

OLYMPISM 365 INNOVATION HUB



International
Olympic
Committee

In collaboration with



Women Win

STATE OF PLAY IN 2025: INNOVATION IN SPORT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

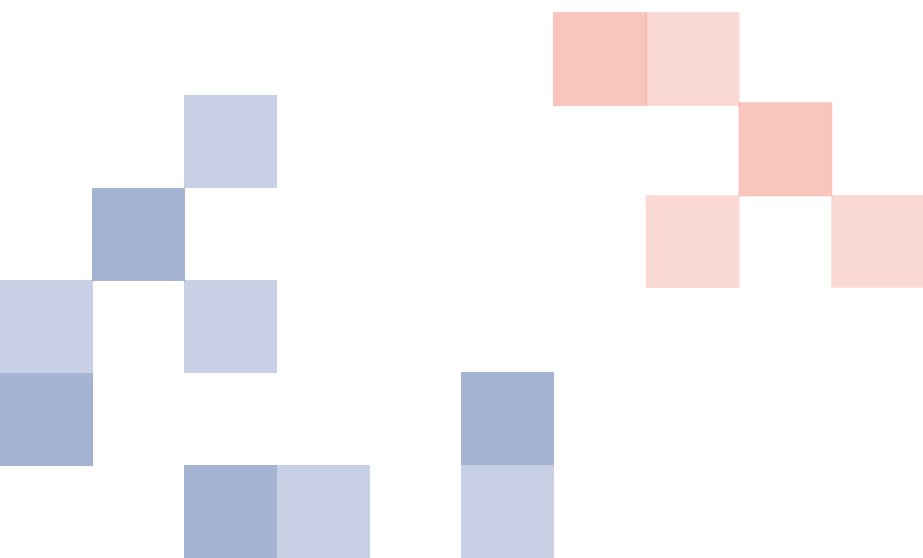


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The State of Play 2025: Innovation in Sport for Sustainable Development provides a comprehensive analysis of how innovation has been mobilised across the sport for sustainable development (SfD) sector between 2020 and 2025, conveying how innovation is defined, practiced, and supported in diverse contexts across the world.

Against a backdrop of pandemic recovery, climate instability, and technological transformation, innovation in SfD has shifted from being seen as a peripheral add-on to a core, necessary function of effective programming. Innovation today is understood not only in terms of new technologies, but as an inclusive, participatory process rooted in co-creation, community leadership, and systems change.

Drawing on the lived experience and recommendations of 61 innovators from across 33 countries within the Olympism365 Innovation Hub, of whom include social entrepreneurs, technologists, and grassroots leaders, this publication explores the enablers and drivers of innovation, the barriers and challenges to innovation, how financing and partnerships influence the innovation process, and what conditions beyond funding are needed for innovation to succeed.

This publication synthesises these practitioner insights, along with case studies of innovation in action as well as emerging academic research on five key thematic areas: organisational culture, cross-sector collaboration, social entrepreneurship, digital technology, and evolving evaluation systems. It highlights both the enablers and constraints of innovation, offering a grounded and timely reflection on what is working, what needs to change, and how the sector can move forward with more inclusive, responsive, and equitable models of change.

Structured across six areas, the publication:

- Defines innovation as it is currently understood and practiced in SfD;
- Analyses global trends and developments that shaped the period 2020–2025; Showcases case studies from the Olympism365 Innovation Hub;
- Captures practitioner perspectives and insights from a cross-fund global exchange;
- Identifies systemic barriers and enabling conditions;
- Offers practical recommendations for practitioners, funders, policymakers, and practitioners.

In doing so, *State of Play 2025* seeks to advance a shared understanding of innovation as a systemic lever for social transformation, and to guide its responsible growth in the years ahead.

OLYMPISM INNOVATION HUB

About the Olympism365 Innovation Hub

The Olympism365 Innovation Hub, launched by the IOC with Beyond Sport and Women Win, has played a catalytic role in enabling innovation at multiple levels, through supporting community-rooted initiatives, social enterprise models, cross-sector coalitions, and emerging technologies (Olympism365 Innovation Hub consortium leads: Women Win and Beyond Sport). By supporting diverse actors with flexible funding, convening opportunities, and shared infrastructure, the Olympism365 Innovation Hub has created a platform where innovation can be tested, refined, and scaled (sportanddev.org, 2024).

FULL REPORT

Introduction to State of Play In 2025: Innovation in Sport for Sustainable Development

The years 2020 to 2025 have represented a pivotal period in the evolution of innovation within sport for sustainable development (SfD). Marked by a global pandemic, rising socio-political complexity, and technological acceleration, this era has profoundly reshaped how innovation is defined, practiced, and supported across the sector.

Innovation in this context is understood not only as the introduction of new technologies or products, but as a dynamic process of co-creation, adaptation, and systems transformation. Rooted in social innovation theory and informed by lived experience, it challenges traditional power dynamics and emphasises participatory, localised responses to complex social issues.

Within this evolving landscape, the Olympism365 Innovation Hub, established by the International Olympic Committee in collaboration with Beyond Sport and Women Win, has emerged as a leading platform supporting innovation as a systemic enabler of sustainable development through sport. Created to respond to the urgent need for context-sensitive, inclusive, and equity-driven solutions, the Hub operationalizes innovation as a necessity, especially in under-resourced communities experiencing conflict, exclusion, climate disruption, or digital marginalization.

Through five distinct but interconnected funding streams - Enterprise365, Grassroots365, Collective365, Tech365, and Ignite365 Awards - the Olympism365 Innovation Hub has invested in diverse innovations across 33 countries. These funding strands reflect the Hub's recognition that meaningful innovation happens at all levels of the system: from early-stage, community-rooted prototypes to strategic, cross-sector coalitions aiming to shift norms and structures.

At the heart of this publication are the insights and lived experiences of 61 innovators joining from across 33 countries, selected from over 450 applications from 80 countries. These individuals and organisations, ranging from hyper-local community leaders to social entrepreneurs and technologists, are the catalysts of innovation within their own ecosystems. Their collective voice was amplified during the Olympism365 Innovation Hub cross-fund global exchange held in March 2025, where innovators across all funding strands gathered to discuss and debate the drivers,

barriers, and future directions of innovation in sport for sustainable development (O365 Innovation Hub cross-fund convening, March 2025).

Their perspectives, shared during group conversations and breakout discussions cross-fund global exchange that took place in March 2025, form the evidentiary backbone of this publication. The diversity of their approaches, blending sport with digital inclusion, climate resilience, economic empowerment, and social justice, demonstrates the breadth of innovation taking place and highlights the systemic conditions needed for it to thrive (O365 Innovation Hub cross-fund convening, March 2025).

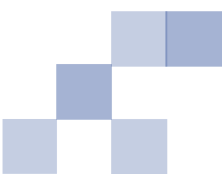
Purpose and Structure of This Publication

This publication aims to distil key insights, implications, and recommendations for advancing innovation as a systemic lever in SfD. Drawing on both academic research and practitioner perspectives (innovators from the Olympism365 Innovation Hub), it offers an updated snapshot of how innovation has been mobilised between 2020 and 2025, what has enabled or constrained progress, and how impactful practices can be sustained and scaled beyond 2025.

The publication is structured to:

- Define the core conceptual foundations of current innovation in SfD;
- Contextualise global trends, shifts, and disruptions between 2020 and 2025;
- Share case studies from the Olympism365 Innovation Hub.
- Highlight practitioner perspectives and key insights from the first global exchange that took place in March 2025 with 61 innovators in the Olympism365 Innovation Hub.
- Present a synthesis of enablers, barriers, and systemic conditions for innovation.
- Offer forward-looking recommendations for funders, policymakers, and practitioners.


In doing so, it seeks to consolidate and update a shared understanding of innovation as a systemic lever for social transformation for the years ahead.



Defining Innovation in Sport for Sustainable Development

Innovation in sport for sustainable development (SfD) has been conceptualised as both a process and an outcome. In academic circles Svensson and Cohen (2020), among others, define innovation in this space as “the development and implementation of new ideas, practices, or programs that enhance the capacity of sport to contribute to social change”. This includes both radical innovation (entirely new models or technologies) and incremental innovation (modifications to existing practices). A recurring theme is the application of social innovation theory to sport for sustainable development (SfD), which focuses on co-creation with beneficiaries, systemic change, and shifting power dynamics. Svensson and Cohen (2020) emphasize that innovation in SfD should not be viewed as linear or top-down, but as an emergent, participatory, and often grassroots-led phenomenon, where communities are co-designers rather than passive recipients of change.

The Olympism365 Innovation Hub builds on and complements these academic framings by defining innovation as the development and implementation of new ideas that challenge the status quo and lead to tangible positive change, particularly in communities and contexts where innovation is often under-resourced (Women Win, n.d. and IOC, n.d.).



We believe innovation is delivered when a powerful idea that challenges the status quo, is tested, put into action, and developed to reach its full potential. Innovation is driven by bold creative culture and behaviours, data and insight, and intentional and diverse collaborations. Innovation overcomes barriers and meets unmet needs, and ultimately has the power to transform communities and systems across the world.

GLOBAL TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS 2020-2025

Introduction

Between 2020 and 2025, the sport for development (SfD) sector has undergone a period of accelerated transformation. While this era has been marked by disruption and uncertainty, it also catalysed deep shifts in how innovation is understood, practiced, and supported across the sector. COVID-19 emerged as a major catalyst for innovation. The pandemic disrupted traditional, in-person sport programs, forcing organisations to adapt and find new ways to deliver their missions. A 2022 United Nations report highlighted how SfD actors implemented creative adaptations to deliver sport during the COVID-19 pandemic, and noted “the potential to apply innovations to scale up impact” going forward. In 2020, amidst the pandemic, the UN Secretary-General’s report similarly examined the role of digital technology in helping sport mitigate the pandemic’s impact on health and well-being, and urged investment and innovation in sport to build global resilience against future shocks. In practical terms, many programs pivoted to virtual delivery – for example, sport organizations created virtual networks to engage children and youth in staying active at home. Digital tools (from simple mobile messaging to sophisticated online training platforms) became indispensable for coaching, education and community-building when physical gatherings were limited.

At the same time, sport’s profile in the global development agenda has risen, reinforcing a mandate for innovative approaches. Sport is acknowledged as an “important enabler” of sustainable development and peace by the UN, with unique contributions to health, education, social inclusion, gender equality and more. This global recognition, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has encouraged stakeholders to seek new ways to maximise sport’s social impact. Over the last five years, there is a clear trend toward more systematic integration of sport into development policies and multi-sector collaborations. The field has become increasingly formalised and complex, with a growing number of stakeholders involved, including governments and large institutions alongside traditional NGOs.

Yet it is important to acknowledge a deeper and more uncomfortable truth. Traditional sport systems, despite billions of dollars in investment, have failed to move the dial on key social indicators such as physical activity participation, obesity, and mental health. This stagnation has exposed the limitations of conventional models and created the imperative for new ideas. The failure to achieve systemic and sustainable change through established institutions has created space, and need, for social entrepreneurs and start-ups to drive innovation from the ground up.

Emerging Trends and Developments

In the past 5 years the main emerging trends and developments for innovation in SfD driven by practitioners and academics alike are driven by:

- Organizational culture and agility
- Cross-sector and multi-level engagement
- Social entrepreneurship
- Digital and technological application
- Knowledge and evaluation systems

Organizational Culture and Agility

Research has highlighted how internal organizational culture, leadership, and values drive innovation. Andersson et al. (2023) argue that organizational bricolage, the ability to creatively use limited resources, is a defining feature of innovation in low-resource SfD settings. This ties closely to the concept of adaptive capacity, where organizations that foster learning, reflection, and horizontal leadership structures tend to be more innovative and resilient, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Sport for Development Coalition, n.d.).

One of the most significant shifts has been the normalisation of innovation as an operational necessity rather than an experimental luxury (IMD, 2025 and Better Reality, 2020). Whether responding to the constraints of a global pandemic, navigating climate-related disruptions, or addressing entrenched social inequities, organizations increasingly approached innovation as a core competency. In turn, this reframing has opened the door to a wider interpretation of what counts as innovative, moving beyond purely technological interventions to include relational, financial, and cultural innovation (Bocken and Geradts, 2020 and UNCTAD, 2018).

Cross-Sector and Multi-Level Engagement

Another significant development has been an increased emphasis on cross-sector partnerships and knowledge sharing. The complexity of social challenges addressed by SfD (from public health to peacebuilding) has driven stakeholders to collaborate more intentionally and it has given rise to hybrid models that blend sport with mental

health support, climate action, digital learning, and community finance (UN, n.d.; UNESCO, 2023; Warner et al., in press). Academic studies increasingly point to the importance of cross-sector collaboration as a condition for innovation. Kolovou et al. (2023) examine how partnerships between governments, NGOs, and the private sector can facilitate resource sharing, knowledge transfer, and policy alignment. Other researchers have emphasized intersections between sport and adjacent fields such as health, education, and justice, showing how hybrid models can emerge that blend sport with psychosocial care, life skills training, or legal empowerment initiatives (Camiré et al. (2021); Bates and Kratz, 2022). Research also stresses multi-level innovation, showing how macro-level (policy), meso-level (organization), and micro-level (community) dynamics intersect. Innovation, according to van Lunenburg, Geuijen and Meijer, (2020), is often initiated at the grassroots but must be scaffolded by enabling ecosystems to scale sustainably.

Increased emphasis on cross-sector partnerships and knowledge sharing is also found in the strengthening of networks that connect practitioners, researchers, and funders, allowing innovative ideas to spread more quickly. An illustrative finding from a 2021 study of SfD organizations during COVID-19 was that collaboration and knowledge exchange were vital strategies for resilience. Organizations that actively shared resources and ideas, and that balanced structure with flexibility, managed change more successfully. Indeed, a “strong focus on creativity and innovation” in the field, combined with partnerships, was identified as key to navigating the pandemic and should be integrated as a long-term strategy beyond it. The crisis, while challenging, effectively accelerated the adoption of innovative practices and reinforced the value of agility in program design.

The consolidation of sport within the global development policy landscape has also influenced this shift towards more cross-sector partnerships and knowledge sharing. As sport’s role in advancing the SDGs became more institutionalized (from UN declarations to national-level frameworks), the sector saw a surge of interest in frameworks that link sport to broader systems change (United Nations, 2020; United Nations, 2018). This has encouraged new kinds of partnerships and accountability expectations, demanding that SfD actors think and work in more integrated, systemic ways.

Social Entrepreneurship

Financial pressures and recent political aid upheavals have influenced innovation. The annual *State of the Sector* surveys on SfD fundraising reveal that while organizations

have seen generally positive funding trends, dependency on single-income sources (especially grants) remains high. In 2023–24, income growth was expected to slow for the first time in years. This reality is pushing organizations toward bold and innovative funding approaches – those “who are bold and innovative in their approach to raising income generally perform better” than more conservative organisations. While philanthropic and grant-based funding remains central, new mechanisms (including blended finance, outcome-based contracting, and earned-income strategies), are gaining traction as means of building more resilient and scalable solutions (Oaks Consultancy, 2024). The recent months have seen a dramatic reconfiguration of global development funding, with increasing volatility in donor commitments, political constraints on aid, and growing expectations for return on investment in the social sector (FundsforNGOs, n.d., GlobalGiving, 2023 and Arman, 2024). The result has been a more urgent push toward new financing strategies, particularly among underfunded grassroots organizations, which are turning to entrepreneurial income, crowdfunding, and hybrid capital models to survive.

There’s a growing wave of social entrepreneurs and purpose-driven start-ups bringing fresh energy and creativity into the Sport for Development (SfD) space. These individuals and ventures are applying business thinking like innovation, sustainability, and efficiency to achieve social goals through sport. This blend of approaches has opened up new ways of working, allowing sport initiatives to become more self-sustaining and focused on measurable impact. Researchers such as Hautbois and Desbordes (2023) and Bostock et al. (2021) highlight how these hybrid organisations mix social missions with commercial strategies to tackle complex challenges, offering room for bold experimentation, financial independence, and the potential to scale their impact. These entrepreneurs are designing new models, from sports-based microfinance schemes, to fitness programs that raise money for social causes, to digital platforms that connect marginalized youth with coaches. Many of these innovators, especially youth-led groups and underrepresented voices are working outside traditional funding systems and are pushing the field forward with bold, ground-up solutions (World Bank Group, 2025 and Sustainable Development Solutions Network – Youth, 2020). They aren’t just expanding existing programs; they’re reimagining how change happens, and who gets to lead it. Still, this approach brings challenges. Bringing business models into SfD means navigating tensions between market-driven logic and the field’s core equity goals. If this balance isn’t carefully managed, there’s a risk that social justice aims could be diluted. That’s why many of these new initiatives also stress the importance of lived experience, cultural relevance, and strong local roots, qualities that help them succeed where more traditional interventions have often fallen short.

Digital and Technological Application

One growing trend is the blending of technology with sport for social good. The world is experiencing a technological revolution, with the speed of artificial intelligence advancement in society - and indeed sport - being unprecedented. Digital innovation in SfD is being leveraged not only for program delivery but also for measurement and scale. For instance, organizations use data collection apps and online dashboards to track outcomes, improving evidence of impact. Emerging technologies like virtual reality (VR) are being piloted to enhance training and education in SfD programs. Gamification and e-sports have entered the conversation as potential avenues to reach new audiences and encourage participation in physical activity and learning. And there is a nascent conversation on the role of artificial intelligence in SfD. Researchers, such as Qi et al. (2022), have explored how digital platforms enable new forms of engagement, learning, and program delivery in SfD. One strand of research examines the digital divide, how access to and literacy in technology influence who benefits from digital innovations in SfD contexts, particularly in the Global South.

Crucially, though, innovation is not confined to high-tech solutions; it also includes low-tech and social innovations that make programs more effective and inclusive. Innovations world over are harnessing the unique properties of sport and its capacity to convene, engage, and inspire across boundaries. Many grassroots initiatives and NGOs have introduced non-traditional sports and activities to engage hard-to-reach groups – for example, skateboarding, surfing, or indigenous games – demonstrating creativity in adapting sport to local cultures and needs. They are deploying design thinking and participatory approaches, working closely with communities to co-create programs that suit local needs. This human-centred innovation approach has led to tailored interventions – for example, adapting activities for children with disabilities or developing sport-based curricula that align with cultural norms.

Knowledge and Evaluation Systems

Another key development has been a stronger focus on knowledge ecosystems. Research, evaluation, and learning practices have evolved beyond static monitoring tools and traditional impact evaluation. Increasingly, innovation is being informed by participatory data, real-time feedback, non-linear processes, and shared learning platforms. Organizations are adopting more reflexive and adaptive approaches, where iteration is prioritized over perfection, and where evidence is generated in collaboration with communities, and where ongoing learning, systems thinking, and

adaptation are emphasized over rigid metrics (Qi et al., 2024, Cecere, 2025 and Brimhall, 2019). These approaches are particularly relevant for innovations that evolve dynamically in response to context-specific challenges. There is a need to clarify, however, whether evaluation frameworks are assessing the degree of innovation itself, for instance, how new or disruptive a practice is, or the outcomes and impact of that innovation on social change. Literature suggests that both layers matter but require distinct evaluative tools.

Conclusion

In summary, the 2020–2025 period in sport for sustainable development (SfD) is characterized by rapid change, adaptation, and geopolitics. Global disruptions like COVID-19 triggered transformations, particularly in digital program delivery and cross-sector collaboration. At the same time, there is a broader institutional push (from the UN to national governments) to leverage sport more strategically for the SDGs, prompting new policies, investments and partnerships. The convergence of these factors has created a dynamic environment in which innovation is no longer a buzzword but a practical necessity for achieving impact at scale. Academic and practitioner literature over these years underscores this momentum: scholars note that innovation in SfD has received increasing attention – from design thinking in program development to social entrepreneurship – yet also call for more research into sustaining innovation at all levels. Practitioners, for their part, largely echo the importance of being creative, collaborative, and outcomes-focused in a changing world.

There are continued challenges, such as gender-based barriers, digital divides, and funding asymmetries, which continue to constrain who can access, design, and lead innovation in SfD. The period from 2020 to 2025 made visible the sector's internal challenges: from exclusionary funding criteria to tokenistic inclusion practices, innovation has often flourished in spite of, rather than because of, existing systems (sportanddev.org, 2021). These tensions underscore the need for a more intentional reimagining of how innovation is resourced, recognized, and replicated moving forward.

The stage is set for innovation to continue driving SfD as we move beyond 2025, with lessons learned in this period laying a strong foundation. The challenge is not only to celebrate creativity but to institutionalize the conditions that allow it to flourish, especially for those closest to the challenges sport seeks to address.

ABOUT THE OLYMPISM365 INNOVATION HUB

International organisations have long played a pivotal role in advancing innovation in sport for development (SfD), providing not only strategic vision but also crucial platforms, partnerships, and resources that enable impact at scale. In recognition of the urgent need for more inclusive, context-sensitive, and systemic approaches in this space, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), in partnership with Beyond Sport and Women Win, launched the Olympism365 Innovation Hub. It was launched in response to growing recognition that traditional development models are insufficient to address complex, interconnected global challenges and is designed to support a diverse community of innovators leading new and impactful approaches to sport for sustainable development with funding, knowledge sharing, and partnership brokering across sectors in and outside of sport.

Since its launch, the Olympism365 Innovation Hub has supported diverse innovators through interrelated funding strands.

- Enterprise365 backs social enterprises, businesses, and entrepreneurs developing income-generating and sustainable finance solutions that use sport as a vehicle for sustainable development.
- Grassroots365 funds local groups and individuals working directly within communities to test and grow innovations that reimagine sport's role in driving positive social change.
- Collective365 supports collaborative initiatives that connect sport and non-sport sectors to embed sports-based solutions within broader systems for sustainable development.
- Tech365 supports initiatives powered by emerging technologies that accelerate sport's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals, including innovations in education, inclusion, governance, and community engagement.
- Ignite365 Awards is the flagship awards initiative of the Olympism365 Innovation Hub, investing in innovative community projects that showcase the transformative power of sport for social impact.

Together, these funding streams reflect the Hub's commitment to ecosystem-wide transformation, recognising that innovation occurs at multiple levels and in multiple forms.

Snapshot of the innovation Landscape through Funding Applications to the Funding Streams

61 innovators from 33 countries were selected across the 4 fund strands and Ignite365 Awards, from over 450 applications from 80 countries. The organizational profile and geographic reach of applications to the Olympism365 Innovation Hub show the depth and breadth of innovation ideas and activities happening across SfD. The applicant pool included a wide range of actors, including hyper-local, non-registered groups, social enterprises, for profits, and universities. Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for over 50% of applications to Grassroots365 and Collective365 fund strands that support hyper-local and seed innovation. More than half of Grassroots365 applicants had annual reporting budgets of under USD 25,000, which demonstrates creativity of grassroots actors working with limited means. The top three Sustainable Development Goals that applicants are working with were Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), Gender Equality (SDG 5), and Quality Education (SDG 4), whereas climate action (SDG 13) and Responsible Consumption (SDG 12) were less common. Applicants also reflect the broad interpretation of innovation, ranging from tech-enabled tools to adaptive, community-rooted programming. Many emphasized low-tech, culturally embedded, and co-created approaches, citing participatory design and flexible funding as key enablers. Applications for the Ignite365 awards also surfaced persistent structural barriers, including concerns around access to traditional funding, reliance on informal networks and volunteerism, exclusion from global innovation discourse, and the need for trust-based support systems.

INNOVATION IN ACTION: Case Studies from the Olympism365 Innovation Hub

By April 2025, the Olympism365 Innovation Hub had supported over 60 innovators across more than 45 countries. These innovators represent diverse pathways toward social change through sport, shaped by local contexts, grassroots leadership, and inclusive design. The four funding strands (Enterprise365, Grassroots365, Collective365, and Tech365) offer a lens through which to explore these innovations in action.

Enterprise365: Leveraging Social Enterprise for Impact

In Kenya, Alive and Kicking combines sport manufacturing with inclusive employment and health education. By training and employing women and people with disabilities to hand-stitch durable sports balls, the enterprise promotes economic empowerment and skill development. The initiative also delivers health education through sport and expands access for visually impaired youth with sound balls and adapted football training. Its innovation lies in integrating product-based income generation with inclusive design and local employment, creating a self-sustaining social business that scales access to play and education.

In Papua New Guinea, The Grass Skirt Project (GSP) uses sport-based entrepreneurship to address gender inequality, health, and leadership. Its Gymbox initiative converts shipping containers into mobile community fitness facilities that generate income while offering physical activity, health education, and gender-based violence prevention. The model is supported by a social enterprise approach and a bold goal to empower one million leaders by 2050. By combining infrastructure innovation with local economic development and social justice, GSP redefines how sport can drive sustainable, community-owned impact.

Grassroots365: Hyper-local Solutions in and through Sport

In Mae Sot, Thailand, the Freedom Restoration Project has built a community football league for women and children who are survivors of gender-based violence and forced displacement. Operating in a border town with a high population of migrants from Myanmar, the project integrates trauma-informed physical activity with holistic recovery services. By scaling informal fitness programs into an organized football

system, it creates safe, inclusive spaces for healing, empowerment, and community belonging, using sport as a pathway to dignity, leadership, and resilience.

In La Paz, Bolivia, the AYNi Skate Project reclaims neglected urban spaces by transforming them into inclusive skateboarding zones for marginalized youth, especially girls. Combining skateboarding with sessions on leadership, gender equity, and mental wellness, the program responds to the needs of underserved communities while nurturing confidence and agency. Through locally rooted design and peer-led education, AYNi creates a model of grassroots innovation where sport becomes a vehicle for social inclusion, youth development, and public space transformation.

Collective365: Advancing Cross-sector Collaborations in and outside of Sport

In Nigeria, a collaboration between Save the Street Child Foundation (AKHIN) and Zigstar Fresh Farm combines football, agricultural training, and entrepreneurship to support homeless youth facing unemployment, exclusion, and food insecurity. By blending sport with practical agribusiness education, their collective empowers young people to build self-sufficient futures, challenging social stigmas and creating pathways to economic resilience in communities impacted by marginalization and poverty.

In Madagascar, Terres en Mêlées and local GBV experts co-created the Ampy'zay programme, integrating rugby and psychosocial support into middle schools to combat gender-based violence and harmful social norms. Through values-based sport, trauma-informed education, and whole-community engagement, their partnership fosters safer environments for girls while reshaping attitudes around gender, power, and respect in both classrooms and broader society.

Tech365: Promoting Knowledge Exchange and Incubation of Projects Using Emerging Technologies in Sport for Sustainable Development

In the United Kingdom, PiTCH is using generative AI and machine learning to create a collaborative digital platform that supports training, coaching, and athlete health. Developed by Edinburgh Napier University, the system enables coaches and sport practitioners to share best practices, resources, and insights in real time, fostering a

global knowledge network that advances learning and development across all levels of sport.

In Brazil, eMuseum of Sports has designed a virtual reality and AI-powered simulator that brings inclusive sport experiences to people with disabilities. Through mobile 3D exhibits and gamified storytelling, the platform allows users to interact with sporting memories and environments in immersive ways, transforming how sport is accessed, remembered, and shared, particularly in underserved and physically inaccessible settings.

Ignite365: Sparking Community Innovation Through Sport

In Argentina, Fenikks is transforming plastic waste into football equipment to empower youth in low-income communities. By setting up collection points across disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the initiative recycles discarded plastics into shin guards, donating one pair for every pair sold. The model not only addresses environmental degradation but also increases access to sports gear for young players who might otherwise go without, turning sustainability into a tool for inclusion and dignity on the pitch.

In France, touch2see is revolutionizing the live sports experience for blind and visually impaired fans with a groundbreaking tactile tablet. This device uses magnetic cursors, vibrations, and automated audio to translate on-field action into a touchable, audible experience, making sports not just watchable, but truly feelable. By bringing accessibility to stadiums, touch2see opens new emotional and social dimensions of sport to a previously excluded audience. The innovation redefines what it means to be a fan, proving that sport's power to include and uplift can be expanded through technology and empathy.

PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES: Experiences of Innovators in the Olympism365 Innovation Hub

Innovators in the Olympism365 Innovation Hub Ecosystem

Representing a rich diversity of geographies, disciplines, and lived experiences, innovators in the Olympism365 Innovation Hub ecosystem include former athletes, community leaders, researchers, technologists, and social entrepreneurs. Their work spans everything from youth empowerment in conflict zones to adaptive sport technologies, clean energy innovations, and sport-based community healing programs.

The following perspectives, key insights, and recommendations are drawn directly from 61 innovators that joined from across 33 countries, and who participated in a global exchange in March 2025 that brought together innovators from all fund strands: Enterprise365, Grassroots365, Collective365, and Tech365. This unique gathering was designed to spark collective reflection and shared learning on the conditions that foster or inhibit innovation in and through sport. It prompted a deep exploration of how sport intersects with sustainable development, particularly when viewed through a local and inclusive lens. The resulting dialogue surfaced common enablers, persistent barriers, and a shared desire to strengthen collaboration across sectors.

Key Insights

1. The enablers or drivers of innovation in sport for sustainable development.
2. The main barriers or challenges to innovation.
3. How financing influences the innovation process.
4. How partnerships and collaborations drive innovation.
5. The conditions beyond funding that are needed for innovation.

The enablers or drivers of innovation in sport for sustainable development

Deep listening and community-led design

Multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration

Culture shift and inclusion

Leadership culture of humility, curiosity, courage

Local leadership and role models

Flexible and incremental approaches

Scarcity and urgency

Trust, flexibility and risk-tolerant funding

The main barriers or challenges to innovation

Cultural and social resistance

Gender inequality

Structural inequities and contextual realities

Capacity constraints and volunteer burnout

Rigid funding models and accountability frameworks

Exclusionary funding systems and application processes

Institutional inertia

Difficult to network and navigate resources

How partnerships and collaborations drive innovation

Bridging tech and community

Trust-based local partnerships

Shared infrastructure and skills

Move from competition to complementarity

How financing influences the innovation process

Funding comes with pros and cons

Importance of early and flexible funding

Innovative funding models encourage innovation

The conditions beyond funding that are needed for innovation

Psychological safety and team buy-in

Ecosystem connectivity

Time and space to reflect

Technological access and literacy

INSIGHT 1: Enablers or Drivers of Innovation in Sport for Sustainable Development

Deep Listening and Community-led Design

Across regions and projects, innovation is most often sparked by context-specific needs. Innovators emphasize that the most impactful ideas come from listening closely to communities and co-creating based on their needs. Innovation, in this view, is not synonymous with new technologies, but with contextual responsiveness. For example, in Afghanistan, where sport for girls is banned, one program transforms traditional sport delivery into psychosomatic strength-building and breathwork exercises, supporting girls' mental health and agency in discreet ways. In Argentina, simply creating a safe space for football for girls and queer persons is described as a form of innovation.

Innovation that lasts, scales, or transforms comes from understanding community needs, as opposed to just delivering external ideas. Innovators repeatedly emphasize the importance of listening first and asking the right questions in the right language, at the right time as a foundational innovation method. Understanding cultural norms, existing resources, and aspirations often unlocks far more effective solutions than imposing external models. Several groups adapt indigenous or community-specific games instead of introducing Western sports, finding that such adaptations increase trust, relevance, and long-term engagement. "Access" is reframed not just as availability, but as the intersection of affordability, acceptability, and trust.

“I think the biggest driver of innovation is understanding the needs of the communities. And I think that comes from asking the right questions.”

– Innovator, USA

Multidisciplinary and Cross-sectoral Collaboration

Diverse teams emerge as a powerful driver of innovation. These teams are often more reflective of the diverse realities of target communities and thus better positioned to design inclusive innovations. Collaborations that combine legal expertise, engineering, sport, business strategy, and behavioural science are especially effective in creating inclusive, adaptive programs. Many groups use hackathons, co-design sessions, or advisory groups to blend lived experience with technical know-how and creative courage (Brazil, Palestine, US).

Across many initiatives, youth voices are essential, not just as beneficiaries but as co-creators. Some teams also integrate commercial logic, such as advertising through clean energy infrastructure or launching sport-linked enterprises, to support community needs sustainably. Multi-sector exchanges – including the cross-fund convening itself – are noted as a valuable moment of cross-sector exchange, reinforcing the idea that collaborative ecosystems accelerate meaningful change.

“To be a good innovator, you have to have a really broad, diverse background where you can pull ideas from other areas and integrate and synthesize ideas... in one specific field of excellence, where... you are one of the top 10 in the world.”

– Innovator, Australia

Culture Shift and Inclusion

Several innovators highlight the importance of changing cultural narratives around sport, gender, and inclusion. Whether tackling menstrual stigma in Japan, challenging perceptions of disability in Kenya, or redefining sport in digital spaces in Colombia, these innovators position social change as a prerequisite for innovation. Programs often have to first shift mindsets before any new models or tools can be introduced.

Leadership Culture of Humility, Curiosity and Courage

Many speak of the need to dismantle ego in leadership and move from a “being right” mindset to a “learning together” mindset. The best innovations emerge when leaders embrace vulnerability and admit they don’t have all the answers; take risks, make space for failure, and share power with others; and centre humility and curiosity over status or credentials.

"As soon as we let go of being right, we opened up room for real innovation."

– Innovator, USA

Local Leadership and Role Models

The presence of community-rooted leaders (i.e., former athletes, grassroots coaches, or local youth) is repeatedly highlighted as a critical enabler. These individuals often act as both role models and bridge-builders, making new ideas more acceptable, especially in conservative or underserved contexts (Ecuador, Colombia).

Flexible and Incremental Approaches

Rather than pushing for rapid or disruptive transformation, many organizations favour small-scale, iterative innovation. In contexts where cultural, logistical, or political constraints are high, starting small and adapting along the way is often more effective. Incremental change allows communities to build confidence and ownership while reducing risk.

Scarcity and Urgency

Scarcity is a powerful catalyst. In places experiencing energy shortages, conflict, or displacement, innovation is a response to necessity. Across contexts, from energy crises in Mali to restrictions on girls’ movement in Afghanistan, innovation is frequently sparked by urgent needs or gaps. Conflict, displacement, or political instability push groups to reimagine how sport and psychosocial care can be delivered safely and discreetly. Innovators working in fragile, under-resourced, or transitional

environments speak of innovation as a survival response, born from necessity rather than luxury. In contexts of violence, repression, or austerity (Argentina, Palestine), just maintaining operations, creating safe spaces, or “holding the line” on rights is framed as radical and innovative.

"We didn't have a field, so we built our own. If a screw fell off the board, we'd use a stick or tape. That's how we started innovating."

– Innovator, Argentina

Trust, Flexibility and Risk-tolerant Funding

Long-term, unrestricted funding is cited as a major enabler for meaningful innovation. Flexible, open-minded partners and funders are key to enabling risk-taking and adaptation. Where funders prioritize learning over rigid KPIs, grantees are empowered to test, iterate, and shift course based on real-time feedback. Academics and trust-based funders who allow mid-program pivots are especially appreciated. Long-term, flexible, and unrestricted funding enables teams to focus on systemic impact rather than short-term outputs. Innovators also call for a broader understanding of what “success” looks like, acknowledging that relational, invisible, or non-linear outcomes are equally valid.

INSIGHT 2: Main Barriers or Challenges to Innovation

Cultural and Social Resistance

Deep-rooted social expectations often limit innovation. In many communities, sport continues to be seen through a narrow lens – as elite, male, and competitive. Programs that emphasize inclusion, community wellbeing, or non-traditional sports face scepticism or backlash. There is often cultural resistance, whether toward new technologies, gender equality, or viewing sport as a tool for social change (Argentina, India, Kenya).

"We have been having another problem in Kenya which is lack of awareness and resistance to change. Especially if you go... into the far interior areas, they're still not accepting the technology part of it."

– Innovator, Kenya

Gender Inequality

In some regions, community acceptance of girls' or women's leadership, participation in sport, or visibility in public life remains low. Gender norms are particularly challenging, with some families actively opposing girls' participation in sport or public life. Families and communities sometimes resist female involvement in sport or community leadership. Multiple speakers identify gendered barriers, from lack of leadership opportunities for women (Amazon region, Brazil), to stigmas around menstruation (Japan), to safety and mobility restrictions (Palestine, Afghanistan). These are compounded by limited funding and recognition for women-led initiatives.

"One of the barriers that we have is this cultural barrier that women are more supposed to be at home taking care of the kids... men they don't want to see us in these leadership positions. And they do everything they can to boycott the events that we do."

– Innovator, Brazil

Structural Inequities and Contextual Realities

Innovators working in conflict zones, underserved rural areas, and regions on the frontlines of climate change (e.g. Palestine, India, Kenya, and the Himalayas) describe systemic challenges that go beyond logistical obstacles. These include political instability, deeply entrenched social inequities, and institutional neglect that directly impede innovation. In these contexts, the urgency of basic survival (access to clean water, electricity, or safe spaces) often eclipses the pursuit of new ideas. Innovators note that marginalization is not accidental but structurally embedded, requiring them to operate within power imbalances and chronic underinvestment. The effects of climate disruption, displacement, and economic austerity further compound these issues, reinforcing a vicious cycle of precarity.

"We're not just innovating for development, we're innovating under pressure, in systems that weren't designed for us to thrive."

– Innovator, Pakistan

Capacity Constraints and Volunteer Burnout

Teams, especially in grassroots or fragile settings, are overstretched and often lack paid staff. Many initiatives operate with minimal staffing and heavy reliance on volunteers. While volunteers are essential, their temporary involvement and high turnover create challenges for consistency and growth. Leaders juggle multiple roles and struggle to carve out time for innovation. Burnout is common, particularly in under-resourced environments with high emotional demands. Without flexible core funding, many initiatives remain locked in survival mode.

"When working with local communities – we need skilled people but do not have the resources and finance to afford them... We need educated people in all sectors."

– Innovator, South Sudan

Rigid Funding Models and Accountability Frameworks

Rigid funding structures are repeatedly described as a major obstacle. Short funding cycles, tightly defined outcomes, and funder-driven indicators limit experimentation. Restricted funding and unrealistic reporting stifle innovation. Moreover, programs sometimes feel pressured to deliver what funders already believe will work, rather than what communities are asking for. Innovations in areas like mental health, systems change, or healing often lack the “hard” metrics required for continued support, leaving many promising ideas underfunded or untested.

"We're told to hit targets, not test ideas. That's the problem."

– Innovator, Rwanda

Exclusionary Funding Systems and Application Processes

Access to funding and support systems is not equitable. Application processes often privilege English fluency, grant-writing experience, and prior exposure to international networks. Local innovators without institutional affiliations or formal education find themselves locked out. Some innovators note they only discover the Innovation Hub by chance, highlighting broader issues around outreach and inclusion in global development and sport systems.

"Application processes are set up for those who already know the game - and that leaves a lot of potentially impactful innovators out."

– Innovator, Somalia

Institutional Inertia

Organizations themselves are sometimes slow to adapt. Patterned thinking, outdated models, and siloed structures inhibit creativity. In some organizations, staff can be unwilling to pilot new approaches for fear of reputational risk or perceived failure (France, Ecuador).

Difficulty Navigating Networks and Resources

Innovators describe difficulty connecting the dots between available resources and their practical application. Legal complexity, limited digital infrastructure, and lack of pilot funding often leave good ideas stranded at the concept stage. Programs also struggle to identify and access complementary resources outside their immediate networks or countries.

INSIGHT 3: How Partnerships and Collaborations Drive Innovation

Bridging Tech and Community

One of the most effective strategies is pairing software developers or digital platform providers with grassroots actors. In Spain and Argentina, sport tech startups collaborated with NGOs to co-design and pilot tools for youth engagement, injury prevention, and inclusive play.

"We bring varied stakeholders in the sports and the technology ecosystem together and create magic by making many people get to play sport."

– Innovator, India

Trust-based Local Partnerships

Building trust with local leaders and organizations is cited as key to scaling innovation, particularly in contexts where external models may face scepticism. For example, in Tennessee, USA, colleges served as key community anchors, helping connect sport programs with broader local networks and enhancing their legitimacy and reach. In Ecuador, partnerships with Kichwa-speaking Indigenous communities ensured that sport initiatives were embedded within local traditions and language, increasing cultural relevance and acceptance. Meanwhile, in Kenya, collaboration with disability federations and faith leaders played a vital role in grounding inclusion-focused programs within trusted authority structures. These cases demonstrate how involving schools, traditional leaders, and community organizations helps ensure that innovations are contextually relevant, socially accepted, and more likely to sustain impact.

Shared Infrastructure and Skills

Collaboration between like-minded organizations also allows for resource-sharing. Women-led sport initiatives in Brazil, for instance, work together to develop leadership toolkits that can be adapted across regions. Pooling resources, like digital platforms, monitoring tools, or eco-materials, is a practical form of innovation.

"Innovation is not just a new idea. It's an old idea applied in a new or inclusive way. That happens when unlikely people come together."

– Innovator, Brazil

From Competition to Complementarity

Several innovators urge a mindset shift from competition to complementarity in the ecosystem. Recognizing the value of each actor's unique asset, be it tech, reach, or knowledge, enables more strategic and synergistic collaborations (France, US). Rather than guarding ideas or competing for visibility, organizations are encouraged to see one another as collaborators in a broader movement. The Olympism365 Innovation Hub's cross-fund structure is seen as a powerful model to promote this shift and foster long-term learning.

"Finding relevant partners to go faster, I think could be nice, because sometimes we see each other more as competitors. And I think sometimes we are more complimentary than competition."

– Innovator, France

INSIGHT 4: How Financing Influences the Innovation Process

Funding Comes with Pros and Cons

Funding is seen as both a powerful enabler and a potential barrier. When designed well, financial support enables organizations to test new ideas, experiment, and build prototypes with community participation. Early-stage, flexible funding is particularly critical—this is when innovations are riskiest, and where risk-tolerant, trust-based capital can make the difference between stalling and scaling. As noted across several Innovation Hub convenings and Ignite365 submissions, the Olympism365 Innovation Hub intentionally provides space for “failing forward,” where learning and iteration are not only permitted but encouraged. Innovators emphasized that appetite for risk needs to vary across the innovation lifecycle: higher-risk funding is essential in the early design and piloting stages, while more structured, lower-risk investments are required to sustain and scale proven interventions. However, when financing is rigid

or only available after pilot success, innovation often stalls. Many innovators express frustration with funders' preference for "safe bets" or highly measurable outcomes. This excludes emerging initiatives and leaves little room for trial and error. To address these issues, several innovators are exploring alternative financial models to reduce dependency on short-term grants. These include revenue-generating social enterprises, hybrid funding approaches, and match-funding schemes. Some programs are also experimenting with circular economy models, such as recycling-for-impact initiatives, that embed innovation into funding itself. The Innovation Hub's multi-strand structure, including grassroots, enterprise, and tech-based funds, offers a pathway to diversify financial support and tailor it to different stages and types of innovation.

Importance of Early and Flexible Funding

Several innovators emphasize the value of having financing available from the start of a project to support ideation, co-creation, and proof-of-concept stages, rather than only post-pilot. Flexibility in how funds can be used is also highlighted.

"I would say a key barrier... is the funder or supporting agency's requirements, openness and flexibility to us being able to adapt to what we're seeing and what we're doing and how it's working."

– Innovator, Somaliland

Innovative Funding Models Encourage Innovation

Some innovators note that diversifying funding streams, including through social enterprise models, match-funding, or aligned donors, creates a more stable base for innovation. Innovative funding models themselves (e.g., recycling-for-impact initiatives) are also part of the sector's evolution.

INSIGHT 5: Conditions Beyond Funding That Are Needed for Innovation

Psychological Safety and Team Buy-in

A recurring theme is the importance of internal team support and openness to change. Without buy-in, even well-funded innovations can falter. Leaders who foster learning cultures and encourage failure as part of growth are more likely to succeed. Innovation thrives in environments where psychological safety and team trust are present. Leaders who encourage openness, normalize failure, and invite input from all levels of their organization create fertile ground for creative thinking. Without this internal culture, even well-funded initiatives can falter.

“We didn’t need a lot, we just needed someone to say: we trust you, keep going.”

– Innovator, Olympism365 Innovation Hub (CrossFund transcript)

Time and Space to Reflect


Innovation requires dedicated time to reflect, test, and adapt. Especially in overstretched organizations, carving out time for strategic thinking, adaptation, and experimentation is a luxury, but a necessary one. Innovation is described as a process, not a spark, and that process needs space.

“It’s hard to innovate when you barely have time to breathe.”

– Innovator, Somalia

Ecosystem Connectivity

Conditions that support connection across stakeholders (academia, government, private sector, community) enable collective innovation. When programs have access to academic institutions, local government, private partners, or peer networks, they are more resilient and responsive. Many innovators call for more platforms to exchange tools, share lessons, and collectively troubleshoot.



“A handful of ‘rebellious’ individuals who are typically rivals and now collaborate and are creative to bring new ideas/ solutions – lead to increased finance in the clubs.”

– Innovator, Sweden

Technological Access and Literacy

Basic digital literacy and internet access are preconditions for many innovations to be adopted or scaled. In remote or marginalized areas, lack of smartphones or connectivity remains a major limitation (Ecuador, Colombia, Kenya). Programs working in adaptive sport and disability inclusion underscore that equitable access to technology, whether for communication, program delivery, or design, is essential to ensuring innovation reaches everyone. Disability-inclusive design and adaptive sports emerge as frontiers of innovation, particularly where technology meets equity (Kenya, India).

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS: Strengthening Innovation as a Systemic Lever for Social Change

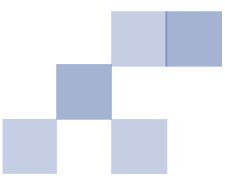
The innovators in the Olympism365 Innovation Hub collectively developed these recommendations, which are directed at a broad community of stakeholders within the SfD ecosystem, including funders, innovators, implementing organizations, policymakers, and convening platforms. They aim to guide both strategy and practice by connecting innovation to broader social and structural goals, acknowledging the importance of leadership, infrastructure, financing, and culture in sustaining progress.

Centre Innovation in Local Contexts and Communities

- Design with, not for, communities: Engage local actors, especially youth, not as beneficiaries but as co-creators across all states of the innovation process.
- Prioritize listening before designing: Begin with deep listening and context mapping to understand lived realities, unmet needs, existing resources, and cultural dynamics.
- Adapt to local realities: Utilize familiar formats (e.g., traditional games) that are culturally relevant.
- Recognize grassroots innovation: Reframe innovation to include informal, low tech, or community-led solutions that emerge out of necessity.

Redefine What Counts as Innovation

- Embrace broad definitions: Innovation includes social process innovation, narrative change, and relational shifts, not just tech solutions.
- Focus on relevance and impact over novelty: Reward approaches that tangibly improve inclusion, health, or motivation, even if they are not “new” in form.
- Celebrate incremental, cumulative work: Small, community-led improvements often lead to greater systemic resilience than disruptive interventions.



Create Enabling Internal Cultures

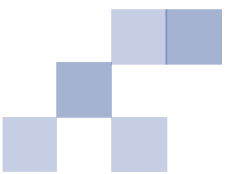
- Foster psychological safety: Build leadership and team cultures that normalize failure, encourage curiosity, and dismantle ego.
- Centre courage and care: Innovation is not always fast or flashy. Sometimes it is invisible, quiet, and deeply human.
- Shift from “being right” to “learning together”: Promote leadership grounded in humility, openness, and co-creation.
- Prioritize internal reflection time: Carve out space within organizations to think, adapt, test, and evolve ideas without external pressure.

Strengthen Collaborative Ecosystems

- Build cross-sectoral teams: Combine expertise from sport, health, technology, education, business, and justice systems to address complex challenges.
- Move from competition to complementarity: Promote trust-based collaboration and shared learning over visibility or resource competition.
- Co-invest in shared resources: Create open-source tools, co-authored curricula, and interoperable platforms to reduce duplication and strengthen infrastructure.
- Work through trusted channels: Engage faith leaders, grassroots institutions, and cultural brokers to navigate sensitive issues and embed legitimacy.

Make Funding Models More Flexible and Inclusive

- Provide early-stage and flexible capital: Fund ideation, co-creation, and prototyping phases, not just polished projects.
- Embed innovation in funding mechanisms: Explore models like circular economy revenue generation, social enterprise structures, and pooled infrastructure funds.
- Design accessible application processes: Simplify eligibility criteria, allow for non-written submissions, and remove language and institutional biases to ensure local changemakers can access support.



- Adopt trust-based models: Reduce rigid KPIs and instead prioritize iterative learning, contextual responsiveness, and mid-course corrections.

Address Structural Barriers and Inequities

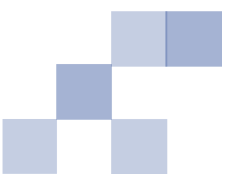
- Support gender equity intentionally: Resource and amplify women-led initiatives, address taboos (e.g., menstruation), and provide leadership opportunities for women and girls.
- Tackle systemic exclusion in sport: Challenge ableism, elitism, and colonial power dynamics within sport institutions.
- Acknowledge and address social and cultural resistance: Work patiently with communities to shift perceptions around girls' participation, inclusive sport, and non-traditional models.
- Create more accessible pathways into the sport ecosystem: Reduce bureaucratic and reputational gatekeeping that prevents emerging innovators from breaking in.

Invest in Infrastructure and Digital Equity

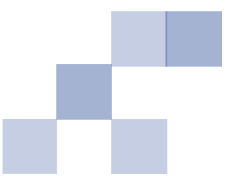
- Support basic digital access: Ensure connectivity, device access, and digital literacy in under-resourced or conflict-affected settings.
- Design inclusive tech: Co-create tools with diverse users, ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities and linguistic minorities.
- Leverage shared infrastructure: Encourage modular or customizable systems that reduce individual overhead and improve collective outcomes.

Champion Innovation as a Long-term, Systemic Process

- Value long-term funding over short-term outputs: Support programs that aim to build systems, not just deliver services.
- Recognize that innovation is non-linear: Allow for iterative processes, slow builds, and relational outcomes.



- Support sustainability beyond funding cycles: Encourage models that build local capacity and organizational resilience beyond external grants.
- Measure what matters: Success should include learning, relationship-building, and systemic shifts, not just numbers.



CONCLUSION: Moving Beyond 2025

As we move beyond 2025, innovation in sport for sustainable development must be viewed not as a single intervention or product but as an ongoing, adaptive process embedded in complex social realities. The past five years have shown that innovation in sport for sustainable development is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Faced with layered crises and rising complexity, SfD actors have responded with creativity, courage, and conviction. They have reimaged what sport can do, how it can be delivered, and who it can be for.

What emerges from this period is a clear call to action: innovation must be community-led, equity-focused, and supported by systems that are willing to learn, adapt, and share power. The findings in this publication show that impactful innovation often arises in response to urgent, real-world constraints when resources are scarce, communities face exclusion or crisis, and trusted relationships become the foundation for creative problem-solving. It is in these high-pressure settings that solutions gain traction, built on necessity and driven by those closest to the challenge.

Key Implications for the Sector

- **Institutional transformation:** Organizations must undergo a fundamental shift in how they operate—moving away from top-down models toward participatory, locally grounded approaches to innovation. This includes redefining leadership to emphasize humility, shared decision-making, and community legitimacy. Innovation should be co-created with local actors who hold lived experience, cultural insight, and long-term trust. Internally, this requires nurturing team cultures rooted in curiosity, vulnerability, and horizontal collaboration.
- **Funding reform:** Innovators across the sector consistently call for funding that is early-stage, flexible, and trust-based. Funding models should support experimentation and learning—not only scaling proven solutions. This means offering diverse types of funding throughout the innovation lifecycle: from high-risk prototyping and co-creation to long-term systems change. Funders should also adapt their evaluation frameworks to accommodate emergent outcomes and non-linear progress.
- **Ecosystem connectivity:** The sector must shift from siloed efforts to strategic collaboration. This means embracing complementarity over competition and

fostering networks that bridge sectors (health, education, tech), geographies, and disciplines. Stronger connectivity enables resource-sharing, accelerates knowledge transfer, and builds collective resilience. Platforms for peer learning, cross-sector alliances, and shared infrastructure will be critical enablers.

- **Expanding definitions of innovation:** Innovation in sport for development (SfD) is often quiet, iterative, and shaped by cultural context. It is found not only in new technologies but also in adaptive, relational, and grassroots-led approaches. From menstrual dignity programs in Japan to recycled-material pitches in West Africa, the sector must broaden its definition of innovation to recognize low-tech, community-designed, and equity-focused solutions. Celebrating this diversity strengthens the field's ability to respond to complex realities.
- **Linking innovation to broader social challenges:** SfD innovations must be intentionally adapted to tackle wider global challenges—from climate resilience and youth mental health to digital inclusion and gender equity. The relational assets built through sport—motivation, trust, community belonging—can be leveraged in adjacent domains like public health, education, or civic engagement. Recognizing these transferable strengths opens new pathways for scaling impact beyond the sports field.
- **Embedding equity and access in systems change:** Innovation cannot thrive without addressing deep structural inequities. Barriers like gender bias, digital exclusion, rigid reporting structures, and language gatekeeping continue to limit who gets to innovate—and who benefits. The sector must commit to systemic inclusion by redesigning access points, application processes, and success metrics to centre marginalized voices and community-driven solutions.
- **Reimagining evaluation and learning:** To fully support innovation, the sector needs to adopt evaluation practices that value learning, iteration, and adaptive change. Traditional metrics often miss the relational and systems-level impacts that innovation produces. Approaches like developmental evaluation, which prioritize reflection and responsiveness, are better suited for capturing innovation in complex, dynamic settings.

How the O365 Innovation Hub is Responding

The Olympism365 Innovation Hub is operationalizing many of these recommendations through its strategic design and program delivery. This includes:

- **Support for early-stage innovation:** Through its different fund strands, Olympism365 Innovation Hub provides funding not only for proven models but also for prototypes, pilots, and community-led experiments, acknowledging that breakthrough ideas often begin small and informal.
- **Embedding a culture of learning and risk:** The Olympism365 Innovation Hub intentionally designs its convenings, application processes, and funding models to encourage adaptation, failure, and mid-course corrections. It champions initiatives that frame themselves as “works in progress” rather than final products.
- **Building collaborative infrastructure:** The cross-fund Knowledge Exchange convenings and virtual gatherings are designed to break silos and connect innovators across geography and discipline, fostering peer learning and shared problem-solving.
- **Centring equity and inclusion:** From simplifying application language to promoting women-led and youth-led initiatives, the Olympism365 Innovation Hub is focused on reducing structural barriers and making innovation spaces more accessible and representative.

As the sector moves beyond 2025, the challenge is not to scale every new idea indiscriminately, but to build the enabling environments in which meaningful innovation can take root and grow. This means reshaping funding models to allow risk and iteration, investing in inclusive infrastructure, and embedding co-creation into every level of strategy and delivery.

The Olympism365 Innovation Hub represents one such ecosystem, a space where diverse innovators can test ideas, share learning, and build collective momentum for change. But the work cannot stop here. Innovation in SfD must continue to challenge norms, centre lived experience, and expand the imagination of what is possible.

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