

Promoting Physical Activity and Sports for Quality Living in North-Western Nigeria: Post COVID-19 Issues and Prospects

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has posed a lot of problems worldwide to the health sector, economy and general lifestyle, including participation in sports and recreation. A number of issues existed that hinders the promotion of physical activity and sports for healthy living among individuals, especially in the north. What is the possible post COVID-19 prospects and what are the issues on the ground? The author discusses the growing evidence that appropriate physical activity is not only healthy for individuals but improves overall quality of life. In Nigeria, there were significant factors affecting the increase and decrease in the number of people taking part in sports. This paper particularly, focused on those issues and prospects that surrounded sports participation for healthy living in northern Nigeria. Based on the review, the author recommends that government at all levels should shoulder the responsibilities outlined by the National Sports Commission which included proper budgeting and provision of sports facilities; stop encroaching sports grounds and recreational centers under the current political pressures. Physical education periods should be restored and utilize for meaningful physical activities in basic and secondary schools. For the purpose of changing negative behaviours of communities and families in Northern Nigeria towards healthy lifestyle, awareness campaign towards parents in particular must be carried out. It is also recommended that public and private sectors should be encouraged to invest in physical activity and sport industry in Northern Nigeria to join the silent multi-billion industries globally.

Keywords: *Physical activity, Sports, Quality living, COVID-19*

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Background to the Study

COVID-19 pandemic has posed a lot of problems worldwide to the health sector, economy and general lifestyle of the, including participation in sports and recreation. Earlier in history, a number of issues existed that hinders the promotion of physical activity and sports for healthy living among individuals, especially in the north. Between the period of independence in 1960 and the 21st century, there were significant decrease in the number of people taking part in physical activity and sports in Northern Nigeria. Between the 1970s and 1990s the expansion of facilities to increase access to universal basic education lead to the reduction of spaces especially play grounds by the erection of classrooms and other structures either to accommodate more learners or even to expand the schools to accommodate Junior post basic and in some cases senior secondary levels. Many primary and secondary schools and in some cases even post secondary institutions have been affected by such actions. Many pieces of land curved out for schools were offered to individuals for residential or commercial purposes; play spaces were mostly affected. Majority of Islamiyah schools, which host more than half of students' population in states like Kano, do not provide room for sports participation.

Views about health and sports have evolved over time, and are understood differently across cultures. The dominant religion and culture of the northern people (Hausa Muslims) does not totally condemn sports and physical activities; however, the subject is surrounded by both cultural and religious misconceptions. These misconceptions have affected sports development and participation. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has affected sports participation and kept people physically inactive for several months. Many people who have made a healthy choice of participating in regular physical activity have been affected negatively and demotivated.

Numerous scientific evidences proved that engaging in sports and physical activities play a significant role in promoting health and wellness across gender and ages. Sport and physical activity do not only help to improve physical fitness and health; it is also an integral strategy for stemming metabolic diseases which are critical health priority areas for global health maintenance. According to World Health Organization (2003) appropriate physical activity and sports for all constitute one of the major components of a healthy lifestyle, along with healthy diet, tobacco free life and avoidance of other substances harmful to health. Available experience and scientific evidence showed that regular practice of appropriate physical activity and sports provides people, male and female, of all ages and conditions, including persons with disability, with wide range of physical, social and mental health benefits (Eime, Harvey, Charity, Casey, Westerbeek, and Payne, 2017). Sedentary behaviour is a potential risk factor for chronic ill health and mortality, that is, independent of health enhancing physical activity (Chau, Grunseit, Midthjell, Holmen, Homen, Bauman, Van der Ploeg, 2012). Physical inactivity leads to a number of health problems including obesity and subsequent risks of cardiovascular disease. Obesity is a significant health problem that has reached epidemic proportion around the world.

One study (Sabir, Jimoh, Iwuala, Isezue, Bilbis, Aminu, Abubakar and Sa'idu, 2016) in North-western Nigeria suggested an increased weight gain among Hausa Fulani, the dominant ethnic group. With these recent developments, there is urgent need to address problems and issues

related to sports development and participation in physical activities in North-western Nigeria. The purpose of these research is to discuss issues and prospects in Northern Nigeria related to health promotion and sports development.

Physical Activity and Sports for Health Promotion

Participating in regular physical activities is a major health choice along with other changes in lifestyle. It is believed that achievement of health is not a single event; attaining and maintaining health and wellness is an ongoing process. Regular physical activity is a key factor in health promotion strategies, as indicated by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2010). In order to improve and maintain health, an individual requires at least 30 minutes of cumulative moderate physical activity every day which can be reached through a broad range of appropriate and enjoyable physical activities and body movements in people's daily lives, such as walking to work, climbing stairs, gardening, dancing, as well as a variety of leisure and recreational sports. Additional health gains can be obtained by relevant daily moderate to vigorous physical activities of longer duration. The Centers for Disease and Prevention (CDC) (2008) and the American Heart Association (AHA) (AHA, 2009) recommend 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise every week for adults (CDC, 2008). The activities should include games, sports, recreation, planned exercise and transportation.

Current Issues in Physical Activities and Sports

1) Physical education programmes in schools: School physical education programmes were intended to inculcate positive health behaviours and exposed children to active sports and games. In many countries, less than one third of young people are sufficiently active to benefit their present and future health. In Nigeria, physical activity levels of youth are moderate while sedentary behaviour (inactive lifestyle) is high with a decreasing physical activity and sports programmes in schools at an alarming trend. High body mass Index (obesity/overweight) rates are increasing among young people as well as among middle aged adults. This is related in part to lack of physical activity in leisure time, but is even more likely the result of people spending increasing amounts of time in sedentary behaviours such as watching television, using computers, and excessive use of “passive” modes of transport such as cars, buses and motorcycles (WHO, 2003; Akinroye, Oyenyemi, Adukoya, Adeniyi, Adedoyin, Ojo, Alawode, Ozomata, and Awotidebe, 2014). Now that schools are reopening from Corona break, it is compulsory for school authorities to find alternatives for outdoor physical education programmes and sports.

2) Awareness about benefits: lack of awareness over the benefits of sports and physical activities among individuals from the rural to urban dwellers have led to wrong decisions and inactions; that turned useful spaces for sports and physical activities to personal properties and commercial structures. This lack of awareness also derailed other supporting incentives such as family motivation and support from family and friends for individuals especially adolescents and young adults to engage in active sports and physical activities for health benefits.

3) Personal motivation: Health and wellness is a personal journey that encompass a lifestyle that includes the joys of physical activity as an integral part of daily living. Due to

socio-cultural barriers the society in the north looks at sports and physical activity with negative or questionable perception which reduces the intrinsic motivation of adolescents and younger adults to engage in physical activities and sports. Therefore, there is need to understand how sport and physical activity are accessible to the people in their childhood, since sport and physical activity involvement needed economic and cultural capital as well, that may include two indicators of the parents' socioeconomic status (education and occupation). If we lack examples, with which we want to identify ourselves and which represent a certain social status, it means we don't have a guide; thus, it will be hard for us to fight for a cause. Additionally, the stay home policy against Corona infection has left a big excuse for people, even though they have lots of physical activity to do at home.

4) Support from family and friends: Family and friends have a big and crucial role in sports participation and making physical activities attractive to the individual. Friends, teachers or popular role models are models who affect people and create the desire for identification with them. Since the community does not view physical activities and sports from a favourable angle it would be very difficult for family members and friends to offer any kind of support to individuals interested in engaging in physical activities and sports (Alla and Ajibua, 2012).

5) Access to sport facilities and availability: Despite considerable evidence on the health benefits of regular physical activity, few individuals got opportunity to engage in sufficient levels of physical activity and sports in northern Nigeria. One major reason has been lacking of sporting facilities, especially at community levels. physical activities and sports facilities refers to buildings, centers, or other facilities operated by a local governmental authority and with designated space for physical activity, including open spaces, fitness centers, tennis clubs, indoor exercise settings, or community parks (Eime, Harvey, Charity, Casey, Westerbeek, and Payne, 2017). The increasing awareness among the populace and Doctors recommendation on various ailments would surely increase pressure on government to focus on sports facilities. Scholars (Alla and Ajibua, 2012; Reimers, Wagner, Alvanides, Steinmayr, Reiner, Schmidt and Woll, 2014) postulates two theoretical processes that determine the relationship between availability and utilization of sports facilities. First, the absence of nearby sports facilities in the community and second proximity to sports facilities.

6) Availability of Local physical activity programmes: - Programmes include organized physical activity in the form of instruction or group classes and team-based sports. The arrangement put in place by the government for the provision of sports and physical activity programmes and facilities at local level seems to be facing serious challenges (Alla, Ajibua, 2012). Many young potential medallists were forced to engage in passive viewing or even violent crimes instead of active sporting. Organization of Sports and physical activities locally has not been achieving satisfactorily in Nigeria and particularly in the north. This therefore made it difficult to achieve the national sports objectives.

7) Choice of different sports and physical activities: - Participation in specific activities in sports within northern Nigeria can be measured using possibility of being a member of a sports club/group or several other sports clubs/groups. This measure can be dichotomized to

discriminate between those who engage as active club/group members and those who do not belong to any club/group. Furthermore, participation is at most based on the different sports they engage in within their locality, which is commonly football and some local games which are also on the path to extinction.

8) Data on sports programmes and development: Data on sports programmes and developments in northern Nigeria is presently very scanty (Alla and Ajibua, 2012); thus, planning for sports programmes could be challenging. Many sporting programmes and activities that were taking place in northern Nigeria cannot be easily traced to meet policy and developmental needs thereby making any attempt towards boosting sports a challenging task.

9) Levels and determinants of physical activity participation in Northern Nigeria: The determinants for participation in physical activities include socio-economic betterment, educational levels, higher opportunities for professionalism as well as cultural compliance. More educated men and women now engage in weekends physical activities than people from the low socio-economic status.

10) Political commitment and support: Sports and physical activities have never been part of political plans in the north, many politicians prefer raising structures providing haphazard vocational trainings, and paying money to media campaign against the provision of qualitative sports pitches, gymnasiums and play arenas. You hardly notice any significant amount budgeted by states and local governments for the development of sports and physical activity programmes. The challenge is how to get the politicians involved.

11) Economic and other competing pressures: Due to economic and political pressures many governments would prefer offering pieces of available lands to individuals and groups for the purpose of generating income to meet personal financial needs. Also, many able-bodied youth and adolescents and their parents would prefer economic activities throughout the days to help make ends meet.

12) Time Constraint: Both children and adults are engaged in activities that give no space for engaging in recreational sports and physical activities. This ranges from multiple schooling, schooling and trade, schooling and vocational training etc. such that no space is left for extra personal activities.

13) Status of women in society: It is a common understanding that the northern culture does not tolerate women engaging in physical activities and sports in the open, except for those in the boarding schools. This barrier is very strong and paving only slowly.

14) Participation of local and international organizations: In the past few decades there were many interventions in both education and health, but with no focus in sports and physical activities, which are very vital to achieving both. Many local organizations have taken roles to community development without considering the role of sports participation as a vital tool to achieving peace and security, in addition to educational and health benefits. This

may not be unconnected with the roles of sports professionals which need to guide the stakeholders and make proposals.

Mitigating the Challenges

Upon all the challenges, many prospects exist for sports and physical activity development in North-western Nigeria. One of the major objectives set forward in the National Sports Policy of Nigeria (2009) is to encourage mass participation in sports and recreation with a view to using exercise for the improvement of general health and fitness of citizens. Along to achieving these and other objectives, the National Sports Policy shouldered some responsibilities upon the states and local governments which include the following:

Role of State Governments

The State Governments through their supervisory agencies shall:

1. Provide adequate and standard facilities, organize and deliver sports services at their level.
2. Encourage development of physical education and sports in schools.
3. Establish State Sports Councils or Commission as the case may be for the development of sports in their States.
4. Ensure adequate Budgetary Allocation to Sports.
5. Ensure that at least 5% of the total Budget for Sports is earmarked for maintenance of sports facilities and infrastructure.
6. Collaboration with the State Ministry of Education on matters of schools' sports.

Role of Local Governments

The Local Governments through their supervisory agencies shall:

1. Establish Local Government Area Sports Committee.
2. Provide adequate funds for Sports in the Area.
3. Encourage development of Physical Education and Sports in schools.
4. Provide community-based sports centers in the Area
5. Encourage the formation of Sports Clubs;
6. Earmark at least 5% of its total Budget for the maintenance of Sports facilities and infrastructure.
7. Collaborate with the Local Government Education Authority/Board on matters of school's sports.

These responsibilities shouldered on the States and Local Governments are enough to help in achieving mass participation in sports among all ages. However, the problem is whether or not the two levels discharge these responsibilities. The fact remains far from the present reality. Very little examples can be sighted in Northern-Nigeria to indicate full commitments of states and local governments towards sports or leisure development. The sports facilities are deteriorating both in schools and in the public.

Role of Healthcare personnel

Professionals in every area supposed to shoulder the responsibility of public enlightenments to create positive awareness on subjects at stake. Although many adults including women today

participate in weekend physical activities, majority remained sedentary throughout the week. There is need for media programmes, bill boards and posters to educate people on the benefits of exercise and how much exercise they require to maintain good health. Sport bodies like sports councils and sports units in the ministries have a vital role to play in this regard. Health educators working with the local government health departments need to include sports awareness during their local health campaigns.

Promoting Physical Education Programmes in Schools

Optimal physical-education programs engage students on a daily basis in cognitively, socially, and aerobically demanding physical activity and provide opportunities for physically strenuous play in order to inspire and instill lasting healthy behavioural patterns.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper reviewed and summarised literature on the issues and prospects in promoting physical activity and sports for quality living in northern Nigeria, post-COVID-19 era. It was concluded that physical activity and sports for quality living for all requires capital investment and optimal supports from lawmakers, executive members and change agents from the community. If we do not act, the obesity epidemic will continue and results in subsequent debilitating ailments that will lower the quality of living of our people. Acting promptly and wisely on the other hand, will help in reducing the prevalence of obesity and cut-off the burden of healthcare cost, overcrowding in the health centers and death.

For the purpose of changing negative behaviours of communities and families in Northern-Nigeria towards participation in physical activities and sports, community mobilization and public awareness campaigns must be carried out. The current educational and sport policies must be reviewed; education and sport must be integrated. Physical education lessons must include organized physical activities that will not only provide the required level of physical fitness, but will inculcate positive behaviours on students to adopt active lifestyle. Active recreation should be encouraged and supported by the government, civil societies and community-based groups.

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