Constraints to Participation in Sport in Developing Countries: A Comparison

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Physical inactivity is becoming a major problem worldwide, but especially in developing countries where activity levels are dropping sharply (Adedoyin, Ibrahim, Awotidebe, Ativie & Oyeyemi, 2014). Physical inactivity is not only an important risk factor for non-communicable diseases such as obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers, but the fourth leading cause of death in developing countries (WHO, 2009). In South Africa, a middle income, emerging country with one of the highest unemployment rates in the world (CIA world fact book, 2015), the condition of hypokinesis (diminished or abnormally slow movement) is cause for alarm.

Tertiary institutions provide excellent opportunities for influencing sport participation because students constitute a significant group of young adults whose behaviour and attitudes, as future opinion leaders and policy makers, can shape societal principles and norms (Leslie, Sparling & Owen, 2001). For this reason, our research focused on university students. However, we also wanted to know if South African students’ problems differ much from those of students in other developing countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Malaysia, Turkey and Uganda) as this answer could help inform decisions on how to address the challenges.

A meta-analysis of students’ perceived constraints to physical activity in low to middle income countries was done. Students in Malaysia found lack of information about facilities to be the most constraining factor to participation in sport (Yusof & Shah, 2007), while in Turkey, the most profound constraint was found to be society (Öcal, 2014). “Exercise tires me” was the biggest barrier to physical exercise among students in South Africa (Muzindutsi, Nishimwe-Niyimpanira & Sekhampu, 2014). Ghanaian students found lack of participation skills to be the most constraining factor to participation in physical activity (Adam, Hiamey & Afenyo, 2015). Male students in Uganda complained about the “lack of the right equipment to exercise” while their female counterparts found “lack of motivation” to be the biggest barrier (Nizeyimana & Philips, 2006). The major constraint to participation in sport among students in Nigeria was lack of time (Awotidebe, Adedoyin, Adegbesan, Babalola, Olukoju, Mbada, Chirwa & Bisiriyu, 2014).

 Upon the comparison across the countries examined, the major constraints to sport participation seem to differ among the students of Ghana, Malaysia, Nigeria, South Africa, Turkey and the female and male students of Uganda. These results allude to the complexity of the barriers inhibiting sport participation and the likelihood that a general approach to dealing with the decrease in physical activity is unlikely to be effective. Each country might therefore need to develop its own strategies for addressing the challenges. However, this does not imply that decision-makers cannot learn from the experiences of those in other countries.