South African Journal for Research in Sport, Physical Education and Recreation, 2022, 44(2): 53-62.
ISBN: 0379-9069

THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING IN PURSUIT OF IMPROVED EMPLOYABILITY IN THE SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT SECTOR: A CASE STUDY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Kgomotlokwa B. MXEKEZO-LALLIE and Cora BURNETT
Department of Sport and Movement Studies, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, Rep. of South Africa

ABSTRACT

Volunteers are integral to the delivery of sport at a community level and the main implementers of many sport for development (SfD) programmes. However, research into this phenomenon in the global south is lacking. This exploratory study investigated the value of volunteering in pursuit of improved employability in the SfD sector through a case study analysis. Participants were traced from 67 ex-volunteers who had volunteered at an SfD organisation delivering programmes in impoverished communities in South Africa, Namibia and Zambia between 2012 and 2020. Thirty-eight were recruited for the study – 23 from South Africa, 10 from Namibia and 5 from Zambia, and they completed a questionnaire as part of sequential multi-method approach. Twelve ex-volunteers, three in-country managers and two managers from the organisation's head office were interviewed. The volunteering experience was found to have contributed to a 65% employment rate and a high level of perceived employability, and met expectations of personal development, networking, active citizenship and social validation. It is against the reality of youth unemployment and the quest for survival that the role of volunteering found special meaning as a pathway to socio-economic empowerment and delivered on the aspirations and outcomes of volunteering in an SfD organisation.

Keywords: Volunteering; Sport for development; Employment; Employability; Sub-Saharan Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that volunteering in the sport sector is a significant cost-saving factor and cornerstone for community or club-level sports (Welty Peachey *et al.*, 2014). Contrary to institutionalised sport, the sport for development (SfD) sector predominantly focuses on service provision to vulnerable populations and is highly reliant on a volunteer "workforce" (Schulenkorf, 2016). In extreme and chronic poverty contexts, volunteering by unemployed youth is a mechanism for survival, as it is standard practice to earn a stipend, gain access to resources for personal development, and render services to local communities (Welty Peachey *et al.*, 2013). Volunteering provides opportunities for meaningful social learning (Hallmann *et al.*, 2020), ways to deal with diversity, and the forging relationships of trust while experiencing a sense of belonging (Ng & Salmikangas, 2019).

In contexts where volunteering brings no monetary reward, it provides meaningful leisure and opportunities for learning (Cantillon & Baker, 2020). From grassroots to higher levels, the competitive sport sector is highly dependent on voluntary services, and in some cases may lead to career-related pathways within the sector (Van Der Veken *et al.*, 2020; Wallrodt & Thieme, 2020). A similar scenario is observed where international volunteers deliver services in developing contexts (Darnell, 2011), but the reverse is true for local volunteers in the SfD sector where the volunteers are often desperate to earn some income (Jones *et al.*, 2018; Van der Klashorst, 2018). In southern Africa, volunteering is remunerated, and "volunteers" receive a modest stipend (mostly a minimum wage) to cover the costs of their personal needs and, in some cases, their transport costs to implement the programme at local schools or in local communities. In the latter instance, such volunteers harbour expectations of becoming more employable within sport or other sectors (Van der Veken *et al.*, 2020).

In South Africa, such volunteers are often youth searching for opportunities for learning and growth while being dedicated to serving local communities where they are validated for their "work" (Burnett, 2010; Burnett, 2011). In this context, volunteering provides the catalyst for social change and active citizenship by focusing on the reciprocal benefits for communities and for volunteers as beneficiaries themselves. Such individuals mostly display high levels of civic mindedness underpinned by an ethos of care. However, earning a living wage and gaining entry into the world of work may be an unfulfilled aspiration, as SfD organisations are often highly vulnerable and dependent on external funding (Burnett, 2011). High levels of South African youth unemployment of up to 63.3% (Statistics SA, 2018) reflect the reality of daily challenges and adversaries the youth face – especially in the COVID-19 era (Burnett, 2014; Donnelly *et al.*, 2021).

Literature review

Literature reports that in-service training and mentorship provide students with cognitive gains and moral development, leadership skills, teamwork, time management, and improvement in self-confidence. These factors are transferable to various life settings (Moore *et al.*, 2014). Volunteering presents an in-service training scenario in which social learning (Bandura, 1989; Bandura, 2008) and formative socialisation occur (Ng & Salmikangas, 2019). A primary construct that fits with the social learning of volunteers is acquiring knowledge through training (Ng & Salmikangas, 2019). Institutional change is often guided by a theory of change (Coalter, 2019). Training of the volunteers provides the input that enables delivery of activities to target groups (outputs) that lead to organisational outcomes and have a longer-term impact at the community level. However, volunteers (peer leaders) themselves constitute a critical output of the SfD process, leading to crucial individual outcomes and effects that result in the effectiveness of organisational programme delivery (Coalter, 2019).

Insights emanating from the theory of change and social learning postulate a pathway of progress towards increased employability by acquiring skills and experiences that may prepare volunteers for the world of work (Piopiunik *et al.*, 2020). Competencies associated with enhanced employability relate to attitude (e.g., being enthusiastic, motivated and goal-oriented) and exemplary conduct. The multi-dimensional benefits of programmes show causality to the envisaged educational and social outcomes (Edwards & Rowe, 2019). The benefits also relate to personal health, well-being and inclusion (Brown *et al.*, 2016). These outcomes present a complex picture, as contextual realities play a significant role in programme effects to

materialise as tangible results (Burnett, 2009). This study was informed by such insights, although there is little local literature reflecting on the benefits of volunteering in the context of poverty and how these outcomes relate to perceptions and outcomes of becoming employable (Cnaan *et al.*, 1996; Clohesy, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

Since 2012, a population of volunteers (N=67) had volunteered at an SfD organisation with branches in South Africa, Namibia and Zambia. Participants entered volunteering with the expectation of earning some income or to enhance their level of employability. Most only completed high school (Grade 12) as their highest qualification. Of the 67 volunteers, 43 were traced of whom 38 (88.4% of the number traced) agreed to participate in the study and met the criteria as volunteers. In addition, three country-level managers and two senior managers from the head office were interviewed. The focus was to obtain insights and opinions from them regarding the volunteering process and possible outcomes related to employability and employment. The interview questions were adapted to reflect the experience of the interviewees as ex-volunteers and/or as managers overseeing volunteers and facilitating their process.

The following inclusion criteria were used to select a cohort of ex-volunteers:

(1) Four ex-volunteers were interviewed per country to capture the experiences, insights and opinions from this cohort from different implementing countries.

(2) An equal number of men and women were selected per country (gender).

(3) An equal number of ex-volunteers per country were selected, including those who found employment within the SfD sector and another sector.

(4) Age differentiation with age ranging from 18 years up to two older individuals over 35 years who fell outside the "youth" category. Most (n=36; 94.7%) of the ex-volunteers fell in the category of "youth" and were between 18 and 35 years old (Table 1).

Table 1. **AGE CATEGORIES OF RESPONDENTS WHO COMPLETED THE ONLINE SURVEY**

Age group (years)	Female	Male	*n*
18–20	2	-	2
21–25	7	4	11
26–30	8	6	14
31–35	4	5	9
42–48	-	2	3
Total	21	17	38

A mixed method approach was used, entailing thematic document analysis, questionnaires (completed by 38 respondents) and 27 interviews (5 managers and 12 volunteers, of whom 6 were men and 6 were women). The methods articulated the provision of quantitative and qualitative data integration (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017). The research design was sequential and displayed the following phases:

Phase one – All the ex-volunteers (who were older than 18 years, with 25 falling in the age range of 21 to 30 years) recruited for the study had volunteered with the organisation in South Africa, Namibia and Zambia (see Table 1).

Phase two – All the research participants gave written informed consent, and 38 completed the questionnaire. In addition, 12 volunteers and 5 managers were interviewed using similar interview questions, to capture experiences and perceptions relating to employability and employment. The interviews took place in person pre-COVID restrictions and telephonically or via Zoom during COVID restrictions or to save costs.

Phase three – Follow-up discussions took place for further exploration or clarification on the emerging themes for all research-participant cohorts.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics refers to frequencies and generated comparative data. Narrative data obtained through interviews were analysed and coded in several steps. Firstly, interviews were described verbatim, followed by line-by-line coding to identify the smallest semantic units of cause-and-effect relations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Piopiunik *et al.*, 2020). During the next round, an axial coding strategy was used to develop subthemes. Various semantic categories were created by linking and integrating semantic units of sentences and/or statements.

Trustworthiness

The study received and organised data from various research participants from impoverished communities in South Africa, Zambia and Namibia. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and material analysis were used to obtain data from volunteers. Various methods were used as described in the data analysis section to contribute to the validity of data. In addition to the various methods, the supervisor assisted with the first few interviews to establish a standardisation of the protocols, procedures and approach of the face-to-face interviews. This contributed to data triangulation using multiple sources of information (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Denzin, 1970).

RESULTS

Themes and subthemes that emerged from the data related to the topic and referred to: (1) active citizenship in terms of delivering services to the community; (2) socio-economic issues related to the earning a stipend; and (3) employability status related to the acquisition of knowledge, skills and networking.

Most volunteers (56%) volunteered to improve their current quality of life and find the status conferred to volunteers within the local communities. The volunteers also acted as role models and found a high level of social acceptance and recognition. An ex-volunteer said:

> *My experience has been that school drop-outs were not only helped by the programmes organisations like this ran but also grew up to be volunteers in the community. This gave me a sense of satisfaction because now the young people are getting involved in things that help them and others. Others also saw this as an opportunity to reflect on their choices and went back to school. When you help others you really feel that sense of achievement in your life; it may not be money that you give out but new skills, an ear to listen, and to help someone think differently.*

The family background of the research participants differed and displayed various degrees of vulnerability. Some were from child-headed households, and some were from a single parent (typically a mother) household dependent on social grants. Others had mothers who earned low wages as domestic workers, whereas their fathers worked on farms. Volunteering becoming a way to earn a stipend and contributing to the meagre household income was indicated by 85% of respondents. An ex-volunteer said the stipend helped him to survive and afford basic things. He received a tracksuit, t-shirt and shoes, which enabled him to save some money to send home regularly.

One manager concurred and said some volunteers saved some money and could mitigate risks as they "work for the home" in supporting the household – particularly elderly family members. This manager said that he had to call families to explain that a particular coach or peer-educator was only a volunteer and that the family is expected to provide financial support. Socio-economic stability was the main aspiration for all. Volunteering was viewed as an important step towards employment. A research participant said:

> *I had always wanted a career in sport as I grew up playing sport and helping around at school. The sport volunteer programme became a game changer for me. It opened a new door, exposed me to the real work world, and gave me a different understanding of how I can build my career in sport. This opportunity also meant that I had relevant, work-related experience. Some skills that I learned on this journey were related to teamwork – at the level required by the organisation, and to improve my critical thinking skills.*

Of the 38 respondents, only 10 (26.3%) could continue with their studies as 12 did not obtain a grade that allowed them entry into further education and training, and 7 indicated they did not have funding to continue with post-school studies. These individuals were keen to follow a pathway of continued training as coaches and complete accredited sports coaching courses. The organisation provided both training and an exit strategy for the young people to enable them to find employment. Volunteers experienced an insider's understanding of the professional work environment, as explained by a manager:

> *The volunteer programme is very structured and gives one that taste and experience of being professional. There are professional skills that I got to know, such as keeping time, dressing appropriately, understanding local protocols when dealing with stakeholders, and reporting on my activities. Those are some of the things I got from when I started as a volunteer.*

From this narrative, it was clear that the volunteers were shaped by the creation of a working environment where they could develop professional attitudes and competencies. The volunteers followed a structured programme of service delivery and were exposed to principles and practices of good governance. The success or throughput rates to differential levels of employability that translate into employment appear in Figure 1.

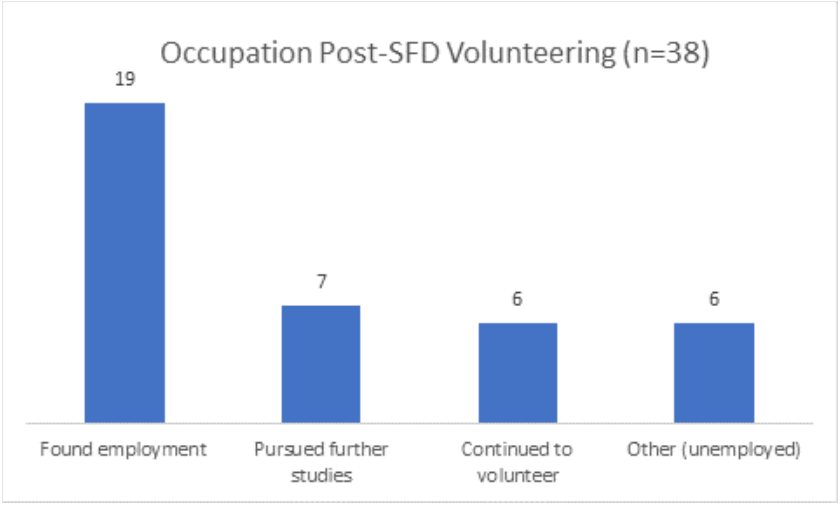

Figure 1. **POST-VOLUNTEER PROFILES RELATING TO EMPLOYMENT**

The post-volunteer employment rate of 65% exceeded the national average of 63% by 2% in the year of data collection. In addition, 7 pursued further studies, bringing the total of a successful outcome to 26 (68.4%) (some are still in the process of volunteering). Only 6 (15.7%) reported being unemployed.

Research participants identified teamwork and relationship building with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds as meaningful. In addition, 36.8% of research participants reported that they gained knowledge on how to maintain relationships with stakeholders and their participants. They benefited from volunteering by contributing to community development – by building a more cohesive, safer, and stronger community and increasing social networking between various sectors within and between communities.

DISCUSSION

The main results of this study support the premises of various social learning theories. Authentic learning took place and transferred to various spheres associated with the experiences of volunteers. The comprehensive gain in knowledge combined formal training and non-formal learning related to delivering programmes at schools, organising events, managerial tasks, and community consultation.

The manifestations associated with volunteerism are possibly unique in impoverished local communities where volunteering is status conferring and of key importance in life transitions from youth to adulthood. Volunteer coaches receive respect as role models and gain access to income, which is a step towards self-reliance. However, the stipend may contribute in many ways to self-preservation and household survival.

Multiple levels of learning take place. For the volunteer, the learning and experience may relate to improving their employability status. In turn, they act as instructors and significant others to the participants (Haan *et al.*, 2020). The coach–participant relationship transcends mere learning, and in this case, the coaches (as volunteers) may influence participants by acting as meaningful role models (Holt *et al.*, 2020). In the latter case, being from a particular community provides the context of authentic learning, feedback and knowledge transfer. Adult role models and significant others are important in the socialisation into sport and through sport participation (Bailey *et al.*, 2015). The process of learning relates to the transfer and application of knowledge and skills in other social spheres (Jacobs & Wright, 2018).

In impoverished communities and settings with high unemployment, claims of organisations that they can improve the employment status of their volunteers are questionable, as job-creation is out of their control (Schulenkorf, 2016). The delivery of programmes and multiple contextual factors may derail the aspirations and outcomes of programmes and programme effects in placements or access to stable or formal employment.

Understanding and implementing programme theory informed by the theory of change and the theory of action is important in programme design and delivery (Chen, 2018). However, improved employability may not lead to employment (Coalter, 2013). Many ex-volunteers count themselves fortunate to access contractual jobs or low-paid self-employment (Burnett, 2009). The understanding of "employment" is thus very broad and contextual. However, there is a belief in communities that volunteering is a gateway to employment. The following continuum illustrates a belief system of relative helplessness in avoiding the poverty trap and offering a way "out of the streets" (Figure 2).

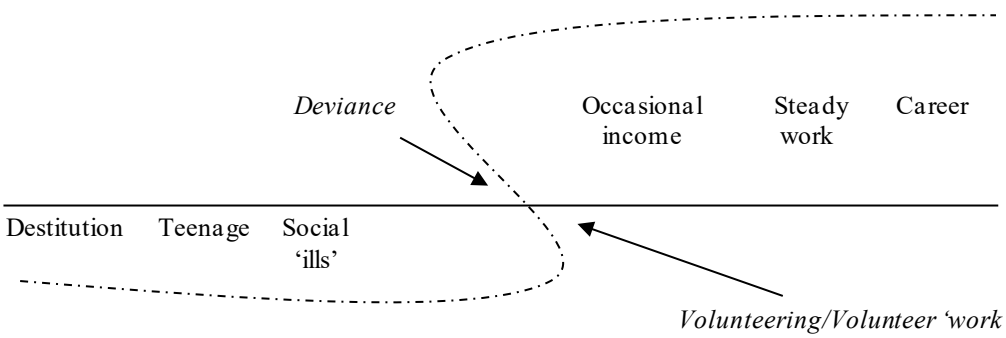

Figure 2. **THE PERCEIVED ROLE OF VOLUNTEERING ON A PATHWAY TO EMPLOYMENT (BURNETT, 2009: 1199).**

The literature on youth and civic participation suggests that significant benefits are likely to flow from involving young people in volunteering and community service programmes. The literature also reports on how volunteering contributes to young people's improved employability status, network building (gaining social capital through building relationships of

trust) and promotion of active citizenship (Kay & Bradbury, 2009). It is assumed that young volunteers will demonstrate this ethos of care (active citizenship) throughout their lives, and so continue to contribute meaningfully to their communities and society.

A theory of change encapsulates the process – from inputs to outputs, outcomes, and the broader community level impact over time. The theory also refers to the central mechanisms by which change comes about for individuals, groups and communities. The theory of action emphasises the importance of the context for programme implementation being appropriate and that an intervention is meaningfully constructed and facilitated for the theory of change to work (Chen, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study provided an in-depth understanding of volunteers' motivations and ambitions when setting out on a pathway to employment within and through the SfD sector. The context of poverty played a significant role among some volunteers when making choices. This research identified the main factors that influence active participation. The factors present as a continuum, with volunteering providing transitional steps, a pivotal influence and an identity marker when entering into employment.

The study contributed to the body of knowledge that improves meaningful practices in impoverished communities by acknowledging the impact of poverty and volunteers in the SfD sector and focusing on reducing youth unemployment. In a small but significant way, these youths contribute as programme implementers to key development discourses meaningful to themselves and other development participants (Swinburn *et al.*, 2019). The reciprocal benefits at a grassroots level are most significant for individuals (beneficiaries) and for the organisations that have to balance the roles of employers and training institutions.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

REFERENCES

BAILEY, T.; JAGGERS, D. & JENKIND, S. (2015). *Redesigning America's community colleges: A clearer path to student success*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

BANDURA, A. (1989). Human agency in social cognitive theory. *American Psychologist*, 44(9):1175-1184. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.44.9.1175

BANDURA, A. (2008). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. In J. Bryant & M.B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 110-140). Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.

BROWN, W.J.; MIELKE, G.I. & KOLBE-ALEXANDER, T.L. (2016). Gender equality in sport for improved public health. *The Lancet*, 388(10051): 1257-1258. doi: 10.1016/s0140-6736(16)30881-9

BURNETT, C. (2009). Engaging sport-for-development for social impact in the South African context. *Sport in Society*, 12(9): 1192-1205. doi: 10.1080/17430430903137852

BURNETT, C. (2010). Sport-for-development approaches in the South African context: A case study analysis. *South African Journal for Research in Sport, Physical Education & Recreation*, 32(1): 29-42.

BURNETT, C. (2011). Local agency as a strategic imperative in sport for development: Sport for development. *African Journal for Physical Health Education, Recreation & Dance*, 17(Special issue 2): 917-926.

BURNETT, C. (2014). A critical reflection discourse. south african journal for research in sport. *Physical Education & Recreation*, 36(3): 11-24.

CANTILLON, Z. & BAKER, S. (2020). Serious leisure and the DIY approach to heritage: considering the costs of career volunteering in community archives and museums. *Leisure Studies*, 39(2):266-279. doi: 10.1080/02614367.2019.1694571

CHEN, S. (2018). Strengthening the global framework for leveraging sport for development and peace. In *Background Paper University of Birmingham*. pp. 13-14. https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2018/06/7.pdf

CLOHESY, S.J. (2000). *E-philanthropy, volunteerism, and social changemaking: A new landscape of resources, issues, and opportunities*. Pretoria: WK Kellogg Foundation.

CNAAN, R.A.; HANDY, F. & WADSWORTH, M. (1996). Defining who is a volunteer: Conceptual and empirical considerations. *Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 25(3): 364-383. Doi: 10.1177/08997640962530

COALTER, F. (2013). *Sport for development: What game are we playing?* Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.

COALTER, F. (2019). *Continuum thinking on sport in relation to development.* Personal correspondence email received on 14 March 2019.

CRESWELL, J.W. & CRESWELL, J.D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. London: Sage.

DARNELL, S.C. (2011). Identity and learning in international volunteerism: 'Sport for Development and Peace' internships. *Development in Practice*, 21(7): 974-986. doi: 10.1080/09614524.2011.590885

DENZIN, N. (1970). Strategies of multiple triangulation. *The research act in sociology: A theoretical introduction to sociological method*, 297(1970): 313.

DONNELY, P.; DARNELL, S.; KIDD, B. & ARMSTRONG, M. (2021). *Policy analysis tool for community sport and sport for development in response to COVID-19*. London: Commonwealth Secretariat.

EDWARDS, M.B. & ROWE, K. (2019). Managing sport for health: An introduction to the special issue. *Sport Management Review*, 22(1): 1-4. doi: 10.1016/j.smr.2018.12.006

HAAN, E.; MOLYN, J. & NILSSON, V.O. (2020). New findings on the effectiveness of the coaching relationship: Time to think differently about active ingredients? *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice & Research*, 72(3): 155-167. doi: 10.1037/cpb0000175

HALLMAN, K.; ZEHRER, A. & FAIRLEY, S. (2020). Gender and volunteering at the Special Olympics: Interrelationships among motivations commitment and social capital. *Journal of Sport Management*, 34(1): 77-90. doi: 10.1123/jsm.2019-0034

HOLT, N. L.; DEAL, C. J. & PANKOW, K. (2020). Positive youth development through sport. In G. Tenenbaum & R.C. Eklund (Eds.), *Handbook of sport psychology* (pp. 429-446). John Wiley & Sons. doi: 10.1002/9781119568124.ch20

JACOBS, J.M. & WRIGHT, P.M. (2018). Transfer of life skills in sport-based youth development programs: A conceptual framework bridging learning to application. Quest, 70(1): 81-99. doi: 10.1080/00336297.2017.1348304

JONES, G.J.; WEGNER, C.E.; BUNDS, K.S.; EDWARDS, M.B. & BOCARRO, J.N. (2018). Examining

the environmental characteristics of shared leadership in a sport-for-development organisation. Journal *of Sport Management*, 32(2):82-95. doi: 10.1123/jsm.2017-0274

KAY, T. & BRADBURY, S. (2009). Youth sport volunteering: Developing social capital? *Sport, Education & Society*, 14(1): 121-140. doi: 10.1080/13573320802615288

MOORE, E.; WARTA, S. & ERICHSEN, K. (2014). College students' volunteering: Factors related to current volunteering, volunteer settings, and motives for volunteering. *College Student Journal*, 48(3): 386-396.

NG, K.W. & SALMIKANGAS, A.K. (2019). Social learning among transplant sports event volunteers. *European Journal of Adapted Physical Activity*, 12(9): 1-13.

PIOPIUNIK, M.; SCHWERDT, G.; SIMON, L. & WOESSMANN, L. (2020). Skills, signals, and employability: An experimental investigation. *European Economic Review*, 123(April): 103374. doi: 10.1016/j.euroecorev.2020.103374

SCHULENKORF, N. (2016). The contributions of special events to sport-for-development programs. *Journal of Sport Management*, 30(6): 629-642. doi: 10.1123/jsm.2016-0066

STATISTICS SA. (2018). *Overcoming poverty and inequality in South Africa.* Pretoria: Statistics SA.

STRAUSS, A. & CORBIN, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research. grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park: Sage.

SWINBURN, B.A.; KRAAK, V.I.; ALLENDER, S.; ATKINS, V.J.; BAKER, P.I., … DIETZ, W.H. (2019). The global syndemic of obesity, undernutrition, and climate change: The Lancet Commission report. *The Lancet*, 393(10173): 791-846. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(18)32822-8

VAN DER KLASHORST, E. (2018). Exploring the economic, social and cultural rights of youth leaders working in sport for development initiatives at grassroots level in South Africa. *Leisure Studies,* 37(1): 109-116. doi: 10.1080/02614367.2017.1383504

VAN DER VEKEN, K.; LAUWERIER, E. & WILLEMS, S. (2020). "To mean something to someone": Sport-for-development as a lever for social inclusion. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 19(1): 11. doi: 10.1186/s12939-019-1119-7

WALLRODT, S. & THIEME, L. 2020. The role of sports volunteering as a signal in the job application process. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 20(3): 255-275. doi: 10.1080/16184742.2019.1598457

WELTY PEACHEY, J.; COHEN, A.; BORLAND, J. & LYRAS, A. (2013). Building social capital: Examining the impact of Street Soccer USA on its volunteers. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 48(1): 20-37. doi: 10.1177/1012690211432068

WELTY PEACHEY, J.; LYRAS, A.; COHEN, A. & BRUENING, J. (2014). Exploring the motives and retention factors of sport-for-development volunteers. *Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 43(6): 1052-1069. doi: 10.1177/0899764013501579

Corresponding author: K.B. Mxekezo-Lallie; **Email:** Kgomotlokwalallie@gmail.com

(Subject editor: Dr. Jose Rodriguez)