

Sports can be used by companies to achieve specific outcomes through their CSR budgets

India Inc, Game Face On



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It's not IPL, but the Brahmaputra Volleyball League (BVL) is one of the most exciting sports propositions in the country, enabling over 1,000 young girls and boys from across Assam to play matches live-streamed online for anyone in the world to watch. BVL is the brainchild of former Indian volleyball captain Abhijit Bhattacharya, and its scale has grown each year with the support of corporate social responsibility (CSR) funding and innovative crowdfunding.

Another CSR initiative, GoSports Foundation's programme supporting Paralympic athletes returned 8 of the 19 medals at the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics and 3 of the 4 medals in 2016 at Rio. These projects are examples of how CSR funding for sports has the potential to accelerate change. They also point to the diverse ways in which sport can be used to achieve developmental goals in education, health, inclusion and other areas.

To fill a void in research at the intersection of sports funding and sports development, Pacta and the Sports and Society Accelerator undertook a multi-year (2014-15 to 2020-21) analysis of CSR data from the National CSR Portal, including a spotlight on a sample of companies that funded sporting activities. This provides preliminary, yet important, insights on funding patterns, preferences, approaches, gaps and opportunities in sports CSR.

Schedule 7 of the Indian Companies Act 2013 recognises contribution to sports as a permitted CSR activity. The law takes an ecosystem approach to sports. Eligible CSR contributions encompass

training to promote rural, nationally recognised sports, Paralympic and Olympic sports, creation and maintenance of sports infrastructure, upgradation and renovation of existing sports facilities, and sports science support, including setting up of gymnasiums and rehabilitation centres.

Early indications suggest that CSR funding has prioritised projects that focus on sports outcomes. A wider approach would also see sport as a powerful vehicle to achieve other developmental goals.

Between 2014-15 and 2020-21, the annual growth rate of funding for sports CSR activities has matched that of overall CSR at 27%. While promising, it is dwarfed by the 62% year-on-year growth of the Indian sports industry that surpassed ₹5,500 crore in 2021. Despite this growth, sports CSR comprised less than 1% of cumulative CSR spend in that same period, with health and education activities capturing the majority (51%) of total funding.

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Our study also found that sports CSR funding is geographically concentrated: Maharashtra, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and Karnataka together accounted for about 40% of funds, with only 17% allocated to other states, and the rest going to 'pan-India' projects and activities.

These five states also received higher overall CSR funds and had a higher concentration of companies' headquarters and in-state NGOs (often the immediate recipients of CSR funds).

Even within the sample of companies that spent on sports CSR, the average share of sports CSR in total CSR here is less than 5% across years. The number of companies implementing consistent, multi-year,



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Rise to the occasion

sports-focused CSR programmes is minimal. This implies that only a few companies view sports as a strategic priority and CSR imperative. Within our sample, unlisted companies contributed a higher share of their CSR spend—about 20%—to sports activities. But the quantum of sports CSR and average ticket size were significantly higher for listed companies. The sources of funds were also highly concentrated, with 10 companies accounting for almost 50% of the total.

Global evidence has shown that when sports proliferates within communities, it creates teamwork, develops life skills, fosters leadership and improves productivity. This is true for India too. Football programmes run by organisations like Yuwa and Shreeja have empowered hundreds of girls from tribal areas. Treating Paralympic achievements at par with Olympic achievements signals a strong shift in the disability inclusion discourse, and demonstrates a commitment to mainstream people with disability.

Countries like Britain, Australia and Canada have shifted gears on their sport and health policy frameworks towards sports for development

(S4D) and population-scale physical activity (PA) as targeted outcomes. S4D and PA discourses are at a nascent stage of development in India and there is a dearth of compelling research and scalable models.

Research into trends and patterns in sports CSR presents an opportunity to explore inter-sectoral linkages and reshape policy priorities beyond approaching sports as an isolated impact area. An integrated approach to sports CSR that combines sports excellence, S4D and PA perspectives will enhance the scope of sport, not just as a goal in itself but also as a means to achieve several other goals.

Many companies have specific mandates to support rural development, health, education and gender empowerment through their CSR budgets. Sports can easily be used to achieve these outcomes. But more awareness and model proofs-of-concept will aid in building this narrative.

Turnkey projects and plug-and-play initiatives where a company could adopt a playfield or invest in rural sports infrastructure can provide model theories of change, scalable project designs and measurable outcome indicators. Creating such a body of work would be crucial to bring new stakeholders and sources of capital to Indian sport.

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