Dawn Goodwin, Head of Programme Delivery, shares how inspired she felt on her recent trip to Bahir Dar, Ethiopia.

Imagine a world where everyone has the opportunity to enjoy their rights; where all barriers to leading a full life are removed and inequality is the stuff of history books. What a wonderful world! Unfortunately, unlike John Lennon, it’s something I find really hard to imagine. We are so accustomed to living in a world built around the needs and ease of those with the power and influence to shape it, that imagining a truly inclusive world has always been a real stretch of the imagination for me...until my recent visit to Ethiopia.

In Ethiopia, International Inspiration is proud to be working in partnership with Cheshire Foundation- Action for Inclusion (CF-AI) to deliver an innovative programme that uses sport to help children and young people with disabilities to fully participate in community life. Over the last 2 and a half years the Comic Relief funded ‘Sport for Inclusive Development Project’ has been supporting 9 specially trained facilitators to deliver regular community-level inclusive sport sessions across the city of Bahir Dar. For this reason, I found myself on a cold and misty morning, just as day was dawning, catching my first real glimpse of what an amazing, diverse and dynamic place a truly inclusive world would be. A world rich in experience and full of understanding.

That morning I watched a community sport session in central Bahir Dar. There were around 150 children, young people and adults of all ages and abilities playing a range of different sports and activities together. Darts, table tennis, football, sitting volleyball, basketball, wheelchair basketball – the list goes on. People with and without disabilities, from many different backgrounds, were enjoying sport side by side on a public square: Adjusting their use of space and equipment to accommodate each other; respecting and encouraging each other in their chosen pursuits; sharing the resources available; adapting local materials; and valuing and appreciating the effort and achievements of those around them.

In Bahir Dar 3 years ago, this inclusive sport session would have been unthinkable. In most of the rest world it still is unimaginable! And yet on that cold, grey morning no one passing by gave it a second glance. It was just another normal morning in Bahir Dar. And for me it was an amazing, if fleeting, glimpse of how an inclusive society might look.

Naturally, this change in attitudes and opportunities in Bahir Dar didn’t happen by accident. It’s the result of a really collective commitment at a local and regional level. Over the last 2 and half years the ‘Sport for Inclusive Development Project’ has been working closely with local communities, sports clubs, regional and local government and thousands of children and young people to provide regular spaces for people with and without disabilities to come together through sport. And in coming together through sport, the programme is seeing incredible results in terms of the level of inclusion both on and off the sports field – with greater representation of people living with disabilities in local decision making processes, a tangible change in attitudes towards disability and an increasing number of local role models for children and young people with disabilities.
Nelson Mandela once said that sport has the power to unite people in a way that little else does, and CF-AI’s work with inclusive community sport is a very practical example of how sport can help strengthen and enrich social capital. The many different inclusive sport sessions that I visited in Bahir Dar really challenged my thinking around inclusion. It was challenging because the sessions represented such a stark contrast with the day to day reality of the world we live in, where so many people are routinely and systemically marginalised. But it also challenged me to be more optimistic. This wasn’t the stuff of imagination – it wasn’t perfect, but it was real life. And if two years of concerted, collaborative work can create oases of inclusion across a bustling city in Ethiopia, it is almost possible to imagine what can be achieved over the next 15 years as the leaders of the world sign up to a new global development commitment, pledging time and time again that no one will be left behind.

At International Inspiration we recognise that sport isn’t the answer to all the world’s problems, but through our work with CF-AI, and other partners in many different contexts, we know sport can make a difference. This year the United Nations are launching a new framework for international development, which will provide the road map for all countries to work together to end poverty by 2030. For the first time in history, the world’s leaders are signing up to a global agreement that acknowledges the growing contribution sport can make to a culture of tolerance and respect, the empowerment of women and young people and the achievement of health, education and social inclusion objectives.

As we begin a new era in international development, sport has a valuable role to play in promoting a world of unity, equity and opportunity for all; but we have to work together to make that happen. It will take a genuine commitment and possibly a little imagination too, but in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals there is a real opportunity for the world of sport and the international development community to work together to build a more peaceful, prosperous and equitable world - leaving no one behind.

*In recognition of the great progress being achieved in Bahir Dar, IN is delighted that CF-AI and the ‘Sport for Inclusive Project Development Project’ have recently been shortlisted for the Beyond Sport ‘Sport for Social Inclusion Award.’*