

# REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT

A DECISION-  
MAKING  
PLAYBOOK FOR  
YOUTH AGENCY



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# FOREWORD

**A**s the authors of this playbook, we recognize that our own youth sport experiences deeply influence how we approach this topic. This is a bias we carry, but it is also the foundation of the empathy that guides our work. We write with the passion that others, too, should experience sport as a place of growth, agency, empathy, and contribution. With this ethos, we invite you - before diving into the report - to get to know us and our own stories in youth sport. Understanding where we come from helps explain why we approach this topic with both deep care and urgency, and why we see it as so important for the future.

For us, youth sport has always been a space of growth, challenge, and discovery - shaping how we engage with the world as adults, whether as fans, professionals, educators, coaches, or parents. For many of us, those early experiences stayed with us, leading us into careers, movements, and dialogues where sport serves as a central equalizer. This stemmed from key experiences that have stayed with us. For Edgardo, it was the discovery of ultimate frisbee and realizing, "how a sport could be collaborative even in competitive settings. Unlike other sports I had practiced before, Ultimate emphasized teamwork, communication, and fairness as much as performance. That memory stays with me because it showed me that competition does not have to come at the expense of collaboration," while for Meredith, it was stepping into a new position on the field, finding the confidence to come back from a 0-1 early start.

Similarly, for Jimmy, playing soccer in Mozambique without speaking the language highlighted how sport can transcend barriers, build connection, and foster empathy without words.

Our experiences also showed us that sport can provide sanctuary during difficult times. Moving into new schools, navigating social exclusion, or encountering bullying could have been overwhelming - but on the field, none of those differences mattered. Athletics, soccer, handball, and volleyball became spaces to grow, to prove oneself, and to feel genuinely connected.

**Even moments of awe reinforce the inspiration sport provides.**

Yet, while we hold true the benefit and sense of belonging we felt in sport, we also experienced its exclusion; its potential to damage and dismantle the positive growth it once fueled. We know that youth sport is not without its challenges. Too often, the emphasis on winning and competition creates pressure, exclusion, and inequality. Resources are disproportionately directed toward elite pathways, leaving the majority of children without meaningful access. **Youth sport must shift from being a privilege to being a right - a tool for connection, empowerment, and community transformation.**

These experiences shape how we make decisions as youth sport leaders. Inclusion, empowerment, and well-being guide our choices: designing programs where children feel safe, capable, and inspired to use their agency. We focus on holistic growth, fostering empathy, resilience, and social responsibility through every activity.

For example, integrating visually impaired siblings into a local youth run illustrated how thoughtful design prioritizes personal development and community cohesion over performance alone. We also ask whether each path allows us to create, explore, and connect in ways that uplift women, strengthen communities, and foster meaningful participation. This lens ensures that our work supports children not only in developing skills, but in learning how to empathize, collaborate, and contribute positively to the world around them.

Through all of this, one truth stands out: youth sport is most powerful when it is fun, accessible, and transformative; when it is positive, welcoming, and inclusive. It is a place for growth, connection, and empowerment - a space where every child can belong, every voice is heard, and the lessons of empathy, teamwork, and resilience carry beyond the field into life. These experiences and beliefs are the foundation of our approach, shaping how we envision youth sport today and for generations to come.

**Sincerely,**

*The Reimagining Youth  
Sport Steering Committee*



*Finally watching Arsenal play live! September 6th, Arsenal vs London City Lionesses at the Emirates... I had multiple epiphanies and 'pinch me' moments throughout. I didn't even know women's football leagues existed before November 2021. Fast forward three years and nine months, and I'm watching my childhood club's women's team play live at home – something I wondered if I'd ever experience in my lifetime – and to experience it before turning 20 is surely one of my dreams come true."*

**GLORIA**



*I finally began to believe in myself and my ability to contribute in new ways. I played with the confidence and joy that I had been seeking for so long, and ended up scoring 4 straight goals to help my team win. It wasn't so much the goals that make this memory stand out - it was the belief in myself that has stuck with me for so long."*

**MEREDITH**



*At the end of day one, when I still couldn't find my way to my host family's house, I saw a game of soccer happening near our language training group. As soon as class was out, I changed into soccer gear and joined the game. Without verbal language, without referees, and without coaches, we figured out how to play together. I felt like soccer was something that connected us without knowing anything else about each other."*

**JIMMY**



*In my decision-making, I prioritize inclusion and empowerment. Sport can either exclude or transform—and I choose to make it transformative."*

**ABRAHAM**



*I prioritize two things: the well-being of young people and the educational value of sport. For me, sport should be a tool to help children and youth build values such as teamwork, empathy, and responsibility. This means that when I design or evaluate activities, I focus less on competition and more on how the experience contributes to their personal and social growth."*

**EDGARDO**

## ABOUT ASHOKA

Ashoka is the largest global network of leading social entrepreneurs—individuals with new ideas to systemically address the world's biggest challenges and the entrepreneurial skill to transform those ideas into national, regional, and global social impact. **Over 40 years, Ashoka has supported nearly 4,000 social entrepreneurs in more than 90 countries** with solutions addressing society's most pressing issues. **Ashoka's vision is a world in which Everyone is a Changemaker**—a society that responds quickly and effectively to challenges, and where everyone has the freedom, confidence, and societal support to address any social problem.

## ABOUT ASHOKA SPORT FOR CHANGEMAKING

The **Ashoka Sport for Changemaking Team** leverages a collective **20+ years of experience using sport as a platform to create societal change**. Our expertise draws across diverse experiences as practitioners, researchers, and innovators who understand how sport intersects across industries and impact areas. These experiences have allowed us to connect with and learn from social entrepreneurs, policymakers, and industry experts to explore the opportunities and obstacles to foster a sports ecosystem where **every person is a powerful contributor for the good of all**.

## ABOUT THE REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT PROJECT

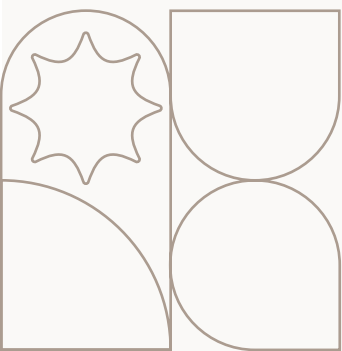
The **Reimagining Youth Sport Project** is a global effort to reshape youth sport. Launched as a collective of 15 changemakers from across the United States, Chile, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and Kenya, **this initiative aims to drive a shared systems change vision to ensure young people's agency is centered in youth sport**.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was made possible through the collective efforts of the **Reimagining Youth Sport Steering Committee**, with support from the **Collective365 Fund** provided by the **Olympism365 Innovation Hub**. **We are deeply grateful for the expertise, insight, and curiosity contributed by all those involved:**

- **Meredith Whitley**, Professor at Adelphi University and Research Fellow with the Centre for Sports Leadership at Stellenbosch University
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- **Gloria Mariwa**, Young Leader, World Freestyle Football Association
- **Edgardo Jose Martinez Peñalva**, Global Chief Development Officer, Education for Sharing
- **Abraham Muñoz Barbosa**, Chief Executive Officer, Education for Sharing
- **Emily Reynolds**, Children and Young People Director, Youth Sport Trust
- **Saif Adam**, Youth Board Member, Youth Sports Trust
- **Victor Gutierrez**, Ashoka Fellow
- **Hector Moyeton**, Global Co-Leader, Ashoka Sport for Changemaking
- **Alex Richmond**, Sport for Development Research Consultant, Ashoka Sport for Changemaking

We extend special thanks to **Jimmy Schneidewind**, volunteer research consultant for the **Reimagining Youth Sport Project**, whose long-standing commitment and passion helped ensure that this work can be translated into actionable next steps for youth sport and to **Vinícius Ayres** for leading the design and layout of this report. Finally, we thank **Emilia Gonzalez** for bringing her expertise in gender equality and for challenging us to hold a truly global perspective throughout this project and to **Elvis Nshimba** for offering his review, feedback, and expertise to strengthen the report.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth sport can be a powerful environment for young people to develop agency and build changemaking skills that contribute to their peers and communities. Yet, many young people around the world still face barriers to accessing and participating in sport. These barriers don't just limit play - they also affect physical health, mental wellbeing, and the strength of communities.

The *Reimagining Youth Sport Project* argues that lasting change cannot be achieved by focusing only on isolated actions or regulations that impact individuals. **To drive change at scale, we must shift the mindsets that shape our systems**—reexamining the biases, assumptions, and priorities that guide decision-making in youth sport.

## ABOUT THE REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT REPORT

This report offers guidance for youth sport leaders - including funders, policymakers, parents, coaches, educators, administrators, regulators, and investors - on how to put youth agency at the center of decision-making. We focus on decisions and the mindsets that guide them, because the way priorities are set has a ripple effect. A single decision can shape immediate actions and also spark broader movements that either strengthen or restrict youth agency. To support leaders in navigating this complexity, we introduce a decision-making guide - or architecture - that considers the ecosystem of influences on youth sport.

This guide highlights seven interdependent systems of influence, each reflecting the people (parents, siblings, peers, coaches) and contexts (organizations, communities, societies) that shape - or are shaped by - young people's experiences, attitudes, and outcomes in sport:

- **Cultural:** The stories, norms, and beliefs that define who belongs in sport and how success is measured.
- **Economic:** The distribution of funding, time, facilities, and human resources that determine access.
- **Political:** The priorities and investments of public policy and civic agendas in supporting youth sport.

- **Legal:** The rules, protections, and regulations that govern participation, inclusion, and safety.
- **Measurement:** The indicators and criteria used to define, track, and evaluate success.
- **Technology:** The tools and platforms shaping access, engagement, visibility, and safety.
- **Organizational:** The governance, leadership, and structures that guide youth sport programs and institutions.

## THE NEW ARCHITECTURE FOR DECISION MAKING IN YOUTH SPORT

Young people participate in sport for many reasons— to build physical skills, to pursue high-level competition, to make friends and strengthen peer connections, or simply to play. Yet, youth sport as a whole is not currently designed, supported, or regulated to fully embrace these diverse purposes. Still, innovative approaches show us what is possible: they point to how decisions could be guided and which priorities might emerge if youth agency were placed at the center. When youth agency is prioritized, young people not only shape their own sport experience but also carry that sense of agency into other areas of their lives. When we do this, we can accelerate critical changes already being experienced in silos - but not yet at scale. These include:

### PLAY #1.

*Youth sport participants develop personal agency as intentionally as they develop physical skills.*

### PLAY #2.

*Youth sport participants share responsibility with their communities and decision-makers in shaping the purpose and structure of youth sport.*

### PLAY #3.

*Youth sport participants experience success as long-term personal and collective growth—where competition supports wellbeing, empathy, self-efficacy, and mutual support, not just short-term wins.*

# CENTERING YOUTH AGENCY IN OUR **DECISION-MAKING**

Explore the three plays and see how they can activate new ways of decision-making across each of the seven systems. Each play includes a short description, how the youth sport landscape could evolve, and examples of actions, opportunities, or outcomes that may emerge when we center youth agency across all of youth sport and play.

## PLAY 1.

**ACTIVATE youth development, agency, and contribution to their peers and community through sport.**

← **WHAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE**

A move away from sport focused solely on physical performance, toward a model that prioritizes youth agency and contribution. This means creating environments where sport nurtures leadership, supports community impact, and redefines success through holistic development — not just competition.

← **DESCRIPTION OF THE OUTCOME**

- **CULTURE:** More funding flows into informal, youth-led networks that foster safety, belonging, and long-term community development in sport.
- **MEASUREMENT:** New school-based initiatives integrate physical activity with social-emotional learning, supporting holistic youth development.
- **LEGAL:** Equity-focused sport policies are introduced that guarantee safe access and leadership opportunities for all young people.
- **TECHNOLOGY:** Tech platforms co-design with youth are launched to amplify their voices, connect peers, and map changemaking opportunities in sport.
- **ORGANIZATION:** Youth advisory groups are established within national and local sport bodies to co-lead program design and decision-making processes.
- **POLITICAL:** New measurement systems are piloted that track youth-defined outcomes like confidence, wellbeing, agency, and contribution.
- **ECONOMIC:** Investment shifts towards community-rooted programs that prioritize inclusion over performance, expanding access in underserved areas.

← **HOW WE MIGHT GET THERE**

## PLAY 2.

**ESTABLISH SHARED RESPONSIBILITY across young people, communities, and current decision makers towards shaping the direction of sport through sport.**

← **WHAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE**

Where and who makes decisions transitions from a top-down model to one where decision-making is distributed and inclusive, with diverse voices—especially youth—actively shaping how sport is designed, delivered, and governed.

← **DESCRIPTION OF THE OUTCOME**

- **CULTURE:** Youth culture labs are launched in schools and communities to surface new narratives of belonging in sport, which are then integrated into coach training and public campaigns.
- **MEASUREMENT:** A public “belonging and voice” scorecard is co-developed by youth and published annually, rating sport orgs and systems on inclusion, trust, and youth-led influence.
- **LEGAL:** A youth Sport Bill of Rights is drafted and ratified locally with young people, outlining rights to participation, safety, and leadership - tied to a public accountability framework.
- **TECHNOLOGY:** An open-source youth sport governance app is co-designed, enabling real-time polling, feedback loops, and decision tracking across communities and orgs.
- **ORGANIZATION:** Sport organizations adopt “rotating youth fellow” seats on leadership teams, where young leaders shadow, advise, and co-lead decisions in real time.
- **POLITICAL:** Participatory budgeting pilots are launched in local municipalities where youth and communities vote on how sport funds are allocated.
- **ECONOMIC:** A pooled investment fund is co-managed by youth-led and community-rooted sport organizations, directing resources toward priorities like free play spaces and informal leagues.

← **HOW WE MIGHT GET THERE**

## PLAY 3.

**REDEFINE SUCCESS FROM WINNING TO SUCCEEDING at the individual and community levels.**

← **WHAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE**

The shift from valuing short-term individual wins in competition to recognizing competition as catalyst for long-term growth - measured by wellbeing, self-efficacy, empathy, and mutual support.

← **DESCRIPTION OF THE OUTCOME**

- **CULTURE:** Youth-led mentorship circles are embedded into sport programs, pairing older athletes with younger peers to build life skills, community connection, and holistic growth beyond performance.
- **MEASUREMENT:** A dual-score system is piloted in youth leagues that tracks both game performance and indicators like resilience, teamwork, and confidence, with youth self-reflections included.
- **LEGAL:** New safeguarding standards expand beyond protection from harm to include access to emotionally safe, growth-centered environments with clear youth rights to support.
- **TECHNOLOGY:** Personalized digital tools are created to track youth athletes' wellbeing alongside performance, offering daily check-ins, peer support prompts, and life skills goal tracking.
- **ORGANIZATION:** Coaching roles are redesigned to include emotional wellbeing facilitation, with ongoing training in trauma-informed approaches and social-emotional learning.
- **POLITICAL:** Mental health and life skills programming is embedded in national youth sport policy frameworks, with funding and accountability tied to their performance.
- **ECONOMIC:** Public and philanthropic funds are allocated toward dual-impact sport programs that demonstrate both athletic performance and positive community or developmental outcomes.

← **HOW WE MIGHT GET THERE**

# THE REALITY OF A REIMAGINED YOUTH SPORT LANDSCAPE

As you move through this report, you'll see what's possible for youth sport: potential futures, innovations that are already reshaping priorities, and near-term actions that emerge when we change how decisions are made.

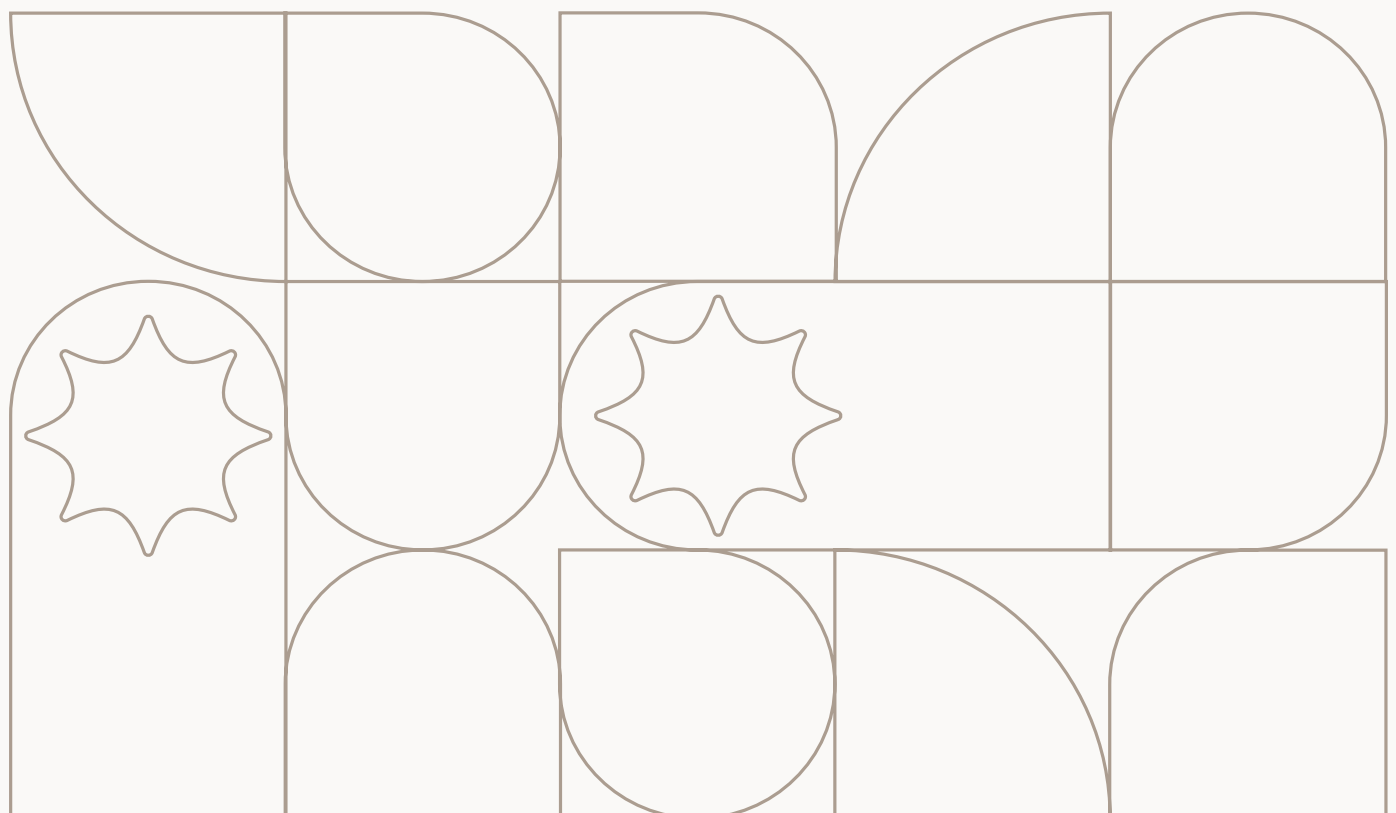
Everything you'll find here was imagined by the **Reimagining Youth Sport Project**—imagination grounded in listening. We learned from young people, practitioners, families, coaches, and leaders across the landscape: what they value in youth sport today, what they're eager to change, and how they believe the future should look.

Imagination alone isn't enough; real change takes all of us. As you read, we invite you to reflect on this vision and consider how your own decisions and priorities can help bring it to life.

**1** How might your decisions today either expand or restrict young people's agency in sport?

**2** In what ways can you align your role—whether as a funder, policymaker, coach, parent, or leader—with others across the seven systems to scale impact?

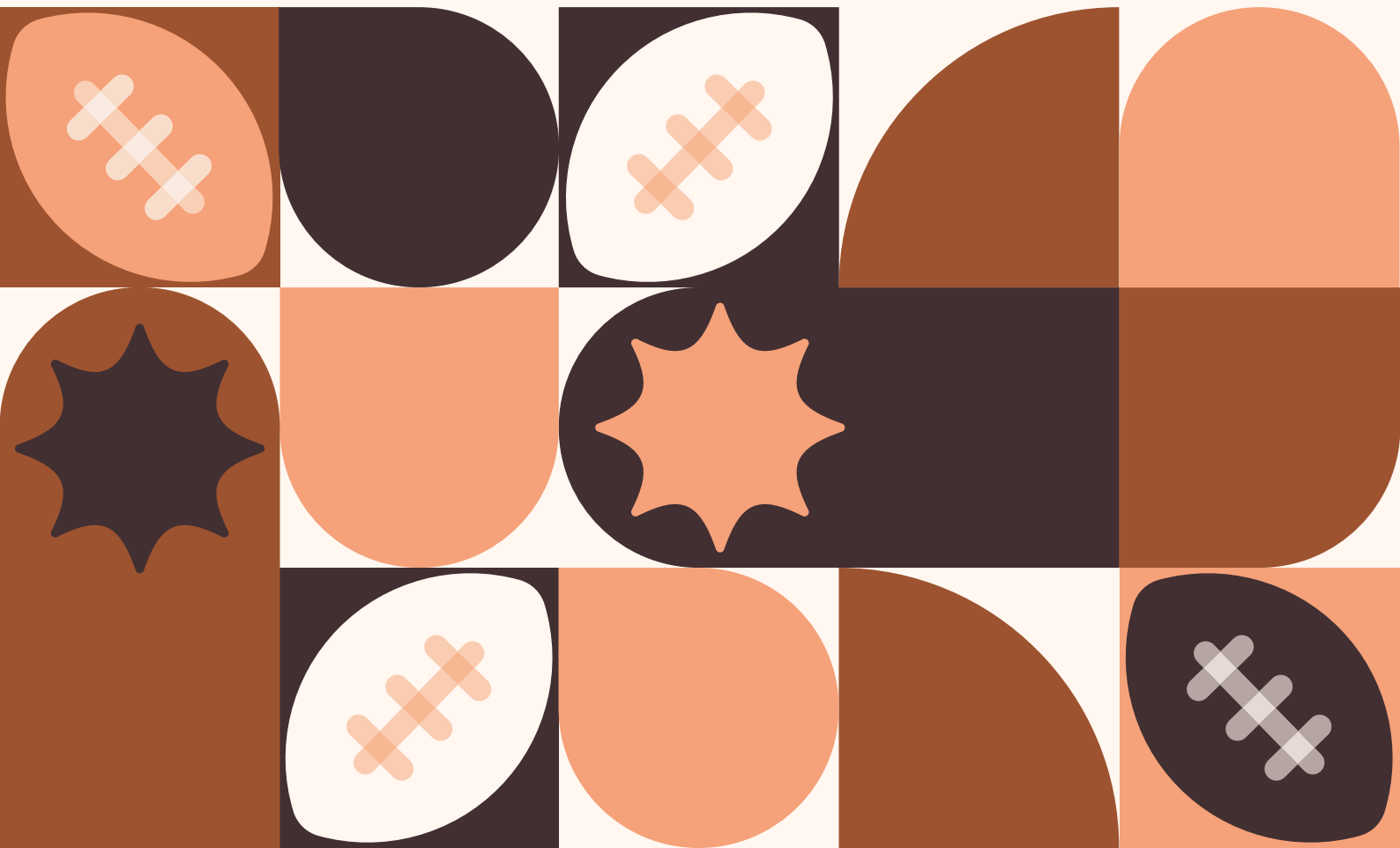
**3** What actions can you take now to ensure youth sport becomes a space where young people not only develop the skills for play, but also gain the agency to shape their futures and communities?





REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT

# INTRODUCTION



# A TRANSFORMING YOUTH SPORT ECOSYSTEM

Young people are growing up in a world defined by constant change and uncertainty. In this reality, sport<sup>1</sup> has the potential to be a powerful space for them to build resilience, develop life skills, and feel a sense of belonging. **For the purposes of this work, we employ the following definition of the youth sport system:**



*The set of interdependent persons (i.e., parents, siblings, peers, and coaches) and contexts (i.e., organizations, communities, and societies) that have the potential to influence or be influenced by an athlete's behaviors, attitudes, experiences, and outcomes in youth sport."*

**DORSCH ET AL. (2022)**

When we consider the benefits of youth sport, it follows that funding, organization, governance, regulation, and the services and resources within the landscape should aim to maximize these proven outcomes:

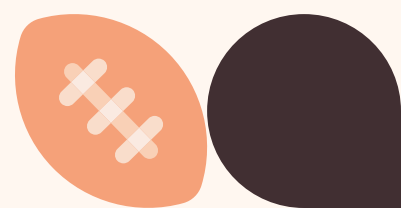
- ★ **Physical Health** - Promotes regular physical activity, improves fitness, prevents chronic disease, and supports long-term wellbeing.
- ★ **Mental and Emotional Wellbeing** - Builds resilience, reduces stress, and supports mental health through structured activity and social connection.
- ★ **Social Skills and Leadership** - Develops teamwork, communication, empathy, educational resourcefulness, employability skillsets, and leadership abilities that carry beyond sport.
- ★ **Inclusion and Equity** - Creates opportunities for all youth to participate and thrive, challenging stereotypes and reducing social disparities.
- ★ **Lifelong Engagement and Belonging** - Encourages sustained participation and fosters a sense of community, belonging, and connection.

However, current youth sport systems are falling short in fostering these outcomes. These challenges are visible not only in the day-to-day realities of the youth sport landscape but also in the underlying systems that uphold them. These persistent tensions in youth sport include:

- ★ **Participation vs. Competition** - When youth sport prioritizes elite competition over inclusive participation, it creates environments that pressure young athletes, erodes enjoyment, and drives many out of sport early.
- ★ **Cultural Norms and Inclusion** - Cultural and social norms can either reinforce exclusion or challenge inequities. When harmful stereotypes and stigma go unaddressed, they limit who feels welcome and able to thrive in sport.
- ★ **Intentional Design for Health and Social Outcomes** - Sport can improve physical health, mental well-being, and social skills, but without intentional program design, these outcomes are inconsistent and often inaccessible.
- ★ **Power Structures and Equitable Access** - When decision-making is concentrated in a small group of political or private actors, resources are distributed inequitably, restricting access for marginalized and under-resourced communities.
- ★ **Narrow Measures of Success** - Defining success primarily by elite performance overlooks the broader benefits of sport, resulting in missed opportunities for holistic development, lifelong participation, and community wellbeing.

When these systemic failures persist, the consequences are far-reaching. The global inactivity crisis is one stark example - **projected to cause over 300 million new cases of related health issues and to cost \$300 billion USD by 2030**. This goes beyond a public health crisis -- it highlights fundamental disconnect between the potential of youth sport and the reality of how it's often experienced. Closing that gap requires reimagining youth sport through a systemic lens -- seeing it not as a siloed activity, but as the dynamic, interconnected ecosystem it truly is.

<sup>1</sup> Sport, as referred to in this report, is "all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental wellbeing, and social interaction. These include play; recreation; organized, casual or competitive sport; and indigenous sports or games." (United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace, 2003)



Current innovations are already showing us what this can look like. They are fueling a growing movement to re-center youth voices, promote inclusion, and leverage sport for long-term social good. Now is the time to build on that momentum -- moving from fragmented efforts toward a shared, systemic vision of youth sport that is inclusive, emotionally supportive, and future-focused.



*There is currently a tale of two ecosystems largely working independently. The first is the "more traditional" system comprised of [many] community clubs that are governed by provincial and national sport governing bodies. The second is an ecosystem of "other" providers that include schools, municipalities and not-for-profit organizations. The former is less inclusive and less affordable. The latter is more inclusive and either low-cost or no-cost."*

#### **NORTH AMERICAN QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENT**

This report from **Ashoka's Reimagining Youth Sport project** provides guidance for decision-makers in creating a system that truly supports young people. In doing so, this report helps to empower young people, mitigate unintended consequences and overcome structural barriers that hinder youth agency and changemaking.

## **HOW TO READ THIS REPORT**

The report is organized as follows:

### **1. About the Reimagining Youth Sport Project.**

Explore detailed information on the project's objectives, stakeholders, and guiding vision, along with a description of the outputs it delivers to the youth sport landscape.

**2. Methodology and Development.** Gain insight into our collective learning journey, grounded in futures thinking, that drives ongoing exploration and discovery.

**3. A Decision-Making Architecture for Youth Sport.** Examine the guiding principles, key considerations, and reflection prompts to support intentional, systems-level change. This section also includes persona narratives illustrating how decisions could look different when guided by this architecture.

**4. The Plays for Change.** Engage in three areas where embracing innovation can address major challenges in youth sport: the emphasis on elite physical development over holistic growth, decision-making without youth and community input, and a 'win-at-all-costs' definition of success.

**5. Recommendations for Innovation and Transformation.** Review the practical steps and incentives drawn from leading social entrepreneurs and youth sport experts to drive long-term, dynamic change in the system.

**By engaging with these insights, we invite you to dive deeper into how our decisions can shape a future where youth sport is an inclusive, impactful, and sustainable ecosystem that plays the long game for young people and all stakeholders involved.**





REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT

# PROJECT BACKGROUND



# ABOUT THE ASHOKA REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT PROJECT

Launched in 2025, the **Reimagining Youth Sport Project** is a global effort to reshape youth sport, guided by the North Star where **“every young person experiences sport as a space to grow their agency and drive change—on their team and in their community.”** The project aims to:

- ★ Contribute to this North Star through a shared approach across a diverse group of stakeholders—social entrepreneurs, young changemakers, academics, foundations, and global sport organizations.
- ★ Co-develop guidance for sport leaders across roles—like funders, regulators, policymakers, media, organizations, coaches, parents, and more—on how they can prioritize young people and their agency in youth sport.

This guidance - referred to in this project as an **“architecture”** - is designed to be tested, adapted, and embedded across local and global systems.

## AN ARCHITECTURE FOR CHANGE

A **decision-making architecture** provides guidance for those seeking to reimagine youth sport by first rethinking the priorities and assumptions of the decision-makers who shape it — offering a new way to address the challenges facing the field. This “architecture” is not a set of fixed answers - it’s a **shared compass** to support how people think, act, and make decisions in a youth sport system that is already shifting. It names what matters, helps align efforts, and supports those at every level—from grassroots organizers to funders and policymakers—who want to make sport more inclusive, youth-led, and purpose-driven. To further understand this architecture, it is important to understand two components that underpin its development.

**Firstly**, this architecture is *built on systems thinking*. This means that the guidance offered acknowledges that youth sport is influenced by—and influences—many interconnected systems. **We’ve mapped seven core systems that must be engaged if we are to transform youth sport:**

## YOUTH SPORT IS SHAPED BY A COMPLEX SET OF INTERDEPENDENT SYSTEMS:



### CULTURAL

The stories and beliefs about what youth sport is for, who belongs, and what defines success in sport.

### ECONOMIC

How funding, time, facilities, and human resources are distributed and accessed within youth sport.

### POLITICAL

The role of public policies and civic agendas in prioritizing and supporting youth sport.

### LEGAL

The formal rules, laws, and protections that govern youth sport participation and safety.

### MEASUREMENT

The criteria and indicators used to define and evaluate success in youth sport.

### TECHNOLOGY

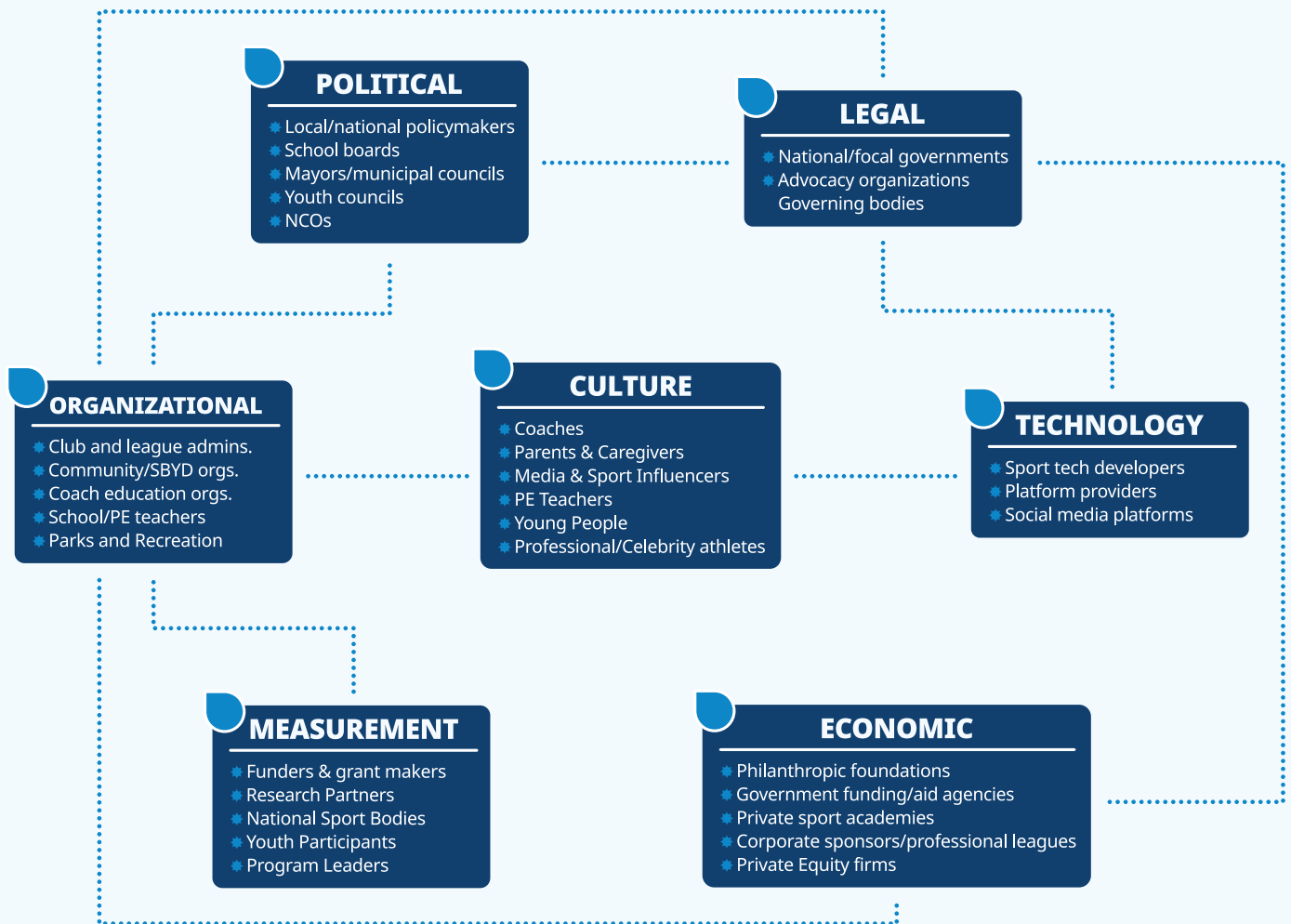
The tools and platforms that influence access, engagement, and safety for youth in sport.

### ORGANIZATIONAL

The structures, leadership, and governance models that guide youth sport institutions and programs.



# WHO MAKES DECISIONS IN YOUTH SPORT?\*



\*Stakeholders identified in one part of the system often participate in and influence decisions across other dimensions. However, the level of influence they hold can vary, shaping the current dynamics of the youth sport landscape.

It encourages us to zoom out—to see how systems interact and to recognize that lasting change requires shifts at multiple levels within each system: from individual roles, to the relationships between stakeholders, to the results each system values and prioritizes

**Secondly**, it is *informed* by **futures thinking**. This means that rather than reacting to crisis or replicating outdated models, this architecture encourages decision-making with the future in mind — guided by early signals already emerging at the edges of the youth sport landscape. By building the architecture through this methodology, we aim to move beyond short-term fixes and toward systems designed to meet the evolving realities of youth.

**Together, these lenses help us understand the complex youth sport landscape and the roles and priorities that shape it - now and in the future.**



REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT

# METHODOLOGY

DEVELOPING THE ARCHITECTURE



## GUIDING METHODOLOGY

To engage with the complexity of the youth sport ecosystem, the Reimagining Youth Sport Project applies **futures thinking** - an approach well-suited to systems with many moving parts and competing priorities. It helps us explore and assess possible futures, identify the outcomes we want to work toward, and understand the incentives and forces shaping the system over time.

One of the central tools we use is the **Three Horizons framework**. This tool supports a more dynamic and forward-looking view of change by recognizing that transformation unfolds over time and across different phases. It allows us to: map the current state of youth sport (**Horizon 1**); surface emerging innovations and signals of change already taking shape (**Horizon 2**); and envision long-term shifts that could define a reimagined future (**Horizon 3**). Working across these horizons helps us see what needs to be strengthened, what new ideas are gaining ground, and what future directions we can start building now.

This structured approach not only enriches our understanding of the youth sport ecosystem but also informs strategic decision-making aimed at building a resilient, forward-looking system. We focused on the following critical questions to guide this project: to understand the current priorities shaping youth sport, identify emerging priorities, and determine the priorities we want to guide the future system we are working to build:

- 1** **What** current factors within the youth sport landscape perpetuate a win-at-all-costs mentality among young people and their communities?
- 2** **Which** incentives and policies could dismantle these barriers and foster a mindset oriented toward the common good?
- 3** **What** actions must youth sport stakeholders take to effectively plan for and implement this new mindset across the system?

## PROJECT PHASES

### PHASE 1.

#### Build a Diverse Steering Committee

Ashoka Sport for Changemaking convened a diverse steering committee of 12 members from Ashoka's global network to capture a wide range of international perspectives and stakeholder insights, including associations, social entrepreneurship, foundations, corporate sport, youth leadership, research, and education. As the conveners, Ashoka designed and delivered workshops and led the capture of insights—creating a space for open dialogue while maintaining an impartial perspective throughout the process. The committee's diversity ensured that the project's methodology and outcomes reflected the broad voices and experiences driving change in youth sport globally, resulting in a comprehensive and inclusive approach to reimagining youth sport.

This group served two key roles within this methodology: validating our work and acting as thought partners throughout the process. Their main tasks were to test assumptions, broaden our inquiries, and ensure the project remained grounded in diverse, global lived experiences. **This was achieved through five structured workshops held monthly from March to July 2025.**

### PHASE 2.

#### Environmental Scan (Data Collection)

The environmental scan was the foundational phase of the **Reimagining Youth Sport project**, designed to understand the current youth sport system and the broader forces shaping its future. We employed a mixed-methods approach to capture diverse global perspectives. A review of over 60 academic and grey literature sources provided a baseline understanding of youth sport today, highlighting structural barriers and signals of change. This was supplemented by semi-structured focus groups with 10 youth practitioners, young leaders, and social entrepreneurs from various regions, revealing lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations—especially around equity, inclusion, and youth agency.

## PHASE 2. Cont.

To deepen insights, we distributed a global questionnaire that collected qualitative responses from 20 stakeholders across 15 countries, including federation leaders, grassroots coaches, foundations, and young changemakers. This gathered important perspectives on priorities, decision-making gaps, and who should shape youth sport's future. Additionally, the scan surfaced emerging innovations through a review of 100 current Ashoka Fellows working within or on the edges of sport and youth systems, highlighting inclusive, participatory models in action.

## PHASE 3.

### Analyzing Youth Sports Three Horizons

We first analyzed the data using a mapping exercise based on the Three Horizons Framework, grouping it into **three distinct buckets**:

- ★ **Horizon 1 – Current youth sport systems:** Capturing what is currently happening, what should be retained, and what needs to change.
- ★ **Horizon 2 – Emerging trends:** Highlighting innovations and practices appearing at the edges of the traditional system.
- ★ **Horizon 3 – Future state:** Defining the aspirational system we aim to build.

Once the data were organized, we identified key trends in the current youth sport landscape — namely, the prioritization of elite and physical growth over holistic youth development, the centralization of decision-making without meaningful youth and community input, and a “win-at-all-costs” approach to defining success. We then looked at innovations emerging on the periphery of this landscape, noting how they are largely aimed at addressing these same challenges and offering insights into patterns – or “dynamic changes” that could be accelerated to shape the future system. The project’s Steering Committee was central to refining and validating these findings. Through three structured workshops, the committee reviewed the mapped practices, challenged assumptions, provided feedback, and helped prioritize key elements.

## PHASE 4.

### Testing through Root Cause Analysis

After identifying the three key shifts emerging from our analysis, we asked what was preventing these shifts from scaling across the youth sport landscape. To answer this, we conducted a root cause analysis to uncover the underlying assumptions and decision-making patterns that keep the system in place, asking: “Are there official rules in youth sports—or unspoken incentives—that perpetuate these problems?” We identified these root causes and mapped them at the base of each “tree.” (See Appendix A)

From there, we translated these root causes into how they might influence decision-making priorities across the seven central systems governing youth sport that this project focused on. The Steering Committee again played a central role in refining and validating the analysis through two additional workshops. Finally, two youth changemaker focus groups were held to ensure the findings reflected youth perspectives and remained relevant to diverse stakeholders.

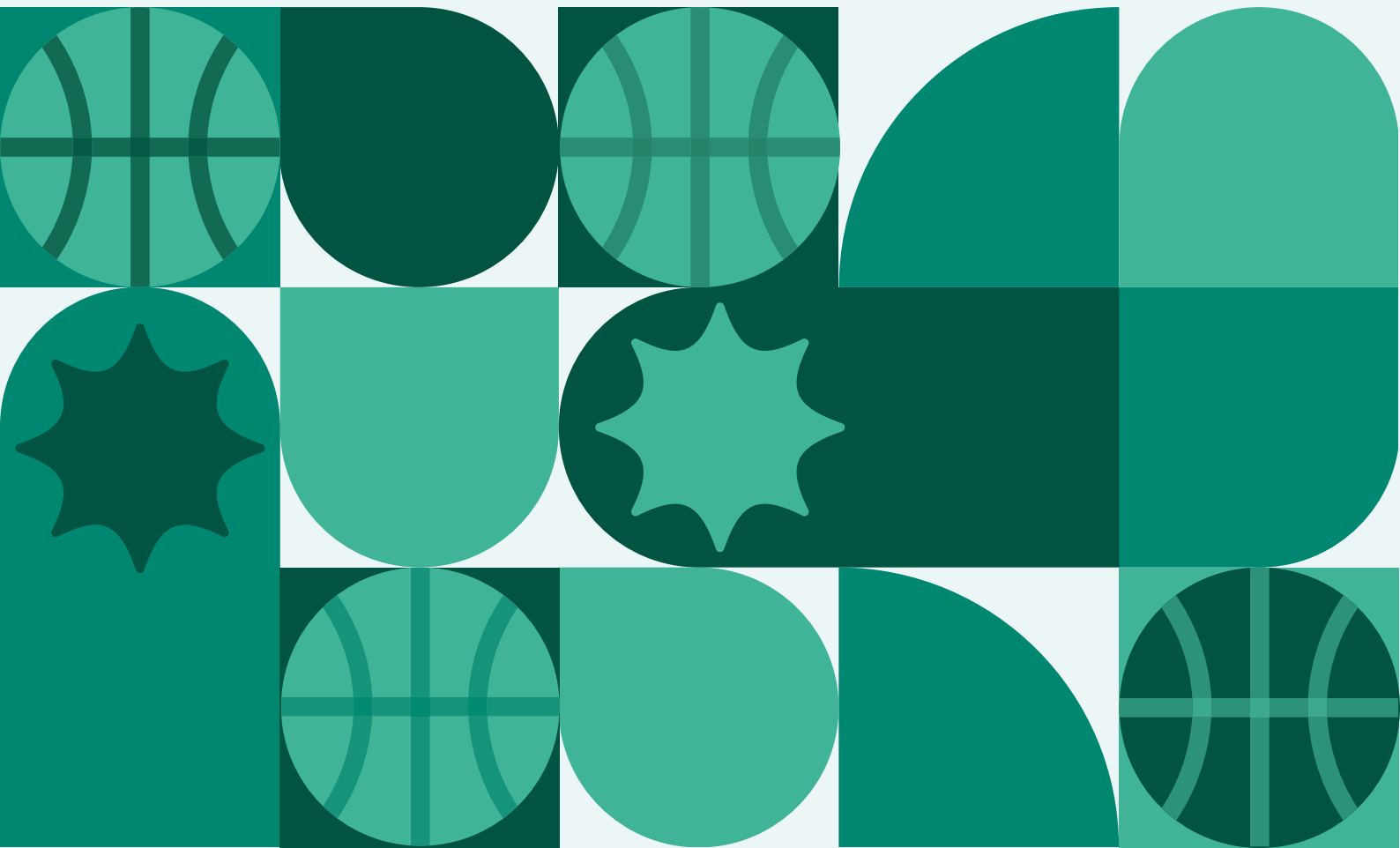
**This methodology does more than map today’s challenges** — it builds the foundation for a decision-making architecture that can adapt as youth sport evolves. By applying futures thinking and testing assumptions through diverse perspectives, we surfaced the mindsets, priorities, and root causes shaping the current system. **These insights now guide the creation of a flexible framework for decision-making that places youth agency at the center of sport and play.**





REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT

# A REIMAGINED DECISION- MAKING GUIDE FOR YOUTH SPORT



# THE REIMAGINED YOUTH SPORT ARCHITECTURE

The beliefs and principles that guide the decision-makers across all systems dimensions, shaping how they contribute to a world where every young person can grow, lead, and drive the change through youth sport.



This **Reimagined Youth Sport Decision Making Architecture** is a high-level guide designed to transform youth sport by reshaping the underlying priorities - centering youth agency, equity, and holistic development.

It outlines recommended priorities across the seven systems that shape youth sport – each framed to address the root causes that limit sport from fully supporting young people’s agency and overall development.



*It starts by training professionals to have an integrated view of what sport can offer and how it can impact the life of a young person."*

**LATIN AMERICA - REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENT**

This section invites you to reflect on these priorities by:

**1. Understanding** how these priorities challenge the assumptions that currently shape youth sport. This helps us align on what we want to move away from as we work toward a reimagined youth sport landscape.

**2. Exploring** how these priorities can reshape decisions in youth sport and accelerate three dynamic plays already underway:

**PLAY #1.** Youth sport participants develop personal agency as intentionally as they develop physical skills.

**PLAY #2.** Youth sport participants share responsibility with their communities and decision-makers in shaping the purpose and structure of youth sport.

**PLAY #3.** Youth sport participants experience success as long-term personal and collective growth — where competition supports wellbeing, empathy, self-efficacy, and mutual support, not just short-term wins.

We focus on these three changes currently happening because while promising, they are not yet widely spread or have become standard practice. Using these priorities can create real, growing experiences and give useful guidance for future decisions in youth sport. However, as we move into their explanation, it is important to note that their uptake and impact will also look different depending on the context in which youth sport operates.

Cultural norms — including religion, traditions, and values — as well as geography, political environments, and levels of economic investment - all shape how these changes will emerge and take hold. In some contexts, the foundations for youth agency and redefined measures of success already exist, creating fertile ground for scaling. In others, limited resources or entrenched assumptions about the purpose of sport may slow progress or require adaptation.

Recognizing this diversity is essential. It ensures that these plays are not seen as one-size-fits-all solutions but as adaptable approaches that can be locally interpreted while still advancing a shared vision for youth sport centered on agency, equity, and long-term growth.

## THE ROOTS OF OUR CURRENT ORIENTATION AND DECISIONS AROUND YOUTH SPORT

This project identified deep-rooted assumptions shaping key systems — from funding and organization to regulation and more. By starting with these assumptions, we gain a better perspective on why the priorities in the architecture are what they are and how they challenge the current status quo:

- ★ **An elite performance focus:** The belief that success at elite levels — such as a country winning an Olympic medal — will inspire wider youth participation and benefit all. This assumption prioritizes elite achievement, often sidelining broader goals like inclusion and personal growth. It persists because decision-makers view elite success as a visible and measurable return on investment - one that can justify public funding, attract sponsorships, and enhance national pride.
- ★ **Economic gatekeeping:** Funding and resources primarily flow to established organizations and power centers, reinforcing existing inequalities. This concentration limits innovation and excludes grassroots initiatives because power controls the flow of money.
- ★ **Homogenized models:** Youth sport typically offers standardized, one-size-fits-all pathways that fail to reflect the diversity of young people's experiences and interests. These models persist because they make governance, evaluation, and delivery simpler - and tend to support those with similar identities or lived experiences to those in decision-making roles. As a result, many young people who don't fit

traditional molds are excluded or underserved by the current system.

- ★ **A culture of competition:** Success is measured mainly by medals, rankings, and winning outcomes rather than wellbeing, community connection, or lifelong engagement - even at the youth level. This competitive culture continues because measurable outcomes like wins often justify funding and recognition.
- ★ **Paternalistic, reactive governance:** Decisions are often made for youth and communities, rather than with them. This top-down approach persists due to entrenched power structures and risk aversion, limiting meaningful youth participation in decision-making.

When these assumptions inform our decisions, we will continue to see patterns of inequity and exclusion, such as:

- 1. Youth Sport access remains limited:** Financial, geographic, and cultural barriers prevent many young people from participating in meaningful ways. Participation is often measured by numbers alone, overlooking the quality of engagement and whether young people truly feel included or empowered - central indicators to their long-term engagement.
- 2. Resources are unevenly distributed:** Funding disproportionately favors large, well-established institutions, leaving community-driven and innovative programs under-resourced and struggling to sustain their impact.
- 3. Equity progress is inconsistent:** While some parts of the system are adopting inclusive values and practices, many continue to uphold traditional hierarchies and exclusionary norms, resulting in uneven access and experience for youth.
- 4. Recognition and reward structures are narrow:** The system celebrates winning and exceptionalism, often overlooking collaboration, personal growth, and social impact as measures of success.





*Shifting regulatory frameworks to promote physical activity for life, not just for elite competition, could ensure that sports programs are designed for long-term engagement. This might include expanding recreational and non-competitive options that emphasize fun, community, and health."*

**EUROPE - REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENT**

Rather than see these systemic patterns persist, we want to harness the energy of innovation, learn from what is already challenging these assumptions, and explore how we can activate systems aligned with these priorities. These are the key plays with the potential to shape the youth sport landscape.

**PLAY #1: ACCELERATING PURPOSE OF YOUTH SPORT AND INDIVIDUAL ENGAGEMENT: FROM PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TO YOUTH AGENCY.**

**CARING ABOUT THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE**

Why do young people play sport? Currently, youth sport systems tend to focus on physical performance and skills that support elite-level success. But sport can offer so much more, and designing only for this narrow focus excludes young people who don't see themselves in that priority.



*"There is an increasing emphasis on becoming the best player of his team, Winning is considered as the top priority. The wider youth community consider that sport is necessarily related to winning, being awarded a trophy and being famous in the region."*

**AFRICA - REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENT**

Let's look at some systems and see this *play* out. Organizationally, many youth programs adopt one-size-fits-all models that prioritize winning and short-term performance, often ignoring diverse motivations and developmental needs. This performance-centric design limits sport's developmental potential to support holistic youth development, contributing to declining participation and engagement among young people.<sup>23</sup> More so, by designing systems around these priorities, youth sport often emphasizes structured, outcome-focused experiences. This shapes how young people understand sport,

making organized play the default and narrowing the ways they can engage. As a result, many young people no longer see themselves in the system, limiting their participation, agency, and the broader potential of sport to support their development.<sup>4</sup>

We can see the political impact of the fact that sport is not consistently treated or supported as a public good. The disconnect between policy and public understanding also helps explain the difficulty in translating policy ideals – such as the value of sport as a tool for social, health, and community benefit - into effective, inclusive programs on the ground.<sup>5</sup> This gap occurs because policy decisions often emphasize and favor elite sport performance and national prestige over mass participation and grassroots development. When this plays out, young athletes from diverse and often marginalized groups—such as girls and young women, youth with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, and those from low-income or migrant communities—are often excluded from meaningful participation. This exclusion limits their access to the developmental, social, and health benefits of sport. In many contexts, strong grassroots efforts have emerged to intentionally foster inclusivity and create spaces where these young people can belong. Yet, at the aggregate level, the broader sport landscape has not fully connected these grassroots initiatives with national objectives. As a result, the opportunity for all young people to engage in sport and realize their full potential remains uneven.

<sup>2</sup> (PDF) Participant Development in Sport: An Academic Review

<sup>3</sup> State of Play 2023 - Project Play

<sup>4</sup> Active Lives Survey 2023-24 Year 7 – technical note | Sport England

<sup>5</sup> Elite Sport Development | Policy Learning and Political Priorities | M

## PLAY #1: LOGIC AND OUTCOMES OF INACTION

System	Current Logic and Orientation	Examples of How It Plays Out
<b>Cultural</b>	Sport is valued primarily for physical performance.	Parents emphasize scholarships and college recruitment; youth report pressure to specialize early.
<b>Economic</b>	Funding follows promises of medals or financial returns.	Grant criteria favor revenue-generators, pushing out community-focused nonprofits.
<b>Organizational</b>	Sport is structured and delivered primarily to promote physical activity and health outcomes.	Club and league administrators prioritize participation rates and physical metrics to justify funding and program success.
<b>Legal</b>	Legal structures should be designed to minimize physical risk and liability.	Safeguarding rules focus on protection from physical harm, overlooking power dynamics or youth autonomy.
<b>Political</b>	Sport is prioritized when it aligns with national pride agendas.	Policies favor elite development pipelines that produce medals or visibility on the global stage.
<b>Measurement</b>	What matters most is what can be quantified and compared like wins, stats, or the number of players participating.	Evaluation frameworks prioritize numbers (e.g., how many games won, players engaged) over intangible growth like confidence, leadership, or belonging.
<b>Technology</b>	Technology should optimize performance, efficiency, and monitoring.	Investment in tech goes toward wearables, video analysis, or scheduling systems—rarely toward co-creation tools or storytelling platforms that amplify youth voices.

## REIMAGINING THE INDIVIDUAL PURPOSE OF YOUTH SPORT

Athletic performance is just one of several priorities, not the sole focus. In our Reimagined Youth Sport landscape, physical activity and performance share priority with other key outcomes—such as developing agency, fostering community impact, and supporting holistic youth leadership. But, simply naming these outcomes isn't enough; the real question is how to prioritize them equally in practice.

Social entrepreneurs, young changemakers and community-based organizations are redrawing what success in youth sport looks like - transforming environments from competitive academies into platforms that dually promote youth voice, leadership, and community impact. **Examples include:**

- **Fabrice Vil (Canada):** Pour 3 Points transforms sports coaches into holistic mentors who guide youth from disadvantaged backgrounds both on and off the

field. The program emphasizes youth development, integrating life skills and resilience training alongside athletic performance. By training coaches to support personal growth, Pour 3 Points fosters leadership and self-confidence in young people. This approach ensures that coaches support personal growth, fostering leadership and self-confidence in young people.

- **Elvis Nshimba (Democratic Republic of the Congo):** Umoja Sport Foundation leverages the transformative power of sport for community development in the DRC. The foundation focuses on holistic youth development, integrating sport with education and economic empowerment. Through programs that combine physical activity with life skills training, Umoja Sport aims to equip young people with the tools they need to become active, engaged citizens. This model demonstrates how sport can be a catalyst for social transformation, fostering environments where youth voice, leadership, and community impact are prioritized alongside athletic performance.

• **Ernest Jr. Edmond (Canada):** Les Ballons Intensifs offers free, high-quality sports training to at-risk youth, combining early morning sessions with afternoon community leadership initiatives. The program prioritizes civic engagement and personal agency, encouraging youth to co-lead community projects. This dual focus on sports and social responsibility cultivates empowered young leaders committed to positive change. By integrating competition with civic engagement, the program fosters a sense of purpose and community involvement among participants.

**These examples highlight the promising potential of equalizing the priorities of youth sport – to include not only physical development, but leadership development, economic development, and more.**

## PLAY #1: THE OPPORTUNITY OF REIMAGINED PRIORITIES

System	Future Logic and Orientation	Examples of How It Plays Out
<b>Cultural</b>	Every young person has the right to participate in sport as a space to grow, lead, and belong.	Youth-led campaigns challenge exclusion and redefine success. Local clubs shift from “elite pipeline” narratives to community belonging.
<b>Economic</b>	Investment in sport is justified not just by return on performance or profit, but by long-term social value, community wellbeing, and youth development.	Sponsorships support inclusive leagues and multi-sport opportunities rather than elite-only pipelines.
<b>Organizational</b>	Youth voice and leadership are essential in designing and shaping sport experiences.	Youth advisory groups are established within national and local sport bodies to co-lead program design and decision-making processes.
<b>Legal</b>	Rather than compliance or protectionist mindset, legal systems recognize young people as active rights-holders with a say in the systems that impact them.	Equity-focused sport policies are introduced that guarantee safe access and leadership opportunities for all young people.
<b>Political</b>	Youth are not only impacted by policy—they have a right and responsibility to influence it, especially on issues directly affecting them.	New measurement systems are piloted that track youth-defined outcomes like confidence, wellbeing, agency, and contribution.
<b>Measurement</b>	What we measure reflects what we value—so to center youth agency, success metrics must include youth-defined goals and experiences.	New school-based initiatives integrate physical activity with social-emotional learning, supporting holistic youth development.
<b>Technology</b>	Technology should enhance—not replace—human connection and be shaped by the needs, values, and creative potential of youth themselves.	Tech platforms co-designed with youth are launched to amplify their voices, connect peers, and map changemaking opportunities in sport.

By examining where decisions are currently made—and where new values are emerging—we gain a roadmap for reimagining the entire decision architecture of youth sport. What begins as isolated innovation has the potential to reshape norms, resources, and policies across the system.

## IMAGINING THE CHANGE: YOUTH-DRIVEN NARRATIVES

Youth-driven narratives are central to shifting the cultural system that shapes young people's experiences. By reimagining youth sport through these narratives, we can ask: What are we doing? What are we prioritizing? And what outcomes might result?

**Let's imagine ourselves in the shoes of a young person who has the opportunity to be a central contributor, shaping the value and purpose of youth sport through their own stories.**

**W**hen I joined the *initiative*, I thought my role would be limited to playing and following instructions—but I quickly realized I could shape the story of youth sport from the inside. I became a producer, not just a participant. Together with other youth, we identified the experiences and values we wanted to highlight: moments where teamwork, inclusion, and personal growth mattered more than winning, and how sport connected us to our communities.

We decided the best way to share this story was through a short documentary-style video. To gain access to this medium, we partnered with a local media studio that had experience producing youth content. The team helped us frame the narrative, record footage, and edit the story while ensuring our voice remained central. We weren't just on camera—we contributed to every decision: what scenes to show, what voices to include, and how to emphasize collaboration and empathy over competition.

Once released online and through community screenings, the story reached coaches, teachers, local leaders, and families who had never worked with us directly. From what we could see in responses and feedback, the impact was real: coaches began asking their teams how to incorporate inclusive games and reflection activities; teachers considered linking PE to broader life skills; families commented on valuing participation and youth leadership over trophies or rankings. People reflected on what they were prioritizing and questioned their assumptions about sport. Even though we weren't interacting with these stakeholders directly, our story created a ripple

*effect—shifting perceptions and behaviors across the youth sport landscape. I realized that when youth have ownership over narratives, we can influence the wider system, showing that competition, community, and personal growth can coexist, and that young people's voices can guide the priorities of sport for everyone.*

By role-playing this scenario, we can see the broader impact this “bright spot” could have as it gains influence—alongside the key priorities that may help drive and sustain this change:

- ★ **Youth are positioned as producers, not just participants.** Training, tools, and resources are built into the structure so they can lead the narrative process.
- ★ **Story creation is embedded in systems, not left to chance.** Roles, timelines, and decision rights are clearly defined for youth contributors.
- ★ **Distribution is designed to reach both local and global audiences.** This ensures community pride is nurtured while also influencing broader public perception of youth sport.

## PLAY #2: ACCELERATING NEW RELATIONSHIPS FOR DECISION-MAKING: FROM CENTRALIZED TO SHARED RESPONSIBILITY IN YOUTH SPORT GOVERNANCE.

### CARING ABOUT THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Who governs and holds power over sport and the structures? Today, youth sport governance is largely dominated by a top-down model, where decisions are made primarily by governing bodies, elite organizations, and financial stakeholders. This model concentrates power and limits meaningful youth and community participation in shaping the systems designed for their development. Youth voices are marginalized, and community ownership is often weak or absent, which perpetuates inequities in access, programming, number of opportunities, and leadership.



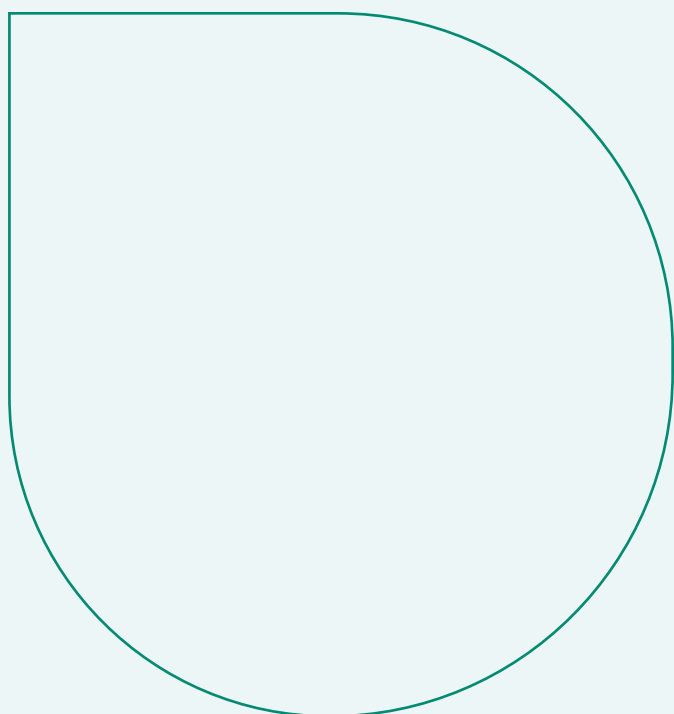
*"It starts with centering the young participants and understanding their experiences and preferences. In Wales, we've gotten good insights into what kids want and what can be adapted to meet their needs, but there's always a list of obstacles to implementing those ideas."*

**SPORT WALES FOCUS GROUP**

What this means is we will see challenges continuing to play out unless we prioritize the integration of youth and community voice—shaped by how and what systems prioritize. Research shows that only a small proportion of youth sport organizations include young people in leadership roles—sometimes as low as **15%**—limiting their ability to address diverse needs and promote equity. When youth voices are absent, participants—particularly girls and marginalized communities—often feel excluded, reducing engagement and retention.

Governing bodies frequently favor established individuals in decision-making, despite evidence that greater community participation can challenge corrupt practices and promote more equitable sports development. Programs like the Norwegian Young Leader Programme demonstrate that involving youth in leadership and planning fosters sustainable participation, challenges institutional inertia, and strengthens youth agency in governance. Similar patterns appear in funding structures: community-based organizations in low-resource areas often struggle to access resources due to governance requirements that favor established institutions (National Recreation and Park Association). This concentrates power and resources away from grassroots leaders who might better serve local needs.

**Taken together, these insights show that current governance systems reinforce inequities in access, leadership, and program design—making it urgent to shift toward more distributed, youth-centered decision-making.**



## PLAY #2: LOGIC AND OUTCOMES OF INACTION

System	Current Logic and Orientation	Examples of How It Plays Out
<b>Cultural</b>	Adults are the natural authorities and gatekeepers of expertise in youth sport, making youth passive participants in sport rather than active agents.	Adults determine what “success” looks like based on traditional values of competition and discipline.
<b>Economic</b>	Centralization reduces costs, enhances brand control, and attracts investment. Youth involvement in governance is seen as inefficient, hard to scale, and risky for ROI.	Economic value is tied to performance and participation — not process or co-creation.
<b>Organizational</b>	Efficiency, control, and risk management require centralized structures.	Organizational legitimacy is tied to adult credentials, not intergenerational collaboration.
<b>Legal</b>	Legal systems prioritize safeguarding and liability mitigation over empowerment, assuming youth lack the capacity to meaningfully consent, decide, or lead.	Youth rarely have legal standing to challenge exclusionary or harmful sport practices.
<b>Political</b>	Power in sport policy is vested in institutions, not individuals — especially not youth. Youth are policy subjects, not political actors, and sport governance is for adults who “know best.”	Youth participation in policy is tokenized through listening sessions, not embedded co-governance.
<b>Measurement</b>	What matters is what can be quantified — and adult-defined metrics (wins, participation hours, program completion) are viewed as objective truths.	Dashboards emphasize outputs (e.g., tournaments played) not outcomes youth define (e.g., sense of belonging).
<b>Technology</b>	Technology is a tool for control, surveillance, and optimization — not empowerment.	Apps are created for adult users (coaches, administrators), not youth experiences.

## REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT GOVERNANCE

The future of youth sport governance is about sharing power—between youth, communities, and traditional stakeholders. Decision-making becomes a collective effort, one that values youth agency and their ability to drive real change. Shifting governance this way moves us from gatekeeping to partnership, giving communities the tools and space to design systems that reflect their priorities and values—and making sure every young person has fair access and real opportunities to thrive.



*Current leaders in sport who own and control the monopoly influence how sport currently is. Changing leadership and hierarchical structures in sport federations, governing bodies and youth sports organisations should be central to our future vision.”*

**EUROPE - REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENT**

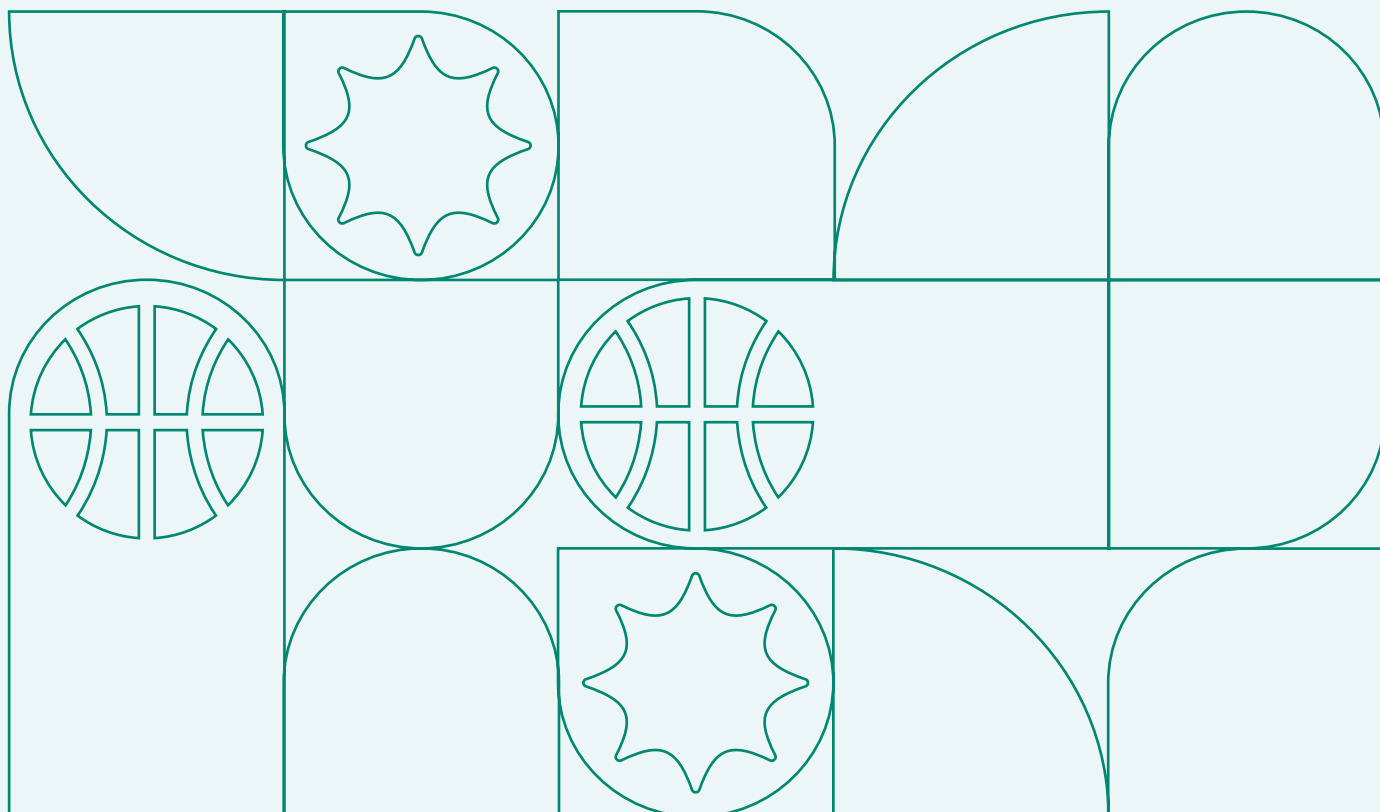
We see these models emerging through the work of changemakers—their leadership, programs, and innovations—showing the added value for young people and other sport stakeholders when youth and community are actively involved in decision-making. This includes shaping the rules of play, designing game structures, and creating opportunities for young people to contribute to their communities beyond formal governance roles. **Examples of changemakers leading in this way include:**

- **Kelly Davies (UK):** Vi-Ability is a social enterprise that collaborates with young adults to transform struggling community football clubs into viable businesses and thriving community centers. By integrating sports and business education, Vi-Ability empowers youth to take on leadership roles, manage operations, and redefine success beyond traditional metrics like medals. This approach redistributes power, fosters collaboration, and models new organizational systems that reflect community values and priorities.

- **Steffi Biester (Germany):** KickFair is a German NGO dedicated to empowering young people through street football initiatives. Active in approximately 40 locations across Germany, KickFair focuses on integrating sports with education to promote social inclusion and democratic values. The organization adopts a youth-led approach by assigning young participants leadership roles in organizing and officiating football games.

For instance, 12- and 13-year-olds are guided to organize tournaments for younger peers, fostering a sense of responsibility and leadership. This model not only builds confidence and leadership skills among youth but also instills democratic values and a sense of community. By actively involving young people in decision-making processes, KickFair creates an environment where youth can co-create their learning experiences and contribute to positive social change.

- **Bob Munro (Kenya):** MYSA is a community development organization in Nairobi that uses sports as a tool for socio-economic development. The organization combines sports with community outreach and development activities to empower youth and improve their lives. The organization operates on a youth-led governance model. Youth participants take on formal leadership roles, including electing peer representatives to decision-making bodies that influence both sport and community development initiatives. This approach has led to significant community engagement and development. MYSA's initiatives have improved environmental conditions, reduced drug abuse, and provided educational opportunities for youth. The organization's success demonstrates the effectiveness of youth-centered governance in driving positive social change.



## PLAY #2: THE OPPORTUNITY OF REIMAGINED PRIORITIES

System	Current Logic and Orientation	Examples of How It Plays Out
<b>Cultural</b>	Youth are seen as present-day contributors with unique insights, not just future adults in training.	Youth culture labs are launched in schools and communities to surface new narratives of belonging in sport, which are then integrated into coach training and public campaigns.
<b>Economic</b>	Economic value in sport emerges from relationships, co-ownership, and long-term community impact.	A pooled investment fund is co-managed by youth-led and community-rooted sport organizations, directing resources toward priorities like free play spaces and informal leagues.
<b>Organizational</b>	Legitimacy in sport organizations comes from intergenerational collaboration and shared decision-making.	Sport organizations adopt “rotating youth fellow” seats on leadership teams, where young leaders shadow, advise, and co-lead decisions in real time.
<b>Legal</b>	Legal systems uphold youth rights by enabling their agency alongside protections. The law is a tool designed not only to shield, but to empower.	A youth Sport Bill of Rights is drafted and ratified locally with young people, outlining rights to participation, safety, and leadership – tied to a public accountability framework.
<b>Political</b>	Youth are political actors with lived expertise who deserve a role in shaping the policies that govern their sport experience.	Municipalities are reclaiming underutilized land and opening it for youth to organize their own sport initiatives. These shifts move decision-making closer to those most affected, giving young people real ownership over how resources are spent and how space is used.
<b>Measurement</b>	What gets measured should reflect what matters to those most impacted — including youth.	A public “belonging and voice” scorecard is co-developed by youth and published annually, rating systems and sport organizations on inclusion, trust, and youth-led influence.
<b>Technology</b>	Technology is a shared tool for connection, creativity, and equity. It should be designed with youth, not just for managing them.	An open-source youth sport governance app is co-designed, enabling real-time polling, feedback loops, and decision tracking across communities and organizations.

## IMAGINING THE CHANGE: YOUTH-DRIVEN GOVERNANCE

Youth voice can be – and, in some cases, already is – directly embedded into sport governance. This “bright spot” across the youth sport landscape is emerging through adaptations of existing structures and the creation of flexible, youth-led models.

These approaches reflect young people’s agency and lived experience—through advisory roles, voting seats on boards and federations, informal leadership in community activities, and feedback systems that shape funding and programming.

By creating authentic and diverse pathways at the organizational level, youth can meaningfully lead and participate in decision-making processes, with sport being a central language spoken between young people and adults. **Let's imagine ourselves in the shoes of a parent who has the opportunity to be a central contributor in shaping the value and purpose of youth sport.**

**W**hen the idea of a youth governance model was first introduced at our club, I wasn't sure what to make of it. Many parents, myself included, felt uneasy. After all, this was a space where adults had always taken the lead — organizing schedules, setting priorities, deciding what mattered. Handing some of that over to young people felt risky. Could they really make decisions about budgets, training structures, or community events? Wouldn't it just slow everything down?

But as the club leaders explained why they were considering this change, it started to make sense. They had noticed troubling patterns: older players were dropping out at much higher rates, especially girls. Some young people had spoken privately about feeling like they didn't have a say in how things were run, or that sport was something "done to them" rather than with them. Coaches, too, were stretched thin — sometimes clashing with players over rigid training designs, sometimes struggling with how to balance performance with safeguarding and well-being. There were even moments where conflicts escalated simply because there wasn't a safe or structured channel for young people to voice their concerns.

The youth governance model was their answer to these challenges. The club created a youth council with representatives across age groups, gave them advisory and voting roles on certain decisions, and involved them directly in shaping practice sessions and community activities. It wasn't a token gesture. Coaches received training on how to facilitate shared decision-making, and parents were invited to listen in on council meetings so we could understand how it worked. The idea wasn't that young people would replace adults, but that they would bring perspectives adults were missing.

At first, there were growing pains. Some of the early meetings were messy, and a few adults still struggled to take youth input seriously. But over time, things shifted. My child, for instance, went from being quiet on the sidelines to confidently raising ideas in council sessions — ideas that actually shaped what happened on the pitch.

*Other parents noticed the same: kids who once seemed disengaged were stepping up, because they could see their opinions mattered.*

*The ripple effects extended beyond individual confidence. Coaches started listening differently. Instead of dictating every practice, they asked athletes what drills would help them meet their goals or what would make training more fun and inclusive. That small change transformed the tone: players became more motivated, and conflicts with coaches decreased. Parents began to see the club as a place where their children weren't just participants, but leaders developing skills that stretched far beyond sport.*

*Even within families, the change was visible. We started hearing our kids talk about fairness, inclusion, and well-being in ways that surprised us. They weren't just playing the game — they were shaping it and learning that they could shape other parts of their lives too.*

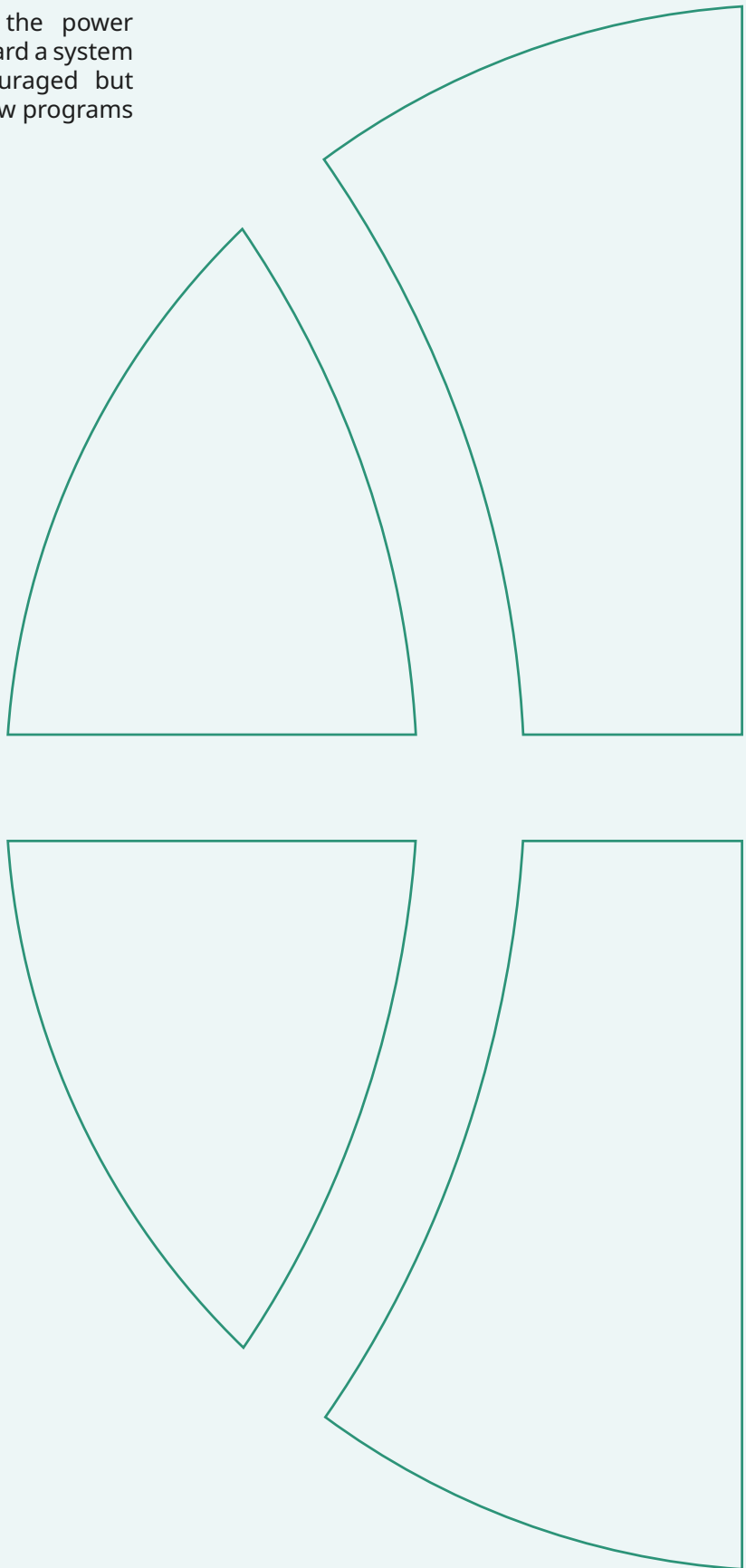
*For me, that's why I can say the changes are real. The club didn't turn to youth governance because it was trendy; they did it because they faced real problems — dropout rates, conflict, safeguarding concerns — and they had the courage to try something different. What I've seen is that when young people are trusted with responsibility, they don't just rise to the challenge; they help the entire community grow stronger.*

By role-playing this scenario, we can see the broader impact this "bright spot" could have as it gains influence—alongside the key priorities that may help drive and sustain this change:

- ★ **Youth are positioned as decision-makers, not just advisors.** Roles with voting rights and leadership training equip youth to participate meaningfully in boards, federations, and funding decisions.
- ★ **Leadership is flexible and multifaceted.** Models blend formal roles (like youth delegates with voting seats) with informal community leadership and feedback systems, recognizing diverse youth agency.
- ★ **Youth governance is embedded in organizational systems.** Structures, timelines, and decision rights are clearly defined so youth input directly influences programming, policy, and resource allocation.

- ★ **Pathways are authentic and accessible.** Leadership opportunities are designed to reflect young people’s lived experiences, interests, and capacities, allowing for ongoing, meaningful engagement.

This governance shift could reshape the power dynamics within youth sport, moving toward a system where youth agency is not just encouraged but structurally embedded—transforming how programs are designed, funded, and delivered.



## PLAY #3: ACCELERATING HOW WE VALUE COMPETITION: FROM INDIVIDUALISM TO COLLECTIVE SUCCESS

### CARING ABOUT THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

What do we really mean by competition in sport? While widely recognized as a core value, competition is often understood more as a measure of success—winning, rankings, or athletic dominance—than as a tool or concept to support personal growth, social connection, or community wellbeing. This narrow framing has become entrenched across sport systems worldwide, shaping policies, funding, coaching practices, and cultural expectations, and limiting our ability to realize the broader benefits competition can offer.



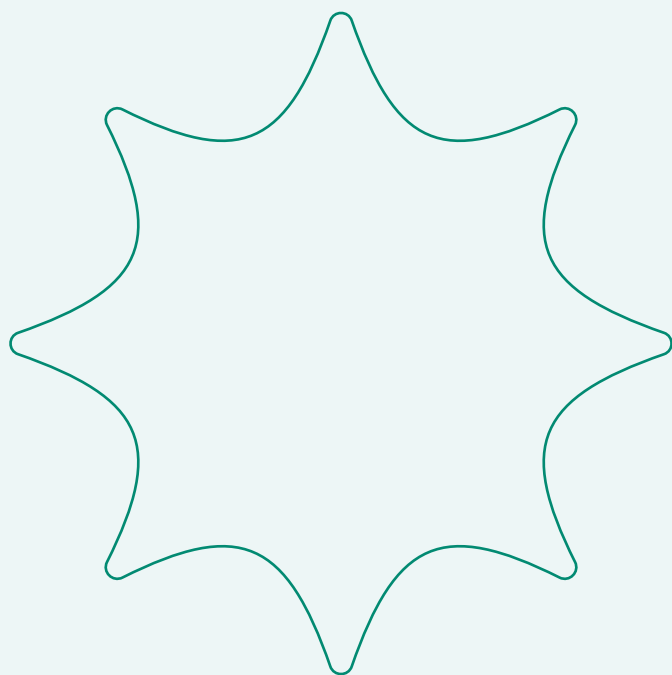
*It's not just about developing while playing soccer—it's about being part of a community where everyone's voice matters. [In our organization] democracy is part of our everyday experience, and it gives young people the confidence to use their voice and participate in their communities"*

**EUROPE, YOUNG CHANGEMAKER FOCUS GROUP**

When we limit the definition of success in youth sport to only winning or rankings, current systems fail to realize the broader value of sport for long-term peer and community contribution. Research shows that when competition is connected to broader development goals—emphasizing teamwork, empathy, resilience, and social responsibility—youth are more likely to transfer these skills into adulthood and actively contribute to their communities.

For example, youth involved in sport-for-social-change programs recognized the importance of competition not just as a measure of success but as a vehicle for learning cooperation, leadership, and social accountability. Critically, program designs that explicitly linked competition to values beyond winning—such as civic engagement, social cohesion, and mentoring—produced the strongest effects on sustained peer leadership.

Early participation in sports correlates with higher rates of civic engagement and volunteering in adulthood, showing that the skills cultivated through thoughtful competitive experiences persist over time. Youth who experience competitions framed around learning, collaboration, and fair play are more likely to engage in community initiatives, peer mentoring, and leadership roles later in life. In contrast, systems that emphasize performance-only outcomes often foster stress, dropout, and disengagement, limiting these long-term contributions.



### PLAY #3: LOGIC AND OUTCOMES OF INACTION

System	Current Logic and Orientation	Examples of How It Plays Out
<b>Cultural</b>	Competition is primarily about outperforming others rather than mutual growth.	Media glorifies individual champions while sidelining team cohesion or community stories.
<b>Economic</b>	Economic returns depend on investing in elite performance outcomes, where funding is justified through medal success and marketable athletes.	Grassroots or youth-led programs struggle to secure resources.
<b>Organizational</b>	Organizational legitimacy and efficiency stems from producing elite athletes.	Coaching certifications emphasize competition preparation over holistic development.
<b>Legal</b>	Legal frameworks should primarily protect the integrity and fairness of competition as a performance arena, emphasizing rules and regulations that maintain strict standards for performance.	Legal definitions of sport success hinge on performance standards and adherence to competition rules rather than community impact or athlete well-being.
<b>Political</b>	Sport policy should center on national prestige via elite achievement, using medals and rankings as political currency.	Social inclusion programs receive limited political attention or funding.
<b>Measurement</b>	Success is defined through objective, quantifiable indicators—wins, medals, rankings—deemed reliable and justifiable.	Funding and program evaluation depend heavily on medal counts and participation rates.
<b>Technology</b>	Technology’s role is to optimize competitive performance and administrative efficiency, reinforcing elite sport priorities.	Data collected prioritizes performance metrics over social or emotional indicators.

### REIMAGINING LONG-TERM SUCCESS AND COMPETITION’S ROLE IN IT

In our reimagined future of youth sport, competition is understood in a multidimensional way that goes beyond winning and rankings. It is seen not just as a measure of performance, but as a tool to foster personal growth, teamwork, resilience, empathy, and community connection. This approach values both individual and collective success, showing how competition can support lifelong skills, social development, and stronger communities.



*A cultural shift toward embracing play and creativity in youth sports could disrupt the current highly structured, competitive models. Programs that emphasize free play, creativity, and enjoyment could make sports more appealing to a broader range of children, especially those who don't thrive in traditional competitive environments."*

**- NORTH AMERICA - REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENT**

We see this evolving perspective reflected in the work of changemakers, demonstrating the powerful impact that arises when competition is reframed to include diverse voices and experiences:

- **Drive for Life (Norway):** The program emphasizes youth-to-youth agency by organizing sports around team-based, cooperative activities. Participants develop leadership, empathy, and life skills while shaping inclusive environments—especially for marginalized or refugee participants—through peer influence and group decision-making. By focusing on collaboration over competition, Drive for Life fosters a sense of community and belonging, encouraging young people to become lifelong contributors to society.

- **Victor Gutierrez (Global):** Operating in various regions, including Latin America, Africa, and Europe, Fundación Fútbol Más uses football as a medium to promote social inclusion and community cohesion. The organization focuses on integrating values such as respect, joy, responsibility, creativity, and teamwork into its programs. Youth collaborate in inclusive match formats that promote empathy and shared responsibility, enabling them to influence how sport is structured in their communities.

- **Jim Thompson (United States of America):** The Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) is an American non-profit organization that aims to create a positive youth sports environment. Founded in 1998, PCA has delivered over 20,000 live group workshops to millions of youths across the United States. PCA equips coaches with tools to use competition as a means for teaching life skills and social-emotional learning. Youth benefit from environments that emphasize respect, character development, and resilience, with young athletes indirectly shaping sport values through feedback loops and coach-athlete dialogue.



## PLAY #3: THE OPPORTUNITY OF REIMAGINED PRIORITIES

System	Future Logic and Orientation	Examples of How It Plays Out
<b>Cultural</b>	Competition is framed as a collaborative and inclusive process that builds social skills, empathy, and lifelong relationships.	Youth-led mentorship circles are embedded into sport programs, pairing older athletes with younger peers to build life skills, community connection, and holistic growth beyond performance.
<b>Economic</b>	Funding decisions prioritize sustainability, youth empowerment, and social innovation alongside traditional returns.	Public and philanthropic funds are allocated toward dual-impact sport programs that demonstrate both athletic performance and positive community or developmental outcomes.
<b>Organizational</b>	Legitimacy in sport organizations stems from intergenerational collaboration, shared leadership, and recognizing youth as active stakeholders in competitive processes.	Coaching roles are redesigned to include emotional wellbeing facilitation, with ongoing training in trauma-informed approaches and social-emotional learning.
<b>Legal</b>	Legal frameworks should guarantee youth access to emotionally safe, growth-centered competitive environments.	New safeguarding standards expand beyond protection from harm to include access to emotionally safe, growth-centered environments with clear youth rights to support.
<b>Political</b>	Sport policies integrate mental health and life skills programming as essential components of competition.	Mental health and life skills programming is embedded in national youth sport policy frameworks, with funding and accountability tied to their performance.
<b>Measurement</b>	Success in sport is defined through multidimensional metrics that reflect youth values and holistic development—not just performance.	A dual-score system is piloted in youth leagues that tracks both game performance and indicators like resilience, teamwork, and confidence, with youth self-reflections included.
<b>Technology</b>	Technology is designed to enhance youth voice, wellbeing, and community connection alongside athletic performance tracking.	Personalized digital tools are created to track youth athletes' wellbeing alongside performance, offering daily check-ins, peer support prompts, and goal tracking to life skills.

### IMAGINING THE CHANGE: VALUES-BASED RECOGNITION

One emerging bright spot in the youth sport landscape is the rise of values-based recognition and rewards. Instead of reinforcing only wins, losses, and medal counts, these systems foster celebrations of values-driven achievements—such as teamwork, resilience, leadership, empathy, and inclusion. Allocation of “fairplay” points, counting community service hours as indicators of achievement in the

league table, or environment action credits shifts what gets recognized in competition -- showing that its true value lies not just in performance outcomes but in building skills and relationships that last long beyond the playing years.

**Let’s imagine ourselves in the shoes of a coach who has access to such a platform, where recognition comes not only from coaches or parents but also from their peers.**

**A**s a coach, I'll admit this wasn't easy at first. I was trained to focus on performance—on drills, fitness, and winning matches. The idea that young people could use an app to award each other points for things like fair play, community service, or even environmental action felt foreign, almost like it wasn't "real sport." The platform is simple: each player logs actions or behaviors they've observed in their peers, and these points accumulate to reflect both individual and team contributions. Players can see updates in real time, share reflections, and celebrate each other's accomplishments beyond the scoreboard. At the start, I struggled. Was I supposed to celebrate a clean-up initiative or teamwork moment with the same enthusiasm as a winning goal?

But once the system was in place and I saw the players use it, my perspective began to change. The kids took real ownership. They were thoughtful in awarding points to each other—not just for effort on the pitch, but for showing respect, helping a teammate, or giving back to the community. I realized they weren't replacing competition; they were expanding it to include the values they cared about. That was powerful.

It wasn't without tension. I had to unlearn parts of my own training and seek out new opportunities to build the skills I lacked—how to recognize different kinds of contributions, how to have conversations about respect and fairness, how to foster an environment where those values are seen as equal to performance. I've started advocating within my club for more training like this, because it's clear to me now: if we want to keep kids in sport longer—especially girls, who we've too often lost in the older leagues—we need to recognize the broader ways they find meaning in it.

This approach has shifted how I coach, how I connect with parents, and even how I measure my own success. Sport is still about skill and performance, but it's also about building young people's values, voices, and relationships—and that's something I would have missed if I hadn't been challenged to see it through their eyes.

By exploring this bright spot, we see how values-driven recognition systems can reframe competition as a long-term developmental tool. The potential priorities that can influence this shift include:

- ★ **Youth ownership of success definitions:** Young people are empowered to decide what behaviors and contributions matter, positioning them as producers who set the standards for recognition rather than passive participants.
- ★ **Holistic understanding of competition:** Programs intentionally emphasize values such as empathy, teamwork, resilience, and community contribution, ensuring that competition reflects broader developmental goals, not just wins and losses.



# USING THE ARCHITECTURE TO ACCELERATE TRANSFORMATION

We set out to contribute to a shared North Star: every young person experiences sport as a space to grow their agency and drive change - on their team and in their community. We approached this by analyzing the current youth sport landscape—understanding its challenges, patterns, and priorities—and by surfacing the desires and aspirations of those within it. From these insights, we developed a decision-making architecture designed to guide all system actors in reimagining priorities, embedding youth agency, and aligning actions with a future where sport contributes to holistic youth development.

To bring this to life, we shared stories of change from three key stakeholders: young people, coaches, and parents. These narratives show what can happen when priorities are reimagined and youth agency is placed at the center. Young people stepped into meaningful decision-making roles, shaping the rules, goals, and culture of sport in their environments. Coaches adapted their practices to recognize values such as collaboration, resilience, and community contribution, while parents observed their children growing not just as athletes, but as leaders. These stories reveal the ripple effect of reprioritized decisions—how intentional shifts in one part of the system can influence behaviors, norms, and expectations across others in the youth sport landscape.

As we look to the future of youth sport, we invite everyone to carry forward the following insights into how we approach, understand, resource, support, and activate youth sport:

- **Youth agency is central.** Centering youth agency across all sporting environments unlocks transformative outcomes—not only in sport but also in young people’s wider communities.
- **Redefining priorities shifts the system.** By activating youth development, agency, and contribution, we can move beyond a narrow focus on physical and performance outcomes.
- **Shared responsibility** between young people, communities, and traditional decision-makers creates more inclusive, innovative, and effective approaches to sport—from informal play to structured competition.
- **Redefining success strengthens growth.** When we shift from a “win-at-all-costs” mentality to a broader understanding of success, competition becomes a catalyst for wellbeing, empathy, and long-term growth rather than just short-term achievement. This shift powers the three big plays that can reshape youth sport for all.

- **Lasting change requires intentionality.** Transformation is not only about resources, programs, or funding—though they matter. True impact comes from intentional decisions, challenging the assumptions we hold, and rethinking what we prioritize.

Finally, we invite you to use this as a moment to pause and reflect: consider the priorities guiding your decisions, examine the assumptions behind them, and think about how your choices shape the experiences of young people, their peers, and the broader community (See **Appendix B** for a comprehensive guide).

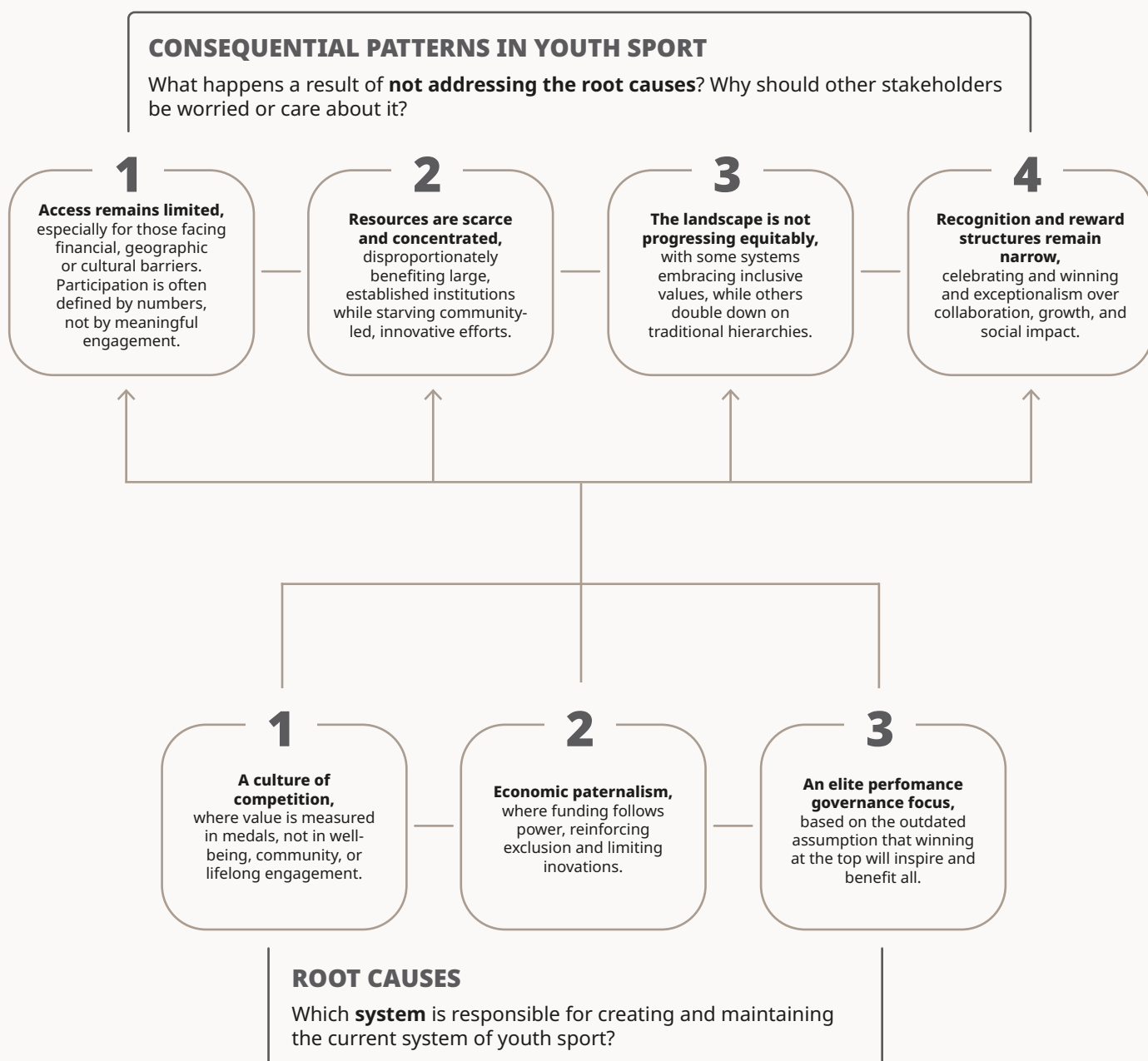
- Are you a **cultural actor**? Consider what platform, resources, or access you can offer to amplify youth voices and lived experience.
- Do you fund the **youth sport economy**? Consider how your investment priorities and incentives reinforced elite-focused, winner-takes-all sport models, and whom might this exclude.
- Do you **regulate** youth sport? Consider how you might establish or amplify systems to ensure young people meaningfully co-design policies and hold us accountable.
- Do you set local **youth sport policy**? Consider what outcomes your policies and funding decisions currently reward, and how might they shape what young people perceive as valuable in sport.
- Are you designing new **technology** for youth sport? Consider if your current tools either reinforce traditional hierarchies or empower youth agency and voice.
- Are you a **youth sport club**? Consider if and how your current policies or leadership models reinforce adult control or centralization.
- Do you **measure** youth sport engagement? Consider what indicators you have traditionally used to define success in youth sport, and what they might overlook.

By embedding youth agency intentionally into decision-making, we can move from short-term outcomes to sustained systems change, ensuring youth sport fulfills its promise as a space for leadership, growth, and positive impact.

# APPENDIX A: ROOT CAUSES OF YOUTH SPORT INEQUALITIES

The root causes in youth sport play a critical role in shaping the problems we see and the recurring patterns across the landscape. By uncovering these causes, we can better understand what drives current decision-making priorities—and, just as importantly, how we might begin to correct them.

## ROOT CAUSES INFLUENCING OUR CURRENT LANDSCAPE



# APPENDIX B: REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT REFLECTION GUIDE

Realizing our North Star requires all of us—it's not just about changing organizational systems or media narratives, but about collective action across the entire youth sport landscape. We invite you to use this report not as a fixed solution, but as a tool for reflection and guidance—a way to examine how you make decisions as a stakeholder within, and across, the systems that shape youth sport.

## CENTERING YOUTH AGENCY IN... CULTURAL SYSTEMS

As our cultural systems begin to prioritize decisions that redefine the purpose of youth sport—placing belonging, agency, and holistic development at the center of how we understand performance and competition—those closest to young people in sport will play a critical role in shaping what is “normal” in this reimagined system. To move this vision forward, we invite these decision-makers to pause and ask:

- 1. What have you come to accept as “normal” in youth sport — and who does that serve?**
- 2. What outcomes do you most often celebrate or reinforce? How are these shaping what young people believe matters?**
- 3. Where might you create or support space for young people to shape the narrative of sport in your community?**
- 4. What platform, resources, or access can you offer to amplify youth voices and lived experience?**

## CENTERING YOUTH AGENCY IN... ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

In a reimagined youth sport landscape, economic systems prioritize aligning resources with long-term youth and community-centered impact instead of short-term performance results. To move this vision forward, we invite these decision-makers from foundations to aid organizations, from corporate giving to private equity to consider:

- 1. How have our investment priorities and incentives reinforced elite-focused, winner-takes-all sport models, and whom might this exclude?**
- 2. How might we design or support shared governance and co-managed investment models that amplify youth and community leadership in funding decisions?**
- 3. What metrics and accountability frameworks can we implement to evaluate dual-impact outcomes—both athletic and social—in our portfolio?**

## CENTERING YOUTH AGENCY IN... ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

Organizations are already beginning to reimagine the structures through which youth voice is heard—from feedback surveys to youth boards to co-designed rules of play. However, the ways in which youth voice is centered can continue to evolve and innovate as these systems prioritize shaping sport organizations to support young people to lead authentically and align their participation with purpose.

- 1. What organizational structures or practices have you accepted as “the way things are”? Who benefits most from those, and who might be left out?**
- 2. How are your current policies or leadership models reinforcing adult control or centralization? Where could leadership be shared or made more adaptive?**
- 3. When have you seen young people offer valuable insights or leadership in your program? What systems could you put in place to make that input consistent and influential?**

## CENTERING YOUTH AGENCY IN... POLITICAL SYSTEMS

How politics plays a role in sport undoubtedly differs across global contexts and levels of government—from policymakers, school boards, mayors, and municipal councils to youth councils and National Olympic Committees (NOCs). Each operates within different administrations and systems of governance, and each plays a distinct role in shaping youth sport. While the influence of these actors will continue to be shaped by shifting political priorities, the opportunity remains for these political systems of influence to ensure that sport policy reflects the full range of reasons young people engage in sport—so their identities, goals, and interests are considered at every level of decision-making. In moving this vision forward, we invite reflection on:

- 1. What assumptions have we normalized in youth sport policy — and whose interests are prioritized by those assumptions?**
- 2. Which outcomes do our policies and funding decisions currently reward, and how might they shape what young people perceive as valuable in sport?**
- 3. What existing platforms, resources, or decision-making structures can we leverage or create to amplify youth voices and ensure their lived experiences inform policy?**

## CENTERING YOUTH AGENCY IN... LEGAL SYSTEMS

Legal frameworks shape who can participate, how they are protected, and the standards programs must meet—safeguarding youth and ensuring accountability across the system. Stakeholders within these systems can continue to reimagine how these protections are enacted, centering youth agency as both the priority and the outcome when they prioritize protecting and enabling youth participation, leadership, and holistic development through rights-based governance. To drive this vision, we further invite reflection on:

- 1. What legacy pressures and institutional priorities have historically defined my leadership focus, and how might they have limited the inclusion and empowerment of youth in our governance?**

- 2. How can I proactively shift governance culture from one of institutional protection toward genuine youth-centered equity, voice, and leadership?**

- 3. What concrete governance structures or platforms can I establish or amplify to ensure young people meaningfully co-design policies and hold us accountable?**

## CENTERING YOUTH AGENCY IN... MEASUREMENT SYSTEMS

As measurement systems begin to shift toward valuing what matters to youth—such as personal growth, agency, and diverse definitions of success—funders, grant makers, research partners, national sport bodies, youth participants, and program leaders can redefine how success in youth sport is understood and evaluated, influencing the direction, accountability, and learning within youth sport systems. Driving this vision forward includes reflecting on the following:

- 1. What indicators have you traditionally used to define success in youth sport? Who do these measurements serve, and what might they overlook?**
- 2. Where have you seen youth or community voices influence measurement criteria, and how might you expand or deepen that participation?**
- 3. What steps could you take to support or pilot new evaluation tools that balance competitive performance with personal development?**

## CENTERING YOUTH AGENCY IN... TECHNOLOGY SYSTEMS

Finally, reimagining youth sport also means reimagining the role of technology—from digital tools that monitor athlete performance to systems that enable equitable access and organizational development within the youth sport landscape. Sport tech developers, platform providers, and social media companies can contribute by prioritizing the use of technology to enhance youth voice, connection, and holistic development in sport. For this vision to align with our north star, let's reflect on:

- 1. How has our focus on physical performance data historically shaped power dynamics between youth athletes, coaches, and institutions — and what unintended harms might this have caused?**

**2. In what ways do our current tools either reinforce traditional hierarchies or empower youth agency and voice?**

**3. How can we intentionally shift from being controllers of data to facilitators of youth-led collaboration, wellbeing, and decision-making?**

This is not about having every answer—but about committing to a cycle of reflection, accountability, and adjustment. The systems shaping youth sport are shifting—often in unpredictable ways. Let’s ensure our decisions stay anchored in what matters most: creating environments that prioritize youth agency as both a process and an outcome.



# APPENDIX C: REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT REFLECTION GUIDE

**Youth Sport:** Youth sport refers to the structured or organized practice of physical activity among children and adolescents, typically facilitated through schools, community programs, or sport organizations. Beyond physical activity, youth sport is a social institution that transmits values, fosters development, and reflects broader cultural and systemic dynamics.

**Systems Change:** the process of shifting the underlying structures, relationships, mental models, and rules that shape a system. In youth sport, systems change means addressing inequities and redesigning norms, incentives, and practices so that young people's voices, agency, and well-being drive the system, rather than adult-centric or profit-driven priorities.

**Root Cause Analysis:** an approach to uncovering the deeper factors that drive persistent challenges in a system. Rather than addressing only symptoms, it identifies underlying causes that sustain inequities or harmful patterns. In youth sport, this might involve asking why certain groups face barriers to access, why norms prioritize competition over belonging, or how policies reinforce exclusion. By naming these root causes, we can reorient decision-making toward systemic correction and long-term transformation.

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**Three Horizons Methodology:** a strategic framework used in futures thinking to explore how change unfolds over time. It organizes thinking into three overlapping timeframes:

- **Horizon 1** represents current systems and practices that may be effective now but are beginning to lose relevance.

- **Horizon 2** includes emerging innovations, tensions, and experiments that challenge or disrupt the status quo.

- **Horizon 3** envisions the long-term future we aspire to build.

By mapping across these horizons, stakeholders in youth sport can better understand how present-day decisions and innovations might bridge today's challenges with tomorrow's possibilities, supporting a smoother transition toward a more inclusive and youth-centered future.

**Trend Spotting:** the process of identifying and analyzing emerging patterns that signal change. These trends—whether technological, cultural, social, environmental, economic, or political—help us anticipate disruptions and opportunities. In the youth sport context, trend spotting informs system redesign that centers youth agency, belonging, and community contribution.

**Foresight Casting:** Process that involves creating plausible future scenarios based on current data and trends. This practice allows decision-makers to visualize multiple futures and stress-test strategies to ensure resilience and alignment with long-term goals. In youth sport, foresight casting helps stakeholders imagine futures where young people's voices shape norms and institutions.

**Foresight Panel:** To ground this work in lived expertise, Ashoka convened a global steering committee composed of brands, funders, corporations, social entrepreneurs, grassroots leaders, and young changemakers. This diverse panel acted as a foresight group—sharing insights, surfacing blind spots, and co-creating a shared vision for the future of youth sport. By integrating youth voices into foresight processes, the panel modeled systems change in practice.

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# REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORT

A DECISION-MAKING PLAYBOOK FOR YOUTH AGENCY

Questions? Reach out to us at [sportforchangemaking@ashoka.org](mailto:sportforchangemaking@ashoka.org)



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*Ashoka's Reimagining Youth Sport project has been selected as part of the Collective365 series of the Olympism365 Innovation Hub, a collaboration between the International Olympic Committee, Beyond Sport, and Women Win, as one of the pioneering innovations driving social impact through sport.*

