



# Policy Brief

## FROM PLAYGROUNDS TO PROGRESS: STRENGTHENING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORTS INFRASTRUCTURE IN SINDH

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### INTRODUCTION

Youth development in Pakistan is at a critical juncture. With nearly two-thirds of the population under the age of 30, the country's demographic profile presents both opportunities and challenges. Sports infrastructure, when accessible, inclusive, and safe, has the potential to foster physical health, mental resilience, academic performance, and social cohesion among young people. Yet, in Sindh, youth participation in sports remains constrained by inadequate facilities, cultural barriers, and fragmented policy frameworks.

This policy brief synthesizes evidence from a mixed-methods study conducted under the RASTA project, which examined the availability, accessibility, and utilization of youth sports facilities in Sindh. The study combined a systematic review of global and national evidence, focus group discussions with youth, parents, coaches, and policymakers, and a quantitative survey of 1,032 youth across four districts. The findings provide a comprehensive picture of the barriers and enablers shaping youth sports participation and offer actionable recommendations for policy reform.

### METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods design to capture both breadth and depth of evidence:

- **Systematic Review:** A catalogued source list of 79 documents was developed, including international guidelines (UNCRPD, WHO Safety Standards, International Youth Sports Standards), regional frameworks (European accessibility guidelines, Paralympics Australia universal design), and Pakistan-specific studies on infrastructure gaps, governance issues, and policy implementation. The review was structured around the PICO framework, focusing on youth populations, interventions related to sports facility provision, comparators across national and regional practices, and outcomes of accessibility, safety, inclusiveness, and effectiveness.



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- **Qualitative Research:** Focus group discussions were conducted with youth, parents, coaches, and policymakers in Karachi, Hyderabad, Kemari, and TMK. Themes explored included leisure patterns, facility availability, barriers to participation, family and community influences, and recommendations for improvement.
- **Quantitative Survey:** A structured questionnaire was administered to 1,032 youth aged 18–24. Independent samples t-tests, chi-square analyses, and regression models were used to examine associations between availability, access and utilization of sports facilities with outcomes such as psychological distress, physical health, academic resilience, academic performance, and substance use risk.

This triangulated approach ensured methodological rigor, transparency, and contextual relevance, allowing for robust conclusions and policy recommendations.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

### *Global Standards vs. Local Gaps*

The systematic review conducted under the study revealed a striking contrast between global expectations for youth sports facilities and the realities observed in Pakistan, particularly in Sindh. Internationally, sports infrastructure is designed to meet rigorous standards of accessibility, safety, inclusivity, and program quality. Guidelines from organizations such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the World Health Organization, and international youth sports federations emphasize universal design principles, equitable access for girls and marginalized groups, and the integration of sports into broader youth development agendas. These frameworks highlight sports not merely as recreational activities but as essential components of physical health, mental resilience, and social cohesion.

In Pakistan, however, the policy framework remains fragmented and underdeveloped. Funding for sports facilities is inconsistent, enforcement of standards is weak, and exclusionary practices persist. Infrastructure gaps are evident in both urban and rural areas, with facilities often poorly maintained, inaccessible to disadvantaged groups, or lacking basic amenities. Stakeholder coordination is limited, resulting in duplication of efforts and missed opportunities for synergy between government departments, schools, and community organizations. This inconsistency between global standards and local realities underscores the urgent need for reform and investment in youth sports infrastructure.

### *Youth Perspectives*

The voices of young people themselves provide critical insight into the barriers and opportunities surrounding sports participation. Focus group discussions revealed a growing shift toward digital entertainment and sedentary lifestyles, driven largely by parental safety concerns and the absence of safe, accessible outdoor spaces. In Karachi, while facilities were more numerous, they were



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frequently overcrowded, expensive, or poorly maintained, limiting their usability. In Hyderabad, the situation was even more dire, with a near absence of well-maintained public grounds.

Youth identified several barriers to participation, including financial constraints, safety concerns, academic pressures, and restrictive gender norms. Despite these challenges, there was a strong and consistent demand for sports opportunities. Young people articulated the benefits of sports in terms of physical health, mental well-being, academic performance, and social cohesion. They emphasized that sports provided a sense of belonging, reduced stress, and fostered resilience in the face of academic and social pressures. Their perspectives highlight both the unmet demand for sports infrastructure and the transformative potential of inclusive, accessible facilities.

### ***Parents and Coaches***

Parents and coaches play a pivotal role in shaping youth engagement with sports, yet both groups face significant challenges. Parents often prioritize academics over sports, reflecting limited awareness of the developmental benefits of physical activity. Safety concerns, particularly for girls, further restrict participation, with cultural norms reinforcing gendered barriers. Coaches, meanwhile, reported high levels of absenteeism among youth, often linked to parental fears or competing academic demands.

The lack of structured programs, trained staff, and mentorship pathways compounds these challenges. Coaches emphasized the need for professional development, standardized training, and structured competitions to sustain youth engagement. Both parents and coaches recommended awareness campaigns to highlight the benefits of sports, improved public facilities, female-friendly spaces, and structured coaching programs. Their perspectives underscore the importance of engaging families and educators in efforts to expand and sustain youth sports participation.

### ***Policymakers***

Policymakers acknowledged the systemic challenges facing youth sports in Sindh. Insufficient funding, fragmented policy frameworks, and urban development pressures that reduce available space for sports were identified as critical barriers. Safety, accessibility, and gender inclusion emerged as priority concerns. Policymakers emphasized the need for increased budget allocations, stronger public-private partnerships, and robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to ensure accountability and impact.

Their recognition of these challenges is an important step toward reform, but translating acknowledgment into action requires political will, sustained investment, and cross-sectoral collaboration. Policymakers' perspectives highlight the need for coordinated strategies that integrate sports into broader youth development and urban planning agendas.

### ***Quantitative Evidence***

This study showed that sports facilities clearly bring many benefits for young people, but the findings also show that availability alone is not enough. While youth in areas with facilities reported lower distress, better health, and stronger academic resilience, the data highlight that without



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supportive programming, risks such as substance use can emerge. This means investments in infrastructure must go hand in hand with preventive measures that guide safe and healthy engagement. Gender and equity issues also stand out. Girls showed strong academic resilience but poorer physical health, pointing to barriers in access and participation. Policies must ensure that facilities are safe, affordable, and welcoming for all youth, with special attention to gender-sensitive programming. Addressing these inequities will help ensure that the benefits of sports reach every group rather than reinforcing existing divides.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that sports infrastructure plays a vital role in reducing distress, improving health, and strengthening academic resilience among youth. At the same time, it revealed that facilities alone are not enough—without inclusive programming and preventive measures, risks such as substance use may arise.

To maximize benefits and minimize harms, policymakers must prioritize investments that combine infrastructure with equity-focused programming, community engagement, and strong governance. By embedding preventive education, mentorship, and safe access into every facility, sports can become a true protective force.

Taken together, these findings call for immediate action: to treat sports infrastructure not as a luxury, but as an essential investment in youth wellbeing and resilience. With integrated reforms, Sindh can build a future where every young person thrives in safe, supportive, and empowering environments.

## KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following specific recommendations are proposed:

### Decentralize Sports Financing:

- Allocate ring-fenced budgets at the Union Council level through Sindh’s Finance and Sports Departments.
- Ensure funds cover playground rehabilitation, amenities (lighting, washrooms, seating), equipment, and community programs.
- Implement standardized reporting and oversight mechanisms to prevent leakage and ensure accountability.

### Professionalize Facility Management:

- Appoint trained facility managers under Municipal Corporations and the Sindh Sports Department.
- Managers should oversee maintenance, safety, scheduling, and community engagement.



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- Prioritize high-use grounds in Karachi, Hyderabad, and peri-urban districts where neglect is most acute.

## Reintegrate Structured Physical Education:

- Sindh Education Department should recruit trained PT teachers and protect weekly sports periods.
- Open school grounds after hours for community use, especially in low-income urban schools.
- Integrate sports into academic calendars to balance academic pressures with physical activity.

## Ensure Gender-Responsive Access:

- Collaborate with the Sindh Women Development Department to establish female-friendly spaces.
- Provide secure boundaries, lighting, female-only timings, and trained female coaches.
- Immediate improvements should target Karachi East, Kemari, and Hyderabad, where gender barriers are most pronounced.

## Integrate Mental Health Promotion while mitigating risk for substance use:

- Partner with NGOs to embed counseling, mentorship, and psychosocial support into sports programs.
- Mandate trained supervision and substance-use prevention programming at all sports facilities.
- Pilot programs in high-stress urban areas within 6–12 months, followed by phased scale-up.

## Invest in Coach Training and Certification:

- Pakistan Sports Board and Sindh Sports Department should establish standardized training and certification programs.
- Emphasize safety, inclusion, and youth development, with mandatory annual refreshers.
- Provide incentives for coaches working in underserved districts.

## Revive Community Tournaments and Traditional Sports:

- Local governments should organize seasonal inter-school and neighbourhood tournaments.
- Include traditional games (kabaddi, Gilli Danda, wrestling) alongside cricket and football to foster cultural identity and cohesion.

## Rehabilitate and Maintain Community Grounds:

- Upgrade facilities with proper lighting, seating, washrooms, and safe surfaces.
- Ensure consistent usability through regular maintenance schedules.

## Encourage Regular Utilization:

- Organize weekly community tournaments, peer-led clubs, and structured schedules.
- Move beyond availability to sustained engagement.

## Launch Parental Awareness Campaigns:



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- Conduct workshops highlighting the physical, mental, and academic benefits of sports.
- Target parents in low-income urban areas where academic pressures and safety concerns most restrict participation.

### Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Planning & Development Department should implement frameworks to track facility use, participation, gender inclusion, and youth outcomes.
- Use data-driven planning to guide resource allocation and policy reforms.