Comic Relief

Sport for Change Research

FINAL REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview of the research

This report presents the findings of a piece of independent research which sought to examine Comic Relief's 'Sport for Change' funding approach. It charts the operationalisation and impact of this approach which, since 2002, has invested £80 million into projects in the UK and internationally. During that time over 500 projects have been funded which have used a variety of sports, including skateboarding, surfing, football, martial arts, yoga and boxing, to promote an array of social issues such as: education, employment, mental health, gender equality, social inclusion.

The foundations of Sport for Change concern the intentional use of sport and physical activity as a cross-cutting tool to respond to social issues, provide a basis for social change, and enable the participants of funded programmes to derive more benefits from their engagement in sport or physical activity. Also known as 'sport for development', or 'sport for good', the approach of sport for change goes beyond simply providing people with the opportunity to take part in sport and physical activity but in addition uses their participation as a platform to address specific personal and social objectives. However, to maximise any impacts of these programmes, the sport/physical activity provision needs to be accompanied by specialist non-sport support that has been intentionally designed to respond to social need and enhance social outcomes. Therefore, at the heart of Sport for Change is a focus on understanding diversity, and intentionally addressing barriers to inclusion by creating safe spaces for people to build friendships and connections, engage in important conversations, and access specialist support through sport.

The report focuses on the range of Sport for Change work that Comic Relief has funded since 2016 with the specific intention of providing an in-depth understanding of the impact of that funding on the organisations involved (both in the UK and internationally). A key aim of the research was to assist Comic Relief in their development of a revised Sport for Change strategy and how such work may be funded in the future.

Methodology

The research engaged organisations from a range of social and geographical contexts, all of which had received Sport for Change funding since 2016. Data collection took place between 21st August – 4th December 2023 and representatives from a total of 27 organisations took part.

The research comprised a multi-method, qualitative approach consisting of document analysis of recent internal reviews and impact reports from Comic Relief's Sport for Change portfolio, alongside a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the stakeholder organisations. The central aim of the research was to explore the long-term impacts of Sport for Change funding on stakeholder organisations, and to articulate how this funding had supported these organisations to grow, develop, expand, adapt, and have greater impact. In turn, the research sought to discern if and how impact varied across social contexts, geographies, sectors, or types (size/maturity) of organisation. Crucial here was the extent to which funding had added value, and which funding models or approaches had made the most difference.

Headline Findings

For more than two decades, Sport for Change has been instrumental in stimulating sport and physical activity interventions in the UK and beyond. Since 2016 this stimulus has not only been consolidated but has accelerated as a consequence of an altogether more intentional approach to the funding of a wider variety of projects and programmes. This research highlights a collective desire across all of the featured stakeholder organisations for Sport for Change to continue in its endeavours to be innovative in its outlook and to model best practice in its operational approach.

- There is a plethora of evidence within this report testifying to the ways in which Sport for Change continues to positively impact its stakeholder organisations. The majority of respondents commented on the extent to which Sport for Change funding had a significant impact on organisational life, particularly in relation to: strategic planning and implementation, the promotion of service delivery, and reputational enhancement. Respondents also noted the role of Comic Relief investment in terms of the creation of relationships, networks and strategic partnerships with funders, policy-makers, and sector leaders.

- A number of organisations spoke of the flexible approach adopted by Comic Relief (compared to other funders) in relation to the stewardship of allocated investment, the ownership and outworking of project aims and intentions (including the intentional use of stakeholder knowledge and expertise to underpin project design and delivery), and the importance of manageable reporting protocols. This more flexible approach to grant allocation, and how funding may be spent, was regarded as extremely valuable by all

respondent organisations, especially those delivering interventions in locations where particular stipulations and restrictions dictated how grant monies could be used.

- The extent and duration of funding varied across projects and funded partners, but many spoke of the support they had felt (both individually and organisationally) from longer-term funding arrangements which had provided opportunities for infrastructure and workforce development, and in a number of cases had facilitated a more coherent approach to resource allocation, human resource management, and organisational governance.

- Several respondents reflected on the benefits of the support they had received around monitoring, evaluation, and learning, and related opportunities to engage across various learning forums and platforms. A number of organisations reflected on the importance of in-person site visits by Comic Relief staff to obtain a greater level of insight into project delivery.

- Respondents were unanimous in their positive articulation of the levels of trust, transparency, and reciprocity evident in their communications with Comic Relief, and the responsiveness of Comic Relief staff, especially their empathetic and non-judgmental approach and their willingness to co-create and learn.

- A number of respondents viewed Comic Relief as an organisation who had a realistic understanding of the challenges of project delivery, a genuine interest in the 'depth and quality' of project outcomes, and a passion and desire to advance the sport for development sector.

- Many organisations saw Comic Relief as an advocate, influencer, and thought-leader in the sport for development sector, as well as an important enabler of systems change. As a consequence of their relationship with Comic Relief, a number of organisations had been presented with the opportunity to connect with government departments either locally, nationally or internationally.

Conclusions

Sport for Change has continued to act as a catalyst for social transformation via its funding streams in recent years, this despite the significant social challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. In turn, it has established a foundation experience and expertise upon which the sport for development sector can build. The organisational stakeholders featured in this report were unequivocal in their positive assessment of the operational approach of Sport for Change

and the processes and practices via which funding was administered and managed. In turn, a significant degree of trust has accrued in Comic Relief (both in the UK and internationally) as a robust, yet sensitive, grant-making body, and one which is innovative and collaborative in its approach. Over time, these operational practices have generated a high level of 'buy-in' across stakeholder organisations in relation to shared/peer learning and knowledge exchange, all of which has served to enhance and accelerate on-the-ground delivery. The findings of this report underline that Comic Relief continues to function as a key player on the sport for development landscape, and a key facilitator of solution-focused sport and physical activity interventions.

Recommendations for sport for development funders

The findings of this report identify several aspects of Sport for Change which have wider relevance for the sport for development sector and which are recommended for consideration by policy-makers, funding/grant awarding organisations, and commissioners.

Provide funded partners with greater autonomy for funding allocations, decision-making, and adaptations to projects.

Organisations that intentionally use sport to tackle social issues often face significant and prolonged external challenges which not only impede the scale and depth of the impact of their programmes, but also threaten organisational survival (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). Providing organisations with additional flexibility in relation to objective-setting, decision-making, and responding to local need is essential. Granting flexibility over the allocation of funding, and allowing funded partners to have ownership of project aims and intentions, will empower them to utilise their local knowledge and community experience to deliver maximum impact in the short-term, but also enable a focus on strategic priorities in the longer-term.

Provide longer-term funding, which can be allocated to support wider organisational operations rather than specific projects costs.

Granting longer-term (minimum 3-5 year) funding provides numerous benefits and creates stronger opportunities for organisations to develop and sustain in terms of both infrastructure and delivery. Where grants are able to be used to support core funding costs and allow funded partners to internally allocate money has not only been welcomed by funded partners, but can also be used to support investment into the professional development of staff, support career progression, and address challenges pertaining to staff retention.

Implement a Funder+ model which incorporates a package of support and sector guidance that exceeds financial support for funded partners.

Funded partners benefit significantly from the funding that they are awarded, but equally valuable is the package of support that the awarding organisation can offer alongside financial assistance. Additional support can take various guises but could include:

- helping funded partners improve their organisational governance

- informing funded partners on safeguarding policies and good practice

- providing reflective learning opportunities where organisations can consider the effectiveness of their delivery systems and processes (e.g. approach to monitoring and evaluation)

- offering collective learning opportunities (in-person or online) involving workshops or networking opportunities

- creating access to online platforms to share learning and discuss issues pertinent to the sector

- facilitating opportunities to connect with the wider sport for development sector so that organisations can gain valuable access to key partners both to access critical service provision but also to establish strategic partnerships with policy-makers and sector leaders

- connecting funded partners with other funding organisations to create opportunities to explore additional/future funding

Enable organisations with a 'tried and trusted' model of delivery to nurture other smaller or less established organisations and advocate for them in the wider sport for development sector.

The sport for development sector is vast involving countless organisations comprising input from the private, public, and voluntary sector. While the majority of these organisations are concerned with a similar goal (namely utilising sport to address social issues), the sector is often beset by competition for funding, duplication of services, and fragmentation. Enabling and resourcing more established organisations in the sector to nurture and incubate less established organisations and advocate for them in broader sector discussions will support coherence in provision, streamline funding (and other resources), and help to co-ordinate the sector around collective messaging regarding the potential of sport to support social change.

Grant-making bodies, non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), and policy-makers need to periodically keep abreast of the changing and emerging issues pertinent to the sport for development sector.

The sport for development sector is dynamic, complex, and highly nuanced, which means that funders (and associated organisations) must remain vigilant in understanding the most pressing issues facing both the sector and wider society. Working in partnership with expert organisations (such as Comic Relief) is key to understanding the changing nature of the sector, as is showing a genuine interest in funded projects. Generating impact through a sport-based project often takes times and can be difficult to capture tangibly, therefore demonstrating that a flexible approach to the method and frequency of impact measurement is essential. In addition, a commitment to learning about the process mechanisms that 'work' within sport for development projects should supersede a focus on simply capturing quantitative impact.

Recommendations for Comic Relief's Sport for Change Strategy

The report indicates that while Sport for Change is an example of good practice when supporting sport for development projects, there are opportunities that should be considered that will either consolidate current practice or strengthen the contribution of Sport for Change within the wider sector.

- Recognise the pivotal role that Sport for Change is making towards broader Comic Relief aims and ensure that this critical work is resourced appropriately to maintain and deepen its impact.
- Continue to be a key advocate for the sport for development movement and, if possible, become a key contributor and thought leader in enabling systems change both in the UK and internationally.
- Continue to build trust and open communication with funded partners/organisations to ensure that funding relationships are transparent, open, and reciprocal.
- Implement meaningful and inclusive "onboarding" and "offboarding" processes, involving co-design within the establishment of initial programme objectives, support to sustain projects once Sport for Change funding has ceased, continued access to national and international networks and partners both during and after the funding period, and signposting of training opportunities.

- Monitor and, where necessary, adapt the application process to attract the most appropriate organisations (both in the UK and internationally) to apply for Sport for Change funding, and ensure that the process is fair, transparent, and commensurate with the size of grants being awarded.

- Monitor and, where necessary, adapt the reporting processes expected of funded partners, where possible allowing for "narratives" to emerge and creative and innovative methods to be used to report the impact of projects. Enabling a "lighter touch" approach to reporting frees up resources and time for funded partners to allocate to delivery. This is also beneficial when funded partners have multiple funders to report to and may feel pressured to deliver on multiple outcomes.

- Ensure that grant management is consistent, and that relationships are developed with the funded partner which are supportive, but also built on clear expectations.

- Seek to align funded programmes clearly with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to offer clarity and coherence between Sport for Change and wider/global political agendas and strategies.

Best practice principles

The report highlights a number of 'best practice' principles, that are evident within Sport for Change programmes, which might be adopted by organisations that deliver projects that intentionally use sport as a cross-cutting tool to respond to social issues. These principles relate to the design of programmes, the inclusion of opportunities for wider learning and personal development among participants, and the benefits of partnership working.

Programme design

It is vital to establish an intentional methodology and systematic design for the desired development outcome(s) that a programme aims to achieve. This may be accomplished by:

- offering a varied menu of sport and physical activity opportunities to programme participants, which help to support multiple levels of engagement.

- creating an inclusive environment where participants feel safe to express themselves physically and which provides a setting to enhance their sense of belonging with their local communities and feel socially connected beyond the confines of the intervention itself.

- using this "safe space" to raise the participants' awareness about the boundaries of healthy risk-taking and give participants a 'voice' to express their personal perspectives, empowering them to be advocates for their communities (especially women and girls).

- engaging other family members, carers, and broader community stakeholders within the sport activities where possible, to develop more cohesive community bonds.

- transitioning the ownership of programme design and delivery to local communities and stakeholders.

- incorporating individuals with 'lived experience' of the programme and/or the issues being addressed by the programme within the project personnel.

Wider learning and development opportunities for participants

Providing opportunities for participants to engage in wider learning and development opportunities within programmes has been shown to better support programme outcomes. While sport is a very good tool to engage participants and act as a 'hook' for participation, placing the onus on sport and just concentrating on the sport aspects of the programme will limit the extent to which social change will occur. Providing opportunities to take courses, obtain qualifications, meet new people, encounter new experiences, and build self-confidence, resilience and aspiration all help to support participants beyond the boundaries of the programme. If possible, offer opportunities for participants to transition from being a "beneficiary" to being more deeply involved in the design, delivery, and evaluation of the programme. This might include operational roles, such as volunteering, coaching, or marketing of the programme, or undertaking strategic roles, like becoming a Board member. It may also be possible to offer formal or informal engagement and employment avenues, where "participants" transition to becoming paid "staff members" of the programme.

Partnership working

Working in partnership with trusted, strategic partner organisations and service providers can contribute to providing wider support to participants (e.g., mental health support). Working collaboratively can have multiple benefits for organisations, including the opportunity to share resources, pool expertise, and enhance the profile of the project. Partner organisations may be able to provide critical services to enhance the overall impact of a programme, such as access

to role models, mentors or change agents. Partnerships can be a particularly effective method to develop participant referral pathways to ensure that recruitment to programmes is targeted and specific, making certain that vulnerable populations get to engage with these projects. These partnerships may also help to provide clear exit trajectories for participants "post-project" towards opportunities for further education, training or employment.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a piece of independent research which sought to examine Comic Relief's 'Sport for Change' funding approach. It charts the operationalisation and impact of this approach which, since 2002, has invested £80 million into projects in the UK and internationally. During that time over 500 projects have been funded which have used a variety of sports[1], including skateboarding, surfing, football, martial arts, yoga and boxing, to promote an array of social issues such as: education, employment, mental health, gender equality, social inclusion.

The foundations of Sport for Change concern the intentional use of sport and physical activity as a cross-cutting tool to respond to social issues, provide a basis for social change, and enable the participants of funded programmes to derive more benefits from their engagement in sport or physical activity. Also known as 'sport for development', or 'sport for good', the approach of sport for change goes beyond simply providing people with the opportunity to take part in sport and physical activity but in addition   uses their participation as a platform to address specific personal and social objectives. However, to maximise any impacts of these programmes, the sport/physical activity provision needs to be accompanied by specialist non-sport support that has been intentionally designed to respond to social need and enhance social outcomes. Therefore, at the heart of Sport for Change is a focus on understanding diversity, and intentionally addressing barriers to inclusion by creating safe spaces for people to build friendships and connections, engage in important conversations, and access specialist support through sport.

The report focuses on the range of Sport for Change work that Comic Relief has funded since 2016 with the specific intention of providing an in-depth understanding of the impact of that funding on the organisations involved. Given that organisations from both the UK and overseas have benefited from Sport for Change investment, the report, where appropriate, presents the findings of UK and international projects separately, to take account of the contextual, cultural, and operational differences (not to mention differing challenges) present. A key aim of the

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[1] It is important to provide definitional clarity in relation to our use of the term 'sport'. In this case, the term encompasses a wide range of physical activities, that, via casual or organized participation, are aimed at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming relationships, or obtaining results in competitions at all levels (Council of Europe's European Sports Charter, 2001, cited in Bailey 2005). As such, this definition of sport is inclusive of a breadth of physical activities, not just competitive games, including (but not restricted to) dance, outdoor activities, and the martial arts (Bailey 2005).

research was to assist Comic Relief in their development of a revised Sport for Change strategy and how such work may be funded in the future.

The research engaged organisations from a range of social and geographical contexts, all of which had received Sport for Change funding since 2016. Data collection took place between 21st August – 4th December 2023 and representatives from a total of 27 organisations took part. The research comprised a multi-method, qualitative approach consisting of document analysis of recent internal reviews and impact reports from Comic Relief's Sport for Change portfolio, alongside a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the stakeholder organisations.

Despite the fact that there is little definitive evidence to suggest that sport provides a comprehensive remedy to various social ills (Coalter, 2013), it is well documented that sport can be an effective means through which to engage individuals in activities that may promote broader personal and social outcomes. For example, Nichols (2007) argues that sport has the potential to disrupt cycles of anti-social behaviour, and related research suggests that when packaged alongside a range of other support structures, sport participation can minimise socialisation into criminal/anti-social behaviours (Muncie, 2009). Exposure to sporting contexts and experiences can also positively impact marginalised young people by promoting re/engagement with education, training and work (Morgan et al., 2023). In turn, engagement with sport-based interventions can serve as a powerful tool via which to address issues concerning personal and social education (see Morgan and Parker, 2017) and active citizenship (Parker et al. 2019; Morgan and Parker, 2021, 2022).

The findings of this report highlight the way in which Sport for Change funding has been utilised by stakeholder organisations in order to positively impact their participants, and how (and to what extent) Comic Relief's grant-making and grant management processes have facilitated these outcomes.

2. THE RESEARCH

2.1 Aims and objectives

The research sought to understand more about the impact of Sport for Change funding on organisations that were in receipt of financial support between 2016-2023, and consequently, to examine how resultant projects helped address a range of social issues both in the UK and internationally. Specifically, the research aimed to explore how Sport for Change funding had added value for award holders in relation to organisational capacity and learning, and to identify specific gaps or opportunities for Comic Relief to (re)consider in terms of strategy development. A further aim of the research was to make visible the operational processes and practices behind Comic Relief's Sport for Change approach in order to better engage wider stakeholder audiences: i.e., funders that may already fund sport for change programmes or that are new to the sector, key players in the sport for development sector, and organisations interested in applying for sport for change funding.

The research also sought to explore the long-term impacts of Sport for Change funding on stakeholder organisations, and to articulate how this funding had supported these organisations to grow, develop, expand, adapt, and have greater impact. In turn, the research sought to discern if and how impact varied across social contexts, geographies, sectors, or types (size/maturity) of organisation. Crucial here was the extent to which funding had added value, and which funding models or approaches had made the most difference. These aims informed the following research questions:

1. What has been the impact of Sport for Change funding on stakeholder organisations during the identified time period?
2. How (and to what extent) has Comic Relief supported these stakeholder organisations to deliver agreed outcomes?
3. What added value can be attributed to Comic Relief as a consequence of the funding relationships in play, and how might these relationships have been improved?
4. Which funding models or approaches have been most successful, and why?

With these issues at its core, this research sits comfortably amidst contemporary debates surrounding the role of sport as a mechanism for social change, and social and political agendas

concerning social justice, social inclusion, and community development (see Morgan and Parker, 2023).

2.2. Methodology and methods

As noted, a multi-method, qualitative research model was utilised in order to address the above research questions, comprising document analysis of Comic Relief reviews and organisational impact reports from the Sport for Change portfolio, alongside a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with organisations that received funding from Comic Relief between 2016 and 2023. The research was undertaken in two sequential phases. Phase 1 involved the identification of key themes and factual information from the analysis of the review documents and impact reports (and related literature). In Phase 2 these themes and findings of fact were used to inform the structure and content of the semi-structured interviews which followed.

In terms of data collection, a total of 30 current or former grant-holder organisations were identified by Comic Relief as potential respondents (based on geography, social context, sector, and size/maturity), 27 of which (12 UK and 15 international) agreed to take part. Interviews were carried out virtually via Zoom or Teams calls, all of which were preceded by initial e-mail communication, first from Comic Relief and subsequently from the research team, to request (and confirm) the participation and consent of respondents. Interview discussions lasted between 34 and 62 minutes (mean duration 51 minutes) and explored stakeholder perceptions and experiences of the funding relationship with Comic Relief. All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim.

Qualitative data was analysed using a grounded theory approach whereby respondent interpretations of their experiences were explored in detail as were the meanings which they attached to these experiences (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The questioning style during interview was open-ended and, where necessary, further probing took place to clarify responses (see Bryman, 2016). Grounded theory methodology allows for the systematic analysis of data through a process of open, axial and selective coding, and the formation of a conceptual narrative that explains the experiences of participants from their perspective (Charmaz, 2014). Data were coded, managed and organised manually and were subsequently analyzed in four stages. First, transcripts were read in full to gain an overview of the data. Second, each transcript was individually coded and indexed allowing the different

aspects of respondent experience to be captured. Third, these experiences were clustered and inductively rationalized into a number of over-arching topics. The final stage of analysis involved the formal organization of these topics into generic themes in line with which the qualitative data are presented. The empirical findings of the research are located and contextualized against an analysis of existing literature surrounding the broader topic of 'sport for change' and it is to this that we now turn.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sport is often promoted as a vehicle through which a variety of social issues and global development outcomes can be addressed, such as access to education and employment, gender equality, social inclusion, and supporting mental health. Consequently, the rhetoric surrounding the transformative qualities of sport is often highly visible in domestic and international policy directed at social change (see European Commission, 2010), with many global organizations, such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth Secretariat, acknowledging the potential of sport to offer an effective means to build capacity for a more just and inclusive society (Dudfield and Dingwall-Smith, 2015).

That said, critics have questioned the potential of sport to act as a 'panacea' to address social issues. For example, Collins and Kay (2014) observe that access to sport is often restricted by demographic background, a factor that is heightened by the (often) competitive nature of sport, which, by definition, is exclusive. Hence, claims regarding the perceived 'power of sport' to address social outcomes should be interpreted against the fact that participation in sport is often a unitary or differentiated experience which can limit the extent to which sport can be used for developmental purposes or social change (Coalter, 2007; Morgan and Parker, 2017; Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Morgan et al., 2019).

Deeper analysis of the literature reveals that sport is largely superfluous in the process of enacting social change. In fact, research shows that the major role that sport plays in the process of addressing social issues is that of cultural intermediary, where it serves as a metaphorical 'hook' to engage participant groups (see Coalter, 2007; Morgan and Parker, 2022). Consequently, it would appear that 'other' change processes within sport-based programmes might be more influential and that these 'non-sport' processes (or mechanisms) may reveal the true impact of sport-based interventions on the lives of marginalised populations (Hartmann, 2003). Nevertheless, sport, as a 'hook' for programme engagement, remains a key mechanism in the process of social intervention, especially when sustained and consistent sport opportunities are provided that support multiple levels of engagement (Sterchele, 2015).

To provide some clarity on the value of sport-based social interventions, academic literature pertaining to 'sport for development' has identified a number of factors that are common within effective sport-based interventions. We now explore these factors in more detail.

3.1 The creation of a 'safe space' for community engagement and development

Sports-based programmes or interventions should take place in environments where participants feel safe, and this has long been argued as central to facilitating positive engagement in programmes designed to support development through sport (Witt and Crompton, 1997; Coakley, 2002; Crabbe et al., 2006; Spaaij and Schulenkorf, 2014). More specifically, these environments should ideally offer a neutral space where participants feel able to express themselves with confidence, and develop at their own pace (Coalter, 2013). Recent research has advocated for the inclusion of trauma-aware pedagogies within efforts to create a safe environment in sport-based programmes (Parker and Larkin, 2023). Implementing trauma-aware (or trauma-informed or trauma-responsive) approaches is underpinned by four overarching assumptions (4 R's) (Quarmby et al., 2021). First, is a *realization* that individual behaviour stems from and is conditioned by the experiences of trauma. Second, is the necessity for facilitators to *recognize* the signs of trauma. The third assumption is that the sport-based programme is *responsive* to understandings of trauma, by utilising suitably qualified staff and by providing physically and psychologically safe environments. Finally, efforts should be made to *resist re-traumatization* and enable healing. Quarmby et al. (2021) go on to propose five principles that may inform trauma-aware or trauma-informed practice: i) ensuring the safety and wellbeing of participants; ii) establishing routines and structures with programme delivery; iii) developing and sustaining positive relationships that foster a sense of belonging; iv) facilitating and responding to youth voice; and v) promoting strengths and self-belief. Not only do these principles correspond to previous research on interpersonal relationships within sport-based interventions (e.g. Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013; Morgan and Parker, 2017), but they may also provide direction for further theoretical exploration of such relational pedagogies within sport and social change programmes.

3.2 The importance of a key figure, role model/mentor, or change agent

Research demonstrates that sport-based programmes are more likely to support social outcomes when positive relationships are constructed between 'leaders' and 'participants' that: (i) are based upon trust and mutual respect; (ii) enable participants to feel valued or that recognize the abilities and contribution that the young person can bring to the relationship; and (iii) promote programme leaders as role models who understand and appreciate the challenges that participants encounter in their everyday lives (Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013; Morgan and Parker, 2017; Nols et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2019). In turn, research has observed how relationships built upon trust and mutual respect are critical to facilitating behaviour change (Coalter, 2013;

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Morgan and Parker, 2017). In cases where educational, social, or economic exclusion has led to young people engaging in 'negative cycles of behaviour,' such as crime, antisocial behaviour, and/or substance misuse, the establishment and development of trusting relationships is a vital part of these programmes, if a re-calibration of the worth and value of the participants is to be facilitated (Morgan and Parker, 2021). To this end, instead of employing traditional measures of individual 'recognition', which emphasize formal indicators of success such as academic achievement, which have the potential to devalue, stigmatize, or exclude marginalized young people (Rose et al., 2012), more informal structures of recognition such as verbal praise, or simply knowing that someone believes in you has proved to be of greater relevance (Whittaker, 2010). Therefore, when leaders of sport-based programmes seek to commend young people for the talents which they exhibit, they legitimise a young person's innate qualities and enable them to feel more valued as citizens, which, in turn, helps to construct a stronger sense of self, belonging, and acceptance (Morgan and Parker 2017). Finally, and perhaps, most importantly, research suggests that there is a need for the leaders of sport-based programmes to possess a strong awareness of the issues of concern within local communities, and, more critically, appreciate how these issues impact on the lives of individuals within those communities (Henderson and Thomas 2013). This requires programme leaders to demonstrate a community consciousness, whereby their lived experience of the community and the social issues in play, help to support individual development within programme participants (Morgan and Bush 2016; Spaaij et al., 2018).

3.3 A clear systematic design for the desired development outcome which involves a collaborative and co-creative approach

A major criticism of sports-based social interventions is that they are often characterised by a lack of theoretical clarity in their design which leads to the creation of hard-to-follow or vague outcomes (Coalter, 2007; Haudenhuyse et al., 2013). As such, the logic surrounding the use of sport to address social issues is often formulated in imprecise terms, which limits the extent to which sport-based programmes might systematically and intentionally achieve social impact. Recent attention has turned towards frameworks that concentrate on both the mechanisms in play that might contribute to programme outcomes and the specific programme context under investigation (Pawson, 2006; 2013; Room, 2013). Commonly referred to as a 'theory of change' approach, the aim is to capture the 'programme logic' on which a sports-based intervention is based, and systematically map the mechanisms or processes that connect programme inputs with intended programme outcomes (see Morgan et al., 2020). In short,

theory of change approaches attempt to understand the conditions under which a programme intervention or policy is likely to work (Weiss, 1997) by examining the specific conditions of the programme and highlighting what is it about it that works, for whom, and in what circumstances (Pawson et al., 2005).

Alongside a more systematic approach to programme design, literature advocates for a more participatory approach to program design, delivery, and evaluation (Coalter, 2013), which draws upon the preferences and strengths that participants bring to a programme (Morgan and Parker, 2023). A major criticism of many sport-based programmes is that the delivery methods employed are often grounded in a 'deficit' perspective, whereby the programme itself is designed to address an individual's or community's deficiencies and problems or steer them away from risks associated with negative outcomes (Farrington and Welsh, 2009). Programmes based on a deficit model often reinforce negative assumptions about certain individuals or groups inferring that it is their (in)actions that contribute to their problems (Paraschak and Thompson, 2014), and that only the actions of 'experts' outside of the community in question can resolve the problems in play (Saleebey, 2013), leaving those within these communities feeling disempowered and dependent (Garven et al., 2016). In contrast, a 'strengths-based' approach focuses on the specific 'strengths' that individuals or communities possess (Case, 2021), which accentuate the lived experiences, visions, values, and hopes of programme participants as the stimulus for intervention (Saleebey, 2013). These 'strengths-based' approaches intentionally involve participants in the design of programmes, re-framing problems and focussing attention on individual strengths and available resources to unlock positive change for those concerned.

3.4 A sustained and long-term commitment to funding and resource support alongside a transfer of knowledge and responsibility to local communities

A major challenge to achieving long-term social change through sport-based programmes is ensuring that programmes are sustained, primarily in terms of resource allocation but also in relation to continued organisational/policy commitments (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). When examining resource allocation, academic literature highlights the fraught environment that delivery organisations typically face during the continual struggle to access funding for programmes (Collins and Kay, 2014; Mori et al., 2023). Several associated problems have been reported in the literature, including threats to organisational survival (Mori et al., 2023), and delivering programmes that fail to meet the specific needs of the targeted community (Collins

and Kay, 2014). Literature also highlights the problems associated with a funding landscape that is epitomised by short-term (6 – 12 month) grants that are highly restrictive or prescriptive in how resources may be allocated. For example, Collins and Kay (2014) described this approach as a 'wasteful model' as sport-based programmes habitually take significant time to reach fruition and are often beset by contextual challenges. Appeals to provide organisations and staff with a realistic chance of engendering lasting social change and achieving desired outcomes have been offered (see Collins and Kay, 2014) by lengthening policy and funding allocation timespans and devoting sufficient resource and intellectual effort to give sport-based programmes a better chance of success. A further, critical, aspect of sustainable sport-based interventions is the necessity to intentionally embed opportunities to facilitate the transfer of programme responsibility from delivery organisations to local ownership (Attwell et al., 2019). Central to this strategic objective is the creation of a programme delivery environment that promotes local empowerment and a stated commitment to transferring ownership control (Schulenkorf, 2010). Importantly, by positioning local programme ownership as a strategic aim, research indicates that there is potential to realise benefits beyond sustainability, including greater social inclusion, improved engagement of local stakeholders throughout the life of the programme, and an ability to respond more effectively to local challenges (Attwell et al., 2019; Hoekman et al., 2019; Schulenkorf, 2010).

In summary, while it is clear that sport participation can have beneficial impacts on social issues and global development outcomes, the varied experiences that engagement with sport-based interventions convey suggests that it is necessary to caution against the universal application of sport as a 'silver bullet' through which social issues can be addressed (Coalter, 2007, 2013). Without question, the mere presence of sport within the lives of marginalised or vulnerable people cannot deliver outcomes related to sustained social change. However, where interventions possess clarity of aim and are designed coherently (Coalter, 2015), it is possible to better articulate the exact contribution and impact that sport-based interventions can make to fostering social change. This accentuates the central importance of designing sport-based interventions that are critically considered, theoretically informed, and, above all, contextually aware of the challenges and opportunities that exist for a specific group of participants (Morgan and Parker, 2017; Parker et al., 2019).

4. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Our review of previous impact reports, research findings, and wider documentation produced by both Comic Relief and funded partners revealed that Sport for Change investment has had a positive impact on funded partners. A wide range of benefits were reported in connection with a number of important individual outcomes, and in keeping with previous research and evaluation studies which have examined programmes that utilise sport to address social issues. Sport for Change investment has helped to support organisations, both in the UK and internationally, to facilitate the enhancement of: (i) physical and mental wellbeing, (ii) personal confidence and resilience, (iii) trusting relationships between individuals and organisations, (iv) belonging and social connection, (v) social cohesion, (vi) social capital, and (vii) individual and organisational identity.

On account of the fact that the majority of the documents only report on the initial impact of specific funded projects, or offer evaluation on the timescales of implementation, little, if any, longitudinal evidence is available. In addition, those impact reports that were reviewed lacked consistency in reporting methods, especially in relation to timescales and timelines of reporting periods. Consequently, it is difficult to discern or establish any sense of clarity and accuracy around the precise impact of previous Sport for Change investment on strategic outcomes. For this reason, it important to note that any benefits identified here as accruing via Sport for Change investment, can only be attributed to short-term impact and/or restricted to the duration of projects in question.

While there was significant evidence of the influence of Sport for Change investment at the individual (participant) level, less evident were the beneficial impacts on wider social outcomes (e.g., social inequalities) and community development. Admittedly, reflection on and evaluation of community-level outcomes were rarely reported in the documents reviewed, and while the emphasis on individual impacts and personal development should in no way be dismissed or downplayed, there would appear to be a case for supported organisations to be encouraged to better monitor, reflect upon, and empirically evidence wider community impacts of their projects (whether communities are defined as geographically bounded areas/physical spaces, or as relational collectives of like-minded people/individuals possessing a shared protected characteristic – see Rich et al., 2021).

That said, our analysis of the various documents did provide insight into the aspects of programme design, implementation and monitoring that have enabled the Sport for Change approach to have a positive impact upon participants. In keeping with previous analyses of 'what works' in relation to programmes that utilise sport to address social issues, the review highlighted several recognisable features within sport for change ventures. Among these were narratives about offering a varied menu of sport and physical activity opportunities to programme participants (Green, 2008); transferring ownership of programme design and delivery to local communities/stakeholders (Lyras and Welty Peachey, 2011); creating inclusive environments where participants feel safe (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014); placing the onus on wider learning and development opportunities within programmes (and not just concentrating on sport and physical activity) (Parker et al., 2019); working in partnership with trusted, strategic partner organisations (Morgan and Baker, 2021); building trust between Comic Relief (donor) and the recipient organisation (Morgan et al., 2020); and the importance of incorporating individuals with 'lived experience' of the challenges facing programme participants within project personnel (Morgan and Parker, 2023). Similarly, the review highlighted a number of familiar challenges that may impede effective sport interventions. For example, our analysis revealed that barriers around accessing (targeting) specific populations (Morgan and Costas Batlle, 2019); the limited provision of clear exit routes into further education, training or employment for participants from Sport for Change funded programmes (Morgan et al., 2023); and (in some cases) the poor quality of facilities to deliver programmes (Coalter, 2007), was evident.

Importantly, there appeared to have been a noticeable 'step-change' in the investment strategy and approach to Sport for Change since 2015. Not only had a higher number of grant awards been made since then, but, in addition, a greater sense of balance was evident between the number of international and UK projects supported. By way of illustration, in the years preceding 2015, Sport for Change funded a total of 213 projects, of which 171 (80%) were in the UK and 42 (20%) were international. This rose to 311 funded projects (a 46% increase) between 2015 and 2021 (213 (68%) in the UK and 98 (32%) internationally). In turn, a more focussed approach to grant funding appears to have been implemented in recent years, with the identification of four key funding themes (Children Survive and Thrive; Gender Justice; Safe Place to Be; Global Mental Health Matters). This thematic approach appears to have offered greater cohesiveness to Sport for Change work. Furthermore, the identified themes clearly align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby demonstrating a

greater awareness and willingness on the part of Comic Relief to intentionally establish a greater sense of coherence in terms of wider strategic debate, and a stronger external narrative in relation to project impacts, both internationally and in the UK. This explicit alignment also provides the opportunity to further cohere the Sport for Change approach and related impacts with global policy priorities and agendas and to potentially act as a means to acquire additional funding and support from national and international organisations and governments. This evidence also provides opportunities for Comic Relief to reflect more widely upon its engagement with such priorities and agendas both in terms of internal (organisational) and external (policy level) narratives.

5. FINDINGS: UK ORGANISATIONS

5.1 Participant impacts

In accordance with the purpose of Sport for Change, all organisations commented on the potential of sport to act as an important enabler of social change. Typically, testimonies highlighted how sport acted as tool for initial engagement with participants, offering an accessible 'hook' that participants responded to. In a number of instances, respondents outlined how sport, when used intentionally within the context of interventions, provided an effective method of establishing relationships that could lead to engaging with a wider array of support services and potentially impactful care provision:

> … a lot of the young people who are accessing our services have adverse childhood experiences. A lot of our young people needed sort of extra support and extra one-to-one attention to be able to engage with our community, engage with the school, and avoid [school] exclusion … Football was a sort of a Trojan Horse, the main sort of hook to engage young people who historically for structural and cultural reasons never really engaged with the therapeutic environment.

> When we first met them [participant] the first thing we would talk about was the activity timetable … [and] because we talked about activities first and foremost, sometimes it was the hook, but sometimes it reduced the time it would take for us to build up those positive relationships because the first time we did anything meaningful it was more positive - it was an activity. So, they [the participants] had never seen us as mentors or a member of staff, they saw as somebody who [had participated in the activity].

Other respondents highlighted how, in their view, the intervention environment helped to enable a prolonged and meaningful engagement. In particular, several respondents explained how the sport-based intervention offered a 'safe space', where participants felt secure to share information about themselves and offer personal perspectives on social issues:

> … sometimes it [participant support] is just about offering space. It's just about offering time. And so we can do that regardless of funding, regardless of what else we've got.

> I think having a space where they [participants] feel safe to be able to explore things like faith and gender and stereotypes [is important]. So that's a big part of what we do

> … like having a space where they are able to have a discussion openly and freely and also exploring things …

In turn, there was evidence to indicate that such 'safe spaces' presented critical opportunities for participants to develop a wider and more ingrained sense of belonging with their local communities and to feel socially connected beyond the confines of the intervention itself:

> They [participants] appreciate what it is that communities can offer to them. So beyond us there is a community that they can access, there is support, that confidence building, that you can become a member of a community beyond our buildings …

In some instances, participants profited from their engagement with interventions in altogether more tangible ways. Typically, this involved the creation of defined pathways to employment, or opportunities to (re)engage with formal education and training opportunities:

> We supported individuals to experience university, staying there for a couple of days … businesses are another community who have been coming to us and saying "We understand you work with young people, we can perhaps offer them employment", offering life skills sessions … skill development workshops …

There were several examples of funded interventions supporting the transition from 'programme participant' to 'staff member', demonstrating their potential to enable meaningful, sustained employment. Reflecting on one such example of a 'full circle' transition, one organisation explained:

> I think [Comic Relief funding] has created jobs … And yes, there's certainly members of our team at the moment who [have come through our programmes] went off, did some sports coaching qualifications … and one has been at [our organisation] probably two years now, and has just got an internal progression …

Data further revealed that the most significant impact of Sport for Change on the lives of participants was in supporting mental health outcomes. Many UK organisations outlined that mental health issues were the single most significant issue that young people presented with when joining a sport-based intervention. While the reasons for increases in mental health challenges for young people are complex, varied, and contextually specific, respondents indicated that factors including a loss of confidence to engage socially following the social isolation brought on during the COVID-19 pandemic, pressure to achieve educationally, and/or

the burden of having to 'look a certain way' were common. Reflecting several respondent testimonies, one organisation outlined specifically how their sport-based intervention had sought to address a range of related issues:

> We get a lot of feedback around how it's given them [our participants] some structure back into their day, given them a reason to get out and do something. And then supported them to actually be confident to do other things that they could be doing in their community. So it's not always about the actual sport and physical activity, it was just getting out and socialising which I think was really important, developing their confidence, their communication skills, feeling confident to speak to other people and have conversations.

Furthermore, respondents spoke of the beneficial impact that sport-based interventions could have on promoting body positivity, especially when they were designed and implemented to maximise participation, personal improvement, and consistent engagement. This was particularly the case for young female participants, all of which alluded to sport being a vehicle for personal empowerment:

> For young Muslim women and girls, there's a lot of narratives about our bodies, about ourselves and about those things and also, I think, sport has a lot about that embodiment, feeling strong, taking up space and it's creative as well … I think it's really important to have that ownership over your body…

The above discussion provides a snapshot of the participant impact of Comic Relief funding from the viewpoint of respondent stakeholders. More importantly, it illustrates the extent to which this funding allowed stakeholder organisations to provide the structural and environmental conditions within which meaningful participant experiences could take place, and it is to a further analysis of this organisational context that we now turn.

5.2 Organisational impacts

In addition to the impact which it had on the lives of the participants, Comic Relief funding also had a series of positive impacts on the funded partners themselves. These were primarily in the areas of: i) strategy; ii) reputation; iii) learning; iv) partnerships; v) sector leadership; and (vi) operational flexibility, each of which we address in turn.

5.2.1   Strategic impacts

Several, if not all, respondents indicated how Comic Relief funding had provided their organisation with the stability to think strategically about how best they could use sport to address a range of social issues. More nuanced responses provided deeper insight into how funding had supported opportunities to establish (longer-term) strategic priorities and provided the opportunity for them to think about how their organisation might scale-up their activities and impact. One organisation reflected:

> … you've got guaranteed income for a certain amount of time that enables us to plan and, at the moment, scale. So, for us to have that [money] in the bank knowing that we'll get it year after year is super important … so longer-term commitments from funders who are able to commit to two plus years for us is really crucial from a planning and a scaling perspective.

A number of organisations spoke about the flexibility afforded by Comic Relief (comparative to other funders) for funding partners to have ownership of project aims and intentions, using local knowledge of funded partners to underpin ideas about how projects could provide maximum impact:

> Comic Relief gave us the confidence to deliver the projects that we wanted to … that was a significant strategic evolution for us … shifting how we describe our work … understanding what social change really means in sport …

Further facilitating the development of the strategic direction and scale was the capacity of Comic Relief to offer (comparatively) longer-term investment and support. While the duration of funding varied across projects and funded partners, several respondents reflected on how longer-term funding had provided numerous benefits and created stronger opportunities for them to develop both in terms of infrastructure and delivery. Two responses exemplified the views of UK organisations:

> Comic Relief allows you to live your best life because you are far less likely to get that level of funding from anywhere else. It's 'gold standard'. … It's luxurious to have guaranteed three-year funding and income coming through the door where you know that you can build, develop. But it also gives you the capacity and the ability to make mistakes and still move forward, whereas when you have got limited funding you really haven't got the option of being able to do that. You are so conscious of having to get it

right because you can't afford to lose [money] by trying to do something that doesn't work.

My goodness, what a difference [longer-term funding] makes to an organisation, to a generation. Knowing that you're working to this five-year sort of evaluation, it's wonderful. … It's kind of five-year grants with a beautiful piece of blue-sky thinking attached to it; tell people what you really want the world to look like through this work ... around systemic change and social change ambitions.

To place this data in wider context, for the majority of the organisational stakeholders interviewed, typical funding agreements lasted for one to three years, with the former being the norm. Perhaps not surprisingly, short-term funding led to short-term thinking which, in turn, often militated against organisations achieving their potential in relation to strategic planning and implementation, and participant impacts. It was widely accepted and acknowledged, for example, that even when three-year funding timelines were granted, year one was spent establishing the foundations of the project, year two was spent establishing stakeholder relationships and honing delivery, and year three was spent winding down the project and/or seeking additional funding. All of which meant that within any three-year funding period, the priority focus for organisations often lay in non-participant matters.

For this reason, the longer-term mindset of Comic Relief was extremely well received. For less established (or 'younger') organisations, Sport for Change investment provided an opportunity to clarify mission and purpose. For emerging, or more established organisations, the ability to focus less on organisational survival and grant capture, and explore their broader role in the sport for development sector was something that Comic Relief support offered. There was also evidence to indicate that funding had enabled space for funded partners to consider how they might generate wider social impacts:

I feel like as an organisation it's given us a bit more focus in terms of our own priorities [and] helped give us a bit more focus on what our role is within that sector because we are a sport and physical activity charity there's only a certain role that we can play within the mental health space [but] I think it's made it clear what role we can play.

It's almost like you're strategically growing things or developing things in a way that we never even knew was possible. Effectively, it's Comic Relief that's enabled us to get into that space.

A final strategic impact concerned the opportunity to develop the workforce of funded partners. We deal with this issue in greater depth later in this section, but for now, it is pertinent to note that many organisations acknowledged the critical role which Comic Relief funding had played in supporting investment in the professional development of staff. For example, one organisation revealed how funding had 'transformed' the complexion of 'frontline' delivery:

The biggest impact for me organisationally, is the transition of the team; how we went from being ['sport'] coaches to 'social change' coaches. It transformed what it is to be a [sport] coach to being a social change practitioner …

5.2.2   Reputational impacts

A number of respondents outlined how Sport for Change investment had helped them to not only promote their services more widely but also to build their reputation as an effective delivery organisation, both locally and nationally. For some organisations, investment had enabled them to become more deeply embedded in their local community, more attuned to the challenges that participants faced, and more credible within the neighbourhoods where they delivered:

… the impact of Comic Relief's grants to us has been about establishing us as a charity, establishing us in [targeted] geographies … and I guess it's enabled us to really get under the skin of what are the issues facing that community, what is the best place for us to work in so that we can be sustainable.

Other organisations spoke about their status in the sport for development sector and how this had increased, noting how working in partnership with Comic Relief (and being able to draw on the benefits of the Comic Relief brand) not only offered enhanced legitimacy for their programmes and services, but also acted as an indicator of the organisation being a sector-leader, which was often attractive to other funders:

Having the name Comic Relief [as a supporter] is really a mark of confidence … that your project is legit[imate]. And to [other fundraisers] I've definitely dropped the name a few times, and it really shows that … you are able to widen who you go for.

While most organisations highlighted the reputational benefits of the Comic Relief brand, particularly in building confidence to bid to other (similarly-sized) funders, there was limited evidence to suggest that the connection with Comic Relief had tangibly unlocked access to other funds. For example, one organisation reflected:

> … you get funded by Comic Relief, it means your project's serious. With the greatest respect, that badge is probably the best description. You have the badge, that's a validation, so that increases your reputation. But in terms of unlocking money; I have to say hand on heart, I can't say it has unlocked additional funds …

5.2.3   Learning impacts

An important organisational impact reported by respondents was the manner in which Comic Relief investment had enabled them to build their capacity to learn about their own systems and processes. Several respondents reflected on a range of benefits that had been accrued in relation to monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes, including a capacity to reflect on the effectiveness of their approach to evaluation. Many organisations spoke positively of the opportunities to engage in regular learning forums that Comic Relief offer, and the significant benefits that they had accumulated by being able to access platforms to share learning and discuss issues around monitoring and evaluation with other funded partners. In some cases, respondents reflected on the benefits of being able to visit fellow funded partners and observe first-hand their delivery models, organisational processes, and practice. The following two examples highlight the value that funded partners placed on the opportunities to share learning and insight:

> … they [Comic Relief] had monthly regular workshops, where in that workshop there would be people from … all over the world, and we would share ideas and information and look for those trends …

> … bringing the organisations together that were funded at the same time to share learning and best practice was something that I really valued. The time that was put into that going to visit other projects in other parts of the country and the learning that came from that. … [T]hat's been a real kind of bonus of being involved in the project.

Such was the value placed on shared learning platforms, many organisations indicated that offering more learning opportunities and workshops to explore issues within the sport for

development sector would be welcome. Echoing several responses, one organisation mentioned:

> From a delivery perspective I find these things [learning platforms and workshops] quite helpful … there's things that we hadn't thought about before or you know there's networks to be made there and so there just might be that, just that opportunity to have more of that …

5.2.4   Partnership impacts

Given that the majority of sport for development work in the UK is based on a partnership model, the research highlighted several indications as to how Comic Relief investment had helped to not only establish new relationships with a wealth of partner organisations, but also to strengthen existing partnership arrangements. For some funded partners, investment had enabled a broadening of working networks which provided valuable access to local authorities (and their related services) or presented critical referral routes to both engage participants or pass them on to specialist services. One organisation summarised the partnership benefits and network capacity-building that Comic Relief funding had enabled:

> … we are so reliant on partnership work at the beginning of a young person's journey, because we need those referral routes into [our programmes]. So, our frontline staff will be networked with all sorts of organisations, you know, mental health organisations, housing associations, obviously job centres, [government department] provision, probation, police etc. So, that funding will certainly have established those relationships.

In relation to the creation of relationships with 'new' funders or key sector partners, respondents were equally complimentary about the role that Comic Relief investment had offered. Combining some of the reputational benefits that organisations had acquired through Comic Relief support with the impacts on learning, one organisation noted the consolidated benefits of investment on partnership development:

> Because we've learnt a lot on the ground, we're able to then take that [learning] and have those bigger conversations which particularly opens up more funding or opens up more kind of room for collaboration because how do we tackle [a larger geographic area] when it's obviously in lots of fragmented pieces and is so different and so complex…

A number of respondents highlighted how network development and partnership working had not only facilitated the building of key connections with local stakeholders and services but had also enabled organisations to establish strategic partnerships with policy-makers and sector leaders, which provided the opportunity to 'speak truth to power' about the benefits of sport for development. In addition, some organisations had created a platform to share the wider benefits of the intentional use of sport on society with audiences that possessed political influence:

> On a more strategic level we've been able to connect with our [local representative] of the House of Lords, for example. It gave [our organisation] that access to personalities either in a political class or the elites, who came to our space and met [our participants], understand their issues … and we've done some campaigning as a result of that engagement where politicians, MPs also came to visit.

5.2.5   Sector leadership

In terms of sector leadership, Sport for Change investment appeared to impact at two key levels. First, it helped some organisations generate or strengthen partnership arrangements with others or allowed them to enable other smaller or less established organisations build or scale in relation to their own capacity. The second area of impact was that of advocacy. Here some larger organisations had begun to act as representatives of smaller or less established organisations within wider conversations and debates in the sector. The following data extracts evidence these distinct impacts:

> So we're currently working in partnership to train and support various [sports] clubs across England. I think we've trained about 25 now. So, the idea is they adapt our model for their local practice. So, we're not trying to scale by growing our operation; for us, scale is all about impacting young people's lives and we think the best way to do that is giving others the opportunity to use their local knowledge.
>
> [Sport for Change funding has] enabled our core team to build [our] offer by working on a sustained basis [with our] member organisations through various means, including working groups, task and finish groups, national and regional events … There are many small organisations that are really addressing the need, or tackling the inequalities, are doing a good job, but all that's stopping them is resources or funding. So, we feel like we have a duty … to represent those organisations and give them the stage and even if

we're not upskilling them, we [can be] exposing them, knowledge transfer and supporting each other across thematic areas.

5.2.6 Operational flexibility

A key finding of the research was the identification by respondents of the organisational benefits and impacts they had acquired through Sport for Change that were a consequence of Comic Relief's willingness to offer a significant degree of flexibility around how allocated investment was spent by funded partners. Almost without exception, respondents expressed their frustration about the fact that the majority of their funding from other grant-giving organisations was highly restrictive in terms of how money could be spent, particularly around stipulations to spend exclusively on project delivery as opposed to supporting core costs (i.e., staff salaries). Indeed, there was wide consensus that having greater ownership of how funded partners could internally allocate funds was both refreshing and novel within the context of the sport for development sector. One respondent captured the views of the majority:

> … having an opportunity to apply for a grant that will cover your core costs, that will … increase the capacity of the work that you're delivering, is really important … We've been able to have somebody directly working on the project and that has been really beneficial because then they can really put a lot of time and investment into being able to work with those [smaller] [sports] clubs and those communities and really deliver what we set out to deliver ... It really gives us a lot of flexibility in terms of who we want to work with and how we want to work with those clubs.

6. FINDINGS: INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

6.1 Participant impacts

All respondents provided insight into how Sport for Change investment, and the intentional use of sport more specifically, had been instrumental in supporting the participants that they had engaged. Again, there was demonstrable evidence for deploying sport as an effective tool to engage participants and stimulate active participation in wider intervention support. Particularly evident was the use of sport as a means to connect with 'new' participants in targeted neighbourhoods, or for use in projects that were delivered in locations that had seen very little in relation to community development. By way of example, one organisation revealed:

> I used to go on the streets to engage with children, I engaged through play and games. If I had taken out a book or a notebook, or an exercise book, they would have run off, you know, not interested. To build a rapport with the kids, play and games and sports is one of the best techniques. So we have used that right from the beginning…

In some cases, other forms of physical activity, such as dance, were utilised as a 'hook' for engagement. These activities proved equally effective to engage participants, thus corroborating academic research that has suggested that widening the physical activity 'offer' beyond 'traditional sport' should be considered in the design of sport-based interventions. One organisation highlighted how dance had brought an altogether more inclusive feel to project work:

> Many partners also usually go for the easy ones – soccer you know, football. So we said, let's get the dance, because dance is integral for everybody – for young children, for adults, for youth. It is attractive and anyone can dance in their own style. No one can say they don't know how to dance. So, we chose dance as our sport.

Again, there was significant evidence to support the notion that sport-based interventions provide a 'safe space' for participants in terms of both security and personal expression:

> … we've used boxing and sport to provide a safe space and access to caring adults and meet all those very basic child developmental needs in a way that can be lifelong.

Several organisations spoke of the stigma that many young people faced in their communities (most notably in relation to disability and mental health) and that sport-based interventions

offered a protective safe haven from discrimination, which, in turn, facilitated a deeper engagement with the wider support services offered by the intervention:

> … sport really had turned into something that we never expected, and also it's made the space a lot safer because nobody thinks twice about anybody coming in. There's absolutely no stigma attached at all. So, we've gone deeper into the work than we maybe could have done otherwise …

A further finding that resulted from the provision of 'safe spaces' was the freedom that sport offered participants (in particular, adolescents) to raise their awareness about the boundaries of risk. Often this involved encouraging participants to challenge themselves within the confines of the sport intervention itself to recognise the difference between 'extending their comfort zone' and being reckless. One organisation captured the essence of finding this balance:

> … [We have seen] significant improvements in children's adaptive risk-taking. It means that if they come [to our organisation] they're able to take more positive risks because adolescence is also about them taking some risk, but they must be healthy, right? So, kids that are taking no risks start to take more adaptive risks … kind of doing things that show them they can master new things and they can build confidence. And for kids that come and initially they're taking every possible, terrible risk, taking drugs and being with friends that they think are cool but are not going to school, we see that their risk-taking becomes more adaptive. So, they start to do things that challenge them…

Beyond beneficial impacts in relation to personal development, a key finding from the research was how Sport for Change had helped to generate a stronger sense of community engagement and belonging among participants. In some cases, this simply involved creating stronger bonds and friendships between programme participants and/or staff. As one organisation explained:

> They've [the participants] really felt a solidarity within the group. A lot of them were young people who'd been ostracised from their home, had really low self-esteem … [so we saw the benefit of] talking about issues that (a) they weren't used to talking about and (b) having a peer group that they could talk openly about these subjects. There was a real intense bond between them …

In other cases, there was evidence to indicate that stronger bonds had been created outside of participant cohorts. For example, one organisation revealed how the play-based activities that

they offered in their intervention had been instrumental in facilitating wider engagement of family members to develop more cohesive families in the localities where they operated:

> … what this support has done is that we also got the parents to come out and play … And to get the fathers and the mothers, and the mothers who never kind of step out of their homes to play, was something that, actually, it kind of emotionally touched all of us, because the mothers were so happy to play with [other] women … And we went back to their childhood games. And that improved, I must say, the relationship between the husband and wife. It also improved, I would say, the bonding within the family.

Critically, there was evidence to indicate that interventions had been central to giving participants a sense of 'voice' in their communities and empowering them to have 'choice' in relation to their aspirations and ambitions. This was especially the case in projects that focused on gender inequality. Two testimonies, in particular, captured how Sport for Change had addressed stereotypical perspectives in relation to female life-roles, life transitions, and access to future opportunities:

> A lot of the parents have come to us and said, you know, "My daughter was really shy, and she didn't really have any friends, and now she actually does have friends, and she likes going out" … [So] from a gender perspective, just making girls feel more sort of like their voices can be heard, because it's always been focused on boys' sport and boys' football, and that they [girls] have the designated time now as well.

> I've seen that girls have transitioned from Primary School. We have seen girls transitioning to entrepreneurship. You know, on their own in choosing their own life … the life that they want … [but through the project] they are also changing attitudes and norms within the community so that they support girls' education through sport … We worked a lot with the communities, with parents, with tribal chiefs and all the leaders … how can they use it [sport] to deal with those negative social norms? To deal with transition, so that girls are able to make informed choices about their future, their present …

As a further benefit of enhanced community engagement and the development of stronger family bonds, a number of organisations articulated how sustained involvement in their sport-based interventions had helped to support better health behaviours among participants. This was particularly evident in projects that focused on improving sexual and reproductive health

outcomes, where a broader array of people could input and provide support for participants around messaging about their health. One respondent reflected:

> I think we see a lot around the knowledge that we've built among young people in terms of their health behaviours … [but] our model allows us to also engage the households through home visits, so over and above the individuals, the young people that we've engaged, we have also been able to access the households where these young people are coming from, meaning that to some extent we have been able to influence the environment within which these young people are coming from.

One final participant impact that was evident from respondent testimonies was the manner in which participation in the sport intervention had enabled better or more sustained access to formal education. The benefits of prolonging engagement in formal education, particularly for young females, were numerous, ranging from increased opportunities to gain meaningful employment to reducing childhood marriage and pregnancies. One organisation observed:

> … less than 5% of girls in Zambia will finish a full 12 years of education, so we wanted to look at how we [could tackle this issue] … We knew that there were these certain barriers that were preventing girls from returning to school … We [also] know that if a girl is out of school she is at much higher risk of being married and having teenage pregnancies. So, we don't have the full statistics on that yet, but we know from on the ground, and this is in the clinics that we track, that the rate of teenage pregnancies has dropped in the communities where we're working, and they're continuing to rise [elsewhere].

Examples of Sport for Change interventions leading to opportunities for employment were numerous, and mirroring the UK findings, there was evidence of participants transitioning from 'programme participant' to 'staff member'. In some cases, this transition had materialised into full-time, paid, and sustained employment, with clear career progression opportunities:

> … we do hire some of [our participants] who then go on to become coaches. And their journeys are incredible. The stories we have from those kids that have become our coaches and then stayed with us on two-year contracts, some of them have then even gone on to become members of our training and development team, so they then train other coaches how to do that job. They've had incredible outcomes, and probably I would say much more sustained outcomes.

… our curriculum is delivered by young people, they're like peer educators. And those peer educators are trained by [our] lead trainers. These lead trainers are also young people, but they are master trainers who are all over the globe, in different countries where we work. So like we have one lead trainer in Malawi as well, and we flew in a couple of lead trainers from nearby countries to Malawi. And they train these peer educators in Malawi, like a group of around 40, 50 peer educators, who then delivered our curriculum to around 6,000 – 7,000 young people in different schools in Malawi.

In other instances, the opportunity to transition from programme participant to staff member was less formal. In these examples, participants acted as advocates for the interventions that had supported them, either as volunteer coaches or youth mentors:

The ones [participants] that are supported and treated [through our project] go back to their groups, but they go with two tasks. One of the immediate tasks is to do two community outreach [sessions] within their communities. So, that's when we leave the mantle to them. We organise the meetings. They call the gathering and they teach, in their local language, what depression is, what mental health is – causes, prevention and where in the programme might help … What we have learnt, which we didn't plan for, is that the learners who finish [our project] have remained a resource for the community.

We've developed a concept called 'psychological foot soldiers', where young people that have grown up in our programme … are trained and are part of the gym. Not all of them trained, but some of them had peer counselling training, have been mentored to be young leaders and young peer support groups. They look out for each other in the broader community and parents around our gym generally approach them when they're working out on the streets or walking home from the gym or whatever and ask them for assistance with their kids if they need it.

6.2 Organisational impacts

As with UK organisations, International respondents offered much reflection on the manner in which Sport for Change support had impacted positively at the organisational level. Commensurate themes to the UK organisations were noted and can be similarly categorised as follows: i) strategy; ii) partnerships; iii) learning; and (iv) operational flexibility.

6.2.1 Strategic impacts

Several organisations referred to the benefits of Comic Relief funding on assisting financial stability, which in turn enabled them to adopt a longer-term, more strategic approach to operations. Many spoke of the enhanced confidence they felt from Comic Relief support, and similar to their UK counterparts, indicated that they had been able to deepen the impact of their interventions by not having to continually worry about their immediate organisational survival. These strategic benefits were best summarised by two respondent organisations:

> Comic Relief have been a really strong supporter of ours over the last decade, and security builds confidence, strength to improve your processes, develop your staff team. So, it means then the quality of your product essentially gets better because you know that you can invest in the staff team, you can train them, you can work with them, which then means that staff team deliver better projects; they train the peer educators better, they work with the partners better. So, by getting that sustained investment, it allows us to be confident to put the resource and the effort in to working with our staff team to build them up. Which then means we end up building and delivering better projects.

> … just having that headspace to think in an organisation[al] [way] and not constantly be scrambling for little bits of money everywhere to make sure you can continue … I think from coming from [a situation] where we just did not have a lot of space to think at all – it was just like panic-survival mode all the time to … being able to be more strategic.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the benefits of being able to plan for longer-term organisational development contributed to more coherent resource allocation during the implementation of interventions. This was particularly noticeable in relation to the management of human resources, where Comic Relief support frequently enabled organisations to invest more thoroughly in staff development, which in turn, helped to optimise staff retention. There was also evidence to indicate that Comic Relief funding had helped to enhance physical resources, such as sport facilities, and/or provide project leaders with the capacity to transfer their operational input from front-line delivery to more strategic, project management roles. As one organisation observed:

> Comic Relief was really fundamental in providing us with security for developing a secure base. Before that funding, we would not have sustained all projects … we didn't have any staff, we couldn't pay any staff salaries … An operational based grant where

we could have salaries, people, extend our gym to be bigger and accommodate more people, and start to put in some of the programmes that we wanted to do to … made us sustainable in the sense that we could focus a bit more on the strategy and development of the organisation rather than just trying to be coaches.

As well as the opportunity to plan for the longer-term and allocate resources, some organisations indicated that the wider support offered by Comic Relief, in addition to funding, had provided further strategic benefits. For example, one organisation highlighted the support they had received to improve their organisational governance, referring specifically to the safeguarding policies they had developed in collaboration with Comic Relief around their intervention. This support helped to address an important omission in their previously existing governance documentation:

> We got funding to support a women's programme to [empower] girls to have the courage to step onto the court … We needed to create a safeguarding policy … we created a zero-tolerance policy for harassment, all these kinds of things to protect women and girls to even access the sport. So, you know, having female coaches, having safeguarding policy and a zero-tolerance policy for harassment and our courts being a safe space …

Other organisations described how Comic Relief had provided support around the development of programme aims and outcomes. Not only did this kind of support help to provide clarity of purpose, but there was also evidence to suggest that it had assisted funded partners to broaden their impact outcomes by focusing on the importance of process learning as part of their monitoring and evaluation systems:

> From the word go they [Comic Relief] were behind us, they were clear in what they wanted. We had to develop a learning paper together and they were clear in what the learning product should be. So, we developed a learning product. So, it was very clear from the outset in terms of what they need, who and what would gain by it.

> Comic Relief allocated a lot of resources to us in the beginning in terms of really developing our broader outcomes, which … really made me think critically about how we think about and measure our work in a way that fits in the context of sports for development and the thinking at the time.

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A final strategic advantage observed by respondents was the potential to utilise the reputational benefits of their funding from Comic Relief to lever additional financial support from other grant-making bodies. A number of stakeholder organisations inferred that Comic Relief investment was often perceived as the 'gold standard' for international sport for development work, and that some organisations intentionally made reference to their success in obtaining such funds in subsequent grant applications.

> It [Comic Relief investment] allowed us to really start to leverage other funding, because it helped us hit international standards for those things [sport for development outcomes]…

Along similar lines, respondents spoke positively about how they had used the insights and learning acquired during their relationship with Comic Relief as a central feature of other funding applications and project continuation conversations:

> Because [our organisation] is an organisation which is very, very strong in communications and the branding part of our organisation, in creating visibility, once we have the true impact of the project we can generate some nice evidence and stories and cases, to either scale up the programme or look for other ways of funding, or bringing in new partners to sustain the programme as well.

6.2.2   Learning impacts

Respondent organisations provided much detail on the significant benefits they had accumulated in relation to learning impacts. As a distinctive feature of Comic Relief's approach, the onus on monitoring, evaluation and learning not only provided an accountability tool, but, more importantly, acted as an intentional facilitator of organisational development. All organisations offered perspectives on how their learning capacity had developed as a consequence of their working relationship with Comic Relief, with many indicating that this period had been instrumental in shaping their outlook on what effective monitoring and evaluation entailed. As one of several examples, one organisation revealed:

> … they [Comic Relief] talked about outcomes and indicators and that was the first time that our organisation had really thought that deeply about monitoring and evaluation and in turn that kind of adjusted our programmes that we offer our participants.

In a similar vein, many organisations reflected more broadly on the insight and learning approach adopted by Comic Relief. Of particular note, was how Comic Relief actively

encouraged and advocated for more detailed and nuanced approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning, and underpinned this by offering support for funded partners to engage in wider learning experiences such as attendance at workshops and conferences, undertaking visits to other organisations, and/or commissioning research:

> They listen [to us] because they know that we are speaking from our knowledge from the ground … Many of the typical traditional funding agencies won't give you money for research. They won't give you money for advocacy. They won't give you money for conferences or colloquiums. They won't give us the money to visit another organisation to learn from, you know. And those things are something which Comic Relief is open to. And that's what we appreciate about this organisation, that they value the learning.

International organisations also greatly valued opportunities to access learning platforms or to join partner networks that were focused on the sharing of information and evidence. One of the additional benefits that these learning platforms created was their potential to alleviate the often isolated nature of project delivery (and evaluation) and, as a result, organisations felt more comfortable about their own monitoring and evaluation methods:

> I feel like this thing of sharing across the organisations that work with Comic Relief it has really been a very, quite special for us to share learning and projects and to get those contacts. I have contacts for myself exchanging their ideas about the business and I feel like this was only created by Comic Relief…

> Comic Relief create platforms where organisations can sit together, from different contexts, to learn either by way of evaluations that have been conducted or using routine data that has been collected, whether you're seeing what are the challenges, how they ended up getting results, and then learn from their insights.

6.2.3   Partnership impacts

The opportunity to establish, maintain or develop relationships with other organisational partners was a clear benefit of Sport for Change investment. Partnership impacts were observable at all levels of local, regional, national, or international governance. At the local level, facilitating and fostering community partnerships helped to embed funded partners in local systems, which in turn, supported capacity building for the intervention. For example, one respondent explained the benefits for their intervention as a result of the partnerships they had established:

… just in general, supporting girls' right in terms of sports, education, transition, whatever the girls want to do … strengthening through our work with the government, we have seen that the involvement of special education teachers also increased the capacity of our teachers to induce learning outcomes.

At the regional and national level, there was evidence to suggest that such benefits extended beyond national boundaries:

Internationally, we have linkages with people from Zambia, Rwanda and different organisations like that … looking for different funding opportunities we can always reach out to them and work together.

For a number of organisations, key strategic-level partnerships had been created through Sport for Change, where opportunities had arisen to connect with (national) government departments or to explore opportunities to create or convene partner networks, both locally and internationally. One such organisation explained how their partnership operations had not only provided organisational benefits, but also wider influence in a critical policy space:

Essentially, so many organisations wanted to learn from what we were doing, but we wanted to try and house a space where we could create a way of addressing this huge treatment gap in [our] country, because there's such a huge mental health problem. We work with the Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, the Department of Health, and others; we've created this network where we try and equip sport and physical activity services to adopt our methodology.

Such testimony is indicative of the extent to which many organisations supported by Comic Relief had generated opportunities for sector leadership, where funded partners became a central pillar in efforts to mobilise policy change, address policy issues, and/or act as an enabler for other organisations in the sport for development sector to connect with the policy landscape. In addition, some organisations shared that they had become a key contributor to building an evidence-base within specific areas of political interest, or a key informant for policy guidance and insight. The following examples illustrate this partnership benefit:

We really are seen now as a key player in the public health space here in [our country]. We work very closely with the Centre for Public Mental Health, and we speak and advise on a lot of forums. The networks that we host are very embedded with things at the Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, who have a mandate to use sport to

improve mental health. And they use our methodology quite extensively now to meet those mandates … So, there's a massive need for you not to just work in a silo, and I think Comic Relief really encouraged that and understood one organisation's not going to solve mental health problems for children and adolescents in a country.

Our research and learning are very integrated with the sort of research bodies in the country that are the main advisors for the Department of Health, so it's quite strategic for us that we're able to do that. You know, Comic Relief has helped us to create a thought leadership monitoring evaluation team that's housed in our head office, and we then can house big external research projects that are funded in part by people like the Department of Health, and the Department of Education, and the Department of Social Development.

6.2.4   Operational flexibility

Echoing the testimonies of UK organisations, international respondents were equally expressive about the willingness of Comic Relief to provide flexibility around investment decisions during project delivery. In addition to the numerous benefits that flexible funding enabled, including the opportunity to fund core costs, respondents outlined how the flexibility afforded by Comic Relief enabled them to think more broadly about resource allocation across the entirety of the organisation and not just in relation to the specifics of project delivery, as one organisation observed:

> Comic Relief, they're really good donors. And I don't mean that they give you loads of money. What I mean is they really understand that it's the whole organisation that needs investing in … A lot of projects pay you for direct programme costs and virtually nothing else, and you've got to scrape something in to cover for that. So Comic Relief really understand that, and that's really, really important.

This distinctive feature of Comic Relief support was echoed by other respondents, one of whom offered insight into how Comic Relief's advocacy for flexibility within resource allocation had supported them though the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, they articulated how Comic Relief's approach had differed to other grant-making organisations in the sector during the uncertainties of this period:

> I think they've always been very open and flexible with us. You know, I had first-hand experience during COVID and our grant manager was really understanding, very

flexible. Obviously everything was shut down, they allowed us to put some funding into support salaries to support our core work, to ensure kind of organisational stability which is huge. I mean [another of our funders] said, "Stop. All money back," you know, so it was, like, "Well, what about the people that we've got to pay?" Whereas Comic Relief adopted very much a "We understand" attitude.

7. REFLECTIONS ON COMIC RELIEF

Funded partners were asked to reflect on the distinctive features of Comic Relief as a funder within the sport for development sector, and findings revealed overwhelmingly positive experiences in relation to the working practices of Comic Relief staff and their relationship with funded partners. Uppermost within these reflections was the view that Comic Relief staff demonstrated a strong understanding of the sport for development landscape, and that this knowledge had the potential to benefit the sector at large. Respondents valued the depth of knowledge and experience that Comic Relief staff demonstrated in relation to Sport for Change work. In addition, they valued the fact that staff not only volunteered this knowledge in project discussions but also took great interest in learning from the projects that they supported. Two examples from UK organisations highlighted this point:

> Compared to other donors, they really understand the role of sport in our programmes ... Comic Relief are so embedded in the sport for development sector, I think that probably sets Comic Relief quite apart, they just really understand the sport for development world … [they] have a nuanced, hugely knowledgeable outlook on sport.

> … it's that curiosity about the issues at hand that you are dealing with … Their [Comic Relief] staff actually care themselves about the issues, [they have] a personal interest and understanding of the issues they are funding – I find that remarkable. And also a keen interest in understanding the young people's stories and their journeys … [they] comment on the young people's stories, what they read, what they see.

Further insight into this deep appreciation of the sport for development sector was provided by respondent interpretations of outcomes and impact as it related to Sport for Change. Discussions centred on Comic Relief's understanding of scale, and how they demonstrated a genuine interest in the 'depth and quality' of project outcomes rather than being preoccupied with notions of 'quantity'. One international organisation, whose project focused on sexual and reproductive health, captured the essence of this approach:

> … [With] some organisations [funders], essentially you're ticking [boxes] for numbers. It's just, "How many have you reached?" It's, like, "Great, I reached 5,000 people." But what was the quality of that intervention? It was awful. You just went on a microphone and said, "Wear a condom." Comic Relief I think would be happy if you said, "We're going to reach 250 people," and as long as you can explain why and the

depth of the intervention, I think they'd be happy to fund it, and so for that I have a huge amount of respect for the way Comic Relief have done their funding in the past.

In other cases, organisations reflected on their experience of discussing the intangibility of some impacts and how this was not always easy to measure, may take longer than the duration of the project to accomplish, or may not be achieved through intentional means, all of which Comic Relief staff were attuned to. As one UK organisation commented:

It's the unintended outcomes that have created the biggest impact. When you try and report back what we're doing, it's really difficult because I'm always saying, "Well, we planned to do that but this happened and now this has changed, but we've done that which has led to this" … and then you almost feel like, [sighs] we weren't able to do what we said we were going to do. But luckily the relationship we've had and the understanding and the discussions along the way, they [Comic Relief] kind of see it, they understand it, they hear from others, they're around it…

Such testimony was reflective of a more extensive conversations about the value of Comic Relief being perceived as funding the wider vision and purpose of the organisation as opposed to simply supporting individual elements of specific projects. As one international organisation remarked:

… there's definitely value in having those measurable outcomes to check on your progress and are you achieving what you set out to achieve? But definitely having something [in the evaluation] that gets to the very basics of *what we do* rather than what projects are we going to do. Like having an understanding that meeting the [participants] needs is more of an approach than a programme or a project has helped us a lot … So, yes, Comic Relief understanding that our work is an approach and not a programme is very, very helpful.

Such reflections on Comic Relief's understanding of the sector and impact measurement aligned with a broader theme around trust and open communication with funded partners. Without exception, respondents spoke of the significant benefits that a reciprocal relationship created within project management processes, especially in relation to the maximisation of project impact.   The following two examples offer indicative insight into the nature of respondent communications with Comic Relief:

They're always … sharing with us resources as well; so I think there's also this kind of trust there now between us and Comic Relief, with us learning from them but also them listening to us and like having a relationship. I think, it's a very reciprocal relationship. It doesn't always feel like that with funders (UK organisation).

… when we first got the Comic Relief funding they were rigorous in a good way … But what I found with Comic Relief is they want you to be open, they want you to, you know, talk about your skeletons and be clear about, like, where do you have organisational weaknesses? (International organisation).

The responsiveness of Comic Relief staff, and in particular, the willingness of grant managers to reply to requests swiftly, and act decisively when required, was also highlighted. In turn, respondents indicated that communication was always empathetic and focused on allowing the organisation to fully explain current challenges or ask questions without prejudice or judgment:

…all these years that we have had a relationship with Comic Relief, it has been very much engaging. It has been very much respectful, in the sense that they are a great listener, you know, they want to also, in the sense, learn. They want to understand (International organisation).

Importantly, for stakeholder organisations who were leading collaborative projects or had specific responsibility for supporting and resourcing local, less-established delivery organisations, respondents indicated that the 'lighter touch' approach adopted by Comic Relief in relation to communication and grant management strongly influenced the relationship that they were able to build with local partners. As one international respondent remarked:

Whenever a donor puts a lot of compliances and conditionalities on you, as a grantee, it happens that you trickle it down to other partners. That is still the relationship between you and the partner, even though you might not be the one agreeing to a lot of conditionalities and compliances. But you have to adhere to them, because they are coming from the top.

When asked to elaborate further on their experiences of Comic Relief in relation to grant management, respondents highlighted the importance of having a consistent, designated grant manager to provide support and guidance, a feature that was not always evident with other grant-making bodies. One international respondent explained:

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> Some of the other institutional funding, you're maybe dealing with 10 different people, and through the whole grant sometimes you don't even know who you're reporting to, because people are always leaving and there are different bodies coming in. So, it's really nice that at Comic Relief we have one designated grant manager, and we know if we have a problem who to go to, you kind of have that one person.

Continuing this theme, several organisations offered positive reflections on individual Comic Relief staff members who had acted as grant manager for their project. These reflections reaffirmed the responsive and flexible approach adopted by Comic Relief staff, and in several cases, their clear passion for supporting work in the sport for development sector. As one UK respondent outlined:

> [Comic Relief] seems to care, really care, not just, "Oh, it's interesting", like they seem to really care deeply about what we're all trying to do together. I think that's really important … So, when we've submitted a report they come back to me and it's so clear that they've really thought about it, reflected on it, and they've come back to me with further questions …

For those organisations affected by changes in personnel and/or the grant management arrangements provided by Comic Relief, there was also positive commentary around how staff transitions were managed and implemented. One respondent highlighted the diligent and conscientious approach of new Comic Relief staff, and their knowledge understanding of the sport for development sector. Alongside this was a clear willingness to 'get up to speed' on the details of specific projects, to ensure that such transitions were as seamless as possible. This was particularly noticeable among international organisations, one of whom commented on the efforts of Comic Relief staff to understand the complexities of their operating context:

> … even if a new person was coming in, you would see that they had done their background work. They wouldn't ask you the usual questions, they would ask you questions that builds on their knowledge and when you ask something in the project that you needed they would respond to you that they would give you clear direction and that if you needed a view on something, they were onboard.

Such sentiment was representative of a view shared by several organisations that they viewed Comic Relief as a 'learning organisation', who were equally (if not more) concerned with understanding the process of Sport for Change than in capturing the quantitative impact of the

projects that they funded. Respondents welcomed the opportunity to provide narrative accounts of their impact and participant stories, which underpinned their perception that Comic Relief staff were genuinely curious about understanding 'what works' in sport for development interventions. Three UK organisations reflected on this finding:

> … it does feel a two-way relationship as well; it's never just, you know, "How are you, I'm supporting you". You always feel like they want to be funding us because they're learning so much from it, and they always come to us as well for advice, what do you think about this?; how does that work?; how did you find that? … I think they learn, and learn about the sector and the direction, and what it's like to work with government or what it's like for us for to work with government …

> … that's one of the benefits of Comic Relief, where even the report - obviously there's stuff with numbers, and you know outcomes and outgoings, but it's so geared towards narrative and what has the funding enabled you to do?

> I think you can tell that they care because they read everything you send them because of the questions that follow up … So you know through that you can just tell that they are interested and then want to help you to further that work. That doesn't always happen it's kind of "okay, thanks" and then you move on sort of thing so, so I think that does stand out a bit from others.

Respondents also noted how they were encouraged to provide reflection on the process of using sport instrumentally for social change and to pinpoint specific mechanisms that may have contributed more significantly to project outputs. In this sense, the reporting process was commonly perceived as being collaborative and faciliatory rather than being about external scrutiny, again a distinctive feature of the Comic Relief approach. Reflecting many similar perspectives, one international organisation noted:

> … other funders need a lot of detailed information about everything and communication and reporting and I almost feel like you're being performance managed by them. I don't have that same thing with Comic Relief. It feels very easy. I get a lot of anxiety when it comes up to other funders' reporting times because I know I've got to find information all over the place on everything. And it's not that we can't do that it's just like, "Am I going to tick all the boxes?". With Comic Relief it doesn't feel like it. It

feels like we're just sharing our progress and our learning and it's very easy and it feels like open and like a learning space and a reflection space…

Despite the emphasis on learning that Comic Relief fostered, funded partners perceived learning to be collectively gathered and shared across the Comic Relief network. While this was not a theme that many organisations reflected upon, there was the suggestion that Comic Relief might look to further enhance their capacity for external communications to share learning across network partners. Reflecting on this theme, one international organisation shared:

What I am probably missing, to see, is how that learning pulls all these things together and share back, so that we can have [access to] this. I have not seen – maybe I am not very active in using the Comic Relief website, but I am not seeing [collective learning]…

For the UK organisations at least, a number of respondents indicated how the genuine interest in and passion for sport for development exhibited by Comic Relief staff could translate in various ways into opportunities for advocacy. Findings revealed that many organisations in the UK sport for development sector valued Comic Relief as a key contributor to enabling systems change and being a thought-leader and advocate for the work conducted by the wider development sector. Such views demonstrated the further impact of Sport for Change investment in not only enabling positive change at the individual and community level, but also in facilitating opportunities to influence at the policy-level in the UK:

I think people invest in [our organisation] at the moment because funders are always looking for real change. Change in [people's] lives is real change, but I think they're always looking for that strategic element now, they're looking for that systemic change … We're constantly on this wheel, you might be changing one life at a time until you're knackered, you can't do it anymore. But if you can change a policy you might be able to change hundreds of thousands of lives.

In some cases, respondents suggested that such is the position of legitimacy and influence now held by Comic Relief in the UK, that their advocacy and contribution to wider policy debates has become integral to the development of the sector:

… the single most important thing is, at the moment, is advocating to Treasury about the value of sport for development, because that's where the biggest change will come

from. Although we can't control the political system in the four-year political cycle, [we can] be fit for purpose for policy makers, that's probably the most important thing. And having a partner like Comic Relief has been enormously important. I mean the money's nice, but it's actually the bit where we work with Comic Relief, that understanding of things we need to iterate and need to develop. It is, in effect, trying to sort of change systems, especially with the concept of sport for development.

Respondents reflected on how such advocacy was essential to reinforcing messaging around the value of sport as a vehicle for social change, whether this was with external organisations (such as government departments) or internally within conversations around broader Comic Relief strategy. Again, this was far more pronounced for UK organisations with one revealing:

I think [Comic Relief] have probably been most supportive right the way through, but really it feels like [they've] gone into bat for us internally time and time again saying, "Look, you've got to fund this organisation, this is the impact they're having," and I feel unless you've got somebody who's going to bat for you within that organisation I'm sure that relationship would probably fizzle out.

While the above comments provide insight into the general experience of collaborating with Comic Relief on Sport for Change investment, respondents also provided their reflections on the day-to-day operational side of working with Comic Relief. Specifically, respondents felt that the application process, whilst thorough, was commensurate with the sums of money and timescales for funding in play. In addition, organisations were satisfied that their applications for funding had been scrutinised thoroughly and fairly. As one international organisation reflected:

… that robust screening process to make sure, you know that organisations are there, they can handle this amount of funding, it was a good. You know we were joking with the team like we've never seen an application this long but now we get it, you know, the impact that has provided…

Respondents also commented on the process of inducting them as new grant-holders, and that 'on-boarding' meetings offered by Comic Relief had equipped them effectively to implement their project and to understand the funder's expectations, especially around monitoring and evaluation:

… as soon as we got this investment there was a workshop that Comic Relief put on in Rwanda and invited all the grantees [funded partners] to and it was just such a learning opportunity. I mean not only did we kind of understand the issues that are facing other organisations as far as gender inequality goes but also they really held our hand through the monitoring evaluation and learning process and making sure that we were doing it correctly and giving accurate data… (International organisation).

… the startup meetings that you have once you receive a grant off Comic Relief are really helpful … you know, you get to just reflect on your own outcomes for a little while, you bounce off ideas, the training's really well delivered, they simplify what monitoring and evaluation means, it's really wonderful (UK organisation).

I really liked their initial briefing when you were awarded a grant ... Objectives were set, outcomes and outputs and everything else. And what is really different to other funders is giving you that space for you to discuss the challenges, and the difference you want to make in the community (UK organisation).

While perceptions of induction processes were favourable, some organisations indicated that improvements could be made to those surrounding the 'off-boarding' of funded partners at the conclusion of the investment. While organisations were fully appreciative of the reasons as to why continuation funding may or may not be granted, and indeed, fully understood the realities of funding agreements and protocols, some suggested that they would have appreciated and benefitted from further support in relation to remaining connected to important networks and connections and/or being signposted to other potential avenues of funding:

The onboarding process is fab. And so, actually if there could be a sort of next potential routes; this is where the learning and sharing can go; here's some potential opportunities beyond [this funding] - doesn't have to be financial, you know. Work related professional development opportunities with Comic - just the whole saying goodbye process, potentially, could be stronger (UK organisation).

However, some respondents offered suggestions as to how the completion of the funding relationship might be improved to protect project sustainability, and to ensure that both Comic Relief and funded partners leave the funding relationship on 'good terms'. Two examples from the international interviews were particularly noteworthy:

I think they were very clear that there was no funding for continuing that phase. But I think for us we are relieved that we have maintained our contact with the diagnostic partners and be strengthened and ready for the next phase so we could go forward.

I think maybe some sort of sustainability training or something like that to move forward well without their support would be good, connect us to other opportunities, like I think [other grant awarding organisations] who was doing their own kind of investments…

As noted, when respondents reflected on the arrangements for reporting the impacts of their projects, there was consensus regarding the reporting timescales expected by Comic Relief which were unanimously seen as manageable. Moreover, many respondents indicated that reporting for Comic Relief had more of a developmental aspect to it, again highlighting a philosophy of 'learning' about projects, which was markedly different to reporting for other funders:

> … they [Comic Relief] want to know numbers and what we did on the ground. But equally they seem as interested in the organisational development … and what has this enabled you to do – a much more interesting, richer, story of impact. Whereas other funders, [they're] fixated on this one cohort of 20 young people that we've got to go into a lot of detail about, and I don't think they [other funders] get much out of reporting and sharing information at that level (UK organisation).

> … when I'm doing the annual reports that Comic Relief asks us to do, that structure, sometimes it's a lot for you to handle but at the same time I know this is good for me and so I share my Comic Relief reports with my team as a way of sharing impact. Because it's just when you are working for a non-profit which is all the grind all the time, you are on the next project, you are on to the next programme and you are planning for it. You don't have too much time to reflect and you know I do feel intimidated by the reports sometimes, but it always feels better after. Especially when someone, a grant manager comes in and really takes the time to read through it and then give you the feedback and ask questions about it (International organisation).

> … predominantly we're funded as an organisation by Sport England which is fine, but actually it's provided a good comparison between two different funders and how they

operate. I found it a lot more challenging with Sport England and their requirements, restrictions, reporting. Comic Relief have just been so much more flexible and that's been really beneficial for us (UK organisation).

One UK respondent commented on the way in which Comic Relief had encouraged them to adopt an altogether more creative approach to reporting, incorporating innovative methods (such as digital story-telling) and co-construction with participants:

> [Reporting for Comic Relief] is more exciting as well. It makes me feel like, "Oh, I can think more creatively about how we're going to do this." And also then that means that we can get the young people that are involved in this process to be like, "This is not just like anonymous funding that will pull at the end of the year".

Some of the UK organisations reflected on the importance of site visits by Comic Relief staff to obtain further insight and learning on the impact on Sport for Change investment. Others commented that they would like to see an increase in site visits to funded partners:

> I don't think anyone has visited us from Comic Relief and I think that would have been good, really good. Not just to see the work but for the relationship, make is stronger.

Such reflections connected with a wider sentiment about the involvement of Comic Relief's corporate supporters. While most respondents did not comment on these strategic relationships, there was some reflection that ingratiating themselves to the interests and priorities of corporate supporters had the potential to mitigate the impact that Sport for Change could have. One UK organisation recalled their experience of hosting a corporate partner:

> … the corporate supporters that came in then had a knock-on effect on the pressure of us delivering projects to entertain those relationships, and I do say entertain … And I do understand that people want to, you know, they want some tangible experiences, or more immersive relationships, with the initiatives that they fund. [But] just on our personal experience, when it comes to the pressure of press doing this, and social media posts or promoting this, I don't know, it all becomes a little bit unravelling from there.

While both UK and International respondents were overwhelmingly satisfied with their working relationship with Comic Relief, this reflection was one of a handful of concerns reported by organisations. Another common concern was the recent levels of staff turnover

within the Sport for Change team, and that staff instability may have led to a loss of identity for Comic Relief in the sport for development sector. One international respondent noted:

> … the organisation [Comic Relief] to me feels like it's lost a little bit of its identity … They've had so many different staff, so much different leadership, that every time we talk to them they're doing a strategy review. They seem a bit lost as an organisation, so as I said it's a bit tricky to give them that feedback directly, but it comes from us from a good place that we felt Comic Relief were an important voice in the sector, and it's a voice that's been lost a bit now.

Continuing on the theme of identity, another international organisation felt that Comic Relief may wish to do more in terms of their global profile given that, in comparison the UK, the Comic Relief brand appeared less familiar in some of the countries where they operated:

> In Zambia, it's strange, because actually not that many people know who they [Comic Relief] are. So, when we'd go and have the council meetings when we first announced the project, they didn't have any idea who they were so we had to go through this whole thing. In the UK I think it [Comic Relief support] definitely does help.

That said, there was evidence to indicate that in relation to the narrower confines of the international development sector, Comic Relief was a well-known, recognisable partner organisation.

> … internationally, when you go and when you speak about [development issues], because you've got the logo of Comic Relief … then they [other sector partners] say that, "Oh, okay, Comic Relief is supporting you. Oh, that's great", you know.

8. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As part of the data collection process, respondents were provided with the opportunity to comment on some of the major challenges facing the sport for development sector, to not only raise these issues to a conscious level, but also provide direction for sector funders (including Comic Relief) to develop strategic responses. While there were some thematic overlaps reported by UK and international organisations (e.g., access to funding, workforce issues, difficulties in connecting at a policy level), the contextual differences between the two sets of respondents meant that the issues present were highly nuanced, which suggests that considering these challenges and opportunities separately would be warranted.

8.1 UK challenges and opportunities

First, and foremost, UK respondents noted that they were, on the whole, experiencing increased demand for their services, especially from young people, with a growing number of referral partners and service providers recognising the value of sport as an intervention tool. Reflecting on the contributing factors for this increase in demand, two respondents offered specific insight:

> … absolutely the biggest challenge is just the growing demand for our services. I think, again, it's hard to know whether is that because we're more well known as an organisation or is it because of the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions? To be honest it's probably a bit of both and in a way; it doesn't really matter, the bottom line is we're getting a hell of a lot more referrals.

> I think a lot of what we've seen in this past year, especially since schools have been back from COVID, a lot of them [young people] are sort of grieving their childhood, grieving actually losing members of their family. It's like the level of their mental health and their wellbeing, particularly for marginalised young people, for people on the fringes … There's so much pressure at the moment on young people, whether that's like their exams, whether that's like life pressures, the cost of living crisis, and I think, for us, that's what we're seeing is that to be in more schools and share more resources and actually thinking more strategically about how are we supporting our young people in terms of what is a mental health crisis.

As one might expect, access to funding was identified as another major challenge across the sport for development sector. Respondents observed that they had experienced reductions in

the size of grant allocations, and, perhaps more tellingly, indicated that they were having to apply for funding more frequently, which increased competition for investment and negatively impacted the sustainability of their work. Others revealed how the current economic climate in the UK and increased sense of financial uncertainty had seen a reduction in the number of funding opportunities available through corporate organisations, including less access to unrestricted sources of funding. Capturing several of the financial challenges facing the sport for development sector (and the charity sector more widely), one organisation revealed:

> … having spoken to a few colleagues, read a few things, its comparable to the 2008 fundraising landscape of, there just isn't much money going round and there's more charities than ever, with costs going up. So that's a really big impact. Just in trusts and foundations I'm seeing smaller grant allocations, and I'm seeing more rounds to get the same amount of money as before. So I think, yeah, lack of corporate funding, unrestricted funding, it's really sort of difficult to get.

Financial uncertainty had also negatively impacted the sport for development workforce. Respondents noted a host of workforce challenges, including staff turnover and the difficulties of retaining experienced and highly effective staff within the sector.

> … when lockdown restrictions were lifted there was a definite upturn in our staff turnover. I think some of the reasons for people leaving more in the kind of last probably 18 months have been things around a lot of people leaving for better paid jobs. The cost of living has really, you know, obviously impacted everybody, so we've done things as an organisation to counter that. So, obviously we've kind of reviewed all staff pay, and there have been one-off payments and all the rest of it, so hopefully we're putting in place things that mean that that turnover will slow down …

Given the critical importance of employing high-quality, frontline staff to deliver sport for development interventions, and the centrality of mentoring relationships between staff and participants as a key mechanism of effective programming, respondents explained how staff instability had begun to affect the depth and quality of their offer. As one respondent revealed:

> … when there's instability you really see the impact in terms of frontline staff and how long they stay really, but also the potential reduction in social impact on the ground with young people.

Such testimony opened a wider discussion with many organisations about the challenges they faced in recruiting staff. Critically, many organisations had to prioritise the recruitment of frontline delivery staff in order to fill gaps in provision. Often this involved recruiting individuals who had experience as coaches or educators, or those whose expertise within the sector was based on personal or lived experience. As one organisation noted, while this addressed a short-term recruitment need, the longer-term development of these staff and transitioning them into management and leadership roles was a central concern in relation to capacity building:

> … because we put so much emphasis on the relationship between our coach, therapist and young person, it does mean we've been recruiting a certain kind of coach who's got lived experience of various issues … we recruit kind of more about their attitude rather than kind of qualifications. So actually, our coaches aren't necessarily going to be right for management roles, so they need support. I'm not saying they can't do it, but they probably need more support than we can offer them…

These insights present an important consideration for the sport for development sector, not only in relation to staff retention, but also in regard to the adequacy of training and professional development opportunities available to the current workforce to upskill and support career progression towards leadership and management roles.

While many organisations reflected on the challenges facing their paid staff, others commented on a further workforce challenge in relation to volunteers. Unlike many sectors and industries, the sport sector is highly reliant on its volunteer workforce to maintain and sustain provision. Indeed, the social and economic issues contributing to challenges within the paid workforce were equally evident within the volunteer population. Summarising some of the current challenges of engaging volunteers for sport-based interventions, one organisation commented:

> … a lot of the organisations we fund are [reliant on] volunteers and obviously since Covid there's been a massive impact on the number of people within clubs who are volunteering … As the project went on we found it harder and harder to engage with clubs because they just didn't feel like they've got the capacity to take on anything additional. It's just not possible … We offer a lot of additional training, support, knowledge, awareness within the workforce, but again there's challenges around them [volunteers] being able to actually attend that training because they've all got a full time job and this is just what they're doing in the evenings … no matter what we do and

what training we can put on it still doesn't work for the group of people that we're working with.

A final challenge reported by respondents was the longstanding problem of trying to connect, engage and influence at the policy-level. Many of the comments on this theme related to the potential of sport for development to offer a 'cross-cutting' policy tool, but that accurate and impactful messaging across government departments (in particular) was still lacking. Respondents indicated that clearer definitions and articulations of the work of the 'sport for development' sector were required, and that there was a need for an organisation (or coalition of organisations) to lead on engagement with policy-makers. As one organisation noted:

> With sport for development, we sit in this weird space where we do a lot of football, where we use football in a very specific way. And obviously football is our theme, and it's what helps reinforce our messages. But we're in the education sector, predominantly I'd say. And I think then just having the capacity to engage those people [education policy-makers], you know the people in the policy space will always be a challenge … We need to find the right people to lead us on this path, with the right expertise to deliver that [connection to policy-makers].

8.2 International challenges and opportunities

In common with their UK counterparts, several international organisations raised issues around access to adequate funding as a major challenge. The primary issue here was in relation to the duration of investments, with a perception that many funders preferred to provide short-term, project focused grants, which enabled impacts to be reported quickly and conveniently, but which limited the extent to which interventions could be embedded and sustained. Several organisations spoke of their concerns about delivering interventions which had short-term benefits, but could not be sustained, often leading to the withdrawal of interventions (and organisations) from project locations. Speaking of this dynamic, one organisation highlighted that the 'expand and contract' nature of short-term investment could actually create more harm than good:

> I could tell you lots of things that are wrong with the development world as well as what is right with it. But one of the major factors is that people [some funders] really like short term pieces of work. They like pieces of work they can fund for a year or two, tie it up in a bow, do an evaluation and it's done, and it's neat and it's tidy and that's

what they really, really like. Because of this expectation, that shapes the type of work you can do, which is like really not meaningful, these things that you can tie up in a year or two generally only scratch the surface of something, and what you find is that, you know, you see the fossilised remains of these projects all over the world … You have to develop the culture of the project … it's the culture that gives the answers to hard questions.

As a consequence of short-term funding, the necessity to continually make grant applications and develop new and innovative projects was highlighted as an organisational challenge to remain successful in an increasingly competitive context. Many respondents reflected that the requirement to be repeatedly making grant applications not only drained organisational resources, but also had a negative effect on staff motivation and wellbeing which, in turn, negatively impacted project delivery. One organisation remarked:

> …there is so much work to be done and it feels overwhelming that we have started something but that fear when the funding is up, we have got to fill that. You know all these non-profits are scraping for funds and battling each other and all doing good projects but there is so much help that is needed and so I think that's a huge barrier …

Commenting on the additional issues caused by short-term funding, several international organisations reflected on the challenge of retaining project staff. Some spoke of their frustration of investing time and resource to train and upskill staff, only for the removal of continuation funding to cause these individuals to leave the organisation. Others referred to the competition for high-quality staff that exists within the sport for development sector (and development sector more broadly), and the additional challenges this presented in relation to staff retention. Capturing the experiences of several respondents, two organisations reflected on this issue:

> …the biggest challenge when we're running the organisation, it is people. You just have to find the right people … often [there are] pots of funding available [to cover staffing], but they are not very consistent ... We want to be accessing those pots of funds, because we can't only hire staff for six months and then fire them, and then hire staff for six months and then fire them. That would mean that the entire model that we have, that consistency of routine for kids, would fall apart.

> … for small organisations like ours, we are used as training products. Like when a person gets experience then they'll jump off to the next big organisation, well-paying organisation and then you're going to have to recruit, re-train, re-mentor before you begin to get the dividends of having a fully trained member of staff. So, yes, it helps for people to stay in their jobs for some time but I think when an opportunity comes for those that are really good at what they do, it's very easy for them to be bought off from small organisations and, yes, those that have more money.

A further funding issue was the difficulty in securing funding for an organisation's core costs. As we have seen, Comic Relief has a more flexible approach around how grant money can be spent, but this is very much the exception in the sector, with most grant-making organisations preferring to invest in direct delivery costs only. Given the complexities of delivering sport for development interventions in the locations where respondents operated, stipulations and restrictions on how grants could be used created significant challenges. As one respondent explained:

> … it's harder and harder to fund our core activities, it's harder and harder to fund it especially in [one country] where we've grown a lot, and we've got government contracts. We've got a big project in [one city] that requires really professional management and governance, like legal issues. But a lot of that funding won't pay for the back-office costs. So the costs of running a professional and diligent organisation requires a type of funding that a lot of funders aren't willing to give.

Alongside funding challenges, several international respondents provided insight into the difficulties they faced in connecting with the broader sport for development policy landscape. Many of the organisations interviewed revealed that they received financial support from multiple grant awarding organisations (in addition to Comic Relief). While at one level this wider support enabled more extensive interventions to be developed, at another, respondents highlighted the practical challenges of attempting to deliver on multiple outcomes from multiple funders, which were rarely, if at all, aligned. As one organisation reported:

> If you're doing good work and you're getting more funders interested, then you're getting more and more funders pulling you in different directions and wanting different outputs and different ways of reporting. So you're writing 10 different reports on something very similar, when you could do a slimmed down way of doing things that would allow you to focus on the work that you're doing.

Other organisations outlined the difficulties attached to scaling their impact and building on the successes of previous projects. Notably, one organisation suggested that a broader-level debate across the sport for development sector was required to attain clarity of how scaling should be defined:

> … the nature of scaling and how it's seen in the sector - there's like this huge push to scale, scale, scale. And although we want to do that, we've always felt that scaling, there's no right or wrong way to scale in my mind, there are just different ways of scaling, and so I think just maintaining our identity as we continue to scale, and not being too donor-led.

A final challenge noted in relation to the policy landscape was the issues raised by changes in government or fluctuations in political priorities by those in power. Naturally, while the timescales for parliamentary elections and the potential for changes in government varied across the international locations that were surveyed, there were several examples provided of political change having clear detrimental impact on the delivery work of respondents. For some organisations, much of their work consisted of government contracted delivery, which meant that the challenges caused by political change were felt more acutely, as the following two testimonies illustrate:

> The other challenge that we face is that our biggest partner in all our work is the government. So then the transitions from governments, from one party to the other comes with change in policies, change in systems or governance, priorities and all that sort of thing. So you'll have to go and do almost everything against that which you have created … you have to re-establish yourself in those relationships, you have to restart some of the conversations …

> We are part of an international alliance … that were working with street-connected children … And it really worked out very well because these organisations became friends and they could share some of their very innovative ways of working, which was adapted by others. So there was cross learning … But the [national] government made amendments to the law, and we were not allowed to do any transferring of funds to any other organisation outside the country. So that became a problem for us … But then in 2021, again, the government came up with another amendment, and that amendment said that if you receive funds, you cannot transfer funds to any other organisation, even within our own country.

Respondents also provided important insights into the broad-scale contemporary challenges on which sport for development organisations might focus their attention. As with UK organisations, international respondents observed the widespread levels of mental health issues that had become prominent within their target communities, in particular among young people. Critically, respondents spoke of the significant levels of stigma that still existed in the Global South in relation to mental health issues, and the resultant challenges which this creates around societal acceptance of mental health disorders and the availability of support services and treatment options for such conditions. There was also evidence that stigmatisation around mental health also negatively impacted other health imperatives. One organisation that supports young people with HIV illustrated the compound effects of the growing mental health crisis:

> … there's a lot of stigma in our context around issues to do with mental health and usually it translates into other parts of life as well; [poor mental health is] a condition impacted by many factors that happens in one's life … That could be the trigger for [a young person] just abandoning their [HIV] treatment and all those things. So we have a number of sad stories that really have impacted individuals at a personal level…

On a slightly wider scale, there was also evidence from the international organisations which reflected on the growing range of challenges directly attributable to climate change. The urgency to address climate issues is nothing new (both in the development sector and beyond), and respondents offered critical insight into how climate change acts as a foundation for a number of wider societal problems in the Global South, many of which are a direct strategic imperative for Comic Relief. Primarily, respondents from sub-Saharan Africa indicated that climate change had contributed to significant instances of crop failure, which in turn, had led to issues of hunger and poverty. Moreover, these wider issues had led to a number of subsequent challenges, including: population displacement, increased criminality, child trafficking, reductions in educational access, and increased rates of child pregnancy and marriage.

Such sentiment presented clear empirical evidence that there is a need for the sport for development sector to take more seriously the relationship between its funding programmes and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). During interview, only a small number of the stakeholder organisations explicitly referred to the links between their work and the SDGs. Likewise, very few featured any specific mention of (or connection with) the SDGs on their websites. Those that did, demonstrated an authentic alignment with specific SDGs, and a clear

understanding of how their work with participants (and their stewardship of funding) facilitated such alignment. Given the relative absence of such connections, there is evidence here to suggest that Comic Relief may wish to re-consider the extent and nature of its eligibility criteria and broader funder requirements around SDG engagement. Similarly, the wider sector may wish to consider the scope and remit of its funding strategies and especially the need to think beyond 'single problem solutions'.

9. CONCLUSIONS

This report presents the findings of a piece of independent research into the longer-term impact of Comic Relief's Sport for Change funding on organisations that were in receipt of this funding between 2016-2023, and how resultant projects have helped to address a range of social issues both in the UK and beyond. The research aimed to explore how Sport for Change funding added value for award holders in relation to organisational capacity and learning, and to identify specific gaps or opportunities for Comic Relief to consider in terms of strategy development. A further aim of the research was to make visible the operational processes behind Comic Relief's Sport for Change approach in order to better engage wider stakeholder audiences, i.e., funders that may already fund sport for change programmes or that are new to the sector, key players in the sport for development sector, and organisations interested in applying for Sport for Change funding. The research also sought to explore how this funding supported organisations to grow, develop, expand, adapt and have greater impact, and if/how impact varied across social contexts, geographies, sectors, or types (size/maturity) of organisation. Important here was the extent to which funding had added value, and which funding models or approaches had made the most difference. From these aims, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What has been the impact of the Sport for Change approach on stakeholder organisations during the identified time period?
2. How (and to what extent) has Comic Relief supported stakeholder organisations to deliver agreed outcomes?
3. What added value can be attributed to Comic Relief as a consequence of the funding relationships in play, and how might these relationships have been improved?
4. Which funding models or approaches have been most successful, and why?

In addressing these questions, central to this report has been the presentation of organisational stakeholder perceptions and experiences of the funding relationship with Comic Relief. What follows is a brief overview of the resulting findings.

Impacting stakeholder organisations

There is a plethora of evidence within this report testifying to the ways in which the Sport for Change approach positively impacted stakeholder organisations during the identified time period. The majority of respondents commented on the potential of sport to act as a tool (or 'hook') for initial engagement and an enabler of social change, and that when used intentionally

it could provide an effective method of connecting participants to a wider range of support services. In addition, several respondents described how sporting interventions offered a 'safe space' where their 'voices' could be articulated and heard. Such spaces also had the potential to facilitate a greater sense of community engagement, belonging and development, and in some cases pathways to employment, or opportunities to (re)engage with formal education and training opportunities. Likewise, in terms of operational matters, interviewees revealed how Sport for Change funding had a significant impact on organisational life. Evident here were issues such as strategic planning and implementation, the promotion of service delivery, and reputational enhancement. Respondents were equally aware of the role that Comic Relief investment had offered in terms of the creation of relationships, networks and strategic partnerships with funders, policy-makers, and sector leaders.

Supporting stakeholder organisations

A number of organisations spoke of the flexible approach adopted by Comic Relief (comparative to other funders) in relation to the stewardship of allocated investment, the ownership and outworking of project aims and intentions (including the intentional use of stakeholder knowledge and expertise to underpin project design and delivery), and the importance of manageable reporting protocols. The extent and duration of funding varied across projects and funded partners, but many spoke of the support they had felt (both individually and organisationally) from longer-term funding arrangements which had provided opportunities for infrastructure and workforce development, and in a number of cases had facilitated an altogether more coherent approach to resource allocation, human resource management, and organisational governance. In terms of added value, respondents were unanimous in their positive articulations of the levels of trust, transparency, and reciprocity evident in their communications with Comic Relief, and the responsiveness of Comic Relief staff, especially their empathetic and non-judgmental approach and their willingness to co-create and learn. To this end, several respondents reflected on the benefits of the support they had received around monitoring, evaluation, and learning, and related opportunities to engage across various learning forums and platforms.

A number of respondents viewed Comic Relief as an organisation who had a realistic understanding of the challenges of project delivery, a genuine interest in the 'depth and quality' of project outcomes, and a passion and desire to advance the sport for development sector. Findings revealed that many organisations saw Comic Relief as an advocate, influencer, and

thought-leader, and an important enabler of systems change. Indeed, as a consequence of their relationship with Comic Relief, a number of organisations had been presented with the opportunity to connect with government departments either locally, nationally or internationally.

A number of organisations reflected on the importance of in-person site visits by Comic Relief staff to obtain a greater level of insight into project delivery. Others articulated a desire to see an increase in such visits. An on-going challenge reported by respondents was how to connect, engage and influence at the policy-level and the need for one organisation (or coalition of organisations) to mobilise activity in this area. Perceptions Comic Relief's 'on-boarding' and induction processes were favourable, however some organisations indicated that improvements could be made to the processes surrounding the 'off-boarding' of funded partners at the conclusion of the funding period.

Funding models and approaches

Perhaps not surprisingly, funding was identified as the most significant challenge facing respondent organisations, and amidst reductions in the size (and duration) of grant allocations, increased competition for investment, and a reluctance by funders to service 'core costs', many found themselves having to apply for funding more frequently. UK-based organisations reflected how a growing sense of financial uncertainty had witnessed a reduction in the number of funding opportunities available, including less access to unrestricted funds. Respondents also noted how financial uncertainty had brought with it a host of workforce challenges, including staff turnover and the retention of experienced personnel. Against this backdrop, Comic Relief's more flexible approach to grant allocation and how funding may be spent was regarded as extremely valuable by all respondent organisations, especially those delivering interventions in locations where particular stipulations and restrictions dictated how grant monies could be used. That said, one of the areas where respondents requested increased clarity from Comic Relief was that of continuation funding. While organisations were appreciative of the reasons why continuation funding may or may not be granted, some noted the need for further transparency around related conversations, and where continuation funding was not granted, further support in relation to accessing other funding sources.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT FUNDERS

The findings of this report have identified several aspects of Sport for Change which have wider relevance for the sport for development sector and which are recommended for consideration by policy-makers, funding/grant awarding organisations, and commissioners.

10.1 Provide funded partners with greater autonomy for funding allocations, decision-making, and adaptations to projects.

Organisations that intentionally use sport to tackle social issues often face significant and prolonged external challenges which not only impede the scale and depth of the impact of their programmes, but also threaten organisational survival (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). Providing organisations with additional flexibility in relation to objective-setting, decision-making, and responding to local need is essential. Granting flexibility over the allocation of funding, and allowing funded partners to have ownership of project aims and intentions, will empower them to utilise their local knowledge and community experience to deliver maximum impact in the short-term, but also enable a focus on strategic priorities in the longer-term.

10.2 Provide longer-term funding, which can be allocated to support wider organisational operations rather than specific projects costs.

Granting longer-term (minimum 3-5 year) funding provides numerous benefits and creates stronger opportunities for organisations to develop and sustain in terms of both infrastructure and delivery. Where grants are able to be used to support core funding costs and allow funded partners to internally allocate money has not only been welcomed by funded partners, but can also be used to support investment into the professional development of staff, support career progression, and address challenges pertaining to staff retention.

10.3 Implement a Funder+ model which incorporates a package of support and sector guidance that exceeds financial support for funded partners.

Funded partners benefit significantly from the funding that they are awarded, but equally valuable is the package of support that the awarding organisation can offer alongside financial assistance. Additional support can take various guises but could include:

- helping funded partners improve their organisational governance
- informing funded partners on safeguarding policies and good practice

- providing reflective learning opportunities where organisations can consider the effectiveness of their delivery systems and processes (e.g. approach to monitoring and evaluation)

- offering collective learning opportunities (in-person or online) involving workshops or networking opportunities

- creating access to online platforms to share learning and discuss issues pertinent to the sector

- facilitating opportunities to connect with the wider sport for development sector so that organisations can gain valuable access to key partners both to access critical service provision but also to establish strategic partnerships with policy-makers and sector leaders

- connecting funded partners with other funding organisations to create opportunities to explore additional/future funding

10.4 Enable organisations with a 'tried and trusted' model of delivery to nurture other smaller or less established organisations and advocate for them in the wider sport for development sector.

The sport for development sector is vast involving countless organisations comprising input from the private, public, and voluntary sector. While the majority of these organisations are concerned with a similar goal (namely utilising sport to address social issues), the sector is often beset by competition for funding, duplication of services, and fragmentation. Enabling and resourcing more established organisations in the sector to nurture and incubate less established organisations and act as advocates for them in broader sector discussions will support coherence in provision, streamline funding (and other resources), and help to co-ordinate the sector around collective messaging regarding the potential of sport to support social change.

10.5 Grant-making bodies, non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), and policy-makers need to periodically keep abreast of the changing and emerging issues pertinent to the sport for development sector.
The sport for development sector is dynamic, complex, and highly nuanced, which means that funders (and associated organisations) must remain vigilant in understanding the most pressing

issues facing both the sector and wider society. Working in partnership with expert organisations (such as Comic Relief) is key to understanding the changing nature of the sector, as is showing a genuine interest in funded projects. Generating impact through a sport-based project often takes times and can be difficult to capture tangibly, therefore demonstrating that a flexible approach to the method and frequency of impact measurement is essential. In addition, a commitment to learning about the process mechanisms that 'work' within sport for development projects should supersede a focus on simply capturing quantitative impact.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMIC RELIEF'S SPORT FOR CHANGE STRATEGY

The Conclusions drawn from this report indicate that while Sport for Change is an example of good practice when supporting sport for development projects, there are opportunities that should be considered that will either consolidate current practice or strengthen the contribution of Sport for Change within the wider sector.

- Recognise the pivotal role that Sport for Change is making towards broader Comic Relief aims, and ensure that this critical work is resourced appropriately to maintain and deepen its impact.

- Continue to be a key advocate for the broader sport for development movement and, if possible, become a key contributor and thought leader in enabling systems change both in the UK and internationally.

- Continue to build trust and open communication with funded partners/organisations to ensure that funding relationships are transparent, open, and reciprocal.

- Implement meaningful and inclusive "onboarding" and "offboarding" processes, involving co-design within the establishment of initial programme objectives, support to sustain projects once Sport for Change funding has ceased, continued access to national and international networks and partners both during and after the funding period, and signposting of training opportunities.

- Monitor and, where necessary, adapt the application process to attract the most appropriate organisations (both in the UK and internationally) to apply for Sport for Change funding, and ensure that the process is fair, transparent, and commensurate with the size of grants being awarded.

- Monitor and, where necessary, adapt the reporting processes expected of funded partners, where possible allowing for "narratives" to emerge and creative and innovative methods to be used to report the impact of projects. Enabling a "lighter touch" approach to reporting frees up resources and time for funded partners to allocate to delivery. This is also beneficial when funded partners have multiple funders to report to and may feel pressured to deliver on multiple outcomes.

- Ensure that grant management is consistent, and that relationships are developed with the funded partner which are supportive, but also built on clear expectations.

- Seek to align funded programmes clearly with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to offer clarity and coherence between Sport for Change and wider/global political agendas and strategies.

12. BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

The report highlights a number of 'best practice' principles, that are evident within Sport for Change, which might be adopted by organisations that deliver projects that intentionally use sport as a cross-cutting tool to respond to social issues. These principles relate to the design of programmes, the inclusion of opportunities for wider learning and personal development among participants, and the benefits of partnership working.

12.1 Programme design

It is vital to establish an intentional methodology and systematic design for the desired development outcome(s) that a programme aims to achieve. This may be accomplished by:

- offering a varied menu of sport and physical activity opportunities to programme participants, which help to support multiple levels of engagement.
- creating an inclusive environment where participants feel safe to express themselves physically and which provides a setting to enhance their sense of belonging with their local communities and feel socially connected beyond the confines of the intervention itself.
- using this "safe space" to raise the participants' awareness about the boundaries of healthy risk-taking and give participants a 'voice' to express their personal perspectives, empowering them to be advocates for their communities (especially women and girls).
- engaging other family members, carers, and broader community stakeholders within the sport activities where possible, to develop more cohesive community bonds.
- transitioning the ownership of programme design and delivery to local communities and stakeholders.
- incorporating individuals with 'lived experience' of the programme and/or the issues being addressed by the programme within the project personnel.

12.2 Wider learning and development opportunities for participants

Providing opportunities for participants to engage in wider learning and development opportunities within programmes has been shown to better support programme outcomes. While sport is a very good tool to engage participants and act as a 'hook' for participation, placing the onus on sport and just concentrating on the sport aspects of the programme will

limit the extent to which social change will occur. Providing opportunities to take courses, obtain qualifications, meet new people, encounter new experiences, and build self-confidence, resilience and aspiration all help to support participants beyond the boundaries of the programme. If possible, offer opportunities for participants to transition from being a "beneficiary" to being more deeply involved in the design, delivery, and evaluation of the programme. This might include operational roles, such as volunteering, coaching, or marketing of the programme, or undertaking strategic roles, like becoming a Board member. It may also be possible to offer formal or informal engagement and employment avenues, where "participants" transition to becoming paid "staff members" of the programme.

12.3 Partnership working

Working in partnership with trusted, strategic partner organisations and service providers can contribute to providing wider support to participants (e.g., mental health support). Working collaboratively can have multiple benefits for organisations, including the opportunity to share resources, pool expertise, and enhance the profile of the project. Partner organisations may be able to provide critical services to enhance the overall impact of a programme, such as access to role models, mentors or change agents. Partnerships can be a particularly effective method to develop participant referral pathways to ensure that recruitment to programmes is targeted and specific, making certain that vulnerable populations get to engage with these projects. These partnerships may also help to provide clear exit trajectories for participants "post-project" towards opportunities for further education, training or employment.

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