

# White Paper on Social Sustainability and Sports Facilities



Written by Remco Hoekman,  
Mulier Instituut

Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport,  
Council of Europe

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# Contents

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>FOREWORD</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>SUMMARY – WHITE PAPER ON SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND SPORTS FACILITIES</b>	<b>7</b>
Background	7
Social sustainability and sports facilities	7
Conclusions and recommendations	8
<b>CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2 – BACKGROUND</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1. Sustainable Development Goals	11
2.2. Role of sports facilities in policies	13
<b>CHAPTER 3 – SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND SPORTS FACILITIES</b>	<b>15</b>
3.1. Social sustainability	15
3.2. Social sustainability and sports facilities	16
<b>CHAPTER 4 – QUICK SCAN: DATA, KNOWLEDGE AND GOOD PRACTICES</b>	<b>17</b>
4.1. Access to sports facilities	17
4.2. Optimal use of sports facilities	19
4.3. Sustainability of sports facilities	21
<b>CHAPTER 5 – CASE STUDIES ON THE DISTRIBUTION OF SPORTS FACILITIES</b>	<b>23</b>
5.1. General methodology	23
5.2. The Netherlands	23
5.3. Denmark	25
5.4. Belgium	26
5.5. Finland	27
5.6. England	27
5.7. Conclusion	28
<b>CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>29</b>
6.1. Conclusions	29
6.2. Research agenda	30
6.3. Policy recommendations	30
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>33</b>

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# Foreword

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**Solène Charuau**  
**Chair of the EPAS Governing Board**

Sports facilities play an essential role in promoting social sustainability by creating inclusive and safe spaces that allow access to sport for everyone, thus promoting the right to sport for all, physical and mental health, well-being and social cohesion. Within the framework of the Council of Europe and more specifically of its Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS), these values are at the core of the European Sports Charter, which states that participation in sport partly depends on the extent, variety and accessibility of sports facilities.

The European Sports Charter highlights the importance of having sustainable, safe and inclusive sports environments, with strong and sustainable governance as well as funding mechanisms that maintain the accessibility and economic viability of sports facilities. By supporting the social sustainability of sports infrastructures, EPAS is at the forefront of promoting ethical, responsible, inclusive and sustainable sports policies within its member states and beyond. As this study stresses, the social sustainability of sports infrastructure is understood as going beyond physical infrastructure. It also means guaranteeing equal access for everyone to sports infrastructures, especially by making them accessible to the most vulnerable, marginalised and under-represented groups, including persons with disabilities or on low incomes. By promoting the broadest possible accessibility from the design stage to their daily use, these facilities can become catalysts for inclusion and social integration. This report also stresses the importance of defining strong governance frameworks, regulations and sustainable policies, including energy-saving and resource-friendly management, to ensure the long-term social impact of sports facilities.

For EPAS, the integration of social sustainability in the definition of sports policies guarantees that access to sports facilities is not limited to a part of the population, thus contributing to making the practice of sport a right for all and helping to shape a more inclusive, safer and healthier European sports landscape. This contribution of EPAS to the social sustainability of sports facilities is fully in line with the broader social objectives defined by the Council of Europe and also by the United Nations in their Sustainable Development Goals. This study will inspire our future work to strengthen the social sustainability of sports facilities in Europe and beyond and contribute to making access to sport a fundamental right.



## Summary

# White Paper on Social Sustainability and Sports Facilities

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### Background

This report is a key EPAS deliverable on the mapping of sports facilities, providing insights into social sustainability and sports facilities. It ties in with current policy frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the European Green Deal and uses the Revised European Sports Charter as a starting point.

The Revised European Sports Charter (Council of Europe, 2021) addresses three key issues related to sports facilities. First, in order to guarantee the right to sport, local authorities should ensure that all members of the local community have opportunities to take part in sport<sup>1</sup> and as such have access to sports facilities. Second, the overall planning of sports facilities is a matter for the public authorities, who should take measures designed to ensure good management and the safe and full use of facilities. Third, owners of sports facilities within the infrastructure must act proactively and implement sustainability measures.

The concept of social sustainability is relevant to these key issues for sports facilities. This report on social sustainability and sports facilities will focus on: (1) access to sports facilities; (2) the optimal use of sports facilities; and (3) the sustainability of sports facilities.

### Social sustainability and sports facilities

Sports facilities, as (indoor or outdoor) spaces planned, designed and used for sporting activities, can contribute to the social sustainability of communities. Social sustainability is defined as the health, well-being and quality of life of communities and their adaptability and capacity to function effectively in the future. Good sports infrastructure is an important prerequisite for participation in sport and can have a social function within a community. Its contribution to social sustainability depends on the accessibility of sports facilities, the use and proper management of sports facilities and sustainability issues.

Data on sports facilities in different countries show that they are fairly well distributed. However, accessibility is an issue of concern. It is a multifaceted concept and it is not possible to provide an overall picture of the situation. To ensure the inclusion of all groups in society, more attention should be paid to the views of those in the more vulnerable groups.

Information on the use of sports facilities for sporting purposes is available from Eurobarometer data, which show a decline in the use of formal sports facilities. There is an interest in expanding the use of sports facilities in order to increase their financial and societal value. In general terms, it can be said that for a sports facility to be of optimal use and social value, it is vital that the “hardware” (the sports facilities or spaces), “orgware” (the organisational and/or political actors governing the space) and “software” (the activities taking place in the facility) are perfectly attuned to the needs of the population. Suboptimal use of sports facilities is often the result of a combination of factors. These may include their monofunctional nature, the limited organisational power of sports providers, the level of accessibility experienced by users, and restrictive laws and regulations and zoning plans.

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1. The notion of sport in the text refers to the definition provided by the Revised European Sports Charter (2021): “‘Sport’ means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, are aimed at maintaining or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels”.

There has been an increased focus on the sustainability of sports facilities in recent years. Several Council of Europe member states have subsidy programmes in place to stimulate sustainability measures at the grassroots level. The impact of this on the sustainability of sports facilities and the progress made towards the European Green Deal targets is largely unknown. Where data are available, they show that the “low-hanging fruit” has been picked and that more substantial action is needed to achieve the targets of the European Green Deal.

## Conclusions and recommendations

We conclude that the social sustainability of sports facilities is about making sports facilities affordable and accessible to all groups in society, and about using and operating them in a sustainable way. They should act as meeting places for all groups in society to connect with each other. As such, sports facilities can contribute to socially sustainable communities and broader sustainable development goals. Optimal use of sports facilities is important to make them financially sustainable for the future and to increase their wider impact on the community. Such facilities also need to be sustainable in order to contribute to the European Green Deal.

Improvements are proposed for all aspects. First, the accessibility of sports facilities needs to be improved and monitored in order to gather data on this issue. Second, the use and social value of sports facilities should be further investigated in order to better monetise the value of sports facilities and their contribution to social sustainability. Third, more insight into the sustainability of sports facilities is needed in order to monitor progress towards the goals of the European Green Deal.

Based on this report, we have formulated the following policy recommendations.

- ▶ Continue activities on sports facility mapping to provide a platform for discussion and knowledge exchange on sports facilities.
- ▶ Ensure that the accessibility of sports facilities remains a priority on the policy agenda, and organise a high-level meeting dedicated to this topic (High-Level Forum on Accessible Sports Infrastructure), targeting decision makers in Council of Europe member states who are responsible for developing policy programmes and subsidy schemes.
- ▶ Facilitate a research agenda on sports facilities to improve the data and knowledge on the subject. A good starting point would be a co-ordinated effort to collect more harmonised data on the presence, use and sustainability of sports facilities.
- ▶ Collect evidence of good practice on accessible, well-used and sustainable sports facilities to be made publicly available internationally.
- ▶ Adopt the concept of placemaking. Placemaking is essential to make the step from an ordinary space to a place that people want to use or where they feel at home.
- ▶ Take forward the SHARE<sup>2</sup> initiative to raise awareness of sports facilities’ specific role in the context of regional and local development. The social return on investment model could be used and developed to calculate the social value of such facilities in a local or regional context. This is deemed helpful to providing arguments to justify new investment or maintain the current levels of investment in sports facilities in times of crisis.

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2. [www.sport.ec.europa.eu/policies/sport-and-economy/share-initiative-2018-2023](http://www.sport.ec.europa.eu/policies/sport-and-economy/share-initiative-2018-2023).

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

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In 2020, the Council of Europe launched its activities in the field of sports facilities mapping within the framework of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS). To build on existing initiatives, it sought to collaborate with stakeholders involved in sports facilities research. This led to co-operation with the Mulier Instituut, which chairs the Expert Group on Sports Facility Databases and Related Research (hereinafter, “the Expert Group”). The Mulier Instituut is one of the organisations in Europe that is active in the field of sports facility mapping and takes initiatives to exchange knowledge with other organisations in Europe on this topic. It is supported by the Dutch Ministry of Sport.

The Expert Group has taken an active role in supporting the Council of Europe in its initiatives to engage in debates on different aspects of sports facilities mapping in Europe. A series of expert meetings were co-organised by EPAS and the Mulier Instituut, focusing on the presence, accessibility, use and sustainability of sports facilities.<sup>3</sup>

The overall conclusion was that the topic of sports facilities, in all its aspects, was relevant to EPAS members. In addition to mapping sports facilities, issues of inequality and sustainability were deemed to be important in the current policy landscape. The need for a key deliverable on the presence and social value of sports facilities was also identified. The presence of sports facilities is closely linked to EPAS objectives for sports facility mapping. The social value of sports facilities ties in with the societal relevance of access to sports facilities and the broader policy context in which sports facilities are placed (such as the Sustainable Development Goals).

For this key deliverable, the Council of Europe asked the Mulier Instituut to draft a white paper. To position this deliverable within current policy paradigms, its scope was broadened to include “social sustainability and sports facilities”. This provides an opportunity to address both the presence of sports facilities, which is linked to issues of equity of access and distribution, and the social and sustainability angle.

This white paper therefore aims to highlight the existing knowledge on social sustainability and sports facilities. Chapter 2 provides more background information on the Sustainable Development Goals and the role of sports facilities in policy. Chapter 3 looks at the concept of social sustainability and sports facilities and provides a definition. Chapter 4 presents available data and knowledge on different aspects of sports facilities. Chapter 5 focuses on the presence of sports facilities, with case studies from the Netherlands, Flanders (Belgium), Denmark, Finland and England. Last, Chapter 6 highlights key findings and identified knowledge gaps and concludes with suggestions for a research agenda on social sustainability and sports facilities and policy recommendations.

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3. [www.coe.int/en/web/sport/mapping-of-sports-facilities](http://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/mapping-of-sports-facilities).



## Chapter 2

# Background

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**T**his chapter places social sustainability and the role of sports facilities in a broader context. We begin with the relevant policy frameworks within which the issue of social sustainability and sports facilities can be placed. First, we outline the Sustainable Development Goals, which were adopted by United Nations member states in 2015. They are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. This provides a broader policy framework for social sustainability. Second, we highlight the European sports policy framework and the attention that is paid to sports facilities at a European, national and local level.

### 2.1. Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals are “a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere”.

**End poverty in all its forms everywhere**

**End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture**

**Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages**

**Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all**

**Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls**

**Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all**

**Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all**

**Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all**

**Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation**

**Reduce inequality within and among countries**

**Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable**

**Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns**

**Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts**

**Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development**

**Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss**

**Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels**

**Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development**

Sport is considered an enabler of sustainable development and can contribute to advancing the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This is also stressed in the Revised European Sports Charter (Council of Europe 2021: 9-10):

- ▶ sport is a social, educational and cultural activity based on voluntary choice which encourages contact between European countries and their citizens, and plays a fundamental role in the realisation of the aim of the Council of Europe by reinforcing the bonds between peoples and developing awareness of a European cultural identity;
- ▶ sport can make diverse contributions to personal well-being and social development, and physical exercise in particular helps to promote both physical and mental well-being;
- ▶ there is a close interrelationship between sound environmental conditions, sporting activities and a need to integrate environmental considerations and the principle of sustainable development into sport;
- ▶ sport is also an important economic sector in Europe in its own right, contributing to economic growth, development and employment, as has been underlined by many studies;
- ▶ political, economic and social changes and their impact on sport have occurred in Europe at a rapid pace since the last revision of the European Sports Charter in 2001, making a new European Sports Charter necessary to reflect these changes and to face up to future challenges;
- ▶ the combination of standards on sports development and on sports ethics into one single reference standard on sports policies would be more effective;
- ▶ public authorities should develop reciprocal co-operation with the sports movement, as the essential basis of sport, in order to promote the values and benefits of sport, and in many European States governmental action in sport is taken in order to be complementary to and support the work of this movement (subsidiarity);
- ▶ the current structure of competitive sport in Europe, which is mainly based on a national configuration with competitions at regional, national, continental and global levels, and which respects the regulatory role of international governing bodies, has delivered benefits in terms of the coherent development of sport and international solidarity.

The Kazan Action Plan<sup>4</sup> also marks a commitment to link sport policy development to the United Nations 2030 Agenda, making it a relevant framework.

However, the extent to which sport can fulfil this enabling role is a matter of some debate. The main critique is that policy and politics mostly overlook the exclusionary nature of many sporting practices and often convey an overly simplistic connotation of the goodness of sport and its potential to bring social objectives closer (Coakley 2015; Coalter 2007; Elling 2018). One could say that nowadays there is a seemingly naturalised, normative and instrumental view of sports participation, with a presumption of links between sport and various democratic, economic, educational, societal and health values (Coalter 2007; Österlind 2016). Unlike most other policy areas, sports policy has rarely been subject to extensive critical analysis. Much is therefore unknown about the actual functioning and development of sports policy (Houlihan 2005; Mansfield 2016).

More recently, however, Grix et al. (2018) noted a growing interest in evidence-based empirical research on the impact of sports policy. There is also a growing demand for sports policy indicators. To this end, the European Commission set up a Task Force on Harmonised Sport Statistics with subgroups on the economic, health and social dimensions of sport. The Revised European Sports Charter includes a recommendation that member state governments should provide or facilitate the provision of information and data that will be needed for monitoring. The Kazan Action Plan also includes an action to develop indicators to measure sport's contribution to the SDGs. We will adopt this more evidence-based and data-driven approach when looking at the available evidence and data on the relevant aspects of sports facilities.

In Chapter 3, we explore the links between sports facilities and the SDGs, and describe their contribution to achieving them where it is most evident.

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4. [www.unesco.org/en/kazan-action-plan](http://www.unesco.org/en/kazan-action-plan).

## 2.2. Role of sports facilities in policies

### European Sports Charter and other policies

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In addition to the broader attention given to sport in policy documents, several references are made to aspects related to sports facilities. The European Sports Charter specifically refers to sports facilities in section E, “Means”, in which it is stated that participation in sport is dependent in part on the extent, the variety and the accessibility of facilities. The overall planning of sports facilities is considered a matter for the public authorities. Those responsible should take account of national, regional and local requirements, and take measures designed to ensure good management and the safe and full use of facilities. The accessibility of sports facilities is also referred to in this section, with a call for sports facility owners to take appropriate steps to make sports facilities accessible to people from disadvantaged groups. This ties in with section D, “Sport for all”, Article 10, which states that it should be ensured that all members of a local community have opportunities to take part in sport and that, where necessary, additional measures are taken that are aimed at enabling disadvantaged individuals or groups and people with disabilities to make effective use of such opportunities.

There is a further reference to facilities in the European Sports Charter, in Article 9 on sustainability, which builds on previous commitments made by some Council of Europe member states on sustainability issues, including the European Green Deal. The European Green Deal sets a path towards carbon neutrality by 2050 and calls for collective action from every sector of society, including the sports sector. A recent report by the European Commission’s Expert Group, “Green Sport: a common EU framework”, provides focused guidance and recommendations to create a pathway for European sport to meet the goals of the Green Deal. It provides guidance to policy makers and to the sports movement on four focus areas: “innovative cross-sectoral solutions”, “sustainable sport events”, “sustainable sport infrastructures” and “capacity building, education, and promotion of sustainable sport practices”.

The Green Sport Expert Group was established as part of the EU Work Plan for Sport 2021-24 (European Union 2023). Composed of representatives from EU member states, observers from the global sporting world and experts from institutions such as the European Environment Agency and the Secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, it has charted a sustainable course for sports under the European Green Deal. Its report serves as a comprehensive “playbook” for promoting environmental sustainability in the European sports sector. It underscores the need for EU member states to develop national strategies for sustainable sport and for sports organisations to calculate and monitor their carbon footprint.

### National policies

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Governments have long played an active role in providing sports facilities where commercial parties do not provide them. As such, ensuring access to sports facilities is considered a central element of effective sport participation policy (Nicholson, Hoyer and Houlihan 2011). By adopting the Revised European Sports Charter, Council of Europe member states underline their responsibility to facilitate sporting practices. In some countries, national governments take more responsibility than in others. In Norway, for instance, the government subsidises the construction of sports facilities. In the Netherlands, on the other hand, this was only the case in the 1960s and 1970s, through a subsidy programme for municipalities to build sports facilities. The Netherlands does have a programme for voluntary sports clubs and foundations to receive public funding to make their sports facilities more sustainable or accessible to people with disabilities. Similarly, in Portugal, the National Public Sports Institute (IPDJ) runs the Sports Facilities Regeneration Programme. This aims to provide financial support for the rehabilitation of sports facilities. Eligible measures include the adaptation of existing facilities to ensure accessibility for people with reduced mobility and sustainability projects.

In Italy, sport has benefited from the recovery and resilience plans implemented after the Covid-19 pandemic. Italy has invested in urban regeneration measures with a focus on sports facilities to promote social inclusion and integration, especially in the most deprived areas (European Commission 2022). The project supports the construction and regeneration of sports facilities in disadvantaged areas of the country and the distribution of sports equipment to disadvantaged areas. It will also support the completion and adaptation of existing sports facilities. This includes, for example, functional recovery, restructuring, extraordinary maintenance, removal of architectural barriers and energy efficiency.

In general, the facilitation of sporting activities takes place mainly at local level. Local authorities are the most important, but also the most tangible governmental structure for promoting sport participation at community level (Vos, Vandermeersch and Scheerder 2016). Based on the principle of subsidiarity, in some countries

(such as Denmark and France) this is enshrined in law. In others, however, it is a non-statutory public service provided by local authorities (as in the Netherlands and the UK), which means that they have full autonomy and are not obliged to promote sport. In Flanders (Belgium), the former Flemish Parliament law on local sports policy was recently amended by decree, bringing the situation closer to that in the Netherlands and the UK, where local authorities have the autonomy to decide how and to what extent they want to invest in sports.

## Local authorities

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Local authorities play a key role in the provision of grassroots sport. Sports facilities account for by far the largest proportion of local sport budgets, making them a key priority for local sport policy. The lack of knowledge about the impact of sports facilities on increasing participation rates is problematic, given the current drive for evidence-based and proven effective sport policy, as highlighted above. Local authorities have an overview of spending on sports facilities and the number of sports facilities available. But less is known about the usage of sports facilities and their societal value. However, it is generally accepted among policy makers that ensuring access to sports facilities is a central element of an effective sports participation policy (Nicholson, Hoye and Houlihan 2011).

Data on local authority expenditure in the Netherlands show that 72% of the local sports budget is dedicated to sports facilities (Van Eldert 2023). Although policy storylines embrace the entire sporting landscape and focus on the instrumental value of sport, actual policy expenditure is concentrated on providing facilities (Hoekman, Elling and van der Poel 2019). In other countries too, a large proportion of local sports budgets is spent on sports facilities. In Portugal, for example, local authorities manage local sports infrastructure and generally make it freely available to the public. The impact of this financial support, for example in terms of the societal value of sport, is largely unknown. However, it is assumed that it contributes to better access to sports facilities.

In an effort to make sports facilities more accessible, several countries have set up websites where members of the public can find sports facilities in or close to their municipality. In Portugal, the general public and sports entities can consult a website listing sports facilities by location and sport to find out what is available and accessible in their area ([www.snid.pt](http://www.snid.pt)). In Finland, a similar service is provided by LIPAS, Finland's national database of sports facilities. It includes approximately 43 000 sports facilities, outdoor routes and recreational areas ([www.lipas.fi](http://www.lipas.fi)). However, there are also many countries that lack comprehensive data on sports facilities and would benefit from standardised mapping of sports facilities.

Issues of supply and demand, usage, financial management and societal value are all part of the current local policy landscape for sports facilities, as are sustainability issues. Needless to say, these policy issues are inter-related and subject to limited resources, competition for space and changing patterns of participation in sport.

For the purposes of this report, we will not address all of these challenges in detail. We will focus on those aspects enshrined in the Revised European Sports Charter. First, the right to sport means that local authorities should ensure that all members of a local community have opportunities to take part in sport and that, where necessary, additional measures are taken that aim to enable disadvantaged individuals or groups and people with disabilities to make effective use of such opportunities. Second, the overall planning of sports facilities is a matter for the public authorities, who should take account of national, regional and local requirements, and take measures designed to ensure good management and the safe and full use of facilities. Third, the owners of facilities within the sports infrastructure, which are local authorities in most European countries, must act proactively to identify the effects and consequences of their facilities, implement sustainability measures and use technological advancements to increase accessibility and optimise the use of sports facilities.

## Chapter 3

# Social sustainability and sports facilities

In this chapter, we will first take a closer look at the definition of social sustainability. We will then apply the concept and definition of social sustainability to sports facilities and identify the aspects that will be central to the rest of the report.

### 3.1. Social sustainability

The concept of social sustainability is most often used in relation to the more topical areas of sustainability (such as climate). The literature suggests that social sustainability needs to be more explicitly defined, identified and planned to have a broader purpose (Baldwin and King 2018; Montalbán-Domingo et al. 2018; Ly and Cope 2023). Ly and Cope (2023) link social sustainability to social capital. This could open up questions about how sports facilities relate to various aspects of social capital. They also identify the five main elements or principles of social sustainability: quality of life; safety and security; equity; adaptability; and social inclusion and cohesion. These can also be applied to the sports sector.

**Figure 3.1. Conceptual model of social sustainability**



Figure 3.1. Source: Ly and Cope 2023: 5350

Another applicable definition can be found in McKenzie (2004), who sees social sustainability as “a positive condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition”.

Socially sustainable communities could be described as equitable, diverse, connected and democratic and providing a good quality of life. It is when formal and informal processes, systems, structures and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities. As Baldwin and King (2018) argue, social sustainability is concerned with communities’ health, well-being and quality of life, and their capacity to function effectively in the future. Based on this, we have built our definition of social sustainability.



### Definition

**Social sustainability:** the health, well-being and quality of life of communities and their capacity to adapt and function effectively in the future.

## 3.2. Social sustainability and sports facilities

The Commonwealth (2019) noted the link between sport policies and SDGs in its report. In the previous chapter, we also highlighted the function attributed to sport as an enabler for achieving the SDGs. As sporting practices require certain spaces such as sports facilities, it can be argued that sports facilities also have an impact on social sustainability through their role as an enabler of sport participation.



### Definition

**Sports facility:** an (indoor or outdoor) space planned, designed and used for sporting activities.

Sports facilities are spaces that are planned, designed and used for sporting activities. According to Lefebvre (1991), space is both the medium and outcome of social relations. In this sense, the social sustainability of sports facilities is about facilitating social relations, bringing all groups in society to the facilities. Sports facilities should also support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities. This requires access to sports facilities and use of sports facilities by all groups in society. Furthermore, sustainable funding models for sports facilities are essential to make them affordable and financially sustainable for the future. In addition, attention should be paid to the more topical areas to which social sustainability is often linked: sustainability itself (such as the climate). How sustainable are sports facilities? This will also most likely relate to sustainable funding models for sports facilities, as rising energy prices can have a major impact on their running costs.

The above-mentioned topics tie in with the references to sports facilities in the Revised European Sports Charter, which we discussed in the section on the role of sports facilities in policies in Chapter 2. To further highlight the importance of sports facilities in relation to social sustainability, we have drawn a clear link between the SDGs and sports facilities. First, sports facilities play a role in SDG number 11 (“Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”). Infrastructure and space for sports can support or initiate active and healthy lifestyles for the citizens in communities. Second, SDG number 10 (“Reduce inequality within and among countries”) is also relevant here. Inequality within countries can be reduced by providing equal access to sports facilities, for which the accessibility and equal distribution of sports facilities is necessary. Third, sports facilities can also contribute to SDG number 3 (“Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”). Sports facilities and the activities they provide for all ages help to promote healthy lifestyles. Fourth, the accessibility of sports facilities to women and girls is relevant to SDG number 5 (“Achieve gender equality and empower women and girls”) and can be promoted through activities for women and girls in such facilities. Last, there is a clear link between sustainability measures and SDG number 13 (“Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”). The remainder of this report is dedicated to further exploring the potential for sports facilities to contribute to the SDGs and how this relates to the social sustainability of sports facilities.

## Chapter 4

# Quick scan: data, knowledge and good practices

**B**ased on the previous chapters, we have defined three aspects that are central both to the concept of social sustainability and to the policy rhetoric about the importance and challenges of sports facilities. These are (1) access to sports facilities for all groups in society; (2) the optimal use of sports facilities in terms of their financial operation and the societal value they contribute; and (3) the sustainability of sports facilities. In this chapter, we highlight some of the available data, knowledge and good practice. Note that this is a quick scan and a first step in identifying the available knowledge on these issues.

### 4.1. Access to sports facilities

In the European Sports Charter, emphasis is put on equal access to sports facilities for all. Depending on the country or municipality where you live, there may be differences in the availability of sports and sports facilities. The Eurobarometer provides information at national level on how satisfied people are with the opportunities for physical activity in the area where they live.

QB13.1 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about sport and physical activity?  
(% - The area where you live offers you many opportunities to be physically active)

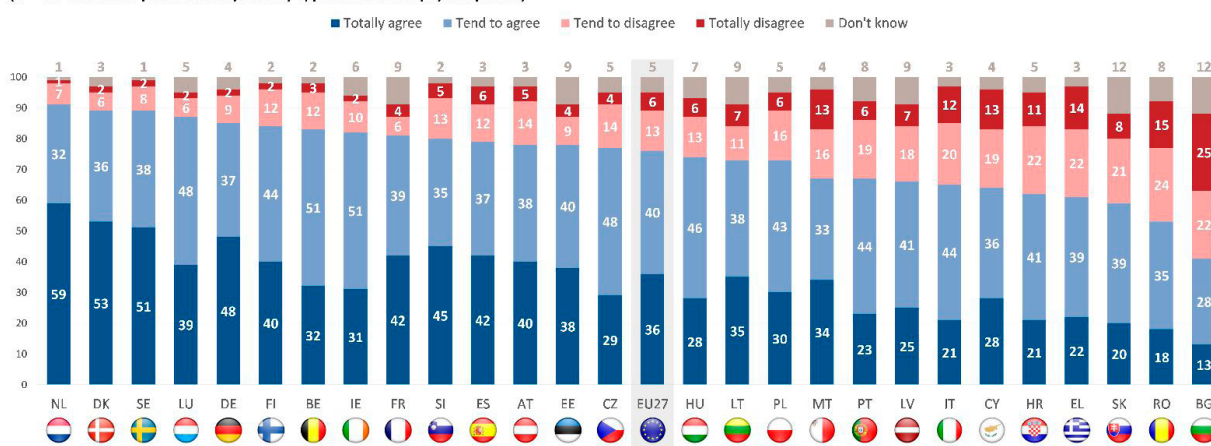


Figure 4.1. Source: European Commission 2023

The figure above shows a high degree of variation between countries. This points to inequalities in the opportunities to be physically active in the areas where people live. In the context of the SDGs, it could be argued that the socio-spatial distribution of sports facilities is linked to environmental injustices and inequalities in participation and opportunities for a healthy lifestyle. The absence of sports facilities in deprived areas could reinforce the sport participation gap observed between poorer and richer areas based on individual factors such as education and income levels (Hoekman, Breedveld and Kraaykamp 2017).

However, a review of previous analyses of sports facilities in different European countries shows mixed and sometimes contradictory results regarding the presence, variety and proximity of sports facilities and the level of deprivation in the area. The results varied according to the type and ownership of the sports facilities studied and the country or even the region. For example, a study in Glasgow, Scotland, found an inequitable distribution of recreational facilities in favour of the most affluent areas (Macintyre, Macdonald and Ellaway 2008). In line with this, studies in France (Ministère des Sports 2011) and England (Hillsdon et al. 2007) showed that there were fewer sports facilities in deprived areas. With regard to different types of sports facilities, Macintyre, Macdonald and Ellaway (2008) found that tennis courts were more likely to be situated in affluent areas, while public sports centres and public playing fields were more likely to be located in deprived areas. This could be partly explained by the logic of supply and demand, as higher social classes are likely to have a higher demand for tennis courts than lower social classes. Next, privately owned sports facilities appeared to be more common in affluent areas, following purchasing power, while public sports facilities, which aim to provide equal access for all, were more common in poorer areas (Ahlfeldt and Feddersen 2007; Lamb et al. 2010).

In the next chapter, we will present case studies on the presence of sports facilities in the Netherlands, Flanders (Belgium), Denmark, Finland and England.

Having access to sports facilities is not the same as having a sports facility nearby. Sports facilities also need to be accessible to all target groups and this is an issue of concern. At the EPAS meeting on the mapping of sports facilities on 5 July 2022, the Czech representative Tomáš Fíbek, from the Department of Sports, said that their work on mapping sports infrastructure and establishing sports registers also related to financial and social sustainability. It was noted that physical and socio-economic accessibility was crucial for access to sports facilities. As a result, an additional meeting on the accessibility and use of sports facilities was held during the Czech Presidency of the European Union on 22 September 2022. It was noted that accessibility was about more than providing a ramp to make such facilities wheelchair accessible (Rodríguez 2022), although in most cases this was as far as the thinking went when it came to accessibility for people with disabilities. This is an illustration of how proximity does not always mean accessibility, as different kinds of social, financial or physical barriers may prevent some groups from using nearby available facilities.

Physical accessibility should include the ability to enter, usability, ease of exit and accessible information at the site. Ability to enter refers to whether everyone can easily enter the facility and the variety of spaces available there. Usability focuses on whether everyone can use what is on offer. Ease of exit refers to whether everyone can leave the facility quickly and safely (in an emergency). And accessible information is about whether everyone can easily read and understand the information on site. In addition to physical accessibility, attention could be paid to social accessibility, practical accessibility and information accessibility.

With the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the attention to accessibility in the Revised European Sports Charter (Council of Europe 2021), there is a clear policy framework that promotes the accessibility of sports facilities for people with disabilities. It is generally recognised that the accessibility of a sports facility, in addition to accessible sports activities, is an important prerequisite for the use of such facilities. However, there are many examples of sports facilities that are not accessible to various groups in society, particularly those in vulnerable or marginalised situations. In the Netherlands, the government has therefore introduced a subsidy scheme to support accessibility measures in sports facilities. The very limited number of applications received so far shows that more needs to be done to make sports facilities accessible. Again, the problem is the lack of data on the extent to which sports facilities are currently accessible to people with disabilities.

When it comes to the accessibility of sports facilities, it is a good idea to involve the target groups in the construction process. For example, in order to create optimal facilities for sports participants with disabilities, it is essential to identify their needs at the very beginning of the planning process and to involve appropriate organisations, such as associations and sports clubs for people with disabilities (Essig et al. 2021). In terms of creating an inclusive built environment, the challenge of ensuring accessibility to sports facilities for people with a migration background lies partly in their cultural and religious differences, which can be anticipated at the design stage. Examples include providing privacy (such as screens) for women and girls playing sports who prefer that, or having separate rooms and different times for men and women.



### Good practice: Lisbon – Desporto Mexe Comigo (Sport moves me)

The main aim of the Desporto Mexe Comigo programme is to foster the social inclusion of children and young people considered to be at risk, and preferably living in Lisbon's priority intervention areas, by promoting access to regular sporting activities. The programme is run exclusively in partnership with local organisations and promotes access to regular sporting activities. Participation is completely free of charge. Activities focus on the development of personal and social skills with a view to individual and collective awareness, with a consequent change in risk behaviour and the acquisition of positive values inherent in sport and citizenship. The programme requires an average of three hours of sporting activity per week over 10 months and participation in at least three social events during the sporting season. The Municipality of Lisbon has 113 green spaces and public areas, with 146 sports facilities and areas for free access and use, most of which are managed by the City Council and Parish Councils.

For further information, see [www.lisboa.pt/temas/educacao/recursos-educativos-maio/desporto](http://www.lisboa.pt/temas/educacao/recursos-educativos-maio/desporto).

There are also financial costs associated with access to sports facilities. To make sport accessible, governments invest in sports facilities. As mentioned above, some countries provide sports facilities free of charge to voluntary sports clubs to support accessibility (as in Denmark). Countries that propose low fees for voluntary sports clubs tend to have a high sports club participation rate and a well distributed sports infrastructure. It is unclear how the governmental investment in sports facilities relates to national sports participation rates or usage of sports facilities. More data on this are needed to provide an insight into this relation.



### Good practice: placemaking for active recreation

Placemaking for active recreation is a concept that pertains to the design and planning of public spaces to encourage physical activity and social interaction. It is a subset of the broader field of placemaking, which involves designing and managing spaces with the goal of creating vibrant, people-centred locales that foster a sense of community.

The placemaking for active recreation approach is a collaborative effort initiated and led by Bulgaria Be Active, with the expert support of Placemaking Europe and the International Sport and Culture Association and has been tested in Spain, Romania, Malta and Bulgaria.

For further information, see [www.placemakingforactiverecreation.org](http://www.placemakingforactiverecreation.org).

Access to sports facilities is also about feeling welcome there. In other words, where “space becomes place”. From an ordinary space to a place where people feel welcome and share physical, cultural and social identities. For this process, it is essential to use a demand-driven approach where citizens’ needs are listened to and accommodated. Accessibility for an individual is about the optimal connection between the person and the hardware (sports facility), orgware (sport providers, degree of ownership) and software (activities, intervention) (Hoekman 2023).

## 4.2. Optimal use of sports facilities

In general, governments aim to increase participation in sport and improve the use of sports facilities. The use of sports facilities has a social function, bringing people together and contributing to their health and well-being. This reflects the inherently social nature of sports facilities. In the current crisis-like situation in Europe (post-Covid recovery in the face of a climate crisis and high energy prices), there is an obvious focus on increased use and financially sustainable operation of sports facilities. However, there has only been limited research on how to make better use of sports facilities. First, the actual use of sports facilities is largely unknown. Data on the use of sports facilities are mostly available at national level, but the Eurobarometer questionnaire provides a European benchmark. It shows a decrease in the use of more formal sports facilities and an increase in the use of parks and public streets. This is in line with developments in sports practices, with an increase in types of sports that are practised in public spaces and a decrease in types of sports that require formal sports facilities such as volleyball, handball, swimming and football.

To optimise the use of sports facilities, it is necessary to have data on each facility and how this differs from one facility to another within a municipality. Such data are hard to find. In some cases, information is available on the number of members per outdoor sports field, but not on the number of hours the field is used. Data on the use of indoor sports facilities usually come from their rental system and are based on the number of hours they have been rented out. This does not always reflect actual use. Research in Denmark shows that there is a gap between the number of rental hours recorded and the number of hours of actual use (Høyer-Kruse, Iversen and Forsberg 2017). There are also differences in the number of users per hour. Insight into the actual use of sports facilities is needed in order to think about how to increase the use of sports facilities. A digital monitor system utilising sensor-based facility tracking could be helpful in this regard.



### Good practice: Portugal – Desporto no Bairro (Sport in the Neighbourhood)

The Sport in the Neighbourhood programme aims to encourage young people to practise sport. They can choose from breaking, street basketball, skateboarding and surfing. Launched in 2020, the programme runs from July to November each year in 17 areas of Porto and eight intervention centres. The aim is to enable young people to participate in urban sports that have become very popular in Porto, and to promote their practice in a safe way, with highly qualified and experienced teachers and mentors. The four sports included in the Sport in the Neighbourhood programme have a strong appeal to the target group.

The project also involves young people who are part of the coaching team and who help to train other young people. These are young people who, as a result of their involvement in the project, are now part of neighbourhood clubs, helping other young people to discover a new passion for these sports and inspiring more people by their own example.

For further information, see [www.agoraporto.pt/noticias/desporto-no-bairro-2023-arranca-com-mais-meses-de-atividade](http://www.agoraporto.pt/noticias/desporto-no-bairro-2023-arranca-com-mais-meses-de-atividade).

The optimal use of sports facilities can be approached from the perspective of the most financially viable use or from a societal value perspective. The latter refers to the broader societal value of sport and models such as Social Return on Investments or the UEFA Grow model<sup>5</sup> (UEFA 2015).

Governments justify spending on sports facilities on the basis of the value that sports and the necessary infrastructure bring to users and to society. As financial resources are by definition scarce, it is important to gain a better understanding of the value of sports (facilities) and to be able to communicate this clearly and convincingly. This can help prevent cuts and encourage investment. Driven by the need to demonstrate accountability for public spending and the effectiveness of public policy, there is a growing demand from managers and policy makers for evidence of the wider impacts of sport and physical activity. A social return on investment (SROI) framework can help measure the impact of sport and physical activity. A study by Davies et al. (2021) of 12 community sports and leisure facilities in Sheffield found that for every £1 spent, an SROI of between £1.20 and £3.42 was generated. The research enables managers to identify the value of facilities beyond the financial indicators commonly used in performance management.

There is very little research on the monetary value of sports facilities. For example, it is plausible that the proximity of sports facilities has a positive influence on property values, but to our knowledge this has never been investigated. Sports facilities may also have a higher social and economic value in rural areas than in urban areas as there is not much else around. The Rural Development Programme in Croatia (Kriznjak 2022) is relevant here. One of its aims is to improve living conditions in rural communities, thereby contributing to the attractiveness of villages and their development potential for other activities, thus promoting growth and socio-economic sustainability. Using an ecosystem approach in a study of outdoor sports facilities in Germany, Katthage (2022) also concluded that sports facilities contribute to public welfare and human well-being.

Organisational capacity and entrepreneurship are also important for a better use of sports facilities and thus a greater contribution to public welfare. They enable a more consumer-oriented approach; that is, sports facilities are better adapted to the changing needs of (potential) sports participants and/or promote multifunctional use. This requires sports providers, owners and operators of sports facilities to have a better understanding of trends and developments in sports participation, and of how to adapt or tailor what they provide and/or

5. [www.uefa.com/news-media/news/0264-10fe1ac0497c-ffe49c301d3e-1000--uefa-explainer-valuing-european-football-s-social-return-on-/](http://www.uefa.com/news-media/news/0264-10fe1ac0497c-ffe49c301d3e-1000--uefa-explainer-valuing-european-football-s-social-return-on-/).

their facilities accordingly, without increasing pressure at peak times. It is important to recognise that sports facilities are often designed for one purpose and one type of user. To ensure optimal use of these monofunctional sports facilities, it is important to see them more as meeting places where different functions can come together. More value can be created by increasing the use of such facilities for activities other than sports.

However, sometimes it is necessary to modify sports facilities to allow a wider use of formerly monofunctional sports facilities. Good examples of these changes, such as converting old monofunctional handball facilities or other buildings into more multifunctional sports facilities, can be found in Denmark. Innovations in energy generation, water storage and biodiversity can also give sports facilities a sustainability function. These possibilities can be further explored to optimise social use, sustainability and possibly also contribute to better financial exploitation.

For non-sporting uses and for sports facilities to become neighbourhood meeting places, it is essential that they are connected to the neighbourhood and respond to the wishes and needs of the people who live in the area. There is no single solution or ideal mix of elements that will make a venue successful. It all depends on the context and how the facility, the organisation and the activities fit into that context. In general terms, it can be said that for a sports facility to be of optimal use and social value, it is vital that the “hardware” (the sports facilities or spaces), “orgware” (the organisational and/or political actors governing the space) and “software” (the activities taking place in the facility) are perfectly attuned to the needs of the population.

Suboptimal use of sports facilities is often the result of a combination of factors. These may include various conflicting interests that make co-operation difficult, the monofunctional nature of a facility or other requirements for use by other parties, the limited organisational power of sports providers, the level of accessibility experienced by users, and restrictive laws and regulations and zoning plans (Hoekman and Schadenberg 2023).

### 4.3. Sustainability of sports facilities

Some of the long-term challenges facing the sports sector in recent years have been environmental sustainability and the link between sport and the climate crisis. The rise in energy prices in 2022 has also highlighted the energy inefficiency of sports facilities in Council of Europe member states. Sports facilities are often quite old and in need of renovation. Ownership of the facilities is also an issue, as they are often not owned by sports clubs but by local authorities. When having to avoid high costs, closure is often the fastest and easiest solution.

In contemplating strategies to “build back better” from the social, political and economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is crucial to integrate environmental sustainability as a core component of the recovery process. The bounce back from such a crisis presents a unique opportunity to forge new paths and establish greener habits. Outdoor sports facilities, for example, have the potential to reduce land and resource consumption, adapt to climate change and increase the biodiversity of flora and fauna (Katthage 2022). This could be integrated into local sustainability strategies.



#### Good practice: Estonia – incentivise sustainable sports facilities

The objective of the Regional Recreational Sports Centres funding application round is to support the development of up to two regional health sports centres in each county, which will provide a wide range of opportunities for people to take part in different types of outdoor exercise all year round, free of charge.

By the end of the funding period, the centres should have high-quality, floodlit exercise tracks and the capacity to produce artificial snow. Due to the warm winters, artificial snow production is very important in order to have the right conditions for skiing. With this support, several regional recreational sports centres have upgraded their lighting to more eco-friendly LED systems and replaced their artificial snow production systems with more environmentally friendly systems that produce snow directly on the tracks instead of piling it up and then covering the track with heavy machinery.

In Germany, guidelines have been developed for the sustainable construction of sports facilities, with a focus on sports halls. The development of these guidelines has shown that although the promotion of sustainability in the construction industry is a key objective of the German government, sports facilities have not been adequately considered to date. Nonetheless, the guidelines represent a significant step forward in the promotion of sustainable design, construction and operation of sports facilities (Essig et al. 2021). In Wallonia-Brussels Federation, the general administration for sports (ADEPS) offers a subsidy for the renovation of sports facilities

in order to minimise the environmental impact of sports infrastructure (energy renovation of sports infrastructure). A similar scheme exists in Portugal. In 2023, the country launched a programme for the renovation of sports facilities. Its main goal was to promote measures to increase the energy efficiency of sports facilities (for instance, by reducing energy consumption and using renewable energy sources for own consumption). Some examples are the installation of LED indoor and outdoor lighting systems and the installation of thermal solar panels. In the Netherlands, subsidies are also available to voluntary sports clubs, most of which own (part of the) outdoor facilities. According to the programme's monitoring reports, the clubs primarily invested in solar panels and LED lighting systems. This shows that the "low-hanging fruit" has been picked and that more substantial action is needed to achieve the targets of the European Green Deal.



### Good practice: Sweden – Mistra Sport & Outdoors

Mistra Sport & Outdoors is a research and collaboration programme to generate knowledge and solutions for increased sustainability in sports and outdoor recreation.

The programme is made up of six themes.

- ▶ Knowledge and transformation
- ▶ Sustainable transport solutions
- ▶ Sustainable land and water use
- ▶ Material and sustainable equipment
- ▶ Sustainable events
- ▶ Behaviour, policy and future change

The starting point for the programme is the environmental challenges facing society. The programme aims to find and implement sustainable solutions in practice, supported by research. It also aims to start a movement for sustainable development in sport and outdoor recreation and establish a network-based development centre for sustainable solutions.

For further information, see [www.mistrasportandoutdoors.se/en/](http://www.mistrasportandoutdoors.se/en/).

Policy documents argue that sport, with its mass appeal to all segments of society, holds immense potential to spearhead awareness and drive the change towards environmental sustainability (European Union 2023). A report on sport's contribution to the European Green Deal provides more detailed analysis of the challenges and opportunities for sport to move towards a greener path and discusses the role of various stakeholders in addressing environmental issues in and through sport. It also puts forward practical guidance, resources and case studies for sports practitioners on key issues such as sustainable sports infrastructure or sustainable sports events.

However, there is a general lack of data on the current energy consumption of the sports sector. To our knowledge, only a few countries have a monitoring system in place to determine the sustainability of the sports sector and progress towards a sustainable sports sector in line with the European Green Deal. Countries with a solid database on sports facilities have been able to utilise this to include sustainability characteristics of these sports facilities in the database and monitor developments over time. However, during the second meeting of EPAS and the Mulier Instituut on mapping sports facilities, which focused on sustainability,<sup>6</sup> it became clear that there are few good examples of available data on the sustainability aspects of sports infrastructure.

6. [www.coe.int/en/web/sport/mapping-of-sports-facilities](http://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/mapping-of-sports-facilities).

# Chapter 5

## Case studies

### on the distribution of sports facilities

In the context of the social sustainability of sports facilities, it is important to gain an insight into the distribution of those facilities. The distribution in a country shows the opportunities for people in different areas to be able to access and use a sports facility (the equality of opportunity). This chapter therefore focuses on the distribution of sports facilities according to the socio-economic status of residential areas. We present case studies from the Netherlands, Denmark, Flanders (Belgium), Finland and England and discuss the findings from these countries.

#### 5.1. General methodology

To gain an insight into the distribution of sports facilities in different countries, the number of facilities per 25 000 inhabitants and the average distance to the closest facility are calculated for several types of sports facilities and for the total number of sports facilities in the country. Since we are interested in the accessibility of sports facilities, the results of the two analyses for each country are presented by area, classified according to its socio-economic status. The general methodology used is described in the box below. The results of the country-by-country analysis are presented in the sections that follow. Where appropriate, deviations from the methods due to differences in the data available for a country are also highlighted.



#### General methodology

##### *Number of sports facilities*

The number of sports facilities per 25 000 inhabitants is calculated for different types of sports facilities and, in some cases, for the total number of sports facilities in the country. Also known as the density of facilities, this is presented for the different types of facilities in different classifications according to the social-economic status (SES) of the lowest geographical level in terms of data availability, for example at neighbourhood or municipality level.

##### *Average distance to closest sports facility*

The average distance to the closest facility is also calculated for different types of sports facilities and, in some cases, for the total number of sports facilities in the country. The lowest possible geographical level in terms of data availability is used for each country, depending on data availability: address, 100 x 100 grid, district or neighbourhood. The distance is population-weighted and also presented in different classifications according to the socio-economic status of the area. Specifically, the distance is calculated from the centroid of a neighbourhood to the nearest sports facility and weighted by the number of people living in that neighbourhood. The distances of all the neighbourhoods with a given SES score are added up and divided by the total number of people living in these neighbourhoods. The distance is calculated by road or in a straight line (as the crow flies), depending on data availability.

#### 5.2. The Netherlands

##### Index for socio-economic status

In the Netherlands, the socio-economic status of areas is based on the variable Socio-Economic Status – Welfare, Education, Employment (SES-WEE). The SES-WEE score consists of the financial welfare, level of education and labour force participation of each household in a neighbourhood. The average SES-WEE score for the country as a whole is 0. Neighbourhoods with higher scores have residents who are wealthier and/or more educated and/or more likely to be in long-term employment.

## Distribution of sports facilities

The number of sports facilities per 25 000 inhabitants is lower for almost all types of facility in neighbourhoods with the lowest score on the SES-WEE index. Neighbourhoods with the highest SES-WEE scores generally have a slightly lower density of sports facilities than neighbourhoods with the second- or third-highest scores.

**Table 5.1**

Number of sports facilities per 25 000 inhabitants in the Netherlands for different types of facilities, by socio-economic status at neighbourhood level (in number of facilities)								
SES-WEE	Athletics	Fitness	Golf	Field hockey	Sports hall	Tennis	Football	Swimming pool
Less than -0.2	0.3	3.9	0.1	0.3	2.3	1.1	1.8	1.3
-0.2 to 0.1	0.2	4.9	0.1	0.3	2.2	1.8	2.1	1.8
-0.1 to 0	0.4	4.6	0.2	0.4	2.6	2.4	2.7	2.3
0 to 0.1	0.4	4.2	0.3	0.5	2.8	3.1	3.3	3.2
0.1 to 0.2	0.3	3.8	0.5	0.5	2.4	3.8	4.3	3.6
0.2 or more	0.2	3.3	0.8	0.7	1.6	4.1	4.7	3.1

Source: Mulier Instituut 2023

The average distance to the closest facility is calculated from 100 x 100 grids and weighted by population based on the number of people living in a grid. As SES-WEE scores are not available at this geographical level, we assigned each grid the score of the neighbourhood in which it is located. The average distance that residents have to travel to the closest sports facility for different types of facilities is predominantly shorter for people living in a neighbourhood with a lower score on the SES-WEE index. People living in neighbourhoods with the highest scores on the index have, on average, shorter distances to travel to facilities for golf and field hockey than people living in neighbourhoods with slightly lower scores. On the other hand, there is no clear relationship between the distance people have to travel to reach tennis and football facilities and SES-WEE scores.

**Table 5.2**

Average distance to the closest sports facility in the Netherlands for different types of facilities, by socio-economic status at neighbourhood level (in kilometres by road)							
SES-WEE	Fitness	Golf	Field hockey	Sports hall	Tennis	Football	Swimming pool
Less than -0.2	0.8	4.9	2.9	1.2	1.5	1.4	1.4
-0.2 to 0.1	0.9	5.4	3.5	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.4
-0.1 to 0	1.2	7.0	4.7	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.7
0 to 0.1	1.4	6.5	4.7	1.7	1.5	1.5	1.7
0.1 to 0.2	1.8	6.5	5.0	1.8	1.6	1.5	2.0
0.2 or more	1.7	5.7	3.9	1.9	1.6	1.5	2.2

Source: Mulier Instituut 2023

## 5.3. Denmark

### Index for socio-economic status

The Danish index for socio-economic status (Socioøkonomisk Indeks) is a reflexive index. SES scores are only available at municipality level. The primary objective of the index is to determine the amount of financial support that wealthier municipalities should provide to more economically challenged municipalities. Municipalities with a score of 1 are right in the middle and should not provide or receive any support to or from other municipalities. Wealthier municipalities have a score closer to 0 and more economically challenged municipalities have a score closer to 2. The score is based on the municipality's weighted shares of different criteria (for instance employment and education, but also the number of housing types and the number of people with disabilities or psychiatric patients in the municipality) in the entire country and the municipality's share of the population of the entire country.

### Distribution of sports facilities

The number of sports facilities per 25 000 inhabitants is particularly high for municipalities in the group with the second "highest" score on the SES index (0.8 to 0.9). In particular, the total number of facilities, the number of sports halls and the number of football facilities per 25 000 inhabitants are high for this group. There seems to be no clear correlation between the SES score of the municipality and the density of sports facilities.

Table 5.3

SES	Total	Athletics	Fitness	Golf	Sports hall	Tennis	Football	Swimming pool
1.2 or more	50.1	0.3	5.6	0.8	6.9	2.8	7.3	1.7
1.1 to 1.2	53.8	0.5	6.9	0.7	7.5	3.1	8.8	1.6
1 to 1.1	47.5	0.3	6.3	0.7	5.8	2.4	6.4	1.5
0.9 to 1.0	55.8	0.2	6.8	0.9	7.8	3.1	8.9	1.7
0.8 to 0.9	71.7	0.3	7.7	1.2	11.3	4.1	11.3	1.9
Less than 0.8	45.6	0.3	5.3	0.8	5.7	3.5	5.2	1.4

Source: IDAN 2023

The average distance to the closest facility is calculated for parishes (neighbourhoods) and weighted by population based on the number of people living in a parish. Since the SES-WEE scores are not available for this local level, we assigned each grid the score of the municipality in which it is located. There is less variation in the average distance to the closest facility for municipalities with different SES scores. Sports halls and facilities for fitness and football are on average within 2 km for people living in municipalities in all SES groups. The average distance to athletics facilities varies much more between the different SES groups. To a lesser extent, this also applies to the average distance to golf and swimming pool facilities.

Table 5.4

SES	Total	Athletics	Fitness	Golf	Sports hall	Tennis	Football	Swimming pool
1.2 or more	0.7	10.6	1.8	5.0	1.3	2.2	1.2	3.0
1.1 to 1.2	0.7	6.7	1.7	5.9	1.4	2.4	1.2	3.6
1 to 1.1	0.6	7.0	1.3	6.0	1.2	2.0	1.1	2.4
0.9 to 1.0	0.7	9.0	1.6	5.3	1.3	2.2	1.1	3.2
0.8 to 0.9	0.8	12.3	1.9	6.2	1.6	2.5	1.2	4.2
Less than 0.8	0.7	7.2	1.5	4.5	1.2	1.9	1.2	2.6

Source: IDAN 2023

## 5.4. Belgium

### Index for socio-economic status

The index for socio-economic status in Belgium is based on three variables. The scores are only available at municipality level. The scores consist of statistics on the unemployment rate, the average income per inhabitant and the proportion of people with a low level of education in the municipality. Municipalities with the highest unemployment rate, the lowest average income and the highest proportion of people with a low level of education receive a score of 1. Conversely, municipalities with the lowest unemployment rate, the highest average income and the lowest proportion of people with a low level of education receive a score of 6.

### Distribution of sports facilities

The distribution of sports facilities is better in lower SES municipalities. On average, there are more facilities per 25 000 inhabitants in these municipalities than in higher SES municipalities.

Table 5.5

Number of sports facilities per 25 000 inhabitants in Belgium for different types of facilities, by socio-economic status at municipality level (in number of facilities)								
SES	Athletics	Fitness	Golf	Field hockey	Sports hall	Tennis	Football	Swimming pool
1	0.9	2.4	0.1	0.2	4.2	10.7	10.0	2.0
2	0.7	2.0	0.1	0.1	3.3	7.0	7.9	1.5
3	0.6	1.4	0.2	0.1	3.1	9.8	8.6	1.6
4	0.7	1.4	0.1	0.1	2.9	8.1	7.6	1.0
5	0.6	1.6	0.3	0.3	3.0	11.6	8.2	1.5
6	0.3	0.8	0.2	0.2	1.6	5.7	5.4	0.2

Source: Sport Vlaanderen 2023

The distance is calculated from each address to the closest facility. The municipality's score on the SES index is assigned to each address. For most sports facilities, residents of lower SES municipalities have a shorter average distance than residents of higher SES municipalities, with the exception of golf and field hockey facilities. These tend to be closer to residents of higher SES municipalities.

Table 5.6

Average distance to the closest sports facility in Belgium for different types of facilities, by socio-economic status at municipality level (in kilometres, measured as the crow flies/in a straight line)								
SES	Athletics	Fitness	Golf	Field hockey	Sports hall	Tennis	Football	Swimming pool
1	3.4	2.4	8.7	9.4	1.3	1.9	1.0	2.6
2	3.5	2.6	10.2	10.9	1.3	1.8	1.0	3.1
3	3.9	2.9	9.5	10.9	1.5	2.0	1.0	3.6
4	3.9	3.5	10.0	9.7	1.7	2.2	1.1	4.1
5	3.5	2.3	7.4	7.3	1.4	1.9	1.0	3.1
6	4.1	2.9	7.1	7.0	1.9	2.4	1.2	4.6

Source: Sport Vlaanderen 2023

## 5.5. Finland

### Index for socio-economic status

In Finland, the socio-economic status of areas is based on the proportion of people with a low level of education (no qualification after basic education or unknown qualification), the proportion of residents in the lowest income category and the proportion of unemployed labour force, defined as people aged 15-64 who were unemployed on the last working day of the year. Geographical squares of 1 km by 1 km were used as identifiable areas.

### Distribution of sports facilities

The number of sports facilities per 25 000 inhabitants is calculated at the scale of the 1 km<sup>2</sup> grid. Results are presented only for the highest quintile of socio-economic status and the lowest quintile of socio-economic status. The results show that, with the exception of golf courses, the distribution of different types of sports facilities is mostly in favour of areas with the lowest socio-economic status.

Table 5.7

Average number of sports facilities per 25 000 inhabitants in Finland for different types of facilities, by socio-economic status, in 1 km by 1 km squares (in kilometres, measured as the crow flies/in a straight line)		
Type of sports facility	SES highest 20%	SES lowest 20%
Neighbourhood sports area and parks	14.89	25.24
Athletics fields and areas	2.02	6.12
Ball fields	28.50	40.51
Open-air ice venues and ice-skating sites	12.60	19.41
Golf courses and training areas	1.04	0.53
Gyms and training halls	14.79	39.00
Sports halls	3.85	7.29
Miscellaneous sport-specific indoor venues	1.80	4.68
Indoor ice arenas	0.52	1.93
Indoor swimming pools and spas	0.59	2.64
Open-air pools and public beaches	8.13	8.42

Source: LIPAS sport facility database 2023, University of Jyväskylä

## 5.6. England

### Index for socio-economic status

In England, the socio-economic status of areas is expressed in the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). The IMD combines information from seven domains (income; employment; education, skills and training; health and disability; crime; barriers to housing and services; living environment) to produce an overall relative measure of deprivation. Areas with a score of 1 on the IMD are the 10% most deprived areas, areas with a score of 10 belong to the 10% least deprived areas. The IMD is available at the scale of output areas; the smallest census report unit is equivalent to between 40 and 250 households or 100 to 625 people.

## Distribution of sports facilities

The number of sports facilities per 25 000 inhabitants is calculated at the scale of the output areas and includes all facilities within a maximum of 2 000 metres (straight-line distance). The threshold of 2 000 metres is applied to define facilities that a population is able to reach. A threshold of 2 000m was selected as a blended distance to capture the options of reaching a facility by driving, public transport, cycling or walking.

**Table 5.8**

Number of sports facilities per 25 000 inhabitants within 2 000 metres of the population within each IMD decile (in number of facilities within 2 000 metres)									
IMD decile	Artificial grass pitches	Athletics	Golf	Grass pitches	Health and fitness gyms	(Indoor) tennis courts	(Outdoor) tennis courts	Sports hall	Swimming pool
1	5.8	0.3	0.5	23.6	4.8	0.9	7.1	6.1	2.6
2	5.1	0.3	0.5	23.3	4.8	0.8	8.3	5.8	2.7
3	4.6	0.2	0.5	21.3	4.6	0.8	8.5	5.4	2.6
4	3.9	0.2	0.5	20.2	4.3	0.8	8.8	4.9	2.5
5	3.4	0.2	0.6	19.4	3.7	0.8	8.4	4.5	2.2
6	2.8	0.2	0.6	18.5	3.3	0.7	8.5	4.0	2.0
7	2.7	0.2	0.6	18.7	2.9	0.8	8.7	3.8	1.9
8	2.5	0.1	0.7	19.2	2.6	0.8	8.7	3.7	1.8
9	2.3	0.1	0.7	19.3	2.5	0.7	8.9	3.7	1.8
10	2.3	0.1	0.8	20.9	2.4	0.8	10.2	3.9	1.9

Source: Sport England 2023

Sports facilities in England are more common in lower IMD deciles than in higher IMD deciles. This holds true for most sports facilities based on the 2 000-metre threshold. Golf courses and outdoor tennis courts are the exception and are more common in higher IMD deciles.

## 5.7. Conclusion

The sports facility databases in the countries presented in this chapter allowed geographical analyses of the presence of sports facilities. In general, the results showed a reasonable distribution of sports facilities in lower SES neighbourhoods. It should be noted that lower SES neighbourhoods are more likely to be situated in urban areas. This could partially explain the shorter travel distances to most facilities in lower SES neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, the availability of sports facilities tends to favour low SES areas in most countries. This shows that people in these areas are more likely to have sports facilities nearby. What is not known, however, is how accessible these facilities are.

## Chapter 6

# Conclusions and recommendations

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### 6.1. Conclusions

Participation in sport is seen as a powerful tool to promote social inclusion, cohesion and well-being. Sport brings people together, which is invaluable at a time when differences between communities are so often highlighted. As a result, sport is seen as an enabler of sustainable development and can contribute to advancing the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As sporting practices require certain spaces, such as sports facilities, it can be argued that sports facilities, as enablers of sporting practices, also have an impact on social sustainability.

In this report we have defined social sustainability as the health, well-being and quality of life of communities and their capacity to adapt and function effectively in the future. Sports facilities, as (indoor or outdoor) spaces planned, designed and used for sporting activities, can contribute to the social sustainability of communities. Sports infrastructure is an important prerequisite for participation in sport and can have a social function within a community. The contribution of sports venues to social sustainability depends on their accessibility, use and proper management, as well as on sustainability aspects.

In the Revised European Sports Charter (Council of Europe 2021), such aspects of social sustainability also have an impact on three key issues related to sports facilities. First, to safeguard the right to sport, local authorities should ensure that all members of a local community have opportunities to take part in sport and as such have access to sports facilities. Second, the overall planning of sports facilities is a matter for the public authorities, who should take measures designed to ensure good management and the safe and full use of facilities. Third, owners of sports facilities within the infrastructure must act proactively and implement sustainability measures.

The accessibility of sports facilities is an issue of concern. It is a multifaceted concept and it is not possible to provide an overall picture of the situation. To ensure the inclusion of all groups in society, more attention should be paid to the views of those in the more vulnerable groups. This issue should be placed higher on the policy agenda. A specific meeting on this topic is recommended to gather more information and stimulate the exchange of knowledge on this issue.

To make better use of sports facilities, attention must be paid to the combination of hardware, orgware and software. The use of sports facilities depends in part on the sports provider, the extent to which the activities organised meet community needs and whether people feel welcome there. Another aspect that has been identified for the optimal use of sports facilities is their potential for multipurpose use and the opportunities this can offer for increasing their social value. There are also innovations that can give sports facilities a sustainability function by generating energy, storing water and supporting biodiversity. These opportunities can be further explored to optimise social and potentially financial benefits.

The social value of sports facilities is hard to calculate. Some initiatives have been taken to calculate the SROI of sport or of a specific sport (for example, the UEFA Grow Model). However, the study by Davies et al. (2021) shows a positive SROI for community sports and leisure facilities in Sheffield (SROI of between £1.20 and £3.42). Such an SROI could strengthen the financial and social case for sports facilities. Social value can be increased by reaching the more vulnerable groups in society.

Suboptimal use of sports facilities is often the result of a combination of factors. These may include various conflicting interests that make co-operation difficult, the monofunctional nature of a facility or other requirements for use by other parties, the limited organisational power of sports providers, the level of accessibility experienced by users, and restrictive laws and regulations and zoning plans.

In summary, the social sustainability of sports facilities is about making sports facilities affordable and accessible to all groups in society, and providing a meeting place for them to connect with each other. As such, sports facilities contribute to socially sustainable communities and broader sustainable development goals. In addition, social sustainability is about ensuring optimal use of sports facilities to make them financially sustainable for the future and to increase their wider impact on the community. Sustainable sports infrastructure contributing to the European Green Deal is also part of social sustainability.

## **6.2. Research agenda**

The Revised European Sports Charter includes a recommendation that member state governments should provide or facilitate the provision of information and data that will be needed for monitoring. The Kazan Action Plan also includes an action to develop indicators to measure sport's contribution to the SDGs. In order to increase the level of data and knowledge on sports facilities, a research agenda on sports facilities is recommended.

First, in order to obtain a better Europe-wide overview of the available data on sports facilities in relation to the SDGs and the elements of the Revised European Sports Charter, it is recommended to send out a questionnaire to Council of Europe member states to collect information on the availability of relevant policy information. The successive meetings of EPAS and the Mulier Instituut on the mapping of sports facilities showed that in most countries there is limited information available on the accessibility, use and sustainability aspects of sports facilities.

Second, there is limited information on the social value of sports facilities. More robust calculations of the social return on investment in sports facilities can provide useful arguments to support new investment or maintain the current levels of investment in times of crisis. As governments justify spending on sports facilities on the basis of the value that sports and the necessary infrastructure bring to users and to society, it is important that we gain a better insight into the value of sports (facilities) and are also able to communicate this clearly and convincingly.

Third, it would be helpful to have more information on the nature and extent of the use of sports facilities, which could be expressed in terms of key figures and indicators. This would also enable municipalities, operators and sports providers to compare their own figures with national data. In addition, there is a need for more research into the factors that have an impact on the use of sports facilities. Understanding the demand side is also key to facilitating the optimal use of sports facilities and increasing their social value.

Fourth, we observed that there is limited information available on the accessibility of sports facilities. To ensure equal opportunities to participate in sport, we need to know more about how accessible facilities are to all groups in society. More research is needed on the views of the more vulnerable groups in society on the accessibility of sports facilities and what measures could be taken to make sports facilities more accessible.

Fifth, the issue of sustainability has received increased attention in recent years. Several countries have introduced subsidy schemes to support sustainability measures. However, the data available on sustainability are still limited. Information on how these sustainability measures have reduced energy consumption in the sports sector is largely lacking. The same is true for progress towards the goals of the European Green Deal.

Last, we would encourage the members of the Expert Group on Sports Facility Databases to continue their work. The analyses on the distribution of sports facilities provided interesting policy information on the presence of sports facilities. This is a good starting point for further analysis and more in-depth studies, for example on the accessibility of sports facilities.

## **6.3. Policy recommendations**

The meetings on the mapping of sports facilities held by EPAS and the Mulier Instituut have stimulated the debate on sports facilities. This seemed to be a good starting point to share good examples and good practices from different Council of Europe member states. From a policy point of view, it would be useful to keep sharing good practices.

We recommend that the activities on the mapping of sports facilities be continued and that this co-operation be extended by sending questionnaires to Council of Europe member states to collect the information available on the accessibility, use and sustainability of sports facilities. The resulting good practices can be shared more widely. Inspiration can be drawn from the UNESCO (2023) report "Creating inclusive cities through sport", which focuses on inclusion and the SDGs. It provides examples of inclusive and sustainable cities from the Fit

for Life programme, with local cases and mechanisms that could provide ideas for others. A similar publication focusing on the role of sports facilities might be worth considering.

The Revised European Sports Charter, with its recommendation to Council of Europe member states to provide or facilitate the provision of information and data, provides an opening for a co-ordinated effort to collect more harmonised data on the presence, use and sustainability of sports facilities. It is recommended that the collection and exchange of data on sports facilities within and between Council of Europe member states be ensured.

To ensure the inclusion of all groups in society, more attention should be paid to the views of those in the more vulnerable groups. Better insights into their perception of the accessibility of sports facilities are needed. A specific political meeting with experts on this topic in 2025 is recommended to gather more information and stimulate knowledge exchange on this issue.

To increase the societal value of sports facilities and their use, it is essential to consider “hardware”, “orgware” and “software” as the holy trinity of placemaking. It is also necessary to identify the needs of the target group and tailor the provision of sports activities to the context. This includes understanding their views on the accessibility of sports facilities. Placemaking is essential to take the step from an ordinary space to a place that people want to use or where they feel at home. We recommend that the concept of placemaking, which is currently being applied in various projects funded by the European Commission, be adopted, as well as ongoing collaborative work with EPAS.

We also recommend taking forward the SHARE initiative to raise awareness of sports facilities’ specific role in the context of regional and local development. The SROI model could be used and developed to calculate the social value of such facilities in a local or regional context.



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Sports facilities can play an essential role in promoting social sustainability when they create inclusive and safe spaces that allow access to sport for everyone, thus promoting the right to sport for all, physical and mental health, well-being and social cohesion.

Within the framework of the Council of Europe and more specifically of its Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS), these values are at the core of the European Sports Charter, which states that participation in sport partly depends on the extent, variety and accessibility of sports facilities.

This White Paper on Social Sustainability and Sports Facilities is a key EPAS deliverable on the mapping of sports facilities, which ties in with current policy frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the European Green Deal and uses the European Sports Charter as a starting point.

It was commissioned by the Council of Europe and drafted by the Mulier Instituut, an organisation that is active in the field of sports facilities mapping and takes initiatives to exchange knowledge with other organisations in Europe on this topic.



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