



Research Paper

# Sport as a Driver of Economic Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: Opportunities and Gaps

Tolulope Christianah Adeyemo

**ABSTRACT:** This paper critically reviews the potential of sport as a driver of economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), highlighting both opportunities and systemic gaps. Drawing from interdisciplinary frameworks Sport-for-Development and Peace (SDP), entrepreneurial sport management, and policy coherence with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the study explores how sport contributes to employment, tourism, entrepreneurship, and social inclusion across SSA. Despite its potential, sport remains underutilized due to fragmented policies, inadequate funding, postcolonial aid dynamics, and weak institutional capacity. Through a desk-based thematic synthesis of peer-reviewed literature and policy reports from 2003 to 2024, the review identifies four key themes: employability and entrepreneurship, sport tourism and mega-events, governance and policy vacuums, and structural inequalities. The review calls for African-led, context-sensitive policy and research approaches that prioritize equity, local ownership, and sustainable development outcomes.

**KEYWORDS:** Economic Development, Sub-Saharan Africa, Policy, Sport Tourism, Youth Employment.

Received 26 July, 2025; Revised 03 Aug., 2025; Accepted 05 Aug., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.  
Published with open access at [www.questjournas.org](http://www.questjournas.org)

## I. INTRODUCTION

Despite its rich endowment in natural and human resources, Sub-Saharan Africa continues to face significant development challenges, with many countries in the region exhibiting high levels of poverty due to structural, governance, and historical factors [1]. Among the region's underutilized assets is sport, a multidimensional tool capable of contributing to economic development, social cohesion, and national identity. Over the past few decades, sport has not only been regarded as an entertainment and health-associated value but also as an attribute with the competence to provide employment, drive tourism, aid small enterprises, and encourage infrastructural growth [2, 3, 4].

Nonetheless, there is global excitement concerning the potential of sport as a development tool yet the application of sport into the national and regional economic development plans has been haphazard and has been theorized to a limited extent in SSA. Most policies have been rhetorical with no institutional capacity and funds, as well as strategies to transform sport policy into measurable economic results [5, 6]. The lack of connection is specifically obvious in the gap between the dreams of mega-event organizers, such as the FIFA World Cup, and real-life experiences of surrounding community and sportsmen [7, 8].

The reasons why the review is pertinent are that the sport poses a critical concern that necessitates reframing of sport in a way that allows it not to be a standalone recreational activity, but part and parcel of the development agendas of SSA. The principles of youth empowerment, employment, and inclusion are also the critical aspects of the long-term transition in the region discussed in the Agenda 2063 by the African Union [18]. All these pillars are connected with sport. However, according to [9] and [10], the grass-root turnover of sport-for-development programmes is usually piecemeal in character, with shoddily defined goals and low local ownership levels.

The present review, thus, attempts to question the status quo of sport in economic development discourses in SSA, which gaps and flaws are there concerning policy and practice, and in what ways are they worth being bridged strategically.

## II. OBJECTIVES

- To examine the existing literature on the economic contributions of sport in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- To identify gaps in policy coherence, implementation, and evaluation of sport-based economic interventions.

- To propose recommendations for optimizing the role of sport in SSA's economic development, with a focus on sustainability, inclusivity, and contextual relevance.

This review provides a critical synthesis of the literature on the subject based on sociology, economics, policy studies, and sport management to add to an existing literature body, which attempts to reinstate the role of sport as a valid tool of development based on evidence in Africa [11, 12, 20].

### **III. REVIEW STRUCTURE/Framework**

The review is organized through an interdisciplinary lens based on three intersecting theoretical lenses namely, sport-for-development theory, the entrepreneurial approach to sport management, and policy coherence to sustainable development. It is possible to view these frameworks as presenting a critical lens in which the economic aspects of sport in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) can be significantly assessed.

#### **1. Sport-for-Development and Peace Lens**

The main idea of this review is called Sport-for-Development and Peace (SDP) framework, in which sport is used as the instrument to promote other development outcomes, including health, education, gender equality, and economic inclusion. Although SDP activities have been spreading in SSA, the influence of this type of economic activity is understudied or even anecdotal [9, 10]. Offering the critique of the widespread belief that sport is always positive, this review adopts the SDP lens to challenge the situative forced and structural barriers to sport as a means to reinstate its potential to transform the economy [11, 13].

#### **2. Entrepreneurial Sport Management Perspective**

Using the theory of Ratten on sport-based entrepreneurship, the review has also taken the sport management approach that relates innovation, business development, and sport ecosystem [12, 14]. The framework highlights the importance of localized sport enterprise, events and structures in spurring the growth of small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) activity and youth employment, especially in the tourist branches of emerging economies where there are few opportunities for formal employment [4]. In this light, sport is more than a developmental tool because in this aspect, it is also an economic sector that possibly has a lurking entrepreneurial potential.

#### **3. Policy Coherence and goals of sustainable development (SDGs)**

The last lens is based on the study of [5] regarding policy consistency and how the inclusion of sport into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was achieved. Sport policies have become operational in many SSA governments, although they do not integrate into the economic planning and youth employment policies [2, 18]. The framework criticizes such fragmentation and suggests the need to have more seamless and multisectoral sport policy design in line with SDG targets under decent work (Goal 8), reduced inequalities (Goal 10) and sustainable cities (Goal 11).

Integrating together the three opinions SDP, entrepreneurial sport management and SDG policy coherence this review offers not only multidimensional look at the actual and prospective contributions of sport to economic development in SSA but also at the normative policy question of how the concept of sport development and its policy should be drawn. Such conceptual synthesis will allow systemizing criticism of current practices and provide theoretical and empirically based recommendations.

### **IV. CONCEPTUAL OR THEMATIC SYNTHESIS**

An excellent literature review unveils four significant thematic areas that the sport contributes to economic development in the Sub-Saharan Africa: (1) employability and entrepreneurship, (2) sport tourism and mega-events, (3) policy and governance, and (4) structural inequalities and development limitations. These themes echo a marriage of evidence on the prospects as well as the erraticities in sport-based economic plans.

#### **1. Entrepreneurship in sport and Employability**

Youth taking part in sport-based activities are increasingly recruited as avenues to employability and development of an entrepreneur among the youth. As an example, [10] discusses how a sport-for-development (SfD) programme in South Africa developed vocational skills in adolescent girls, who could both enter the formal and informal economies. Likewise, [12] and [14] suggest that entrepreneurship in the sports industry would result in innovation, especially in those areas where the economic infrastructures are not strong. These programmes are usually favourable in micro-enterprises creation in areas such as coaching, clothing designing, event management, and media production where the youths are able to venture with ease.

But the initiatives are not always scale-able. According to [15], even though sport may develop soft and hard skills, the lack of financial and institutional resources limits a long-term process into sustainable

livelihoods. Therefore, sport and employability connection is rather active and yet still vulnerable, so it needs systematic investment and integration of policies.

## **2. Mega events and Sport Tourism**

Sport tourism characterized by sport participation and spectating travel as a creation has shown direct impacts in local economies of the potential destinations. According to [4], festivals and other small-scale sports events in rural areas in South Africa led to more earnings by local traders, hotels, and transportation agents. On the same note, [8] present a comparative analysis between the long-term effects of such global mega-events as the 2010 FIFA World Cup and the frequent local events, which reveals that although mega-events have both immediate growth and exposure effects, local events present a more sustained economic engagement with communities involved.

However, [6] warns that inequality can be enhanced by securitization, gentrification and resource capture by the elite during the mega-event. Winner in such instances are political elites and multinationals and not the locals. The planning process needs to be more integrative and inclusionary in order to achieve better local economy.

## **3. Governing and Policy Frameworks Vacuums**

Even though in some continental initiatives like the Agenda 2063 of the African Union, sport has been acknowledged as a developmental force [18], policy coherence has not been achieved. According to [5], national sport policies in SSA are hardly in line with the wider economic development agendas or SDGs. [16] additionally state that some of the existing countries already have formal structures of sport governance, which may be little funded, irregular, or not well executed.

[2] urges governments to consider making sport a part of employment strategies among youths and as policy instrument of public health, that is not used in silos. Yet, [17] notes that the issue of human rights is not always discussed in sport policy creation, which restricts the involvement of the fulfillment of human rights of non-discrimination, participation, and accountability principles.

## **4. Politics of Aid and structural Inequities**

There is a rich literature which questions the implicit assumption that sport/sport development is a neutral or even a benign process. [11] and [9] are equally critical of the issue that sport-for-development programmes may be used in various donor countries as soft power tools, i.e. they create dependency instead of autonomy. [19] point out that in most cases, the international aid by using sport rarely empowers local stakeholders as it tends to reflect the same postcolonial power relationship.

Furthermore, [13] cautions that most of the sport-for-development evidence base is anecdotal or donor-led, with little or no regard to rigorous impacts. The African-driven research and policy innovation which is rooted to the grassroots realities and aligns to the local economic priorities is badly needed.

This thematic synthesis shows that sport has the potential to be used as the economic enabler in SSA, although its transformative force depends upon the fair policies, inclusive governance, and sensitivity to special conditions. Part two provides a methodology of the approach that was adopted to conduct this desk-based review.

# **V. METHODOLOGY**

The desk-based qualitative research approach was used in this study, it used a working literature review design and took advantage of systematic literature study to review the economic role of sport in Sub-Saharan Africa. The main task was to synthesize available literature on academia, institutions, and policies that have been used to formulate key themes and opportunities as well as opportunities and gaps in the use of sport as a primary tool of economic development.

Relevance, credibility and geographical focus were used to select the literature. It was taken into account by the academic journals, policy papers as well as books that have been published during the period of 2003-2024, with a special consideration of peer-reviewed literature and institutional research conducted by reputable organisations and the likes of UNESCO, African Union and the Commonwealth Secretariat. The consulted databases were Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus and institutional repositories of African and global development agencies.

The choice of the literature was based on a purposive sampling strategy that ensured the inclusion of the pieces of literature addressing at least one of the following:

The place of sport in the employability or entrepreneurship

- The role of sport in employability or entrepreneurship
- Sport tourism and event-based economic strategies
- National or regional policy frameworks on sport and development
- Critical perspectives on aid, inequality, and postcolonial dynamics in sport initiatives

The major elements of the contemporary approach to critical views on the concept of aid in sport initiatives are the confirmation of lack of awareness and inequality, and the assessment of postcolonial processes in its development.

Thematic analysis approach was applied to classify the findings into coherent domains. Inductive extraction of themes was carried out by frequent readings in addition to coding of the literature documented followed by conceptual clustering across four oversimplified areas including employability and entrepreneurship, sport tourism and mega-events, policy and governance, and structural inequalities.

The theoretical gaze was informed by the Capabilities Approach that focuses on increasing the real freedom of individuals to pursue a life they cherish [21]. It is this framework that allowed critically assessing how sport projects can either improve, or on the contrary limit the capacity of the economy in various African settings.

Although the present review is not based on primary data, it provides the necessary contribution to the scholarly discussion by attracting the multidisciplinary contributions and pointing at the directions where little research has been conducted and therefore empirical analysis is needed to fill the gap.

## **VI. IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

The analyzed literature on the topic is engaging and has a potential path in spite of the complexity that surrounds the use of sport as a lever of economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa. The actualization of such a potential when it comes to sustainable impact, however, is hindered by structural, political and contextual constraints.

Among the major implications of the study is that the elements of sport-for-development (SfD) are frequently promoted as apolitical remedies, which conceal the more profound disparities related to the concept of global development [9, 11]. Some of the donor-initiated programmes jeopardize potential emphasis on dependency, under-development or doctrinaire of western culture instead of promoting pure local governance [19, 14]. It necessitates a transition to the locally-owned and context-sensitive models, which fit within the Agenda 2063 aspirations of the African Union to ending poverty in all of its forms with inclusive growth and employment [18].

When it comes to economic opportunities, such programmes field as sport entrepreneurship, skills-based employability pathways have proved to be positive not only in general but more particularly in young people and women [10, 12]. Still, narrow availability of training, infrastructure, and financial capital negatively affects the scalability of these models. Future study directions should investigate ways of sustainable financing and partnerships between the public and private sectors that will enable grassroots entrepreneurs in sport.

Sport tourism especially mega-events has become a focus because it is a source of revenue. Whereas a number of studies speak of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa as a landmark in the field of African sport diplomacy [6, 7], there are also some accounts of unequal advantages and greater securitisation [5, 8]. The new sites have to have the best balance between prestige, community inclusion, and planning of the post-event legacy [4].

Policy fragmentation is an important obstacle. In spite of the attempts of continental organizations and international agencies, the internal sport-economic development plans are numerous, many countries have no coherence. Poor relations between the national sport policy and development constraints impede implementation [2, 16]. Multi-level governance structures are necessary to promote the coordination among the ministries, the NGOs, and the private players.

Furthermore, evidence-based decision-making cannot be realized due to data shortage, as well as poor systems of monitoring. Such works as the ones by [13] and [3] emphasize the need in strong indicators that would be used to monitor economic contribution of sport in terms of employment, tourism and social enterprise. An African-led assessment starting point and a disaggregated data system should also be a forthcoming research priority.

Lastly, equity should be the focus. Those marginalized groups such as the rural youth, girls, and people with disabilities are not actively involved in sport development opportunities [15]. Capabilities-based approach [21] provides a normative test to assess whether sport activities are increasing the real freedom and long term wellbeing of people.

Overall, literature indicates the existence of a huge but underexploited economic potential of sport in Sub-Saharan Africa. To realize this potential entails context-sensitive policies, an inclusive practice and critical scholarship that questions opportunity as well as constraint.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

Sport is transformational when it comes to economic development of Sub-Saharan Africa. The positive effects of such well-structured sport programme can be felt in large areas related to entrepreneurship, tourism, employment, and social cohesion, filling a significant role in national and local economies. Nevertheless, this

potential has been highly underutilized because of structural inequalities, incoherent policies and predisposition to copy models rather than adapt to the local realities.

This review has also pinpointed the necessity of context specific and equity-oriented practice that encompasses and inculcates the sport into larger development frameworks like African Unions Agenda 2063 and sustainable development goals. Also, the governance of inclusive sport, effective data systems, and sustainable financing are needed to convert the isolated success to a systemic one.

The frameworks that enable future research and practice need to be African-led, that is, they are responsive to the sociopolitical contexts on the continent and can utilize the voices of underserved populations in the society. Closing the gap between sport and economic growth is not only an idealist policy making point but a must have as far as inclusive growth in the region is concerned.

## REFERENCES

- [1] A. O. Acheampong, J. Dzator, M. Abunyewah, M. O. Erdiaw-Kwasie, and E. Evans, "Sub-Saharan Africa's Tragedy: Resource Curse, Democracy and Income Inequality," *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 168, no. 1–3, pp. 471–509, May 2023, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-023-03137-2>.
- [2] I. Lindsey and T. Chapman, "Enhancing the Contribution of Sport to the Sustainable Development Goals," 2017. Available: [https://www.sportanddev.org/sites/default/files/downloads/enhancing\\_the\\_contribution\\_of\\_sport\\_to\\_the\\_sustainable\\_development\\_goals\\_.pdf](https://www.sportanddev.org/sites/default/files/downloads/enhancing_the_contribution_of_sport_to_the_sustainable_development_goals_.pdf)
- [3] A. Mwisukha, W. W. S. Njororai, and V. Onyweru, "Contributions of Sports towards National Development in Kenya," *East African Journal of Physical Education, Sports Science, Leisure and Recreation Management*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 73–81, 2003.
- [4] S. Nyikana and T. M. Tichaawa, "Sport Tourism as a Local Economic Development Enhancer for Emerging Destinations," *Euro Economica*, vol. 37, no. 02, pp. 76–89, 2018, Available: <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=728414>
- [5] I. Lindsey and P. Darby, "Sport and the Sustainable Development Goals: Where is the policy coherence?," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 54, no. 7, pp. 793–812, Jan. 2018, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690217752651>.
- [6] S. Cornelissen, "Mega Event Securitisation in a Third World Setting," *Urban Studies*, vol. 48, no. 15, pp. 3221–3240, Oct. 2011, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098011422392>.
- [7] J. Nauright, "Selling Nations to the World through sports: Mega Events and Nation Branding as Global Diplomacy," *Public Diplomacy Magazine*, vol. Winter, pp. 1–59, 2013.
- [8] A. Giampiccoli, S. 'Shawn' Lee, and J. Nauright, "Destination South Africa: comparing global sports mega-events and recurring localised sports events in South Africa for tourism and economic development," *Current Issues in Tourism*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 229–248, Jun. 2013, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2013.787050>.
- [9] S. Damell, *Sport for Development and Peace: A Critical Sociology*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. Available: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/58721>
- [10] C. Burnett, "Employability pathways in a sport-for-development programme for girls in a Sub-Saharan impoverished setting," *Journal of Physical Education and Sport*, vol. 22, no. 4, Apr. 2022, doi: <https://doi.org/10.7752/jpes.2022.04109>.
- [11] T. Gadais et al., "Sport Against Development and Peace," *Routledge Handbook of the Global South in Sport for Development and Peace*, pp. 281–300, May 2024, doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032667805-21>.
- [12] V. Ratten, "Sport, Innovation and Public Policy," in *Sport Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, V. Ratten and J. J. Ferreira, Eds., London and New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 179–191. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315393384>.
- [13] L. Langer, "Sport for development – a systematic map of evidence from Africa," *South African Review of Sociology*, vol. 46, no. 1, pp. 66–86, Jan. 2015, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2014.989665>.
- [14] V. Ratten, "Sport-based entrepreneurship: towards a new theory of entrepreneurship and sport management," *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 57–69, Mar. 2010, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-010-0138-z>.
- [15] A. Mabiso and R. S. Benfica, "The Narrative on Rural Youth and Economic Opportunities in Africa: Facts, Myths and Gaps," IFAD RESEARCH SERIES, 2019. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3567001>.
- [16] J. R. Chepyator-Thomson, S. Seiler, K. Sonkeng, and S. Kim, "Sport policies and their sociocultural impacts," *Sport Governance and Operations*, pp. 21–38, Sep. 2021, doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003213673-3>.
- [17] G. M. Yélamos, "An interdisciplinary multi-level approach to advance human rights in and through sport," 2023. Accessed: Jun. 22, 2025. [Online]. Available: [https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/id/eprint/17280/1/Masdeu%20Yelamos\\_PhD\\_Final%20version.pdf](https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/id/eprint/17280/1/Masdeu%20Yelamos_PhD_Final%20version.pdf)
- [18] African Union Commission, "Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want.," Addis Ababa: African Union, 2015. Available: [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36204-doc-agenda2063\\_popular\\_version\\_en.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/36204-doc-agenda2063_popular_version_en.pdf)
- [19] G. Akindes and M. Kirwin, "Sport as International Aid: Assisting Development or Promoting Under-Development in Sub-Saharan Africa?," *Sport and International Development*, pp. 219–245, 2009, doi: [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230584402\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230584402_10).
- [20] N. Dyck and H. Hognestad, "Anthropological perspectives and the sociology of sport," in *Routledge Handbook of the Sociology of Sport*, R. Giulianotti, Ed., Routledge, 2015, pp. 123–132. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203404065>.
- [21] A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*. New York: Knopf, 1999.