Nancy McLennan is a specialist in inclusive change methodologies who has managed projects within an intergovernmental environment for more than 15 years. Her professional experience in participatory policy design, sports values education and grassroots movement building complements her passion to create transformative, rights-based change with public and private sector partners. The COVID-19 pandemic has spotlighted the value of good health and the need to build resilient systems. The impacts of the pandemic, reaching far beyond health, require a response which combines the skills, expertise and resources of public and private sector stakeholders. UNESCO’s new sport-based initiative, Fit for Life, provides a practical framework for stakeholder ecosystems to activate smart investments in sport to tackle rising inactivity, mental health issues and social inequalities.

**FIT FOR LIFE**

**A partnership compact powering**

1. Grassroots participation in sport and quality PE to reduce inactivity and chronic diseases
2. Quality and inclusive sport policies which drive health, education and equality outcomes
3. Values education through sport to promote equality and build skills
4. Educator training and delivery of quality, student-centred sport curricula
5. Evidence, data systems and use of technologies which support smart investments in sport

Fit for Life is designed to activate smart investments in sport to tackle rising inactivity, mental health issues and social inequalities. To enhance wellbeing from the ground up, Fit for Life will connect policy-makers, industry leaders, academics and civil society groups in the field of sport and development.

The need for integrated action from all stakeholders at all levels is pressing, and COVID-19 provides a unique portal to align strategies, investments, programming and impact methodologies. A key success factor in making sport a central proposition in policy frameworks, urban development plans, health strategies and social integration programmes is presenting the business case for investment.
Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a 41% decline in physical activity and a 200% increase in youth mental health conditions, exacerbating existing crises and disproportionately impacting disadvantaged groups. Findings from UNESCO’s Quality Physical Education Survey, supported actively by WFSGI’s Physical Activity Committee, point to a correlation between chronic underinvestment in PE and grassroots sport programmes, and documented spikes in inactivity and mental health issues.

Data gathered from 117 countries points to four key areas of opportunity which connect school PE lessons and grassroots sports practice: equality of access and participation between genders and for persons with disabilities; wellbeing and training of educators; building evidence and collective commitments around the value of sport and PE beyond physical health outcomes; and delivering new investment models with clear potential for scaling, notably to improve infrastructure.

Quality physical education provides a springboard for lifelong participation in physical activity and a unique space to fuse physical, mental, and socio-emotional skills. Despite this, “most schools don’t have enough space or equipment to exercise. Balls aren’t enough, we need better infrastructure” exclaimed one PE Teacher in the UNESCO QPE Survey.

57% of countries invest less than 2% of national education budgets in PE
89% of countries say PE is the same for girls and boys, but less than 40% monitor and enforce gender equality policies
Only 64% of ministries require equal PE opportunities for students with disabilities
Only 44% of countries have specialist PE teachers in primary schools
Only 47% of in-service training (INSET) or continuing professional development (CPD) training includes safeguarding
81% of PE teachers report that classes have been negatively impacted by COVID-19, with girls and children with disabilities most affected
69% of PE teachers indicate that both the physical and mental health of students has worsened during the pandemic

UNESCO’s QPE Survey Highlights

1 “To be published in a global status report in 2022."
There is an urgent need to reverse negative trends and an opportunity to capitalise on the appetite of public stakeholders for cost effective solutions to crises in physical, mental and social wellbeing. Fit for Life will tackle crises by breaking down knowledge siloes and systematising investments in sport for individual, social and economic development. A global Fit for Life baseline study, to be rolled-out in 2022, will gather data on sport policy, grassroots participation rates and related patterns of investment. This study represents the first-time data has been collected from upstream and grassroots respondent groups at this scale.

Building on the productive engagement in UNESCO’s QPE policy project, Nike will join as a core partner in the baseline study. According to Kelly Lau, Senior Director in Social and Community Impact at Nike, “The QPE Policy project was a unique and rewarding opportunity for us to collaborate with public-sector and community-based stakeholders. This engagement helped inform our contribution to quality PE in elementary schools as part of Nike’s Made to Play commitment to get kids active”

Through capacity-building and the use of AI technologies, the baseline study also represents a strategic opportunity for stakeholders from public, private and civil society sectors to integrate existing data sets, combine agendas and increase impacts. Data and measurement methodologies on the social return on investment will play an important role here in ensuring that PE and sport data can contribute to a safe empirical environment for public and private investors, as well as to encourage investment from new stakeholder groups.

In parallel to global data and advocacy activities, Fit for Life’s partnership compact will create impact at regional and national levels through the establishment of action-oriented networks, the delivery of workshops and trainings to policy-makers and curriculum specialists, the roll-out of resource packs and the launch of a youth taskforce and scholarship programme which empower young people to both produce and use evidence to create behavioural and systems-level change. “Youth should be involved in all policy processes to ensure inclusive participation and innovative solutions. To achieve this, we need tools that enable us, as young leaders, to take our legitimate sports at the table” Laura-Maria Tiidla, IOC Young Leader, Estonia.

Fit for Life will provide both the tools and the mentoring called for by youth communities. It will also scale existing good practice. A partnership highlight in this respect, stemming from WFSGI engagement, is the integration of BOKSKids activities and trainings in schools and communities around the world through the Fit for Life champion country change programme. As Kathleen Tullie, Founder and Executive Director of BOKS, puts it “We’re thrilled to be partnering with Fit for Life to scale the BOKSkids.org resources and provide impact across the globe through this unique private-public partnership. Together, we will ensure that mental and physical health is seen as a priority core subject for all students.”

All stakeholders have a role to play in framing sport as a central proposition for development agendas and a critical investment for resilient citizens, societies and systems. Fit for Life offers governments, companies, institutions and individuals a joined-up framework to strengthen partnerships, layer insights, hone interventions and increase impacts.

Now is the time to connect across the sport industry to offset the impacts of COVID-19 and move forwards with a common vision. UNESCO looks forward to continuing its collaboration with WFSGI members to deliver Fit for Life’s ambitious agenda.