

Community Sports Programmes as Tools for Social and Economic Development in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Community sports programmes have become important instruments for promoting social and economic development in Nigeria. At the grassroots level, these programmes provide opportunities for physical participation, social interaction, youth empowerment, and community integration. Sports activities organized within communities contribute to improving health, developing life skills, reducing social exclusion, and creating economic opportunities through employment, local businesses, and sports-related services. In Nigeria, where many communities face challenges such as youth unemployment, inadequate recreational facilities, and social inequality, community sports programmes provide a practical approach for addressing some of these developmental concerns. This paper examines the role of community sports programmes in promoting social cohesion and economic growth in Nigeria. It discusses the concept of community sports, different forms of community sports initiatives, the benefits of such programmes, and the challenges affecting their sustainability. The paper highlights the need for stronger government support, private-sector participation, improved sports infrastructure, and community involvement to maximize the developmental potential of sports in Nigeria.

Key words; Community Sports, Sport Programmes, Social Economic development

Introduction

Community sports programs have emerged as a vital component of social and economic development initiatives worldwide. These programs leverage the universal appeal of sports to foster community engagement, promote physical and mental well-being, and drive economic growth. By providing opportunities for individuals of all ages to participate in sports, community sports programs can help bridge social divides, promote social cohesion, and contribute to the overall quality of life (Kidd, 2022; Collins & Costa, 2023).

In many communities, sports programs serve as a platform for social mobilization, youth development, and community outreach. They can also play a significant role in promoting healthy lifestyles, reducing crime and delinquency, and fostering community pride. Furthermore, community sports programs can have a positive economic impact by creating jobs, stimulating local economies, and attracting tourism (Coalter, 2013; Kiss, 2021; Higham, 2018).

Community sports programmes have long been recognized as valuable tools for promoting both social and economic development. These initiatives, often organized at the grassroots level, aim to encourage physical activity while addressing various societal issues such as unemployment, social exclusion, and community cohesion. Recent studies have highlighted the multifaceted roles that community sports play in contributing to the overall development of communities, especially in marginalized areas (Kidd, 2022). The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between community sports programmes and their impact on social and economic development, emphasizing their role in fostering cohesion, inclusion, and economic growth.

Concept of Community

The concept of community is multifaceted and has been defined differently across various disciplines, including sociology, education, and community development. Generally, a community refers to a group of people who share common interests, values, identities, or geographical locations and interact with one another for mutual benefit and collective well-being. Communities are characterized by social relationships, a sense of belonging, shared goals, and active participation in activities that promote social cohesion and development (Putnam, 2023). Communities may exist in physical locations such as villages, towns, or neighbourhoods, or they may be organized around common cultural, social, or economic interests.

Beyond geographical boundaries, a community embodies social networks and relationships that foster cooperation, support, and collective action among its members. Members of a community often share responsibilities and contribute to activities that improve their quality of life and strengthen social bonds. Community participation is therefore essential for sustainable development because it promotes inclusiveness, social integration, and collective problem-solving. In modern societies, communities serve as important platforms for mobilizing human and material resources towards achieving social and economic objectives (Gidley, Tully, & James, 2022).

In the context of sports, a community refers to individuals and groups who participate in, organize, or support sports activities within a particular environment or locality. Community sports programmes are designed to bring people together regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background, thereby fostering social interaction and mutual understanding. Sports provide opportunities for community members to collaborate, develop leadership skills, and promote shared values such as teamwork, discipline, and respect. Consequently, community

sports programmes serve as important tools for strengthening social relationships, enhancing community engagement, and promoting both social and economic development within communities (Collins & Costa, 2023).

Furthermore, communities are not merely defined by physical proximity but by the quality of social interactions and the extent of mutual support among their members. Through community sports programmes, diverse groups can interact in meaningful ways, reducing social barriers and promoting social inclusion. Such programmes encourage active citizenship and strengthen community identity by creating shared experiences and collective achievements. As a result, community sports have become valuable instruments for fostering community development and social cohesion in contemporary societies (Gidley et al., 2022).

Sports

Sport has different meaning to different people. The wide range of ambiguity in this meaning prompted the United Nations (UN) Inter-Agency Task force to provide a more recent acceptable definition which is adopted by sports organizations and governments (Adeyanju, 2017). Sport is regarded as all forms of physical activities that can contribute to physical, fitness, mental well-being and social interaction including play, recreation, organized, casual, competitive or indigenous games (UN Inter-Agency Task Force Article 2). Prior to the above, sport has been generally referred to as activities involving physical exertion and skills in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment or satisfaction and as a contest or game in which people do certain physical activities according to a specific set of rules and compete against each other (Mohammed, et al., 2019).

On the surface of it, most people consider sports as organized physical activities through which fun, play and relaxation are enjoyed. A more critical examination of sports shows that it is an important social phenomenon that has grown from recreation to a viable, valuable, visible and prominent instrument for social, political and economic empowerment for any nation (Ogu, 2007).

Social Development

Social development refers to the process of improving the well-being and quality of life of individuals and communities through deliberate investments in people, institutions, and social relationships. It encompasses efforts aimed at promoting social justice, reducing inequalities, strengthening social institutions, and creating inclusive societies where individuals are empowered to participate meaningfully in social, economic, and political activities. Social development is concerned not only with economic prosperity but also with human welfare, social cohesion, and equitable access to opportunities and resources (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

The concept of social development recognizes that sustainable development cannot be achieved without improving people's living conditions and strengthening the social structures that support them. It involves enhancing access to quality education, healthcare services, housing, employment opportunities, and social protection programmes. Social development also promotes values such as equality, social inclusion, community participation, and human dignity. Consequently, it seeks to address social challenges such as poverty, discrimination, unemployment, social exclusion, and unequal access to basic services, particularly among vulnerable populations (UNDP, 2022).

Social development is a multidimensional process that focuses on building human capabilities and promoting positive social relationships among individuals and groups. It encourages active citizenship, civic engagement, and collective responsibility for societal progress. Communities that experience positive social development are often characterized by higher levels of social trust, stronger institutions, improved public health outcomes, and greater opportunities for personal and community advancement. Social development initiatives therefore aim to create environments that enable individuals to realize their full potential while contributing meaningfully to the development of society (Todaro & Smith, 2015).

In contemporary society, social development has become an essential component of national and community development strategies. Governments and development agencies increasingly recognize that investments in human capital and social programmes contribute significantly to sustainable economic growth and social stability. Policies and programmes that promote education, youth empowerment, gender equality, and community participation have been identified as critical drivers of social development across both developed and developing nations (Panth, 2020).

Within the context of community sports programmes, social development is reflected in the ability of sports to promote social inclusion, strengthen community relationships, and foster positive behavioural change among participants. Community sports programmes provide opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds to interact, collaborate, and develop essential life skills such as teamwork, leadership, discipline, and mutual respect. They also serve as platforms for youth engagement, crime reduction, gender empowerment, and the promotion of healthy lifestyles. Through these contributions, community sports programmes play a significant

role in advancing social development by improving individual well-being and strengthening the social fabric of communities (Coalter, 2013; Kidd, 2022).

Furthermore, community sports initiatives contribute to social cohesion by bringing together people of different ages, cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, and abilities in a shared environment. Such interactions foster tolerance, mutual understanding, and a sense of belonging, which are essential elements of social development. By promoting inclusivity and community participation, sports programmes can help address social challenges and support the creation of more resilient and sustainable communities. Consequently, social development remains one of the most important outcomes of well-designed and effectively implemented community sports programmes (Collins & Costa, 2023).

Economic Development

Economic development refers to the process of improving the economic well-being and quality of life of a community, region or country through growth, income, employment opportunities, expanding industries, sectors and economic activities (Micartney, 2016). According Panth (2020) economic development is attracting investment in infrastructure, human capital, innovation, building roads, transportation, energy and communication systems.

Economic development deals with human capital development, enhancing education, health care, new businesses, technologies, and expanding domestics and international trade (Todara & Smith, 2015). Economic development aims to reduce poverty, inequality, and unemployment while promoting sustainable and inclusive growth.

Community Sports Programmes

Community sports programmes are organized initiatives that aim to promote physical activity, social integration, and personal development through sports. These programmes targeting local populations, are designed to be inclusive, allowing individuals of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities to participate (Collins & Costa, 2023). They include after-school sports clubs, adult fitness classes, sports leagues, and community-based events. Community sports programmes are not only about physical engagement but also serve as powerful tools for addressing social issues like isolation, inequality, and lack of opportunity (Cunningham & Sagas, 2021).

Through participation in sports, individuals develop not only physical skills but also essential social skills such as teamwork, communication, and leadership. These skills are pivotal for fostering a sense of responsibility, cooperation, and respect within the community (Chadwick et al., 2023). As such, community sports programmes create spaces for meaningful social interactions that contribute to social cohesion and integration (McGillivray et al., 2022).

Types of Community Sports Programs

Community sports programs can be diverse and cater for various age groups, interests, and abilities. Collins and Costa (2023) explained the followings as types of community sports programs

- (1) **Youth Sports Programmes:** Youth sports programmes are organized to encourage children and adolescents to participate in sports and recreational activities. They contribute significantly to physical development, socialization, leadership skills, discipline, and healthy lifestyles among young people. These programmes also help to

identify and nurture sporting talents at an early age. Examples include: little leagues, youth soccer leagues, basketball clinics, tennis lessons, swimming programmes

- (2) **Adult Sports Programmes:** Adult sports programmes are designed to promote lifelong participation in physical activities among adults. They help improve physical fitness, mental well-being, stress management, and social interaction while encouraging healthy living practices. Examples include: recreational leagues (e.g., softball and volleyball), fitness classes (e.g., yoga and pilates), running clubs, cycling groups, adult swimming lessons
- (3) **Senior Sports Programmes:** Senior sports programmes provide older adults with opportunities to remain physically active and socially engaged. These programmes are particularly important for maintaining mobility, improving cardiovascular health, and enhancing the overall quality of life of senior citizens. Examples include: senior fitness classes, walking clubs, golf lessons, swimming programmes for seniors, low-impact exercise classes
- (4) **Disability Sports Programmes:** Disability sports programmes are developed to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in sporting activities. These programmes promote inclusion, confidence-building, social participation, and physical well-being among participants. Examples include: adaptive sports programmes, wheelchair sports leagues, blind sports programmes, intellectual disability sports programmes, inclusive fitness classes
- (5) **Community-Based Sports Initiatives:** Community-based sports initiatives are grassroots programmes organized within communities to encourage active participation in sports and strengthen community relationships. They often serve as platforms for

social development, volunteerism, and community empowerment. Examples include: community centres with sports facilities, sports-based youth development programmes, community sports festivals, sports tournaments, volunteer-based sports coaching programmes

- (6) **School-Based Sports Programmes:** School-based sports programmes are implemented within educational institutions to complement academic activities and promote holistic student development. These programmes encourage teamwork, discipline, leadership, and healthy competition among students. Examples include: Interscholastic sports leagues, Physical education programmes, After-school sports clubs, School-based sports camps, Sports mentoring programmes
- (7) **Indigenous and Cultural Sports Programmes:** Indigenous and cultural sports programmes preserve traditional sporting practices while promoting cultural identity and community participation. They provide opportunities for communities to celebrate their heritage through sports and recreational activities. Examples include: traditional sports programmes (e.g., indigenous games), cultural sports festivals, ethnic-specific sports programmes, community-based sports initiatives promoting cultural heritage, indigenous sports coaching programmes

Basic Challenges to Community Sports Programmes

1. **Funding and Resources Scarcity:** community sports rely heavily on external cash (grants, donations, local governments). When money dries up, you get bare-bones equipment, broken facilities and no budget for upkeep. That shrinks the programme scope, kills morale and make long term planning near impossible (Coalter, 2013; Kidd, 2022).

2. **Weak Infrastructure and Venues Access:** No proper fields, courts or pools limited activity options. Even if a space exists, it might be far, poorly lighted or unsafe, communities in slums or rural zones often lack transport links, so participants simply can't show up (UN-Habitat, 2016; Higham, 2018).
3. **Shortage of Qualified Staff and Volunteers:** Good coaches, referees and admin staff are scarce. Volunteers often juggle jobs, school or family leading to burn out and high turnover. Without solid mentorship, skill development suffers, safety risk rise and the programme loses credibility (Collins & Costa, 2023; Cunningham & Sagas, 2021).
4. **Low Community Engagement and Participation:** Competing leisure (TV gaming, social media) pulls people away. Cultural norms may de-prioritize sports for certain genders or age groups. If outreach is weak, word-of-mouth stalls, and the programme remains invisible to the very community it aims to serve (McGillivray, Walker, & O'Connor, 2022; Coalter, 2013).
5. **Safety, Liability and Health Concerns:** Injuries happens without clear safety protocols. Insurance or first aid training organizers fear law suits and community mistrust. Health worries (e.g COVID-style outbreaks) can shut programmes down abruptly, scaring off sponsors and participants (World Health Organization, 2022; Kidd, 2022).

Community Sports Programmes as Tools for Social and Economic Development

Community sports programmes are valuable tools for both social and economic development. They promote unity and social cohesion, reduce crime and social exclusion, and improve public health. These programmes also create economic opportunities through direct employment, the generation of local business activity, and the attraction of tourism and investment (Kiss, 2021).

1. **Human Capital Formation:** Participation community sports programmes boosts physical and mental health, school attendance and skill acquisition (discipline, teamwork, leadership). These “Soft skills” raise employability and life time earning (Bailey, 2005). Sports creates peer groups and mentorship ties that cross socio-economic lines. Access to coaches, sponsors, or alumni networks can open scholarships, internships or job leads. Bailey further explained that human capital development through community sports is like investments in youth sport which yield higher lifetime earnings, lower welfare dependence and reduced crime costs. The aggregate effect raises national Human Development Index (HDI) scores.
2. **Social Inclusion and Cohesion:** Sport cuts across ethnicity, gender and class, fostering trust and reducing conflict. Mixed group activities build networks that strengthen community resilience (Coalter, 2013). Regular play creates a common language-rules, goals, rituals. Participants develop, mutual respect, fostering “We Feeling” that translate into broader community trust. He further stressed community sports programme empowered marginalized groups, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities, gain voice and visibility on the field. Sports connects families, schools, Non Governmental Organization (NGOs) and local businesses.

Moreover, community sports often serve as catalysts for wider social change. For example, in communities with a high degree of social inequality, sports can bridge divides between different groups, reduce tensions, and build shared understanding (Perkins & O’Leary, 2022). Economically, successful sports programmes can lead to increased infrastructure investment, job creation, and economic growth, creating a sustainable cycle of development (Benson et al., 2022).

3. **Local Economic Stimulus:** Events require vendors, transport, accommodations, and services, generating short-term jobs and cash flow. Regular programmes also create stable jobs for coaches, officiating officials, administrators and facilitates staff (Grafton & Taylor, 2000). Direct and indirect employment boost, facility upkeep (ground keepers, cleaners generate manual jobs) local vendors (food stall, transport, mech) see higher sales during events. Nearby shops and hotels benefits from visiting teams/spectators. Every money spent on sport circulates, workers spend wages, locally, businesses reinvest profits, overall income grows faster than initial outlay. Thus, community sports programmes represent a holistic approach to addressing both social challenges and economic issues. Their integration into development strategies is essential for ensuring that the benefits of sports reach all members of society and contribute to long-term sustainable growth.
4. **Infrastructure and Public-Good Investment:** Fields, courts, gyms built for community sport double as venues for health clinics, schools, and civic gathering. Improved public spaces raise property values and attract further investment. According to UN-Habitat (2016) cites sports infrastructure as a catalyst for integrated neighborhood upgrading and public good delivery, services synergies as lighting and drainage installed for night games also serve street lighting, access roads built for transport of equipment benefit residents, businesses. Also locating facilities in underserved neighborhood guarantees universal access narrowing service gaps.
5. **Tourism and Brand Building:** Reputation as a “sport friendly” town. Draws festivals, tournaments, media coverage, visitors arrivals, lodging and restaurant revenue. According to Higham (2018) successful leagues or tournaments draw visitors, media

coverage and sponsorship, positioning the locality as vibrant and safe. This “sport-driven branding” boost long term tourism revenue. Merchandise (Jerseys, caps, equipment) spurs manufacturing and retail, services like exert management, security and logistics generate spin-off enterprises and jobs. He further stressed that increased visitor number boost accommodation taxes, sales taxes and venue rental fees and with higher tax revenue can be reinvested into further sport, health and infrastructure projects, creating a virtuous cycle.

Conclusion

Community sports programmes are powerful tools for fostering social cohesion and economic development. They contribute significantly to the well-being of individuals and communities by promoting healthy lifestyles, reducing social exclusion, and creating employment opportunities. The impact of these programmes goes beyond physical health, as they play a critical role in community cohesion, social integration, and the broader economic development of local areas. To maximize the potential of community sports, governments, local organizations, and stakeholders must collaborate to ensure the sustainability and inclusivity of these programmes.

Recommendations

1. **Increased Government Support:** Governments should allocate additional resources to community sports programmes, particularly in underserved areas, to make them accessible to all populations.
2. **Local Collaboration:** Local organizations, businesses, and educational institutions should work together to develop and sustain community sports initiatives that meet the needs of diverse groups.

3. **Investment in Infrastructure:** Governments and private investors should prioritize funding for sports facilities and infrastructure, ensuring that they are accessible and equitable in communities.
4. **Research and Evaluation:** Continuous evaluation and research into the social and economic impacts of community sports programmes are necessary to ensure their effectiveness and to refine best practices.
5. **Promoting Inclusivity:** Efforts should be made to ensure that community sports programmes are inclusive of all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic background, gender, disability, or ethnicity.

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