

## Sports and Fun for All

**Overview of Sports and People with Disabilities:** Around 5.6% of the population<sup>1</sup> (i.e. 8 to 10 million people in Bangladesh) is disabled. People with Disabilities (PWDs) are among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged sections in the community. They are mostly excluded from mainstream development and social interactions. Misconceptions on disability and consequent negative attitudes are the major barriers to the inclusion process. The promotion of a more positive environment is therefore essential and should be initiated through the joint efforts of development and rehabilitation services.

The sports arena of Bangladesh is enormous and comprises of various Government, national, regional and local organizations, as well as voluntary associations and sporting clubs at different levels. But there are very few initiatives on regular sports for PWDs in Bangladesh. Competitive sports events for PWDs have been developed since the 1970s and have progressively found more place in the media. In fact, organizations focusing on sports for children with intellectual disabilities, now organize an annual “Special Olympic Games”<sup>2</sup>.

But in most cases the sports infrastructures in Bangladesh are not accessible to PWDs. Moreover, children and youth with disabilities are often excluded from sports due to several factors including low self esteem and lack of awareness or publicity initiatives. The absence of qualified sports instructors or adapted sports programs also keep PWDs from enjoying opportunities.

Sports is a recognized social practice that carries a large amount of value in today's society. It promotes performance, efficiency, and the pushing of personal limits as well as respect and the need to support one another. It provides a mirror that reflects the beliefs and values of a society. Also, sports and physical activities enhances self-esteem and physical rehabilitation for everyone. And when PWDs are playing, general people first see their abilities, not their impairments.

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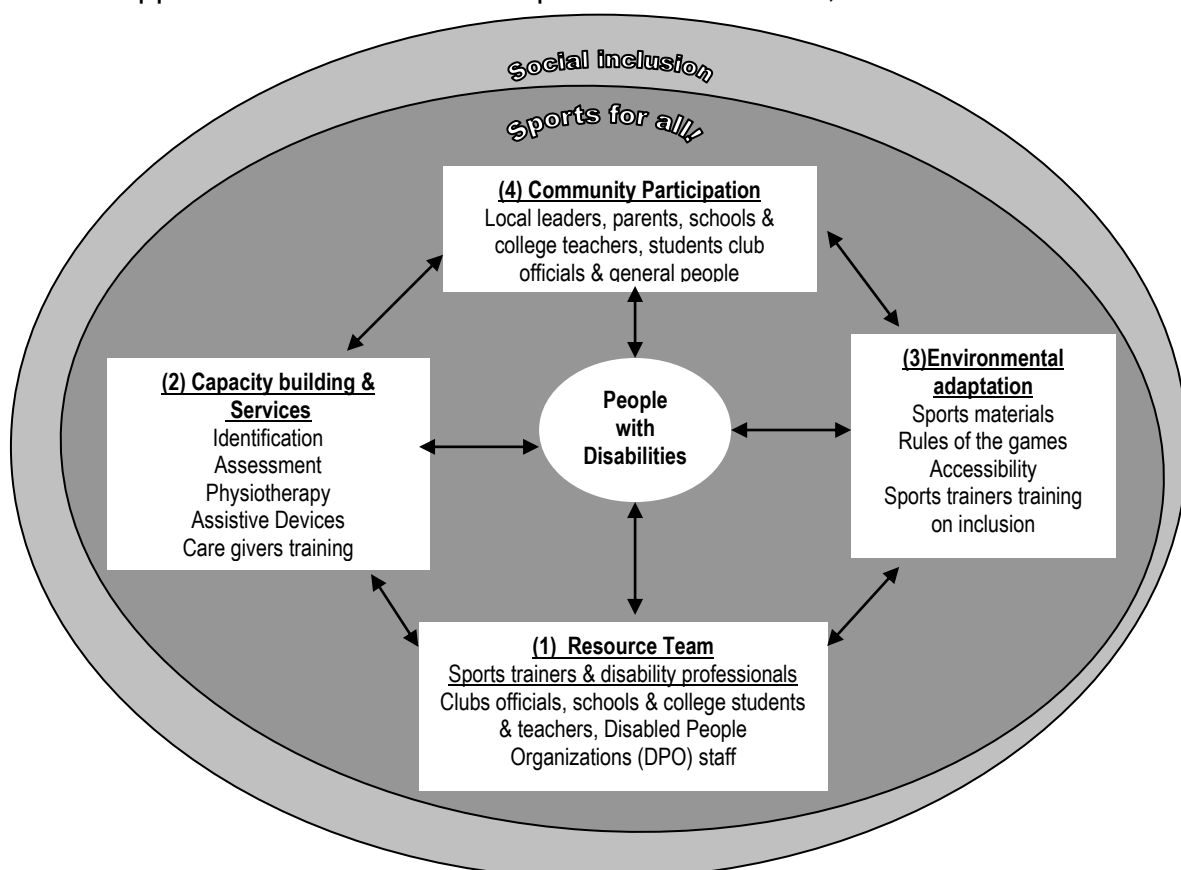
<sup>1</sup> Disability in Bangladesh, A Study on Prevalence, July 2005, NFOWD and HI.

<sup>2</sup> The Special Olympics is an International non-profit organization dedicated to empowering individuals with intellectual disabilities to become physically fit, productive and respected members of the society.

**Specific needs of people with disabilities in sports:** PWDs can have difficulties in daily living activities such as moving, communicating, seeing, hearing and many other functions but, as human beings, they have equal needs and perform the same activities as non-disabled people within their society. Performing sports activities may require special services, (orthotic devices for instance), but will increase the capacity of a physical disabled person and facilitate their participation in a game with non-disabled players. In this arena, special services become a contributing factor for inclusion.

**Inclusive sports and physical activities:** Sports and Physical Activities (SPAs) allow personal development and social inclusion of PWDs. An inclusive approach promotes active participation and representation of PWDs in all aspects of life. For sports, physical and recreational activities, this means people with and without disabilities gathering to enjoy activities together on the same field, rather than playing separately. Events like athletics, football, table tennis, badminton, cricket, and simple games can improve physical and mental conditions by building up muscles, self esteem and team spirit. They can therefore facilitate rehabilitation for participating PWDs.

Moreover, SPAs are an educational source. They promote a number of important ethics including respect, tolerance, and hygiene. This contributes to the development of the PWDs on a personal level and becomes a means to re-socialization. The social inclusion approach of SPAs follows steps as outlined below;



**Handicap International's experience in Bangladesh:** Handicap International, with the financial support of the Switzerland Development Cooperation (SDC) in Bangladesh, has implemented a 15 month project entitled "Promoting Sports and Physical activities for Social Inclusion and Personal development of Children and Youth with Disabilities in Three Districts (Manikganj, Tangail and Mymensingh) in Bangladesh" from October 2005 to November 2006. The project was based on an inclusive approach for children and youth with and without disabilities playing together, focusing on three main aspects:

- ❖ **Development of a Resource Team** combining the skills of sports trainers and disability professionals (Occupational therapist, physiotherapist) with specific capacities to work with PWDs on inclusive sports activities.
- ❖ **Awareness** of local authorities, schools teachers, students and families. As sports activities were very new for disabled children, families were often hesitant in the beginning. Children with disabilities are sometimes overprotected by their parents.
- ❖ **Regular practice of sports.** SPAs including badminton, football and cricket were made available; as were basic rehabilitation services (including therapy and provision of assistive devices when needed) for disabled children and youth.

The project aimed to improve the quality of life for Children and Youth with disabilities by developing their physical, psychological and social capacities through the practice of SPAs. The idea was to:

- Develop a dynamic approach on sports at Disabled People Organization (DPO) level through support of local trainers (setting up of teams for different disciplines);
- Develop a resource team (sports trainers and disability professionals) with specific capacities to work with PWDs;
- Improve access to sports' infrastructure for PWDs, provide adapted equipment and ensure a follow up mechanism by the relevant DPO and community;
- Sensitize general people on disability issues through workshops, meetings and sports events.

Three Disabled Peoples' Organizations (DPOs) based in three different districts (Manikgonj, Mymensingh and Tangail) were jointly responsible along with Handicap International for implementing this project. They supported local trainers to enable them to manage the SPAs at field level. At the same time different activities took place within the project period, including:

- Mobilization of human resources:

Generally the human resource needs any project are planned according to the volume of activities. But the provision of inclusive sports activities required teams, comprising of sports trainers and medical staff (OT/PT/disability officer). Each team worked with PWDs to prepare them to participate in the inclusive sports and physical activities. In addition, Handicap International formed a "National Resource Team (NRT)" of sports trainers and medical staff. This group was responsible for planning and arranging the monitoring of SPAs in the field.

- Organizing assessment camps:

The assessment camps were held with the DPOs for identification and assessment of Children and Youth with Disabilities in the project areas. Handicap International organized and set up different assessment camps to link with schools, colleges, clubs, local government, village leaders, religious leaders and other NGOs in the project areas. These assessment camps created learning opportunities for individuals and PWDs on their daily life and social activities.

- Assistive devices:

An assistive device (prosthetic and orthotic devices) such as a wheelchair or artificial leg can significantly increase the mobility of Children and Youth with Disabilities. Handicap International followed strict criteria in distributing devices to the PWDs considering the huge number of attendants at the assessment camps. The criteria were:

- Children and Youth with Disabilities between 3-30 years old were eligible for the provision of assistive devices
- Gender issues and age were given special consideration, creating more opportunities for adolescent women and girls.
- PWDs with an interest in sports and physical activities as recreation as well as a means of rehabilitation were also given priority.

- Accessible facilities and playgrounds:

The physical environment of playgrounds for the SPAs was a critical component for the project to address. Handicap International carried out considerable accessible initiatives in those project areas. For example, it raised the land level of one playground surface, made ramps for the fields, made toilets accessible and ensured the water supplies were accessible for children and youth with disabilities. Those initiatives also influenced family members, caregivers and communities to think about accessibility for PWDs.

- Sports rules and material's adaptation:

In inclusive sports activities, adaption of sports rules and materials is vital for PWDs. Handicap International introduced and innovated several new rules and adaptations for classic games including football and cricket. In football for example, players with wheelchairs played in defence and had special zones that able-bodied players could not enter .

Besides this, adaptations were considered for sports materials together with sports activities and rules. For example, balls of different sizes, colors and weights were used.

- Regular practice sessions:

Regular practice sessions were some of the key components among the inclusive sports activities. The sessions helped players with and without disabilities to understand themselves, and the nature of the adapted game. Therefore, disabled and non-disabled players become friends on the field, which helped to facilitate social inclusion beyond the playground. The players practiced 3 times in a week, for 2 to 3 hours. Once a month, a general meeting was organized involving the whole team to analyze activities and behavior on the field and consider any re-adjustments that may have been required.

- Producing different Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials:

Production of various Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials was a part of awareness raising and offered possibilities to disseminate the process to different stakeholders and other regions. The IEC materials were made according to the requirements and activities in the field. Materials produced included: posters, leaflets, video documentations, t-shirts, stickers and booklets.

**Conclusion:** According to the activities in the field, the project has introduced ideas for equal opportunities, mutual understanding and community mobilization. The main appeal of the project activities was the positive change in attitude for the PWDs themselves, as well as the caregivers and other people in the target communities. It also helped facilitate the inclusion of PWDs in community life beyond the sports activities. Many children are now able and allowed to go to school and are well accepted by the students and teachers; others have joined vocational training or economic activities.

Above all, time, skill, and regular and long-term practice is required to ensure equity among the players whatever their situation. Efforts are also needed to mobilize volunteers to support this endeavor. It is through them that this process can be made sustainable and that the community can acquire a sense of ownership. At any rate, “Sports” has proved to be an excellent tool for inclusion of PWDs.

**Handicap International Bangladesh**