

WHITE PAPER ON

Sustainability in Grassroots Sport

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Introduction

Sustainability means fulfilling the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations Brundtland Commission, [1987](#)).

Due to the global interest in sports and its media coverage, sports can influence millions of people around the globe, and lead by example as it reexamines its own practices and policies to move fans and society towards a more sustainable future within and beyond the sporting field (ENGSO Youth).

However, when addressing sustainability in or through sports, it is often referred to the environmental dimension of sustainability. Indeed, sport has been affected by extreme weather conditions and the global sports sector contributes the same level of emissions as a medium-sized country (Rapid Transition Alliance, [2020](#)). Good practice examples of sustainable practices in sports circulate around sporting events that utilize environmentally friendly methods to reduce their carbon footprint ([Symbiosis School Of Sports Sciences](#)) or concern the design and management of sports recreation and leisure facilities ([Sport England](#)).

It is undeniable that especially winter sports are dependent on functioning ecosystems (Slippery Slopes, [2023](#)) but also the general population will be affected by climate change-associated health risks due to extreme temperatures, or increased air pollution by ozone ([Schneider, S. 2021](#)). This will affect the share of people identified in the [Special Eurobarometer 525](#) "Sport and Physical Activity" that indicated parks and the outdoors as the most favored settings to do sports, which may be one of the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Those "free" settings can be a way to mobilise more people into being physically active, especially those with financial difficulties, who may find it hard to afford a membership of formal and organised sports offers. Acknowledging that sport and physical activity are considered meaningful and cost-effective tools to achieve Sustainable Development Goals ([Global Agenda 2030](#)), we aim to go deeper into the three sustainability dimensions and outline how far grassroots sport is making use of it and where potential remains.

In general discussions sustainability is often used in close connection to the preservation of a particular resource, however, broadly speaking, there are three dimensions that make up sustainability.

- Environmental sustainability
- Social sustainability
- Economic sustainability

In the world of sport, the International Olympic Committee has adopted the holistic approach to sustainability by defining it as ensuring feasibility and seeking to maximise positive impact and minimize negative impact in the environmental, social, and economic dimensions in all decisions (IOC, [2017](#)).

1. Environmental Sustainability

This dimension aims to improve human welfare through the protection of natural capital. Environmental sustainability places the emphasis on how positive economic outcomes can be achieved without doing any harm, in the short- or long-term, to the environment ([FutureLearn](#)). Additionally, it is also concerned with creating and maintaining the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony to support the well-being of present and future generations (EPA, [2022](#)). It is a condition of balance, resilience, and interconnectedness that allows human society to satisfy its needs while neither exceeding the capacity of its supporting ecosystems to continue to regenerate the services necessary to meet those needs nor by our actions diminishing biological diversity (Morelli, [2011](#)).

In the European Union, the first allusion to the environmental dimension of sport was recorded in the landmark White Paper on Sport ([2007](#)), which acknowledged that the practice of sport, sport facilities, and sport events all have a significant impact on the environment. The White Paper has also identified strategic areas, such as green procurement, greenhouse gas emissions, and energy efficiency, to which the sport sector could contribute in an effort to reduce its impact on the environment.

The sport sector, in its own right, has been referenced as an important driver of positive environmental change due to the sheer scale of its popularity and reach. This has been further reflected in various EU policy papers. For instance, the EU Work Plan for Sport 2021-2024 (Council, [2020](#)) named sport for the first time as a standalone priority area. Other important milestones include the work of various presidencies of the Council of the European Union, such as the French presidency's focus on sport as a lever for sustainable transformation and development, and the Czech Republic's priority on sustainable sport infrastructure.

The European Parliament Report EU Sport Policy: Assessment and Possible Ways Forward ([2021](#)) notes that there is no specific policy field of sport and environment at the EU level. The lack of a coordinated approach to the environmental dimension of sport at the European level makes the environmental policies rather limited in reach and ineffective in power to change. Nevertheless, the report underlines that four of the nine Green Deal policy areas have an impact on the sport sector either directly or indirectly.

In fact, there are already a few initiatives at the EU level in place to address environmental sustainability:

- The [SHARE initiative](#) launched by the European Commission in 2018 aims to raise the profile of sport in European, regional, and local political agendas. In particular, the objectives are to unlock the full potential of sport to contribute to the development of a greener Europe as well as decrease carbon emissions. Therefore, the SHARE initiative published guides on how to access the regional development funds but is also bridging the gap between tourism and sport.

- The New European Bauhaus invites the sport movement to strengthen the position of sport on the European agenda. It is connecting project between the EU Green Deal and the SHARE initiative which aims to encourage sport organisations to tackle environmental problems through innovative ideas spanning from the creation of active spaces, and new technologies, encouraging the uptake of physical activity to raise environmental awareness.
- The European Commission Expert Group on Green Sport (2021-2023) is bringing together Member State representatives with the stakeholders from the sport sector in order to draw up recommendations concerning sustainable sport infrastructure, sustainable sport events, innovative cross-sectorial solutions, and capacity building, education and the promotion of sustainable sport practices.

Within the scope of sports, environmental sustainability refers to the practice of creating and managing sports events and facilities in a way that minimizes the negative impacts on the environment, promotes social responsibility, and maximizes economic benefits (Green Sports Alliance).

Despite acknowledging the sport sector as an important contributor to the fight against climate change, there is still a lack of broader recognition of specific areas of sport. The grassroots sport sector, being the foundation of the European sport model, has the capacity to unlock the full potential of sport to contribute to the development of a greener Europe. The large base of participants that the grassroots sport sector unites makes it possible to act as an agent of change in four of the EU Green Deal policy areas, including clean energy, sustainable industry, building and renovation, and sustainable mobility. The grassroots sport sector can play a crucial role in each of these areas, leveraging its broad base of participants and influence to create positive and lasting impacts on the environment. Furthermore, the grassroots sports sector can also serve as a platform to raise awareness and educate the public about the importance of sustainability and the need to address climate change. To this end, creating opportunities for accessing structural funds at the European, regional, and local levels can help create a greener and more sustainable future for the continent and beyond.

- According to 2018 data, more than 3000 amateur clubs have benefited from Dutch royal football federation (KNVB) devised a scheme to lower their energy costs and environmental impact. The plan involves partnerships with energy companies to install solar panels, new boilers, and insulation. As a result of the initial investment of 30,000 – 50,000 EUR, amateur clubs have saved 7,000 EUR in energy costs across the year. This shows how grassroots sports clubs implemented innovative solutions in order to drive down energy costs as well as to tackle the wider problem of climate change.

- The [Guidelines for more sustainable local sports events for youth leaders](#) developed by ENGSO Youth offer recommendations for young leaders to implement preventive and reactive environmentally sustainable actions linked to sports and outdoor activities. They aim to equip young sports event organisers in grassroots clubs with ideas about sustainable event management principles and environmentally protective sport activities.
- The PlayGreen Project has developed a [Guide on environmental volunteering in sports](#). Engaging young people through an environmental incentive had been identified as an innovative approach to reach those that aren't yet practicing sports. The developed tools and guidelines set a specific, well-organised structure with adaptable and flexible activities and resources to enable sports organisations to adapt it to the needs and nature of their sport to simultaneously further their engagement in environmental sustainability and reaching new young leaders.
- The "Air Quality and Sport Alliance" was formed as a group of international sports organisations committed to solving air quality issues that impact global sport. Air quality is a critical issue that concerns everyone, which consequently has an effect on the quality of physical activity at all levels, including the [grassroots level](#). This working group was the first 'lab' to operate within the Sustainable Sport Lab, a programme initiated by [SandSI](#) focused on exploring, experimenting, and engaging sustainable initiatives that advocates for high-impact systematic change across the global sport sector. The participating organisations are committed to driving awareness about air quality issues, collaborating on resources, sharing knowledge and expertise, investing in research, and coordinating with industry partners in an effort to collectively address and resolve these issues.

2. Social Sustainability

This dimension of sustainability focuses on the world in relation to communities, cultures, globalization, and social equality. It aims at preserving future generations by acknowledging that the population has an impact on others and the world we live in ([UN Global Compact](#)). Social sustainability is also about expanding opportunities for all people today and tomorrow. Together with economic and environmental sustainability, it is critical for poverty reduction and shared prosperity. The core tenet of social sustainability and inclusion's work is to help people, regardless of their gender, race, religion, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, or disability, overcome obstacles that prevent them from fully participating in society and supporting their efforts to shape their own future ([World Bank](#)). It also includes equity of access to key services, equity between generations, a sense of community ownership, and mechanisms for a community to fulfil its own needs where possible through community action (McKenzie, [2004](#)).

The United Nations Development Programme ([UNDP](#)) affirms the social sustainability dimension of sport. Sport can be catalytic when it is shaped to improve people's opportunities, confidence, and sense of belonging in the short run while laying the ground to change mindsets and build inclusive societies. Women's and girls' participation in sports, for example, can boost confidence and self-esteem while challenging gender stereotypes and influencing the behaviour of men and boys.

Within the context of major sports events, the Council of Europe (CoE EPAS, [2015](#)) refers to social sustainability as being able to prepare for a successful and lasting legacy of a sports event, the economic, environmental as well as social dimensions should be taken into consideration and pursued. To guarantee a positive and lasting legacy, governments need to play a strategic role in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of sustainability programs bringing in balanced economic, environmental, and social objectives.

The EU Work Plan for Sport 2021-2024 acknowledges that sport can contribute to social sustainability by means of promoting social cohesion and community development, encouraging healthy lifestyles and well-being, fostering equality, and enhancing education and lifelong learning skills.

Sport and grassroots-based sports organisations have great potential to mobilise people by raising awareness of the issue at stake and nudging people toward conscious behavioural change.

- The [Sport and Social Cohesion Lab](#) is acknowledging that the increasing change and diversity in European cities, encouraging social cohesion is seen as of utmost importance for the stable growth and solidarity of European cities. Sport and physical activity have become increasingly recognized and implemented as tools to foster social cohesion in neighbourhoods, cities, and communities around Europe. The Sport and Social Cohesion Lab aims to increase social cohesion in diverse, vulnerable urban neighbourhoods and support practitioners in delivering high-quality sport for social cohesion programs.
- Non-mega sport events appear to provide more positive social impact and outcome opportunities for local residents than mega sporting events. It is hypothesised that the bottom-up strategy of non-mega sport events, planning starts within the local communities, creates a sense of ownership which is perceived as a solid foundation for positive outcomes. Small and medium-sized events do not have a global reach, but as there are more of them and closely connected to local communities they may be more relevant as a means for durable benefits for the host communities (Günter et. al [2013](#))
- The way physical, cultural and social places are developed impact the creation of socially sustainable communities. Both design and outcome of infrastructure need to reflect the nature and requirements of the local community. Therefore, the inclusive design process which is creating social links, networks, and ownership in the local communities can also be used for sports infrastructure as one place that fosters health, well-being, and a sense of belonging in local communities (Palich & Edmonds, [2013](#))

3. Economic Sustainability

This dimension of sustainability aims at capital and improving the standard of living while acknowledging not only the quantity but also the quality of economic growth ([FutureLearn](#)). Economic sustainability is understood to be economic development that does not have a negative impact on environmental or social sustainability. An increase in economic capital must therefore not be at the expense of a reduction in natural capital or social capital ([KTH Royal Institute of Technology](#)). The full life cycle of goods from the extraction of raw materials, through processing, manufacture, distribution, use, maintenance, repair, and eventual recycling or disposal has to be carefully considered ([University of Maine](#)).

Within the sport sector, economic sustainability is only hardly found in literature as the sport is often based on not-for-profit organisations. Therefore, sustained growth of resources and profit margins do not apply in sports. There the question is whether revenues from ticket sales, television broadcasts, sponsorships, and public subventions are sufficient to meet payroll and other financial commitments ([Sanderson & Shaikh, 2017](#)).

Sport organisations, especially at the grassroots level, find themselves in a complex financial situation. While some sport organisations are economically self-sufficient, for most of them public support remains essential ([European Commission Sport Unit](#)), alongside effective solidarity mechanisms that redistribute the revenues created by financially profitable top sports. Economic sustainability within the grassroots area refers to the diversification of income, meaning income through membership fees, sponsorships, and public funds without being dependent on one single source.

- Within its competencies, the European Commission aims to build a secure and sustainable future for sport by focusing on public and private financing. This includes developments in other policy fields that can have an impact on the financing of the sports sector (VAT reductions, internal market provisions), EU financial instruments like the Erasmus+ program that can provide funding for the sports sector and its activities, as well as the exchange of best practices between different organisations and Member States. In that regard, a study on the financing of grassroots sport and sport for all in the Member States ([Eurostrategies et. al, 2011](#)) and a communication on sport that addressed the redistribution of revenue derived from professional sports to lower levels of the sport chain ([European Commission, 2011](#)) have been published.
- In order to make small sports clubs manageable and economically sustainable a cluster study from Italy ([Musso et. al 2017](#)) has shown that effective clubs are rather larger in size and have the ability to attract new participants while also establishing a wide variety of services that contribute to the diversification of income and financial viability.

Summing up

All in all, to have a thriving sports movement in the long term, sustainability in all its dimensions has to be considered as they are interlinked and interdependent.

With its global reach, universal appeal, and the power to inspire and influence millions of people around the globe, sport is uniquely placed to lead by example as it reexamines its own practices and policies to move fans and society towards a more sustainable future within and beyond the sporting field.

While sports cannot provide all the answers, sports entities can play an important role. When considering sport as a tool, it is important to realise its potential when used in combination with other tools to educate on different topics and advocate for sustainability.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), as a complementary approach to all sport-related processes, should enhance collective action among sustainability initiatives. ESD provides the empowering mechanism through which we can transform the critical sustainability challenges that we are facing in the sports sector, into opportunities by supporting the skills development of young people and fostering intergenerational dialogue, supporting physical education practitioners, and ensuring that sports education initiatives for sustainable development are inclusive, affordable and accessible.

All mechanisms aimed at the holistic understanding of sustainability should include dedicated funding, institutional integration, working space, mandates, recognition, and training to ensure the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.