Vladimir Borkovic and William Rook reply to two questions as part of the Sport & Development e-Debate.

How much sport is too much sport? What’s the key to optimising the balance between sport and educational components in health awareness programmes?

The key to optimising the balance between sport and education lies in overcoming the distinction between them and working towards integrated interdisciplinary programmes that utilise sport as a tool in delivering education. Fortunately for healthy young people, the inherent enjoyment of playing sports rarely becomes too much. However, this of course depends on the environment in which sport is offered, the fun built into sports programmes and the social context in which activities take place. Indeed, like anything else, involvement in sport can get too much if it starts to negatively impact on a participant’s life and opportunities, and we perhaps see this phenomenon with young men and women encouraged to pursue professional sport at the expense of their educations. This is all part and parcel of the competitive and potentially lucrative world of sport and symptomatic of the decline in the perceived value of recreational sporting activities. Competitive sport and having ambitions in sport are entirely valid and not without benefit. However, the key to ensuring that no amount of sport is too much sport is to revitalise the traditional idea that sport is a tool, a method for developing skills for life, and not just an end in itself.

In the context of contemporary development, the skills for life that can be promoted through sport must be carefully calibrated for the challenges faced, and the rules of sports themselves can even be manipulated to promote pressing aspects of good citizenship. As such, ‘too much sport’ does not become an issue if the sport played is largely recreational and socially beneficial, and of course does not infringe on educational components. In the field of development that streetfootballworld operate, the sports programmes offered by our affiliates are not competing with formal education (and as such, not distracting kids from school), and are in fact mostly established with the central aim of disseminating education. This educational core to sporting programmes ensures that the sports element is not excessive. However, in Development through Football programmes, sport can sometimes become too much when the relationship between the sporting and social components are not clear at the outset to those designing, delivering and participating in activities. A clear understanding of how sport is being used in education is vital.

With regards to health awareness programmes, the benefits of using sport are threefold; the promotion and demonstration of good health through fun and physical activity, the opportunity to use sport as a learning environment in and of itself, and the attraction that sport offers as a gateway to other types of educational delivery. Ultimately, optimising the balance between sporting and educational components depends on the extent to which education is integrated with sport. It goes without saying, of course, that education is the goal in health awareness programmes, and sport should never compromise the educational message. However, it is possible that a balance need not be struck; sport can itself be the educational component in health awareness, a change that perhaps requires some to look at sport in a new way and requires us all to generate innovative methods of utilising sport as a tool in development. Most pressingly for our development community, it is crucial to define as accurately as possible the scope of using sport to address the various health issues; to what extend can sporting activities themselves be adapted to integrate the relevant health messages? In defining this it would be wise to consult both health and (physical) education experts.
How can we formulate realistic aims for Sport for Development projects aimed at improving health? Can you name examples of realistic aims?

Aside from the intrinsic health benefits from sporting participation, the aims for improving health in the development through sports movement should not differ from the fundamental health objectives of the development community at large. There are two main aspects to this, the first being infrastructural capacity, which although outside the direct sphere of sports and development, should remain a conscious objective. The goals in this area should prioritise primary health facilities as part of sporting facilities, and training in skills such as first aid incorporated into sports.

The second aspect is health awareness with the ultimate aim of course being a reduction in chronic diseases such as AIDS and malaria, and a reduction in self-inflicted health problems associated with diet and the consumption of drugs and alcohol. Increasing health awareness and knowledge of positive lifestyle choices and disease prevention is a realistic aim for the development through sports community, with the larger objective being the internalisation of this knowledge and the actualisation of positive lifestyle choices. It is relatively straightforward to evaluate the transmission of health education, but long-term benefits and social change are harder to assess, especially the impact of sport in generating social change. This remains a field in need of in-depth research, but should not deter those of us working in Sport for Development from realistically aiming to reverse the destructive impact of preventative disease through education. As such the more practical aim for us should be to use sport as an attraction and as an educational tool in building health awareness, attempting to reach as many people as possible with this message (directly and indirectly), and ensuring that health awareness is internalised by participants.

An approach with so far positive results is the integration of testing (e.g. HIV/AIDS) and general vaccination sessions in sport programmes and connected events (e.g. tournaments), always of course in cooperation with all relevant actors, such as local health institutes, community leaders, entities dealing explicitly with testing/vaccination, etc. In the case of HIV/AIDS testing, apart from the obvious benefit of knowing one's status and receiving immediate support as necessary, its application in the framework of sporting activities also greatly helps to lower the knowledge barriers and weaken or extinct the prejudices around the disease. A defined set of outcomes of such an approach (e.g. # of people informed, tested and, accordingly, medically cared for) could be an aim that is both feasible and measurable.