

Sport and Social Cohesion:

Bridging Social Divides through Equitable Sports Policies

Clara Lundén

IYTT WORKING PAPER No. 5
DECEMBER 2023

in connection with IYTT's
INTERNATIONAL YOUTH CONFERENCE 2022

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The **IYTT: INTERNATIONAL YOUTH THINK TANK** is a Gothenburg-based initiative mobilizing youth from diverse backgrounds across Europe with the aim of promoting a democracy movement based on open society values. Activities center around annual youth conferences in which participants develop and present policy proposals for strengthening an open and democratic society, while being brought together variously with executives from industry, academia, culture, politics, and civil society. Participants publish their proposals in a conference report and, engaged afterwards as Youth Fellows, develop them further into policy briefs through the "IYTT Bottom-Up Policy Advise Loop", a learning process involving open deliberations with decision-makers, scholars, peers in the IYTT European Youth Panel, and laypersons.

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ABSTRACT

Building on one of the proposals given by the Youth Fellows at the 2022 International Youth Conference, this paper discusses the possibility of using sports as a tool for community building. By looking at how three aspects of social cohesion; socioeconomic status; common values and social capital; and social and institutional trust, this paper assesses the potential of sports policies to reduce polarization and strengthen democracy. The paper concludes that sports have the capability to foster both inclusive and exclusive communities, and that policy makers and implementing bodies must ensure that policies and programs prioritize diversity and social inclusion. Furthermore, the paper argues that for sports policies to succeed in promoting social cohesion, they need to adopt a holistic approach to the dimensions of social cohesion, taking into account economic, social, and structural circumstances of sports participants.

KEYWORDS

Sports policy, social cohesion, social inclusion, group boundaries

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IYTT.

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Introduction

The early 2020s is a time of increased political polarization, with divides between political parties and ethnical, religious, or social groups running deep (Goldsworthy & Huppert 2020, Sandel 2018). While it is not the first time the world has gone through a period of polarization, it is a cause for great concern, as such periods have “typically ended in civil unrest, deep recession or war” (Goldsworthy & Huppert 2020, p. 61). Strong group boundaries can in worst-case scenarios lead to such strong exclusionary attitudes that one group denies other group(s)’ right to equal participation in society and politics. Therefore, polarization is not just a threat to domestic and global peace, but also to the democratic system (Novy et al. 2012). Researchers point to a decline in social interactions and exchanges as a contributing and vital aspect of increased polarization. Without in-person discussion and debate between individuals with different or opposing views, it is difficult for one person to understand the other’s reasoning (Putnam 2000, Goldsworthy & Huppert 2020).

At the 2022 International Youth Conference, the Youth Fellows, while discussing the effects of polarization on democratic societies, turned to their own life experience in search of ideas to bridge societal gaps, and suggested that by pursuing common activities, citizens are given an opportunity to engage with one another. In the final report from the conference, the Youth Fellows stated: “Through association, through community, people recognize the influence their behaviour has on those they interact with. This could develop a bond of reciprocal obligation both amongst each other as well as with institutions they engage with. This reciprocal obligation entails mutual trust” (IYTT 2023, p. 16). The Youth Fellows consequently came up with proposals meant to improve social cooperation. This paper focuses on the idea of “Community building and association through sports”, where the Youth Fellows propose the possibility of using “sports as a glue for community building” (IYTT 2023, p. 16). The paper reviews research on the effects of sports practices on society, rather than effects on the individual. By looking at the effect of sports on social cohesion – sometimes described as ‘the glue’ that binds society together – the paper evaluates the prospect of using sports policies to reduce polarization and enhance democratic structures.

The paper is outlined in the following way. The first section discusses the definition of social cohesion, dimensions of social cohesion that could be influenced by sports; socioeconomic status; common values and social cohesion; social and institutional trust, and explores how social cohesion matters for democracy. The second section relates social cohesion to sports, and the potential of sports policies to enhance social cohesion. The third section discusses the findings and relate back to the IYTT Youth Fellows proposal. The concluding section discusses sports as a tool for social cohesion promotion.

1. Social Cohesion

1.1 Definition

While much research explores how sports influence social cohesion, the impact of that influence varies in research results. One explanation for this could be that researchers seem to find it difficult to agree on one, concise, definition of what constitutes social cohesion. Furthermore, ‘social cohesion’ is used both as an analytical concept for researchers and as a buzzwordy policy objective by decision makers, and when used in these different discourses, the connotations and denotations vary. Indeed, Kearns and Forrest (2000), in searching for a definition of social cohesion state: “What is meant by the term 'social cohesion'? Typically, it is used in such a way that its meaning is nebulous but at the same time, the impression is given that everyone knows what is being referred to. The usual premise is that social cohesion is a good thing, so it is conveniently assumed that further elaboration is unnecessary” (Kearns and Forrest 2000, p.996). Therefore, before delving into a discussion on how sports might affect social cohesion, it is prudent to first discuss definitions of social cohesion.

In the European Union, social cohesion policies fall under the umbrella term of “Cohesion Policy”, which also encompasses economic and territorial cohesion – all aimed at decreasing disparities between EU regions (European Parliament n.d.). However, it is difficult to find a common definition for social cohesion within the European institutions. The European Commission’s Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs offers the definition “Capacity of a society or community based on a common vision and a sense of belonging where people’s diverse background (including migratory) and circumstances are mutually appreciated and positively valued”, while also noting that “There is no universally accepted definition of social cohesion, existing definitions refer to a sense of belonging to a community with solidarity and tolerance of its members” (European Commission, DG HOME n.d.). Another European organization, the Council of Europe, ties social cohesion to democracy in its definition: “the capacity of society to ensure the well-being of all its members – minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization – to manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all members. Social cohesion is a political concept that is essential for the three core values of the Council of Europe: human rights, democracy and the rule of law” (Council of Europe 2010, p.2). The US Department for Health and Human Services emphasizes social capital in its definition of social cohesion: “Social cohesion refers to the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among members of a community. One indicator of social cohesion is the amount of social capital a community has. Social capital deals with shared group resources, like a friend-of-a-friend’s knowledge of a job opening. Individuals have access to social capital through their social networks, which are webs of social relationships. Social

networks are sources of multiple forms of social support, such as emotional support” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d).

1.2 Dimensions of social cohesion

While the examples focus on different dimensions, they all emphasize a frequent and positive exchange between individuals and societal groups of a community. Explained in a different way, Larsen (2014) states that social cohesion is the glue that binds society together. However, this is also rather vague. What constitutes a social “glue”? What are the dimensions that bind society together? Unsurprisingly, considering this broad and non-fixed definition of social cohesion, researchers have found many different dimensions, and consequently, policies, which may impact it. Novy et al. state that “social cohesion is not about a single issue, addressing a clearly specified problem, but a set of issues, embracing a variety of dimensions of human living together” (Novy et al. 2012, p. 1877). In the following sections, three dimensions of social cohesion that can affect or be affected by sports and sports policies will be outlined from the perspective of how they might impact social cohesion.

1.2.1 Socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic status is a commonly explored dimension of social cohesion in research (Vergolini 2011, Novy et al. 2012). Socioeconomic status is made up of several dimensions including income, wealth, education, and occupation. It is generally believed that socioeconomic status affects social inclusion and social exclusion, where a higher socioeconomic status facilitates social inclusion, through having a socially valued education, occupation, and economic position, in contrast to low socioeconomic status which can cause social exclusion due to the lack of the same resources (Novy et al. 2012, Sandel 2018). Vergolini analyses how economic inequalities relate to social cohesion and concludes that poor economic conditions exert a negative effect on social cohesion. His theorized explanation is that “a lack of resources could lead to a deprivation in the capability space” (Vergolini 2011, p. 207-208). More precisely, a lack of wealth may lead to an individual getting excluded from certain paths that could improve their socioeconomic status and thus more pronounced social inclusion: education, more favorable living conditions, and occupational status. The results of Vergolini’s study suggest that should policies aim to create or enhance social cohesion, there needs to be a dimension of redistributive policy – to mitigate the negative effect of economic disparities.

1.2.2 Common values and social capital

Some researchers emphasize the importance of members of society to share a common culture and shared values. Kearns and Forrest (2000) identify common values as a dimension of social cohesion, stating that sharing culture and values allows members of the community to

identify common goals and objectives, as well as share a set of moral principles that guide members' interaction with each other. In brief, common values foster social inclusion. Being a part of such a community also ensure that the members benefit from social capital, that is: the resources a group (community) may provide its members. In one of the most famous modern works on social capital, Robert D. Putnam (2000) explains that "social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) increase production, so too social contacts effect the productivity of individuals and groups" (Putnam 2000, p.19). Putnam's explanation of social capital indicates that social networks are essential for individuals to succeed in society. As such, membership in one of societal group may grant resources and opportunities not afforded to individuals outside the group. Therefore, common values and social capital can have a direct effect on socioeconomic status, implying that a lack of social capital increases the risk of marginalization or exclusion. Although common culture and values can foster cooperation and ensure common goals within a community, they can also lead to the exclusion of certain individuals who the "in-group" deems to not share this culture or values. Putnam identifies two types of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital is about knitting together group members, causing a strong in-group identity. This type of social capital is also known as exclusive, as it generates strong group boundaries defining who is 'in' and who is 'out', creating strong in-group loyalty and sometimes out-group antagonism. (Putnam 2000, p.23). Extreme examples include ethno-nationalistic or certain religious exclusionary groups. In contrast, bridging social capital means social interactions that transcend group boundaries, allowing for an exchange of views, values, norms, and culture.

Strong senses of group values and culture may thus have a negative effect on social cohesion (Novy et al. 2012, Putnam 2000). Societal leaders have the ability to influence the shared moral code and values of their community, and thus the possibility of promoting inclusive attitudes. This can be done through means available for governments, such as policies promoting equality, freedom of religion, speech, and opinions, and all individuals' equal worth, and then introducing these in spheres of society where the government has an influence, such as the educational system, the labor market, or other public programs (Novy et al. 2012).

1.2.3 Social and institutional trust

Another social cohesion dimension relates to institutional trust. According to Novy et al. (2012) an individual's participation in public affairs is essential for them being a full member of the community. However, research shows that political participation often requires trust in both society and the governing institutions (Kaul 2020, Hyun-Soo Kim 2014). Research shows that the social and institutional trust dimension of social cohesion is closely tied, and can be influenced by, socioeconomic status as well as common values and social capital. Vergolini

finds a link between poor economic conditions and mistrust and negative attitudes towards government institutions, and argues that “economic conditions exert a negative influence on the capability to acquire a set of functioning included the skill to take part of the community’s life that could be mirrored in a low level of trust and negative attitudes towards the institutions” (Vergolini 2011, p.208). Put differently this means that a lack of some or several of the elements that make up socioeconomic status, wealth, income, or, occupational status, can lead to economic as well as social deprivation – leading to social exclusion. In turn, this can lead to the individual losing faith in government institutions, perceiving that these institutions have failed to provide the necessary resources for them to access paths to improved socioeconomic situation.

Putnam sees social trust as a vital part of social capital (and therefore vital for social cohesion), arguing that norms of reciprocity are vital to social capital, and to the function that social capital fills. He argues that members of a group care for each other and lend help and favors to each other because of reciprocity, that is: we help others because we trust that in return, they will help us. In other words, to create a community where people help each other thrive, there is a need for social trust (Putnam 2000). Social trust and institutional trust are by nature different. As Putnam puts it “One could easily trust one’s neighbor and distrust city hall, or vice versa”. However, social trust can promote institutional trust. A lack of social trust can breed social groups with strong and exclusive boundaries, making inter-group collaboration difficult. This in turn can lead to polarization in politics, due the difficulties for groups to find common goals or to collaborate around common solutions to shared issues. Furthermore, in societies where group divisions become extreme, where a majority in-group has strong exclusionary attitudes towards minority out-groups, the in-group might try to restrict the out-groups’ political rights. This may result in a negative effect on the out-group members’ trust in governmental institutions, as they may experience that they – and their concerns – are inadequately represented (Putnam 2000, Novy et al. 2012).

1.2.4 The effect on democracy

As hinted by the discussion above, disparities in socioeconomic status, the lack of social capital, and a lack of social and institutional trust can all be catalysts for polarization. Both socioeconomic status and social capital can affect the resources an individual needs to participate and act politically. Furthermore, a lack of either socioeconomic status or social capital can make individuals feel as though a government and official institutions have failed them, leading to a lack of trust in the political system. A lack of intra-group social trust may lead to antagonistic attitudes between social groups, leading to an unwillingness to cooperate and help each other across groups. Thus, in short, a lack of social cohesion may cause polarization, which in turn threatens peace and democracy.

2. Sports and Social Cohesion

As social cohesion has gained prominence as a policy objective over the past two decades, there has been an increase in policies aimed at fostering social cohesion in many countries (Moustakas 2022). Sports have often been hailed as a policy tool for the purpose of social cohesion, due to the capacity of sports to increase interaction between social groups and foster norms of collaboration and reciprocity (Putnam 2000, Moustakas 2022, Dowling 2023, Meir & Fletcher 2017, Mitchell et al. 2016, Kelly 2011). At the same time, some researchers have found that many sports policies only target certain dimensions of social cohesion, and that the effect of these policies risks being overstated (Moustakas 2022, Spaaij et al 2014, Kelly 2011, Mitchell et al. 2016). This part of the paper discusses how sports policies relate to the dimensions of social cohesion.

2.1 Sports and socioeconomic status

Evidence from several researches shows that socioeconomic status can both effect and be affected by sports and sports-promoting policies. As Collins (2004) states, participating in sports is expensive: “To engage in most sports costs money – for clothing and equipment; for subscriptions to clubs and magazines, match fees, insurance and coaching if one becomes more serious; for entry fees to facilities for competitors and spectators; for travel, food and drink when competing away from home” (Collins 2004, p.728). Collins stresses that with economic disparities in society, the costs of participating in sports will not have an equal impact on all individuals. Individuals with greater wealth will have easier access to the resources required to practice sports, than will those of lesser wealth. As such, without policies aimed at mitigating the effect of disparities in wealth, sports could act as a catalyst for larger social divergence, rather than social cohesion, by excluding individuals without necessary economic means (Collins 2004). This illustrates the point made above; if sports policies are to mitigate the effect of economic disparities on the ability of individuals to participate in sports, there is a need for a redistributive element.

When looking at the effects of the UK program ‘Positive Futures’ – which was described as a national sports-based social inclusion program targeting young persons – had on social cohesion, Kelly (2011) found that through the funding of leisure activities, individuals who would have otherwise been excluded on financial grounds were able to participate in sports programs organized through ‘Positive Futures’. Thus, the funding provided succeeded in mitigating, at least partially, the effect of economic disparities for its participants. However, Kelly cautions against making assumptions that the program would have a permanent effect on participants’ economic situation, stating that “activities remain only temporarily secured unless the structural conditions of their [participants] initial exclusion are addressed. Clearly,

projects can do little to impact on these factors (which include not only material poverty but inadequate public facilities, poor transport links or caring responsibilities) or on broader processes perpetuating inequality” (Kelly 2011, p.133). As such, a concern among interviewees in Kelly’s study was that once the program ended, or participants aged out, the positive effects participating in sports may have on the social inclusion of young persons otherwise excluded on financial grounds, may be revoked.

However, there are other ways than securing funding that allow economically underprivileged persons to participate in sports, in which sports can serve as an equalizing factor for socioeconomic status. In Cubizolles’s (2010) research on a tourism project for development in South Africa, with football (soccer) as the prime component, he argues that supporting the development of sports in a certain area can have the secondary effect of increasing the growth of the local economy and increased employment opportunities by, for example, increased tourism, the production and selling of merchandise, and building the necessary infrastructure to support an increase of people, goods, and services. However, Cubizolles’s study, which looks at the effect the ‘Kayamandi Economic and Tourism Corridor’¹ (a project with the purpose of developing Stellenbosch through tourism connected to football) had on Africans contra Coloureds², found that sports policies for economic development can have a diverging effect on society and social cohesion if one group is perceived to receive all benefits from the funding. Cubizolles found that Coloureds perceived that Africans were the only ones benefiting from the program, as the infrastructure³ was built in the Kayamandi township of Stellenbosch, which was predominantly populated by Africans. The Coloured population, of which a large proportion lived in Cloetsville and Idas Valley, argued that part of the regions inhabited by their group needed resources just as much as the Kayamandi township did. Africans in turn, felt that the investments by the government into Kayamandi were fair, considering the detrimental effect the Apartheid system had on both the Coloureds group’s societal and economic standing. As such, the results of Cubizolles’ study show that the policies meant to promote sports, for the purpose of economic and social development, instead fueled grievances between two already contentious groups, furthering the divisions between them (Cubizolles 2010). Efforts to promote development and growth through sports thus have the potential to develop both cohesion and division, and as such risk falling into the same pitfalls of other

¹ The Kayamandi Economic and Tourism Corridor (KETC) was part of the “Great Stellenbosch 2010” program leading up to the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

² Two categories of the division of individuals into ethnical groups in South Africa, a remnant of the apartheid system.

³ The project was based around the Kayamandi Economic and Tourism Corridor, a tourism building meant to turn the area where it was located into a “main centre of football focus for the community in 2010”, and was the host for several football-based initiatives. (Cubizolles 2010, p.30)

economic efforts to promote development and growth; insufficient targeting of society as a whole, leading to a real or perceived unequal division of resources.

When it comes to sports policies having an effect on the educational element of socioeconomic status, the United States provides a somewhat unique example due to the prevalence of scholarships tied to sports participation at universities. The socioeconomic status of the U.S. population varies greatly by race. The Black and Hispanic populations make up the groups with the lowest incomes and levels of education, while the White and Asian populations make up the groups with the highest income and levels of education (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2022, National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). As such, the Black and Hispanic populations will generally have a harder time improving their socioeconomic status – due to a lack of resources, than will the White and Asian populations. Because the U.S. also has some of the highest tuition costs for universities in the world (OECD 2022) a sports scholarship can drastically help mitigate some of the effects of socioeconomic status (specifically a lack of wealth) on the possibility to pursue higher education. However, Lopchick (2010) finds that despite an increasing attendance of African Americans on athletic scholarships, a lower percentage of African-American athletes graduate than White students. This relationship is mirrored in a 2018 report from the University of South Carolina Lancaster’s Race and Equity Center, stating that at only four American universities is the graduation rate for Black student-athletes higher or the same as student-athletes overall (Harper 2018). Both Lopchick and Harper found that this relationship is mirrored in the general student population, where Black students graduate at a lower percentage than White students (Lopchick 2010, Harper 2018). This indicates that athletic scholarships may not be enough to fully mitigate the social effect of race on educational levels in the United States.

Kelly (2011), finds that within the ‘Positive Futures’ program in the UK, both employment opportunities and the notion that sports can allow participants to (re)engage with education, is strongly tied to the idea of social capital. Kelly finds that a minority number of participants had been able to gain employment, volunteering, or training positions – especially within the sports field – due to social contacts gained through the program. She also finds that the sports organizers and leaders had found that talking to young participants on the availability of education, employment or training could allow them participants to see and consider paths that previously were unknown to them. However, as Kelly does in consideration of what sports funding might alleviate economic conditions, she cautions against overstating the effects of ‘Positive Futures’ on employment or education. Considering that the majority of participants did not find employment or (re)engagement with education through the program and that those who did mainly did so within the sports field, Kelly suggests that should similar sports programs wish to have a major effect on employment or education (of young persons), they

would need to expose participants to broader opportunities, by actively striving to put them in contact with employers and businesses across a variety of sectors.

2.2 Sports, common values, and social capital

Several researchers have found that if sports policies are to foster common values, community ties, and social capital, they must not only be targeted to ensure sports promotion but there also need to be structures ensuring that clubs and teams put these policies into practice. On the latter point, Spaaij et al (2014) illustrates the possible disconnect between policies and practices, in their study of the adoption of diversity management policies among local sports clubs in the Australian state of Victoria. The authors acknowledge the important role sports can play in fostering common values by stating “Community sports is an important setting where people are socialized into norms around race, gender, and ability, with significant consequences for how they engage with people of diverse backgrounds. It provides a site for socialization and community building for many young people, parents, Volunteers, coaches and spectators” (Spaaij et al. 2014, p.347). Spaaij et al. thus demonstrate the great potential sports can have to foster both common values and social capital. However, the result of their study is that although Australian policies encourage diversity in sports, it does not always filter down to the grassroots level. They note that in Victoria, an underlying business approach, that leverages diversity in terms of benefits and cost for the community club, is an obstacle to policy implementation. They find that if the perceived costs are higher than the benefits, clubs choose to not implement the policies. Spaaij et al furthermore state that “Perceived organizational performance benefits such as “access to external funding affect how local sports clubs, and the state sport organizations with which they are affiliated, understand and deal with diversity”, meaning that certain clubs only do what is necessary to receive funding that is tied to diversity practices, without truly promoting diversity (Spaaij et al. 2014, p.356). This suggests that there is a rent-seeking aspect to the sports business rationale, that policies aimed at fostering social cohesion must pay attention to.⁴

In the results of their study of two different types of community sports clubs, Okayasu et al. (2010) echo Spaaij et al.’s conclusion of the importance of diversity when exploring the relation between sports participation and social capital. Their study looks at what they call “traditional” contra “comprehensive” community clubs in Tokyo, and explain that traditional community clubs in Japan have historically been tied to businesses or schools and that the activities of such clubs are mainly focused on technical practice. The authors argue that due to this, there has been a lack of adequate infrastructure for sport at the community level (for

⁴ While outside of the scope of this paper, the rent-seeking aspects of sports businesses have been discussed elsewhere, for examples see McLeod et al 2021, Feess et al. 2015

example: facilities, equipment, funding, and coaches). As the Japanese government adopted the idea that sports can generate social capital, they created policies to support a new type of community club: the comprehensive community sports club. Okayasu et al. argue that this type of club differs from the traditional clubs in three major dimensions: first, where traditional clubs usually focus on one sport, the comprehensive clubs offer multiple sports; second, they have the purpose of involving individuals from across society, regardless of age or skill; third, such clubs also include and promote cultural activities such as singing, drawing, and ceramics. Okayasu et al. find, much like Spaaij et al., that clubs that include a more diverse group of individuals are more likely to foster social cohesion, than are clubs that recruit members specifically on skills. More exactly, they find that based on Putnam's (2000) division of social capital as bridging/inclusive contra bonding/exclusive, comprehensive community club fosters bridging/inclusive social capital, whereas traditional community clubs foster bonding/exclusive social capital. As such, in line with the discussion of Novy et al. (2013) sports clubs that do not prioritize diversity in their practices risk fostering exclusionary and antagonistic attitudes rather than inclusive attitudes that contribute to social cohesion.

In a similar vein, Dowling (2023) analyzes the discourse of sports policies in Norway rather than the practices of sports organizations, to evaluate the impact on social inclusion. As mentioned above, Putnam argued that bridging social capital allows for social inclusion and social exchanges across group boundaries. However, when looking at sports policies in Norway, Dowling finds that, despite an emphasis on social inclusion and integration, when it comes to encouraging the social inclusion of minorities, the policies focus not on an equality-based cultural exchange, but on 'fostering' ethnic minorities to the Norwegian majority's norms, values and customs. She argues that the policies aim at assimilating minorities to the customs of the majority, rather than fostering bridging attitudes that allow for multiculturalism. Furthermore, Dowling argues that the Norwegian sports policies included in her study frames ethnic minorities as 'problematic'. For example, it is argued that sport is an arena where ethnic minorities can learn about democracy and democratic institutions. Dowling maintains that "the inference ... is that ethnic minorities are possibly ignorant about, or lack, experiences of democratic ideals" (Dowling 2023 p.12). She argues that Norwegian sports policies tend to frame ethnic minorities as the 'other', the one that should change to fit the 'us', and by doing so Norwegian sports policies lose sight of their stated goal of 'inclusion', as inclusion means fostering an environment where all individual differences are respected and valued. Dowling argues that 'othering' is detrimental – if the goal is to build social inclusion (and thus by extension social capital). This is a concern echoed in studies of programs that target 'troubled youth', where the framing of the targeted individual as 'problematic' can be interpreted as exclusionary and affect the participation rates of the very individuals they are meant to help (Kelly 2011, Meir & Fletcher 2017).

Some researchers (e.g., Mitchell et al. 2016, Cubizolles 2010) question whether sports may contribute to social exclusion, due to the nature of sports teams competing against each other, thus pitting teams and supporters against each other. As George Orwell once famously put it: sport is “war minus the shooting” (Orwell 1945). While there are enough reports on clashes between players and supporters of various sports to support Orwell’s argument that sports can be antagonistic rather than unifying, research has shown that when social interactions between teams are encouraged through programs and policies, sports can foster social inclusion even in a competitive setting. Furukawa (2022) studied the effect the ‘Fifth National Unity Day’ (NUD5) had on the attitudes of the athletes concerning persons from different ethnic groups in South Sudan. Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan has been struck by two domestic conflicts, one in 2013 and one in 2016, which has left the country’s society greatly divided along ethnic lines. The National Unity Day has been arranged since 2016 under the theme of ‘Peace and Social Cohesion’ and the objective to “promote interaction of diverse populations through sports, the spirit of fair play, and sportsmanship” (UNDP 2020). Furukawa collected survey data and conducted interviews with athletes before and at the end of the event. Her study finds that before the event, a majority of participating athletes showed anxiety and anticipation towards participants from other ethnic groups, mirroring the ethnic tensions in South Sudan. However, the organizers of the event had ensured that different teams and ethnic groups would interact with each other by arranging housing, transport, and meals without any attention to ethnic lines, resulting in persons from different ethnic groups sharing rooms, transport, and meals together – giving them a chance to socialize outside of sport and competition. Despite some initial uncertainty about these arrangements from the participants, Furukawa finds some striking effects of these social interactions: “Most athletes stated that by staying in one place with athletes from different states, they began to share ideas, talk to each other, play and practice sports together, play and practice sports together, share their sports gear, and support and love each other” (Furukawa 2022, p.76). Thus, the results of Furukawa’s study indicate that NUD5 was successful in building ties between the diverse ethnic groups that participated, fostering understanding and respect across community lines. As such, Furukawa, who also follows Putnam’s division of social capital as bridging contra bonding, states that the event successfully created bridging social capital (Furukawa, 2022, p.79). She also observes attitudes of reciprocity and trustworthiness between athletes, indicating a strengthened social trust between participants. As argued above, social trust ties into institutional trust, which affects democratic participation. The effect of sports policies on social and institutional trust, as well as democratic participation has been discussed by other researchers (e.g., Cubizolles 2010, Mitchel et al. 2016, Kelly 2011) and will be further explored below.

2.3 Sports and social and institutional trust

While sports policies often highlight the democratic effect of participating in sports, it is mostly framed in research as the secondary effect of social cohesion and inclusion (see for example Dowling 2023). It is assumed that sports policies foster social and institutional trust. However, some researchers have found that this is dependent on how well these policies target *all* individuals and the political and cultural setting of the location of sports programs.

When looking at Sports for Development and Peace, which has gained popularity in both academic analysis and as a policy objective, Northern Ireland makes for an interesting case. Five decades after the division of Northern Ireland and Ireland, Northern Ireland experienced a thirty-year period known as the ‘Troubles’. On each side of the conflict stood a religious-political group: the Protestant Democratic Unionist Party, which wanted Northern Ireland to remain a part of the United Kingdom, and the Catholic Irish Republican Army. Known as the IRA, which was at the time associated with the political party Sinn Féin. Sports during this period tended to emphasize and antagonize the cultural divides rather than challenge or bridge them. Teams, and even types of sports, were divided along these cultural divides (Mitchell et al. 2017). Since the Good Friday peace agreement in 1998, efforts have been made to bridge these divides between Protestants and Catholics in sports. Mitchell et al. (2017) look at three of the largest sports in Northern Ireland, whose practices have historically been associated with either Protestants or Catholics: Gaelic sports (which technically is an umbrella term for several sports, but mainly governed by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), and has been associated with Catholics), Rugby (which in Northern Ireland had predominantly been practiced associated with protestants), and football (soccer) (which has historically been practiced by both Protestant Unionists and Catholic nationalists but was used during the Troubles as an antagonistic platform for both sides). Mitchell et al. (2017) finds that since the Good Friday Agreement all three sports have incorporated more inclusive practices. The GAA has opened up their membership to members of Northern Ireland security services, who were predominantly protestant during the Troubles, and whom the GAA had prohibited to participate in sports practiced by the GAA. While rugby had always been the least politically divided of the three, steps to bridge the cultural divide have been taken, including the creation of a neutral anthem that is neither British nor Irish. A pike in sectarian trouble (between Protestants and Catholics) in the football domain, led to ‘Football for All’. Which was a high-profile community-relations campaign “aimed at eradicating sectarianism from the game...” (Mitchell et al. 2017 p. 987). The campaign was deemed to be greatly successful. In a survey conducted by Mitchell et. Al, which included both members of the public and representatives of sports bodies, when respondents were asked if The Irish Football Association takes “active steps to welcome all traditions in NI”, more than half of the Catholic respondents (54.6%), and nearly half of Protestant respondents (48%) replied affirmatively, and only 24.2 % of Catholics and 24.6 %

of Protestant answered “No probably not” or “No definitely not”. This is significant, because although when asked about Ulster Rugby, more persons responded affirmatively: Catholics (62.6%) and Protestants (61.8%), rugby was never used as an antagonistic platform the way football once was, showing that steps taken within football policies to foster intra-group acceptance and trust has been, to at least some degree, successful. When the same question was asked about the GAA, a much higher percentage of Catholics (60.2%) responded affirmatively than did Protestants (29.8%), and a much higher percentage of Protestants (44.3%) responded negatively than did Catholics, indicating that the GAA still has a way to go if they aim to foster an environment where both Catholics and Protestant perceive to be welcomed.

The results of Mitchell et al. 's study show that policies specifically aimed at bridging the gaps between Protestants and Catholics, sports, which was once a platform for furthering the conflict and social distrust between the two groups, have been successful in bridging the divide and building social trust between them. The case of Ireland is interesting because of the starting point of great cultural division. While Mitchell et al. 's study certainly indicates that there is work still to be done, the fact that traditionally culturally divided clubs have managed to bridge the divide between the cultural groups to some extent, and include individuals who in the past would be excluded due to their group-identity, is of importance. As discussed, in section 1, social and institutional trust is essential for democratic participation. It has often been assumed that sports can benefit both types of trust. However, the results of Mitchell et al.'s study show that the political climate where sports practices are implemented has the possibility to either encourage social trust or thwart it.

The example of the Kayamandi township in South Africa is discussed above, from the viewpoint of the project's socioeconomic implications. It has already been discussed that the project was perceived as mainly beneficial for the ethnical group of Africans that made up the majority of the population in the township. This led to persons from the Coloureds' neighborhood feeling that they were excluded and treated unfairly, whereas the African community saw the beneficial impact to their community as fair – as a part of making up for the economically detrimental structures and politics of the Apartheid regime. As the project was initiated by the African National Congress (a party that started as a liberation movement by Africans against apartheid and consequently has strong ties to the African community) the Coloured participants of Cubizolles' article felt that the ANC favored Africans, and thus the project caused not only a social divide but a political one. Cubizolles found that while the group that felt that they were justly benefiting from the project, the Africans, had an improved institutional trust after the project was announced to be put in Kayamandi, the Coloured lost faith in the political institutions, due to feeling inadequately represented and claiming they had as much right to the resources tied to the project as did the Africans. The results indicate that it

is possible to influence institutional trust through sports-promoting policies, but that the program must be felt to benefit all of society – not only a few people.

3. Discussion

At the 2023 Annual International Youth Conference, the Youth Fellows pronounced their conviction that sports have the capability of reducing polarization and fostering societal and institutional trust, by bringing people together. They argued that sports can have a positive effect on a sense of community, especially for the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups. They called on policies that ensured sports as a right for all, regardless of social categories such as sex, age, national origin, or physical abilities. They suggested twofold action:

- “1. Stepping in to guarantee accessibility to sports by creating venues, facilities, and courses that are either totally free or reduced fee (you pay as much as you can). Focus on group sports. Creating popular, state-funded sports associations that are not subjected to market volatility and prices.
2. Foraging grassroots sports associations already in place by providing funding given that these comply with requirements – non-discrimination upon entry, etc.” (International Youth Think Tank 2023, p.16)

Thus, without calling it such, the Youth Fellows pointed to all dimensions of social cohesion discussed in this paper. The section on ‘Sports and Social Cohesion’ above shows that many researchers have found proof for the Youth Fellows statement that sports can make a difference in community, social and institutional trust, polarization, and democracy. The examples of the NUD5 and steps taken in Northern Ireland to make sports more inclusive, show how by ensuring interactions between ethnical groups in a sports setting – it is possible to overcome ethnical and cultural divides, which in turn fosters peace in formerly conflict-ridden areas. The examples of comprehensive community clubs in Tokyo, and the effect of equality practices in Victoria prove the importance of ensuring that sports policies and programs include people from all across society, regardless of sex, age, ethnicity, or physical ability, if these are to foster social inclusion and social capital, and thus contribute to social cohesion.

On the first of the two actions suggested, The Youth Fellows also identified one of the seemingly largest hurdles for using sports as a social cohesion-enhancing policy tool: that of economic cleavages. Research has shown that a lack of resources can prevent economically underprivileged persons from participating in sports, meaning that this factor is likely to most severely impact marginalized groups. These groups therefore run at risk of not being able to participate at all – excluding them from any other potential benefits to community building that come from participating in sports. The example of ‘Positive Futures’ shows that ensuring that funding is allocated to assist with fees, equipment, and clothes can ensure that persons with economically limited resources still have the chance to participate in sports.

On the second action, the Youth Fellows suggested that funding be given with the requirement that the clubs ensure practices of equality and non-discrimination. The evidence from Spaaij et al. (2014) shows that for this type of caveat to be successful, they need to be accompanied by structures that ensure that the clubs commit to practicing equality and inclusion – not just doing the bare minimum to secure said funding.

The literature also shows the potential of sports programs on two dimensions of socioeconomic status not discussed by the Youth Fellows: that of education and occupation. Kelly (2011) argues that when working with disadvantaged youth, it is common for sports programs to focus on attempting to engage the participants in society through educational or occupational opportunities. She also found that some participants, albeit a minority, had been able to gain employment or training – especially within the sports field. This shows that sports program has the potential to help participants in their educational and occupational careers – although Kelly argues that for these practices to be truly successful, they need to encompass opportunities outside of sports as well.

While the literature shows that sports policies do have the potential to make a difference in all three of the social cohesion dimensions, such achievements do not automatically translate into social cohesion. Evidence from the discussion of sports and socioeconomic status proves that despite the possible improvement of participants' income, occupation, or educational levels – it may not have a positive social inclusive effect or mitigate social divides. The tensions between Africans and Coloureds in South Africa increased rather than decreased from the 'Kayamandi Economic and Tourism Corridor'. African American university student-athletes still graduate at a lower rate compared to the general student body. And even in projects where employment and education are in focus, not all participants are successful in obtaining either of these. Many of the policies and programs focusing on fostering common values, a sense of community, and social capital run the risk of fostering bonding social capital, rather than bridging social capital. This is especially seen as an issue where studies have identified that the targeted individuals are perceived as the 'problematic other' that needs to assimilate to the values and culture of the majority (Dowling 2023, Kelly 2011, Meir & Fletcher 2017). Furthermore, some researchers have found that programs that focus mainly on social interactions and building social capital tend to focus very little on the structural issues affecting the participants, including socioeconomic factors, but also on social structures such as structural racism or systematic discrimination (Moustakas 2022). The example from Northern Ireland showed that despite efforts to bring individuals from ethnical and political fractions of society together through sports, the historical divisions of cultural groups in Northern Ireland make this complicated and not something that happens automatically. Steps taken to overcome the antagonistic tradition of the past have led to greater inclusion of both sides – but there is still

work to be done. Indeed, much research points to the necessity of enduring effects of sport policies if they are to have a real effect on social cohesion.

Despite these shortcomings, the positive outcomes are just as significant. The positive outcomes of sports policies and programs prove that through community building that focuses on all dimensions of social cohesion, sport has the capability of reducing societal polarization. This suggests that holistic sports policies, striving to incorporate and influence all dimensions of social cohesion, would have the highest chance of contributing to peaceful, democratic societies. Researchers have called for future research to focus on the impact of incorporating efforts to combat structural issues with efforts to enhancing social interaction, social inclusion, and social capital. (Moustakas 2022, Meir & Fletcher 2017). Future research needs to assess the economic and structural factors that might prevent sports from contributing to social cohesion – or in the worst case foster social exclusion and contribute to a greater social divide.

There are several other possible avenues for further research into sports policy as a tool for social cohesion. Many of the studies discussed here lack a gender aspect in the analysis of how sports policies and programs affect social cohesion (except for Spaaij et al. 2014 and Dowling 2023). Future research could include a discussion, or even focus on, whether sports policies aimed at fostering social cohesion frames and affect genders in an equal way. Most research on sports policy focuses on the participants. Spectators and supporters of sports can also develop inclusive or exclusive attitudes, which is evident by clashes of supporter groups tied to specific teams. Future research could include or focus on the effect of sports policies aimed at promoting social cohesion have on spectators. Also, many policies focus on team sport, due to the idea that exercising sports in a team fosters common values and norms or reciprocity. However, it should not be assumed that there are no social interactions in sports where participants compete individually and that the same effect of social exchange cannot be found in these types of sports. Future research should analyze whether there is a difference in the positive social effects of sports based on the sport being practiced individually or in teams. While the discussion on the dimension of social and institutional trust established that both of these types of trust are vital to political participation and that sports policies often assume that sports have a positive effect on democracy, few scholars evaluate the connection between sports and trust. Future research should analyze this relationship further.

Conclusion

The purpose of this working paper is to assess the feasibility of using sports as a policy tool to foster social cohesion. It draws on three dimensions of social cohesion that could affect, or be affected by, sports policies and programs: socioeconomic status, common values and social capital, and social and institutional trust.

Evidence from studies included on the socioeconomic dimension of social cohesion shows that economic factors can hinder individuals from participating in sports, emphasizing the need for sports policies to provide funding that can mitigate the effect of economic cleavages. However, it also shows that through sports, participants may be introduced to employment or educational opportunities they might not otherwise have been aware of. One main take-away is that to combat socioeconomic cleavages, sports programs must offer a broad variation of opportunities, and that these policies must focus on enduring effects.

The section on the dimension of sports and common values and social capital of social cohesion shows that sports have the capability to foster both inclusive and exclusive attitudes and values, and both bonding and bridging social capital. If sports are to foster social cohesion, policies must ensure that practices focus on equal and broad participation, regardless of age, gender, or physical capability. As such, if the goal is social cohesion, policies cannot focus on the performance of athletes, but should rather focus on the social exchange and ensure that differences between individuals are respected and valued equally.

Research on social and institutional trust shows that sports have the capability of bridging divides in culturally and ethnically divided communities. However, to build trust, it is of utmost importance that all societal groups feel that they benefit equally from sports policies – otherwise, these policies risk causing social and institutional mistrust rather than building trust.

Furthermore, these dimensions of social cohesion interact. Policies aiming to create social cohesion must have a holistic approach that considers how all three dimensions impact social cohesion. This correlates to the suggestion made by the Youth Fellows suggestion of "Community building and association through sport", where they point out the importance of equal access to sports, the inclusion of all members of society, and the impact this may have on democracy.

About the author

Clara Lundén is a young professional from Sweden, living in the United States. She holds two Master's degrees; one in political science from the University of North Carolina, and the other

in European Studies from Gothenburg University. She works in research with a focus on social policy, with a specialization in welfare and workforce questions. She did a Blue Book traineeship at DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, where she worked with long-term care workforce. In 2021 she was awarded the Rutger Lindahl Award for Best Master Thesis in European Studies for the thesis *Welfare chauvinism, a privilege of the wealthy? A cross-country study on the effect of socioeconomic status and social spending on welfare chauvinism*, a feat that inspired her to pursue a career in research. Since making the move to the United States, her focus has shifted from European to American social policy. During the fall of 2023, Clara Lundén is Visiting Fellows within the IYTT with the task of writing the present working paper.

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This working paper explores the potential of using sports policies as a means to reduce polarization and enhance democratic structures. With increased political polarization on the rise across the world, the paper argues that a lack of social cohesion can lead to exclusionary attitudes, which threatens the democratic system, and that world leaders must prioritize policies that bridge social divides and foster social inclusion. The paper reviews research on the effects of sports practices on society and evaluates the prospect of using sports policies to improve social cooperation and community building.

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