

# Coping with Poverty and Social Exclusion: Promoting Capabilities Through Long-Term Sports Participation

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## Abstract

Poverty and social exclusion (PaSE) are multifaceted challenges that affect individuals across all stages of life, manifesting as financial deprivation, health inequities, and restricted access to social and economic opportunities. Sports participation offers a promising avenue to mitigate these challenges, providing access to health benefits, social connections, and life skills. This study contributes to the limited body of research on sports programmes for adults affected by PaSE by investigating how long-term participation in a low-threshold and diverse sports programme supports them in navigating and coping with their challenges. Drawing on Amartya Sen’s capability approach (CA) as a theoretical framework, biographical-narrative interviews were conducted with 16 adults who participated in the sports activities of a voluntary sports club (VSC) in Southern Germany for at least one year. The thematic analysis identified three key capabilities fostered through participation: the *capability for better coping with daily life*, the *capability for group belonging and social confidence*, and the *capability to actively shape physical and mental changes*. Crucial conversion factors—such as flexible participation options, reliable programme structures, and a supportive group culture—played a pivotal role in enabling these capabilities and achieving related functionings. By identifying the mechanisms through which the sports programme fosters inclusion and well-being, this study provides deeper insights of how sports programmes can address the complex needs of individuals experiencing PaSE. These findings provide actionable insights for the design of inclusive and long-term sports programmes that empower participants to achieve meaningful and self-determined outcomes.

## Keywords

capability approach; health; inclusion; social support; poverty; social exclusion; sport for development; voluntary sports club

## 1. Introduction

Poverty is more than financial deprivation; it encompasses social exclusion, disconnecting individuals from essential networks, resources, and opportunities, thereby limiting their societal participation, including in sports (European Parliament, 2016; Kronauer, 2010; Levitas et al., 2007). Social exclusion is not merely a byproduct of poverty but a reinforcing cycle that exacerbates marginalisation and isolation. Those affected by poverty and social exclusion (PaSE) face heightened stressors, including higher rates of physical and mental health issues (Apostu et al., 2024; Mackenbach et al., 2008). Illness is both a consequence and a cause of poverty, further deepening cycles of deprivation (Kröger et al., 2015). Unemployment, which affects a significant proportion of individuals living in poverty (Eurostat, 2024), contributes to stress, stigma, and diminished well-being. It also reduces skills, self-confidence, and social connectedness, perpetuating disadvantage (Goffman, 1986; Jahoda et al., 2021; Leonardi et al., 2018; Sen, 2001).

Sports programmes have gained recognition in policy frameworks for their potential to contribute to social inclusion by promoting health-enhancing activities, fostering social connections, and building essential life skills (Council of the European Union, 2020; European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2007; European Parliament, 2016). In the context of adults affected by PaSE, however, social inclusion is often strongly tied to employability goals, with many programmes narrowly focusing on predefined employment-related outcomes and achieving mixed success (e.g., Burnett, 2022; Inoue et al., 2013; Kreuzfeld et al., 2013; Moustakas et al., 2022; Spaaij et al., 2013). These approaches often overlook structural barriers like the labour market demand and primarily target younger participants, excluding groups such as older adults and those with disabilities (Coalter et al., 2020; Eurostat, 2024; Levitas, 1996; Spaaij et al., 2013). This narrow focus limits the broader potential of sports to address the varied needs of adults affected by PaSE.

Within the broader sports system, voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) offer a promising context for fostering inclusion, with their emphasis on social connections and long-term engagement (Breuer et al., 2017; Elmoose-Østerlund et al., 2023). Yet, they often remain inaccessible to individuals affected by PaSE. Financial constraints frequently prevent access to membership fees, clothing, or equipment. Physical performance expectations and health-related challenges further restrict participation, while social stigma and fears of judgment can discourage individuals from joining (e.g., Breuer & Wicker, 2008; Collins & Kay, 2014; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Goffman, 1986; Gregg & Bedard, 2016; Oettle, 2025; Vandermeerschen et al., 2017b). These barriers highlight the need for tailored, inclusive approaches to enable meaningful participation.

To better understand these barriers and develop effective responses, a framework is needed that not only evaluates outcomes but also considers the pathways enabling these outcomes. Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) provides such a lens by focusing on the opportunities and freedoms individuals have to achieve valued functionings. Unlike existing studies, which often focus on narrow outcome indicators such as employability, this research applies the CA to analyse both the outcomes of sports participation and the factors that enable their realisation. By examining capabilities, conversion factors, and functionings, the CA provides a lens to explore how sports programmes within VSCs, which offer a set of opportunities, can address the needs of marginalised populations.

benefit e.V. (benefit), a VSC based in Freiburg, Southern Germany, provides the organisational structure for this investigation. The club specifically aims to reduce exclusionary barriers in traditional sports settings by

offering a low-threshold, cost-free, and supportive environment. The VSC primarily targets adults affected by PaSE, including those experiencing low income, homelessness, substance dependency, mental health challenges, disabilities, and forced migration backgrounds (beneFit e.V., 2025). Participants are not required to meet specific physical performance standards and are offered a safe space where they can engage in sports without fear of stigmatisation. The programme includes a diverse range of nine weekly sports activities, including dancing, kickboxing, and Nordic walking, alongside occasional social events. By fostering an inclusive and long-term club structure, beneFit aims to tailor its sports programmes to the complex needs of adults affected by PaSE.

This study investigates the following research question: How does long-term participation (with “long-term” defined as a minimum of one year since the first course participation) in a tailored, low-threshold, and diverse sports programme contribute to individuals’ ability to navigate and cope with challenges associated with PaSE?

## 2. The CA as a Theoretical Framework for Evaluating Programmes Addressing PaSE

To examine how long-term sports participation impacts adults affected by PaSE, this study employs Sen’s CA (Sen, 2001). The CA shifts the focus of human development from economic measures to the real freedoms individuals have to lead lives they value. By emphasising opportunities and freedoms over predefined outcomes, the CA provides an open framework for evaluating how individuals can pursue meaningful lives despite severe social exclusion. These valued aspects often include access to education, health, and social participation—critical for well-being but frequently out of reach for those experiencing PaSE. Unlike resource-oriented approaches, such as the basic needs approach (Streeten et al., 1981), which measure success by material provisions, or utilitarian frameworks that prioritise aggregate utility, the CA assesses development by exploring the transformation of resources into real achievements (functionings), such as being healthy, forming social connections, or achieving economic security. This shift in perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between individual circumstances and external opportunities. The CA has significantly influenced global development frameworks, serving as the conceptual foundation for the Human Development Index, which integrates education, life expectancy, and income to reflect multidimensional human progress (United Nations Development Programme, 2010). In recent years, this approach has also been applied occasionally in contexts aiming at social development in and through sport (Dao & Smith, 2019; Svensson & Levine, 2017; Zipp et al., 2019).

The CA’s analytical framework is built on three key interconnected elements: capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors (Robeyns, 2005, 2017; Sen, 2001, 2010). Capabilities represent the set of opportunities or freedoms individuals have to achieve valuable functionings—beings and doings that they have reason to value. Functionings refer to the actual achievements individuals realise, such as being employed, participating in a community, or maintaining good health. Conversion factors mediate this relationship, influencing how resources and opportunities are transformed into achieved functionings. Unlike Martha Nussbaum’s approach with its fixed list of universal capabilities, Sen’s CA remains deliberately flexible, allowing for context-specific evaluations—a key strength for analysing the diverse needs of individuals affected by PaSE (Robeyns, 2005).

In this study, the capability set includes opportunities fostered through participation in a VSC. These capabilities may involve engaging in social interactions, improving physical health, or managing daily life

challenges. The extent to which these capabilities can be converted into functionings depends on conversion factors, which encompass personal, social, and environmental elements (Robeyns, 2017). For example, personal health or motivation, social factors such as supportive trainers and group dynamics, and environmental aspects like accessible facilities all could play a role in determining whether a capability is actualised. Simply providing access to resources, such as cost-free participation, does not guarantee meaningful engagement; individual circumstances and structural conditions play a pivotal role (Collins & Kay, 2014).

The CA framework underscores the importance of conversion factors, emphasising how individual contexts and circumstances shape people's abilities to achieve valuable functionings (Garcés Velástegui, 2020). This is particularly critical in VSCs, where interventions often focus solely on reducing financial barriers while overlooking the broader set of factors necessary for meaningful inclusion (Breuer, 2017; Corthouts et al., 2020; Vandermeersch et al., 2017a). By integrating the CA, this study provides a comprehensive lens to analyse how tailored sports programmes can foster capabilities, address barriers, and illuminate the conversion factors that mediate outcomes for individuals affected by PaSE.

### 3. Understanding Sports Programmes Within the CA

Sport programmes aimed at enhancing the life circumstances of those affected by PaSE typically fall within sport for development (SfD; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Svensson & Woods, 2017). By applying the CA, researchers in this field aim to understand the multidimensional impacts of sports programmes, focusing on the freedoms and opportunities individuals gain through participation. Research applying the CA to SfD remains relatively sparse but offers valuable insights into how sport can foster capabilities and address barriers for marginalised groups. Studies have targeted diverse populations, from children in Vietnam (Dao & Darnell, 2021) to Indigenous communities in Australia (Rossi, 2015), and highlight the CA's flexibility in evaluating the multidimensional impacts of sports programmes (Açıkgöz et al., 2022; Jarvie & Ahrens, 2019; Ralls, 2021; Suzuki, 2017). This flexibility, while a strength, poses challenges for comparability, as researchers adopt varying interpretations of the CA.

Studies applying the CA in SfD often focus on football (Açıkgöz et al., 2022; Dao & Darnell, 2021; Jarvie & Ahrens, 2019), though there are exceptions, such as culturally relevant activities in Rossi's (2015) study of water sports for Indigenous Australians or Ralls' (2021) exploration of running programmes for Ethiopian girls. The majority of the interventions examined also include supplementary components like life skills training and health education (Açıkgöz et al., 2022; Dao & Darnell, 2021; Ralls, 2021; Suzuki, 2017).

The findings from these studies underscore the central role of social and environmental conversion factors in fostering capabilities. For example, Dao and Darnell's (2021) analysis of the Football for All Vietnam (FFAV) programme shows how stable community support and an inclusive environment can enhance emotional expression and practical reasoning. Similarly, Rossi's (2015) work highlights the importance of culturally meaningful sports, which address historical exclusion and promote healing within Indigenous communities. In another context, Jarvie and Ahrens (2019) emphasise how programmes like the Homeless World Cup foster leadership, mental health resilience, and social networks, while also addressing barriers such as stigma and fear of participation.

Across these studies, the capability to enhance physical health emerges consistently, though the pathways vary. For example, FFAV participants benefited from interactive and non-authoritarian learning environments (Dao & Darnell, 2021), while participants in the Homeless World Cup and Street Soccer Scotland programmes gained health benefits through structured team activities that fostered goal-setting and accountability (Jarvie & Ahrens, 2019). These differences underline the importance of context-specific conversion factors, such as mentorship, safety, and stable social ties, in enabling individuals to transform opportunities into tangible outcomes.

Studies highlight the importance of long-term sustainability in projects. Rossi (2015) and Suzuki (2017) argue that short-term programmes often fail to sustain social networks and skills post-intervention. Rossi's analysis shows that extended durations help participants build and maintain capabilities and connections, fostering inclusion. Similarly, Açıkgöz et al. (2022) found that short project durations in Turkish SfD programmes limited participants' ability to uphold relationships and skills, emphasising the need for ongoing support and capacity-building. Suzuki (2017) highlights the need for a diverse range of leisure activities to ensure equal levels of substantive freedom in sports programmes. In Scottish football-based programmes, core training sessions gradually shift towards recreational activities to better address participants' needs. In contrast, programmes in Basotho and Japan remain limited to football activities, which restricts flexibility and reduces the ability to cater to individual interests.

Building on this research, the present study applies the CA to an underexplored context: a long-term, low-threshold, and diverse sports programme specifically designed for adults affected by PaSE. While much of the research in the field of SfD has focused on youth populations (Schulenkorf et al., 2016), existing programmes targeting individuals affected by PaSE have predominantly emphasised employability-related outcomes (e.g., Moustakas et al., 2022; Spaaij et al., 2013). This study shifts the focus beyond employability to a broader range of life-enhancing capabilities, investigating the impact of long-term participation in a tailored sports programme for adults affected by PaSE in a German context—an area that remains largely unexplored. In contrast to the predominant emphasis on short-term interventions or employment-oriented sports initiatives, little attention has been given to the long-term engagement of adults affected by PaSE, particularly in Germany. This study helps to address this research gap by exploring how long-term participation in a tailored sports programme may foster capabilities, while considering the conversion factors that shape their development and examining the achieved functionings from the participants' perspective. By adopting this approach, the study contributes to a better understanding of how sports can address the complex challenges faced by adults affected by PaSE. Furthermore, the findings provide insights into the mechanisms that enable meaningful participation and offer valuable guidance for designing inclusive and sustainable sports programmes.

## 4. Research Design and Methodology

### 4.1. Setting

benefit, a VSC based in Freiburg, Germany, was founded in 2022 to address the exclusionary barriers in traditional sports settings. The club adopts a low-threshold, inclusive approach guided by the sociology of poverty and inspired by the books of Spaaij et al. (2014) and Collins and Kay (2014). The primary aim is to remove barriers and provide meaningful opportunities without prescribing specific outcomes. The VSC

specifically targets adults affected by PaSE, including those experiencing low income, homelessness, substance dependency, mental health challenges, disabilities, and forced migration backgrounds (beneFit e.V., 2025). Outreach is conducted through collaborations with welfare organisations, shelters, and institutions serving low-income populations to ensure accessibility. While beneFit's primary focus is on individuals affected by PaSE, participation remains open to all adults aged 18 and older, regardless of gender or background, fostering an inclusive environment that facilitates diverse interactions.

Participation is voluntary, and while formal registration is not required, attendance is documented using participation lists. Participants can also opt to receive reminders about upcoming sessions.

During the data collection period (June 2023–April 2024), the sports programme of beneFit consisted of nine weekly sports activities, including dancing, whole-body strength training, kickboxing, street soccer, swimming, Nordic walking, jogging, cycling, and a sports course with weekly changing content. These activities were typically structured into three blocks of 13 sessions each, with short breaks in between. Additionally, the club hosted social events approximately once a month, which were not necessarily related to sports or physical activity (e.g., barbecues and communal cooking). At the time of the study, no explicit educational programmes or additional elements beyond these offerings were implemented within the club.

The sports activities are developed collaboratively with participants (e.g., through feedback sessions and surveys) to ensure alignment with their interests. Activities with strong participant support are expanded, while those with low demand are discontinued. This approach allows for an efficient allocation of resources while maintaining a diverse range of activities. The sessions are typically conducted by multiple trainers who alternate in leading the activities. In addition, project coordinators frequently accompany sessions, providing support to trainers and serving as contact points for general inquiries. At the time of the study, approximately 30 active trainers were involved in delivering the courses. Trainers primarily have backgrounds in sports science, sports education, or social work and receive specialised training to work effectively with heterogeneous groups, including individuals who are particularly vulnerable due to health, economic, or social factors. The training process is integrated into an onboarding framework: In an initial meeting of approximately 60 minutes, trainers are introduced to the club's approach, including key topics such as inclusion and diversity. They are also encouraged to observe at least one session, ideally of the same sports activity they will be leading. Depending on their professional background, additional topics are covered—for example, trainers with a social work background receive a stronger focus on sports science and health-related aspects. To ensure programme quality, ongoing feedback mechanisms are in place. In the first weeks, trainers receive direct feedback from the coordination team, and at the end of each course cycle, participants provide structured feedback on both the course and the trainers. Thus the short breaks between programme blocks serve as an opportunity for programme refinement and participant recruitment.

#### **4.2. Participants and Data Collection**

This study involved participants who had been actively engaged in beneFit's offerings for at least one year, attending sessions regularly (minimum of once per week). This criterion ensured the inclusion of individuals who had experienced sufficient time within the programme to reflect on potential developmental processes (Suzuki, 2017). Additionally, participants required proficiency in German to facilitate in-depth engagement with the interview process. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Freiburg's Ethics Committee in June 2023 (approval number 22-1024\_1).

The primary researcher (LO), who was closely involved in coordinating beneFit's activities (Gieß-Stüber & Oettle, 2024), leveraged established trust with participants (Helfferrich, 2011) to recruit a diverse range of individuals. Potential participants were provided with detailed study information, and participation was entirely voluntary. Sixteen individuals ultimately participated, representing diverse ages, genders, employment statuses, and lived experiences, including various physical and mental health conditions. Participants' ages ranged from 28 to 66 years, with an equal female-male gender split. Except for two individuals, none of the participants were employed (see Table 1).

Data collection employed biographical narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983), allowing participants to share their life stories with minimal constraints. This method provided insights into participants' broader life contexts and their experiences with beneFit. Interviews began with open-ended prompts, such as: "Tell me about what you have experienced in your life. Feel free to take your time, even with the details." This approach aimed to uncover participants' life trajectories, including their aspirations and challenges, as these relate to the CA framework (Sen, 2001). Follow-up questions explored participants' goals and life priorities, linking the discussion to the concept of real freedoms central to the CA. Questions such as "can you describe your own development at beneFit?" "what goals or changes have you observed in yourself since joining beneFit?" or "what aspects of the programme helped you participate?" encouraged connections between narratives and key CA components, like conversion factors and achieved functionings.

All interviews, lasting up to 55 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' consent. A short paper-pencil questionnaire collected sociodemographic information. Audio files and questionnaires were pseudonymised and content-semantically transcribed by JG following Dresing and Pehl's (2018) guidelines.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic data of study participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Employment and housing status	Years of participation
Michael	Male	66	Retired	2
Andrea	Female	39	Unemployed for six years	2
Peter	Male	61	Retired	1.5
Markus	Male	29	Employed	1.5
Julian	Male	59	Unfit to work; homeless for three years	2
Sabrina	Female	59	Retired	1.5
Marion	Female	62	Unemployed for three years	1
John	Male	64	Unemployed for five years	1.5
Julia	Female	39	Unemployed for 15 years	1
Sarah	Female	28	Employed	1.5
Lila	Female	58	Unemployed for 20 years	3
Nadine	Female	54	Unemployed for over ten years; homeless for more than 18 years	3
Bernd	Male	54	Unemployed for 16 years	1.5
Stefan	Male	53	Retired	1
Angelika	Female	58	Unfit to work, retired	2.5
Thomas	Male	42	In a return-to-work programme	2.5

Notes: For illustrative purposes, the names have been replaced with pseudonyms; the number of years of participation has been rounded up to the nearest half-year.

Identifying information was anonymised during transcription, and pseudonyms were created based on age, gender, and origin for descriptive purposes in the findings section (see Table 1). Quotations were translated and grammatically corrected by the authors, with final checks by a native British English speaker. The transcribed data were imported into the software MAXQDA 24 (Release 24.6.0) for systematic organisation and coding, supporting the subsequent thematic analysis.

### 4.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) was used, combining an inductive exploration of participants' narratives with a deductive alignment to the CA (Sen, 2001), ensuring that the findings reflected both data-driven insights and theoretical grounding. The analysis began with a familiarisation phase, during which the researchers repeatedly read transcripts and listened to audio recordings to deeply understand participants' life trajectories, challenges, and experiences with the beneFit programme. This phase facilitated the identification of key aspects, such as valued goals and perceived outcomes, such as the role of routine, social connections, and health-related concerns in participants' lives. During this phase, initial ideas were noted to guide subsequent coding steps. Next, systematic coding was conducted independently by two researchers (LO, JG), ensuring multiple perspectives and consistent interpretation. The process involved labeling meaningful data segments to capture recurring ideas. For the theme *capability for better coping with daily life*, codes like "building routine," "finding stability," and "mutual support" emerged, reflecting aspects participants highlighted regarding everyday challenges and strategies for managing them. These codes were then grouped under the overarching theme of "managing daily life," capturing how participants navigated everyday challenges and maintained structure in their routines. This theme was further refined through the CA lens, linking it to conversion factors (e.g., programme flexibility, safety) and specific functionings, including "reducing stress."

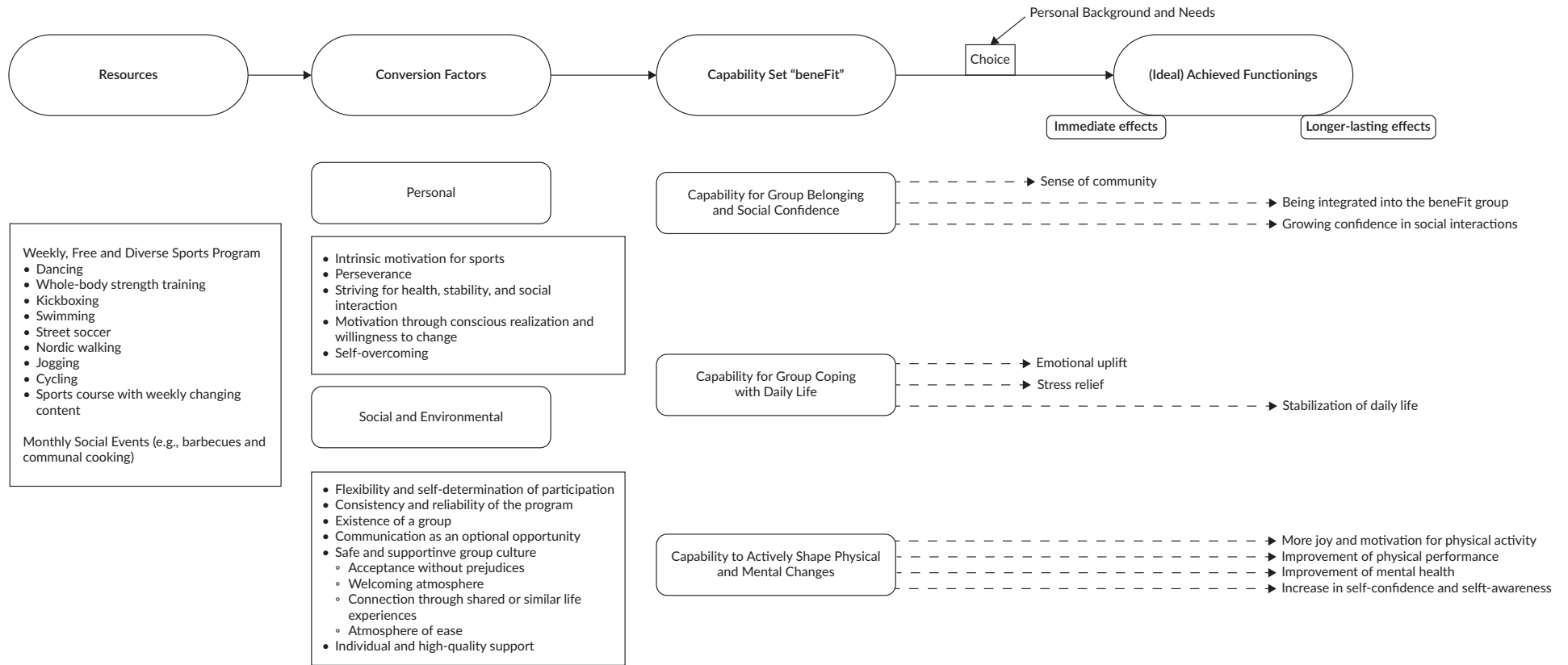
## 5. Findings

To align with the theoretical framework, the findings are structured as follows: personal conversion factors, which often appear reduced among participants, are discussed first. This is followed by key personal, social, and environmental factors enabling the transformation of resources into functionings. Finally, the findings are organised under three capabilities, with connections to conversion factors and resulting functionings highlighted. Figure 1 provides an overview of the analytical structure, illustrating the relationships between conversion factors, capabilities, and achieved functionings explored in this section. It serves as a visual representation of how various factors interact within the programme, helping to contextualize the findings presented below.

### 5.1. Conversion Factors

Participants' narratives reveal life situations shaped by multifaceted challenges, significantly limiting their personal conversion factors. Prolonged burdens such as traumatic experiences (e.g., childhood abuse, bullying, or family crises), chronic illnesses, and mental health issues often lead to compounded difficulties. These challenges restrict opportunities for independent living and create barriers to achieving desired functionings. Health problems frequently prevent sustained employment and financial stability. One participant described the cycle of recurring surgeries and unemployment: "And then odd jobs, many





**Figure 1.** Application of the CA in the beneFit sports programme. Notes: This graphic is intended for illustrative purposes and does not claim absolute validity; immediate effects arise during or directly after activities, while longer-lasting effects typically emerge over weeks or months.

operations afterwards, on both knees repeatedly, then long-term unemployed, but couldn't get into work because of the operations" (Marion, 62). Similarly, Julian (59) highlighted the cumulative impact of challenges:

I just overworked myself, and then that led to this burnout, you know. Two thousand twenty, yeah, and then the pandemic happened, you know, which made things even harder with finding housing and all that stuff, and then dealing with people who were mentally overwhelmed, overburdened....All of that dragged me down even more, and then there was also the thing with my ear, you know.

Despite diverse life situations, a recurring pattern emerges: participants' personal conversion factors seem notably reduced compared to those typically observed among members of VSCs, underscoring barriers to participation. These biographical narratives highlight the importance of social and environmental conversion factors in supporting inclusion within VSCs.

A safe and supportive group culture emerged as a crucial social conversion factor, helping participants overcome these barriers. Marion (62) explained: "It doesn't matter if I'm fat, thin, an alcoholic, a drug addict, or nothing at all; everyone is accepted as they are. That's the most important thing for me—that people are taken as they are." Similarly, Peter (61) highlighted the shared experiences among participants: "I feel comfortable and supported at beneFit because of the people who are there. Many are also living in poverty or facing similar struggles, so there is no focus on 'what you have' or 'what I have.'" Flexibility and self-determination were also crucial. Participants valued the ability to engage at their own pace, which represents both social and environmental conversion factors. Marion (62) noted:

It's important to me that I can just be a spectator sometimes, like with kickboxing. When the structure changed and it became too much for me, I said, "I'm out for now," and that was okay too. That's what I find great.

Julian (59) emphasised the adaptability of the programme: "I can try out for myself how far I can go or not. If I'm not feeling up to it, I can step back. That's what makes it so valuable to me."

While personal conversion factors such as physical performance or health were often limited, other personal factors were critical for developing capabilities. Intrinsic motivation was a driving force for many participants. Andrea (39) shared: "My motivation to take part in the course was very high. I was genuinely excited because it's so much fun and something I really enjoy." Sustained participation, however, often required perseverance. Michael (66) reflected: "You need perseverance and commitment. These are key factors for making changes and sticking to them." Many participants tied their involvement to broader goals. Julian (59) described:

I go there because I'm disabled, because I can't really do sports, and no doctor can give me any prognosis. They just say, "Well, it's not really possible anymore, but you might as well try." So, I go there, and for me, it's really an inner goal—to maintain as much as possible, to keep as much fitness as I can.

## 5.2. *Capability for Better Coping With Daily Life*

In addition to the overarching conversion factors described above, certain conversion factors are directly linked to specific capabilities. One such example is the *capability for better coping with daily life*, reflecting

participants' ability to manage everyday challenges more effectively. One key social conversion factor that enables the development of this capability is the consistency and reliability of the programme offerings. Year-round courses, including those held on Sundays, provide stability and support participants in developing routines. Julian (59) explained: "Since I have no daily structure, I can say, okay, Sunday evening is beneFit, so I prepare myself for it and make sure I get there."

Equally important is the safe and familiar environment that beneFit offers. Many participants appreciate the welcoming and supportive atmosphere, which allows them to engage in activities without hesitation. Julian describes it as: "It has become something familiar by now...a place where you can go without fear." This sense of familiarity provides security and encourages active participation. Within this environment, the connection with other participants in similar life situations becomes a valuable conversion factor. Interacting with people who face similar challenges fosters community and mutual support. Sabrina (59), who cares for her mother at home, describes how these exchanges help her:

When I have an argument with my mother, I've shared it with someone, and they've comforted me. Susi has the same problem as I do; she has her father at home, who is 91. My mother is also 91, and the experiences we share—it's good to have that exchange.

While beneFit cannot directly change participants' life circumstances, these social conversion factors enhance their capability to cope with daily challenges, equipping them to manage their situations more effectively.

The achieved functionings resulting from this capability are evident in immediate impacts felt during or after activities, as well as in longer-lasting effects. Many participants describe the programme as a "vent," or a way to "breathe." The study revealed that emotional uplift and stress relief are among the immediate impacts. Participants report feeling more relaxed and balanced after activities. One participant recounts their experience with Nordic walking: "At first, I felt really bad inside, but then I somehow got into a flow. When I walked along, I could let go of all the heaviness for a bit and focus on other thoughts" (Angelika, 58). Beyond these immediate effects, longer-term impacts also emerged. Julian (59) describes how beneFit has provided him with a stabilising element in his life: "I would say that beneFit stabilises parts of my life situation as I currently experience it because it's something I go to, it's reliable, and it has a stabilising effect. It's like a small anchor, somehow."

At the same time, it should be noted that managing daily life often depends on multiple factors, and beneFit is just one part of the equation. While some participants view it as a central activity, many continue to rely on other networks and pursuits. As one participant explains her strategies for coping with everyday life: "I think it's largely the chemical cocktail I take, which I now take more regularly" (Sarah, 28). In addition to medical support, she emphasises the importance of building a broader social network: "Another pillar is that I'm building a better social network....If no one is available, there's maybe a beneFit offering or something." This perspective highlights that the improvements participants experience often result from a combination of approaches and are not solely attributable to participation in beneFit.

### 5.3. Capability for Group Belonging and Social Confidence

The findings reveal that the *capability for group belonging and social confidence* plays a meaningful role for participants in the beneFit programme. This capability combines two key aspects: experiencing a sense of community and developing confidence in social interactions. These are closely tied to participants' involvement in a structured yet low-pressure group sports environment. Some participants expressed a personal need for social interaction as a motivator for participation. Angelika (58) noted: "It was very important for me to get out of isolation and to have the experience again that there are nice people." The opportunity to connect with others in similar life situations was particularly valued. As one participant noted positively, it was possible to meet people "who are in similar economic situations or perhaps somehow disadvantaged due to illnesses or disabilities" (Bernd, 54). This participant also observed that substance use within the group was lower: "In my experience, there aren't many smokers. One or two people might smoke, but alcohol is not an issue. They may have a beer after beneFit, but they don't have problems with it." The sports context itself provides a social and environmental conversion factor conducive to fostering these connections. Physical activities offer a natural and informal setting for interaction, without pressuring participants to engage, where communication with others is seen as an optional opportunity. Participants can simply engage in the physical activity without feeling pressured to speak with others. As Julia (39) describes:

You can start a conversation, but you don't have to. You can also just do your own thing, and you're not forced to talk to each other. It's not like in a support group or anywhere else, but you can talk if you want to, and I find that really pleasant.

This environmental factor, combined with the programme's long-term and consistent nature, allows individuals, particularly those who initially struggle with social insecurities, to gradually open up and connect with others. By developing this Capability, participants were able to achieve functionings of being, such as a sense of community and growing confidence in social interactions. One participant noted:

The fact is, we miss each other when someone isn't there. Even when I wasn't there, people noticed and asked: "Where were you?" I was really surprised because at first, I wasn't there regularly. But the fact that people cared—that's something I really appreciated. (Marion, 62)

The sense of group belonging sometimes extended beyond the sessions, with participants spending leisure time together. For some participants, the programme serves as a starting point for spending time together outside of organised sessions. Peter (61) shared: "Spending leisure time has now come about through beneFit or the sports activities, and, well, it's also led to meeting up with people from the group, like going for coffee with individuals or with different people."

The findings show that participants' social confidence improves as they reflect on how the programme helps them interact with others more easily. Peter (61), who has a social phobia, described the sports activities as a kind of training ground for social interactions: "Well, I go there, and it's also a kind of training for me to deal with people in the VSC, and, uh, I've become...more relaxed as well, and I see things more calmly now, yeah."

Michael (66) observed impacts on other areas of his life: “And now it’s completely different, yes, now I’m already socially integrated in many areas. And I also notice that sports—my being active in sports—contributes a lot to being sociable, yes.”

#### **5.4. Capability to Actively Shape Physical and Mental Changes**

This capability emphasises participants’ ability to actively engage in processes that lead to long-term improvements in their physical and psychological well-being. This capability was meaningful for many participants, enabling them to positively influence their physical and mental conditions despite challenges like obesity, depression, organ damage, or low fitness levels. For some, these conditions were exacerbated by medication side effects, such as sedation or weight gain, which participants often perceived negatively. Despite these challenges, the desire to improve their health through physical activity emerged as a central personal conversion factor. Sabrina (59) exemplified this drive:

I want to reduce the medications I’m taking. I still have meds for my circulation because I have very high blood pressure. These medications are, of course, quite burdensome. I’m trying to wean off them bit by bit by losing weight through sport—swimming or dancing—so that I can manage my blood pressure more naturally.

This intrinsic motivation to improve health served as a key factor enabling participants to pursue physical activity despite their limitations. Building on the conversion factors discussed in Section 5.1—such as a safe and supportive group culture or perseverance and self-awareness—additional factors played a vital role in shaping this capability. The diversity of offerings at beneFit represented a key resource that provided participants with access to a wide range of physical activities. This variety ensured that participants could find activities that suited their individual needs and preferences, creating opportunities for engagement regardless of their physical limitations or personal interests. For instance, beneFit offered options such as dancing, swimming, Nordic walking, and kickboxing, which catered to diverse levels of physical ability and fitness. Sabrina (59) highlighted how the variety of activities allowed her to choose options that aligned with her physical limitations: “Since I’m handicapped due to my hip, I wasn’t very good at swimming. Dancing causes fewer problems with my hip—I don’t know why, but swimming movements just don’t work for me.” Similarly, John (64) highlighted how certain activities worked well for him while also acknowledging limitations: “Nordic walking, though, is great—it’s gentle on my bones and helps build my stamina. Kickboxing has also been very beneficial, but the kicking is a bit of an issue because of my bones.” For others, the programme’s diversity created opportunities for progression. Michael (66) described how the availability of different activities allowed him to take incremental steps toward his fitness goals:

I realised at some point that Nordic walking wasn’t quite it anymore—it just wasn’t the thing for me anymore. Jogging, though, felt like the next step. And then I thought about my schedule, and it fit in perfectly, time-wise. When I started jogging, I thought, ‘Wow, this is exactly what was missing.’ It’s the next step for me.

The capability led to various achieved functionings. Many of these functionings were closely tied to self-defined goals, such as improving physical and mental health. For instance, some participants observed tangible improvements in their physical fitness, posture, and overall appearance, directly aligning with their

personal aspirations for better health. Julia (39), who had been inactive for years due to mental health challenges, noted the positive changes:

Yes, so I've definitely gotten fitter, I think. I've also received feedback from others that my stature has improved....What I really do regularly is Nordic walking, so I think it's because of that. My posture has improved, my presence, and so on. Before, I would enter a room like a sack of potatoes, and now it's much better.

John (64), who had struggled with depression, described how participating in the programme helped him regain a sense of vitality:

When I looked at a picture from a camera, I saw life coming back, yeah? I'm smiling again. I've been in a good mood for the past six months. Without the sport, it wouldn't have worked, or I'd probably still be lying around like a wet sack, yeah.

While many participants highlighted positive developments, others experienced challenges and limitations related to their physical health. For example, Julian reflected on the difficulties he faced due to the progressive loss of his balance:

That's obviously exhausting, you know, and it happens again and again, especially during sports. Like when we were playing that, what was it called, Bounce Ball? Sometimes I get blackouts, you know....Same with sudden drops in blood sugar levels. And I realised, okay, the physical strain is increasing....So, it's a bit of a mixed feeling. On the one hand, it's great to do sports, but on the other hand, you're constantly struggling. It doesn't actually get better, and that's frustrating because, of course, you want to see progress when you're putting in the effort. It's a tough situation.

In addition to these goal-oriented outcomes, participants achieved functionings that initially seemed unrelated to their personal objectives but were nonetheless appreciated. For example, some participants discovered new interests or developed a deeper understanding of their preferences through the programme's diverse offerings. Julia (39) reflected on her newfound sense of curiosity and exploration:

But I notice through Nordic walking that I've gained more confidence, that I can even do sports, that I'm even capable of something. And now I've gotten more interested in trying something like Qigong on YouTube. I'm learning what I like and what I don't like. I've realised that I enjoy slow, steady activities like Nordic walking. Now I've talked to Jana [trainer] about trying slow jogging. Things like that, or Qigong, or those more calm activities, I really like those. I'm not so much—I think I get the impression I'm not so much—an aerobics type of person, not really. And that's completely new for me, because before, I had absolutely no idea what I might like—I only knew all the things I didn't like.

## 6. Discussion of Findings

This study explored how long-term participation in a low-threshold, and diverse sports programme contributes to individuals' ability to navigate and cope with challenging life situations associated with PaSE. By applying Sen's CA, the study shifts the focus from predefined outcome measures to an exploration of how conversion factors mediate the transformation of resources into meaningful functionings.

The application of Sen's CA situates this study within a growing research area on sports programmes. Unlike outcome-driven frameworks that prioritise predefined goals like employability (Moustakas et al., 2022; Spaaij et al., 2013), the CA adopts an open, participant-centered perspective, emphasising real freedoms and opportunities for individuals to pursue valuable ways of living as they define them. Taking a broader focus, participants highlighted capabilities such as better coping with daily life, group belonging and social confidence, and actively shaping physical and mental changes as particularly meaningful. These capabilities, in turn, influence key aspects like positive health development, fostering a sense of community, and managing everyday challenges. This broader perspective ensures that the CA accommodates diverse needs and aspirations, especially for individuals facing health challenges or for whom traditional outcomes like employment are less relevant. Other studies that utilise the CA as an analytical framework and examine different target groups also confirm key findings of the present study. For instance, improvements in health and overall well-being through sports activities have been highlighted (Dao & Darnell, 2021; Jarvie & Ahrens, 2019). Furthermore, research by Dao and Darnell (2021), Jarvie and Ahrens (2019), Ralls (2021), and Rossi (2015) demonstrates that sports programmes can enhance participants' sense of belonging and self-confidence.

A strength of the benefit sports programme is its diverse activities, engaging a wide range of individuals within the PaSE group. This included both younger and older adults, as well as women and men, all facing varied social and health challenges. This counters the criticism that SfD approaches often focus too narrowly on youth or overemphasise football as the sole activity (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Furthermore, SfD initiatives frequently prioritise men or boys, with limited inclusion of women or mixed-gender activities, as groups often train separately. Açıkgöz et al. (2022) similarly highlight this issue, calling in the limitations of their study for a greater focus on the inclusion of women and girls in future programmes. Another strength is its detailed exploration of participants' life contexts. Biographical-narrative interviews captured both immediate programme experiences and broader life circumstances, providing nuanced insights into individual progress and barriers.

A particular focus of the present study lies in examining conversion factors—elements that enable participants to develop capabilities and transform them into achieved functionings. The findings highlight the importance of a supportive group culture, flexible participation options, reliable programme structures, and participants' intrinsic motivation and perseverance in addressing diversity and providing meaningful opportunities. Flexible participation and reliable structures are closely linked to long-term programme sustainability and diverse offerings, which Suzuki (2017) identifies as prerequisites for fostering social relationships. Suzuki (2017) also emphasises the importance of a safe space, reflected in this study's supportive group culture. Furthermore, shared life experiences fostered a sense of belonging, a crucial driver of engagement. Similarly, Rossi (2015) highlights the positive impact of learning alongside peers from the same community, reinforcing the value of shared experiences in creating meaningful connections and encouraging active participation. Figure 1 provides a visualisation of these interconnections by mapping the relationships between conversion factors, capabilities, and achieved functionings within the programme. By systematically structuring these elements, this context-specific representation highlights key mechanisms that shape participants' experiences and outcomes. This visualisation not only aids in understanding how specific programme elements contribute to meaningful participation and long-term engagement but also provides a conceptual basis for analysing sports programmes within the CA. The figure illustrates that functionings do not simply result directly from participation but emerge through complex interactions between personal, social, and environmental conversion factors.

While programme design plays a crucial role in shaping participant experiences, these findings also indicate that inclusion and well-being are influenced by factors beyond sports alone. This underscores the importance of considering complementary support systems. Participants frequently relied on complementary measures, such as healthcare and social networks, to achieve meaningful improvements. Other activities and measures in their lives likely also contributed to the achieved functionings. Future programmes could benefit from integrating additional resources or partnerships with health and social services to create a more holistic support system. Research highlights the importance of practical benefits to enhance participant engagement. For example, Açıkgöz et al. (2022), Dao and Darnell (2021), and Suzuki (2017) emphasise programmes that offer pathways from volunteering to paid roles or integrate life skills activities, fostering long-term commitment and career prospects. Future studies should explore how other activities and external factors contribute to achieving functionings for adults affected by PaSE.

The application of the CA in this study entails several methodological challenges. A key difficulty lies in identifying capabilities, as these were derived from the achieved functionings and the associated conversion factors. Consequently, only realised capabilities were captured leaving hypothetical opportunities unconsidered—an issue also noted by Leßmann (2013). This limitation highlights the need for methods to better address unrealised capabilities.

Another challenge is distinguishing between types of conversion factors. Flexibility and self-determination, for example, can arise from both social relationships and structural programme design, creating overlaps. Future research should further investigate these interactions to clarify their roles in capability development. Furthermore, few environmental factors were identified, even though studies emphasise elements like transportation or spatial accessibility (Jarvie & Ahrens, 2019). This limited exploration may be due to the study's focus on programme content and the positive selection of participants. Addressing structural and geographical influences more comprehensively is crucial, as location-dependent challenges in the context of PaSE are significant (Madanipour et al., 2015).

## 7. Conclusion

The findings emphasise that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for addressing the diverse needs of adults affected by PaSE. Long-term, community-based sports programmes embedded in existing structures, such as VSCs, hold great potential to promote social inclusion and alleviate poverty. However, for VSCs to succeed, they must adopt more inclusive practices, such as removing performance barriers and training facilitators to address the diverse needs of participants. By utilising their established infrastructure and community reach, VSCs can play a pivotal role in fostering meaningful participation and long-term engagement in sports. This study highlights the value of moving beyond narrow outcome indicators such as employability and instead considering context-sensitive strategies that support participants pursuing the functionings they find meaningful.

For the evaluation of sports programmes, this suggests that, in addition to examining achieved outcomes, greater attention should be given to understanding the processes through which these outcomes emerge. A deeper insight into which programme elements and mechanisms facilitate meaningful change can help refine future interventions, making them more responsive to participants' needs and circumstances. This, in turn, could contribute to improving programme quality and increasing their potential for long-term impact.



Beyond contributing empirical insights, this study develops a context-specific model with the CA (Figure 1) that can inform both programme planning and further research. By structuring the relationships between conversion factors, capabilities, and achieved functionings—the three key interconnected elements of the CA—this framework can provide a systematic basis for analysing how sports programmes foster inclusion and well-being. At the same time, it offers researchers a foundation to expand upon, explore in different contexts, and refine through future studies. Investigating its applicability across various settings could help enhance its relevance for both practice and academic discourse.

Ultimately, tailored sports programmes should not only be seen as isolated interventions but as part of a broader effort to create environments that support inclusion and well-being. By fostering spaces that acknowledge and accommodate the diverse life situations of marginalised individuals, sports programmes have the potential to support social inclusion and address some of the challenges associated with poverty. These outcomes benefit not only individuals but also foster healthier and more inclusive communities. Investing in inclusive, long-term sports programmes is more than a question of social responsibility—it is a necessary step toward structural inequalities and ensuring equitable access to meaningful participation.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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