

# Sport for Development in the Western Balkans

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## Context

Young people in the Western Balkans face significant socio-economic challenges, including high unemployment and social inequalities. This often leads to emigration as many youths seek better opportunities abroad. Despite these difficulties, young people are still optimistic and supportive of EU accession<sup>1</sup> and regional cooperation, aspiring for peace, stability, and economic growth. The GIZ Global Programme Sport for Development leverages the power of sport to address these challenges, focusing on empowering young people, particularly those from marginalised groups. Through sport-based pedagogical measures, the programme promotes employability, gender equality, and social cohesion, unlocking the potential of young people to shape their future in the region.

## The ‘Sport for Development’ approach

Recognised by the United Nations ‘as a means to promote education, health, development, and peace’, Sport for Development (S4D) uses sport, physical activity, and play intentionally as tools to achieve development objectives.

Sport offers young people a dynamic, collaborative environment to learn and grow. When taught in a context-sensitive, pedagogical way, it fosters a healthy lifestyle, encourages gender-inclusive participation, builds resilience, teaches teamwork, and offers peaceful conflict resolution strategies. These key skills help young people navigate their personal and professional lives.

German development cooperation, in partnership with governments, civil society, business, and academia, has developed a rich S4D portfolio that promotes intersectoral collaboration.

## ‘Sport for Development’ in the Western Balkans

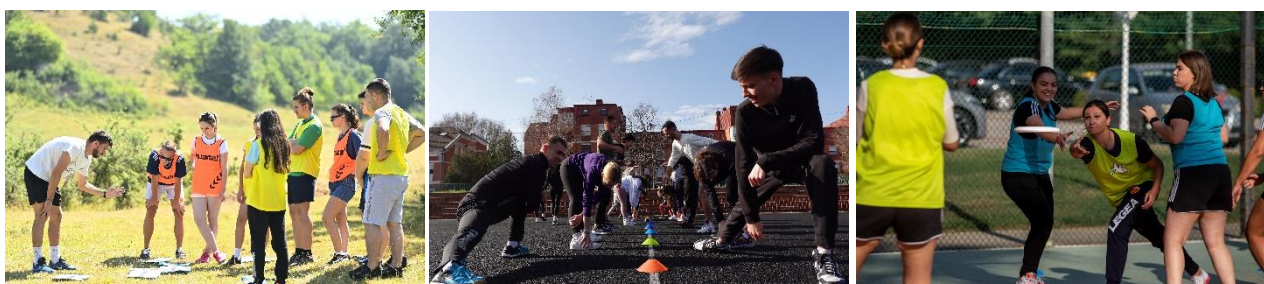
Sport is a powerful social experience that reaches deep into civil society, fosters participation, and creates a sense of belonging across ethnic and social divides.

The S4D programme strengthens the capacities of both governmental and non-governmental organisations in the Western Balkans. It promotes the development of a shared agenda for youth development and social cohesion through sport. By integrating sport as a key dimension within education, youth, and sport policies and S4D as an approach within sector concepts and training curricula, regional, national, and local development initiatives are positively influenced.

In collaboration with partners, the programme creates dynamic learning environments and capacity-building opportunities for sports coaches, teachers, and youth workers, enabling them to apply sport pedagogical concepts in their work effectively. Regional trainings foster collaboration among communities and organisations across the Western Balkans and improve neighbourly relations. The [“Global S4D Community”](#) Platform further supports this by enabling knowledge sharing and collaboration worldwide. Central to the programme is the empowerment and skills development of young people.

## Implementation insights

Significant efforts have been made to integrate Sport for Development (S4D) into national policies, organisational strategies, and training curricula across the Western Balkans. In 2023, North Macedonia recognised sport as a tool for youth empowerment in its new youth strategy (2023-2027). S4D can



L. to r.:  
Sport for Employability Training in Kosovo.  
S4D Youth Ambassadors Training in Serbia on the topic of Human Rights.  
The young professional leadership training ‘Future Leaders in Football’ in Albania.

<sup>1</sup>Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) [Balkan Barometer 2024](#)

contribute to capacity development of youth workers and sports coaches. In Kosovo, international expertise contributed to the preparation of a new sports law, while the State Strategy for Youth (2024-2032) and its action plan recognises the role of sport in developing youth's personal and professional skills. Aligning to its priorities, in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport and the Employment Agency as well as several municipalities in Kosovo, 'Fit4Life' Summer Schools were implemented to provide employability skills to young people through sport.

In the 2023/24 school year, 200 coaches and physical education (PE) teachers in Albania were familiarised with the S4D approach to promote a more skills-oriented and inclusive sports practice. The School Sports Teams project is implemented by the Ministry of Education and Sport and the Albanian Olympic Committee.

A key aspect of the S4D programme is to strengthen organisational capacities and networks. In Serbia, youth workers now have access to two S4D training modules developed with NAPOR, the national umbrella organisation for youth work. These modules combine theoretical and practical elements tailored to the specific needs of youth workers.

The programme also prioritises regional cooperation and reconciliation through sport. In partnership with the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), joint regional Summer Camps are organised, bringing together young people from across the Balkans to work together on topics such as gender equality, peacebuilding, and reconciliation. Through S4D activities, participants have developed a better understanding of intercultural learning and improved their collaboration and teamwork skills. Sport and play are also used in regional school exchanges and youth encounters with teachers and staff from the RYCO SuperSchools.

In line with this, the 'Scoring Development' conference in October 2024, co-organised by GIZ and RYCO, successfully brought together stakeholders from the Western Balkans to share experiences in the field of youth empowerment and regional cooperation through sport.

Additionally, the programme hosted the fourth edition of 'Future Leaders in Football' in Albania, organised together with the German Football Association (DFB) and Volkswagen, where female participants strengthened their career prospects and leadership skills in sport focusing on equal opportunities.

The 20 S4D Youth Ambassadors aged 16 to 25, from the countries of the Western Balkans are also putting their newly acquired skills into practice. With their own initiatives, they support the personal development and teamworking skills of young people as well as equality in and through sport.

The scientific monitoring of the S4D activities proves that they achieve their targeted effects. In collaboration with ten secondary schools in the municipality of Tirana, Albania, an extracurricular sports education programme was implemented with the focus on youths' employability skills. An impact study, conducted with the support of the Faculty of Social Science in Tirana, revealed that the S4D training significantly boosted self-confidence and enhanced goal-setting skills among high school students who participated in regular S4D sessions over one school term.

## Achievements

Across the region, the potential of S4D in promoting positive social development at both local and regional levels is increasingly recognised. In collaboration with partners, S4D is being implemented in schools, sport clubs, and youth organisations, with regionally co-created training materials promoting the mutual exchange of knowledge and learning. Over 870 coaches, youth workers, and teachers in the Western Balkans have been equipped with practical experience to apply S4D in classrooms and training sessions. Through the support of various partners, German development cooperation has empowered over 1.4 million youth worldwide, using sport as a tool for social development and cooperation. S4D offers the opportunity to learn from each other, to cooperate and to strengthen dialogue. S4D partners are connected across borders and together we are committed to promoting youth and their future.

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GIZ is responsible for the content of this publication.