



CISD POLICY BRIEF · SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES

The Play Deficit: How Nigeria Lost *Its Recreational Soul*

On the slow collapse of sport, play, and recreation as public goods, and the twin crisis it is inflicting on social cohesion, mental health, and athletic excellence.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nigeria is experiencing a quiet but consequential collapse in recreational culture — one that is simultaneously fracturing our social fabric, inflicting deep psychosocial harm on a generation, and dismantling the grassroots talent ecosystems that once produced world-class sportspeople. This brief argues that recreation is not a luxury but a public good, and that its decline demands urgent policy attention at federal, state, and community levels.

01 — CONTEXT & FRAMING

What We Have Lost, and Why It Matters

We played street football on untarred roads. We played suwe in dusty compounds. We pulled out the draught board on evenings when the light was good. In secondary school, boys and girls were playing badminton and cricket. Ijemo Titun High School in Abeokuta won an international cricket competition, and the Ogun State Government under Governor Osoba recognised the team. We were poor, but we were playing.

That recollection is not nostalgia for its own sake. It is a precise diagnosis. Recreation used to be embedded in daily life, regardless of economic class. It was not an industry, a product, or a scheduled event. It was a norm, available, spontaneous, intergenerational, and profoundly social.

Today, that commons is disappearing. The street that once hosted football is now fenced off or tarred over, without the pedestrian culture that once animated it. The school that fielded cricket elevens has been stripped of its sports allocation. The local government that maintained a football pitch has diverted its vote to recurrent expenditure. And the family



that once pushed its children outdoors has quietly contracted the space for unstructured play.

This brief names that constellation of losses as the Play Deficit — and argues it carries three distinct but compounding crises that Nigeria cannot afford to ignore.

02 – THE DUAL CRISIS

Two Crises, One Root

The Play Deficit is not a single problem. It splits into two distinct yet deeply interrelated crises, each deserving serious analytical attention, and is further deepened by a third psycho-social dimension explored in Section 05.

PILLAR I

The Social Cohesion Crisis

Recreation has always been a primary technology of social integration. As it retreats, the bonds it quietly maintained — across tribe, class, religion, and neighbourhood — are fraying.

PILLAR II

The Talent Pipeline Crisis

Sporting excellence begins in streets, schoolyards, and open fields — in informal repetitions that form elite reflexes before any coach ever sees a child. As those spaces disappear, Nigeria's grassroots talent pipeline quietly runs dry.

03 – THE FIRST CRISIS

Recreation as the Sinew of Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is not produced by speeches, national day celebrations, or unity summits. It is built, slowly and organically, through shared experiences that cut across the lines society tends to harden. Recreation is among the oldest and most effective of those experiences.

In the compound, on the field, at the local government court, children and adults of different backgrounds submitted to the same rules, celebrated the same goals, and negotiated the

same disputes. Play was, in this sense, a daily civic education, in tolerance, in fair competition, in the recognition of the other's humanity.

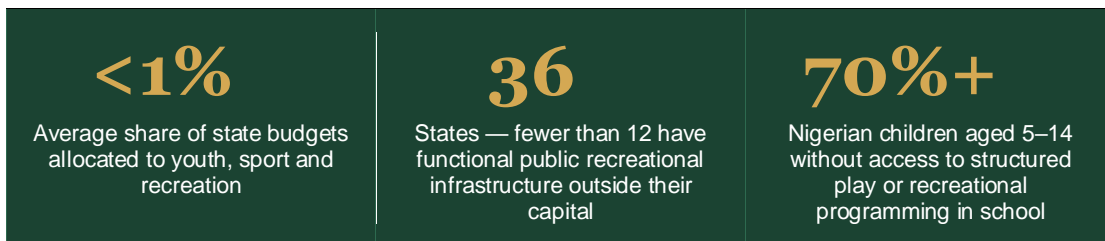
When you play with someone, you humanise them in a way that no civic curriculum can replicate. You learn that they hurt when they fall, celebrate when they score, and sweat in the same heat. That is the irreducible social technology of recreation.

The Tribalization of Sports as Symptom

We are now living with the consequences of a society that has lost this technology. The Super Eagles, once a point of genuine, cross-cutting national pride, are increasingly being consumed by the same ethnic and regional fractures that mark Nigerian politics. When a player underperforms, the response on social media is quickly coded into tribal terms. This is not primarily a sports story. It is a social cohesion story.

The Infrastructure of Shared Space

Recreation requires physical infrastructure. Parks, courts, open fields, school pitches, and community halls. These are, without exception, categories of public expenditure that have been systematically defunded or neglected over two decades of fiscal stress, recurrent expenditure dominance, and the collapse of local government finance.



<p>WHAT WE ARE LOSING</p> <p>Intergenerational, cross-tribal daily play as an informal civic institution; street sport as a space of negotiated coexistence.</p>	<p>WHAT REPLACES IT</p> <p>Privatised leisure sorted by class; digital entertainment that individualises; political spaces that amplify ethnic framing, including around national sports.</p>
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04 — THE SECOND CRISIS

The Grassroots Talent Pipeline: A Structural Failure

Nigeria has produced world-class athletes in football, athletics, boxing, and tennis. But that production is increasingly inconsistent, and in several disciplines, in outright decline. The common explanation points to corruption in sports federations. These are real, but they are not the root cause.

The root cause is further upstream: **the destruction of the conditions under which talent discovers and develops itself.**

How Elite Talent Actually Forms

Sports science is unambiguous on this. Elite athletes do not primarily emerge from academies. They emerge from thousands of hours of unstructured, informal, self-motivated play — what researchers call deliberate play — before they ever enter formal training environments. The academy refines; the street, the compound, the school field creates.

Ijemo Titun High School did not send a cricket team to an international competition because it had elaborate facilities. It sent a team because cricket was culturally alive in its corridors, taught by teachers who played it, and woven into school identity. That ecosystem is what we are losing, not merely the money for equipment. I went back to the same school in 2021. I saw some of the students, who would doubt the school had such a history, they had bigger problems than cricket.

The School Sports Collapse



School sports in Nigeria have been progressively eliminated as a casualty of pressures on the educational system. The drive for examination performance, the collapse of school physical infrastructure, the erosion of PE teaching capacity, and the defunding of inter-school competitions have removed the most critical institutional pathway for identifying and developing talented children.

We are not producing fewer talented children. We are producing fewer structures in which talent can be seen. The pipeline has not dried up at the source; it has cracked in the middle.

The Multi-Sport Problem

Nigeria's sporting ambitions have narrowed catastrophically toward football, leaving other disciplines in near-total neglect. The cricket generation that Ijemo Titun represented has no institutional successor. Athletics programmes in schools are skeletal. Badminton, table tennis, and hockey, all once genuinely popular school sports, have faded from widespread practice into niche existence.

05 — THE PSYCHOSOCIAL DIMENSION

The Inner Life of Play: Mental Health, Stress, and the Architecture of Creativity

There is a dimension of the Play Deficit that is perhaps the least visible in policy discourse, yet the most pervasive in its effects on everyday Nigerian life. It is about what happens inside the human mind and body when play disappears — and what is lost, neurologically, psychologically, and socially, when an entire generation grows up without adequate access to unstructured, self-directed recreation. This section makes a claim that may feel counterintuitive: **the mental health consequences of the Play Deficit are themselves a development crisis** — one that is quietly undermining productivity, civic resilience, family stability, and the creative capacity that drives economic and social innovation.

Play as Psychic Infrastructure



The developmental psychology literature is among the most consistent bodies of research across cultures: play is not merely pleasurable for children. It is constitutive of healthy psychological development. Unstructured, child-directed play is the primary laboratory in which children develop emotional regulation, frustration tolerance, social problem-solving, executive function,

and the capacity to manage uncertainty. These are not peripheral soft skills. They are the psychological foundations of a functional adult.

When that laboratory is removed — when children's time is colonised entirely by structured academic demands, household economic obligations, and passive digital consumption — the developmental work that play performs does not simply get deferred. In many cases, it does not happen at all. The child who never learned, through the natural friction of playground negotiation, how to lose gracefully or persist through failure, arrives in adulthood with deficits that formal education cannot easily remedy.

Play is not a break from learning. It is the form that learning most naturally takes when the human mind is young. A society that

removes it is not producing more serious children — it is producing more anxious, more brittle, and less creative ones.

The Stress Architecture: What Recreation Does to the Body

Physical recreation is one of the most evidence-backed interventions for stress regulation available to any population. The physiological mechanisms are well established: vigorous physical activity reduces cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone; stimulates the production of endorphins and serotonin; improves sleep quality; and activates the parasympathetic nervous system, counteracting the chronic fight-or-flight activation that characterises sustained psychosocial stress.

Nigeria is a high-stress society. The stressors are not abstract — they are daily, cumulative, and often acute: economic precarity, fuel and food inflation, traffic, power failure, insecurity, and the relentless negotiation of survival in a context where institutional support systems are weak. These are not conditions that produce mild, manageable stress. They produce chronic physiological stress load that, over time, degrades immune function, cognitive performance, interpersonal relationships, and mental health resilience.

In this context, the retreat of physical recreation is not a lifestyle inconvenience. It is the removal of one of the few widely accessible buffers the population had against a crushing ambient stress environment. **The street football game that ended a child's day was doing psychophysiological work that no government programme has since replaced.**



Against this backdrop — near-absent formal mental health infrastructure, high ambient stress, and deep cultural reluctance around mental health help-seeking — recreational activity was functioning as Nigeria's largest informal mental health system. Its dismantling has not been met with any equivalent investment in formal mental health services. The gap it leaves is showing up in rising rates of urban violence, domestic conflict, substance abuse, and the quiet despair that increasingly characterises the lived experience of Nigerian youth.

Youth Mental Health: A Generation Under Pressure

Nigeria's youth population — the largest in its history — is navigating a particular confluence of pressures that make the psychosocial consequences of the Play Deficit especially acute.

They face one of the world's highest youth unemployment rates, a cost-of-living crisis that has made independent adult formation near-impossible for millions, pervasive insecurity in many regions, and an aspirational culture amplified by social media that constantly measures lived experience against curated representations of success.

The psychological literature consistently identifies three primary protective factors against youth mental health deterioration under conditions of chronic stress: **physical activity, peer social connection, and access to mastery experiences** — the feeling of being genuinely good at something. Organised and informal recreation delivers all three simultaneously. The retreat of recreational culture is therefore not merely removing a leisure option from young Nigerians. It is systematically dismantling three of their primary psychological defenses.

The results are visible, even if rarely named as such. Nigerian youth mental health data, where it exists, paints a troubling picture. Rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among Nigerian university students have been documented in multiple studies at levels that should constitute a public health emergency. These are not the mental health problems of comfort or affluence. They are the problems of young people under structural pressure, without adequate coping infrastructure.

The Creativity Dividend That Is Not Being Collected

There is a third psychosocial dimension that extends beyond mental health into the domain of economic and social innovation: the relationship between play and creativity. This is among the most robust findings in cognitive and developmental science, and among the most consistently ignored in Nigerian economic and education policy.

Unstructured play is the primary environment in which the human brain develops and exercises its creative capacities. In play, children encounter open-ended problems with no predetermined solutions. They improvise, experiment, test rules, break them, renegotiate them, and discover what happens next. These are not merely childhood amusements. They are cognitive rehearsals for the kind of creative, adaptive problem-solving that drives entrepreneurship, artistic production, scientific inquiry, and civic innovation.

The street game of *suwe* — with its invented variations, negotiated boundaries, and constantly adapted rules — was doing more for the development of flexible, creative thinking than a rote-learning classroom session. The compound draught board, with its forward-planning demands and adversarial problem-solving, was building executive function and strategic cognition. These were not peripheral activities. They were, in their own organic way, a distributed creative education system.



Nigeria speaks constantly of needing more innovation, more entrepreneurship, more creative capacity. But it is dismantling, generation by generation, the informal ecosystem that produced exactly those capacities. You cannot strip children of unstructured play and then expect them to grow into creative adults. The seeds must be planted in childhood or the harvest will not come.

— Folahan Johnson, CISD

Digital Substitution: Why Screens Are Not the Answer

A common implicit response to concerns about the retreat of physical recreation is to note the rise of digital entertainment — that children are not idle, they are gaming, streaming, scrolling. This response misunderstands the nature of the loss.

Passive digital consumption — the dominant form of screen time for most Nigerian children and youth — does not replicate the psychosocial benefits of physical play. It does not produce the physical stress regulation that vigorous activity delivers. It does not create the in-person social bonds and conflict-resolution skills that shared physical play generates. And it does not, in its passive form, stimulate the open-ended creative cognition that unstructured play develops. In fact, a substantial and growing body of research links high rates of passive screen time — particularly social media use among adolescents — with increased depression, anxiety, loneliness, and reduced attention span.

The Family as an Unwilling Vector

It is important to resist the temptation to assign blame for the Play Deficit to families who have reduced their children's recreational time and space. The reduction of family-level recreational culture is not primarily a values failure. It is a rational response to structural pressure.

The family that no longer allows children to play street football is often one in which streets are genuinely less safe, working hours are longer and more uncertain, and the economic pressure to prioritize examination performance over play is more intense. Policy cannot responsibly address the psychosocial dimension of the Play Deficit by moralizing about parenting choices. It must address the structural conditions — the unsafe streets, the collapsed public parks, the defunded school PE programmes — that have made those choices feel necessary.

PSYCHOSOCIAL LOSSES (CUMULATIVE)

Emotional regulation deficits in children; chronic stress without physical release mechanisms; rising youth depression and anxiety; atrophied creative and problem-solving cognition; erosion of peer social bonding skills.

PSYCHOSOCIAL RETURNS ON INVESTMENT

Every naira invested in accessible recreational infrastructure generates returns in reduced healthcare costs, improved educational outcomes, lower youth violence, stronger community

cohesion, and higher creative economic productivity — across decades.

The Policy Implication: Recreation as a Mental Health Intervention

The psychosocial analysis points to a critical reframing. Recreation should not only be classified under the sport and culture budget lines where it currently sits — poorly funded, politically peripheral, and easily sacrificed. It should also be recognised and funded as a public health intervention, a mental health delivery mechanism, and a human capital investment.

This reframing activates health budget allocations for recreational infrastructure. It creates grounds for cross-ministerial programming between the Ministries of Youth and Sport, Health, Education, and Women Affairs. It makes the case for recreational access as a component of social protection, not merely a leisure amenity. And it provides the evidence language — public health return on investment — that speaks most directly to the fiscal calculation of treasury officials and state budget committees who must be persuaded to fund the reversal of the Play Deficit.

06 — THE POLITICAL ECONOMY

Why Recreation Was Defunded and Why That Was a Political Choice

The Play Deficit did not happen by accident. It is the product of consistent, if rarely acknowledged, political choices about what counts as essential public expenditure.

Across Nigeria's federal, state, and local government architecture, recreation and sport consistently lose in budget negotiations to recurrent expenditure, security, debt service, and the political priorities of incumbents whose electoral calculations do not include playgrounds. Local governments — constitutionally the tier closest to community recreation infrastructure — have been so thoroughly hollowed out by state-level fiscal capture that they have ceased to function as meaningful providers of local public goods.

The irony is that the public health, social cohesion, and talent-development returns on recreational investment are among the highest available to any level of government. But because these returns are diffuse, long-term, and not easily monetized into electoral cycles, they are consistently sacrificed to more immediately legible spending categories.

There is also a class dimension. Nigeria's policy elites tend increasingly to access private recreation. Their children play in private academies, private pools, and private clubs. The diminishment of public recreational infrastructure does not touch their lives in the way it touches the lives of the majority. This insulation reduces the political urgency of the problem even as it deepens its social consequences.

07 – POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A Framework for Reversing the Play Deficit

CISD proposes a ten-point framework organized across governance, investment, school systems, mental health integration, and civic culture.

1. Constitutionalize Recreation as a Basic Right

Amend the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy to explicitly recognise access to recreational facilities and physical activity as a social right. This creates a constitutional anchor for budget advocacy and litigation.

2. Establish a National Recreation Investment Fund

Create a dedicated fund — co-seeded by federal, state, and private contributions — for the rehabilitation and construction of public recreational infrastructure. Prioritise LGA-level facilities in underserved communities. Target: one functional public recreational space per 10,000 citizens by 2030.

3. Mandate School Sports in the National Curriculum

Restore Physical Education and structured school sport to their full curricular standing. Mandate a minimum of five hours per week of physical and recreational activity in all primary and secondary schools, and establish national inter-school competition calendars in at least eight sporting disciplines.

4. Revive State Sports Academies with Community Intake Quotas

Rehabilitate and fund state-level sports academies, with a mandatory minimum of 60% of intake drawn from community (non-private academy) channels. This directly addresses the pipeline access gap for children without private school connections.

5. Multi-Sport Diversification Policy

Develop a National Multi-Sport Development Plan covering at least twelve disciplines beyond football. Assign dedicated federal and state funding lines for cricket, athletics, swimming, table tennis, badminton, hockey, and martial arts development pipelines.

6. Classify Recreation as a Mental Health Intervention

Formally recognise recreational infrastructure investment as a public health and mental health expenditure in national and state health budgets. Commission a Nigerian Recreation and Mental Health Study to generate the evidence base for cross-ministerial resource allocation.

7. Reform Local Government Recreation Mandates

Condition a portion of the Federation Account FAAC allocation to local governments on demonstrable investment in and maintenance of public recreational infrastructure. Restore the local government as the primary provider of neighbourhood parks, pitches, and community sport courts.

8. Public-Private Partnerships for Urban Recreation Space

Develop a framework for PPPs that unlock corporate social investment into community-facing recreational infrastructure, with tax incentives calibrated to the accessibility and geographic equity of the facilities developed.

9. Protect and Formalize Street Play Culture

Develop urban planning guidelines that explicitly protect recreational land use from residential and commercial encroachment. Designate and formally gazette street and neighbourhood play zones in all urban local governments, especially in high-density areas.

10. Civic Education Through Organised Sport

Develop a national programme using organised inter-school and inter-community sport as a vehicle for civic education on national unity, ethnic coexistence, and constitutional values — directly addressing the social cohesion dimension of the Play Deficit.

08 — CONCLUSION

Play is Not Peripheral. It is Constitutional to Who We Are.

The image of boys and girls at Ijemo Titun High School winning an international cricket competition is not sentimental. It is a data point about what a society looks like when it invests — even informally, even without luxury — in the conditions under which human beings discover their capacities, bond across difference, and build the psychological resilience to sustain complex lives.

That investment has been allowed to lapse. The social costs are now manifesting across three painful dimensions: a country more brittle and tribalized in its public culture; a sporting nation increasingly unable to field consistent excellence because it has dismantled grassroots development ecosystems; and a generation experiencing measurably deteriorating mental health in the absence of the recreational buffers that once sustained it.

The good news is that the Play Deficit is a policy-reversible problem. It was not created by fate or culture. It was created by choices — budget choices, planning choices, governance choices. Those choices can be made differently. The political will to make them differently is what this brief exists to help generate.

A nation that does not play together will not long remain a nation that can hold together. Recreation is not a luxury we must earn after development. It is part of what development is for.

— CISD, Play Deficit Policy Brief, March 2026

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