

**SPORT, RECREATION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to promote considerations about what sport and recreation can do to strengthen its contributions to Canadian communities in addressing major social challenges.

## BACKGROUND

As a reflection of the on-going development and evolution of sport and recreation in Canada, more and more leaders are collaborating around how sport and recreation can better understand its role and actively contribute to social development in Canada. In part, this has emerged because there are an increasing number of individual, community-based initiatives that are already applying this approach. It is likely true that there is a timeliness and readiness factor in the works, too. It seems that sport and recreation leaders are more ready than ever to both think about and to apply their leadership muscles to broader social challenges.

Arising from all of this work and preparation is the following question: what are some of the practical and effective ways that sport and recreation should address social issues?

## DISCUSSION

*What does participation in sport and recreation have to do with human and social development?*

Ask a Canadian and they'll tell us that participation in sport and recreation is all about fun - about good times with friends and neighbours. Or they'll talk about how they want to be active and healthy. A few will highlight how much they enjoy some friendly competition. Many more will remind us that it's all about quality of life. Each individual will seek out their own benefit.

These individual reflections are supported by what we know from the research, public opinion sampling, and the experience of sport and recreation practitioners. We also know about how these individual benefits translate into social development.

Based on a range of research areas, we know that physical activity is vital to the health of Canadians, and that physically active people engaged in community sport and recreation will be more active in other types of social activity.

The latest Statistics Canada research tells us that sport and recreation account for the single largest area of volunteerism in Canada. Almost half of all

volunteers begin their volunteering through sport and recreation. And unlike forms of volunteering where participants largely remain strangers to each other, sport and recreation volunteers come together in their community to make life better for their children and themselves. They come together as neighbours and leave as friends.

We know that leaders, especially young leaders, are developed through community sport and recreation programs benefiting from a range of local programs, mentors, and developmental opportunities. Sport and recreation creates conditions for leaders to develop and grow.

We also know that Canadians see community sport as one of the most important ways of transferring values to young people, and that active kids are less likely to be involved in drug use, crime or violence.

More recently, we've come to know that (aside from economic and geographic barriers) participation in sport and recreation reaches out to different cultures and ethnic groups, and that it is one of the most common ways that new Canadians integrate into Canadian society, especially young people and second-generation Canadians.

All in all, sport and recreation offers quite a social developmental continuum. The desire to have fun, to be healthy, and to enhance our quality of life encourages a high rate of civic participation and volunteerism. This volunteerism drives the planning, governing and delivery of sport and recreation opportunities which contributes to leadership, values, and cross-cultural development.

*So what? And so what's happening?*

Fair enough. Sport and recreation are clearly not the only means of pursuing social development. But they certainly can make a difference, in both direct and indirect ways, especially when sport and recreation strives to be inclusive.

More inclusive sport and recreation means more participants, which in turn means more direct involvement of citizens in their communities. When citizens participate in this way they learn to work together, to make decisions, to solve problems and achieve common goals. They learn the fundamentals of democracy and civic engagement which once acquired and practiced can be applied to any number of social enterprises.

This kind of social enterprise is already taking modest shape, mostly in specific places and with few external supports. Canada has fostered numerous local initiatives abroad for many years, loosely coordinated under a banner of international development through sport. Many community recreation centres and the YMCA-YWCA networks have seen what's possible in local communities

through an inclusive approach in all aspects of programming development and implementation. Unique partnerships are also tapping into the potential of an inclusive sport and recreation framework, turning out MoreSports in Vancouver, the Winnipeg Aboriginal Sport Achievement Centre in Winnipeg, the Toronto Sport Leadership Program for youth, and the After School Activity Initiative in North End Halifax to name a few.

We know that the kind of inclusion and engagement that underpins these initiatives links individuals to places, systems, decision-makers and resources. As Putnam would say, it aggregates people (belonging together) and bridges people (connection to others) and institutions in ways that create communities of trust and resilience. And we know that these community assets are determinants of a healthy, thriving society.

Sport and recreation can therefore make a difference in social development. The question is how to fulfill that potential. And do people who are involved in delivering sport and recreation appreciate this potential for social development? Do they reach out to engage others?

*Do we know how to use sport and recreation for social development?*

We might want to look at this in two ways:

1. A capacity approach: Are there practical ways to expand and strengthen the constituency of practitioners and policy-makers who employ and promote sports and recreation as a mechanism for social inclusion and community development?
2. A development approach: Are there things we can do to develop sustainable sports and recreation programs that foster community leadership and engaged citizenship within marginalized communities?

By looking at these two questions we might be able to find ways of developing, testing and evaluating sustainable community leadership and citizen engagement through sport and recreation, especially within marginalized communities.

### *Sport and values interaction*

Is there anything special about sport and recreation that should be taken into account as we try to answer the above questions? The sheer size of the sector may be one, and the fact that most of the 34,000 sport and recreation organizations in Canada operate without public funding and without full time staff.

There is also the inherent values interaction that is fundamental to sport and recreation. What we typically refer to as *values* is not a fixed set of beliefs or desires we keep to ourselves. It is in the interaction between individual people and groups that we develop the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about the things that matter to us. It is when we do sport and recreation that we express our values.

The value of equity may be another such special consideration given that access – sport and recreation for all - is a first step towards social inclusion. Equity is more than access; it is a determinant of successful sport and recreation. Given the evidence about the positive benefits of sport and recreation participation, the commitment to equity means that leaders in these sectors are required to consider how what they do meets up with who they do it for and with.

When we choose to engage in community sport and recreation activities, which we do in great numbers, it is our values, decisions and behaviours that interact to generate the kind of trust and civic engagement we find in healthy communities. Since sport and recreation rely on certain values such as fairness, fun, respect, inclusion and excellence, we use those values as the raw material for social interaction. Community development and economic research tells us that communities with high levels of values interaction generate the trust and social cohesion that fosters individual resilience, make communities safer, more democratic, more attractive to investment, more resistant to crime, and more easily able to integrate new Canadians.

*Is it any kind of sport and recreation that counts?*

There is a distinction to be made between commercial entertainment (professional sport) and community sport (amateur sport).

The distinction has less to do with the nature of the activity, and much more to do with the values that underpin the activity and the motivation of the participant. One can find both good and bad sport, whether it falls in the realm of what we call professional or amateur sport.

Good sport and recreation is the kind that takes place in a safe and welcoming environment for its participants. It has a clearly articulated set of values related to fair play, inclusion and respect for others. It is also the kind of sport and recreation Canadians say they want. As noted earlier, the vast majority believe that, second only to the family, community sport is the most important factor in the development of values for our children. It promotes an exploration of physical activity – of the interplay between mind, body and soul. Good sport is meant to contribute to human excellence – it is meant to contribute to our human potential, both at the individual and collective level.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is a good rationale for looking at how we can improve or strengthen sport and recreation's contributions to social development in Canada. Of particular interest are sustainable programs and strategies that foster community leadership and engaged citizenship through sport and recreation, especially within marginalized communities. The values interaction found in sport and recreation help develop the kind of trust and resiliency that creates social cohesion and social capital, which contributes to safer, healthier and prosperous communities. Sport and recreation leaders wish to explore practical and effective ways of strengthening, expanding, improving and fulfilling the sector's role and contributions to social development in Canadian communities.