

**THE MANY CULTURAL MEANINGS OF SPORT FOR ALL**  
**Introducing the new book "Worldwide Experience and Trends in Sport for All"**

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When Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the Olympic Movement of the Modern Era, coined and used the expression Sport for All (SFA) for the first time in 1919, he meant sport for everybody and considered it explicitly a utopia. However, it is possible to admit that along the years, since that occasion, sports have become part of the daily lives of millions of individuals. Sports are played everywhere in the five continents, wherever there are human beings (sport is a representational and cultural practice that has grown together with social development). Sports are played in big cities, small cities and the countryside, by the talented and the non-talented, by men and women, by children of all ages, by the elderly, by the handicapped, by prisoners, by refugees, by immigrants, by the employed and the unemployed, by people of all colors and religions.

According to the new SFA book, one in every six inhabitants of the population of the planet does some kind of physical activity or sport. Therefore, sports have almost become an international currency, accepted by everybody everywhere. This estimate is supported by the contributions to the SFA book, which had 87 authors putting together 36 countries for a comparative study made by the editors.

In terms of intervention by professionals and institutions, SFA has initially assumed the meaning of democratization of sport in international perspective since 1975, when the Charter of Sport for All - Council of Europe was published. Previously, in 1971, the FIEP Manifest as referred to 80 countries emphasized the role of SFA in Physical Education. Pierre Seurin, FIEP's president at that time, reported the fact in his famous book "Fundamental Problems of Physical Education and Sport" (1979, p.50). Unsurprisingly, this support has become a tradition as it may be seen in the recent issued FIEP World Manifest of Physical Education - 2000, which includes "Sport for All" in its chapter 10.

Despite this historical involvement of leading international bodies, SFA has been progressing with loose definitions mainly used to classify initiatives that offer access and opportunity of physical activities for people without motivation, awareness and means to participate in them. However, today's conception of SFA according to the comparative research found in the aforementioned book is related primarily to sport, games, and physical exercise practiced as social development tools for the benefit of its participants and of society as a whole.

Since the 1970s, SFA has also been promoted by specialized international associations, namely Trim and Fitness International Sport for All Association (TAFISA) and the Fédération Internationale du Sport pour Tous (FISpT), in order to maintain the original drive of SFA movement throughout the world. Besides the Council of Europe and FIEP, it is also important to mention the involvement of other non-specialized international organizations in SFA developments as attending broader aims of sport, health, education and culture, such as UNESCO, WHO, IOC, ICSSPE and CSIT.

Still focusing on the SFA book, campaigns to motivate and encourage participation of the general public have existed in several countries for some time. However, mass campaigns that work for a nation do not necessarily work for another especially because of a delicate and crucial role played by cultural elements. They are the keys for any project to function. It is very difficult for a mass campaign to be transplanted to another culture if no adaptations and changes are tailored-made for that specific scenario, respecting the cultural environment and cultural beliefs of the people involved. The emphasis of SFA is on cooperation, creativity and challenge, enjoyment, self-expression, individual difference rather than competition.

From the government point of view, the experience surveyed in SFA means the involvement of great numbers of the population in sport, community recreation, fitness, outdoor recreation, and other physical activities to increase and enhance lifelong participation, to realize the social health and economic benefits of participation, and to develop quality infrastructure, opportunities and services to support participation. To any government this means to set up a structure of public services through some government sports authority, local authorities, community centers, institutes of higher learning, nature organizations, and private clubs that create a fair supply of structures and programs which should lead to a steady growth of a variety of physical activities.

Other findings suggested that social characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, race, income, and wealth, which have always determined access and opportunity in the various social spheres, should not hinder access of potential

players to a comprehensive range of participation opportunities. On the contrary, they should all be inclusive and enable participants to fulfill their capabilities and realize their physical, social, mental, and spiritual benefits regardless of socio-economic status, race, age or gender, ability and geographical location. The requirements for anyone to have the benefits of SFA tend to be the following: lifelong participation, enjoyment, diversity and choice of participation, continual improvement in the delivery of programs. Since participation also contributes to the health and general well being of the community, participants are encouraged to engage in 30 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week.

It is then possible to observe four great challenges in the last 30 years covered by the SFA book: (1) to convince sedentary people that being physically active will not only bring pleasure and enjoyment to their lives but also make them feel fitter and healthier; (2) to encourage people to introduce themselves to sports, which they have never tried before, with the hope that this involvement or exposure might lead them to continuing participation, reducing social and psychological barriers; (3) to integrate sport, recreation, and health strategies, and (4) to assist the disadvantaged in gaining access to sport facilities and to help them finance their ongoing involvement.

We would rather say, joining the authors from the book, that Sport for All " is an umbrella term for recreation, sport development, mass participation programs and cultural recreation activities aiming to provide leisure opportunities and health promotion to their adherents" (Goslin & Bush, 2002). Today SFA refers to any kind of sport practiced without the pressures of top sport, which is usually represented by athletes dealing with measured performances and accepted rules. It is a new conception that goes back to the old tradition of facilitating the access of people to games and physical activities. It has been a response to the crying need not only for more opportunities of leisure but also for the creation of means to promote health. It is exactly in the area of health promotion that lies the core meaning of SFA today, ratified by the contributions of the five continents included in the 800-page volume of the "Worldwide Experiences and Trends in Sport for All" first edition.

Taking the reports and analysis of the book, it is possible to observe very clearly the continuous expansion of SFA at local, regional and national levels. Geography and the location of the different areas of the many countries that participated in this comparative study played a crucial role in determining the directions of recreational activities and sports. From the Australian Beach culture to the war situation in Mozambique, it is possible to find diverse recreational activities that bring satisfaction and pleasure to participants. SFA is becoming a visible

means of promotion favoring traditional sports and games, practiced locally, as opposed to top sport, which presupposes limitations and difficult access of the population as a whole.

The expression Sport for All (SFA) has been frequently used to designate a collection of different activities, but its essence is still being experienced and developed all around the world. If we focus on selected countries as a means of approaching the book highlights, Australia is the first appropriate choice. In this nation, sports have always existed, provided for diversity, accessibility and informality as well as competition and elite performance, **building on a SFA culture**. It has created a multi-dimension sporting framework that provides an enormous variety of physical activity experiences. Some of these experiences require a degree of preparation and expensive equipment, but others need few resources and little planning, and provide for all types of people and abilities. People can also play at their own level, either competitively or socially. The activity can be structured and team-centered, or unorganized or solitary. It may be physically demanding, or alternatively low impact and gentle. Elite sport is just one of a number of active recreational possibilities. SFA embraces all these different possibilities by focusing on physical activity in all its forms.

SFA in Malaysia wants to involve the whole population in sports, leisure and recreational activities. It aims at SFA **in cultural diversity**: raising the national fitness in order to increase economic growth, improving the quality of life and decrease social ills, and this way fostering national unity among the different races that populate the country.

The idea called 'lifelong sport' was proposed by the Japanese government to encourage people to adopt exercise and sport activities, and generally to enhance a healthy lifestyle. SFA **in lifelong perspectives of health and fitness** took into consideration the Japanese culture and lifestyle of the people who practice self-discipline and process-orientation, encouraging every person, no matter what their age or level of physical ability, to enjoy participating in sport and physical activities throughout their life. A variety of phrases for promoting sports for the general population have been used such as: trim, lifetime physical education, lifelong sports, community physical education, health and fitness, physical recreation and so on.

In Israel, because the people have always placed intellectual activity first, SFA has come up **as history, culture and society** once its objectives are (i) to increase the standard level of public awareness of the need for physical activity by showing the problems caused by lack of activity; (ii) to raise the rate of activity by

promoting an increase in physical activity during leisure time, and (iii) to encourage the improvement of individual physical fitness levels.

In Korea, **the various roles of SFA in society** reflect the characteristics of the Korean people. Perhaps the first main role that SFA played in Korea was to help the Korean people gain the independence from Japan. Other aims of SFA could be to promote the health of the population, aid them to gain or lose weight, make it easier for them to achieve personal satisfaction, manage their stress, develop their social skills and make friends. Determining the most important aim depends upon the social and cultural characteristics of the individuals and groups of individuals of that cultural group. The level of participation is influenced by the social and cultural factors as well. In other words, the social and cultural circumstances have influences on the aim of Sport for All, the participation level, the choice of events and the participation frequency. The ratio of average working hours to spare time has a major influence on the level of participation and the disposable income of an individual has a big influence on the choice of events. The impact of SFA on the people and on society is closely related to the social and cultural environment. In other words, SFA itself cannot change either the society or the people.

People's Republic of China, as one of the most ancient civilized countries, has a long and glorious sport history. Its various folk sports are well known, and have become most popular "sports for all" among the Chinese people if a current western conception of sporting and leisure activities is taken primarily here. The development of SFA in China is presupposed and determined by people's social needs and aspirations. It started out as **folk sport**, and then it became **mass sport**, controlled by administrative decree and by the government. After that it evolved into SFA, which might mean social inclusion. The objectives to develop sport in China were to improve people's health and strengthen the whole nation: people were called on to develop physical education and sport in order to promote their health.

Besides placing great emphasis on developing elite sports with a view to pursue excellency and athletes' own and national glory in the international sports competitions, **the Olympic Movement** in Taiwan has been playing its most important role **as a support to** SFA helping to promote people's good health and physical fitness. The Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee (CTOP) has been placing equal emphasis on Sport for All in its role as a National Olympic Committee (NOC). The general objectives of the Committee are to promote Sport for All, to develop the Olympic spirit, and to strengthen the friendly relationship between this Committee and the International Olympic Committee as well as sport organizations both at home and abroad.

In Singapore, the meaning of SFA is concentrated on the promotion of healthy, vigorous exercise for the whole population. Based on this directive, the Singapore Sports Council (SSC) formulated the SFA policy, to provide ample opportunities for Singaporeans to participate actively in both recreational and competitive sports and physical activities. The policy can be best represented by the pyramid model, which aims to produce a broad base of people participating in sports of their own choice for the purpose of enjoyment, exercise and health. From this base, those with talent are encouraged to commit themselves to higher levels of competition and achievement. Its main objective is to promote greater and more regular participation in sports and physical activities among Singaporeans, particularly senior citizens, housewives and working adults. Singapore is marching **towards a sporting nation** with SFA.

Since 1994, cultural differences, ethnic uniqueness and cultural pride have been key performance indicators of all social initiatives. The cultural fabric of South Africa is very complex, as it is a rainbow conglomeration of eleven official languages and a plethora of cultures. All cultural groups have traditional games and tribal dances as part of their unique cultural heritage. Within so much diversity and within an atmosphere of democratic respect for the various sporting activities, SFA has now been playing the crucial role **as getting the nation to play**.

Due to the cultural and linguistic diversity in Mozambique, and in spite of the scarcity of resources, it is possible to observe that there is a wide range of traditional sports and games. As spontaneous and popular practices, such cultural identity manifestations are visible in all the nation's regions, on any occasion, and are practiced by anyone, including children in their daily routine. There are also specific games from certain regions linked to traditional and religious rituals, and restricted to certain ethnic groups, or still restricted to the gender of the participants. In spite of some encouraging results of recent years, SFA is far from being considered a stable social accomplishment in Mozambique. Actually, SFA has been on trial in this country **under poverty and war conditions** prevailing in the last three decades.

SFA went **from a way of life to a matter of choice** in Bulgaria's recent history. The country saw changes, from general calls for mass participation to sport as a means of enhancing fitness, based on the initiative of each citizen. Despite the primacy of quantitative concerns most of the programs had sound research grounding and the results achieved were very informative for Sport for All's development. These unfortunately did not have a great bearing on the decision making process because of the utilitarian justification of sport policy. It saw sport chiefly as a contributor to health, enhancing work productivity and the defense capability of the state, and left

beyond serious consideration issues concerning the quality of participation - duration, intensity, frequency and settings.

SFA in Poland is addressed to all target groups across the lifecycle. It is considered **as physical culture and social value**. The fundamental strategic aim of physical culture is to arrest the negative tendencies in the biological development of children and the youth, to prevent civilization diseases that have a direct connection with insufficient physical activity, and to arrest the decrease in physical fitness and stamina in the regions and groups most at risk. Therefore, the strategic plan provides for the action to create the social awareness that physical activity is the main element of a healthy lifestyle, assigning social value to the practice of sporting activities.

The primary objective of any SFA program is to get as many people as possible involved in physical activities. Most people who take up a sport activity have embraced a SFA philosophy. That is, they have made their experiences casual, unstructured, and by implication often low cost and inclusive. This increasing preference for small scale, informal, uncompetitive, time compressed activities is the result of two factors. The first factor is the changing lifestyles of many people. SFA model focuses on community participation, casual and informal engagement in sport, and a preference for those activities that do not require extensive preparation or costly infrastructure. The second factor is clearly the impact of the whole SFA message, which seductively tells us that physical activity in our daily lives is not only fun, but it is good for our psychological and physical health.

Overall, the interpretations of Pierre Seurin on SFA claims and directions are still valid today coherently with FIEP updated principles and recommendations. After all, in his 1979 book (page 45) he paraphrased the French philosopher Bergson when suggesting that trends must be more taken into account than state of affairs.

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