European Network
Sport and Disabilities

Background Note
Intro

- People with disabilities represent the European Union’s largest minority (approximately 15% of the population).
- The EU’s Charter of fundamental rights recognises many rights for people who have disabilities. There is still great uncertainty surrounding the right to practice a physical or sporting activity.
- More than half of people with disabilities (56%) say that they do not practice physical activity daily (Enquête 2004).
- However, studies and experience show that sport is a powerful tool for integration, of openness to others, of pushing one’s limits and self-affirmation for people with disabilities. It is also a privileged means of maintaining good health.
- The United Nations Convention concerning the rights of handicapped people (2006) enounces in its Article 30 the right to “participation in cultural life, leisure and sports,” and particularly insists upon equal access to sports infrastructure.
- For the 80 million people affected by disabilities, and despite planned advances by the European Strategy for Handicap 2010-2020 and national legal framework, access to a certain number of services or fields of social life remain complex (employment, school, daily life... but also cultural and sporting activities).

The Think tank’s position

- Access to sport is a fundamental right. It is the public authorities’ and sports world’s responsibility to guarantee this access to all members of the public, whichever their specificities may be.
- The development of sports practice is not a challenge specific to handicapped people but concerns the population as a whole, if only with regards to well-being and Health. Even more so, since the motivations of non-practicers - whether they have disabilities or - overlap (lack of time, lack of money, lack of motivation...) However, these factors are reinforced by difficulties that people with disabilities encounter daily.
- It would be suitable to act upon the brakes that curtail access to physical activity: these brakes are material, but also psychological. Act on the demand.
- It would also be suitable to act on the offer. Render the offer as large as possible, be sure that it is close and adapted to the expectations and the abilities of participants.

The state of affairs in Europe

- Most countries show a commitment to sport for handicapped people, even if few of these have articulated and detailed policies.
- Despite an increase in political interest for the promotion of participation in sports for handicapped people, few quantitative and qualitative research have made the follow-up of the state and evolution of the sector in Europe possible.
- The definitions of disabilities, sport and participation vary considerably from one country to another, rendering the comparison almost impossible; standardized procedures of collection of data do not exist.
- Few specific policies concerning the participation of handicapped people exist.
- The principal obstacles and challenges to participation in sport are the following: “accessibility,” “financial support,” and “cooperation” between shareholders.
- A series of key organisations are taking part, including diverse national sports for people with disabilities and traditional sports. However, organisations of handicapped people are rarely part of these.
- An essential political objective between the countries is the transfer of responsibility towards “ordinary” organisations, even though only limited and variable knowledge exists concerning implementing it efficiently.
- The necessity to have better informed and educated staff and improved infrastructures of support and accessible installations constitute a constant challenge.
- With existing heterogeneous terminology and definitions in different European countries (ranging from elite sport to recreational sports and physical activity adapted to concepts of sports and readaptation), defining sport for people with disabilities is as complex as defining the term “sport.”
- Harmonised European statistical measures on the participation in physical activity for people with disabilities do not exist.
- The lack of a common definition and of a homogeneous statistical database renders the comparison on the levels of practice difficult.
- Nevertheless, the SEDY project has enabled a filling of this gap to a certain extent:
  - Participation varies strongly (especially amongst young people) between countries: approximately 22% for those aged under 24 years old, 43% for those aged 6 to 44 in Italy, 28% for those aged 14 to 25 in the UK.
  - For other countries (Portugal, Lithuania), only data concerning elite athletes are available.

**Challenges and institutional motivations**

- The principal objectives for each country vary slightly. For some, the objectives seem more based on participation and performance, particularly on the success of elite sport (Switzerland). For the majority, however (UK, France, Greece, Germany), the objectives are vast, notably concerning the improvement in options of participation, of performance and of élite, but also concerning using sport as a tool of readaptation, of social integration and of health.

**Challenges**

**Accessibility**

- This concerns not only the pre-existing framework, but also the entirety of services, welcome, information and the practices themselves.
- The majority of European countries have built the integration of handicapped sports people with sports values, within the same near structure, either sport for the disabled, either valid, either both, via the sections of sport for the disabled.
- In this respect, France remains a unique model in Europe, with a federation for sport for the disabled.
- However, the place of specific federations remains central as:
  - A share of the public will not be able to be part of valid federations as they are too handicapped.
  - A certain number of specific disciplines exist (power wheelchair, goalboal).
  - These federations have acquired real expertise in the fields of sport and disabilities, which render them vital for the putting into place of adapted and adequate practice.
  - Sport is also the opportunity to share other experiences. The regrouping within a federation also reveals a true will to assemble in pairs.

The development of the practice of sport at school and outside school

- The inclusion in an ordinary environment brings about difficulties concerning the identification of demand. By principle, each school, college or lycée is susceptible to welcome a youth with a disability. Therefore, this encompasses an effort to identify potential practisers, and an almost tailored response, in line with their expectations, motivations, the nature of their handicap.
- Another difficulty concerns the training of professors. All are not trained for managing specific audiences.
- The final difficulty is material. All structures do not necessarily have the adequate material, which would allow the practice of an adapted sporting activity, even more so considering that certain materials, which are very specific, are expensive.
- Finally, too many children with handicaps are excluded from the practice of sport at school, often because of the will of school health guidelines and by the parents themselves who ask for an exemption. Physical education teachers are also afraid – because of their lack of knowledge of the concerned pathologies – to make mistakes of counter-indication.

Information, awareness and discovery

- Parents have an essential role to play to develop the practice of sport, especially among young people. They want to encourage children, accompany them daily in their activities.
- Information is vital to make known the available sporting offer and the possibilities of practice, notably in terms of proximity.
- Beyond this information, raising awareness around the benefits of sporting activities, as much for health as for the well-being of those taking part, is a key to success. Work must be done in families, for whom the practice of sport is not necessarily a priority.
- To offer sporting activity is also to make kids more independent in their future adult lives (be able to move, to find one self, learn how to bike ride...). For many it is a question of confidence and support.
- **The discovery of sporting activity is vital** to develop the practice. Open days for discovery, raising awareness – be it at school or in specialised centres – must allow handicapped people to discover the passion of sport and to take part in the long term. As an example, the FFH and the UCPA offer “holidays for handicapped people” in France. These are adapted sporting holidays, that make for reaching a larger audience than the one registered in clubs.

- **Positive communication** is essential. Moving from the notion of “patient” to that of “person.” Speaking of sporting activity for pleasure, physical and mental well-being, self-esteem, discovery, freedom... Whichever the level of practice may be, sport can become a formidable motor of resilience and going beyond one’s limits.

- To communicate on the positive aspects of sport implies **convincing the directors of establishments, educators ... the medical and social staff** especially.

### Sporting practice in specialised establishments

- **Each establishment is free** to offer physical and sporting activities. Therefore, their putting into place relies on the will of the direction or on the specialised educators. The restricted economic situation means that this type of activity is currently under threat. Therefore, there is an essential solution: be sure that there is an **obligation to introduce physical education in all educative projects medical and social establishments**, for reasons that everyone agrees on.

- **Very few medical and social establishments integrate physical or sporting activities in their institutional establishment project**, by lack of belief in the purpose of this type of practice, by lack of means or by lack of information on the feasibility of the activity/

- **The material and organisational constraints** of each establishment (management of human resources, planning, available resources, vehicles necessary for the movement of the public...) also impact the levels of practice. In this regard, the sporting activities that necessitate moving are more complicated to put into place than those offered within the establishments themselves.

- The entrance to these establishments is a **consumer’s practice**. The youth will want to try activities, to which they have limited access, but this does not always work in the long term.

- A difference exists between establishments specialised for young children and teenagers, who have disabilities. Physical activity is more often offered to young children.

### Obstacles preventing the practice of sport

- The absence of **human means** (trained leaders, necessary for the development and to follow-up of actions) and **accessibility to sporting infrastructure**, notably in terms of times of availability (swimming for example)

- **Mental disabilities** are a fundamental obstacle to the practice of sport. Human support (and its structuring, which sometimes involves one educator per person) renders the development of daily practice difficult.
The conditions of welcome set up for participants, their families, is primordial. An adapted reception is necessary, so as not to discourage potential participants. However, this reception is often problematic.

The remote location of sporting infrastructures is also a brake in some regions, as journeys often constitute difficulties that need to be overcome. This necessitates support, and therefore an investment.

**The apprehension of the environment.** Sport is often perceived as secondary. There always exists a difficulty to spread the message that physical activity can help the youth gain confidence and independence.

**A very weak mediatisation** that contributes to the perpetuation of prejudices. The angle under which sports people with disabilities are observed is poorly adapted: their exceptional courage is highlighted too often, which pushes their sporting performance into the background. This lack of recognition of handicapped athletes’ sporting performances hinders the creation of “role models” susceptible to encourage handicapped people to play a sport.

Evolutions are necessary with regards to mentalities: **disabilities make one fearful**, particularly due to ignorance in the field of sport. The majority of people ignore what disabled people can achieve in terms of sport and prefer not to face that.

**A disparate organisation** of sport in Europe: there are **great differences in the organisation of sport** for people who are handicapped in Europe. Numerous Europeans practice the “integrated whole,” delegating to each sports federation the responsibility to look after its members who are handicapped: an approach that can lead to forgetting some severe handicaps, as these are too restrictive and not mediatised enough.

In France, on the contrary, the FHH preserves the control over the practice of sports for all types of handicaps and can welcome all, which enables complementarity with adequate counterparts.

There exist numerous laws concerning inclusion, notably in sport, but there is not enough regulation, which would enable to put these laws into practice: even though the tools exist, they are not used.

The different shareholders in sport for handicapped people communicate too little, which hampers the exchanges of knowledge and good practices, as well as possibilities of cooperation.

**Potential levers**

- **Development of a legal basis** in Europe for the integration of specific education on how to deal with disabilities in the education programmes of students in physical education, as well as in those of sport coaches.
- Work for the putting into place of a **common definition** in order to support the collection of information and analysis of the phenomenon of sport for people who are handicapped.
- **Development/support of innovative projects** with large potential for bringing different groups together, which brings about new norms in terms of welcoming members of the public who are handicapped.
- Construction of bridges between the world of sport and the medical-social sector, in order to offer an adapted sporting activity within establishments. In a period of budgetary constraints, the financing of these activities remains an equation to solve.

- Efforts to raise awareness around different levels of management of handicapped people. Fight for sport to be more recognised in institutional projects of establishments and give the means to people who have a project of this type to be accompanied the furthest possible.

- The support for the development of human resources (trained leaders) and the presence of relays in territories is vital to develop and follow projects.

- The adaptation of material means, persons, pedagogical content, reglementary aspects... Training is essential, as is the professionalization of clubs and welcome structures, in order to not discourage potential practitioners. Help for the visibility of the actions being led, through sporting meetings where the youth, handicapped or not, can meet.

- Communication on the different forms of disabilities, so that the image is not confined to the erroneous image of people with reduced mobility.

- Help with the acquisition of specific materials, or in rendering them available.

- Facilitate the link-up between practitioners, disabled or not, in order to respond to the challenge of support.

- Develop a sporting offer of discovery, of leisure, in order to allow a first experience and to spark the desire to start again.

European markers: global politics

- The European Union has defined a strategy concerning handicap on three principal axes
  - Cooperation between member states and the Commission
  - Complete participation of handicapped persons
  - Integrate handicap in a transversal manner in public policies

- The “European strategy 2010-2020 in favour of handicapped people”: an engagement renewed for a Europe without shackles. The strategy encourages the incorporation of the notion of accessibility in the training of concerned professionals, announces that the Commission commits itself to improve access to sport, participation in sporting events and the organisation of specific events, and will promote an education and training that are inclusive through the programme Youth on the Move.

European markers: Sport policies

- Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union (2000). The Union recognises and respects the right of handicapped people to benefit from measures aiming to ensure their autonomy, their social and professional integration and their participation in community life. (art. 26)

- White Book on sport 2007: it encourages Member States and sporting organisations to take the needs of handicapped people into account: they must assure themselves of the ease of accessibility to the equipment. It suggests adopting specific criteria to
ensure equal access to sport for everyone, and particularly for children who are handicapped, as well as promoting the training of staff, with a view to receive people who are handicapped. It also indicates that the subject will have an important priority level in the future sport agenda of the EU.

- **Opinion for an initiative of the Committee of the Regions of the EU “Sport, handicap, leisure” of 2013**: the Committee of the Regions of the European Union demands that the priority be given to education, training and raising awareness. It encourages the creation of an annual European day of sport for handicapped people and proposes to set up a system of regional officials for the development of sport for handicapped people in order to better link European politics with regional realities.

- **European Week of Sport**: it encourages the Member States and sporting organisations to take into account the needs of people in a situation of handicap: they must assure themselves of the accessibility of the equipment. It suggests to adopt specific criteria to ensure equal access to sport for everyone, and particularly for handicapped children, and to promote the training of staff with a view to welcome people who are handicapped. It also indicates that the subject will have an important level of priority in the future sport agenda of the EU.

**Project All for Sports for All**

- Project led by the European Paralympic Committee aiming to map the status quo of the handisport sector, and then to provide information on the upcoming challenges and the recommendations for the activities aligned in the sector at European level.

**SEDY Project**

- Project aiming to develop the practice of sport for handicapped youth, notably through researching a better coordination between offer and demand.
- Project piloted by the University of Amsterdam. Sport and Citizenship intervenes notably in the collection and bringing up of information at French level. It also uses the pilot organisation, notably in terms of communication and dissemination of results.

**Project EWOS Ability LINK KIT**

- Project aiming to **raise awareness and increase participation** of people who are handicapped in physical and sporting activities that are good for health, in the framework of the European Week of Sport. This project is piloted by the European Paralympic Committee. Sport and Citizenship participates in this project with the help of the pilot organisation, notably for the dissemination of project results.

**Examples of actions put into place by Sport and Citizenship in this field**

- Animation of a network of European experts on the theme “Sport and Handicap”
- Sport and Citizenship’s Review n°12, Sept. 2010
- Sport and Citizenship’s Review n°26, March 2014
- Sport and Citizenship’s Review n°37, March 2017
- Publication “Sport and Handicap in Europe”, 2014
- Conference “Sport and Handicaps: which levers, which perspectives?”, Paris, February 2014
- Conference “Europe, sport and disabilities: the challenge of inclusion. What kind of education and training for the coaching staff?”, 2012
- Consultation in the framework of the report written by Jacques Blanc for the Committee of the Regions on the theme “Sport, Handicap, Leisure” (2014).