

Vatican speech: Inclusion – how to tailor sport to each person

[COVER SLIDE]

Good morning everyone, on behalf of the International Paralympic Committee and the Paralympic Movement, it is an absolute honour and privilege to be with you today.

[NEXT SLIDE – LINDA PEREZ LOPEZ, VENEZEULAN VI ATHLETE]

The IPC coordinates the organisation of the Paralympic Games. After the FIFA Men's World Cup and the Olympics, the Paralympics are the third largest sport event on the planet.

They are also the biggest showcase of persons with disabilities on the world stage. We know our Games play an important role in raising the profile of the world's 1.2 billion persons with disabilities, representing 15% of the global population.

[NEXT SLIDE – WETHE15 STADIUM]

Over the next 25 minutes or so I plan to talk to you about the importance of sport in a sustainable and inclusive society and why sport needs to be tailored to meet each person's needs.

Along the way, I will share with you some of the initiatives the IPC is undertaking to drive inclusive sport around the world and how we tailor programmes for the benefit of all.

So, let's start at the very beginning and look at why increasing sports participation and inclusive sport makes sense.

[NEXT SLIDE – HANNAH COCKROFT]

Well, according to the World Health Organisation physical inactivity has been identified as the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality, causing an estimated 3.2 million deaths worldwide each year.

Globally, 23% of adults and 81% of school adolescents are not active enough, with these figures even higher for lower income countries, females, and persons with disabilities.

Last year a study published in the global medical journal, The Lancet was titled "The participation of people living with disabilities in physical activity: a global perspective". It found persons with disabilities are 16 to 62% less likely to meet physical activity guidelines. This puts them at an even higher risk of noncommunicable diseases related to inactivity than people without disabilities.

Sadly, the emergence and global spread of COVID-19 has only made matters worse.

Prior to the pandemic, in a small number of countries and after years of excellent work by many organisations, we were starting to close the gap between the activity levels of persons with and without disabilities close for the first time in history.

However, over the last two and half years, progress appears to have come to a grinding halt or gone backwards. The pandemic has led to the widening of existing inequalities for persons with disabilities and the creation of new ones too.

It is not that persons with disabilities do not want to do sport and get active, far from it.

[NEXT SLIDE – ATHLETE WITH WEIGHT]

Sport England research has shown that 70% of persons with disabilities want to get more active and into sport and I am sure this figure is high throughout the world.

With such a high percentage figure, we need to ask ourselves - if the desire to do sport is there, then what is preventing the world's 1.2 billion persons with disabilities from doing so?

Well, sadly the answer is society!

We are disabling people of different abilities and backgrounds from enjoying and practicing sport. As a good friend of mine, Juan Pablo Salazar said at an event last week: "The problems that people with disabilities face are not in our bodies but in the external barriers that prevent us from accessing our rights"

Access to sport is a fundamental human right and we must do all we can as society to ensure this is fulfilled for everyone.

[NEXT SLIDE – BARRIERS]

In terms of persons with disabilities, barriers to participation can be generally classified into three areas: individual, social and environment.

Individual barriers relate to functional limitations of the disability or to psychological aspects. Social barriers refer to the lack of professional preparation among community sport and physical activity personnel. Environmental barriers generally refer to the availability of accessible facilities that are conveniently located by accessible transport.

In my view, the current barriers to participation should act as guides as to what needs to be done to tailor and adapt programmes to get people active.

For a start sport clubs need to be accessible and welcoming to all. People need to be aware they exist and feel encouraged to attend.

Specialist training of coaches needs to be undertaken so that training methods can be adapted to suit the needs of the individuals who take part.

Activities need to be inclusive and encourage the integration of people with and without disabilities.

Role models are required to reach harder to reach groups, which is why for the IPC increasing the global broadcast coverage of the Paralympic Games is so important.

[NEXT SLIDE – CREATING MORE GLOBAL AWARENESS]

The Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games had a cumulative global TV audience of four billion and saw us for the first time broadcast free-to-air in Sub-Saharan Africa.

For many people across the African continent, it was the first time they had seen a person with an impairment as a positive role model. That is the power of sport, our Games are a catalyst for changing attitudes. Sport must also be safe for everyone that takes part, in particular for those who are most vulnerable, whether that be women and girls, persons with disabilities or displaced peoples.

[NEXT SLIDE – BOCCIA]

There also needs to be an appreciation that not everyone who gets involved in sport has an aspiration to win an Olympic or Paralympic gold. Sport should not just be about winning, but the taking part, and the empowerment of individuals. Sport must have a purpose beyond medals. Sport's purpose must be to make for a better society.

In addition, it should be acknowledged that there is a significant difference in the funding of recreational and competitive sport for persons with disabilities, compared to those without.

If we are serious about making for an equitable society, the funding also needs to be equitable, with governments and corporate sponsors key players in the future of sport.

[NEXT SLIDE – SUPERBOWL]

Today sport is one of the planet's biggest and fastest growing entertainment and leisure industries. It generates over 500 billion US dollars each year, star players at the highest level earn millions, and attendances and TV audiences continue to grow exponentially.

Despite elite sport's astronomical growth I still feel it is detached and disconnected in certain parts of society, especially within governments who I fear undervalue and underappreciate the health and societal benefits sports participation can bring.

Currently there is a significant discrepancy in the amount governments invest getting people active compared to the sums they spend treating diseases and conditions caused by a lack of activity.

[NEXT SLIDE – THE NEED TO BE ACTIVE]

To illustrate the point, consider these EU figures.

In 2018, the 27 EU Members States spent collectively nearly EUR 51 billion on recreation and sport.

However, according to a 2018 study by the Centre for Economics and Business Research for the International Sport and Culture Association, the same nations spend on average EUR 80.4 billion each year in treatment of diseases caused by a lack of exercise. This is a number set to rise even higher if Europeans do not exercise more.

This means that roughly EUR 30 billion more is spent on treatment related to inactivity than on prevention by getting more people active in the first place. This is despite a 2021 World Health Organisation report highlighting that for every 1 dollar spent on addressing physical inactivity, the return on investment is 3.20 dollars.

The sooner this is addressed, the faster the amount spent on treatment will decrease.

Together, we have a duty to inform governments and policy makers about the health benefits of sport and work with them to negotiate the barriers to participation. This could include changing or introducing new legislation.

[NEXT SLIDE – MACRON]

Ahead of the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games, we've seen the French government reduce the VAT on a range of equipment for persons with disabilities from 20% to 5.5%. The cost of assistive technologies has just become less of a barrier to France's 12 million persons with disabilities.

Locally that means men, women and children become more active in their community and healthier. Nationally that investment in 15% of their population will benefit their economy in the long-term. It's a win-win.

But we also need governments to look beyond the health and economic benefits sport brings and consider the educational impact too.

This is why the starting point for getting people active and into sport must be the schools, with today's youngsters less active than ever before.

If we do not get youngsters active and into sport when they are at school, then what chance is there of them getting active later in life?

Most likely they will remain inactive; the result will be greater health problems for society and an even greater impact economically.

For the school sport system to be as productive as possible, we need to ensure the system works for everyone, not just for a few. For too long children with a disability have been excluded from physical education sessions or marginalised from the school sport system. This must change and physical education teachers need to be educated on how to train individuals with a disability.

Take a moment and think back to your school days.

[NEXT SLIDE – LAST KID]

Was sport really a truly enjoyable and inclusive experience for everyone in your class or looking back do you think it had negative impact on some people?

I'm sure for many of you this was a familiar scenario. The two best players would be captains and they would take it in turns to pick their teams from the gathered classmates in front of them.

Usually, the kids who did not really like enjoy sport were chosen last and forced to play in a position where they did not have too much involvement. For many this was their first experience of sport, and I am certain it was not enjoyable.

To achieve a positive experience school sport needs to be inclusive for all and not just an opportunity for the talented kids in a particular sport to excel further.

[NEXT SLIDE – SITTING VOLLEYBALL]

I think the school sport model, particularly in junior schools, needs to be reserved. Rather than focussing on popular sports, the attention should switch to a sport which everyone can enjoy no matter what their ability. Enjoyment and fun for all should be the key drivers.

Sport at school should not just be seen purely as recreation either, sport needs to be seen as an important part of the education process too.

Sport is life's great educator, helping develop a range of life skills that are beneficial to all.

Teamwork, leadership, communication, learning to win with grace, learning to lose with dignity, self-confidence, discipline, playing by the rules are all life skills taught by planting sport. The earlier people can learn these skills, the better it will be for society.

[NEXT SLIDE – GUTTMANN]

And we can say that with authority. The Paralympic Movement began with a German Jewish Second World War refugee called Sir Ludwig Guttman. A leading neurologist, he started research into how sport could be used to treat and rehabilitate those with spinal injuries.

In 1944 Guttman opened the spinal injuries centre at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Great Britain, treating injured soldiers and civilians. In time rehabilitative sport evolved to recreational sport and then competitive sport.

In 1948 the first Stoke Mandeville Games were held, and 16 injured servicemen and women took part in injury.

[NEXT SLIDE – ROME 1960]

Twelve years later, the first Paralympic Games took place here in Rome with 17 countries and 209 athletes.

Six decades later in Tokyo 162 countries and 4,400 athletes competed at the Paralympics in Tokyo. The Paralympic Movement is proof that Change Starts With Sport.

For persons with disabilities, Para sport participation also has additional benefits in terms of brain health and social inclusion with evidence supporting an increased sense of confidence, independence, acceptance and quality of life.

[NEXT SLIDE – SOPHIE CHRISTIANSEN]

A 2019 study including elite Para athletes showed that 97% of athletes were employed – a rate much higher than the general population of persons with disabilities.

As the President of the IPC, I want share with you some examples of how the IPC works closely with its 200 plus Members Organisations to try and facilitate a route into sport for persons with disabilities.

Although the global governing body of the Paralympic Movement, the IPC is like most international federations, we are not a cash rich organisation and every single cent spent must count and return value for money.

With the resources we have, we cannot do everything and that is why we work so closely with our members, the people who are on the ground, to support them in increasing participation. They know their territories much better than we do.

[NEXT SLIDE – NPCDP GRAPHIC]

Since 2017, we have been working with Toyota, one of our prized Worldwide Paralympic Partners, to deliver an ambitious project to support National Paralympic Committees and change our society to be one in which everyone can participate and contribute through the power of sports and mobility.

Together we developed our National Paralympic Committee Development Project (NPCDP) which aims to increase the knowledge, skills, capacity and opportunities for National Paralympic Committees at all levels to develop Para athletes and Para sport.

Rather than just providing financial support, we consulted with our National Paralympic Committees and asked them what they needed from us. With the feedback provided we tailored a development programme for them that provides strong structural education, training, and support to grow local partnerships with both commercial and non-commercial entities.

[NEXT SLIDE – ANGELICA ESPINOZA, PERU ATHLETE]

The programme operates in three key areas – training courses to further the organisational capacity of National Paralympic Committees, Sport Technical Training for coaches, officials and classifiers, and Athlete Development Training Camps for athletes including sport skills and education.

To date, 137 National Paralympic Committees and 53,000 individuals – split 50/50 in terms of gender - have benefited from the programme in just five years. Primarily the National Paralympic Committees that have benefited are located in Central and Latin America, Africa, South-East Asia and Oceania.

Had it not been for the pandemic, seven NPCs would have competed in their first Paralympic Game in Tokyo as result of this Toyota supported programme. In the end, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, six featured for the first time which is still a fantastic step in the right direction.

In addition, nearly 280 Para athletes that have benefitted from tailored training programmes have attended major events including World Championships. At the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic

Games there were 120 athletes who competed that came through the National Paralympic Committee Development Programme – two of them won gold medals.

[NEXT SLIDE – HERBERT ACEITUNO, EL SALVADOR ATHLETE]

One great example of what we have achieved through the programme is the National Paralympic Committee of El Salvador. Through the programme we have trained 75% of their national coaches with regards to Para sport. With specialist training now available, there has been a 50% increase in the number of people practicing Para sport in the country. Today, more than 2,000 Para athletes now participate in 15 different sports in the country.

At the Lima 2019 Parapan American Games, El Salvador won its first gold medal in 20 years with a coach and Para athlete who were supported by the National Paralympic Committee Development Programme. That athlete, Para Powerlifter Herbert Aceituno, went on to win El Salvador's first ever Paralympic medal in Tokyo.

In addition to working with corporate partners, we also work closely with development banks.

[NEXT SLIDE – POLETH MENDES, ECUADOR ATHLETE]

Since 2017, we are incredibly grateful that the Latin American Development Bank has invested more than USD 1.5 million to develop Para sport as a tool for social inclusion in the Americas.

Targeting 11 countries, we have worked to improve access to Para sport, provide sustainable pathways for people with disabilities living in underserved communities, raise awareness of the Paralympic Movement, and contributed to a more inclusive society in the Americas region.

This programme does not just promote sport and its health benefits, but the positive values of sport in society.

To date more than 800 athletes, 2,500 local leaders and 250 coaches have benefited from the programme.

Already we are seeing more and better athletes emerging from the Americas region. At the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games we witnessed history as Ecuador won gold for the first time, while Venezuela, Chile and Colombia had their most successful Games ever.

People with disabilities experience greater disadvantages in the area of education, health and employment than the general population. Therefore, the Inter American Development Bank support Paralympic sport as a tool for social and economic inclusion to help improve their quality of life.

Before I conclude, I want to share with you the powerful story of Luis Herazo as a shining example of why tailored sport programmes work, and how they can transform the lives of those who benefit from them.

[NEXT SLIDE – LUIS HERAZO]

Born with cerebral palsy which affects the lower parts of his body, Luis had regular surgery and often would consider what to do with his future following a difficult childhood.

Aged 19 years-old, and just a short time after recovery from his latest surgery, we invited him to take part in a Para sport development training camp held in his hometown of Monteria, Colombia.

Despite being excluded from school sport due to his impairment, Luis often dreamt of becoming an athlete. He also dreamt of being an active member of his local community who, at the time, excluded him for having a disability.

At the training camp we found that Luis had a natural talent for throwing the javelin. We found him a coach, and soon after invited him to compete at an Athletics International Open in Medellin where he won a bronze medal.

From there he was invited to Sao Paulo, Brazil, to take part in an international workshop alongside his coach who received specialist training.

The experience completely changed his life, transforming the relationship he held with the local community and, most importantly, his own father.

Because of his introduction to sport, he was the first person in his family to compete in a national championships in any sport.

By flying to Sao Paulo, he was the first person from his village ever to get on a plane and travel to another country.

In winning a bronze medal, and eventually going on to become national champion and national record holder, he went from community exclusion to community inclusion. He is now a role model for all other kids with disabilities in his neighbourhood.

His father has gone from thinking his son had no abilities and no future, to feeling a great sense of pride at the talents of his son.

“When I was younger, people used to look at me in a bad way, with pity in their eyes, but that has clearly changed over the years thanks to my sporting performances. Now they even see me as an inspiration!” he said.

“I am no longer seen as an ignorant young man, but as a sportsman and as a positive example of life.”

[NEXT SLIDE – CLOSING REMARKS]

Closing remarks by Andrew.