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Football United® : addressing equity gaps through Football

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Football United® was founded in 2006 at UNSW's School of Public Health and Community Medicine (SPHCM) Sydney, where the program headquarters remains auspiced by UNSW-SPHCM. Football United® was developed from a vision that people's love for Football (soccer) can be used to build opportunities for belonging, racial harmony and community cohesion.^{1,2} Begun with a goal to support refugee and newly arrived immigrant youth and families in their transition into Australian society, as the program implementation progressed, Football United leadership noted that often community sport, as currently practiced, is exclusive rather than inclusive. Participation is largely not possible for many socio-disadvantaged youth.^{1,2}

This vision has evolved to become a program which combines a number of effective mechanisms for engaging and re-engaging refugee and disadvantaged youth into their communities, fostering their educational experiences and promoting multicultural harmony in general. Football United's experience and expertise in implementing a sustainable model of football for social development means that it is well placed to play a part in addressing these wider issues of exclusion.^{1,2,3,4}

The Football United® Vision is based on a Community Development, Determinants-based Health Promotion and Positive Social Change approach that underpins all Football United interventions.^{1,2} Importantly all Football United® programs engage with local partner groups, and all intervention sites involve extensive partner consultation and engagement, resulting in site-specific activities that are particularly adapted to the needs and realities of those sites. While intervention components are similar or the same in the different sites, (eg. Coach training, regular playing opportunities, access to leadership opportunities), flexibility and adaptation according to site specifics is vital for an effective program impact and community outcomes.

Core Principles of Football United® Vision:

- using community building, social development principles ;
- partnership-based approach which involves working with the community and community leaders to identify and address local needs;
- all programs systematically include local engagement, capacity building and leadership development programs, which developing self-esteem and leadership skills whilst building community morale and participation.

Why Football?

It is also important to understand why football is seen as a tool that can be used to better society. Research suggests that participation in sport can be crucial in the development of young people. Health and fitness, through the pursuit of physical activity, is widely regarded as a key factor in personal development and many of the skills that are fundamental in sports participation, particularly in team sports, are transferable in wider aspects of life. Sport encourages strong community bonds, regular physical activity and access to positive mentors for young people. In disadvantaged communities

these features are essential to social development of children and youths and building the capacity of the community more broadly. ^{1,2,5,6,7,8}

Among the various sports, Football, in particular, is an ideal tool to foster socialisation. It is the one single global sport, hence its appeal across all socio-cultural groups. In addition, it is relatively inexpensive, and is designed as a non-violent sport. It is played by both genders, thus is non-exclusive. It provides transferable skills of fair play, tolerance, inclusion and understanding of oneself, team mates and opponents alike. It teaches of responsibility, winning, losing and participation. It can address diverse and complex issues, such as children's rights, peace building, education, health promotion and anti-discrimination. On top of all that, it is fun. ^{1,2}

Key Issues related to the equity gap in participation

Gaps in equity of access to sport in Australia are apparent across many low SES communities : often community sport, as currently practiced, is **excluding** rather than inclusive. Participation is largely not possible for many socio-disadvantaged youth. ^{1,2}

Consequently, Football United[®], and its innovative approach, has been engaged in effectively addressing areas of social inequity and their ensuing impact on communities since 2006, addressing the following issues:

1. There are extreme gaps in equity of participation in sport in both the community sport arena as well as within the public education sector;
2. These gaps in participation translate to gaps in opportunity, which if not addressed, result in issues of disaffection in society (leaving school, aggressive behaviour, unemployment etc);
3. Misunderstanding of newly arrived immigrants and different cultures often translates further to racism.....and the ensuing problems it provokes.

The above-mentioned phenomena highlight issues of inequity of access to sport, education, employment, health and community services in disadvantaged communities. Football United's[®] proven capacity and innovative approach of using Football as the vehicle to address these issues, through programs, research and advocacy, has resulted in rapid growth in demand across Western Sydney, interstate and now internationally.

The issues highlighted below are central to the design and implementation of Football United[®] with evidence taken from our own and others' research and Government reports, including the 2009 Crawford Report, Children Sport, Youth Leadership Report and research by the Centre for Multicultural Youth Inc. and the Australian Bureau of Statistics^{9,10,11}, all of which highlights

- *Very low participation* rates of people from disadvantaged and multicultural backgrounds in sport and physical activity
 - “Club sports are made up mostly of children from middleclass backgrounds,.....because participation requires adequate disposable income to pay for fees, uniforms, equipment and transport.” ¹¹
 - People born in Australia had participation rates (in organised sport) of 27%, compared to around 10% for people born in non-English speaking countries.”

- *Long-term funding approaches* are needed to address this issue and improve the ineffective distribution of short term, short sighted funding .^{10,11}
 - “Government and NGO’s have historically supported one-off, short-term activities that limit the development of genuine community capacity and undermine the potential for sustainable community-run sport programs
- *Developing neighbourhood programs, re-building schools’ systems, and training teachers* are crucial to addressing the physical activity needs and interests of children, youth and families from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, enabling them to overcome their limited resources and better engage with educational and social systems .^{10,11}

Football United[®] experiences, researches *and engages with* these issues both intimately and extensively.

How does Football United address the needs?

Football United[®] uses the globally attractive passion for the worldwide game to provide a pathway to engagement and development opportunities for disadvantaged youth, children and their families in communities with high proportions of people from, refugee, indigenous, migrant and lower socio-economic backgrounds.^{1,2,7} Football United[®] runs 15 programs across Western Sydney, Adelaide and the ACT that improve their access to education, health services and physical activity. This is achieved through:

1. Provision of regular, free, accessible and localised football training and playing opportunities for up to 3000 children per year to improve social cohesion while increasing physical activity rates for disadvantaged children and youth.
2. Provide training and mentoring for 150 youth each year, through tailored programs in leadership, community coordination, football coaching qualifications, personal development and life-skills. A significant proportion of youth continue with the program as coaches and project coordinators.
3. Build extensive and collaborative relationships with diverse community-based partners as well as local and state government agencies. This includes training and development of staff in these organisations increasing their skills and enhancing the ongoing sustainability of the projects.
4. Create awareness of these issues through advocacy, high profile partners, ambassadors and ground-breaking research to ultimately influence changes to government policy and public perceptions.

These programs are all developed in collaboration with local stakeholders to meet the cultural needs and socio economic realities of the community targeted. The growth of Football United[®] occur’ s based on demand and requests from communities with implementation achieved through partnerships with schools, Migrant Resource Centres and other local community groups.

Supported by the Australian Research Council, Football United recently completed a ground-breaking three year research project assessing the impact of the program in a case-comparison multi-methods study. Study protocol and results are reported elsewhere, but the results indicated strong positive impact of the program.² Football United[®] participants reported significantly higher Other Group Orientation than comparison school participants such as meeting and getting to know people from ethnic groups other than their own. Football United[®] boys in the study had significantly higher

scores on pro-social behaviour than boys surveyed at the Comparison schools, and overall the young people in the Football United group reported feeling better since commencing in the program and reported that the program had helped them.¹³

The ARC study and ongoing program monitoring and evaluation has contributed to the evidence base for the effectiveness of holistic, integrated and long term sport for development programs, particularly for young males.¹³

Concluding comments

Football United®'s strengths lie in the diversity and experience of its management team, members and supporters. Football United® gathers a diverse, multi-sectoral group, combining the skills of talented corporate leaders, the commitment of a wide range of community groups, NGOs, the engagement of academia, and supported by local and state government representatives. Through this rapidly expanding network Football United® fosters the power of football to inspire and promote social justice and community development.

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