

Editorial

Disability sport: Changing lives, changing perceptions**Ian Brittain¹, Eli A. Wolff²**¹ Coventry University, UK² Brown University, USA*Corresponding author email: aa8550@coventry.ac.uk; eli_wolff@brown.edu*

Welcome to this special edition of the Journal of Sport for Development (JSFD) entitled *Disability Sport: Changing lives, changing perceptions*, which was inspired by a conference of the same name held at Coventry University, UK in September 2014. The aim of the conference was to bring together practitioners and academics working in the field of disability and Paralympic sport, begin a dialogue and create opportunities for future collaboration via knowledge exchange in both formal presentations and informal discussions. This Special Issue of JSFD continues the conference's goals by providing insight into the numerous ways in which sport can play a positive role in the lives of people with disabilities.

The Special Issue covers a range of topics, including social change, inclusion, disability sport marketing policies, negotiating disability, identity and belonging through sport, and the use of critical pedagogy to develop and promote inclusive practice with the higher education sector with regard to sport. These topics are discussed in various sporting, cultural and geographical contexts and highlight the great potential for future research in this emerging field. In the wider field of sport for development there is a steadily growing body of work regarding the significance of sport within society and its potential impacts, particularly in developing 'better' citizens with regard to health, behaviour, and productivity.¹

There is also a growing body of work regarding the use of sport in conflict zones as a means of development and brokering peace. However, there appears to be little work that addresses these issues regarding the use of sport for people with a disability and the role sport might play in overcoming them—e.g. the re-integration of people with

disabilities into society, the potential impact of sport on perceptions of people with disabilities within the wider community, and the role that a change in perceptions can play in aiding the re-integration process. In this editorial, we seek to introduce readers to issues faced by people with disabilities in these regions. We highlight a lack of both programmes using sport for development for people with disabilities in these regions and, as a result, a lack of research in this area.

People, particularly children, with disabilities do not have equal opportunities and equal access regarding most aspects of life. This lack of access includes basic services (especially education and health), a result of physical inaccessibility to the buildings, lack of information in adapted formats (e.g. braille), and discriminatory behaviour within society. In addition, people with disabilities tend to suffer disproportionately during and after conflict situations. They are often the most exposed to risks such as physical and sexual violence, exploitation, harassment and discrimination—a reality particularly true for females.² Research by the United Nations indicates that violence against children with disabilities occurs at annual rates at least 1.7 times greater than for their non-disabled peers.³ Finally, individuals with a disability often lack options for making a living and, therefore, transcending poverty, which often means they either remain a financial burden on their families or are forced to beg to make a living.

Disability and poverty are also closely linked with insecure living conditions, lack of access to basic services, malnutrition, and other dimensions of poverty. These links not only lead to disabilities, but also make life much harder for those who are born with or acquire disabilities as a result

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of accidents or conflict. In addition, the perceived stigma attached not only to the person with a disability but also their families can cause parents in some countries to attempt to conceal their disabled children. The rehabilitation of children with conflict-induced disabilities includes a set of additional issues such as the context of poverty, social stigma, cultural values and traditions prevalent with the society under investigation. Moreover, there are numerous priorities for reconstruction in post-conflict affected environments and people with disabilities, especially children, are far less likely to have access to decision making processes, means of production, and financial capital, causing them to tend to be further marginalized within society.

Armed conflicts often result in a high level of acquired disabilities caused by small arms and light weapons including anti-personnel landmines. Youth, both as civilians and combatants, are one of the most affected groups. It is often the case that there are no adequate socio-economic services or opportunities in post-conflict environments to help deal with the many issues raised by these conflict-induced impairments. However, research relating to the impact of conflict-induced disability, particularly with regard to children, is scarce. The lack of research in this area may be partly due to the difficulties of carrying out research in the often challenging situation of a post-conflict society.⁴ It is equally important not to overlook the challenges faced by those who received their disabilities as a result of non-conflict accidents or congenital disabilities; otherwise, there would be a risk of marginalising further an already marginalised group.

One of the key issues faced by people with disabilities around the world, but particularly in conflict and post-conflict zones is exclusion from the rest of society. The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) broadly define social exclusion as a process by which certain groups are systematically disadvantaged because they are discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, caste, descent, gender, age, disability, HIV status, migrant status or where they live.⁵ Discrimination occurs in public institutions, such as the legal system or education and health services, as well as social institutions like the household. DFID identifies social exclusion as a priority because it both causes poverty and impedes poverty reduction. Moreover, poverty reduction policies rarely reach socially excluded groups unless they are specifically designed to include them.

DFID highlights that social exclusion is a leading cause of

conflict and insecurity. This finding relates strongly to people with disabilities in conflict zones in that they often become displaced from their villages and local communities—either forcibly or out of fear for their own safety—and often end up in internal displacement camps. However, once the resettlement process is underway, the devastation caused by the conflict in terms of the destruction of villages and infrastructure often mean that people with disabilities are one of the hardest groups to re-settle. These people with disabilities typically meet other people with disabilities in the camps that enable them to achieve some sort of camaraderie, which is preferable to the isolation they can feel in their own villages where they may be shunned or stigmatized by their acquired disability.⁶ In short, life for people, particularly youth and children, with disabilities in a post-conflict environment often means marginalisation, exclusion, disparity, poverty and ostracisation.

There is a growing body of evidence that sport may have an effective role to play in improving challenges faced by people with disabilities broadly. The articles in this Special Issue add to this growing evidence base, highlighting the global scope of the subject of people with disabilities and sport for development. It addresses inclusion in grassroots and community settings as well as within large scale events like the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Rio 2016. It covers social inclusion and identity for individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities. The Issue further addresses considerations with respect to pedagogy as well as marketing concerns. Ultimately, this Special Issue serves as a testament to the emergence of people with disabilities within the sport for development space. However, further research and programs are needed to better understand the role of sport in these areas, particularly in post-conflict settings.

Beyond research initiatives, there is growing awareness, momentum and commitment for inclusive sport for development.⁷ Paragraph 37 in the new United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reads:

“Sport is also an important enabler of sustainable development. We recognise the growing contribution of sport to the realisation of development and peace in its promotion of tolerance and respect and the contributions it makes to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives.”⁸

Further in the revised UNESCO Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport that was adopted in November of 2015, Article 11.3 states that

*“Sport for development and peace initiatives should be inclusive, and culture-, gender-, age- and disability-sensitive, and include strong monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. They should encourage local ownership of projects and embody the same principles of sustainability and integrity as other physical education, physical activity and sport initiatives.”*⁹

We hope that this Special Issue can further contribute and make the case for inclusive sport for development in practice, policy and research.

In their introductory editorial to the very first edition of JSFD, Richards et al outlined the range of SFD research objectives including that of disability in terms of development, access, inclusion, and human rights of persons with disabilities using an evidence-based approach.¹⁰ We feel that these comments resonate strongly with the issue of people with disabilities living in post-conflict zones and the potential utilization of sport for development as part of an overall strategy for their integration and inclusion within the rebuilding process for such societies. We also feel that the seven papers presented in this special edition provide a good introduction to the numerous ways sport impacts upon or intersects with the lives of people with disabilities and the huge potential and opportunities that the field offers for research that can also have a measurable and verifiable social impact.

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Call for Abstracts

Disability Sport: Why do we ‘Dis’ people’s abilities? 27-29 June 2016, Coventry University, UK.

Following on from the success of the first two conferences held in 2012 and 2014, the Centre for Business in Society at Coventry University, UK will be hosting an international, inter-disciplinary conference for academics and practitioners.

The conference will focus on the use of disability sport as a tool for peace, development and social inclusion.

Further details can be found at:

www.coventry.ac.uk/disabilitysportconference