The power of sport?

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(With thanks to former colleague Dan Bates)

UNITED NATIONS
UNOSDP
Office on Sport for Development and Peace

NICE TO MEET YOU

Stephen or Ste

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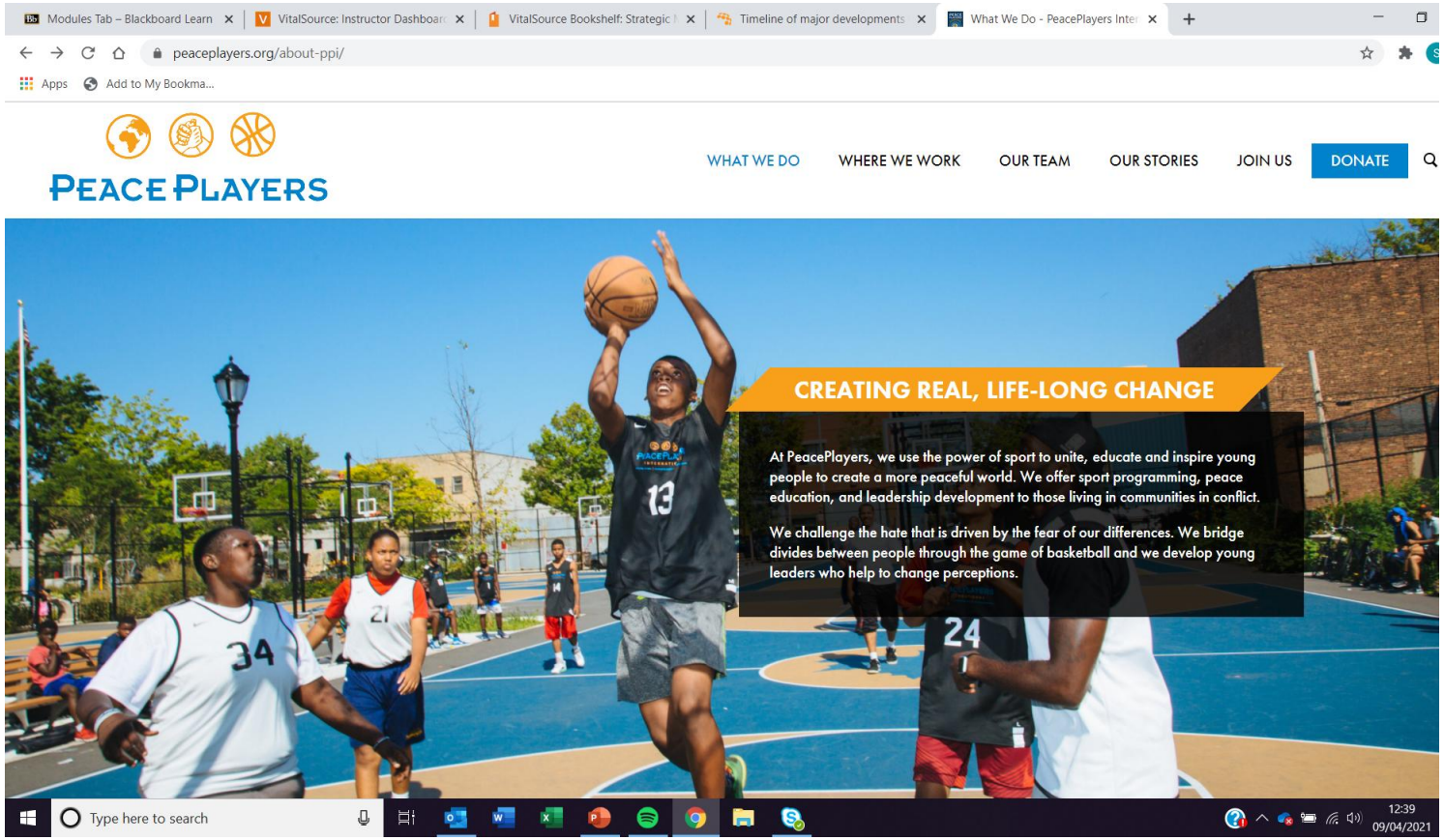
Background in community sport/ sport for change

Trigger warning…

- 14. We are meeting at a time of immense challenges to sustainable development. Billions of our citizens continue to live in poverty and are denied a life of dignity. There are rising inequalities within and among countries. There are enormous disparities of opportunity, wealth and power. Gender inequality remains a key challenge. Unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, is a major concern. Global health threats, more frequent and intense natural disasters, spiralling conflict, violent extremism, terrorism and related humanitarian crises and forced displacement of people threaten to reverse much of the development progress made in recent decades. Natural resource depletion and adverse impacts of environmental degradation, including desertification, drought, land degradation, freshwater scarcity and loss of biodiversity, add to and exacerbate the list of challenges which humanity faces. Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time and its adverse impacts undermine the ability of all countries to achieve sustainable development. Increases in global temperature, sea level rise, ocean acidification and other climate change impacts are seriously affecting coastal areas and low-lying coastal countries, including many least developed countries and small island developing States. The survival of many societies, and of the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk (SDG, 2015: 4/35).

Today

- The power of sport?
- What is ‘development’?
- Designing ‘sport for development’ interventions
- Human resources and sport for change



SfD intervention: PeacePlayers

- Conflict resolution and peace through sport
- eg Peace Players Cyprus
  - Greek and Turkish young people in divided Cyprus
- We need to ask questions like:
  - What assumptions are they making about the power of sport?
  - Could other forms of intervention make more of a difference?
  - How does a programme like this address the underlying causes of conflict, unrest etc?

What do we mean by ‘Sport for Development’?

- A broad social field in which sport and related activities are utilised to pursue different non-sporting development and peacebuilding goals across the world (Collison et al, 2019: 1)
- Aim to organize and mobilize sport and physical activity in order to contribute to gender empowerment, health promotion, economic development, and peace and conflict resolution, among other goals (Darnell et al, 2019)
- Be aware… “some activities at first glance seem hardly to constitute sport at all” (Hylton and Totten, 2013: 81)
  - Yes: football, cricket, rugby…etc
  - And yes: parkour, capoeira, indigenous games, play…
  - What about something like World Bicycle Relief?

Why sport?

"Sport is increasingly recognized as an important tool in helping the United Nations achieve its objectives, in particular the Millennium Development Goals. By including sport in development and peace programmes in a more systematic way, the United nations can make full use of this cost-efficient tool to help us create a better world."

Ban Ki-moon, former United Nations Secretary-General

"Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand."

Nelson Mandela

"Sport has a crucial role to play in the efforts of the United Nations to improve the lives of people around the world. Sport builds bridges between individuals and across communities, providing a fertile ground for sowing the seeds of development and peace."

Wilfried Lemke, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace

Figure 2.1 Unique attributes of sport

Universal popularity	People around the world are attracted to sport, and this popularity can transcend national, cultural, socio-economic, political and even linguistic boundaries.
Ability to connect people and communities	Sport is an inherently social process that can bring people together and unite them through a common interest.
Communications tool	Due to its universal popularity, sport is a form of global mass entertainment and has become one of the most far-reaching communications platforms in the world. Global sporting events and high-performance athletes are effective platforms for educating the public and mobilising the masses.
Cross-cutting nature	Sport can be used to address a broad range of social and economic challenges. As more SDP programmes are put into practice, sport is increasingly used to promote health and prevent disease, strengthen child and youth development, enhance education, foster social inclusion, prevent conflict and build peace, foster gender equality, enhance inclusion of persons living with disabilities, and promote employment and economic development.
Potential to empower, motivate and inspire	Sport draws on, develops and showcases peoples' strengths and capacities. By putting emphasis on what people can do rather than on what they cannot do, sport has the ability to empower, motivate and inspire individuals and their communities in a way that promotes hope and a positive outlook for the future.

See:
Sport for Development and Peace Youth Advocacy Toolkit Commonwealth

Youth Sport for Development and Peace Working Group (2015)

Perhaps, but…

- Notions of the character-building power of sport are simplistic (Coakley, 2011)
- ‘Universal language’ analogies gloss over inequities in power (Darnell, 2012; Giulianotti et al, 2016).
  - Whose voice and perspective? ***Culture matters***.
- So, theory and practice need to go beyond evangelistic and essentialist conceptions of sport (Coalter, 2007; 2013)
- Practice cannot come at the expense of critical and theoretically-informed reflection (Black 2010)
- Frequently positioned as apolitical and non-threatening… because it is understood to have universal, transnational, and transhistorical meanings (Darnell et al, 2019)
- Our romanticised view of sport as a ‘free’ space/ apolitical = ***severely misguided***

SDGs (latest update here)

Beware sloppy thinking

- Sport viewed as an ‘unambiguously wholesome and healthy activity in both a physical and moral sense' (Smith and Waddington, 2004)
- Coalter (2002) argues that there are:
  - *Unexamined assumptions* about the nature and benefits of sport
  - Relationships between participation in sport and a range of social outcomes is poorly explained or understood!
  - Assumed link between sporting and social inclusion
- Sport is like eating green vegetables: it’s just good for you

Key principles

- ***Reflects limitations of top-down and facility orientated interventions*** that fails to adequately address the sporting and social barriers faced by different communities
- Interventions need to be ***co-produced*** with local people in order to better understand their lived experience
- ‘Bottom-up provision’; enabling communities to take a ***greater degree of control*** over the development process
- Professionals ***and communities*** have expertise that’s vital to the development of sustained change
- Need to grasp workings of **power**

Summary thoughts

- “While sport can have a positive role to play in addressing social cohesion, this is unlikely to happen if it is organised or promoted along conventional lines. Engaging the most disaffected… can best be achieved through the deployment of a combination of *community development and sports development resources*” (Coalter, 2002)

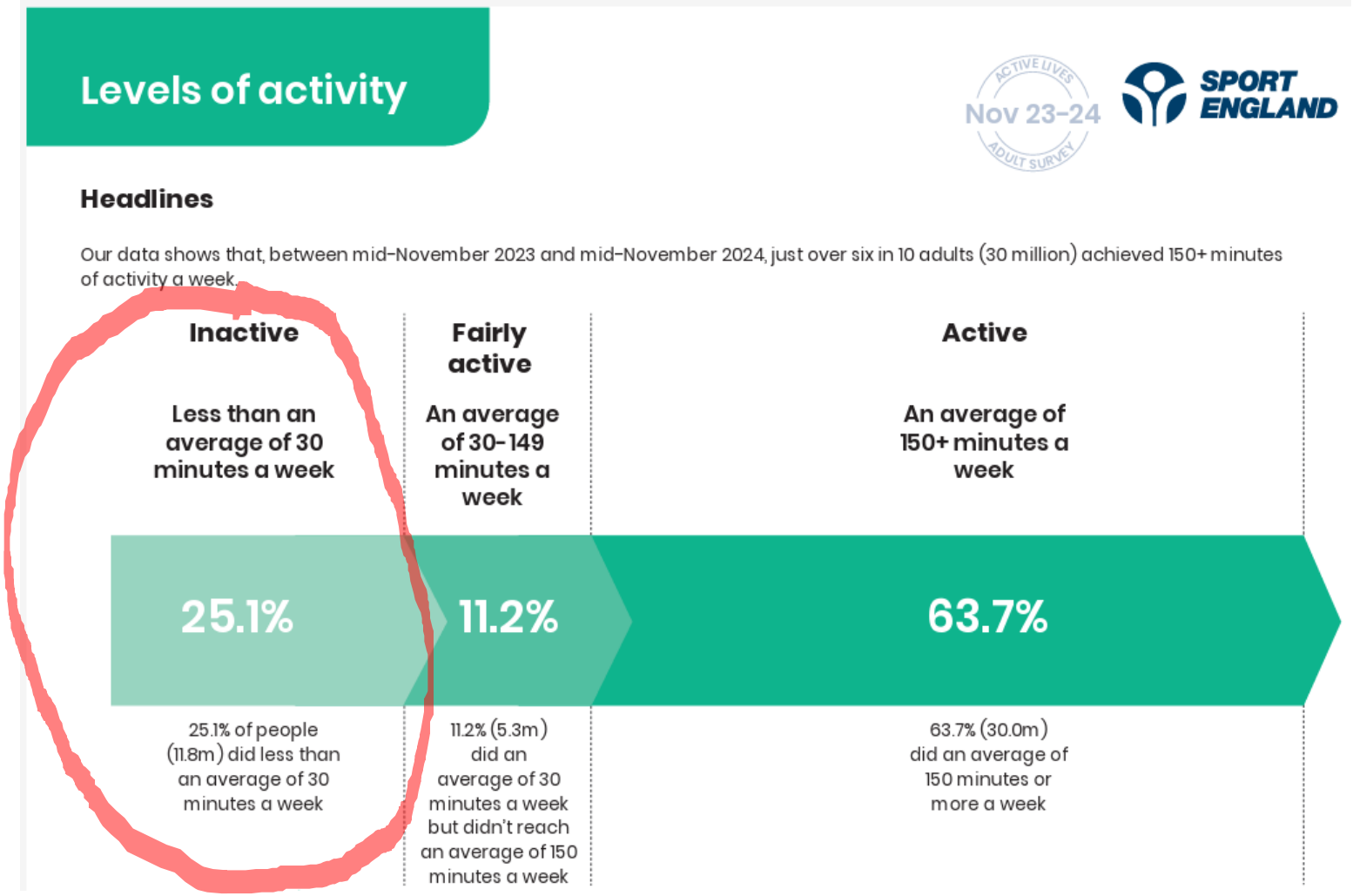
- “if sport practitioners are to be serious about development, they need to figure out what they believe development should be and construct sport programs and education initiatives designed specifically to address these ideals and objectives” (Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011: 298)

Development in context

- Stated aims of sport for development interventions include:
  - Peace and conflict mitigation;
  - Crime and poverty reduction;
  - Community empowerment and development;
  - Youth employment and leadership;
  - Education;
  - Physical and mental health (obesity, diabetes etc.);
  - Inequalities reduction (disability, gender, age, ethnicity etc.)
- What constitutes ‘development’ in these contexts? How do we know it has occurred?

Who takes part?

A quarter of adults in England are inactive (Sport England 2025)



Levels of activity

Active: 150+ minutes a week

Nov 23-24

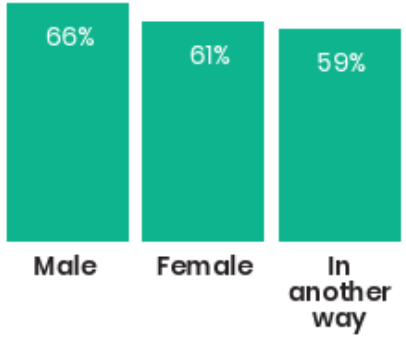
SPORT ENGLAND

Summary of demographic differences

Our data shows there are significant inequalities:

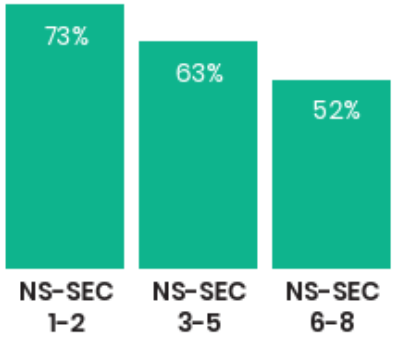
1 Gender

Men (66% or 15.1m) are more likely to be active than women (61% or 14.6m) and those who describe themselves in another way (59% or 0.2m).



2 Socio-economic groups

Those from lower social groups (NS-SEC 6-8*) are less likely to be active (52%).

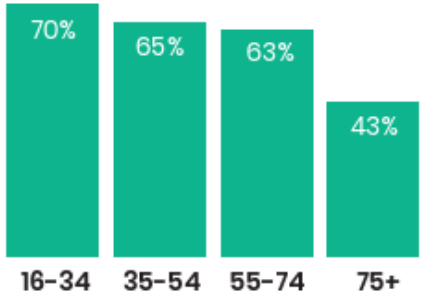


Link to data tables

*See our definitions page for the full definition of each demographic group.

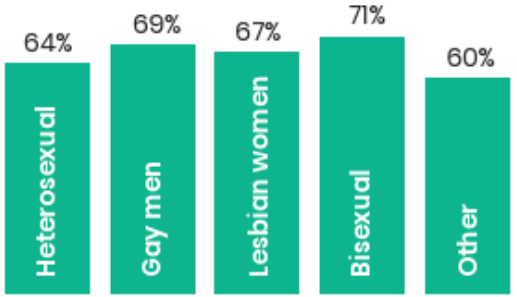
3 Age

Activity levels generally decrease with age, with the sharpest decrease coming at age 75+ (to 43%).



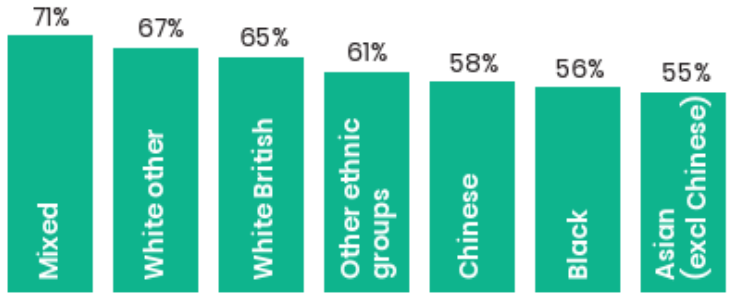
4 Sexual orientation

Gay men and bisexual adults are both more likely to be active than heterosexual adults.



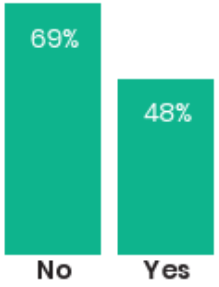
5 Ethnicity

There are differences in activity levels based on ethnic background.



6 Disability and long-term health conditions

Activity is less common for adults with a disability or long-term health condition* (48%) than for those without (69%).



Additional demographic breakdowns for transgender, faith, working status and education stage can be found in the data tables.

An uneven playing field?

“There is a wide range of evidence-based interventions which aim to increase population based physical activity. However, evidence suggests that many interventions exacerbate inequalities for communities with protected characteristics. Protected characteristics include age, ethnic or national origin, religious belief, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, sex, being pregnant, married, in a civil partnership or has a disability. It is against the law to discriminate against anybody because of these characteristics. It also includes socioeconomic position, occupation, geographic deprivation, and membership of a vulnerable group.”

(Public Health England 2021: 4)

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For examples of interventions, see…

- https://www.connectsport.co.uk/ - see ‘Directory’
- https://sportfordevelopmentcoalition.org/ - see ‘News and views’
- https://sportandrecreation.org.uk/members/membership-directory
- https://www.sportanddev.org/en
- https://www.streetgames.org/our-story/our-approach/
- https://allianceofsport.org/ - see ‘Our work’
- https://www.laureus.com/sport-for-good - see ‘Where we work’
- https://www.common-goal.org/ - see ‘Our work’