined that the focus groups would not be held at multiple time points with smaller groups, but rather with the aid of the three RAs to coordinate questions, responses, and take notes. By including the three RAs, participant engagement was managed, questions were focused and interpreted for clarification, and accurate notes regarding participant actions and attitudes toward the questions were taken.

The first focus group consisted of nine (n = 9) youth aged 7-10, labelled as "youth participant." The younger girls' program occurred in the first time block between 4:00-6:00pm and a 20-minute focus group was held at the end of this session. The gIRL program for 14 participants aged 11-15 was held between 6:00-8:00pm and we conducted a 25-minute focus group in the latter half of the session. We labelled participants in the gIRL program and those who participated in the second focus group as "gIRL participant." Many of the participants in both groups had participated in all three of the 9-week program cycles as well as attended other co-ed program nights at LP. For both youth participant focus groups, the LP staff were in the room to increase comfort levels of participants by including leaders with whom they were familiar.

A third focus group was conducted with all seven of the program leaders after all program sessions and youth participants left the MLSE LP. Within the findings these individuals are labelled as "Staff participant." Participants in this focus group were both paid staff as well as community volunteers. The duration of this focus group was 25 minutes. This focus group was also held at the end of the 9-week cycle so the staff and volunteers could discuss their experiences throughout the cycle. We amended the focus group guide several times in the weeks prior in consultation with the RAs and MLSE LP senior staff to ensure the questions and language would be appropriate for young ages to understand, and that the separate guide for staff would be relevant. The focus groups explored factors related to complexity of the program, experiences in the program, subsequent sport trajectories, and factors within the program impacting continued participation or dropout, including variety and choice, long-term relationships, positive role models, and physical literacy. We designed the focus groups in such a way that anyone was welcomed to raise their hand to share their thoughts and, if some participants did not feel comfortable, they were not obligated to share.

Additionally, two RAs used reflexive journals and notes throughout the program cycle and discussed these regularly with the research team. These reflexive journals were a way to reflect on the dimensions of Marra's (2015) framework in relation to what the RAs were observing in each program session. For example, when the RAs identified a volunteer who was able to adapt their activity to the group they were serving, the research team noted this was an example of adaptation that would shape the evaluation. Each reflexive journal entry was reviewed and discussed by the entire research team.

Data Analysis

We analyzed data using NVIVO 12, per Braun and Clarke's (2019) guidelines. The first step of our analysis was data familiarization, where we dissected focus group data thoroughly (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We engaged in line-by-line coding to highlight important concepts that each participant discussed during the focus groups. Step two involved generating initial codes. Here, we used the MLSE LP's values and Marra's (2015) terms of dimensions of

complexity to code in two layered phases. We then grouped codes in the third step of the analysis, and cross referenced the focus group data of program participants and facility staff to ensure consistency and representation among all focus groups within the code groupings. During this step, we linked the coded text to Marra's (2015) dimensions (e.g., self-organization, adaptation) and outlined evaluation criteria for effective and ineffective program parameters. For accuracy, we reviewed preliminary codes as a research team and with the gIRL staff members, and once we were satisfied, we developed names and defining parameters for the themes. The final step of our thematic analysis was to build the analytic narrative and represent the data in a meaningful way (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Throughout the data analysis process, we established trustworthiness and credibility through research team dialogue, which also included the MLSE LP RA who provided intimate perspective of the program. Importantly, the MLSE LP RA and one member of the research team identifies as a person of color. Their perspectives were invaluable in mitigating any bias that may have resulted from the privilege of whiteness (Green et al., 2007), held by three of the other research team members (two RAs and senior researcher). We held several research meetings and engaged in consistent dialogue to debrief each week of observational data collection as well as to discuss themes and pertinent topics throughout the programming cycle. Here, we were challenged by the MLSE LP RA as she brought forth her perspectives to think more critically about the program topics we discussed. For example, the way in which we viewed choice in terms of self-direction was in a positivistic way, but the MLSE LP RA pushed back, outlining that choice was dependent on staff member capacity/limitations in their roles when compared to management. Although choice was seen as important for participants and staff recognized this, they were not always given the tools to self-direct. Our team dialogue was critical to ensure themes were true to the essence of the findings and consistent with the experiences of the RAs while participating in the programming.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There were several concepts that frame the evaluation of the gIRL program developed to increase retention for marginalized girls in sport at MLSE LP. In particular, we deemed the program to be effective in participants identifying their willingness and desire to continue sport participation. Below, we discuss the themes that were generated by exploring how Marra's (2015) elements appeared in this program as well as how they are essential to creating effective SFD programming that encourages participation retention. The ability to adapt shaped by choice refers to the concept of adaptation, interconnected relations and role modelling which explore the complex interdependencies in LP programming, and self-organizing: the individual role was understood as the capacity of individuals to participate in and contribute to programming.

The Ability to Adapt Shaped by Choice

Based on participants' discussion of their perception of the program, choice became a key pillar to adapt. Using Marra's (2015) theory, adaptation referred to agents who can learn self-organization and co-evolve with their environments where order and progress can emerge naturally from interactions within complex adaptive systems. In response to RQ_1, we found that choice was an important aspect of programming that offered the potential of staff having the opportunity to revamp weekly discussions after engaging with girls' wants and needs in the program. This further included building sport confidence when playing amongst boys, developing life skills that build off each other and implementing suggestions they receive from girls about programming were labelled as adaptation. This was seen through this staff member's response,

...when it comes to creating aspects of a program, it's important to have discussions between the coaches and participants, especially when it comes to those older girls, have discussions surrounding the rules of the program and the content of the program, so we can get a compromise so they aren't just blindly following rules but there's a sense of okay, you have some input into the program into the rule making so it's not just what we want but also what you want. Which kind of gives them some incentive to follow the rules.

Participants viewed having input as an important aspect of programming in both structure and activities. This sentiment is echoed by Hull et al. (2021), that designing and delivering programming is complex and multi-faceted. There is an increased need for choice and the integration of social elements as continued participation is influenced by factors such as fun, friends, and self-efficacy (Hull et al., 2021). Eime et al. (2020) highlighted that choice components have been found to produce strong intervention effects on behaviors for adolescent girls. The staff member's comment above indicates consistency with Allison et al.'s (2017) work that when participants are consulted, they may increasingly engage because they also had a stake in the program design.

After reviewing the transcripts, the staff's acknowledgement of pivoting during program became evident. We interpreted this as actions or outcomes that could be enacted naturally throughout the sessions rather than program leaders adopting a more rigid, structured delivery. This was highlighted in the RA observational and reflexive notes that participants appeared to be most excited for the open-gym and more flexible "free time" point of the program. Girls could decide which activities they wanted to partake in, which often involved activities that were not part of the structured programming, like rock climbing. Additionally, participants in the staff focus group mentioned the value of adapting and pivoting during activities to keep girls engaged. This included incorporating more fun-focused aspects into the sport skill that was being taught such as practicing dribbling and shooting a basketball while playing free throw games. Concomitantly, the gIRL participants also explained their desire for more variety in the sports offered and that MLSE LP focused mainly on basketball. Instead, the girls wanted to have more sporting activities brought in like gymnastics, rugby, and tennis. Flexibility throughout programming promotes organic interaction. Raw (2020) outlined that different social and environmental factors can influence participation for historically oppressed communities. Program structure is particularly salient in this context as focusing on the needs of participants can encourage engagement rather than an extremely rigid design.

Examples of participant adaptation included gIRL participants sharing how they feel about playing sports with boys, how they feel about the life skills taught and how they feel about developing sport skills. For example, one youth participant said, "playing with the boys is really annoying but coming to MLSE and teaching us social competence and other stuff it shows me to never give up." Girls in the program expressed their discontentment when participating with boys on other nights that are not girls-only. Instead, they prefer to have dedicated activities to shift the gendered power dynamics as well as have the opportunities to participate and feel comfortable doing so. Empowerment can be multi-levelled and it is important here to recognize the different ways in which shifts occur, even if they are not explicitly expressed (Seal, 2020). In this context, when dedicated programming is offered, girls feel they can play sports and learn life skills without the fear of gendered power dynamics. For this reason, the gIRL program and the LP dedicating a weekly evening is important because it provides participants with the opportunity to play in a way that they may not get to during co-ed programming throughout the week.

Opportunities to adapt through the program were present in several program features. Some participants, both youth and staff, were critical of some of the life skills taught. Many youth participants enjoyed discussions on life skill development and its integration throughout programming, but they also identified related elements that would be valuable to include. A core pillar of the life skills discussed within programming included grit. When girls were asked weekly by coaches about grit, the idea of improving your skill set and to keep trying after failing at an activity were discussed. The coaches tried to define grit in a similar way to how the girls described it, but a concrete or formal definition was never given to explain grit (hence answers from girls were repeated every week with no differentiation of scenarios). All participants in the focus groups agreed grit was overly discussed and that repetition negatively impacted both the program and focus of girls during discussions. Moreover, girls and staff members shared thoughts on discussions in programming and revealed the topics they would like to learn about in more depth, such as confidence, social competence, and communication skills. Discussing other community aspects aside from sport was additionally expressed as an interest from a participant, "it's important to learn about other peoples' cultures too" (youth participant).

The commentary that implied the need for further life skill development was also interpreted as learning opportunities for both youth participants and program designers. For example,

maybe not even focusing on one life skill but asking them which life skill they thought they showed that day. So, it's forcing them to remember other skills too, such as social competence or whatever. They have the capacity to remember them, we just have to ask and prioritize it (staff participant).

The programming structure does prioritize life skills and social competencies in which participants may engage in discussions related to them. This is particularly valuable for the population the SFD facility serves as it encourages girls to take the life skills taught in programming into their communities and personal lives. Seal (2020) outlined that unique sessions, such as the gIRL life skill workshops, can facilitate consciousness-raising experiences for participants and promote critical thinking. Therefore, it is worth considering further how life skills and social competencies are built into program design.

Youth participants and staff members developed recommended improvements to highlight ideas within this theme. One improvement noted was,

I think there should be an aspect to every program or a program in itself where people can enroll into or sign up

themselves where we enforce that life skill and really get in-depth in it, how they can show it, and do activities that are centered around showing that life skill (staff participant).

This recommendation focused on having more structured life skill development. Previous studies have discussed the transferring of life skills learned in sport programming to other settings (Whitley et al., 2019). The findings here support the ongoing need for SFD program staff to design and implement curricula with opportunities to practice life skills outside intervention contexts.

Interconnected Relations and Role Modelling

Participants valued dedicated girls' programming on the certain days this was done so they may engage with individuals like them and have opportunities to participate in ways they may not be capable of on other nights when boys attend the SFD facility. To address RQ_2, interdependencies focused on social norms and institutions that can affect actors operating in delimited contexts as well as social groups and organizations in broader environments. The social norms we found included, 1) gender social norms such as how girls engage in sports with boys, 2) the way participants act with female coaches versus male coaches, 3) behavioral differences amongst age groups, and 4) the participants' views of cultural norms.

It is important to note here that the girls in this program may also participate in other co-ed programming, but these findings were discussed in relation to the girl-only programming. A gender behavioral norm that was mentioned by a youth participant was "when you're playing with boys, like playing anything, they don't pass you [the] ball." Participants collectively agreed that they preferred girls' night compared to other activities with mixed genders. The girls felt that they did not enjoy participating in other programming as much because of the lack of opportunities and interpersonal factors related to gender norms. This is consistent with Eime et al. (2020), as boys can often dominate the activities or games and fail to engage with the girls. This is also problematic as Zarrett et al., (2020) argued that negative experiences with both coaches and other program participants are more likely to cause drop out among girls. These factors additionally lead to a decrease in sport enjoyment for girls (Rowe et al., 2018) thus, dedicated programming has been a way to promote participation for individuals in this community.

We explored the various interdependencies within MLSE LP's gIRL program from several lenses. The first was to understand the relationships among the different levels of staff and volunteer leaders as they related to direction and support to deliver the programming. These interdependencies often influenced the sports chosen in programming and underscore the power dynamics between coaches. For example, one experience revealed,

…in general, I feel that the dynamic between leads and assistants could be improved. It does show in programming, because people, coaches that are usually taking the lead and they don't allow the assistants to step in and help out, but they do to a minimal (staff participant).

Power dynamics between staff were commonly discussed among those who participated in the focus group. They noted that often, only a few coaches would lead programming, and others would not actively contribute, simply serving as supervisors rather than engaging in the activities. Conversely, some staff and volunteers explained that they wanted to lead activities but were not given the opportunity as one "head" coach did most of the facilitation. It was interesting that this topic was brought up in the discussion as that lead individual was not present on the night of the focus group. This further indicates that there are power relations among the staff that contributes to coaches' capacity to facilitate programming. Literature on the dynamics between SFD programming staff is limited, therefore further attention should focus on how role parameters are developed and how to improve relationships among leaders with respect to program delivery.

Similarly, our sub-theme "connection related to embedded power" related to the topic of power dynamics in which we looked at comments linked to how girls behave with female and male coaches. Power dynamics also referred to hierarchical levels of staff and who could have the most power and authority to implement changes in programming. As stated by a staff participant,

I feel that the guy coaches do have more authority, they use their voices more than us female coaches. So, us as women, we don't have to yell as much on Mondays [gIRL programming]. The guys enforce it [rules] more [on other program nights], and yes, I can see how it can be a weakness for us.

Despite the opportunities for female coaches to have girls-only programming to lead, the residual gender imbalance remains in how participants engage. Thus, further consideration should explore how gender inequity continues to exist within various levels of sport, including resources like training and development for coaches (Eime et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant as coaches have a

significant influence on participant experience and the likelihood of them staying engaged in sport (Zarrett et al., 2020). As such, a greater emphasis should be in the investment of time and resources into strategic coaching education like how to specifically coach girls and unique approaches to girl-centered programming.

Gender influences were prominent in all focus groups and here, we focused on gender norms and the girls' personal experiences in sport. We explored the concept of connection related to gender to highlight challenges that staff have experienced and quotes pertaining to gender differences among sport coaches. For instance, one staff member said that "you see more guys on staff, which means more authority of course," which emphasized the social roles adopted by coaches during sport programming at the MLSE LP. Another staff member explained,

She [youth participant] doesn't take us seriously and that she used an example of the guy coaches, like they would yell at them [participants] or talk to them. When he speaks to them, they listen because he makes them run suicides, but she can't take us seriously, people who aren't strict but try to be strict.

Some staff members described their perceptions of the difference in how participants responded to them compared to male coaches and that there were discrepancies in behaviors between co-ed and girls-only programming. Many female staff for the gIRL program noted these changes in engagement to which Eime et al. (2020) argued can be a common challenge as male-dominated cultures often perpetuate barriers for women, extending to leaders as well. In this case, the female coaches discussed having difficulty with gaining authority because when participants also attend co-ed programming at MLSE LP, the male coaches are perceived as stricter and more respected. Thus, the embedded social culture in both broader society and within the facility itself poses increased challenges for female staff to facilitate effective programming. Linked to the concept of self-organization (Marra, 2015), in this context, participant experiences involve simultaneously breaking away from norms and perpetuating norms at the same time.

Societal gender norms included boys being more vocal in sports, and how this can discourage females from participating in sports. "I don't like playing because when the boys say that you don't know how to play, I know how to play" (youth participant). Consistent among participants was the frustration of traditional gender norms in which discourse pertains to girls' lack of competence in sport. Female-oriented programming promotes empowerment by challenging conventional binaries and allows girls to develop skills through inclusive participation (LaVoi, 2018; Seal, 2020). Fostering new perceptions of gender roles and sport can enhance confidence and self-esteem and promote engagement in these safe spaces. Moreover, individuals at the executive level in SFD facilities need to consider how female staff are supported, feel capable to assert their leadership roles and feel confident in their leadership abilities in programming. With these considerations, self-organization (Marra, 2015) could be enhanced and effectiveness within the program may be more closely aligned with pillars of "ready for school, ready for work" (MLSE LP, 2023).

The topic of diversity was included as an interdependency and revealed how girls felt more comfortable with coaches who came from similar backgrounds as them (i.e., being Black), and girls revealed this as an influence for sport participation: "I look up to the Black staff here, 'cause, they're like me, funny and they relate to us" (gIRL participant). Participants expressed the importance of representation and relatability among staff. In SFD programming that services marginalized communities, it is highly valuable to have leaders reflect the backgrounds of participants as it promotes empowerment to see others like them in leadership roles and contributes to building trust from shared understandings and experiences (Stronach & Maxwell, 2020). Race was seen as an influence for many girls in programming as coaches who shared the same ethnicities and race as participants were seen to be more influential on the girls' participation levels (Kraft et al., 2022). The girls indicated they liked having Black staff as they felt included and more comfortable in those settings and labelled them as role models. One youth participant said that she looks up to the Black staff because they are more like her and left her "feeling accepted." Leaders representing various intersectional backgrounds serve as positive role models for participants (Maxwell & Stronach, 2020).

Self-Organizing: The Individual Role

Everyone involved in the program plays an integral role in the group dynamic and contributes to how the program runs each week. When one key individual such as a participant or coach does not attend, the programming looks incredibly different. Responses analyzed as self-organization referred to items that showed how people interrelate, are influenced by others, and how they can most effectively complete tasks given available resources and contexts (Marra, 2015). This is important because within a program evaluation, if program elements look different with different leaders, this may alter the ability of the program to meet objectives.

Therefore, this inconsistency is important for MLSE LP senior staff to consider. This included positive and negative cases where girls and coaches interrelated due to diversity and age, the influence of role models, girls' behaviors during programming and how repetitive lessons throughout the program cycle influenced disengagement.

The continuous participation was a benefit for participants in some cases, however, repetition was noted as an issue. For example, one gIRL participant indicated,

I mean the life skill, we got like how many months, 6 months? Like once a month we can do it. But when we stop every time like 20 minutes before, just to explain a little thing and giving shoutouts or whatever, it's just taking off our time playing the game we actually enjoy.

The girls would rather keep playing: "shoutouts are good too, you can boost other people's self-esteem and sometimes it can be a little bit annoying because if you have a long day, you have to sit there, and just hear some people talk" (gIRL participant). Embedding life skills into program design is important to both participants and facility management (Whitley et al., 2019). Here, participants noted the value of life skills within programming, but when too repetitive, it would cause disengagement. Continued evaluation on the implementation of such program features is therefore salient to ensure that the program is effectively highlighting those life skills and not causing adverse effects.

In connection, role models were generated as a sub-theme of self-organization, and explored who girls look up to most and how they chose those individuals thus, addressing RQ_3. Focus groups revealed that they look up to their friends, coaches, family members who are high-performing athletes, and other females. One youth participant labelled her friends as important role models, "some of my friends that play sports because, they kind of teach me a lot and it's a role model because they teach me stuff." Support from peer groups is an important factor to enjoyment and continued participation in physical activity throughout life (Eime et al., 2015; Scheerder et al., 2007). When girls are supported and encouraged by their friends both in programming and outside of the SFD facility context, they may feel more empowered to join activities and continuously participate in them.

Similarly, a gIRL participant stated, "my sister because she plays in the Olympics for Women's Rugby. So, I just think she is a role model." In both focus groups, the social norm of high-performance athletes being seen as role models was discussed and linked to sport development.

I look up to my brother because he plays soccer and he's going into the TFC [Toronto Football Club] Academy and like, I want to play for the TFC too and I look up to him and his skills and how he plays (gIRL participant).

Having positive role models is important for participants to continue engaging in sport activities. Participants may also be increasingly motivated if those whom they look up to are family, friends or other peers they feel connected to, including shared backgrounds or social identities (Stronach & Maxwell, 2020).

Sport competency development focused on answering RQ_4, that related to building sport-specific skills and emphasizing the idea of being good at sports (i.e., becoming athletes). Since the girls each had varying sport abilities, there were several references to the idea of fun-focused programming. In addition to skill development, many girls continued to want to play sports as they found them fun, interactive, and helped improve physical and mental health. "I want to continue playing sports when I'm older because, sports are fun, and they keep you active" (gIRL participant). Furthermore, they expressed playing sports as a "fun hobby" (youth participant). Universally, participants agreed that engaging in programming taught them the importance of living healthy lifestyles and expressed their interest in continuing to be physically active as they mature. SFD programming can promote lifelong participation for marginalized populations by providing access and teaching the skills necessary to continue at different life stages (Newland et al., 2020). It is therefore critical that programming offers enjoyable activities and teaches participants fundamental skills that they may take into their adult lives (Hull et al., 2021).

In Marra's (2015) terms of self-organization, in which we focused on situations where girls were not actively participating or activities and behaviors that hindered girls' engagement, we created the sub-theme of program disengagement. For example, "when someone's doing something funny, it just, I just end up looking at that instead of paying attention" (gIRL participant). The propensity of literature pertaining to disengagement in girls' sport programming is limited. The majority of research focuses on how to promote participation but lacks the recognition of behavioral aspects that impede engagement in activities. RAs observed disengagement throughout the program cycle and noted that when friends gravitated towards each other during programming, side conversations often occurred which distracted girls from actively participating or contributing to the activity. Here, motivation to participate through participant input in the design of rules and structure could serve as a mechanism to mitigate these behaviors.

Moreover, it is important to consider how and why girls may be disengaging. The structured nature of the program should be considered. The discussion of questions about disengagement was emphasized by staff sharing that,

…a lot of the old, like 13/14 girls aren't engaged, so a lot of the times they'll come in, see what we're doing and if it's boring then they'll leave. So, I feel like even though the gIRL program is 11-14, it's a lot more of the 11–12-year old's, it's only one or two girls that are 13 or 14, so that would be one of the weaknesses (staff participant).

Throughout the focus group, program staff indicated they were aware of girls disengaging but were unsure how to solve this. For instance, it was discussed that as girls got older, they would become less interested in attending programming at LP such that several of the older girls would leave the facility to meet up with friends or older siblings at the mall. As a strategy to attempt to mitigate this behavior, the LP staff tried to offer different types of activities in programming and asked participants what they want to do so that they are less persuaded to leave. This finding is consistent with the literature on the challenges to sport retention among adolescent girls (Newland et al., 2020). As other social factors become prominent in their lives, participants may feel less inclined to attend programming (Sherry & Rowe, 2020). This notion extends the nuances of participation decline or dropout, revealing factors other than previous research has discussed, such as girls losing interest in activities offered because programming does not appeal to their wants or needs (LaVoi, 2018; McGovern, 2021).

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

A major strength of the current study is that it highlights the importance of flexibility and choice within SFD programming to increase participant engagement. Raw (2020) identified that future investigations should focus on the differences and effectiveness between more structured forms of sport compared to leisure activities. We argue that SFD programming centered around recreation ought to embed flexibility within its design so that the enjoyment of participants is at the forefront and thus, promotes participation. Life skill integration is important for programming targeted to racialized youth from under-resourced areas as it encourages participants to practice those competencies outside of the MLSE LP. However, when life skills are too repetitive within programming, the continuous reiteration diminishes their effectiveness. Too much repetition of life skills can also increase behavioral issues within programming and can cause disengagement. Participants may get bored from the constant discussion of the same topics and not engage. Along this vein, although literature suggests keeping friend groups together in programming to promote engagement, this can also be problematic as peers shared that it can be a distraction to program engagement and can create a divide amongst peers (e.g., bullying). Thus, staff should continue to be actively engaged in activities to mitigate disruptive behaviors and continue to unpack the source of disruptive behavior (e.g., boredom or need to socialize). Additionally, the present study provides deeper insights into reasons for drop-out among adolescent girls in relation to program elements that were problematic within the evaluation frame (e.g., self-organization, adaptation). Previous research has outlined that participation rates decrease significantly among adolescents, but this work extends our knowledge of program evaluation criteria comprehension, which may help explain where program gaps exist in relation to goals. Among participants of this study, contributing factors to disengagement and decline in participation included the lack of interest in program offerings. If participants are not interested in the activities, we need to explore the program features that lead to that disengagement. This was a feature of the program that we noticed and could be a concern for long-term participation if disengagement leads to participant drop out. SFD programming has the opportunity to retain girls at the cusp of dropping out if program evaluation includes participant consultation regarding activities they enjoy most, and those ideas are implemented into programming.

This study does not come without its (de)limitations. First, the present work only focused on one program at one SFD facility: MLSE LP. The findings from this study reflect the experiences of 23 youth and seven staff which may be different from other participants of the MLSE LP, such as girls who attend other co-ed nights but do not participate in girl-only programming or chose not to participate in the research. Similarly, given that this study's participants were youth, obtaining consent presented the limitation of guardians not wishing for their child to participate resulting in missed views from the work. It is also possible that the youth participants did not fully understand the focus group questions and this could have skewed results. Next, during the programming cycle, there was a staff turnover. Given the coaches were a combination of paid staff and volunteers/interns, this turnover was anticipated as volunteers' presence at MLSE LP was dependent on their availability. Some staff were present throughout the entire cycle, however, there were new coaches that were added towards the end which may have influenced participants' attendance or willingness to share their experiences if they were not fully comfortable around those new individuals

Inconsistencies among the staff may have disrupted the group dynamic and altered potential discussions in the data collection. Along the same vein, group dynamics played an important role in the program. Participants who were unconsciously deemed the natural leaders of the group had a significant influence on the entire group and thus could take over the conversation. This notion is particularly salient during the focus groups as the group dynamics influenced the quality of conversation as there were often influential participants changing the discussion away from the topic questions. It is important to reflect on the role of these influential peers and how their referent power may be leveraged to help engagement in the group (e.g., peer-to-peer mentor).

Thus, this study raises several future directions. It would be valuable to explore community-oriented programming further to gather a deeper understanding of what communities need and tailor specific activities that meet them. Additional exploration focused on female adolescent age groups would also be beneficial to expand research pertaining to sport participation decline and the potential ways to mitigate such dropout rates. Future work should continue to look at how life skills and social competencies are built into SFD programming. If SFD facilities, like MLSE LP, want to bolster their activities, further examining how to effectively integrate and refine life skills and social competencies into program offerings is recommended. We also encourage further research on how organizational values are reflected in staff structures, policies, and practices related to evaluations within program delivery. Finally, it may be valuable to investigate staff group dynamics among SFD facilities. Relationships between staff are important to the overall functioning of programming and thus, understanding the complex dynamics between staff should be considered. Future research should be concerned with how role parameters are defined by both institutions and interpersonal practice, as well as how they are implemented into programming. From a participant-staff perspective, it is critical to explore how roles are built such that if coaches are meant to be role models for participants, they receive adequate resources to perform such a role. Given that staff are from marginalized communities to provide representation for participants of those same communities, these female coaches should have access to training for that leadership position.

CONCLUSION

This study explored a transformative SFD program, gIRL at the MLSE LP, designed to serve youth from historically oppressed groups. Adopting Marra's (2015) theory, the research outlines the presence of several determinants within programming. Findings suggest that programming created to provide sporting opportunities for girls from under-resourced communities effectively fosters enjoyment, life skill development, and interest in continued participation among these individuals. SFD facilities have the capacity to provide positive and meaningful experiences to their participants if staff are equipped with the necessary tools to deliver such recreational programming. Continued work should focus on program evaluation centered around underserved communities so they may receive equitable resources to provide access to sport participation for youth.

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Original Research

Fútbol Con Corazón: The Cultural Roots and Health Promoting Value of Soccer for Latino Families in the United States

Eduardo De la Vega-Taboada[1], Juliet Pérez-Del Oro[1], Dionne P. Stephens[1]

[1]Department of Psychology, Florida International University, Miami, FL, United States

Correspondence Email: Edela123@fiu.edu

ABSTRACT

Sports after-school programs have shown benefits for reducing children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors and improving their socioemotional skills development, positive peer socialization, and prosocial behaviors. Nevertheless, lack of participation remains a challenge for many programs. We conducted nine (9) interviews with parents, residing in a primarily Hispanic-populated city in South Florida, and who had a child enrolled (or were planning to do so) in a soccer-for-development program called Fútbol con Corazón (FCC). We based the qualitative inquiry on the Theory of Planned Behavior to understand motivations and barriers to parental engagement. We conducted a codebook thematic analysis, in which two researchers analyzed the transcripts independently, then discussed discrepancies to reach consensus. Findings revealed that the most relevant factors for improving parental engagement included soccer's cultural roots, perceived physical and mental health benefits for their children, and proximity to the park. The findings support a growing body of literature indicating that soccer related programs offer culturally sensitive approaches in addition to mental health promoting opportunities for Latino communities in the United States.

Fútbol Con Corazón: The Cultural Roots and Health Promoting Value of Soccer for Latino Families in the United States

After-school programs can reduce children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and improve their socioemotional skills development, positive peer socialization, and prosocial behaviors (Frazier et al., 2012; Shen et al., 2022; Stead & Nevil, 2010). Social and emotional competencies in preschool children (4-6 years old) predict mental health, school adjustment, and success throughout the life course (Adela et al., 2011). Additionally, low-income parents juggling multiple jobs or navigating unemployment may find a complement in after-school programs to improve their children's socioemotional skills and offer safe and enriching entertainment during out-of-school hours. Thus, when these services are accessible and high-quality, they can help mitigate the potential negative impacts of under-resourced or adverse environments for young children (Adela et al., 2011; Frazier, 2012; Shen et al., 2022).

The growing field of Sport for Development (SFD) programs utilizes the power of sport to improve the socio-emotional and physical skills of children commonly exposed to some levels of adversity. SFD focuses on pursuing systemic changes by addressing social issues such as poverty, health, education, gender equity, and social inclusion. These programs engage underserved participants and their immediate social network with experiences designed to improve their health and well-being. Many occur during outside of school time, outside of the educational setting, and close to the participants' homes (LeCrom et al., 2019). However, as noted by Danish and colleagues (2005) there is nothing magical about sports that lead to positive outcomes. Moreover, the process has to be analyzed through a developmental sciences lens by asking what works, under what circumstances (cultures) and for whom (Bronfenbrenner, 1976).

In the United States (U.S.) the lack of participation remains a challenge for many programs, and studies of programs across five of America's biggest cities found that only 50% to 60% of children in need of out-of-school programs were enrolled in at least one and reported parental satisfaction as an indicator of potential utilization. Studies considered a school-aged child needing after-school programs when their parents could not supervise them during out-of-school hours (Cornelli Sanderson & Richards, 2010; Weitzman et al., 2008). This underutilization is even

Keywords: Sport for Development, parental engagement, cultural responsible, after school programs

more relevant for low-SES Latino[1] children who are more likely to be physically inactive and whose involvement with organized after-school programs in the U.S. is lower when compared to the general population of children in the U.S. (Day 2006; Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012; Lopez et al., 2008). Researchers argue this is due to insufficient financial resources for sports registration and other related costs, restricted access to sports facilities, cultural inappropriateness, and safety concerns (Alliance, 2014; Holt et al., 2011; Simpkins et al., 2017).

Parents and caregivers of preschool children are responsible for enrolling, transporting, and engaging their sons or daughters in out-of-school activities. Therefore, to reduce the disparity in access, it is necessary to understand the motivations and barriers among low-SES Latino parents and caregivers for choosing and sustaining their children's participation in sports after-school programs. Further, since relevant research has consistently found a positive relationship between programs' cultural responsiveness, parental engagement, and program efficiency (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Simpkins & Riggs, 2014), we need to expand our understanding of racial/ethnic and other cultural influences. This issue is particularly important when considering Latino populations and a culturally relevant sport such as soccer.

This study aims to identify the parents' perceptions of a Soccer for Development program for preschool Latino children in South Florida. We will investigate their perceptions based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which allow the understanding and prediction of behaviors based on inquiring about attitudes and perceptions. The theory will guide us to identify the present quality of the participants' parental engagement and the probable level of engagement with the program in the future.

This study aims to explore parents' views on a Soccer for Development program that focuses on preschool Latino children in South Florida. Employing the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as a framework, we seek to understand and forecast behaviors by examining attitudes and perceptions. This theoretical lens will facilitate the assessment of current parental involvement quality and anticipate future engagement levels with the program.

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

TPB is one of today's most relevant theories in social psychology for predicting behaviors and was first described in 1985 by Icek Ajzen. TPB states that if an individual sees a behavior positively (attitudes towards the behavior), believes that those around them endorse the behavior (normative belief), and has a sense of control over said behavior (perceived control), they will have a solid intention to behave in that way and be more likely to enact that behavior over time (Ajzen, 1991). Abundant empirical studies have shown TPB's efficacy in predicting positive behaviors such as physical exercise and sports participation (Conner & Norman, 2022). It has also been used to understand and prevent unhealthy behaviors such as drug use (Cooke et al., 2016; Eaton & Stephens, 2019).

Behavioral beliefs (or attitudes toward the behavior) refer to the perceived consequences of a behavior and one's attitude toward it resulting from the perceived valence (positive or negative) of those consequences (Ajzen, 2011). For example, suppose a parent perceives that enrolling their child in a program (behavior) will generate discipline and joy for their son/daughter (positive outcome) and outweigh their perception of injury risks (negative outcome). In that case, their attitude towards enrolling their son/daughter in the program will be positive and will increase their likelihood of remaining enrolled over time.

A normative belief (or subjective norms) is the person's estimation of their social network's likelihood of supporting or rejecting their intended behavior (Ajzen, 2011). For example, a father who perceives that his relatives, friends, doctors, and priest will support his decision to enroll his daughter in a soccer program is more likely to follow through, than a father who perceives reservations or disapproval from those he trusts. Further, culture and subjective norms are related because culture permeates how people from a particular community or identity group value some behaviors (e.g., for Latino immigrants, playing soccer is a way to connect with their roots).

Control belief (or perceived control) refers to the perceived influence of factors that may facilitate or discourage a behavior; if enabling factors are more potent than limiting ones, there is more likelihood for that behavior to occur over time (Ajzen, 2011). For example, suppose that a parent perceives that transportation to the after-school program is complicated, and no services facilitate the transport. In that case, it is less likely for that parent to enroll their child in the program even if they like the program.

Based on TPB's applicability on understanding behaviors, this theory will guide the construction of the questioning route to capture the parents' level of engagement with the program and their likelihood of keeping their son or daughter participating in the program.

[1] The authors recognize that there is disagreement in how the term Hispanic, Latino and LatinX is applied and used to identify Spanish speakers in the United States. The authors have chosen to use the term Latino in the present study because the research participants self-identified with this term (Fry & Lopez, 2012; Guidotti-Hernández, 2017). Further, this term better captures the nation of origin, immigration identities, and cultural linguistic norms of this unique group of Hispanic parents (Bedolla, 2003).

Sport for Development (SFD) Builds Socioemotional Skills

Sport for Development (SFD) programs have gained recognition as powerful platforms for promoting socioemotional skills among participants. These programs utilize a unique combination of sports activities and intentional skill-building exercises to foster personal growth, social integration, and emotional well-being. By harnessing the inherent qualities of sports, such as teamwork, discipline, and perseverance, SFD initiatives offer a holistic approach to child and youth development (Coalter, 2013; Shen et al., 2022).

Socioemotional skills encompass a range of competencies that enable individuals to understand and manage their emotions, establish, and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and effectively navigate social situations. These skills are crucial for personal development, academic success, and future employability. SFD programs provide a uniquely engaging and dynamic environment that challenges youth to push their limits, overcome obstacles, and achieve personal goals, in turn cultivating self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem. As participants witness their progress and achievements in sports, they develop a positive self-image beyond the playing field (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Holt et al., 2017).

Recently, Positive Youth Development (PYD) approaches have enhanced the understanding of how developmental outcomes, such as social and emotional skills, occur through sports. These approaches are based on developmental sciences, specifically in the Bioecological model coined by Bronfenbrenner (1976) and later developments such as Relational Developmental Systems (Overton & Molenaar, 2015), in which development is contextualized as the co-action of multiple variables such as culture, social interactions, and biology. Thus, socio-emotional learning in children occurs due to intervening not just one but multiple variables simultaneously (e.g., coaches-child interactions, parental training, cultural transformations) (Holt et al., 2016).

Cultural Responsiveness Influences Family Engagement

Incorporating TPB, the research highlights that the disparity in access to and enrollment in organized activities for non-white populations is related to a lack of culturally responsive recruitment methods and activity structures (Yu et al., 2021), which are partly due to the deficiency in understanding about the normative beliefs (subjective norms) of the people that they intend to serve.

The Latino population are the largest growing group in the United States and due in part of minority status Latino youth may face a disproportionate social and contextual challenges to positive development. Moreover, Latino youth often avoid participating in community or after-school programs to avoid forced assimilation (ineffective acculturation), which limits their access to high quality positive youth development programs (Borden et al., 2006; Riggs et al., 2010). Acculturation refers to the process through which an individual undergoes cultural and psychological changes by adjusting to the norms of a particular society, typically occurring during migration. Research indicates that SFD events that consistently include sociocultural aspects to make the participants feel at home contribute to effective acculturation (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). Thus, culturally responsive practices that understands participants normative beliefs, may help after-school programs to improve minorities participation and development (Riggs et al., 2010).

Moreover, control beliefs, which encompass perceived ease or difficulty in participating in these activities, are evident in the work of Simpkins and Riggs (2014). They suggest that the cultural responsiveness of a program, which can either facilitate or impede participation, is a significant predictor of enrollment, participation, and retention. The feeling of belonging, as informed by self-determination theory, can be seen as a proxy for control beliefs, where the ability to identify with a cultural group within the program plays a role in the perceived control over engagement in the program.

Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior, the current study aims to investigate the factors impacting parental engagement through the investigation of a Soccer for Development program (Fútbol con Corazón) conducted in a U.S. region (South Florida), where most of the parents were born in Latin America. We interviewed 9 parents who enrolled their child in a Soccer for Development program or were considering enrollment. We explore into behavioral beliefs (e.g. parent's perceived impact of the program in their child), normative beliefs regarding cultural norms and expectations of participation, and control beliefs concerning the perceived ease or challenges of engaging with the program. These elements are essential in understanding the motivations behind parental engagement (and desire to enroll their child). The primary research question was: *What are the barriers and facilitators for parental engagement with a Soccer for Development program offered in South Florida?*

Fútbol con Corazón (FCC) in Alliance with a Community Center in South Florida

FCC promotes Sports for Development programs developed by soccer coaches and psychologists that uses soccer to endorse life skills. FCC has been offered over 14 years in six countries in Latin America, involving more than 100,000 children and adolescents and impacting more than 40 communities. Through nurturing relationships between coaches and participants and based on a structured curriculum, FCC aims to promote four core values (respect, honesty, tolerance, and solidarity) and 14 socioemotional skills such as self-reflection, autonomy, flexible and creative thinking, problem-solving, decision making, self-knowledge and self-esteem, emotion control, stress management, social responsibility and cooperation, empathy, establishing and maintaining relationships, respect and appreciation for others, expression of ideas, emotions and assertiveness. The FCC's operations in South Florida began in 2020 a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic started. Currently they are conducting eight programs across the region (https://www.fccusa.org/). The World Health Organization (WHO) suggests these skills improve health, peace education, human rights, citizenship education, and other social issues (Puerta et al., 2016). FCC model includes parental engagement and training and co-creating collaborations with allies in their area of influence (https://www.fccusa.org/).

The allied Community Center (CC), whose name will not be disclosed to protect confidentiality, aims to improve the quality of life for children and families. They provide recreational, educational, and cultural activities and comprehensive services in a safe, caring, and nurturing environment. As a private, not-for-profit corporation, this CC seeks "opportunities, partnerships, and resources to meet changing community needs". They share FCC's values such as respect, integrity, and sensitivity to diversity.

FCC and CC partner to provide a Sport for Development after-school program offered Tuesdays and Thursdays from 4 pm to 5 pm for the preschool students of the CC (4 and 5 years old). They received support from The Laureus Foundation USA (https://laureususa.com), an NGO that "supports more than 300 programs in over 40 countries and territories that use the power of sports to transform lives". The NGO was founded in response to Nelson Mandela's claim that sport has the power to change the world. They have benefited more than 6 million people through their work.

METHOD

Sample

The study was conducted in a city in South Florida affluent with cultural and ethnic diversity and populated mainly by Latinos (65%), some with roots in the Caribbean. The percentage of poverty in the county (21.4%) is almost twice that of the whole country (12.8%), and more than one-third of the population (38.2%) were born outside the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Nine parents (n = 9) consented to participate in the study and despite efforts to recruit fathers, the majority were mothers (8 mothers, 1 father). Seven parents (n = 7, of 19 that originally provided contact information) were recruited during an FCC-Halloween Fair in October 2020. Two more parents (of 3 present on the field) enrolled in the study during an on-site park visit early in 2023 (the third parent was from Jerusalem, and thus ineligible for this study focused on Latino families). All parents resided in the target city at the time of their participation. Parents ranged in age from 23 to 57 years (M = 37, SD = 3). Their homelands included the Dominican Republic (n = 1), Mexico (n = 3), Colombia (n = 1), Nicaragua (n = 1) and Guatemala (n = 3). Six parents had one child enrolled in the program, while three other parents were thinking of enrolling their kids (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Participant demographics

Participants characteristics	*n*	*%*	M	SD
Parent Binary Gender				
Male	1	11		
Female	8	89		
Country of Origin				
Guatemala	3	33		
Mexico	3	33		
Colombia	1	11		
Dominican Republic	1	11		
Nicaragua	1	11		
Primary Race/Ethnicity				
Hispanic	9	100		
Language used in Interview				
English	*2*	22		
Spanish	*3*	33		
Spanish/English	*4*	45		
Age of the parent			*33.4*	*4.1*
Years of parents living in the U.S.			*17.8*	*9.5*
Age of the children attending the program	*6*		*4*	*0*
Binary Gender of children attending the program				
Male	*3*			
Female	*3*			

Materials

We based our questioning route on the TPB by dividing the questions into three segments: behavioral belief, normative belief, and control belief. The first segment (behavioral belief) explored parents'/ caregivers' emotions towards the FCC program, their child's enthusiasm for or rejection of the program, perceptions of their child's developmental benefits or losses based on the program, their perception towards the specific sport of soccer, and their attitudes towards the parental workshops. Questions included: How does your child benefit from FCC? How enthusiastic is your child for the program? What motivated you to enroll your child?

The second segment (normative belief) explored perceptions of support/rejection by their social network when enrolling their child or thinking about enrolling their child in a soccer for development program such as FCC. Questions included: What would your family and friends think when you enroll your child in a Soccer for Development program? Who may be against you enrolling your child in a Soccer for Development program? Who may support you? Would it be different if they were boys or girls?

The third segment (control belief) explored perceived barriers and facilitators to enrolling their children in a Soccer for Development program such as FCC. Questions included: What things help your child participate? What things stop or limit your child's participation? What things stop or limit your involvement in parental workshops? Can you keep your child enrolled and active in FCC for one semester? What about one year? Can you stay engaged in parental activities for one semester? What about one year?

Procedures

FCC expanded its model to Florida a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic. They stopped operations for a few months during the pandemic and then reopened facing a high demand for outdoor children's activities following quarantine. As they resumed operations, the first author met with the founder and Director of FCC-USA to build a collaboration. After those meetings, the authors sought their university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct a systematic study of facilitators and barriers to parental engagement. Following approval (IRB-21-0388-AM01), the researchers began recruiting by introducing the study and collecting contact information during a Halloween Fair in 2022 organized by FCC. The researchers called each parent individually to explain the study goals, procedures, risks, and benefits in greater detail. Additional recruitment took place on-site at one park program in early 2023.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author in Spanish (n=3), in a colloquial mix of Spanish and English (n=4) and in English (n=2). The language was decided by parental preference and the interviews were conducted over the phone or Zoom (audio only) with an approximate duration of 30 minutes (M = 28.76, SD = 6). Interviews were audio-recorded, with the participants' expressed permission.

Data Analysis

The researchers transcribed verbatim the interview recordings and then translated them from Spanish or Spanish/English to English. We utilized the codebook thematic analysis as it aims to determine, analyze, and report patterns that occur in the data and can organize logically following a structure based on an agreed codebook (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Clarke et al., 2015). The researchers coded and analyzed the English transcription documents using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software (VERBI Software, 2021). All participants selected pseudonyms to protect their identities. Authors one and two collaborated on creating a codebook that contained the proposed initial codes (based on interview content) and the guidelines for using them. Then, to ensure trustworthiness, they independently applied the codes (multiple codes were allowed) to quotes from each interview transcript (Clarke et al., 2015). After the initial coding phase, they met to identify overarching themes that would be used to categorize the codes. After this discussion, the researchers compared their initial coding work and revised the interrater agreement to identify each disagreement in the coding. Then, the researchers resolved differences through one-on-one discussions and created a combined version of their coding (Clarke et al., 2015; Jonsen & Jhen, 2009). Next, the researchers reviewed the codes and deleted or combined codes that no longer served their purpose. Also, to ensure credibility the two coders were Spanish and English speakers, had received significant training in qualitative methods and triangulated their coding of the interviews. The first author designed the questioning route.

Author's Positionality

The first author is a Latino man born in Cartagena, Colombia, who immigrated to the U.S. more than four years ago. He worked for more than 15 years in Colombia, implementing socioemotional programs for the Ministry of Education and leading Positive Youth Development programs through various NGOs that serve children

experiencing poverty, violence, and other types of adversities. During this time, he observed how structural inequalities influenced the safety, opportunities, and health disparities experienced by children and adolescents. The first author also witnessed a troubling trend of children and adolescents getting involved in drugs and crime fueled by drug gangs exploiting the region. Despite these challenges, he recognized the power of soccer as both a space and a tool for driving social change. He noted the significant number of soccer activities attracting large groups of boys in the afternoons in Colombia. He became curious about the real impact and the opportunities for improvement of those types of interventions. As a doctoral candidate in developmental psychology, the author aspires to utilize his training, skills, and ample knowledge of academia to better serve children experiencing adversity.

RESULTS

Results are presented under the structure of TPB, through which we analyzed and organized parent responses: *behavioral beliefs (attitudes), normative beliefs (subjective norms)* and *control beliefs (perceived control)*. For each main theme, we captured the most relevant subthemes, as described below. We then identified the salience of the different subthemes to capture the valence of the main theme.

Behavioral Beliefs (Attitudes)

Experiences with the Staff

The attitude towards the program depends strongly on the parents' experiences with the staff. In this case, parents described mostly positive experiences with coaches and FCC representatives. These interactions fostered positive associations with the program. When asked about the coaches, some parents stated the importance of the coaches' patience and that observing that quality in the staff helped them to feel good about the program:

I can see that they have patience with the children even though the children are practically babies and still don't understand some things […] I have been happy with them. It hasn't been much time, maybe about two months. But, up until now I feel good about that program.

Children's experiences with staff were cited as a crucial factor to valuing the program as stated by Lima, a mother who said "Everything depends on that. If the children communicate well with their coach, there are more chances of everything working in harmony in the team."

This was also supported by a mother (Dominican Power) who described the coaches not only as soccer trainers for their kids but as teammates for their children's development:

It fascinates me because the coaches always demonstrate… It's like a second team when the mother is not there. They become responsible for the children, and they can call me if anything happens. If the mother cannot answer the phone, they'll react accordingly.

Parents also commented about the coaches' passion for their job and ability to understand their cultural and socioeconomic background. The coaches acknowledged the difficulty the parents face when doing things outside of their culture such as filing forms and were patient supporting the process. The parents valued those behaviors as Hele expressed:

They also enjoy their work [...]. When someone doesn't enjoy their work, it's bad news and they may not have patience. For us Latinos, sometimes it takes us a bit to get involved in things. This is especially true for me because I am a mom who takes a while to fill out paperwork for my kids. This is especially true in Homestead as well. There are many parents here who the opportunity to study didn't have, so we must ask a lot of questions and ask for help. Some people don't have the patience to help. I can see that the coaches are doing their job with love and doing it well.

Meanwhile, when staff did not meet parents' expectations, parents reported feeling disconnected from FCC, highlighting the importance of consistency when trying to generate positive attitudes towards a program. One mother (Jossie) detailed her frustrations:

Today, for example, our last meeting on Thursday, they could have told us 'Oh, there's not going to be soccer next week on Tuesday and Thursday, because of the holidays', You know? They didn't tell me, so I had to go to the center, and they told me that there was no soccer today. So, I don't feel really connected with the coach or whoever's in charge of the program.

Physical and Mental Health Benefits

All the parents interviewed spoke of the health benefits of exercise in sports programs and/or the therapeutic benefits of using sports as an outlet for stressors in life. This perceived benefit fosters positive emotions among parents, subsequently enhancing their willingness to have their children continue participating in the program. For example Hele said "Well, I think that when kids are in programs

like this, they stay active. As I said, at the same time, it's healthy for them, physically and mentally."

Various parents focused on the mental health benefits of Sport for Development programs, even considering the usage of sport as a form of therapy for the Latino population, including not only children but parents too. She stated that: "I have always said that a good sport always takes a child on a good path. […] for us Latinos[...] I think of sports as a therapy for them." Another mother said that the same is true for the parents: "It's even good therapy for the parents because when they go to work and leave their children in the sports program, they can know that their children are in good hands".

Parents perceive the soccer activity as a way to cope with the stress that result from adverse conditions such as immigration, as one mother (Val) said: "I think that it would help because the activity helps them forget about everything stressful in their lives. Children have their own stressors, and it helps them forget and move forward from that." Thus, the parents value the stress-relieving characteristic of the physical activity.

Some parents placed higher value on the program helping to reduce behaviors that they perceived as unproductive or unhealthy. For instance, Hele viewed sports as a method of redirecting her child(ren)'s attention away from undesirable activities:

I enrolled him in the program because of difficulties with him spending a lot of time on the phone, watching television, and such. That is not healthy for him. However, being in the soccer program and playing is healthier for him.

Emotions, Socialization and Discipline Development

When parents observed improved socialization and discipline in their FCC-enrolled children, their attitudes toward the program became more positive. For example, one mother (Lima) said: "It would be discipline. When you do something consistently, it builds discipline. I would like her to learn that the effort it takes to be disciplined comes with its rewards at some point." In terms of socialization another mother (Shakira) mentioned that her child is: "learning to build friendships, he is learning to talk more with other kids".

In terms of socioemotional skills, most of the parents see that the program fosters social skills. Some parents even referred to their desire to enroll their older sons or daughters, so they can develop socioemotional skills:

[Talking about Soccer for Development] It is something that we like very much. It is something that [..]fosters the social skills of the children, but also gives them purpose and makes them more reasonable. I would like my older daughter to achieve it to, since she is a little shy, [I would like her to] socialize more, integrate more. I'd also like her to learn to share because soccer is a sport that involves sharing.

Two mothers mentioned the positive emotions of their children towards the sport, even if sometimes it takes some effort to get them there. Hele stated:

Sometimes, he is enthusiastic about it and says 'yes, yes, I'll go'. But sometimes he doesn't want to go because he wants to be on the phone longer. I don't let him do that. But when he arrives and sees his friends playing, he enjoys it then.

Val confirmed this idea that her child's enjoyment of soccer has a positive impact on his emotional state by saying: "First of all, my son is young, and he loves soccer. He loves that activity. As long as he is happy, then I am too."

Soccer vs Other Sports

Parents with negative attitudes towards other sports often spoke more favorably about soccer. For example, both Dominican Power and Lima viewed American football as an inherently aggressive sport and soccer as the opposite. To this point Dominican Power said: "I don't think that soccer is aggressive. But I do think that football is very aggressive," and Lima said: "Soccer is good because it isn't really fast or rough […] American football, for example. I think it's aggressive all the time."

Some parents had a positive attitude towards soccer but felt that it was not a one-size-fits-all activity. For example, Dominican Power said: "Well, sometimes, let's say, there are children who can't succeed in sports. Although they may try, they might feel a little sad or depressed by their performance."

Some parents expressed concern about potential injuries. For example, Hey stated:

Even though I have one that is really active, and she probably will benefit because she's really active. She loves running, training. She never gets tired. If she falls, she gets up. But it's just me that… I think they're fragile and I wouldn't want them getting hurt all the time and falling or breaking a leg or, you know. I don't know.

In fact, Hey identified injury as the only explicit risk or disadvantage of sports, saying: "I don't think there's a negative thing. Only getting hurt is the negative part of it." Lima expressed a similar worry, stating: "Well, the only negative for me would be scrapes or bruises that they might get from falling and the possible frustration."

Normative Beliefs (Subjective Norms)

External Support

Most parents interviewed felt supported by their loved ones and peers in their decision to enroll their child(ren) in soccer. One father (Ronaldo) expressed that his family had high hopes that his son would become a professional soccer player like Cristiano Ronaldo, stating: "They always tell me that my son is going to be a future Ronaldo at 10 years. […] They always support me in everything." Several other parents felt similarly encouraged by those around them. Val stated: "Yes, as long as my son likes it, I think that they would be on board with it," Lima stated: "Well, I don't really have many friends here but the ones that I do have would be cool with it," and Dominican Power stated: "A while ago, I talked to my family. They have always supported me. […] they have always told me that sports would be good for my son."

Soccer as a Cultural Root

Several parents saw soccer as a facet of Hispanic/Latino culture. The following dialogue is from a discussion with Ronaldo about how soccer relates to his culture:

Interviewer: Culturally, how connected do you feel to soccer?. Ronaldo: Yes. I think that everyone identifies with soccer. Interviewer: Are you referring to Mexico when you say everyone? Ronaldo: Yes, in Mexico. Interviewer: And what would be the second sport in Mexico after soccer? Which is the other one that is better known? Ronaldo: Surely, there isn't one.

Other parents also reported that soccer was the number one sport in their culture. For example, when asked what sports are most valued in Mexican culture, Val said: "Yes, we really like soccer. After that would be volleyball, and then basketball. But soccer comes first." Lima responded similarly, stating: "In my country it's the best. Soccer is the best and practically the only sport. Here in my house, well… my husband likes it very much. The house is filled with happiness when there is a game." Lima also spoke about the value that soccer programs like FCC bring to low-income individuals and immigrants within the Hispanic/Latino community in Florida:

Florida is a place where a lot of low-income people live. So, this is a very big opportunity because many people from Homestead are immigrants. They are people who work very hard and find it difficult to do things for their children. And the sport that Fútbol Con Corazón offers, soccer, is an excellent opportunity because it's economical and not expensive. It allows them to place their children in something that's going to serve them, that they are going to busy themselves with, and that will prevent them from being idle. So, I think that what they're doing is very beautiful.

Some parents even went so far as to say that soccer is enjoyed across all Hispanic/Latino cultures. For instance, Hele said: "I think Latinos like soccer more," and Hey said: "Hispanics mostly like soccer, but most Americans like basketball or football. American football."

The connection with the cultural root that soccer brings to these Latino immigrated parents help them recall positive moments with the sport which may enhance their enthusiasm for enrolling their children, as Ronaldo expressed:

I remember that when I was in elementary school, I started playing soccer. My parents came here, to the United States, and I stayed with my grandparents. My grandparents couldn't afford cleats, soccer shoes for me. I got my first pair of cleats from my coach, and I remember that they were a little big on me. I even remember the color of the cleats. They were black with yellow stripes. I still remember the game. We lost, but the important thing is that I was happy because I had finally gotten a pair of cleats.

Gender Differences

Most parents, except for a few who recommended alternate sports for girls, said that there was no problem with both girls and boys playing soccer. Those who recommended different sports for girls than boys reported being hesitant about the possibility of their daughter(s) getting hurt. For example, Hey stated: "Girls are more sensitive, they're more delicate, they're more fragile." When asked if her immediate family would support her choice to enroll her daughters in soccer, she added: "Maybe not that much because, the same thing, they'll think about 'oh, they might get hurt.' And the girls are more fragile. Yeah, maybe not as much as the boys."

Lima echoed the idea that girls who wanted to play sports were not supported as wholeheartedly as their counterparts when asked about how soccer was perceived in society. She said: "Society generally considers that soccer is only for boys." These Latino parents can distinguish the cultural

difference in the U.S. as compared to their home countries, having higher possibilities for enrolling their female children in soccer programs here in the U.S., as Shakira stated: "There [In Guatemala] soccer is more designed for boys, but here, here is the same for everyone, everyone has the same right".

Control Beliefs (Perceived Control)

Logistical Barriers and Facilitators

These parents have multiple jobs and irregular schedules, common challenges within the low socioeconomic status (SES) Latino population. These factors are obstacles to their attendance at educational events like workshops. While some parents expressed appreciation from those workshops, they also highlighted the barriers that hinder their active participation like work schedules. For example, Hele spoke about her previous experience attending parent workshops:

I personally enjoyed attending. Sometimes I could not go because of my work schedule, but I always went when I had a chance. It is difficult for me to take my son to that program, to his practices, but I try to make time for it because it is very good. It's important and attending those workshops is very good. It helps us a lot as parents.

When asked if they believed that they could consistently attend parent workshops and take their child(ren) to practice consistently for one full year, all parents said that they could, but some mentioned potential challenges as Dominican Power referred to: "It depends, because sometimes my schedule is different. So that would be something that can cause me not to be able to go".

Thus, the most recurrent challenges were related to their uncertain and demanding work schedules. The parents acknowledged the program staff's flexibility and understanding about their demanding schedule conditions and recognized that this flexibility increases their engagement. For example, Val said:

Well, sometimes it's difficult because of time. I work almost every day. Sometimes I arrive 20 minutes after the other children get dropped off. That happened today. I couldn't take him because I had to go do something. He had practice today. But, as long as they [the FCC staff] don't tell me that it's an issue, I will continue to take him there because he needs it.

On the other hand, some parents found it hard to arrange transportation for their children to attend practice. This issue is also related to demanding schedules. Those same parents mentioned that transportation organized by the soccer program might alleviate this issue. For example, Hele said transportation would help keep her child enrolled over time:

If there was transportation for the children. Of course, I want to be there to see him, and I wouldn't send him alone all the time, but sometimes my job is all day, and it makes it difficult for me to drop him off and pick him up. It's what makes it difficult for me. I don't know if it happens to the other parents.

Val expressed a similar sentiment: "Well, yes. If there was a form of transport to pick up and drop off the children, it would be easier. That way, if someone is busy at work, they don't have to worry about it."

However, this solution was not ideal for all; for instance, Hey expressed concerns about those possible transportation arrangements: "Maybe I lack the confidence to let my kids drive with somebody else that is not me." And some of them did not see the need for transportation because the park where the program takes place is close to their homes, as Ronaldo expressed: "It's easy because it's close to us". In general, the parents perceived that the FCC structure, which is free of charge, close to their home and has a time-appropriate and a flexible schedule helps them keep engage with the program, as Lima expressed: "Fútbol Con Corazón makes everything simple for everyone. If we're talking about in general, there are many obstacles. Some examples would be money, schedule, and distance."

DISCUSSION

To understand family engagement in after-school programs, we applied the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) framework to the Fútbol Con Corazón (FCC) initiative in a predominantly Latino-populated region in South Florida. The results showed strong parental engagement based on responses to three sets of questions, corresponding to specific TPB factors: *behavioral beliefs (attitudes), normative beliefs (subjective norms), and control beliefs (perceived control)*.

First, the questions on behavioral beliefs revealed predominantly positive attitudes toward and experiences with the program, based on parent interactions with staff and perceived enthusiasm from their child(ren). The positive contact with staff and the physical, mental health, and physical health benefits they expected for their child(ren) outweighed reported concerns (mainly potential for injury associated with playing sports).

Second, the questions on normative beliefs confirmed the importance of soccer for the Latino culture and the value placed by parents (and others in their social networks) on organized after-school care. Universally, parents reported enthusiasm within their social networks for children participating in programs like FCC, that merge soccer and socio-emotional skills.

Third, the questions on control beliefs showed high accessibility to the program, with few barriers identified related to transportation or cost. The program's place in a park close to families' homes was a positive feature. Nevertheless, uncertainty associated with tight (and sometimes unpredictable or inconsistent) job schedules and competing demands (most parents had multiple jobs to sustain their families) were mentioned as concerns that may interfere with sustained engagement with the program over time. Despite this, the number of facilitators, compared to the number of barriers to parental and child engagement, were favorable towards enthusiasm for and engagement with the program.

The results prominently reflect the interrelatedness of the three categories of beliefs. Notably, parents' attitudes towards the program (behavioral beliefs) were influenced by the cultural background of the staff (normative beliefs), which in turn appeared to bolster the parents' perceived ability (control beliefs) to maintain engagement with the program over time. Furthermore, the findings' prominence of behavioral and normative beliefs suggests that an emotional connection and cultural resonance with the program may overshadow logistical concerns in influencing continued participation.

Interestingly, the apparent endorsement of soccer involvement for both boys and girls by others seems to challenge the conventional Latino societal belief that girls and women should not play soccer (Knijnik & Garton, 2022). While we anticipated and discovered a strong affinity of the Latino population with soccer, considering it as a paramount sport in Latin America intricately woven into its cultural fabric (Cuesta & Bohorquez, 2012), we were also prepared for, yet did not find, the gender disparities and exclusions commonly observed in Latin American soccer programs (Bland-Lasso, 2018). This discrepancy might arise from the acculturation processes that the Latino families experience upon their arrival in the US (Glass & Owen, 2010). SFD, particularly soccer can be seen as an appropriate tool for accompanying acculturation processes for Latino population living in the U.S., which has been supported by other research in the U.S. where sport events have been used as 'vehicles' for social integration by including certain conditions (Jones et al., 2021) like the ones observed in the FCC programs.

The results highlight soccer's promising perception and potential to enhance socio-emotional learning during early childhood. Parents noted the program's positive impact on their children's emotions and well-being, even considering it therapeutic. They appreciated their children's improved ability to engage safely with peers outdoors. These experiences are especially meaningful in the early stages of growth, potentially fostering positive developmental pathways that can mitigate the adverse effects of poverty in low-income households, where SFD can prevent violence exposure and improve developmental pathways (Adela et al., 2011; Blair & Raver, 2012; De la Vega-Taboada et al., 2023).

Finally, the deeply ingrained nature of soccer within the Latino culture deserves mention. It should be harnessed to enhance parental engagement and children's participation in after-school programs among immigrant Latino communities in the US. This approach can address the prevailing issue of low participation rates in after-school programs within this demographic (Borden et al., 2006).

As a limitation, qualitative methods use small sample sizes that may not represent the diverse experiences of families from different regions (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this case, the participant's recruitment was challenging due to concerns (Martinez et al., 2012).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper examined the engagement of parents and their children in the Fútbol Con Corazón (FCC) after-school program using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) framework. The study explored the attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control factors that influence parental involvement in this soccer-based initiative within a predominantly Latino community in South Florida. The results underscore parents' positive attitudes toward the program, driven by their favorable experiences with staff, the perceived physical and mental health benefits of participation, and their children's positive emotions and socialization derived from the program. Moreover, parents demonstrated strong normative beliefs, considering soccer an integral facet of their culture, and finding support from their social networks for enrolling their children in the program. Perceived control was generally high, with the proximity of the program's location, transportation accessibility, and economic affordability being identified as facilitators. However, challenges related to inconsistent work schedules and competing demands were potential barriers to sustained engagement.

The study also shed light on the evolving gender dynamics within Latino families, as many parents supported and encouraged both boys and girls to participate in soccer programs, challenging traditional gender stereotypes associated with the sport. Additionally, implementing FCC in a new cultural context highlights the potential for Sport for Development organizations to disseminate their design and expand their impact and methodologies across different regions.

The findings have implications for organizations working with Latino populations, suggesting that leveraging soccer's cultural significance and emphasizing the support of social networks can enhance parental engagement in after-school programs. However, it is essential to recognize the limitations of this study, which focused on a specific program within a specific region. Future research should explore similar programs in diverse settings to validate these findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how soccer can be harnessed to foster socio-emotional development and parental engagement among various populations.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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