
Increasing sport participation in major cities

November 2012


A study by



tseiconsulting

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1 — Study introduction

The world is becoming more urbanised, and its population increasingly sedentary (Nicholson, 2011). While there is a strong trend of migration to major cities as people seek employment, educational opportunities and higher standards of living (UNFPA, 1999), previous research indicates that men and women tend to practise less sport when they are based in major cities (Commission of the European Communities, 2007).

The aim of this study is to investigate sport participation in urban environments, and, based on the knowledge collected, identify an approach to assist major cities to overcome the various challenges they face when trying to increase sport participation rates regardless of the authorities leading the programme.

Before looking into ways of improving sport participation in major cities, this study reviewed both areas – participation in sports and urban lifestyle – in order to adopt a methodology that would best fit its purpose of identifying how to increase sport participation in major urban centres.

This study provides cities worldwide with a ‘how to’ guide on boosting sport participation programmes in major urban centres. The study was conducted by a team of consultants from TSE Consulting over the year 2012, and it was supported by TSE’s Academic Advisor, Dr. Andrew Smith, Senior Lecturer at the University of Westminster in London, England. The report was published in November 2012.

Study background

While there is a tendency for everyday life to be reduced from active participation to passive consumerism (Smith, 2012), growing competition from the entertainment industry and new technologies within major cities contribute to inhabitants practising less sport, thus leading a more sedentary lifestyle.

Considering this current situation, cities worldwide have looked into sports as a way to address not only health-related issues concerning urban inhabitants today, but also several social phenomena commonly present in major urban centres – e.g. health, wellbeing and mobility.

Due to a general lack of evaluation and monitoring mechanisms to oversee the success or failure of sport participation programmes worldwide, cities/ countries have little or no historical statistical records of participation in physical activities. As a result, there are insufficient tested universal methods to quantify the level of sport participation in different regions in order to make coherent comparisons among them. This study intends to address this matter and isolate key success factors which will help increase sport participation in major cities.

Study methodology

Considering the goal of identifying key factors which help increasing sport participation in major cities, the study followed four steps:

Preliminary desk research

Collection of general concepts and data on sport participation in major urban centres.

Research and hypothesis development

Based on desk research and focused readings on the subject, development of five hypotheses for increasing sports participation in major cities.

In-depth interviews and hypotheses test

Interviews of cities with respect to their on-going sport participation programmes and testing of the hypotheses previously developed.

Report

Compilation of the information collected previously and development of a set of recommendations based on the findings.

Based on a hypothesis-led approach, this study aimed to fill the gap between the literature and real-life cases, and provide an effective assessment of participation efforts which are capable of helping sports programmes across the world to overcome challenges inherent in major urban cities.

The first step was to collect general concepts and data on sport participation. Subsequently, the corresponding relevance to urban environments was analysed and the hypotheses were developed giving consideration to the strongest concepts found during the research phase.

The study used agreed principles and tested how these were applied in the field by cities running sport participation programmes. This study considered a sport participation programme to be any set of organised activities aimed at promoting physical exercise. The hypotheses were tested through detailed, structured interviews with various cities, and their responses were subsequently compiled to generate a set of practical lessons learnt in relation to increasing sport participation in major cities.

The hypotheses led to a survey which was directed at a number of cities selected according to the criteria below:

Population

The city's urban population should be over 1 million inhabitants.

Involvement in sports

Cities should have a recognised interest in promoting sports activities and/or hosting sports events.

Geography

The final list of cities should cover all continents.

The study does not intend to be exhaustive and it does not address an individual's motivations to engage in sports. Instead, this study takes a generalist approach with a view to assisting major cities in increasing sport participation by challenging existing theories with what cities are doing in practice. This enables one to extract realistic and useful lessons for running sport participation programmes in major cities, and assisting future organisers to maximise their programme's results regardless of where they are in the world.



2 —

Challenges and key hypotheses

Urban life entails specific challenges which need to be addressed when developing effective sport participation programmes. This study took these challenges into account and developed a set of hypotheses to test what elements rank more strongly among sport participation programmes as drivers for increasing participation rates in major urban environments.

Urban challenges

The key challenges for improving participation rates in major cities revolve around several issues:

Urban mobility

Weak transportation networks that prevent (potential) participants from coming and going easily.

Sustained funding

Lack of long-term commitment to secure facility maintenance and qualified staff to run long term and comprehensive programmes.

Urban noise

Increased competition with a vast range of substitute industries and a transitory lifestyle contribute to people's reduced attention span and decreased interest in sport activities.

As contemporary life becomes more urbanised (Nicholson, 2011), several phenomena gain relevance and therefore need to be addressed by public authorities. Health-related problems such as obesity and diabetes, or even depression and isolation, have become more common worldwide (Commission of the European Communities, 2007), and especially so in larger cities. Additionally, major urban centres often face greater social inclusion issues, as well as violence and drug-related problems (Harrell, 1992). These are very complex matters that often require a holistic approach to solving them. Increasing participation in sports is one way of effectively addressing several of those issues.

“It is important that politicians are committed to the long term and willing to draw in as wide a range of partners as possible.”

Mr. Robert Elphinston, OAM, Sydney

Hypotheses for increasing sport participation in urban environments

Based on a specialised literature review, the study used ‘universal’ principles and concepts that drive sports participation in major cities to develop a set of hypotheses related to increasing sport participation in major urban centres.

The hypotheses developed contemplated areas such as accessibility, flexibility, diversification, partnership and mobilisation. They were tested in the form of a survey with various cities using questions which derived from the statements below:

— Ensuring facilities are accessible increases sport participation rates.

— Promoting various forms of activity encourages participation in sports.

— Offering flexibility increases the number of participants.

— Developing (multiple) partnerships increases the number of participants.

— Implementing a mobilisation campaign increases participation rates.

The in-depth interviews were the primary source for drawing practical lessons about how to increase sport participation in major cities. The interviewees – head and/or top members of the respective city’s sports department or relevant local agency – were key to defining challenges specifically inherent in urban settings and how they managed to overcome them.



3 — Tested hypotheses and findings

The study developed the current body of knowledge on sport participation and tested it with major cities through their respective programmes. This was achieved by testing the hypotheses developed with a range of cities worldwide who run successful participation programmes.

Each statement below derives from key issues related to sport participation in urban environments – e.g. accessibility, flexibility, diversification, partnership and mobilisation. This section discusses how various cities addressed each aspect, and uses one case to illustrate how one place approached some of the common challenges for increasing sport participation in major cities.

Hypothesis 1

Ensuring facilities are accessible increases sport participation rates

The venue's accessibility – i.e. how easy it is to reach and use the facilities – is generally accepted as a driver of sport participation (Collins, 2004). Experts say that in general, facilities for those seeking sports activities should not be more than one hour away from potential practitioners. "Ten to fifteen-minute walk catering for youth and lower-classes, and a maximum of a fifteen-minute drive for motorised families and adults," says Mr. Dan Chenier, Ottawa's General Manager for Parks, Recreation and Culture.

Due to growing safety concerns and competing lifestyle commitments in major urban centres, accessibility plays a strong role when defining a sport participation programme. According to the findings, in order to maintain or increase participation rates in sports, cities should be creative in their understanding of 'facilities' as well as in its provision of accessible (spare) spaces for practising sports. Equally important, public authorities should have a long-term perspective when developing the city's spatial plans. The survey results indicate that the programme's accessibility to its target group is a strong driver for increasing participation in sports.



—
City
Medellin, Colombia

—
Urban population
3.497 million (CIA World Factbook, 2012)

—
Highlight
In order to address mobility issues within Medellin and have more inhabitants take part in physical activity programmes, the city created itinerant programmes (e.g. 'Programas móviles') promoting physical activities in different areas throughout the city. These 'moving' programmes tackled the accessibility barrier by regularly taking the activities to various neighbourhoods in the city area. Creating a 'cluster of programmes' help to cover a larger area within the city and enable more people to participate in the activities offered.

"Consider the programme's proximity to the target area and provide a means to get participants to the location."

Mr. Dan Chenier, **Ottawa**

Hypothesis 2

Promoting various forms of activity encourages participation in sports

A diverse sport participation programme – i.e. provision of different types of activities as well as equipment – increases participation in sports. Experts encourage programmes to include traditional and non-traditional sports, as well as non-competitive and non-organised activities such as walking and climbing (Bruerer, 2011).

“We focus on sports with some degree of popularity because ignoring those hinders participation.”


Mr. O.P. Bhatia, New Delhi

Space restrictions in major cities and the ‘popular sport syndrome’ – e.g. cricket in India, or football in Brazil – are only a few reasons why it is important for sports programmes to incorporate a diverse range of activities as part of its offerings; programmes need to challenge people’s thinking about where and how they can practise physical activities and traditional sports.

The findings show that diversifying the activities offered by a programme and providing support tools to the participants increases the programme’s participation rate. However, the survey results indicate only a medium correlation between programme diversification and expanding the number of participants.

“There is no ‘sport fits all’ approach, so a diverse programme caters for different target segments.”

Mr. Simon Tan, Singapore



City
Dakar, Senegal

Urban population
2.453 million (CIA World Factbook, 2012)

Highlight
The programme is based on the popular sport of athletics. Its specificity lies in the fact that the programme not only uses a platform of eight to ten other sports, but also includes singing, arts and drama, and focuses on a different theme every year – e.g. health awareness and environmental consciousness. This way, the programme attracts more children who would not have participated otherwise and generates benefits which go well beyond physical fitness.

Hypothesis 3

Offering flexibility increases the number of participants

Previous studies show that sports programmes benefit from greater flexibility as the public can engage in physical activity whenever they want. Put in an urban context, this argument becomes even stronger due to the lifestyles people tend to lead in major cities – e.g. late working hours, and increased family and social commitments. This explains why the most practised activities tend to be individual, non-organised sports such as cycling, swimming and running (Bruerer, 2011). People have less time to exercise during the facilities' opening hours thus driving the trend of growing numbers of private gyms and the expanding popularity of commercial facilities as they tend to have longer opening hours.

Earlier and later opening hours, including weekends and holidays, remove barriers for practising sports in major cities. The findings show that a more flexible schedule increases participation rates of sport programmes in major cities. In fact, the survey results indicate that 'flexibility' strongly influences the number of participants a programme has; whether it caters to elders who wake up very early, or to those who work late and need extended opening hours. Giving participants the option to practise sports whenever they want regardless of time constraints increases participation rates. In general, people do not find time to exercise during the facilities' regular opening hours; extended schedules eliminate this barrier.

“People would like to do more activities when they need, not only when the programme is running.”

Mr. Djamil Faye, **Dakar**



“The main reason people ask for late opening hours is work.”

Mrs. Carla Tavares, **Rio de Janeiro**

Hypothesis 4

Developing (multiple) partnerships increases the number of participants

This hypothesis challenges the widely accepted idea that a sport participation programme will grow its participant base if it builds a network of partners to assist and/or enhance its offering.

Previous studies indicate that successful sports programmes have developed strategic partnerships relevant to the target group and complementary to the programme's core offering. Strategic partnerships help to reach out to scattered target groups and better engage with (potential) participants.

“The effectiveness of partnerships depends on how it is formatted. We have two classes of partners: those who help to frame, plan and lobby, and those who add value to the implementation.”

Mrs. Carla Tavares, Rio de Janeiro

The study shows that using partners to enhance a programme's content is indeed a driver of participation in sports; however, the number of partners involved, or failing to frame the roles of each of the parties, may be counter-productive and could generate disappointing numbers for the programme and all its stakeholders

Therefore, additional partnerships display a low correlation with increased participants and it is not in itself a major driving force of participation rates, even if it may influence the quality of the service provided.



—
City

Sydney, Australia

—
Urban population

4.627 million (CIA World Factbook, 2012)

—
Highlight

The National Government programme is run in conjunction with local sports programmes in order to allow the children to be 'filtered' into the club structure. This way, the programme's value is maximised, ensuring continuity and ongoing long term success. Furthermore, such partnerships provide access to a variety of facilities and services across the community.

“Partners are essential to increase coverage and funding capabilities, as well as to integrate less favoured participants.”

Mr. David Mora Gómez, Medellín

Hypothesis 5

Implementing a mobilisation campaign increases participation rates

Previous studies have acknowledged that mobilisation campaigns – i.e. communication efforts aimed at (potential) participants – give exposure to participation programmes, create awareness and, therefore, increases the number of participants.

Today, and especially in major cities, the way people access information has become more scattered – there are a plethora of media channels to consider when building a communications strategy.

“We focused on signage and billboards to make the participants feel special and enhance the sponsors’ exposure.”

Ms. Janis Schmees, **Houston**

In this case the study indicates that traditional media publicises, but does not necessarily bring (new) participants on board. In addition to reinforcing the need to address mobilisation from several angles, this study indicates that a locally-oriented approach to a programme’s communication strategy is the most effective way of increasing participation rates.

As expressed in the interviews, word-of-mouth generates a greater impact on participation rates in major cities than traditional media. In general, the survey results indicate that a mobilisation campaign is not in itself a driver of participation; however, as a complementary tool, it may help a programme in achieving various other objectives.



City
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Urban population
12.387 million (CIA World Factbook, 2012)

Highlight
A combination of communication channels is used to achieve more support for the programmes. Beyond a mix of traditional media such as print advertisements, TV and radio, and new media such as the internet, YouTube, and social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter), the programmes build a strong relationship and generate awareness with the local community through local events and merchandising. Additionally, relationships with participants is continued beyond the programme itself, and local ‘leaders’ are identified and used to increase the programme’s exposure and recognition.

“The effectiveness of partnerships depends on how it is formatted. We have two classes of partners: those who help to frame, plan and lobby, and those who add value to the implementation.”

Mrs. Carla Tavares, **Rio de Janeiro**

4 — Lessons learnt

In order to effectively face urban challenges and address the problems most major cities have, a set of lessons learnt has been developed after assessing the collective feedback the cities provided. These lessons revolve around four key and interrelated aspects – target groups, programmes, facilities and mobilisation – whereas the target group is the core of this interrelation and should directly influence the remaining three areas: the programme content should reflect the target group’s general interests; facilities should be defined in a way that enables the target group to easily take part in the programme; and the mobilisation campaign should be tailored according to whom the target group is.

Target groups

The core of sport participation strategies

Similar to what the general theory argues, this study shows that within the urban context it is key to kick-start a sport participation strategy by clearly defining the programme’s target group(s). In order to run effective sport participation programmes, cities should consider tailoring the programme – i.e. general organisational aspects and its core offering – according to the target group prioritised – i.e. the programme should aim at a specific group according to the objectives it aims to achieve.

Tailor the programme according to the target group

With respect to sport participation programmes, everything revolves around the target group – i.e. specific age group, gender, and ethnicity. This means that the programme’s content – what it offers, where it takes place and who runs it – should be tailored according to the group’s needs and preferences. Any (potential) restriction for that group to attend the programme should be addressed.

For instance, promoting physical activities in the work-place is a way of countering the long office hours which usually hinder higher rates of participation in sports for many professionals of various ages. This has been adopted in some Asian countries where employers ensure staff are involved in stretching sessions and/or Tai Chi exercises.



Prioritise the group with the greatest impact potential

In order to achieve the programme’s goals and generate positive results faster, organisers should focus on the group with the greatest impact potential. Given that the family background – or social heritage – plays a very strong role in how a person relates to practising sports, children tend to be a common target group when trying to increase future sport participation rates. In the event that the child’s family background shows a low interest in doing physical activities, the child will help to establish a higher cultural starting point to promote a long term cultural change and achieve better numbers for participation in sports in the years ahead – more active children become more active parents which will positively influence their own children to take part in physical activities in the future.

Key areas of sport participation programmes

Similar to what the general theory argues, this study shows that within the urban context it is key to kick-start a sport participation strategy by clearly defining the programme's target group(s). In order to run effective sport participation programmes, cities should consider tailoring the programme – i.e. general organisational aspects and its core offering – according to the target group prioritised – i.e. the programme should aim at a specific group according to the objectives it aims to achieve.

Programmes

Diversify the offering

Adding new options and additional activities to the programme – including non-sport activities such as seminars, dancing classes or other forms of adapted disciplines – expands the programme's offering and consequently generates greater interest to (potential) participants. Even though a diverse programme may provide participants with a holistic experience and thus become more appealing to non-participants, it is important to balance how 'wide' the programme's offer is – i.e. how many different disciplines and activities are provided – with how 'deep' it intends to be – i.e. how many different forms of practising the same discipline. And avoid falling into the 'popularity syndrome' trap, where places with one over-popular sport tend to emphasise activities exclusively on one discipline, thereby missing a group of people not at all interested in that sport.

Develop strategic partnerships

There is a growing trend of establishing private gyms and commercial facilities in major cities. Sponsors have been increasingly active in delivering new facilities. Exploring the concept of 'neighbourhood gym', for instance, could help a participation programme in broadening its penetration and becoming more accessible to various target groups. Neighbourhoods tend to have several options within the area and the population is capable of choosing the one that best fits their priorities. Developing partnerships with established local private gyms, sponsors, schools and other facilities is therefore a way of increasing a programme's reach and using space and resources already available. Even though the excess of partners is understood to make operations difficult, if the right partners are attracted to the programme.

Establish evaluation mechanisms

Running regular feedback sessions with the target group allows the programme to monitor results and study the respective group's demands. By keeping in touch with what people want, the programme generates a positive spiral effect with (potential) participants and develops clear indicators for measuring the programme's Return on Investment (ROI). In addition to enhancing the relationship with participants, effective evaluation mechanisms may also contribute to more optimal engagements with the programme's partners.

Facilities

Counter accessibility issues

A programme's location – i.e. the place where the programme is organised – needs to be as accessible as possible to the target group. Building a cluster of programme locations is a way to address this issue and enable more participants – especially children and lower income groups – to effectively engage with sports programmes across the city. City planners should equally consider being more open to creative solutions which do not necessarily use fixed physical locations and provide city inhabitants with temporary facilities, thus covering a larger city area.

Offer flexibility

People like to do activities when they feel like doing them; therefore, providing more flexible schedules enable a wider number of (potential) participants to attend the programme on a more regular basis. Long opening hours eliminates a potential barrier to sport participation..

Be creative

People like to do activities when they feel like doing them; therefore, providing more flexible schedules enable a wider number of (potential) participants to attend the programme on a more regular basis. Long opening hours eliminates a potential barrier to sport participation.

Mobilisation

Build local engagement

Information channels in major cities have become so scattered that participation programmes are most effective if they build rapport with the local community. This can be done through local partnerships or by organising parallel events in the community. The word-of-mouth generated in the surrounding areas is recognised as a strong driver of sport participation and, therefore, it is good to keep a local focus and prioritise community-based solutions such as, for instance, using the local community radio, promoting local events and champions, and encouraging local volunteering.

Develop a mixed media strategy

It is important to make use of various media platforms according to the target group in question. Even though media efforts alone do not drive participation rates, a targeted media-mix provides continuous communication with participants, it inspires (potential) participants and stakeholders, and it engages with the target group and local community. From the most common traditional media – e.g. TV and radio – to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and other digital solutions, the messages used should be tailored and repeated according to the target group's profile and the goals you are aiming at achieving

Promote endorsements

Use local role models and leaders to embrace your programme and help to promote the activities therein. If these role models are chosen according to the target group's interests, they are likely to elevate the programme's status and ultimately attract a larger number of participants.

The target group definition and the three key interrelated aspects form a strong foundation for the development of sport participation programmes in major urban environments. While the successful implementation of participation programmes may require other preconditions in addition to the above, these extracted lessons may serve as a practical guide for improving participation in sports and maximising the impact and effectiveness of the respective programmes.



5 — Concluding remarks

To conclude, it is possible to summarise the lessons learnt about improving sport participation in major cities as follows:

— Target group

Information channels in major cities have become so scattered that participation programmes are most effective if they build rapport with the local community. This can be done through local partnerships or by organising parallel events in the community. The word-of-mouth generated in the surrounding areas is recognised as a strong driver of sport participation and, therefore, it is good to keep a local focus and prioritise community-based solutions such as, for instance, using the local community radio, promoting local events and champions, and encouraging local volunteering.

— Programmes

Continuously evaluate the programme and stay in touch with what people want to do. This should also help to find the most suitable partners to enhance the programme according to the participants' expectations.

— Facilities

Address the lack of facilities in major cities by being creative in the usage of public spaces. Facilities may be anything where someone can practise physical activities. Make sure the venue is accessible and does not impose schedule restrictions to your target group.

— Mobilisation

Build local connections that will assist in spreading the word about the programme on a local level. In addition to that, a comprehensive media mix strategy will contribute to publicising the programme and attracting new partners. Bringing on-board someone who is a role model to the programme's target group is an additional way of building greater rapport with the public and encouraging them to keep attending the programme.

As the process of urbanisation continues – i.e. increasing urban density and less open public spaces – the connection between urban design and physical activities tend to become stronger and society may be faced with growing challenges in promoting physical exercise in major cities.

Some types of urban designs are drivers of participation in sports; others actually deter participation. This calls for a renewed role of public authorities and how they plan urban developments. It is hoped this study will shed new light on ways of increasing sport participation in major cities and tackle the barriers inherent in urban life that hinder participation in physical activities.



5 — Appendix A

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Appendix B

Contract information

The table below lists all contacts established during this study. Some cities interviewed did not wish to disclose their contact details and were therefore not included in the contact information list.

City/Organisation	Contact information
City of Amsterdam	Mr. Marco Kooiman Olympic Ambition Programme Manager
World Sport Chicago	Mr. Scott Myers Executive Director
JAPPO Events and Sports Management, Dakar	Mr. Djamil Faye CEO
Qatar Olympic Committee	Mr. Mohammed Al-Fadhala Head of activities section-SAD
Houston Sports Authority	Ms. Janis Schmees Executive Director
Institute of Sports and Recreation (INDER), Medellin	Mr. David Mora Gómez Director
Corporate Games, New Delhi	Mr. O.P. Bhatia CEO India
City of Ottawa	Mr. Dan Chenier GM Parks, Recreation and Culture
City of Rio de Janeiro	Mrs. Carla Tavares Sub-secretary of Sports and Recreation
Singapore Sports Pathways Development	Mr. Simon Tan Deputy Director (Participation Development)
Bob Elphinston & Associates, Sydney	Mr. Robert Elphinston, OAM, Director
City of Zurich	Mr. Marcel Straub Head of Physical Education Centre of Excellence

Appendix C

The questionnaire below was used to guide interviews with city representatives. Interviewees were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statements and their answers were subsequently compiled in a way that allowed for quantitative and qualitative analysis.

City:	
Questions	Answer
Introduction	
1. Do you have any current programmes aimed at providing people with more opportunity to practice sports?	
2. If not, have you had any such programmes in the past? Or are you planning any such programmes in the future?	
3. Have you encountered any specific challenges in improving sport participation in urban environments?	
Accessibility	
4. Location (i.e. the place where the programme is organised) is an issue when developing sports participation programmes. Based on your experience, what are the key considerations when thinking about a programme's location?	
5. The venue's accessibility (i.e. how accessible it is by transportation networks) influences the number of participants of a given programme.	
Introduction	
6. A diverse programme (i.e. provision of different types of activities as well as equipment) encourages participation. How?	
7. Does your programme include any of the following:	
- Single/Traditional sport (e.g. Football, volleyball, basketball, boxing)	
- Multiple activities / Non-traditional sports and informal play (e.g. Kids Athletics, foam-ball tennis and any adapted sports disciplines)	
- Social and/or educational activities (e.g. Awareness campaigns, integration activities, seminars)	
- Take home tools (e.g. Equipment for independent practise)	

Flexibility	
8. A more flexible schedule (i.e. earlier and later opening hours, including weekends and holidays, etc) increases participation rates	
9. People or groups demand longer opening hours. What were the reasons people asked for this?	
Partnership	
10. A programme is better off if it is run with partners.	
11. What do you feel are the Pros and Cons of working with partners?	
12. Partnerships should be developed according to their relevance to the target group.	
13. The number of partners involved affects participation rates. If so, how?	
Mobilisation	
14. Communication tools (i.e. social media, press, radio, TV) help to increase/drive participation. How?	
15. In your experience, what communication channels are best for driving participation in major cities? Why?	
Evaluation	
16. Measurement/evaluation tools are helpful in assessing the success, or not, of participation programmes in order to improve participation rates in the future.	
17. What criteria do you use to evaluate your programme?	
Evaluation	
18. Do you have any other suggestions, lessons learnt or comments to share with us in relation to increasing sport participation in major urban environments?	



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