

INTERNATIONAL
YOUTH
THINK TANK

Policy Brief

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Sports and Social Cohesion

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a society in which polarisation is an increasing threat to democracy, sports can play a pivotal role in promoting social cohesion by transcending societal barriers and fostering unity among individuals. This policy brief explores the significance of sports as a powerful medium for bringing people together, regardless of differences in background, culture, or status. The wider consequence of socially cohesive societies on democratic practices should not be underestimated. Ultimately, the promotion of sports not only enhances physical well-being but also fosters social integration, solidarity, and harmony in societies worldwide, equipping communities with the skills and attributes to be active members of healthy democracies

PROBLEM DEFINITION

During the International Youth Conference held in Gothenburg, Sweden, in November 2022, the Youth Fellows identified two major problems facing society at the moment that represent a threat to democracy. Firstly, the early 2020s have been a time of increasing polarisation and division, not only on a horizontal level, that is between citizens themselves, but also on a vertical level, between citizens and institutions. Undeniably, strong group boundaries threaten to aggravate exclusionary attitudes, denying some their equal political and social participation and creating animosity between social groups, detrimental to democratic systems. Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic separated people from their families, colleagues and friends and has had a lasting effect on how social people feel. Overcoming isolation and ensuring that people feel confident and comfortable in new social settings will be a huge step towards increasing social cohesion.

The proposed policy interventions start from the most basic assumption: sports bring people together. In this context, sports can build key competencies on an individual level while fostering social inclusion and social capital on a community level, making valuable contributions to intercultural learning. With this in mind, the proposals foster the idea that sport should be done by people for people, transcending social categories, regardless of sex, age, origins, abilities and socioeconomic status. In essence, by providing a fun and accessible environment, sports can promote and strengthen social cohesion, be beneficial for communities' economies as a whole, and pave the way for an inclusive and democratic system.

Work derives from Clara Lundén's Working Paper: [Sport and Social Cohesion: Bridging Social Divides through Equitable Sport Policy \(2023\)](#).

POLICY PROPOSALS

Grass-roots Sport Associations

Create venues, facilities, and courses that are either free or reduced fee (you pay as much as you can) to guarantee accessibility

Open up the industry to involve marginalised groups in the leading of sports, benefitting their economic standing and allowing economic stability

1

Means-tested grants to diminish economic barriers

2

Broader reform to encourage participation of time-restricted groups (i.e., women requiring childcare to be able to participate, creating measures for mitigating this)

3

Circular Investment

4

Investing in sports and the mental-physical wellbeing of groups from across society will promote private investment and increase participation within communities

5

+ social participation
+ inclusion in state processes
- susceptibility to polarisation

SOCIAL COHESION

Integration of marginalised groups within and between communities would encourage shared discourse and societal participation, reducing social isolation and improving both short and long-term economic conditions

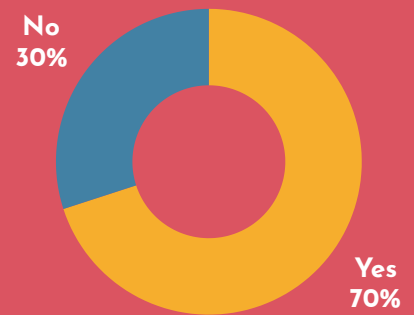
THE IYTT YOUTH PANEL

The Youth Panel enriches the policy brief proposal process with feedback from young people from all over the world. It is especially the qualitative responses that make up the value of the Youth Panel, as they offer a peer-review of the first thoughts and ideas and inspire the following policy brief development.

VOICES FROM THE IYTT YOUTH PANEL OF SPORTS AND SOCIAL COHESION

HAVE SPORTS ACTIVITIES SHAPED YOU AS A CITIZEN?

The respondents highlighted the enjoyment of sport in groups, enabling them to learn how to work in a team, making friends along the way and bridging the gap for marginalised individuals and groups to gain access to the community.



HAVE SPORTS ACTIVITIES MADE YOU FEEL ENGAGED AND INCLUDED IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

According to the respondents, participation in sports especially fosters inclusion as the bond between participants reaches beyond the mere sport activity. This also allows for awareness of the issues of racism, sexism and other social issues.

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED ANY BARRIERS WHEN WANTING TO PARTICIPATE IN SPORTS ACTIVITIES?

Respondents that experienced participation barriers, pointed out that their abilities refrained them from joining due to a lack of non-competitive sport activities. Also, financial barriers in more expensive sports hinder inclusion.



DO YOU BELIEVE THAT SPORTS ACTIVITIES CAN CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIAL COHESION?

The Youth Panel overwhelmingly agrees that sports activities can contribute to social cohesion as it offers a bond, "whatever your religion, nationality, colour is", by "creating a community and meeting people from different social and cultural backgrounds and lives".

SUPPORTING DATA & EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Examples on how different approaches to sport can counter barriers to social cohesion have been drawn from an impressive set of case studies, ranging from South Africa, the US, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, Norway, South Sudan, the Balkans and Ireland (Cubizolles; Okayasu et al.; Spaaij et al., 2014; Kelly, 2011; Lopchick, 2010; Dowling, 2023; Furukawa, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2017). In the following, we will highlight three of these initiatives, demonstrating the significant role of sports on social cohesion.

It has been found that sport programs have to prioritise diversity within their projects or otherwise risk fostering exclusionary attitudes and behaviour (Novy et al., 2013). Sport promoting policies that have prioritised diversity, that have taken into account their political climate and that have created a perceived benefit to all of society (rather than selectively), have proven to show great success in building ties between diverse ethnic groups. Results showcased

- A development of mutual understanding
- Respect across community lines
- Attitudes of reciprocity and trustworthiness
- A strengthened social trust between participants.

Example 1



The Sport for Development initiative (S4D), implemented from 2019 to 2022 in multiple regions, including the multi-ethnic, post-conflict societies of the Western Balkans. Commissioned by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the S4D initiative has been used to reach vulnerable groups in societies at risk of socio-economic crises, such as children and youth, marginalised people, girls and young women.

Individuals were encouraged to apply concepts of tolerance, anti-discrimination and conflict resolution in their physical education, thus supporting non-sporting development outcomes following a rights-based approach while embracing diversity. The potential of adopting and promoting positive social cohesion is recognised in more than seven municipalities. In five Western Balkan countries and approximately 32.000 young people have further developed their self-, social and sport specific competences. Teachers and trainers who use the S4D method in their groups reported a positive development of social relations even beyond the actual physical education lessons, especially between children from different backgrounds who would not otherwise mingle (Steinbach and Klingmann, 2021).

Example 2



A study in South Sudan further consolidates the positive effect sports can have on social cohesion. Since the independence of South Sudan from Sudan mainly two tribal groups, namely the Dinka-centred government side and the Nuer-centred opposition, have developed hostile attitudes toward each other. In order to smooth relations, a National Unity Day

was organised, a sport event under the theme of peace and unity, including a sport trip to Juba, during which individuals were randomly allocated to rooms and seats disregarding their ethnic background (Furukawa, 2022). According to the athletes, habits of mutual sharing were developed, as well as the exchange of ideas and support of each other, successfully building ties and trust between the Dinka and Nuer supporters (Furukawa, 2022). It begs to think about the potential sports could carry for other countries that are divided by rising ethnic disparities.

Example 3



The United Nations recognises sport as an enabler of sustainable development and “as a means to promote education, health, development and peace” (UN General Assembly, Resolution 58/5).

A research in the UK sheds further nuance to this promising topic. Kelly (2011), finds that within the ‘Positive Futures’ program in the UK, sport was viewed as a possible means for individuals to gain social capital, which has been linked to both employment opportunities and the notion that sports can allow participants to (re)engage with education. Increasing employment and education can be seen as relevant factors for the re-engagement in society and hence improving conditions for social cohesion. Although Kelly (2011) finds that while only a minority number of participants had been able to find employment volunteering, or training positions due to social contacts gained through the program, she also finds that simply talking to young participants on the availability of education, employment or training could allow them to see and consider paths that previously were unknown to them. These examples suggest that sports-promoting policies teach people how to mingle despite different standings and backgrounds, indicating sports to be a potential tool to solve division, isolation and polarisation. However, we want to notice that all findings need to be considered in their respective contexts and are not necessarily universally applicable. We want to state that further research should be encouraged and the local levels considered.



Youth Fellows at the International Youth Conference 2023

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH THINK TANK

The IYTT: INTERNATIONAL YOUTH THINK TANK is a think tank in which youth take the lead for democracy-strengthening activities with the aim to inspire decision-makers to democratic renewal and people to become more active citizens. Youth Fellows recruited via open calls for annual four-day conferences with 24 participants run the IYTT activities. To inspire decision-makers Youth Fellows develop democracy-renewing proposals that are published in a user-friendly democracy handbook, in reports, working papers, and in policy briefs. To inspire people to active citizenship Youth Fellows, take to the streets and engage in conversations with passers-by using a method they developed themselves called Open Chair Democracy Talks (OCDT). Since its inception in Athens in September 2021, Youth Fellows have conducted OCDTs in over 50 locations and five continents. The IYTT's early international advance is shown by an article in The New York Times, in October 2022, and that applications for the fifth anniversary conference come from 540 youth from 68 countries.

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