

National Physical Activity Policies: A (New) Role for Sport?

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Abstract

The World Health Organization has identified that obesity levels have risen three-fold or more since 1980 in some population groups of North America, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, the Pacific Islands, Australasia and China. The WHO also estimates that one billion people worldwide are overweight and more than 300 million people are considered clinically obese. The momentum and increasing globalisation of the overweight and obesity epidemic have resulted in many national governments focussing their attention and resources on increasing physical activity among their citizens as a way of combating this problem.

This paper examines a range of national physical activity policies in North America, Europe and Australasia, in order to determine the role of sport organisations within physical activity policy communities; to identify the range of policy instruments national governments have employed to tackle inadequate levels of physical activity; the impact physical activity policies have on the sport sector and on sport organisations; and how the sport sector and sport organisations influence the implementation of national physical activity policies and programs.

The research revealed that the role of sport within national physical activity policy communities was not universal. Rather, the role of sport can be considered as part of a continuum where at one end nations in which the ministry of health is almost exclusively responsible for the development of physical activity policies and the sport ministry and sport sector has very little or no influence in the policy community; while at the other nations ascribe their respective sport ministry with responsibility for the development of physical activity policies, in conjunction or consultation with the ministry of health and related health agencies. Not surprisingly, in those nations in which the sport ministry and sector have greater influence and responsibility, physical activity policies are skewed towards organised sport and towards elite sport.

The research also revealed that national governments use a common set of policy instruments, such as physical activity guidelines, but that there is significant variation between nations. The paper concludes that there is little agreement between nations regarding physical activity policy best practice, nor is there a collective agreement regarding the implementation of policy, nor the role of sport within broader attempts to increase physical activity levels. It is becoming increasingly clear that national physical activity policies have the potential to significantly impact sport and sport organisations. Importantly, the sport sector is being viewed within many national contexts as one arm of a whole-of-government approach to tackling physical inactivity, in which traditional priorities and outcomes (such as elite sport success) might become obsolete. Finally, the research postulates that the sport sector and sport

organisations are likely to become increasingly marginalised within national physical activity policies unless sport organisations can be conceptualised as environments in which the provision of physical activity opportunities is the primary goal. Furthermore, the severity of the overweight and obesity problem, particularly within developed nations, might mean that health and related sectors have increasingly more influence in the development of national sport policies.