

# Interweaving the concepts of sport for development and adapted physical activity in a Latin American context

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## ABSTRACT

Sport for Development (SFD) initiatives have brought about positive societal changes; however, many scholars have recently offered more critical perspectives, emphasizing the need for a broader focus. As a multidisciplinary kinanthropological discipline with a strong special education overlay, adapted physical activities (APA) are strikingly similar to SFD in their use of a physical activity to improve the overall quality of life for individuals with special needs. This article aims to demonstrate that APA and SFD are not two separate fields but complementary approaches by examining the literature on SFD in the Latin American context and linking it terminologically to APA, particularly from the perspective of psychosocial prevention for vulnerable youth, to unify these concepts into a scholarly theme. This literature review draws on 79 peer-reviewed articles published in English, Spanish, and Portuguese over the past two decades on SFD and APA in Latin America, identified through systematic database searches and reference tracking. Using thematic analysis, overlapping goals, ethical tensions, and political dimensions of sport-based interventions were synthesized. Findings indicate that both SFD and APA prioritize promoting social inclusion, psychosocial well-being, and empowerment, particularly among marginalized groups. However, both face challenges, such as implementing universal approaches, meeting expected outcomes from sponsors, and being instrumentalized for political or diplomatic purposes. Aligning SFD and APA through shared ethical principles and emphasis on psychosocial aspects, inclusion, and community embeddedness can enhance their impact and sustainability, especially when tailored to the sociopolitical realities of Latin America.

## KEYWORDS

critical perspective; kinanthropology; Latin America; psychosocial development

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## INTRODUCTION

What could connect Zlatan Ibrahimović, one of the world's most talented and controversial football players, with Kyle Maynard, a successful wrestler, climber, and inspirational speaker? They both came into the world at a particular disadvantage. Their stories might have ended up unnoticed and marginalized. Instead, through sport, they discovered a path to self-development and social recognition that might otherwise have been unattainable.

This transformative potential of sport is not limited to Europe or North America. Chilean Paralympian, Francisca Mardones, rebuilt her life after a spinal cord injury, moving from wheelchair tennis to athletics and ultimately broke her own world record in the women's F54 shot put at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. Similarly, Yulimar Rojas, raised in a poor area on the Venezuelan Caribbean coast where she suffered bullying as a child, became the world's leading triple jumper, an Olympic and world champion who also broke barriers as an openly LGBTQ+ athlete.

Together, the stories of Ibrahimović, Maynard, Mardones, and Rojas illustrate sport's capacity for psychosocial transformation. Starting with their stories is not to romanticize overcoming obstacles but to underscore a fundamental truth: sport has the potential to effect profound psychosocial transformation. When approached with the correct values of inclusion, support, and respect for diversity, sports can foster identity, confidence, and a sense of belonging, inspiring hope and optimism.

In this literature review, we focus on Latin America because of its unique combination of vibrant sport cultures, persistent inequalities, and the increasing use of sport as a tool of development. Thus, we examine 79 academic papers published over the last two decades on adapted physical activity (APA) and sport for development (SFD) approaches in the Latin-American context. These papers cover a wide range of topics, including the theoretical foundations of APA and SFD, case studies of successful initiatives, and critiques of the current approaches. Of these, 60 were in English, 11 in Portuguese, and 8 in Spanish language. We explore both the potential and limitations of these approaches, demonstrating that APA and SFD converge as complementary approaches centered on psychosocial well-being, inclusion, and community, particularly within the sociopolitical realities of Latin America.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Concepts such as *sport*, *development*, *adapted physical activity*, *the psychosocial aspect of health*, and *Latin America* are open to broad interpretation. While we attempt to unify these concepts into a scholarly theme, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations, omissions, and fragmentation that burden the current literature and practice. Each concept warrants a separate scholarly treatment, but a critical perspective is essential for a comprehensive understanding.

As this paper addresses the above points, we aim to provide more up-to-date, comprehensive, and contextually relevant information. In this spirit, we aim to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on APA and SFD by reviewing the literature on this agenda in the Latin American context.

## Adapted physical activities

Adapted Physical Activities are not just a set of physical activities, programs, and strategies. They represent a comprehensive approach to developing an active lifestyle and improving the quality of life for people with special needs. This approach encompasses mental, physical, and social development, instilling a sense of reassurance and confidence. Traditionally, it has implemented its activities in physical education, sport, physical recreation, and compensatory rehabilitation. It involves working with individuals with disabilities through physical activity as a means of overall development for both the individual and society.

The history of sports for people with disabilities reflects the world's events, highlighting the connection between disability sports and rehabilitation. Although forms of disability sport have existed since the 19th century (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Cherney et al., 2015), it was not until World War II that a fundamental transformation in societal perceptions of them occurred. Ludwig Guttmann organized the first Stoke Mandeville Games for the Paralyzed in 1948, laying the foundations for the Paralympic movement (Blauwet & Willick, 2012). In the same year, the lesser-known but historically significant Kladruby Games, founded by Vojmír Srdečný, were established in Czechoslovakia. These games combined sport, culture, and community gatherings in the spirit of psychosocial rehabilitation. However, the original inclusive *ethos* of these Games contrasts with today's shift towards a performance model in Paralympic sport (Martínková et al., 2020).

Today, the issue of equal access and participation in sports remains an ongoing concern. Children and adults with disabilities face environmental barriers, a lack of inclusive programs, and persistent stigmas (van der Ploeg et al., 2004; Shields & Synnot, 2016). In Latin America, these challenges take on specific forms, as demonstrated by Camargo Rojas et al. (2023) in their review study. Levels of accessibility, social acceptance, and support structures following participation in sports for people with disabilities vary between countries. In Brazil, there is a lack of qualified professionals; in Colombia, physical activity is perceived as a tool for autonomy but is institutionally limited; in Peru, segregation persists; in Chile, gender inequality persists; and in Paraguay, there is a lack of pedagogical training.

In addition, the underrepresentation of people with disabilities in textbooks and media images of sports contributes to their symbolic marginalization (Hardin, 2007; Botelho-Gomes et al., 2008). Only 1.2% of photographs in physical education textbooks depict people with disabilities, mainly in high-performance contexts (González-Palomares & Rey-Cao, 2020). This critique further develops Cherney et al. (2015), who point out that the media often reproduce two extremes: 'superheroes' who overcome unimaginable limits, or passive victims. Such narratives distract from the everyday realities and structural barriers that affect the participation of people with disabilities in sports. Thus, sports are not neutral, and how we portray them reflects social power structures and gender inequalities (Moya-Mata et al., 2023). Therefore, we should critically analyze materials and media discourse rather than simply reproducing hegemonic patterns that not only fail to reflect the diversity of experiences of people with disabilities but also reproduce normative ideas about physicality and performance, and show the dangers of selective representation.

Similar inspirational stories about Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Kyle Maynard, Francisca Mardones, and Yulimar Rojas, as we mentioned in the introduction to our article, are very tempting. However, as we mentioned, we do not mean to idealize overcoming obstacles but to emphasize that sport can be a powerful tool for psychosocial transformation, provided the professional public grasps it well. Moreover, it is this “grasping of sport” that is key. When competitiveness directly conflicts with the inclusive nature of disability sports, tensions arise.

After all, gaining social connections is one of the most significant benefits of participating in sports (not only) for people with disabilities. Meeting others and feeling integrated into a group helps individuals feel more satisfied overall, and even a simple “trip out of the house” boosts their self-esteem (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008). In short, the stronger the social ties, the more likely a person with a disability is to participate actively in sports. The undeniable benefit is then friendship, whether it is with children (Seymour et al., 2009), adults (Ashton-Shaeffer et al., 2001; Lindemann & Cherney, 2008; Cherney et al., 2015), or retired people (Güths et al., 2017; Silva et al., 2025).

Thus, sport can only be a tool for psychosocial emancipation if we understand it as a space of identity, relationship, and participation rather than an exclusive performance sphere. This approach is central to the conceptualization of both APA and SFD as it highlights the need for inclusive and ethically grounded practices.

### **Sport for development**

Unlike the APA, sport for development is a relatively young field that has emerged as a powerful paradigm for addressing various social issues worldwide over the past two decades. Founded on the belief that sport has a unique ability to promote positive social change, the field of SFD has quickly gained the attention of academics, policy-makers, and practitioners alike. Its formal recognition and structured implementation began with the formulation of the Magglingen Declaration in Switzerland in 2003, after the UN International Conference on Sport and Development. The ambitious, perhaps even paternalistic, aim was to bring together key stakeholders to discuss the best ways to collaborate and work towards a ‘better world’ through sport.

Since then, the field of SFD has evolved to include organizations in more than 120 countries, resulting in a wealth of primary and secondary literature on its application, strategies, and outcomes (Svensson & Cohen, 2020). Despite its relatively short history, any researcher interested in the topic should not overlook some of the work. Many researchers, including ourselves, recommend Schulenkorf et al.’s (2016) integrated review of the SFD literature as the theoretical pillar of their studies.

Before delving into Latin American material, however, it is worth noting that even in just two decades, scholarship has evolved, and researchers have advanced beyond conceptual issues and superficial empirical studies to incorporate diverse perspectives (Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Whitley et al., 2019). Their work has led to many theoretical and empirical studies across many sports disciplines, including management, sociology, health, public policy, gender studies, education, marketing, media, and conflict and peace studies. Researchers have recently advocated for more capacious perspectives and interdisciplinary collaboration. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding

of the impacts of SFD, they have recommended giving greater attention to areas such as disability, gender, and economic livelihoods. For example, Giulianotti et al. (2019) also highlighted the transnational, methodologically plural, and interdisciplinary nature of the SFD field.

As is often the case with this type of global strategy, attention to SFD in recent literature has shifted from initial enthusiasm and numerous documented successes to adopting a more critical perspective (Cohen et al., 2019). Increasingly, scholars are examining the underlying assumptions and broader impacts of SFD initiatives and questioning their long-term sustainability and effectiveness. For example, Coalter's (2015) 'black box critique' notes that many initiatives fail to adequately explain how and why sport contributes to change. Other critiques, in turn, often highlight the perpetuation of neoliberal agendas (Melo, 2018), the reinforcement of gender norms (Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014; Zipp & Nauright, 2018; Guevara Pérez et al., 2023), the persistence of racism (Venâncio et al., 2024), and the environmental consequences of major sporting events (Millington et al., 2020). These critical perspectives are essential to a comprehensive understanding of SFDs, as they reveal the complexities and challenges that accompany their implementation.

Effective SFD programs must go beyond individual empowerment and target systemic inequalities, as Darnell & Millington (2019) remind us. Hence, current research increasingly turns to a holistic understanding of sport as a physical and, more importantly, psychosocial transformation tool. Due to the many directions SFD is taking today, it is not easy to retrospectively track scientific findings. On the other hand, the field is open to any new perspective. Thus, the intersection of SFD concepts with APA enables for the formulation of new theoretical and practical frameworks for working with marginalized youth in Latin America and beyond.

### **Latin American context**

Scholars often highlight the ability of sport to inspire, unite, and empower, but its role in development is not nearly as clear. Who defines "self-improvement" or "good" values in sports? Histories of colonialism, inequality, and contested development persist in the Latin American context, and sport is not only a cultural, recreational, or economic phenomenon but also a space fraught with political and social relevance (Bravo et al., 2016). Thus, we join other scholars who have warned against romanticizing the potential of sport without a critical approach.

For these reasons, the broader Latin American region, with its rich sports culture, diverse socioeconomic environments, and politically contested history of 'dependent development' and persistent inequality, provides a unique context for exploring the impacts and implications of SFD and APA initiatives.

Several countries in the region have adopted the concept of development through sport, including at the central government level, to address pressing social issues ranging from youth violence to gender inequality. However, scholars often debate the effectiveness of these programs, and each is limited by factors such as political instability, economic disparities, and cultural barriers.

Given these contexts, it is then pertinent to consider Svensson & Woods' (2017) systematic review, in which out of 3,138 organizational records in SFD databases, they

listed a total of 955 actors involved in grassroots practice, of which “only” 99 were from Latin America, mainly Brazil, Colombia, and Peru. However, authors Añorve & Flores (2021) reported only 79 ad hoc organizations. This relative dearth of research on Latin America is concerning because established models and theories of SFD may not always be applicable to a given context. Particularly because what constitutes the ‘global’ knowledge base of SFD research comprises a relatively narrow group of researchers (Darnell et al., 2019) with specific geographical and cultural backgrounds and affiliations to the so-called ‘Global North’. Fortunately, da Silva Freitas et al. (2022) provide evidence that voices from the ‘Global South’ are actively producing and writing on the topic. Other academics have also recommended greater inclusion and collaboration between the ‘North’ and the ‘South’ in order to capture regional dynamics and achieve more balanced research outcomes (Moura & Šafaříková, 2024; Graeff et al., 2023).

The Latin American region thus offers specific challenges and examples of good practice. The review by Parnell et al. (2018) and the monograph by Jaitman & Scartasini (2017) demonstrate that sport is often successfully used to promote social capital, inclusion, community cohesion, education, and health; however, it is less effective in crime prevention, for example. A notable example from Colombia is an initiative in Ciudad Bolívar, where a community sports program has helped local youth reach international levels, including the Olympic Games (Gadais et al., 2022). However, the study notes that the pressure for elite performance has gradually undermined the program’s social mission.

Other research emphasizes the importance of participant engagement, reflexivity, and contextual sensitivity, as shown, for example, by Ponciano Núñez & Carter (2025) in programs in Central America that build on Freire’s pedagogy and focus on community empowerment and youth civic engagement. However, they criticize structural barriers such as inadequate funding, gender stereotypes, and vertical decision-making models that limit the transformative potential of sport. We can also mention other SFD initiatives examined in El Salvador (Gadais et al., 2017), Colombia (Oxford, 2017; Hills et al., 2018; Cárdenas, 2019), Barbados and Saint Lucia (Zipp & Nauright, 2018), Belize (Wright et al., 2018), Mexico (Añorve & Flores, 2021), Ecuador (Córdova Paredes et al., 2024), Uruguay (Figueiredo et al., 2024), Guatemala (Mandigo et al., 2018), Nicaragua (Hayhurst et al., 2018), Brazil (Rubio, 2014; Toledo & Silva Bega, 2019; Kravchychn et al., 2019), Argentina and Chile (Levoratti et al., 2024), or for the Latin American population in the USA (Baker et al., 2018). Given sport’s central role in Latin American culture and society, the country’s case studies illustrate the importance of a local and culturally sensitive approach.

Sporting activities, with their intrinsic values, can become excellent tools to improve educational outcomes, support livelihood generation, and promote peace, social integration, and development in Latin America (Añorve & Flores, 2021). Nevertheless, their effectiveness depends on context and proper implementation. Government support and local community involvement are key success factors (Gadais & Baptista, 2019), as sport alone cannot solve the structural causes of conflict, inequality, and social isolation (Cárdenas, 2019).

## DISCUSSION

This review of the available literature suggests that SFD and APA approaches share several key features, particularly an emphasis on participation, community embeddedness, and psychosocial benefits. However, their developmental trajectories, institutional embeddedness, and modes of legitimation differ significantly. While APA grows out of academia and its long-standing work with disadvantaged groups, SFD is a globally mobilized movement whose legitimacy is often shaped by the political discourse and development agendas of international organizations.

However, both approaches face similar challenges regarding ethical embeddedness, inclusion, and unique contexts in a world oriented towards measurable outcomes and standardized models. Many studies (Martins et al., 2015; Belizán et al., 2019; Proaño et al., 2023) show that the effectiveness of movement programs increases significantly when they are rooted in community settings, reflect cultural specificities and involve local people already in the planning process. In contrast, one-size-fits-all interventions, lacking local context, often fail in terms of long-term sustainability and do not achieve the expected psychosocial impact. In a systematic review of 71 studies, Ponciano Núñez et al. (2023) highlight that although community sports interventions often show positive outcomes such as improved physical health, mental well-being, and life skills, most lack theoretical grounding and rigorous evaluation methods.

This raises a fundamental question: Can sport be a universal tool for development? Unfortunately, the answer is not yes. If a sport intervention is not firmly anchored in local sociocultural structures, it loses its transformative potential and can become a tool to reproduce already existing inequalities (Giulianotti et al., 2016; Melo, 2018; Vasquez et al., 2020). The loss of community embeddedness, whether due to sponsor pressure, politicization, or professionalization, emerges as a crucial tipping point in several case studies (Watson, 2022; Gadais et al., 2022).

Sport in Latin America has historically served as a tool for identity formation, nation-building, and political legitimacy, often shaped by colonial legacies and state interventions (Bravo et al., 2016). Moreover, the scholars note that although sports promote development and peace, many initiatives lack coordination and local context. They, therefore, call for a regionally embedded approach that better reflects the sociopolitical realities of Latin America. Skepticism towards SFD by academics and practitioners is further confirmed by Darnell et al. (2016) and Welty Peachey et al. (2017), who highlight the need for culturally sensitive and participatory approaches that reflect local conditions. Meanwhile, gender and structural inequalities are evident, for example, in the Colombian women's football league, where female players face insecurity, marginalization, and weak institutional backgrounds (Martínez Mina et al., 2019), in the Mexican women's soccer league where hierarchical structures persist (Añorve, 2019), or in Nicaraguan gender-based violence projects where rigid sponsorship expectations hinder deeper community engagement (Hayhurst et al., 2018). Gender, security, and cultural norms thus fundamentally affect the effectiveness of SFD programs (Vasquez et al., 2020). In this sense, Venâncio et al. (2024) offer practical insights for SFD organizations to achieve sustainability and social change by overcoming structural inequalities, lack of resources, cultural resistance, and limited awareness.

The interconnection between sport and politics also manifests at the state level of representation (Rofe, 2018). For example, the Colombian government utilized football in the Golombiao program as a tool for state legitimation and peace diplomacy (Watson, 2022), so we find it necessary to highlight the transformation of sport into a tool of soft power and international representation (Castilho & Marchi Júnior, 2023). Sports can easily be instrumentalized without firm roots in ethical and community frameworks.

Fortunately, practical examples show that sports based on participatory and culturally sensitive approaches can empower disadvantaged groups. Havelange's approach to informal diplomacy (Gutierrez, 2023), the Afrodescendent Games in Colombia (Cáceres, 2020), and adventure sports for people with disabilities (Cantorani et al., 2023) are examples of the use of movement as a space for psychosocial intervention and cultural expression.

The disability-focused approach overlaps thematically with SFD approaches focused on disadvantaged youth, supporting the idea that 'disadvantage' can take many forms (social, mental, physical) where sport can be a universal means of developing human potential (Araújo et al., 2023).

Thus, we should not view APA and SFD as separate worlds, but rather as complementary approaches. Linking them enables the formulation of new frameworks for interventions that are not based on performance but on relationships, unique identity, and local context. While sport, understood in this way, is not a 'one-size-fits-all' solution, it can be an important tool for working with marginalized groups if it is underpinned by long-term collaboration, trust, and cultural sensitivity (Finck Barboza et al., 2014; Ramos et al., 2023).

Success, in this sense, should not be understood as a measurable outcome but as a process. We view success as developing the ability to act conscientiously and responsibly, establish healthy relationships with others, and feel part of a community. The measure of success, then, is not limited to quantitative indicators of participation but also encompasses transformations in self-worth, relationality, and the ability to co-create a safe and empowering environment (Ariza, 2014; Larsen et al., 2014; Camaño Rojas et al., 2023).

The link between APA and SFD is theoretical and practical – allowing for the development of comprehensive, contextually sensitive, and values-based approaches to working with disadvantaged youth in Latin America. Both fields oppose social inclusion and the improvement of the quality of life for people with disabilities (McKinnon et al., 2022). This creates a space for the development of sport, which is not only a tool but also something that extends beyond the field and continues in the life stories of its participants.

Sport cannot be understood as a neutral tool – its form, effect, and purpose are always shaped by context. Thus, both APA and SFD can be powerful tools for inclusion, emancipation, and participation when they reflect local needs, inequalities, and the potential of individuals and communities. In conclusion, combining these two fields enriches scholarly knowledge and opens new avenues for practical action in the Latin American context and beyond.

## CONCLUSIONS

This literature review has demonstrated that APA and SFD are not two separate fields but complementary approaches that share an emphasis on psychosocial aspects, inclusion, and community embeddedness. This is particularly true in the Latin American context, where sport often holds strong cultural and political significance. It is crucial to reflect on local specificities, the history of inequalities, and the need for participatory approaches. Interventions rooted in local structures and based on community needs are more likely to have a long-term impact than universal models transmitted from above.

We, therefore, recommend an emphasis on ethically and culturally sensitive approaches that develop not only performance but, more importantly, relationships, identity, and psychosocial empowerment of participants. For future research, this implies the need to link existing findings from APA and SFD to encourage research conducted from a Global South perspective, focusing on the long-term impacts of sport.

## Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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