



# **Study on the Contribution of Sport to Regional Development through the Structural Funds**

*Executive Summary*

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2016

ISBN 978-92-79-54596-2

doi: 10.2766/53955

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PRINTED ON PROCESS CHLORINE-FREE RECYCLED PAPER (PCF)

## **1 Introduction**

People take up sport and physical activity for a variety of reasons, including for the sheer enjoyment of it, to improve fitness and health and to generate a sense of well-being. Promoting sport is important in itself, but sport also makes a direct contribution to economic activity and has huge strengths as a means of motivating a wide range of individuals and groups. In short, sport and physical activity can have very important economic and social impacts, especially at a local or regional level.

**It is on the economic and social benefits of sport and physical activity that the Study on the Contribution of Sport to Regional Development under the Structural Funds has concentrated. In this sense, the study has not primarily been about how to get more funding for sport. It is much more about the role of sport in modern economies and society and how sport and physical activity can be a powerful means of achieving the objectives of EU Cohesion policy.**

The European Commission is committed to exploiting the support of sport by the Structural Funds as a tool for regional and rural development and in order to strengthen the skills and employability of workers in the sport sector. This study aims to assist the implementation of this commitment by providing practical information and advice in the following ways:

- summary information on 229 sport and physical activity projects that have already been supported (mainly in the 2007-2013 period) by the Structural Funds,
- 33 good practice cases, illustrating the effective use of EU Funds,
- analysis explaining the nature and impact of sport-based initiatives, with an identification of the relevant general policy objectives and a more specific categorisation of the sport interventions used to achieve them,
- practical advice for those interested in developing projects set out in a guidance document and in the report's recommendations.

As background to the presentation of this material, the report briefly explains the policy context for the study and the growing profile of sport at a European level, notably since the reference to sport in the Lisbon Treaty. It also refers to important debates relating to sport and regional development in the academic literature, such as sport's role in the Experience Economy. Finally, by way of context, the methodology of the study is explained.

## **2 The Evidence on Sport-based Initiatives**

It is clear that sport and physical activity are proving to be a powerful means of achieving the economic and social objectives of the Structural Funds – the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. Sport has many direct and indirect impacts on regional and national economies and can be a very valuable way of engaging with a variety of social groups with a view to developing skills and enhancing employability. In fact in some areas, sport and physical activity can make virtually unique contributions to such processes. It can be particularly good, for instance, in getting through to marginalised and alienated groups that other schemes have failed to engage with. At the same time it can also be associated with advanced forms of economic development, making use of sport science and advanced training facilities, but also including the development and exploitation of innovative technologies and business processes. In some regions there have been direct attempts to build sport-based competence clusters as a focus for regional development and sport is also recognised for the contributions that it can make to resolving societal challenges relating to health problems, an ageing population and environmental issues. Frequently developments form part of a broader economic strategy, especially when this relates to the tourism sector or to the cultural and creative industries. Sport activities, for instance can help develop the tourist offer, lead to more stable employment and better paid jobs or be important in extending the tourism season. In some cases sport is an essential component of building the experience offer. Sport businesses themselves are a significant element in many local economies and there are examples of direct support for sport-based businesses, though this is a characteristic of certain regions and reflects the stage of development of the regions in which they are adopted.

The financial scale of the support for sport-based projects ranges from a few thousand euro, particularly for small-scale developments in rural communities, to many millions of euro for ambitious sport-related projects aiming to contribute to urban regeneration or the development of significant new activities in a regional economy. Sometimes the impact is intended to be in the form of a direct generation of business income and employment, whereas more often the projects are more strategic in nature, aiming to create these effects over a longer time period.

The type of sport and related activities supported is very varied. There are many projects where the focus is on team sports, like football, hockey and netball, but equally there is support for athletics and general fitness and exercise. Walking and cycling and other outdoor activities are common themes, as are sailing and water and winter sports in the appropriate regions, but there are also cases of perhaps less expected activities being supported, such as skateboarding, paragliding and diving. Many projects, however, envisage support for a variety of activities through the development of multi-purpose facilities or the support of training for people from a variety of sport backgrounds.

There is a certain amount of support for infrastructure and equipment acquisition, but usually within a broader development context. There is some support too for developing sport skills, but more for developing coaching and teaching school children and also some examples of training to enhance good governance in sport.

Many interesting developments are taking place through collaborative projects between Member States under INTERREG.

Selecting from the examples collected, the project team has investigated some 33 cases illustrating a range of different types of initiative. These present clear illustrations of practical projects to inspire those in the sport community who may be interested in developing projects in the current programming period. The cases have been grouped broadly according to their general objectives:

- Direct impacts on employment
- Innovation
- Sport Infrastructure & Regional Strategy
- Sport & Regional Strategy – General
- Sport & Urban Regeneration & Development
- Sport & Rural Development
- Integration with Tourism Strategy
- Integration with Cultural & Creative Industries
- Training of Sport Staff – Direct Skills Development
- Employability & Transversal Skills
- Contributions to Health Improvements
- Contributions to the Environment
- Social Cohesion & Reconciliation

Within these, particular projects can have a range of more specific objectives and are likely to combine different categories of intervention. It was thought useful to isolate the different components within projects with a view to showing in more detail what sport and physical activity is capable of achieving and also to act as a sort of checklist for those thinking of developing new projects. This is presented in a Categorisation of Sport Interventions in the main Report, with a distinction between interventions that are mostly relevant for ERDF projects and programmes and others more likely to be supported by the ESF.

From the variety of interventions identified, therefore, and the cases examined, the project has drawn some important practical conclusions about why and how sport-based projects can be supported. This has been used to develop a Practical Guidance document in order to provide advice to sport organisations and others on the steps that they need to take to mount a successful project.

### **3 Recommendations**

The following summarises the recommendations that have been made to the Commission:

- The Commission is in a good position to publicise the evidence on the impact of sport-based projects and their suitability for achieving important objectives of the ESIF and Europe 2020 and to encourage Member State authorities and sport organisations to play their role effectively.
- The evidence collected could usefully be up-dated to reinforce the evidence base.
- The study's findings should be used to support some of the work of the Expert Groups under the EU Work Plan for Sport.
- The Commission should consider encouraging national officials responsible for sport to work together, and with other sectors, in developing the case for sport-based initiatives at a national and regional level.
- Sport-based projects are often part of a broader tourism or Experience Economy strategy. The Commission should explore these links further, especially in the contexts of smart specialisation and urban development initiatives.
- The study team has proposed that a Sport Action Network be formed, made up of persons or organisations interested in a self-help group to exchange information or provide mutual support in developing sport-based proposals under the ESIF. This could be usefully encouraged by the Commission, both formally and informally.
- It is not recommended that the Commission should endorse any particular approach to developing projects based on sport or any particular forms of intervention. In general, the need to respond to the specific circumstances in the regions precludes any possibility of privileging certain forms of intervention.
- It may be appropriate for the Commission to highlight the particular strengths of sport in contributing to certain forms of economic and social development, as identified in the report.

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