

Chapter 6

Sports and Recreation

Sport is considered an essential activity for individuals of all ages, and it plays an important role in all societies. The UN has touted sport as a cost-effective tool for meeting many development and peace challenges, and as a vehicle for achieving the SDGs – a sentiment reiterated by Ghana’s minister of youth and sports (Abayateye, 2018). However, although sport is considered an important tool to enable sustainable development,¹ recent discussions at the Fourth Commonwealth Debate on Sport highlighted that ‘intentional action’ is needed to scale sport’s impact on sustainable development (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2019).

Sport does not only promote physical activity, it teaches important life skills and lessons to youth (Danish et al., 2004). Engagement in sport programmes and initiatives provides youth with opportunities to be physically active – thereby improving their physical health – as well as contributing to youth psychosocial development by providing opportunities to learn important life skills such as cooperation, discipline, leadership and self-control. Furthermore, physical activity habits developed during childhood and adolescence are associated with physical activity habits in adulthood, meaning an active youth population can translate into a healthier adult population (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). All this combined make sports and recreational activities a favourable option for development actors and policy-makers to consider in fostering *positive* youth development.

6.1 Positive Youth Development and sports

PYD in connection to sports and recreation refers to the ways in which youth ‘may accrue optimal developmental experiences through their involvement in organised activities’ (Holt and Neely, 2011, p. 300). Sports and recreation can foster PYD in various ways. Scholars have found that various leisure activities have the ability to promote physical, psychological, emotional, social and intellectual development in youth populations (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). For instance, sports and recreation can combat obesity and related diseases, increase self-esteem and decrease stress, promote peer relations and leadership skills, and foster increased participation in academic endeavours (*ibid.*). It has been documented that sports participation not only reduces the tendency among youth to engage in negative social behaviours and is connected to lower rates of drug use, depression and incidence of suicidal behaviour, but also is linked to increased likelihood of attending tertiary education institutions, achieving independence and obtaining satisfactory employment (Zarrett et al., 2008). Today, a number of higher education institutions in Ghana offer courses and programmes in both the theory and the practice of sport, allowing young people to further pursue interest in sport as a career. In essence, sport provides opportunities

to foster PYD in many ways and should therefore be considered an important topic of focus in youth development policies.

6.2 Football

Football is widely acknowledged to be the most popular sport in Ghana. Former President Kwame Nkrumah recognised football's important mark on Ghanaian culture and believed the sport to be a 'rallying point for nation-building and pan-African unity' (Darby, 2013, p. 221). Ghana is home to many local ball teams, including youth teams like Kumasi Asante Kotoko and Accra Hearts of Oak.

6.2.1 Risks associated with international football leagues

There is growing interest in watching European football matches in lieu of attending local Ghanaian league matches, and betting on these matches is increasing among the youth populations.

The allure of fame and fortune, combined with the growing number of Ghanaian footballers in prestigious European, Asian and Middle Eastern football clubs, has made football an attractive career for Ghanaian youth (Esson, 2015). Lack of job opportunities for young graduates in the formal sector, growing economic uncertainty and poor returns on education investment are spurring youth to pursue careers in football clubs outside of Ghana with the idea that education is no longer the best route out of poverty – and that football is. Many skilled football players drop out of school to focus on the sport in the hope that a visiting agent will offer them a contract with a foreign club (ibid.). Unfortunately, tighter immigration regulations and the high level of international competition mean these dreams are not realised for the majority of these players. Furthermore, these aspiring young players are vulnerable to human traffickers posing as football recruiters (ibid.).

6.2.2 Inherent risks of increased use of electronic games

Ghanaian youth participate in numerous outdoor games during their leisure time. The most renowned traditional games are *pilolo*, *oware*, *chaskale* and *ampe*. Participation in outdoor activities such as these occurs most often during break time at school or outside the compound of houses when young people are home with their siblings or peers. Unfortunately, with the expanding use of video games, less and less time is spent engaging in outdoor activities; this is being replaced by a much more sedentary lifestyle (Boampong, 2019).

6.3 Current policy initiatives in sports and recreation

GoG currently recognises sport as a strategic tool for youth development, specifically for its ability to promote healthy lifestyles, decrease delinquent behaviour and increase opportunities for Ghanaian youth.² The value of sports in fostering youth development in the Ghanaian context can be seen in the various policies and programmes created by major actors such as MOYS, local institutions/companies and international

development players. For example, the NYP 2010 includes sports and recreation in its policy plan for youth development, indicating that sports and recreation ‘enhances one’s physical well-being, and self-esteem, while contributing to socio-economic development in the form of improved public health’. Because of this, the main policy objective is to increase participation in sports and recreation as well as to promote ‘positive leisure activities’ through the promotion of sports competitions. Another important objective of the Policy is to promote participation in sport by youth with disabilities. This is an important step for Ghanaian development in general, especially since persons with disabilities are often been overlooked and marginalised in policy development (Bourgeois, 2011). Active acknowledgement of their needs is critical to the development of equitable policies.

Since the creation of the NYP 2010, a number of initiatives have centred on youth sports development. Two of these are the Youth in Sports Programme and the Youth Resource Centre Project. The Youth in Sports Programme, a community improvement initiative, aims to help youth acquire sports-related employment. Specifically, it provides two-week training in sports-related courses like coaching and sports journalism. The overarching purpose is to use sports as a vehicle to provide the youth demographic with more employment opportunities, with the overall goal of training and helping 8,000 youth acquire sports-related jobs by the end of 2019 (Abayateye, 2018).

The Youth Resource Centre Project is a push to provide proper multi-purpose youth centres for Ghanaian youth in the original 10 regions of Ghana with the goal of better preparing youth athletes for major competitions (Aduonum, 2018; Tahiru, 2018). Each facility will be equipped with an eight-lane athletic track, a FIFA standard pitch, a career counselling centre, basketball and handball courts, a multi-purpose sports hall, a restaurant and an ICT centre (Tahiru 2018).

6.4 Gender and sports

Gender is an important topic with respect to sports and recreation development in Ghana. Traditionally, sports and leisure have been understood as male-centric activities. In Ghana, a 2008 study found low levels of female participation in sport, especially at the university level (Ampong, 2008). It has also been acknowledged that, although Ghana values football, women’s football is not given the same attention as men’s; women’s football is described as ‘forgotten and neglected’, with minimal support from media outlets (Bamba, 2017).

In Ghana, physical education, an essential aspect of the school curriculum, is structured according to gender. Boys regularly play soccer and other local games such as *pilolo* (a hide-and-seek game) while girls are typically restricted to playing netball or *ampe* (a jump, clap and a foot-step forward play). Boys dominate the football field, and boys who do not play football are often referred to as *obaabema* (which literally means ‘man-woman’). Basketball, volleyball, *ludo* and *oware* are non-gendered. In many of these sports, skilful teenagers are selected for district, regional and national competitions as part of the Inter Schools and Colleges Athletics Championships.

6.5 Summary points

1. Sports and recreation is understood to be positive for youth development on various levels (physically, physiologically, emotionally, socially and intellectually).
2. Ghanaian youth engage in many sporting activities; however, football remains the dominant sport.
3. Increasingly, Ghanaian youth are recognising football as a route out of poverty.
4. Sports betting in football has also become an increasing phenomenon among the youth demographic.
5. Numerous policies and initiatives target sports and youth development in Ghana, including the NYP, the Youth in Sports Programme and the Youth Resource Centre Project.
6. Although Ghana has made great strides in sports and youth development, the gender divide continues to be an on-going issue in sport; female athletes are often neglected and overlooked in comparison with their male counterparts.
7. Traditional games must be preserved and promoted in the wake of contemporary sporting or leisure activities.

6.6 Recommendations

1. Youth development interventions such as the Youth in Sports Programme and the Youth Resource Centre Project should be gender-sensitive. The importance of females in sport must be acknowledged and they must be given equitable opportunities.
2. Sports participation does not automatically result in PYD. The importance of positive youth–adult/coach relationships should be highlighted given the importance of the role of mentoring figures in designing teaching environments that facilitate the transmission of critical life skills and supporting the autonomy of young athletes.
3. The increasing popularity of sports betting among the youth demographic requires attention; betting companies have made it too easy for young people to engage in problematic gambling. Implementation of increased regulation is recommended.
4. Bottom-up strategies for the establishment of successful sports initiatives are required for local accountability and sustainability. This requires active involvement of youth representatives and comprehensive community assessment to ensure any and all initiatives are accepted, supported and sustained.
5. Traditional games must be rebranded, documented and promoted as competitive activities for young people to participate in.

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Notes

- 1 <http://thecommonwealth.org/media/event/4th-commonwealth-debate-sport-and-sustainable-development>
- 2 <http://www.ghana.gov.gh/index.php/media-center/features/2576-growing-youth-employability-and-employment-through-sports>

