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Navigating between Gut Feeling, Donor Demands & Daily Business: A Case Study on Developing a Theory of Change Approach to Measure Social Impact in Sport for Development

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Abstract

The field of Sport for Development (SFD) has grown significantly over the past two decades, using sport to achieve various social goals. Despite this growth, evidence to support the claimed social impacts of these programmes remains scarce. As a result, a growing body of literature has called for robust theory-based approaches to better understand the underlying mechanisms of programme success or failure. This study aims to understand the challenges faced by SFD organisations in monitoring and evaluating their programmes, the opportunities offered by a Theory of Change (ToC) approach, and the difficulties in implementing such a theory-based approach in practice. A qualitative single case study approach was used, involving triangulation of different data sources. The results show that M&E activities are strongly influenced by meeting mostly quantitative external demands to secure funding, placing accountability over learning. The findings suggest that ToC approaches can help practitioners to better understand the links between activities and outcomes and encourage critical reflection. However, implementing such an approach is resource-intensive and often conflicts with day-to-day operational demands. Involving different stakeholders in the development of ToCs can increase participation and buy-in, but requires sufficient resources and dedicated staff. The research highlights the importance of bridging the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications, suggesting that deeper engagement with practitioners is essential. By addressing these challenges and drawing on practitioners' insights, SFD organisations can develop more effective and context-specific interventions. This study calls for future research to support the implementation of theory-based approaches and to ensure that practitioners' voices are heard.

Keywords: Theory of Change, theory-based evaluation, Sport for Development, Case Study, Social Impact Measurement

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Relevance of Research

Nelson Mandela (2000) once said:

> *Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair.*

This quote has become widely used in the field of Sport for Development (SFD) to justify the use of sport as a tool for social change. However, many questions remain about how to unpack this "magic box" (Coalter, 2022, p. 107) of sport and reliably evaluate its claimed social impact.

Over the past two decades, the field of Sport for Development has grown significantly. Sport, physical activity, and related activities are increasingly used to achieve various non-sport goals, fostering social development worldwide (Kidd 2008; Levermore 2008). Multiple actors, including NGOs, sports clubs, schools, and municipalities are implementing programmes targeting themes such as youth education and employment, conflict resolution, gender equality, disability inclusion, health education or urban violence and gang activity (Collison et al., 2019).

The growing popularity of SFD programmes and their potential to positively influence social development outcomes for young people has led to an "almost evangelical policy rhetoric of the sport-for-development movement" (Coalter, 2010, p. 295). This has resulted in a prevailing assumption that sport inherently leads to positive social outcomes, whilst the processes involved have not been fully explored. Coalter (2022, p. 107) refers to this as sport being a "black or magic box which produces measurable outcomes".

Challenging this rhetoric, critical scholars have raised concerns about the limited evidence base within the SFD sector and highlighted the need for a more rigorous evaluation system (Levermore, 2008; Coalter, 2010, 2013; Welty Peachey & Schulenkorf, 2022). In recent years, the calls for theory-based approaches increased to help uncover the mechanisms by which SFD programmes may (or may not) contribute to the claimed individual outcomes and broader societal impacts (Chen, 2023; Coalter, 2017). Developing theory-based approaches, such as a Theory of Change (ToC) provides a structured framework for programme design, implementation, and evaluation, enabling organisations to critically reflect on and improve their programmes (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018).

While calls for theory-based approaches have become more prominent in research in recent years (Chen, 2023; Coalter, 2022), the voices of practitioners applying and implementing these in the field have received limited attention (Adams & Harris, 2023).

Given the intensive time and resource requirements of ToC approaches (Baffsky et al., 2021) alongside pre-existing challenges in M&E activities for organisations (Levermore, 2011), paying attention to practitioners' perspectives is essential. Yet, there is limited literature exploring this gap between calls for theory-based approaches and the reality of implementing them in practitioners' everyday work.

Therefore, this study aims to better understand the challenges SFD organisations and practitioners face in effectively monitoring and evaluating their programmes, the opportunities that developing a ToC can bring to increase their social impact, and the challenges practitioners face in implementing and applying such a theory-based approach. These aims lead to the following research questions, which form the basis of the research:

- *Research Question 1: What challenges do sport for development organisations face in measuring the social impact of their programmes?*

- *Research Question 2: How can a Theory of Change approach be used to improve programme outcomes and impact?*

- *Research Question 3: How can a Theory of Change be implemented in practice and which factors can hinder its application in the field?*

2 Theoretical and Conceptual Background

The main components addressed in this chapter are: The Theory of Change approach followed by conceptual underpinnings of social impact measurement in SFD. Both concepts require an interdisciplinary approach to achieve a comprehensive understanding. The ToC approach is rooted in evaluation science, yet has been applied across multiple disciplines, including public health, public policy, and international development. Similarly, SFD draws from sport management, sociology, political science, international relations, development studies, and youth development (Welty Peachey & Schulenkorf, 2022). Drawing from these diverse disciplines, the research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how SFD practitioners can use the Theory of Change approach in their work.

2.1 Theory of Change – Concept and Definition

The ToC approach has been popularised by the works of Weiss (1995, 1997) and Chen (1990). It belongs to the broader field of theory-based evaluation and has been used by evaluators, policymakers and practitioners specifically for health promotion and risk prevention programmes (Weiss, 1997). Theory-based evaluation articulates the beliefs and assumptions underpinning an intervention through a programme theory or Theory of Change. This helps structure evaluations to explain the mechanisms behind a programme's success or failure (Weiss, 1997). Yet, there is little consensus on how a ToC is defined. The Centre for ToC (2024) defines it as:

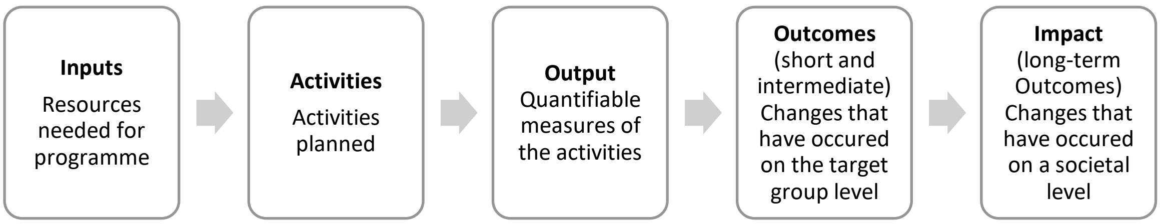
> *[…] a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It is focused in particular on mapping out or "filling in" what has been described as the "missing middle" between what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved.*

A ToC can help uncover implementation gaps and the assumptions driving them, leading to improved programmes (Bolton, 2023). Developing a ToC is typically done using a backward mapping approach, starting with identifying long-term outcomes and then working backwards to the initial activities and inputs (Connell & Kubisch, 1998). The steps include stakeholder agreement on desired impact, defining short and intermediate outcomes, determining activities, and identifying necessary resources.

An interactive workshop format can help facilitate the process of developing a ToC. Ideally, this includes a wide range of stakeholders ranging from programme managers, policymakers, evaluators, funders and representatives of the target group (Breuer et al., 2014). Engaging different stakeholders creates ownership among them and surfaces different perspectives, facilitating discussions to align and agree upon project objectives (Breuer et al., 2014). One result of these workshops is usually a visual mapping of the different elements from inputs to the desired impact shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Visual Mapping of ToC Elements



Description. Inputs, Activities, Outputs, Outcomes and Impact adapted from Bolton (2023).

For a ToC to be implemented successfully Connell & Kubisch (1998) have identified three attributes. Firstly, it should be *plausible*, meaning evidence and common sense indicate that the activities will lead to the desired outcomes. It should be *doable*, ensuring that the necessary resources (economic, technical, political, institutional, human) are available to implement it. Finally, it should be *testable*, with enough specific indicators and completeness for evaluators to reliably track its progress.

A developed ToC can guide all programme stages, from design to evaluation (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018). It can be applied to individual projects or scaled to broader programmes and policies (Bolton, 2023). To find out whether the ToC has been successfully designed and implemented rigorous testing needs to be conducted (Chen, 2023). The ToC approach is methodologically neutral, allowing both quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods to be used (Connell & Kubisch, 1998). Therefore, organisations can choose from a wide range of mixed methods tools ranging from focus group discussions, interviews, observations, surveys or more novel approaches like storytelling, videos or drawing to evaluate whether the assumptions and causal claims underlying their programme led to the desired outcomes and impact (Engelhardt, 2019).

2.2 Social Impact Measurement in the Context of Sport for Development

While many SFD organisations aim to have a positive impact on the lives of the young people who participate in their programmes and create a long-term social impact for their communities, there is a lack of evidence supporting whether sport can live up to these claims. As a result, many scholars have argued that a more robust evaluation system is needed (Levermore, 2008; Welty Peachey & Schulenkorf, 2022).

A structured monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system can help organisations look critically at (un)intended effects of their programmes (Engelhardt, 2019). The ToC approach can be used as part of a broader M&E strategy informing its phases.

M&E activities are either conducted by external stakeholders or the organisation itself (Engelhardt, 2019). Coalter (2008) understands monitoring as a process that systematically collects and analyses programme information to ensure it meets targets and objectives, while also identifying necessary changes. Evaluation aims to systematically examine the monitoring information collected. It focuses on assessing efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability while identifying lessons learned and potential improvements for the programme (Coalter, 2008). Evaluation activities look at different stages of a programme, adopting different analytical perspectives and seeking diverse insights, also known as ex-ante, ongoing, final and ex-post evaluations (Caspari, 2004). Ex-post evaluations and longitudinal research, in particular, are important for recording and assessing the overall social impact of a programme, identifying interrelationships and examining its sustainability after a programme has ended (Burnett, 2015).

To successfully undertake M&E activities, an organisation needs sufficient financial resources, expertise and the right attitude to learn from and improve its programmes. These are factors that influence the scope of an organisation's M&E activities, as identified by Engelhardt (2019):

1. Available Budget
2. Monitoring and Evaluation Expertise
3. Expectations of M&E Outcomes (focus on learning or performing minimal investigation to meet donor requirements)
4. Evaluation Report Audience

Another important factor influencing an organisation's M&E activities is the function and motivation for undertaking them in the first place. In the SFD sector, two functions of evaluation are widespread: 1) accountability (legitimacy) and 2) learning (Coalter, 2009; Kay, 2012,).

Organisations focusing on accountability use evaluation results to justify the use of public funds and enhance programme credibility (Caspari, 2004; Coalter, 2009). This approach relies heavily on summative evaluations (Coalter, 2009). Conversely, the learning function of evaluations aims to foster internal learning, share knowledge, and encourage dialogue with stakeholders (Coalter, 2009; Kay, 2012). This function involves critically examining the causes of success and failure, stakeholder collaboration, and implications for future actions, which is crucial in formative evaluations (Caspari, 2004).

3 Literature Review

Theory of Change approaches are increasingly used in public health, public policy and international development (Bolton et al., 2018; Breuer et al., 2016). Yet, there is little research on their use in Sport for Development. To frame the field and provide a broader understanding, this literature review aims to give an overview of the state of the M&E landscape and theory-based approaches in SFD.

Over the years of growth in the field, the call for more evidence to prove the effectiveness of SFD has become an increasingly prevalent mantra at conferences and in the literature (Engelhardt, 2019). Yet, the evidence base is largely built on descriptive outcomes. As highlighted by Jones et al. (2017), there has been limited exploration of the complex interactions and mechanisms behind sport programmes (Jones et al., 2017). Furthermore, Chen (2023) points to the underdeveloped state of evaluation research in sport and leisure and emphasises the role of theory-based approaches in overcoming methodological weaknesses.

Two studies were identified providing examples of how a ToC can be used in youth sport programmes. Bolton et al. (2018) in their article on sport participation programmes for 'hard to reach' groups, show how a ToC systematically links outcomes to broader programme and policy objectives. They highlight the value of the approach in articulating expected outcomes and evaluating projects over time, emphasising real-time learning and stakeholder discussions to clarify project goals. However, they also note challenges, such as the risk of oversimplifying complex issues, the limited inclusion of beneficiary voices, and the difficulty in proving causal links without long-term studies and multiple control groups.

Baffsky et al. (2021) examine the ToC approach for a sports-based positive youth development programme aimed at promoting health and life skills among socially excluded youth. They emphasise the importance of moving beyond intuition-based decision-making of practitioners by clearly identifying the target group and desired outcomes. They stress the need to share the ToC within the team and with external stakeholders to ensure alignment and maintain programme quality. At the same time, they recognise that developing and implementing a ToC is resource-intensive and time-consuming.

The two studies provide insights into the benefits and challenges of using a ToC approach for broader national and provincial sport programmes with a focus on policy perspectives. However, little is known about how practitioners and smaller-scale organisations can develop and implement a ToC approach. This reflects a longstanding evolution in the M&E landscape in SFD. The current landscape is heavily influenced by elite actors, including external consultancies and academic institutions that have built silos with specific knowledge communities, using professional language as a gatekeeping mechanism (Adams & Harris, 2014). In their integrated literature review, Schulenkorf et al. (2016, p.27) have identified "a clear practitioner–scholar divide in SFD […]".

Despite their crucial role in the day-to-day life of programmes, the insights of practitioners are often undervalued. Adams and Harris (2014) note that this situation creates a power imbalance where the knowledge produced is often disconnected from the realities of programme implementation. Structural challenges such as lack of time, limited human resources and short programme life cycles (Levermore, 2011; Moustakas, 2024; Engelhardt, 2019), as well as limited training for practitioners, reinforce this challenge. Furthermore, Moustakas (2024) critically reflects on the dominant power structures of elite actors taking over knowledge pathways and controlling field projects through funding and requirements capturing their effectiveness. This development places practitioners in spaces with tight structures that limit their ability to build their own evidence and learning (Moustakas, 2024).

Therefore, this study aims to better understand the role and experiences of practitioners involved in monitoring and evaluation activities, and in developing a ToC approach to programme improvement. Noting that this process is often non-linear, Baffsky et al. (2021) highlight the importance of case studies in gathering empirical evidence to inform programme development and adaptation.

4 Case Study Context – 3X3 Unites Leader Course Programme

3X3 Unites is a Dutch non-profit organisation based in Amsterdam that uses 3X3 basketball for positive youth development. Concentrating on optimal development, positive youth development aims to equip young people with the skills and competencies necessary to lead satisfying, productive and healthy lives with meaningful social relationships and active engagement in society (Hamilton et al., 2004).

Through their Leader Course Programme, the subject of this study, 3X3 Unites aims to create a safe and inclusive learning environment to teach young people skills and competencies. The player-driven nature of 3X3 basketball encourages participants to take ownership of decisions and processes in and outside of sport. The target group is young people aged 15 to 26, mainly from underserved urban areas in various Dutch cities. The course, facilitated by a trained educator, consists of eight two-hour workshops covering topics like 3X3 basketball rules, positive coaching, integrating life skills, goal setting, leadership, and community building[1]. After the course, 3X3 Leaders can follow different pathways including leading their own 3X3 activities, taking roles in the organisation, helping organise events, or joining national gatherings with other young people.

Based on an observed and reported deficit in the monitoring and evaluation strategy of the Leader Course Programme, it was decided to introduce the ToC approach to the organisation. A first introduction to the approach was made during a team meeting and a general interest in starting the process was reflected. As a next step, it was collectively decided to conduct an interactive workshop for the core management team members to gather input for the development of the ToC. I structured the workshop based on PHINEO's Social Impact Navigator (2016) for practitioners and facilitated the whole process. After the workshop, I developed a draft ToC, received feedback, and created the final version (see Appendix).

5 Methodology

Guided by the research questions, this chapter explains the process of designing the empirical study and provides an overview of the procedures regarding research design, data collection and data analysis.

5.1 Research Design and Sample

This research uses a qualitative single case study approach, involving the triangulation of different data. An exploratory design was chosen to deeply understand causal relationships and dynamics within the organisation. This approach can provide insights and a broader understanding of the practical

[1] An overview of the behaviour change methods connected to the course can be found in the appendix.

application of theory-based evaluations. It contributes to a deeper knowledge of the complexities and benefits of this approach for practitioners.

The research was conducted during a four-month stay at the organisation 3X3 Unites and included observations, semi-structured interviews and a qualitative content analysis.

Observations included day-to-day work, active participation in M&E meetings, analysis of documents and ongoing M&E activities and the process of developing the ToC including the workshop. Afterwards, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six team members of the organisation. All six interviewees were employed by 3X3 Unites and were part of the core management team at the time of the research. The interviews were conducted at the 3X3 Unites office and online in April 2024 and lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. Due to the still relatively small size of the organisation and the requirement to attend the workshop, it was not possible to conduct more than six interviews.

5.2 Data collection

The integration of qualitative interviews, direct observation and qualitative content analysis in the data collection process was chosen as a case of triangulation, allowing for a holistic understanding of the case. Ongoing observations guided the data collection and adjustments were made throughout the process. The development of the ToC approach in the organisation proved to be more challenging than initially anticipated due to the emergence of some barriers and challenges. At this point, it became clear that more information was needed to better understand the organisation's implementation and use of the approach. Consequently, I decided to focus not only on the potential benefits of developing a ToC approach as originally planned but also on considering the barriers that organisations face in developing and implementing theory-based approaches in their work.

This new observation led to an extension of the scope of the literature review and the adoption of the guideline for semi-structured interviews. This informed the development of the following themes to answer the research questions: (1) perceptions of success, (2) status quo of monitoring and evaluation methodologies, (3) benefits of developing a ToC, and (4) challenges of implementing a ToC and applying it in practice. The full guidelines for the semi-structured interviews can be found in the appendix.

The semi-structured interviews were chosen to better understand the experiences, thoughts and perceptions of the team members with their current M&E strategies and the process of developing a ToC approach.

5.3 Data Management and Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded using an electronic device, with the interviewees' prior consent. The recordings were fully transcribed to produce an accurate written copy. Before data analysis began, interviewee names were replaced by codes with a 'P' followed by a number from 1 to 6 to facilitate reference to specific interviewees and ensure anonymity. All six interviews were included in the qualitative data analysis. The observations - the second source of data - were not formalised but were used for contextual purposes to put the findings and discussion into context.

The interview data was coded and analysed using NVivo14 qualitative data software. A categorical system was developed to cover all important aspects related to the RQs. This process involved both deductive and inductive category development. Deductive category development involved the deduction of categories derived from the RQs and was therefore based on the theoretical underpinnings and previous academic work presented in the literature review (Mayring, 2015). This process was followed by adding inductive analysis, which captured thematic codes that had not been covered previously. Simultaneously, these codes were already categorised while working through the material, as recommended by Mayring (2015). Based on this process, four broader dimensions emerged. A categorical system was developed for each of the four dimensions, including subsequent themes, descriptions, codes, frequency and exemplary empirical indicators (see Appendix). Throughout the process, formative and summative checks were carried out to 're-test' the results (Mayring, 2015, p. 124). Due to a lack of human resources, the recommended intercoder reliability resulting from an additional analysis by another researcher could not be carried out.

5.4 Positionality and Reflexivity

Before and during the research process, I was part of the organisation, simultaneously functioning as a team member and an external observer. This dual role allowed me to understand the process from a research perspective as well as the experiences of a practitioner. This was crucial to the topic of the study. Over time, I developed close relationships with the core management team, which helped build trust and gain a deeper understanding of the organisational dynamics. However, since I introduced the ToC to the organisation, facilitated the workshop, developed the ToC and conducted the research, there may have been a positive bias toward the approach due to the trust given to me by the team members. This potentially caused negative or critical views to be withheld. Despite these potential biases, I found the interviews to be open, honest, and critical and observations helped to reveal altered attitudes towards the approach. Throughout the research process, I continually reflected on my role to maintain a balance between involvement and observation.

6 Results

This chapter provides an initial overview of the data drawn from the six qualitative interviews conducted with respondents from the NGO 3X3 Unites. The results will be presented according to the four dimensions that emerged from the data: 1) *Perception of success (RQ1), 2) Status Quo of* *monitoring and evaluation activities (RQ1), 3) Theory of Change Approach Development and Opportunities (RQ2)* and *4) Implementation of Theory of Change (RQ3).*

6.1 Perception of Success (RQ1)

Responses to respondents' perceptions of success provide valuable insights into what they consider to be important outcomes of the Leader Course. Their responses highlight the personal development of participants as a key outcome, emphasising behavioural changes and reflection on personal growth. One respondent explains:

> *For me it's a success when there has been a change in behaviour of the participants and some reflection about their own growth and that they experience the strengths and the life skills of 3x3 within their context and that could be of course within their social system but it can also be that they change something in their daily life.* (P4)

This aligns with the programme's goal of equipping young people with important life skills applicable on and off the court, reflecting the positive youth development focus. Additionally, maintaining participants' connection to the organisation after the course is seen as an important measure of success. Building connection and a community was particularly identified by respondents who were active or former educators and based on their personal feelings and experiences, as highlighted in this quote:

> *I don't really, I'm not the person that only thinks through paper, so for me it's more a feeling. If you start with a group, which is not a group yet, and you finish with the community. That's how I see it when a Leader Course is successful.* (P6)

Meeting external requirements, mainly in terms of participant numbers and completion rates of the course, was seen as an external measure of the course's success and was mentioned by almost all respondents. This depended on what was agreed before with external stakeholders, mainly funders as mentioned by a respondent:

> *One is that it depends very much on, what we agreed before, if we have some kind of where we get the money from, so it's also about how many people have to complete the course. This is also for us a part of the success.* (P1)

6.2 Status Quo of Monitoring and Evaluation Activities (RQ1)

Current M&E Activities

Although all respondents emphasised that measuring the success of the Leader Course Programme was important to them, when asked about current M&E tools, knowledge of the tools in place at the time of the research varied considerably, pointing to different levels of staff engagement with M&E. At the time of the research, the organisation had several tools in place, including the collection of quantitative measures such as completion rates, different feedback surveys depending on the funding of the course, a video portfolio as a requirement for the official course diploma, and a collection of individual stories from selected participants.

To understand participants' personal development and community engagement, the organisation collects individual stories from 3x3 Leaders who have been active for a year after the course. These narratives provide valuable insights but, as one respondent noted, are not easily comparable:

> *We write those nice stories about them. We do storytelling and let the young people reflect on their development after they have been a Leader for a year. Which is good, but it's also not very comparable.* (P1)

A total of 94 stories have been collected up until now and shared on the website, social media and in a book format, including pictures. However, one respondent critically noted that these stories only highlight the organisation's successes of individual participants, potentially overshadowing other results:

> *It's also a bit of cherry-picking because they are leaders for a year ... and then we make that story. It's always a positive story. If that's the only thing we have, then we are just like, look how good we are. That's easy, so I think it's good and you can show it in some impact report ..., but you need more.* (P3)

Besides the individual stories, respondents mentioned that the organisation has general control of the quantitative measures:

> *The things I know that should be okay or should be able to be okay is that we get the quantitative data. I think we're probably pretty aware of how many people started and completed the course. I think we also have some kind of monitoring of how many people are in the activities that leaders lead because we asked them to fill those Excel sheets. So, I think we do have kind of a basic grip on the just very basic numbers.* (P1)

In addition, as already mentioned concerning perceptions of success, the primary educator plays an important role in monitoring and evaluating the course based on their personal judgement:

> *So again it adds to the gut feeling of the educator, and that is about it. So we don't really check it out all too much because it's just, you know, kind of underlines what the educator think's, and there's no second educator looking in on that stuff.* (P5)

Challenges of Current M&E Activities

While talking about the existing tools, some respondents started mentioning challenges even before the interview question about current challenges and barriers to M&E was raised. This added to the general impression of the self-critical and reflective attitude of some of the respondents regarding the organisation's M&E activities. Based on the respondents' reactions, various internal and external challenges were identified, including organisational challenges, resource constraints and different attitudes towards M&E within the team. A key challenge identified from the data is the *tick-box mentality* towards evaluation:

> *They set some numbers, but are those numbers really the social impact? No, it's just our numbers. We tick boxes like we need to have 15 participants in every activation. Okay, what does that mean? I can bring random 50 people to that court and then we check the box.* (P3)

By "they", the respondent refers to the funder of the course and the numerical measures that the organisation has to meet to receive the funding. The illustrated tick-box mentality has several underlying mechanisms. As described above it is strongly influenced by the need to meet external requirements, mainly from funders:

> *We have several ways to fund the course and several demands that come with that, not just as far as numbers and participation, but also as far as participants that are not or are club-bound, age of participants, gender, all that stuff. There's so many variables.* (P5)

This quote illustrates the difficulty for the organisation in developing their own approach to monitoring and evaluation, as there are all sorts of external requirements to meet first. Additionally, external conditions can further limit the scope to engage in M&E activities due to limited funding for programme coordination, including evaluation activities, as described by another respondent:

> *And then you write down a budget. … Why do you need five hours of coordination? And then you bring it back to one, two hours or something. And if every municipality or funder does that, then nothing is left … . So, you need extra money from somewhere. And if you don't have that, then this is the first thing you won't do. Because the activities, you show yourself. That's important. And all the rest is like, okay, we will fix it in some way or another. And then it's also on the ones who give you the money. So, that makes it hard.* (P3)

This further leads to a *lack of follow-up reflection*, as it is more important for the organisation to first deliver its programmes when faced with resource constraints. Besides the limited funding for evaluation activities, the lack of follow-up is also influenced by organisational structures and a general lack of critical reflection within the team, as highlighted by a respondent:

> *Yes that's also the thing for the whole organization at every level at every project everything we do what, I don't want to use the word consequences, but, we do something and then did we do good, did we do bad, did you do good did I do good or did you fuck up?* (P3)

The above-mentioned internal and, to a greater extent, external factors ultimately contribute to the prominence of a tick-box mentality towards M&E, which can limit the scope for deeper learning.

Different attitudes towards M&E within the team pose another challenge ranging from proactive to rather reluctant: *"I think I'm one of the only educators that uses the survey. ... I needed some feedback ... and made that list of questions for my leaders, but it's not part of the course."* (P6) Particularly older educators struggle with adapting to changes and using new tools. One possible reason for the more reluctant attitude of staff could be a lack of understanding of why they should be involved in M&E, as explained by one respondent*: "... The understanding of why we need to use those is not always there, so it doesn't always happen."* (P5) This response is echoed by another respondent:

> *I don't know if people understand that if we really gained insights into how effective we are in developing life skills, we could adapt our programme in a way that we can educate people better.* (P4)

In addition to different perspectives on M&E, the level of *organisational skills* among staff also varies, with people coming from different sectors or sports backgrounds:

> *People don't do their paperwork properly because we have basketballers, we have people coming cross-sector, and mostly not with a background in project administration, or very organized backgrounds.* (P1)

The lack of a well-defined *data collection infrastructure* increases the challenge for staff to do their "paperwork" properly:

> *If you collect it then it's in Google sheet, device, whatever. Or it is on a server or it is on, I don't know, somebody's own Dropbox. There's no structure in there. I think that's a really big part of the problem for the organization.* (P3)

This lack of structure complicates data analysis, which is necessary to draw conclusions from the collected data (Engelhardt, 2019). Additionally, data collection is challenged by the low response rate from participants: *“I send it afterwards and I think 10% of the leaders fill it out, and that's most of the time people that are very excited ... or someone that has something else to say.”* (P6)

6.3 Theory of Change Approach Development and Opportunities (RQ2)

Insights from ToC Development Workshop

As described in the methods chapter, all interviewees participated in an interactive workshop on developing a ToC for the Leader Course Programme. Respondents indicated that through the workshop they gained a better understanding of the underlying causal relationships between the different components of a programme, and in particular the link between an activity such as the Leader Course Programme and its desired long-term impact. One respondent shared:

> *It was good to run it for our program and make it very concrete. ... It was clear how the different things add up ... to the impact you're making or you want to make and how to go from there.* (P1)

Other respondents noted that the workshop was valuable as it “put words” (P6) to the logic behind the Leader Course Programme and to knowledge that had been in the team for a long time. Additionally, one respondent mentioned that the ToC could help identify potential mismatches between an activity and the long-term impact, facilitating programme adaptations to better fit the local context. Respondents also appreciated the workshop's role in raising awareness of theory-based approaches among all team members. One noted:

> *A lot of them learned what's necessary to come from input to impact and what happens behind everything that we do …. So, I liked it really much for insights for more people*. (P2)

Another respondent mentioned that the workshop increased the understanding and importance of evaluating programmes among team members by providing a structured approach, directly addressing one of the current challenges in M&E activities: *“People ... figured out why it's a way of solving a problem or making it visible, ... making our product better.”* (P5)

Opportunities of the ToC Approach

Based on the interviews, it was observed that the ToC approach has the potential to encourage critical reflection by examining causal relationships and potential failure points. One respondent noted:

> *You just usually have all this information and it's kind of messed around and now you can sort it into the different categories which makes it more clear where you want to turn the screw where you want to adapt things, where you can have a look at and it's also helped me in a critical way, you reflect on the activities you're doing, is it leading to the desired outcome? Or*

is it related to each other? Or do you just do it because it's a feeling to do it, you know, and then look at it. (P1)

Weiss (1997) supports this, stating that confronting their theories helps practitioners identify and address weak premises, improving practice. Another key opportunity mentioned by respondents was the shift from focusing solely on the activities to a more comprehensive *impact orientation*. This involves starting new programmes by considering the desired social impact and tailoring activities to fit the local context. One respondent explained:

If we are approached by a city or municipality or whatever organization who wants to work with us then maybe we should start and look at what they really want to achieve so what impact do they really want to make and then use the ToC to work backwards to what we're gonna do there and of course it will be a Leader Course in some form but that form you can decide on the impact you want to make. (P3)

This approach is in line with Dhillon & Vaca (2018), who emphasise the importance of focusing on intended social impact and using backward mapping to adapt activities to specific needs. This can also facilitate a clearer mapping of the impact journey. Respondents noted that the ToC approach can provide guidance in mapping the social impact journey, setting long-term goals and creating a clear roadmap. As explained by a respondent:

I really like the fact that you work towards the ToC as a bigger holistic thing. ... You can also put it like a dot in the future somewhere where it is really handy to … have a little hook to put it. It gives guidance … and to use this also to make it clear to people. (P4)

The ToC approach can also enhance the ability to visualise and communicate the programme's social impact to external stakeholders. This can shift quantitative to qualitative measures allowing organisations to not only demonstrate effectiveness but also explain the reasons behind their success and how they aim to achieve it. One respondent emphasised:

You can use it to make also maybe for outside clear how you are dedicated to your mission and vision and how you're getting there. So potentially, of course, you can make a communication instrument out of it, where you write an article and elaborate a little bit more on that. How are you realizing your mission and vision. (P1)

6.4 Implementation of Theory of Change (RQ3)

Challenges in Implementing the ToC Approach

The primary challenge mentioned was maintaining the momentum of the developed ToC to *keep it alive* and assigning a dedicated member responsible for its ongoing implementation. One respondent stated:

> *To keep it alive is a challenge and I think it's needed to really find somebody who loves to keep it alive …. So I think that's a real challenge because sometimes we really dive into these things and then I think we always use it in a way but it's not always alive it needs water to keep on growing and it needs attention so I think that's a big challenge.* (P4)

From the responses, two mechanisms were identified that influence the challenge of keeping it alive: A lack of knowledge and expertise and a focus on day-to-day operations. As one respondent noted:

> *Knowing where to start, what to use, how to use it. I think well I always act on ideas and feelings I hate to say it every time but that - this has to be more on top of my mind but then also I don't know where to fit it so knowledge for me on this, how to use it, how to implement it - like I said before then I think it's very valuable.* (P4)

Insufficient knowledge and expertise within the team on how to implement the ToC and take concrete steps forward can be a significant barrier. Besides that, the daily operational demands were also identified as a potential barrier overshadowing the strategic implementation of the ToC. One respondent described:

> *All the other stuff you have to do besides your goal where you want to work towards what you want to do while, well, planning it all. So that's going to be one of the biggest hurdles, I think. And that's ourselves as a team. The daily business but also the things that just drop in your lap from one moment to the other moment.* (P2)

This makes it particularly difficult to implement such a complex and time-consuming approach. In addition, if there is insufficient funding for programme coordination, evaluations will be the first to go, as described above as a challenge to M&E identified by respondents.

Finally, respondents mentioned the challenge of adding more data collection tools, which can increase the *burden on participants* and potentially lead to disengagement. One respondent stated:

> *The best would be of course that we can customise our own or that we put in the things in this monitoring evaluation tools that at least we want to know instead of putting extra things in it or maybe making an extra survey or making something extra and then it's not that user friendly anymore and then it can be a burden of course for people to invest time in it and to stay attached to it.* (P4)

Solutions for Implementing the Theory of Change Approach

For the ToC to be sustained, respondents mentioned the need for *support by the core management* team. This support would help in overcoming scepticism and ensuring that all team members understand and commit to the approach. One respondent emphasised:

> *I think it's important that the main part of the management pushes it. That it's important and then at least the ones that are now more sceptic about it maybe get the idea of I have to do it. But in the end they also need to understand very clear why we do it. And also feel it, so that they will start doing it on their own.* (P3)

Improving the M&E infrastructure by building a central database and improving data management systems were identified as critical steps to streamline M&E activities. As one respondent suggested:

> *My idea is more or less we have now sort of a central database and we put some numbers in it now we can build on that and if we build on that we can expand it*. (P3)

Additionally, respondents mentioned utilising AI and automated processes to enhance the efficiency of data collection. Lastly, the data showed that identifying and implementing *quick wins* were perceived as crucial in demonstrating the value of the ToC approach and maintaining momentum. One respondent noted:

> *There are a lot of possibilities, but maybe we can identify some quick wins, which are like, just looking at the video portfolio to adapt it, looking, if we can really say, hey, we agree on the focus group discussion combined with a community event for every course. And we do it.* (P1)

7 Discussion

7.1 The M&E Landscape – Accountability over Learning?

The research has identified several challenges in measuring the social impact of programmes, primarily due to strong donor demands for quantifiable measures, often leading to superficial evaluations. These findings are reflected in the current M&E landscape. Despite calls for more evidence and theory-based approaches, the current landscape is strongly influenced by the need for organisations to demonstrate accountability to external stakeholders (Whitley et al., 2020). The findings of this research confirm this, showing that the demands of funders have led to a tick-box mentality within the organisation, limiting critical reflection. Rather than reflecting on their programmes to foster learning and improvement, organisations are pushed to tick the necessary boxes to secure funding. Moustakas (2024) supports these results, noting that the reliance on short-term grants often leads to a focus on quantifiable measures. Additionally, Coalter (2009) highlights that such evaluations primarily serve funders' interests at the expense of deeper qualitative insights.

Furthermore, as the results show, limited funding for coordination and evaluation tasks exacerbates the problem. This finding supports Whitley et al. (2020) who observed that most funding is allocated to specific project delivery costs rather than monitoring and evaluation expenditures. As a result, when budget and time are limited, organisations tend to prioritise activity delivery over reflective practice. Additionally, Engelhardt (2019) highlights that the available budget and expectations of M&E results have an impact on the scope of M&E activities. Organisations with a limited budget and a focus on minimal evaluation to meet donor requirements tend to perform an accountability function of M&E, rather than using it to learn about their programmes.

Besides the strong focus on the accountability function of M&E, it is important to acknowledge that practitioners also use alternative approaches to demonstrate their social impact, such as storytelling formats and videos, as the findings show. The stories of the Leaders after a year of active engagement provide important information on the long-term outcomes of the programme. This provides an ex-post evaluation examining the programme's overall sustainability and engages with the target group through creative storytelling. This aligns with Engelhardt's recommendation to find tools that meet the needs of the target group and reduce the burden on participants. Adams and Harris (2014) suggest that producing new forms of evidence can empower practitioners and influence funding organisations, promoting more inclusive and balanced approaches to M&E.

7.2 Using a ToC Approach to Move Beyond Accountability

The results of this research show that the development of a ToC can have several benefits for an organisation's work. The use of an interactive workshop to develop the ToC helped team members gain a clear and concrete understanding of how different programme components contribute to the desired impact, consistent with Dhillon & Vaca (2018), who highlight the importance of articulating assumptions and linking strategies to outcomes. The research revealed that the co-production of the ToC facilitated a shared conversation between team members, aligning their desired outcomes. Literature confirms that this process can help articulate assumptions, share knowledge, discuss specific aspects of the ToC, and assess the feasibility of a programme in a particular context (Connell & Kubisch, 1998).

The workshop with the wider team allowed more team members to get involved in the process and build a deeper understanding of how programmes can achieve the desired impact. In this context, Baffsky et al. (2021) highlight the importance of sharing the ToC with the team to ensure everyone is moving in the same direction and understands its contribution to maintaining and improving programme quality. This can potentially address one of the challenges identified in the research: staff reluctance towards engaging in M&E due to a lack of understanding of its purpose. The ToC can help staff better understand the evaluation approach, allowing for greater participation (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018).

In addition, as the results of this research show, developing a ToC can increase awareness of critical reflection based on a deeper understanding of causal relationships and areas of potential failure. This can help practitioners move beyond intuition-based decision-making and positively influence the described lack of feedback culture. Engaging in critical reflections on the causes of success and failure and examining what consequences this has for future action can enhance a learning culture within the organisation (Caspari, 2004). In this way, organisations can move further towards an organisational culture that values critical self-reflection to improve their programmes.

Besides the internal benefits of using a ToC, the results also revealed some external benefits. The developed ToC can help visualise the intended social impact for external stakeholders, aligning with Dhillon and Vaca (2018) who argue it aids in better understanding an organisation's goals, successes, and challenges. The findings also show the potential of a ToC to articulate a programme's impact journey, making it easier to communicate the rationale behind interventions (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018). If funders better understand the rationale for a programme, they may be more inclined to provide funding for coordination tasks, including M&E. This could address one of the key M&E challenges identified in this research, the lack of funding for coordination tasks. Whitley et al. (2020) support this by arguing that funders should support practitioners to understand and improve their programmes, not just to demonstrate the impact of their funds.

7.3 A Resource-Intensive Approach in Resource-Poor Settings

Despite the discussed benefits, the results also revealed several challenges in implementing a ToC in practice. The biggest challenge identified in this study was keeping it alive. This challenge is influenced by other factors, including a lack of knowledge, lack of (infra)structure, and interference from daily business tasks.

Connell and Kubisch (1998) highlight that one of the three preconditions for successful ToC implementation is ensuring that the necessary resources—economic, technical, political, institutional, and human—are available. Engelhardt (2019) further supports this, noting that the expertise within an organisation strongly influences the scope of M&E. In particular, the task of analysing the data collected requires substantial technical and academic expertise (Engelhardt, 2019). Despite this, many SFD practitioners are inadequately trained to conduct sufficient or appropriate M&E (Hylton and Hartley, 2011). Questions about how to implement and use the ToC approach in this research also highlighted these concerns and identified a lack of knowledge among staff. However, this challenge cannot be seen as the sole responsibility of practitioners. Whitley et al. (2019) found a strong interest among practitioners in increasing their knowledge of programme design and evaluation methodologies, such as theories of change, to better understand how and why certain outcomes are achieved. Yet, this interest is often unmet due to a lack of accessible knowledge, research and training resources (Whitley et al., 2019), reflecting the siloed knowledge landscape in M&E.

Besides the limited resources, daily business operations pose another challenge identified. Coalter (2009) confirms that organisations become resistant to monitoring and evaluation when it disrupts their programme delivery in resource-poor settings. This resistance clashes with the resource-intensive and time-consuming nature of ToC implementation described by Baffsky et al. (2021) and observed in this research.

The results of this research also suggest some ideas of the respondents to overcome the challenges of implementing a ToC. Firstly, it was highlighted that it requires having ambassadors in the core team to support its ongoing implementation. Building a central database and using automation and AI can streamline M&E processes and address resource constraints. In addition, identifying and implementing quick wins can keep the day-to-day work going and maintain the momentum of ToC implementation.

7.4 Implications

Overall, this research has implications for both practitioners and researchers. For other NGOs operating in SFD, the findings suggest that using an interactive workshop to develop a ToC can help staff better understand how activities are linked to outcomes and impact by mapping the impact journey. This can increase their understanding and participation in evaluation activities, thereby improving the overall measurement of social impact. Using the ToC for critical reflection and learning can improve programmes and move them away from simply serving accountability to external stakeholders and funders. In addition, involving different stakeholders in the development, including funders, implementers and representatives of target groups, can increase their participation and buy-in, which are crucial for successful implementation. Nevertheless, organisations need the necessary human and financial resources to implement the approach. Further research is needed to understand how organisations can be better equipped and supported to apply theory-based approaches.

In terms of research, this study touches on an unexplored topic in the SFD literature and seeks to address the existing practice research gap. Moving the field forward requires creating an empowering context and building bridges that adopt appropriate M&E approaches while sharing knowledge between all interested groups. Deeper engagement with practitioners can provide insights into their perceptions of evidence and the realities of their daily work. Participatory evaluation research is needed to ensure their voices are heard alongside those of funders, policymakers and academics. Recognising the crucial role of practitioners and focusing on the learning function of M&E does not mean avoiding negative findings, but critically examining why success stories work in some contexts and not others. Future research is needed to explore how to further close the gap between practice and research, how to better include the voices of practitioners, and how to move the M&E landscape away from knowledge silos towards participatory approaches aimed at supporting those working with target groups to increase overall social impact.

7.5 Limitations and Strengths

The study attempted to provide a new perspective on the social impact measurement landscape in SFD through the use of a case study design focusing on practitioners' experiences. This is a new perspective that has not been explored before and therefore provides an initial foundation for further research in this area.

However, a key limitation of the study is that the ToC developed had not been fully implemented at the time of the research and therefore the identified benefits and challenges of the approach, except the workshop findings, need to be understood as speculations. Further research is needed to prove whether these speculations actually represent benefits and challenges in a practical application. Evaluating whether the ToC has been successfully designed and implemented and whether activities are leading to desired changes requires long-term testing. This process was beyond the scope of the study.

Another limitation of the research and ToC development is that only team stakeholders were involved in the development workshop. Due to time and logistical constraints, funders, policymakers and representatives of the target group could not be included, limiting the diversity of perspectives. Finally, extending the study to other NGOs would have provided a broader perspective.

8 Conclusion

This research underscores the complexity and challenges of implementing a ToC approach in sport for development programmes, highlighting the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications. While theory-based evaluations are highly praised in literature, this research identified that they often do not align seamlessly with on-the-ground practices.

While valuable opportunities were identified in implementing the ToC approach, the research also revealed a number of barriers. The findings indicate that maintaining the momentum of ToC implementation is challenging without dedicated staff and sufficient knowledge and expertise within the team. Moreover, the daily operational demands often overshadow strategic M&E efforts, compounded by the external pressures of meeting funder requirements, which tend to focus on quantifiable measures at the expense of qualitative insights.

If successfully designed, the ToC can help engage different stakeholders in a conversation that ensures that programmes are designed to meet the needs of local contexts by aligning desired outcomes and impacts. This can help to shift the current focus of M&E activities from accountability to understanding underlying mechanisms and learning to improve programmes for target groups.

Finally, the research highlights the importance of bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practitioner experiences. Engaging more deeply with SFD practitioners through participatory evaluation research can empower them and ensure their voices are heard alongside those of researchers, funders and policymakers. This approach is essential for developing M&E strategies that are not only theoretically sound but also practically applicable and beneficial for all stakeholders involved.

In conclusion, while the journey to fully integrate a ToC approach and effective M&E practices presents challenges, the potential benefits in terms of improved programme outcomes and impacts can be significant. By addressing the identified barriers and leveraging the insights of practitioners, SFD organisations can develop more nuanced, context-specific, and impactful interventions. However, this has to be supported by research exploring the voices of practitioners and funders listening to their needs.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Behaviour Change Methods of the 3X3 Leader Course Programme

Reflecting on evidence-based behaviour change methods from the existing taxonomy of Kok et al. (2016)[2], the Leader Course uses different applications of these behaviour change methods. The key determinants targeted by these methods include knowledge, skills, attitudes and environmental conditions. The behaviour change methods and their application in the course are listed in the table below.

Method (related theories and references)	**Definition**	**Application**
Participation (Diffusion of Innovations Theory; Theories of Power; Organizational Development Theories; Models of Community Organization; Cummings & Worley, 2015; McCullum, Pelletier, Barr, Wilkins, & Habicht, 2004; Rogers, 2003; World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2002)	Assuring high level engagement of the participants' group in problem solving, decision making, and change activities; with highest level being control by the participants' group.	The end of course event is organised entirely by the participants themselves.
Active learning ((Elaboration Likelihood Model; Social Cognitive Theory; Kelder, Hoelscher, & Perry, 2015; Petty et al., 2009)	Encouraging learning from goal-driven and activity-based experience.	The course takes place on a 3X3 basketball court, allowing participants to put into practice what they have learned about becoming a 3X3 leader.
Modeling (Social Cognitive Theory; Theories of Learning; Kazdin, 2008; Kelder et al., 2015)	Providing an appropriate model being reinforced for the desired action.	All the educators who facilitate the course have started their journey with the Leader Course and therefore provide valuable role models for the participants, showing them where the journey can go. The educators themselves follow positive coaching characteristics and integrate life skills into the course, providing positive examples of the desired behaviour.
Guided practice (Social Cognitive Theory; Theories of Self-Regulation; Kelder et al., 2015)	Prompting individuals to rehearse and repeat the behavior various times, discuss the experience, and provide feedback.	The course includes guided practice on how to integrate life skills into 3X3 activities, positive coaching or differentiation of exercises giving participants the opportunity to practice leading activities and receiving feedback from their peers and the educators.
Developing new social network linkages (Theories of Social Networks and Social Support; Valente, 2015)	Linking members to new networks by mentor programs, buddy systems, and self-help groups.	The course allows participants to connect with peers and access the wider 3X3 Unites network.

[2] Kok, G., Gottlieb, N. H., Peters, G.-J. Y., Mullen, P. D., Parcel, G. S., Ruiter, R. A. C., Fernández, M. E., Markham, C., & Bartholomew, L. K. (2015). A Taxonomy of Behavior Change Methods; an Intervention Mapping Approach. Health Psychology Review. DOI: 10.1080/17437199.2015.1077155

Appendix B: Indicator-based Theory of Change – Leader Course Programme 3X3 Unites

(WE) WIN TOGETHER

INPUT

Number of
- Capable educators (Role Models)
- Capable local coordinator
- Perspectives for participants: Events, roles to take on etc.
- Local network: Organisations working with youth
- Existing community members
- Available facilities

Amount of
- Funding/Sponsoring
- Time
- Funding for activation afterwards

Other
- Enthusiastic and open staff who can build trusting relationships with participants
- Experience
- Energy

3X3 UNITES STRATEGY & PRIORITIES

PURPOSE-DRIVEN TEAM

COMMITTED COMMUNITY

TOP TIER 3X3

STRATEGIC PARTNERS

SOCIAL IMPACT, POWER OF 3X3, MAXIMUM POTENTIAL

OUTPUT

Level 1: Activities are carried out
- x numbers of 8-week (girls-only) leadership courses
- x numbers of end events
- x numbers of life skills workshops within the leadership course
- x numbers of trainer's days
- x numbers of get-togethers with leaders
- x numbers of specific workshops (like photography, storytelling etc.)
- x numbers of Inspirational sessions
- x numbers of mentoring moments (informal)

Level 2: Target groups are reached
- x numbers of leaders in total who are educated
- x numbers of female leaders who are educated
- x numbers of local stakeholders/ organisations who are connected to the course
- x numbers of young people who are active during the end event
- x numbers of non-sporters/ non-basketballers who are educated

Level 3: Target groups accept offers
- x % of (female) leaders are satisfied with the course
- x % of leaders follow extra workshops/get-togethers etc. and are satisfied with it
- x % of non-sporters/ non-basketballers are satisfied with the course

OUTCOMES

Level 4: Change in Knowledge & Competence gain
- Leaders know how and feel confident to organize safe and inclusive 3X3 activities and events on their own
- Leaders have improved their (positive) coaching ability
- Leaders know how to integrate life skills into their 3X3 coaching
- Leaders know how to behave as a role model and engage their peers in a positive way
- Leaders have improved social skills (relationships, teamwork, empathy, conflict resolution, motivating others)
- Leaders have improved professional skills (organisational skills, communication skills, leadership etc.)

MECHANISMS:
- Trusting relationships
- Empowerment
- Encouragement
- Motivation

OUTCOMES

Level 5: Change in Attitude & Behaviour
- Leaders organise and implement safe and inclusive 3X3 activities in their neighbourhood
- Leaders are more conscious about the consequences of their behaviour and are able to reflect on their behaviour as role models
- Leaders take an active role in their neighbourhood and feel ownership of the court and responsibility for the community that plays there
- Leaders are involved in organising events/ assisting in organising events such as: Street League, all Women's Events, Pro League
- Leaders are empowered to take control of their own life choices and set personal and professional goals

Level 6: Change living conditions
- x numbers of leaders have an official diploma
- x% of leaders are involved in other 3X3 programmes/activities/events
- x% of leaders take part in the Academy
- x% of leaders grow into a role within the organization (crew)
- x% of leaders have made new friends
- x% of leaders feel a sense of belonging to a wider community
- x numbers of young people (female) are reached by the 3X3 activities organised by leaders

IMPACT

Level 7: Change in society

Building Strong Communities by increasing

- **Gender Inclusion:** Increase gender inclusion by proactively promoting female and non-binary role models in 3X3 and increase overall female participation.
- **Health:** Positive impact on young people's health by providing more places where they can enjoy being active and become part of the 3X3 Unites community.
- **Employability:** Contribute to increasing perspectives and employability for young people.
- **Youth Participation:** Encourage youth participation in society by increasing the number of young people with valuable skills and future potential who play an active role in their neighbourhoods and communities.
- **Diversity & Inclusion:** Ensuring equal access for every young person to participate freely in sports and build more diverse and inclusive communities.
- **Positive Youth Development:** Promote positive youth development by supporting young people in their developmental stage and the mental, emotional and physical challenges that come with it.

Appendix C: Semi-structured Interview Guidelines

1. **Attitude towards monitoring and evaluation**
    a. When do you consider the Leader Course programme a success?
    b. Is it important for you (as an organisation) to measure whether you have achieved this success with the programme? If yes/no, why?
2. **Status Quo of monitoring and evaluation methodologies** (experience)
    a. How do you currently measure the outcomes for the target group and the societal impact of the Leader Course programme?
    b. Reflecting on your current monitoring and evaluation activities: What works well to measure whether the Leader Course programme is leading to your desired outcomes and impact?
    c. Are there any challenges in monitoring and evaluating the outcomes and impact of the Leader Course programme? If yes, which ones?
        i. Where do you see the biggest challenges in practice to collecting and analysing the relevant data?
3. **Understanding theory-based evaluation** (experience)
    a. Has the workshop helped you to understand how to develop a Theory of Change? If yes/no, how?
    b. Has the workshop and the development of the Theory of Change helped you to better understand how programme activities can lead to desired outcomes and impact? If yes/no, how?
    c. What are your main takeaways from the workshop and the development of the Theory of Change for the Leader Course programme?
4. **Opportunities of developing/applying a ToC** (speculation)
    a. In your opinion, do you think the Theory of Change is a helpful tool for your organisation? If yes/no, why?
    b. Where do you see opportunities of using a Theory of Change approach?
        i. At the design/adaption phase of a programme
        ii. At the implementation & monitoring stage
        iii. At the evaluation stage
        iv. Regarding the impact of the project
        v. As part of a broader organisational strategy
5. **Challenges implementing a ToC and applying it in practice** (speculation)

a. Where do you see challenges in applying a ToC in practice? What can hinder its implementation?

7. **Additional information**

a. Would you like to add anything else with regard to the previous questions? Something from your experience or any examples that may come to your mind.

Appendix C: Category systems

1) *Dimension: Perception of success (RQ1)*

Theme	Description	Code	Files/ Frequency	Example empirical indicator
Internal measures	Perceptions of what makes the leader course programme a success based on internal measures such as participants' connection to the organisation after the course, some form of personal development of the participants, mainly based on the feelings of the main educator.	Connection	3/4	"But also we start with like 10 or 12 how many will finish it and from those how many will stay connected to 3x3 Unites. That's also a sign of how good your leader course and your community are in that region. So I think that's more from our side." (P3)
		Personal Development	5/7	"For me it's a success when there has been a change in behaviour of the participants and some reflection about their own growth and that they experience the strengths and the life skills of 3x3 within their context and that could be of course within their social system but it can also be that they change something in their daily life." (P4)
		Feeling	3/3	"I don't really, I'm not the person that only thinks through paper, so for me it is more of, it's funny because we started this interview about feelings, it's more a feeling. If you start with a group, which is not a group yet, and you finish with the community. That's how I see it when a Leader Course is successful." (P6)
External Measures	Perception of what makes the leader course programme a success based on external measures such as quantitative requirements of funders e.g. how many participants need to complete the course.	Quantitative requirements	5/5	"One is that it depends very much on, what we agreed before, if we have some kind of where we get the money from, so it's also about how many people have to complete the course. This is also for us a part of the success." (P1)

2) *Dimension: Status Quo of monitoring and evaluation activities (RQ1)*

Theme	Description	Code	Files/ Frequency	Example empirical indicator
Current M&E activities	Statements about the current focus of monitoring and evaluation activities mainly based on quantitative measures such as participant numbers, the personal judgement of the main educator and individual stories of selected participants.	Quantitative measures	3/4	"The things I know that should be okay or should be able to be okay is that we get the quantitative data. I think we're probably pretty aware of how many people started and completed the course. I think we also have some kind of monitoring of how many people are in the activities that leaders lead because we asked them to fill those Excel sheets. So, I think we do have kind of a basic grip on the just very basic numbers." (P1)
		Personal Judgement	4/4	"So again it adds to the gut feeling of the educator, and that is about it. So we don't really check it out all too much because it's just, you know, kind of underlines what the educator think's, and there's no second educator looking in on that stuff." (P5)
		Individual Stories	3/3	"We write those nice stories about them. We do storytelling and in that we let the young people reflect on their development after they have been a leader for a year. Which is good, but it's also not very comparable." (P1)
Challenges	Statements about challenges within current M&E activities, including organisational challenges such as lack of structure, tick-box mentality, lack of reflection after a programme has ended, human	Tick-box mentality	3/4	"They set some numbers but are those numbers really the social impact? No, it's just our numbers. So we tick boxes like we need to have 15 participants in every activation. Okay, what does that mean? I can bring random 50 people to that court and then we check the box." (P3)
		No follow-up/ Feedback culture	4/6	"Yes that's also the a thing for the whole organization at every level at every project everything we do what, I don't want to use the word consequences, but, we do something and then did we do good, did we do bad, did you do good did I do good or did you fuck up?" (P3)
		External Stakeholder Demands	4/7	"We have several ways to fund the course and several demands that come with that, not just as far as numbers and participation, but also as far as participants that are not or are club bound, age of participants, gender, all that stuff. There's so many variables." (P5)

	resource challenges including lack of organisational skills and different attitudes towards M&E, difficulties in adapting to change, and finally challenges caused by external conditions such as stakeholder demands, lack of funding and low response rates from participants.	Limited funding for M&E	1/2	“And then you write down a budget. […] Why do you need five hours of coordination? And then you bring it back to one, two hours or something. And if every municipality or funder does that, then nothing left […] So, you need extra money from somewhere. And if you don't have that, then this is the first thing you won't do. Because the activities, you show yourself. That's important. And all the rest is like, okay, we will fix it in some way or another. And then it's also on the ones who give you the money. So, that makes it hard.” (P3)
		Lack of organisational skills	3/3	“People don't do their paperwork properly because we have basketballers, we have people coming cross sector, and mostly not with a background, which is in project administration, or which is in very organized backgrounds.” (P1)
		Different attitudes	5/8	“I think I'm one of the only educators that uses the survey. I think at the beginning when I started working here I really felt like I didn't know what I was doing so I needed some feedback and no one was looking with me so I made that list of questions for my leaders but it's not part of the course.” (P6)
		Difficulties adapting to Change	2/3	“New educators do a really good job I have to say 'cause we wrote […] a very clear guide on how to use several tools, but the educators that have been a part of our organisation for a long time struggle with adapting to new situations because they have been used to going about things in a certain way.” (P5)
		Lack of structure	5/9	“If you collect it then it's in Google sheet, device, whatever. Or it is on a server or it is on, I don't know, somebody's own Dropbox. There's no structure in there. I think that's a that's a really big part of the problem for the organization.” (P3)
		Data collection	4/5	“I send it afterwards and I think 10% of the leaders fill it out and that's most of the time people that are very excited that's what my feeling is or someone that has really something else to say.” (P6)

3) Dimension: Theory of Change Approach Development and Opportunities (RQ2)

Theme	Description	Code	Frequency	Example empirical indicator
Insights from ToC development Workshop	Statements on how the workshop improved the understanding of the causal relationships between input, output, outcomes and impact, and how it raised awareness of the subject across the wider team.	Clearer understanding of causal relationships and Impact	4/7	“It was good to run it really for our program and make it very concrete. Because we did it from start to the end. So it was very clear for me how the different things add up to each other that you in the end look at, the impact you're making, or you want to make and how to go from there.” (P1)
		Awareness for whole team	4/5	“A lot of them … learned what's necessary more to come from input to impact and what happens behind everything that we do …. So, I liked it really much for insight for more people.” (P2)
Opportunities of ToC approach	Statements about the opportunities of using a ToC approach, including having a clear visualisation of the social impact journey for external and internal use, focusing on impact rather than activities, enhancing critical reflection and the	Visualisation for external stakeholder	3/5	“You can use it to make also maybe for outside clear how you are dedicated to your mission and vision and how you're getting there. So potentially, of course, you can make a communication instrument out of it, where you write an article and elaborate a little bit more on that. How are you realizing your mission and vision.” (P1)
		Impact Orientation	4/7	“If we are approached by a city or municipality or whatever organization who wants to work with us then maybe we should start and look at what they really want to achieve so what impact do they really want to make and then use the theory of change to work backwards to what we're gonna do there and of course it will be a leader course in some form but that form you can decide on the impact you want to make.” (P3)

	potential to improve programme quality.			
		Impact Journey Guidance	3/4	“I really like the fact that you work towards the theory of change as a bigger holistic thing […] you can also put it like a dot in the future somewhere where for people it is really handy to […] have a little hook to put it on and for people it gives guidance […] and to use this also to make it clear to people.” (P4)
		Critical Reflection	2/3	“You just usually have all this information and it's kind of messed around and now you can sort it into the different categories which makes it more clear where you want to turn the screw where you want to adapt things, where you can have a look at and it's also helped me in a critical way, you reflect on the activities you're doing, is it leading to the desired outcome? Or is it related to each other? Or do you just do it because it's a feeling to do it, you know, and then look at it.” (P1)

4) Dimension: Implementation of ToC (RQ3)

Theme	**Description**	**Code**	**Frequency**	**Example empirical indicator**
Challenges	Statements about the challenges of implementing a ToC approach in practice, including the need for a dedicated person to keep the approach alive, the lack of knowledge about how to implement it, the interference and prioritisation of daily business tasks, the potential burden on participants due to administrative effort, and the need for drastic organisational change.	Keeping it alive	4/7	“To keep it alive is a challenge and I think it's needed to really find somebody who loves to keep it alive […]. So I think that's a real challenge because sometimes we really dive into these things and then I think we always use it in a way but it's not always alive it needs water to keep on growing and it needs attention so I think that's a big challenge.” (P4)
		Lack of knowledge	3/5	“Knowing where to start, what to use, how to use it. I think well I always act on ideas and feelings I hate to say it every time but that - this has to be more on top of my mind but then also I don't know where to fit it so knowledge for me on this, how to use it, how to implement it - like I said before then I think it's very valuable.” (P4)
		Daily business + run mentality	2/3 + 2/2	“All the other stuff you have to do besides your goal where you want to work towards what you want to do while, well, planning it all. So that's going to be one of the biggest hurdles, I think. And that's ourselves as a team. The daily business but also the things that just drop in your lap from one moment to the other moment.” (P2)
		Burden for participants	1/2	“The the best would be of course that we that we can customize our own or that we put in the things in this monitoring evaluation tools that at least we want to know instead of putting extra things in it or maybe making an extra survey or making something extra and then it's not that user friendly anymore and then it can be a burden of course for people to invest time in it and to stay attached to it.” (P4)
		Drastic change	2/3	“But you know this, the cultural change to actually implement this is pretty big.” (P5)
Solutions	Statements on possible solutions to overcome barriers to implementing the ToC approach, including support for the approach by the core team, building the necessary infrastructure for M&E and	Core Team Ambassadors	3/4	“I think it's important that the main part of the management pushes it. That it's important and then at least the ones that are now more sceptic about it maybe get the idea of I have to do it. But in the end they also need to understand very clear why we do it. And also feel it, so that they will start doing it on their own.” (P3)
		Central Database	1/2	“My idea is more or less we have now sort of a central database and we put some numbers in it now we can build on that and if we build on that we can expand it.” (P3)
		Automatisation and AI	3/4	“If we have a better program, which runs pretty automatically where you just have to pop in the numbers. You have to pop in the feedback. And if we are, we're working with [one of the Leaders] on automatization, if we can make it as automatic as possible.” (P1)
		Quick Wins	1/1	“There are a lot of possibilities, but maybe we can identify some quick wins, which are like, just looking at the video portfolio to adapt it, looking, if we can really say, hey, we agree on the focus group

	data collection by building a central database and using automatisation and AI, and focusing on the quick wins.			discussion combined with a community event for every course. And we do it." (P1)
		Visualisation	1/2	"I think it needs to come in every presentation we do, so I think we really need to if we think it's valuable we really need to spread it out all the time." (P4)