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Social impacts of community sport organisations: a scoping literature review

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to conduct a scoping literature review (SLR) to explore and describe the social impacts of community sport organisations (CSOs) within local communities in which they are located. Following the PRISMA protocol, we conducted a search of academic and grey literature in sport and broader social sciences and humanities databases. From the initial 16,438 records found, 40 made the final sample. Specifically, we conducted a scoping review on CSOs to describe what social impacts such organisations have produced based on previous empirical data. Findings showed that social impacts are not automatically produced by sport participation but emerge through deliberate organisational practices, relationship building and strategic resource mobilisation through CSOs. The selected studies showed that these deliberate organisational practices operate across organisational, individual, and community levels. The review also revealed that whilst sports participation is the fundamental instrument for individual changes and for CSOs' survival, participation is not sufficient to produce social impacts. To produce social impacts, CSOs need deliberate programming, with activities designed specifically to promote social development. The study indicates that purposeful approaches are the most optimal means for accruing social impacts. Thus, social impacts within CSOs are produced not from participation itself but from the intentional strategies of sport programmes.

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SUBJECTS
Sport and Leisure Management; Sport and Leisure Studies; Sports Development

1. Introduction

Governments alongside international institutions, such as the United Nations, frequently embed sport within wider social agendas and interventions on the premise that organised sport produces positive externalities at various levels (Jarvie et al., 2026; Sotiriadou & Wicker, 2013). Central to delivering programming and generating non-sporting outcomes are community sport organisations (CSOs). CSO's are ground-level, grassroots entities that play a valuable role in promoting physical activity, sport, social cohesion, and civic engagement across diverse populations (Schulenkorf, 2012). Defined as membership, not-for-profit organisations that provide structural opportunities for organised sport (Cuskelly, 2004), alongside sport for development (SFD)(Kidd, 2008), CSOs have attracted substantial attention from policy-makers, governments, and researchers for their potential to generate broader social outcomes (Misener & Doherty, 2013). Such social impact entails improvements to inclusivity, well-being, youth development, and crime reduction, among other areas (Fortune & Oncescu, 2024; Nathan et al., 2013; Willis, 2000). Subsequently, the social impacts which emanate from CSO's work reflect similar concepts and practices of SFD as these non-sporting outcomes are often, but not always, byproducts of sport programming with a developmental focus (Walker, 2025). As a field of research and practice, SFD is commonly defined as the intentional use of sport to address social inequalities and forms of disadvantage by engaging specific populations (Burnett, 2001; Coalter, 2010; Jarvie et al., 2026; Kidd, 2008; Walker, 2025). Through developmental and intentional ethos, literature to date has argued that further embedding notions of SFD within CSOs' programming would help optimise CSOs' capabilities and maximise the

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social impacts rendered (Walker, 2023). This is because, where CSOs deliver programming through an SFD lens, SFD supplies the intentional design logic which guides practices towards cultivating specific social impacts (Burnett, 2001; Walker, 2025). Such focused approaches are required for CSOs because with growing international and policy influenced interest in leveraging SFD, this has increased the expectation of and increased the pressure on CSOs to deliver more social benefits from sport (Kidd, 2008; Jarvie et al., 2026).

More recent studies (Bauer et al., 2024; Walker, 2026a; Whitley et al., 2019) have started to consider, albeit still very timidly, the role of CSOs in creating social impacts, still not placing the organisations in the centre of the process creating social impacts beyond sport participation. Within sport-based research, there remains a tendency for scholars to stay in their own lane (Whitley et al., 2022). Whilst some authors (e.g. Coalter, 2010; Kidd, 2008) highlighted that the SFD suffer from debates about methodologies and approaches from terminological imprecisions, more recent research focuses must be interdisciplinary engagement rather than continuing to existing within single disciplinary silos (Bauer et al., 2024; Whitley et al., 2022). Therefore, despite growing policy endorsement and an expanding empirical literature basis around CSOs and SFD, the evidence of CSOs' and SFD's social impacts remains fragmented across the disciplines (Blomqvist, 2022; Brown et al., 2014; Doherty et al., 2014). This lacuna is reflected by the lack of published scoping literature review's (SLR) on the social impacts of CSOs. Thus, there is a limited understanding of the SFD process through which CSOs generate social impacts (Walker, 2026a). Given the paucity of knowledge relating to insights gleaned from empirical studies and grey literature, there remains a requirement to systematically document and synthesise the empirical and grey literature evidence base and to clarify how much this evidence contributes to an improved understanding of the field.

To address the aforementioned gaps, this SLR presents an overview of the organisation-level mechanisms through which CSOs specifically translate and use sport to generate social impacts (Burnett, 2001; Bruner et al., 2023; Coalter, 2010; Kidd, 2008; Walker, 2026a). Therefore, the study aims to explore and describe the social impacts of CSOs within local communities in which they are located. We intentionally focused on local community because CSOs are organisations that have the mission of providing sport activities in a specific geographic area. This area is defined as the 'local community'. Therefore, whilst social impacts might happen in non-local communities, these would be rare and usually not particularly planned by CSO managers. A systematic search of academic and grey literature in sport studies, social science, and humanities databases was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2015). Scoping reviews allow researchers to analyse knowledge gaps in a given field and identify key characteristics or factors related to a concept (Munn et al., 2018). They help scholars pinpoint what we know, what we do not know and what we need to know to advance knowledge. By identifying trends and gaps in existing literature, this study can contribute to informing further research policy, practice, and public understanding of the topic. The novelty of the current study lies on the fact that we do not assume that CSOs produce social impacts, rather we explored where and how such organisations may produce impacts. SFD plays an important role in the process. However, we investigated the literature to explore whether CSOs have produced social impacts beyond the existence of SFD programmes, which are intentionally designed to deliver such impacts.

With this review presenting an overview of the implementation and understanding of social impacts of CSOs whilst also more broadly encompassing study types and methodological approaches of existing literature, in doing so, it adopts the following definitions. In this review, 'local community' is defined as the geographically bounded population co-located with a CSO (e.g. its neighbourhood and town), which we distinguish from non-local or dispersed communities of interest (e.g. online communities) that CSOs may serve (Bradshaw, 2008; Hillery, 1955). CSOs are conceptualised as 'where' social impacts can be produced. In other words, CSOs are organisations where sport activities are offered to the local community. For example, people come to CSO to play football, to dance or to swim. Such sport activities have potential to create impacts on the community such as improving health, mental health, and sense of community. Then, it is proposed that social impacts represent 'what' can be produced from the activities run by CSOs (Coalter, 2010; Levermore & Beacom, 2012). For this review, we adopted a multidimensional definition of social impacts from Burdge and Vanclay (1996) who indicated that social impacts refer to the full range of social and cultural effects experienced by individuals or communities because of public or private actions that change how people live, work, interact, organise their lives, and function within

society. Within community sport contexts, social impacts typically manifest through mechanisms such as social capital formation, social inclusion, community cohesion, capacity building, and community resilience (Fortune & Oncescu, 2024; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Moustakas, 2022; Rocha et al., 2026; Tacon, 2019; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Whilst CSOs, SFD and social impacts forms the tripartite analytic framework and key themes guiding this review, in the research, the social impacts of CSO's remains the core focus with SFD treated as an overarching element of the findings.

2. Materials and methods

This scoping review follows the PRISMA protocol (Moher et al., 2015). Figure 1 shows the details of the PRISMA flow chart. The research process started with the authors defining the search terms for the SLR. Having defined the terms, we started conducting the SLR. The first author conducted the initial search and downloaded the references of all records, which were imported into Mendeley so that duplicates could be identified and excluded. Subsequent steps included study screening and quality assessment, which were completed by each author individually. After each step was completed, we met to discuss and resolve any disagreements. Upon any disagreements emerging, a majority decision was incorporated to determine the inclusion or removal of sources. Further methodological details are given below.

2.1. Search strategy

The systematic search strategy employed the Boolean operator 'AND' to find studies that examined the association between CSOs ('where') and social impacts ('what') and SFD ('how'). With each group, we

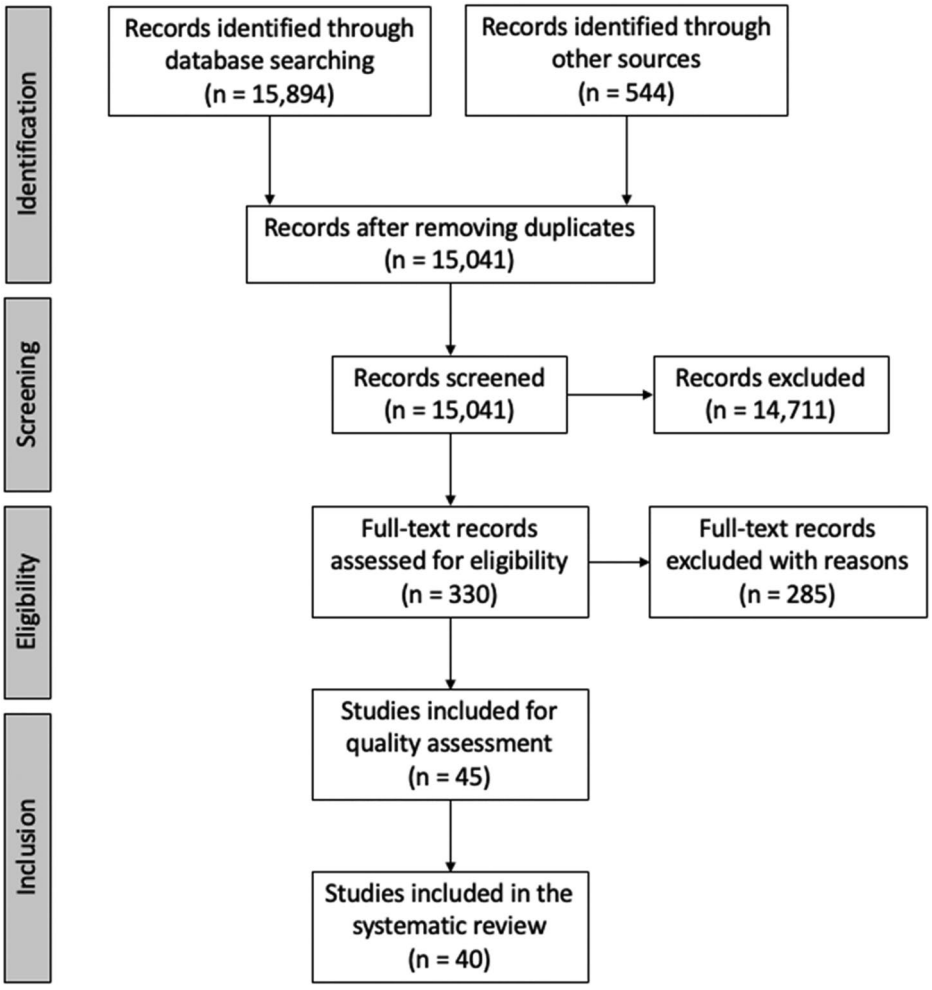

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

used the Boolean operator 'OR' to search for terms of interest at different locations in the document, specifically the title (TI), abstract (AB), keywords (KW), and subject (SU). To capture as wide a range of relevant literature as possible, we developed the following three groups of search terms:

Group 1 (FOCUS ON 'WHERE')

[TI (communit* sport* organisation* OR communit* sport* organization* OR communit* sport* club* OR sport* club* OR sport* program*) OR AB (same terms) OR KW (same terms) OR SU (same terms)]

AND

Group 2 (FOCUS ON 'WHAT')

[TI (social impact* OR social chang* OR social inclus* OR social cohesion OR social capital OR social leverage OR capacity building OR community resilience) OR AB (same terms) OR KW (same terms) OR SU (same terms)]

AND

GROUP 3 (FOCUS on 'HOW')

[TI (sport* for development) OR AB (sport* for development) OR KW (sport* for development) OR SU (sport* for development)]

We are aware that in some parts of the literature, SFD is followed by the term 'peace', leading to the concept of sport for development and peace (SDP). Using the term 'sport* for development' allowed us to find studies that use either SFD or SDP.

The overall focus of this study is to describe how the literature has explored social impacts generated by CSOs. It clearly aligns with proposed research core questions of 'where', 'what', and 'how' social impacts are produced.

2.2. Search process

The first author systematically searched academic literature across sport-related and broader social sciences and humanities databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, Sport Discus, ProQuest, SocIndex, Public Affairs Index, and Political Science Complete. Compared with academic literature databases, the advanced search functionalities of grey literature and theses databases differ from those of academic databases, meaning that the same detailed search strategy could not be directly applied. Following consultation with the research team, a simplified search approach was adopted for grey literature and theses, retaining only the most relevant terms. The first author then conducted searches of the grey literature and theses using the following search string: 'social impacts*' AND ('community sport* organisation*' OR 'community sport* organization*' OR 'sport* club*' OR 'sport* program*') on Ethos by the British Library, Open Access Theses and Dissertations (OATD), and Open Grey. To make sure we have not missed any record, we also conducted an additional search in Google Scholar using the terms 'community sport* organization' and 'sport* for development'. Then we check the first ten pages of the results. The references from search results were selected according to relevance. Further and more specific details regarding the results from each stage of the search process alongside the number of results, are outlined in Figure 1. Searches were conducted in April 2026.

2.3. Study selection

The search process identified 16,438 records (15,894 records from database searching and 544 from other sources, grey literature). After duplicate removal, 15,041 records were retained. Titles and the abstracts were screened by the first author using pre-selected inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria encompassed English-language empirical studies, including journal articles, academic books, academic book chapters, theses/dissertations, in which the search terms appeared in the title, keywords, abstract, or subject. The exclusion criteria entailed conceptual papers, conference abstracts, records without authors, works that discuss social impacts and/or SFD but are not related to CSOs.

Screening resulted in the exclusion of 14,711 records, with 330 studies proceeding to full-text review. After reading these papers and applying the inclusion/exclusion criteria, we eliminated 285 records and kept 45 records for quality assessment. These 285 records were excluded primarily because they did not report a measurable social impact outcome ($n = 58$), were not empirically grounded ($n = 46$), focused on organisational settings outside the CSO adopted in this review ($n = 159$), or were an ineligible publication type (e.g. conference abstract) ($n = 22$).

2.4. Quality assessment

To assess the quality of the 45 records for final inclusion, we followed guidance from Smith and McGannon (2018) for developing rigour in qualitative research. To do so, member checking was utilised (Birt et al., 2016). This involved all three authors evaluating the 45 files individually using the American Psychological Association's guidelines (Mallinckrodt, 2011) before discussing any divergence. To support each decision, each researcher made notes about their rationale for inclusion or exclusion of papers, then discussed repeatedly until agreement was reached. The final selection was reached if at least two out of the three researchers agreed on a decision for inclusion. Following quality assessment, five studies were excluded on the basis of methodological weaknesses, lack of scientific rigour, or inadequate focus on the social impacts of CSOs. This resulted in a final sample of 40 empirical papers.

2.5. Data extraction and analysis

A data extraction process was undertaken for the 40 studies retained in the final sample, including information on source (journal, university or institution), authors, date of publication, sport organisation investigated, research aims (research questions), theory or theoretical framework, method, main findings, and limitations. We tried to analyse strengths, similarities, and differences in the final studies. This enabled a focused examination of three core areas: (1) Where Social Impacts are Produced – Characteristics of CSO Publications, including publication journals, organisational types and areas, theory and/or conceptual frameworks, and methodological approaches; (2) What Social Impacts are Produced – The Multilevel Nature of Social Impacts; and (3) How Social Impacts are Produced – Two Distinct Types of Impacts.

3. Results

3.1. Where social impacts are produced – Characteristics of CSO publications

Table 1 presents an overview of the 40 studies included in the final sample, all published in peer-reviewed journals. Some studies ($n = 16$) appeared in sport management journals: Journal of Sport Management ($n = 8$), Sport Management Review ($n = 6$), and European Sport Management Quarterly ($n = 2$). Five studies were published in sport sociology journals, such as International Review for the Sociology of Sport ($n = 2$), Sport in Society ($n = 2$), and Journal of Sport and Social Issues ($n = 1$), while two studies were published in the International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics ($n = 2$). This result shows that CSOs have been studied more from a management point of view than from a sociological point of view. Considering the social importance of sport developed in CSO, this is an important result for reflection on how the knowledge in the field can progress. The studies were published between 2000 and 2026, with 33 of them (82.5%) being published between 2013 and 2026, indicating that CSOs have attracted the attention of researchers in the very recent past. The findings are outlined in Table 1:

The terms that the authors used to refer to CSO vary, but most studies used either the term community sport organisation ($n = 15$), sport club ($n = 12$) or sport(s) programme/program ($n = 13$). They all refer to the same type of sports organisation, which we defined above as CSO. Most of the studies have been conducted in developed countries in Global North, such as Canada ($n = 9$), Australia ($n = 8$), the UK ($n = 4$), the United States ($n = 3$), and Germany ($n = 3$). There are a few studies conducted in developing countries in the Global South, such as South Africa ($n = 3$), Brazil ($n = 1$), and China ($n = 1$). In this review, 'Global North' and 'Global South' follow the United Nations Trade and Development classification of national economies, applied to the location of the CSOs (rather than the institutional affiliation of the authors)

Table 1. Summary of the extracted data from studies included in the final sample of the scoping review.

Source	Authors (Date)	Sport organisation/ Sport programme	Research aim or questions	Theory/conceptual framework	Method	Findings	Limitations
Journal of Sport Management	Anderson-Butcher et al. (2014)	2011 Learning in Fitness and Education (LIFE) Sports Camp – a CSO in the USA	To examine the impact of a community sport programme on the development of sport and social skills among vulnerable youth that may benefit the most from these experiences.	No theory/theoretical framework	Surveys ($n=287$).	Initial evidence supports the role of strategically designed community sport in promoting positive youth development outcomes, particularly for youth who enter the programmes with greater needs related to social development. A sense of belonging among participants to community sport programmes emerged as a key programme element, alongside the importance of sport management leaders and practitioners.	Dual role of researchers as both data collectors and programme developers could introduce bias despite efforts to minimise it. The study used youth self-report measures that may be subject to social desirability or inaccurate reporting.
International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics	Blomqvist (2022)	Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC)	To examine the SSC's approach to supporting sport in socioeconomically deprived communities, with a focus on ethnic minorities.	Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979)	Reports and interviews ($n=27$).	The SSC used sustainable funding strategies to ensure consistent inter-sectoral practices. The sport club served as a mediating link between clubs and local directives. A 'principle of closeness' was embedded throughout the confederation's practice, and every engagement in the process was shaped by this principle. Certain individual characteristics become decisive factors in determining programme outcomes.	The study lacked in-depth contextualisation. Data collection was limited to dominant institutional voices rather than grassroots perspectives. Online conference format constrained data richness.
Managing Sport and Leisure	Brake and Misener (2020)	Soccer programme in one municipality in Ontario, Canada	To investigate factors that facilitate positive intergroup interaction in urban youth sport for development and peace soccer programme implemented in the public sector.	Contact Theory (Allport, 1954)	Semi-structured interviews ($n=13$).	Within an inner-city youth sport for development and peace programme contexts, participation is facilitated by thoughtful programme planning, recognition of diverse perspectives, influential youth development advocates, and adequate human, financial, and partnership support.	The study reflects a relatively narrow range of participants roles, limiting the diversity of perspectives captured. The exclusively qualitative design constrains the ability to assess the scale significance of outcomes.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Source	Authors (Date)	Sport organisation/ Sport programme	Research aim or questions	Theory/conceptual framework	Method	Findings	Limitations
Sport Management Review	Bullough et al. (2015)	A community Free Swimming programme (FSP) in UK	To evaluate a community free swimming initiative for young people (under 19s) within one English local authority, examine its value for expanding swimming participation.	Sport for social change (e.g. Coalter, 2013)	Secondary analysis of user data by the IT software databases and a longitudinal survey ($n=359$).	The programme demonstrated value for improving access, aiming to attract as many non-swimmers as possible to swim more regularly. Both market penetration and the removal of the price barrier were key mechanisms employed.	The surveys relied on self-reported participation frequency accurately. Young respondents whose parent/guardian completed the form may have introduced interpretation inconsistencies compared with self-completion.
Journal of Sociology	Brown et al. (2014)	Community sport and other third sector organisations in the State of Victoria, Australia	To explore empirically the relationship between community sport participation and generalised trust.	Social capital theory (Putnam, 2000)	Surveys ($n=1833$).	Community association membership and generalised trust are significantly positively associated. The data indicated that community membership in sport organisations tends to foster trust rather than the reverse.	A cross-sectional design as well as providing a basis for assessing whether trust elevation is sustained over time.
International Review for the Sociology of Sport	Burnett (2006)	Siyakhula Community Club in Tshabo, South Africa	To assess the impact of the Australia Africa Active Community Clubs Initiative in fostering active citizenship and developing networks within the impoverished rural Easter Cape village.	Neo-classical capital theory (Bourdieu, 1984). Rational choice theory (Coleman, 1990). Network theory (Portes, 1998). Framework of civil engagement (Putnam, 2000).	Interviews ($n=209$) in 18 focus group sessions.	Social capital was translated into perceptions of employability, reduced poverty exposure, and access to organisations such as Australian Sports Council at individual level. Social capital also facilitated community-level development by active community initiative.	The study does not provide long-term evaluation data to demonstrate social impact are sustained over time.
International Review for the Sociology of Sport	Burnett (2001)	The Australia-South Africa Sport Development programme in five school in northern and western cape of South Africa	To outline the methodology, rationale and social outcomes of the junior component of the Australia-South Africa Sport Development programme.	No theory/theoretical framework	Interviews ($n=9$), focus group interviews ($n=173$), surveys ($n=146$), and sociometric test ($n=40$).	Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) offers a new philosophy and opportunity that change the ideology of sport. In macro level, SDP afforded the children the opportunity to take part in activity. At the meso-level, SDP was a viable reason for parents to support sport participation.	Limited time for data collection
Annals of Leisure Research	Casey et al. (2009)	Eight of the VicHealth-funded programmes in Australia	To develop a deeper understanding of the challenges of cross-organisational partnerships in overcoming long-term barriers to physical activity participation.	No theory/theoretical framework	Semi-structured interviews ($n=11$), document analysis, and final programme reports were used to inform the case descriptions.	Extending those of others in the literature and providing an insight into the challenges of partnerships between volunteer- and professional-based sport and recreation organisations to promote participation in physical activity, particularly in terms of partnership formation and generating shared interests.	Information was collected once (i.e. near the end of the programme funding period) and not every programme was completed.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Source	Authors (Date)	Sport organisation/ Sport programme	Research aim or questions	Theory/conceptual framework	Method	Findings	Limitations
Sport in Society	Davies (2016)	Orford Jubilee Neighbourhood Hub (OJNH) in Warrington, UK	To examine the intended objectives of a local sporting and regeneration facility and assess the extent to which those aims were being achieved.	No theory/theoretical framework	Document review and interviews ($n=13$).	The evidence indicated OJNH was functioning as a sustainable sports facility in financial and sporting terms. The case was presented as a potential model for other facility development.	There is limited tangible and quantitative evidence to support the notion that OJNH is achieving its intended economic outcomes. The case study design reinforced the need for more robust evaluation approaches.
Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly	Doherty et al. (2014)	Community sport clubs in Ontario, Canada	To develop organisational capacity framework by identifying critical internal dimensions, including human resources, finance, infrastructure, planning and development, and external relationships.	Multidimensional framework of organisational capacity (Hall et al., 2003)	Focus groups with presidents of sport clubs in Ontario ($n=51$, 13 focus groups)	The identified capacity dimensions offered policy makers a roadmap for strengthening specific aspects of human resources, infrastructure, planning and development, and external relationships.	Variation by club characteristics (size, age, volunteers, location) limited generalisation of the impact of each dimension.
Journal of Sport Management	Doherty and Cuskelly (2020)	Community Sport Organisations (CSOs) in Canada	To investigate the relative impact of different dimensions of organisational capacity on CSOs performance, thereby testing the capacity theory in CSOs Canada context.	Multidimensional framework of organisational capacity (Hall et al., 2003)	Web-based survey ($n=336$).	Predictive capacity models identified key indicators of CSOs performance, highlighting the importance of human resources, infrastructure and finance across different outcome dimensions.	Predictive models were derived from a population specific to the sampled CSOs, limiting generalisability. The cross-sectional design prevented examination of capacity changes over time.
Journal of Sport Management	Elmose-Osterlund et al. (2021)	Voluntary Sport Clubs (VSCs) in Denmark	To investigate organisational capacity (OC) differences between VSCs that participated in a club development programme and comparable non-participating VSCs.	Multidimensional framework of organisational capacity (Hall et al., 2003) and Resource-based view (Barney, 1991).	Survey ($n=48$) and focus group interviews ($n=5$).	There were significant differences in OC building between the participating and nonparticipating VSCs. Some improvements were sustained for up to four years following the programme. Human resource capacity, planning and development capacity, and infrastructure and process capacity remained visible three to four years after participation.	Questionnaires could have been sent to both participating and nonparticipating VSCs before the initiation of the club development programme. Limitations in experimental design reduced the ability to draw causal conclusions.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Source	Authors (Date)	Sport organisation/ Sport programme	Research aim or questions	Theory/conceptual framework	Method	Findings	Limitations
Leisure/ Loisir	Fortune and Oncescu (2024)	Community Sport and Recreation Organisations (CSROs) in Germany	To examine how community sport and recreation organisations (CSROs) support the inclusion of low-income families in sport and recreation.	No theory/theoretical framework	Semi-structured interviews ($n=11$).	CSROs reduced the financial barriers to participation for low-income families. Most of initiatives aimed at meeting the needs of low-incomes populations relate to financial and equipment assistance. CSROs collaborate with multicultural organisations and indigenous communities to promote inclusion.	Only the organisational dimension of inclusion was investigated in this study.
Leisure Sciences	Forsell et al. (2020)	Victorian Recreation and Sport Clubs in Australia	To develop and validate a scale measuring social capital within recreation and sport clubs.	Social capital theory (Putnam, 2000)	Semi-structured interviews ($n=4$), two focus groups ($n=8$), and a polit study ($n=100$).	Governance, norms, friendship-acceptance, and trust-reciprocity were identified as four factors. These factors indicated a strong relationship among members, characterised by behaviours of trust, helping, and governance on the second reciprocity dimension.	The lower response rate among clubs.
European Sport Management Quarterly	Frisby and Millar (2002)	WOAW (Women Organizing Activities for Women) in Canada	To examine the key community development process from the perspectives of those engaged in a collaborative research initiative to increase the participation of low-income women in local sport and recreation over three years.	No theory/theoretical framework	Semi-structured interviews ($n=41$), observations and field notes, and document analysis.	The study illuminated the complexities of doing community development from the perspectives of most actively engaged in it. It offered promise for the least involved participants in planning local sport and recreation programmes, enabling governments to better fulfil their service mandates.	Interviews with local staff rather than marginalised citizens limited the depth of community perspectives.
Sport Management Review	Harith et al. (2025)	IncluPAS- a disadvantaged community sport project in three European cities (Ghent, Vilnius, and Thessaloniki).	To examine the beliefs, values, reasons and motives influencing users' adoption of a digital application within a Sport for Development and Peace programme.	Behavioural Reasoning Theory (Westaby, 2005)	Semi-structured interviews ($n=51$).	A priority towards academic achievement by both youth and their families. It identifies those subjective norms, attitudes and perceived behaviour control influenced the failed adoption of the digital app.	Given there were no cause champions from Ghent included in this study, additional reasons for the (non) adoption of the digital app within the Ghent context may have aligned or contrasted with cause champion from other contexts.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Source	Authors (Date)	Sport organisation/ Sport programme	Research aim or questions	Theory/conceptual framework	Method	Findings	Limitations
European Sport Management Quarterly	Hoeber et al. (2015)	Community Sport Organisations (CSOs) including curling, soccer, swimming, and Ultimate. Canada	To explore the nature of innovation within CSOs and its significance for knowledge acquisition and organisational change.	No theory/theoretical framework	Semi-structured interviews ($n=42$).	CSOs actively engaged in innovations activities, typically focusing on process-related, administrative, and incremental innovations. Coding of innovations according to three attribute sets, highlighting their variety.	Coding of the innovations based on the three sets of dichotomous attributes (form, type, and magnitude).
Sport Management Review	Jones et al. (2018)	Westside Youth Centre (WYC) an American CSO	To empirically examine how one community sport organisation implemented community capacity strategies in an underserved community.	Community capacity theory (Edwards, 2015)	Interviews ($n=8$), direct observations, and document analysis.	WYC had a positive impact on various dimensions of community capacity. The organisation formed community partnerships that led to improvements in physical resources and infrastructure with reverberating effects across the community.	Single case study using only one youth sport organisation. Data was collected over a limited period. The deductive analytical approach and data sources primarily from WYC interactions limited opportunities for wider community perspectives.
Journal of Sport Management	Macrae (2017)	39 Voluntary Sport Clubs (VSCs) in the UK	To understand voluntary sport clubs' perception of their participation legacy goals of London 2012 and the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.	No theory/theoretical framework	Survey (Phase 1 $n=36$; Phase 2 $n=5$) and semi-structured interviews (Phase 1 $n=6$; Phase 2 $n=1$).	Policy makers acknowledged that hosting alone provided no clear evidence of a sustained rise in post-event sport participation. A need for capacity-building initiatives was recognised, alongside a clear need for national governing bodies and policy makers to support suitable VSCs.	Low participation rates from VSCs limited generalisability. A lack of engagement from all suitable VSCs constrained conclusions.
BMC Public Health	Marlier et al. (2015)	Community Sport Programme (CSP) - four disadvantaged communities in Antwerp, Belgium	To increase sport participation rates and physical activity levels.	No theory/theoretical framework	In-depth semi-structured interviews ($n=44$).	Thirteen elements of cross-sector partnerships were identified as critical, including trust, collaboration time, shared vision, personal contact, coordination, and accessible funding. Partnership support was developed by partners, with clear metrics of success established.	The issue of external validity and transferability of the findings. The study focused on the competencies of those directly involved in the partnership.

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Table 1. Continued.

Source	Authors (Date)	Sport organisation/ Sport programme	Research aim or questions	Theory/conceptual framework	Method	Findings	Limitations
Journal of Sport Management	Marshall and Barry (2015)	Kicking AIDS Out Network in Southern African	To examine the practitioner perspectives on sport for development (SFD) elements critical for achieving social development objectives in Southern Africa.	Sport for Development framework (Lyras, 2009)	Semi-structured interviews ($n=12$).	Practitioners and donors largely agreed that the Sport for Development Theory (SFDT) model had strong applicability to most network components. Capacity development, sport, inclusivity, and Community participation were widely identified as a key and significant element of the Kicking AIDS Out Network in Southern Africa.	Small sample size limited generalisability of findings outside the study context.
Sport in Society	McMahon and Skytt-Larsen (2021)	Setanta GAA, a local sport club in Ballymun, Dublin, Ireland	To examine how local sports clubs can positively influence the social regeneration of disadvantaged areas by building social capital and reducing social stigma.	Social capital theory (Putnam, 2000)	Semi-structured interviews ($n=4$) and focus group interview ($n=4$).	Sport clubs can help to mitigating stigmatisation by giving younger residents the opportunity to forge positive identities. Local clubs demonstrated responsibility for taking on a significant amount of social responsibility for their communities.	Methodologically, the study used a limited sample in attempting to understand these processes based on a small number of interviews with recorded experiences.
Journal of Sport Management	Millar and Doherty (2018)	A curling club and a competitive North American football programme in Canada	To examine capacity-building processes in the community sport context and assess the validity of a proposed capacity-building model.	No theory/theoretical framework	Multiple case study. Semi-structured Interviews ($n=9$).	The thoroughness of the needs assessment, the choice of capacity-building strategy and the level of preparedness for capacity-building are key factors in the success (or failure) of capacity-building efforts.	The multiple case approach provided insight into capacity-building processes within two CSOs and was not intended to be generalised across all CSOs.
Journal of Sport Management	Misener and Doherty (2009)	Westbury Gymnastics Club (WGC) in Canada	To examine how dimensions of organisational capacity affected goal achievement within a community sport organisation.	Multidimensional framework of organisational capacity (Hall et al., 2003)	Semi-structured interviews ($n=7$) and observations.	Human resources capacity was perceived by participants as the most critical dimension. Financial capacity was not perceived as significantly impacting the club. Planning and goal attainment were also perceived as important. Infrastructure and process capacity did not significantly affect overall goal achievement.	Insufficient number of volunteers, which constrained organisational capacity and programme delivery.

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Table 1. Continued.

Source	Authors (Date)	Sport organisation/ Sport programme	Research aim or questions	Theory/conceptual framework	Method	Findings	Limitations
Sport Management Review	Misener and Doherty (2013)	Community sport organisations (CSOs) in one mid-sized community in Ontario, Canada	To examine the processes and outcomes of interorganisational relationships (IOR) among small non-profits to better understand their impact on organisational capacity to achieve their mission.	Multidimensional framework of organisational capacity (Hall et al., 2003)	Semi-structured interviews ($n=20$).	CSOs were connected to a wide range of partners across different sectors including for-profit, public, and non-profit domains. The range of relationship types was relatively common across the organisations, and the variety of relationships was broad.	Small sample size (i.e. 20 CSOs) and Single geographic context (i.e. one mid-sized community). Lack quantitative data.
Nonprofit Management and Leadership	Misener et al. (2020)	Seven community sport organisations (CSOs) in Ontario, Canada	To explore the impact of organisational social responsibility within non-profit membership associations on members' positive behaviours, including volunteering, advocacy, and loyalty.	No theory/theoretical framework	Surveys ($n=735$).	Evidence was found that grassroots membership associations influence members positively via the association itself. Findings supported the function of membership behaviour that promotes socially responsible activities within CSOs. Opportunities for CSOs to translate their internally focused socially responsible practices into positive external involvement behaviours were highlighted.	Low response rate. Conclusions across different membership groups were not feasible. Insufficient data were available for many groups. The study design only reflected clubs already engaged in socially responsible activities.
Social Sciences	Moustakas (2022)	Three organisations from Ireland, Germany and the Netherlands	To explore how three European sport programmes conceptualize and foster social cohesion.	No theory/theoretical framework	Interviews ($n=20$), focus group discussions ($n=4$), documents, and observations.	The study indicated how organisations had adopted a relatively consistent set of practices that centred on peaceful social relations and networks of diversity, promoting appreciation of diversity and collective identity. The study also outlined how these programmes' individual characteristics aim to develop elements seen as essential to social cohesion. Findings highlighted how programmes expect individuals to take personal responsibility for social cohesion in their broader communities.	Participant voices were largely missing from the research.

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Table 1. Continued.

Source	Authors (Date)	Sport organisation/ Sport programme	Research aim or questions	Theory/conceptual framework	Method	Findings	Limitations
BMC Public Health	Nathan et al. (2013)	Football United programme in Australia	To report on the impacts reported by young people who participated in a school-based sport for development programme, Football United, compared to those who did not participate, but attended schools in a similar setting.	No theory/theoretical framework	Surveys ($n=142$) and interviews ($n=79$).	Young people who participated in Football United showed significantly higher other-group orientation and significantly higher prosocial scores than boys in the comparison group. Higher scores on prosocial behaviour in the Football United programme were associated with attendance at the survey.	The number of participants was limited to those in the selected Football United programme schools in the primary study year. Outcome data were collected at one time point only. The comparison group's sample composition was similar.
Annals of Leisure Research	Robertson et al. (2019)	Community sport organisations (CSOs) in Global.	To examine the premise that CSOs are responsible to society to a certain extent.	No theory/theoretical framework	A three-wave Delphi study (First round $n=54$, second round $n=49$, third round $n=28$).	CSOs were perceived as having a broad range of social responsibilities. Health promotion as a social responsibility was not rated highly by clubs. Fundamental responsibility of CSOs was to maximise participation. In terms of CSO responsibility, a safe and inclusive environment was considered the most fundamental responsibility.	Social responsibility framework transferability was developed and applied to small non-profit organisations in other contexts.
Social Sciences	Rocha et al. (2026)	Community sport organisations in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.	To examine how community sport organisation in favelas managed a public health emergency and effect of crisis management on community resilience.	Stakeholder theory of crisis management (Alpaslan et al. 2009)	Semi-structured interviews ($n=13$).	Managers respond to the COVID - 19 crisis by redirecting their focus toward community support and resilience across four regions of Rio de Janeiro. When sport activities were no longer possible, CSOs repurposed their organisational capacity toward food distribution, network building with other NGOs, and community mobilisation.	The case study has potential for analytic generalisation; however, the specific context of favelas may limit the generalisability of implications. The authors did not investigate the socioeconomic realities in depth.
International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics	Schulenkorf et al. (2014)	Football for Peace (F4P) projects in Israel	To expand the sport for development and peace (SDP) field by gathering insights from 13 Football 4 Peace (F4P) initiatives, specifically through the perspectives of local stakeholders like coaches, volunteers, and community leaders, developing the existing body of knowledge by examining lessons learned from these projects.	Critical SDP theory (Coalter, 2010)	Semi-structured interviews ($n=30$) and two focus group discussions ($n=24$).	This research explores varied community viewpoints across key themes of values and delivery, engagement and commitment, and scope, regularity and sustainability. The article demonstrates how the understandings and interpretations of SFD found within the academic literature are wide-ranging.	The study acknowledges that qualitative and exploratory design limits opportunities for generalization beyond the specific F4P context in Israel. It also notes underrepresentation of female voices, as most community representatives interviewed were men.

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Table 1. Continued.

Source	Authors (Date)	Sport organisation/ Sport programme	Research aim or questions	Theory/conceptual framework	Method	Findings	Limitations
Annals of Leisure Research	Sotiriadou and Wicker (2013)	Sports clubs of Gold Coast Community Guide 2010–2011 in Australia	To explore what community sport clubs involved in through applying the process for government funding.	Institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978)	Semi-structured interviews ($n=18$).	Community sports clubs have similar administrative and sport development needs related to attracting and retaining volunteers and members. They had similar venue-related needs and required quality programmes, training opportunities, and competition environments.	The transferability of the findings needs to be considered with caution (e.g. club system and government support).
Journal of Sport and Social Issues	Spaaij et al. (2014)	Community sports clubs in Victoria, Australian	To critically examine how diversity is understood and valued in community sport in Australia.	No theory/theoretical framework	Semi-structured interviews ($n=41$).	Community sports clubs had similar administrative characteristics. There was a discrepancy between government and clubs' diversity objectives. The way diversity is understood and managed by government organisations and community sport clubs differs, and diversity is not being widely promoted across community sports clubs.	The study is grounded in particular community and migrant contexts, limiting the generalisability of findings across different national and policy environments.
Leisure Studies	Spaaij (2015)	Community football clubs in Melbourne, Australia	To investigate how community sport is used by refugee youth to negotiate a sense of belonging.	No theory/theoretical framework	Observation and in-depth interviews ($n=51$).	Belonging was constructed by a dynamic and situational manner within the clubs, operating at varying scales of experience from local sports team and community to global Somali diaspora and cosmopolitan identity.	The empirical research focused only one group of people who has refugee backgrounds, and specifically on participating in football in one organised form of sport in one country.
International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy	Tacon (2019)	Two voluntary sports clubs: a cricket club and a tennis club in the UK	To examine the specific processes through which people from social ties and how organisations shape the type of ties people form.	Social capital theory (Putnam, 2000)	Observation and semi-structured interview ($n=23$).	The clubs formed the formation of ties in meaningful ways, organisationally embedded in significance. Members appeared to value their weak ties for what they provided unexpected.	Two specific organisations conducted on the empirical research. Focus on certain dimensions meant lack of attention to gender, class and power. A lack of class and power balance limited the scope of the study.

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Table 1. Continued.

Source	Authors (Date)	Sport organisation/ Sport programme	Research aim or questions	Theory/conceptual framework	Method	Findings	Limitations
Sport Management Review	Wegner et al. (2023)	Building capacity programme workshops in US	To analyse the capacity-building process for organisations engaged in a sport for development (SFD) through a structured capacity-building programme.	No theory/theoretical framework	Focus group ($n=29$), semi-structured interviews ($n=3$), observation, field notes and workshop documents.	The dual burden of building capacity for sport and for SFD was identified as a challenge. Capacity in the SFD context does not constitute a simple proposition, nor is it size dependent. Existing capacity can serve to promote or constrain SFD initiatives. Organisations with little capacity found SFD an additional burden.	The study are limited in transferability due to the structured program context, and the lack of longitudinal tracking of specific organisations means long-term impacts could not be fully assessed.
Sport Management Review	Wicker and Breuer (2011)	Sport clubs in Germany	To offer the evidence of empirical research for the resource structure of sport clubs through presenting the types of resources available to them.	Resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978)	Panel survey questionaries ($n=13{,}068$)	Sport clubs appear to possess organisational capacity, drawing on a variety of resources that align with four key capacity dimensions.	The study was limited to a two-year period, preventing long-term analysis. The quantitative data could not establish links between resource changes and club goal achievement, nor empirically prove connections between resource dimensions.
Journal of Sport Management	Wicker et al. (2013)	Sport clubs in Queensland, Australia.	To investigate how community sport clubs maintain organisational resilience following natural disasters.	No theory/theoretical framework	Surveys ($n=200$).	Human and financial resources were primarily drawn upon during recovery, with organisational resilience, membership size, and government grant utilisation each contributing positively to clubs 'perceived overall recovery.	The study is limited by a small sample size, low response rate, potential validity concerns with the organisational resilience scale, and its focus solely on flood and cyclone events.
Canadian Journal of Development Studies	Willis (2000)	Mathare Youth Sport Association (MYSA)	To explore the connection between sport and grassroots development through MYSA, an innovative Nairobi-based organisation that integrates youth engagement with sport and developmental programs.	No theory/theoretical framework	Press articles, internet report, semi-structured in-depth interviews ($n=49$), and observation.	The resilience and overlooked potential of disadvantaged communities is notable. Sport serves as an effective entry point for development, and while cynicism is easy, tangible grassroots action is genuinely taking place.	Lack of quantitative data.
International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	Yang et al. (2022)	Marathon urban running associations in China	To examine how urban runners interact and behave within their community through the lens of social interaction theory.	No theory/theoretical framework	In-depth interviews ($n=10$) and participant observation.	The interaction process within running groups unfolds across three dimensions: self-reflection, adapting behaviour in response to others, and a shared sense of group belonging as the central driving force.	The study is qualitative with a relatively small sample (10 interviewees), data rely on self-reported experience that can be subject to bias. The participants are only from a single city's running groups.

(UN Trade and Development, 2007). It should also be noted that South Africa, Brazil, and China are upper-middle-income countries and major global economic actors. They are not representative of the lower-income and low-middle-income countries that represent the broader Global South category. In studies related to CSOs, the majority of studies have been conducted in the Global North by authors from the Global North, indicating a gap of studies in the Global South conducted by local authors. The unequal geographical distribution is noted as a descriptive pattern in the data, and its implications are discussed further in the discussion section.

The studies have drawn upon a variety of theoretical frameworks to examine the social impacts of CSOs. Whilst there is no dominance of a specific theory, theories related to organisational capacity (Hall et al., 2003; Millar & Doherty, 2016), social capital (Putnam, 2000), and SFD (Lyras, 2009) have been more frequently used. Organisational capacity frameworks are used to analyse the internal and external capabilities of CSOs that enable social impacts. Several studies adopt multidimensional and process models of capacity building (Doherty et al., 2014; Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2021; Millar & Doherty, 2018; Misener & Doherty, 2009, 2013; Wegner et al., 2023) to examine functional areas such as human resources, finances, infrastructure, and planning and development, and to explore the relationships between CSOs and organisational effectiveness. The findings of these studies show that 'capacity building' works as a dynamic process that is often dependent on developments in other areas, such as community and public relations and funding opportunities, highlighting the relational nature of capacity within CSOs (Doherty et al., 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2009). Social capital theory has been used in some of the studies in the final sample, particularly to examine the social outcomes associated with sport participation in CSOs (Brown et al., 2014; McMahon & Skytt-Larsen, 2021; Tacon, 2019). These studies indicate that sport participation through CSOs is associated with higher levels of trust, social ties, and sense of belonging, therefore, creating social capital in the communities. In studies using SFD frameworks, sport programmes are used to address broader social objectives within CSOs (Marshall & Barry, 2015; Schulenkorf et al., 2014). For example, Burnett (2001) shows that structured sport programmes within CSOs are perceived to support inclusion, participation, and life-skills development – key elements in the SFD.

A notable proportion of the studies ($n = 20$), representing half of the final sample, did not explicitly draw upon any stated theory/theoretical frameworks. These studies have a descriptive nature, aiming to offer a view of how CSOs have produced social impacts and/or to illustrate the role of SFD initiatives within CSOs. Many of these studies adopt case study designs and focus on capturing organisational practice, programme delivery, and participant experience (Marlier et al., 2015; Nathan et al., 2013; Robertson et al., 2019; Spaaij et al., 2014; Willis, 2000). The descriptive nature of these studies has played an important role in knowledge advancement, mainly at early stages of the area development. For example, Frisby and Millar (2002) were one of the first authors to discuss the impacts that community sport recreation programmes have on their communities. Using a case study technique, they explored the case of a CSO in Canada whose aim was to include low-income women in local sport and recreation activities. They found that such an aim could be facilitated by applying innovative managerial strategies, such as adopting collaborative principles of management and encouraging active participation of marginalised groups in the decision-making process. Whilst not explicitly framed through a theory, such work contributed to foundational empirical insights that helped to shape subsequent research.

Regarding the data analysis technique employed, the review found that the vast majority ($n = 28$) of studies employed a qualitative approach. To collect data, 12 of those 28 studies used only interviews, whilst the remainder employed other strategies such as focus groups and document analysis (sometimes in association with interviews – see Table 1). For example, Jones et al. (2018) and Moustakas (2022) employed interviews with document analysis and direct observations. Misener and Doherty (2009), Spaaij (2015), and Tacon (2019) used interviews and observations. In contrast, seven studies employed a quantitative approach by using survey questionnaires (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2014; Bullough et al., 2015; Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Misener et al., 2020; Wicker et al., 2013; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Five studies employed mixed methods, combining interviews with surveys and/or surveys with interviews and direct observations (Burnett, 2001; Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2021; Forsell et al., 2020; Macrae, 2017; Nathan et al., 2013).

3.2. What social impacts are produced – The multilevel nature of social impacts

The findings also showed that social impacts were analysed at multiple levels: organisational, individual, and community level. At the organisational level, capacity building studies (e.g. Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Misener & Doherty, 2009) indicated that organisational capacity operates as a multidimensional and dynamic prior condition for the generation of social impacts. The capacity dimensions identified across human resources, finances, infrastructure, planning and development, and external relationships do not function in isolation. They are relational and interdependent with capacity building in one dimension, enabling and/or constraining others (Doherty et al., 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2009). Human resources capacity consistently emerges as the most critical dimension. For example, Misener and Doherty (2009) found that human resources capacity was perceived based on positive teamwork efficiency, collaboration, alongside the professional skills and shared values that members bring to CSOs. The authors linked these factors to the organisational capacity to pursue CSOs' social mission. Other studies explore this mission more clearly through the concept of organisational social responsibility (OSR). For instance, Robertson et al. (2019) found that CSOs are perceived to carry broad social responsibilities, with maximising participation in a safe and inclusive environment being identified as the most fundamental one. Misener et al. (2020) further showed that member awareness of a CSO's socially responsible practices positively influenced volunteering, loyalty, and club advocacy among members.

At the individual level, the most frequently reported social outcomes were related to the development of social skills and the building of social capital, such as inclusion, communication, trust and reciprocity (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2014; Brake & Misener, 2020; McMahon & Skytt-Larsen, 2021; Spaaij, 2015). For example, Anderson-Butcher et al. (2014) found that participation in community sport programmes fostered a sense of social connection and inclusion among participants. Furthermore, CSOs help to facilitate the development of communication networks linking coaches, parents, and volunteers (Jones et al., 2018). In addition, CSO programmes can provide important opportunities for disadvantaged youth. For example, McMahon and Skytt-Larsen (2021) found that a sport club in Dublin, Ireland created a programme that generated a significant impact on adolescents from marginalised communities, improving employment skills and developing their respect, teamwork, and personal skills. These initiatives contribute to the development of bridging social capital, which is paramount for improving social and economic mobility (Putnam, 2000). Meanwhile, participation in CSOs fosters bonding social capital, particularly among marginalised youth (Spaaij, 2015). Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and trust and reciprocity that facilitate cooperation and collective action within communities (Putnam, 2000). Social capital was identified as a key outcome of sport participation across several studies in the final sample. Forsell et al. (2020) highlight that social capital in community sport encompasses multiple dimensions, including bonding social capital, bridging social capital, and linking social capital. Social capital is produced through ongoing participation, shared activities, and interpersonal relationships formed within CSOs (Forsell et al., 2020).

At the community level, findings show that building community capacity (e.g. community partnerships, community ownership, and community resilience) is a central determinant of sustained impacts within CSOs. For example, Jones et al. (2018) found that CSOs draw on community partnerships to improve physical resources and infrastructure, which in turn produce broader effects across the community. These initiatives help CSOs to obtain resources for increasing sport participation. Brake and Misener (2020) and Marshall and Barry (2015) pointed out that members develop a sense of ownership towards their community because of the positive interaction developed during sport participation. Rocha et al. (2026) found that sport managers responded to the crisis generated by public health emergencies by shifting their focus toward community support and resilience rather than keeping the focus on sport participation. These findings indicate that community-level social impact is associated with the capacity of CSOs to adapt their organisational processes and creatively create value to the community environment where they are located.

3.3. How social impacts are produced – Two distinct types of impacts

A further analysis of the articles revealed that nine studies focused on a specific type of impact: capacity building of CSOs (Doherty et al., 2014; Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2021;

Jones et al., 2018; Marlier et al., 2015; Millar & Doherty, 2018; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Wegner et al., 2023; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). These articles analysed two impacts of capacity building in CSOs. First, internal impacts of organisational capacity indicated that building organisational capacity can help CSOs to acquire resources, become more sustainable organisations, and develop more effective organisational processes (Doherty et al., 2014; Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Hoeber et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2018; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Across the review, studies showed that organisational capacity was built upon investment in human resources management practices, such as volunteer recruitment, training, and retention (Jones et al., 2018; Misener & Doherty, 2009). Second, external impacts of capacity building are those whose outcomes go beyond the management and operation of CSOs and are mainly related to how CSOs can provide better services for the community. Examples include promoting community cohesion, expanding interest in sport and physical activity, improving a sense of belonging, and creating volunteering opportunities (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2014; Casey et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2018; Moustakas, 2022). The distinction between internal and external impacts is an important result of the current study and is discussed further in the discussion section.

The second type of impact focuses on SFD. Studies that focus on SFD as a means to generate positive social outcomes propose that that happens through intentional design logic to have change-making effects (Marshall & Barry, 2015; Wegner et al., 2023). For example, Willis (2000) highlighted that the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA), a CSO in Kenya, made deliberate efforts to promote gender empowerment beyond sport participation. Thirteen studies indicated that a demarcation between SFD and regular community sport offered by CSOs is often blurred (e.g. Brake & Misener, 2020; Bullough et al., 2015; Burnett, 2001; Marlier et al., 2015; Marshall & Barry, 2015). SFD programmes differ from regular sports activities as the former ones have clear aims that are not related to sports performance and/or participation only, rather they focus on social issues such as gender empowerment, health promotion, and positive youth development (Brake & Misener, 2020; Marshall & Barry, 2015; Willis, 2000). Community sport aims to enhance mental health, share interests, support cultural development, and increase sport participation (Bullough et al., 2015; Casey et al., 2009; Marlier et al., 2015), they focus on the feeling of civic identify and building connection with others. In Marshall and Barry (2015), although some organisations are investigated under the label of 'implementers' of SFD programmes, very little is discussed about the role of the organisations. Rather, they focus on SFD interventions (using the case of Kicking AIDS Out Network) to propose that CSOs promote awareness of HIV/AIDS through SFD programmes in Africa (Marshall & Barry, 2015), such as the community socially healthier, as it promotes social changes. The finding further showed that social outcomes are not an automatic consequence of SFD (Frisby & Millar, 2002; Harith et al., 2025; Misener et al., 2020). Harith et al. (2025) offer an example where, SFD programme fails to produce social impact due to lack of adequate organisational capacity (e.g. support and training) to implement a social innovation digital app into community. On the contrary, Frisby and Millar (2002) illustrated how Women Organising Activity for Women (WOAW), an SFD programme, produced social impacts by offering participants a voice.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to conduct a scoping literature review to explore and describe the social impacts of CSOs within local communities in which they are located. Drawing on 40 empirical studies published between 2000 and 2026, the findings make important contributions to our understanding of 'where', 'what', and 'how' social impacts were produced. The following subsections discuss these themes that emerged from the scoping review: geographical and contextual distribution of research; theoretical and methodological landscape; multiple-level social impacts of CSOs; organisational capacity of community sport organisations; sport for development in community sport organisations.

4.1. Geographical and contextual distribution of research

The findings raise important questions about whose knowledge, social outcomes, and CSOs are being studied and theorised within this field. The unequal geographical distribution is not merely a peculiar

occurrence in the statistical analysis of literature. It reflects structural inequalities in research funding, institutional capacity, and publishing power (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Rather than a funding shortfall, the more consequential pattern identified in this review is who conducts the research and where. For example, studies on CSOs located in the Global South are authored by Global North-based researchers, which may limit the contextual and local specificity of the evidence base. Whether this pattern is itself driven by the underlying distribution of research funding remains unclear, and future research should examine this relationship directly. Furthermore, this review reveals a partial inversion of a pattern observed in the wider SFD literature because most SFD studies have historically been conducted in the Global South, however, completed by researchers from the Global North (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). The studies on social impacts of CSOs in this review were overwhelmingly conducted in the Global North by Global North researchers. These findings suggest that the literature lacks studies on the social impacts of CSOs in the Global South and studies conducted by Global South authors.

The absence of social impacts of CSOs' research in low- and middle-income countries is relevant because CSOs in these contexts are likely to function differently, serving populations experiencing more acute forms of social disadvantage and operating under considerably more constrained environments. The MYSA in Kenya represents an instructive example of a Global South CSO that has deliberately positioned itself as an SFD vehicle. Using organised sport within MYSA as an entry point to promote civic engagement, gender empowerment, and community development, Willis (2000) described how CSOs can operate effectively to generate intentional social impact, which is particularly important in contexts where sport is one of the few accessible public goods. Yet, studies in this context remain underrepresented in scholarly literature. Future research should therefore make efforts to examine the social impacts of CSOs operating in diverse cultural, economic, and political environments, including those unique contexts that are present in low- and medium-income countries.

4.2. Theoretical and methodological landscape

The theoretical landscape of the studies included in this review is both diverse and fragmented. No single theoretical framework dominates the field. However, organisational capacity frameworks (e.g. Hall et al., 2003; Millar & Doherty, 2016) and social capital theory (e.g. Brown et al., 2014; Forsell et al., 2020) have been most frequently employed. These diverse theoretical perspectives reflect the inherently interdisciplinary nature of research into CSOs, which draws from sport management, sociology, public health, community development, and policy. However, this theoretical diversity has not yet resulted in cumulative integration. Instead, the field continues to produce theoretically siloed studies that speak to specific aspects of CSO functioning without contributing to a coherent explanatory model of how social impacts are produced. This pattern mirrors a broader critique within the SFD field: scholars have repeatedly observed that SFD research remains fragmented across disciplinary traditions – including sport management, sociology, public health, and pedagogy - with limited cross-disciplinary dialogue and no shared theoretical or conceptual vocabulary (Bauer et al., 2024; Whitley et al., 2022). Addressing this fragmentation within CSO-specific research, as within the wider SFD field, is therefore likely to require transdisciplinary approaches that build outward from a broader perspective and greater collaboration rather than from separate disciplinary starting points (Whitley et al., 2022).

Organisational capacity frameworks have helped explain internal dimensions of CSO functioning. Studies employing these frameworks have shown how some dimensions of organisational capacity, such as human resources, finances, infrastructure, planning and development, and external relationships, interact dynamically to enable or constrain social impact generation (Doherty et al., 2014; Millar & Doherty, 2018; Misener & Doherty, 2009). The process model of capacity building (Millar & Doherty, 2016) has been especially useful in highlighting that capacity is not a static property of an organisation but an ongoing, relational achievement. This perspective challenges the idea that low-capacity CSOs are problematic entities requiring external intervention. It rather emphasises the process by which organisations can enhance their capacity over time. For example, Millar and Doherty (2018) demonstrated that a CSO facing membership decline is usually unable to build new capacity without addressing specific problems, such as its weak volunteer base and financial shortfalls. This underscores the importance of the process by which CSOs can improve their capacity, which remains a prerequisite for generating social impacts.

Social capital theory has illuminated ways sport participation within CSOs generates bonding and bridging social capital (Brown et al., 2014; Forsell et al., 2020; McMahon & Skytt-Larsen, 2021; Tacon, 2019). Drawing on Putnam's (2000) distinction, the reviewed studies indicate that CSOs can create both intra-community identity (bonding social capital) and cross-group connection (bridging social capital), with the latter being particularly important for addressing structural inequalities and improving social and economic mobility. However, a recurring limitation in these studies is the tendency to treat social capital as an outcome without adequately examining the organisational processes and power dynamics. For example, Tacon (2019) found that whilst CSOs shaped the formation of relationships among members, questions of power, exclusion, and unequal access to social networks were largely absent from the analysis. This limits the explanatory reach of social capital theory and points to the need for studies that integrate relational and structural dimensions of inequality into their frameworks.

The methodology of the studies in the final sample is predominantly qualitative, with 28 studies employing methods to collect qualitative data, seven quantitative data, and five adopting mixed methods designs. This methodological distribution reflects the exploratory nature of community sport research, alongside the challenges inherent in operationalising and measuring social impacts in CSO settings (Reale et al., 2018; Vanclay, 2002). Qualitative methods with interviews, case studies, and observations have been particularly effective in capturing the lived experiences of participants, the relational dynamics within CSOs, and the processual dimensions of social impacts. However, the predominance of qualitative methods limits the generalisability of findings and makes it difficult to identify patterns across organisational types, sport disciplines, and national contexts (Brake & Misener, 2020; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). The challenge of measuring social impacts, particularly at the community level, is not well recognised in the broader social impacts' literature (Vanclay, 2002). Thus, future research is suggested to develop a tool on how measure social impacts of CSOs through employing quantitative methods.

The five mixed-methods studies in the review represent a potentially productive methodological middle ground, capable of capturing both the depth and breadth of social impact phenomena. Studies by Nathan et al. (2013) and Burnett (2001) demonstrated how the combination of survey data with qualitative interviews and observations can provide more nuanced accounts of impacts than either method alone. Going forward, the field would benefit from greater adoption of longitudinal mixed methods designs that can track the development of social impacts over time and across different phases of CSO development. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data to explain social impacts is another area in dire need to advance the field.

4.3. Multi-level social impacts of community sport organisations

The multi-level nature of social impacts suggests that CSOs must be understood as complex social systems rather than simple delivery mechanisms for sport participation. The findings challenge overly linear assumptions about how sport generates social value, and instead point to the importance of organisational structures, governance, and deliberate programmes as mediating factors. The social impacts of CSOs are conditioned by capacity, context, and intentionality across all three levels: organisational, individual, and community. At the organisational level, the emergence of OSR consistently appears as the structural condition associated with generating social impacts. Misener et al. (2020) and Robertson et al. (2019) reveal that OSR in CSOs is not simply a set of outward-facing obligations towards society but also an inward-facing governance practice that shapes how CSOs engage members. However, CSOs tend to prioritise sport delivery and organisational viability over extended social agendas. This pragmatic orientation reflects the structural tension within many CSOs as they are expected to generate broader community social benefits whilst also managing the everyday demands of running a voluntary organisation. Studies highlight practices such as safeguarding, inclusion, community-oriented initiatives, finances, and volunteer support as the mechanisms through which CSOs convert participation into social value (Hoeber et al., 2015; McMahon & Skytt-Larsen, 2021; Misener et al., 2020; Misener & Doherty, 2013; Robertson et al., 2019). This finding has important implications for CSOs' leadership and governance, suggesting that organisations that institutionalise social responsibility are more likely to generate sustained social impacts. Social impacts beyond sport participation do not arise automatically; rather, it is produced through deliberate organisational practices that mobilise resources, relationships, and governance around

one specific goal and social issue (Sotiriadou & Wicker, 2013; Walker, 2025). In practice, OSR is operationalised through a range of deliberate organisational capacities, including formal capacity building and targeted diversity initiatives, which align organisational resources and governance structures with specific social development objectives (Misener et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2019).

At the individual level, there is consistency in the extent to which studies identify social skills development and social capital formation (Brown et al., 2014; Forsell et al., 2020; Fortune & Oncescu, 2024; Jones et al., 2018; Marlier et al., 2015). The findings suggest that CSOs function as social learning environments as much as sport delivery organisations. This challenges policy frameworks that evaluate CSOs primarily through physical activities, participation metrics, and instead suggests that the interpersonal and relational dimensions of CSO engagement may be equally, if not more, important for social development. Inclusion is an important dimension of the individual level. Fortune and Oncescu (2024) examined how CSOs support the inclusion of low-income individuals in sport and recreation programmes and found that CSOs can improve inclusion by reducing the financial barriers associated with participation and building relationships. They also found that CSOs create opportunities for inclusion by building relationships not only with individuals but also with other organisations, which can help low-income participants to overcome financial barriers (e.g. coaches' fees) (Fortune & Oncescu, 2024). In addition to inclusion, communication represents another vital, yet underexplored, individual social skill generated through sport participation in CSOs (Jones et al., 2018; Misener et al., 2020). Jones et al. (2018) suggest that CSOs create conditions not only for sporting interaction but for broader civic communication – a form of bonding and bridging capital that strengthens the social fabric of communities. Despite the importance of communication, the review reveals that communication as a social outcome is rarely the primary focus of studies. It tends to appear as a secondary finding within broader examinations of social capital or capacity building (Jones et al., 2018). This suggests that future research could treat communication development as a distinct social impact category within CSOs contexts, examining how different programmes designs, governance structures, and organisational cultures either enable or constrain communication capacity among participants and even other stakeholders.

Whilst not much has been investigated about communication, trust and reciprocity are the most cited constructs linking sport participation to social outcomes (Brown et al., 2014; Forsell et al., 2020; Marlier et al., 2015; McMahon & Skytt-Larsen, 2021). For example, quantitative evidence identifies perceived sense of trust as a significant predictor of social development (Marlier et al., 2015). Trust has been defined as the basis on which social capital is created (Forsell et al., 2020). Reciprocity, in turn, is understood as both giving rise to higher levels of generalised trust and being indicated by those levels (Brown et al., 2014). Qualitative research work shows reciprocity and 'family-like' ties cultivating bonding social capital, confidence, and stability (especially among youth) as important factors to promote social development (Burnett, 2006; McMahon & Skytt-Larsen, 2021). These mechanisms align with social capital theory (Putnam, 2000), with bonding ties underpinning trust and reciprocity, especially in contexts where sport enables multiple forms of belonging, including belonging across genders, beyond communities, and transnational identities (McMahon & Skytt-Larsen, 2021). However, a recurring limitation is that studies tend to treat social capital as an outcome to be measured rather than a process to be explained. CSOs generate social capital without adequately examining the organisational conditions that make this possible or the circumstances under which it may be withheld or unequally distributed (across genders or any other demographic characteristic).

At the community level, capacity is a central determinant of sustained social impacts of CSOs (Brake & Misener, 2020; Hoeber et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2018; Marshall & Barry, 2015; Rocha et al., 2026). Community capacity is generated through both sport and non-sport activities. This distinction is significant because it reframes the role of CSOs beyond sport delivery, positioning them as broader community development agents whose value ties in their ability to mobilise residents. For example, when a public health emergency stopped the provision of sport activities, CSOs in deprived communities in Brazil redirected their organisational capacity toward food distribution, hygiene provision, and interorganisational networking, directly strengthening community resilience through non-sport activities (Rocha et al., 2026). This suggests that social impacts of CSOs at the community level depend not on sport participation alone, but on the degree to which CSOs can harness both sport and non-sport activities to continuously adapt, mobilise, and serve the communities in which they are embedded.

4.4. Organisational capacity of community sport organisations: capacity building within organisations

Studies in the final sample show that capacity building depends on factors such as volunteers, money, facilities, planning and partnerships, all directly influencing how CSOs can operate and deliver programmes (Burnett, 2006; Millar & Doherty, 2018; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). These studies explored the motivations of CSOs managers to build organisational capacity (OC). For example, Millar and Doherty (2018) found that CSOs in Canada tried to build capacity because they were losing members or lacked qualified instructors. When CSOs do not have sufficient funding to support the promotion of new programmes or keep existing schedules, managers subsequently look for capacity building alternatives to ensure the organisation's survival and programme sustainability (Millar & Doherty, 2018). In another study focusing on internal elements, Doherty and Cuskelly (2020) found that the strongest elements to create OC were effective communication, volunteer training, strategic plan, and facility availability because these elements are linked to the CSOs' capacity to offer high-quality activities. Doherty and Cuskelly (2020) found that larger and older CSOs tend to have stronger capacity because they are more likely to retain key human resources (e.g. skilled volunteers). This pattern of HR investment, reported in the findings above, appears consistently across the internal impact literature review here. Despite suggestions, this group of studies have not directly measured social impacts on the local community.

Other studies tried to connect OC building with community capacity building. Jones et al. (2018) and Edwards (2015) argued that CSOs had a positive impact on various dimensions of community capacity through different capacity-building strategies among sport and non-sport programmes and events. For example, Jones et al. (2018) found that the Westside Youth Centre (WYC) leverage community partnerships to improve physical resources and infrastructure directly impacting the community. A successful partnership with a local church made it possible for them to instal lights for a gazebo, fix water leaks, and refurbish a clubhouse. These infrastructural upgrades allowed WYC to host a greater variety of community-based sport programmes and events year-round. In return, the church could use the facility for events, such as Sunday worship, Bible study, Summer Camps, and a food pantry, expanding the role and utility of the facility within the community (Jones et al., 2018). These partnerships seem to provide additional opportunities to enrich local skills, knowledge, and resources through utilising non-sport events to build organisational capacity in CSOs. These examples are significant because they demonstrate that CSOs can deliberately integrate non-sport elements to strengthen community bonds and expand social connections. This suggests that the boundary between sport delivery and community development is more fluid than policy frameworks typically acknowledge, opening an important avenue for future studies.

Further exploring internal impacts of organisational capacity building, Marlier et al. (2015) explained that partnerships build capacity at three levels: practitioner (manager), organisational, and partnership level. At the practitioner level, process evaluation and trust are vital for capacity building in CSOs through skills and knowledge sharing. Practitioners within CSOs can rely on process evaluation to identify shortcomings in their programmes and refine their approaches, strengthening the organisational capacity. Trust encourages more open sharing of knowledge and skills, enabling practitioners to have confidence in one another's capabilities and intentions. Maintaining this trust, in turn, supports deeper and more effective capacity-building of CSOs. At the organisational level, public organisations in the health and education sectors depend on CSOs to provide sport programmes with health and educational aims, whilst the health and education organisations can provide services to support members of CSOs. This way, each group can help to offset the other, supporting more holistic social impacts. At the partnership level, CSOs can depend on diversity of activities, partner complementarity and fit, and the period of collaboration necessary to strengthen their capacity beyond simple resource sharing. Through this collaborative approach, each group helps to offset the other's weakness – CSOs gain the sustained partnerships needed to build long-term capacity, whilst partners benefit from the breadth and fit of what CSOs offer, such as access points, networks and context-specific knowledge, thus strengthening their organisational capacity and supporting a more interconnected relationship (Marlier et al., 2015).

Few studies examined capacity building through other organisations as a networked process, particularly within the non-profit SFD context. For example, Wegner et al. (2023) analysed capacity building

across a network of organisations rather than within a single CSO, highlighting how they enable and/or constrain the capacity building process. Wegner et al. (2023) findings suggest that capacity building in SFD settings extends beyond internal resources and competencies, relying heavily on collaboration, knowledge exchange, and shared infrastructure among partner organisations.

4.5. Organisational capacity of community sport organisations: capacity building within the community

Whilst the reviewed literature places strong emphasis on OC building and internal impacts, the findings also reveal a range of important external impacts that extend beyond CSOs into local communities. These external impacts are often under-theorised: studies (e.g. Anderson-Butcher et al., 2014; Casey et al., 2009; Moustakas, 2022) tend to list community outcomes without adequately explaining the mechanisms through which improved OC translates into social change at the community level. These external impacts reflect how CSO capacity building enhances the quality and reach of services provided to volunteers, participants, and community members. Across the review, external impacts are associated with improved access to volunteering opportunities (leadership, life skill, knowledge, and resources), growth in sport and physical activity participation, increasing in feelings of belonging within communities and its members, and improvement in community cohesion (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2014; Casey et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2018; Misener & Doherty, 2009).

One of the most consistently identified external impacts of CSO capacity building is the creation and enhancement of volunteering opportunities. For example, Misener et al. (2020) showed that CSOs rely almost exclusively on volunteers for their operational functions. Providing volunteers with opportunities to develop leadership, knowledge, and life skills has important external social impacts. For example, Misener and Doherty (2009) found that training volunteers not only supports the mission of providing accessible sport opportunities, but also contributes to broader community needs (beyond sport) by reinforcing social ties and helping to address community challenges (e.g. financial planning and management), especially in lower-income areas. In another example, Jones et al. (2018) indicated that CSOs can promote local leadership development by allowing volunteers to move beyond operational roles into decision-making positions. They found that leaders could be identified from the volunteers who perform well and demonstrate commitment to the CSOs, and then such leaders could, for instance, apply to join the Board of Directors. This decentralised leadership approach aims to promote collective leadership that is adaptable and responsive to community needs. However, several problems have hindered this process, including high turnover – as many volunteers become overwhelmed by the complex tasks they face and drop out before assuming leadership roles. Despite the challenges, this structure reflects some internal management capacity that may produce external impacts (both positive and negative) in the community.

From an external perspective, Casey et al. (2009) and Anderson-Butcher et al. (2014) explored the factors that can make CSOs more effective in delivering sport and recreational programmes whilst helping people to overcome barriers to physical activity participation. Casey et al. (2009), for example, discussed how partnerships with other organisations (e.g. private recreation organisations) can help CSOs to promote physical activity in communities. Anderson-Butcher et al. (2014) found that, in marginalised communities, CSOs are most effective when they move beyond more physical activity delivery to become intentionally designed relationship-centred environments that prioritise belonging and holistic development. Despite these examples, the review reveals that most studies focus on participation outcomes without critically examining long-term engagement with sport and/or physical activity. Investigating how CSOs may expand participants' long-term engagement is therefore a priority for future research aiming to investigate external impacts of OC.

Other studies show that CSOs' internal capacities enable sport participants to be active members of local communities through promoting social cohesion (Jones et al., 2018; Moustakas, 2022). Moustakas (2022) explained that the notion of social cohesion should consider the broader community of people who are not involved in the programme or associated with a CSO. They found that, whilst sport can help to promote social cohesion, CSOs should stop seeing the broader community as an external, passive environment and instead reframe it as a co-creator of the intervention, and the ultimate site where the success or failure of transferring social cohesion outcomes is determined (Moustakas, 2022). Without this

shift, Moustakas (2022) argues that sport will continue to produce isolated moments of connection on the pitch that fail to translate into lasting cohesion in the community. This analysis highlights a fundamental limitation in the current evidence base: social cohesion is largely evaluated from within the CSO rather than from the perspective of the wider community. Therefore, claims about CSOs producing social cohesion may overstate their reach and underestimate the degree to which cohesion is confined in organisations' internal environments. We suggest that although the external impact of OC building may indirectly promote social cohesion, there remain gaps in knowledge around how social outcomes transfer to the community from the CSO.

4.6. Sport for development in community sport organisations

A central concern of this review was to examine the relationship between CSOs and SFD. SFD programmes produced positive social outcomes due to addressing social issues usually through structured activities provided by CSOs. For example, the Kicking AIDS Out Network – a group of organisations that promote awareness of HIV/AIDS through the use of sport and physical activity in communities in Africa (Marshall & Barry, 2015). The network of CSOs addressed social issues of participation and inclusion, changing behaviour and attributes of sport by fostering youth empowerment and including HIV education into physical activities. Their findings suggest that SFD initiatives rely heavily on organisational capacity to deliver the programme and help with social issues. The review revealed that the boundary between SFD programmes in CSOs and regular community sport activities is often blurred, as many CSOs incorporated social elements without formally identifying their activities as SFD. This raises a conceptual question: whether SFD constitutes a distinct programme category within community sport practice. Studies show that social outcomes are not an automatic consequence of SFD, but rather a product of organisational capacity (Marshall & Barry, 2015; Misener et al., 2020). SFD scholars have rarely acknowledged or examined the organisational demands that these programmes impose on CSOs, which are expected to act simultaneously as sport providers, educational facilitators, and community development agents (Casey et al., 2009; Misener et al., 2020; Sotiriadou & Wicker, 2013; Whitley et al., 2019).

Although CSOs are frequently referenced as a key delivery platform for SFD programmes, the relationship between CSO organisational practice and social outcomes depends on key factors, such as participants' voice, particularly from marginalised groups. The Women Organising Activity for Women (WOAW) programme (Frisby & Millar, 2002) offers a compelling illustration of how centring participant voices within CSO-delivered programmes can transform social impacts from a passive outcome into an CSO-led process. Participant voices were centred through involving people in the CSO decision-making process, which addressed matters of exclusion. Much of the existing research prioritises organisational perspectives and programme intentions rather than participants' lived experiences (Harith et al., 2025). Whilst participation depends on resources and organisational capacity (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2021), SFD impacts depend on lived experiences inform organisational activity, which have lacked investigations. This evidence suggests that social impact within the SFD context in CSOs is produced not from participation itself but from the intentional organisational strategies that explicitly centre participant voices, address exclusion, and create the conditions for sustained community-led engagement. When CSOs fail to adopt such intentional approaches, the risk is that participation becomes an end in itself, disconnected from the broader social outcomes that SFD programmes are designed to produce.

5. Limitations

The scoping review revealed some limitations in the published empirical studies and possibilities for future studies. From a theoretical point of view, half of the empirical studies were conducted as descriptive investigations, with no theory supporting the research. Whilst such work has evidence of impact, limited theoretical engagement constrains cumulative knowledge development and weakens the explanation of underlying mechanisms. Moving forward, stronger integration of theory is necessary to clarify how, why, and under what conditions CSOs generate social impacts. We conclude that academic evidence in this field remains fragile because the underlying empirical studies frequently lack a robust theoretical foundation.

6. Conclusion

This scoping review moves beyond assumptions about sport participation and offers a more critical and nuanced understanding of CSOs' social role. By highlighting both the structural constraints facing organisations and the theoretical fragmentation within the literature, it provides a foundation for more analytically rigorous and theoretically informed future research, policy, and practice. Through doing so, this review makes interconnected contributions to knowledge.

The study provides the first scoping review of empirical evidence on social impacts of CSOs, revealing that social impacts are produced through two distinct pathways – organisational capacity building and SFD programmes – operating across organisational, individual, and community levels. Critically, the review shows that the pathways and levels' outcomes are not independent: internal organisational capacity is a precondition for external community-level impact, yet the studies in the field have largely treated them separately. This distinction between internal impacts, which strengthen the organisation itself, and external impacts, which extend into the community, is an important analytical clarification that the existing literature has not previously made explicit.

The existing literature to date has remained fragmented across silos (e.g. Blomqvist, 2022; Brown et al., 2014; Doherty et al., 2014), with scholars tending to stay in their own lane rather than pursue the interdisciplinary engagement needed to trace how organisational-level processes connect to community outcomes (Bauer et al., 2024; Whitley et al., 2022). This has left a limited understanding of the SFD processes through which CSOs generate social impacts (Walker, 2026a; Walker, 2026b). However, despite these differences, the current SLR extends the argument of Walker (2026a) regarding the need for further research documenting how CSO's generate social development.

Rather than treating organisational capacity, SFD, and social impacts as separate bodies of literature, this review advances knowledge by integrating these areas of investigation into a coherent explanatory framework. Previous studies have typically examined these elements independently (e.g. Brown et al., 2014; Forsell et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2003; Millar & Doherty, 2016). The review demonstrated that organisational capacity is not merely another determinant of programme success but the enabling mechanism through which SFD principles are translated into sustained organisational, individual, and community-level social impacts. This builds on Walker's (2023) argument that embedding SFD within CSOs' programming helps optimise organisational capabilities, extending it beyond capability-building alone. Whilst the Sport Management literature has examined how CSOs develop under resource constraints through concepts such as bricolage and dynamic capability (e.g. Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Marshall & Barry, 2015; Misener & Doherty, 2013; Wegner et al., 2023), the current SLR extends this conversation by demonstrating that organisational capacity should also be understood as mechanisms through which social impacts are produced.

The review repositions CSOs from being passive delivery settings for sport programmes to active social actors that intentionally configure governance, partnerships, resources, and relationships to generate social impacts. This shifts the analytical focus from evaluating whether sport programmes produce social outcomes towards explaining how CSOs create the conditions that enable sport to contribute to social change.

Sport participation alone remains the fundamental instrument for individual change, and for CSOs' survival, participation is not sufficient to produce social impacts. To produce social impacts, CSOs need deliberate programming, with activities designed specifically to promote social development. This dual dependency means that CSOs operating under resource pressure are compelled to prioritise participation numbers to secure funding, volunteers, and continued community support. Such CSOs tend therefore to relegate deliberate, intentional programming – the necessary mechanism through which social impact is generated – to a secondary role. This situation is not a failure of individual organisations but a systemic feature of how CSOs are positioned within wider policy and funding environments.

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that all data supporting the findings of this study are available within this article. Further information can be made available on reasonable request and acquired from the lead author, Qingjie Sun.

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