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From: General Secretariat of the Council  
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council  
Subject: Increasing the participation of children and young people in sport in 21st  
century Europe  
- Policy debate

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Following consultation of the Sport Working Party, the Presidency has prepared the attached discussion paper, which is submitted as the basis for the policy debate to take place at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 22 - 23 May 2019.

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## **Increasing the participation of children and young people in sport in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Europe**

Playing sports comes with a wide range of well-documented benefits, both at an individual and societal level. However, statistics show that while the situation differs from one Member State to another, on average *interest in playing sports is decreasing in the EU*. Almost a quarter of all young Europeans (15-24-year olds) are not engaging in any sport or exercise at all, with non-participation increasing by 7 percentage points from 2009 to 2017<sup>1</sup>. Many factors influence why children and young people are not actively engaging in sports. This paper sets out to explore a number of them with a view to also understanding how current trends may affect participation in sport in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To begin with, *competition on the 'leisure market'* to influence how children and young people spend their free time can be high, especially considering the push made by the entertainment sector, and in particular the digital segment. Owing to advances in technology that have enabled increased connectivity at broadband speeds, the attractiveness of home-based leisure (e.g. computer gaming, watching and/or interacting with audiovisual content) has increased, and it can be expected to become even more appealing in the future<sup>2</sup>. Technology can also generate new leisure options for children and young people (e.g. sports spectating) and enhance their experience of existing ones, as is also the case for various forms of cultural participation (e.g. cinema, live performances, cultural sites) popular among young people in the EU<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Special Eurobarometer on Sport and Physical Activity 334 (2010) and 472 (2018).

<sup>2</sup> López Sintas, J., Rojas de Francisco, L., & García Álvarez, E. (2017). Home-based digital leisure: Doing the same leisure activities, but digital. *Cogent Social Sciences*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2017.1309741>

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat (2017), Culture statistics - cultural participation by socioeconomic background.

In contrast, *sports continue to offer an ‘analogue’ experience* whose attractiveness depends on the availability, accessibility and quality of sports facilities and social interactions with teammates and relevant sport staff. Augmented reality technologies may have the potential to generate new sports that also carry a physical activity component in the future, but at present their influence is negligible at best. Therefore, while diversified leisure activities play a positive role in children’s and young people’s personal development, there is a risk that sport will have fewer chances to make a contribution to this in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

At the same time, *the costs involved in playing sports* are an important determining factor for sport participation levels, regardless of age. The extent to which sports clubs must ask for contributions from their members to support their day-to-day activities and even investments, rather than being able to access public funding or secure private sponsorship, can affect a person’s preference for sports over other pastimes. The same applies in non-organised sports settings, where costs matter since they are typically borne in full by the individual.

On the topic of the ‘economics of sport’, the impact of the increasing *commercialisation of sport*<sup>4</sup> must also be considered. On the one hand, elite sport attracts lots of media coverage. Besides generating income, this can also inspire people, especially children, to take up a sport. On the other hand, if there is too much focus on commercial aspects, some sports organisations may be more oriented towards the profitable harvesting of young talent for the upper echelons and be less concerned with enabling sport to fulfil its social and educational function<sup>5</sup>.

Financial solidarity mechanisms between elite and grassroots sport are one way to enhance the latter’s capacity to foster active participation in sport. In any case, given current development trends, the need to harmonise the agendas of elite and grassroots sport in the future must be analysed, in the context of addressing the downturn in sport participation levels.

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<sup>4</sup> While it stood at \$91 bn. in 2017, ‘the worldwide sporting events market is expected to increase at a compound annual growth rate of 3.6 per cent in 2017-2021’. UNCTAD (2018), Competition issues in the sale of audiovisual rights for major sporting events, available at: <https://bit.ly/2PoJysq>

<sup>5</sup> Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Article 165(1).

Another issue that needs to be considered in the present discussion relates to *the attitudes and profile of current generations of children and young people*, and more specifically, what motivates them to play a sport. Qualitative research indicates that children and teenagers are interested in sports because they facilitate social interactions and support, help with weight management and above all are a source of enjoyment. The latter is typically true in a context where there is little pressure to compete and win<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, while more sociological research is certainly needed, incoming generations of young people have sometimes been described as being inclined to follow not only well-established sports but also emerging ones<sup>7</sup>. In this context, it is important to understand to what extent the European inter-sport market is actually open to new sports actors, with a view to increasing the chances available to persuade future generations of young people to be more active.

Certainly, a significant part of the conversation should also be dedicated to the demographic sectors that have traditionally been doing poorly in sport participation – *girls and young women* and also *persons with disabilities* particularly stand out here. Action at both EU and Member State level placing an emphasis on these groups could lead to more active future generations of young Europeans.

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<sup>6</sup> Allender, S. et al. (2006), Understanding participation in sport and physical activity among children and adults: a review of qualitative studies. *Health Education Research*, Vol. 21, no. 6, pp. 826-835

<sup>7</sup> Changing the game: How gen Z is redefining sports, consumption & sponsorship (2018). Report available [here](#).

Ministers are kindly invited to express their views with regard to the elements put forward by this paper, with the aim of supporting an exchange of good practices and potential policy solutions that can contribute to a more sports-aware and engaged European youth. The questions below have been formulated in order to provide some orientation for the ensuing discussions:

1. How can public authorities and the sport movement cooperate at EU and Member State level in order to boost sport participation rates among children and young people?
2. What measures can be undertaken at EU level in order to strengthen the links between elite and grassroots sport with a view to better supporting sport's social and educational function?