



NEIGHBOURHOOD SPORT FACILITY

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**NEIGHBOURHOOD
SPORT FACILITY**



ATELIER LOIDL

Trampolins in the yard of Park am
Gleisdreieck in Berlin.

LIKES Research Reports on Physical Activity and Health 327

ISBN (nid.) 978-951-790-425-4 | ISSN 0357-2498

ISBN (pdf) 978-951-790-424-7 | ISSN 2342-4788

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www.likes.fi

Pictures: Riikka Leinonen and Janne Saario (Cover Page)

Printing factory: Grano Oy Jyväskylä, Finland



IMPROVING PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES AT LOCAL ARENAS **IMPALA**

EU-Financed research and developing
project 2015–2016 in Finland

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CHAPTER III

International examples based on Impala case studies

The Implementation of the EU Physical Activity guidelines
on infrastructure development in Italy

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The national context in a nutshell

Italy is undoubtedly still behind in the process of building a reliable and broadly shared framework for enhancing physical activity (PA) - and therefore health - among communities, within the urban spaces and the everyday environments in which most people live: cities and neighbourhoods. Until today, there has been no comprehensive regulation addressing the issue of promoting the practice of PA at national level: no government, nor other national private or public institutions have produced effective guidelines, directives or pilot projects including such a perspective that capable of having a powerful and positive effect on the whole national territory. The lack of recognized and unanimous standards and requirements to be met thanks to the implementation -at the local level- of neighbourhood sports facilities (NSF) enhancing PA among citizens represents a great deficiency in our national system, one that is growing increasingly evident as the promotion of PA develops and increases on many other international agendas. It has been difficult for any institution to produce and implement effective strategies and actions on a national scale, due to a strong sector-based approach, a still complicated constitutional framework that rules on responsibilities and task subdivisions between the central government and the different regional governments, and the heavy bureaucracy which often oppresses our regulatory systems.

Thus, regional governments, metropolitan systems, municipalities and other organizations acting at the local level have taken responsibilities for implementing policies and programmes, as well as operative projects, for building

new networks, infrastructures and facilities capable of enhancing PA among the city dwellers. This means that, without a broader national framework, each local government is empowered to act (or to neglect) according to its willpower and cognizance, setting the priorities for local development among which PA and the construction and management of NSFs may or may not be included. When referring to “neighbourhood sports facilities” in Italy one is conditioned to think primarily about gyms, sport centres, and other indoor sport and recreational facilities within local districts, which are most likely private and paid services. These are far from the actual definition of outdoor, free of charge, and highly accessible installations. In fact, even though Italian cities and towns are historically quite dense and compact, and most times rich in public spaces and allowing a fair accessibility to recreational parks and public areas in which to freely perform any kind of PA, within our collective consciousness the practice of sport and PA is strongly associated with specific indoor structures and settings. According to the Special Eurobarometer 412 “Sport and Physical Activity”, Italy is the European country with the highest use of gyms and indoor sport centres for the practice of PA (19%; European Commission, 2014, 38). Moreover, this national trend is exacerbated by the strong presence of private organizations operating in the field -therefore primarily pursuing a direct financial revenue, instead of long-term, social, public health and urban quality benefits- and often outdoing the public sector.

Children's autonomy and independent mobility

The lack of available and accessible NSFs -including children's playgrounds, small-scale sports facilities, etc.- affects children and young people, in particular. It can be argued that this lack is intimately bound up with the low rate of autonomy and independent mobility that can be observed among Italian children. According to comparative research led by Shaw et al. (2015), Finland is by far the highest performing country in aggregate rank scores of children's independent mobility; Italy, along with Portugal, is penultimate. In Italy, a child gets the same permission (e.g. going alone to places within walking distance) approximately three or four years after children living in the best performing countries (Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Japan along with Finland). The freedom to roam within walking distance is given to 17.5% of Italian children compared with the mean of 65% in the countries in the study. The lack of autonomy implies that children up to the age of 11 are often not allowed to roam neighbourhoods and visit the facilities while a certain autonomy is permitted after that age. Up to two decades ago, they were allowed to play in yards, in the immediate vicinity of the home, to roam the neighbourhoods for playing and for small errands, to be independent on the way to school or to informal spaces, playgrounds, and oratories. The latter have been used for decades as safe places in-between home and public space.

In Italy, the playgrounds on school premises are not available for use after school hours. The rules of many apartment buildings do not allow children to play in the common spaces and the freedom of play of children and

adolescents in the playgrounds is often restricted by municipal provisions that prohibit play with balls or "noisy" games. Moreover, according to Save the Children (2014), which elaborated data from the National Statistical Institute (ISTAT), there is a remarkable gap between northern-central and southern Italy concerning the rate in using spaces for play. 38.4% of Italian children between the ages of 3-11 play in parks, in Tuscany 62.1%, in Sicily the 12.6%; 25.5% play in courtyards, 39.2% in Emilia-Romagna, 11.2% in Basilicata; 16.1% play in oratories, 28.5% in Lombardy, 6% in Campania; 14.2% play in informal green areas, 41.2% Bolzano, 3.9% Sicily; 6.4% play in streets not congested by traffic, 14.7% in Umbria, 2.5% in Lazio. These data, matching those described above, show a dramatic gap in the rights of children to use public spaces, even if accompanied by adults: children aged 3 to 11 living in the south of Italy are allowed to play in public spaces three to four times less than those living in the North. These data seem to be associated with the rate of children aged 3 to 17 not participating in sport (national 28.1%, 8.8% Bolzano, 48.1% Campania; ISTAT, 2013), and with the rate of obesity and overweight in children aged 8 to 9 (national 30.7%, Bolzano 17.4%, Campania 47.8%; ISS, 2016).

Innovative practices and good examples

In spite of these discouraging premises, things are slowly evolving, thanks to the formalization of national networks and movements. In fact, since 1995 Italy has "imported" and

started to develop, at the national level, an Italian Healthy Cities network, officially transformed into a non-profit organization in 2001 and gathering today more than 70 municipalities across the nation (Janss Lafond, 2015). Thanks to this WHO-promoted initiative, a growing number of local authorities have begun to build and share knowledge and expertise on the promotion and implementation of multilevel and intersectoral policies, initiatives and projects for building healthier urban environments for all, also through enhancing PA at the local scale. Associated cities aim at building a shared platform for collecting, analysing, and disseminating the best practices and most successful experiences throughout the country, giving each other support and guidance for further implementations. The obvious limitation of relying on such an official, but yet voluntary and non-constraining organization, instead of having the obligation to meet shared standards while implementing projects at the local level following broader and more global directions, is that the peculiarities of each site, and of each neighbourhood may vary greatly from city to city and town to town. This is true in Italy even more so than in other European countries. Thus, the attempt to intervene through the adaptation and the re-proposition of projects carried out in other, different urban realities (e.g. in terms of urban characteristics, city shape, culture-related habits and behaviours) is not always the right approach, often leading to unfitting and underused interventions. A further step towards the construction of a national framework for promoting PA within the urban context is represented by the recently created Active Cities network, which has called for action in this field since 2012. Similarly to the process undergone by the Healthy Cities national programme, Active Cities is still not an officially

recognized network, therefore it is not capable of driving change and coercing municipalities to promote PA at the local and neighbourhood level in accordance with certain designated standards and procedures.

A growing number of regional and municipal governments (often in collaboration with private companies) are implementing policies, plans and projects for promoting PA and the construction of sports facilities at the local scale. For instance, the Tuscany region has adopted, starting in 2012, a multi-year Regional Plan for promoting sport culture and the practice of sport and leisure-time physical activity within its territory, with the aim of granting equal and fair accessibility to sport and PA, promoting healthy lifestyles, and boosting social integration as the basis for welfare development. Such a multisectoral plan represents the framework on a regional level, setting the goals and tracing the path for any kind of intervention for PA promotion, including the construction and maintenance of new NSFs, in collaboration with individual municipalities (for this purpose, Tuscany's regional government allocated almost 7 million euros for interventions in between 2012 and 2015). Also at municipal level a rapidly growing number of cities across the country, thanks to local administrative initiatives and often also to administrator's personal interests, have or are implementing outdoor sports facilities. At times, these are integrated in broader territorial systems trying to create a real network of installations for the construction of a common vision (i.e. Rimini), or they may be single interventions, built ad-hoc for responding to special and highly local needs. The case of the city of Rimini and its hinterland is one worth citing. In fact, through the adoption of the municipal strategic plan Rimini Venture 2027, the realization of many different NSFs has been planned and

included as a core action in a broader spatial and time framework, addressing people's wellbeing, along with tackling urban quality issues and environmental concerns. Finally, we would like to mention one last case, somehow exemplifying the paradigm of the current Italian situation. An outdoor public space with sport and recreational facilities and the installation Plug & Play was inaugurated in December 2015 in a peripheral neighbourhood of the metropolitan city of Bologna. It was an urban re-qualification project conceived for contrasting urban decay and abandon while providing the district with new PA installations. Subsidized and promoted by a private foundation in collaboration with the municipality, the project was the outcome of a participatory process culminating with an international design competition. Despite the participatory process, the direct involvement of many different public and private actors and stakeholders, and the long period of gestation (over two years), the absence of a well-established regulatory and operational framework guiding local implementation from a higher level resulted in an embarrassing situation of impasse. In fact, as of today, this public space and its brand new sports facilities (fitness, parkour, basketball courts etc.) have not been used because of management disputes and responsibility issues. The everyday administration of this NSF represents a major, and apparently insurmountable matter around which the municipality, the local community and the involved actors have failed to reach a compromise.

By focusing on children's autonomy, two interesting examples can be reported. The first is the project Ready, Steady, Go! financed by Mondelēz International Foundation, coordinated by Save the Children Italy in collaboration with some partners, including the two largest Italian Sport for All Associations (CSI and UISP). The project, begun in 2011,

focuses on citizens' quality of life in 14 deprived areas in Italy, including neighbourhoods of large cities. Playgrounds, green areas, skate parks and urban vegetable gardens were built or rehabilitated to provide PA opportunities and healthy nutrition education to 105,000 children and parents, with the involvement of 1,500 teachers and social operators as well. In Genoa, a city with a high presence of migrants (9.5% of the population), mostly from Central and South America (40.6% of registered migrants), the project is located in the district of Sestri Ponente. It involves local schools, NGOs and existing facilities such as the Gianni Rodari park and a skate park. Training courses for teachers and social workers have been offered as well as specific courses for children.

The second example is the project "Primosport 0246" funded by Verdesport, a foundation of Benetton. It is building several playgrounds designed to promote PA and sport for children between the ages of 0 and 6. The first "0246" playground was built in la Ghirada, the Benetton sport centre in Treviso. A second one is now situated in Rome. Finally, three mini-playgrounds have been built in school yards in the Verona area and further playgrounds are planned in eight cities in Italy. One of the main characteristics is that their use is monitored through a research project led by the University of Verona (Fumagalli 2012; Tortella 2012) concerning children's learning of motor skills and competences.

The way ahead: defining policy for the promotion of neighbourhood sports facilities in Italy

The development of a strategy for the promotion of a system of neighbourhood sports facilities in Italy is undoubtedly a step that has the potential to make more effective the existing policy that, at both the national and local level, aims at promoting individual healthier lifestyles and wellbeing. It is also a critical action concerning the promotion of higher level of autonomy and independent mobility among children and young people. In this view, a series of both political and strategic interventions seem to be necessary in the near future. First, there is the need to define a comprehensive regulation addressing the issue of promoting PA as part of citizens' daily routine, with a specific focus on children and youth. Italy, differently from the rest of the European countries, does not have a Ministry of Sport. The Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI) is, de facto, the governing body that is in charge of defining policy and strategies in this important area of society. At the same time, regions have part of the responsibility, especially the area of the sport for all (Borgogni, Digennaro & Sterchele 2015). The collaboration among the state, CONI and the regions is weak and this results in a series of disarticulated interventions that have feeble effects on the Italian population. To provide with equal opportunities to engage in sports activities, there is a need for long-term planning that reduces the huge gaps that can be easily noted by comparing the rate of participation registered in the richest and more developed regions (e.g. Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige) and the less developed ones (e.g. Campania, Calabria).

To fill these gaps, a plan based on the construction of NSFs at a local level is regarded as an effective strategy by promoting a small-scale and easily accessible place in which people can engage in PA. It is easily understandable that the improvement of participation rate and the reduction of inequalities are closely tied to the establishment of proper environments. A large part of the available public funds are, devoted to building new sports facilities for national and international sporting events, and are expected to be used by a restricted number of people. This kind of sport venue presents at least two weaknesses: first, in many cases, these venues struggle to produce sufficient revenue to sustain annual operating costs; second, they have a low impact on the rate of participation among the population, especially in low-income groups of population. From this perspective, diverse Italian cities have partially changed their strategies and have seized upon local sports facilities as a means to redeveloping specific districts within their downtowns. This type of intervention is considered to be a catalytic factor that spurs development in the immediate surrounding area in which sports facilities are built. However, regardless of the positive experience and the encouraging results that have been achieved, there is still the need to better define sports facilities development strategies by nesting them in the policy of urban development and regeneration. Typically, sports facilities are planned separately from other programmes, which often results in a spatially isolated approach and design. On the contrary, there is the necessity to foster intersectoral collaboration that includes different policy sectors (e.g. sports, health, urban planning) and that, in the same vein, comprises collaboration between the public, private and third-sector.

The efficacy of the interventions described above is intimately bound up with three critical factors that need to

be carefully addressed by policymakers in the near future. First, it is essential to encourage people to be more active by fostering accessibility and the use of the available facilities through safe and attractive design of public spaces, the presence of sufficient cycle parking, car-free areas. In other words, the instalment of an NSF should be the pillar of an all-encompassing urban plan that fosters accessibility and active movement. Second, the management of the available facilities should be taken into consideration as a central aspect. Considering the specific nature of such a kind of facilities, the management should support the multiple uses

of the available spaces allowing a large number of users to practice a large variety of sports and PA. Finally, it should be logical to promote the perspective of the Active and Healthy City model, in which the promotion of an active lifestyle plays a crucial role. Therefore, the enhancement of number of small, local sports facilities should not be considered as a “separate functionality” but as an important step that is central in the promotion of living quality in general. This requires a change in the priorities that policymakers set at local level, which should also be accompanied by a change in the urban planning process.

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