Mapping Sport and Social Cohesion in Europe: An Exploratory Study

UNDERSTANDINGS, ASSETS, NEEDS AND ACTIVITIES OF SPORT FOR SOCIAL COHESION PROGRAMMES

LOUIS MOUSTAKAS (GERMAN SPORT UNIVERSITY)
BEN SANDERS (SWISS ACADEMY FOR DEVELOPMENT)
MARISA SCHLENKER (SWISS ACADEMY FOR DEVELOPMENT)
DENISE ROBRADE (GERMAN SPORT UNIVERSITY)

Sport and Social Cohesion Lab

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Executive Summary

The use of sport for social cohesion has grown rapidly in recent times both globally and in Europe. This is linked to the growth of the sport for development and peace (SDP) movement and changing demographic composition of European societies. Many actors and organisations across Europe are now using sport-based approaches to contribute to social cohesion goals and objectives.

However, despite this growth, there remain key limitations and discrepancies within current definitions and understandings of social cohesion. The use of sport for social cohesion exhibits a diversity of approaches, yet overall there is a lack of evidence, transparency and understanding of these programmes. This is partly due to the fact that sport itself is a complex phenomenon, often undermined by idealistic notions of the 'power of sport'. Further, actors using sport for social cohesion often lack the capacity needed to design, deliver, evaluate and improve their programmes.

Given these limitations, it is important to conduct further research into the key factors, challenges and opportunities underlying such programmes. This study seeks to generate greater understanding of how sport can contribute to social cohesion, through a European-wide survey and targeted organisational analysis.

Findings reveal that social cohesion is understood and applied in many different ways, with sport usually seen as a vehicle to enable such change. Programmes tend to target 'vulnerable' groups within society, including girls and women, refugees and migrants, and people with disabilities, with a particular focus on children and youth. Activities include sport-based volunteering, life skills sessions, workshops and trainings, all aimed at promoting inclusion, integration and mixing of groups.

Challenges and opportunities co-exist. This includes the need to build capacity among actors, especially around their ability to monitor and evaluate their work. There is a need to adopt more participatory approaches so that beneficiaries and other stakeholders are more involved throughout projects. Most interventions address individual and community issues, with limited engagement and understanding of the systemic and structural obstacles to social cohesion.

These findings will be used to strengthen the Sport for Social Cohesion Lab (SSCL) project, which aims to better understand and apply the use of sport for social cohesion across Europe. Project partners will adapt their grassroots initiatives based on these findings, and work with stakeholders to pilot a Living Lab approach in their settings. This approach will be tested, iterated and evaluated throughout, ultimately offering greater insights into the use of sport for social cohesion and implications of a Living Lab approach. Results will be shared publicly and disseminated widely.

Introduction

The demographic composition of Europe has shifted dramatically over the last 20 years. European populations have become older and migration within and from outside the European Union (EU) has also significantly risen. Given this increasing change and growing diversity in European communities, encouraging social cohesion is of the utmost importance for stability, growth, and solidarity in these communities.

Acknowledging the critical importance of social cohesion, over the last decade, sport and physical activity have become increasingly recognised and implemented as tools to foster social cohesion in neighbourhoods, cities and communities around Europe. As a result, numerous programmes have emerged that attempt to enhance social cohesion through various sport-based approaches, including sport for development.

However, despite this boom in sport and social cohesion, some "wicked problems" remain to be addressed. First and foremost, current definitions and understandings of social cohesion rarely consider the needs, expectations or understanding of practitioners and participants on the ground in detail. Second, practitioners in the field often lack the skills and tools necessary to design, measure, evaluate and improve their programmes – it is rare to find organisations or practitioners with well-defined expertise in both sport and social cohesion. Further, evangelistic notions of the 'power of sport' may prevent critical and robust analysis of such initiatives. And, finally, overall there is a lack of evidence, transparency and understanding of these programmes.

The Living Lab concept provides an innovative approach to address these gaps in knowledge, implementation and evaluation. Living Labs are user-centred, open innovation ecosystems based on a systematic user co-creation approach, integrating research and innovation processes in real-life communities and settings (European Network of Living Labs, 2021).

The Sport for Social Cohesion Lab (SSCL) project will implement a Living Lab approach. In this approach, a consortium of partners - including grassroots actors, universities and other key stakeholders - will directly engage programme participants, generate an understanding of the elements that promote social cohesion in a sport setting and develop relevant tools to explore, measure, and improve social cohesion outcomes in highly diverse but vulnerable urban neighbourhoods across Europe.

Ultimately, the SSCL project aims to support practitioners in planning, delivering and evaluating high-quality sport for social cohesion programmes, ultimately contributing to increased social cohesion in diverse urban settings across Europe. Further, it is hoped that the findings from this project and the use of a Living Lab approach will hold value for current and future policies and programmes that use sport for social cohesion.

Background

Within sports, social cohesion has not always been optimally or consistently conceptualised, and this is reflected in the wide array of indicators used to measure initiatives (Coalter, 2017; Jones, Edwards, Bocarro, Bunds, & Smith, 2017). On the one hand, this assortment of indicators can reflect the diversity of local contexts, understandings and programme goals being measured. On the other hand, this can mirror the top-down approach taken by implementers, policymakers and researchers (Giulianotti, Coalter, Collison, & Darnell, 2019), whereby their interpretations of social cohesion are inserted into programme design, delivery, measurement and evaluation. In other words, current conceptualisation and measurement of social cohesion is driven by a narrow set of political (e.g. OECD, 2011), institutional (e.g. Delhey et al., 2018) or academic definitions (e.g. Chan, To, & Chan, 2006). Little attention is given to understanding how theoretical notions of social cohesion align with local realities (Daley, 2007; Stead, 2017), and the perspectives of on-the-ground practitioners are often marginalised (Sabbe, Bradt, Spaaij, & Roose, 2018). Not only are these local perspectives discounted, but there remains a lack of understanding as to how sport and social cohesion programmes are run. Elements such as the type of sport, duration of participation, frequency of participation and non-sporting activities remain under-reported and subject to minimal evaluation (Coalter, 2017; Svensson & Woods, 2017).

This lack of information regarding sport for social cohesion programmes has important implications for the implementation of any eventual Living Lab approach. Living Labs require us to analyse local complexity from the bottom up to establish a common, shared vision and approach. In other words, we need to fully understand the realities faced by partner programmes to tailor our approach accordingly. We also need to understand what is happening more broadly in Europe to identify potential common characteristics, solutions and opportunities for Living Labs elsewhere.

Against this background, this report seeks to accomplish two related goals. First, it aims to map out the stated goals of the partner programmes – grassroots initiatives run by local NGOs in this SSCL project. This includes mapping the following: the types of participants targeted, the types of activities delivered, and the socio-cultural context surrounding these programmes and specific neighbourhoods. This mapping will also allow us to begin identifying the assets, needs and challenges in the field, especially as it relates to the future implementation of Living Lab activities for the project.

Second, through a global survey, parts of this mapping will also be done with organisations throughout Europe and globally. As such, even at this early stage, the project can begin identifying unique features and commonalities across programmes, both within the project and beyond. This has implications for both policy and practice.

Methods

This section describes the elements of study design, data collection and analysis.

Design

An online, structured survey was used to map out the different understandings, goals and programmatic elements of organisations using sport for social cohesion throughout Europe and beyond. This survey aimed to gather basic organisational information (e.g. location, structure) as well as insights into how these programmes define and seek to promote social cohesion. The survey was made available in both French and English. A mix of open-ended questions and multiple-choice questions were used. Open-ended questions were first used to allow respondents to provide their own unique responses and not be influenced by a list of potential options. Subsequent multiple-choice options are based on theoretical conceptualisations of social cohesion (Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2019; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017), formal descriptions of social cohesion projects (Council of Europe, 2019; European Commission, 2020), as well as research from a variety of sport for social cohesion initiatives (Flensner, Korp, & Lindgren, 2020; Kelly, 2011; Sabbe et al., 2018; Stead, 2017). Complementing this larger survey, a specific questionnaire was designed for SSCL NGO partners to obtain more in-depth information about the goals, realities, and challenges inherent to their unique settings, while mapping out their programmes.

Data Collection

To obtain a maximum of responses, the survey was disseminated by all SSCL project partners and was also directly shared with relevant thematic networks and platforms connected to sport and social cohesion (e.g. FARE, streetfootballworld, sportanddev.org, Council of Europe). These network organisations were chosen as many of their members are local sport or community organisations with an explicit social mission and therefore are likely to focus on issues related to social cohesion.

Data Analysis

Data were extracted from the survey and compiled in tabular. Closed-ended or multiple-choice questions were analysed using Microsoft Excel to extract descriptive statistics. For open-ended responses, thematic analysis was used to identify common ideas or patterns (Bryman, 2012), especially related to how social cohesion is understood and promoted within programmes. The six-step process of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2012) was used to code and organise the data. This included becoming familiar with the descriptions, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining final themes, and writing

the data. MaxQDA 2020 was used to code and organise the data. The questionnaires were analysed using Creswell et al's (2007) procedures making sure to note pre-determined and emerging research themes. An independent researcher created themes (for comparison) thus increasing the validity and reliability of the categorising.

Findings

This section summarises findings from the European survey and partner analysis.

European Survey

First, findings were generated through the dissemination of a global survey to gather basic organisational information as well as insights into how these programmes define and seek to promote social cohesion. Overall, 157 organisations from nearly 70 countries completed the survey. However, given the aims and scope of the SSCL project, the following results will focus exclusively on the European continent.

What kind of organisations are involved?

In total, 84 organisations from across Europe completed the survey, representing 26 countries. The top countries in the survey include Italy (n=9), France (n=8), the Netherlands and Croatia (n=7). These organisations take many different forms, but NGOs (47.6%) and sport clubs (22.6%) were the two top organisational types selected by respondents.

Table 1. Respondents per organisation type

TYPE	COUNT	PERCENT
Business	3	3.6%
Humanitarian / Aid / Development Organisation	1	1.2%
Non-governmental organisation (NGO)	40	47.6%
Other (please describe)	12	14.3%
Sport Club	19	22.6%
Sport Federation	4	4.8%
University / College / Tertiary Education Institution	4	4.8%
Municipality/ Local Government	0	0.0%
Regional Government	0	0.0%
National Government	0	0.0%
School / primary or Secondary Education Institution	1	1.2%
private donor / funding organisation	0	0.0%

How do they define social cohesion?

In open-ended responses, respondents present various understandings of social cohesion as well as diverse related goals. In particular, three preliminary themes emerge from these answers. First, respondents aim to improve social relations between different groups through their sport activities. Even within this section, ideas of promoting mixed group activities and intergroup contact are apparent. Second, and relatedly, promoting the acceptance or even appreciation of diversity are often mentioned as key components of social cohesion. Finally, many organisations highlight the importance of creating common goals and promoting mutual collaboration. For many, this mutual collaboration takes the shape of volunteering or other forms of civic participation.

When given a multiple-choice selection regarding social cohesion-related goals, these themes further bear out. As illustrated in Figure 1, over 80% of organisations report "always" or "often" aiming to, amongst others, "promote and celebrate socio-cultural diversity", "promote solidarity and support towards others" or "promote and support volunteering."
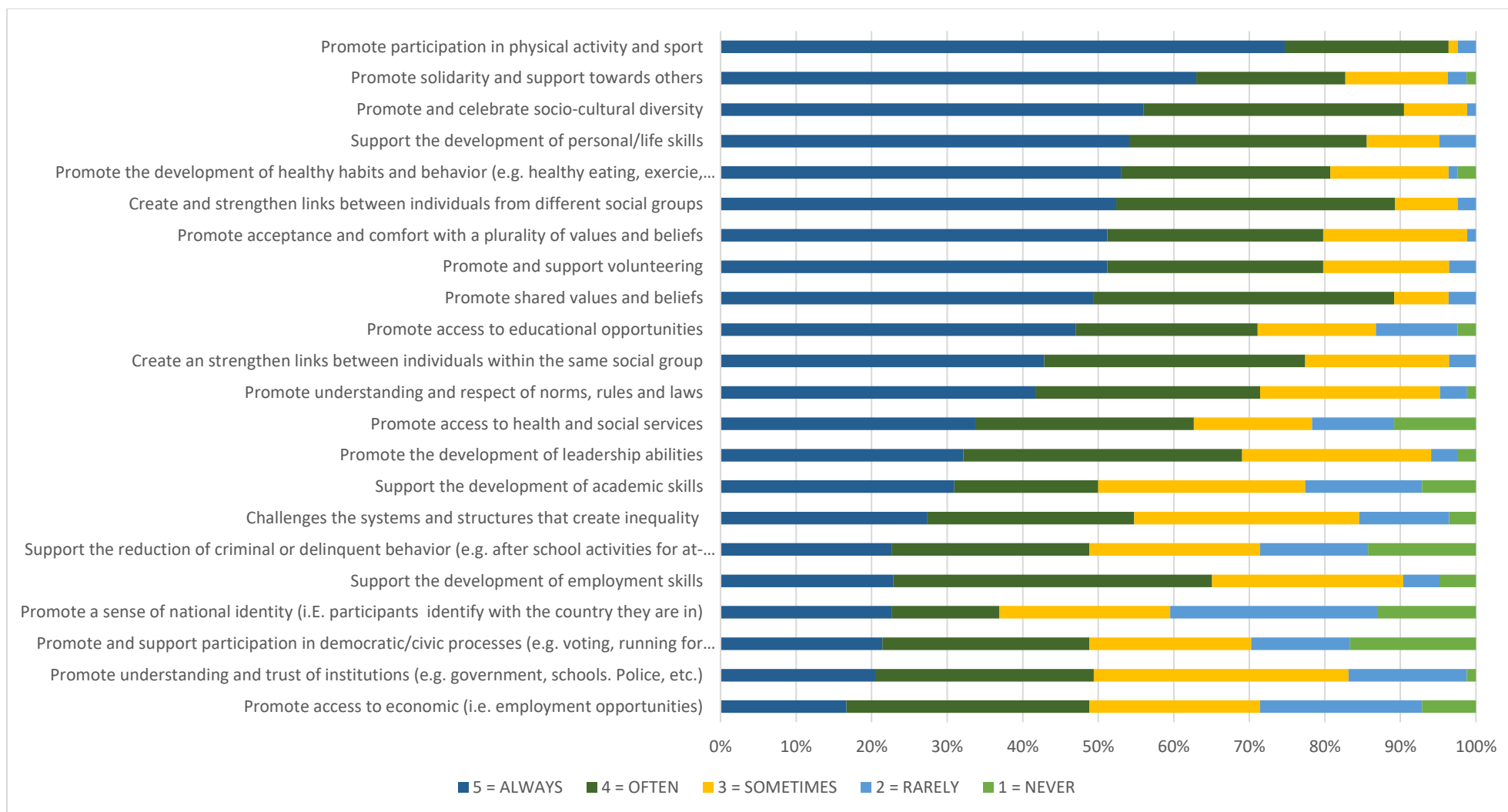
Figure 1. Summary of reported social cohesion goals (Y-axis: reported social cohesion goals. X-axis: percentage of surveyed organisations; multiple responses possible)

What sports do they use to support social cohesion?

Similar to other studies, football (soccer) is the most used sport, with 60% of organisations reporting its use for social cohesion. Basketball, running, and dance are also popular, with around 30% of organisations reporting their use. One interesting sub-finding is that, from the available selection of sports, more respondents selected typically individual sports such as dance or running (156 selections) than team sports (140 selections). While there was not space to list each sport/activity, an 'other' option was provided and was selected by over a third of organisations (37%), again illustrating the diversity of approaches used. Please note that organisations could select more than one sport in this question as some use a multi-sport approach.
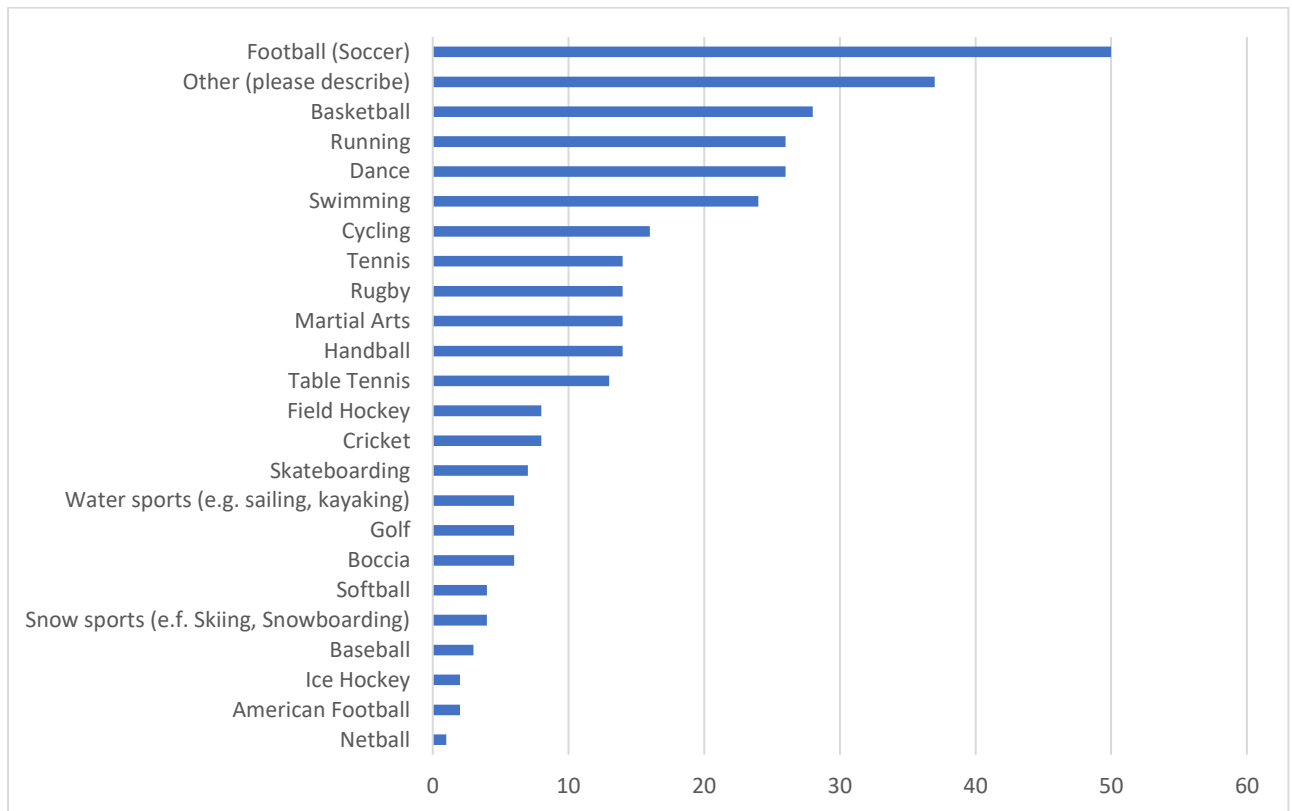

Figure 2. Summary of sports used in sport for social cohesion (Y-axis: sports. X-axis: total number of responses; multiple responses possible).

What activities do they implement to support social cohesion?

Beyond regular sport activities or special sport events, one of the main vehicles for achieving social cohesion is by encouraging or promoting volunteering. In open-ended answers, volunteering is presented as a vehicle to create new social connections, build social networks and foster a sense of belonging. Otherwise, depending on the thematic focus of the organisations and local needs, many also deliver workshops related to specific topics or areas (e.g. employment, education, social issues, etc.). In short, many organisations rely on a combination of sport activities, community engagement through volunteering, and targeted workshops to achieve their goals. Living Labs or other highly participatory methodologies were not readily present in the open-ended responses though deeper investigation may be merited in this regard.
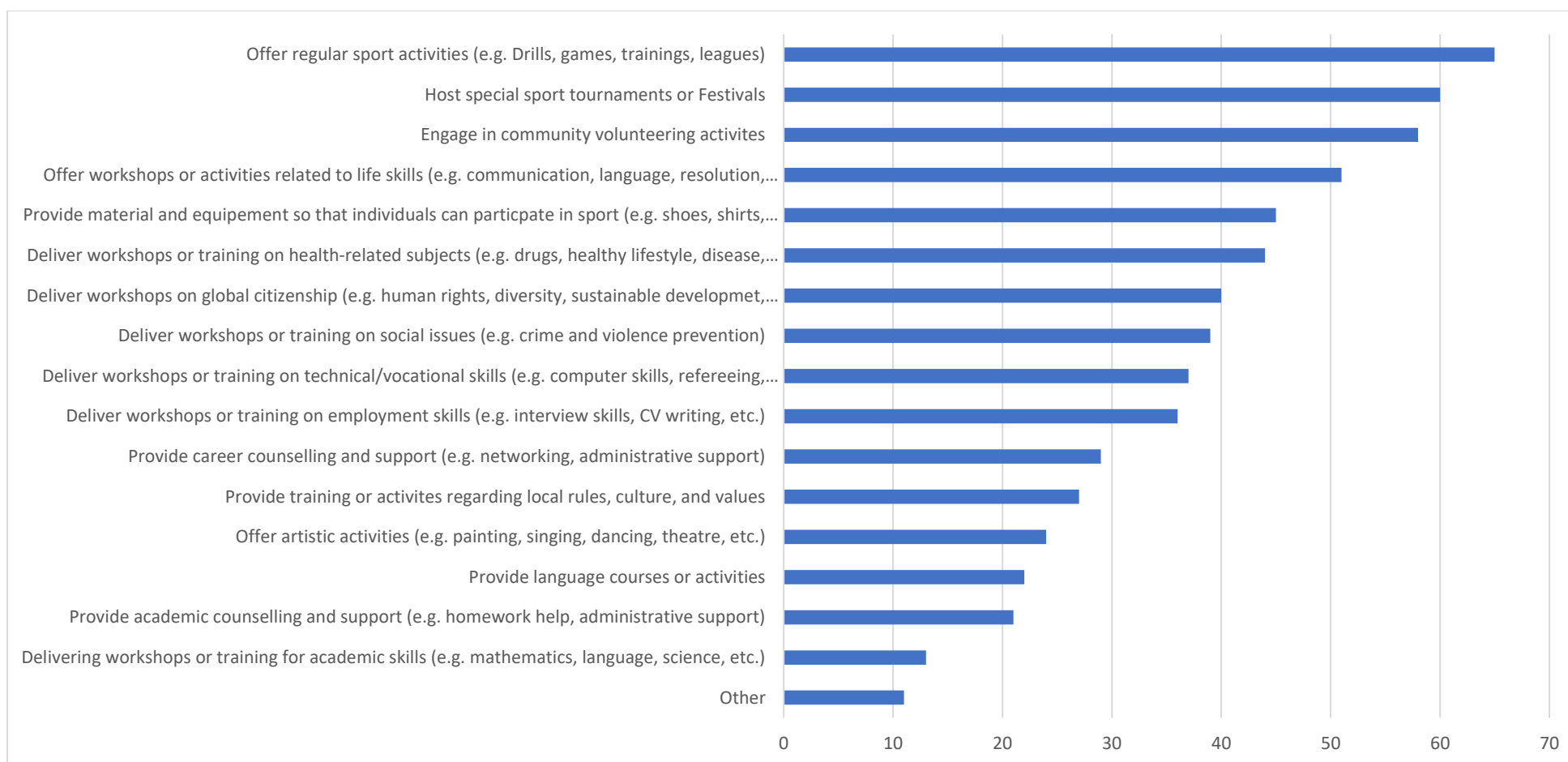
Figure 3. Summary of activities used to support sport for social cohesion (Y-axis: non-sport activities. X-axis: Total number of responses; multiple responses possible).

Who are the main target groups?

Based on open-ended responses, surveyed organisations mainly target individuals that they categorise as 'vulnerable' or marginalised groups. In particular, certain key groups emerge, including children and youth, people with disabilities, migrants/refugees, and women and girls.

Generally speaking, young migrants or refugees, as well as people with disabilities, are the top target groups. However, some programmes are notably unspecific, simply defining their target groups as 'marginalised' or 'vulnerable' groups. Furthermore, groups that can be understood as holding privilege or power, such as politicians, officials or upper-classes, are not readily addressed by programmes.

Project Partners

In addition to the wide ranging survey, this mapping exercise involved data collection and analysis from the NGO partners within the SSCL project – these are the actors that work in communities using sport for social cohesion. They will work with a partner university in each country to deliver a Living Lab approach in this project.

The four partners are:
- In safe hands e.V. (Germany)
- Sport Against Racism Ireland (Ireland)
- International Sports Alliance (Netherlands)
- INEX-SDA / fotbal pro Rozvoj (Czechia)

How do they understand social cohesion?

Unsurprisingly, partners described social cohesion, and related outcomes, in a range of ways. This reflects the diversity of understandings and terminology from the wider European survey. Clearly, social cohesion is a complex and intersectional issue, with a myriad of definitions, terms and understandings – these will influence the manner in which sport is used to contribute to social cohesion, as illustrated by the partners.

As with many other actors, the partners tend to use the terms social inclusion and social cohesion almost interchangeably. They also reflected that understanding and measuring social cohesion was challenging and open to debate – this will be explored further under the 'Challenges and Opportunities' sub-section below.

With varying ways of defining social cohesion and differences among organisations, it is not surprising that the sport-based programmes which are being designed and delivered will vary depending on the organizational context and related project goals.

How do they use sport for social cohesion?

Despite varying understandings of sport for social cohesion and the unique settings in which they work, the partners do share commonalities in their approaches.

Findings indicate that the partner organizations tend to view and use sport as a tool, entry point and site for socialization, when positioning it as a vehicle for social cohesion. This corresponds to the survey findings and broader literature and landscape of the sport for development and peace (SDP) field, in which sport is seen as a cost-effective and user-friendly tool with which to contribute to other outcomes.

The partner organisations use sport *intentionally* in this way to foster both individual and community level processes of social integration and social inclusion. At the individual level, sport is seen as a mechanism for the development of life skills. At the community level, it can serve as a platform for inclusivity by bringing different (even opposing) groups together and can challenge stereotypes and prejudices.

Partners reflected that this *does not happen automatically*. Sport programmes need to be carefully designed, delivered and measured to ensure they promote inclusion and diversity, and contribute to social cohesion. This is critical as limited evangelistic notions of sport assume that sport by default creates positive change.

Who do they seek to benefit?

All partners offer sport based programmes for children and youth who, for one reason or another (or in combination), are on the margins of their communities. This ranges from primary school children (6 years +) to adolescents (15-24 years old).

A wide range of beneficiaries are engaged including refugees and migrants, ethnic minorities, disaffected youth; women and girls or people of indigenous background. Typically organisations seek to involve those who are often left behind and do not have equal access to sport activities and opportunities, and other social services.

Secondary beneficiaries include the persons implementing the relevant programmes – it could be coaches, social or youth workers, community-based organisations etc. Overall the programmes seek to benefit the overall communities in which they work, including programme beneficiaries and also community members/stakeholders.

What activities do they offer?

The programmes offered aim to bring the targeted youth closer to their respective communities using sport as a space to learn important life skills which will support

them in their integration processes. As part of this process, some initiatives seek to connect the youth to further opportunities, trainings, networks and resources.

To offer additional opportunities through a sport approach, organizations need to form partnerships and linkages with local institutions. For example, ISA partners with community based organizations to design and deliver life skills through sport sessions with their trainers, while In safe hands works in partnership with schools to directly deliver their curriculum to the primary school students. INEX-SDA trains social workers to use sport as a tool in their own programmes while also working closely with youth centers to deliver activities for the youth beneficiaries. SARI has partners sitting across sectors, from those specifically in football to those working in the employment and career spaces. Local partnerships and linkages are crucial.

Challenges and Opportunities

Partners identified various challenges and opportunities in using sport for social cohesion, and these were also reflected in the wider survey.

A common challenge is that the many definitions and understandings of social cohesion may make it difficult for organisations to plan, deliver and measure their work effectively. In particular, partners commented that this makes it hard to monitor and evaluate the main mechanisms, processes and outcomes necessary to enable social cohesion outcomes through sport.

As one partner stated: *"When is social cohesion actually achieved and what is the sort of "benchmark"? Based on that how to set a meaningful and accurate M&E process?"*

Linked to the above, partners may lack the capacity to design, measure, evaluate and improve programmes. This provides an opportunity for learning and the provision of capacity building resources to build the necessary skills within organisations. This also presents an opportunity for shared learning and resources to build greater transparency, understanding and evidence of the use of sport for social cohesion.

As social cohesion requires individuals connecting with other individuals and groups both within and across communities, it is vital that partner organizations account for these processes when aiming to build pathways for the participants that move beyond individual level change. Most organizations have a limited sphere of influence in contributing to societal level changes and may need to develop a more nuanced understanding of the structures underlying these issues.

Furthermore, all partners indicated that sport has great potential to play in addressing issues of social cohesion and that other actors may not always realise the true value of sport-based interventions. This relates to the need to advocate for, and better illustrate the value of such initiatives, with robust evidence and methods.

Insights and Recommendations

The findings above provide some clear insights and recommendations on: the use of sport for social cohesion; and the Living Lab approach to be utilised in this project.

General Insights

It is clear that there is great diversity, and discrepancy, among the organisations using sport for social cohesion that participated in this study. This extends to their understanding of social cohesion itself, which is subject to different interpretations.

Core components
Most organisations tend to use sport as a vehicle to engage participants, essentially reflecting a *Plus-Sport approach* in which sport is used to contribute to outcomes in other domains (e.g. using sport as a tool to bring different groups together). Mostly, programmes are aimed at youth, especially those marginalised within society, with attempts made to ensure gender equity, access and inclusion of vulnerable groups.

Core components of programmes include the use of sport activities, usually run by volunteers and/or trained personnel (e.g. coaches, social workers), and other capacity building opportunities – e.g. workshops, trainings, mentoring. While this is admirable, there appears to be a lack of deep participatory approaches in which beneficiaries are deeply involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of activities.

Limited focus programmes
Most progammes are focused on the individual (micro) or community (meso) level, with little attention paid to structural or systemic drivers of social cohesion (macro). Related to this, broader societal goals are less frequent than objectives aimed at specific individuals or groups – or if such larger goals are present, the links between these and the specific activities are not always clear. As Coalter (2010, p. 1) says many actors are "*seeking to solve broad gauge problems via limited focus interventions*".

Linked to the above, there is a general absence of engagement with more 'privileged' groups within society (e.g. political and public authorities; corporations) who may be obstacles and/or enablers to social cohesion. While this may simply not be reflected in organisational reporting, it seems to reflect a deeper issue with most projects focusing almost extensively at grassroots level and neglecting the broader ecosystem.

This also illustrates a broader challenge in development projects and specifically among SDP actors, who usually do not tackle the structures that cause the problems they seek to solve in the first place (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Sanders, 2016).

Recommendations for the Living Lab Approach

The Living Lab approach may help to address some of the challenges and opportunities identified above. As explained, Living Labs are user-centred, open innovation ecosystems based on a systematic user co-creation approach, integrating research and innovation processes in real-life communities and settings.

The following recommendations are made to ensure that the Living Lab approach can maximise the ability of sport to contribute to social cohesion within this project.

Firstly, the Living Lab approach needs to effectively adopt a **participatory approach**, involving all stakeholders and especially the local community, as co-creators. These stakeholders need to be involved in every stage of the project cycle: planning, design and development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and project closure. As such, the Living Lab framework should provide direction and solutions on how to engage the diverse groups targeted by the partners. Knowledge generated from Participatory Action Research, which share many commonalities with Living Labs, may provide useful insights as well (see, e.g., Holt et al., 2013).

Building on such an equitable approach, the approach needs to move away from a deficit-based model and instead focus on building upon assets that already exist within target populations. Drawing upon other relevant approaches, such as Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Social Learning Theory may also prove worthwhile.

Secondly, this approach needs to be guided by **results-based monitoring and evaluation** (M&E) – with an emphasis on measuring outcomes as well as outputs. Sport-based approaches often suffer from a lack of robust evidence or methods, and rigorous research is important to articulate the value and viability of such initiatives. Further, it may be useful to align and link sport-based interventions to broader development goals such as the SDGs, to ensure political buy-in and support.

Actors need to recognise the value, and the limitations, of a sport-based approach, rather than assuming sport contributes to social cohesion. Programmes need to be intentional about their outcomes and articulate this in a theory of change and/or logic model, which should be constantly reviewed and adjusted as appropriate.
Thirdly, **linkages and partnerships**, as envisaged in the Living Lab approach, remain critical. Sport can only contribute to social cohesion outcomes if it also involves actors outside of sport. This may include a range of stakeholders such as public authorities, social work units/teams, youth centres, or refugee services. The relevant linkages will

depend on the services required by the project beneficiaries. Actors can consider creating a directory of services and/or referral pathways for their work.

In addition, it is important for actors to consider a **socio-ecological approach** in their work, taking note of structural factors as well as those at individual and community level. Linked to this, working with - and potentially even challenging - vested power interests and/or privileded groups, needs to be considered as a way to drive change.

Linked to the above, social cohesion should not only be seen as an end goal but rather as a complex construct which involves individuals, communities and institutions. Programmes and policies using sport for social cohesion should consider how they best fit within this reality and unpack why social cohesion is important for communities – with this process ideally led by the communities themselves. Social cohesion may also enable communities to address other complex problems more effectively – e.g. a cohesive community may be better able to address issues of access to health care. Projects should thus consider how their work can have impact beyond an intervention.

While the above recommendations are made, it is important to acknowledge the **unique context** of each community and thus the need for a tailored Living Lab approach. These recommendations serve only as guidelines to be used as appropriate by local stakeholders who know and understand their reality best.

Conclusion

Social cohesion remains a pressing issue globally, and within Europe. Sport can play a role in contributing to social cohesion and many organisations are working to advance these goals. However, social cohesion is a complex and intersectional issue, making it hard for actors to adopt common understandings and terminology. Further, the use of sport as a vehicle provides an additional layer of complexity, with evidence showing that sport does not automatically contribute to social cohesion.

Despite this, many organisations are delivering grassroots projects that intentionally use sport to engage marginalised groups in society. While a diversity of approaches exist, most aim to increase engagement and opportunities for these groups. The research findings illustrate that actors may not always have the capacity to most effectively design, deliver, monitor and evaluate their work – and this presents opportunities for learning and capacity building. Actors can do more to involve beneficiaries more fully in all project phases, adopting a participatory approach such as a Living Lab. Further, most initiatives target individual and community level factors, with limited attempts to tackle structural factors or involve powerful and privileged groups.

The SSCL project will use these findings to adapt the overall approach and the Living Lab concept, while recognising each setting and project is unique. This will create an enabling environment for initiatives to be more effectively designed, delivered and evaluated, thus providing insights for the broader use of sport for social cohesion.

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