



# Special Olympics: An Emerging Player in the Sport for Development Field

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**Special Olympics**





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## Executive Summary

Special Olympics was founded in 1968 under the leadership of Eunice Kennedy Shriver. At the time, people with intellectual disabilities were largely institutionalized or hidden from society, and Special Olympics created a unique opportunity to engage in meaningful sporting activities. The organization's mission was, and continues to be:

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*To provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community.*

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Special Olympics was revolutionary in that it allowed athletes with intellectual disabilities to train and compete at national and international events, opening the door to sports participation in a highly segregated society. As the Movement progressed, Special Olympics began to grow both geographically and programmatically. The organization has expanded from its North American roots into a global Movement with four million athletes participating in Special Olympics programs in 170 countries.

As the community of athletes has expanded and changed, Special Olympics programs have evolved as well. The needs of athletes go beyond the playing field and vary from Program to Program depending on the cultural and socioeconomic climate of the country. There are approximately 200 million people living with intellectual disabilities worldwide and despite rights declarations such as that of UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), people with intellectual disabilities remain one of the most marginalized populations in the world.<sup>i</sup> Severe stigma and social isolation create disparities in access to health care, education, and community life. These problems are exacerbated in the developing world, where stigmas are more prominent and resources more limited. Today, 70% of Special Olympics athletes reside in developing countries and to address the needs of this new athlete demographic, Special Olympics has developed a robust sport for development platform. As the largest convener of people with intellectual disabilities in the world, Special Olympics uses the convening and inclusionary power of sport to not only guarantee the right to sport for people with intellectual disabilities but also to promote the human rights and development objectives for this population in health, community integration, and education.



Special Olympics works to address the health needs of people with intellectual disabilities by providing health education and screenings and promoting physical activity. People with disabilities are disproportionately affected by the double burden of communicable and noncommunicable diseases. Special Olympics meets the unique health needs of its athletes in a multi-dimensional approach:

- **Sporting events:** Special Olympics trainings and competitions create an opportunity for athletes to engage in physical activity, decreasing the risk factors for noncommunicable diseases.
- **Family Health Forums:** Events at which family members, athletes, and community supporters are educated about locally relevant health issues such as nutrition or malaria prevention
- **Healthy Athletes:** Provides health screenings and referrals to athletes in seven disciplines.

Moving forward, Special Olympics will begin screenings for communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis and will then connect athletes to treatment through local partnerships. Through this multi-pronged approach, Special Olympics uses sport to promote the health of athletes and to address the barriers to parity in health and health care for people with intellectual disabilities.

Special Olympics also focuses on promoting social inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities. While all Special Olympics programming emphasizes inclusion, Unified Sports has become a pioneer for engendering social capital and social inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities. In Unified Sports, athletes with intellectual disabilities and partners without intellectual disabilities compete side-by-side. It builds social capital and social inclusion among athletes by empowering them to be present in the community, participate in that community through sport, and build relationships and friendships with others.<sup>ii</sup> Social inclusion is not only a human right outlined in the UNCRPD, it is also necessary in order for athletes to be able to access resources such as health care and education.

The third pillar of Special Olympics development programming is education and self-advocacy. Special Olympics actively advocates for the global population of people with intellectual disabilities on a number of fronts. First, through Athlete Leadership Programs athletes are trained in the leadership and interpersonal skills that empower athletes to become more visible in their communities and to assert themselves in positions of leadership. Special Olympics also advocates for athletes through data collection and research about the status of people with intellectual



disabilities. In order to demand the rights and services that athletes are entitled to, data must be available to demonstrate where the need lies and what services are not being provided. Through the magnification of the voice of people with intellectual disabilities, Special Olympics works to generate awareness and promote inclusion.

In order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, the development community must work to include the global population of 200 million people with intellectual disabilities in the development agenda and make a concerted effort to reach this hidden population. Moving forward, Special Olympics hopes to use its convening power to increase the integration of people with intellectual disabilities in development policies and initiatives and has committed to expanding its own sport for development programs. To accomplish these goals and to ensure the sustainability and local relevance of programs, Special Olympics is working to increase its local, national, and international partnerships with organizations and governments committed to addressing larger development issues. Collaboration will be key to not only strengthen the sport for development goals of Special Olympics, but also to deepen the impact of global development initiatives through the incorporation of people with intellectual disabilities.

## Introduction

### History of Special Olympics

Special Olympics began in the early 1960s when Eunice Kennedy Shriver created a summer camp at Timberlawn for people with intellectual disabilities. Mrs. Shriver was a long-time advocate for people with intellectual disabilities and the camp developed from her outrage at the lack of sports opportunities available to children with intellectual disabilities. This response to the stigma and social exclusion that people with intellectual disabilities face is what has fueled Special Olympics and allowed it to evolve over time. The organization was founded in 1968, a period in which the vast majority of people with intellectual disabilities were institutionalized. At this time the concept that people with intellectual disabilities could participate in meaningful sports activity was revolutionary. Special Olympics helped bring people with intellectual disabilities into the community, shattering the commonly held misconception that they were unable to participate in sports and demonstrating that there was potential for the social integration and inclusion of this population. Initially, the organization focused on the right to sport as a first step in the inclusion movement by bringing people with intellectual disabilities into the public sphere. In this way Special Olympics worked to



breed understanding in the larger society, where many people had experienced little or no interaction with a person with an intellectual disability.

### **Geographic and Programmatic Evolution of Special Olympics**

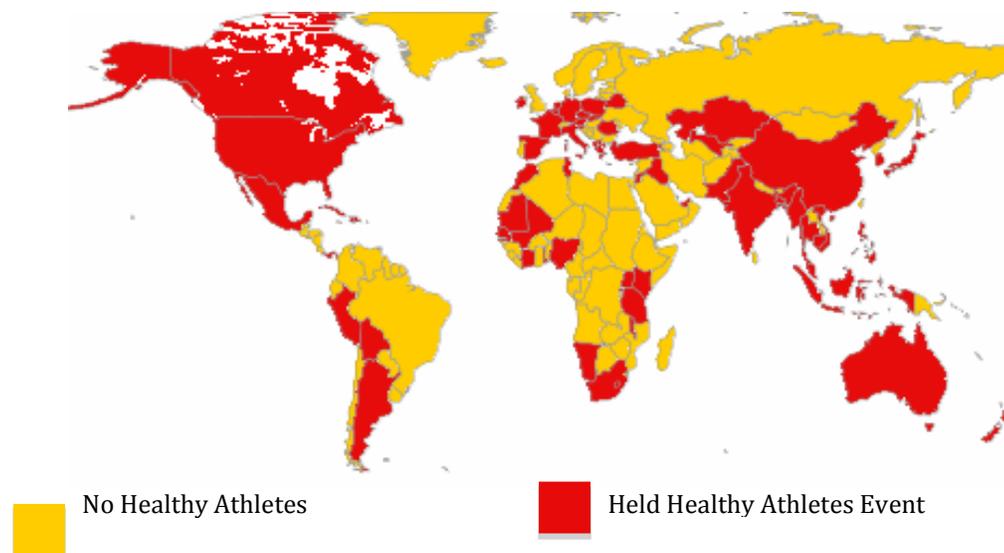
As the Movement progressed and social perceptions and attitudes began to change, Special Olympics quickly grew geographically. The first World Games was composed of athletes from a few states in the US and Canada. By the mid-1970s all fifty states and thirteen additional countries were participating and by the 8<sup>th</sup> World Games in 1991, 6,000 athletes were competing from 107 different countries. This change has been reflected in the Special Olympics logo, which has evolved from a single stylized figure to five figures surrounding a globe, representing North America, South America, Asia, Europe, and Africa. Today, Special Olympics serves over 4 million athletes in 170 countries and 7 regions and has become a truly international presence. In the past five years Special Olympics' Africa, East Asia, and Asia Pacific Programs have grown their number of athletes by 53%, 74%, and 122% respectively. In 2004, the largest population of Special Olympics athletes resided in North America, today North America has become the third-largest Special Olympics region.<sup>iii</sup> This shift underscores the universality of the message of the Special Olympics Movement that people with intellectual disabilities have a right to equality, dignity, and community.

As SOI has expanded geographically, the services it provides have also grown to address the diverse needs of Special Olympics' global population of athletes. Special Olympics was founded in the United States in the 1960s during a period of seclusion and institutionalization of people with intellectual disabilities. Beginning in this environment, programming focused on generating the opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities to engage in sports and sporting events, capitalizing on the empowering effect of sports participation. As the Movement has developed, Special Olympics has taken a step further and implemented programs that use sport as a catalyst to address the needs of athletes beyond the playing field. Currently, 70% of Special Olympics athletes reside in developing countries, and this population faces unique challenges. Studies show that 98% of children with disabilities in developing countries are denied an education and a disproportionate percent of people living with disabilities in these countries are living in extreme poverty.<sup>iv</sup> Special Olympics has worked to address these larger needs using the convening and inclusionary power of sport to fuel community change and to provide access to resources. The decentralized structure of Special Olympics has helped to facilitate this programmatic expansion. While Special Olympics International in Washington, DC remains the coordinating force of the Special Olympics Movement, each country (and in the United States, each state) is its own Special Olympics Program. Programs



maintain their own 501(c)(3) status and their own Board of Directors. For this reason, Programs pursue objectives relevant to local capacity and needs.

To meet the needs of its diverse population of athletes', programming has expanded in the areas of health, community integration, and education. Healthy Athletes, a program that provides health screenings at competitions or separate Healthy Athletes events, has grown from 10,448 screenings in 2006 to 80,147 screenings in 2011. The map below shows the countries that held Special Olympics screenings in 2011.



**Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of Healthy Athletes Screenings in 2011**

Growth has been particularly strong in Special Olympics' Africa region, where the number of screenings jumped from 961 in 2006 to 10,164 in 2012.<sup>v</sup> Unified Sports, another program that focuses on community integration by allowing people with and without intellectual disabilities to compete side by side on the same playing field, has also expanded rapidly. In 2006, there were 119,044 Unified Sports athletes with intellectual disabilities and partners without intellectual disabilities, 47% of which were in Special Olympics' North America Region. Today, there are 546,804 Unified Sports athletes and partners, with only 15% of those participants located in North America. Other Special Olympics programs, such as Athlete Leadership Programs, have taken similar paths as a result of Special Olympics' global expansion and its efforts to use sport to change whole communities. Special Olympics is now actively incorporating development goals such as health, inclusion, and education into its programming and has expanded dramatically in these fields.



As the population of Special Olympics athletes has grown and diversified from its North American origins, the organization has worked to address the larger needs of the athletes it serves. Special Olympics has begun to step into its new role on the international stage as one of the largest conveners of people with intellectual disabilities worldwide. This places the organization in a unique position to support people with intellectual disabilities through sport and beyond. As a sport for development organization, Special Olympics is integrating issues such as health, social inclusion, and self-advocacy into its programs to ensure that people with intellectual disabilities have access to the basic dignity and services that they deserve.

## Special Olympics International and Sport for Development

Sport has been recognized by the UN and other prominent international development organizations as a powerful tool to achieve social change. It can act as a catalyst for health promotion and disease prevention, peace building, education, social inclusion, and economic development. Due to sports' universal popularity, it acts as a bridge across social divides, uniting and engaging people of diverse backgrounds on an equal playing field. In this way sport is an excellent platform for a variety of development goals. It has been shown to be an especially powerful force to promote the rights of people with disabilities. People with disabilities comprise 15 percent of the global population, yet they are often excluded from development initiatives. People with intellectual disabilities in particular remain one of the most marginalized groups in the world.<sup>vi</sup> Due to high levels of stigma and socioeconomic barriers, they are often hidden or isolated from the rest of society and denied many of the basic rights to health, education, and community participation that they are entitled to. There are 200 million people living with intellectual disabilities worldwide and many face social isolation and lack access to basic health care and education. Special Olympics utilizes the power of sport to bring people with intellectual disabilities into the community, promoting social inclusion and connecting athletes to a range of services and opportunities.

Special Olympics programs utilize sport in two ways, reflecting the two pieces of the organization's mission statement. First, Special Olympics opens doors to sporting opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that, "States Parties shall take appropriate measures to encourage and promote the participation, to the fullest extent possible, of persons with disabilities in mainstream sporting activities at all levels."<sup>vii</sup> The UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace has also affirmed that sport is far from a luxury, but is a human right necessary to leading a healthy and fulfilling life.<sup>viii</sup> Stigma and social



isolation often keep people with intellectual disabilities from participating in sport and this exclusion serves to reinforce internalized oppression and segregation from the larger community.<sup>ix</sup> Consequently, Special Olympics works to guarantee access to this right to sport for people with intellectual disabilities around the world and brings opportunities to train, practice, and compete to its four million athletes worldwide.

Beyond providing access to sport, the second piece of Special Olympics' mission emphasizes ensuring the social inclusion, equality, and dignity of people with intellectual disabilities beyond the playing field. Special Olympics programs utilize sport to empower people with intellectual disabilities to claim their basic human rights to education, health care, and community life. These goals are not only emphasized at the Summer and Winter Games, they are integrated into year-round practices and competitions of Special Olympics teams. In these settings, sport acts as a catalyst to reconstruct communities around the world to ensure the equality and dignity of all persons with intellectual disabilities. As a sport for development program, Special Olympics utilizes sport to provide needs-based services to its athletes and conducts development initiatives in the areas of health, education, and community integration.

## Health

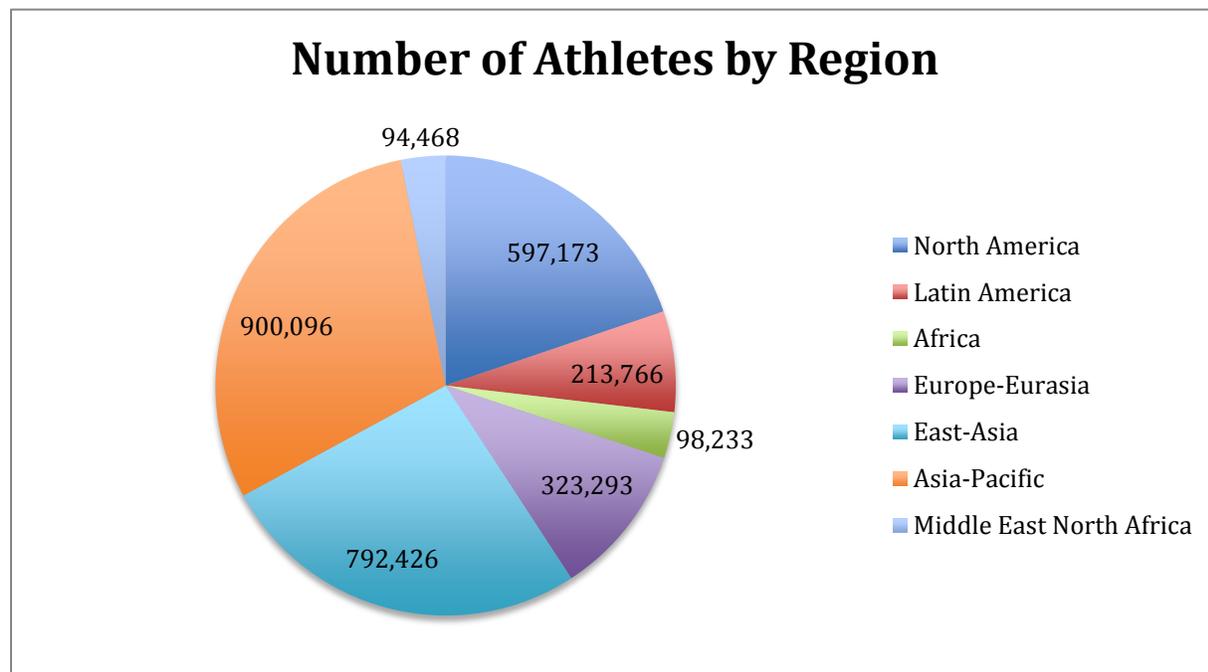
### Physical Activity

Special Olympics promotes the health of its athletes in a number of ways. First, it prevents noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) by providing an avenue for physical activity. The World Health Organization estimates that mortality, morbidity and disability resulting from NCDs accounts for approximately 43% of the global disease burden and is expected to rise to 60% by 2020.<sup>x</sup> Underdeveloped countries are disproportionately affected by NCDs, with 90% of all premature deaths attributed to NCDs occurring in low and middle-income countries. To ebb the burden of NCDs, particularly in the developing world where health resources are limited, preventative physical activity is crucial.<sup>xi</sup> Still, people with intellectual disabilities are less likely to engage in physical activity than the general population, putting them at a higher risk of acquiring a NCD.

Special Olympics combats the spread of NCDs by offering a sports experience for people with intellectual disabilities who would otherwise not be given an opportunity to participate. In Special Olympics, athletes are given a chance to practice, train, and compete in one of Special Olympics' 32 sports, providing them with an important outlet for physical activity. In 2011, 4,004,415



athletes with intellectual disabilities participated and trained in Special Olympics Programs. In addition to training, 3,019,455 athletes competed in 53,601 competitions around the world.<sup>xii</sup> The figure below shows the distribution of athletes in the seven Special Olympics regions and demonstrates the geographic diversity of Special Olympics



While the Special Olympics World Games, which occurs once every two years, receives the most media attention, the practices and competitions that are continually taking place around the world are crucial to improving the health outcomes of athletes.

### Health Education

In addition to creating a sporting experience, Special Olympics works to improve health behaviors of its athletes through education. Misconceptions about people with intellectual disabilities and their health status have generated assumptions that this population does not need access to health information and disease prevention messaging.<sup>xiii</sup> Segregated or non-existent schooling compounds this problem, as children with intellectual disabilities are not exposed to the same school health education as their nondisabled peers. This lack of education adds to the disease burden of people with intellectual disabilities and makes them more vulnerable to communicable and noncommunicable diseases. To address this issue, Special Olympics has formed a partnership



with Lions Club International to create Family Health Forums. In these forums, family members, athletes, and community supporters are educated about locally relevant health issues. By incorporating athletes, families, and communities in these forums, positive outcomes and behavioral changes are much more likely to be attained. A recent Family Health Forum in South Africa was held in conjunction with a Special Olympics South Africa Floor Hockey Tournament. It brought together 450 participants and provided information on malaria infection, symptoms, and prevention. Participants were also instructed in the breeding habits of mosquitoes and how to treat stagnant pools of water in which mosquitoes thrive and reproduce. Another Family Health Forum that took place in Bolivia addressed healthy lifestyles and nutrition. Poor nutrition is one of the top four risky behaviors that attributes to noncommunicable diseases and remains a common problem among athletes and the larger population of people with intellectual disabilities.<sup>xiv</sup> The forum in Bolivia addressed this issue, educated participants about nutrition and healthy eating habits, and encouraged athletes and families to work together to improve nutrition in their homes. Forums such as these have taken place worldwide, using the power of sport to spread health awareness to people with intellectual disabilities and the communities in which they live.

### **Screenings and Links to Health Care**

The third health topic that Special Olympics addresses is the limited access to basic health care for people with intellectual disabilities. Barriers such as social stigma, lack of transportation, and communication challenges are just a few of the obstacles people with intellectual disabilities face to attain proper health care. Many doctors have difficulty treating people with intellectual disabilities either due to a lack of training or cultural beliefs and stigmas. A survey of U.S. medical school students found that 80% of students reported not getting any clinical training to treat people with intellectual disabilities.<sup>xv</sup> These factors, in conjunction with lack of health education for people with intellectual disabilities, leads to increased risks for both chronic and acute illnesses and diseases. Moreover, stigma and social isolation causes people with intellectual disabilities to fall between the cracks in development agendas, government programs, and NGO outreach efforts. Because this group is difficult to reach through broad-based programs, targeted interventions are necessary to help reduce the existing inequalities in health.<sup>xvi</sup>

Special Olympics is working to close the gap in access to health care for people with intellectual disabilities through Healthy Athletes. As the largest convener of people with intellectual disabilities world-wide, Special Olympics capitalizes on this organizing power to provide health screenings and education at local, national, and international events. To date, Special Olympics has



provided 1.2 million health screenings in the seven health disciplines of Fit Feet (podiatry), FUNfitness (physical therapy), Healthy Hearing, Health Promotion (healthy behaviors and nutrition), Opening Eyes (vision), Special Smiles (dentistry), and MedFest (sports physical exam). In 2011 alone, Special Olympics hosted 765 Healthy Athletes events, resulting in 116,900 screenings. Findings in these screenings stress the need to both identify and address the health needs of this community. Of the screenings that took place in developing countries in 2011, 52.2% of athletes had never received an eye exam, 55.6% had untreated tooth decay, and 44.4% had gait abnormalities. In some cases, screenings have caught potentially life-threatening health conditions such as atrioventricular septal defects (commonly found in individuals with Downs Syndrome).<sup>xvii</sup> Screenings help athletes and parents identify health issues that might be overlooked or ignored and are an important first step to improving the health of athletes.

Upon completion of these screenings, Special Olympics works with athletes to connect them to resources and health providers that are necessary to address any identified health problems. At various Healthy Athletes events Special Olympics has fitted athletes with eyeglasses and hearing aids after their Opening Eyes and Healthy Athletes screenings. Since 2004, 400 athletes across 40 countries have received hearing aids. Since 2007, nearly 50,000 eyeglasses have been fitted and distributed to athletes around the world. Many Programs have also formed partnerships to connect athletes to a health service provider after their screening. In Latin America, Programs in Peru, Bolivia, Panama, and Mexico have formed partnerships with Universities to provide follow-up dental care to athletes who are diagnosed with oral health issues at Special Smiles screenings. Athletes are tested at Healthy Athletes events and are then referred to the local University for treatment, where they are guaranteed to receive free or reduced cost care. Partnerships are not limited to Universities and emerge from a number of sectors. For example, Panama has partnered with a University, Universidad Nacional de Panama, as well as an optical services company, Optica Sosa y Arango, to provide post-screening care to athletes. Partnerships vary from Program to Program but are instrumental in creating a full service loop for Special Olympics athletes to ensure that they are able to address their need.

Looking forward, Special Olympics is preparing to deepen the impact of its health programs by targeting more specific local health needs through its Healthy Communities initiative. This program is working to address relevant health issues beyond the seven disciplines of Healthy Athletes and one example of this is the expansion into the field of communicable diseases. The UN estimates that people with disabilities are substantially more likely to contract HIV/AIDS than



nondisabled people due to, “poverty, severely limited access to education and healthcare, lack of information and resources, lack of legal protection, increased risk of violence and rape, vulnerability to substance abuse, and stigma.”<sup>xviii</sup> There has not been a concerted effort to include people with intellectual disabilities in HIV/AIDS policies, services, and prevention strategies, yet the stigma and marginalization this population faces makes targeted programming even more important. In order to meet the Millennium Development Goal to halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, this disparity in health care for the population of over 200 million people with intellectual disabilities must be addressed. While HIV/AIDS is one prominent health concern, particularly in the developing world, which will be addressed through Healthy Communities, the initiative will work to incorporate a myriad of locally relevant health needs. In addition, Healthy Communities will be working to make the health programming of Special Olympics year-round by building partnerships with local service providers and NGOs. Special Olympics will screen athletes, utilize partnerships to connect them with local service providers, and establish follow-up systems to ensure that athletes are receiving the care that they need. By creating this full-service loop rooted in local health concerns, Special Olympics will increase the impact of its health programs.

## Community Integration

Community integration is another central focus and goal of Special Olympics. Due to the stigma and discrimination people with intellectual disabilities face, they are often isolated from society. A multinational study conducted in 10 countries around the world concerning attitudes about people with intellectual disabilities found that the majority of people believe that people with intellectual disabilities should work in special workshops, not “mainstream” workplaces, and should be educated in separate schools.<sup>xix</sup> In the developing world in particular, discrimination is so high that obtaining employment or education becomes nearly impossible. Many families are ashamed of having a child with an intellectual disability and keep them hidden from society altogether. Because of these barriers, people with intellectual disabilities often become invisible members of society, allowing myths and misperceptions about them to self-perpetuate. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that people with intellectual disabilities are entitled to full inclusion and participation in the community and that state parties should do everything within their power to facilitate this inclusion. Despite these rights declarations, people with intellectual disabilities remain on the fringes of society. Without social inclusion, it becomes impossible to attain independence, health care, and education.



Special Olympics utilizes sport as a tool to bring people with intellectual disabilities into the community and to foster meaningful connections between people with and without intellectual disabilities. The universal language of sport helps to bridge differences and increase communication between people with and without intellectual disabilities. Special Olympics Programs around the world have found unique ways to combat stigma and promote social inclusion. For instance, Special Olympics Haiti has canvassing committees to address the pervasive stigmas against people with intellectual disabilities that often keep them isolated and hidden from public life in Haiti. These canvassing committees, comprised of Special Olympics volunteers, enter into communities and knock on doors searching for people with intellectual disabilities that could potentially participate in Special Olympics programs. Volunteers speak with parents and family members to persuade them to allow their children to enter into society and engage in sports. Physical presence in a community is a necessary first step to integration and through this presence with Special Olympics athletes are then connected to other resources such as health screenings through Healthy Athletes events.<sup>xx</sup> Special Olympics Programs around the world utilize a variety of strategies to reach out to the marginalized population of people with intellectual disabilities to provide them with an opportunity to engage with the community and to increase social inclusion of athletes.

Many studies have found that repeated, meaningful, and structured contact between people with and without intellectual disabilities can create positive attitude change about this population.<sup>xxi</sup> Special Olympics uses this concept by creating an arena in which people with and without intellectual disabilities can interact, breaking down stigmas and misperceptions. Volunteers are able to see people with intellectual disabilities in an arena in which they are first and foremost athletes. Stigmas, particularly in the developing world, often persist due to the isolation of people with intellectual disabilities. Without contact in the school or community, people often fail to understand what an intellectual disability is and how people with intellectual disabilities can contribute to society. Special Olympics increases the frequency of contact between people with and without intellectual disabilities in a meaningful way and thereby helps mitigate societal misunderstandings and misperceptions about this population.

### **Unified Sports**

Unified Sports is a rapidly expanding Special Olympics initiative that has demonstrated a unique capacity to promote inclusive communities. Unified Sports allows athletes with intellectual disabilities and partners without intellectual disabilities to compete side-by-side. There are three models of Unified Sports: Unified Sports Competitive, Unified Sports Player Development, and



Unified Sports Recreation. In the competitive model, athletes and partners of similar age and athletic ability compete side-by-side, which allows for equality among competitors that is ideal for creating social inclusion and mutual understanding. Unified Sports Player Development consists of approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes and partners of similar age competing in team sports. Athletes and partners need not be of similar abilities, and teammates of higher abilities serve as mentors to assist teammates. Finally, Unified Sports Recreation allows athletes and partners who are not of similar age and athletic ability to participate together in sport. These models provide flexibility for Special Olympics Programs to adapt their Unified Sports experience to the needs and demographics of their athletes and partners. In all three models, social inclusion is promoted through a shared sports experience for people with and without intellectual disabilities.

Participants of Unified Sports, both with and without intellectual disabilities, benefit in a number of ways. Participation has been proven to facilitate meaningful friendships between athletes and partners and creates positive associations and a better understanding of intellectual disability among partners.<sup>xxiii</sup> One Unified Sports partner remarked that, “Friendship is the most important thing about being a member of a unified team. We are all friends both on and off the field.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Another remarked, “The stereotypes about people with intellectual disability that keep us away from each other, fears that they are dangerous and so on, but if you take part in Unified Sports then you can smash these stereotypes and see just that they are people.”<sup>xxv</sup> Unified Sport’s strength lies in its ability to build social inclusion and social capital. Social inclusion refers to an individual’s feeling of belonging within their community.<sup>xxvi</sup> This is closely intertwined with the concept of social capital, which refers to the networks, norms, and trusts that link an individual to a community.<sup>xxvii</sup> Unified Sports builds both social capital and social inclusion by empowering people with intellectual disabilities to be present in the community, participate in that community through sport, and build relationships and friendships with others.<sup>xxviii</sup> By creating an opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities to have a meaningful and equal presence, both physically and socially, Unified Sports breaks down barriers and provides access to community life.

## Education and Advocacy

### Athlete Leadership Programs

While it is important to provide athletes with resources, it is equally important to educate and empower athletes to self-advocate and demand these resources in their own communities.



Special Olympics trains athletes in self-advocacy through Athlete Leadership Programs (ALPs). In this program athletes are trained in leadership and interpersonal skills. These skills range from giving a speech to writing a blog post, allowing athletes to play to their strengths and advocate in a way that is effective for them individually. Trainings provide athletes with the skill set needed to hold non-traditional leadership roles within Special Olympics such as a coach, sport official, member of a Board of Directors, or a public speaker (Global Messenger). Global messengers are the highest level of ALPs training and these individuals serve as ambassadors for Special Olympics, spreading awareness about Special Olympics and the needs of people with intellectual disabilities. While this role as global messenger is highly public and requires the most training, all levels of ALPs empower athletes to become more visible in their communities and to assert themselves in positions of leadership. By elevating people with intellectual disabilities in the public eye and placing them in positions of leadership, ALPS raises awareness and understanding about people with intellectual disabilities and strives to set an example of complete integration within an organization.

## Research

In addition to ALPs training, Special Olympics advocates for people with intellectual disabilities through research. The needs of people with intellectual disabilities remain largely unknown due to a lack of research and documentation surrounding this specific population. A study of 131 national monitoring systems found that 63% monitored general disability in some way yet only 25% separately coded people with intellectual disabilities.<sup>xxix</sup> Without information on the health and education status of people with intellectual disabilities, it is difficult to ensure that their needs are being met. In addition, statistical monitoring and evaluation is crucial in achieving positive policy change and implementation. For example, poverty reduction policies utilize monitoring tools to attain feedback on program effectiveness and as a source of information to improve programs. Moreover, many of the statistics that inform poverty policy were instrumental in galvanizing the “war on poverty”.<sup>xxx</sup> Governments base many policy decisions on information they receive from their census and other large research tools and without information demonstrating where gaps in service lie, the needs of people with intellectual disabilities will continue to go unmet. Therefore, a larger body of research on people with intellectual disabilities is needed in order to advocate effectively for this population.

Special Olympics is working to fill this gap by conducting its own research. Since 2001, Special Olympics has commissioned 24 studies about the needs of people with intellectual disabilities, attitudes about this population, and the effectiveness of Special Olympics programs.<sup>xxxi</sup>



Moreover, over 200 independent studies have been conducted about Special Olympics and the population it serves.<sup>xxxii</sup> Research has ranged from the oral health needs of people with intellectual disabilities to studies about sports participation and self-efficacy. By providing a body of knowledge that policymakers and stakeholders can use and learn from, Special Olympics is working to raise awareness about the needs of people with intellectual disabilities. In addition to these studies, Special Olympics compiles information on the health of its athletes through the Healthy Athletes Software system. After every health screening, information on the results of the screening are loaded into this database, which has become the largest database of health data in the world specifically about people with intellectual disabilities. This health data is crucial to improve access to health care and to bring about policies that address the specific health needs of this population. As Jean-Chevalier Sanon, Program Director of Special Olympics Haiti, commented, “If we don’t talk about them nobody will know these problems exist...By creating awareness you create accountability.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> Research provides tools to generate both awareness and accountability and thus constitutes an essential component of Special Olympics International.

## Moving Forward: Needs for Growing SOI’s Sport for Development Initiatives

### Forging Partnerships

In its 2011-2015 Strategic Plan, Special Olympics International made a commitment to expanding its sport for development initiatives. This commitment has been demonstrated through efforts to double Unified Sports participation and the launch of the Healthy Communities initiative. In order to grow this sport for development platform, Special Olympics will need to increase its partnerships on the local, national, and international level. Special Olympics has a decentralized structure, with each Special Olympics country Program maintaining its own 501(c)(3) and Board of Directors. Therefore, while Special Olympics International provides leadership, grants, and program support, it is the responsibility of the individual Programs to implement initiatives. This decentralization is beneficial in that it allows countries to implement programs tailored to the specific needs of their athletes. Yet, without the necessary in-country support structures, many Programs cannot implement all of the development initiatives that Special Olympics can offer.

In order to broaden the availability of Special Olympics’ sport for development programming, partnerships will be crucial. Effective sport for development organizations work



collaboratively with other development initiatives so that they are mutually reinforcing.<sup>xxxiv</sup> To ensure a coordinated development strategy, Special Olympics is seeking to work with other local, national, and international development organizations in each of its countries. Local and national partners will not only help strengthen programs, they will also help to inform how the programs are structured within the country. They will allow for a needs-based approach that addresses issues specific to the location, health, socioeconomic status, and education of participating athletes. International partners are also important to provide program support and increase global awareness.

One partnership that has been particularly successful is Special Olympics' collaboration with UNICEF. While the two organizations have worked together on multiple occasions, in June of 2011 an official Memorandum of Understanding was signed signaling a mutual effort to support the rights of children with intellectual disabilities around the world. The partnership has brought about excellent support in a number of Programs and has increased the reach and impact of Special Olympics initiatives. For example, Special Olympics Azerbaijan and UNICEF recently collaborated to provide sporting opportunities to 400 participants in the Goychay and Ganja regions. Some competitions were Unified Sports competitions and incorporated 160 participants from mainstream schools as partners.<sup>xxxv</sup> Efforts such as these, which combine the resources and reach of multiple organizations, create a more effective development strategy. The success of the UNICEF partnership highlights the importance of collaboration to create an integrated development strategy across organizations that can mutually reinforce each organization's mission and goals.

Government partners are also necessary to truly expand the scope and impact of Special Olympics programs. Backing from the government can add to the legitimacy of the organization and provides structural support. Support has generally come from the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Sport, but it is not limited to these areas. One extremely successful government-Special Olympics partnership is in Paraguay. Funding for Special Olympics Paraguay is written in as a line item in the government budget and the organization often uses the sporting grounds of the military for training and events. Partnerships like these provide crucial financial support and open doors for other partnerships, but they are not only beneficial for Special Olympics programs and can benefit governments as well. Beyond helping governments provide the equal care that all citizens are entitled to receive, programming can also reduce public costs. According to the CDC, 4.9% of the Medicaid population has an intellectual disability, yet their care costs account for 15.7% of total Medicaid expenditures.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Programs can reduce government health care costs by increasing



independence and providing preventative screenings and care. In addition, by fostering social inclusion and social integration, Programs empower people with intellectual disabilities to be a contributing member of society, adding to economic productivity and reducing social costs.

Special Olympics cannot provide all of the services that people with disabilities need, but it can play a powerful role in bringing this hidden population into society and connecting them to other organizations that are providing resources people with intellectual disabilities have a right to receive and are guaranteed under the UNCRPD. As Simon Koh, Director of Operations of Special Olympics Asia Pacific, remarked, “We recognize we can’t do it alone... We need to engage others, people that are doing similar work. We need to engage and share knowledge and reach each other so we will all be better equipped to do our job.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> To accomplish this end, Special Olympics continues to seek out additional partnerships with development organizations and governments to help bridge the divide between development initiatives and people with intellectual disabilities.

## Media

Media attention will be another important factor in building Special Olympics’ development objectives. In order to fully step into this new sport for development field, programs such as Healthy Athletes and Unified Sports must be recognized as integral parts of the new Special Olympics.

External demonstration of the transition to a development approach will be important to gain new partnerships, foster awareness, and attract widespread support. Due to the history of Special Olympics, many misconceptions still abound about the organization, its mission, and the initiatives it currently undertakes. The media must begin to acknowledge the shift in Special Olympics and increase coverage beyond small, local events and the World Games. A greater media presence focused on Special Olympics’ sport for development agenda will assert Special Olympics’ place in the global sports community and help to recognize the shift that has occurred over time. In addition, media attention around these programs will help highlight the sport and development needs of people with intellectual disabilities, and can assist with advocacy to achieve needed policy change and implementation.

## Increased Integration of Development Objectives in Programming

As Special Olympics continues to progress as a sport for development organization, it is working to incorporate development objectives at every level within the organization. Integrating health promotion, education, and social inclusion objectives more directly into daily trainings will further the development agenda of the organization. This will help continue the push away from the



“sports plus” model and will ensure the development agenda is on par with the sports agenda in every Special Olympics country Program. Moreover, it will increase the impact of Special Olympics Programs by enhancing the multidimensional experience and benefits of participation.

This will require a great deal of support within each country Program. In addition to partnerships and support for programming, staff support is needed as well. Currently, many Programs operate on a largely volunteer basis. Increasing the partnerships and fundraising power of each Special Olympics Program to ensure that enough paid, full-time staff is available to execute development programming will be crucial. Some Programs have been able address this challenge and have achieved self-sustainability through partnerships and fundraising; for example, roughly 25% of Programs in Special Olympics Asia Pacific maintain self-sufficient Healthy Athletes programs.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Still, many have yet to achieve this level of support. Particularly in resource-poor

countries where funding is thin but development programs are most needed, expanding staff resources will be key. Garnering support from the global development community and governments will work toward these ends.

## Conclusion

Special Olympics began as a sports program for people with intellectual disabilities, shattering the preconceived notions and stigmas about the abilities of this marginalized population.

During this time, Special Olympics also generated development outcomes, such as a decrease in stigma and an improvement in health, but the focus remained primarily on access to sport. In recent years, Special Olympics has made the shift from a sports organization with development outcomes to a sport for development organization that provides access to the right to sport and other basic human rights. It is working toward the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, which cannot be attained without including the 200 million people with intellectual disabilities around the world. This population has been chronically marginalized and forgotten in the broader development agenda and Special Olympics is working to change this through the power of sport. Sport holds immense power and potential in its ability to bridge societal barriers and promote empowerment. Special Olympics has embraced this tool and is no longer an organization focused solely on recreation; it is working to bring basic rights to a marginalized population. The opportunities Special Olympics provides are not extra, they are essential. Special Olympics’ Programs are striving to meet the basic needs of people with intellectual disabilities, and



must be integrated further into the broader development community to ensure the dignity and respect of the global population of people with intellectual disabilities.

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<sup>ii</sup> Dowling, Sandra, David Hassan, Roy McConkey, and Sabine Menke. "'Unified Gives Us a Chance': An Evaluation of Special Olympics Unified Sports Programs in Europe/Eurasia." p. 85.

<sup>iii</sup> Special Olympics Program Census 2006 and Special Olympics Program Census 2011

<sup>iv</sup> "Report of the UN Secretary-General, In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All," *United Nations* 2005 <<http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/>>.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid III

<sup>vi</sup> Emerson E., McConkey R., Walsh P.N. & Felce D. "Editorial: Intellectual disability in a global context." *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 5(2008): 79-80.

<sup>vii</sup> Article 30.5 UNCRPD

<sup>viii</sup> "Why Sport?" *UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace* 2012 <<http://www.un.org/sport>>

<sup>ix</sup> Lord, Janet and Stein, Michael Ashley. "Social Rights and the Relational Value of the Rights to Participate in Sport, Recreation, and Play." *Boston University International Law Journal* 27 (2009):249-281. P. 264.

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<sup>xi</sup> Ibid X

<sup>xii</sup> "Special Olympics Reach Report." 2011.

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<sup>xv</sup> Corbin S., Holder m., Engstrom K. *Changing Attitudes, Changing the World: The Health and Health Care of People with Intellectual Disabilities*, Washington, DC: Special Olympics International; 2005.

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