

Public and sustainable development sports management applied in the Atlantic Axis of the Peninsular Iberian Northwest

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ABSTRACT

A sustainable development sports program provided by local and regional governance policies will contribute to the well-being of the communities. The aim of the present study was to examine the public sports policies of the municipalities in the Northwest Atlantic Axis of the Iberian Peninsula (the northwest area of Portugal and the south area of Galicia, Spain). A structured questionnaire was applied to 16 municipalities (13 from Portugal and 3 from Spain), addressing the main key sports areas, including organisations, facilities, funding, and sports programs. The sports facilities and sports offering data showed that Portugal had significantly more infrastructure ($t = 3.32$, $p = .0009$) and sports activities than Spain ($t = 13.74$, $p \approx 0$). However, the cities of Spain had a significantly higher sports budget than the cities of Portugal ($t = -3.17$, $p = .0015$). The findings highlight and provide some insights for managers and policymakers, proposing strategies to enhance the social impact of sports as a tool for inclusion and community development, particularly by promoting dialogue and knowledge exchange between municipalities (both within and beyond the region) to facilitate the adoption of innovative strategies and successful practices, and strengthening research collaborations with universities and research centres.

KEYWORDS: sports; public policies; social inclusion; municipalities; sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The sports sector plays a pivotal role in driving regional development, contributing to the economic, social, and environmental well-being of local communities (Videira et al., 2006). Over recent years, the relationship between tourism and sport has gained increasing recognition as a strategic pathway to promoting sustainable development (Baena-Morales et al., 2024; Radicchi, 2013).

Sport is a universal cultural phenomenon that intersects social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions and holds a multifaceted role within modern societies, influencing individuals and communities across cultural, social, environmental and economic dimensions (Baena-Morales et al., 2024). As a vehicle for integration, education, and health promotion, sports have evolved into a universal phenomenon with significant implications at both micro and macro levels. For example, as a

medium for social integration and cultural exchange, sports act as a powerful instrument for social integration, bridging cultural divides and fostering shared identities. Sarmiento (2009) highlights sport as a space for socialisation and the development of values essential to fostering active and healthy citizenship. This perspective is supported by the European Charter of Sport (Council of Europe, 1992), which emphasises the role of sport in promoting health, well-being, and social cohesion. Moreover, authors such as Canotilho and Moreira (2007) warn against the political instrumentalisation of sport due to its mass appeal. This risk is particularly evident in large-scale sporting events, which often yield socio-political and economic implications disproportionate to their local benefits, particularly in developing countries (Starepravo et al., 2011).

Internationally, initiatives such as the Olympic Games illustrate sports' ability to unite the nations under shared ideals of competition and partnership. Senn and Guttmann (1993)

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Conflict of interests: nothing to declare. **Funding:** nothing to declare.

Received: 13th February 2025. **Accepted:** 29th April 2025.

argued that the structured nature of modern sport—defined by universal rules—fosters inclusivity and intercultural understanding. This perspective aligns with the European Charter of Sport (Council of Europe, 1992), which underscores sports' role in promoting social cohesion and mutual respect across communities. Therefore, modern sport must be seen as a structured activity governed by universal rules, reinforcing its potential for intercultural connection and the promotion of human rights shaped by different gender, age, education, and socioeconomic context (Grima et al., 2017; Senn & Guttmann, 1993).

Over the years, there has been increasing acknowledgement of the critical role that sports and physical activity play in fostering healthier lifestyles and enhancing social inclusion, particularly for vulnerable populations (Morgan & Parker, 2017). For instance, sports initiatives introduced in Belgium during the late 1980s aimed to encourage healthy behaviours through community engagement in physical activities (Veken et al., 2019). However, ongoing discussions and research continue to evaluate the effectiveness of such initiatives in achieving their intended goals.

The practice of sport during childhood and adolescence is critical to an individual's holistic development. Research conducted in Portugal showed that school-based sport plays an essential role in motor development and the formation of healthy habits (Figueira & Teixeira, 2021). However, structural and logistical challenges hinder the effective implementation of sports programs in primary schools, underscoring the need for robust and integrated public policies. For many children, schools provide the only opportunity to engage in sports, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas. This highlights the municipalities' responsibility to deliver inclusive and accessible programs, as the lack of appropriate sports activities can negatively impact children's physical and social development (Baena-Morales et al., 2022).

Research consistently emphasises the transformative potential of sports-based programs to foster recognition, inclusion, and acceptance among marginalised youth (Morgan & Parker, 2017). These initiatives create opportunities for individuals to develop interpersonal connections, boost self-esteem, and integrate into broader social contexts. Nonetheless, some scholars caution against narrowly defining social inclusion through predetermined metrics, as this may inadvertently exclude those unable to meet such benchmarks (Morgan & Parker, 2017). Since the 20th century, sports have been recognised as a dynamic and influential element of modern society, since sports transcend recreational value, representing an integrative force that reflects broader societal ideals and values, aligning with the ultimate purpose of human action and societal organisation.

Additionally, Costa (1993) underscores that sports attain the status of a total social phenomenon only through their interaction with key systemic domains of modern life, including culture, technology, economics, politics, and social structures. Meanwhile, Azevedo and Eira (2022) further elaborated that sports represent a deliberate, institutionalised endeavour whose formalisation depends on structured social norms, defined roles, and the collaborative efforts of individuals within sports communities to fulfil essential social needs.

At a municipal level, the provision of sports involves public services, facilities, and programs that facilitate access to diverse sports activities. Over the past two decades, municipalities have assumed an increasingly significant role in advancing local sports, backed by evolving legal frameworks. These frameworks assign rights, duties, and responsibilities to municipalities to address community needs across various domains, including socio-economic development, public health, and sports. As noted by Januário et al. (2009), municipalities hold a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of life for local populations. Municipal sports programs are designed to meet fundamental needs, promoting health and well-being through physical activity.

Recognising sports as a constitutional right (with a social interest) underscores the importance of developing robust public policies to support regional sports initiatives. Pires (2005) argued that sports programs must align with public policy frameworks and contribute to the developmental trajectories of communities, regions, and, ultimately, nations. These initiatives should yield tangible benefits for individuals, or they risk becoming inconsequential. Similarly, Starepravo et al. (2011) advocated for a thorough examination of the socio-political environments in which sports policies operate, emphasising the need to analyse stakeholder relationships and evaluate policies that have succeeded, failed, or remained unrealised.

Contemporary practices in municipal sports management require critical reflection, as outlined by Zabaleta and Rosell (2004). This author identified that current municipal sports services predominantly focus on health and leisure activities, engaging approximately 80% of the active population, and proposed that municipalities should implement strategies to broaden access to regular sports programs, such as creating diverse activity levels, incorporating family-oriented initiatives, and ensuring inclusive participation. Therefore, the design and evaluation of municipal sports programs are a priority for advancing local sports development and informing the creation of more effective public policies tailored to the actual needs of communities.

Despite its potential, sports also face challenges, including commercialisation, inequality in access, and ethical concerns such as doping and corruption. The commercialisation of sport has shifted its focus in some cases from public benefit to profit generation, often alienating grassroots participants. Additionally, access to sports facilities and programs remains unequal, with marginalised communities frequently lacking opportunities. However, the rise of inclusive policies, such as gender equity in sports and adaptive programs for individuals with disabilities, offers a pathway to address these disparities. Collaborative efforts between governments, private entities, and civil society can ensure that sport fulfils its potential as a driver of societal progress.

Due to the absence of systematised data and comprehensive analyses on the management and impacts of municipal sports policies, assessing their efficiency and effectiveness remains a challenge. Therefore, the present study adopts an observational and a report approach to analyse the municipal sports landscape in Northwest Atlantic Axel of the Iberian Peninsula, which comprises municipalities from Portugal and Spain, emphasising the sports organisation, infrastructure, and funding structures.

The present study aimed i) to characterize and compare municipal sports services, focusing on their organization, infrastructure, funding, and program offerings within the Northwest Atlantic Axel of the Iberian Peninsula; (ii) to analyze the financial investments in sports and key outcomes, such as infrastructure availability and the diversity of activities within the Northwest Atlantic Axel of the Iberian Peninsula; and (iii) to identify the best practices and obstacles in the implementation of inclusive policies, particularly for underrepresented groups within the Northwest Atlantic Axel of the Iberian Peninsula. This approach addresses a relevant gap in the literature related to the contribution of cities to the development of population sports engagement.

METHODS

To better understand this phenomenon, an exploratory study design was conducted.

Sample

From the 39 municipalities that compose the Northwest Atlantic Axis of the Iberian Peninsula, a transboundary association governed by public law, only 16 responded and participated in the study. This entity comprises municipalities and local government that collectively form the urban system of the Galicia-North Portugal Euro-region, operating under Portuguese legislation and relevant European Union

regulations. Of the selected municipalities, 13 were from Portugal and 3 were from Spain.

The selection of municipalities was based on specific inclusion criteria, which required membership in the Atlantic Axis of the Peninsular Iberian Northwest, encompassing municipalities from both Portugal and Spain, and the completion of the submission of data through the collection instrument. The instrument focused on key domains, namely: Sports organisations, Funding structures, Sports infrastructure, and Diversity of sports programs offered (Castanho et al., 2020). The study was approved by the Social Research Ethics Committee of the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Protocol number: CEIS-625346-Q8Z7). Moreover, to ensure compliance with ethical standards, all representatives of the participating municipalities provided informed consent by signing a formal declaration (Ramalho & Belchior-Rocha, 2022).

Procedures and data collection

The data collection instrument employed in this study was the questionnaire designed by Paípe et al. (2016). The questionnaire assessed several dimensions and subdimensions about the impact of municipal sports services near their communities (Table 1).

The collaboration with the administrative body overseeing the Northwest Atlantic Axel of the Iberian Peninsula Euro-region was instrumental in distributing the questionnaire to the selected municipalities, facilitating the collection of comprehensive data for analysis.

The institutional framework of the study universe within the Northwest Atlantic Axel of the Iberian Peninsula Euro-region, we established a collaboration from the governing body to facilitate the dissemination of the questionnaire to all analyzed municipalities. The Northwest Atlantic Axel of the Iberian Peninsula constitutes a cross-border association under Public Law, comprising municipalities and local government entities that form the urban system of the Galicia-North Portugal Euroregion. According to Second Article of its statute, these urban entities aim to be authentic drivers of development within the regional space they occupy, characterized by the existence of certain similar socioeconomic and cultural realities. Cooperation programs between local entities focus on various areas, including Sport. The thematic group on Sport regularly brings together political leaders and technicians from each municipality to collaborate on several projects, events, training actions, and sports development initiatives.

An authorization to distribute the questionnaires was requested from Atlantic Axis, through its Secretary General, who not only facilitated the procedure but also provided the

Table 1. Order of dimensions and their items of the questionnaire developed by Paipe et al. (2016).

Dimensions	Items
Creation of the services	Initial name Year of creation Constitution Current name Most appropriate name Efficiency of the services
Human resources	Academic level Sport training Internal employees External collaborators Contract type
Organizational culture	Internal structure Satisfaction survey Local strategic plan Evaluation
Relation with other entities	Cooperation Collective projects Protocols Technical support
Sport facilities and management	Facilities charter Utilization Accessibility Management
Municipal sports offer	Sports programs Sports event Offer diversity Sporting disciplines Demand and supply
Financial Management	Budget for sport Support to associative movement Investment Expenses
Information management and communication	Database Website Section for sport Advertising and marketing Information dissemination points
Sport and environment	Preserving plan of environment Conservation sporting patrimony Walking routes Environmental guide

preferred contacts for the study's target audience. Data collection was conducted through the Sports' Thematic Group, identified as the primary channel for communication and collaboration in this context. This group acted as a platform comprising representatives from the municipal sports departments of all participating municipalities, enabling effective coordination and the collection of comprehensive responses.

Statistical procedures

To verify the normality of the data, the Shapiro-Wilk test was applied, demonstrating normal distribution. Descriptive

statistics (mean \pm standard deviation) were calculated for all measurements (Field, 2018). An independent *t*-test was performed to compare the data obtained between the municipalities of Portugal and Spain. Data were analysed with IBM SPSS Statistics, version 28.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). The alpha level of significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To achieve the aim of the present study, we specifically characterised and compared the domains fully responded by the 16 municipalities that underpin the sports programs (i.e., Organisations, Funding, Sports Facilities, and Sports Offer). The results obtained and their discussion are presented for each of the research domains analysed.

Organizations

From the analysis of the data collected, we observed that within the universe of 16 municipalities, 81.3% corresponded to Portugal and 18.8% to Spanish municipalities. The designation "Sports Service" is more common in Portuguese territory, while "other designations" are more characteristic in Spain, like "Concelleria de Deportes".

Municipal Sports Services can be understood as municipal sports management carried out within a particular municipal sports organisation (Martínez Aguado, 2017). In fact, management and organisation are inseparable and interdependent elements, as their decisions on how to structure the municipal sports organisation stem from municipal sports management and the interactivity that this management fosters in order to bring together the residents of a given city. Moreover, policymakers are increasingly confronted with complex and multidimensional challenges and must deal with a range of unforeseen situations. They seek to fulfil the priorities and long-term commitments made to citizens, such as the promotion of sport and health. This situation requires robust strategic and coordination mechanisms and models capable of responding to the current challenges of the sports system.

Regarding political decision-making, it was found that 18.8% of municipalities have a councillor responsible for only one area of intervention in sport, which corresponds solely to Portuguese municipalities. However, the remaining councillors combined their sports duties with other areas of intervention. According to the study conducted by Figueira and Teixeira (2021) in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA), a sports councilor was identified in all municipalities of LMA, showing a positive progression over the years, particularly in 1998 (90%), 1999 (86%), and 2021 (100%). However, in all municipalities, the role of sports councillor is combined with

other areas of intervention, maintaining the trend observed in 81.2% of the municipalities in the Atlantic Axis of the Peninsular Iberian Northwest.

Additionally, in LMA, an increase in the importance assigned to sport in municipalities was observed, with the presence of the Sports Portfolio in all municipalities (Figueira & Teixeira, 2021). This represents a significant evolution from the data conducted in 2005 (70%), 1999 (71%), and 1998 (79%). The role of local authorities is now irreplaceable, playing a crucial part in promoting sport at the local level by intervening in several areas of action (Kuvaja-Köllner et al., 2022), for example: construction sports' facilities, and land use planning; partnerships and support for associations; programs and sports' activities, where local authorities should create plans and schedule activities to ensure sports opportunities for all; relationship with the educational system; organization of sports events; and professional sport.

Therefore, local authorities play a pivotal role, given the significance and scope they have achieved in the context of national sports development. For all these reasons, they must regard as a primary responsibility to create the better conditions for all citizens to have access to sports' events and its participation, and municipal sports policy must be grounded in the local reality, while building its actions on the foundation of a modern and humanizing conception of sports practice (Januário et al., 2009).

Funding

Associativism, as a form of social organisation, is typically characterised by its voluntary nature, involving the gathering of two or more individuals to meet human individual needs. Recent socio-cultural, political, and sports changes have influenced social dynamics, marking a process of transformation that has led to modifications in the philosophy, purpose, mission, and structure of sports clubs up to the present day.

Regarding the budgets of the analysed municipalities, we observed that one town in each country has a budget higher than 100.000.000€, and the lowest budget is attributed to one Portuguese town (Table 2). Additionally, only two cities in each country had a sports budget higher than 1.000.000€. Unfortunately, two cities from Portugal did not provide any budget.

However, when we compared the sports budget between countries, the results showed that the municipalities of Spain invested significantly more than the cities of Portugal (Spain: $940.571 \pm 789.952\text{€}$ vs Portugal: $621.558 \pm 505.846\text{€}$; $t = -3.17$, $p = .0015$). Therefore, the municipalities of Portugal allocated a lower budget to sports programs than the cities of Spain, which could compromise the promotion of the population's lifestyle.

Sports' facilities

Sports facilities serve as a social infrastructure that supports sports practice and acts as a foundation for democratising physical culture (Carvalho, 1994). Recognising the significance of this element in promoting sports development, it is noted that out of 15 identified types of sports facilities, four municipalities provide more than half of these categories. Portuguese municipalities exhibit the highest levels of availability, nearing the total range of facility offerings (Figure 1).

Moreover, the results of the sports facilities between the cities of the two countries evidenced that Portugal had significantly more sports infrastructures than Spain (Portugal: 10.92 ± 3.41 vs Spain: 9.67 ± 2.89 ; $t = 3.32$, $p = .0009$).

Regarding the management type of sports facilities, none of the 16 studied municipalities employ a direct management model. Only 19% of the municipalities (3), specifically E1, P4, and P13, use a mixed management approach. Consequently, in most of the analysed municipalities (81% — 13 cities), the management of sports facilities is conducted directly by public entities. According to a comparative analysis of municipal services in Andalusia and Catalonia, the authors observed that in the municipalities of Andalusia with populations exceeding 30,000, the management of sports facilities was directly through their own sports departments (Arboledas & Puig, 2012). Similarly, Teruelo (2003) found that in the Basque Autonomous Community (Spain), 65% of municipalities managed their sports facilities indirectly through autonomous bodies, 33% managed them directly through the municipality, and 2% used other management models.

Sports offerings

All 16 municipalities included in the study provided sports activities on a regular basis. However, a more detailed analysis reveals that only 43.7% of these municipalities offer sports activities that ranged comprehensively to all age groups and the full spectrum of target audiences studied (Figure 2). This indicates that less than half of the sample demonstrated a truly inclusive and broad-ranging approach to sports provision. Additionally, in Portugal the sports offering was significantly higher than in Spain (Portugal: 13.08 ± 1.14 vs Spain: 11.33 ± 0.95 ; $t = 13.74$, $p \approx 0$).

Therefore, access to sports practice is a fundamental right enshrined in Article 79 of the Portuguese Republic Constitution, which mandates that “the State working in collaboration with schools, associations, and sports organizations must promote, encourage, and support the practice and dissemination of physical culture and sports, as well as prevent violence in sports”. Similarly, the Basic Law on Physical Activity and Sports (Diário da República, 2007)

Table 2. Total and Sports Budget from each city of the Northwest Atlantic Axis of the Iberian Peninsula.

Country	City	Total Budget (€)	Sports Budget (€)
Portugal	P1	84.568.501,00	685.000,00
Portugal	P2	46.148.600,00	810.500,00
Portugal	P4	115.780.737,00	1.079.303,32
Portugal	P5	24.397.375,02	42.400,00
Portugal	P7	5.500.000,00	150.000,00
Portugal	P8	38.000.000,00	1.000.000,00
Portugal	P10	57.000.000,00	200.000,00
Portugal	P11	62.805.293,57	2.692.357,70
Spain	E1	24.900.735,14	900.000,00
Spain	E2	86.869.243,11	1.921.713,26
Spain	E3	106.478.713,00	1.079.303,32

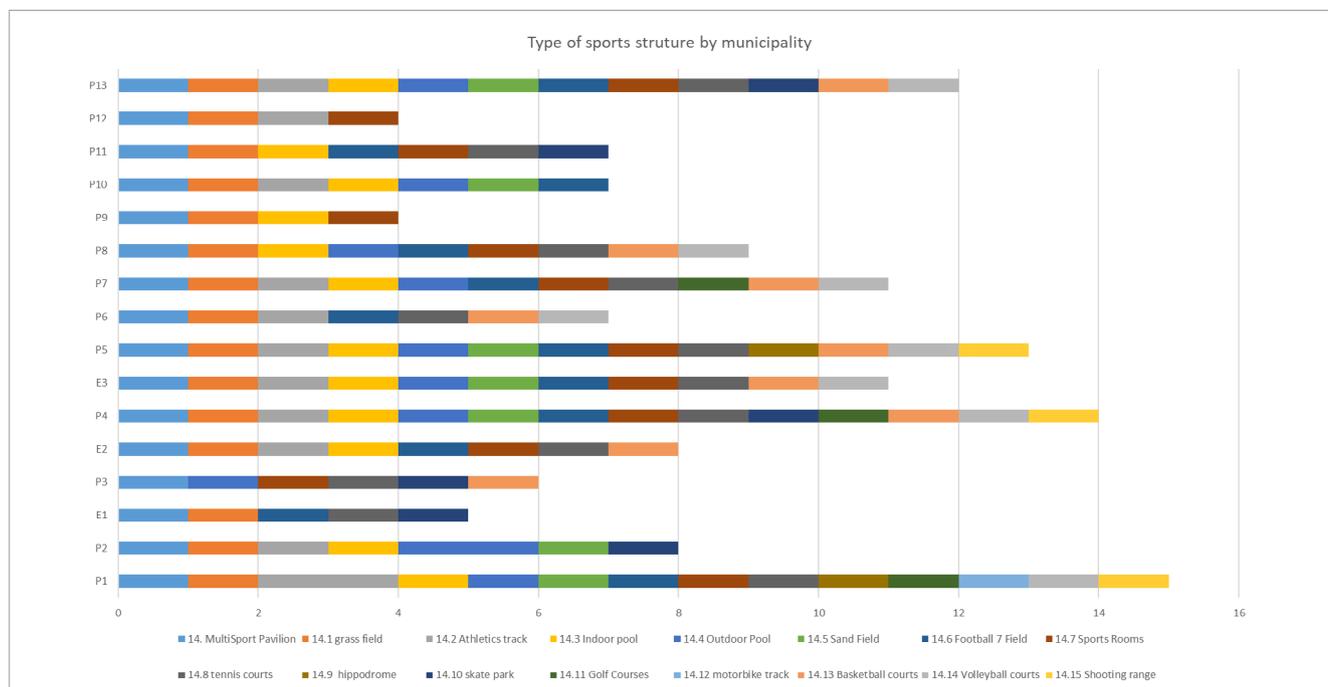


Figure 1. Type of sports structure in each city per country.

highlights the importance of ensuring universal access to sports, emphasizing the integration of physical education and sports into school curricula to foster the comprehensive development of students.

Similarly, in Spain, their Constitution established a framework for local governance that explicitly defined guidelines for sports regulation, recognising the critical role of municipalities in fostering sports development (*apud* Boletín Oficial del Estado, 1985). According to Celma (2020), the democratic transition following Franco’s dictatorship led to a paradigm shift, empowering local governments to prioritise popular sports and develop sports facilities as part of their democratic mandate. This shift underscored the

growing recognition of sports as a tool for social inclusion and public well-being.

Despite these legal frameworks and the recognised importance of sports for individual and community development, it is evident from the present study that a significant proportion of municipalities are far from perfect since they have not implemented inclusive and comprehensive sports offerings to the entire community. Addressing this gap remains crucial to achieving the broader goals of universal access, social inclusion, and physical literacy as outlined in national and constitutional mandates.

The promotion of sports activities of the municipalities studied is carried out exclusively by the municipalities

themselves (81%), using their own resources. However, 19% of the municipalities report establishing partnerships with third parties to ensure the provision of municipal sports offerings (Figure 2).

Unfortunately, the city councils of Portugal and Spain did not adequately respect or promote sports activities that encourage women’s participation (Figure 3).

The integration of women into the world of sports has long been a subject of debate and scholarly research. A substantial body of literature highlights the numerous barriers and challenges that women face in pursuing athletic excellence. Among the most significant obstacles are deeply ingrained sociocultural stereotypes. Historically, sports have

been perceived as a predominantly masculine domain, a notion that has led to socialisation processes discouraging women from participating in physical activities. As McElroy and Willis (1979) observed, these stereotypes are compounded by traditional gender roles, wherein women are expected to prioritise family care while men assume the role of breadwinners. This dichotomy reinforces unequal opportunities and expectations for men and women in sports and beyond (Park, 2010). In addition, the Spanish population participated significantly more in activities offered by their municipalities than the Portuguese one (Spain: $26 \pm .1$ vs Portugal: 14 ± 11.25 ; $t = 9.60$, $p \approx 0$).

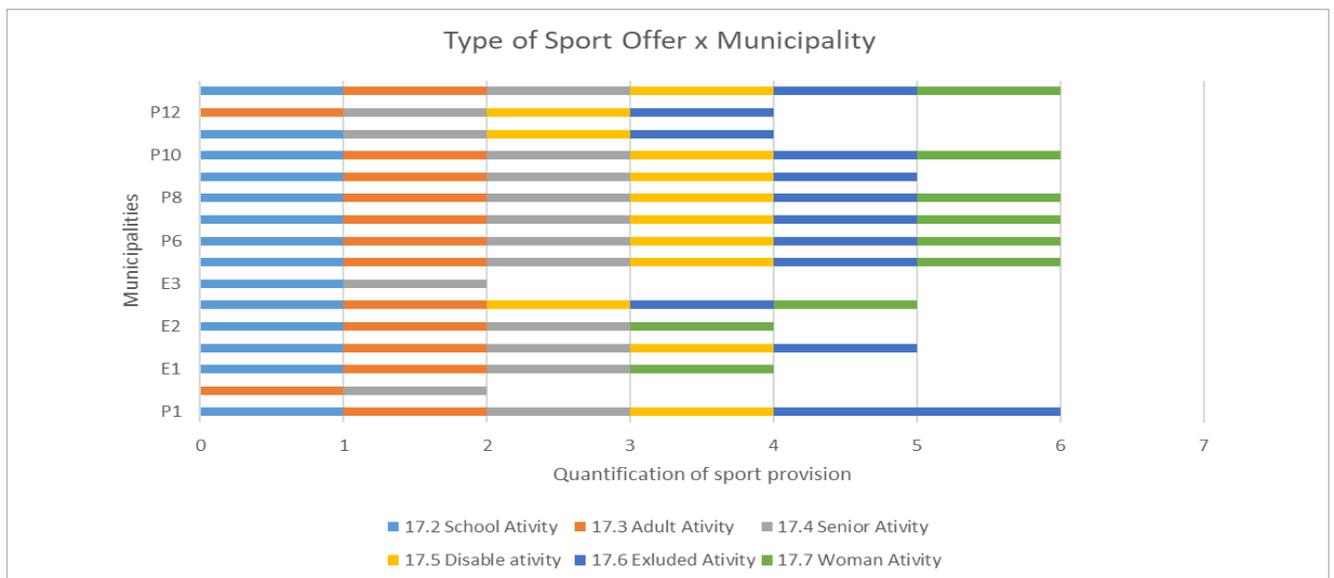


Figure 2. Type of sport offer by each town per country.

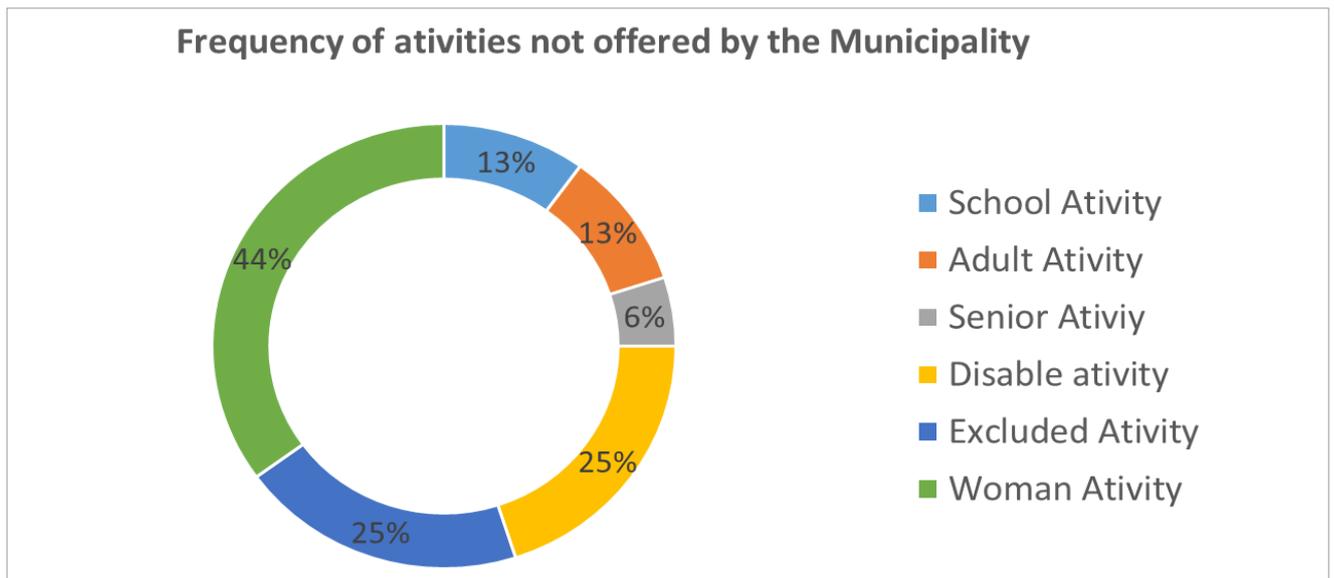


Figure 3. Frequency of activities not offered by the Municipalities.

Moreover, educational systems further entrench these disparities by perpetuating gender norms. Hardin and Shain (2006) argued that differences in educational opportunities and resources available to male and female athletes limit women's ability to develop their intellectual and organisational capacities. These limitations, in turn, hinder women's potential to excel in the sports field, reinforcing the perception of sports as a domain unsuitable for women.

Considering these findings, it is imperative to foster values such as inclusion (e.g., providing real possibilities for physical activity and sport for all, including individuals with different skill levels, morphologies, ethnicities, and disabilities) and co-education (e.g., promoting gender equality) to guide sports practices. Promoting these values can help challenge prevailing stereotypes and create an environment where women feel encouraged to participate in sports. Additionally, future research should focus on deepening our understanding of the barriers women face in sports. This includes planning research initiatives to develop knowledge and strategies that aim to dismantle these systemic obstacles, ultimately ensuring equitable access to sports for women and girls.

Practical sustainable implications

The findings of the present study had significant implications for the development and management of municipal sports policies, particularly in their alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). Strategically allocating resources and designing inclusive sports programs can contribute to achieving key SDGs by addressing health disparities, promoting gender equality, and fostering inclusive communities.

Expanding sports programs that target underrepresented groups, such as women, youth, and vulnerable populations, can reduce the prevalence of non-communicable diseases and improve mental health outcomes. Moreover, aligning municipal sports policies with these global sustainability goals enhances their social impact and demonstrates how local governments can contribute to broader societal goals. Successful examples, such as inclusive sports programs implemented in several European cities, illustrate the potential of sports as a transformative tool for achieving sustainable development. Such initiatives foster community well-being and position municipalities as pivotal agents in advancing the SDGs through targeted and equitable investments in sports.

However, a major limitation of the present study should be addressed, particularly the reduced number of municipalities that participated. This research topic requires the proper attention of all stakeholders, as the gap between what municipalities currently have in place and what they need to efficiently deliver programs and services is still growing.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the role of public sports policies in the cities of the Atlantic Axis of Peninsular Iberian Northwest, focusing on organisation, funding, infrastructure, and program offerings. The findings revealed that Spain invested more money in sport and their residents' participation than the cities of Portugal. However, the municipalities of Portugal had more sports facilities and activities available to their population. Despite growing efforts to utilise sports as a tool for social and economic development, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access, efficient management, and the implementation of impactful policies. Moreover, to address the low financial investment challenges, municipalities should develop standardised indicators to evaluate the impact of sports policies, emphasising inclusivity and alignment with the SDGs.

Finally, fostering dialogue and knowledge exchange between municipalities (both within and beyond the region) can facilitate the adoption of innovative strategies and successful practices. Strengthening research collaborations with universities and research centres will provide evidence-based insights for continuous improvement of social, cultural, and sports policies. There is a need to understand the levels of development of each municipality to ensure that all can successfully deliver the activities and that they answer the citizens' needs.

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