



Advancing Health through Physical Activity and Leisure in BRICS Plus Nations: A Report from the BRICSCESS Plus Association

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ABSTRACT

The shift from BRICS to BRICS+ signifies a major step forward in global cooperation among emerging economies, with an emphasis on inclusivity, shared development, and collaboration among developing nations. As the bloc expands to include countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Indonesia, opportunities for joint health promotion efforts have also increased. Within this broader context, the BRICS Council of Exercise and Sport Science (BRICSCESS) has evolved into BRICSCESS+, a global platform focused on advancing health through physical activity, sport, and leisure. This article explores the growth, aims, and impact of BRICSCESS+, particularly its role in combating physical inactivity and non-communicable diseases in the Global South. Established in 2014 and formally launched in 2015, BRICSCESS has fostered international cooperation through biennial congresses, research partnerships, and community-driven initiatives. Its transformation into BRICSCESS+ mirrors the inclusive vision of the expanded BRICS+ alliance. Drawing on comparative research—including a doctoral study on Physical Education across the original BRICS countries—the article investigates how cultural, systemic, and policy environments influence health promotion strategies. Case studies from new BRICS+ members, such as Ethiopia's grassroots programs, Iran's school-based initiatives, and Saudi Arabia's national fitness campaigns, further illustrate this integration. The article also highlights the successful BRICSCESS congresses held in Brazil (2017), South Africa (2019), and India (2024), and looks ahead to the 2026 event in Moscow. It concludes that BRICSCESS+ serves as a vital, evidence-informed platform for advancing sustainable, holistic health development across emerging nations.

Keywords: BRICS+, BRICSCESS, health promotion, physical activity, leisure, global health, developing countries

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Улучшение здоровья посредством физической активности и досуга в странах БРИКС Плюс: отчет ассоциации БРИКСЕСС Плюс

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Переход от формата БРИКС к формату БРИКС+ знаменует собой важный шаг вперед в глобальном сотрудничестве между развивающимися экономиками с акцентом на интеграцию, совместное развитие и взаимодействие между развивающимися странами. По мере расширения блока за счет включения таких стран, как Египет, Эфиопия, Иран, Саудовская Аравия, ОАЭ и Индонезия, также возросли возможности для совместных усилий по укреплению здоровья. В этом более широком контексте Совет БРИКС по физической культуре и спортивной науке (БРИКСЕСС) трансформировался в БРИКСЕСС+ — глобальную платформу, ориентированную на укрепление здоровья посредством физической активности, спорта и отдыха. В данной статье рассматриваются развитие, цели и влияние БРИКСЕСС+, в частности его роль в борьбе с физической неактивностью и неинфекционными заболеваниями на глобальном Юге. Созданный в 2014 году и официально запущенный в 2015 году, БРИКСЕСС содействует международному сотрудничеству посредством проведения раз в два года конгрессов, исследовательских партнерств и инициатив, инициированных сообществами. Его преобразование в БРИКСЕСС+ отражает интегративное видение расширенного альянса БРИКС+. Опираясь на сравнительные исследования, включая докторскую диссертацию по физическому воспитанию в странах-основателях БРИКС, статья рассматривает влияние культурных, системных и политических факторов на стратегии укрепления здоровья. Примеры из практики новых членов БРИКС+, такие как программы развития на местах в Эфиопии, школьные инициативы в Иране и национальные кампании по фитнесу в Саудовской Аравии, дополнительно иллюстрируют эту интеграцию. В статье также освещаются успешные конгрессы BRICSCESS, проведенные в Бразилии (2017), Южной Африке (2019) и Индии (2024), и анализируется предстоящее мероприятие 2026 года в Москве. В статье сделан вывод о том, что BRICSCESS+ служит важной платформой, основанной на фактических данных, для продвижения устойчивого и комплексного развития здравоохранения в развивающихся странах.

Ключевые слова: БРИКС+, BRICSCESS, укрепление здоровья, физическая активность, досуг, глобальное здравоохранение, развивающиеся страны

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1. Introduction

The evolution from BRICS to BRICS+ marks a significant shift in global geopolitics and economic collaboration. Originally formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, the BRICS bloc emerged as a powerful voice for emerging economies, promoting multipolarity and challenging Western-dominated institutions. Over time, the alliance recognized the need for greater inclusivity and broader representation of the Global South. This led to the expansion into BRICS+, an initiative aimed at building stronger

partnerships with other like-minded developing countries across Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East (BRICS, 2023).

Saran [1] and Stuenkel [2] note that the BRICS+ framework promotes broader economic collaboration, knowledge sharing, and policy alignment, thereby strengthening the bloc's collective influence on the global stage. Reflecting this shift, the BRICS group officially expanded on January 1, 2024, during the 15th BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, with the inclusion of five new member states—Egypt,

Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates [3]. This marked a pivotal moment in the transition from BRICS to BRICS+, a term that denotes the original five founding members plus any subsequent additions. Indonesia further joined the alliance in January 2025, increasing the total membership to eleven.

In recent years, the global health landscape has experienced a growing shift toward preventive strategies that emphasize wellness and quality of life. Among these strategies, physical activity and leisure have emerged as essential pillars in promoting health and preventing non-communicable diseases [4]. Within the context of emerging economies, the BRICS Plus nations face unique health challenges and opportunities related to population growth, urbanization, socioeconomic disparities, and changing lifestyles.

The BRICS Council of Exercise and Sport Science (BRICSCESS) was established to address these challenges by fostering international collaboration in the fields of exercise science, physical education, health promotion, and wellness [5]. The inclusion of BRICS+ countries into the framework of BRICSCESS represents a unique chance to broaden the impact of physical activity and leisure-based strategies, particularly in regions that face accelerated urbanization, demographic shifts, and systemic health disparities.

This article explores the role of the BRICSCESS+ organization, in advancing health promotion through physical activity and leisure across BRICS+ countries.

2. From BRICSCESS to BRICSCESS plus

BRICSCESS was first envisioned during the 18th International Scientific Congress held in Kazakhstan in 2014, under the collaborative international leadership of Dr. Ming-Kai Chin (Hong Kong, China), Dr. J. Hans de Ridder (South Africa), and Dr. Ricardo Ricci Uvinha (Brazil). The idea gained momentum during the 4th International Conference of Physical Education and Sports Science in Indonesia in 2015, where these founding leaders were joined by Dr. Gulshan Khanna (India) and Dr. Elena Istiagina-Eliseeva (Russia). Together, they began drafting the BRICSCESS constitution and bylaws, forming a scientific board, and planning for biennial conferences [5].

Dr. Ming-Kai Chin, serving as interim President, led efforts to establish the organizational framework and to prepare for the founding meeting, which took place later that year at the 7th Asia Pacific Conference on Exercise and Sports Science in India. At this historic meeting, Dr. Ming-Kai Chin was elected the first BRICSCESS President, with Dr. J. Hans de Ridder appointed as Vice President and Secretary-General/Treasurer. The other three Vice Presidents were Dr. Gulshan Khanna from India, Dr. Ricardo Uvinha from Brazil, and Dr. Elena Istiagina-Eliseeva from Russia. The association's headquarters was officially established at North-West University in Potchefstroom, South Africa, where the BRICSCESS constitution was finalized and adopted [5].

Shortly after the official expansion of the BRICS group to include five new member countries on January 1, 2024,

the BRICSCESS Board, during its meeting on February 28 in New Delhi NCR, India, resolved to officially adopt the name BRICSCESS+ and welcomed the new BRICS+ nations into the organization. The first BRICS+ member elected to the BRICSCESS Board of Directors is Dr. Dessalegn Wase Mola from Ethiopia. Dr. Mola serves as an Assistant Professor and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sport Science at Ambo University in Ethiopia.

Founded on principles of inclusivity, innovation, and global partnership, BRICSCESS+ serves as a platform for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to share knowledge, build networks, and implement culturally relevant interventions aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of diverse populations [6]. Through international conferences, academic exchanges, community engagement projects, and interdisciplinary research, the association supports sustainable development goals related to health, education, and social equity.

3. Physical activity and leisure in the original BRICS countries

In a PhD study conducted in South Africa by Dr. Vasti Oelofse, the state and status of Physical Education in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) were investigated, recognising its pivotal role in the development of psychomotor, social, emotional, and cognitive skills, as well as its importance in combatting lifestyle-related diseases such as obesity. Despite its potential, Physical Education often faced neglect and marginalization within school curricula. This research addressed the dearth of comparative literature on Physical Education across BRICS nations, aiming to shed light on the subject's implementation and its impact on learners' health.

Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study explored how various ecological systems influenced learner engagement in Physical Education. It also provided a detailed overview of the education systems in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, highlighting key features relevant to Physical Education. These included governance structures in these countries, ranging from centralized to mixed models, each carrying diverse implications for curriculum implementation.

The research contributed to a deeper understanding of the dynamics shaping Physical Education in the BRICS nations and offered recommendations for enhancing its effectiveness in promoting learners' health and well-being. In addition to bridging the knowledge gap in comparative studies, the study's findings informed both policy and practice, providing guidance for the improvement of Physical Education across diverse educational and cultural contexts.

Based on the findings from Dr. Oelofse's doctoral study [7], it is evident that, in terms of key factors such as time allocation, subject recognition, teacher training, and assessment focus within curriculum frameworks, Physical Education is more firmly established in Russia, India, and China than in Brazil and South Africa. These countries, through their

national school curricula—situated within the exosystem of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory [8] — allocate more instructional time, place greater emphasis on teacher preparation, and provide more comprehensive assessment guidelines for Physical Education.

However, the implementation of Physical Education curricula and related policies across all BRICS nations continues to face significant challenges. These include disparities in access to resources, variations in infrastructure, and shortages of well-qualified Physical Education teachers, which differ across regions. Despite these obstacles, various education reform efforts have emerged, signaling a shift towards improving Physical Education. Notable examples include Brazil’s introduction of a new common curriculum, Russia’s curriculum enhancements and the revitalisation of the national “Ready for Labor and Defense” (GTO) programme, India’s launch of the “Fit India” initiative, and China’s focused efforts to promote Physical Education and health through expanded physical activity opportunities. These reform initiatives have already led to positive outcomes, including improved levels of physical fitness among students, greater awareness of the benefits of regular physical activity, and better classroom dynamics. Collectively, these developments support the holistic well-being of learners and enhance their motivation, underscoring the potential of Physical Education as a key contributor to health promotion in the BRICS context [7].

4. Physical Activity and Leisure in BRICS Plus Countries

The global COVID-19 pandemic significantly underscored the importance of health and well-being, not only as an individual concern but also as a global development priority. This emphasis aligns closely with Goal #3 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG 17), which advocates for ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages [9]. As nations began re-evaluating their public health systems in the aftermath of the pandemic, the role of physical activity (PA) and leisure-based movement emerged as a critical strategy for fostering long-term health resilience, particularly in BRICS Plus countries, where rapid urbanization and lifestyle transitions have led to rising rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) [10].

Children and youth, often referred to as the architects of the future, became a central focus of these initiatives. It is now widely acknowledged that early investment in physical activity and structured leisure opportunities can reduce the risk of obesity, mental health disorders, and sedentary-related illnesses in adulthood. In this context, several BRICS Plus nations have taken proactive steps toward integrating physical activity into national health and education policies. For example, Ethiopia has emerged as a noteworthy case in Africa. Through the incorporation of community-based exercise programs within its primary health care framework, the country has aimed to reduce the burden of NCDs such as hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease [11–13]. These community-led interventions leverage local health

workers and volunteers to deliver fitness education, group walks, and culturally relevant movement routines that resonate with rural and urban populations alike.

Similarly, Iran has made substantial strides in promoting adolescent health through school-based physical activity interventions. Recent programs have integrated physical education into academic curricula while also offering extra-curricular sports and wellness activities. These interventions have been linked to improved mental well-being, reduced anxiety and depression symptoms, and better academic performance among students [14, 15]. The focus in Iran underscores a broader Middle Eastern trend toward youth-focused health promotion.

In the Gulf region, both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have launched comprehensive national fitness and wellness agendas. As part of Saudi Vision 2030, the kingdom has prioritized increasing the percentage of citizens engaging in regular physical activity through public campaigns, urban planning reforms, and the development of sports infrastructure [16, 17]. Similarly, the UAE has introduced health reforms encouraging active lifestyles, including the “Dubai Fitness Challenge,” which invites residents to engage in 30 minutes of physical activity daily for 30 consecutive days.

These few examples illustrate how BRICS Plus countries are beginning to recognize the long-term value of preventive health through physical activity and leisure. By leveraging diverse strategies — ranging from grassroots community engagement to high-level national policy — the region is building a more resilient health culture. These efforts not only contribute to individual well-being but also address broader socioeconomic challenges, such as healthcare costs, productivity, and social cohesion. Promoting structured and unstructured forms of physical activity remains an essential pillar for sustainable development in the post-pandemic world.

5. BRICSCESS plus conferences

An excellent way to promote Health through Physical Activity and Leisure in BRICS Plus Nations is by hosting biennial congresses where not only BRICS Plus countries come together, but also colleagues from various other international countries.

The inaugural BRICSCESS Conference took place in Santos, Brazil, from 29 November to 2 December 2017. Organized by the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP) and the University of São Paulo (USP), it was supported by CAPES and CNPq. The event, promoted by BRICSCESS, focused on the theme: “Sports Mega Events and Health Promotion: Policies and Legacies in Exercise and Sports Science.” The scientific program emphasized interdisciplinary approaches to health, wellness, physical activity, and the impact of major sporting events on active living. Over two and a half days, the conference welcomed around 200 participants from 31 countries. It featured four keynote addresses, 18 invited speakers, six workshops, and 15 Future Leaders/Volunteers (FLVs). A total of 41 oral presentations and 44

posters were showcased. This landmark event united global practitioners, educators, and researchers from the BRICS nations and beyond, all dedicated to advancing the field of exercise and sports science [5, 18].

The 2nd BRICSCESS Conference and the inaugural World Congress of Future Leader/Volunteer (WCFLV 2019) took place in Cape Town, South Africa, from 10–13 October 2019. Hosted by North-West University, it marked the first time Africa welcomed this prestigious event, making South Africa the second BRICS nation to do so. For the first time, BRICSCESS partnered with the South African Sports Medicine Association (SASMA) to present a joint congress under the theme: “Holistic Health, Sports Science and Sustainability: The Way Forward.” The conference featured 26 keynote and invited speakers from 23 countries, many of whom are leading global experts in sports medicine and science. The event was officially opened by the Honourable Anroux Marais, Minister of Cultural Affairs and Sport in the Western Cape. A highlight was the special two-hour session on 12 October, sponsored by the Department of Sport and Recreation in the Western Cape, featuring Dr Lyndon Bouah, Chief Director of Sport and Recreation at DCAS, and Professor Ian Culpan from New Zealand. Spanning three and a half days, the conference offered dynamic group sessions, insightful presentations, and vibrant exchanges in both formal and informal settings. International delegates praised the event’s quality and impact, describing it as unforgettable. The conference not only fostered global collaboration but also left a lasting impression on attendees and contributed meaningfully to the development of sport and health in Africa [18, 19].

The 3rd BRICSCESS Conference 2024 was held from 26–29 February at the Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies in Faridabad, New Delhi NCR, India. With the theme “Advances in Holistic Health and Sport for Children and Youth: Innovation, Integration, and Sustainability through Science,” India became the third BRICS nation to host this prestigious event. The inaugural conference was held in Santos, Brazil in 2017, led by Professors Ricardo Uvinha and Nara Oliveira, followed by Cape Town, South Africa in 2019, under Professors Hans de Ridder and Maya van Gent. Chaired by Professor Gulshan Khanna, the 2024 edition upheld the tradition of excellence, emphasizing interdisciplinary collaboration to promote holistic health through scientific innovation. The program featured five keynote speakers, 17 invited speakers, and three workshop presenters, alongside nine Future Leaders (FLVs). Participants represented 20 countries and regions, including Brazil, Canada, China, India, Israel, Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Turkey, and the USA. BRICSCESS 2024 proved to be an inspiring and memorable experience for all attendees, fostering global dialogue and advancing the field of sport and health science [18, 19].

The 4th BRICSCESS 2026 Conference is scheduled to take place from 26–29 October 2026 at the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) in Moscow, RUSSIA. The congress will be held under the theme “Empowering

Future Generations through Holistic, Science-Based Health Solutions” and will be led by Prof. Yulia Gushchina of Russia, who serves as Chair of the Local Organizing Committee (LOC). Prof. Gushchina is the Deputy Director for International Affairs at the Institute of Medicine, RUDN University. Preparations for the event are well underway behind the scenes, and the congress is expected to be a major success, continuing the strong legacy of the previous three BRICSCESS conferences.

6. Future Research Directions

Future research within the BRICSCESS+ framework should focus on comparative studies that examine how cultural, policy, and systemic factors shape health promotion strategies across diverse BRICS+ nations. As the alliance expands to include countries like Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, there is a growing need to explore localized approaches to combating physical inactivity and non-communicable diseases. Investigating grassroots initiatives, school-based programs, and national fitness campaigns can reveal scalable models for holistic health development. Longitudinal studies assessing the impact of physical activity and sport on youth well-being, especially in underserved communities, will be crucial. Additionally, interdisciplinary research integrating sport science, education, and public health can inform inclusive policies that support sustainable wellness. Future congresses, such as the 2026 event in Moscow, should serve as platforms to present findings, foster collaboration, and refine global strategies. BRICSCESS+ offers a unique opportunity to build a robust evidence base for health promotion across emerging economies.

7. Conclusion

The transition from BRICS to BRICS+ reflects a growing recognition of the need for inclusive global collaboration, particularly in addressing shared health challenges among emerging economies. Within this evolving framework, BRICSCESS+ has emerged as a vital platform for promoting physical activity, sport, and leisure as strategic tools for health promotion and disease prevention. Its evolution from a visionary idea into a thriving international organization underscores the power of academic partnerships, cross-cultural dialogue, and evidence-based practice.

From the early foundational work of its leaders in Brazil, South Africa, Russia, India, and China, to its expansion to include new voices from countries such as Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, BRICSCESS+ has shown that cooperative health strategies can be both contextually grounded and globally impactful. As demonstrated by initiatives in countries like Ethiopia and Iran, national and community-based interventions are increasingly integrating physical activity into broader health and education policies, contributing to long-term societal resilience.

Moreover, the success of past BRICSCESS conferences in Brazil, South Africa, and India has highlighted the value of convening global experts, youth leaders, and policymakers to

share innovations and build sustainable health networks. The upcoming 4th BRICSCESS+ Conference in Moscow promises to build on this momentum, fostering holistic, science-based solutions to empower future generations.

In a world where non-communicable diseases, mental health challenges, and lifestyle-related illnesses are on the

Authors contributions:

Ricardo Ricci Uvinha — writing original draft, review & editing, validation, supervision, methodology.

J. Hans de Ridder — methodology, project administration, writing original draft.

Julia Sh. Gushchina — software, data curation, resources.

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rise, the role of physical activity and leisure cannot be overstated. BRICSCESS+ stands at the intersection of science, policy, and community, offering a collaborative path forward for improving public health across the Global South. As the alliance continues to grow, so too does its potential to shape a healthier, more equitable future for all.

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