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The Game Changer Project: the local legacy of Tokyo 2020

As with all Olympic and Paralympic Games, a promise is made within a city's bid to provide a legacy to increase sports participation by making it accessible for all. Therefore, when Tokyo had its turn in 2020 – or 2021 as it turned out due to the COVID-19 pandemic – the Game Changer Project joined forces with them to help keep this promise, since disabled citizens were not a common sight in public places, let alone sports arenas, in Japan prior to the Games.

The project, brought to life by the Japan Sport Council, the Dutch Embassy in Tokyo and the Netherlands Olympics Committee (NOC*NSF), was carried out in three Tokyo districts: Adachi City, Edogawa City, Nishitokyo City. It was

created to integrate people with disabilities into Japanese society through sport. Specifically, by providing opportunities for school children, teachers and local communities to meet, play and learn from Paralympic athletes and



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coaches. Each of the three municipalities vary in size, population density and resources but were ultimately able to tailor the Game Changer approach to fit with their own needs but also to learn how to do this from each other, so that they could eventually become self-sufficient from the programme.

Initially, the municipalities were presented with an event-based programme whereby a non-disabled audience was presented with Paralympic sport through an athlete or coach to help change perspectives about disability and sport. This then progressed to focusing on providing local disability sport through experience-based content and infrastructure. People with disabilities were included in activities and the experience of teachers and coaches was built upon to help address the problem of inaccessibility – and each municipality chose to do this in different ways.

The Game Changer Project in practice

Edogawa City decided to use a ‘top-down approach’ with the ‘Edogawa Sports Concierge’ – where facilities can connect with citizens through municipality-based service points – and allowed a place for those citizens to come for a consultation. Local policy makers, professionals and volunteers were able to ask people with mental impairments what their needs and wishes were and one of the results was to establish a basketball club for children with a mental impairment or behavioural challenges.

This provided the development of a structural solution for accessibility issues for disability sports and is a good practice for other municipalities to follow. Furthermore, the Para-sport Ambassador programme was also established, to attract valuable volunteers and provide education on disability sports.



Adachi City on the other hand, chose the reverse with a 'bottom-up approach' connecting first with local sports clubs, coaches and disabled facilities. The Game Changer Project helped to provide workshops on different teaching methods for disability sports and included the presence of disabled students and athletes. Similarly, Nishitokyo City used workshops along with connecting existing clubs and facilities, due to its limitations in size and budget. And while stakeholder integration had improved in recent years through this method, the City then decided to learn from Edogawa and go one further in implementing the service point strategy to structurally improve accessibility to disability sports.

Working as one

The other benefit of so many departments working together in this way – especially those disabled services and non-disabled services – have included empowering families, who would normally rely on special education services, to



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increase the quality life for disabled children through receiving the wider support of their communities. Not having had this level of support in the past could often lead to social isolation for those children.

There was also an improvement in the relations between municipalities as a result of the Game Changer Project, as they would often share sports equipment for different stages of the programme which they would not have done prior to the project.

A study on the Game Changer Project found that leveraging the Paralympic Games in the host community, as the three municipalities have done, is more effective, as opposed to a national legacy-based approach which has been the traditional way of thinking at previous Games. For example, each municipality connected local organisations with existing sports facilities rather than building whole new infrastructure for disability sports.

Additionally, research has shown that facilitating disability sport into schools in Japan in order to create inclusive communities has relied on

teaching experience and structural opportunities – this is central to the Game Changer Project and helps prove why it has been the success that it has. In short, the Olympic and Paralympic Games can be used as a catalyst for the social integration of disabled people, as Yasushi Yamawaki, former Vice President of the Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee puts it: “They were a golden opportunity to not only change public perception towards people with an impairment but also to make Japanese citizens realise that social inclusion is essential for Japan’s future society.”

Take-away

- Make projects more sustainable by creating flexible programmes which can be tailored to a municipality based on their size, population density and budget.
- Create learning communities with local organisations to learn from each other, share resources and help develop more effective programmes.
- Decide on a specific approach at the start – either ‘top-down’ whereby citizens are the first point of contact for organising a programme or ‘bottom-up’ where organisations and facilities are firstly considered – to help find the most appropriate strategy for a local authority when taking on a sports initiative.

Other examples and best practices

TRUST: With funding from the Democratic and Inclusive School Culture in Operation (DISCO) program of the EU and Council of Europe, the UNESCO Chair, and key partners, are developing TRUST – The Rights Understanding in Sport - as a training module for use in schools, colleges, clubs and the wider community, providing resources for teaching human rights in and through sport and for embracing a human rights approach to sport education. It includes theoretical and practical resources that will help foster effective rights-based sport education and delivery practices. TRUST also delivers advocacy and audio-visual materials to help raise awareness of the role that sport can play in promoting these rights, particularly when addressing the needs of all in sport, including minority groups such as people with disabilities. A draft for review is currently available and opportunities for dissemination of this resource are ongoing.

- TRUST Ireland: This project funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission aims to:
 - Increase understanding among state actors, the sports sector and grassroots organisations of sport both as a human right and as a tool for human rights promotion, including within the context of Irish reporting to UN human rights mechanisms.
 - Ensure that grassroots organisations can articulate to the State their contribution towards implementing human rights through sport on the ground and hold the State to account regarding their human rights treaty obligations related to sport and facilitate conversations between all actors.
 - Facilitate conditions for better engagement between all actors on human rights, sport reporting and policy development.
- iPEPAS: iPEPAS is a blended learning, training and education resource which inclusivizes physical education, physical activity and sport (PEPAS) training and education, increasing the capacity of practitioners to operate inclusively. iPEPAS enables PEPAS-related training and education providers to increase the capacity and self-efficacy of their learners (i.e. pre-service or

in-service practitioners) to operate inclusively. iPEPAS adopts an intersectional approach to inclusion, while focusing on the inclusion of people with disabilities. It is currently being piloted with the Mauritius Institute of Education.

- The Inclusive Martial Arts Platform, developed by the UNESCO Chair in collaboration with UNESCO ICM (International Centre of Martial Arts for Youth Development and Engagement), provides educational resources for martial arts educators. An innovative online educational course has been designed for increasing self-efficacy among martial arts instructors, preparing them to work with women and girls effectively, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups.
- Plan2Inclusivize (P2I) is an active and participatory approach developed to promote social inclusion of children with disabilities through inclusive sports and play. It aims to encourage and contribute to mainstreaming inclusion in development and humanitarian programming to build inclusive societies. Plan2Inclusivize strives to improve the inclusion of children with disabilities in education and communities by increasing the capacity of practitioners and volunteers to deliver inclusive physical education and sport & play programmes as well as to facilitate children with disabilities to empower themselves by providing them with opportunities to experience inclusive sport and play. P2I is a five-day training course. It has been successfully piloted in several development and humanitarian settings in collaboration with Plan International and International Needs.
- Universal Fitness Innovation & Transformation (UFIT) is a social movement led by the UNESCO Chair building capacity in the fitness industry to mainstream diversity through local partnerships in a lifelong, life-wide manner for greater well-being. There are currently over 100 fitness clubs involved with UFIT across USA, Ireland, UK, Portugal, Spain and Peru.