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Benefits of Promoting Disability Inclusion in Sports

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Abstract

This paper examines the design of a Paralympic sports complex in Zambia to address the shortage of inclusive and adaptive sports facilities in Zambia. The lack of accessible infrastructure limits the participation of people with disabilities, contributes to discrimination, and restricts talent development. Establishing a dedicated Paralympic sports complex has the potential to reduce these barriers and promote equal access to sports opportunities.

Sports play a key role in improving physical health, mental well being and social inclusion although Zambia has a growing population of people with disabilities, the country lacks adaptive sports facilities. This gap results in limited accessibility, inadequate training environments and reduced opportunities for high performance development.

How can promoting disability inclusion through the design of a Paralympic sports complex improve sports participation and performance outcomes for persons with disabilities in

Zambia?

This study aims to explore how an inclusive national sports facility can expand opportunities for athletes with disabilities and support Zambia's broader goals for equality and high-performance sports development.

A mixed method approach was used, combining literature review with interview involving athletes and coaches. Results show that athletes with disabilities experience several challenges, including inaccessible training spaces, inadequate sports equipment, and limited exposure to competitive opportunities. The proposed design features of the new complex include barrier-free circulation, adaptive training zones, multipurpose courts built to Paralympic standards, accessible accommodation, and integrated medical units. These features aim to enhance functionality, safety, and athletes performance.

Keywords: Disability Inclusion, Paralympic Sports, Accessibility, Inclusive Sports Facility

Introduction

Sport is widely recognized as a powerful tool for promoting health, social inclusion, and human development across the world. It provides opportunities for participation, interaction, and personal growth regardless of age, gender, or background.

People with disabilities access to sports remains unequal, Particularly in developing countries such as Zambia.

Globally, over one billion people live with some form of disability, many of whom face significant barriers to participation in physical and recreational activities, in Zambia, people with disabilities represent a notable proportion of the population yet they are often excluded from mainstream sports due to inaccessible infrastructure, limited resources, and persistent social stigma. These challenges restrict their ability to benefit from the physical, psychological, and social advantages that sports offer.

Disability inclusion in sports refers to the intentional, educational, or professional levels. This includes the provision of accessible facilities, adaptive equipment, inclusive policies, and supportive social environments. Promoting inclusion is not only a matter of fairness but also a recognition of the rights of people with disabilities to fully participate in society.

The importance of inclusion is reinforced by global framework such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, which emphasizes equal access to recreation, leisure, and sport.

In Zambia disability inclusion is increasingly recognized as part of national development efforts. People with disabilities however still experience exclusion from key areas such as education, employment, and recreation, sport offers a unique platform for addressing these inequalities by promoting participation, interaction, and empowerment.

Globally sport is used as a tool for development, but in Zambia its potential remains underutilized, particularly in relation to disability inclusion. With approximately 11% of the population living with disabilities, there is a strong need to promote inclusive practices across all sectors, including sports.

Sports play a critical role in promoting physical fitness, mental well being, and social inclusion for people with disabilities, sports provide opportunities for employment, rehabilitation, and participation in community life (DePauw & Gavorn, 2005) [28]. Globally, the Paralympic movement has expanded significantly, with increasing emphasis on equality and accessibility in sports infrastructure.

In Zambia the number of people with disabilities continues to grow due to congenital conditions, accidents, medical complications, and aging. The sports infrastructure available to them remains limited, outdated, and inaccessible. Many public facilities lack adaptive sports equipment, barrier-free circulation, and proper training environments needed for high performance sports.

Building a dedicated Paralympic sports facility represents both a practical and symbolic step towards equality such as a center would not only nurture competitive athletes but also serve as a community hub for rehabilitation, education and social integration. International evidence shows that when countries invest in inclusive sports infrastructure they achieve better health outcomes stronger communities and enhanced global visibility.

According to the United Nations, sports is a critical tool for fostering inclusion and improving the well being of persons with disabilities.

Promoting disability inclusion in sports ensures that individuals of all abilities can participate, compete and benefit from sporting activities. This paper examines the wide ranging benefits of such inclusion focusing on health, social integration, empowerment, and broader societal impacts.

This study therefore seeks to examine the benefits of promoting disability inclusion in sports in Zambia. By exploring its impact on individuals and communities the research highlights the importance of inclusive sports as a tool for empowerment and national development.

Problem Statement

Zambia does not have a fully dedicated Paralympic sports complex. Existing sports facilities are largely designed for able-bodied athletes, resulting in limited participation for people with disabilities. This restriction leads to reduced talent development unequal opportunities, and underrepresentation in competitive sports. The absence of an inclusive national sports facility continues to hinder the growth of Paralympic sports and prevents Zambia from full participating in regional and international competition.

Despite policy efforts and global commitments, people with disabilities in Zambia continues to face significant barriers to participation in sports. These include:

- Limited access to inclusive and accessible sports facilities.
- Social stigma and discrimination.
- Lack of adaptive equipment and trained personnel.

The research shows that people with disabilities in Zambia are often excluded from community life and face stigma, inadequate supports and limited participation opportunities.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore how designing an inclusive Paralympic sport complex can promote disability inclusion in sports and enhance performance outcome for athletes with disabilities in Zambia.

Research Questions

- What are the benefits of promoting disability inclusion in sports in Zambia?
- How does inclusive sports participation impact physical and mental health?
- In what ways does sport reduce stigma and promote social integration?
- How can promoting disability inclusion through the design of a Paralympic sports complex improve sports participation and performance outcomes for people with disabilities in Zambia?

Objectives of the Study

The main objective is to explore how an inclusive Paralympic sports complex can expand opportunities for athletes with disabilities.

Specific Objectives

- To assess the current state of accessibility and inclusivity in Zambia's sports facilities.
- To identify challenges faced by athletes with disabilities in accessing training spaces.
- To evaluate how much such a facility can improve participation, talent development, and performance.
- To propose design features for an inclusive Paralympic sports complex.
- To examine the role of sports in promoting social inclusion.
- To evaluate economic and developmental benefits.

Literature Review

Disability inclusion in Zambia remains a challenge due to systemic barriers and limited implementation of policies. Stigma and lack of awareness continue to limit inclusion efforts, particularly in rural areas where infrastructure and resources are scarce. Existing studies emphasize that inclusive sports infrastructure enhances athletes performance, social integration, and national representation (IPC, 2020) [1].

Adaptive training environments, accessible buildings, and specialized medical support improve safety and competitiveness in Paralympic sports.

Regional studies highlight that most African nations lack dedicated Paralympic facilities, leading to reliance on inadequate public structures (Mutuku, 2019) [2]. Countries with specialized complexes such as South Africa have seen increased participation and international success.

Benefits of a dedicated sports facility.

- Feelings of exclusion and discrimination.
- Physical and mental health: Regular participation improves cardiovascular fitness mobility and pain management to decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety.
- Social inclusion and confidence: Paralympic sport participation increases social networks self esteem and community participation.
- Education and employment pathways: Sport engagement can raise opportunities for education and vocational training and in some cases lead to employment.
- National profile and soft power: Supporting high performance for disabled athletes raises national

visibility and can attract investment and partnerships.

The Paralympics sports in Zambia dates back in the early 1990s with the formation of the Zambia Paralympics committee (ZPC) in 1996.

Zambia has since participated in several international competitions. Athletes often face challenges and limitations due to inadequate facilities and resources. The establishment of a dedicated sports complex marks a significant milestone in addressing these challenges.

The Paralympics games were first held in 1960 in Rome establishing a powerful that has evolved into an international celebration of sports and inclusivity for people with disabilities over the years.

Paralympics sports have grown significantly leading to a wide range of sports and participation.

In Zambia athletes with disabilities have demonstrated remarkable resilience but often encounter significant barriers that limit their participation in competitive sports. Currently there are limited training facilities and resources dedicated to sports for people with disabilities. The policies that support disability rights exist but are poorly implemented and causes funding to be insufficient.

This has made a significantly impact that rose awareness about disabilities and fostering understanding.

Barriers to Sports Participation

Research highlights several barriers to inclusive sports in Zambia, including lack of facilities limited knowledge, and cultural benefits surrounding disabilities.

Physical and Health Benefits

Participation in sports improves physical fitness, mobility and overall health among individuals with disabilities. Inclusive sports programs encourage activities lifestyles, reducing the risk of chronic diseases.

Psychology Benefits

Inclusive sports contribute to improved mental health by increasing self esteem, confidence, and emotional well being participants often report reduce stress and a stronger sense of identity and achievement. Inclusive sports environments foster happiness and personal growth, particularly among young people with disabilities.

Social Inclusion and Community Development

Sports play a critical role in promoting interaction between individuals with and without disabilities.

Community based sports programs in Zambia have shown success in promoting inclusion, awareness, and participation through local initiatives and sensitization campaigns.

Economic Empowerment

Inclusive sport can contribute to economic empowerment by creating opportunities for employment, skill development and participation in sport related activities. It can also provide livelihood opportunities and help individuals with disabilities develop marketable skills.

Gap in Literature

Although there is growing research on disability inclusion, there is limited Zambia specific research focusing on sports as a tool for inclusion. More localized and empirical studies are needed to understand context specific challenges and opportunities.

Methodology

Research design: This study adopts a qualitative research design, this design enabled a detailed understanding of current facility limitations and user experiences. The design is exploratory and descriptive, aiming to provide an in depth understanding of the benefits of promoting disability inclusion in sports in Zambia.

A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on social experiences, perception, and impacts that cannot be easily quantified. It allows for a deeper interpretation of how inclusive sports influence individuals and communities.

Data collection methods

Data was collected through a systematic review of published materials. The process included:

- Identifying relevant keywords such as disability inclusion, sports participation, and Zambia.
- Selecting recent and credible sources.
- Screening materials based on relevance to the research objectives.
- Organizing data into thematic categories.
- Feelings of exclusion and discrimination.
- Literature review: Academic journals, government reports, and Paralympic committee guidelines.
- Interviews: Conducted with athletes disabilities, sports coaches, and managers.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had direct experience with disability sports. Case study sites were selected based on notional relevance and usage.

Data analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic coding, while accessibility assessments were compared against international Paralympic standards.

The thematic analysis approach is used to identify key themes such as:

- Inaccessible entrances, ramps, and circulation paths
- Health benefits
- Social inclusion
- Psychological empowerment
- Economic opportunities
- Justification of methodology
- Familiarization with the data
- Grouping codes into major themes (health, social inclusion, psychological benefits, economic impact).
- Interpreting findings in relation to the research questions.

A qualitative approach is appreciated because it allows for an in-depth understanding of social issues such as inclusion, stigma, and lived experiences.

Limitations of the Study

- Inclusive spectator areas.
- Lack of primary specific to sports participation in Zambia.
- Limited availability of localized research.
- Possible bias in secondary sources.
- Findings may not fully capture lived experience at the local level.

Results and Findings

1. Accessibility challenges

Interviews and facility assessments revealed the following barriers

- Inaccessible entrances, ramps, and circulation paths.
- Lack of adaptive equipment and training tools.
- Poorly designed changing rooms and restrooms.
- Limited medical and physiotherapy support.
- Lack of trained adaptive sports professionals.

Table: Disability in sports and rate of inclusivity (Global and Zambia context)

Indicator	Global	Zambia	Implication
Disability prevalence	15%(WHO, 2011)	11%(UN Zambia, 2024) [32]	High need for inclusion
Participation rates	Low globally	Very low locally	underrepresentation
Facility access	Improving globally	Limited	Infrastructure gap
Social Inclusion	Increased	Low	High st

Facility performance and participation

Only one of the five assessed facilities partially supported athletes with disabilities but it still lacked:

- Proper adaptive flooring.
- Specialized courts.
- Accessible seating.
- Barrier-free mobility routes.

Athletes reported:

- Difficulty moving within facility.
- High risk of injury due to poor equipment.
- Limited exposure to competitive events.
- Feelings of exclusion and discrimination.

Proposed Design Features

The study proposed design the following features for a new Paralympics sports complex:

- Barrier-free circulation throughout the site.
- Adaptive training zones for different disabilities.
- Multi-purpose courts built to IPC standards.
- Accessible accommodation.units.
- Inclusive spectator areas.
- Safe outdoor circulation and emergency access routes.

Universal design and accessibility i.e ramps, tactile way finding, wide doors, accessible changing rooms, lifts access where needed.

- A muti sport training zone for wheelchair basketball, tennis courts, athletic training track, strength and conditioning gym adapted with hoists and modified equipment as well as an aquatic center with accessible pool entry for para swimming.
- Equipment workshop and storage for wheelchair repairs and adaptive gear and prosthetic maintenance.

Physical Health Outcomes

The finings indicate that inclusive sports significantly improve physical health among persons with disabilities in Zambia.

Participation in inclusive sports programs tend to experience:

- Improved cardiovascular fitness
- Increased strength and flexibility
- Enhanced mobility and coordination

Sports where access to health care is limited, sports acts as a preventive health strategy. Inclusive participation also promotes active lifestyle, reducing risks of chronic illnesses.

Psychological and Emotional Benefits

The study found strong evidence that inclusive sports positively impact mental health. Key outcomes include:

- Increased self confidence and self esteem
- Reduced stress, anxiety, and depression
- Improved sense of identity and purpose

For many individuals with disabilities, participation in sports provides a sense of achievement and recognition that is often lacking in other areas of life.

Social Inclusion and Reduction of Stigma

One of the most significant findings is the role of sports in promoting social integration. Inclusive sports create shared spaces where individuals with and without disabilities interact.

Sports shift societal perceptions from focusing on disability recognizing ability. This contributes to long term cultural change.

Barriers Affecting Outcomes

Despite the benefits, the study identified key challenges limiting the full impact of inclusive sports in Zambia:

- Inadequate sports infrastructure
- Lack of funding and equipment
- Limited trained presonnel
- Cultural stigma and discrimination

Promoting inclusive sports throughout the sport context allows athletes with and without disabilities to compete together in the same team, such as in the special Olympics unified sports in addition the inclusive sports practice aims to impact on individuals with disability positively which will encourage them to take part in all activities.

Discussion

Inclusion in sports is about more than just physical activity, its about creating a society where everyone regardless of ability, one has the opportunity to thrive.

According to UNESCO, inclusive sports programs promote values like teamwork, respect, and equality, which extend far beyond the playing field.

The findings reveal that promoting disability inclusion in sports in Zambia has multiple benefits:

- Health benefits improves physical fitness, mobility, and reduced health risks.
- Psychological benefits will help increase confidence, reduced stress and improved mental well being.
- Social benefits: Reduced stigma, improved relationships and community integration.
- Economic benefits: Skills development employment opportunities and empowerment.

However these benefits are often limited by barriers such as poor infrastructure, lack of funding, and weak policy implementation.

Creating a dedicated Paralympic sports complex directly supports Zambia’s national development and equality goals. Inclusive infrastructure ensures equality participation for all athletes reduces equal participation of all athletes, reduces discrimination, and improves well-being.

Athletes with disabilities cannot reach elite performance levels without:

- Specialized equipment
- Adaptive training spaces
- Trained support staff
- Integrated sports science

A dedicated complex would address all these factors, enabling Zambia to develop strong Paralympics teams.

National and economic benefits.

- Paralympic complex would.
- Increase Zambia's representation in international competition.
- Create inclusive empowerment opportunities.
- Support sports tourism.
- Strengthen national identity and pride.
- Talent development and national representation.

A centralized training environment improves talent identification and athlete progression to international competition raising Zambia's profile and unlocking athlete's scholarships and sponsorship opportunities.

Social inclusion and education sports programs foster social network and enhances confidence and facilitate school and vocational engagement and dedicated facilities.

Dedicated facilities enable consistent programming for children and adults who currently lack opportunities.

Economic and community returns: Direct employment and improve health reducing long term care costs indicate positive cost benefits potential when planned and managed sustainability.

Linking Findings to the Social Model of Disability

The finding strongly support the social model of disability, which argues that disability is largely shaped by societal barriers rather than individual impairments. In Zambia the limited participation of people with disabilities in sports is not due to inability, but rather due to inaccessible infrastructure, lack of equipment, and negative societal attitudes.

Inclusive sports initiatives help remove these barriers by creating environments that accommodate different abilities. This demonstrates that when structural and social obstacles are addressed, individuals with disabilities can actively participate and excel in sports.

Physical and Health Implications in the Zambian Context

The study confirms that inclusive sports significantly improve physical health. In Zambia where access to health care service can be limited especially in rural areas sports serve as an alternative and preventive health strategy.

Promoting inclusive sports could reduce pressure on the health care system by encouraging active lifestyles. However, the lack of accessible sports facilities limits these benefits, indicating a gap between potential and actual outcomes.

Role of Institutions and Stakeholders

The discussion highlights the importance of institution of institutional support in promoting inclusion. Organizations such as the Zambia agency for people with disabilities and the national paralympic committee of Zambia play a role in the advancing of disability inclusion in sports.

Economic and Developmental Implications

The study shows that inclusive sports can contribute to economic empowerment by developing skills such as transferable to employment and entrepreneurship.

In Zambia, where unemployment rates are high especially among people with disabilities, inclusive sports could serve as pathway to economic participation. Additionally, sports events and programs can be job opportunities and stimulate local economies.

Implication for Practice and Policy

The discussion suggests several important implications:

- Inclusive sports should be integrated into national development strategies.
 - Schools should introduce inclusive physical education programs.
 - Awareness campaigns should be strengthened to change societal attitudes.
 - Government should invest in accessible infrastructure
- Zambia can maximize the benefits of inclusive sports by addressing these areas.

Several researchers suggested that physical activity and sport intervention programs positively contribute to the overall person development and life quality improvement in individuals with disabilities.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study demonstrated that promoting disability inclusion in sports in Zambia offers wide ranging benefits that extend beyond physical activities to include psychological well being, social integration, and economic empowerment. Inclusive sports provide individuals with disabilities an opportunity to improve their health, build confidence, and actively participate in society.

Disability inclusion in sports has the potential to transform the lives of individuals and communities in Zambia. While significant challenges remain, the benefits of inclusive sports are clear and reaching.

Inclusion in sports plays a role in challenging stigma and changing societal perception by shifting focus from disability to ability.

This study concludes that Zambia urgently needs a dedicated Paralympic sports complex to strengthen disability inclusion and expand national sports development. Current facilities are inadequate and limit participation, training quality, and performance outcomes. The proposed design features such as barrier-free circulation, adaptive zones, and integrated medical services would significantly enhance accessible, safety, and athlete performance. Establishing this complex is essential for promoting equality and unlocking long term social economic and competitive benefits for the country.

A dedicated Paralympics sports facility in Zambia is an evidence based investment with strong public health social and national sports development returns.

This will strengthen athlete pipeline and improve quality of life for people with disabilities create jobs and raise Zambia's presence in regional and global sports for people with disabilities.

The Paralympic sports center will serve as a national pride to show love and pride to people with disabilities.

Recommendations

- Investments in accessible Sports infrastructure where the government of Zambia should prioritize the development and upgrading of sports facilities to ensure accessible seating, and safe playing surfaces.
 - Training and capacity building for sports personnel for example coaches, teachers, and sports administrators should receive training on inclusive sports practices, which includes understanding the different types of disabilities, adapting training methods, and promoting inclusive participation.
 - Provision of adaptive sports equipment. All individuals with disabilities will be able to participate due to lack of specialized equipment.
1. Government investments in inclusive sports infrastructure.
 2. Collaboration between architects, disability specialists, and sports bodies.
 3. Adoption of global Paralympics committee accessibility standards.
 4. Training programme for coaches in adaptive sports.
 5. Policy framework that prioritize disability inclusion in national sports planning.

Cross ministry steering group: To create a steering body to oversee planning, accessibility standards and funding commitment.

2. Align with national law: To ensure the facility design and operation comply with the person with disabilities act and national disability policy.
3. Mixed finding: Combine central government capital grant (IPC development funds, UN agency small grants), Private sponsorship and service income seek cost sharing with university (sports science, and physiotherapy) for research and staffing.
4. Capacity building: embed coach education classifier training and community outreach as core budget lines.
5. Regional hub model: once the Lusaka facility is established we can replicate smaller regional hubs to decentralize access.

Therefore promoting disability inclusion in sports should be prioritized as a key strategy for national development. Strengthening institutional support, investing in inclusive infrastructure, and raising public awareness are essential steps towards achieving meaningful inclusion.

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