Social exclusion is a contested term, it can be traced back to Weber, who identified exclusion as one form of social closure (Parkin 1979), an attempt of one group in society to secure itself a privileged position over another.

Modern usage of the term “social exclusion” may have originated in France where it principally refers to people who slipped through the French Social insurance system, ‘Les exclus’ were those who fell through the net of social protection, disabled people, lone parents, the unemployed, disaffected youth, isolated individuals and more latterly marginalised (rural, ethnic, gender, religious, aged, poor, self excluding etc.) societal community groups.

Despite some similar sports development agendas since 1960, it could be argued that the political concept of Social Inclusion entered British mainstream politics principally as a result of the EU’s (1996) Lisbon summit, which committed member states to adopt the promotion of social cohesion and inclusion as a strategic goal; Social inclusion then became a cornerstone of New Labour’s social policy agenda and became the first “cross cutting” agenda for this social democratic badged 1997 ‘New Labour’ British government, who immediately set up the Social Exclusion Unit publishing the cornerstone document “Bringing Britain Together” in 1998 which resulted in the formation of the policy action teams - sport and the arts were Policy Action Team 10 built from the PAT 10 Research (Collins et al 1999) report.

PAT 10, or more accurately the research that underpinned PAT 10 by Collins et al, has provided the glue that binds sports development together, certainly since the confusion that the Compulsory competitive tendering in local government leisure service provision provided, having come about under the previous Conservative government. The repeal of this in April 2000 and replacement by the Best Value Legislation made things slightly easier. The claims, in PAT 10, made for sport’s social potential in terms of health, crime reduction, regeneration and employment, have not been lost on a sport development community seeking purpose. The application of such inclusion policies, particularly in terms of the regeneration of neighbourhoods and communities (most particularly applicable to sports development) could be considered to be academically seated in “social ecology”

Peter Bryant in relation to sport (2001) says;
“Tackling social exclusion is both a local and national challenge. The UK government has shown its commitment through its Social Exclusion Unit and Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and many local authorities have followed suit by producing their own Social Inclusion strategies. However, interpretation of the concept is varied and as a direct result of this locally based policy and practice responses vary too. It is for this reason that it is important to examine different people’s interpretations.

The government’s says:
‘Social exclusion is a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown’. (SEU 1998)

‘In the past governments have had policies that tried to deal with each of these problems individually, but there has been little success at tackling the complicated links between them or preventing them from arising in the first place’. (Cabinet Office, Social Exclusion Unit leaflet, July 2000)

There has been much debate around the links between poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. Social exclusion is defined in a way that includes a number of characteristics, which are not usually referred to in definitions of disadvantage and poverty: It is a process rather than a static condition it is a relational concept (groups and individuals are excluded from others and society as a whole) This means people may be poor without being socially excluded and vice versa. The use of this concept then encourages policy responses ‘which seek to change institutions and institutional processes rather than solely seeking to change socially excluded individuals, groups and communities’ Percy Smith (see document for reference) The difference with inequality is that social exclusion is ‘about mechanisms that act to detach groups of people from the social mainstream’ Giddens (see document for reference) The implication of this, is that the person working in this field (paid or voluntary), must understand the dynamics of the process (i.e. what factors, institutions and circumstances are producing exclusion?) (Goodlad 2000). Many are frustrated by such a definition and its failure to list the groups who are socially excluded. However, this results from a misunderstanding of the concept. (The government’s social exclusion unit has however focussed on the problems of school exclusions, homelessness and the worst estates) (Social Exclusion Unit 2000). The government has also talked about social exclusion in terms of a lack of social capital. Social capital being; the existence of community networks, civic engagement or participation in community networks and a sense of community identity, solidarity and equality with other community members.
The role of sport in achieving the government’s social inclusion agenda is summarised in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s (DCMS) PAT 10 Report (1999). The aim of the report was to ‘draw up an action plan with targets to maximise the impact of arts, sport and leisure policies in contributing to neighbourhood regeneration and increasing local participation’ (PAT 10) The report identified the role of sport and also the problems which in the past have led to the failure of this role to be fully realised. The report concluded the importance of local authorities adopting a community development approach to sports development ‘the principles of the community development approach should underpin and build on the ways in which local authority culture/leisure strategies and services are developed and provided.’ (PAT 10) The report listed these principles as:

Valuing diversity:
Embedding local control:
Supporting local commitment:
Promoting equitable partnerships:
Defining common objectives in relation to actual needs:
Working flexibly with change:
Securing sustainability:
Pursuing quality across the spectrum:
Connecting with mainstream: (PAT 10)"

The above is an extract from Bryant’s 2001 document, for references please download

In terms of sport policy these principles were translated via the 2002 publication of Game Plan: Achieving the governments' sport and physical activity objectives. The report, probably the most comprehensive sports policy report ever from government was published by the Social Exclusion Unit - in conjunction with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, reflecting the perceived role that government saw for sport as an instrument in the development of society.

Game Plan provided clear evidence of a shift away from "sport for sports sake" and a focus on sports' (or more particularly, physical activity and sub-elite sport) instrumental role in addressing the crosscutting agenda of social inclusion and the values that make up that domain, those of
social justice and equality of opportunity. In essence, Sport as a social instrument.

The social inclusion agenda, the formation of UK sport as distinct from Sport England, PAT 10 and Game Plan, could be argued as providing a bifurcation (fork in the road) for sports development, performance sport (sports for sports sake) and sport as an instrument in social inclusion each have sets of values and domain assumptions (and conditions) that are almost opposite. It is this paradox that underpins our assertion that "sports development" remains a contested term.

The awarding of the 2012 Olympics to London has, in some sport development senses, proved to be divisive to the use of sport and physical activity as a form of social intervention. In 2008 DCMS replaced Game Plan with a new sport policy document “Playing to Win”, the focus of which is rather given away in the document title.

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