



Original Research Article

The Role of Sports Organizations in Advancing Sustainable Development Goals in Rajshahi City, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Background: Sports organisations can significantly contribute to sustainable development by fostering health, enhancing social inclusion, encouraging community involvement, and strengthening social bonds. This study explored the contribution of sports organisations towards selected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

Methods: A mixed-methods design was used. A total of 102 participants took part in the study, comprising 91 athletes and 11 officials and stakeholders from five sports organisations. The study used a two-stage data collection process; in the first stage, data were gathered through in-person interviews and focus-group discussions, and in the second stage, data were gathered through document analysis.

Results: Athletes reported that they participated in a variety of social-development activities. The largest participation was in blood donation (82%), followed by drug awareness activities (59%), tree plantation (35%), and providing education to the illiterate (10%). Furthermore, 84.6% of athletes perceived high or very high interpersonal relationships in sports organisations, which means that there are strong social relationships within sports organisations.

Conclusion: Sports organisations in Rajshahi contribute to sustainable development primarily through health-related activities, community involvement, and building social capital. More systematic and inclusive programs can further build the role of local sports organisations in contributing to the SDGs and improve their broader social impact on the community. The results emphasise sports as a real-life community-based tool for promoting interconnected social and developmental agendas.



1. Introduction

Sport is not just a matter of fitness, competition and recreation but also has an important place in today's society. Sport can have a broad impact on the social values and life skills that children, adolescents and adults have the opportunity to develop and learn, such as: Empathy, Team work, Leadership, Discipline, Responsibility, Cooperation and Coping with success and failure (M et al., 2024). As humans are social creatures, there is a need for regular contact and collaboration with others in order to develop relationships and social integration. Sport is one such place where people of various social, cultural, age and economic backgrounds can gather around common interests and aspirations (Quintela, 2025). Sports organizations therefore can be considered to be not just places of training and skill development, but also being of paramount importance as a space for strengthening social ties and community involvement. Social capital is an important concept to be used when considering the broader social impact of sport. Social capital usually is used to describe the networks and connections that link people in a given society and enable collective action (Zhou et al., 2021). It also involves trust, reciprocity, shared norms, understanding, cooperation, and common values among social groups that allow them to operate effectively (Haque & Hackel, 2026). In the case of social networks, they can give people emotional support, information, opportunities for working together and a sense of belonging. In this way, social capital can help to serve individual development and the operation of communities. Interpersonal relationships are especially relevant to the sport organization as athletes interact with teammates, coaches, senior athletes, officials, supporters and others in the broad community on a regular basis.

There has been much academic debate on the theory of social capital in the social sciences. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the resources that a person can mobilise and access within the existing web of social networks and relationships, as well as the potential they could build if they chose. In this view, the resourcefulness of an individual's social capital is related to the size and quality of the network that can be called upon and the resources that are available in this network. Organised sports can create these networks by bringing people together on a regular basis for training, competition, meetings, tournaments, and community even. Such interactions can build trust and cooperation, and open avenues for the development of new and existing relationships that could transcend sports. The sports sector can thus create a specific context that can be an even more valuable space for creating social capital. Sports teams frequently rely on each other to cooperate, communicate, encourage, and achieve together (Swandana et al., 2025). Teammates can give emotional and social support, senior players can give technical support, and coaches can mentor and provide technical support from recovery injury (Tabassum and Azim et al., 2024). Sports can also foster links between athletes and people beyond their specific teams in the context of competitions, sporting associations, community programs, and volunteering (Thomas et al., 2026). Hanson Kim (2025) stressed the significance of sports-related networks as a pathway to access supportive social relationships. These can be networks that expand bonding social capital (intra-sporting group bonds) and bonding bonds between sports participants and their communities (Kim & Kim, 2025). (Kim & Kim, 2025) These positive relationships that can be built in sporting settings can thus enhance social cohesion as well as social development at the individual level.

The social dimension of sport is also linked to the international development agenda for sustainable development. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda considers sports as an important enabler of sustainable development, as it can contribute to health, education, social inclusion, gender equality and empowerment, tolerance, and peaceful communities (Lemke, 2016). Regular sports and physical activity participation is especially relevant to SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing, as regular participation can support physical and psychological health and promote healthier lives (Oecd, 2023). However, sports organisations can make more than just a physical impact. Community-based and sports organisations can create blood donation programmes, health and drug-awareness events, educational support, environmental activities, and more social programs and events. By doing this, they may have the potential to contribute to multiple SDGs that are connected to each other. Sports can also be used to achieve SDG 4: Quality Education by fostering teamwork, communication, responsibility, perseverance, and other life skills. Playing sports as children has been linked to a wider range of developmental and educational benefits (Raw & Sherry, 2021). In the same way, sporting opportunities that are inclusive can contribute to SDG 5: Gender Equality, by providing children and young women with places to be, build their confidence, and break down traditional gender barriers. Sports can also help to address SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities by fostering interactions between people from various social and cultural backgrounds. Previous studies have indicated that sporting clubs can support social integration, but that can depend on the sport club environment and the individual context (Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2019). Sports can also make a contribution to community development and social wellbeing. Good relationships between athletes, coaches, administrators, and community members can have a positive impact on fostering an inclusive, cohesive community, relevant to SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. In addition, sports organisations can encourage environmental responsibility in tree planting, green space maintenance, and environmental awareness programmes, thus establishing potential connections with SDG 13: Climate Action and SDG 15: Life on Land. In addition, structured sports activities could promote positive behaviour among young people and promote positive social interaction. For instance, Othman et al. (2019) found that sports programmes

were linked to decreased aggression and antisocial behaviour and increased psychological outcomes. The results are a reflection of the broader impact of sports on social interaction, which can go beyond sporting performance (Othman et al., 2019).

Although sport has gained international attention as a possible catalyst for sustainable development, there is scant empirical awareness of the contributions of local sport organisations towards both social capital and the SDGs in Bangladesh, especially in the context of sport in Rajshahi City. Previous studies have been written about sport, social interaction, health, and community development, but there is little local evidence on the social-development activities that sports organisations engage in, and on the relationships that are established between their athletes. This gap is especially significant because local organizations are in situ and could offer practical opportunities for translating global sustainable-development priorities into in situ action. The present study will focus on sport organizations of Rajshahi City, Bangladesh and their engagement in social-development activities and the interpersonal relationships that were established among the participants. In particular, the study aims to evaluate the role of sports organizations in relation to the achievement of selected SDGs as well as the social relations and networks developed within the sports organizations and among the athletes, its members, and the community. The study aims to generate evidence that is context specific in terms of understanding the social role of sport and its contribution to sustainable and inclusive community development in Rajshahi City, by focusing on the activities of local sports organisations.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Design and Setting

The present study was of empirical, mixed methods and both quantitative and qualitative research design in nature, was used for the contribution of sports organizations to sustainable development and social relations in Rajshahi city, Bangladesh. The selected sports organizations in the Rajshahi City Corporation were selected and the study was conducted on them. The mixed methods approach was adopted to gain both quantitative data on the number of athletes who participated in social-development activities, as well as qualitative data regarding the experiences and perceptions of athletes, officials, and other stakeholders. Primary and secondary sources were used to gain a wider knowledge of the activities, policies and social roles of the chosen sports organisations.

2.2 Study Population and Sampling

The study population included athletes, officials and stakeholders of sports organizations of Rajshahi City. The participants were randomly selected from five sports organizations that were part of the study area. According to the original study, "purposive random sampling" was used which involved recruiting people if they are directly involved in the selected sports organizations. The study included 102 (91 athletes and 11 officials and stakeholders) participants. Athletes were the largest quantitative study group, and officials and stakeholders provided information on events, practices and community involvement of their organizations.

2.3 Data Sources and Data Collection

Both primary and secondary data were collected. Primary data were collected from individuals connected to the chosen sports organisations. The main tools used for primary data collection were face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions (Mazhar, 2021). Methods employed to collect data on areas covering athletes' involvement in social-development activities, relationships within sports organisations, and the contribution of sports organisations for the development of the community and SDGs.

The study also considered organizational policies and procedures, characteristics of the study area, and information received from the respondents as primary sources. Document analysis was used to gather secondary data. The secondary sources used were research reports, journal articles, official statistics, publications, and daily newspapers. These were used as sources to deliver contextual and conceptual information on sports, social capital, physical activity, community development, and sustainable development.

The quantitative part concentrated primarily on the athletes' reported participation in blood donation, drug awareness programmes, tree plantation, as well as providing education to the illiterate, and their perceptions regarding interpersonal relationships in sports organisations.

2.4 Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse quantitative data. The participants' responses were summarised using descriptive statistical procedures. Participation in various social development activities and athletes' perceptions of interpersonal relationship strength were reported using frequencies and percentages. The results were then presented in tabular and narrative formats to facilitate interpretation.

The qualitative data from interviews, focus group meetings, and documentary sources were analysed descriptively, with the help of logical reasoning, as described in the original study. To complement and contextualise the quantitative findings, relevant participant statements were included in the analysis. The intention behind the mixing of quantitative and qualitative evidence was to give a comprehensive description of the role of sports organisations in Rajshahi City towards social interaction and selected dimensions of SDGs.

3. Results

3.1 Participation in Social Development Activities

Table 1 has the reported incidence of participation of the athletes in four social development activities, namely, plantation of trees, drug awareness programmes, blood donation and education of illiterate people. The highest level of participation was recorded in the activity of blood donation (65 respondents, 82%) while 14 (18%) reported no participation. The participation in drug-awareness activities was also fairly high, 47 respondents (59%) said that they were involved in drug-awareness activities, while 32 (41%) reported non-participation. The participation in tree-plantation activities was also low, with 28 participants (35%) participating and 50 (65%) not doing so. The lowest level of reported involvement was found in activities associated with educating illiterate people, with 8 of those who responded reporting involvement and 71 (90%) reporting no involvement in such activities. Therefore, in the four activities mentioned in Table 1, the involvement of athletes was strongest in the blood donation and drug-awareness campaigns, and weakest in the educational activities for those who are illiterate in the community.

Table 1. Participation of athletes in different social development activities

Social development activity	Yes, n	Yes, %	No, n	No, %
Tree plantation	28	35	50	65
Drug-awareness activities	47	59	32	41
Blood donation	65	82	14	18
Educating illiterate people	8	10	71	90

3.2 Participation in Activities for Educating Illiterate People

Table 2 gives a more detailed evaluation of the extent to which athletes are involved in activities that help the education of illiterate people in the study area. When asked if they engaged in these activities, 8 athletes (10%) said yes and 71 athletes (90%) said no. The table also reflects an "Others" group, about 13% of the athletes, with those who did not take part in social development activities and others who were not aware of this. Overall, there was not much direct contact with the athletes in the educational programs for the illiterate members of society as compared with the other social development activities evaluated in the study.

Table 2. Athletes' participation in activities aimed at educating illiterate people

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	8	10

No	71	90
Others	Reported separately	13
Yes/No responses	79	100

3.3 Strength of Relationships Among Athletes Within Sports Organizations

As can be seen in the results of Table 3, the overall interpersonal relationships between the 91 athlete respondents were found to be fairly good. The majority of the athletes (53, 58.2%) stated that they had very high relationships with others in their sports organisation, and an additional 24 (26.4%) stated that they had high relationships with others in their sports organisation. Another 14 athletes (15.4%) selected the medium level of relationship. None of the respondents indicated either a low or a very low relationship.

If the high and very high categories were grouped together, 77 of the 91 athletes (84.6%) indicated that they had a high or very high relationship with other members of their sports organisations. The descriptive findings show that positive interpersonal relationships were common among the athletes in the study.

Table 3. Perceived level of relationships among athletes in sports organizations

Level of relationship	n	%
Very high	53	58.2
High	24	26.4
Medium	14	15.4
Low	0	0.0
Very low	0	0.0
Total	91	100.0

3.4 Participation in Tree-Plantation Activities

Table 4 indicates the level of involvement of the athletes in the tree-plantation activities in the study area. Of those respondents who answered yes or no, 28 said they took part in tree-plantation programmes and 50 said they didn't take part. The manuscript also separately finds that around 13% of athletes were not involved in general social development activities, or did not know of social development activities. For this reason, the number of respondents who definitely said yes or no for tree planting programs only accounted for about one-third of the sample for which a response was provided.

Table 4. Athletes' participation in tree-plantation activities

Participation in tree plantation	n	%
Yes	28	35
No	50	65
Yes/No responses	78	100

3.5 Participation in Drug-Awareness Activities

The level of involvement of athletes in drug-awareness activities in the sports organisations they participated in is presented in Table 5. 47 respondents (59%) of those who answered yes reported involvement in drug-awareness programmes and 32 (41%) reported no involvement. The source table also shows that nearly 13% of athletes were classified differently; either because they were not involved in social development activities or they did not know about them. As such, the proportion of social-development activities in which the children and young people participated that included drug-awareness activities was generally one of the more common types of participation in social-development activities identified in the activities investigated.

Table 5. Athletes' participation in drug-awareness activities

Participation in drug-awareness activities	n	%
Yes	47	59
No	32	41
Yes/No responses	79	100

4. Discussion

The present study explored the role of sports organizations in Rajshahi City in terms of their contribution to sustainable development through various social-development activities, outreach and the relationships between the sportspersons. The results show that these organisations have a role in realizing several aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) although the role varies significantly per activity. The participation was highest in blood donation (82%) and drug-awareness activities (59%) and very low in tree plantation (35%) and educating illiterate people (10%). Furthermore, 58.2% of the athletes rated their relationships within sports organizations as very high, while 26.4% rated it as high, resulting in 84.6% of the participants reporting high interpersonal relationships within sports organizations. In general, these results indicate that local sports groups are more than just places to play sports, but also places to meet others, to promote health, and to engage in community action.

The relatively high participation rate in blood donation and drug awareness activities is especially important to SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being. Sport and physical activity are seen as key to health promotion and sustainable development (Fiorilli & Buonsenso, 2026). The current results broaden this perspective, showing that the involvement of athletes does not have to be limited to sports-related activities, but can include other sports-related social campaigns for health. Drug-awareness activities are especially relevant because sports organisations have good contact with young people and could offer an appropriate context for the dissemination of prevention health messages (Asensio-Hernández et al., 2026). The study also mentions evidence that the implementation of smoke-free policies in sports event venues can lead to a decrease in exposure to environmental tobacco smoke and healthier sports event venues. While this study did not examine smoking behaviour, drug use, or health outcomes, the reported involvement shows the potential of sports organisations as a useful venue for community health-promotion efforts. Another significant finding was the importance of interpersonal relationships among athletes. Over 80% of the respondents rated their relationships in their organisation as high or very high. This finding is similar to the definition of social capital, where networks, trust, reciprocity, shared values, and cooperation among social group members are emphasised (Flemington et al., 2023). This is confirmed by qualitative evidence. Coaches, senior athletes, and teammates provided technical support, encouragement, and advice. These interactions suggest that sports organisations can create bonding social capital by fostering relationships and social support among participants. In addition, sports networks play an important role in developing positive social relationships, as highlighted by Wasche (Wäsche, 2020). The interpersonal relationships identified in this study may be meaningful not only for sports participation but also for the general sense of community engagement and social support. The results are also relevant to SDG 4: Quality Education. This was the least reported social development activity among the respondents, with only 10% engaging in activities targeted at educating illiterate people. This finding leaves them with the impression that sporting organisations are not involved in

direct educational activities. However, in this study, it was found that in several instances, sporting bodies were able to help disadvantaged children with their educational needs. Sports can also be an indirect force for education, fostering teamwork, tolerance, discipline, communication, and interpersonal skills. Mello et al. (2024) found positive associations between classroom and sports engagement in children, highlighting the broader developmental function of sports. However, the low participation in the present study suggests that sports organisations, particularly in the context of SDG 4, need more attention in terms of the organisation of direct literacy and educational support programmes. (Mello, 2024)

There was little observation of involvement in environmental issues, as only one-third of the respondents indicated involvement in tree planting activities. This discovery is important for SDG 13: Climate Action and SDG 15: Life on Land. The findings indicate that sports organisations in Rajshahi City have some scope for environmental activities, but their involvement is less compared to health-related activities. The finding thus indicates a potential for sports organisations to include environmental responsibility in a more systematic manner into their programmes. The link between sports and environmental sustainability could be further reinforced through tree-planting campaigns, green sporting spaces, and environmental-awareness activities linked to sporting events (Dingle & Mallen, 2020). The present evidence, however, should be interpreted with caution: there is environmental engagement in the organisations studied, but it seems to be less well developed than health-focused social engagement. This study also contributes to SDGs 5: Gender Equality and 10: Reduced Inequalities. Female athletes also play hockey, basketball, and boxing along with male athletes. This is in line with the statement that sports and physical activity can empower women and girls in the presence of access and equity (International Society for Physical Activity and Health) (Pedersen & King, 2023). Likewise, sports groups have worked to minimise religious discrimination and ensure a respectful sporting environment. Previous studies have shown the potential of sports clubs to foster social integration, but inclusion is not granted automatically, as it can be highly dependent on the organizational conditions and practices of the sports club (Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2019). Thus, the present results do not suggest that gender or social equality has been reached, but rather that inclusive practices exist.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Md. Tawfiq Tushar: Methodology, Data analysis, Data Curation, Writing Review & Editing; **A.K.M. Mahmudul Haque:** Supervision, Conceptualization, Investigation, , **Jannatul Rouza Rifa:** Investigation, Visualization, Writing Original Draft; **Imran Hossain:** Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Validation, Writing Review & Editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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