

# // SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT: THE ROAD TO EVIDENCE

A Systematic Review & Comparative Analysis



Laureus 

**SPORT  
- FOR -  
GOOD**

 The Commonwealth

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## // Summary

**Laureus Sport for Good and the Commonwealth Secretariat are both committed stakeholders in the Sport for Development (SfD) field, which uses sports-based programming to tackle key social issues.**

In recent years, a number of organisations – from funders and delivery organisations to academic institutions and intergovernmental bodies – have invested time and resource to assess the impact of this approach as compared to other methodologies. Seeking to better understand the evidence base created by this, we worked with leading researchers to compare the impact of SfD and non-sport youth development interventions on four specific social concerns: community cohesion; education; employment; health and wellbeing. We chose a group of six cities – London, Nairobi, New Orleans, Cape Town, Hong Kong and Mumbai – split across the continents and across developed and developing economies, in which we knew (a) that large numbers of SfD organisations were operating with a focus on those social concerns, and (b) that research had been conducted, and we worked to examine the state of the evidence and the methodologies used to capture it.

Across the review we found that many similarities exist between SfD interventions and youth development interventions not using sport, both in terms of potential and in terms of challenges. It should be seen that, despite the fact that considerable learning and data can be gleaned from the studies conducted, the research team concluded that – both in sport and non-sport interventions – the methodologies used were inadequately described or developed, which limited the quality and validity of some conclusions. Nonetheless, the research team made clear recommendations to multiple stakeholders on how to work together towards strengthening the evidence base. As is more fully examined in the full research report:

- If practitioners, researchers, and policy makers agree to prioritise rigorous, appropriate (and relatable) methodologies when researching or evaluating SfD interventions, there is the potential to improve the **quality of evidence** in the field.
- There is no evidence that SfD is more impactful in one part of the world than another (i.e. developed vs developing economies), and there is no difference in the strength of evidence offered across the different settings. On the other hand, it is important for all stakeholders not to presume that what works in one social, cultural, or geographic area, or with one SfD organisation, will necessarily work in another.
- The environmental context in which SfD and non-sport youth development interventions take place was rarely analysed in detail, with the focus instead on the intervention itself. More research needs to be conducted that is contextualised within the social and political climate of the interventions. **Critical factors** for success or failure, and potential **explanatory variables**, including common challenges, should be front of mind when planning programmatic delivery and study of impact. These factors directly and tangibly affect programme efficacy:
  - Explanatory variables: (e.g. programme climate; policy landscape; relationships; programme design and implementation; programme leadership; participant access to opportunities).
  - Common challenges: (e.g. lack of resources; insecure housing; inadequate staff training; familial responsibilities).
- **It is important to consider stakeholder impact** on SfD efficacy in greater detail, and go beyond assessing perceptions of participant outcomes only. Including stakeholders such as parents and community members, partner organisations, officials and policy makers in programme evaluation will lead to a greater understanding about the efficacy and effects of SfD programming.



## // Play-by-Play

### Before We Took the Field: Background and Reasons for the Research

Laureus Sport for Good and the Commonwealth Secretariat were interested in comparing the reporting on, and evidence of, the social impact of SfD interventions with that of other interventions in the same geographic location that also target young people but do not include sport as a core component of programming. Though we accepted in advance that the boundaries of SfD are not iron-clad, the review team found that Sport for Development is, in fact, often inseparable from “generalised” youth development, since “sport was so often integrated into comprehensive youth development programmes that any comparison [between SfD and non-SfD programmes] was challenging.” This is important insight at a time when many people in the field are discussing the ‘mainstreaming’ of SfD and debating what constitutes the SfD ‘sector’. This research reinforces that sport is already critical to many youth development efforts, and, in fact, discussing SfD as a wholly separate approach to youth development is perhaps unnecessary separation. Working towards integrating interventions with broader youth development and social policy interventions is a more effective approach.



### Game Plan: Research Methodology

The team reviewed both academic and grey literature to create a robust analysis framework, considering more than 16,000 sources. They then screened these sources based four criteria for inclusion: a) data collected in specific locations, b) participants' ages (10-25 years old), c) evidence of a SfD intervention, or of a youth development intervention, and d) evidence of outcomes related to at least one of the four thematic areas. Based on these criteria they reduced the pool to 188 articles and documents. Of these, 20 SfD academic articles, 25 non-sport youth development academic articles, 29 SfD grey documents, and 10 non-sport youth development grey documents had enough methodological details for critical appraisal. These articles and documents were independently assessed and critically appraised. The review team followed the recommendations of Braun, Clarke, and Weate (2016), which utilised a location-specific process to analyse data across six geographic locations.

### Reel Review: Major Learning Points and Recommendations

#### Shifting the Goalpost: From individual to structural impact

An important learning from the review is a need to consider more extensively if and how SfD interventions contribute to broader community, societal and structural change. The systematic review suggested the effect of SfD is enhanced through initiatives designed to contribute to policy change, build institutional capacity, and actively engage community leaders. There is a need for greater focus on MEL beyond individual-level outcomes.

#### Shifting the Game Plan: Accounting for contextual and explanatory factors

Recognition of the impact that contextual and explanatory factors have on the effect and impact of interventions received less attention than would be expected across the review. This dynamic suggests practitioners, researchers and funders would be well served by placing additional emphasis on the contextual and explanatory factors that impact the efficacy of each intervention, while remembering that the programme design and evaluation challenges may have similarities across SfD and non-sport interventions. These findings underscore the critical importance for programmes and interventions to be intentionally designed, and that design backed by empirical and approachable research and theory.

This shift has potential applicability in ways and spaces not previously considered. The traditional positioning of SfD in international development and cooperation efforts has tended to promote a focus on interventions in the global south (e.g., Africa, Asia, South America), However, the literature reviewed and compared in this study shows that SfD interventions are also important in the global north (e.g. Europe, North America) and that joined-up learning and development is important.

#### Sources Considered

**9,239**  
SfD academic articles

**6,486**  
non-sport youth development  
academic articles

**244**  
SfD grey documents

**135**  
non-sport youth development  
grey documents

#### Theory Matters

Programmes and policy makers would benefit from increased focus on programme theories or theory of change (i.e. models by which they conceptualise sport making a positive contribution or affecting change) which when developed, can help to account for context and scale, and also help to explain why SfD programmes work, or don't. While the results of SfD programmes are not easily replicable and/or modifiable, programme theories are likely more so, particularly if they focus less on specific programmes and more on broader understandings of the mechanisms of change in SfD. Further to this, given that the research from the non-sport youth development literature does not provide a clear blueprint for research and M&E in sport-based programmes, SfD organisations will likely need to continue to develop their own rigorous assessment models and practices.



## // Sfd Impact

Four priority themes of mental health & wellbeing, employment, education, and community development, social cohesion & peacebuilding, were identified at the start of the systematic review. Studies reviewed could be classified into more than one theme.

Across the studies reviewed, the team found that **mental health and physical wellbeing and community development, social cohesion and peacebuilding**, comprised the most common Sfd impact areas with evidence that met the criteria for this research. It could be that these thematic areas, which were most represented in the results across all six geographic locations, offer the greatest potential for impactful contribution, but it is possible these results were featured for a variety of reasons, such as their ease of measurement, the funding climate, contextual factors, or policy (e.g., the former UN Millennium Development Goals, governmental policy). These overarching social issues are intersectional and wide reaching, particularly for policymakers and social-change funders. By augmenting the current research into these intersections, the Sfd field will be better positioned to deepen understanding of the impact on these priority youth development goals.

## // Quality Of Evidence: Strengths and Potential

The research team's critical appraisal determined that the quality of evidence in both Sfd and non-sport studies was quite low, with only a limited number of quantitative studies determined to have moderate evidence, and a limited number of qualitative studies determined to have an aligned and appropriate purpose, philosophy, methodology, and methods. This trend was also persistent throughout the grey Sfd literature.

**This review found that significant potential exists to enhance the methodology used to research and report in both Sfd and the youth development sector.** Quality of evidence is a concern for many practitioners and funders, and is often linked explicitly to programmatic factors, amount of funding, and staff expertise. However, it is equally important that funders, practitioners and policy makers consider non-programmatic explanatory factors, context, and specific variables that affect programme impact.

Using a quality assessment tool derived from the Effective Public Health Practice Project, this review indicated that the methodologies of both Sfd and non-sport youth development literature and impact reporting should to be significantly strengthened. Critically, challenges with quality of evidence were found to be consistent across both Sfd and non-sport literature, which supports the idea that Sfd stakeholders would be well served to look for best-practice examples beyond general youth development. Stakeholders are also encouraged to pursue high quality research and evaluation approaches to design and implementation where possible.

### Critical Factors

The evidence presented in the Sfd literature reviewed mainly focused on specific intervention outcomes for programme participants and **not the critical factors that may impact these outcomes**. Thus, identifying and examining the critical factors that impact the reported

efficacy of Sfd was limited. To understand the implications of Sfd at government and policy levels and for funders seeking to deliver youth development outcomes, it is important to deepen our understanding of the factors that can be seen to influence success in particular contexts.

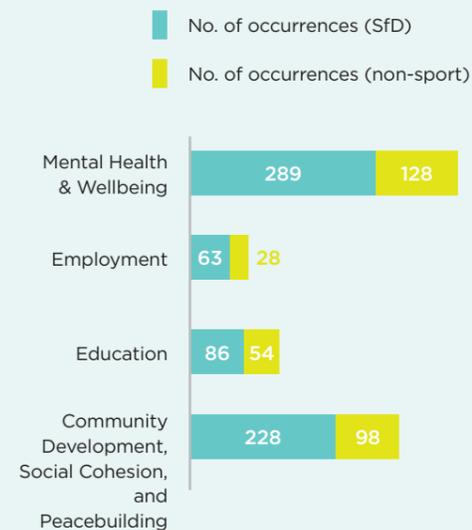
Very few explanatory variables were identified in the reviewed sources, and even fewer with strong empirical support. However, across all six geographic locations we saw articles that did address explanatory variables focused on:

- programme climate - e.g., safe and welcoming environment, supportive adults and peers.
- relationships and partnerships - e.g., mentorship, accessibility, reciprocity.
- programme design and implementation; - e.g. curriculum, theory of change.
- programme leadership - e.g., coach quality, volunteer retention.
- participant access to opportunities - e.g., community service, workshops.

Likewise, the problems programme providers face were also similar across each location (e.g., lack of resources, insecure housing, inadequate staff training, familial responsibilities).

It became clear that providers and funders would benefit from considering (and reporting on) **contextual and environmental variables and factors** in more detail. As emphasised by the research team, programmes that did this presented "a more coherent conceptual understanding of their theory of change" of how sport contributed to youth development outcomes.

### Occurrence in examined literature



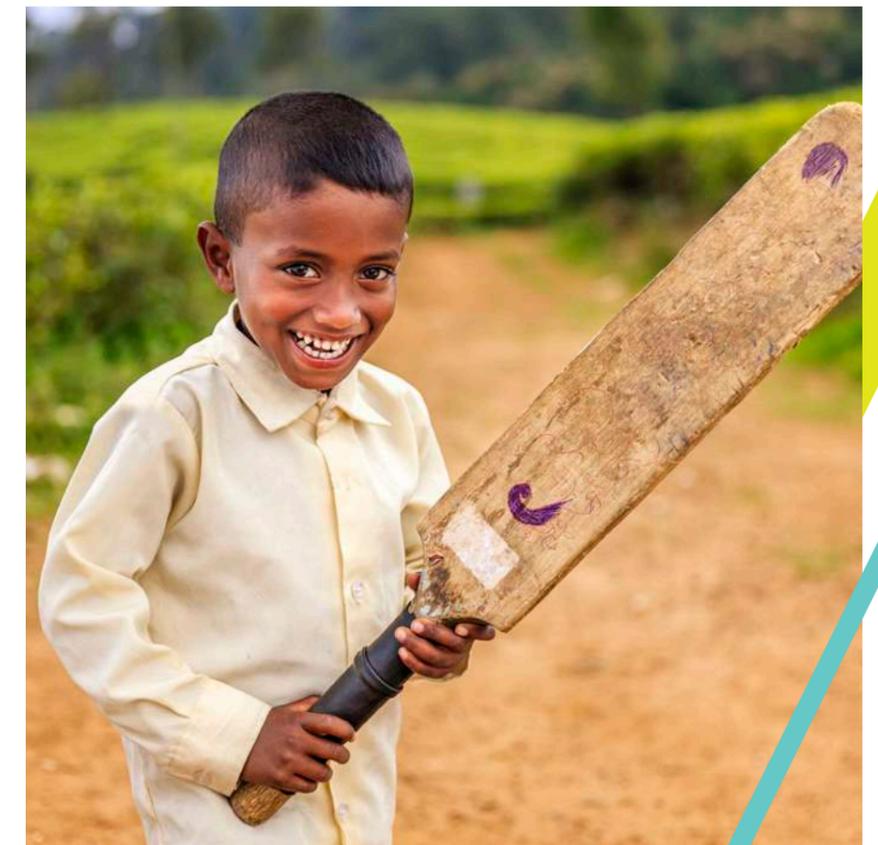
## // The Stakeholder Effect

The review also suggested there is a need to consider the impact varied stakeholders have on the efficacy of Sfd in greater detail. Within both academic and grey literature, funders and adults involved with the programme were most frequently engaged in research when asked to assess participant outcomes. The role of other stakeholders, such as parents, community members, officials in partner organisations or government agencies, and their impact on the efficacy of Sfd interventions was less frequently considered. The review showed that **including stakeholders in programme evaluation led to a greater understanding about the programme theory and effects**. For example, one programme identified the lack of 'buy in' from partners as a significant barrier to effective implementation and evaluation. This type of analysis and identification of what did and did not work should be encouraged more broadly. The same findings emerged in the review of non-sport youth development literature regarding stakeholders. Funders and other adults involved with programmes were the most frequently cited and largely participated by discussing youth outcomes, and not a focus on their own roles and impact as stakeholders. One notable exception was a project where a comprehensive evaluation included stakeholder's experiences, and asked them to identify programme-impact recommendations.

### Iterative Learning

**The review highlighted the potential for greater emphasis on iterative learning and measurement/communication of what works and, critically, what does not work in each context.**

Funders play a key role in this regard. Encouraging more open and transparent communication of mistakes, key learning and plans to change approach, would greatly assist in this regard.



## // Implications and Recommendations

The review team compiled a set of recommendations for those involved in SfD, many of which are applicable across the following groupings.

- **researchers**
- **practitioners**
- **funders**
- **policy makers**

This review was not intended to be research for the sake of research, but to develop practical insights that can inform future action by these groups.

### FRONTLINE ORGANISATIONS SHOULD:

Use explanatory variables to enhance programming efficacy including, but not limited to:

- Programme climate (e.g., safe and welcoming environment, supportive adults and peers).
- Relationships and partnerships (e.g., mentorship, accessibility, reciprocity).
- Programme leadership (e.g., coach quality, volunteer retention).
- Participant access to opportunities (e.g., community service, workshops).

**Share** research and evaluation methods. Include how results were obtained.

**Report** both positive and negative outcomes to enhance research and evaluation transparency and **identify** effective practices.

**Outline, adopt, and test** programme theories.

**Integrate** measurement of critical factors into MEL and research efforts.

**Consider** longitudinal studies and/or integrate long-term data collection efforts into routine procedures.

**Prioritise** hiring and retaining qualified, experienced staff and provide financial incentives that encourage employees to become rooted in the organisation.

### FUNDERS SHOULD:

**Recognise** the value in providing more meaningful support for research and evaluation designed to lessen knowledge gaps in the field. Consider:

- Capacity building to develop strong MEL procedures.
- Instrument development and validation.
- Resources for pre-programming and needs assessment activities.

**Set** expectation that organisations assess critical factors impacting their intervention's efficacy.

**Consult** with organisations to determine what assessments are useful and appropriate.

**Support** organisations in identifying and reporting null/negative findings which will result in more honest scholarship, more authentic partnerships, and add knowledge in meaningful ways.

**Support** longer funding cycles to reduce the fear of losing funding. The greatest impact evidence has been found from long-term, time-intensive interventions.

**Commission** studies that use a social return on investment method or a cost-benefit analysis.

**Require** evidence beyond intervention outcomes, which will allow for the development of a better understanding of 'what works' and 'what influences' SfD interventions within/ across contexts and thematic areas, and 'why'.

### POLICY MAKERS SHOULD:

**Support** holistic understandings and take into account the relevant contextual factors and stakeholder diversity. Programme climate, design and implementation, leadership, and relationships should all be considered.

**Consider** the explanatory variables which impact the efficacy of SfD programmes including, but not limited to:

- a) programme climate;
- b) relationships and partnerships;
- c) programme design and implementation;
- d) programme leadership; and
- e) participant access to opportunities.

**Understand** sport (both empirically and strategically) as one element of broader, integrative approaches to youth and place-based development.

**Consider** the context (e.g., geographic, social, political) in which SfD programmes are designed and implemented.

**Consider** the scale (micro vs. macro, local vs. global) at which SfD is implemented and measured.

### RESEARCHERS SHOULD:

**Recognise** that while certain challenges are inherent in conducting research in the SfD field, this does not change the need for more rigorous studies focused on specific SfD interventions that utilise multiple time points, multiple groups, and validated measures.

**Use** control or comparison groups, validated measures, and behavioral assessments.

**Understand** that there is little support for the notion that simple changes in knowledge and attitudes lead to behavioral change.

**Declare** ontological and epistemological positions and describe methodology and methods for qualitative studies.

**Create** public outlets for research publications beyond peer-reviewed journals.

**Contextualise** the research within the programme's social and political climate.

**Increase** the number of studies that are multi-site, comparison, and/or longitudinal.

**Consider** new research directions designed to inform programme design and practice, as well as the overall development of the field, based on the gaps identified in this review related to thematic areas, critical factors, and location.





“As funders and partners, Laureus is committed to learning, including exploring what doesn’t work and not punishing programmes for being open about moments of failure”

**Sean Fitzpatrick, Chairman,  
Laureus World Sports Academy**

#### CHALLENGE HIGHLIGHT:

##### **THE EFFECT OF RESTRICTED FUNDING PRACTICES**

By hiring more experienced and local staff, less initial training and supervision is required, and these staff members are often able to quickly understand the programme’s vision. Advantages to hiring local staff (especially those already embraced as community leaders) include: their knowledge of local issues, their existing relationships, and the respect they share with others. The fundamental tenet remains that, in and beyond SfD, human resources are the crucial pieces to the success of any organisation... precarious funding schemes within SfD, including short-term grants, significantly influence any serious attempts to consolidate staff retention practices. This may require a significant rethinking of how budgets are allocated.

#### The Review Team

The review team was diverse in terms of training, geography, research, field experience, and career status, with past experiences working together on various projects in dyads and teams. This resulted in a strong, collaborative, rigorous team who was passionate about SfD and the potential to influence the field through this review. At the project’s start, the team had 79 SfD articles published in academic, peer-reviewed journals, along with practical and research experience working within the countries of each selected city. The project lead was **Meredith A. Whitley** from Adelphi University, with support from **William Massey** (Oregon State University), **Martin Camiré** (University of Ottawa), **Lindsey Blom** (Ball State University), **Megan Chawansky** (University of Kentucky), **Shawn Forde** (University of British Columbia), and **Simon Darnell** (University of Toronto). Each team member brought knowledge and expertise that prepared them for their role, specifically, and added value to the review team more broadly.



#### **The Commonwealth Secretariat:**

The Commonwealth Secretariat supports member countries to develop policies and strategies to maximise the contribution of sport to national development objectives and the Sustainable Development Goals. This work focuses on the intentional use of sport as a tool in advancing sustainable development and strengthening governance, gender equality and the protection and promotion of human rights. The Commonwealth is recognised as a global leader in this sector and plays a key coordination role with international intergovernmental organisations and the Commonwealth sports movement, as well as business, academia, non-government groups and civil society.



#### **Laureus Sport for Good:**

Using the power of sport to end violence, discrimination and disadvantage. Proving that sport can change the world.

We support Sport for Development programmes which enhance the social and emotional development of children and young people in disadvantaged communities, reduce the impact of violence, conflict and discrimination in their lives, inspire healthy behaviour change and increase their educational achievements and employability skills. We strengthen the Sport for Development sector through impact measurement, research and knowledge-sharing. We highlight serious social issues faced by children and young people and unlock greater resources for the sector through effective advocacy and communications.