



OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

EU action for the post-COVID-19 period: recovering better through sport

EU action for the post-COVID-19 period: recovering better through sport
(Own-initiative opinion)

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Rapporteur: **Pietro Vittorio BARBIERI**

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 After the long period of pandemic, which has hit the sports sector as a whole and local sports clubs in particular hard, with many facilities having to close, a strategic approach is necessary to boost and promote the role of sport and physical activity in building a more resilient and sustainable society, as part of the wider process of economic and social recovery. Such a choice should be seen as part of the wider economic and social recovery process, in an attempt to identify targets to make the sport sector more responsive to crises that are increasingly affecting us.
- 1.2 Sport and physical activity will need to be mainstreamed into economic and social development strategies, and broader cross-sectoral links forged, in particular with public health, education and social inclusion. Sport is a driver for social, economic and environmental sustainability that fosters recovery by creating new employment and business opportunities based on it. It will also be important to foster social dialogue on the issue of well-being and physical activity in the workplace, involving the social partners. The EESC therefore calls for studies showing the link between sport and people's general well-being.
- 1.3 At school and during the various stages of education, just as people are taught to perform a task, to learn and to grow, it is necessary to teach girls and boys all about body literacy. Revitalising physical education at school from a perspective of play, recreation and multidisciplinary means creating an unparalleled tool for delivering results, serenity, the ability to live with other people and, above all, achieving educational success and promoting healthy lifestyles. This means recognising the value of sport and physical activity in the same way as other subjects, particularly in training paths for the younger generations, focussing in particular on inland areas and those disadvantaged due to their geographical characteristics.
- 1.4 The Lisbon Treaty outlined the European dimension of the social and economic value of sport. In the aftermath of the health emergency, it is necessary to make the values that sport and physical activity represent in European policy more visible, while affording them full dignity in the same way as other European policies. Therefore, not just cohesion policies are needed, but a real process of empowerment - a **genuine sports transition** that attaches significant value to the impact generated on people's wellbeing and quality of life.
- 1.5 It is therefore important to:
 - 1.5.1 include the sport deprivation rate - or the rate of exclusion from benefiting from a necessary good: the right to practice sports - in the Eurostat list of indices to measure material deprivation;
 - 1.5.2 make all EU funding for the period 2021-2027 – whether under direct or indirect management – available to the sports sector, considering sport and physical activity to be an investment in the individual and collective well-being of communities;
 - 1.5.3 provide for a greater share of the total amount of funding allocated to sport and cross-sectoral cooperation, including sport, in the Erasmus + programme. Funding should come not just from cohesion funds but also from the resources for the various strands of the recovery fund, as

funding is severely reduced for sport. In addition, greater redistribution of resources between high-performance and social sport;

- 1.5.4 develop plans to assist sport in the event of (economic, social and health) crises and emergencies, including preparedness plans, with the forms of administrative simplification needed to deal with heavy bureaucracy, especially for local sports clubs. It is therefore a priority to provide support especially for local sport, as it is that level which plays a role of including people with disabilities or in fragile or vulnerable situations, as well as providing significant intercultural interaction.
- 1.5.5 encourage support for active citizenship networks in achieving these objectives at local level, through partnerships and co-design between public policies and networks, in order to kick-start forms of social innovation, building on experiences of shared administration and circular subsidiarity. Encourage the participation of the social partners and organisations.

2. **General comments**

- 2.1 Against the backdrop of a pandemic that continues to put us to the test, and as we battle to protect lives and livelihoods, we must not lose sight of the fact that the choices we face will determine the future of the EU's socio-economic systems and the lives of Europe's citizens.
- 2.2 The health emergency has shown that, because of the multifaceted nature of the problems besetting us, it is impossible to achieve levels of resilience that would provide total security to the EU's socio-economic systems. Action is needed to adapt our society to crises and change by advancing resilience models grounded in the ability to anticipate crises and tackle them with the right "tools".
- 2.3 The coronavirus pandemic has changed the economic, social and health outlook for the years ahead and with this has come a change in the approach towards development and cohesion strategies. We need to choose whether to keep on doing what we have always done, or to change and adapt the paradigm that underpins development and cohesion policies given the problems brought to light and the experience gained as a result of the COVID-19 emergency.
- 2.4 The world of sport in its entirety has been badly hit by the COVID-19 crisis across Europe, but we need to emphasise that grassroots sport has faced the worst problems and challenges. The impact of the crisis in sport has affected young people in particular by constraining their "right" to engage in sport and physical activity. The whole branch of sports associations and the sports industry has likewise been affected by the health crisis, with consequences that will bear on its recovery even in the medium term.

3. **The role of sport in development and cohesion processes**

- 3.1 Sport enables civil society to channel its capacities constructively, enriching its positive values in a unique and multidimensional approach that contributes to physical and mental wellbeing; it also mitigates social problems through its ability to bring together culturally diverse communities. Sport is a vehicle for social, economic and environmental sustainability - under the conditions described in this opinion - increases the regeneration and attractiveness of regions and localities and furthers recovery by making it possible to create new employment and business opportunities based around it.
- 3.2 In economic terms, sport can stimulate the emergence of new lines of business or the consolidation of existing ones, by nurturing social and technological innovation; it can create new job opportunities, including through formal and non-formal training for young people; it is an implement with which to improve and consolidate workers' health and skills and, since it relies mainly on human involvement, it is an effective lever with which to generate local employment.
- 3.3 In social terms, sport is characterised by its ability to interact with a wide range of social groups, bridge differences, bring local communities together and get "fragile" and vulnerable social groups involved in the life of the community. Sport projects can also help prompt social regeneration in disadvantaged areas such as urban suburbs and rural and inland areas in Europe's regions.
- 3.4 On the environmental front, sport is a strategic tool for attaining the goals set to meet the challenges posed by the fight against climate change. Sport is an instrument for nurturing sustainable mobility and the green regeneration of urban areas as part of adapting to climate change. If transformed into Nearly Zero-Energy Sports Facilities¹, sports infrastructure will help - together with the holding of low-carbon events – to achieve the environmental sustainability goals. Finally, sports events are a formidable vehicle for disseminating and getting across positive environmental messages.
- 3.5 Although all the major international strategies (2030 Agenda; cohesion policy 2021-2027; WHO Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030) have identified sport as a priority instrument for achieving development, sustainability and cohesion goals, this approach has regrettably not yet been fully implemented in many Member States, with sport and the playing of sport still often relegated to a leisure and recreational role.
- 3.6 Where sport is concerned, the COVID-19 emergency means that the crisis will likely reduce the playing of sport or make it impossible. In the absence of specific and "innovative" measures that can effectively address problems and find solutions, the chain of events that characterises the social and economic dimension of this critical situation will have a disastrous impact, restricting some activities that are essential to ensure people's quality of life, wellbeing and health. This situation will not only endanger the "survival" of many bodies, associations and businesses operating in the field of sport, but will also lead to a social problem involving people's quality of

¹ [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on education for environmental sustainability.](#)

life and an economic one involving the lack of a source of income for those who derive their livelihood from such work. Similarly, the economic hardship brought about by the crisis will make it impossible for many people to pay for their children, or themselves, to do sport, thus adversely affecting physical wellbeing and health.

- 3.7 For vulnerable population groups, such as those with disabilities, the risks of sport deprivation will exacerbate already critical situations that in some Member States amount to systemic limitations. Specifically in the field of mental health, the pandemic has greatly reduced the active take-up by users, family members, operators, individuals and sports clubs of dedicated services and departments, depriving people with mental health conditions of sport as a means of building and maintaining supportive relationships that counter the isolation and marginalisation that arise from these illnesses. Collective wellbeing is a fact that affects everyone, not just those providing or receiving treatment.
- 3.8 Given the severe limitation of social opportunities which has significantly affected children and young people, opportunities for sport and physical activity, education and training should be boosted, with a focus on the safety of the places where they take place, to protect children and adolescents. Sport is an area where huge numbers of children and their teachers, technicians and coaches meet daily. This is one of the most sensitive environments for the physical and mental development of those practising sport, and it requires specific policies to be adopted to enable them to reap all the benefits that the activity can bring within a protected environment. Sport for all should not mean sport at all costs.
- 3.9 Regular physical activity also contributes to active ageing and can play a key role in improving older people's functional capabilities and quality of life. Moreover, the effects of physical exercise are amplified if older people are involved in social and productive activities at the same time. Sport therefore plays a preventive role, so that workers are healthy and fit when they reach retirement.
- 3.10 Developing physical activity for as many individuals as possible also requires social and societal innovation, which organised civil society and the social partners should pioneer. The everyday dimension, reflection on workers', students' and pupils' rhythms, and the ability to design areas where parents can carry out physical activity at the same time as their children, are crucial. The pandemic has helped us rediscover outdoor exercise, which can promote innovative trends such as urban and rural sport, to regenerate spaces and share space flexibility. The need for social innovation is huge and should be promoted and encouraged to help counter the fact that most people do not have time to engage in sport, even when they would like to.
- 3.11 The role of local private facilities (sports centres), which have all the capacity needed to work with businesses and other facilities (centres for people with disabilities, for example) of civil society organisations, should be emphasised in the development of collective programmes to benefit workers and people in general.

- 3.12 In this connection, the contribution of civil society and all the social partners is key. By encouraging civic engagement and launching social dialogue they can promote strategies for quality of life in the workplace, including as part of collective agreements, mount campaigns encouraging workers to join gyms and/or sports clubs, encourage sports workers to protect their own interests, and introduce pauses in work for people to stop and move around. The role of health professionals and teachers working with young children in raising awareness and promoting sport should be emphasised and strengthened in order to build a new culture and encourage employers to provide incentives to engage in sport.
- 3.13 As regards the gender dimension, the European Charter of Women's Rights in Sports² is certainly a work programme for continuing to educate people about differences and experiment with new activities, continuing the dialogue and collaboration between different stakeholders, particularly on the subject of communication, where there has for some time been a closer relationship between women and the media, to promote respectful and attentive journalistic language, enabling sport to combat all forms of violence, discrimination and economic inequality, and an increasingly welcoming and inclusive sport and mobility culture.

4. **Sport in the 2030 Agenda**

- 4.1 Sport is a universal language that unites people, peoples and cultures; its values are values of universality and harmony. Sport is a key tool with which to assist action to transform our societies into more thoughtful, sustainability-minded "environments". It is helping to achieve the 2030 Agenda goals by affirming the principles of respect, understanding, inclusion and dialogue, so contributing to the development and fulfilment of individuals regardless of age, sex, origins, beliefs and opinions.
- 4.2 Despite the obvious cross-cutting nature of sport as a means of supporting the implementation of the principles enshrined in the 2030 Agenda, it is clearly more likely to benefit some of the Agenda's 17 goals more than others.
- 4.3 Sport is an area in which the EU's remit is relatively new, having been introduced only with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. The EU is responsible for the development of evidence-based policy, as well as for fostering cooperation and managing initiatives in support of physical activity and sport across Europe. In the 2014-2020 period, a dedicated budget line was made available for the first time under the Erasmus+³ programme to support projects and networks in the area of sport. EU action in support of sport will be maintained and upgraded in the period 2021-2027.

² [European Charter of Women's Rights in Sports.](#)

³ [Erasmus+ - Performance.](#)

5. **Sport and cohesion policy**

- 5.1 The EU is striving to achieve greater fairness and openness in sporting competitions and greater protection of the moral and physical integrity of those engaged in sport, while bearing in mind its particular characteristics. Specifically, the EU covers three areas of activity in the field of sport: 1) its social role; 2) its economic dimension, and 3) the political and legal framework of the sector. For these areas, in addition to measures supported by directly managed financial instruments, the EU promotes the use and complementarity of the opportunities afforded by cohesion policy.
- 5.2 Sport and physical activity have demonstrated their ability to interact with a wide range of social groups, bridge differences, bring together local communities and get excluded social groups involved in the life of the community. Sports projects can also help towards a raft of political goals: nurturing innovation, promoting urban regeneration, sustaining rural development and contributing to domestic investment in Europe's regions.

6. **Sport and the WHO Global Physical Activity Action Plan 2018-2030**

- 6.1 The Global Physical Activity Action Plan 2018-2030⁴ sets out the strategic objectives to be achieved through policy measures to reduce the general lack of physical activity in adults and adolescents by 15% by 2030. It underscores the need for a cross-sectoral, holistic approach and the importance of investing in social, cultural, economic, environmental, educational, etc. policies to promote physical activity and contribute to the achievement of many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030. The strategies for implementing the plan should incorporate all the decisive factors that influence lifestyle and seek to put into practice effective health promotion measures from a cross-sectoral perspective and using a holistic approach.
- 6.2 Promoting physical activity is a complex matter that requires strong leadership and policy measures from the health sector, which is crucial at national level, but also a great deal of interaction with other sectors, such as education, culture, transport, urban planning and the economic sector. In order to increase physical activity and discourage sedentary behaviour, it is essential to address the environmental, social and individual problems of physical inactivity and to implement effective and sustainable measures through collaboration between different sectors at national, regional and local level. This must be done following the cross-sectoral approach that enables measures to be taken to change unhealthy behaviours, both by acting on individual lifestyles and by creating environmental and social conditions that can encourage behavioural change.

⁴ [Global action plan on physical activity 2018-2030](#).

7. **From strategies to practice**

- 7.1 Despite the clear contribution that sport and physical activity can make to achieving the goals of development, sustainability and cohesion, making European funds eligible and accessible for initiatives aimed at promoting and enhancing sport is still very difficult. The main reason for this situation is the absence of sport as a clear area of investment in the regulations underlying cohesion policy in 2021-2027. A clear reference to sport in cohesion policy implementation programmes would not only provide a clear pathway for these funding streams to reach sport, but would also simplify the work of the managing authorities of the funds in approving "sport and physical activity" projects.
- 7.2 In order to highlight the strategic nature of sport in the implementation of development and cohesion strategies, an analysis is appended below of the consistency between the goals of the 2030 Agenda and those of cohesion policy 2021-2027 and the possible measures to be implemented through sport.

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Christa Schweng
The president of the European Economic and Social Committee
