

Sport - a potential catalyst in development assistance

In 2007, Denmark ratified the UN Convention, which is about the rights of disabled people. It includes an article regarding the need for nations to act in order to develop sports opportunities for disabled people. Denmark has gone very far in this development, and is now able to use sport as a means of building capacity in developing countries. This is a good example which shows, that development aid provided through NGO matters.

By Jens Boe Nielsen and Ole Ansbjerg

March 30th 2007 Denmark signed the UN Convention for Human Rights for the Rights of Disabled Persons. Although the Convention have an impact on conditions for disabled people in Denmark, it is hardly in Denmark, the UN will have their focus, when countries in a year must report on the progress being made. In Denmark, we are already very far ahead in minimizing the limitations for people with disabilities, which will enable this group to take full part in society. The Convention points to the fact that disabled persons should be entitled to a life without being discriminated against, the right for liberty and security of the individual, recognition before the law, respect for privacy, education, ability to freely move around and find employment, being able to access information, receive treatment, participate actively in society and have the right to make their own decisions. Although much can still be done, we are very much ahead in this field in Denmark. Actually we are so far ahead, that the Danish model can be both a model for many other countries as well as being exported to developing countries in particular.

Disabilities in developing countries

The UN estimates that there are about 650 mill. disabled people in the world. If the families of people with disabilities are included, it means that around 2 billion people in some degree are affected by a disability in the family. It is especially among the poor and especially in developing countries, you will find many people with disabilities. Thus, the UN estimates that 90% of all disabled people and that 98% of all children with disabilities live in developing countries.

The UN also suggests that there is a strong correlation between poverty, lack of education, poor diet, poor health conditions and dangerous working conditions.

Many disabled people in developing countries are thus both a

product of a condition and a symptom. The question is whether a special effort for people with disabilities in developing countries therefore becomes pure symptomatic treatment rather than a genuine effort to raise living standards in the country?

Sports Society

Article 30 of the Convention outlines the disabled persons right to play sport. It states that in particular it is the right of the disabled persons to participate at equal terms with others in recreational activities and volunteer in sport. Actually the state must encourage the individuals with disabilities, to participate in sport as much as possible, whilst helping people with disabilities, as well as giving them the opportunity to organize themselves and develop special offers, which are aimed at different disability groups. This also applies to the training of instructors, and access to facilities. Finally, the Convention points out that there must be special focus and attention towards persons with disabilities, in order to actively getting them involved in sports during school.

A concrete example

The Danish Sport Organization for the Disabled (the DSOD), supported by the Project Council in Denmark (the DANIDA) have over the last years gained experience with the implementation of sport for the disabled in Ghana. This has been carried out in collaboration with the Ghana Society of physically Disabled (the GSPD).

The concept has been: "Helping people to help themselves". A number of sporting activities were presented in front of a large group of disabled and non-disabled persons. A number of participants from this group who displayed flair and skill within the various sports, were chosen to ensure future training and presentation of the activities and above all: to ensure a future organization. The work and the activities which will be carried out, must be firmly rooted in the Ghanaian public administration through cooperation with the ministries of health and sport.

There is thus formed a sports committee of disabled people. They have been trained and have subsequently taken responsibility for publicizing sport for the disabled in Ghana: the recruitment, development deals, training of managers and coaches. Furthermore the DSOD have arranged a series of seminars in sport for disabled persons in the two largest cities: Accra and Kumasi. A so-called "cascade" model have been applied when training future sports leaders and coaches. Firstly some participants are being trained at certain sporting activities, secondly those participants take part in training other new participants. This practice will enable them to conduct future training and retraining of local sports

leaders and coaches. Periodically managers and coaches will meet and share experiences from the work which has been carried out. Thereby inspiring and motivating each other to further develop their sport.

An environment has been created where the Ghanese from the GSPD, have obtained skills, particularly within the area of organization – and teaching – in certain sports activities. This will enable them to inspire each other and to further develop disability sport. Usually many young people up to the age of 30 years, are interested in organized sport and thus take responsibility for the development and for the organization.

The starting point has been to disseminate knowledge of the disabled persons opportunities for expression, and create sufficient basis to developing projects locally, offers that are both fun, motivating, activating and with the possibility to develop into real competitive sports opportunities at a later stage.

Does it make sense?

One can legitimately ask: Why create disability sport in a country that might have the need for other basic necessities? Does it make sense to spend money to develop disability sport? The question is both provocative and relevant. It is "provocative" because it is more than difficult to demonstrate that the implementation of disability sport has a positive impact on a country's living standards. There are simply not enough studies that can demonstrate such a connection. But the question is also "applicable" because the intention of Denmark's efforts in developing countries must necessarily be aimed at creating conditions that makes people independent from aid in the future. Disability sport has proved to be a dynamo that can change attitudes and conditions for the individual, the family and hence society.

The Ghana project indicates six good reasons why a particular approach to disability in developing countries may be beneficial.

1. The physical health promotion

The health-promoting effects of sports is by now well known: increased oxygen delivery and thus endurance, improved muscle strength, increased flexibility, improved neuromuscular control and therefore coordination, balance, reduced risk of osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease, etc. A stronger health also reduces the risk of infections.

This is all well documented. In countries, which moreover lacks treatment options and trained health personnel and therefore have a poorly developed health care system, sport is a very important

alternative to physiotherapy and health prevention in general.

2. The mental health promotion

Mental health promotion is an area which documents positive effects from exercising, : increased confidence and increased self-esteem and thereby increased overall motivation to actively take part in social relationships. In many countries, especially in many developing countries the disabled are tucked away. Countless examples indicate the fact that disabled persons do not come outside their homes and thus do not become part of community life. Sporting activities have managed to get the disabled out of their homes and out amongst others both disabled and non-disabled people, which develop their social skills.

3. From burden to resource

Especially the mental health promotion factors means that disabled people may have both the desire and imagination to figure out how to get involved actively in social life and thus at work. The head of the GSPD in Accra, Billy Wilson tells us that the disabled now come from afar to the GSPD office on Fridays. They overnight in order to attend training Saturday morning. At the other GSPD offices people have started to repair the old wheel chairs, so as they can be used for wheelchair basketball activities. Finally, it has provided work for individuals, which means they can now afford transportation as well as wheelchairs.

Involvement in social activities, motivates and get people with disabilities out of their home, where they are often a burden for their families, out into society where they have obtain greater focus on their own options, which in turn make them more able to take personal responsibility for their own situation.

4. Organizing, democracy and capacity development

Unfolding sports require organization. Sport is a good way to create associations and to create understanding and development of democratic processes. The disabled of Ghana have already long been organized, but the new action sports have given new activities and thus made new organization forms. There is now a large group of both disabled and non-disabled people who are working to develop sports opportunities everywhere in Ghana. It has created an important understanding in public administration and activities are now supported by the public. In this way disability sport is a good tool for capacity development: building personal skills, development of democracy as the individual's active participation in community building.

5. Integration and attention for the opportunities of disabled

The Ghana project activities create awareness among the people passing by at the sports site in the town centre, where

wheelchair basketball is being played. It has created a big interest among non-disabled people to engage themselves at this project. This proves that sport can be used as a tool for the surrounding community, to realise the fact that focus should be directed at the opportunities of the disabled people, rather than looking at their limitations, just as sport helps to integrate disabled people even more in the surrounding communities.

When people with physical disabilities can accomplish spectacular results on the sports pitch, the attitude from the surrounding society changes and extends into other areas of life such as work and education. The visibility of marginalized groups in different situations, is imperative if the acceptance from the surrounding society must take place.

We are getting wiser in Denmark

What makes an industrialized country with a developed offer of disability sport engage in such cooperation? The questions can be asked, if you have a feeling that it is one country giving to another. But in a partnership activity, as described here, there is certainly talk about an exchange of relationship.

The Danish participants specific benefits have been multifaceted. It has obviously been a great experience for the Danish instructors to come to Ghana and be introduced to a totally different culture and lifestyle. They have met many wonderful people, made new connections and many friendships across the continents. The Ghanese appreciate the help of - and cooperation with Denmark. There are signs of optimism and among many a great belief that there is progress and improved conditions for the individual.

It puts your own life in perspective, and relevant questions arise in relation to ones own actions and for the - in comparison - unequal conditions, we ourselves live under.

The passion of the Ghanese, the spontaneity, creativity and struggle for better conditions are inspiring to all.

The conditions for implementing sport

It is obviously a clear prerequisite for the implementation of disability sport that the conditions in the country are of such that we can begin to treat disabled people as a resource rather than a burden. There are shortages of necessities like food and a place to sleep. If a war is taking place, there are obviously other needs that come before. In developing countries, which both completely lack infrastructure as well as the ability to obtain basic necessities of life, disabled sport have no real growth conditions.

However many developing countries which Denmark focuses on, can with a modest effort transform the opportunities for disabled people and ease the strain on the families as well as for society into a fruitful resource. It must be the prime objective of all aid to developing countries, that the aid is an active component in the country by promoting its own resources, which leads to lasting improvements and the result is an independence of Denmark's continued support.

What can be done?

This brings us back to the little story from Ghana. The story shows that the cooperation has had a very strong and positive impact. Sport for the disabled now takes place in all 10 regions of Ghana and many, both disabled and non disabled persons are actively involved in organizing and monitoring the sporting activities for disabled people. The DSOD have implemented the sport, but the future work has largely been taken over by the involved parties. And as such the sport is a catalyst for development.

As such there are not one but many very good reasons to make an effort to develop the active involvement of disabled people in developing countries. There is a need for the industrialized countries, which themselves have created very good conditions and opportunities to practise sport for the disabled people in their own countries, to make a special effort to develop disability sport in the third world countries. Denmark has shown the way.

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