

Culture, policies, and a move to integrate an assets-based approach to development in the portuguese sport system

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to propose the integration of an assets-based approach to development in the Portuguese sport system. The propositions advanced are aimed at instigating reflections on policy-level initiatives that can be undertaken with the intent of bettering the state of sport in Portugal. We argue that changes from an assets-based approach are needed in both policy and practice to influence the current Portuguese sport culture positively. Specifically, an assets-based approach could prompt a move towards deliverables aimed at promoting social development rather than a unidimensional focus on winning and performance. Based on the current state of affairs, reflections for rethinking the culture and policies of the Portuguese sport system are offered.

KEYWORDS: sport; policy; youth; values; winning.

INTRODUCTION

For several decades, sport philosophers, pedagogues, politicians, researchers, and practitioners have had ongoing discussions on the state of the Portuguese sport system (Bento, 2004; Resende, Sequeira, & Sarmento, 2016; Lima, 2019). A direct result of these discussions has been the implementation of several policies by the Portuguese government aimed at bettering the sport experiences of all participants. Specifically, there are now national policies for fostering ethics and preventing violence in sport (National Plan of Ethics in Sport, 2015) and for the certification of coaches (Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth, 2020). However, recent studies have shown that Portuguese youth sport participants still report negative experiences such as bullying (Nery, Neto, Rosado, & Smith, 2019) and gender stereotyping (Santos et al., 2019a) while partaking in sport. Considering these negative

experiences, it is important to continue to reflect on the state of the Portuguese sport system to determine if further changes are needed to improve the experiences of youth sport participants.

The purpose of this article is to propose the integration of an assets-based approach to development in the Portuguese sport system. The propositions advanced are aimed at instigating reflections on policy-level initiatives that can be undertaken with the intent of bettering the state of sport in Portugal. This article can inspire a range of sport stakeholders such as coaches, sport administrators, policy-makers and athletes to reflect on the current status quo. This article is organised into two sections. First, we review the current sports culture and policies within the Portuguese sport system. Second, based on the current situation, we offer reflections for rethinking the culture and policies of the Portuguese sport system to align with an assets-based approach to development.

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THE CURRENT SPORTS CULTURE IN PORTUGAL

Within today's neoliberal rationality, the pervasiveness of performance and competition create fertile grounds for a culture that casts people as capital who must incessantly lookout for their "value" (Smart, 2007). Neoliberalism extends way beyond market-specific sectors and engulfs non-wealth generating sectors of society, such as youth sport, which, in Portugal, is a very competitive environment (Bento, 2004; Santos et al., 2019a). The result is an ever increasing professionalisation of youth sport (Camiré & Santos, 2019), where exchanges between stakeholders (e.g., club administrators, coaches, athletes) are often transactional and economised, leading to a sports culture characterised by a strong focus on winning across ages, sport contexts, and performance levels. Given that youth sports clubs are funded based on the number of athletes they have, they use their success (i.e., most often measured in wins and championships) as a marketing tool to recruit athletes and convince parents to enrol their children in youth sports clubs. Such marketing ploys lead to winning being reinforced as the most important objective in youth sport (Sapo, 2021).

To better understand how winning permeates the Portuguese sport system, we need to consider several variables such as football's often toxic culture, the lack of importance provided to fair play and ethics, as well as the widespread notion that character development occurs automatically by taking part in sport. It should be noted these variables are influenced by the decisions made throughout the last decades by different parties and the lack of a coherent strategic plan for sports that may continue to move policies forward and enable sustainability (Silva, 2009).

First, the Portuguese sport system as a whole is highly influenced by the sport of football, which has numerous prominent groups of loyal supporters, athletes, and coaches (Seabra, Mendonça, Martine, Malina, & Maia, 2007; Pedras, 2019). Football garners an immense portion of media coverage, mainly focused on club performances but also on the corruption and violence ingrained in the sport. As a result of what has been labelled football's often toxic culture (Público, 2020), some television stations have decided to end some football programming. For example, one news channel ended two sports programs due to the toxic environment in Portuguese football created by commentators who made demeaning remarks about certain clubs in addition to questioning referees' decisions and athletes' professionalism. This news channel stated in a press release that: "The toxic environment created around these programs, to which clubs and their communication machines contribute, made us reach a point where we felt it was time to stop" (Público, 2020).

A second issue to consider is the propagandising from high-profile coaches and other stakeholders that fair play and ethics are unimportant (Correio da Manhã, 2007). For example, one high-performance football coach made headlines on social media with the statement "Fair play is bullshit". Recently, that same coach went a step further, stating that fair play is not needed in high-performance football and that his players should not give the ball to opponents when the game stops due to an injury or a similar event (Tribuna Expresso, 2020). Research has also shown youth sport coaches mainly focus on winning and achieving performance outcomes and give minimal attention to fair play and ethics (Pinheiro, 2013; Santos, Camiré, & Campos, 2018). Consequently, many sports stakeholders such as sports administrators, coaches and athletes publicly exchange accusations about issues such as corruption and violence (i.e., unethical behaviours) and do not embrace fair play and ethics in their own conduct (Diário de Notícias, 2021). In some cases, such behaviours consist of an attempt made by these stakeholders to explain the lack of results and deal with the emphasis placed on winning.

A third issue to consider is how certain youth sports clubs have made it clear in their mission statements that their primary focus is to win, with slogans indicating that their main objective is to win in every competition and develop athletes through winning. Such narratives create a culture that opposes government policies and inevitably compels stakeholders/participants to abide by a 'winning at all cost' attitude (Santos et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2019a). Thus, the present sport culture in Portugal has led to youth sport becoming a reflection of high-performance sport, where winning at all costs is prioritised. It has been argued that this winning at all costs mindset has contributed to a rise in the number of violent episodes amongst parents, referees, coaches, and athletes. In fact, Sofia and Cruz (2017) found that athletes from younger competitive categories tended to be more aggressive than athletes from older competitive categories, suggesting that a strong focus on winning is omnipresent even at the youngest levels of Portuguese sport.

Ironically, intertwined in the culture of winning described above is the widespread notion that character development occurs automatically by taking part in sport, despite researchers' efforts to dispel such notion (Coakley, 2011; Ferris, Ettekal, Agans, & Burkhard, 2016). In Portugal, sport is often considered an important platform for a range of positive developmental outcomes such as emotional control and leadership skills (Santos et al., 2018). For example, the National Plan of Ethics in Sport (2015) recognises sport practice teaches values. However, several studies conducted in Portugal (Santos, Corte-Real, Regueiras, Dias, & Fonseca, 2016, 2018; 2019a)

have shown how coaches have few concrete strategies to use sport's potential for athlete development. Coach education specific to youth development has been positioned as lacking in the Portuguese context, explaining some of the struggles coaches have in implementing developmental strategies (Santos et al., 2016; 2017).

CURRENT SPORT POLICY IN PORTUGAL

In Portugal, policies have been developed to guide sport participation and are considered important tools to influence sport culture and stakeholders' practices (Darnell et al., 2019). In the last 20 years, numerous sport policies have been enacted to delineate the objectives of sport (Fernandes, Tenreiro, Quaresma, & Maças, 2011). However, in many instances, our analysis points to how these policies tend to use evangelical narratives to identify sport as an inherently positive undertaking and as a panacea to solve a range of societal issues (Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth, 2015). For example, the code of sports ethics from the Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth (2015) states that "Sport can justify its presence in society through being an educational and training tool, for personal and social development and entrepreneurship, *of extraordinary power*" (emphasis added, p. 4). Such narratives ascribe to sport an unproportioned responsibility to overperform and overachieve to compensate for society's ills (Silva & Howe, 2012). The need for sport to compensate for society's ills is clearly outlined in the policy document guiding physical activity and sport in Portugal (2007) — *Lei de Bases da Actividade Física e do Desporto* —, where it is stated that efforts should be directed to "prevent and punish unsportsmanlike manifestations, specifically violence, doping, corruption, racism..." (article 3). Even the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (Portugal, 1976) itself addresses how "it is the state's objective, in collaboration with schools and sports associations, to foster a physical and sports culture to prevent violence in sport" (article 79).

Based on the arguments and the evidence put forth, it appears that Portuguese sport policy may be misaligned with Portuguese sport culture. Specifically, sport is expected to have "extraordinary power" for social development (Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth, 2015), but in practice, performance and winning remains the main outcomes (Santos et al., 2016; 2018; 2019b). Further, many policy statements are framed using a deficit-reduction approach (e.g., preventing racism), limiting sport's potential for "extraordinary power" to be reached. Deficit-reduction approaches aim to eliminate unwanted behaviours and undesired outcomes

after their appearance (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005) rather than using a proactive approach to development. For example, multiple awareness campaigns promoted by the Portuguese Olympic Committee (2020) proclaim "No to racism" but provide very few concrete actions to promote allyship, activism, diversity, and inclusion (Mac Intosh et al., 2020). Although deficit-reduction approaches are needed, they are usually insufficient as they generally fail to provide citizens with the skills needed to confront the challenges of everyday life (Lerner et al., 2005; Coakley, 2011).

Conversely, assets-building approaches focus on equipping people with the skills needed to deal with challenging issues as they arise (Lerner et al., 2005). Our position is that assets-building approaches should be prioritised as they help people develop the skills they need to thrive (Lerner et al., 2005; Coakley, 2011). Thus, in the Portuguese context, an important issue may lie in the lack of assets-based policies that explicitly state the developmental outcomes that should be attained through sport. Assets-based policies can perhaps be leveraged to support sports organisations in developing concrete strategies that can help youth learn the skills needed to thrive in and beyond sport.

The current misalignment we have identified between culture and policy in Portuguese sport may be best explained by the fact that funding is mainly tied to national sport organisations' ability to do three things: organise competitions, attain desired results, and promote sports participation (Portugal, 2018). The prominent funding focus on these three aims inevitably acts to limit the influence of policy, especially policy statements oriented towards sport's "extraordinary power" for development (Darnell et al., 2019). Logically, sports organisations implement managerial strategies and use their resources (e.g., time, coaches) based on funding requirements that dictate what the sport system demands of them in terms of deliverables. For example, the Portuguese Basketball Federation (2019) is projected to allocate 39.4% of its funding in 2020 to promote the sport and organise competitive events. However, no portion of its budget was explicitly allocated to efforts to promote ethics and athletes' personal development through sport. Similarly, the Portuguese Rowing Federation (2019) projected to spend nearly 200,000 € on logistical and administrative issues in 2020, while less than 7,000 € was allocated to programs aimed at fostering ethics in sport. These examples suggest that in the Portuguese sports landscape, where resources are often scarce, national sport organisations are compelled to focus on delivering outcomes that enable them to maintain their funding (Portugal, 2018). Having identified some of the misalignments inherent to the current Portuguese sport

system, in the next section, we propose reflections aimed at integrating an assets-based approach to sport, both in policy and funding structure.

INTEGRATING AN ASSETS-BASED APPROACH TO SPORT

If the Portuguese sport system is to implement an assets-based approach as part of its core values, policy changes should occur to influence the culture and delivery of sport in the country. Concerning the nature and scope of the changes that could be introduced in the Portuguese sport system, it may be necessary to consider how deficit-reduction and assets-promotion approaches can and should be combined to frame policy changes, with a particular programmatic focus on assets-building (Coalter, 2010). In concrete terms, it is important to acknowledge the worth of deficit-reduction approaches to eliminate racism, violence, and other forms of negative behaviours from sports. However, such approaches must be supplemented with assets-promotion approaches that promote diversity, activism, tolerance, and respect (Coalter, 2010). For such assets-building approaches to be enacted, policies are needed that provide a concrete plan of action that sports organisations can follow to address in meaningful ways contemporary social justice issues (e.g., racism, sexism, ableism; Mac Intosh et al., 2020). For example, sport policy could focus on explicitly stating what should be the developmental outcomes targeted across coaching domains (recreational sport, competitive sport), specifically which values and social justice life skills should be taught and how. A strategic plan for the Portuguese sport system may need to be created for the next ten years (2021–2031) to expand upon these issues. Currently, there are several laws, but there is not a strategic plan to determine the long-term developmental outcomes and methods to be used by sports organisations. A discussion that involves coaches, sports administrators, coach developers and policymakers may be needed to understand contemporary social justice issues, athletes' developmental needs and define concrete guidelines for sports organisations to help sport stakeholders teach a vast array of life skills and values. A needs assessment that captures the state of affairs in the Portuguese sport system may prompt practice-based policy change.

Nevertheless, it is essential to consider that policy, it and of itself, is not sufficient for sustainable long-term change to occur in the Portuguese sport system (Darnell et al., 2019). Additional strategies are needed to support sport organisations' efforts in implementing assets-based approaches. Such strategies could include educating sports organisations/coaches/

parents on *what* developmental outcomes (e.g., inclusion, diversity, psychosocial development, life skills) should be sought through youth sport (i.e., above and beyond winning) and *how* these outcomes can be attained. It is important to note that current contemporary social justice issues and the focus on winning may suggest the need to help sport stakeholders understand how to use an explicit approach towards teaching values and life skills such as respect, empathy and leadership. This explicit approach involves direct and deliberate strategies focused on teaching values and life skills. The value of this approach has yet to be acknowledged in the Portuguese sport system (Santos et al., 2018; 2019a) but may be crucial for substantial and sustainable change in the current status quo. In many instances, sport is still portrayed as a tool that automatically leads to positive developmental outcomes (Coakley, 2011), which may require sports organisations to focus on *how* these outcomes can be attained. Therefore, large scale asset-based training programs may be needed to help sports organisations understand how to implement sport policy and realise the implications an asset-based approach to development may have for the whole system, specifically for youth sports clubs, coach training, coach developers and sports administrators.

Additionally, the funding system must be tied to organisations' ability to implement policy, not just in terms of the three traditional outcomes (i.e., organising competitions, attaining desired results, and promoting sport participation), but most importantly, promoting the benevolent development outcomes identified above. It must be noted that the suggested adjustments to the traditional funding model come with their own set of challenges (e.g., how do we measure sports organisations' attainment of development outcomes?) but are ultimately needed if sports organisations are to alter/improve how they deliver sport. In other words, sports organisations must be provided with compelling reasons (i.e., impacting how they secure funding) to reframe their mission statement and program delivery; otherwise, they will simply maintain the status quo. To face the challenge of measuring sports organisations' attainment of development outcomes, partnerships with universities and polytechnic institutes may be created and become a necessary and feasible step. Recently, a research group focused on ethics that involves researchers from diverse polytechnic institutes spread across the country was created. This research group is funded by the Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth via the National Plan of Ethics in Sport and aims to develop asset-based training for sport stakeholders. This research group is well-positioned to broaden its reach and scope and work to measure sports organisations' attainment of development outcomes across

the country which could, in turn, influence sports organisations' ability to implement sport policy.

As highlighted by Coakley (2011), sports stakeholders usually assume that “sports participation and consumption will create healthy, productive people; decrease deviance...” (p. 2), which is not the case. To hold sports organisations accountable in terms of the extent to which they implement policy and create a renewed sport culture, new standards of behaviour are crucial. For example, the Portuguese Football Federation (2020) has launched an initiative to evaluate the extent to which its youth sports clubs define objectives and use strategies that provide high-quality developmental experiences for athletes. This initiative includes an evaluation of aspects such as training plans, developmental objectives set per team/age group, sports club's philosophy and training offered to sport stakeholders. However, there is a minimal focus on teaching values and life skills. This is the first initiative of its kind in Portugal, signalling that youth sports clubs that do not meet the criteria established by the Portuguese Football Federation (2020) cannot participate in certain competitions. Given the pervasive influence of football in Portugal, if/when evaluations are able to determine the effectiveness of this particular initiative, similar programs could be launched across sports nationwide further to promote assets-based approaches to development within national sport organisations. Ultimately, the hope is that a trickle-down effect occurs in a wide range of youth sports clubs, thereby shifting the Portuguese sport culture and positively influencing athletes' developmental experiences in sport.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article was to propose the integration of an assets-based approach to development in the Portuguese sport system. We argue that changes from an assets-based approach are needed in both policy and practice to influence the current Portuguese sport culture positively. It is proposed that an assets-based approach could prompt a move towards (some) deliverables aimed at promoting social development rather than a unidimensional focus on winning and performance. Given that less than 1% of Portuguese sport participants reach professional sports status¹, it is important to reflect on how to use sport as a tool for social change rather than simply focusing on competition. Updated policies and strategies can contribute to positive change.

1. See in: <https://ipdj.gov.pt/lista-de-praticantes-de-alto-rendimento>.

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