

The Impact of Grassroots Football on Local Communities in Reducing Inequalities and Promoting Social Inclusion in Italy: The Case of Play for Change

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Date: March 2025

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the impact of grassroots football on local communities, focusing on its role in reducing inequalities and promoting social inclusion. Grassroots football plays a crucial role in fostering community identity, social cohesion, and equal opportunities, regardless of socio-economic background. Through a case study of 'Play for Change' in Italy, this work explores the initiatives undertaken to leverage football as a tool for social transformation. It highlights key projects, measurable impacts, and challenges faced in implementing sustainable and inclusive grassroots football programs.

## **1. Group Work - Context and Background**

As a team of four students, we collaborated closely with Common Goal for our thesis on grassroots football.

### **1.1 Common Goal and Its Mission**

Founded on August 4th, 2017, Common Goal is a pledge-based charitable movement created by streetfootballworld and launched with the public support of Spanish footballer Juan Mata. The initiative is rooted in the belief that football, as the world's most popular sport, has the potential to drive societal transformation (Common Goal, 2024). Common Goal encourages players, coaches, and clubs to pledge at least 1% of their salaries or revenues to social projects, amplifying the sport's contribution to people and the planet.

The organization tackles global challenges such as inequality, education, and climate action by leveraging football's widespread influence. These efforts highlight the importance of studying how climate change affects grassroots football, as these environmental shifts threaten both the sport itself and its role in fostering social inclusion (Common Goal, 2024).

Common Goal collaborates with football institutions, private companies, governmental bodies, and foundations to create sustainable and impactful social change. Some key partners include Adidas, Right to Dream, the EU Commission, and the FIFA Foundation (Common Goal, 2024).

With access to their network, research papers, and field studies, we aim to analyze how climate change and environmental challenges impact grassroots football and why it is crucial to develop effective adaptation strategies.

### **1.2 Grassroots Football as a Social Tool**

Grassroots football has become a powerful mechanism for community development and social change. The universal appeal of football enables it to promote social inclusion, particularly for marginalized groups. It also fosters education through structured youth programs and enhances community engagement by providing accessible sports facilities.

### **1.3 Key Challenges and Opportunities**

Despite its benefits, grassroots football faces several structural and financial challenges, including limited funding and inadequate infrastructure in low-income communities, gender disparities in access to sports and participation, and sustainability concerns for non-profit football initiatives. Organizations such as Play for Change work to address these issues by leveraging football as a tool for education, inclusion, and community empowerment.

## **2. The Impact of Grassroots Football on Local Communities in Reducing Inequalities and Promoting Social Inclusion in Italy: The Case of play for Change**

### **2.1 Introduction**

#### **Context of Grassroots Football in Italy**

Grassroots football represents the foundation of the sport, prioritizing participation, inclusivity, and social impact over professional competition. In Italy, this domain is primarily overseen by the Settore Giovanile e Scolastico (Youth and School Sector) of the Italian Football Federation (FIGC), which manages activities for children aged 5 to 12 under categories like Piccoli Amici (Little Friends), Primi Calci (First Kicks), Pulcini (Chicks), and Esordienti (Debutants) (FIGC n.d.). These categories combine promotional, educational, and recreational aspects of football, enabling children to play while also developing their skills. Complementing these activities are structured yet inclusive formats, such as the Under-12 Female Tournament, Under-13 Fair Play Elite, and Under-15 Championships, which allow children to participate in organized competition (UEFA 2019). Special initiatives like Calcio+15 Femminile and UEFA Playmakers further promote football among girls, and the annual “Grassroots Festival” at the Coverciano Technical Center celebrates the achievements of grassroots participants (FIFA Training Centre n.d.).

Beyond the scope of competition and recreation, grassroots football in Italy also functions as a transformative platform for education and community development. For example, the program Tutti in Goal, a collaboration between FIGC and the Ministry of Education (MIUR), goes beyond football by teaching children organizational, communication, and

leadership skills. Participants aged 10 to 13 are encouraged to engage in tournament logistics, promotion, and refereeing, promoting holistic development that extends beyond the football pitch (Diamond Football n.d.). These elements illustrate how grassroots football contributes to the personal and social growth of young individuals while fostering inclusive communities.

## **2.2. Relevance of the Topic**

Grassroots football is especially significant in Italy, where challenges such as economic inequality, social exclusion, and the need for community cohesion persist. As the country's most popular sport, football has the power to bring people together and address these societal issues. Programs like Tutti in Goal, which aim to tackle problems like school dropout and bullying, demonstrate the potential of grassroots football to foster inclusion and equip young people with essential life skills (FIFA Training Centre n.d.; Putnam 2000). Similarly, initiatives spearheaded by organizations like Play for Change use football to transform vulnerable communities. Through projects such as Liberi Nantes and Lay's Replay, Play for Change creates safe, inclusive spaces where young people can thrive, thereby reducing marginalization and fostering sustainability in disadvantaged areas (Play for Change 2023). These examples highlight how grassroots football not only addresses immediate challenges but also serves as a catalyst for long-term social transformation.

## **2.3. Objective of the Sub-Thesis**

The objective of this sub-thesis is to analyze how grassroots football, through the initiatives of Play for Change, contributes to reducing inequalities and promoting social inclusion in Italy. Using Play for Change as a case study, the research focuses on the design, implementation, and sustainability of projects such as Liberi Nantes in Pietralata, Calcio Sociale Cordiale, and Lay's Replay at the Scampia football pitch. This analysis aims to demonstrate how grassroots football can create safe spaces, foster community participation, and drive positive change in vulnerable communities, offering valuable insights into the broader impact of sports-based interventions.

## **2.4 Background and Theoric context**

### **2.4.1 The Impact of Grassroots Football on Social Inequalities and Inclusion**

Grassroots football is widely recognized as a powerful social tool for reducing inequalities and fostering inclusion, transcending its role as a recreational activity. Drawing on Social Capital Theory, community-driven activities like grassroots football build networks of trust and cooperation that strengthen the social fabric (Putnam 2000). These networks facilitate interactions among individuals from diverse backgrounds, fostering mutual understanding and breaking down barriers related to race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Globally, grassroots football initiatives have demonstrated their ability to address various social issues. In South America, for example, football has been used to engage at-risk youth and divert them from violence and crime. Similarly, in Africa, grassroots football has empowered women and girls by challenging traditional gender roles and promoting equality. These examples underscore the universal potential of grassroots football to create inclusive spaces and provide marginalized groups with opportunities for social mobility and growth.

### **2.4.2 The Italian Context: Challenges and Opportunities**

In Italy, grassroots football operates in a context marked by regional economic disparities, social exclusion, and limited access to recreational activities in disadvantaged areas. Southern Italy faces higher rates of unemployment, poverty, and youth marginalization, making community-driven initiatives critical. Grassroots football addresses these challenges by offering accessible and inclusive activities that enable young people to build social skills, foster a sense of belonging, and engage in positive pursuits. Organizations like Play for Change are at the forefront of this effort, transforming neglected urban spaces into vibrant social hubs. For instance, the Lay's Replay project in Scampia revitalized a deteriorated football pitch, creating a safe environment for local youth to gather and grow. Similarly, Liberi Nantes in Pietralata supports refugees and migrants in integrating into Italian society through football, fostering mutual respect and breaking down cultural barriers. These initiatives align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and

Communities), underscoring the potential of grassroots football to address systemic challenges while fostering long-term sustainability.

### **2.4.3 Conclusion of Theoretical Framework**

Grounded in inclusivity and community empowerment, grassroots football emerges as a vital mechanism for addressing social inequalities and fostering cohesion. In the Italian context, with its unique social and economic challenges, sustainable and replicable models like those developed by Play for Change highlight the capacity of grassroots football to create opportunities for marginalized groups. This theoretical framework establishes the foundation for analyzing how grassroots football initiatives contribute to building inclusive and resilient communities, making it a compelling subject for exploration.

## **2.5 Case Study – Play for Change**

### **2.5.1 Introduction to Play for Change**

Play for Change is a social enterprise that designs and coordinates high-impact projects by creating sustainable and replicable management models through sports, education, and the arts. Leveraging the expertise of its international charitable organization, Play for Change Charitable Trust, the enterprise develops programs to improve the life opportunities of children and young people living in vulnerable contexts or facing economic, cultural, and social hardships.

The organization’s mission revolves around fostering inclusive, sustainable sports and educational activities that empower communities and provide young generations with the tools they need to thrive. Play for Change identifies sport as a universal right and a catalyst for cultural and social transformation. Its programs operate on three core pillars: play, learn, and develop. By offering safe and stimulating environments, facilitating workshops that teach life skills, and supporting community-driven development, Play for Change demonstrates the transformative potential of sport, aligning with the broader understanding of grassroots football as described by FIFA Training Centre (“Grassroots Development”) and FIGC (“Grassroots Activities”).

The organization acts directly or in collaboration with local entities to transform neglected areas into vibrant hubs for social interaction, encourage citizen participation and promote

social inclusion, combat intolerance, marginalization, and inequalities, provide models of inspiration to counteract youth distress, ensure the sustainability of projects by reducing economic disparities and unemployment, and strengthen local groups through community engagement and cohesion.

Play for Change’s programs are carefully designed with local partners to address the specific needs of beneficiaries and communities, a method that aligns with the frameworks proposed by UEFA in its efforts to develop grassroots football across Europe (“How UEFA is Developing Grassroots Football Across Europe”). The organization’s efforts align with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in reducing inequalities (SDG 10), fostering sustainable communities (SDG 11), and empowering individuals through quality education and health (SDGs 4 and 3). Over the last decade, Play for Change has established a global presence, delivering impactful projects in disadvantaged areas across Italy and other countries, where it transforms sports spaces into inclusive environments that promote social cohesion and active citizenship.

### 2.5.2 Key Projects in Italy

Lay’s Replay – Scampia, Naples



*Figure 5: Lay’s Replay project (Source: platforchange.org)*

In 2023, Play for Change launched the Lay’s Replay project in Scampia, one of Naples’ most economically and socially challenged neighborhoods. This initiative aimed to promote a circular economy by recycling chip packs to construct a state-of-the-art football pitch. The project included two key components: sustainable infrastructure, with a five-a-side football pitch made from recycled materials and fully recyclable at the end of its lifecycle, and "Football for Good," featuring educational football programs designed to foster community development and cohesion. These activities addressed pressing local issues such as school dropout rates and social inequality. By revitalizing the “Scampia

Stadium,” this project significantly contributed to the social and cultural regeneration of the area, providing young people with safe spaces to play and connect (Ignarra 2023). This project was highlighted for its innovative approach to sustainability and its ability to bring tangible benefits to the community (“A Scampia il nuovo campo” 2023).



*Figure 6: Scampia's Pitch (Source: playforchange.org)*

### **La Sanità Sport Center – Naples**

In the Sanita district of Naples, Play for Change renovated the sports center inside the Institute La Palma, creating opportunities for over 200 children, young people, and their families. The center provides sports and educational activities, including specialized support for children with disabilities and autism. Additionally, complementary initiatives such as after-school programs, parenting support, and nutritional education are designed to foster sustainable community growth while promoting healthy lifestyles and education (Play for Change 2022).

### **Community Sport Centers – Rome, Naples, and Palermo**

Leveraging the experience gained through the Jucà pe' Cagnà project, Play for Change established Community Sport Centers (CSCs) to create sustainable educating communities. These centers prioritize social impact by expanding access to quality sports and educational activities, sustainability through developing financially and organizationally viable

business models, and replicability by promoting scalable intervention models. Actions include infrastructure redevelopment, activities for people with disabilities, gender equality programs, and health promotion. Operating in areas such as Corviale (Rome), Mercato (Naples), and Montepellegrino (Palermo), these centers engage hundreds of children and foster active citizenship through sport and education (Play for Change 2022).



*Figure 7: Montepellegrino's pitch (Source: playforchange.org)*

### **2.5.3. Measurable Impact**

Play for Change's programs have demonstrated significant, measurable impacts on reducing inequalities and fostering inclusion in Italy's disadvantaged communities, reflecting the wider social role of sport as outlined by Coalter (2007). Over 200 children and young people in Sanita and 90 participants in Mercato, Naples, benefit annually from sports and educational programs that provide safe spaces for personal growth (Ignarra 2023). Projects such as Lay's Replay and Community Sport Centers have transformed neglected areas into vibrant community hubs, promoting social interaction and active lifestyles. Programs specifically target vulnerable populations, including children with disabilities and young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. For instance, the Sanita center accommodates children with autism, ensuring that no one is left behind. By aligning projects with SDGs, Play for Change ensures long-term impact, addressing critical issues such as health, education, and gender equality. Initiatives like the Lay's

Replay project in Scampia have not only improved sports infrastructure but also reinforced social cohesion, giving local communities a renewed sense of pride and belonging.

#### **2.5.4 Challenges and Success Factors**

Despite its successes, Play for Change has faced several challenges in implementing its projects. Securing consistent funding and ensuring the long-term viability of projects remain significant hurdles, which the organization addresses by developing replicable and scalable business models. Engaging local communities and ensuring their active participation can also be challenging, particularly in areas with deep-rooted social issues. To overcome this, Play for Change builds strong local networks with schools, sports clubs, and associations. Transforming degraded areas into sustainable sports facilities requires considerable time and resources, a challenge that is met through collaborations with local partners and stakeholders. Additionally, breaking down stereotypes and fostering inclusivity in conservative communities is a continuous effort. Programs such as gender equality workshops and educational campaigns play a crucial role in overcoming these barriers (Play for Change 2022).

Play for Change's ability to adapt its programs to the specific needs of each community, combined with its commitment to sustainability and inclusivity, reflects principles highlighted in broader studies on community development and sports, such as those by Putnam (2000) and Coalter (2007). By leveraging local partnerships and aligning its efforts with global goals, the organization continues to make a lasting impact on communities across Italy.

## **2.6 Conclusions and Final Reflections**

### **2.6.1 Summary of Findings**

This study underscores the transformative potential of grassroots football through the impactful initiatives led by Play for Change in Italy. By targeting degraded areas and converting them into dynamic hubs of community engagement, the organization has demonstrated how sports can be leveraged to tackle systemic issues such as social exclusion and inequality. Programs such as Lay's Replay in Scampia and the Sanità Sports Center have revitalized neglected urban areas, providing safe environments that foster

youth development. Research highlights that access to well-maintained community spaces not only enhances social cohesion but also reduces antisocial behavior (Coalter 2013). Additionally, the Community Sport Centers (CSCs) developed by Play for Change have embraced a holistic approach by integrating education, health promotion, and active citizenship into their sporting initiatives, aligning with sustainable urban development strategies described by Misener and Mason (2006). These centers stand as exemplars of comprehensive models for community well-being. Furthermore, Play for Change has demonstrated a strong commitment to equity by integrating marginalized groups, including individuals with disabilities and disadvantaged youth, into its programs. This aligns with Nicholson and Hoye's (2008) findings on the ability of sports to bridge social divides. The organization's collaborative efforts with local stakeholders also ensure that programs remain sustainable and contextually relevant, echoing Levermore's (2011) emphasis on the importance of partnerships in sports-based initiatives. Through these efforts, Play for Change has shown that grassroots football transcends the boundaries of sport, becoming a powerful tool for addressing societal challenges and cultivating inclusive communities.

### **2.6.2 Recommendations**

Building upon the remarkable achievements of Play for Change, this study identifies several areas for enhancing the reach and effectiveness of its programs. One key opportunity lies in geographic expansion, particularly into rural communities where infrastructure is often limited. As noted by Doherty and Misener (2021), rural populations derive significant benefits from targeted sports interventions, which could broaden the organization's impact. Additionally, adopting a comprehensive impact evaluation framework, such as the Social Return on Investment (SROI) model, could provide deeper insights into the long-term outcomes of these initiatives, as suggested by Arvidson et al. (2013). Addressing gender disparities in sports participation by introducing initiatives specifically tailored to young women and girls, such as leadership academies or mentorship programs, could further strengthen Play for Change's commitment to inclusion. Research by Burton (2015) underscores the role of sports in empowering women and fostering gender equity. Enhancing community involvement through greater participation from families and local leaders could also bolster the sustainability of these initiatives. Skinner et al. (2008) argue that community ownership models foster trust and ensure project

relevance to local needs. Finally, leveraging digital tools to deliver virtual workshops or facilitate communication between stakeholders could improve the accessibility and scalability of programs. The effective use of technology in extending the reach of community initiatives is well-documented by Green et al. (2015). By implementing these strategies, Play for Change could further amplify its impact, ensuring that its mission continues to resonate with and benefit communities across Italy.

## **2.7 Future Implications of Grassroots Football in Italy**

Grassroots football represents a unique and powerful avenue for addressing critical societal challenges in Italy, particularly in regions marked by economic and social disparities. Football's universal appeal offers a platform for promoting inclusivity and bridging cultural divides, fostering mutual respect and shared identity, as articulated by Giulianotti (2011). Programs like Lay's Replay illustrate how grassroots football can nurture life skills, leadership, and educational aspirations among youth, reflecting the principles of the Positive Youth Development framework, which emphasizes structured activities as a means of fostering resilience (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, and Deakin 2005). Furthermore, the alignment of grassroots initiatives with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ensures that these programs address both immediate social needs and long-term sustainability, as highlighted by Levermore (2008). The ability of grassroots football to adapt to emerging challenges, such as eco-friendly practices and digital education, underscores its relevance in addressing evolving societal demands. Taks et al. (2014) note that adaptability is a critical factor in the success of sports-based interventions. As organizations like Play for Change continue to innovate and lead in this space, the broader adoption of their models could transform grassroots football into a nationwide movement for social equity and inclusion. Through a multidimensional approach that prioritizes sustainability, collaboration, and inclusivity, grassroots football holds the potential to redefine community development in Italy.

### **3. Conclusion**

Climate change is putting grassroots football clubs under a lot of pressure, both financially and socially. These clubs, which are often central to their communities, are struggling with the rising costs of fixing damage from extreme weather, losing money from canceled games, and seeing less income for local businesses that rely on match-day activity. To survive, clubs need to find new ways to make money, embrace sustainable practices, and work closely with their communities to stay strong.

Grassroots football clubs are about more than just sports, they are a platform for education and social impact. Clubs like Darlington Town FC in the UK and Düsseldorf Grassroots FC in Germany show how adopting green technology, such as solar panels and rainwater systems, can cut costs while also bringing in extra income through events and rentals. These efforts make clubs more financially stable and show their commitment to sustainable development.

Football's universal appeal gives clubs a great chance to educate people about climate change. Simple steps like banning single-use plastics, encouraging recycling, and promoting carpooling or public transport on match days can make a big difference. Football Ecologie France is leading the way, using football to teach players, families, and fans about reducing waste, saving energy, and understanding how climate change affects our world. Partnerships with schools, local governments, and environmental groups can further strengthen these efforts with activities like tree-planting, clean-up days, and climate awareness events. These actions highlight how football can bring communities together for a greater cause.

Grassroots football also plays a big role in fighting social inequality. Programs like Play for Change and Lay's Replay show how football can empower marginalized groups, create safe spaces for everyone, and build stronger communities. These projects, which tie into global goals for sustainable development, prove that sports can drive real change. But for these programs to last, clubs need more support with funding, infrastructure, and community involvement.

In the end, grassroots football has the power to go beyond just being a sport. It can teach, inspire, and unite people to tackle major challenges like climate change and inequality. By making sustainability and inclusion a part of everything they do, these clubs can lead the way toward a better future. With clubs, communities, and partners working together, even the smallest football fields can make a big impact on the world.

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