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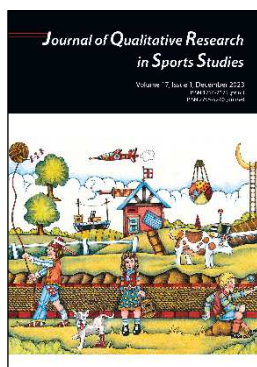
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Establishing and delivering sport and physical activity to rural youth communities across Europe: practical learning through 'fire soul' stories

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Establishing and delivering sport and physical activity to rural youth communities across Europe: practical learning through 'Fire Soul' stories

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Abstract

Low levels of youth sport and physical activity is a concern across the world with many strategies implemented to promote its positive benefits and correlation to young people's health and wellbeing. Little data exist on the specific context of establishing and developing sport and physical activity in rural areas, nor on the role undertaken by social actors working to facilitate this within their local communities; the 'fire souls'. The study's purpose therefore was to learn more about FS' work in rural areas, especially relating to activities targeting children and young people, and provide practical insight to guide similar projects in other rural European settings. A qualitative narrative study was conducted that interviewed 42 Fire Souls in 7 European countries using the 'Freytag Pyramid' structure. Following Framework Thematic Analysis the higher order themes; Motivation to make a difference, Challenges to start and maintain, and Overcoming Issues and Maximising Resources were identified. Findings support previous research exploring worker motivation and emphasise the positive role of sport and physical activity in supporting local communities' health, well-being, and cohesion. The study provides original multi-country, multi-site and multi-activity insights, as well as practical learnings to guide future Sport for Development work in rural settings.

Introduction

This study is part of the larger Erasmus+ Sport project; Villages on the Move GO (VOMGO) that aims to promote healthy lifestyle awareness and Health

Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA), one of the main objectives of European Union sports policy (European Union, 2020). It focuses on supporting voluntary activities in sports and physical activity (PA), social inclusion and equal opportunities for rural citizens so that these are available to all. Initial scoping projects identified numerous challenges to providing sport and PA provision in rural areas, as well as the important role of lone activators, whom the initial project teams termed Fire Souls (FS) (VOMB, 2018; VOMNet, 2018). Robinson and Green (2011) note that in small villages and rural places voluntary sport clubs' activities are at risk and are often dependent on local enthusiasts working alone to make a difference. The previous Erasmus+ Sport Villages on the Move projects (VOM Baltic and VOM Network) substantiated this view and described some of the reasons behind the situation they found, where access to physical activity in rural areas was much lower than that available in more urban surroundings. These studies noted the lack of suitable facilities and instructors, and the limiting factor of the different social environment which made traditional models of service provision unsuitable. A preliminary survey was conducted in rural sport groups in Finland and Estonia by Xamk and Lääne-Viru College, in 2014. Despite the well documented health and wellbeing benefits, children and young people's PA is in decline across Europe, especially in rural and remote communities as is the situation in most regions of the world (OECD, 2023). The purpose of this study therefore was to learn more about FS' work in rural areas, especially relating to activities targeting children and young people, and provide practical insight to guide the creation, resilience and sustainability of similar projects in other rural European settings.

In the context of young people living in rural communities, literature supports the findings of this project's initial scoping study with several barriers perceived to exist that may moderate the success of new activities. In particular, the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE) highlight that 'A lot of the time, people in rural communities do not have easy access to transport and must travel to gain access to opportunities. Electricity, internet connection, and running water are also common challenges in rural communities. There is not a lot to do in rural areas ... and this can lead to challenges for the community' (ICSSPE, 2021:18). Research substantiates this view with studies identifying issues such as the distance from and access to sport facilities (Steinmayr *et al.*, 2011; Wicker *et al.*, 2009), the lack of time and financial resources available to participate (Umstatter Meyer *et al.*, 2017;), social isolation (Moore *et al.*, 2010; Treadwell and Stiehl, 2015) as well as the absence of local role models and facilitators (Conroy and Coatsworth, 2006; Howie *et al.*, 2020; Rottensteiner *et al.*, 2013) as real and present barriers.

The low level of PA worldwide is a well-documented concern (Council of European Union, 2013; United Nations, 2022; WHO, 2018a, 2018b) with research

supporting the World Health Organization's position that worldwide, 3 in 4 adolescents (aged 11–17 years) do not currently meet the global recommendations for physical activity (Guthold *et al.*, 2020). This situation is especially concerning given widespread consensus over the value of sport and PA in facilitating a vast array of health and wellbeing benefits (Pedersen and Saltin, 2015; Schuch *et al.*, 2018; WHO, 2018b) and reducing the impact of non-communicable diseases worldwide (Lee *et al.*, 2012). The low level of PA amongst children and young people is especially worrying due to its correlation with later adult levels of PA. This is even more concerning due to the dramatic 41% reduction in children's PA post the COVID-19 pandemic with vulnerable communities the worst hit (Wilke, 2021) at a time when the pandemic has inflicted a 200% increase in negative mental health issues, particularly anxiety and depression amongst youth (OECD, 2021).

Importantly, research highlights that sport and physical activity can help address this situation with Kellstedt *et al.* (2021:2) noting that young people's PA is 'a high frequency health behaviour'. Unfortunately, however, the positive benefits of such behaviour are differentiated according to a variety of factors, including where young people live, learn and play (Joens-Matre *et al.*, 2008; McCormack and Meendering, 2016). We must, therefore, accept the potential for problems to be compounded amongst young people living in rural areas due to a range of challenges and barriers that they face, many related to lack of access and ease of participation (Eime *et al.*, 2015; Moore *et al.*, 2010; Yousefian *et al.*, 2009). Many organisations are, however, working to address this issue with young people by offering help, guidance and support to promote sport and PA initiatives (e.g., ICCSPE 2021; Mountjoy *et al.*, 2011; UNESCO, 2022; UNICEF 2021; WHO, 2018a). This study, therefore, is informed by sport and PA's use for social development and relates to organisations and projects that use sport as a tool to achieve humanitarian and social change goals (Kidd, 2008). Collectively therefore we consider the project's FS as key members of the Sport For Development (SFD) workforce that drive rural community action.

Welty Peachey *et al.* (2020) noted that SFD has experienced significant advancements in recent years, in both research and practice (Keane *et al.*, 2021; Luguetti *et al.*, 2023; McSweeney, 2020; 2021; Meir, 2022; Smith *et al.*, 2021). In contrast to sport development practices, that focus on the improvement of athletic skills and pathways toward professional sport, SFD is defined as 'the use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialization of children, youth and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution' (Lyras and Welty Peachey, 2011:311). The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2021) estimates that around the world, more than 3,000 SFD initiatives exist, run by 2000 organisations in 148 countries defining SFD as

‘the use of sport, or any form of physical activity, to provide both children and adults with the opportunity to achieve their full potential through different types of initiatives that promote personal and social development’ (UNICEF, 2021:6).

The right of access to sport is mandated in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport and its value is both implicit and explicit within The United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Anecdotally, many pockets of good work are already happening around the world (ICSSPE, 2022; Peralta and Cinelli, 2016; Sport-for-development.com, n.d.; Sumption and Burnett, 2021). Scholars have, however, taken a critical approach to much of the research in this field so far, identifying the neo-colonial tendencies of many SFD organizations (Darnell and Hayhurst, 2012) which has led to the voices of those ‘developed’ going unheard (Nicholls *et al.*, 2011). They have also challenged an evangelical approach to SFD research in which sport is championed as solving societal issues without having the empirical evidence to substantiate such claims (Coalter, 2007; Sugden, 2010).

As noted above the SFD sector has established nearly 3000 projects worldwide but has been criticised in relation to the types of research findings that are presented. This Fire Souls’ study addresses a number of these points. Firstly, it will reflect Nichols *et al.*’s (2017) call for co-creation of knowledge and give precedence to the voices of those driving the SFD initiatives. Secondly it will uniquely provide multi-venue, multi-project, cross-cultural data collection to offer insights from more than one geographical setting (Giulianotti, 2011). Finally, it will reflect the calls from a range of systematic reviews in the field of SFD which request that more robust evidence can be collected to support further work in this domain (Barkley *et al.*, 2018; Cronin, 2011; Langer, 2015; Whitley *et al.*, 2019).

Overall, then, the purpose of this study is to investigate the Fire Souls’ stories in order to positively impact future sport and PA activities for children and young people living in Europe’s rural communities.

Method

This research was undertaken as part of the Erasmus+ ‘Villages on the Move Go (VOMGO) Project’, coordinated by the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences (Erasmus+ Sports project code Nr. 613004-EPP1-2019-1-FI-SPOSCP). The full project consists of 9 partners from 7 European countries exploring numerous local initiatives and utilizing a culture of experimentation to enhance voluntary activities in sport, facilitating social inclusion and equal opportunities of rural citizens, immigrants and refugees. We accept that there is no single best way to define ‘rural’ (Coburn *et al.*, 2007) but in order to provide insight

and permit generalisation, we utilise aspects of Galbraith (1992) and Ritchey (2006). The focus of this study therefore was the activities specifically targeted at children and young people in rural areas, delivered by community activists, the FS, who work through sports organisations to promote positive change that solve and address social injustices and challenges in their communities.

The study adopted a relativist ontology and an interpretive position driven by a subjectivist epistemology, thus promoting qualitative means of inquiry. The advantage of qualitative research to the examination of FS work is the presentation of multifaceted, humanly constructed realities, which is achieved through the process of interpreting and interpretation (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). Qualitative research explores the meanings associated with social phenomena, but specifically from the perspective of those who experience it (Malterud, 2001) offering an insider's perspective (Conrad, 1987) against the backdrop of its natural setting (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2020). A central tenet of qualitative research is to explore the meanings that people give to parts of their lives (Taylor *et al.*, 2016) and to seek understanding of individuals' experiences through their own frame of reference (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Smith (2018) notes that when applied properly qualitative methods can be seen as a reliable way of producing results from a representative sample, that can be generalised to wider populations or contexts. Accordingly, qualitative methods have been chosen to help explore and understand the complex world of the FS in their naturalistic settings so that others may learn from their experiences. The SFD model (Lyras and Welty Peachey, 2011) guided this qualitative project by directing the literature search, as well as informing the findings' analysis and discussion.

Sampling and recruitment

Participants were purposefully sampled by the 9 partners who make up the full VOMGO project. All were identified as expert individuals by each host country partner with initial selections and rationale discussed with all partners until the final selections were made. All FS were working at various sports clubs, rural sport associations, schools, and sport institutions and leading community activities for children from different age groups, including those from socially vulnerable groups such as immigrants and people with disabilities. A total of 42 Fire souls from seven European countries participated in the study. Their data were anonymised and denoted to them in the study by the letters FS and their number 1-42. 17 females (39.5%), 25 males (60.4%), were contacted by the VOMGO partner institution and all agreed to participate in the study. The sample reflected a range of activities, including individual and team sports, as well as indoor and outdoor activities. The demographic characteristics of participants are summarised in figure 1. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Figure 1: Fire Souls' Demographic Characteristics

Country of Firesouls' work	Gender F:female M:male	Years of experience in sport activities	Sport and PA supported and developed	Role	Target group
Finland	F	16	Gymnastics	Coach	Families and children
Finland	F	25	All activities - Physical education focus after school clubs	Activity Leader	School children 7-15 years old
Finland	M	55	Gymnastics	Coach	All ages
Finland	M	55	Biathlon	Leader	Children and high level athletes of all ages
Finland	F	12	Finnish baseball, Pesäpallo	Coach	Children and female adults
Finland	M	35	Football, floorball	Coach	All ages
Finland	F	10	Multi sports	Activity Leader	Immigrant and refugee children and women
Finland	F	30	Cross country skiing, athletics, orienteering, activities for kids	Outdoor Leader	All ages
Finland	M	40	Outdoor activities	Club founder and Outdoor Leader	All ages
Finland	M	25	Lava dancing, floorball, volleyball, cross country skiing	Instructor and Coach	All ages
Lithuania	F	22	Physical activity and movement classes	Fitness instructor	Preschool children
Lithuania	F	27	Aerobics, gymnastics, volleyball	Fitness instructor and Coach	Children, youth, female adults

Lithuania	F	7	Nordic walking, hiking	Outdoor leader	All the community
Lithuania	F	6	Hiking, cycling, volleyball	Outdoor leader and Coach	All the community
Lithuania	F	28	Ballroom dances	Teacher	All the community
Lithuania	M	20	Basketball	Coach	Children and youth
Cyprus	M	20+	Fundamental and Developmental Movement Skills	Movement Instructor	Primarily Children, All ages.
Cyprus	M	20+	Kite Surfing, SUP, Surf	Club founder and Outdoor Instructor	All ages
Cyprus	M	20+	Rhythmic and Artistic Gymnastics	Gymnastics Teacher	Primarily Children and all ages
Cyprus	M	7	Rock climbing, bouldering	Climbing Instructor	All ages
Cyprus	M	15+	Downhill biking	Biking Instructor	All ages
Slovenia	F	26	Martial arts, Functional training	Martial arts teacher	All ages
Slovenia	M	45	Futsal, cycling, hiking, nordic walk	Outdoor Instructor and Coach	All ages
Slovenia	M	16	Basketball	Coach	Children and youth
Slovenia	M	35	Football, volleyball, basketball. Functional exercises for women	Activity Leader and Coach	All the community Female adults
Hungary	M	45	Trail running	Outdoor Instructor	Children and youth
Hungary	M	12	Orienteering	Outdoor Instructor	Children – all ages
Hungary	M	70	Hiking, excursions, orienteering, outdoor sports	Outdoor Instructor	All the community

Hungary	M	50	Swimming, gymnastics, handball, football, PE	PE teacher and Coach	Mainly children and their parents
Hungary	M	45	MTB, trail running, orienteering	Outdoor Instructor	All ages
Belgium	F	15+	Swimming, dance, tennis and gymnastics for people with one or more disabilities	Special Needs Teacher and Coach	All ages
Belgium	M	33	Archery	Archery Instructor	Mainly children and parents
Belgium	M	23	Gymnastics, acro gym, freerunning / parcours	Gymnastics Teacher	All ages
Portugal	F	33	Dance	Dance Teacher	All ages
Portugal	F	22	Orienteering	Orienteering Leader	All ages
Portugal	M	40	Handball and basketball for people with one or more disability	Inclusion Coach	All ages
Portugal	F	22	Dance	Dance Teacher	All ages
Portugal	F	25	Trail running	Outdoor Instructor	All ages
Portugal	M	49	Race walk, triathlon, athletics	Athletics Coach	Children and Youth athletes interested in competition
Portugal	M	54	Cycling	Cycling	All ages
Portugal	M	40	Caving, outdoor activities, running, trail running	Outdoor Instructor	All ages
Portugal	M	29	Surf, bodyboarding	Surf Instructor	All ages

Data collection

Interviews took place at the FS delivery location at a time deemed convenient by them, often before or directly after an activity or group. Interviews were conducted in person and in the FS' native language by a partner researcher from that country. The interview adopted Gustav Freytag's narrative structure the 'Freytag Pyramid' (Kumaat and Zulkarnain, 2021), to help shape interviews based on how participants made sense of their efforts to facilitate grassroots sport and PA activities in the rural communities they served. This structure was chosen as it provided clearly defined stages by which to explore the FS story and thus scaffold the narrative interview (Francis, 2020). The interviews started with a question to put the participant at ease asking the FS how they first got involved in sport. The sharing of experiences between researcher and participant helping develop rapport and shared understanding. An interview schedule was then followed that took the Fire Souls on a life-cycle journey from activity conception to potential future actions (Campbell, 2014; Freytag, 1900) utilising probes and follow up questioning informed by SFD literature and concepts. Interviews lasted from 20-90 minutes (M=65). All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English before analysis.

Data analysis

The study adopted a Framework, Thematic Analysis approach to the data. Framework Analysis (FA) is a series of analytical stages rather than a methodology and offers the flexibility to use both deductive and inductive methods which was required for this study given its aim and purpose (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994).

Spencer *et al.* (2014) describe FA as a matrix-based method comprising five interconnected stages that provide clear guidance on data analysis, from initial collection and management through to the development of explanatory accounts by the researcher. The key tenet of the approach is the development of a 'thematic framework' specific to the research study (Smith and Firth, 2011). This provides the researcher with a defined method to organise data by classifying and labelling data in relation to main themes, concepts, and categories (Ritchie *et al.*, 2010). FA's five stages are the processes of: Familiarisation; Developing a Theoretical Framework; Indexing; Charting; Mapping and Interpretation (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994), with this study following each stage in turn.

1. Familiarisation - The first author read and re-read each transcript and made reflective notes in the margin of each script. These notes related to his own experiences when operating as an activity leader, Physical Education (PE) teacher and coach, but also how the issues and concepts discussed aligned with the SFD literature. 2. Charting / Mapping – a framework was first developed to guide the study's analysis. Following stage one the first and last author reflected on the notes made and how the emerging concepts linked with the Freytag question areas to

establish the interview framework (see figure 2). 3. Indexing – raw data units from each interview were deductively ‘indexed’ and collated together in relation to the Framework categories. Initial comments related to each data unit were noted to support and develop understanding (see Appendix 1 as an example of this process). 4. Triangulation – both authors then analysed the ‘indexed’ data in each area to triangulate their workings and develop their understanding (Maxwell, 2012). Clusters of raw data that related to common concepts were grouped together to identify the emergent themes. These themes were subsequently ‘built up’ into larger representative sub-themes which in turn were grouped to establish the higher order major themes. 5. Mapping and Interpretation – our final themes were then described.

Figure 2: Fire Souls: Coding Framework Index from Interview Questions

Interview questions general area of Interest	Emerging topics from initial reading and notes	
1.Genesis of idea	1.1 Initial motivation to start something in their area	1.2 Physical Activity Philosophy
2.Start Up Experience	2.1 Key influences	2.2 Issues
3.Establishment / Nurturing issues	3.1 Challenges faced	3.2 Solutions
4.Outputs of their work	4.1 Impact on Others	4.2 Rewards for Self
5.Future ideas and hopes for their club / community	5.1 How to Sustain club numbers	5.2 Future Development Ideas

Trustworthiness

This study is driven by Maxwell’s suggested interpretive, descriptive, and theoretical validity criteria for qualitative research (Maxwell, 2012). We also ask the reader to note Nowell *et al.* (2017) and their work depicting that to be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative researchers must demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible. The Framework Analysis (FA) established analytical stages enable others to review how the final interpretation was developed, facilitating transparency of the data analysis process and thus enhancing rigour (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). FA therefore offers a systematic method that is visual and transparent, enabling the development and maintenance of a clear audit trail from the start of data analysis (Tobin and Begley 2004).

Results and Discussion

Following the framework analysis, 24 emergent themes were established from the raw data codes. These were built up into 9 lower order sub-themes which then created the 3 higher order major themes of: i. Motivation to make a difference, ii. Challenges to start and maintain, and iii. Overcoming issues and maximising resources (see figure 3 with illustrative participant quotations).

Figure 3: Analysis of Fire Souls' work with illustrative participant quotations

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Participant Quotations
(i) Motivation to make a difference	Wanting to make a difference and bring benefits for others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give something back to the people and area • Keep things going • Improve lives to build stronger communities • Enable competition success • Share new knowledge 	<p><i>On many occasions, parents would ask me the following: 'Where about should I take my son for sports?', 'Which is the better sport for my daughter?' etc. This is where my idea was generated from! I wanted to establish an academy that would fill in this gap. I wanted to create a sports academy that would address parents' concerns on sports that would be suitable for their children. (FS 28)</i></p> <p><i>It is important that local young people are more oriented towards sport and not devote to harmful habits such as alcohol or cigarettes. (FS7)</i></p> <p><i>It started with the idea and great desire to unite people who educate preschool children, because insufficient attention is paid to the physical activity of children of this age in Lithuania. By uniting such people and setting common goals, it would be possible to achieve even more, expand and coordinate activities, implement the idea of children being active. (FS3)</i></p> <p><i>I want to do something for the community, I feel like as a kid I got a lot of good things in this association and now I want to give it back. It is a principle, that helps me to be motivated. (FS4)</i></p>

	<p>Passionate advocate of Sport and PA values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help children experience the joy of being active • Enhance social capital • Promote health benefits • Being with Nature 	<p><i>There is also an emphasis on raising those children to properly behave outside the playground. We try to make these children better people including every person who loves basketball or any other sport. (FS30)</i></p> <p><i>We also base our actions on well acknowledged sports principles, such as Fair Play. All of our energy is spent to the making of good personalities and characters; we want children and young people to learn how to respect each other, share with each other, claim what belongs to them and not stepping, claim for their rights, negotiate and step back when they are wrong. (FS34)</i></p> <p><i>They are learning basic motor skills through games, gaining psychophysical abilities, balance and strength which is very important at a young age. Exercise is good for a healthy development and socializing but the main thing is to develop a love for the sport. (FS24)</i></p>
	<p>Love of being active and involved in Sport and PA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previous successes • Identity and self worth • Passion and excitement • Way of life 	<p><i>I am involved in the sport because I love this and I constantly do my utmost to transmit this love of mine to other people, who may need this extra motive and inspiration to involve in sports, not necessarily with cycling but with any other sport! (FS2)</i></p> <p><i>I have been doing sport since my childhood. Trainings have taught me to work with perseverance, never to give up any competition but struggle till the end but due to my old age it is not the physical victories, but the health maintaining effects of sport is what I am missioned to pass on. (FS8)</i></p>

		<p><i>I was born with ski equipment on and immediately after learning how to walk I started to ski (FS9).</i></p> <p><i>As far as I can remember myself as a child, I have always been on a bike! (FS21)</i></p>
	<p>Self-gratification and rewards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualifying for an event • Praise and encouragement from others • Personal and Professional Development • Joy in watching others 	<p><i>When a relay race starts and the kids are out in the forest, I have 'flow' all the time, I'm running back and forth between the spectator control and the finish line. I cheer for them, and I really love to see that it goes well for them...you can see the joy on their faces, they seem to have performed well, and it seems also that they gave the maximum but also enjoyed it. It gives me a lot of power; their joy radiates back to me. (FS4)</i></p> <p><i>The biggest success for the coach is when a medal is hung to its trainees' neck. (FS6)</i></p> <p><i>You can see various groups enjoying this sport and you are really happy when you see their photos I saw a photo that was sent to me and I told myself: 'Wow! Look what I did!' This is the impact, and this is the reward I receive (FS11)</i></p> <p><i>They deserve to have and enjoy. We see that every day! They come with a smile, they leave with a smile and when on a holiday break, they say they miss us! And this is really great! (FS28)</i></p>
<p>(ii) Challenges to start and maintain</p>	<p>Critical supporters to make it happen</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lockdown and appreciating benefits of PA • Existing Associations and agencies • Significant People /Volunteers/Family/ Board members 	<p><i>After the quarantine it was even better to meet again. This situation was good for everyone maybe to learn to appreciate this community, which we consider to be permanent. (FS4)</i></p> <p><i>We have supporters, support from the city or district government, not so much financial as moral support from certain people. But if you do,</i></p>

	<p>/Children's parents/ Sponsors</p>	<p><i>plan, of course, if there is support from government organizations, mayors, or other agencies, that's important. Then it is easier to involve everyone. (FS9)</i></p> <p><i>It is definitely the family because we are all connected to sports and to our sports club. The first one is my wife also the most involved person beside me in this sports club, it is the easiest to solve the problems together and we consult with each other. Of course, there are others, my son and daughters, I have very good friends which help me a lot. This is the only way forward, to do it together. (FS1)</i></p> <p><i>There is voluntary people, who work with big heart on their leisure time and get amazing results. I want (to)say big thanks for all people working voluntarily in sport clubs (FS39)</i></p>
	<p>Lessons learnt to build and develop initiatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of technology / Social Media to promote idea/ Improved processes/Improve communications • Learning from others / Mentors and role models/ Personal development needs • Collaborations / Seeing other examples 	<p><i>To be interactive all the time and really use a lot of social media because our young people, children love it very much and it is their main source of information. We use YouTube, social networks are used to broadcast matches. There are more plans for the future with the creation of a platform to help organize more and better, but that requires resources and time. We really use and will use it more widely. (FS9)</i></p> <p><i>we need to do more cooperation and networking work. It is reasonable to do cooperation with other Sports clubs, people to get new experiences, tips, ideas to develop own work (FS16)</i></p> <p><i>So, communication has to be good, surplus also the communication within external people. If you're not communicating properly with the local sports service or people and</i></p>

		<p><i>schools in the neighbourhood, then you potentially miss out the participants. So, the broad spectrum of communication is important.... good collaboration. Don't minimize, but exchange. Look around closely. What is happening in the neighbourhood? Which needs are there? (FS37)</i></p>
<p>(iii) Overcoming issues and maximising resources</p>	<p>Human resources to ensure a legacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing people • Succession planning • Burn out 	<p><i>The hardest, the hardest, like every job or volunteer work, it is always managing human resources. (Isabel)</i></p> <p><i>Building a community is not an easy mission. You have to know how to deal with people: you cannot make them offended, which sometimes is not easy. There are people who think they are the best and know everything. You have to handle these people. You need to create a positive atmosphere and make people feel good. (FS8)</i></p> <p><i>We are getting older, and our physical abilities are deteriorating and replacement will be required, but there is basically no replacement and it may happen that a very successful sports club falls low overnight. We are working on introducing young people to the system, but there is no one who would take on such a responsibility. Here we have a big problem, and we are not the only club. (FS1)</i></p> <p><i>Because a lot of people work a lot for the association, but sometimes that much administration wears us out...we need to be careful not to get burned out. Also, if one or two people takes the back of an association (it) is too much work. We need to pay close attention to this so that the division of labour works properly. (FS4)</i></p>

	<p>Changing behaviours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attract participants and helpers • Covid 19's lasting impact • Diversify activities • Enter competitions 	<p><i>The Coronavirus period placed an emphasis to outdoors activities. It was a step forward to sports as more and more people turned to nature. It has been possibly – besides all the negative aspects – the best period for outdoor activities and physical activities and sports ever! (FS2)</i></p> <p><i>The biggest challenge is to really be able to make changes on the behaviour of the people you know? Because we, I was saying, everyone knows that the exercise is good, its good for your health, they all know the benefits, there are evidence but then on practice because of lack of time, or lack of, some people point out economic difficulties, there is always a reason for them to not practice (FS32)</i></p> <p><i>We aspire to offer classes and programmes targeting parents as well, such as outdoors programmes, which are in fashion now, e.g. cross fit. We also aspire to offer programmes for children and parents together, like bike tours and walking tours. We would like to increase the number of sports we offer and expand towards this direction. We would like to invest in second choice sports, the ones that are less promoted, such as squash, baseball, golf, etc. Because sports like football, which are first choice and first promotion sports, are widely promoted. I would also like to include alternative sports as well as general gymnastics sports for both young people and adults (FS34)</i></p>
	<p>Lack of Physical resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of infrastructure • Finances /Bureaucracy 	<p><i>Indeed, we have plans to establish something of our own. We planned to do it later on and not immediately but based on the current situation and the current developments, it is probably the</i></p>

		<p><i>only solution. Start creating our own place, as soon as possible, will be the solution to our current situation. (FS28)</i></p> <p><i>Of course (our) first challenge is money. Always thinking from where we could get money. Also at the moment municipality finances are weak, so it is really hard to get support from there. (FS15)</i></p> <p><i>Everything was difficult during the initial stages! For every type of license there was a difficulty laying behind... Whatever official I had to do, for example, for the official papers I needed to have or for a license to use the seaside, there was no easy way, there was always an obstacle there waiting for me (FS11)</i></p>
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Major Theme One: Motivation to make a difference

Within this theme, 4 distinct areas were established. These being (i) Wanting to bring benefits to others, (ii) Passionate advocate of Sport and PA values (iii) Love of being active and involved in sport and PA (iv) Self-gratification and rewards. Data here reflected previous studies that have explored the motivation of those engaged in SFD work such as the activity leaders, volunteers, and scholars (Pink and Cameron, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2014; Welty Peachey *et al.*, 2014; 2016; 2018). The FS described their intrinsic and extrinsic motivational drivers (Ryan and Deci, 2000) as well as elements of Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 2008), especially relatedness in how attached and passionate they were to their community, the activities they were involved in, and the meaning this also gave to their lives.

(i) Wanting to bring benefits to others. In this specific environment the FS seemed driven to have a positive impact upon their communities as many felt indebted to their club, area or sport and the beneficial influence it had played in their development. For instance, FS4 explained:

I want to do something for the community, I feel, like, as a kid I got a lot of good things in this association and now I want to give back. It's a principle that motivates me. (FS2)

This impetus presented itself in different ways depending on the particular circumstances in which each FS found themselves and the stage of the community programme, initiative or activity they were involved in (Yu *et al.*, 2023). For some,

the immediate need was to keep activities going, for others, it was to gain recognition for their area, or vicariously for their participants via competition success.

It meant a lot for me, when the team, which I have already prepared for this competition won a championship at the first time. It was a fantastic experience, when I saw it first, that they had stood on the top of the podium. And the guys said that they can also thank me for this. I was a little touched then, it was a really nice experience. (FS4)

Furthermore, being able to bring people together and build stronger community cohesion was seen as a valuable process for the FS. This finding links to sustainable development and the concept of ‘naturalness’ in the community (Skille, 2015) that derives from a sense of social responsibility and one’s goal of social contribution. For example, FS34 explained his personal goal, ‘to support society’.

We make attempts to involve children in participation actions, making them aware of values, not only with regards to sports values but generally. We try to make them aware of societal participation and group participation, so as to prepare them to enter society successfully as citizens. We support active participation. (FS34)

(ii) *Passionate advocate of sport and PA values.* In line with SFD studies the FS were extremely passionate about the positive impact of sport and PA (Van der Veken *et al.*, 2020; Welty Peachey *et al.*, 2018). Their unique circumstances leading to an obligation to pass on what they had learnt in their lives so their community would benefit. This information ranged from ideas about how to facilitate and manage new activities, events and competitions to simply their own self-discovery of the importance of being actively involved in sport and PA within their rural area’s natural environment. FS25 noted that it was her ‘*desire to share that wellness with other people that you have discovered and not to keep only within yourself*’ (FS25). FS26 raised the topic of nature too and how she hopes to promote it in her community, ‘*we like to share with young people and with the community, as a lot of our sport is done in the nature, it is the respect for it. To leave it how we found it or, if possible, even better*’ (FS26). This sentiment is supported by the European Commission’s Work Plan with the promotion of Green sustainable projects, one of their key goals is for sport (European Union, 2020). FS19 also had this desire to share his knowledge to help others and described his main goal as to help ‘*sustain [the natural environment] and stimulate the well-being and physical development of our members*’ (FS19). This feeling now has a growing body of research that highlights the benefits of sporting activities and the promotion of blue-green natural spaces for health and development (Gascon *et al.*, 2017; Stangierska *et al.*, 2023).

Linked to this point, the FS recognised sport and PA’s potential to achieve a variety of positive outcomes at the community and individual levels (Coakley, 2015). Their stories emphasised the positive impact that sporting activities had brought to their communities reflecting, Wadey *et al.*’s (2020) study that highlighted how such

initiatives provide opportunities for collaboration, social equality, health promotion and economic impact. For example, FS3 commented,

The first benefit is human: they start to know each other... this promotes their physical activity, the joy of movement, and the formation of attitudes towards a physically active life. I think our work is very purposeful, focused and beneficial. (FS3)

Continuing in this vein, the FS noted that they were motivated to support the inclusion of all members of their community. Indeed, research stresses that organised sport can contribute to full and equal participation, strengthening the social ties of people with disabilities, fostering social contacts, and helping establish friendship networks (Albrecht *et al.*, 2019; Darcy *et al.*, 2017). As FS24 reasoned,

There is a sociocultural factor here. The acceptance of difference, the diversity of both the cultures and the people who participate... So this diversity and the acceptance of difference is an important value. (FS24)

(iii) Love of being active and involved in sport and PA. This sub-theme highlighted the significance of the FS' previous sporting experiences as participant, performer or volunteer on their subsequent career path. For example FS29 explained,

My opinion is that you don't just decide to work in sport, but that is a way of life. I'm active in sports since a very young age. I started in primary school and led children's groups. Later, I tried some other professions, but I've always returned back to sports because I have never got satisfaction anywhere else. Sport is my life (FS29).

Many FSs often spoke about the great pleasure they found in physical activity as a hobby, while others reported that they were already engaged in volunteering and professional clubs during their childhood or adolescence, *'I started at the age of 15 as an assistant trainer. That way, I also got the chance to train myself'* (FS33). Indeed, being involved in physical activity and sports from an early stage of life seems to be a significant predictor for a lifelong participation in physical activity (Hirvensalo and Lintunen, 2011; Li *et al.*, 2009) and seem to have driven our FSs to help others share in similar experiences. Many felt that being holders of sporting achievements and being recognised at a high level let them succeed at a sort of dual career setting, for example, *'I am professional international football player ... I have been in three women's world championships. One time gold medallist'* (FS7). They felt this also enabled them to act as role models with a potential influence on community members' behaviours (Dix *et al.*, 2010; Storm and Eske, 2021).

(iv) Self-gratification and rewards. The final motivator that emerged from the data was the self-gratification and personal rewards the Fire Souls gained from their work. These ranged from the personal honours and achievements afforded to them whilst others described the recognition they received whilst facilitating activities, as FS28 explained,

What is really meaningful, and rewarding is the love I get from children as well as the support I get from parents. They acknowledge me, they appreciate the centre and the work that we do. It drives us on. (FS28)

The FS also highlighted the immense joy felt from the results of their actions,

Also, these kinds of meaningful moments I get when I see people on the sport field, or seeing kids in sport competitions because there, everything is genuine. Kids and youngsters' sports give these special feelings. Powerful and meaningful. (FS16)

Major Theme 2: Challenges to start and maintain

Challenges to start and maintain has three sub themes of: (i) Human resources to ensure a legacy, (ii) Changing behaviours, and (iii) Lack of physical resources.

(i) Human resources to ensure a legacy. With regards to legacy, the FS recognised their responsibility to those that had come before them and the debt they were owed. FS33 described his need *'to maintain the guild and to pass it on to our successors'* (FS33). This desire to sustain what had already been established by themselves and others presented itself in the succession planning of the FS. As FS5 explained, *'The most important plan is to manage the succession of the leadership of (X). My main mission is to find the person who would manage this succession within 5 years'* (FS5). Many of the FS expressed their concern for how difficult this process was for them. As FS20 noted, *'The biggest difficulty is to continue something. It ends being a cycle, people come, and people go but the hard part is to continue'* (FS20). Some of the difficulty in finding their successors was levelled at the lack of young people willing to take on the role, as FS5 explains,

I would like it not to end. I wish it had young people to replace us and that these activities or even new activities continue. This is what I would like for the future. Let things be maintained, that our children take hold of what we have created. (FS5)

However, the high standards that the FS set themselves and expect of others, as well as their intricate knowledge of what challenges their successors will face, also contribute to this problem. To illustrate this point, FS1 revealed that *'To find a person who believes in the same values and could dedicate himself to the case as much as I did is very hard'* (FS1). FS23 agreed, adding, *'I look back and I won't hand things over to just anyone'* (FS23). FS14 also offered some poignant advice to those who may follow in the FS' footsteps:

They should also remember and take care about their own coping, if they get tired, who is going to keep working? We should remember to share workload and responsibilities among others. That way we can make new activities. We need to learn to say no sometimes. I am not so good at that, but I keep going. (FS14)

The sentiment of sharing the overall responsibility and not trying to do everything themselves to avoid 'FS burnout' was also discussed in other interviews, with FS34 also offering this valuable advice, *'we need to remember that it is easy*

for one stick to break but difficult for a collection of sticks to break' (FS34). Interestingly here the FS's challenge is supported by literature on the importance of Human Resource Development (HRD) (Philip *et al.*, 2023). Although the FS describe their intention to search out their future replacements, they were not able to provide any specific examples of training or support, other than being able to share their experiences, despite this being described in the literature as a key tenant of successful operations (Keane *et al.*, 2021).

(ii) Changing behaviours. The challenge of trying to change the behaviours was discussed in various contexts. Much of this related to motivation and especially the barriers to getting involved in, and then sustaining sports participation activities such as access, finance and relational issues (Pink and Cameron, 2013), as well as the obstacles faced by rural communities such as the lack of human and physical resources (Edwards, 2015; Sherry *et al.*, 2017). It should be noted too that impacts from the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic had severely affected the FS' clubs so, the effects of restrictions in sport clubs' activity were very present in the interviewees' minds, as was the problem of how to re-engage and inspire their local population to get active again. For example, *'The hardest thing for me to do is to make activities good and attractive to a wide circle of people in our local community... Maybe the hardest thing for me [after Covid restrictions] was to motivate the local community to do recreational sports'* (FS1).

While sharing their experiences, FS talked about the decreased motivation of sport club members. One of the reasons mentioned was the inactivity of the community itself to engage in physical activity.

Convincing people who sometimes react too emotionally and endangered, to convince them that this story we set ourselves has a wider meaning and that it is good for the surroundings. To convince people that it is a great way to connect with each other and that the club is worth it, is not a short process. (FS40)

The struggle to involve children in physical activities due to the lack of motivation was also remarked upon.

To attract new people especially young people. They are very much bound by the world of ICT and it's hard to move them out of their online world. It's also difficult to attract middle aged people as they are busy with keeping up their family. (FS8)

(iii) Lack of physical resources. To address this issue the FS were actively seeking out new activities to motivate their communities into action, but often this relied upon the physical resources, location and equipment to deliver.

We need to start seeking for a place that will meet our current needs and the needs of what we do, i.e. the variety of activities and sports, different classes for each level, separated classes for adults and the emphasis on the quality. We wanted to offer this to the kids joining us and to their families. (FS28)

Unfortunately the lack of physical resources, whether equipment, buildings, transport or infrastructure, continue to challenge the FS' creative skills and limit their sports clubs' activities. This is challenging given the work the FS are engaged in to recapture their community's interest.

Indeed, we have plans to establish something of our own. We planned to do it later on and not immediately but based on the current situation and the current developments, it is probably the only solution. Start creating our own place, as soon as possible, will be the solution to our current situation. (FS28)

This need to innovate and be creative resonates with recent research into how SFD initiatives are evolving to survive (Svensson and Cohen, 2020). In line with previous research material however, financial issues are commonly reported as a main barrier when organizations are trying to develop and improve (Lower and Czekanski, 2019). These challenges are clearly reflected too in the FS' responses. The lack of funding for their clubs is a concern for many, as is the bureaucracy that often accompanies and hinders many of their new initiatives. To illustrate this point, FS42 noted that, *'There are difficulties because there are always budget issues. Every step and everything you need or want to do has a certain budget required'*, whilst FS34 bemoaned the bureaucratic burden slowing him down,

Bureaucracy! This is a major issue! Some years back, things might have been simpler, you had the money, and you could go ahead and implement your plans! There are many certificates and paperwork needed nowadays. (FS34)

To summarise the theme of Challenges to get going and sustain, the problems identified by the FS are generally in line with the literature. In particular, our results almost mirror Seippel *et al*'s. (2020) findings that exposed difficulties relating to the recruitment and retention of volunteers at different organization levels, the lack of sports facilities, finances, and rigorous legal requirements that SFD innovators need to overcome.

Major Theme 3: Overcoming issues and maximising resources

The final major theme was overcoming issues and maximising resources. This related to three sub themes that emerged from the data: (i) Critical supporters to make it happen, (ii). Asking for and finding help, and (iii) Changed actions

(i) Critical Supporters to Make it Happen. In a fascinating twist, many Fire Souls noted the positive impact that the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic had had, energising the community and providing a catalyst for the resurgence of their work. As FS2 commented, *'Interestingly, lockdown made us want to get out and acknowledge the benefits of nature. All of a sudden, we all wanted to see at least a tree'*. Encouragement from their significant others was another beneficial factor for the FS. The interviewees emphasised the significant impact that the people who taught and worked with them had had on their professional development and careers.

For example, FS9 explained, *'I had a very wonderful physical education teacher who was the soul of the school. It meant that I wanted to be myself, to work on something similar'* (FS9). *'Now my PE teacher colleague (X) is wonderful and supportive, he never shuns my ideas and is making suggestions and developing ideas with me'* (FS40). When talking about the people who helped them the most, the FS naturally underlined the importance of family and their support in the form of encouragement and understanding. As FS17 recounted, *'the most important person has been my wife who understands me and also understands why I am away from home a lot or need to go again'* (FS17).

Family members constitute key socializing agents (Kay and Spaaij 2011; Wheeler and Green, 2014). Our findings therefore reflect previous research that identify key socializing agents (i.e., teachers, peers, family) as playing significant roles in shaping coaching behaviour (Perényi, 2010) yet adds the critical role that partners and spouses also play.

The most important and closest person is my partner, when I got some questions then he is the first person I address them to. Together we then discuss and think of how we can solve certain things and challenges. (FS15)

The data analysis also revealed the help from the community and volunteers as being extremely important, thus supporting the literature that has shown volunteers to provide essential services to community sport organizations (Wegner, Baker and Jones, 2021). This reflects the SFD literature in relation the critical impact of volunteers in their various roles either as the 'core' FS or the 'peripheral' helpers (Ringuet *et al.*, 2014). As FS25 exclaims, *'of course volunteers! Our own volunteers! We do not have paid employees, so we really need a lot of volunteers when organizing events'*. The rural locations of the FS work make sourcing volunteers more difficult than for other SFD projects (Smith *et al.*, 2014). The lack of access to a local university student population and/or easy transport links to facilitate volunteer tourism as can operate elsewhere, which compound the FS challenge.

(ii) Asking for and finding help. FS described how important the parents were in supporting their projects. *'The biggest support for me is the parent. The first thing I do is to try to win the parent. They seem to me younger and younger. There are parents whose grandparent I used to teach!'* (FS6). FS10 agreed, stating that his *'fantastic help is the 'crew'. This is a group of parents from our members, who put in a huge effort... They are a huge help'* (FS10).

With regards to children's activities, the FS' accounts supported Dyck's (2012) work on how involving families, facilitating their contribution so that they play an active role in helping to organize events, help at the events and even contributing financially evidences the strong social connection between the sports club and the

families (Dyck, 2012). Regardless of their different location and/or activity focus, all FS openly discussed how they got the help they needed from their wider social network and community assets (Bates and Hylton, 2021). What was evident in this rural context too was that their sport clubs do not operate in isolation as they receive help from their immediate social environment (family, friends, neighbours, parents, local businesses), from further away (clubs, partners implementing similar activities) or from formal structures such as associations, foundations and so on.

In particular, the FS promoted the valuable input from sporting associations, government agencies and commercial sponsors. FS10 recognised that he receives *'a lot of support from the gymnastics federation in Flanders. They provide lessons (content, materials) and training programmes which in the future can take place in our own hall'* (FS10). FS16 confirmed this point when he described the support he receives from his Sports Union for, *'questions such as legal help, education, professional help, and financing of the projects we turn to the Sports Union of Slovenia and for co-financing to the municipality of Kranj and the Sports Foundation'* (FS16). FS19 agreed with the positive input from the government and explained, *'Today you have more support from the City Halls and the government to those goals, to support and encourage cycling and sports in general'* (FS19).

The data did reveal, however, that in some circumstances FS felt a lack of support from the authorities. At these times, the importance of local sponsors and business support was vital.

But obviously our sponsors have been boosting our survival. Without it there was no chance. People helping us deserve our thanks and I think it is the most important jump. But it is not only about money, it is the help and advice they offer too. (FS39)

The different experience of government support has been described by other projects around the world. In particular, Rich and Misener (2020) described how government funding priorities had influenced the sport and recreation programme delivery in rural Canada with both positive and negative results. With respect to learning about new ideas and initiatives to drive their projects forward, the FS described the importance of learning from others who already had a track record of success, both those who worked at different clubs but also mentors and role models in their own environment.

The director, X, loves basketball and already supports other local projects and activities in different areas. Part of that certainly helped that we were previous acquaintances, but he also definitely listened to us, liked our vision and plan and decided to cooperate and show support. His recognition gave us a big impetus for the future. (FS30)

In an emotionally uplifting tone, FS highlighted the benefits of collaboration with colleagues who are more like friends to them.

Although leadership might change (like presidents etc) but old colleagues in this sector who take youth important are always there and supporting you. like X, who always kept telling us - no problem, let's keep on doing. (FS6)

They also gave specific examples of friends' help from other professional fields in solving legal or accounting issues. For instance, FS31 spoke about one person,

X, who is also a member of the board is a treasure for us, because his contacts and relations locally help us to get sponsors and funding easier. He has been working for the club longer than I or anybody else can remember. He is an irreplaceable resource for the club, because if he didn't want to continue in the club, part of the club culture would disappear. He's the one who knows how the things were done in the previous times.

Finally in this theme, the FS described how important it was to get support from other more external forces, to learn from how others in distant and different contexts solved the problems that they now faced, and to make the effort to seek out such learning. For example, FS2 noted that,

I try to travel abroad every year... I get to see how other countries manage to face the problems they encountered. How they manage to solve the problems we consider to be problems, because, at times, to them, these are not problems... (FS2)

[FS14 agreed]: It is true that is important to see different people, places and activities to be able to mix and find new ideas. And of course give (our) own tips and ideas to others.

(iii) *Changed actions.* The FS' stories revealed that the most important support to attract was human rather than financial, especially when received from their close social environment. Indeed, the opportunity to develop social networks and promote social equality has been identified as an important factor for those working in this SFD space (Wadey, Day and Howells 2020). It is how to sustain the support networks that leads into the final sub-theme, that focusses on the learning that has taken place and how this will help develop the FS' work by changing their future actions. One of most important areas to support the sustainability and future growth is how the FS will engage with technology. FS3 explained,

Of course, now we all have become IT specialists, because media and chat platforms are already necessary. They help to communicate to meet people quickly within a few hundred kilometres. We also have ambitions to further improve our knowledge in the distance learning process so that we can more easily exchange practical ideas, create a programme that teachers can use in their daily work and show to children. (FS3)

Key to the future plans is the need to communicate better and market the work that is happening in their communities. As FS13 realised,

We need to use a lot of marketing awareness, try to promote what we do. Try to have some reflection on what you do. Show it on social media, talk about it to people, try to get more people involved. People really want to do sports. They want to come along they want to come around. They do not know how to get the right information. They do not know where to go. They do not know where to fit in. (FS13)

The need to develop practices and processes as well as the motivation to develop new activities and opportunities for their communities demonstrates the FS’ innovation. This supports recent SFD literature which highlights how successful projects around the world are being underpinned by the creativity and innovation of their activity leaders (McSweeney, 2020; McSweeney *et al.*, 2022; Neuvonen and Weaver, 2021; Neuvonen-Rauhala and Weaver, 2022; Svensson and Cohen, 2020).

A large part of this learning was accredited to the collaborations the FS had facilitated with other sports clubs and organisations. However, this was an area that still needed development, with FS recognising that much more needed to be done. *What we really need to do more of, as an organisation, is try to work with other organisations as well*’ (FS13). The lack of this type of partnership and support was surprising given the importance that the FS afforded it, but is definitely a key development area for the future. Potentially the plethora of other challenges the FS face had just pushed this desire aside. As FS14 described, *‘Cooperation with other local sport clubs is something that was discussed a lot in the past, but nothing really happened, not enough has been done’* (FS14).

A summary of practical learnings

Reflecting this study’s aim to provide practical learning from the FS’ stories and to guide future project across rural European communities, figure 4 below provides a brief overview of the learning relating to the challenges and solutions to be applied.

Figure 4: Practical learnings from the Fire Souls’ stories

Project Element	Challenge	Solution
Fire Souls	To sustain and develop own work and skills	Honest skills appraisal. Seek out collaborators and mentors. Seek and value family members’ support and input. Source professional development courses. Be realistic about size and scale of project and activities. Recognise when pressure starts to get too much. Ask for help. Accept bureaucracy is involved in getting things done. Engage with new technologies to learn how to promote, deliver and evaluate activities.
User groups-children and young people	Need to attract new participants	Assess what are the best information channels – e.g. Social Media / visiting schools to promote activities / targeting parents. Utilise Active School Communities EU Toolkit to engage schoolteachers as key agents for change. Engage parents – involve them as helpers, provide joint activities or parallel activities

		<p>Promote benefits of activity and beauty of nature especially post-COVID-19.</p> <p>Engage community to co-design activities.</p> <p>Offer choices and variety of activities available</p> <p>Consider motivation of competition, and of providing high profile events to bring others to the area.</p>
Volunteers	To attract, train to independence, and retain new volunteers	<p>Promote benefits of volunteering.</p> <p>Help them learn by doing, get them involved straight away. Pair with mentor to help develop their own leadership skills.</p> <p>Give them responsibility.</p> <p>Get them hooked. Link to motivation factors – help them feel good, feel useful, moral valuing - create a good atmosphere, organise extra activities, excursions, parties, celebrate successes.</p>
	Lack of knowledge, coaching and teaching skills	Sport federations and education associations (schools, colleges, universities) can help provide resources, volunteers, and training.
Parents	To keep engaged and positive about their children's activity	<p>Joint activities and events linked to parent's days and holidays.</p> <p>Run parallel activities at delivery site.</p> <p>Ask for feedback whilst in attendance.</p> <p>Engage in volunteering and support roles.</p>
Wider Stakeholders (businesses, local government and national bodies)	Gain 'buy in' to project that will lead to resource support (finances, authorisations, information)	<p>Appreciate age and experiences of key decision makers. Explore any concerns and agree joint actions to overcome them.</p> <p>Work to co-create future activities.</p> <p>Create a trusted and transparent profile to increase reputation.</p> <p>Provide range of competition and charity events to raise awareness</p>
Physical Resources	To gain finances to secure, develop and maintain physical delivery location and equipment	<p>Learn from others – networks - where and how to access support.</p> <p>Create strategic partnerships.</p> <p>Identify key advocates and champions.</p> <p>Lobby stakeholders – link to profile and reputation</p>
Sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals	To ensure activities enhance social and environmental impact	<p>Promote quality education, inclusion, equality, skill development in volunteering, importance of natural environment, green-blue space benefits.</p> <p>Ensure direct promotion to all diverse social groups</p> <p>Link the outdoor environment to positive health care.</p> <p>Consider the language and communication strategy in order to target all those that can benefit.</p>

Conclusion

The study sought to explore the work of rural community activity leaders, our Fire Souls, and provide practical insight that could guide the creation, resilience, and sustainability of similar projects in rural European settings and positively impact the lives of children and young people living in those communities. In doing so, we conducted in-depth and semi-structured narrative interviews with 42 FS from seven European countries to investigate how they have established, maintained, and developed their clubs and activities, as well as exploring their future plans.

Our findings reinforce much of the existing SFD literature specifically in the areas of motivation, capacity building and social entrepreneurship. With regard to studies highlighting SDT this is specifically poignant given the FS' geographical location, personal ties, and lack of resources ensure that their practice is built upon the 3 areas of autonomy, competency and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2008). The FS are problem solvers and utilise their skills, experience, contacts, and additional social capital to navigate through the varied challenges that they face. They all demonstrate altruistic characteristics within their work and a humanistic philosophy of individual and society development as they try to positively impact the children and families living in their communities.

The FS' stories revealed a multitude of factors that shaped their journey and promotion of sport and physical activities. These stories can act as an account of human capital (Bailey *et al.*, 2015) related to sport and PA participation that can help others develop. Their stories and actions contribute to efforts in the direction of improving health and well-being, promoting social inclusion and community development, and fostering positive social values. The FS appear to act as key socializing agents who can help to build capacity and empower individuals and communities to achieve their development goals. This aligns with the broader goal of SFD, which is to harness the power of sport to promote positive social change and contribute to global development efforts.

As noted above, our findings reinforce existing research on motivation, activity, and outcomes of SFD workers. Interestingly, the study also supports previous studies that demonstrated how sport and activity leaders act as active social agents and community developers by bringing to society beneficial forms of PA and opportunities to participate (Rich and Misener, 2020; Rich *et al.*, 2022; Van der Veken *et al.*, 2020). The FS in this study were certainly committed to creating opportunities for social networking, and new friendships and connections, along with promoting healthy lifestyles and the wider social values evident within sport activities. Their stories emphasised the value of their SFD activities in facilitating the safety, wellbeing, and welfare of the people with whom they work (e.g., children,

parents, athletes, coaches, volunteers and supporters) as well as their motivation to create positive change for their communities (Wadey, Day, and Howells, 2020).

In summary our FS are highly motivated individuals, sometimes what Coalter (2013) would describe as evangelical, and heavily invested in the rural communities in which they serve. They face many similar challenges to other SFD workers around the world but have additional considerations due to their remote location and limited population and support networks. FS find innovative and creative solutions to problems they encounter as they attempt to create a ‘ripple effect’ (Sugden, 2010) which will attract more volunteers, engage more stakeholders, and reap wider benefits for their communities. This learning is being collated so it can be shared through the VOMGO project with others working in this domain.

This study gives voice to the unheard, in this specific context those invaluable sport and PA leaders who operate in rural and sometimes difficult to reach communities – our Fire Souls. It offers a European multi-country, multi-site, and multi activity/sport investigation into their work which, to our knowledge, is the first of its kind. Finally, our study substantiates links to previous research on motivation, activity leadership, volunteerism, and SFD whilst providing additional insight and areas for future development.

Of particular interest here is the FS’ use of their natural environment. Green sustainability is a worldwide focus (see SDGs) but FS’ work offers linkages to contemporary concepts of Learning in Nature, Ecotherapy, and Blue-Green Social Prescribing (Gascon *et al.*, 2017; Jordan and Chawla, 2019), and the associated benefits for children (Stangierska *et al.*, 2023; Wells and Evans, 2003; White, 2004). What this could look like, and the training required for FS and their helpers would be a worthwhile investigation (see Keech and Gray, 2023 for a similar innovation around Nature-Based Learning). This professional development consideration links into 2 further points and areas of future research. 1) What and how training / CPD is offered to FS as well as 2) what training they can provide helpers/volunteers. Human Resource Development could be the lens by which to explore these in more detail. HRD is a key area to cultivate the assets present in rural communities and build community capacity (Bates and Hylton, 2012; Edwards, 2015; Philip *et al.*, 2023).

In recognition of this focus the final VOMGO project will produce a series of guides and handbooks to help other rural activity leaders in Europe to start and to sustain their project ideas. This study’s data will inform the content and delivery mechanisms, but more research is needed into the resources required for volunteers and wider stakeholders to engage more effectively in rural areas. Finally responding to calls for a more holistic study of Community Sports Partnerships (Yu *et al.*, 2023) the whole community needs to be involved in evaluating the FS work ensuring the

macro and meso level data feeds into this process (Keane *et al.*, 2021). Despite the numerous challenges of gaining authentic feedback from children, the end user experience is key if FS are to provide the services they believe their communities need. This may also lead the FS to engage in more co-creation of programmes and even adopt more of a critical pedagogy which would help address the growing social inclusion agenda and reflect some of the more contemporary approaches to research in this domain (Lugueti *et al.*, 2023; Meir, 2022; Smith *et al.*, 2021).

The study presented here does however have some limitations. The interviews were conducted by researchers from seven different European countries. The personal characteristics of the interviewers and the peculiarities of communication could therefore have had an impact on the how the FS were interviewed. The analysis in this study is based on the FS' self-reported perceptions and reflections of their own activities in their own communities. The findings are therefore difficult to generalise to different sports, clubs, and/or geographical locations to provide lessons and guidance for others to follow. Nevertheless, naturalistic generalisations are possible. Those reading the stories and learning about our FS' motivations, challenges, and support, will hopefully recognise and appreciate the FS' circumstances and reflect upon how they too may face similar scenarios and learn from the findings presented here.

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Reviewer Comments

This international team of researchers have pooled their resources, shared their expertise and overcome barriers which can often make academic publication of such valuable research difficult. In so doing, now it is published, it becomes clear how the endeavours of the researchers share similar characteristics with those of the Fire Souls in their community settings. Not least, those of reconciling language differences, seeking funding and even succession planning for implementing long-term ideas come to mind, all are pivotal to promoting health and social wellbeing through sport and exercise (and a lot more besides in this instance). What the Fire Souls are achieving is real success on the ground across Europe, in communities that need and value their efforts. This article does not describe a pipe-dream or ideal, it is not a funding bid for what *might* become, it is a true account of genuine efforts of ‘community coaches’ to make a difference on a huge scale, to many 1000s of people. This excellent research, and report into the activities of the Fire Souls should become part of the funding case for further investment to support this excellent work, and therein celebrate the impact that an academic voice can have on real-world outcomes.

