

Creating opportunities in sport for people with disabilities

SUMMARY

Disability is a complex, multidimensional and contested term for which there is no common definition, but which is generally understood as a dynamic interaction between health conditions and contextual factors, both personal and environmental. A billion people in the world, of whom over 70 million in the EU, live with disabilities today. Official sporting events for people with disabilities have existed for over a century. The Silent Games – the first competition for athletes with a disability (now Deaflympics) – were held in 1924 in Paris (France). Some disability sports are traditional sports slightly modified to meet the needs of people with a disability and are referred to as 'adapted sports'. Others, such as boccia, have been designed specifically with no equivalent in mainstream sport. 'Disability sport' is used as an umbrella term to describe sports activities developed for the benefit of people or athletes with disabilities. In the last century, various disability sports and competitions have been developed and run under the auspices of specialised international organisations.

Regrettably, there is no centralised data collection on the participation of people with disabilities in sport at EU level. Instead, EU countries gather a variety of non-harmonised indicators, making it impossible to make consistent comparisons. According to a 2018 Eurobarometer survey, having a disability or illness is the third most frequently mentioned reason – by 14 % of respondents – for not practising sports more regularly. To remove such barriers and improve the participation of people with disabilities in sports, over 50 Erasmus+ projects have supported such activities since 2014. At national level, some EU countries, such as France, Ireland and the Netherlands, have adopted centralised approaches based on national strategies and funding initiatives. Others, including Belgium, Italy and Spain, favour strategies developed and implemented mainly at regional or local level.

The pandemic has taken a heavy toll on sports activities for people with disabilities. The Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, rescheduled for August-September 2021, will be broadcast to an estimated global audience of 4.3 billion people and should help to put disability back at the heart of the inclusion agenda.



IN THIS BRIEFING

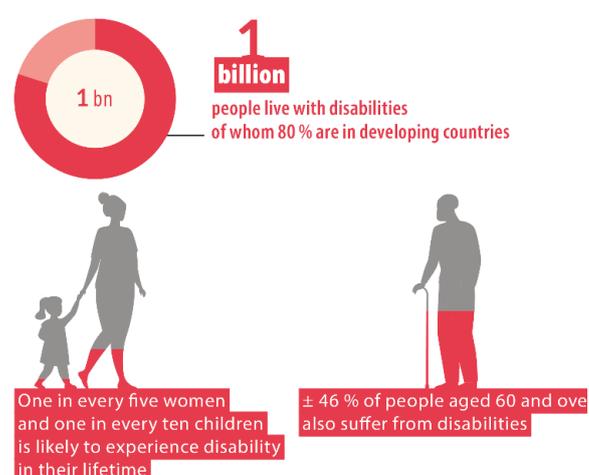
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Background

The International Day of Persons with Disabilities has been marked every 3 December since 1992, to promote awareness and mobilise support for critical issues relating to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society and development. According to the [United Nations](#) (UN) there are currently a billion people living with disabilities in the world, of whom 80 % are in developing countries (see Figure 1). An estimated 46 % of people aged 60 and over are also among those with disabilities. Moreover, one in every five women and one in every 10 children is likely to experience disability at some point in their lifetime. Around the world, people with disabilities experience poorer health outcomes, lower educational achievements, lesser economic participation and higher rates of poverty than people without disabilities.

In the EU, there are over [70 million](#) people with a disability, roughly equivalent to 17.5 % of the total population (see Figure 2). This figure is set to rise rapidly over the next decade, given that the EU population is ageing and that more than a third of people over 75 have a disability. In addition, the global increase in chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and mental health disorders, which impacts the nature and prevalence of disability, may increase the number of people facing disabilities. This implies that ultimately EU countries will face further challenges regarding disability in the future. Worryingly, people with disabilities are among the hardest hit by Covid-19.

Figure 1 – Disability in the world



Data source: [United Nations](#), 2018.

Disability and disability sport

Defining disability

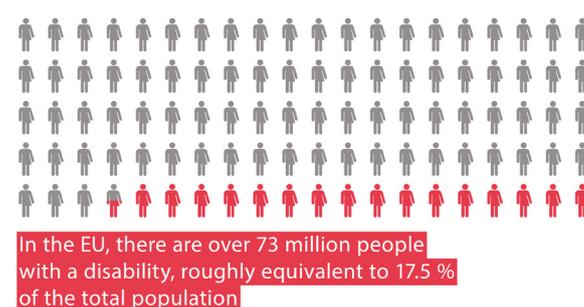
Disability is a complex, dynamic, multidimensional, and contested term for which there is no common definition in Europe or globally. Legal definitions of disability have been the issue of much debate and vary from country to country. Definitions of disability generally fall into one of two main categories: the 'medical model' – linked to a health condition – and the 'social model' which considers persons as disabled by society rather than by their own bodies.

According to the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) used by the World Health Organization (WHO), [disability](#) is a dynamic interaction between health conditions and contextual factors, both personal and environmental.

This 'bio-psycho-social' model is viewed as a compromise between the medical and social models.

Disability is thus considered an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions, referring to the negative aspects of interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and that individual's contextual factors (environmental and personal factors, such as for instance inaccessible transportation and public buildings or limited social support).

Figure 2 – Disability in the EU



Data source: [Eurostat](#), 2018.

Importantly, defining disability as an interaction means that progress on improving social participation can be made by addressing the barriers that hinder people with disabilities in their everyday lives.

While stereotypical views of disability often focus on wheelchair users and a few other 'traditional' groups such as blind people and deaf people, people with disabilities are diverse and heterogeneous. Indeed, disability encompasses the child born with Down's syndrome, the young soldier who lost a leg to a land-mine, the middle-aged person with severe arthritis, and the senior citizen with Alzheimer's disease. Over the last 30 years, there has been a gradual broadening of the concept of disability and a shift toward greater acknowledgement of the social context in which disability is created and maintained. The shift towards a social understanding of disability and of the social and environmental constraints that are believed to 'disable' people has also helped the disability rights movement bring about significant policy change on the part of governments.

The origins of disability sport

Sporting events for people with disabilities have been happening for over a century. The [Silent Games](#) – the first known international competition for athletes with a disability (now the Deaflympics) – were organised in 1924 in Paris with the participation of 148 athletes from nine European nations. Two decades later, a new approach, heralded by [Dr Ludwig Guttmann](#), introduced the idea of sport as an important part of the treatment of people with disabilities. Rehabilitation sport thus evolved rather quickly into recreational sport and the next step to competitive sport took only a matter of years.

In 1960, the [first Paralympic Games](#) were held immediately after the Olympic Games in Rome (Italy) with the presence of 400 athletes from 23 countries, while the [first Paralympic Winter Games](#) took place in 1976 in Sweden. Today, the Paralympic Games are elite sporting events, organised every four years and supervised and run by the [International Paralympic Committee](#) (IPC) – the global governing body of the paralympic movement. Headquartered in Bonn (Germany), the committee provides support for over 200 members to ensure the successful delivery and organisation of the Paralympic Games and act as the international federation for ten paralympic sports.

Similarly, the [Special Olympics](#), launched in 1968, offer year-round sports training and athletic competition in 32 Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop and enjoy sport. Every two years, these competitions culminate in the Special Olympics World Games. Alternating between summer and winter, the World Games have become the flagship event of the Special Olympics movement and have grown to become an international beacon of inclusion, acceptance, and unity.

Concept and specificity of disability sport

Defining disability sports is as complex as defining the term 'sport'. With heterogenic definitions existing in the different EU countries, terms range from 'elite sport' to 'recreational sport' and 'adapted physical education' to 'rehabilitation sport'. Some disability sports are traditional sports only slightly modified to meet the needs of people with disabilities and are referred to as 'adapted sport'. Others, such as [boccia](#) – a specialised disability sport that requires players in wheelchairs to throw or release balls towards a designated target ball – have been specially designed with no equivalent in mainstream sport. In general, [disability sport](#) is used as an umbrella term to describe sports activities developed for the benefit of people or athletes with disabilities.

Paralympic sports refer specifically to those sports contested by athletes with disabilities in the Summer and Winter Paralympic Games. It should be noted that not all sports in the paralympic movement are part of the Paralympic Games and, in addition to those, people with disabilities take part in many sports outside the formal sports movement. Moreover, disability sports and events are constantly evolving. In the last century, many disability sports and competitions have been developed and run under the auspices of various international organisations.

Notwithstanding, for a long time, sport for the disabled was largely disregarded, remained peripheral to mainstream sports or was perceived as marginalised by the wider public. In recent years, however, disability sports have begun to gain increasingly positive attention at both grassroots and elite sport level.

International policy framework

United Nations

The 2006 [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) is a key policy reference. It endeavours 'to elaborate in detail the rights of persons with disabilities and set out a code of implementation'. Countries that sign the convention commit to develop and implement policies, laws and administrative measures for securing the rights recognised in the convention and abolish laws, regulations, customs and practices that constitute discrimination.

The convention's Article 30 refers specifically to 'participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport', to 'promote the participation of persons with disabilities in mainstream sporting activities at all levels; ensure that persons with disabilities have an opportunity to organise, develop and participate in disability-specific sporting activities; [and] ensure that persons with disabilities have access to sporting venues and services'.

As of 2020, the European Union and all its Member States have [signed and ratified](#) the convention.

Council of Europe

The Council of Europe has been promoting the integration of people with disabilities since 1959, notably through its [Partial Agreement in the Social and Public Health Field](#). After having formulated its initial considerations in the 'European Sport For All Charter' (1976), which states that every individual has the right to participate in sport, in 1986 the Council of Europe extended the recognition of people with a disability and their right to participate in sport by creating the '[European Charter on Sport for All: Disabled Persons](#)'.

As sport is a fundamental pillar of civil society and one of the most accessible channels for transmitting core values into everyday life, in 2007 the Council of Europe created the [Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport](#) (EPAS) – a new platform integrating sport organisations into political processes. With its [39 member countries](#), the EPAS has given fresh momentum to pan-European sports cooperation, addressing the current challenges facing sport in Europe, including among its priorities the promotion of diversity and the fight against discrimination towards disabled people.

EU policy framework

Across the EU, people with disabilities have similar concerns, face similar obstacles and experience similar cases of discrimination. The EU's [Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) reflects its commitment to the rights of people with disabilities. Article 26 of the charter thus underlines that 'the EU recognises and respects the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration and participation in the life of the community'.

Interestingly, the charter has helped shift the discussion on disability away from people with disabilities being considered the 'objects' of charity, medical treatment and social protection towards becoming 'subjects' with rights, capable of claiming those rights and making decisions as active members of society.

Disability Intergroup in the European Parliament

In 1980, the Disability Intergroup of the European Parliament was established as an informal grouping of [members](#) of the European Parliament interested in advocating for disability rights and aiming to promote disability policy during their mandates. A strong post-2020 [European disability strategy](#) will be the main focus of the intergroup for the year to come.

The entry into force of the [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) in 2009 gave legal standing to the Charter, which was previously referenced as an independent document. Moreover, the consolidated version of the Treaty specifically refers to non-discrimination regarding people with disabilities (Articles 10 and 19).

Following up on the EU action plans ([2005](#) and [2010](#)) developed to promote the integration and equal treatment of people with disabilities, in 2010, the Commission presented the '[European disability strategy 2010-2020: A renewed commitment to a barrier-free Europe](#)', the first of its kind. The strategy was closely aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol, to which the EU is a signatory, calling on EU countries to promote the participation of and access for people with disabilities in mainstream sporting activities at all levels.

In 2010, the [European Council](#) concluded that sports should serve as a tool of active social inclusion.

A new EU disability strategy is to be announced in early 2021.

EU-level data collection

Regrettably, there is no centralised data collection on the participation of people with disabilities in sport at EU level. A number of EU countries, such as Belgium, Italy, Latvia and Romania, do not collect data regularly at national level. Others gather a variety of non-harmonised indicators on sport and disability, which makes it impossible to make meaningful comparisons between them.

In **France**, the national education ministry collects data on the number of members of disability sports clubs, as well as on the number of such clubs. The data show that there has been a substantial increase in opportunities for people with disabilities to practice sport in clubs in recent years (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Membership/ number of sports clubs for people with disabilities in France

Type of data	2012	2015
Number of members	73 204	91 781
Number of clubs	2 086	2 481

Data source: [Mapping on access to sport for people with disabilities](#), ECORYS, European Commission, December 2018.

Sport **Ireland**, the public body in charge of sport, holds statistics on the proportion of people with an illness/disability participating in sport.

Similarly, the national institute of public health in the **Netherlands**, gathers information on individuals with various types of disability participating in sporting activities.

In **Sweden**, the national public health survey offers information on (in)activity by type of disability.

The annual report of the **Spanish** ministry of education, culture and sports collects data on membership of the various sports federations dedicated to handisport (see Table 2 overleaf). Even though the data show a decline in general membership numbers, a steady increase is visible in the membership of federations aimed at individuals with visual and hearing impairments.

Table 2 – Membership of sports federations dedicated to disability sports in Spain

Type of disability	2012	2016
Sports for members with physical disabilities	2 231	1 632
Sports for members with intellectual disabilities	4 619	5 951
Sports for visually-impaired members	2 009	1 767
Sports for members with a hearing impairment	733	1 079
Sports for members with paralysis	1 557	1 324

Source: [Mapping on Access to Sport for People with Disabilities](#), ECORYS, European Commission, December 2018.

EU-funded projects

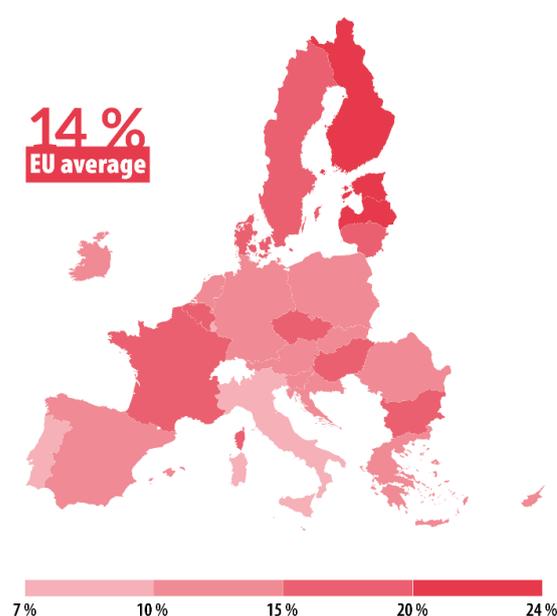
While sports opportunities for people with disabilities have improved significantly across the EU in the past 20 years, barriers still remain. According to a 2018 Eurobarometer [report](#), having a disability or illness is the third most frequently mentioned reason – by 14 % of respondents – for not practising sports more regularly, together with lack of time and lack of motivation or interest (see Figure 3). The highest percentage of people hampered by this type of barrier were living in Estonia (24 %), Latvia and Finland (both 21 %) and Sweden (20 %).

Via the [Erasmus+](#) programme, the EU is working to remove these barriers and improve the participation of people with disabilities in sports.

Since 2014, 51 Erasmus+ [projects](#) have supported such activities. Of these, 33 projects have helped people with disabilities take part in basketball, parachute jumping, athletics, water sports, snowboarding, kickboxing and boccia. The remaining projects focused on building networks among sports organisations, publishing toolkits of good practices or organising sports events where disabled and non-disabled people can participate together.

Some noteworthy Erasmus+ projects from recent years are described briefly in the box overleaf. These include sports that have not traditionally been accessible to people with disabilities.

Figure 3 – Disability or illness: the third most frequently mentioned reason for not practising sport more regularly



Data source: European Commission, [Special Eurobarometer 472](#), Sport and physical activity, 2018.

Examples of projects funded through Erasmus +

The [Snow for everyone](#) project (Bulgaria, France, Italy and Spain) allowed people with (severe) mental and physical disabilities to practice alpine skiing. Conducted in two stages, the project involved the definition of a standard training protocol and the selection of students to become national trainers.

Given the minor effect of gravity in water, it is an ideal environment for practising sports for persons with physical disabilities. The project [Integrating diversities through water sports](#) (Croatia, Italy and Portugal), focused specifically on water sports such as swimming, diving, synchronised swimming, surfing and sailing. The practice of most of these sports involves the whole body in a symmetrical way, which is especially important for people with disabilities who generally suffer from lack of movement.

[Adaptive surfing camps for people with an impairment](#) (Italy, Portugal and Spain) aimed to increase the number of people with an impairment practicing adaptive surfing through the implementation of daily programmes.

The [European competition for autistic people](#) (Italy) is the first European not-for-profit event promoting the social inclusion of athletes with autistic syndrome. Reflecting on the 'sport for all concept', the event focused on grass-roots sports offering the following activities: 'Run for Autism' – a competition including autistic and [neurotypical](#) athletes (e.g. individuals who do not have a diagnosis of autism or any other intellectual or developmental difference), a 'Swimming Cup for autistic athletes', an Autism multisport day, and various training activities targeted at the needs of autistic athletes.

National policies

Some EU countries, such as France, Ireland and the Netherlands, have adopted centralised approaches based on specific national strategies and funding initiatives. Others, including Belgium, Italy and Spain, favour strategies essentially developed and implemented at regional and local level. A recent [study](#) mapping access to sport for people with disabilities provides interesting insights into national policies, which are briefly summarised below.

In **Belgium**, participation in sports for persons with disabilities falls within the remit of the [regional authorities](#).

In **France**, one of the four axes of the [ministry for sports](#) is '*La France qui bouge*' (France in movement) and is aimed at increasing the number of disabled people who regularly practise physical or sports activity. The ministry of state for the disabled is attached to the prime minister's office and the office of the minister for solidarity and health and has a supporting role in enforcing this objective. One of the key bodies in charge of coordinating the various policies and actions in this field is the [interministerial committee on disability](#) which centralises all government-led missions in favour of people with disabilities in the various ministries.

In **Germany**, participation in sports for persons with disabilities falls under the responsibility of the federal states.

Sport Ireland is the [authority](#) tasked with the development of sport in **Ireland** and, among other things, is responsible for the design and implementation of the national sporting strategy. One of the strategy's objectives involves creating opportunities for people with disabilities to participate on an equal footing in recreational, leisure and sporting activities.

Law No 124/15 of 2015 formalised the status of the **Italian Paralympic Committee** as a public authority responsible for promoting, regulating and managing professional and non-professional sport activities aimed at people with any type of disability.

The national strategy for involvement of people with disabilities in sport in **Latvia** is included in the '2014-2020 sport policy guidelines'. Among other things, the guidelines offer support to projects providing equal opportunities for children and youth with disabilities participating in sports events, as well as assistance with the preparation and participation of paralympic athletes in world and European championships.

In the **Netherlands**, the [ministry of health, welfare and sport](#) is the body responsible for the development of policies and programmes aimed at enhancing the participation of people with disabilities in sports activities. One of the objectives of the 2014 law on societal support is, notably, the inclusion of people with disabilities in sports activities.

Law No 3/2013 – [Ley del Deporte](#) – regulates the main aspects of sports activities and programmes in **Spain**. Its Article 4, in particular, invests the Spanish government with a pivotal role in supporting the inclusion of people with physical or intellectual disabilities. The Spanish government recognises the role of sports federations as well as that of the Paralympic Committee and guarantees the accessibility of public sports facilities to people with disabilities.

In **Sweden**, the national strategy on disability focuses on [improving the access](#) of people with disabilities to cultural and sports activities. 'Design for all' is one of the guiding principles in Sweden's accessibility work. General inaccessibility means that people with functional disabilities do not have the same opportunities as others to participate in community life. Consequently, if the various aspects in a given society – housing, transport and services, to name but a few – are designed for all, they are also accessible to all.

The **Romanian** national strategy – [A society without barriers for people with disabilities 2016 - 2020](#) – was adopted in 2016. The strategy was designed to ensure the 'access and participation of people with disabilities in non-formal educational programmes and contexts, as well as cultural, leisure and sport activities that are adequate for their interests and adapted to their condition'.

Examples of national funding mechanisms, projects and programmes

Research shows that across the EU there is a great variation in the mechanisms and levels of funding allocated to sport programmes for people with disabilities. In some countries, funding tends to be allocated through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or paralympic committees and associations, while in others, key programmes are delivered directly by national sports agencies or ministries of sport, health or education.

In French-speaking **Belgium**, the administration of physical education and sports ([ADEPS](#)) provides funding for disability sport through the following mechanisms:

- **funding for equipment for disabled and adapted sports.** Under this heading, sports clubs and public administration bodies can apply for subsidies representing up to 90 % of the price per piece of equipment;
- **funding of sport camps for people with disabilities.** Such camps are entitled to subsidies depending on the number of specialised staff and the number of disabled attendees. ADEPS also organises a series of sports camps for disabled people in partnership with the [francophone disabled sport league](#); and
- **funding of sports clubs for disabled people.** €130 000 is allocated annually to such clubs.

In **France** the key programmes focusing on sports participation for people with disabilities are administered by the national centre for development of sports ([CNDS](#)), an independent public body attached to the ministry for sports in charge of allocating government subsidies for sports participation. Its work is centred on the following initiatives:

- **inheritance and society – sports and disabilities** (Plan Heritage et Société, Volet Innovation sociale, Activités physiques et sportives et Handicap). The [programme](#) is aimed at developing the future legacy of the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games (in Paris), with a focus on equal access to sport and adapted sports (see box overleaf);
- **audiovisual support** – The CNDS has provided €130 000 to finance disability sport audiovisual productions (representing 21 % of its audiovisual fund);

- **Emplois sportifs qualifiés** – This programme, managed directly by the ministry of sports, funds the presence of disability specialists in sports federations. Since 2013, 150 such specialists have been recruited in the [French Disabled Sports Federation](#), the [Federation for Adapted Sport](#) and the [French Paralympic Sport Committee](#) on contracts with the French government.

'Inheritance and society' and 'Like everybody else' (France)

With a total budget of €20 million, the [Inheritance and society](#) programme dedicates €10.5 million to projects for social innovation and environmental responsibility through sport, thus promoting research, scientific innovation and the development of tools for people with disabilities to practise sports. In addition, €5 million is allocated to open access to sports equipment. Finally, €4.5 million has been earmarked for local action purposes.

The programme will build on the principles and lessons underpinning various projects, such as '[Comme les autres](#)' (Like everybody else). This association organises 'adventure trips' for people with disabilities involving (extreme) sports such as bungee jumping and scuba diving. The activity improves beneficiaries' self-esteem and sense of autonomy through participating in more challenging sports. Since its creation in 2011, the association has accompanied more than 1 000 persons with disabilities. Moreover, it has organised over 100 adventure-trips and some 500 beneficiaries have been or continue to be part of the 'personalised support' activity.

In **Germany**, general sports participation programmes with a strong disability component are implemented at regional level. In 2011, the federal government of Germany launched a national action plan based on cross-ministerial involvement where 40 % of measures fall under the responsibility of the labour and social affairs ministry. Since 2017, regional action plans have been in force in all 16 federal states. Starting in 2009, the 'federal youth games' were expanded to include a programme for school children with disabilities, thus allowing all pupils in general education to participate in the national youth games.

In **Ireland**, the key programmes are funded largely by [Sport Ireland](#), the government's sport participation agency, with funding channelled through sport and disability organisations. For example, Sport Ireland recently allocated €249 000 to the [Irish Wheelchair Association](#) to implement specific initiatives encouraging sport participation. Similarly, in November 2020, an [€85 million funding package](#) was announced for the Covid-19-hit sports sector. In 2018, the government launched Ireland's first ever [sport inclusion disability charter](#).

In **Italy**, the main programmes targeting sport and disability are implemented at regional and local levels. Many of these programmes are funded by the ministry of sport and by private foundations or NGOs, which also lend support to the various regional branches of the [Italian Paralympic Committee](#) (CIP). The CIP's budget allocated through the ministry of sport amounts to some €20 million per year. In June 2020, the CIP approved an [emergency fund](#) worth €5 million. The funding will be used to support grassroots sports associations impacted by the coronavirus pandemic and encourage the gradual recovery of sports activities. Similarly, the CIP has announced that it will grant disabled athletes [free admission](#) to its paralympic training centre in Rome, for the whole of the 2020-2021 season.

In the **Netherlands**, the government funds specific programmes directly targeting people with disabilities in order to increase their participation in sport and physical activities (see box overleaf). Moreover, the 2010-2018 sports transport regulation provided for refunds of transport expenses to people affected by severe physical disabilities participating in team sports affiliated with one of the nationally recognised federations. Finally, the 2013-2016 sport research programme and the 2015-2020 sport innovation programme are aimed at strengthening scientific research in the field of disability sports and improving the transfer from science to sports practice and educational programmes.

'Active without boundaries' – Grenzeloos Actief (the Netherlands)

Launched by the Dutch ministry of health, welfare and sports in 2015, the programme aims to stimulate inter-sectoral collaboration by setting up regional partnerships on sport and disability through which a variety of organisations, such as primary healthcare providers, rehabilitation centres, schools, sports and physical activity providers and local government agencies, can work together. Under a national umbrella structure of 43 regional partnerships in 430 locations, the programme focuses on providing personal support through coaches and trainers and removing constraints relating to transport, participation costs or sports equipment, for instance. Two other programmes contributed to the success of the initiative through the expertise of local coaches – [sports and exercise in the neighbourhood](#) and ['Sport Impuls'](#). The programme received €6.6 million from the Dutch ministry of health, welfare and sports over a three-year period.

In **Romania** the government works in partnership with private bodies at regional level to support the organisation of sports competitions and other sports-related activities for children, young people and adults with disabilities.

Free leisure camps (Romania)

The free leisure camps offered to pre-school children, pupils and students with disabilities are organised by the regional agencies for youth and sport. The activities include aerobics, football, volleyball, fitness, handball, tennis, mini golf and table tennis. The programme, with an annual budget of €280 000, has been implemented for more than five years. In 2018, some 3 100 places were available throughout the country.

In **Spain**, at regional level the autonomous communities can develop specific policies and measures with regard to sport and disability. For example, the project 'Sport and young people with disabilities' ([Deporte y jóvenes con discapacidad](#)) was launched in the municipality of Torrelodones (Community of Madrid) and ran for the 2016-2017 academic year. It encouraged the development of sports activities for disabled children in schools. The Judex-Judes programme ([Juegos Extremenos del deporte especial](#) – Extremadura games for special sports) was developed by the community of Extremadura and offers sports activities for disabled people.

In **Sweden**, government grants for sports projects are administered by the Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation](#) (SSC). The SSC channels funding for disability sport via the Swedish sports organisation for the disabled ([Parasport Federation](#)). Parasport Sweden is one of the 71 special sports organisation members of the SSC. The Swedish Parasport association together with the [Swedish Paralympic Committee](#) offers sports programmes for people with disabilities in 16 different sports. The association also leads the work of the [Special Olympics](#). The SSC is responsible for the Lift for Sport programme (see box below).

Lift for Sport (Sweden)

[Lift for Sport](#) supports comprehensive activities for athletes and coaches with disabilities. About 4 000 riders with disabilities currently take part in Swedish equestrian activities. The majority have a cognitive disability and often one or more additional handicaps. Solna Klätterklubb – a local climbing club – has been able to offer special activities for children and young people with disabilities.

Another example is the Falu canoe club, which provides kayaking training for children, adolescents and adults with specially adapted kayaks and docks. One of the project's long-term goals is to offer the opportunity to compete, as flatwater racing is currently represented in the Paralympics.

Pushing back the limits

The substantial progress made during the past decade in disability sport cannot be discussed without mentioning the impact of [Oscar Pistorius](#). Amputated below the knee in both legs, the South African athlete, nicknamed 'Blade Runner', uses carbon fibre blade-shaped prosthetics. Although Pistorius was not the first athlete with a disability to take part in the Olympic Games, his participation has had a profound and lasting effect on the world of sports. While experts are still debating where assistive technology stops, such athletes challenge the established boundaries and question the very nature of competition, technology and human ability.

The Olympic Games have typically offered space for both able-bodied athletes and those with disabilities to explore human limits and help change attitudes towards people with disabilities. The [about-turn](#) by Russia provides a good illustration of this. Arguing that there were no people with disabilities in the country, in 1980, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had declined the opportunity to host the Paralympics. Following Sochi's selection as a host city in 2007, new legislation was passed and the 2014 Organising Committee was able to ensure the accessibility of the games' infrastructure, which was then used as a blueprint to improve accessibility in various other cities across the country.

Similarly, [research](#) reveals that in Brazil, where people with disabilities are virtually invisible, the 2016 Paralympic Games offered a platform for them to show their abilities and needs. The mega-event also provided a good opportunity to challenge misrepresentations and clichés and debate disability issues openly. Interestingly, the authors of the study assert that the power of the Paralympic Games might be even stronger in contexts where people with disabilities are more often victims of stigmatisation.

The global pandemic has had a heavy [impact on sport](#) in general and on sports-related activities for persons with disabilities in particular.

International Paralympic Committee President Andrew Parsons has [argued](#) that the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games (rescheduled for 24 August – 5 September 2021) will be instrumental in addressing the growing levels of marginalisation and discrimination faced by people with impairments. Indeed, the global pandemic has impacted persons with impairments disproportionately all over the world.

The Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games will be broadcast to an estimated global television audience of 4.3 billion people, and are expected to put disability back at the heart of the inclusion agenda. Hoping that the next games will be the 'starting point for a better and more inclusive world for all', Parsons commented: 'Change starts with sport and next year's Paralympic Games are a platform to place disability at the heart of the diversity agenda and show the world why inclusion matters. With record numbers set to watch Tokyo 2020, we are determined to use the Paralympics to change attitudes, breakdown barriers of inequality and create more opportunities for persons with disabilities'.

MAIN REFERENCES

Katsarova I., [Lowering hurdles to sport for persons with disabilities](#), Infographic, EPRS, European Parliament, December 2020.

[Mapping on Access to Sport for People with Disabilities](#), ECORYS, European Commission, December 2018.

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