



Unraveling Systemic Barriers: Cricket Development in Urban High Schools of Mashonaland West, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Cricket development in Mashonaland West's urban high schools remains stagnated despite concerted efforts by Zimbabwe Cricket to democratize access through infrastructure upgrades, equipment donations, and coach deployment. This study investigates the systemic barriers impeding meaningful progress, using a mixed-methods approach that integrates surveys, interviews, and field observations across fifteen high schools. The findings reveal a complex network of constraints, including acute resource shortages, inadequate coaching structures, limited administrative support, and cultural perceptions that prioritise academics over sport. The lack of dedicated facilities, equipment banks, and structured mentorship further exacerbates underdevelopment, creating a cyclical loop in which low participation justifies minimal investment. Comparisons with cricket development strategies in South Africa, England, and Afghanistan highlight contextual gaps and inspire locally grounded recommendations. This study proposes a multi-stakeholder blueprint for revitalisation, encompassing targeted financial support, coaching certification pathways, curriculum integration, corporate partnerships, and seasonal restructuring, aimed at transforming cricket into an accessible and sustainable sporting avenue within Zimbabwe's urban education landscape. The article contributes to the limited literature on school-level cricket in Zimbabwe, offering actionable insights for sports policymakers and development practitioners.

Keywords: Cricket development, Systemic barriers, Urban high schools, Coach certification, Infrastructure, Mashonaland West

1. Introduction

Cricket, long entwined with Zimbabwe's colonial legacy, is undergoing a transformative push toward broader inclusivity. Once confined to elite spaces, the sport has gradually permeated high-density communities through development programs led by Zimbabwe Cricket (ZC), offering opportunities to a new generation of players. Mashonaland West, a province rich in cricketing history, has received notable support from ZC in the form of donated equipment, upgraded school facilities, and coaching deployment. Yet, in sharp contrast to its provincial peers, the region's urban high schools remain conspicuously underrepresented at competitive levels, lacking functional leagues, age-specific structures, and steady player progression.

This developmental stagnation is troubling given the province's heritage — producing players like Edward Rainsford and Carl Mumba, and nurturing coaches such as Walter Chawaguta. While primary school cricket in Mashonaland West shows vibrancy through regular tournaments and inter-school matches, this momentum falters upon transition to high school. Promising junior athletes often migrate to better-resourced provinces to continue their cricketing journey, leaving the local system bereft of both talent and continuity.

Globally, cricket development models offer instructive contrasts. South Africa's Cricket Blue Chip Program, England's Chance to Shine initiative, and Afghanistan's rapid grassroots expansion each demonstrate how structured investment, coach development, and institutional collaboration can radically alter youth sport trajectories. Against this backdrop, Mashonaland West's high schools reflect an urgent need to re-evaluate assumptions, shift cultural priorities, and address infrastructure gaps.

This article investigates the challenges impeding cricket development in urban high schools of Mashonaland West, drawing on mixed-methods research that integrates surveys, interviews, and direct observations across fifteen institutions. Grounded in functionalist theory and systemic analysis, the study not only identifies root causes but maps the causality chain that sustains underdevelopment — a loop in which inadequate investment yields poor performance, further discouraging participation and sponsorship. By unpacking these dynamics and offering context-sensitive recommendations, the research contributes to the limited literature on school-level cricket in Zimbabwe and invites stakeholders to rethink sport as a strategic pillar of youth development.

2. Literature Review

Cricket's developmental trajectory in high schools has long mirrored broader socio-political and institutional contexts, with global variations illustrating both structural constraints and breakthrough strategies. This section examines key literature around sport development barriers, functionalist theory in sport, international cricket development models, and the conspicuous gap in Zimbabwean scholarship.

2.1 Theoretical Framing: Functionalist Lens

The study adopts a functionalist framework, viewing sport as a social institution that both reflects and reinforces societal cohesion (Coakley, 2001; Delaney & Madigan, 2009). In this context, cricket development is not merely a technical exercise but a system of interconnected parts — infrastructure, coaching, participation, culture — each influencing the overall health of the cricket ecosystem. Functionalist theory supports policies aimed at increasing access, professionalizing coaching, and cultivating values that sustain sport at multiple levels.

Durkheim's notion of social stability applies aptly: the absence of institutional support, cultural reinforcement, or developmental planning contributes to systemic instability. Sport, particularly in postcolonial settings like Zimbabwe, bears the dual burden of legacy and transformation — necessitating deliberate, inclusive development strategies.

2.2 Common Barriers to Cricket Development

Multiple studies underscore shared challenges in cricket development across Africa and Asia. Mukucha (2017) identified equipment shortages, poor planning, and lack of facilities as key factors in Zimbabwe's rural sport stagnation. Fokkens (2022), studying North-West Province in South Africa, reported gaps in strategic oversight, inadequate facilities, and limited program monitoring. English (2017) and Dove (2018) emphasized the role of coaching quality, cultural perceptions, and socioeconomic exclusion in hindering talent pathways.

Aluko (1999) posited that performance in youth sport correlates directly with equipment access, a view echoed by Kullegeijn (2013), who linked participation levels with gear availability. Ekpe (2011) highlighted infrastructure deficits as primary constraints in African sport, arguing that underdeveloped facilities depress morale and participation. These findings align with this study's observations of poorly maintained fields, missing protective gear, and insufficient irrigation systems.

Coach development remains another systemic challenge. Locke & Latham (2006) and Balyi & Williams (2009) associated coaching quality with player retention, injury rates, and self-worth — arguing for structured mentorship and certification pathways. Yet, in many schools, coaches remain underqualified and unsupported, with high turnover rates and few professional development opportunities.

2.3 Comparative Models: Afghanistan, England, South Africa

Contrasting Mashonaland West's experience with international models sharpens the developmental lens:

- **Afghanistan's ascent** in youth cricket stemmed from a strategic five-year plan initiated by the Afghanistan Cricket Board, emphasizing infrastructure, school integration, and coach training. By 2019, their U19 team ranked 4th globally.
- **England's ECB "Chance to Shine" initiative** reversed school cricket's decline by investing £50 million in coach training, league creation, and school-club links. Over 14,000 high schools joined the program.
- **South Africa's Blue-Chip Programme** used urban club-school partnerships, coach incentives, and targeted scholarships to expand cricket access. Gary Kirsten's Foundation exemplifies this model by deploying full-time coaches and equipping underserved schools.

These models affirm the value of structured funding, institutional partnerships, mentorship, and grassroots visibility — each absent or underdeveloped in Mashonaland West.

2.4 Gaps in Zimbabwean Scholarship

The paucity of Zimbabwe-focused cricket research is pronounced. Previous studies have emphasized soccer, netball, or athletics, while cricket remains under-theorized. Mukucha (2017) and Magonde (2012) touched on general sport constraints but lacked cricket-specific analyses. No comprehensive studies exist on urban high school cricket systems, facility distribution, or the coach-player development continuum in Mashonaland West.

This article therefore contributes a targeted exploration of cricket development at a provincial high school level, illuminating systemic gaps while proposing actionable strategies. By bridging the literature from global best practices to local realities, it lays groundwork for future comparative and policy-oriented research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study employed a **mixed-methods exploratory design** to investigate the barriers hindering cricket development in urban high schools across Mashonaland West, Zimbabwe. This approach captured both numerical patterns and rich, context-sensitive insights.

The research philosophy drew on **interpretivism** and **relativism**, emphasizing subjective meaning-making and contextual variation among participants. Functionalist theory served as a conceptual lens, framing cricket development as an interdependent system where dysfunction in one area could destabilize the whole.

3.2 Study Population and Sampling

A **purposive sample** of fifteen schools was selected from Chegutu, Chinhoyi, Kadoma, Karoi, and Norton. Participants included:

- Cricket coaches and teachers in charge of cricket
- School sports directors
- Observational audits of facilities and equipment

Thirteen schools responded, yielding an **87% response rate**, strengthening confidence in the study's representativeness.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

- **Semi-structured interviews** with Teachers in Charge of Cricket explored perceptions, institutional challenges, and strategies.
- **Structured questionnaires** gathered demographic data, infrastructure audits, and attitudinal responses from coaches.
- **Observation sheets** evaluated field conditions, practice nets, changing rooms, irrigation systems, and pitch equipment.

Instruments were adapted from South African Cricket's Blue Chip Program and England's ECB developmental frameworks.

3.4 Data Analysis

A **convergent parallel strategy** enabled integration of qualitative and quantitative findings. Data were processed using SPSS and thematic coding, with observational notes triangulated to enrich interpretation.

3.5 Trustworthiness

Credibility was ensured through peer debriefing, member checking, and triangulation. Thick description and an audit trail supported transferability and dependability. Ethical approval was granted by Zimbabwe Open University; informed consent was obtained.

4. Findings

This chapter presents the integrated results of surveys, interviews, and field observations conducted across fifteen urban high schools in Mashonaland West. The findings reveal a network of systemic challenges that form a cyclical loop of underdevelopment.

Infrastructure and Equipment were consistently cited as the most visible barriers. Only a small fraction of schools possessed dedicated cricket facilities, with many sharing multi-use fields that lacked irrigation systems, pitch covers, and mechanized rollers. Coaches reported adapting match formats to reduce injury risk due to missing protective gear.

Coach Development emerged as another pivotal issue. High turnover rates, a lack of professional mentoring, and limited access to certification pathways have resulted in underqualified staff managing cricket activities. This undermines both safety and player progression.

Administrative Support was found to be sporadic and inconsistent. Many schools lacked formal partnerships with local cricket associations, while teachers and coaches expressed frustration over unclear communication, limited recognition, and absence of strategic coordination.

Cultural Perceptions were also identified as subtle but significant barriers. Schools often prioritized academics over sport, and cricket — perceived as time-consuming and elitist — received less encouragement than other disciplines like netball or soccer. This perception contributed to low participation and declining morale among interested students.

Collectively, these findings illustrate how physical resource scarcity, fragmented coaching structures, institutional inertia, and cultural disinterest interlink to sustain a feedback loop in which poor performance justifies minimal investment, and minimal investment breeds poor performance.

5. Recommendations

In response to the identified barriers, this chapter outlines a multi-stakeholder strategy designed to revitalize cricket development in urban high schools. It builds on comparative insights from South Africa, England, and Afghanistan while remaining grounded in Zimbabwe's contextual realities.

5.1 Institutional Strengthening calls for formalized partnerships between schools and the Mashonaland West Cricket Association (MWCA). Regular planning meetings, shared league coordination, and development accountability structures should be introduced, along with regional coordinators to reduce district-level disparities.

5.2 Financial Access and Corporate Engagement must be addressed through bursary schemes, sponsorship networks, and equipment redistribution. Gear banks can be formed by collecting donations from private institutions and former players, enhancing access for under-resourced schools.

5.3 Coach and Human Resource Development should be accelerated through structured contracts, subsidized certification programs, and mentorship networks. PE teachers should also be trained in basic cricket instruction, creating continuity even when external coaches are unavailable.

5.4 Facility and Season Management includes rehabilitating existing infrastructure (favoring concrete nets), introducing pitch covers and irrigation solutions, and revising cricket calendars to align with dry seasons. Standardized fixture planning across districts would also promote equitable matchplay.

5.5 Cultural Transformation and Visibility can be achieved through awareness campaigns aimed at communities, school visits by national players, and more accessible match formats like T20 festivals. Recognition systems — such as awards and local media coverage — can elevate school-level cricket and foster community pride.

Together, these recommendations present a comprehensive blueprint for transforming cricket into an inclusive, strategic, and culturally resonant sport within Zimbabwe's urban education ecosystem.

6. Conclusion

Cricket development in Mashonaland West's urban high schools faces a mosaic of interlinked challenges — from inadequate infrastructure and coaching to low match exposure, cultural resistance, and minimal institutional backing. Despite Zimbabwe Cricket's commendable efforts, the sport remains caught in a loop of underinvestment, poor performance, and declining participation. What emerges from this study is a systems-level picture, where physical, financial, cultural, and administrative constraints reinforce one another in predictable patterns.

Yet, embedded within these challenges are untapped opportunities. Comparative models from Afghanistan, South Africa, and England reveal that meaningful change is possible through coordinated, context-aware strategies — even in resource-limited settings. From grassroots gear banks and mentorship networks to seasonal realignment and parent education campaigns, the possibilities for structural and cultural reform are both practical and profound.

Mashonaland West has the talent, legacy, and institutional bones to restore cricket's vibrancy. What it needs is commitment, coordination, and courage across stakeholders. This study offers not only data and analysis, but a roadmap — positioning school-level cricket not as an extracurricular afterthought, but as a developmental pillar with potential to unite communities, nurture youth, and reaffirm the province's place in Zimbabwe's sporting future.

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