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Research Paper Summary

PARA-SPLISS: Paralympic Athletes Pathways and Sport Policy

Understanding Parasport: an analysis of the differences between able-bodied and parasport from a sport policy perspective

SPORTS POLICY FACTORS LEADING TO INTERNATIONAL SPORTING SUCCESS

VUB VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL

Para-SPLISS Project

SPLISS has set up a PARA-SPLISS research line, on which two PhDs are currently working. Jacqueline Patatas (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) will analyse PARA-athlete pathways and the influence of elite sport policies and stakeholders. Aurélie Pankowiak (Victoria University and Vrije Universiteit Brussel) will assess the elite sport policy factors that influence Paralympic Success. The primary aim of this project is to develop global understanding surrounding the factors optimising the successful development of elite Paralympic athletes.

As a preliminary means to better understand the Paralympic sport domain, this newsletter will contemplate an exploratory study which identifies the differences in sport policy approaches between able-bodied sports and parasports. In this study we explored how the Paralympic sport systems are different and more complex than mainstream sport systems.

Understanding Parasport: an analysis of the differences between able-bodied and parasport from a sport policy perspective

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1. The Paralympic Rising

Paralympic sport and its synonym parasport, categorises the sport practiced by athletes with physical, visual and intellectual impairments who compete in the Paralympic Games. The word "Paralympic" derives from the Greek preposition "para" (beside or alongside) and the word "Olympic", which means that Paralympics are the parallel Games to the Olympics and illustrates how the two movements exist side-by-side. When comparing the first Paralympic Games held in Rome, in 1960 with 400 athletes from 23 countries, and the Paralympic Games held in Rio in 2016 with around 4350 athletes and 160 countries competing, this increasing number of Paralympians performing at elite level allows us to recognize the enormous growth of the Paralympic Movement over the last decades.

Given the increased recognition for Paralympic sport and Paralympic athletes, countries have recognised the importance of efficient policy systems and investments to improve the process to develop para-athletes. With the success of an athlete or a team depending increasingly on the performance capacity of the national system and its effectiveness in using all relevant resources for the benefit of elite sport, many nations have started to recognise that investments and proper functioning of sport policies are crucial when pursuing sporting success (De Bosscher et al., 2006). The study from Hutzler and colleagues (2016) emphasises that even though interest in parasports is increasing, knowledge about the development systems is still very scarce. With that in mind, most of developed nations with structured sport systems, have now started to invest a considerable amount of time and money in their respective Paralympic sport system with the believe that success can be determined by human impact policies (De Bosscher et al., 2015). On that note, the purpose of this study was to identify how elite sport policy approaches differ between able-bodied and parasport systems.

2. Elite Sport Policy and the Parasport Context

With the increase of nations competing for international sporting success, governments and national governing bodies have moved towards a more strategic approach to elite athlete development (Houlihan and Green 2008, De Bosscher et al., 2015). Consequently, a plethora of mainstream elite sport policy literature has emerged over the past decade (Green and Houlihan 2005, Green 2005, Digel et al., 2006, De Bosscher et al., 2008, 2015, Shilbury et al., 2008, Andersen et al., 2015). This includes, on the one hand, international comparative studies which analysed the development of sport policy factors influencing elite sport success (e.g. De Bosscher et al., 2008, 2015), and conversely studies which describe how elite sport policy is shaped (e.g. Houlihan and Green 2008, Andersen et al., 2015). In a nutshell, these studies essentially show similar elements to achieving sporting success, and all of them discussed the role of culture and the environment in an interplay with specific policies for sport (De Bosscher et al., 2015). However, none of these studies addressed the development of sport policies in a parasport-specific context.

Despite the fact that currently the Paralympic Games has turned into the most influential vehicle for the promotion of elite parasport, where athletes with disabilities can attract significant media coverage and commercial sponsorship like most of the able-bodied peers (McPherson et al., 2016), some nuances between able-bodied and parasport context are important to consider. Some differences have been addressed in a few studies, for instance, a lack of formal education on parasport presents challenges to gaining disability specific knowledge (Depauw and Gavron 2005, McMaster et al., 2012, Fairhurst et al., 2017). In light of all of this, the influence of culture and in particular the acceptance of persons with disability is additionally reflected in the amount of research taking up this topic. The lack of acceptance is suggested to result in the death of organised sport programmes, scarce access to coaches, as well as few accessible sports facilities, and a general barrier for parasport integration and recognition (French and Hainsworth 2001, Depauw and Gavron 2005).

Other areas where comparisons have been attempted between the able-bodied and parasport systems include competitive preparation and training modifications (Dieffenbach and Statler 2012, Griggs et al., 2017, Houlihan and Chapman 2016). A debate still exists, between whether adaptations of existing able bodied programmes to the Paralympic context are appropriate (Hutzler et al., 2016, Dehghansai et al., 2017). Likewise, huge variances are prevalent in the parasport context, both environmental and individual, which includes the variety of cultural perceptions of disabilities that could result in significant challenges and constraints (Fairhurst et al., 2017, Hutzler et al., 2016). In conclusion, any adaptations from an able-bodied perspective should be complemented with an understanding of the impairment and sport-specific applied research (Griggs et al., 2017).

3. The Study

3.1 Methods

16 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with international Paralympic experts from eight countries: Canada (n=5), Brazil (n=4), The Netherlands (n=2), Spain (n=1), UK (n=1), Australia (n=1). The participants were high-performance directors (HPDs) and other Paralympic specialists, including academics. The experts were selected from countries considered to be successful in Paralympic sports and/or have recognised elite parasport systems. All countries (except one) were ranked in London 2012 and Rio 2016 PG medal table in the Top 20 and Top 15, respectively.

The interview schedule was composed of open-ended questions and consisted of two parts. The first part included questions about general disability contextual factors and additional factors that characterised differences between the able-bodied and parasport systems which may coherently influence sport policy approaches. The second part consisted of questions regarding the differences between able-bodied and parasport with specific reference to a sport policy perspective by systematically focusing on the nine SPLISS pillars – *Sport Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success* (De Bosscher et al., 2006).

4. Results: The Differences Between Able-bodied and Parasports

4.1 Contextual Factors

Although the interviews attempted to focus on the differences in elite sport policy approaches between the able-bodied sport and parasport systems, notably, more than half of the experts emphasised factors related to the culture of parasport and its specific context, reinforcing the perception that parasports are more significantly influenced by macro-level factors than the able-bodied sport system. Important to note is that, even though these contextual factors influence sport policies to a large extent, they are also arguably outside the influence of a policymaker (De Bosscher et al., 2009).

More than half of the experts interviewed referred to the classification system in Paralympic sport as one of the major differences between able-bodied and parasport. The classification system is used to distribute participants not only by sex or weight, as commonly done in able-bodied sport, but also in categorising by degrees of functional ability. It is the core to what makes Parasport unique, provides a fair competition and creates the competition system. The other emerging contextual themes were: media attention, number of people involved in parasports, awareness about disability and parasport, and equipment. See more information in Table 1.

4.2 Sport Policy Factors

The sport policy dimensions as presented by the interviews were clustered deductively according to the nine pillars of SPLISS as a starting framework (De Bosscher et al., 2006). In the SPLISS framework, nine elite sport policies called 'pillars' were identified along with 96 critical success factors (CSF). The pillars and CSF were clustered and empirically tested, first in 6 nations (De Bosscher et al. 2006) and later in 15 nations (De Bosscher et al. 2015). The nine sport policy pillars include *(P1) financial support; (P2) governance, organisation and structure; (P3) foundation and participation; (P4) talent identification and development; (P5) athletic and post-career support; (P6) training facilities; (P7) coaching provision and education; (P8) (inter)national competition and (P9) scientific research and innovation.* After thematic coding and comparisons of data from the open questions, it appears that all differences in elite sport policy approaches between able-bodied and parasport could be clustered under one of the nine dimensions of this framework. Even though particular differences were distinguished in the sport policy pillars of the SPLISS model between able-bodied and parasport in all the nine sport policies dimensions, the experts perceived more important differences in three major dimensions: Para-athletes pathways (P3 - sports participation, P4 - talent identification and development, P5 - athletic and post-career support); Governance, structure and organisation of elite sport (P2), and Coaching provision and education (P7). Table 1 provides an overview of the main differences in the nine dimensions of the SPLISS framework as perceived by the experts.

Table 1. Overview table of the main Sport Policy factors and contextual differences between able-bodied and parasport. (Adapted from Patatas et al., 2018).

SPLISS Pillars	Main differences perceived by the experts
P1 (16)	- Elite para-athletes receive similar public funding as elite able-bodied athletes - Lack of funding for grassroots parasport - Expensive equipment in parasports (e.g., wheelchairs, prothesis, adapted equipment) - Additional costs for guides and staff for athletes with high support needs
P2 (17)	- More organisation and structures are involved in parasport than in able-bodied sport - NPCs and IPC act as international federations (IF) for some sports - Four types of IF: Olympic sport federation, IPC/NPC sports, federation by impairment group, federations by parasport
P3 (22)	- Parasport has less sport opportunities available in clubs than able-bodied sport - Access to sport differs between congenital and acquired impairments - People with acquired impairment have access to sport through rehabilitation centres - Late entry age for people with acquired impairment

	- People with congenital impairment have access to sport through specialised schools, able-bodied sport clubs or disability associations - Early entry age for people with congenital impairment
P4 (9)	- Lack of structured talent ID programs - There are few talent ID program developed specifically for parasport - The coaches' expertise is used for talent identification - Para-athletes are usually identified as a talent in an older age - Able-bodied sport talented athletes are identified in a younger age when compared to para-athletes
P5 (10)	- Lack of post-career support programs for parasport - Para-athletes have often less education opportunities than able-bodied athletes
***Para-athletes pathways* (20)**	- Para-athletes progress through the system faster than able-bodied (short pathways) - Pathways' length and development differ between congenital and acquired impairments - Due to small number of athletes in each sport class, para-athletes achieve elite level faster than able-bodied - Sport and impairment specific pathways
P6 (13)	- Elite able bodied and para-athletes can make use of the same facilities as long as it is accessible - Sports facilities physical barriers (accessibility) - Para-athletes with high support needs require a transportation logistic to access the facilities (e.g. someone to drive or some pick-up service)
P7 (26)	- Coach transition process - from able-bodied to parasport - Requirements needed for a para-coach: disability specific knowledge, parasport specific knowledge, social skills
P8 (17)	- There are enough international competitions opportunities at elite level - Lack of financial resources to participate in international competitions - Few national opportunities - Few grassroots level competition opportunities
P9 (12)	- Research in parasport sport is less developed than able-bodied - Research still need to be more integrated with practice
Contextual Factors	
Classification System (14)	- Unique characteristic of Paralympic sport - Creates complexity in Paralympic sport - Creates the competition system and ensure fair disputes - Define which athletes are eligible to compete in each sport based on their ability to perform a certain function
Media Attention (7)	- Parasport has less media coverage than in able-bodied sport - Media attention in parasport is often associated with the issue of disability rather than with performance - Athletes with severe impairments have less media coverage than other impairment types
Number of People involved	- The cohort of athletes in parasport comes from a considerably smaller number of persons than in able-bodied sport - Few athletes in each sport classification

(6)	
Awareness about disability sports (6)	- Perception of the position and capabilities of people with disabilities - Lack of awareness and interest in parasport by society - Lack of opportunities for people with disabilities to become fully integrated in societal context - Awareness of the sponsors, coaches, and professionals in general
Equipment (6)	- Equipment exclusive for Paralympic sport - Adaptations in sports equipment, use of racing wheelchairs, prostheses and orthotics

Note: The numbers in brackets in the first column indicate how many times the themes were referred for each question. Some experts referred to more than one theme.

5. Understanding Parasport and Creating Pathways to Success

This study has presented an overview of how elite sport policy approaches differ between able-bodied and parasport contexts by providing a framework of major differences. This is only the first step in understanding the parasport context that helps to generating awareness among sport policymakers and HPDs, in order to understand parasport and its intricacies. Although parasport is a growing field of study and more Paralympic athletes receive similar support as their able-bodied peers, this study contends that there are still significant differences between both systems that influence the way sport policies should be developed. From a sport practitioners point of view, the results of this study can help sport policymakers and HPDs to better understand the specific character of parasport, and the support services that are needed for Paralympic athletes, primarily in how they should approach para-athletes and understand the specific context where they live and train in. Additionally, parasport is being developed within mainstream sports federations; herewith, it is important to create awareness among policymakers and HPDs of its uniquenesses and commonalities.

Even though the SPLISS model was used as a suitable framework to cluster the factors into policy dimensions, this study illustrated that the contextual factors and culture of disability sports need to be taken into consideration when examining factors that influence parasport policy development, not only achieving international sporting success but also in how people with disabilities are treated, and similarly, what kind of support is offered to them in order to promote a platform to improve the lives of all people with disabilities worldwide. While there is no sport policy model specifically created for parasports, the findings of this study will also generate a better understanding of the different approaches that are required to organise and structure parasport, which can lead to the creation of a new theoretical model. This will certainly not be an easy task but the results of this study may provide some initial theoretical contributions.

More Information

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Veerle De Bosscher is an Associate Professor at the department of Sports Policy and Management of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium. She has established and coordinates a worldwide international network on research in high performance sport, called SPLISS (Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success). Her research has resulted in more than 120 publications: approximately 40 publications in the most respected and highest ranked sport management and other journals.

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Overall elite sport policy evaluation: De Bosscher, V., Shibli, S., Westerbeek, H. & van Bottenburg, M. (2015). Successful elite sport policies. An international comparison of the Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS 2.0) in 15 nations. Aachen: Meyer & Meyer.
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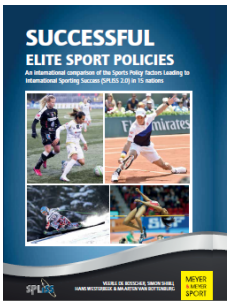

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