THE INCLUSION LANDSCAPE IN INTERNATIONAL SPORTS FEDERATIONS: PERSPECTIVES ON THE PARTICIPATION OF ATHLETES WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT
Introduction: Inclusion within international sports federations has emerged as a critical issue, particularly regarding athletes with disabilities. While some federations have achieved notable progress, others continue to face considerable challenges. A comprehensive understanding of the current state of inclusion is essential for promoting equitable opportunities across global sports. Aim: This study explored the extent of inclusion practices within international sports federations, with a specific focus on expanding sport opportunities for athletes with disabilities.
It aims to develop a typology of international sport organisations based on their approach to inclusion, to analyse the organisational factors that shape these practices, to explore their connection to broader social integration, to identify key enablers and barriers, and to offer evidence-informed recommendations for improving inclusive governance in international sport.
Methods: A comprehensive, qualitative review of selected literature, policy documents, reports, and case studies was conducted. The analysis involved an assessment of organizational policies and programs, a comparative evaluation across different sports disciplines, and the identification of effective inclusion strategies and initiatives. Results: The findings revealed significant variability in the implementation of inclusion efforts among international sports federations. Some organizations have developed comprehensive programs supporting athletes with disabilities, while others display limited or inconsistent initiatives. Successful practices included targeted funding, provision of adaptive sports equipment, specialized training for coaches and officials, inclusive or parallel competition opportunities, and greater media visibility for athletes with disabilities. However, major barriers persist, including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, low awareness, and weak enforcement of inclusion policies. These challenges highlight the need for coordinated, sustained efforts to strengthen inclusivity across international sports. Conclusion: This study underscored both advancements and persistent gaps in the inclusion of athletes with disabilities within international sports federations. Achieving a truly inclusive environment requires continuous investment, stronger policy frameworks, and a systemic commitment to diversity. International sports federations are called to adopt varied practices that ensure athletes with disabilities have full access to training programs and participation in sports competitions across all levels.

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INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of athletes with disabilities has become a central concern in the evolution of international sport policy and governance. Recognized as a fundamental human right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006), the right to participate in sport obligates international sports federations to ensure equitable opportunities for all athletes, irrespective of disability status. Frameworks such as the Kazan Action Plan (UNESCO, 2017) further reinforce these commitments by clearly linking sport inclusion to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Despite these international mandates, significant disparities persist in how inclusion is conceptualized and implemented across different sports disciplines. While some federations have made notable advances in embedding sport for persons with disabilities' pathways into their structures and developing parallel or integrated competition systems, others exhibit only limited or symbolic engagement

(DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Misener & Darcy, 2014; Darcy et al., 2017). This fragmentation often leaves athletes with disabilities facing unequal access to high-performance opportunities, insufficient support for adaptive needs, and inconsistent recognition within international sporting arenas (Jaarsma et al., 2014; Swanson, Kent, 2017).

A critical dimension underpinning these disparities lies within the organizational processes and structures of international sports federations. Inclusion is not only the result of isolated programs or goodwill initiatives, it is fundamentally shaped by organizational determinants such as strategic leadership, governance models, dedicated inclusion policies, resource allocation mechanisms, and internal cultures that either support or constrain change (Shields & Synnot, 2016; Thomas & Smith, 2009). For instance, the presence of dedicated inclusion committees, disability sport officers, or strategic action plans often signals deeper institutional commitment, translating into more sustained and systemic practices.

However, research also highlights that many sports organizations struggle with translating high-level commitments into operational realities, frequently due to gaps in leadership prioritization, lack of specialized expertise, inadequate funding, or absent accountability frameworks (Elling et al., 2001; Misener & Darcy, 2014; Shilbury et al., 2008). As a result, athletes with disabilities may encounter well-intentioned but ultimately fragmented efforts that fail to dismantle structural barriers to full participation.

Aim and Objectives

Given this context, the present paper explores the extent of inclusion practices within international sports federations, with a specific focus on expanding sport opportunities for athletes with disabilities. It aims to develop a typology of international sport organizations based on their approach to inclusion, to analyze the organizational factors that shape these practices, to explore their connection to broader social integration, to identify key enablers and barriers, and to offer evidence-informed recommendations for improving inclusive governance in international sport.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design to develop an in-depth understanding of how international sports organizations conceptualize and operationalize inclusion for athletes with disabilities. The design allowed us to systematically explore diverse organizational contexts, policies, and governance approaches.

Data sources and selection

A document-based review was conducted, analyzing 52 documents published between 2005 and 2023. These included strategic plans, policies, governance frameworks, classification regulations, annual reports, and publicly available audits from international sport federations.

Documents were sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and official websites of relevant sport governing bodies and international organizations (e.g., IPC, UNESCO, Virtus). Search terms included "disability sport inclusion," "organizational policy in sport federations," "inclusive sport governance" and "Para sport development." Documents were included if they explicitly discussed organizational strategies or determinants related to the inclusion of athletes with disabilities in the context of international sport governance.

Data were analyzed through a thematic analysis framework, following these steps:

Familiarisation and initial coding: Documents were reviewed in full, and segments were coded that referenced governance structures (e.g., dedicated inclusion committees, Para divisions), leadership commitments, funding strategies, capacity-building (e.g., coach or official training), and monitoring or accountability mechanisms.

Theme development: Codes were clustered into broader themes that illustrated how organizations approached inclusion - whether through formal governance, resource allocation, programmatic initiatives, or symbolic gestures.

Comparative analysis: Thematic patterns were compared across different sports disciplines and organizational types, allowing for the identification of similarities, divergences, and distinctive governance models.

Categorization: This iterative process led to the emergence of four distinct organizational categories, ranging from exclusive disability sport structures to integrated models that unite athletes with and without disabilities - mirroring the analytical framework presented in the Results.

Although the primary focus was on international sports federations—the formal governing bodies responsible for specific sports - the analysis also included major international sport organizations and programs like Special Olympics Unified Sports. This broader scope was adopted to capture alter-

native organizational approaches that, while not traditional federations, significantly advance social inclusion through sport. Including these examples provided a richer comparative framework, particularly for understanding how sport can serve as a catalyst for societal inclusion beyond elite competition.

This methodological approach allowed the study to move beyond isolated program descriptions and reveal how organizational determinants - such as leadership engagement, funding commitments, and dedicated governance structures - collectively shape the opportunities available to athletes with disabilities, as demonstrated in the four-category framework in the Results.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis identified four broad categories of international sports organizations, distinguished by how they organize and implement opportunities for athletes with disabilities. These range from entities fully dedicated to disability sport to hybrid models that facilitate participation alongside athletes without disabilities. Table 1 summarises these categories, examples, and their typical organizational features.

Table 1. *Categories of international sports organizations and their inclusion approaches*

Category	Examples	Typical organizational features	Notes	Illustrative case
1. Organizations exclusively for athletes with disabilities	IPC, IBSA, IWAS, IFCPF, VIRTUS, WAS, ICSD, SUDS	Dedicated governance, technical committees, policies tailored to impairment needs, specialist expertise in classification, secure funding streams	Highest alignment with disability sport, though often operate in parallel to mainstream structures	The IPC's classification protocols and sponsorship models for Para competitions
2. Mainstream federations with dedicated Para programs	ITF, ITTF, UCI, World Rowing, World Taekwondo, World Triathlon, World Sailing	Formal inclusion policies, disability sport committees/ officers, targeted budgets, joint event calendars	Integrated or hybrid structures, influenced by leadership commitment and historical context	UCI's integration of Para-cycling Championships into its main calendar
3. Mainstream federations with limited initiatives	FIBA (some inclusive events like FIBA Open), FIFA, ICC, other IOC IFs without Para divisions	Inclusion references in mission or CSR documents, few dedicated staff/ resources, occasional partnerships	Engagement generally limited and sporadic	FIFA's reliance on external partnerships for disability football
4. Programs mixing athletes with and without disabilities	Special Olympics Unified Sports	Emphasis on shared teams and educational initiatives to reshape perceptions	Advance social inclusion alongside participation	Unified leagues combining athletes with intellectual disabilities (ID) and without

Case illustrations

Specific examples further clarify how these categories function in practice. Within Category 1, the IPC-VIRTUS partnership reinstated pathways for athletes with ID after the Sydney 2000 exclusion by developing rigorous classification systems and ethical safeguards. This resulted in over 1,000 athletes from 89 countries being classified since 2012, with expanded opportunities for athletes with Down syndrome in multiple disciplines (Burns, 2022).

For Category 2, a study of ITF's wheelchair tennis division highlighted how structured approaches - including international classification, coach education, and integrated event planning - enhanced access, competition quality, and social experiences for players (Vrdoljak, 2017). Similarly, reverse integration in British wheelchair basketball (Ramsden et al., 2023) has shown health and social benefits when able-bodied athletes participate in league play, supported by IWBF at the grassroots level.

Organizational variation in focus and outcomes

A comparative mapping underscores how these categories differ in emphasis on competitive structures versus broader community-building goals. They are organized along this spectrum in Table 2.

Table 2. *Comparative emphasis on sport participation and social integration*

Category	Examples	Sport participation focus	Social integration orientation
Exclusive disability-sport bodies	IPC, IBSA, VIRTUS, ICSD	Very high: specialized systems and competitions	More limited everyday social blending
Mainstream federations with Para programs	ITF, ITTF, UCI, World Rowing	High: integrated events and structures	Moderate: fosters visibility and normalization
Federations with minimal engagement	FIBA, FIFA, ICC	Low: mostly symbolic or occasional partnerships	Low: little impact beyond statements
Mixed-participation programs	Special Olympics Unified	Moderate: less tied to elite sport	Very high: explicitly designed for social cohesion

Organizational drivers and barriers

Beyond these categories, the analysis revealed recurring features influencing how deeply inclusion takes root. Common barriers alongside structural elements that support more sustained and effective practices are compiled in Table 3.

Table 3. *Organizational factors shaping inclusion outcomes*

Dimension	Barriers	Enabling features
Leadership & Governance	Low prioritization; broad mission statements without follow-through	Dedicated committees/officers; explicit strategic plans
Funding & Resources	Ad-hoc project grants; lack of stable budgets	Ring-fenced funding; targeted sponsorships
Capacity Building	Few trained staff; minimal adaptive sport expertise	Specialized coach/official education programs
Competition Design	Standalone events limiting visibility	Joint or parallel events under shared federations
Monitoring & Data	Absence of systems tracking disability participation	Robust metrics and transparent reporting
Societal Impact Orientation	Focused narrowly on competitive sport	Initiatives fostering mixed participation and community ties

Taken together, these results show how international organizations vary not only in their structures and resources but also in the consistency and sustainability of their approaches. The presence of dedicated leadership, earmarked funding, technical expertise, and rigorous tracking systems were repeatedly linked to deeper, more resilient inclusion practices across the federations studied.

DISCUSSION

This study enhances understanding of how international sports federations approach the inclusion of athletes with disabilities by revealing significant differences in governance models, resource allocation, and programmatic commitments. The typology developed demonstrates that inclusion is embedded in organizations to widely varying degrees, ranging from well-established systems with dedicated infrastructure to more superficial engagements confined to mission statements or isolated events.

These findings align with longstanding critiques that sport organizations often adopt broad inclusion language while lacking the structural depth needed for lasting change (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Næss, 2023). Beekman et al. (2023) similarly note that many international sport statutes articulate principles of disability inclusion without enforceable legal obligations, allowing federations to meet external expectations through formal statements rather than meaningful internal transformation.

Even among organizations with advanced governance frameworks, inclusion can be uneven. The IPC and VIRTUS example illustrates that while rigorous systems facilitated the reintegration of athletes with intellectual disabilities post-2000, this also highlighted how the scope of inclusion remains contingent on technical standards and ethical considerations (Burns, 2022; Darcy et al., 2017). This underscores the need for ongoing scrutiny to ensure diverse impairment groups are fully supported.

Notably, the study also highlights the diverse roles that sport can play beyond traditional competitive structures. Programs like Special Olympics Unified Sports show how intentionally designing opportunities for athletes with and without disabilities to participate together can reshape perceptions and build social capital - echoing Dar-

cy et al.'s (2016) findings on the broader societal benefits of inclusive sport initiatives (Djobova & Kirilova, 2021; Djobova & Kirilova, 2023). However, such efforts are relatively rare within the mainstream federation landscape, where the focus remains largely on elite pathways.

Persistent barriers identified here - such as reliance on short-term funding, gaps in technical expertise, and inadequate data systems—mirror patterns observed across broader sport management research. For example, Sotiriadou and Wicker (2013) highlight that sustainable programming requires not only initial enthusiasm but institutional mechanisms that can withstand leadership or funding shifts. Similarly, Hums and Moorman (2018) argue that without systematic investment in staff capacity, inclusion efforts tend to plateau, regardless of high-level policies.

While this paper focused on formal governance documents and strategic plans, future research should explore how these commitments are enacted day-to-day. Prior studies caution that public-facing policies often serve as legitimacy tools that may obscure gaps in lived practice (Misener & Darcy, 2014; Næss, 2023). Interviews with athletes, coaches, and administrators or ethnographic studies within federations could reveal whether stated goals translate into tangible experiences of access and belonging.

Additionally, though this study noted the importance of intersectionality - considering how disability interacts with gender, economic status, and cultural background - this dimension remains underexplored at the international federation level. Pursuing this in the future, work could illuminate how multiple identities shape athletes' opportunities and highlight where inclusive governance must become even more nuanced. While there are promising signs of evolving commitments across segments of international sport governance, achieving genuinely inclusive systems will require more than strategic documents. It will depend on federations embedding disability access into their core operational and cultural frameworks, alongside a willingness to continuously adapt structures, funding priorities, and accountability measures to meet diverse athlete needs.

CONCLUSION

This study offered a detailed examination of how international sports federations organize and promote opportunities for athletes with disabilities, revealing a landscape that ranges from robustly structured systems to more surface-level engagements. By mapping organizations across four categories and highlighting case examples, the analysis shows that the depth and sustainability of inclusion efforts hinge on specific governance choices - such as the presence of dedicated leadership, stable funding streams, technical expertise, and systems for tracking participation.

Examples like the IPC and VIRTUS initiatives, which expanded pathways for athletes with intellectual disabilities through rigorous classification and ethical safeguards, and the ITF's integrated approach to wheelchair tennis, demonstrate how deliberate organizational frameworks can reshape access and participation. These contrasts with federations that maintain general commitments without accompanying structural measures underscore the crucial role of institutional design.

Looking ahead, international federations are challenged to move beyond broad declarations by embedding inclusion into the very fabric of their operations - through committed leadership, targeted investment, and continuous monitoring to ensure progress. Equally important is recognizing sport's capacity to foster community connections and reshape societal attitudes, an aspect that remains underleveraged across much of the global sport landscape.

Future research should complement governance analyses with athlete and stakeholder perspectives to better understand how formal commitments play out in everyday settings. Exploring intersectional dimensions - how disability interlinks with gender, cultural context, or economic status - would further advance the conversation and guide federations toward more comprehensive inclusion strategies.

Ultimately, achieving meaningful and lasting change will require federations to treat inclusion not as an adjunct to existing systems but as a central organizing principle, capable of driving both sporting excellence and broader social transformation.

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