

All Inclusive Empowering Club set up by ENGAGE



Photo courtesy of www.engage.org.np

These days, while sports aficionados are glued to screens to watch the incredible achievements of Paralympians in Rio de Janeiro, ENGAGE is trying, step by step, to lay the foundations for a more inclusive society. In what it is going to be a long and tough journey, the use of sport as a tool for positive change will make the ride a bit easier.

Since the end of the *Turkish Airlines ENGAGE Empowering League*, the first ever wheelchair basketball championship played here in Nepal from May to July, we got busy with important outreach activities of the League. On the one hand the organisation of talk programs in schools around Kathmandu and on the other, the creation of the *All Inclusive Empowering Clubs*.

If we take into account that one of the goals of the League was the creation of more awareness about disability and social inclusion - one of the main reasons the Swiss Embassy in Nepal stepped up its support to this initiative - these outreach activities play a special role.

The two activities are complementary to each other. The talk programmes, where League players share their experiences and play an exhibition game in front of the students, help towards the setting up of social clubs to address issues related to social inclusion such as gender and disability. What can also often happen is the reinforcing of existing social activities implemented by the schools.

We have carried out more than 10 school talk programmes and we have so far set up two *All Inclusive Empowering Clubs* at *Campion Academy* and *Caribbean School*. Further programmes are coming, including one to be established in a community/public school.

No one should be surprised that we got such a big interest to initiate the clubs from the students themselves, as the talk programmes are truly inspirational. They provide students with a prime opportunity to talk with people with physical disabilities.

Thanks to the interaction happening between students and players, we really set the right conditions to pitch for the establishment of the Clubs whose aim is to promote social inclusion at community level.

In the formation of a club we go for a holistic approach about social inclusion that, while putting at the center issues related to disabilities, includes other related domains like gender empowerment and community development.

What is key to mainstream disability, within the broader human development framework, is recognising that issues of discrimination towards a young person with disabilities can be linked or related to other issues of discrimination faced by other vulnerable groups within society.

Therefore there is a certain degree of flexibility in the activities to be run by the Clubs that must be decided by the members themselves and then presented to the school management for final endorsement. The ownership is primarily with the students and under the overall control of the school and this is something really important to remember.

Keeping it simple is also important, complementing the efforts taken by the schools themselves that in many cases already boost some social activities involving their students.

Our role at ENGAGE is to facilitate local ownership, helping to set up local student-led groups that will work long term rather than initiating something very short term directly managed by ENGAGE.

Therefore what we do is provide a basic framework on how to manage the clubs and set broader goals like creating awareness about disabilities, gender, social inclusion and human development. This helps ENGAGE recruit new volunteers and identify young people with and without disabilities in need of some support.

As a learning tool, we use the booklet we have designed - *“Leading through Sports”* - that offers a simple but clear understanding of disabilities and social inclusion by leveraging the power of sports.

While we emphasise the commitment of being a member of a club, it is very important to keep the environment quite friendly and “easy-going” and not too formal or academic. Being a club member is an extra-curricular activity and must be enjoyable and fit within a student's already packed week. Club meetings happen on a weekly basis and normally last no more than 45 minutes.

We believe that if one factor will decide if this pilot initiative will be successful, it is the fact that setting up and getting involved in a club should be about active citizenship and participation but also very importantly - about fun and personal development.

We do not want to attract the so called “usual suspects”, those youths already very socially active and very conscious about issues related to disability and human development. Instead, by tackling sensitive issues through the lens of sports, we want to attract, for example, those who love basketball but have never volunteered before.

A number of our past ENGAGE Sport Coaches, volunteering on our wheelchair basketball coaching programmes, were undergraduate students who never volunteered or got involved in social activities.

Ultimately, the idea of setting up All Inclusive Empowering Clubs is all about creating awareness about disability and social inclusion through actions led and owned by students, reaching out those youths who never had a serious thought about how tough life is when the society is not inclusive for all.

Author: Simone Galimberti