

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

The Magic Pill?

INTERVIEW WITH STEVE HARKNETT

Using sports to boost the self-esteem and integration of people with disabilities is nothing new in Europe. Handicap International, an international NGO, has now also started a sports project in Sri Lanka, in a region hit hard by civil war. According to the Project manager, Steve Harknett, these activities contribute effectively to improving the situation of youth with disabilities. He warns, however, that sport isn't a magic pill that can solve all problems.

Why is sport so important for people with disabilities?

Sport has physical and health benefits and, most importantly, social benefits. Our beneficiaries live in poor rural areas where it's hard for them to get around. Transportation is especially expensive for people in wheelchairs. So isolation is a big problem but sport can bring them together.

Handicap International is an international NGO that supports people with disabilities worldwide. The "sports for all project" implemented by Handicap International and funded by the EU started in October 2011 in Vavuniya, a northern district of Sri Lanka. Handicap International Sri Lanka is committed to strengthen the physical rehabilitation services, access to livelihood services, promote barrier free environments and contribute towards full participation of persons with disabilities in society.

What is the goal of the project?

We want to improve the quality of life of children and youth with disabilities – up to age 30 – through more inclusive sporting activities. The project aims at having a positive impact on their social lives as well as on their physical and psychological health. Furthermore, we seek to make people with disabilities more visible in society, thereby increasing society's appreciation of and respect for them.

How does sport promote visibility?

Most of our activities take place at public sports grounds. So everyone else can see people in wheelchairs playing basketball, people with prosthetics playing badminton, or deaf children doing karate. And at the sporting events we ensure that all the guests and participants without disabilities can see the participants with disabilities. Their parents have already told us how important it is for them to be able to see their child participating and not just sitting and watching. Really, youth with disabilities have never been so visible in Vavuniya before. Furthermore, we do awareness-raising campaigns. We design posters of role models with disabilities like Oscar Pistorius from South Africa. Or we show local sportsmen, like a Sri Lankan with a mental disability who participated at the Special Olympics in Athens in 2011.

We pay transportation costs to our Sunday trainings, for instance, otherwise there would be no way our participants could meet and talk. Sometimes we also organise activities outside Vavuniya, like last week, when we took eleven people with amputations to Colombo. For many of them it was their first visit to the city. They met various VIPs there, some high-ranking officials from the National Olympic Committee and from the National Paralympic Committee. Shaking hands with these celebrities really boosted their self-esteem. As a mainstreaming project our primary goal is inclusion.

The concept of inclusion is rather complex. What exactly does it mean in sports?

That's true, there are different levels of inclusion, and how far inclusion can be taken depends a lot on the

type of disability and the kind of sport. Using badminton as an example, the highest level of inclusion would be mixed teams of players with and without disabilities. The lower level would be to have a para-badminton match alongside a mainstream badminton tournament. In other sports, you can even have reverse inclusion – for instance when people without disabilities participate in a wheelchair race. In our case, we try to give mainstream sporting events – that is to say events originally designed for people without disabilities – a disability component. This could be a wheelchair race at a school sports day, for instance. This is not completely inclusive, but at least it is partially. We strongly promote having people with disabilities take part in mainstream social events rather than offering events exclusively for them.

Is it really that important for people with disabilities to participate in mainstream sporting events? The Paralympics, for instance, is a separate event for people with disabilities, and very respected and well-known.

It definitely is. There are some really good athletes who are deaf, for instance, like sprinters, high jumpers and long distance runners. Just imagine – if they are restricted to training in sports clubs specifically for deaf persons only, they miss out on so many competitive opportunities to improve their skills! In our project, there is one person with an amputation who beats me in badminton and in table tennis. If he only played with people with disabilities, he might have nobody to push him to the next level.

The goal of inclusion is also to make people without disabilities gain more understanding of and respect for of people with disabilities. Inclusive sports meets are a great way of showcasing the abilities of people with disabilities. At some sports meets we've supported, the loudest cheers of the whole event have been during the wheelchair races, which shows how interested the public is in sport which includes people with disabilities.

So what exactly are the project's activities like?

First of all, we do trainings for sports clubs, NGOs, and social and youth workers to show them how to include people with disabilities – for instance by providing different equipment or changing the rules. Furthermore, we ask them if we can offer support for their sporting events and training programmes in order to make them more accessible for the people with disabilities. For instance we offer accessibility arrangements for sports facilities, like building ramps. All these activities are actually very much in line with the country's national policy since the disability policy published by the Ministry of Social Welfare in 2003 prescribes that all public sporting events must include children with disabilities. So we also work with schools and governmental institutions.

How do you cooperate with the schools – do you focus on their sports days?

No, it's more than that. We visit their physical education classes and try to introduce new games like sitting throw ball or boccia. Throw ball is a bit like volleyball, but the players sit on the floor while throwing and catching the ball, which is easier for many children with physical disabilities. And boccia is even an official paralympic sport. Players stand or sit on the ground and try to get their ball as close as possible to the target ball. It doesn't involve much speed, strength or mobility, so is ideal for children with physical disabilities. Also it's a sport which is easy to achieve full inclusion of mixed teams with and without disabilities. We would like the schools to adopt these new kinds of sports because everyone can play them. But that is still in the early stages.

You have even negotiated with governmental authorities you said?

Yes. We asked them to offer additional kinds of sports at their sporting events for kids, like wheelchair races. Most of the officials said they would be happy to do so; they said that they just hadn't thought about it before. This is a general problem: many people think that only very specialised NGOs can deal with the specific needs of people with disabilities – but in fact, every mainstream school or sports club can and should do so.

In order to compete in these events, the children and youths with disabilities need to have some

training too. Do you also coach them?

We offer a sports practice for youth with disabilities at Vavuniya every Sunday. At the moment we're focusing on wheelchair basketball and badminton for standing players with singular leg amputations or leg injuries. Furthermore, we have succeeded in getting a mainstream karate club to accept 10 deaf youths. The instructors have risen to the challenge of communicating with them with gestures and we sometimes hire a Sign Language interpreter to help out, too.

Can anyone with a disability participate?

We include all groups: people with physical disabilities and deaf youth are the main groups at Sunday practice, and now we've just started supporting community-level sport and leisure sessions for children, where there are also children with mental disabilities. There are also a few children with visual impairment.

The country is still suffering the effects of a long civil war that just ended in 2009. Aren't there more pressing issues to be tackled?

In northern Sri Lanka many initiatives address other needs, mainly livelihood and infrastructure. They build roads, houses and schools. Our project might be a bit ahead of its time, but I think it's the right moment, since things are changing very quickly right now. The government is putting a lot of effort into raising the North up to the standard of the rest of the country.

Do you also feel effects of the ethnic conflict on your activities?

I haven't noticed any major ethnic problems so far. On the contrary: perhaps the common destiny of living with a disability and the love of sports help our participants overcome ethnic barriers.

So disability and sports can actually break down the ethnic barriers. But in other cases, sport can even foster conflict. How do you prevent friction in your project activities?

I agree that sport can bring people together, but it can be divisive as well. In our case the risk of friction is low though. There is just one wheelchair basketball team in the town and no opponents around to get into a conflict with. Nevertheless, training is important to ensure that sport continues to unite people and not divide. The values of sport really have to be at the forefront. You have to make time during coaching and matches to do more than just play the game; you need to talk about the values too, of sportsmanship, respect for the rules and for one another, etc.

Are you convinced that sport can really help people with disabilities?

Well, in my opinion sport can only be part of the solution – it can do some things, but it won't meet all needs. There is a lot of hyperbole about sports and development in literature, which I'm a bit fed up with. Sport is sometimes described as a magic pill that can solve the world's problems – but of course it can't. Many sport for development projects are funded by private sector companies who exaggerate the impacts of the projects they fund to serve their own promotion purposes. As a development professional I have a more analytical view of it. The number one priority for people is certainly always to ensure their basic needs are met – health, water and sanitation, livelihoods... Sports and leisure are things you do in your free time – but what if you're working so hard to make ends meet that you don't have any free time? You won't be able to take part in sports activities. In Sri Lanka some people with disabilities face such a difficulty and can't come to our practice. So we have to get the balance right between enabling the person with disabilities to get the social and physical benefits of playing sport, and allowing him or her to pursue many other important activities in his or her life.

Are you facing major difficulties in the project?

It is a challenge to get good coaches. We found a great coach for basketball, but he is not a wheelchair trainer and had to adapt to coaching people who were very different to his usual team. We're now getting a coach from the national volleyball federation in Colombo to offer sitting volleyball. But he comes from far and speaks Sinhala so there's need to do local coach training in Tamil.

What would need to happen so that you'd consider the project a success?

We want the project to have sustainable effects. So with regard to the schools, I would like to see a policy change. That means that schools adopt some of the sports we showed them and make them part of their physical education schedule. When it comes to the people with disabilities themselves, it would be fantastic if they'd take more responsibility. At the Sunday practice we will ask participants whether they would like to form a sports club. This way they could also get support from the National Paralympic Committee. And finally I would like disability focused NGOs to change their attitudes. Some of them have been a bit reluctant about inclusion, as disability is their territory and they don't want to mix things up. But some of them have now started to also invite people without disabilities to their disability events.

Questions by Eva-Maria Verfürth.