

Advancing the Evidence Base of Sport for Development: A New Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed Journal

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We are pleased to release the first edition of the Journal of Sport for Development (JSFD) and we would like to take this opportunity to briefly describe its origins and objectives. In doing so, we endeavour to clarify for researchers, implementers, funders and policy-makers how we believe JSFD fits into the expanding sport for development (SFD) landscape.

It is widely accepted that the United Nations International Year of Sport and Physical Education (IYSPE) in 2005 was an advocacy success and sparked a mass expansion in the SFD sector.(1) This built on several previous international resolutions that recognised recreational play as a human right and emphasised the social potential of sport.(2-9) Over the last decade, SFD has enjoyed widespread and international growth, in terms of resources, constituents, and public awareness.(10) During this period several entities have attempted to define and demarcate the SFD sector. We believe that establishing a common definition is a critical step towards unifying a diverse range of stakeholders, many of which separately articulate the role of sport for social change and peace. However, we prefer to view these areas as integral parts of the sector and have adapted a previously described broad and inclusive definition for SFD:

The intentional use of sport, physical activity and play to attain specific development objectives in low- and middle-income countries and disadvantaged communities in high-income settings.(11)

JSFD was conceived in November 2011 when a series of independent conversations between members of the editorial team reached similar conclusions. As researchers, we were frustrated by the paucity of published evidence supporting the positive rhetoric that continued to fuel the

growth of SFD programmes. It appeared that the sector had not adequately responded to the recommendations in the literature reviews commissioned during the IYSPE and had failed to generate enough contextually relevant high quality SFD research. (12-16) Despite this, from our collective experiences with SFD programmes we were aware that evaluation processes in the sector had evolved substantially since 2005. So then the question became: where were the data and evaluation outputs? When we began disseminating the findings from our own academic work, it became evident to us that there were no peer-reviewed journals exclusively publishing research related to SFD. Additionally, we noted that many SFD practitioners lacked access to the few subscription-based journals that had been publishing SFD-related research.

JSFD aims to fill this gap by providing a multi-disciplinary research focal point for researchers, implementers, funders and policy-makers. Our objective is to examine, advance and disseminate evidence, best practices, and lessons learned from SFD programmes and interventions. We aim to publish both quantitative and qualitative studies that can better inform the SFD sector. This includes evaluations, theoretical frameworks, intervention design papers, and studies assessing the context of SFD programmes. In doing so, we hope to highlight successful results, but also contribute to improving impact by publishing evaluation findings from SFD interventions that failed to achieve their desired outcomes. We believe that JSFD will provide an important forum for critically examining why some initiatives do not live up to expectations. Only well-designed studies will allow us to move beyond the current rhetoric and towards a sound evidence base for SFD interventions.

In its initial stages the journal is scheduled for biannual release. After this first edition, we will make manuscripts available online at the time that they are accepted for publication. Papers published online will also be included in the next full volume of JSFD. In doing so, we intend to provide an important avenue for the timely dissemination of programme evaluation findings and the outputs of a growing number of researchers taking an active interest in SFD.

The editorial team is committed to producing a practically focussed journal that promotes the values of academic rigour in SFD research and evaluation. We believe our peer-review process is a key feature that sets us apart from other SFD platforms and ensures the quality of evidence published in JSFD. To this end, we are interested in research that critically evaluates SFD practice rather than purely seeks to verify the utility of active stakeholders or the sector as a whole. JSFD is receptive to a wide range of SFD research objectives and categorises these under seven broad themes:

Disability – development, access, inclusion, and human rights of persons with disabilities;

Education – educational developmental and other social outcomes for youth;

Gender – gender equity, gender norms, and empowerment of women;

Health – physical, mental, and social well-being of all people;

Livelihoods – economic and vocational opportunities for disadvantaged people;

Peace – reconciliation and peace-building between people and communities in divided societies;

Social cohesion – community-building and social inclusion of diverse populations.

JSFD embraces the diversity of the SFD sector in its authors, reviewers and audience. The editorial team recognises that publications in this sector have previously been confined to a relatively small group of prominent individuals and institutions. We aim to promote original contributions from a broader scope of researchers and implementers. To date, we have received 27 submissions from authors in 13 countries, and these have been appraised by reviewers of 16 different nationalities. The manuscripts published in this first edition include a global review as well as contributions from research conducted in Nicaragua, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Sweden. Given that a substantial proportion of SFD resources are directed

towards low- and middle-income countries, JSFD hopes to provide a platform for researchers from these countries to play a more central role in establishing and examining the sector's evidence base. Through the peer review process, we aim to not only screen research quality, but also to build the capacity of SFD authors in the scholarly reporting of programme evaluations and research.

Since many practitioners, evaluators and researchers around the world (particularly in resource-limited settings) lack access to subscription-based journals, we established JSFD as an open-access journal. This ensures that all published articles are publically available online at no cost. Unlike other open-access journals and subscription journals that offer an open-access option, JSFD does not ask or expect authors to pay for the cost of publication. We minimize publishing costs by relying on capable volunteers, publishing only online, and utilizing low-cost technologies.

As an editorial team, we recognise that our determination to establish SFD evidence and the processes of generating this are not without controversy.⁽¹⁷⁾ There is also ongoing debate regarding the need to develop programme theory to guide SFD implementation.⁽¹⁸⁾ In contrast, among many SFD advocates there are pervasive undercurrents that discredit rigorous evaluation. Several of these stakeholders believe that research and evaluation are unnecessary academic exercises that waste valuable programme resources on outcomes that they postulate are impossible to measure. We believe that JSFD is an ideal platform for informed discussion and critical reflection on these topics and other issues that arise in the sector. Indeed, it is through facilitating these debates that we believe JSFD can contribute to bridging the gap between the diverse range of stakeholders contributing to SFD programmes.

Finally, in a period of increasing austerity in countries that have typically provided the bulk of funding for the SFD sector, we believe its sustainability is closely tied to effective evaluation. We adapt a common mantra from academia in suggesting that SFD organisations must “evaluate or perish”. Only by applying rigorous research methods will the SFD sector establish adequate evidence to streamline its approach and survive broad contractions in foreign aid budgets. At a practical level, this should weed out the “briefcase NGOs” that move from one trend to another at the whim of potential funders but to the detriment of the supposed beneficiaries. We hope that a deeper commitment to rigorous research and evaluation will promote the evolution of the SFD sector and make effective interventions more durable in the changing landscape of international development.

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