

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Disability, sport and leisure'

(2014/C 114/06)

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Context classification

1. draws attention to the fact that the estimated number of people with a disability in the EU is around 80 million persons, which means approximately 15% of the population. People with reduced mobility are estimated to represent more than 40%;
2. stresses that considering the higher risk of disability at older ages and the global increase in chronic health conditions, the number of people with a disability may increase. Hence, European regions will face further challenges in the future;
3. underlines awareness that there exists no common definition of disability throughout the EU, and that legal definitions have been an issue of much debate and interpreted in many different ways. Disability is a complex phenomenon and a multidimensional experience, reflecting an interaction between a person's physical and intellectual characteristics and the characteristics of the society in which they live. It is therefore necessary to introduce concepts such as 'people with a disability';
4. asserts a lack of knowledge and misconceptions about the true effects of disabilities and emphasises the need to focus on 'abilities' that can be explicitly seen when it comes to sports performance;
5. recognises the value and importance of physical activity and sport for people with a disability and the fact that it can make an effective contribution to achieving the EU's strategic goals, including the Europe 2020 objectives. Substantial progress has been made in adaptive sport and sport for people with disabilities in the last few years. The most recent example was the London 2012 Paralympic Games, with the media going out of their way to cover and promote the paralympic movement;
6. draws attention to the fact that sport indisputably contributes to a person's overall wellbeing and has a positive impact on the potential rehabilitation and habilitation of people with disabilities, and that the possibility of participating in sporting activities is, for people with disabilities, above all a fundamental human right;
7. points out that 'sport for people with a disability' covers a wide field of activity, ranging from elite sport to recreational sport concepts and from adapted physical education to rehabilitation sport approaches, going alongside or even beyond the complexity of defining the term 'sport'. That is one of the reasons for the different definitions existing in the different European regions. There are various nuances in the area of 'physical activity' and 'sport', with the effect that physical activity is geared to sport, recreation, something that is good for one's health, etc. This is in any case the reason why people do it, although as a general rule a sports activity implies an improvement in health status, both physical and mental, for everybody;
8. states awareness of considerable debates on the different terms and concepts related to and used by the sector. In this context the term used is 'sport(s) for people with a disability' aiming at a people-centred approach and addressing a generic scope;

9. reiterates the need to fully respect the principle of subsidiarity and the autonomy of sport's governing structures, including independent sports organisations. The recommendations made in the present opinion seek to act as a catalyst in order to increase the impact of action undertaken by Member States and local and regional authorities and to stimulate a change of perception among people with a disability towards their abilities in the community at large;

Political background

10. expresses its appreciation and support for references made by EU policies to the recognition of sport for people with a disability, including the Disability Strategy 2010-2020⁽¹⁾, the Commission's Communication on Developing the European Dimension on Sport⁽²⁾ and the EC's White Paper on Sport⁽³⁾;

11. regrets, however, the absence of any reference to people with disabilities in the European Commission's initial proposal for ERASMUS+, the new Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport for 2014-2020; urges to this effect the inclusion in the new programme, currently still under negotiation, of a clear reference to the need to promote sustainable and inclusive growth by facilitating access to sports activities for persons with disabilities;

12. agrees that national, regional and local authorities can, to the extent of their own powers and budgets, play an important role in the development of sport for people with a disability, including promotion and investment in sport infrastructure and sustainable sporting activities and underlines the necessity of assuring project funds for those regions where the infrastructure of schools and other educational institutions is underdeveloped and there are no or limited possibilities for disabled children to practise sports;

13. when it comes to the use of public facilities, the public authorities must give due consideration to the question of sport for people with a disability to ensure that the requirement to establish equal living conditions for people with disabilities is taken into account. In this regard, accessibility is a fundamental issue;

14. affirms the specific role of stakeholders active in sport for people with a disability in order to exploit the potential of sport for social inclusion, integration and equal opportunities;

15. points out that sport for people with a disability seems to often only be specifically referred to in the context of social inclusion. It calls for an extensive distinction between different scopes of sports for people with a disability that may refer to elite sports, leisure sports, physical education, education and training opportunities through sports, adapted physical activity, rehabilitation sports or sports activities with a specific therapeutic focus;

16. advocates better recognition of relevant sector representatives in all mainstream sport development and reporting activities supported by the EU institutions. Allocation of specific resources to enable such involvement, as well as for specialist training for technical professionals working in the field of sport, should be considered;

17. calls for the development of a comprehensive policy document based on and linked to existing policies but specifically dedicated to the sector of sport for people with a disability, in order to prioritise the approach to fundamental issues inherent within the sector;

Specific challenges: sport participation

18. indicates that despite growing policy interest in promoting the participation of people with a disability in sports, participation rates are still too low. Among other things, this is due to limited access to sports infrastructure adapted to the needs of people with disabilities;

⁽¹⁾ COM(2010) 636 final

⁽²⁾ COM(2011) 12 final

⁽³⁾ COM(2007) 391 final

19. notes that besides physical, socio-economic and communication barriers, participation in sports is affected by cultural barriers and psychological factors, including attitudes towards disability from mainstream sport providers and stakeholders. These attitudes are the result of ignorance and insufficient resources for dealing with a different situation. Information campaigns and training courses should be organised to ensure that people with a disability are accepted in sports activities. It is recommended that any measures for improved access should be established in due consultation with sector stakeholders, as different groups may require different support;

20. the improvement of accessibility, in terms of adequate physical access to sports facilities and better communication, indicates a crucial starting point in order to increase participation rates;

21. calls for coordinated awareness-raising campaigns on existing sporting opportunities. Such campaigns could be set up at European level but must be brought down to the regional and local levels, where specific opportunities are available. The persons with a disability themselves should be addressed and informed. At its best such campaigns are established with support from the mainstream sport movement, national sport and disability sport authorities and disability organisations (in particular associations); in addition, it is important to organise information campaigns not just for people with a disability, but also for the general public, in order to help them understand, accept, integrate and learn how to help their peers with disabilities. People with disabilities must be empowered to the greatest extent possible, facilitated and supported to propose, promote and organise such events;

22. stresses that target groups may need to be addressed individually in view of their abilities, age or social situation; in particular, the young generation must be addressed and supported. Similarly, how the sports sector is organised in each Member State needs to be taken into account, as do any special local and regional features. Support should be given to the provision of reliable, accessible and regularly updated information, so that target groups can be systematically informed about sports to which they can have access. Facilitating and supporting the development of organised grassroots movements in this regard can facilitate the dissemination of such information and accessibility;

23. a specially adapted transport network needs to be available locally and regionally to enable people with a disability to get to sports facilities and practise sport, at both amateur and competition level;

24. points out that parents play a major role in the empowerment of youngsters for sports participation, and that volunteers constitute the backbone of the sector. Therefore, there is a need to raise awareness about the importance of volunteer work and the setting-up of platforms for engaging and training volunteers, as well as measures for recognising and rewarding their contribution, must be envisaged;

25. recommends creating an information platform on EU sports facilities, together with a fully accessible webpage to inform people with disabilities about sports infrastructure, technical possibilities, etc., in the places where they live;

26. draws attention to the fact that some groups of people face double or triple discrimination when they are confronted not only with one disability, but with multiple disabilities, or when they are also from migrant or minority backgrounds or are victims of social exclusion due to homophobia or gender. Specific support and equal opportunities of access to sports for all needs to be assured;

27. notes that sport for people with a disability must not sit aside the mainstream sport system, and that mainstreaming, which is the sharing of responsibility for sports for people with a disability with mainstream sport organisations, already seems to be a key policy aim. Hence, it must be assured that the inclusion of sport for people with a disability progresses within mainstream sport and that the different organizational patterns, formulas and structures may be used in parallel according to the actual capacities of the people with disabilities and with a view to including them;

28. facilitating the inclusion of people with a disability in sport should be the responsibility of the individual sports federation for each particular branch or speciality, liaising with, and with due regard for the role of, the sports federations working primarily with people with disabilities, the vital role of which in this field must be consolidated;

29. sports federations should encourage sports bodies to take part in their assemblies without voting rights even if they are not members of the federation, if their aim is to promote sports activities for people with a disability;

30. notes, on the basis of identified examples, that the approach to connect tourism with inclusive leisure sport opportunities constitutes a useful tool for establishing first contact with sports for people with a disability in order to raise participation rates and to raise awareness of their abilities towards the wider public;

31. include high-quality, updated information on sports activities for people with disabilities, together with information on transport and special access to sports facilities, as part of sports tourism advertising;

Specific Challenges: Education

32. recognises that adequate sport sector development for people with a disability calls for well-educated and trained professionals;

33. considers that even when stigma is absent, persons with a disability may still face exclusion because many people do not know how to accommodate persons with a disability and include them in sport activities and structures. It calls for concerted information through education and training initiatives addressed not only to those directly involved in sports provision but at a larger scale towards the general public, e.g. by making use of easily accessible online training tools. In this regard, general awareness regarding the rights, needs and abilities of people with a disability should be raised in parallel;

34. stresses that all pupils should have access to physical and sports education and that no disability should be a barrier to inclusion in school sport programmes. PE at schools is where young people often get their first taste of and develop a passion for sports; youngsters with a disability are no different. In addition, the school sport environment provides the opportunity to educate pupils without a disability and makes them aware of the abilities of their class mates. In this regard, the introduction of 'inclusive sports programmes' shall be especially supported. The idea of reverse integration, meaning the inclusion of young sportsmen and women without a disability within sports for people with a disability, constitutes a good example to change attitudes towards the abilities of fellow participants. Similarly, initiatives such as mixed ability sport are to be supported and developed. To reach this goal, specific education and training for teachers in education centres, particularly PE teachers is essential, as is providing parents of disabled children with access to information on the various sporting activities available;

35. notes that the knowledge and skills of coaches are often not exploited due to lack of exchange and coordination between stakeholders in sport for people with a disability and in mainstream sport. It is proposed to introduce cooperative training initiatives between these organisations, with the support of training providers and public authorities;

36. recommends involving representatives of higher education more closely in adjustment processes to prevent the exclusion of people with disabilities. The purpose of such involvement would be to bring about changes in training for future PE teachers, enabling them to have a better understanding of the various health issues faced by their pupils;

37. considers that often sports for people with a disability need to be given a better image, by promoting an elite sport for top sportsmen and women with a disability, and obtaining the same status as for elite able-bodied sportspeople. Awareness-raising about elite sports performed by athletes with a disability is widely considered to lead to a change in this perception. To this effect, the communication strategy related to the Paralympics Games and high level sporting events for people with a disability is very important;

38. acknowledges that sport for people with a disability is heavily dependent on volunteering. It recognises that qualitative training of volunteers must be further supported. In some regards, it needs to be adapted to the needs of its stakeholders. In addition, volunteer management is becoming increasingly important. Organisations providing sports for people with a disability need to improve through a process of implementing human resource management and quality development tools. Professionals will have to be trained if we want to improve quality. They are even more essential given the particular nature of the public concerned. The underlying aim should be to make this the work of professionals;

39. regrets that the potential of people with a disability is often underestimated. It underlines that sports can help people with a disability to strengthen their personal development and thereby contribute significantly towards their successful integration into work;

40. supports the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes⁽⁴⁾, which underline that 'it would amount to considerable progress for sport in general and disability sport in particular if measures in support of dual careers were applied equally for all athletes'. The CoR also fully shares the view expressed in the Guidelines that 'as many sport disciplines for people with a disability are integrated in mainstream sport organisations, special attention is needed for this group so that equal treatment can be achieved and specific pathways can be developed if pathways for able-bodied athletes cannot be used';

41. stresses that the sector should already seek the empowerment of its youngest sportsmen and women and accompany them in their personal development. In this regard, specific education initiatives for young sportsmen and women offered during sporting events should be supported;

Specific challenges: health

42. recognises the value of sport in health education and promotion, and underlines the specific relationship between adapted physical activities and rehabilitation for people with a disability as it concerns their physical and mental health;

43. supports the work developed by the EU Expert Group 'Sport, Health and Participation', mandated by the Council to propose measures to promote health-enhancing physical activity and participation in grassroots sport and to identify respective measures by mid-2013; the CoR underlines that adapted physical activity and sports as a therapeutic tool for people with a disability should be explicitly recognised and supported;

44. acknowledges the outcomes of the EU Expert Group 'Anti-Doping' mandated by the Council to draft EU comments to the revision of the World Anti-Doping Code of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and the importance of 'Good Governance' in sport. The CoR recommends the further inclusion of stakeholders from the Paralympic movement;

45. considers that all funding instruments under the new Multi-Annual Financial Framework should include the issue of accessibility for persons with disabilities;

Specific Challenges: Financial & Structural Support

46. takes note of the sport related budget line proposed in the Erasmus+ programme, which is still under negotiation. Urges, however, the European Commission to explicitly refer to sport for people with disabilities in the Erasmus+ programme guide to beneficiaries and to acknowledge sport for this group as a priority within the programme's Sport Action;

47. suggests that the Commission should support specific actions for projects that support the promotion of sport for people with a disability at the local and regional levels;

48. feels that the sector is characterised by a certain fragmentation between different EU instruments implementing similar objectives. Better alignment together with long-term funding commitments for at least the main sector representatives at the European level would greatly benefit the sector;

49. encourages the use of EU Structural Funds for the development of inclusive and accessible sport infrastructures at the local and regional levels. Financing research in the field of technologies related to sport for people with disabilities through Horizon 2020 is also essential. It is essential to invest in research and innovation, primarily through universities and businesses in this sector. Many professionals are in fact already writing their doctoral theses in this field. A special effort needs to be made in the area of sport-based therapies such as equine therapy;

50. stimulates further and extended long-term support by EU institutions of inclusive sports events especially for the group of young people with a disability;

The role of local and regional authorities

51. believes that local and regional authorities play a fundamental role in developing the European dimension of sport for people with a disability, within the limits of their institutional remit;

⁽⁴⁾ <http://ec.europa.eu/sport/library/documents/c3/dual-career-guidelines-final.pdf>

52. stresses the need to strengthen the involvement of local and regional authorities on the basis of an agenda drawn up jointly by the EC, the Council and national authorities responsible for sports, people with a disability and disability sports so that they are included in mainstream sport. Local and regional authorities have the potential to bridge the gap between EU and local levels, in order to reach clubs, schools or parents' initiatives;

53. acknowledges that especially at the local and regional level experience and structured partnerships exist to promote the development of and participation in sports for people with a disability. It calls for the exchange of these good practices and expresses its own capacity to disseminate them with the respective support from relevant EU institutions and sector stakeholders. Translation of existing material constitutes a major challenge and should be supported. Introducing an awarding process for 'outstanding practices' should be considered;

54. supports the system of regional disability sport development officers. They could serve as a source for the exchange and implementation of good practice, for example by means of IT tools, and could make the link between European policies and regional realities. The promotion and implementation of European projects to exchange good practice will help us to come up with viable solutions for common problems and find out more about the needs of other regions and countries;

Additional conclusions

55. takes note of the first initiatives to promote a 'European Week of Sports' and underlines the need to include specific sports for people with a disability and to integrate them into mainstream sports activities. It stresses that, additionally, the establishment of an annual 'European Day for Sport for People with a Disability' should be envisaged;

56. notes a lack of comparable information from the regions about the sector, and calls for the establishment of reliable data collection processes. This should include commissioning a specific Eurobarometer Survey on Sport for People with a Disability, or at least the integration of more specific questions relating to the sector in future Eurobarometer Surveys on Sport and/or Disability;

57. strongly encourages the establishment of a European Expert Group on Sport for People with a Disability that recognises the different remits of the sector and makes it possible to address and receive input from a wide range of sector stakeholders. It would be useful for this EU Expert Group to take the following measures:

- as regards definitions
 - to suggest a common definition of the concepts of sport for people with physical disabilities, sport for people with intellectual disabilities and mixed ability sport, in order to make it easier to promote them;
- as regards technical measures
 - to identify and collect key regional and local practices in order to encourage modelling and dissemination thereof;
 - to give to the political level the technical tools that are essential to increase their awareness and to enable the Committee of the Regions to achieve its aim of being a facilitator in this field where regional and local authorities play the leading roles;

Brussels, 29 November 2013

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
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