**Case Study 2: Special Olympics Youth Unified Sports programme**

**Name of practice:** Special Olympics Youth Unified Sports programme

**Country:** Europe Wide

**Main objective and specific aims:**

The main objectives of the practice are to help children and young people with intellectual and physical disabilities participate in sport, contributing to healthy lifestyles, as well as increase their social integration into the community.

**Relevance for 3rd EU Health Programme objectives**

The practice is relevant to objective one of the 3rd EU-Health Programme:

- ‘Promote health, prevent diseases and foster supportive environments for healthy lifestyles taking into account the 'health in all policies' principle’.

**Target groups**

The main target group of the programme are people with physical, mental and learning disabilities or poor mental health.

**Thematic focus of intervention in relation to reducing health inequalities**

The focus of the intervention is the organisation of sport activities, combining players with and without intellectual disabilities to favour integration among them. The intent is also to give people with disabilities the opportunity to connect with the wider community, building social capital, improve social integration and physical activity.

**Key activities**

The Special Olympics Unified Sports programme combines players with and without intellectual disabilities on the same sports teams for training and competitions. The programme is targeted at young people aged 12-25 and it is financed by substantial grants obtained by Special Olympics International. The majority of Youth Unified teams are involved in playing football and basketball, however, teams are also found in other sports e.g. volleyball, handball and table tennis.

Regular trainings are organised, as well as competitions within the countries and abroad. This offers both the athletes with disabilities and their partners the opportunity to travel and represent their local communities in the competitions.

Parents and families are involved in the activities, often volunteering in providing support to the events organised in various ways.

The coaches have a crucial role in promoting the active participation of athletes and partners and create an environment of social inclusion and integration. They have not only a role as trainers, they also promote team spirit. Coaches also acquire particular importance in the eyes of the players and become models of behaviour to them.

**Geographical scope**

The programme takes place in 58 countries in Europe and Eurasia:

1. Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Faroe Islands, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Gibraltar, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Isle of Man, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyz Republic, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan.

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1 Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Faroe Islands, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Gibraltar, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Isle of Man, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyz Republic, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan.
**Intersectoral dimension**

The programme cuts across two main policy areas: health and social inclusion, given its focus on physical activity and improving social integration of people with disabilities.

**Duration**

Special Olympics Youth Unified Sports was developed in 2005, merging two previously existing programmes, Special Olympics school curriculum 'SO Get into It' and Special Olympics Unified Football. The programme is still running.

**Lead organisation**

The lead organisation is Special Olympics Europe Eurasia Foundation, a not for profit organisation based in Dublin. It supports Special Olympics programmes at the national level in 58 European and Eurasian countries as well as cross-border activities and programmes.

**Partners**


**Main sources of funding**

The programme was funded by Sport Olympics partners; no further information is available regarding the costs of the practice.

**Evidence base for implementation**

The practice was created on the basis of the pre-existing programmes - Special Olympics school curriculum 'SO Get into It' and Special Olympics Unified Football. No information was found showing that the implementation of the programme was based on evidence of effectiveness. However, the evaluation of a pre-existing programme - Special Olympics Unified Football – shows that the programmes were effective in improving athletes’ integration in the communities and improving their physical activity and sports skills.

**Evaluation: Has the practice been evaluated?**

An evaluation of the practice was conducted by the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland in August 2010. The assessment covered five European countries: Serbia, Poland, Ukraine, Germany and Hungary. 200 qualitative interviews were conducted and information was gathered on 55 teams. The interviews were conducted with athletes, with and without disabilities, coaches, parents and representatives of the local community.

The objectives of the evaluation were to examine the strength of the programme and evaluate the impact on social inclusion of the participating athletes. The evaluation provided analysis on the effectiveness and outcomes of the programme, further described below.

**Effectiveness: evidence of outputs, outcomes, results and cost-effectiveness**

Through the evaluation mentioned above, information was gathered on the effectiveness and impact of the programme. The evaluation reported positive effects arising from participating in this programme. The replies provided and experiences reported were very similar among the different countries analysed.

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2 Special Olympics Research Overview, Special Olympics 2015
http://media.specialolympics.org/resources/research/Special-Olympics-Research-Overview.pdf;

3 An Evaluation of A Unified Sports® Football Pilot Project,
http://www.specialolympics.org/Sections/What_We_Do/Research_Studies_Description_Pages/Unified_Sports_Europe.aspx
The athletes reported multiple positive effects:

- **Building social capital and improving social integration:**
  
  The athletes reported to have made friends with other athletes and with partners. Communication opportunities and skills were also enhanced thanks to the participation in the trainings and competitions. The participation in the programme also offered athletes the opportunity to interact with people outside their families and usual networks.

- **The opportunities to travel for competitions also provided athletes with the opportunity to interact with new people, have new experiences, improve their independence and visit new places. As a result in many cases communication skills were improved, as well as self-confidence.**

- **Developing physical fitness and sport skills:**
  
  Most of the athletes reported an improvement in their sport skills, as a result of the participation in the trainings and competitions; abilities in the games, ability to play in a team and fitness capacity were improved. This was reported to be the results of the coaching and playing with the partners. Some of the athletes also reported that, thanks to the participation in the programme, they had developed soft skills that might turn out to be helpful in finding a job in the future.

The impact of the practice on social inclusion and personal development of the athletes that emerged from the evaluation was therefore very positive. Many partners (i.e. players with no disabilities) reported a change in their attitude towards people with disabilities. This can positively contribute to a change in the way the wider society sees people with disabilities and in turn help improve their inclusion in the wider communities. Partners also reported improvements in their sport skills and development of soft skills.

The effects on the partners were slightly more contained; while friendships were established and new attitudes and behaviours produced, the relationships developed thanks to the programme were more limited in terms of number and of relevance.

Even if not all parents actively participated in the programme, the ones who did reported very positive effects of the practice. They confirmed the views and findings from the interviews to the athletes and partners. Also new relationships were reported to have established among parents and families of the athletes and partners. Support, educational and advocacy networks were established. This allowed in particular the parents of the athletes to acquire an increased support in their day-to-day life and gave them an increased confidence in advocating for their children rights.

The community representatives interviewed also recognised the benefits of the programme to the participants and to the wider community.

**Success factors**

A few elements were recognised as success factors needed to achieve the objectives of the programme:

- **Culture of inclusion:** the programme seeks to involve athletes, partners, their families and wider community in the activities carried out. This approach challenges discrimination and promotes a culture of acceptance and inclusion of people with disabilities in the communities;

- **Established position in the community:** the programme benefitted from previous activities carried out by the Special Olympic clubs over the years; networks of support to the activities were therefore already established in the local communities and regions;

- **Enduring programme:** long lasting programmes enable the development of strong bonds among athletes, coaches and partners.
Focus on a shared interest: athletes’ and partners’ participation is motivated by their interest in the chosen sport. This allows differences between them to become less important and increase their focus on commonalities.

Opportunities to travel and compete: travelling enabled both athletes and partners to strengthen their relationships within the teams. It also increased the appreciation of the players by the home communities they represented in the competitions.

Another important element is that the responses provided through the interviews were very similar in the different countries assessed. This clearly shows the effectiveness of the programme.

From the evaluation conducted it also emerged that the programme challenges the existing dominant culture in the wider communities in three main ways:

- creating bonds between people with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, which normally tend to be inexistent given the separation between these groups in the society;
- creating a positive portrayal of people with disabilities, by informing partners and their families of intellectual disability and subverting stereotypes;
- creating relations between parents and therefore support and advocacy networks.

Innovative features

The elements which were considered as innovative in some of the interviewed communities were

- the culture of inclusion described above,
- and the fact of mixing athletes with disabilities with their non-disabled peers, which provided unique opportunities for integration and building social capital.
- In addition, the support from community representatives and institutions, (such as mainstream sporting organisations, schools and local government) appeared to be beneficial for the programme, in terms of funding, in-kind support and the participation of volunteers.

Obstacles and lessons learnt

A number of challenges were faced by the programme including:

- Structures and dedicated areas are necessary to practice, recruitment of well-organised coaches’ is needed, as well as their training in relation to the knowledge of the programme and communication skills; and
- Sustained funding was also highlighted as necessary in many cases, to allow the programme to continue and remain sustainable.
- Lessons learnt from the start of the practice relate mainly to the expansion of the practice. New sports could be included or expanded depending upon adequate support and funding. The participation of female athletes and partners could also be increased. Furthermore, the idea of involving mainstream schools and teachers emerged as another lesson learnt from the evaluation carried out. Such involvement could increase the impact of the practice in the communities.

Potential for transferability and sustainability

Special Olympics Youth Unified Sports is a long standing practice, which is already present in Europe and Eurasia. Positive outcomes were identified across all the projects, suggesting that the practice could be expanded to new regions and communities.

List of references

Special Olympics official website, http://www.specialolympics.org/ ;


Special Olympics Research Overview, Special Olympics 2015 http://media.specialolympics.org/resources/research/Special-Olympics-Research-Overview.pdf;