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SPORT FOR SOCIAL COHESION: SOME CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, social cohesion has garnered significant attention as a key policy objective, with sport increasingly promoted as a potentially effective, low-cost tool to achieve this goal. Despite its growing popularity, the concept of social cohesion, particularly within the sport for development (SFD), faces substantial criticisms regarding its definition and implementation. A primary concern is the individual-centric approach prevalent in many SFD initiatives, which assumes that improving individual skills and attitudes will naturally translate to broader social cohesion. This approach typically targets marginalized groups such as migrants, refugees, and minorities, expecting these individuals to act as agents of change within their communities. However, this strategy often fails to address the structural and systemic factors that influence or limit social cohesion, placing undue responsibility on vulnerable individuals without sufficient support for long-term community impact. Critiques of this individual focus highlight the need for more participatory and political approaches that engage a broader spectrum of community members and stakeholders. Recent efforts in the SFD sector have begun to explore methodologies like co-production, participatory action research, and Living Labs, which involve community members in the design and implementation of programs. These approaches aim to foster sustainable outcomes by addressing community needs and promoting engagement at both community and organizational levels. Moreover, SFD organizations are encouraged to extend their role beyond program implementation to active advocacy for systemic change. By leveraging their insights from community interactions, these organizations can influence policy and advocate for long-term solutions that promote social cohesion. This requires a shift in perspective, recognizing the socio-political role that SFD can play in addressing broader societal issues.

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1. Introduction

Broadly defined as a set of characteristics that allows communities to address shared goals, the last thirty years have seen increased political and practical attention on social cohesion as an laudable goal (Dobbernack, 2014; Mac Fadden, Santana, Vázquez-Cano, & López-Meneses, 2021; Swain & Urban, 2024). With its interactive nature, popularity and low cost, sport in particular has been increasingly deployed as a supposedly high-impact tool to support social cohesion in communities across the globe (Svensson & Woods, 2017). Likewise, international policies have begun to draw ever-stronger connections between sport and its social potential (Moustakas, 2021; United Nations Office of Sport for Development and Peace [UNOSDP], 2015).

Parallel to this growing activity, there have been critiques of the concept of social cohesion itself and, more saliently for the present paper, of how sport for development (SFD) programming attempts to foster social cohesion. More general criticisms of social cohesion have been extensively addressed elsewhere, and have predominantly focused on the core dimensions and assumptions within various conceptualisations of the term (see, e.g. Swain & Urban, 2024). Relatedly, the concept remains poorly defined and operationalised within sport for social cohesion research and practice (Moustakas & Robrade, 2022; Raw, Sherry, & Rowe, 2021). However, I do not want to focus on these more definitional or conceptual issues. Moving forward, let me stipulate that, despite these debates, social cohesion remains a goal worth better understanding and pursuing. Thus, in the following, I wish to highlight the challenges associated with the highly individual-focused nature of most sports programming for social cohesion and avenues for potential solutions.

Individual focus, individual outcomes

One of the critical issues within the practice, and associated research, of sport for social cohesion is the broad assumption that individual outcomes will somehow translate to meaningful, sustainable social cohesion outcomes for a larger swath of a given community.

This assumption is first and foremost evidenced by the choice of activities sport implements for social cohesion programmes. The vast majority of the most common activities explicitly target individuals or small groups, for example through regular (mixed group) sporting activities, life skill building activities or workshops (Moustakas, 2024; Moustakas, Sanders, Schlenker, & Robrade, 2021). Implicit, or sometimes explicit, in this is the idea that individuals require certain attitudes or social skills to enhance their sense of belonging and promote social cohesion in their communities. Development agencies and international governments often explicitly make this connection, underlining how social skills such as teamwork, tolerance, empathy, communication and conflict resolution are essential for greater social cohesion (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit [GIZ], 2022; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021). Within the SFD sector, there is likewise a cottage industry of handbooks, theories and manuals highlighting a link between life skills and development outcomes (Cope, Bailey, Parnell, & Nicholls, 2017; Gould & Carson, 2008).

However, looking deeper, not all individuals are equally targeted as potential recipients of these 'improved' skills and attitudes. Programmes, and the policies that underpin them, are explicit about targeting individuals in various situations of vulnerability, including migrants,

refugees, and minorities (Moustakas et al., 2021; Moustakas & Robrade, 2022). For example, the Council of the European Union (2011) explicitly highlights how sport and sport volunteering can help 'integrate immigrants and other marginalised social groups' (pp. 3-4).

Yet this focus on the skills and attitudes of (specific) individuals presents a slew of challenges and limitations. Most prominently, focusing on the individual level does not generate social cohesion in the broader community. Social cohesion is after all, as its name suggests, concerned with society, and not merely individuals or small groups. Any successful promotion of social cohesion must therefore concern itself with individuals and actors outside of any programme's immediate remit. Otherwise, there is a real risk that programmes create a displacement of scope of sorts, using what Fred Coalter famously called "limited focus programmes" striving to solve "broad gauge problems" (Coalter, 2010). Work done looking at interventions in different parts of the world further confirm this, showing that approaches based on mixed group activities or experiential learning may generate improved attitudes or behaviours within the programme or sport setting, but that these do not necessarily transfer to changes within the larger community (Mousa, 2020; Moustakas, 2022).

The exclusive focus on already-marginalised groups within these programmes presents another critical problem. Programmes seldom target groups in positions of relatively higher power or privilege, focusing on variously defining marginalised, vulnerable, or at-risk groups. These individuals are not only the recipient of programme activities but are often expected to act as 'young leaders' to ensure sustainable social outcomes in the broader community. In many SFD contexts, youth are expected to act as 'multipliers' by implementing further sporting activities, developing their own initiatives, and promoting certain values within their communities. In reality, there is often limited long-term support to ensure this transfer to the broader community (Moustakas, 2022). Responsibility, and by extension blame, for social development issues is instead predominantly placed on the shoulders of these often already vulnerable individuals (Nixon, 2019).

These critical considerations however also point to several potential solutions, including how sport for social cohesion programmes can better work with and for their communities. In the following section, I discuss some of these possible ways forward.

Moving forward with and for the community

One of the main criticisms levied against sport for social cohesion is the use of predominantly individually focused activities to generate broader social changes. Following this criticism, there is growing recognition that programmes need to move beyond interventions that focus solely on the individual level and instead find ways to work with and engage a wide range of community members and stakeholders in order to foster meaningful, long-term social cohesion (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Sabbe, Bradt, & Roose, 2021). The belief is that such inclusive, participatory approaches allow programmes to respond to community needs, foster engagement, and achieve more sustainable outcomes by working at community and organisational levels. Flowing from this, various approaches have been developed and implemented within SFD, including co-production, participatory action research, and Living Labs (Collison & Marchesseault, 2018; Moustakas et al., 2024; B. Smith, Williams, Bone, & Collective, 2022). Though these participatory approaches are fraught with challenges and

risks (Luguetti et al., 2023; R. Smith, Mansfield, & Wainwright, 2023), they provide opportunities in two important ways.

First, and perhaps most intuitively, these approaches ensure deeper community engagement, participation, and buy-in. By involving local stakeholders, these approaches leverage community knowledge and insights that may otherwise be overlooked in more top-down contexts (Sherry, Schulenkorf, Seal, Nicholson, & Hoyer, 2017). This means that programmes can be better tailored to the specific needs and contexts of the communities involved, leading to hopefully more relevant and sustainable outcomes (Galway, Levkoe, Portinga, & Milun, 2022).

Second, as many of these approaches explicitly aim to work with a variety of community stakeholders, these allow local community members to come into direct contact with locally relevant organisations and institutions. This gives a chance for individuals to directly communicate their needs and wants to organisations or institutions that directly affect day-to-day life in their communities. For instance, local youth may have opportunities to speak directly with municipal officials, programme implementers can exchange directly with academics, and so on (Moustakas et al., 2024). In other words, this opens up avenues for action, and interaction, at the organisational and systemic levels.

As highlighted above, participatory approaches can allow communities and institutions to interact, and these interactions can also provide key insights into the realities and needs of the local community, allowing SFD organisations to advocate for meaningful, systemic changes that can foster sustainable social cohesion. Indeed, I would argue that, more than just working with the community to design and implement sport for social cohesion activities, sport for development organisations must use the knowledge and insight gained from these interactions to advocate for meaningful, long-term change within communities. Too often, there has been a focus on the “limit on what sports can do” (Spaaij, Magee, & Jeanes, 2013, p. 1620) and organisations may have become too quickly dismissive of their important socio-political role. As others have highlighted, SFD organisations can play a meaningful role in the policy making and advocacy areas (Sanders, 2016). SFD, and sport in general, is highly multi-sectoral (Ratten, 2018).

This, along with the multi-stakeholder nature of participatory approaches, offers opportunities to directly reach, and advocate to, policy actors and decision-makers. Civil society in other fields has long played an active policy advocacy role, numerous avenues and tools for policy advocacy exist for civil society actors like those in SFD (Gen & Wright, 2013; Mosley, 2010). Through coalition-building, public engagement, information campaigns and policy monitoring activities, SFD organisations have numerous potential advocacy tools.

Finally, as researchers, we also have a crucial role in these solutions and transformations. Suppose sport for social cohesion programmes are to work at the community and organizational levels. In that case, we as researchers must ensure we are adequately studying the context and outcomes of those activities. However, our work has predominantly focused on investigating cohesion-related outcomes within the narrow confines of programme settings. Thus, it is crucial for us to consciously investigate how sport for social cohesion programmes influence outcomes outside of the programme environment, including with regards to individuals or institutions that are not necessarily connected with the programme itself.

2. CONCLUSION

While sport for social cohesion has gained significant attention and is utilized globally, there are substantial limitations to its current practice. While perhaps beneficial to some extent, the prevalent focus on individual-level interventions and the targeting of marginalized groups fails to generate sustainable social cohesion on a broader community scale.

A shift towards more inclusive, participatory approaches is necessary to address this. By engaging diverse community members and stakeholders, sport for social cohesion programs can better respond to local needs and create more meaningful, long-term outcomes. Approaches such as co-production, participatory action research, and Living Labs demonstrate the potential for deeper community engagement and collaboration with relevant organizations and institutions. These strategies can enhance the relevance and sustainability of programs by incorporating local knowledge and facilitating direct communication between community members and decision-makers.

Furthermore, sport for development organizations must embrace their potential for policy advocacy, using the insights gained from community interactions to push for systemic changes. By leveraging the multi-sectoral characteristics of sport, SFD organizations can play a significant role advocating for policies that support their participants and broader social cohesion.

Yet it is also vital that, as researchers, we contribute to addressing these criticisms – criticisms that, often, we are amongst the first to levy. Moving forward, researchers need to work more consciously to raise awareness and develop capacity for SFD organizations to engage participatory approaches or policy advocacy activities. Ultimately, this requires researchers to move away from being more passive observers and demands that we actively shape solutions within the SFD context.

3. Authors' Note

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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