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**Professional Culture of the Specialist of the Future**

**PROFESSIONAL CAPABILITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT IN SPORTS AND RECREATION SECTORS IN  
RUSSIA**

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***Abstract***

In the paper, the issue of professional development of young professionals in sports and recreation sectors in Russia was addressed. As a result of a participative action research conducted with young professionals who study at an extramural bachelor program at one of the sports and physical culture universities in Russia, a list of capabilities of a professional, oriented at sustainable development, was elaborated and refined. These capabilities are: informed vision, affiliation, integrity, knowledge and skills, resilience and confidence, as well as emotional reflexivity. The realization of these “ideal-type” capabilities in the professional practice of research participants was constrained by structural and individual factors. As a result of participative action research analysis, the former constraints are commercial orientations which prevail within the sector and societal discourses about physical activity which foster gender divide and exclusion. The latter include low work autonomy and limited possibilities for professional collaboration on these issues of sustainable development, and a lack of financial and informational resources. Further professional development interventions should address both factors. The paper suggests that participative action research methods can be used in the context of professional development at sports and health universities, and that other stakeholders such as community members should participate in future research.

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**Keywords:** Capability, participative action research, professionalism, sports and physical education, sustainable development.



## 1. Introduction

The importance of sport and recreation has long been recognized by the countries and international organizations for local and international sustainable development (UEFA, 2008). For example, the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games in Australia were organized as “green games”. The UN outlines the contribution of sports to all seventeen sustainable development goals, related to flourishing of “individuals, families, communities and society at large” (UNSECO, 2015, p. 3). The present paper analyzes professional practices and orientations of young professionals in the sectors of sports and recreation, from the perspective of their potential contribution to the goals of sustainable development.

Within the sustainable development agenda, sport is an umbrella concept that comprises “sport for all, physical play, recreation, dance, organized, casual, competitive, traditional and indigenous sports and games in their diverse forms” (Kazan Action Plan, 2017, p. 1). Sport thus covers a variety of activities of people of different ages from various social groups. In the sustainable development agenda mainly organizational actors, such as sport-related organizations, sport federations and foundations are seen as the major actors of the policy implementation process. Less attention is paid to the role of professionals in sports and recreation sectors as actors who can contribute to “bottom up” changes. Professionals in sports and recreation, including educators (coaches and physical education teachers), managers, promoters, are potentially the actors of change, as their collaborative initiatives and everyday professional practices can transform the sectors of sports and recreation “from within”.

A brief literature analysis shows a lack of studies on professional development and sustainability in sports (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). First, it has been rather out of the scope in sustainability education discussion which has a rather narrow focus on curriculum design and is transdisciplinary in its nature (Sugden, 2006). Second, in sport and development studies, the focus has been only on some aspects related to development, such as inclusion of vulnerable social groups and communities, development for peace, and inclusive pedagogies (Vail, 2006; Sherry, 2010). Finally, the issue of professionalism in sports has been out of the scope in the research literature in the field of sports management as the primary focus has been on organizations and institutions (Schulenkorf, 2010; Pogodin, Piskun, & Samorukov, 2018).

Many scholars recognize transformative potential of higher education and its broader societal impact (Boni & Walker, 2016; Bolotin, Piskun, & Pogodin, 2017). Still, the discussion on the role of sustainability education in the formation of future coaches and physical education teachers is rather limited both in the international and in the Russian academic and policy debate. There is a lack of studies which would analyze the perspectives and experiences of participants who combine their university studies with professional work outside the university and have a substantial working experience in the sector. All this demonstrates that there is a need for more research on professionalism in sports and recreation sectors and sustainability.

The present study aims to fill the existing gaps in the academic discussion by analyzing professional practices of sports professionals. This paper presents a participative research project which has raised reflexivity regarding the sustainability issues among practicing sports professionals who were also enrolled at an extramural education bachelor program in physical education. The project was organized and implemented at the university that specializes on teaching and research in the fields of sports, physical culture and health in Russia.

## 2. Problem Statement

The present analysis utilizes the concept of public good professional proposed by Boni & Walker (2016) to analyze professionalism for sustainable development in sports and recreation sectors. This concept was formulated within the capability perspective. Following this perspective, human development should be oriented at expanding individual freedoms. In the capability approach, freedom is understood in terms of capabilities and functionings. Functionings are “beings and doings” – that is, “various states of human beings and activities that a person can undertake” (Robeyns, 2011, p. 1). Capabilities are the alternative combinations of valuable functionings that are feasible for a person to achieve. The realization of capabilities is constrained at structural and individual levels - by structural and individual conversion factors.

Capability approach and sustainability perspective are mutually enriching. On the one hand, capability scholars are against defining development in the narrow terms of fulfilment of “the needs of people today” (Sen, 2013, p. 7), instead, they advocate that development should be enhancing human freedoms on a sustainable basis and address the needs of future generations. On the other hand, development has collective nature and concerns “humanity as a whole” (Sen, 2013, p. 7). The application of the capability perspective to the issues of sustainability means that its focus on the expansion of individual freedoms (capabilities) has to be complemented by the principle of the responsibility towards the wider environment, both natural and social, in the present and in the future. An actor therefore not only pursues his or her well-being and agency today (in other words, his or her individual freedoms), but also the public good. The latter includes sustainable natural and social environments. The actor is therefore viewed as embedded in the social and natural environments rather than being atomized and “selfish”.

The reorientation of professionals in the sphere of sports and recreation at the goals of sustainable development is not compatible with the narrow understanding of sport as a highly individualist and profit-centered activity that prevails in the public discourse nowadays (Gibson, 1993). The view of professional work in sport sector as a merely income-generating activity disregards its transformational potential and societal contribution. Instead, professionalism for the public good seeks to advance sustainability, by creating enabling and empowering conditions for human well-being and agency, embedded in the natural and social environment. Following Walker and McLean, “public-good professionals would be responsible agents with ‘other-regarding’ goals, aware of their obligation to enhance human development, democratic values, and social justice” (Walker & McLean, 2015, p. 61). They conclude, with the reference to Sen, that “if someone has the power to make a change that he or she can see will reduce injustice in the world, there is a strong case for doing so” (Walker & McLean, 2015, p. 44).

Professional reflexivity about the social organization of sports and recreation sectors and about the relationship of professionals with the broader environment is the key to the formation of professional orientations and practices that are oriented at the goals of sustainable development. The role played by reflexivity in the professional development defines the choice of participatory social research methods, in particular, participatory action research in this study. These methods can be used to reveal professional perspectives and constraints to development by reflexive analysis carried out by the research participants themselves (Feldman et al., 2018).

### **3. Research Questions**

In the study, the research goals were formulated in terms of the public good professional framework (Walker & McLean, 2015), which was further expanded to the issues of sustainable development in sports and recreation sectors. The research questions were formulated as follows: which capabilities and functionings are important for a professional practice in sports and recreation sectors that can contribute to change oriented at sustainable development goals (RQ1)? Which aspects of professional practice constraint the formation of these professional orientations (RQ2)?

In the research, the list of sustainable development goals as formulated by the UN with the overview outlining the contribution of sport to the 17 SDGs is used (Sport and the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017). These sustainable development goals include, for example: “end poverty in all its forms everywhere”; “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”; “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all”; “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”; “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all” (the full list is available in: Sport and Sustainable Development Goals, 2017, pp.: 3-17).

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The research aims are, first, to analyze how professionals conceptualize valuable capabilities – valuable beings and doings, in relation to sustainable development goals. Secondly, to identify functionings of professionals in relation to sustainable development goals, and obstacles they face in their professional practice oriented at sustainable development.

The purpose of the study is to identify potentials and constraints for professional development in sport and recreation sectors oriented at sustainable development as well as to implement an action research study which can be further applied at universities.

### **5. Research Methods**

To analyze the perspectives and practices of professionals in sports as embedded in a place and immersed with social relationships, qualitative research design was chosen. Pivotal to development of sports and recreation sector professionals is to bridge their professional experience and knowledge with the issues of sustainability. Following Walker and McLean (2015, p. 62) this can be achieved through “deliberation about the ends and means of development”. This deliberation can be fostered by participative research techniques, such as participatory action research, practitioner research, and participatory inquiry.

Action research is a post-positivist methodology that integrates subjective perspectives and knowledge into the research process. Participatory action research emphasizes the role of academic researcher as a facilitator that fosters reciprocal collaboration with research participants; and recognizes the role of bottom-up processes of reflection and analysis in knowledge generation and application (Walker & McLean, 2015). This allows removing the barriers that arise from the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the research participant. In comparison to many other research approaches, participatory action research is very dynamic and context-specific, because it considers data within its context.

The aim of action research is to obtain new knowledge and foster change in the lives of people in a direction towards a more sustainable state. The unjust structures and unsustainable practices are rooted in

people's beliefs. Participatory research techniques foster reflection processes and by this can empower individuals and make them active subjects of knowledge production.

In this study, participatory action research was implemented in a form of an iterative cycle of research, action and reflection. Participants carried out their inquiry within the specific context of their professional practice where they collected their data, analyzed it, and formulated action directions that should be taken to achieve a more sustainable professional practice. The action was reflected upon by the participants.

The application of participatory action research in this study follows the principles formulated by Walker and McLean in their study of public good professionals, these principles are extended to the research question concerning sports professionalism and sustainability. The analysis departs from the list of eight professional capabilities which could be developed during professional formation at universities (Walker & McLean, 2015).

The research was carried out at one of the Russian universities of physical culture and sports at the bachelor program "physical education". The university is one of the oldest in the country and has many prominent professional sportsmen among its teachers and graduates. The university offers programs in Olympic and non-Olympic sports, health and rehabilitation, physical culture, tourism, management and sports infrastructure. Most of the programs have profiles in pedagogy or life sciences.

Education programs in the field of sports and physical education in Russia comprise of additional education programs for school children (at sports schools for children and youth), vocational level education programs at colleges, higher education programs and postgraduate education at universities and institutes. At colleges, vocational education programs such as "physical education", with the granted qualification "pedagogue in physical education and sport", "adaptive physical culture" with the qualification "pedagogue in adaptive physical culture and sports", "tourism", with the qualification "specialist in tourism", can be awarded.

At universities, bachelor and master programs of this kind are offered: physical culture, adaptive physical culture, recreation and tourism, management, education studies. Within "physical education" program several specializations are offered, for example, coaching in the selected sport, physical education, recreational technologies, and sports management.

Participants of the present study are third year bachelor students at "physical education" program. As a part of the program, students learn the specifics of the sectors of physical education and sports, study such specific disciplines as management of physical culture, contracting in physical culture and sports, sports journalism, sociology of sports, and others. The major component of this program is pedagogical. Sports and physical culture training is also included in the study program.

Bachelor program's graduates can work as physical education teachers and coaches, also as sports managers and promoters. The program is 4 years in duration. Extramural form of education implies that students already work full-time and would like to upgrade their skills and competences. This form of education is popular among practicing professionals. Graduates with higher education degrees have better career prospects in the sector compared to their colleagues who completed short training courses or vocational education programs.

In the research, sixteen bachelor students who study at the extramural bachelor program participated, they were between 25 and 30 years old, all of them were working in sports and recreation sectors. Many of them were professional sportsmen in the past, at the time of their studies they worked as managers in sports associations, physical education teachers at schools, and coaches in fitness centers. Most of the participants have completed pedagogical vocational education, some have completed higher education in the fields other than sports, such as engineering and economics.

The research process included two stages. In the first stage, the list of the capabilities generated by Walker and McLean was used to discuss with the research participants which of the proposed capabilities might work for social transformation oriented at sustainable development goals in their profession? In the second stage, the list was refined and aligned with particular sustainable development goals by the participants themselves.

As a part of data collection process, the participants were asked to write short vignettes that describe situations encountered in the professional practice which are striking and surprising (“critical incidents”). The situations were addressing the list of professional capabilities. These situations were analyzed in groups. The final list of capabilities was a result of grounding the capabilities proposed by Walker and McLean (2015) in the everyday lives of the participants, as well as their understanding of which capabilities can be of high value for the society. The outcomes of the analysis were critically reflected upon by the participants during the group discussion. At the first stage, the following capabilities and functionings were formulated.

1. Awareness: being able see alternatives and possible improvements; awareness about sustainable development. The understanding of wider context of professional action; understanding how environment – natural and social, – forms individual and professional lives;
2. relatedness: accepting obligations to others including other species, other generations, and other people; not leaving nature and environment out of consideration in professional activities; not overlooking foreseeable undesirable consequences of professional actions for others and the environment; awareness of one’s own origins (nature, community, family);
3. integrity: being honest at work and in professional lives; not to ascribe central and primary importance to personal achievement; not acting selfishly;
4. competence: having high professional competences; valuing non-professional knowledge; having knowledge about the environment and possible environmental impact of professional activities;
5. resourcefulness and confidence: being resourceful in difficult circumstances; motivation; having support by professional community and supporting other professionals;
6. empathy: empathy; compassion.

After the list was finalized, a more critical reflection with regard to the contribution of sport to SDGs was made. The outline of how sports can contribute to SDGs from the Kazan Action Plan (2017, Russian version) was used as a starting point for the discussion. As a result of the group discussion, a list was reflected upon and further elaborated. The next step was to test the list in the context of one’s own professional practice. The participants were asked to write a reflexive diary regarding the capabilities and functionings relevant to their actual daily lives. In a two week period, the diaries were analyzed in small groups of 2-3 participants, and evaluated in a group discussion. As an outcome, the list of the following

capabilities and functionings for professionals in sports and recreation, oriented at sustainable development goals, was formulated. The results are presented in the Table 1.

## 6. Findings

As a result of participative research process, the research participants outlined a list of capabilities and functionings which are important for a professional practice in sports and recreation sectors. These capabilities and functionings from the perspective of research participants can contribute to transformation oriented at sustainable development goals (see Table 1 below).

**Table 01.** Professional capabilities of sports and recreation professionals which foster sustainable development

Capabilities	Functionings
1. Awareness:	Acting based on the understanding about alternatives and possible improvements; being aware about sustainable development. Understanding how environment – natural and social, form individual and professional lives;
2. Relatedness:	Being aware of professional’s obligations to others, including other generations and other spaces. Not leaving nature and environment out of consideration in professional activities. Promoting livelihoods, including in host communities of sport events and tourist destinations. Cooperating to promote tolerance, diversity and non-discrimination in the context of schools, universities, sport organizations, fitness clubs and in professional sports. Not leaving out of consideration foreseeable undesirable consequences of professional actions for others and the environment; awareness of one’s own origins (nature, community, family).
3. Integrity:	Building professional practice on respect and the principles of fair competition. Sharing available resources in transparent and equal way. Encouraging diverse individuals, including the elderly, women and disabled to practice active lifestyles and participate in sports. Inform about health restrictions if needed. Promoting the equal participation of diverse individuals. Supporting vulnerable individuals or people from low socioeconomic background in sports and physical education. Consuming responsibly. Avoiding sport goods and equipment that has not been produced in line with labour standards and sustainability benchmarks, for example, using less plastic when possible. Promoting balanced and healthy nutrition, avoiding usage of prohibited or harmful substances. Promoting eco-mobility for example when attending sport events when possible. Using forests and rivers in environmentally friendly way. Organizing the environmentally friendly sport events. Avoiding ascribing personal achievement in sports the only and the utmost importance.
4. Competence	Gaining advanced professional knowledge and skills that corresponds to the professional tasks and responsibilities. Not using falsified education certificates. Developing and valuing competencies in teamwork, cooperation, fair-play and goal-setting. Obtaining knowledge about the environment and the environmental footprint of sports and tourism, about environmental impact of your own professional activities. Being informed about balanced diets, sustainable food production, improved nutrition. Understanding gender norms and social mechanisms behind different types of discrimination.

	Being aware about climate change and the negative impact of sport and recreation. Getting informed about the interactions between biodiversity and the lifestyle we choose in the areas of production of food and other products, including sports; wise consumption of these products. Being aware about environmentally friendly organization of sport events. Understanding the principles of environmentally friendly construction of facilities and infrastructure for sport and recreation. Valuing non-professional knowledge in your practice.
5. Resourcefulness and confidence:	Using resources efficiently. Being resourceful in difficult circumstances; motivating yourself; fostering mutual support for sustainability within professional community and outside.
6. Empathy:	Being empathetic and compassionate, emotionally responsive to the needs of others. Avoiding acting selfishly.

The second research question of the present paper concerned the constraints to the formation of these professional orientations. While the participants agreed about the major capabilities that are relevant and valuable for their professional practice, there was no consensus regarding the actual functionings that can be achieved for each capability. The participants concluded that in their practice, only partial achievement of the formulated functionings is possible. The reason for this were various structural constraints which they encounter in their daily professional practice.

The first type of structural constraints refers to the content and context of their work. Participants had only limited possibilities to address their job assignments with creativity and autonomy. This was especially the case for young managers from sports sector, whose work contained a significant amount of paper work. The fitness coaches mentioned that their interaction with the clients is highly regulated by the fitness centres' administration. This makes their practice and remuneration dependant on "productivity" formulated in narrow terms, for example, as "customer satisfaction" or as achievement of formal productivity criteria unrelated to the sustainability concerns.

The highest autonomy in their professional practices have teachers of physical education. They have a possibility to transmit the values of sustainable development to the students at schools and youth centres and feel in power to do so. They believe they can address the issues of diversity and inclusion as well as cooperation for sustainable development in their practice. Still, they mention that parents see physical education more in terms of recreation and leisure, as well as physical education has a relatively low status within the hierarchy of disciplines at school. This encourages them to cooperate with other teachers in organizing school events which are oriented on cooperation such as school territory cleaning, the day of environment, and other.

Organizational constraints include the lack of facilities that would support practices oriented at sustainable development, with regard to wise use of water, separation of waste, and facilities for the disabled. There is also a lack of awareness about environmental issues on the level of administration and management of organizations. Participants claim that bottom up practices oriented at sustainable development goals can trigger change only if the need for sustainable development is understood at the higher level of organizations, communities, city government, etc.

The prevailing discourses about gender roles and disability is another constraint that was identified during the research process. Physical activities and recreation are still considered within the narrow understanding that divides activities and spaces for men and for women, as well as for the disabled. Physical



activity and recreation is not only divided in terms of gender, but is also embedded within the social structures of status and prestige. Sports participation and achievements transmit the image of success and power. This orientation is especially the case for those participants, who have background as professional sportsmen. This not only places concern for the vulnerable groups aside but is used to explain the practices related to unfair competition and “success at any cost” principle.

## 7. Conclusion

Professionalism oriented at the values of sustainable development has not gained enough attention in the research on sports and physical education. The support of professional development of future professionals as agents for sustainable development as early as during their studies at higher education institutions is highly desirable (Boni & Walker, 2016). The present participative study outlined the professional capabilities and functionings that the participants view as important for a professional practice in sports and recreation sectors that can contribute to transformation oriented at sustainable development. They are informed by the list proposed by Walker and McLean (2015) and include: informed vision, affiliation, integrity, knowledge and skills, resilience and confidence, and emotional reflexivity.

The application of participatory research methodology allowed integrating real-life experiences of professionals into the research as well as various perspectives. The participants reported that the participation in the project has raised their awareness about sustainable development goals and professional reflexivity, and their possible application in their professional practice. However, they outlined a number of structural constraints to the realization of functionings oriented at sustainable development, building on their practical experiences.

The formation of pro-sustainability professional orientations is increasingly constrained, as the public and professional discourse is dominated by the understanding of physical activity as rational and performance-oriented (Gibson, 1993). The study shows that this is particularly the case for sports professionals in Russia. This understanding is exacerbated in competitive, elite and professional sport practices, where the sport values such as fairness and respect were replaced by commercial orientations. In addition, the sector is highly standardized and commercialized, and does not leave enough autonomy for creative search and reflexivity. Another highly commercialized sector is fitness: the commercial priorities are linked with the limited understanding about what ideal body is. Overall, the communication and cooperation among professionals on the level of the wider professional community in sports and recreation sectors is constrained due to its high segmentation as well as a lack of political action for sustainability on the level of the sector.

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