

# ‘Unified gives us a chance’

An evaluation of Special Olympics Youth Unified Sports®  
Programme in Europe/Eurasia



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## **Section 1: Introduction and Overview**

The University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, in partnership with Special Olympics Europe Eurasia has conducted an evaluation of the Special Olympics Youth Unified Sports programme. Working in five countries across Europe this evaluation carried out over two hundred qualitative interviews and gathered data on fifty-five Unified teams. The evaluation examined the Unified model as a context wherein the increased social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities could be fostered. A primary aim was to identify the processes that promoted social inclusion within and in particular beyond Unified Sports.

This report provides a detailed account of the findings of this evaluation. The report begins with an overview of the evaluation and provides a description of the Unified Sports programme before going on to state the aims and objectives of the study. A brief résumé of the methods adopted in the course of this evaluation is then given. A detailed account of the project's methodology is contained in an accompanying report.

Section 2 presents the background to the study and begins by exploring the cultural context in which many people with intellectual disabilities live: the discrimination and challenges they face. Our understanding of social integration is outlined with particular reference to the importance of friendship and relationships as a path towards social inclusion. The concept of social capital which is key to our thinking in this evaluation is then discussed with particular reference to the accumulation of social capital through sport. This section of the report concludes with a discussion of sport, recreation and people with intellectual disabilities.

The findings of the evaluation are presented in the third section and within seven sub-sections, as follows:

1. Description of the sample
2. Key findings for each stake-holder group: Athletes, Partners, Parents, Coaches and Community Representatives
3. Views of National Co-ordinators
4. Personal development through participation in Unified Sports
5. Social Inclusion within Unified Sports
6. The Social Connectedness of the Team members
7. Unified Sports: a micro-culture within the wider dominant culture

The final section of the report identifies the main conclusions and the recommendations arising from this study. These are contextualized within the ambitions of Unified Sports to promote the social inclusion of young people with intellectual disabilities within their local communities.

## **The Special Olympics Youth Unified Sports Programme**

Special Olympics Unified Sports combines players with (Athletes) and without (Partners) intellectual disabilities on the same sports teams for training and competition. The Youth Unified Sports programme of Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia is targeted at young people aged 12-25 and it is financed by substantial grants obtained by Special Olympics International. Presently the majority of Youth Unified teams are involved in playing football and basketball, however, Youth Unified teams are also found in other sports e.g. volleyball, handball and table tennis. Young people with intellectual disabilities (athletes) are matched with non-disabled players (partners) who have a

similar skill level. Teams train regularly and compete in local as well as national and international competitions.

The programme's expressed intention is to enable athletes to develop their sporting skills and to offer a platform for young athletes to socialize with peers and have the opportunity to develop new friendships, to experience inclusion and to take part in the life of their community. Further information is available at

[http://www.specialolympics.org/unified\\_sports.aspx](http://www.specialolympics.org/unified_sports.aspx)

Previous evaluations have shown the programme to be successful in building the self esteem and confidence of athletes and also to be a forum for the growth of improved understanding of people with intellectual disabilities amongst their non-disabled peers, (Norins-Barden et al 2006).

## **Aims of the study**

The present study aimed to examine the strength of the Unified Sports programme in generating social capital amongst participants and to evaluate the impact on athletes of participating in the programme in relation to their experience of social inclusion within wider society.

The objectives were to:

1. Identify the elements of the programme which impact on the greater social inclusion of athletes in their local communities and assess the degree to which these were embedded in the growth of social capital.
2. Identify the contribution of the programme to the development of relationships and friendships between athletes and partners, and highlight particular aspects of the programme that encourage friendships to develop.
3. Identify the barriers to social inclusion in the society in which the programme operates and if/how the programme presents a challenge to these barriers.

## **Methods**

The project ran for 15 months beginning in April 2009 with completion in June 2010. This was a qualitative study, gathering data principally through interview and life-story work with a range of stakeholders – young Special Olympics athletes and non-disabled partners aged 12-25, coaches, parents and representatives of the local community.

Following pilot work in the United Kingdom, we worked across five countries within the Special Olympics Europe Eurasia region, namely Serbia, Poland, Ukraine, Germany and Hungary with fieldwork taking place with the various stake-holders in each of these countries. The work was supported by partnerships developed with local university personnel and with SO programme staff in each of the participating countries. Training and/or competition events were organized in each country as a backdrop to data collection, with representatives of each of the stakeholder groups attending the events. Data was collected in local languages and later translated and sent to the research manager for transcription and analysis.

The methodology was innovative and challenging in three main ways.

- It necessitated gathering data across five disparate countries in terms of their political, social and economic circumstances but especially in their development of support services to persons with intellectual disabilities and experience of undertaking research in this area.

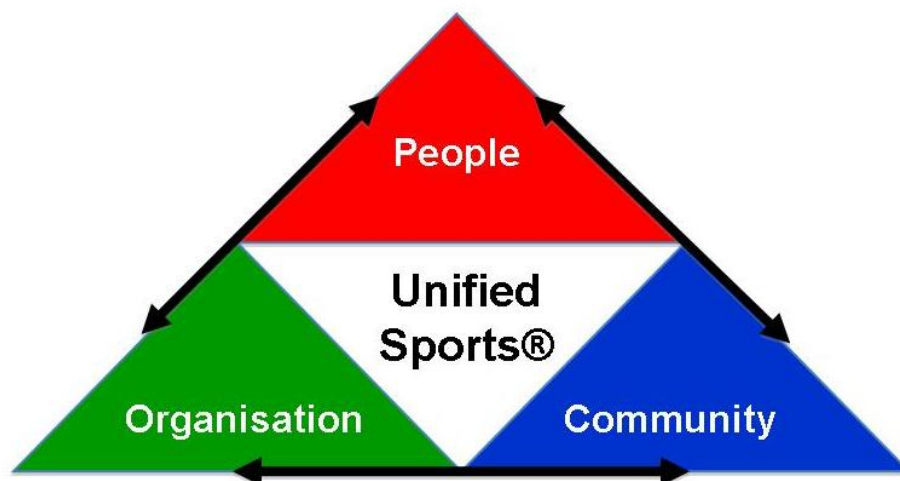
- We wanted to document the experiences of a range of stake-holders in their own words and notably those of the young athletes and their partners. Internationally research studies have tended to focus on the views of parents or support staff and although they have an important contribution to make to our understanding, it was the young people's experiences, beliefs and attitudes that we particularly wanted to capture.
- Few studies have attempted to gather qualitative data in five different languages. The challenge of interpretation and translation was met through close co-operation with evaluation partners recruited from local universities – five in all - who had expertise in data gathering with people who have disabilities. They were supported by the Special Olympics National Co-ordinators who brought detailed knowledge of the programme on the ground and awareness of the various stake-holders. These partners were a vital contributor to successful data gathering.

A detailed description of the projects methodology is contained in an accompanying report. This should be of value to future researchers and evaluators undertaking transnational research within Special Olympics and more broadly in the field of disability and sports. It is available from the project web-site (see below).

### **Findings**

The Unified Sports programme is in essence a fairly simple idea, providing, as it does, a forum for young people with intellectual disabilities to connect with their wider community and meet with other young people around a shared interest in sports. However, this study has found that the programme operates through a complex dynamic of connections at three levels – that of the people participating in the programme, the organisation underlying it and the interaction with local community. These three are interactive and mutually transforming as shown in Figure 1. Section 3 provides a detailed report of the project's findings.

**Figure 1: The three dynamic domains which interact within the Unified Sports programme**



### **Discussion and Conclusions**

In the final section of the report we present an explanatory model as to how Unified Sports address the dual challenge of creating social inclusion and building social capital. This identifies the effective processes and strategies unveiled by the data analysis and from these conclusions are drawn for sustaining and extending the reach of Unified

## *Unified Gives Us A Chance*

Sports nationally and internationally. In the words of the athlete from Serbia who provided the title for this report – *Unified gives us a chance* – many more persons with intellectual disabilities deserve and want that chance.

### **Summary Report**

A six-page, illustrated brochure summarizing the study is available for download at the project web-site:

[www.science.ulster.ac.uk/unifiedsports](http://www.science.ulster.ac.uk/unifiedsports)

## **Section 2: Social Inclusion, social capital and sports**

### **The challenge of discrimination**

Around the world, challenges to many forms of discrimination are found, be they based on gender, ethnicity, religion or sexuality. A strong theme in our post-modern world is taking action to voice challenge to discrimination and provoke change in attitudes and practices. It is common in many democratic countries for a move to openness and acceptance of rights and obligations towards and from others within the human family. However, challenges from or on behalf of people with intellectual disabilities lag behind those of other excluded groups, so that the routine social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in their local communities and within wider society remains some way off in many European and Eurasian countries.

A vision of social inclusion is contained in various Rights Statements that the United Nations has promoted for people with disabilities, such as the recent Convention (2006) which has the aim of ensuring:

*“the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity”.*

However the challenge remains of translating the rhetoric of rights into reality for persons with intellectual disability, who remain amongst the most marginalized in many societies around the world, as many research reports confirm. The reasons for this are multi-faceted (Emerson, McConkey, Walsh and Felce, 2008). Many are born into poverty and because of their disabilities they are perceived to have limited productive capacity. Hence they and their families have little economic power. Moreover they are unlikely to be active decision-makers within communities so they have little political power. Also the stigma associated with their disability has often resulted in their active exclusion from society (Akrami et al. 2005, O’Toole and McConkey, 1995).

Yazbeck et al (2004) report how social policy internationally is broadly intended to support the integration, inclusion and acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities into mainstream society (International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disability 2001; United Nations 1975, 1993), engendering a community where people with intellectual disabilities are *‘able and allowed to be themselves among others’* (Nirje 1985, p. 67). This movement has grown from a rights based agenda that argues that people should be defined by way of their common humanity rather than their disparate abilities (Parmenter 2001; Wolfensberger 2000). However, attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities, which have been the subject of much academic scrutiny internationally, continue, to a significant degree, in a negative vein (Yazbeck 2004, Gething 1994, Novac 1993).

### **Critical link between attitude and action**

Attitudes have been described as latent psychological processes, which are expressed in response to specific triggers (Antonak & Linveh 2000). Attitudes are said to be socially constructed and to develop over time as an individual is exposed to different experiences and expressed ideas (Tregastis 2000). They can be understood as a framework for decoding situations and as the guiding parameters for ones behaviour (Berry & Dahl 1996). Culture, age, gender, educational level and prior experience have been shown to influence the formation of attitudes towards people with disabilities (Priestly 1998, Yazbeck 2004, Tak-fai Lau & Cheung 1999, Yucker & Block 1986). Gilmore et al. (2003) assert that negative attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities strongly influence their social exclusion. Yazbeck (2004) along with



Schwartz & Armony-Sivan (2001) contend that an understanding of attitudes that predominate in a society is crucial to understanding the process of social change, which critically shape people's actions in relation to social engagement and participation. For people with a disability and their carers, societal attitudes can cause them to withdraw from social contacts to avoid negative experiences whereas non-disabled peers may be disinclined to seek contact due to the negative impressions and beliefs they hold about disabled persons.

## **Attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities**

Siperstein et al (2003) conducted an international study across nine countries drawn from five continental regions, of the general public's attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities. The overall findings suggested an under appreciation of the potential abilities of people with intellectual disabilities with consequent low expectations of achievement, although they do need to be understood within their prevailing social and cultural contexts. A prevailing attitude towards the segregation of people with intellectual disabilities in community, housing and educational settings was also found. The family was thought to be the most appropriate place for people with intellectual disabilities to live and a lack of resources and services were seen as obstacles to inclusion. Moreover the attitude of others was also regarded as a barrier to inclusion.

However, research also suggests that attitude change is influenced by contact with people with intellectual disabilities (Tak-fai Lau & Cheung 1999). But this attitude change has been found to be both positive and negative, depending on the type and context of the interaction. Contact, which is well thought-out and involving direct, personal engagement has been found to have a more positive effect on attitudes (Acton & Zabatany 1988). Simple, unstructured exposure to people with intellectual disabilities is not enough, interactions should be structured, organized and meaningful (Rees et al 1991). Moreover the quality of the experience and mutual enjoyment of it seems to be especially significant in influencing attitudes (Shelvin & O'Moore 2000, Eigenbrood & Retish 1988, McConkey & McCormack 1983).

## **Meaningful integration**

Cummins & Lau (2003) challenge the wholesale adoption of the concept of social integration for people with intellectual disabilities, without understanding of the context and meaning of the actions and situations to which the term is applied. They suggest that the crucial measure of social integration is how people feel about themselves and their lives, rather than the breadth of their social network, the frequency of use of community facilities or the number of times they go shopping.

Instead they highlight the definition of social inclusion provided by Sarason (1977):

*'a psychological sense of community [...] the feeling that one is part of a readily available, supportive, dependable structure.'* (p.14).

Asked to rank the factors which are most important in their lives, people with intellectual disabilities are most likely to place 'relationships' and 'friendships' at the top of their list (Cummins 1997). This priority, together with Sarason's emphasis on personal meaningfulness, suggests that there are three core components in realising the *feeling* of social inclusion as well as achieving it in *reality*. They are:

- Community connectedness – people are acquainted with one another, they share common spaces and facilities and they have opportunities for personal interactions.



- Personal interdependency – the interchanges are mutually beneficial and supportive. A sense of equality is engendered.
- Belonging - people are bonded into groups with a shared identity and common purpose.

All of these processes derived from a psycho-social perspective are closely aligned with the concept of 'social capital' that has been popularized in recent years by sociologists and international politicians. Crucially though, the psycho-social perspective proposes that social capital must be nurtured organically rather than constructed through procedures and routines. It is people who create social capital not systems.

## **Friendship**

An important aspect of the Unified Sports programme is that it offers the opportunity for friendships to develop between team members, both those with and without intellectual disabilities. Friendship has been described as '*a bond between two individuals that is stable across time and involves mutual affection, mutual preference and having fun together,*' (Webster 2007, also see Bukowski et al 1996 and Howes 1993). Friendships have been identified as important in young people's development in relation to social and emotional development, companionship, intellectual growth and social support as well as a buffer against stressful life events (Geisthardt et al 2002, Price and Ladd 1986). Research has also reported changes in priorities amongst young people as they mature with a much greater emphasis on intimacy in adolescence than in early childhood (Ladd 1988, Newcomb & Bagwell 1996). However, much of the reported research describing the type and use of friendship has been undertaken in the typically developing population (Webster 2007).

Young people with intellectual disabilities prioritize friendship (as mentioned above) when asked to rate the most important aspects of social inclusion. However, young people with intellectual disabilities are also shown to have greater difficulty in making and maintaining friendships than their typically developing peers (Hall & Strickett 2002, Buysee et al 2002, Guralnick et al 1996). Existing literature relating to young people with intellectual disabilities and friendships has often focused on peer acceptance (Buysee et al 1997, Evans et al 1992), or on the impact of different environments to the formation of friendships (Hall & McGregor 2000, Nabors 1997). Much existing research relating to friendships in inclusive settings, between young people with and without intellectual disabilities, and indeed between young people with intellectual disabilities, is qualitative and descriptive in nature. Webster (2007) suggests that this forms a platform for further work, which could potentially develop a measure of the elements that make up friendships between those with and without intellectual disabilities. The Unified Sports programme could offer a context for such work, which may have particular resonance for the development of inclusive settings and the fostering of friendships amongst young people with intellectual disabilities and with their non-disabled peers, should they so wish (McConkey, 2010).

## **Social Capital**

Social capital has emerged as an important concept in academic and policy debates over the past decade. A basic definition offered by the World Health Organisation that "*social capital represents the degree of social cohesion which exists in communities*" is a useful starting point (Productivity Commission, *Social Capital*, 8). Social capital from this perspective is seen as a way of expanding empowerment, well-being, and community development: all of which are geared toward an improved civil society.

The most popular recent use of social capital is often linked to the writings of political scientist, Robert Putnam (1993, 1995, and 2000). He argues that social capital is about the connections between individuals and refers to:

*‘ the features of social life - networks, norms and trust - that enable participants to act together to pursue shared objectives’* (Putnam, 1995, pp. 664–665).

At the heart of this lie norms of *trust* and *reciprocity*, two concepts that are at the core of Unified sports. The networks and social norms associated with social capital are created through various forms of engagement in associational and civic activities that involve personal interaction, thereby producing greater disposition towards trust and reciprocity.

Several important refinements and distinctions have been proposed, which sit within the overall concept of social capital and these are described in Table 1 below. These build on earlier concepts around weak and strong social links.

**Table 1: Characteristics of various aspects of social capital**

Concept	Reference	Characteristics of the concept
<b>Bonding Social Capital</b>	Putnam 2000	<i>Bonding Social Capital</i> occurs when people with similar backgrounds, values or interests enter into relationships and work together to achieve shared goals, “... <i>undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity</i> ” (Putnam 2000:22). Putman considers these associations as inward looking, close knit, and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups.
<b>Bridging Social Capital</b>	Putnam 2000	<i>Bridging Social Capital</i> connects people from different backgrounds (e.g., different races, neighbourhoods, clubs, religion, and socio-economic divide) and within the community or outside of the community to work together for the benefit of their locality. These networks and alliances are outward looking and comprise people of different sections of society. Putnam sees such connections as essential, not only for community cohesion but also for democracy and the prosperity of community and “... <i>are better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion</i> ” (2000:22).
<b>Strength of weak ties, and of strong ties</b>	Granovetter 1973, 1983	<p><i>The strength of weak ties</i> differentiates between strong ties, (those between close connections) and weak ties (those between acquaintances rather than family and close friends). Based on this view, it can be argued that individuals who are connected to more weak ties have a greater range of associates and greater opportunities for participation in civic activities and experience satisfaction with the way democracy works.</p> <p>Strong ties are established when people see each other frequently over long periods of time. Strong ties stay within groups such as family, friends and other people to whom one is closely knitted. This form of social capital fosters micro-level interactions and local cohesion.</p> <p>Weak ties are acquaintances; they are relationally defined by infrequent contact, and those to whom one is “weakly” tied are usually extra local and are more likely to have different social characteristics and perhaps geographic distance.</p> <p>With reference to social networks and human interaction, an overarching principle that distinguishes the concepts of <i>weak ties</i>, <i>generalized trust</i>, and <i>bridging social capital</i>, from <i>strong ties</i>, <i>particularized trust</i>, and <i>bonding social capital</i> is the issue of</p>

		“outlook.” The former concepts are “outward looking” and involve resourceful interaction with diverse groups, while the latter are “inward looking.”
<b>Linking Social Capital</b>	Wollcock 2001	<i>Linking Social Capital</i> plays an important but different role to bonding and bridging capital as these are concerned with horizontal social relationships as opposed to linking capital, which is concerned with vertical connections between the different levels of social strata. Linking capital can play a role in the exchange of power, wealth and status among social groups (Portes & Landolt, 2000; Putnam, 2000) from different hierarchical positions in society. At another level of discussion both the <i>cognitive</i> and <i>relational</i> dimensions of social capital, described by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), provide evidence about the structural dimension of social capital. The cognitive dimension consists of shared codes, language and narratives, while the relational dimension is understood in terms of trust, norms, identity and obligations.

Less explored has been the relationship between concepts of social capital and social exclusion/inclusion. Nonetheless Coalter (2007) suggests that “*the diffuse and contested nature of social capital is central to the social regeneration/social inclusion agenda*” (p. 159). However for persons who experience social isolation, the immediate issues are conceived more around their inclusion rather than the characteristics of the society in which they reside, which social capital theorists tend to emphasise.

Yet social capital is built around inter-personal relationships and its growth within communities is most profound when relationships are forged between heterogeneous groups. Based on this view, it is argued that individuals connected through bridging capital have a greater range of associates and greater opportunities for broader community engagement. Bridging social capital is therefore not only essential for enhancing social inclusion but also for improving a community’s ability to develop and to affect shifts in attitudes and broader cultural change (McConkey et al., 2009).

The relevant literature further demonstrates the benefits of social capital for community cohesion, economic advantages, increased productivity, information flow, mutually accountable associations between public officials and citizens, democracy enhancement, health and social well-being, lower crime rates, and higher educational achievements (Bullen 2000; Coleman 1998a, 1998b; Deth 2002; Flora and Flora 1993; Lin 1999a; Portes and Macleod 1999; Putnam, 1993a, 1995a, 1995b, 2000. Rosenfeld, Messner, Baumer 2001; Sanders, Nee and Sernau 2001).

A very good, relevant example of the impact of investing in social capital was the successful staging of the 2003 Special Olympics Summer Games in the Republic of Ireland. Special Olympics Ireland has over 18,000 volunteers, supported by 100 community networks. The organisation relied almost exclusively upon volunteer networks to successfully host the 2003 event and the legacy of volunteerism that it created is still evident throughout the country to this day.

Arguably a programme such as Unified sport presents even greater opportunities for further community enhancement by including young people with intellectual disabilities who might typically have been excluded on account of prevailing attitudes and perceptions. Again sport performs a very telling role in offering what appears to be a less serious, for some even ‘unimportant’, platform for inclusion and yet it is often the genesis of much greater levels of engagement than might ever have been considered possible. It is to the contribution of sport that we now turn.

## **Sport and Social Capital**

The contribution of sport to creation of social capital and the countering of social exclusion is highlighted by the capacity of sport to bring groups of people together that might ordinarily remain apart. Marginalised groups, such as young people with intellectual disabilities, may engage, or be encouraged to engage in sporting disciplines alongside and against non-disabled partners with the express aim of promoting social integration. Moreover, Unified Sports offers a comparatively neutral space for young people to come together. Their focus is less on what distinguishes them from each other and more on the fun and enjoyment they derive from the games, the training associated with being a member of a team and the sense of camaraderie and friendship they get from being with likeminded people.

Many recent studies have already focused on social capital and its construction through sport in a wider societal context (Burnett, 2006; Seippel, 2006; Uslaner, 1999; Atherley, 2006; Driscoll & Wood, 1999). Sport is recognised as a way to build positive social capital (Lawson, 2005; Skinner, Zakus, & Edwards, 2005; Zakus, Skinner, & Edwards, 2008; Skinner, Zakus and Cowell, 2008). The research of Crabbe and Brown (2004), Collins and Kay (2003), Coalter and Allison (1996), and Coalter (2007) in the United Kingdom (UK) offer some support to this argument. Atherley (2006) found “*that local sporting clubs are a main focus of community life and participation in, or exclusion from, [and] such groups affects residents’ daily life, social networks, community integration and flow of information*” (p.23).

Delaney (2005) examined cultural participation and social capital in his work on Social Capital and Sport in the UK (Evidence from National and International Survey Data: April 19th, 2005). He summarised the types of social capital derived from sport in the UK as:

### *Individual.*

- Sport may provide a basis for an individual to form a friendship base, provide goals and foster well being.
- Sport may absorb pro-social motivations and utilise the talents of diverse individuals.

### *Local/community.*

- Sport may provide a basis for the building of local networks.
- Through interacting with children’s sports, parents networks may form which have potentially beneficial effects.
- Sport may provide a basis for bringing different sections of communities together.

### *National.*

- Sport may provide a basis for common shared norms and conversational points as well as providing a basis for collective memory.
- Sport can act to transmit pro-social values such as fairness and rule following.
- Sport may act as a vehicle for citizens to engage with other countries.

The priorities for integration as identified by people with intellectual disabilities – relationships, friendships (discussed above) are reflected amongst these types of social capital derived from participation in sport. Moreover, sporting activities are likely to

meet the criteria of the need for structured, organised interactions to produce meaningful social inclusion.

## **Social Capital and Sports Policy**

The importance of social capital in developing social inclusion has not been confined to academic debate. Coalter (2007) argues that the centrality of social capital to the social inclusion agenda is apparent in recent UK policy developments. He argues that a range of UK government departments have produced reviews of this nature for distribution and for shaping the social inclusion policy direction. These reviews focus on how sport can have a positive impact on community connectedness and social inclusion. That is, sport can assist in building positive levels of trust and reciprocity amongst members of a community. These reviews also note how sport can contribute to members of a community developing socially through supportive relationships, education, training, and employment (paid or voluntary). Coalter (2007) suggests:

*‘there have been two broad sports policy responses - to seek to increase social/sports participation via geographically targeted programs in socially deprived areas, and to emphasise the contribution which sports volunteering can make to active citizenship’ (p. 544).*

### **Building Social Capital through outreach activities**

Some UK organisations have used outreach as a method of social capital development. The programs include the Leyton Orient Community Sports Programme (LOCSP), Lambeth and Southwark Sports Action Zone (SAZ), Positive Futures, and Street League which developed organically over time by responding to local need. These organisations operate free from the confines of bureaucratic structures found in local government and traditional sport clubs and, as a consequence, have flourished (i.e., have become sustainable). Likewise the move away from “universal social welfare” programmes to innovative local needs– based programmes appear to be more successful at engaging priority groups on the margins of society. Sport England’s report on *Sport Action Zones* suggested that the policy challenge is to focus resources in an even more targeted way in order to deliver the biggest impact in terms of participation and that funding should be allocated to facilitate innovation and flexibility to respond to prioritised community need.

Vail (2007) has argued that a sustainable, sport-based, community social capital initiative requires four core components:

- community selection (a community’s “readiness” and capacity to change);
- the need for a community catalyst(s)/champion(s) to provide process leadership (not *de facto* hierarchical leadership);
- the need to build a cadre of collaborative group/community partnerships (from a wide cross section of people and organisations who share a vision and have the capacity to achieve that vision through true collaboration and true shared decision-making); and
- the need to promote sustainability through community development processes.

Vail (2007) argued against the traditional, status quo “sports programming” approach, where programs are ‘dropped-into’ settings without proper needs assessment in the community as they often miss matters of sport sustainability and true community development.

## **Social inclusion, sport, recreation and people with Intellectual disabilities**

The benefits of participation in sport and recreational activities for people with intellectual disabilities is reported in the literature in terms of increased community integration, improved quality of life, greater sense of satisfaction and well-being, the development of friendships and increased social skills (Duvdevny & Arar 2004, Orsmond, Krauss & Seltzer 2004, Cummins & Lau 2003, King et al 2003). However, the literature also indicates that opportunities for such participation are not readily available. Abells et al, (2008) have found that real integration in recreational activities is hampered by a number of factors. These include socio-economic status, level of adaptive functioning and availability of transport and other services and supports to facilitate participation.

The European Commission White paper on Sport<sup>1</sup> (2010) also endorses Abell's finding in stating access to sport remains a problematic issue facing disabled people, both with regard to their access to sport activities as sports-people, and their access to sport premises as sports-people and/or spectators. In particular, boys and girls with disabilities do not enjoy the same opportunities to practise sport as their able-bodied peers, particularly in physical education classes in school with their classmates. Consequently, they do not pick up the habit to practise sport at an early age.

However where there are examples of the participation of young people with intellectual disabilities in sport the reported outcomes are largely positive. Sport and leisure activities are found to be an important part of the lives of all people, with or without disabilities (Pegg & Compton, 2004; Stumbo & Pegg, 2004). Patterson and Pegg (2009) report that leisure and sporting experiences contribute to the quality of life of people with disabilities, helping to make their lives more bearable, relieving tensions, and building and maintaining relationships with family and friends as well as increasing self-esteem and enhanced physical health and fitness (Dattilo, 2002; Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991). McGill (1996) reported the benefits of sport as follows: *'through our leisure involvements we have gained a stronger sense of who we are and have strengthened our sense of belonging'* (p. 7).

Sports also provide opportunities for learning, skill development, risk taking, reduce the risk of illness, and help to build and maintain social relationships and networks (Aitchison, 2003; Dattilo, 1994; Driver et al., 1991; Galambos, Lee, Rahn, & Williams, 1994; Prescott, 1994). For example, Shank, Coyle, Boyd, and Kinney (1996) state that sport will enhance quality of life as well as *'improve and maintain physical and psychological health and well-being of people with disabilities'* (p. 190).

The Nice Declaration (2000) underlines that:

*'sporting activity should be accessible to every man and woman, with due regard for individual aspirations and possibilities". It also recognises that "for the physically or mentally disabled, the practice of physical and sporting activities provides a particularly favourable opening for the development of individual talent, rehabilitation, social integration and solidarity and, as such, should be encouraged.'* (p,15)

Special Olympics Europe Eurasia (SOEE) provides opportunities in sport for around 500,000 individuals with intellectual disabilities and coordinates the participation of European athletes in national, European and the quadrennial Special Olympics World

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/sport/white-paper/index\\_en.htm#wp](http://ec.europa.eu/sport/white-paper/index_en.htm#wp)

## *Unified Gives Us A Chance*

Games. Their Youth Unified Sports initiative may be conceived as an attempt to further enable the use of sport as a vehicle to promote the routine social inclusion and integration of young people with intellectual disabilities into their communities. It certainly fulfils the aspiration contained in Article 30.5 (a) of the UN Convention which states:

*‘To encourage and promote the participation, to the fullest extent possible, of persons with disabilities in mainstream sporting activities at all levels.’*

## **Conclusions**

This review has demonstrated the contribution that sport can play in the development of social capital and countering social exclusion. To date, little attention has been paid to the applicability of concepts implicit in social capital to persons with disabilities in general and to their engagement in sports in particular as a means of promoting their social inclusion. Hence the current study has the potential not only to inform the policy and practices of Unified Sports within the context of Special Olympics but it will be one of the first evaluations to critically evaluate the potential for sport to create more inclusive communities.





## Section 3: The Findings of the Evaluation

This part of the report presents the main findings from the evaluation. It is divided into seven parts.

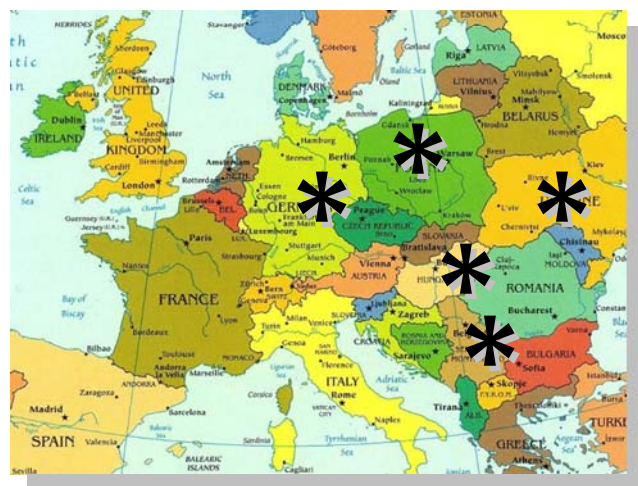
1. Description of the sample (Page 16).
2. Key findings for each stake-holder group: Athletes, Partners, Parents, Coaches and Community Representatives (Page 23).
3. Views of National Co-ordinators (Page 38).
4. Personal development through participation in Youth Unified Sports (Page 42).
5. Social Inclusion within Youth Unified Sports (Page 60).
6. The Social Connectedness of the Team members (Page 68).
7. Unified Sports: a micro-culture within the wider dominant culture (Page 71).

### Part 1: Description of the sample

Youth Unified Sports operates in 28 countries in Europe/Eurasia. More than 16,000 youth aged players (age 12-25) were involved in 28 countries in 2009. It was agreed to focus resources for this study on a number of selected countries within SOEE and to focus on two sports: football and basketball.

The inclusion criteria for the selection of countries participating in the study were devised in co-operation with SOEE. They were:

1. The national Unified Sports program and its teams had been in existence for more than one year
2. Teams meet for regular training and competition
3. There was an established robustness with which National SO Programs prioritized Unified Sports procedures
4. There were sufficient teams to enable a sample to be drawn to participate in the study
5. There was no 'in-country' bias that would confound the aims of the study, such as uniform inclusive education
6. There was a geographic spread between Eastern, Western and Central Europe. Initially eight countries were considered having met the criteria and five were approached as to their ability and willingness to participate in the research (three 'backup' countries were thus identified in the event that countries initially selected would be unable to take part.) However, all countries initially identified as potential participants agreed to take part. They were Serbia, Poland, Ukraine, Germany and Hungary.



In each of these countries the team sports of association football (hereafter referred to as 'football') and basketball were well established within the Unified programme. Football was included in the evaluation in Serbia, Poland and Hungary, whilst in Ukraine and Germany it was basketball.

Planning for the evaluation in each country was achieved through liaison with an identified SO contact person (this process is described in detail in our report on the project methodology), and locations for the evaluation were identified and agreed. We aimed to work in more than one location in each country to allow for in-country comparisons, and this was achieved in all but one location (Germany) where the Unified programme is at an earlier stage of development.

## **Profile of Unified Sports in the chosen countries**

The National Co-ordinators of the five chosen countries were asked to provide details of the Unified Sports teams within their countries. Table 2 summarises the characteristics of the teams as at 2009.

**Table 2: The profile of Unified Sports Teams with the five chosen countries**

Country (population in millions)	Number of Regions	Unified Sports played	Number of Unified teams	Number of athletes		Number of partners		Number of coaches		Estimated Total Partici- pants
				M	F	M	F	M	F	
<b>Serbia</b> (10m)	4	Football* Basketball	20	131	0	117	0	17	10	275
<b>Poland</b> (38m)	9	Football*	98	493	17	367	1	108	31	1,017
<b>Ukraine</b> (46m)	9	Basketball* Football Table Tennis	45	570	240	450	135	45	15	1,455
<b>Germany</b> (82m)	1	Basketball* Football Volleyball Handball	15	64	31	57	23	18	4	197
<b>Hungary</b> (10m)	6	Football* Handball	33	112	18	104	10	11	5	260
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>		<b>211</b>	<b>1370</b>	<b>306</b>	<b>1095</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>3,204</b>

*\* sport included in the evaluation*

With the exception of Germany the number of participants in Unified Sports within the participating countries is roughly equivalent once the overall size of the population is taken into account. Youth Unified Sports became a focus within SO Germany only recently although it is growing in numbers.

As Table 2 also shows, overall male athletes exceed female athletes (81% of all athletes are male) as do male partners (87% are male) but the ratio is less marked with coaches (75% are male). The gender balance varies across countries: females are more commonly found in Germany and Ukraine where basketball is played, rather than or alongside football. However, these proportions may reflect the gender balance when these sports are played by non-disabled persons in the selected countries although this data was not available to us.

### The sample chosen

The coaches for the teams chosen to participate in the evaluation completed a team sheet detailing the characteristics of the athletes and partners. In all 55 team sheets were completed across the five participating countries.

Table 3 summarises the number of participants in the teams selected within each country. Overall around 60% were athletes with special needs and 40% were partners: a similar ratio to that reported earlier for the national teams (see Table 2). However the ratio varied across countries with Ukraine having the lowest proportion of partners (36%) and Serbia the highest (48%). Nonetheless these proportions are broadly in line with the national data reported earlier although more athletes than partners tended to be reported for the teams in the evaluation.

**Table 3: The number of participants in the selected teams across the five countries**

Country	Number of teams	Participants		Total in country
		Athletes	Partners	
Serbia	15	34	31	65
		52.3%	47.7%	
Ukraine	7	16	9	25
		64.0%	36.0%	
Germany	4	21	15	36
		58.3%	41.7%	
Poland	15	34	21	55
		61.8%	38.2%	
Hungary	14	51	32	83
		61.4%	38.6%	
Total	55	156	108	264
		59.1%	40.9%	

In terms of gender, most participants in the chosen teams were male (84%) and the gender balance was the same for athletes and for partners. This reflects the national data presented above. However as Table 4 shows more females were involved in basketball even though males still dominated overall.

**Table 4: The number of participants in the selected teams by gender and sports**

	Gender		Totals
	Female	Male	
Football	27	176	203
	13.3%	86.7%	
Basketball	16	45	61
	26.2%	73.8%	
Total	43	221	264
%	16.3%	83.7%	

From the team sheet data, further information was available on the characteristics of the teams. (Unfortunately this data is not available nationally or across the Region.)

The largest proportion of the participants was aged 16-18 years with around 30% aged 12-15 years. However as Table 5 shows, there were significant difference in the ages of the athletes (more of whom were 19 years and over) whereas the partners tended to be aged under 16 years.

**Table 5: The number of participants in the selected teams by age groups**

	Age Groupings				Totals
	12-15	16-18	19-21	22 -25	
<b>Athletes</b>	32	65	32	27	<b>156</b>
	20.5%	41.7%	20.5%	17.3%	
<b>Partners</b>	47	45	8	8	<b>108</b>
	43.5%	41.7%	7.4%	7.4%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>264</b>
<b>%</b>	29.9%	41.7%	15.2%	13.3%	

Table 6 summarises the length of time participants had been engaged with Unified Sports. Athletes had been involved for longer than partners. Over two-thirds of athletes had been involved for three or more years whereas this was the case for only 12% of partners. This suggests that the turnover of partners may be greater with most staying for one to two years. This could be a reflection of partners leaving school and going on to further education or taking up employment.

**Table 6: The number of participants by the length of time involved with Unified Sports**

	Length time involved with Unified Sports				Total
	1 year	2 years	3-5 years	5+ years	
<b>Athlete</b>	36	61	19	40	<b>156</b>
	23.1%	39.1%	12.2%	25.6%	
<b>Partner</b>	46	47	10	5	<b>108</b>
	42.6%	43.5%	9.3%	4.6%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>264</b>
<b>%</b>	31.1%	40.9%	11.0%	17.0%	

Another marked difference between the athletes and partners was in terms of the school they attended. As Table 7 shows, nearly all the partners attended mainstream schools whereas athletes mostly came from special schools (92% in all).

**Table 7: The number of participants by the type of school attended**

	School			Total
	Mainstream	Special	Inclusive	
<b>Athlete</b>	11	140	1	<b>152</b>
	7.2%	92.1%	.7%	
<b>Partner</b>	103	1	0	<b>104</b>
	99.0%	1.0%	.0%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>256</b>
<b>%</b>	44.5%	55.1%	.4%	

For those persons aged 19 years and over, the employment pattern of athletes and partners was fairly similar as Table 8 shows, although only small numbers of partners had left school.

**Table 8: The number of participants aged 19 years and over by employment**

	Employment Status			Total
	Employed/ sheltered workshop	Unemployed	Training/ apprentice	
<b>Athletes</b>	8	26	22	<b>56</b>
	14.3%	46.4%	39.3%	
<b>Partner</b>	4	4	5	<b>13</b>
	30.8%	30.8%	38.5%	
<b>Total</b>	12	30	27	<b>69</b>
<b>%</b>	17.4%	43.5%	39.1%	

Table 9 identifies the living arrangements of the participants. Nearly one quarter of the athletes lived in institutions/boarding school with a very small proportion living in their own homes. Most lived with families which was the case for nearly all the partners.

**Table 9: The number of participants by living arrangements**

	Living arrangements					Total
	Family	Institution	Boarding School	Foster parents	Own home	
<b>Athlete</b>	101	38	14	1	2	<b>156</b>
	64.7%	24.4%	9.0%	.6%	1.3%	
<b>Partner</b>	106	0	0	0	2	<b>108</b>
	98.1%	.0%	.0%	.0%	1.9%	
<b>Total</b>	207	38	14	1	4	<b>264</b>
<b>%</b>	78.4%	14.4%	5.3%	.4%	1.5%	

An estimate was made by informants of the economic status of participants' families. As Table 10 shows, significantly higher proportion of the athlete's came from poorer backgrounds compared to those of the partners.

**Table 10: The number of participants living with families by economic status**

	Economic Status			Total
	high economic/social status	medium economic/social status	low economic / social status	
<b>Athlete</b>	1	17	65	<b>83</b>
	1.2%	20.5%	78.3%	100.0%
<b>Partner</b>	0	70	9	<b>79</b>
	.0%	88.6%	11.4%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>	1	87	74	<b>162</b>
<b>%</b>	.6%	53.7%	45.7%	100.0%

Likewise coaches rated the extent to which participants’ families were supportive of their involvement in Unified Sports. The proportions were higher for Partner’s families than for Athlete’s families, as Table 11 shows.

**Table 11: The number of participants whose families were supportive of their participation in Unified Sports**

	Support for Unified Sports		Total
	family supportive	no family support	
<b>Athlete</b>	81	20	<b>101</b>
	80.2%	19.8%	
<b>Partner</b>	99	4	<b>103</b>
	96.1%	3.9%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>204</b>
<b>%</b>	88.2%	11.8%	

## Conclusions

These samples of participants may not be representative of the overall population of participants in Unified Sports throughout SOEE. However for the teams who took part in the evaluation, this survey of team membership identified a number of characteristics that need to be borne in mind.

- More males than females participate in Unified Sports both as athletes and as partners.
- Athletes tend to be slightly older and to have been involved in Unified Sports for longer than partners. It may be that there is greater turnover among partners.
- In this sample, nearly all the athletes attended special schools and around one quarter lived in institutions.
- Of those aged 19 years and over, nearly half were in employment or some form of training/apprenticeship.
- Athletes who lived with their families tended to come from poorer economic and social backgrounds compared to partners and about one fifth had no support from their families for their participation in Unified Sports, unlike partners nearly all of whom had the support of their families.

In summary, the athletes are at greater risk of being socially excluded given this pattern of characteristics in terms of schooling, family background, living circumstances and employment.

## Data gathered in the evaluation

With the selected teams, information was gathered from a range of stake-holder groups through interviews supplemented by Life Stories Interviews and the completion of Connections charts to gauge the extent of social inclusion experienced by the athletes and partners. (Details of the methods used are given in an accompanying report).

Table 12 summarises the total samples obtained from the various stake-holder groups across the various locations in each country. At the outset, we had selected a target sample in each location for each stakeholder group and for each type of data we

planned to gather. This target sample was used to guide the work as it progressed, so that the local evaluators could measure the number of interviews completed when visiting the teams against the number intended.

The interviewees included a mix of genders and ages and nearly all were conducted in local languages. These were translated into English by our local partners. Quotations used in this report retain the terminology used by interviewees when referring to people with disabilities. These may not reflect the views of the authors or Special Olympics.

**Table 12: The number of participants in the evaluation across countries and in total**

<b>Data gathered</b>	<b>Serbia</b>	<b>Poland</b>	<b>Ukraine</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Hungary</b>	<b>Total Sample</b>
Athlete individual interview	6	6	6	3	4	<b>25</b>
Partner individual interview	7	7	7	3	4	<b>28</b>
Parent interview	5	5	8	2	4	<b>24</b>
Coach interview	7	5	4	4	5	<b>25</b>
Team interview	6	5	3	2	4	<b>20</b>
Community representative interview	4	6	4	3	5	<b>22</b>
Life story interview - athlete	4	4	4	2	4	<b>18</b>
Life story interview - partner	4	4	3	2	4	<b>17</b>
Connections chart - athlete	7	5	4	2	5	<b>23</b>
Connections chart - partner	3	6	4	2	4	<b>19</b>
<b>Total Sample</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>221</b>

The remainder of this report summarises the information gained from these informants.

The following codes are used to identify the informants whose words are quoted in the reports.

<b>Code meaning</b>	<b>Code example</b>
Country code (first letter of country)	U = Ukraine
Town code (first letter of participating town / city where it was supplied in translations)	K = Kyiv
Type of data	I = Interview LS= Life story
Stakeholder	A=Athlete P=Partner T=team C=Coach Par=parent Para=parent of an athlete Parp=parent of a partner CR=community representative
Number	01/02/03 denotes the number of interview in that group of interviews
<i>Example: UK-LS-P01</i>	<i>Ukraine, Kyiv, Life story, Partner, number 1</i>



## Part 2: Key findings for each stakeholder group.

This section reports on the central findings that apply to each of the groups interviewed – Athletes, Partners, Parents, Coaches and Community Representatives. These findings are primarily drawn from interview data with individuals or with teams but also include some reflections made by the evaluation team during observations of football and basketball games and of the interactions between young people at the tournaments attended during the evaluation. The stories told by some athletes and partners about their involvement are also included.

### Athletes

The athletes’ comments both in the 25 individual interviews and 20 team interviews, tended to revolve around eight main themes as listed in Table 13.

**Table 13: The main themes in the interviews with Athletes and Partners**

Athletes	Partners
Fun	Enjoyment
Football /basketball skills	Improved sports skills
Friendship	Friendship
Communication	Life lessons and personal growth
Travel opportunities	Travel opportunities
Hanging out and learning about new things	Feeling included
Proud of winning and their achievements	Helping others
Links to work and employment	Getting employment/university place

#### 1. Fun

Many participating athletes spoke of the fun that they had through taking part in Unified teams. They enjoyed the company of their teammates and the activities that they did both on the field and beyond. Many said how they laughed and joked around a lot, and others talked of the positive atmosphere within the club, which set them at ease.

*‘I wanted to join this team because I heard that it is lots of fun, and it is true we have one kind of fun on the field and then another kind of fun hanging out after and telling jokes, just laughing and messing around.’ (SC-I-T03a)*

#### 2. Football /basketball skills

Athletes shared a love of the sport in which they took part and most reported an improvement in their sporting skills as a consequence of taking part in training and competitions. Many praised the coaching they had received and also attributed the development of their skill to learning from their partner teammates.

*‘I am a better player now, the trainer and the kids we play with have helped my game. (HD-I-A02)*

#### 3. Friendship

Athletes emphasised the friendships they had made through taking part in Unified Sports, they valued friendships with partners; often commenting that “*they were really great guys*”.

*'I like playing in Unified Sports because we are a very friendly team and I have made new friends that I get to see at every training and get close to. (UL-I-A02)*

However, they often reported that they had to wait for partners to instigate any development of their friendships beyond the team, e.g.: in terms of meeting up outside of training. Athletes were always willing to develop the friendships but it seemed that demands on partners' time or other commitments meant that they could not always accommodate athletes further into their lives beyond meeting at training.

*'The partners are very good students and they have to do their school work and other things, so they do not have so much time for us, when they are ready we athletes will be ready too.'* (UK-I-A01)

#### **4. Communication**

Athletes' emphasized the opportunities they had to develop their communication skills through talking with partners and other people they met at the Unified programme. They enjoyed the chance to talk with people outside of their typical daily experiences, and many highlighted how they discussed problems with partners, talked about schoolwork or about a girl that they liked. Athletes talked of being more confident communicators through their experiences in Unified Sports.

*'I think that being in the team has helped me to know how to get into contact and communicate better with people, I have met lots of different people and I have learned how to talk to them.'* (SP-I-T01a)

Another said:

*'We have got better in basketball and stuff, and in brain things, I can talk to people better right now, I got more self-confidence.'* (G-I-T01a)

#### **5. Travel opportunities**

Many athletes reported on the opportunities they had to travel both nationally and internationally as a result of taking part in the programme. For many these were the first experiences of travel that these young people had encountered. They drew on these experiences both as an opportunity to develop their friendships with teammates, to see other places and meet people from different countries and to experience some independence away from family or special centres, which for many was rare.

*'We have travelled a lot, we have met lots of kids from other cities in our country, it is a really good thing, I have learned about other places, I tell all my friends where I have been, about my experiences and what I have done.'* (SC-I-T04a)

#### **6. Hanging out and learning about new things.**

Through spending time with partners some athletes talked about their enjoyment of simply hanging out with each other and going to places – like the town square – where young people in that area typically spend time together. Taking part in this ordinary activity was remarked on by athletes, as both new and *extra*-ordinary to them. Here they talked with their friends and shared experiences and ideas. For instance some talked about finding out about new (to them) styles of music and texting music files to one another. Others talked about learning how to play on video games. However, these experiences were not reported by all athletes and it was only in a few instances that the friendships had developed to this casual, unstructured level.

*'We go to the town square and talk, or to the games arcade, or we go for a drink in a café, they guys from the team know places to go and we go after training if we all have time..'* (SP-I-A02)

## **7. Proud of winning and their achievements**

Athletes talked of a strong sense of pride they had gained through taking part in the programme. They were proud of their achievements both individually and as a team. Many talked of winning matches or of success in tournaments and of receiving medals to mark their successes.

*'I can tell you in my Unified team I have won lots of prizes and I have lots of medals to show from there. I think the most important is the gold medal we won this year and through this we were able to qualify to go to [the European Unified football tournament in] Istanbul.'* (SP-LS-A02)

*'Our goal is to win in Bremen (at the SO Germany National Games) and of course in Greece (at SO 2011 World Summer Games) as well'* (G-I-T02a)

## **8. Links to work and employment**

Athletes recognised that the skills they had gained through taking part in Unified Sports may be helpful in trying to get employment in their future.

*'I have learnt about being responsible and about my obligations, I have learnt to communicate with other people and I am fit. I think that these skills will be good for an employer and I will definitely tell them about Unified Sports when I apply for a job, I think it will help.'* (SP-I-T02a)

For a small number (four in all) taking part in the Unified programme had directly led to them securing employment with mainstream businesses. These were achieved through introductions made on behalf of athletes by programme leaders and through employers seeing young people play and then deciding to offer them an opportunity in employment. Athletes reported that they were supported in their employment by the mentoring of coaches from their Unified team.

*'I work in a restaurant in the village, this is a full time job, it is what I wanted to achieve, so I work outside the institution. This was with the help of my coach that I got this job. I tried hard to get a job and in the end I got a permanent job'* (G-I-P02)

I am 18 years old and I go to special school in our city. I am educated to work with wood after I leave school. I am also a member of our SO club for 4 years now. I like to play football and basket ball and I also like to Ski. I have been working with our Unified football team. We also do team athletics in our club. I learned through my friends who were involved in SO athletics teams of what a good thing it is to be a member of such a team. And when my coach came to our club to ask who wants to join their new unified sports team that was being formed – that would be a football club- I said I wanted to go to try out. I wasn't that good at playing football at first but now I think I am better and I am very glad that I decided to join in.

I have improved my football skills very much, because I wasn't very good at football, now I can run faster and I can control the ball much better and easier. I have also met lots of new and nice people and I have travelled a lot where I met people from other towns of Serbia. And of course we have won lots of awards and lots of medals.

I think I have learned some new things in Unified Sports that help me in my life. I make friends more easily, I have met lots of people and I have learnt a few things from them. I go with my friends after training to town and I walk around with them. They show me some new comic books that I have not read before and they have given me some new music to share with me and through that I have learnt some new stuff. I started listening to rap music because one of my friends on the team introduced me to it and sent me a rap melody to my phone. Then I realised I like rap music and he sent me a few more things, so I learnt some new things that I was not aware of before, something that I would not have known that I would like.

When we meet after training, we go to town, sometimes we go for a drink or we go to eat something, some kind of hamburger or for an ice-cream or we just sit around the city square. There is a place in our city square where all the young people go to sit, so we go there. It is very interesting if you go there after training and we all have the same tee shirt, so people ask us if we are all a member of the same team, what do we do...and we start to talk to them. A few times they have told me that they recognise me from the newspaper or from the TV when I was on the TV or in the newspaper and that is really cool for me. **Athlete, Serbia**

I go to special school in my city. I am 16 years old and I am 3<sup>rd</sup> year at school. I am an average student. I live with my parents and my brother. My parents are pensioners and they work in the fields and we have some goats, we have some cows and they do farm work and sometimes they field work. They hire their services out to the other people in the village. My brother works. I go to school everyday, after school I do sports and I like to do sports. I am a member of a club in my school, it is a club that is run by the coach.

I would like to do the same things as my brother when I leave school, because I see that he earns quite a bit of money and I would like to do that. I, at the moment, work sometimes in the field and sometimes help the neighbours with their goats and their cows with milking and farm work. I earn a bit of money that way but it is not enough for me. My brother earns quite a lot of money and one day I would like to go and do the same work as he does.

Sometimes I have some difficulties at school. The teacher helps me, the teacher that runs the sports club and he is very kind to me. He helps me with the other teachers and sometimes explains that I cannot do all the work.

I travel by bus and I travel by train. More I travel by train because it is quicker and more safe. It takes between 30-50 minutes everyday, the only problem is that the train and the bus are not always on time, so sometimes in the morning I am late and sometimes in the afternoon because of training I miss the school bus and the train to go home and I have to wait, sometimes I wait for 4 and sometimes for 5 hours for the next train. Sometimes because I have training, my friends from the training wait with me, we hang around in the city, go to arcades, play some games. Sometimes I wait by myself for the next transportation home. It can get very difficult sometimes.

Because of the fact that I have to give lots of money to the monthly ticket and it is not paid so lots of my pocket money goes towards this ticket. **Athlete, Serbia**

## **Partners**

Eight themes also stood out in the comments made by the partners, i.e. the players without disabilities, in the 27 individual interviews and 20 team interviews. These mirror those mentioned by the athletes with only a few different emphases (see Table 13).

### **1. Enjoyment**

Partners too talked about how much they enjoyed their participation in Unified Sports. Often they recalled the fun that they had and the positive atmosphere within the team. Their enjoyment of taking part had an impact on their remaining within the team over time.

*'I really do enjoy my training with the Unified team, we have a lot of good times and fun together, they are great guys and easy to get on with.'* (HD-I-P02)

Another said:

*'I tell my friends that this is a place where we have such a great time, we laugh a lot and do very, very interesting things.'* (SK-LS-P02)

Another reported:

*'When we travel together we are always very cheerful, we always joke, there is lots of laughter, but not just amongst ourselves as a team, but also with the coaches, they are very, very fun.'* (SP-I-P04)

### **2. Improved sports skills**

In most instances, partners, like athletes, reported improvements in their sports skills. They attributed this to the coaching and to the regularity of training, many also remarked on the level of the game being high as athletes were also good players.

*'Of course we have made improvements in our basketball ability, we are not the best ones but we are working hard together.'* (G-I-P01)

Another said:

*'My skills have improved, I have more stamina and I can run faster, I am more accurate in shooting, yes I am better; we train hard, we are a good team.(HD-I-P01)*

However, some highlighted other things they had learned from the project:

*'I think my sports skills have improved a bit, but I think I have got much more than sports ability from being part of this team.'* (SP-I-P03)

### **3. Friendship**

Many partners, like athletes reported that they have made friends with people who they may not otherwise have met, and that these friendships were valued by them.

*'At Unified Sports, there are things that you learn from other people, the fact that I have made friends with people who I may not have made friends with had I not been on this team. I do not know where I would have met them. This team is the perfect opportunity for that. We do different things and I am just having a really good time.'* (SK-I-P02)

*'I make friends for quite long time, they are strong friendships with my team mates as well as my coaches.'* (HD-I-P02)

### **4. Life lessons and personal growth**

Partners remarked on how their participation in Unified Sports had been more than a sporting experience for them. Many said that they had learnt new skills which would be important throughout their lives, such as listening to others, understanding difference, not judging through stereotypes and seeing the world from other people's perspectives.

Partners identified the opportunity to mix with and get to know people with intellectual disabilities as being of central importance in their experience of Unified Sports. Many said that getting to know people personally had had a positive influence on their attitude toward people with intellectual disability. Many reflected that these attitudes would be important throughout their lives.

*'Owing to Unified Sports we have had the opportunity to better understand people with intellectual disabilities and people who have some other kinds of problems, I have changed my outlook greatly.'* (UL-I-T03p)

Another stated:

*'I have learnt not to judge people from the first meeting, there are many prejudices from outside, but most of it is completely wrong, I learnt to accept responsibility because we have to support them a bit sometimes but that his just part of the job.'* (G-I-P03)

A third reported:

*'I have learned to be patient about people, it is worth it to be patient, to sacrifice oneself sometimes to get the best out of other people.'* (P-I-P07)

### **5. Travel**

Opportunities to travel were high on the agenda for many partners. The experience or chance to travel with the team nationally or internationally was regarded by partners as a very attractive element of the Unified programme. For many travel abroad was a new experience. Indeed, being away from home without their families also allowed them to experience a new degree of independence. Furthermore partners also remarked that their friends were envious of the opportunities that Unified Sports afforded them and this countered any negative thoughts that they were playing on an 'easy' team – if there

were high level international tournaments then this raised the profile of the whole programme for sceptics.

*Everyone that I know knows that I travel a lot and I go to different places in Serbia with this team.’ (Sk-LS-P02)*

Another reported:

*‘When my friends heard I was playing on this team some thought it was just an easy team, or that I was just helping out with the disabled, then they saw me going to competitions, to Rome and to Shanghai and they realised that this was a serious team, now they would like to be on the team too.’ (G-I-P03).*

## **6. Equal and included**

This project focuses on social inclusion amongst athletes; however, partners also remarked on how they felt included within the team, that is that the team was based on an ethos of inclusion, which also affected them. Many talked about no one being left out and everyone feeling part of things. They compared this to the factionalism which some had experienced in mainstream sports. Some partners compared the atmosphere in their team to that of a family.

*‘I feel part of the team, we are all equal on the team, the attitude of athletes and partners is very good, I have only positive emotions and impressions of playing on this Unified team.’ (UL-I-T03p)*

*‘At the beginning I felt a bit excluded, maybe it was my fault, because now I see that they [teammates] are very open and speaking to each other in a very open way, I learnt from them. Anyway now I feel included in the team.’ (HP-I-P02)*

## **7. Helping others**

Although most partners interviewed regarded all team mates – athletes and partners as equal members of the team, some did describe their relationships with athletes less as team mates and friends and more in terms of their helping athletes to play sport, to meet others and to have a better quality of life. In these instances the perspective was one in which partners talked of being self-sacrificing in their participation and of feeling sorry for athletes therefore wanting them to have more opportunities. Some partners talk about this from a self-sacrificing perspective.

*‘When I play on the Unified team I feel part of the team and I feel that I can help the athletes and I try to do everything I can to help them, and the athletes know that we will help and support them.’ (UL-I-T03p)*

Another said:

*I always felt sorry for such people and I always thought it was important to help them. Working with them I have found that people with intellectual disability are kind, they are not mean, they are just kind. Working with such people is a very valuable experience and it is a great opportunity to help these people who really need help.’ (UK-I-P01)*

Whilst another reported:

*‘I care more about the disabled; I enjoy more when disabled players shoot a goal more than myself.’ (PSO-I-P010)*

## **8. Getting employment/university place**

There were some partners who thought that their participation in Unified Sports would offer valuable experience for them in getting a place in University or in boosting their CV

when seeking employment. This was in relation to both practical experiences for those who wanted to work in the area of sports or in a social profession, and in terms of the development of personal skills – communication, empathy etc. Other partners did not see that their experience in Unified Sports would have any bearing on their future endeavours or opportunities.

*'In the future I want to work in sports and youth work and I know that this experience will be important for me.'* (PK-I-P02)

Similarly another reported:

*'I am going to work as a teacher of physical education in school or as a trainer/coach and I think this experience will be very useful for my professional life.'* (UL-I-P03)

I am glad that I am a part of this programme because it helps me to understand that people with ID are just like other people, but they only need help sometimes. I think that it is very important for people with disability to take part in sports, it helps them not only because of course it is good for health, but it is good for them because they can connect with other people, communication is better, it helps them to get into society. Communication is very important, the most important. Many people in Ukraine do not know of these activities and even if they know they do not understand ...people just close eyes on this problem and don't want to talk about it. Before I became involved I knew that but I did not what to talk about it. I changed my mind when I came first and I saw how these people can gather and talk and they can take, they are able to take an active part in the life of society and community, and I understood it and I changed my mind. I think that people need to know more about these people and then maybe something will change. They would understand that people with problems are just like us, it's simple - they are just like me. Partner, Ukraine

## **Concluding comments**

Both athletes and partners derive benefits from their participation in Unified Sports. The mutual gains are beneficial in themselves, however critically in the context of this study, they are also a crucial element in sustaining and extending Unified Sports within localities as well as nationally and internationally. Two further points are worth noting.

Firstly, the gains extend beyond the participation in a sports activity. While football and basketball provided a vital context for the interactions between the young people, it is the interactions themselves rather than the sport *per se* that produced this more tangible impact of which the young people spoke.

Secondly Unified Sports has two sets of beneficiaries – the athletes and partners. The latter are not there merely to support or assist the athletes, rather Unified Sports provides mutual support to all its participants.

## **Parents**

Amongst both athletes and partners there was variation in the degree to which their parents were involved in their son/daughter's participation in Unified Sports. Some said that work and other commitments meant that their parents (and indeed other family members) were unable to attend matches to watch the teams play. As noted in Table 9, some athletes some did not live with their families and had little or no contact with them.

The findings presented here and elsewhere in this report from interviews with 24 parents across five countries, are derived from those who attended the training and tournaments on the day of the evaluation visit. Hence they may represent the views of the more interested and engaged parents. In some instances where the majority of young people in a particular area lived in an institution or care home, their support /care workers at times were interviewed in their role as carer.



The first section below presents findings that are relevant to parents of both athletes and partners. This will be followed by headline findings, which are particularly applicable to parents of athletes and then followed by the parents of partners.

### **Parents are supportive of involvement**

Parents interviewed were largely very supportive of their son/daughter's involvement in Unified Sports, and for a number of reasons they regarded it to be a valuable aspect of their lives. Many reported a range of benefits to their son/daughter and these are itemized as follows:

1) Parents talked of how much enjoyment their young people get from taking part in Unified Sports;

*'He really likes to play football all the time, that is what he likes most, so he loves going to training, football is the most important thing for him' (PK-I-Par07a)*

2) Parents noted the importance of sport to their son/daughters and how they had progressed in sport through their training and playing on the unified team;

*'At first I thought his team would not be of a high level and he would not progress as a sportsman, I think a lot of parents fear that and do not want their sons to be held back, but I was wrong, he is playing at a high level, progressing and the coaching is excellent.'* (SK-I-Par05p)

3) Many highlighted the personal developments in their son/daughters confidence, self-esteem and communication skills;

*'The project gives our children the opportunity to become less reserved and to show their skills.'* (UK-I-Par01a)

*'He has really got a lot from taking part in the project, [...] he is much better at communicating with other, he can listen and is patient and he does not judge people but I can see that he takes time to let people show themselves.'* (SK-I-Par03p)

4) Many parents were pleased at the opportunities the programme afforded their young people:

*'In our country there are no other projects which can unite people with disabilities and healthy [sic] people, but because of this I can see changes in my son's outlook, he tries to help people and he pays more attention to the people that he meets.'*

4) Parents also highlight social changes that they attribute to the programme:

*'In some ways because of this programme society starts to understand that all people should have equal possibilities and equal rights and this should not depend on the physical or intellectual abilities of a person. Such projects change the conscience of healthy people in society.'* (UK-I-P01a)

5) Some parents played an active role in the programme through volunteering at events:

*'I, and some of the other parents are now involved too, we help out as volunteers when they have a tournament or another event. We are all part of this now – it is very important to me and I enjoy it very much.'* (SK-I-Par04p)

Based on this common core of views, parents of athletes and of partners went on to make some more specific comments relating to their own circumstances.

## **Parents of athletes**

Four aspects stood out in the interviews with athlete's parents.

1. Parents were often glad of the connections that their young people had made with their non-disabled peers.

*The important thing about this project is the contact between non-disabled and disabled children, through meeting these healthy children, they learn about each others lives, it is the school of life for them. The disabled want to live normally; they do not want to hide.'* (PSO-I-Par05a)

2. Parents of athletes often praised the positive attitude of partners to their son/daughters.

*'The attitude is good without a doubt, they communicate, they spent time beyond the sports and they discuss different topics so I think it is a way of social integration.'* (UL-I-P06)

3. Parents were keen that the programme should spread so that other young people with intellectual disabilities could take part, and they make some recommendations as to how this could happen.

*'I tell people about my son's participation in Unified Sports, and try to convince them of the positive effect it has had on him, if I can just show my son and what he has been able to do then this is the best way to show the advantages of the project.'* (UL-I-P08a)

Another said:

*'To get more people involved – first people must stop being ashamed of these kids. People in our society still have strange reactions to disabled people, sometimes they are scared or ashamed. We can talk more with them inform them more, disability was taboo for many years, it is changing right no but not enough, people do not have access to free information, there are some books but they are expensive.'* (PSO-I-Par04a)

4. Some parents described the support that they themselves had gained through the programme. This was because of the support of other parents who understood much of their life experiences of bringing up a son/daughter with an intellectual disability. Supportive relationships were also forged with parents of partners, some of whom had also become involved in the programme through their son/daughters participation.

*'There are very few children with disabilities who can live with their families because as a rule these families are single parents and the mother cannot afford to go out to work and to keep her child, she cannot earn her living and give her child the care and attention that it needs. That is why a lot of children with disabilities live in boarding schools. There is one such school here in Kyiv. But we are a complete family, a father and mother and I wanted to keep my son at home. But he was not allowed to study in the mainstream school; they would not accept him because he has Down Syndrome. I was told to give my some up to the boarding school. But I would not. So the organisation where my son studies is through Unified Sports and Special Olympics, through the organisation I organised a social group for parents of other disabled children and so all the studying for children with disabilities is provided through Special Olympics and the programmes it organises.'* (UK-I-P01a)

## **Parents of partners**

Likewise four subthemes emerged from the interviews with the parents of the partners.

1. Partners' parents talked of the positive impact Unified Sports had had on their sons/daughters, in terms of their attitudes to people with intellectual disabilities and in relation to a developing maturity they noticed through the responsibility and trusted position they held within the team.

*'Partners in the Unified team help the coach, they also train and support athletes, this gives them some essential skills for life.'* (UL-I-P06)

2. Some of these parents also talked of how the change in their son/daughter's attitudes had filtered through to their families and friends also engendering a positive influence.

*'Partners give a new attitude, but they also get a new attitude; being healthy people, when they see the problems and needs of people with disabilities, they start to perceive the world in different colours and they understand them, the problems they have.'* (UL-I-Par03p)

*'My son, through playing on this Unified team and meeting these unhealthy children has really learned a lot about them and he knows that they are not bad or dangerous, but kind and also fun to play football with. He has talked to us his family and to his friends about his experiences and we have learned too through this I think this has made us all, I mean our family, more open.'* (UL-I-P02p)

3. Parents valued the opportunities that their son/daughters have had to travel through taking part in the programme.

*'My son has travelled to Romania with the team and also to Portugal, when he came back he was full of stories, he told us about the new places, where he has been and what he has learned.'* (SP-I-Par02a)

4. Some parents thought that Unified Sports would help their son/daughters in their future as they progressed in education or looked for jobs.

*'My son has decided to enroll in the sports academy and one day become a PE teacher. He likes working with kids and he likes sports, so he thought this was the best way to combine the two together, and we are very proud of that and we are going to support him very much. One day maybe I am hoping that he can join such a club as a trainer not as a competitor and then he can one day work with people with and without Intellectual disabilities to transfer what he has learnt through his own personal experience.'* (SP-I-Par01p)

## **Concluding comments on parental responses**

It was striking the degree to which both sets of parents identified the same outcomes for their young person's involvement in Unified Sports. Those elements which parents of athletes and partners had in common were the young people's shared enjoyment in sport and the development of their sporting skills, the personal growth in terms of self-esteem, confidence and communication skills, their opportunities to travel and to have new experiences through taking part in the programme, the potential that the programme has to effect wider social change for people with intellectual disabilities as well as the involvement of parents through volunteering. This underlines the earlier point about the mutual benefits to the two sets of participants.

The parental comments also confirmed the young people's own views and provides some independent validation of the gains they had reported.

It is significant too how Unified Sports built social capital among the parents as well as among the young people by linking them with culturally valued sports pursuits that emphasised the abilities of their sons and daughters. This was also evident in the networks which developed because of parents shared connections to the programme. Support, educational and advocacy networks were reported to have emerged amongst parents of both athletes and partners.

## Coaches

Interviews were conducted with 25 coaches across the five countries and the two sports of football and basketball. Coaches were, for the most part, well qualified (graduate level), experienced (i.e. they worked in the education sector) and conscious of the specific needs associated with the Unified Sports programme. They were drawn to this work either through direct professional links (i.e. they worked with young people with ID on a daily basis) or through close association with those that did (i.e. a work colleague or friend socialised them into Unified Sports).

*'I was working in a disabled centre and I heard there was Special Olympics. First it was only football and later running and swimming and then I moved to a special school and I have been in SP for almost 12 years now. I am not only a Unified Sports coach, I am also the trainer for the other sports and the section leader. (P-I-C05)*

In the main, they took on the role of coach in a voluntary capacity although some coaches (G-I-C01, for example) said that it might be difficult to volunteer as a coach in Unified Sports if it was not viewed as part of their job.

*'My director [in an institution] likes the project very much so we are all allowed to do it as part of our paid work. I am not sure that I would do it voluntarily; we all do so much in our free time.'* (G-I-C01)

### The role of the coach

In talking with coaches, our major focus was on their role. A number of themes could be identified across all coaches as shown in Figure 2.

### Sports coaching

The coaches took their roles as sports instructors very seriously and it was seen by most as a central function for them. They emphasised the need for pedagogical know-how (e.g. G-I-C02 and C03) and being able to organise training sessions and tournaments effectively.



Figure 2: The role of coaches

*'I think [the coach needs to have] a combination of sporting ability, you have to know the game of course, and you have to have pedagogic tools as well, that is the most important thing in Unified Sports, that you are able to work with athletes and partners, it is important for partners to know that the coach is capable in the game and for athletes it is good to have some pedagogic capabilities.'* (C-I-C03)

Indeed what is interesting is the emphasis the coaches place on training and practice rather than competition. It appears the most important component is the time the Unified

team spends together in training more so than in competition or indeed time spent together outside the Unified Sports realm.

However, most coaches emphasised that their role was much more than simply sports coaching. This is not to underplay this aspect of their job because the majority of interviewees still considered this to be their principal responsibility.

### **Nurturing team-work**

Coaches placed particular emphasis on inculcating team work. One coach (again SP-I-C02) remarked that no team should have a 'stand-out' individual on it. In this case there was a belief that if one individual emerged as being dominant that a team ceased to exist and the concept would have failed. This was an explicit statement of intent around the composition of the team.

A recurring theme for a number of coaches was the need for consistency. Many of the coaches talked about the importance of being consistent in terms of training, selection and engagement with the athletes. It was clear they needed to create an environment that was predictable and safe in the minds of the athletes. In this regard some coaches (again G-01-C03) said that it was important to recognise that being good at a sport wasn't the same as being able to coach it well and that it was important to outline this distinction.

### **Social Integration**

However there was a strong awareness from coaches of their role in facilitating integration between team members; a theme that we will return to in Part 7 of the findings. These particular concepts – integration and responsibility – emerged throughout a number of interviews. This required careful forward planning in terms of choosing suitable partners:

*'I look for young people who are good as friends and who are open minded' said one coach – SP-1-C02),*

It also means ensuring that there is a continuous stream of partners - as this appears to be an issue when partners leave school and move on elsewhere.

*'collaborations with the mainstream school means that we are able to recruit partners easily' (HP-I-C01)*

What is interesting are the cultural differences that exist between countries involved in Unified Sports and the perceptions coaches held of athletes. Several of the coaches (e.g. P-I-C01 and PK-I-C06) used language (notwithstanding the possibility that this has been lost in translation) that may be considered inappropriate given modern thinking about disability. Some drew distinctions between 'healthy' children (partners) and 'unhealthy' children (athletes) or referred to children with 'weaknesses' (athletes). Elsewhere some athletes were clearly living in residential accommodation and their access to Unified Sport was greater and different from those athletes living at home. In this case their involvement and engagement with coaches was slightly different as well.

It was interesting in some cases to identify how much awareness the coaches had of the athletes/partners with whom they were working. For example, coach PK-I-C06 was able to say that most of the partners on their team 'came from a part of the city where there were no problems'. It hints at the notion that the partners in some cases emerge from a very defined socio-economic grouping. This same coach also highlighted the way in which the athletes were able to use their involvement with Special Olympics to bridge a move into full time employment, suggesting that their engagement on the Unified team gave them sufficient confidence to pursue other avenues in life.

## **Focus on talents**

The coaches talked about the need to treat each team member as an individual and drew particular distinction between athletes and partners and, furthermore, between individual athletes and individual partners. They could then adapt their coaching to the needs of the individuals as well as to the team as a whole. Nonetheless they did recognise the young people's limitations and they appeared to be very aware of the need to refrain from making promises to the athletes that they could not fulfill.

*'It is important to really know your team, all of them as individuals.'* (HD-I-C02)

There was also some recognition on the part of the coaches themselves that they too had developed a range of skills and talents through their involvement in Unified sports – it is not merely a unidirectional process. As one coach reported:

*'Today I have sent my papers to become second class trainer, and maybe the school of management will finance my study because I am part of Unified Sports.'* (PK-I-C06)

Many of the coaches had clearly considered their involvement with Unified at a much deeper level than might be thought typical of a volunteer in another coaching setting. Some were conscious of advancing an egalitarian ethos in their work (e.g. SK-I-C04 coach said *'Conceptually we are all the same'*). Furthermore many of the coaches had been involved in Special Olympics and Unified Sports over some considerable period of time. In the case of coach UK-I-C01 this spanned to a total of 37 years commitment.

The coaches again underlined the value of international travel and community engagement as being a major plus for the athletes and partners alike, as well as for themselves.

*'Unified gives them a chance to see something of this world, maybe to go abroad and to communicate with others.'* (UK-I-C01)

## **Concluding comments**

The coaches are central to the entire concept of Unified Sports. They have a challenging task that extends beyond coaching in a particular sport, although the additional themes noted in Figure 2 are likely present in all sports coaching. Beyond training squadmembers in the particular sport, their role was seen to incorporate the building of a team and encouraging team work over and above any particular talented individual. There was also a role in promoting social integration both as an ethos and through steps towards its realisation in the lives of athletes. We will examine this dimension in further detail in Part 7 of the findings.

The recruitment of coaches fell outside our remit but it was mentioned in several ways. In Germany, for example, it appears one individual played a key role in recruiting several coaches into Unified Sport. However, there was also recognition that as the programme grows there is a need to establish an infrastructure for the recruitment of coaches generally. It was apparent that there is considerable effort being made to the recruitment and education of coaches within this relatively young programme. Amongst those who are taking part as coaches the benefits were commended. One coach G-I-C03 made the point that having been initially recruited as a volunteer coach in Special Olympics that this served as an impetus to attend university and undertake a third level qualification in this field. Another added:

*'The important thing about the project is that all the people involved have the heart for it, they have to enjoy what they do and only people who are committed 100% to this can make the programme sustainable.'* (SK-I-C05)

## **Community representatives**

In all we spoke with 22 community representatives who had some involvement with Unified Sports in the five countries, e.g. some were associated through existing connections they had had with the Special Olympics club in the area. They came from a range of backgrounds: some represented mainstream sporting organisations, mainstream schools and social or local government organisations. Whilst they came from a range of different backgrounds what they had in common was that they worked in or represented mainstream rather than specialist disability settings.

A number of themes emerged from their interviews.

1. Community representatives reflected very positively on the Unified Programme and the impact they reckoned it made in the lives of athletes and also of partners. Many stated that they thought those that participated in the programme benefitted from doing so. One recounted his experience of attending a summer camp with the Unified programme:

*'I experienced the problem of discrimination in my own life until I began to understand their [athletes] inner worlds and about their outlook. I can remember this one guy, he didn't have a very pleasant physical appearance, he has some very strange appearance and firstly no one wanted to communicate with him, but after a couple of days we started to communicate with him, and he was so open and so pleasant in communication that we forgot about his appearance, but you see because of such judgements people don't get to know the inner world and the outlook of these people, but when you communicate with them you get to learn this. Because we (society) leave people out, then they become shy and when you are shy other people may develop a negative attitude. This Unified programme challenges all these problems by making a place where people can know each other.'* (UK-I-CR01)

2. Community representatives pledged 'in-kind' support to the programme in terms of enabling access to facilities, supplying equipment, opportunities for publicising the programme further and sometimes the forum for socialising and meeting people in mainstream settings (e.g. school fetes and celebrations).

*'We try to help as much as possible, we provide equipment and access to sports facilities.'* (UL-I-CR04)

Another stated:

*'I try to give a voice to these children so that they can contribute to our department of media and we can publicise the programme further.'* (UL-I-CR03)

3. A number of community representatives were able to influence the allocation of funds from local government, through which the programme gained financial support.

*'As both a member of the local community and someone who is able to finance different programmes, organisation, institutions, I am able to give finances to different projects with people with intellectual disabilities. We give support to programmes at this school, and to this Unified project. I hope the money they*



*receive is even bigger next year because lots of people can benefit from the sports activities in this school.’ (SC-I-CR01)*

4. Some Community Representatives first knew about the programme as volunteers, and had gone on to continue their association with it in their working lives.

*‘I have known about Unified Sports for a long time, I was a volunteer before as my wife was working here at the institution.’ (G-I-CR02)*

Others continued to work as volunteers on the programme.

*‘When there is an event of something happening tht they need some help they always call me and I try to come if I am free. It is a very enjoyable time for me spending time with these kids.’(SK-I-CR02)*

5. Some community representatives provided examples of where Unified Sports had influenced the development of other Unified activities.

*‘In this school now we have also got some unified activities in IT and in music.’ (G-I-CR01)*

Others recommended that Unified activities should take in more areas of community and work life:

*‘I think it is a very special project, a kind of flagship project, but its impact has to be intensified, it has to go further on in the area of for example farming. I grew up on a farm and there were several people with intellectual disabilities working there, I think there is even a lot more to develop in the area of sports. This basketball team here, there are some really good players on the team.’ (G-I-CR02)*

### **Concluding comments**

In the time available, it was not possible to realise our original intention of speaking with a broad cross-section of persons from the local communities so as to assess the programme’s impact upon local communities. The representatives we did meet were already well-disposed to Unified Sports. Nonetheless they affirmed the benefits of Unified Sports to the participants but also to the wider community. They indicated their willingness to support the programme in tangible ways and cited instances of how attitudes had changed.

### **A note on stake-holder views**

In this section we have drawn together some of the dominant themes identified in the interviews with over 120 stake-holders and 20 teams across the five countries. For us as evaluators what was striking was the similarity of experiences across the different locations and countries we visited and the consistency of responses given to our questions by the various participants. At one level it confirms the validity of the findings but more importantly it demonstrates the robustness of the Unified Sports concept in bringing together athletes with intellectual disabilities with their non-disabled peers.

The next section explores this claim further as we describe the responses from the National Co-ordinators to the Unified Sports programme in their country.

## **Part 3. The Views of National Co-ordinators**

### **Overview**

The National Co-ordinators have a core role in developing and sustaining Unified Sports within their countries. They also have a unique insight into the ways the programmes operate across their countries.

Written questionnaires were completed by National co-ordinators in the five countries chosen to participate in the evaluation plus England as the pilot country. The aim was to obtain basic information about the teams that were operational and the number of athletes, partners and coaches. Open questions were also included which generated qualitative data relating to co-ordinators' thoughts about Unified Sports, primarily in terms of its role in bringing about social inclusion, and the challenges and benefits of the unified sports model. Their comments are summarised in the boxes and the main emerging themes from their responses are identified as follows.

### **Views on Unified Sports**

The qualitative data included in the questionnaires describes something of the part played by Unified Sports programmes in encouraging social inclusion and the development of social capital. In their responses, co-ordinators were attentive to the barriers to social inclusion pertinent within particular social settings and gave an impression of the cultural landscape within which the Unified Sports programmes were operating. Some of the recurring themes are summarised below and will be expanded in future reports and through interviews with the co-ordinators in the final stages of the project.

### **A challenge to accepted ideas**

Several respondents reported that the concept of bringing together people with and without disabilities is new in their country, and is welcomed. The visibility of athletes in the wider community is encouraged through publicising athletes' sporting achievements. It is reported that athletes' achievements are applauded and respected and that this challenges preconceptions about intellectual disability.

### **Co-ordinators' perceptions of Unified Sports**

#### *What is good about Unified Sports?*

- In some countries the concept of bringing together people with and without disabilities is new and is welcomed.
- Athletes' achievements are respected in the wider community and this challenges preconceptions about intellectual disability
- Athletes have more choices through their involvement
- Enthusiasm evident amongst all who are involved
- Co-operation with mainstream schools is a positive benefit
- Some countries identified recent recruitment of coaches as a positive development

#### *The main difficulties we experience are:*

- Lack of adequate coaches and difficulties in recruiting coaches
- Lack of training manuals available in the local language
- Some coaches do not understand the rules of Unified sport
- Lack of funding
- Difficulties accessing transport
- Problems with attitudes in the wider community and difficulties convincing people that it is a good idea - People are sceptical of the idea at first

#### *These difficulties might be overcome by:*

- Increase access to resources and funding
- Challenge attitudes through education and developing networks – demonstrate positive benefits to athletes through education opportunities
- Recruit more coaches, as well as additional training and development of coaches
- Greater involvement in mainstream schools
- Development of a volunteer ethos within countries, - (identified as a particular challenge in countries where people are having to work 2-3 jobs to have an adequate income)

Furthermore the assertion that '*Unified Sports represents a great opportunity to open doors to world, to become visible and to have choices*' echoed the sentiments of several respondents in this study.

Increased 'open-mindedness' is reported to encourage families to be seen out in the local community with their sons/daughters with intellectual disabilities.

### ***Unified Sports – inclusion through involvement***

Athletes experience greater social inclusion through taking part in Unified Sports programmes. Participation has promoted the development of social and communication skills which help individuals to take part and be included in wider society.

Meeting and mixing with people outside of 'special schools' and 'special houses' enables the development of friendships that are reported to extend beyond the sports field as the young people meet outside of club and team events. Young partners are reported to have changed attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities through direct contact, and that it is speculated that these meetings and resulting friendships may create a ripple of change in attitude as partners relate their experiences to others in the wider community. It is reported that some athletes have joined mainstream sports clubs and others have taken part in community activities.

Participation in training and competition leads to improved sporting skills amongst participating athletes and to sporting achievement. This is reported as having positive benefits to athletes as they grow in confidence and self-esteem. There is the potential that this engenders a personal challenge to their own sense of themselves as a disabled person and thus bridges the learnt gap between themselves as *other or different* and their non-disabled peers. This is a question that can be tested in the qualitative interviews with young people taking part in the forthcoming data collection in participating countries.

### **Co-ordinator's perceptions of Community integration**

#### ***Why are athletes more integrated into the local community as a result of their participation?***

- Development of social and communication skills which helps individuals to take part and to become included
- Athletes are beginning to take part in local community events
- Some athletes have joined mainstream sports teams
- Athletes can make contacts outside of special schools or special houses and meet regularly with non-disabled peers
- Changes in attitudes amongst partners aids inclusion
- The community is aware of athletes achievements and this alters attitudes

#### ***Athletes become more socially included in their communities through:***

- Development of problem solving skills enables independence in activities such as shopping and using public transport
- There is increased open-mindedness within families who are now seen out in the community with their children
- Participation in mainstream sports clubs
- The development of friendships between athletes and peers outside of the US football sessions, individuals now socialise of the pitch – this broadens their horizons introducing young athletes to more diverse aspects of youth culture e.g. music or film
- Athletes are sometimes invited to community events and other sporting events.

#### ***The main barriers to social inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities are:***

- Negative attitudes and prejudice in the community
- Lack of knowledge of people with ID, leads to lack of confidence in the wider community in including people with ID
  - Segregated schooling and segregated living arrangements

#### ***To encourage community integration Unified Sports could:***

- Recruit more coaches from mainstream
- Include athletes of all abilities (not just more able athletes) by including more sports in the Unified programme
- Include more younger athletes
- Expand the programme into more regions

## **Barriers to inclusion**

Negative attitudes towards disability are widely reported as a barrier to the easy inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. Whilst Unified Sports provides a welcome and valuable challenge to such attitudes, it is reported that there is still much to be done in altering pre-conceptions about intellectual disability. This is reported to impact on the further development of Unified Sports teams as people remain sceptical and it is difficult to convince them about the merits of Unified teams.

## **Challenges faced by Unified programmes**

Practical challenges of time and space are commonly expressed, that is constraints on coaches and volunteers' time, particularly where individuals are working in two or three jobs simply to make ends meet and therefore their time is limited for volunteering work. Some respondents reported the need to develop an ethos of volunteerism within their countries and regions.

There was a recognised need to recruit more coaches and once recruited to develop their communication skills and knowledge of the programme and its rules. Amongst the challenges faced by coaches was a lack of previous experience of working with young people with intellectual disabilities, and they in turn faced the challenge of attitudes within the wider community where knowledge, experience and outlook about people with intellectual disabilities was also limited.

The financial costs of running the programme were also highlighted and whilst existing funding is appreciated, calls for sustained funding to enable the continuation of the programme were routinely made.

## **Overcoming barriers – what can Unified Sports do?**

Positive attitudes to people with intellectual disability are a founding element of social inclusion. Within programmes it is apparent that attitudes amongst young partners and coaches are positively influenced through their involvement. Additionally the increased visibility of people with intellectual disabilities

### **Co-ordinators' view on the benefits to coaches**

***The benefits Unified Sports has brought to coaches who previously had little experience of people with disabilities are:***

- Getting experience of working with people with ID and sharing experiences with other coaches
- Education and training through participation seminars and training events
- Changing coaches attitudes
- Development of coaches communication skills

***The benefits to coaches who already have experience of people with disabilities are:***

- Improvement in their skills in developing the physical and technical abilities of their athletes
- Work satisfaction and enjoyment in seeing the achievements of their teams
- Self-fulfilment in working towards a more inclusive society
- Development of skills that contribute to other areas of their working or personal lives

***The difficulties that have stopped coaches from benefiting are:***

- A lack of understanding in the wider society
- Time constraints – most coaches are volunteers so their time is precious
- limited previous experience of persons with ID

*These difficulties might be overcome by:*

- Ongoing training and education
- Support from peers and colleagues

***Unified Sports could be expanded to other communities within the country by:***

- Developing awareness through media campaigns/coverage, involvement in higher education, information to more schools and colleges
- Greater involvement of teachers in mainstream schools
- Sustained funding
- Support of the national football association (FA) and Basket Ball Federation is beneficial in the countries where it exists.

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through participation in sports, sporting achievement and use of local community facilities goes some way to challenging negative attitudes in the wider society.

At a structural level commonly expressed ideas were the development of networks within education between mainstream and special schools, and the greater involvement of teachers in mainstream schools within the community. Finally, it appears that challenges to received ideas about people with intellectual disabilities need to be consistently made.

### **Conclusions**

The National Co-ordinators confirm that Unified Sports, underpinned as it is by principles of inclusion, both promotes and challenges attitudes to inclusion and integration. They view it as playing a role in the construction of social capital through the development of networks and the recruitment of coaches and other volunteers. They recounted other personal gains to the participants, athletes, partners and coaches. Nonetheless they were aware of particular challenges to the sustainability of these endeavours.





## Part 4: Personal development through participation in Unified Sports

### Introduction

Interview data with the various stake-holders also yielded information about the impact of participation in Unified Sports on partners but more especially the athletes. This was two-fold: 1) the acquisition of new skills, both sporting and personal and 2) through the expansion of young people's social networks.

This section will provide a detailed narrative of the impact on the personal development of those who participated in Unified Sports with a primary focus on the young athletes. But it should be stressed that partners also recounted how they too had developed new skills as indeed may have coaches and family members.

As Figure 3 shows, these can be grouped into four main themes: sports skills, personal skills; access to places and relationships with people. Within each, a number of sub-themes were also evident from the interview data.

These findings will be further elaborated in the section 5 which examines the contribution of participation in Unified Sports to the promotion of social inclusion amongst this group of young people, as well as the barriers to social inclusion.



Figure 3: The main themes and sub-themes which are developed through participation in Unified Sports

### Summary

- Athletes and partners variously report improvements in their skills on the sports field, in relation to improved stamina and technical skills. They also assert their ability to work as a team and in a trusting relationship with one another. Having improved abilities in sport led to an increase in their status amongst peers at school and in their communities. There is some divided opinion as to the how equal the players are within the team, some saying that those with intellectual disabilities require the support of the partners, whilst others state that all players take part on an equal basis.
- Participation in the Unified Sports programme in many instances has a positive impact on confidence, self-esteem and on the communication skills of both athletes and partners. There is also substantial evidence that through interaction with people with intellectual disabilities the attitudes of partners was altered in a positive way.
- Athletes were found to have increased visibility in their local communities through access to sporting facilities, social places and contact with families. However, here were some reports of limitations to the programme through a lack of frequent access to good quality sports facilities.
- Relationships were of central importance in terms of what participants gained through taking part in the programme. These were friendships between athletes and partners as well as strong relationships with coaches and leaders. There was evidence of the successful growth of relationships which continued beyond the sports field. However, some reported relationships were seen by partners as being supportive of the athletes more so than being equal partners. In these instances relationships were largely confined to training and competition events within the programme with little or no contact between partners and athletes beyond the sports field.

## **Theme 1: Sports skills**

The first domain of personal development was in relation to sports skills. Athletes broadly reported an improvement in their sporting skills through taking part in the Unified programme. Most had some prior sporting experience, often through participation in Special Olympics as well as a common pre-existing interest in football or basketball, both popular sports in the countries taking part in the evaluation.

However, athletes reported that they had developed further sporting competency through taking part in the Unified programme. Athlete thoughts on this were endorsed by their coaches and parents, whilst partners remarked on the considerable sporting skills of athletes – which had taken some by surprise as they had not anticipated finding sporting ability amongst people with intellectual disabilities.

Participants specifically reported improved ability in fitness and game skills. Additional learning was found in the development of trusting relationships between team members and the growth of an understanding of team work. However across the participating countries and teams there were varying views as to the nature of the relationships between athletes and partners. These and other sub-themes relating to sports skills are described in detail below:

### **Fitness**

Improved fitness was a common outcome of participation in the programme:

*'I am better in lots of different aspects, I am faster and I can play sports for longer, I am stronger than I used to be before I was training with these other kids (partners).'* (SP-I-A04)

One partner reported that:

*'We used to have to take it easy in training with the athletes as they got tired very quickly, now they want to go on and on even after we partners have had enough.'* (UK-I-P02)

This was often supported by the views of coaches:

*'athletes become more physically developed, they can develop their physical shape, they become quicker and they improve their technical skills.'* (UL-I-C04)

### **Ability in the game**

As well as improved fitness athletes reported on an improved ability in their game. For example one player described the kinds of skills which he had improved:

*'I think I play football much better than before, my technique is much better, like ball control - passing and shooting and being in contact with other players on the field.'* (SP-I-A05)

Whilst a basketball coach reported on the developments in the team since its inception:

*'We are on the way [to improving] it is about basics right now, easy tactics, but their sporting abilities have improved just by playing together and they are getting more and more confident in their game.'* (G-I-C01)

### **Team work**

Another area which provoked considerable comment was the development of a team ethos. This was emphasised by many coaches as a key aspect of their work since it is

a basic concept of Unified Sports, therefore it was a primary focus of their approach to training the young people. For example one coach stated:

*'This team differs completely from the team I trained before [mainstream football team], because this team is all dependent on everyone working together as one. Here no individual can stand out because if one individual stands out then I don't think the whole team can work. The people on this team understand that they are one team, not an individual within a team.'* (SP-I-C02)

It is also apparent from the data that the emphasis placed by coaches on the need for team work over individual skill is understood and accepted by players, both athletes and partners. One partner stated:

*'Some people think that in a team there should be one leader, but in our team we understand that the team is the leader and everybody should support each other and help each other.'* (SK-I-P01)

A similar understanding was expressed by athletes, as one stated:

*'The main thing to emphasise is how we can work together even though we have not gone to the same schools and not known each other before. On the field we are a great team.'* (SP-I-A04)

One partner reflected on the developments in relation to teamwork:

*'I am very proud of the fact that we work as a team, at the beginning we worked as individuals, but now through training we have been working as a team.'* (SK-I-P01)

## **Trust**

Some team members report on how they develop a trusting relationship with their team mates. A number of athletes particularly remark on how they enjoy the fact that they are trusted members of the team who can be relied upon to deliver good performances during matches. This is a position which is new to many athletes who typically rely on other people for support in many aspects of their daily lives. Therefore to assume a position of trust and have others hold expectations of them is both a confidence boost and a new skill developed through being part of a Unified team.

*'I am needed in this team, I can save goals, I am a good goal keeper and my team mates trust me in the goal – they say no one can get past our goalie. This feels good. I know I can do this job well and they can rely on me.'* (UL-I-A04)

This was also remarked on by a parent of an athlete who pointed out the changes in her son as he assumed the role of a trusted person:

*'It is important to him to try his best so that he doesn't let his team down, he always tries his best and this is because he knows that he has a job to do in the team and that the others trust him to do it. I think this is the biggest change in him, for the first time he is not always leaning on other people, in this team sometimes they are leaning on him.'* (SK-I-P04)

Another athlete when asked what he had learnt through taking part in Unified Sport said:

*'I have learnt that my friends on the team simply trust me.'* (PK-I-A05)



## **Impact of ability in sport**

The development of sports skills had an impact on athletes outside the playing field. Firstly, the popularity of athletes amongst their peers was reported, particularly when they had been successful in competitions:

*'...the athletes who are involved become more popular after taking part in Unified Sports, they are like celebrities in school when they come back with medals from a competition, and that they hang around with kids from the mainstream school gives them higher status here in the special school.'*(SC-I-CR01)

(Note: The status gained by having contact with the young people from the mainstream school is presented as a positive outcome for athletes, however, the context of social hierarchy (discussed in detail in part 7 of this section) is also to be found in this quotation, where status is accorded by association with young people from the mainstream school. By implication young people with intellectual disabilities, attending the special school have also absorbed the culturally dominant idea of social hierarchy based on intellectual status.)

Athletes also find acceptance through the fact of their ability in the game. This point is made by partners -

*'They [the athletes] are also very good players who can help you on the field'*  
(SK-I-P05)

who in some instances express surprise at the skills of athletes, which they had not anticipated,

*'when I tell people that I play on such a team they think that the athletes will not be good players, I also did not think they would be able to play as they do, but some of them are very good players.'* (HP-I-P02)

## **Unified teams – a level playing field?**

In some instances the ability of athletes to play their chosen sport well is reported to be of more consequence than the fact that they have an intellectual disability. That is, coaches and spectators report that they see the skill of a player before they see whether or not any particular player does or does not have an intellectual disability. One coach stated:

*'you have to look at the different abilities of people to make up a good team ... very quickly and easily you can see who in the team you can rely on, who can run the longest, who can hit the ball the hardest. You do not look to see if they are from a special school or from a regular school.'* (SK-I-C04)

In this way ability in the game and the focus on sport rather than on disability, is reported as an 'equaliser' where players are ideally treated in the same way and are regarded as team members first and foremost and not primarily thought of in relation to disability. However, the data are ambiguous in relation to this, on the one hand athletes are labeled as *the same* as partners, as one partner said:

*'you cannot tell the difference because on the field we are all the same.'*  
(SK-I-02)

Whilst another parent reported that:

*'Above all, through being part of this team my son has learnt that people with and without intellectual disability are more or less the same they have the same needs.'* (SP-I-Par01)

However, people with intellectual disability are also identified as having *different needs* to partners, this is articulated by a coach who reported:

*'to make a team we have to understand the needs of all the team members, the athletes have particular needs, the partners have needs and we have to bring these together to make the team work as one unit.'* (HD-I-C02)

Whilst another athlete emphasised the mutual benefits of playing on a Unified team in terms of the acquiring new skills in the game:

*'We learn tactics and flexibility from the partners, but mostly they learn from us, at first they were impressed by our abilities, they couldn't even think about it, for this I think we both learn from the other.'* (G-LS-A02)

Whilst there are contra-indications in the data there is greater weight to the position that sport can provide a level playing field which dissolves the reported differences between athletes and partners. This is summarised by one community representative – a professional sportsman as well as trainer and advocate of community sports for all:

*'In my eyes the importance of sport cannot be overstated. It is open to everyone; it accepts everyone and all people can find a place in sport. For these kids with deficiencies [sic] it is even more important because it is, at least I think it is, the only place that they can share and join in together with others without prejudice.'* (HD-I-CR01)

## **Theme 2: Personal skills**

A second main theme emerged from the interviews with athletes and partners, their parents and coaches, as well as community representatives: namely the range of personal skills said to be acquired by young people, which were attributed to their participation in Unified Sports. These include a growth in self-belief and self-esteem and the development of confidence.

In addition an improvement in communication skills were reported amongst athletes, which was linked to a reported enjoyment and personal enrichment gained through the shared experiences of participating in the Unified team. A striking finding, which also confirms the principle finding of a prior study of Unified Sports (Norrins 2006), was the widespread account from partners and their families and coaches of a change in attitude amongst partners towards people with intellectual disabilities through taking part in the programme. Each of these themes is described and illustrated in detail below.

### **Self-Esteem and Confidence**

A strong theme found in the data is the development of self-belief, self-esteem and confidence reported by and on behalf of athletes taking part in the Unified programme. One athlete stated:

*'Being in this team, and the fact that I know more people and know different sorts of people gives me a better feeling about myself.'* (SP-I-A05)

Whilst another recalled how:

*'I was on the winning team and I felt very good to be with my team when we got our medals. I felt good inside.'* (G-I-A01)

One house-parent from an institution where some of the unified players live, also remarked on how their self-esteem has grown:

*'The boys I know, I can see the difference when they are at home, they are calmer, they do not have to prove themselves in arguing or something like that, they are able to be more sure of themselves.'* (HD-I-P02)

Confidence to achieve ones goals was described by one athlete:

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*'Yes, I believe in myself, I worked hard to be a part of the team and now I believe if I work hard I can achieve many things that I want.'* (HD-I-A01)

Whilst another athlete reported how he had enough confidence to put a plan into action:

*'there is a girl that I like and I talked with my team mates about her and they said I should talk to her, and when I saw her in town then I talked to her and asked her name. I told her, I play on this team and she said she had seen us guys in town and she had heard about our team. I would never have talked to her before.'* (SK-I-A01)

Coaches also commented on the growth in confidence of athletes, one coach attributed this to the contact that athletes have with young people from mainstream schools:

*'Being a member of a team which is different from other teams, where they play with the kids from regular schools, that is the fact that gives them more confidence, they are more confident in themselves and what they can achieve.'* (SC-I-C03)

## **Communication**

Developments in communication skills are widely reported to be consequence of taking part in the Unified programme. This is explained firstly as an outcome of a growth in confidence and self-esteem;

*'I am a more confident person now. I am not shy to talk to people. I will hold my head up and speak out loud. I got more used to people in playing on my team and I am not afraid of people that I don't know.'* (HP-I-A01)

Another said:

*'I have become less reserved, less shy, I feel more confident in communication with people.'* (UL-LS-A04)

Athletes also had the opportunity to communicate with more people, and with 'different' sorts of people, that is those from a wider range of backgrounds and experiences. This was described by athletes particularly as being of importance to them and something they appreciated through taking part in Unified Sports. As one athlete said;

*'It is easier for me to communicate with more people as I am used to communicating with more people and different people.'* (PSO-I-A06)

Some athletes also recognised the limits they face in terms of communicating with others in relation to their own agency in instigating contact:

*'...partners should be more interested in communicating with athletes, athletes are always open to communication because they had a lack of it so they are always ready to communicate but sometimes they have to wait for partners to make the first step.'* (UK-I-A03)

Nevertheless this same athlete reported that:

*'With partners on our team we can communicate a lot, and they understand us, and they have some friends and they also start to understand us and we get a lot of communication and find some new friends.'* (UK-I-A03)

Developments in communication skills are not restricted to athletes, partners also described new learning:

*'At first (when he first joined the team) it was a bit difficult because I didn't know all these people and I couldn't communicate with them in the same way that I did*

*with my friends, but in just a few days this problem disappeared and it was very easy to communicate with these people.’ (UK-I-P01)*

As well as developing their communication skills with people with intellectual disabilities, partners also experienced personal benefits in this area. As one partners said

*‘I have become more confident in myself and I think I can communicate more easily with other people especially people with an intellectual disability because before I did not know anything about them and now they are my friends.’ (HP-I-P02)*

## **Attitudes**

A change in attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities is a further significant theme in the findings on the personal development reported amongst partners. This was cited widely and is of particular relevance in the context of this study because of the importance of attitude in shaping action, which therefore impacts on how people with intellectual disabilities experiences social inclusion through the actions of those around them.

One partner reported:

*‘I have learnt that the people with intellectual disability are the same as you and me. They only have different needs they don’t have any bigger needs they don’t have any needs that are strange, they just have different needs, all of us are different and the fact that they have intellectual disability just makes them more unique not someone that you would not hang out with, but someone that as soon as you meet them and get to know them they are someone that you would like to hang out with and even play sport with, like I do. And I think that if people, like those from my school, would learn a bit more about people with intellectual disabilities they would feel and think exactly the same as I do. (SK-I-P01)*

Another stated that it is:

*‘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.’ (PSO-I-P05)*

Whilst a third talked about the personal changes in their attitudes which challenged entrenched ideas and beliefs:

*‘I think the biggest change in my inner world is the change of my attitude to people with intellectual disability because working and training with these people I try to compare people with disabilities and healthy people and I can say that athletes may be sometimes even more sincere and open and kind than healthy people you meet everyday. So I changed my outlook and I started to understand these people better. I think that healthy people have created some images and attitudes towards people with disabilities and these images and attitudes are inherited by a new generation and it is not correct that people with disabilities have no equal rights and they have no opportunity to take part in social events and celebrations and concerts, so they should be socially included because they are just the same as we are. This project helped me to create the correct image of and attitude to people with disabilities.’(UL-I-P04)*

The impact of a change in attitude on his own life is explained by one partner:

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*'I had to give up some of my friends because they did not understand what I was doing here (in Unified team). I realised I had nothing to share with them if they could not accept my involvement here. (UK-I-P01)*

The development of positive attitudes to people with intellectual disabilities is attributed by partners to their involvement in Unified Sports, as one partner stated:

*'For sure it is because of Unified Sports [change in attitude], before Unified Sports I had a distance to these people, and now they are equal to me. (PSO-I-P10)*

They report that this change comes through actually meeting people with intellectual disabilities. Meeting people in person and getting to know people is, they argue, the best way to challenge stereotypes or prevailing negative attitudes to intellectual disability. Partners recommend that the Unified programme strives to widen its reach by bringing more people into the organisation or inviting more people simply to come, to spectate and support the teams. An example of this was reported by a partner:

*'the first thing is to inform society, for example I talked to one of my friends who is a football player and I aired my feelings and thoughts and I understood that she also became interested in all this and I am sure that she would like to take part in the project. So the only way to inform society is just communicating to share your thoughts and ideas, because if a person just reads a book or watches TV it is not the same as if you give a person your own experiences and impressions. We should invite more people to watch our training and competitions, this would be really useful. (HD-I-P02)*

Attitudes in the wider community were not challenging in all instances. For example in one evaluation site, athletes were well known in the village in which they lived because they were resident in a large institution for people with intellectual disabilities and in turn themselves made up a high percentage of the total village population. They had a high profile in their village and thus villagers were used to seeing people with intellectual disabilities in their daily lives. This unusual situation was described by one partner:

*'It is a special situation here, there are so many living here, but I think it can work in every village somehow. I don't think inhabitants here are more friendly than in other places, just the more informed people are the easier they find it to be inclusive.'* (G-I-P01)

This endorses the point made by partners in other countries – namely it is the increased visibility of people with intellectual disabilities in the life of the community that challenges negative attitudes and is a strong weapon in combating social exclusion. We commonly found, amongst advocates of the programme – athletes, partners, coaches, parents and representatives of the local community - the view that the Unified programme should be expanded, as one coach stated:

*'Yes, we need always to have more and more of these teams in more areas all around the country, this is the best way to change society and to make it possible for people with intellectual disabilities to live freely in society.'* (HP-I-C01)

The way to increase participation, to get more people involved and to change attitudes was repeatedly said to be a role that Unified Sports should take a more active part in:

*'We should tell more people about the competitions, invite people to come and spectate, make announcements in the TV and newspapers. We should always tell people about the fun that we have. Also it would be good to organise meetings with disabled people to enable the healthy ones to get to know them, it is important to show people that disabled ones are really worth meeting. It is a*

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*valuable experience especially for us, but also every contact that people with intellectual disabilities have with healthy ones makes them more included. When you get to know these people you understand them.'* (PK-I-P07)

Another partner said:

*'I think the best way (to get more people involved) is through different sports activities and through inviting them to training and through some competitions that we have so that they can see on the field how good we are and how good this team works. (SP-I-P03)*

After all it was through champions of Unified Sports in the form of physical education teachers in young people's schools or volunteers with Special Olympics that the partners themselves came to be part of the Unified team:

A common response to the question asking how they became involved was:

*'I was invited through my professor at school.'* (SP-I-P03)

*'My PE teacher told me about this project and I thought it was a good idea for me to come along and see what it was all about.'* (UP-I-P02)

*'My friend who works with disabled people told me about Unified Sports he invited me to see a competition, I liked it and I went on to be on the Unified Sports team.'* (P-I-P07)

*'In the seventh grade our sports teacher asked us, we tried and we liked it and there was an information event. (G-I-P01(f))*

We can see that what young partners are recommending is a reflection of their own experiences. That to get more people involved they should be actively invited to engage with Unified Sports either as players or spectators, and then as happened to young partners, direct involvement will challenge negative attitudes to people with intellectual disabilities, which may in turn lead to wider social change. Participants strongly endorsed Unified Sports role in advocacy for people with intellectual disabilities in their communities. One parent stated:

*'This project is a good way of informing people and we should have more of them and we should inform society about the existence of such a project and the existence of people with disabilities via television, radio programmes and so on.'* (UK-I-P01)

This was supported by a coach who said:

*'To get more people involved we have to tell people about what we do here, it is our obligation to do this.'* (HD-I-C02)

## **Theme 3: Access to Places**

A third main theme with respect to personal development, was the broadening of opportunities that Unified Sports athletes had of experiencing community life through their involvement in activities which take them out of disabled centres and into typical meeting places in their communities and beyond. Through these opportunities people experience personal development as well as enjoyment, and as a consequence of this there is an increased visibility of people with disabilities in the community.

### **Sporting facilities**

Training involves the use of sports facilities and in many instances these are located either in mainstream schools or in public leisure centres.

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*'We have a good relationship with the head teacher here in this school (mainstream) and we are able to train here and hold some competitions here too. The kids at this school see our athletes here and they get used to seeing them.'* (PSO-I-C01)

Not only do the athletes have more access to community facilities, partners also in some instances go to disabled centres, special schools or institutions to train or just to meet with athletes.

*'We come to the institution for training and competitions, we use the sports field here and then we see that this place is fine, it is not a bad place or a strange place, just somewhere that people are living.'* (HD-I-T02)

However there were reports of challenges to accessing good quality sports facilities:

*'We lack access to good training facilities, we can only use the place on Sundays, so we are restricted in our training, this is a problem in our country there are not enough such places.'* (UL-I-C02)

Another stated:

*'We manage with an outdoor pitch, but when it is wet or cold in winter we have only a small hall and we have train there, it is not ideal, but we are still a very successful team!'* (SP-I-C01)

### **Out of town ...**

Beyond the local athletes and partners both experience places outside of their communities as they travel abroad with the Unified programme. Sometimes teams travel to national competitions ....

*'The last competition was in Kyiv. I got to see Kyiv, we visited a lot of interesting places there and of course we played matches. We also met a famous boxer in Kyiv, that was a great event, we took photos with him, and we were full of impressions from this trip.'*(UL-LS-A04)

.... as well as to international competitions:

*My son went to Romania and to Portugal, we had to look Portugal up on the map! He learnt a lot of things and he told us about what he had seen there, this experience changed him, he saw something of the world, he came back with his head high, his mother and I were proud of him too.* (SP-I-P01)

The broadening horizons of young participants can be seen through their developing ambitions:

*'This year I will go to Warsaw with the national team, I am really looking forward to it, it is my first international tournament, and I want to go to the 2011 World Summer Games in Athens, I want to go there because then I will have a European competition and world games in my career. The national games were my aim for a long time, it took me a long time to be ready for it, but now I am glad to be picked for Warsaw.'* (G-LS-A02)

### **Social places**

Some participants also talked about the places they go socially with partners as a result of taking part in Unified Sports. This is not the experience of all athletes, but some through spending time with partners after training and matches talk of hanging out in places typically frequented by teenagers, places they did not go to before taking part in the programme:

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*'We go to the town square and talk, or to the games arcade, or we go for a drink in a café, they guys from the team know places to go and we go after training if we all have time..'* (SP-I-A02)

Others report spending more time in their neighbourhood with their friends from the team:

*'We play in the backyard, we play football and sometimes we just hang out and talk. Some of the guys from my team live in the same [block of] flats as me so we can meet up in the backyard.'* (PK-I-A03)

### **Family contact**

For some persons, involvement in Unified Sports has led to contact with the family life of others with whom they have come into contact through taking part in the programme. One parent reported how her son invited his team-mates, both partners and athletes, to his birthday party held at his home:

*'On my son's birthday he had most of the Unified team at our house for a party, as well as friends from school and the neighbourhood. He is not embarrassed to have his friends with disabilities at his party and they are welcome to come to our house, they are good kids.'* (SP-I-P01)

An athlete reported how he had become involved in the family life of his employer – someone who he had been introduced to and employed by (discussed in more detail below) through his involvement in Unified Sports:

*'The director at my work is like the father of me, he has a little daughter, but anyway I go there at Christmas and we meet in the city sometimes, it is like the family that I didn't have and never had before.'* (G-I-A02)

In the wider sense Unified Sports at times is described in familial terms by athletes and partners. One partner stated:

*'Our team is like one family, we look after each other and help one another and we don't see what is different we only see what we have in common.'* (HP-I-P02)

Whilst an athlete remarked:

*'Unified Sports is my [like my] family, my coach is my father and mother and my team mates are my brothers and sisters.'* (HD-I-A01)

## **Theme 4: Relationships with People**

A central finding from this evaluation is the importance of relationships developed with other people in the course of participating in Unified Sports. This fourth theme in the arena of personal development recurred throughout the interview data and was present for all stakeholder groups.

There are reports of important friendships developing between the young people. The centrality of relationships is unpicked in the following presentation of findings in relation to this important theme; illustrated with quotations drawn from interviews made with each of the stakeholder groups across the participating countries.

### **Relationships are key**

The importance of good interpersonal relationships and the impact that these have on team spirit and achievements was explained by one partner:

*'When people join a new thing they are always worried about how they can fit in and how they can show their best skills. This is a team that you should not worry*



*about. You can do anything here, your skills are important but you as a person, and you as a friend, is also very important. This team is very, very fun. We have lots of fun playing sports and I think that is what brings success to our team. (SP-I-P04)*

Whilst this young partner described the positive aspects of good relations in the team, one mother described the importance of friendship to the young people with intellectual disabilities:

*'This is important because non-disabled children often isolate themselves from those who are disabled. They even laugh at them, but here there is contact between them. They can build different relations, they can establish friendly relations.'* (PSO-I-CR03)

### **Being connected to the community**

Some athletes talked about how they felt more connected to their local community through being part of the Unified Sports. The programme was reported to open doors to young people through their being recognised by other because of their achievements, a one athlete reported:

*'When I walk around town lots of different people say hello to me, people that I did not know before but now I do because I met them through this team or have played against them in some other competitions.'* (SC-I-A03)

### **New friends**

For many, friendships made through participation in Unified Sports were reported as one of the principle things which motivated young people, both athletes and partners to take part in the programme. Besides sports, this programme offered an opportunity to make new friends, as one athlete described:

*'Football of course, and also because of making new friends, I heard that the kids from the mainstream school are absolutely brilliant and hanging around with them is good fun. I knew that by Unified Sports I could meet kids that I could not meet in any other way.'* (SC-I-A06)

The importance of making new friends through Unified Sports is emphasised by one young partner:

*'Friendship is the most important thing about being a member of a unified team. We are all friends both on and off the field. We also have a good connection with our coaches who I think I can say are our friends.'* (SP-I-T02-P)

The young people were also discerning about the kind of people they hoped to meet and often judged those involved in Unified Sports in a positive light; this was highlighted by one partner:

*'I went to the first meeting and I say that there were some great people there and I knew that I would make some great friends.'* (HP-I-P02)

Whilst another reported:

*'It is fun, bad things don't happen here and we meet new people and make new friends, the atmosphere is great.'* (P-I-P04)

One partner explained how his friendship with an athlete developed as he was supported by him when he first joined the team:

*'It was a little bit hard at first because the team was already in existence and the play was already established and of course I didn't get the ball and this disturbed*

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*me of course and then I felt like showing it to them, but they made an effort and then I felt like one of them. It was one guy he was always joking – he was the team favourite and team captain and he basically helped me to get integrated into the team – he is not a partner, he is deficient, and he became my friend.’ (HP-I-P01)*

Many young participants make the point that the friendships they have made through Unified Sports would not have happened otherwise, that is if it had not been for the programme these young people would not have encountered one another in their typical daily lives. This highlights the degree to which young people with and without intellectual disabilities live separate lives to one another and how Unified Sports can help to bridge this divide. This was described by a partner during a team interview:

*‘The difference that Unified Sports has made in my life is that you learn about other people, the fact that I made friends with people who I may not have made friends with had I not been on this team. I do not know where I would have met them. This team is the perfect opportunity for that. We do different kinds of things and I am just having a really good time.’ (SK-LS-P02)*

That the programme brings players together on a regular basis over an extended period allows appears to allow for some friendships to develop and grow in strength, this is highlighted by one athlete who relates he shares common interests and even personal information with his friends as time has gone on:

*We mostly talk about school; we compare the schools that I go to and the school that the other kids go to. And we talk about sport, we all like sport and we ask each other have you seen the game last night, and do you know the latest results and things like that. Sometimes there is a girl that one of us likes and we talk to each other about the best way that one of us can ask her out, we share some of that type of information, personal information with each other. It wasn’t like that from the beginning, but it is now because we have been playing together for more than a year and we have become good friends. (SK-I-A01)*

Another athlete described how his friendships with partners on the Unified team led to him learning about new activities and things that he liked which he hadn’t known about before;

*‘There is lots of new boys – partners, there I met on this team who I did not know before. I learnt a few things about them, about different kinds of things and interests that they have, than me, like they have computers and they play computers. I do not have a computer and I never played before computer games, I was interested in what they were telling me about that. I like hanging out with them after training because they have lots of interesting things to tell us and lots of interesting stories that they share with us’. (SK-I-A02)*

Partners and athletes talk about the equality within the team through the friendships they have made, as one partner explained;

*It is a lot of fun, everyone is accepted for who he is, and no one is excluded here that is what I like.’ (G-I-P02)*

This acceptance was also of apparent importance for athletes who valued their friendships with partners, who they recognised they would not have met had it not been for Unified Sports:

*For me Unified Sports is like hanging around with a group of your friends that you just met on the field. Especially interesting for me is the fact that there are kids from special school and regular school. If such a team did not exist I am not sure*

*honestly that we would ever hang around with each other and be friends. (SP-I-A04)*

Other new experiences such as travelling together appear to also cement the relationships between young people as one partner reported:

*'When we travel we get to know people much better because we are in a room together and it is always a new experience.'* (SP-I-P04)

### **Meeting up outside the training**

For some of the players interviewed friendships made on the sports field did translate into their lives outside with young people meeting up to spend time together. As one partner described:

*We made friends and communicate not only in the trainings but also several times beyond the trainings and they also came to our training in other kinds of sports, so we became friends.'* (UL-I-P03)

There are also many examples in the data of young people describing the activities they do with friends outside of the sports field, one athlete explained:

*'We meet at weekends, sometimes we go to concerts.'* (UL-I-A05)

Whilst another athlete said:

*'Usually we meet up in town. Here people hang around in squares and on the street. We talk. We talk mostly about football, but I have to be honest we talk about girls, apart from football, girls are our favourite subject.'* (SP-I-T01-A)

And another athlete explained:

*'Yes. I have a best friend called Goran who is on the same team as I am. From the team I have a few other friends who I had not met before but now because we are on the same team I hang around with them after training and go to town where we play some video games and sometimes come to training together and walk to home from training together.'* (SK-I-A01)

One partner reported:

*'Sometimes me and another guy go together to support the national volleyball team.'*(PSO-I-P10)

And the reason for the development of these connections is summed up by one partner:

*'Because we really have fun together'* (UK-I-P02)

Where there are strong examples of young people developing friendships there is an equivalent impetus from coaches in the same area to promote the development of relationships between athletes and partners:

*'When we have a victory we have a ritual where we, the whole team, go out to a coffee shop or have a drink or a cake somewhere. We celebrate and we show the partners about spending time with athletes, that this is a normal activity. We see that they are doing this too now, going for a drink or something after the training.'* (SP-I-C01)

However for other teams there appeared to little or no contact outside of training. One partner explained:

*'Actually no we don't see each other. We train together, and have tournaments but nothing more, after the regional games we had a meeting with the whole'*

*team at the institution so we went there into the institution. We are not living in the same village so we only see each other at training.’ (G-I-P01)*

Another athlete pointed to the different life experiences of athletes and partners in discussing the reasons for not meeting outside training:

*‘The partners are very busy, they have a lot of things to do, school work and so on, we athletes have more time, we are waiting for the partners and then we can meet and go somewhere.’ (UK-I-A02)*

Whilst another stated:

*‘We don’t meet up outside, I don’t know why, maybe they are shy.’ (P-I-P05)*

Another partner when asked “*What stops people meeting up outside the training? –* replied – ‘*stereotypes*’ (P-I-P03)’

Differences in interests were another reason given for athletes and partners not meeting off the sports field:

*‘the main reason that we don’t meet is the difference of our interests, partners have their interests and athletes have their interests and our interests are different’ (UK-I-A03)*

An athlete explained that they would only have contact with partners were there to be a chance meeting:

*‘We have some contact, we talk if we meet somewhere by chance.’ (P-I-A02)*

### **Challenges to meeting up after training**

Participants also describe some challenges to meeting up outside of training. In some instances these are typical problems of demands on time, lack of money or the barrier of distance. As one partner reported:

*I hang around after training only with those who live close to me, because lots of us live on a different side of the city and it is not so easy for us to hang out after training – we have to catch a bus or train to get home and that is what makes it difficult.’ (SC-I-A03)*

This was endorsed by a parent of a partner who said that she would like her son to meet up with others in his team but that:

*‘Distance is a barrier for us, they do not live in the same area.’ (PK-I-Par08)*

Likewise an athlete explained;

*‘We only meet when we do sports because we do not live close.’ (HP-I-A01)*

Another athlete talked of the other demands on his time which prevented him meeting up with team mates on a regular basis:

*‘Unfortunately, as I have to help my father quite a lot at the house because we have to live off the farm work that he and the other members of my family do, after training I have to go straight home because I have to help, it is not that they do not support me, it is that I have to give my contribution to our family work because this is what we live from. So when sometimes the team goes out and goes to some other activities after training, I am not able to go with them. (SK-I-A02)*

Whilst a partner also spoke of the demands he experiences which mean that he does not have enough time to just hang out with others on the team:

*'Lack of time is a problem, I don't have enough time to finish my school work and then go to training and see my girlfriend and then hang around with my team mates, I would like to have around more but I just don't have enough time.'* (SP-I-P04)

A third also highlighted the difficulties in finding time to meet regularly:

*'We do meet beyond the sports field but not too much because of lack of time, but we do spend some time together.'* (UL-I-A04)

The findings presented here describe fairly typical activities amongst young people as well as common constraints they face in keeping up with their social lives. What is untypical is that it is remarkable. That is to say that these kinds of relationships and experiences forged between young people with and without intellectual disabilities are not common and for some of the young people that we interviewed, the new friendships forged were a direct consequence of their participation in Unified Sports. Nonetheless for other athletes and partners, friendships made on the sports-field did not transfer into their lives beyond unified training and competitions. One possible explanation follows.

### **Sometimes friendships appear to be one sided**

The relationships described by participants did not always emerge from a position of equality. In some instances the norms of the wider culture in which the young people live permeated their thinking, for instance this was apparent as one partner described the role of Unified Sports;

*The point of Unified Sports is that people with disabilities meet and get to know healthy [sic] people, they play together and they make friends.'* (P-I-P03)

Sometimes the relationships come from a perspective of partners helping and supporting athletes to achieve in sports and to improve their lives. As one partner states:

*'It gives me a lot of satisfaction to spend time with such boys and when our team is successful it is good to see them happy. We are complimentary to one another. These are the same people as us however life is more difficult for them. It is very nice to spend sometime with them.'* (P-I-P07)

While another reports:

*'I have always felt sorry for these people, and I always thought it was a good idea to help them and for them to meet with each other.'* (UK-I-P01)

This is reflected by the thoughts of another partner:

*'We meet up beyond our training. In my team the partners are very friendly and they understand the problems of athletes and they try to help them somehow to do everything possible to help them.'* (UK-I-P02)

The divisions are clear and there is evidence of a 'them and us' perspective, which while benevolent is not equal, as a partner says:

*'It is their behaviour that I like, they are "cute", they are helpful, they are always smiling and willing to make friends.'* (G-I-P01)

Even in taking action to meet people outside of training the context was beyond the everyday settings in which they would normally meet their friends, as one partner explains:

*'Sometimes me and a friend go to the disabled centre to play volleyball.'* (PSO-I-P10)

Some young partners saw the place of partners in the Unified team as that of a role model for athletes. That is that through the participation of partners, athletes would have the opportunity to learn from them about modes of behaviour, social skills as well as improving their skills in the game through learning from partners.

*'They [the athletes] have the chance to improve their social interactions, to learn how to behave with other people who are not disabled; they can watch partners and in this way improve themselves.'* (UL-I-P03)

The attitude of the coach could have an influence here. Just as the data shows that young people are sometimes encouraged to meet outside the sports field by their leaders and coaches, so too we can see that in some instances coaches do not anticipate that this will happen, or that the team mates are ready for this type of contact.

*'I see them talking together at training and so on, and it is clear that they are friends, but as for meeting up outside, I don't think they are ready for this yet.'* (PK-I-C02)

Another coach reported:

*'When they go to high school they will not say I played football with the kids with disabilities, their attitudes are changed, they are friends here at football but they do not see each other outside. These partner kids are younger than the athletes.'* (HP-I-C02)

### **Friendships amongst parents**

Finally it is worth noting the opportunities provided by Unified Sports for the personal development of parents such as the development of friendships among them.

*We are a group of parents and now a group of friends. Some of our children are partners and some are athletes but we do not make a difference in that just like we tell our children there is no difference. We try to help each other; we give each other's children a lift or help at an event. Unified Sports is a big part of our lives too.* (SK-I-P01)

Where friendships have developed there is evidence of the growth of a support network as well as an impetus to advocacy on behalf of their sons and daughters with intellectual disabilities, as one mother describes:

*We have set up a union of parents and children in Special Olympics and it is very important because we as parents can understand each other. We can fight for what is right for our children and we can support each other in our decisions. For example even my own family, my sister and my mother do not understand why I am looking after my son, why I am doing all this for him, but the parents understand and we support and help each other and it is very great because you get some help and understanding.'* (UK-I-P01)

### **Concluding comments**

The information gained from the interviews clearly describes the personal development amongst young participants in the Unified Sports programme in their sporting skills, and in their confidence, self-esteem and communication skills, as well as pronounced positive attitude change amongst partners. Moreover many participants reported

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increased participation in the community through access to sporting, social and familial spaces.

All team members had a strong relationship with their coaches. Coaches were often thought of as role models to the young people. Coaches regarded this as part of their role, as discussed elsewhere in this report, and young people accepted that coaches provided guidance both through their own behaviour and as mentors, supporting young people with problems and challenges beyond any problems they had in sport.

The prime mediators of change were the people and the relationships developed and evolved through participation in the programme. Where friendships were found to have grown between players, the athletes were seen to have greater access to the wider social world through spending time off the playing field with partners. Their experiences and their preparedness to embrace new experiences was seen to have grown because of the connections they had made through the programme with their non-disabled peers.

Even so, an innovative programme for persons labeled as 'disabled', presents challenges to relationships and friendships that strive to be based on equality and shared understandings. When this is not present, perhaps due to cultural conventions, a different style of relationships is formed between players with intellectual disabilities and their non-disabled peers with the latter espousing a more supportive role.

In summary, Unified Sports is reported to be influential in promoting the conditions to support the personal development of people with intellectual disabilities, and importantly this in turn increases their social inclusion. This is the aspect to which we now turn.



## Part 5. Social Inclusion within Unified Sports

In this part, the focus shifts from the impact on stakeholders towards to the structural features of the Youth Unified Sports® programme which were found by this evaluation to be critical in encouraging the development of greater social inclusion of athletes within Unified Sports in the first instance and subsequently into their wider communities. These are described first in Figure 4 and are summarised in the Box below. Detailed description of these processes follow, illustrated with quotations drawn from interviews with a range of participants across the five participating countries. The significant contribution made by the personnel and particularly coaches is discussed in Part 7.



**Figure 4: The six key elements found within the Unified Sports® programme that support the growth of social inclusion amongst athletes**

### Box and Key to Figure 4

- **Culture of Inclusion:** As an organisation, Special Olympics seek to enable people, across the spectrum of intellectual disability, to take part in sports along with their families, friends and the wider community through volunteering opportunities in the organisation. Unified Sports extends this inclusivity to include young people without intellectual disabilities in sporting activities with their intellectually disabled peers and in so doing challenges the social exclusions that exist in many countries. The principles which underpin Unified Sports birth and development are influential in the approach taken by coaches and leaders in developing the teams and working with programme participants
- **Established position within the community:** Unified Sports programmes benefited by being part of an established network of support and with an existing profile within the community that had been built by the Special Olympics clubs which hosted many of the programmes.
- **Enduring programme:** The enduring nature of the Unified Sports Programme (a continuous programme with no specified end point) enabled the development of strong long-term bonds among athletes, coaches and partners which created the growth of social capital.
- **Focus – players shared interest in sport:** Athletes and partners come together in the Unified programme because of a shared interest – sport. This mutual interest was central to their involvement. Moreover the emphasis was on what both groups had in common and this outweighed any supposed differences.
- **Unique opportunities to travel and compete:** Unified Sports offered opportunities for travel and competition both nationally and internationally. These were of considerable benefit to athletes in relation to social inclusion and integration as it broadened their horizons, promoted independence and provided athletes with a valued profile in their home communities who they represented in sport competitions. Competing on a larger than local scale provoked team pride and for partners gave them a platform through which to raise the value of this activity amongst their friends and peers.
- **Individual and programme financial costs:** The programme incurs financial costs at both a programme and an individual level. These are sourced nationally and internationally. There is evidence of a shortfall in necessary finances in some instances and where this is so, it puts pressure on the viability of programmes and on individuals' ability to remain involved. Additional investment is needed for the programmes to remain sustainable and for Unified Sports to grow further.



## **Culture of Inclusion**

The Unified Sports programme, situated as it is within the wider Special Olympics movement, supports an ethos of the positive integration of people with intellectual disabilities into their wider communities. The wider Special Olympics organisation expressly challenges discrimination and promotes empowerment, competence and acceptance through sport. This evaluation found that the culture of the organisation provided a critical platform on which the concept of Unified Sports is based. For instance, coaches made a link between the culture of the organisation and its practical articulation through Unified Sports:

*'Special Olympics is the basis of where we can get good ideas and inspiration about inclusion and change. Through Unified Sports we can try to overcome some of the challenges that we have and integration can be much better through what we do in this project.'*(SC-I-CR01)

Given the longevity, reach and success of Special Olympics, this inspired confidence in the potential for individuals to make the programme a reality:

*'At first I was nervous of this idea – whether it could work or not, and then my colleague told me that it was part of Special Olympics and I say that yes this can work so I would really give it a go in my school.'* (PK-I-C01)

However Unified Sports actively breaks down the distinction between the participants.

*'I think that the most important part of this project is the concept on which the final version project is based and that is that we are all the same. We all have the same need and we all have the same interest especially where sports are in question. For instance I think that boys of this age, either they are with and without intellectual disability – like football, like sports and this is the place where they can play football, where they can be together without barriers.'* (SK-I-C04)

Crucially the culture of inclusion can be seen to influence the approaches taken by programme leaders, coaches and assistants. This translates into the positive encouragement of inclusion and an attitude of equal treatment of all players whilst valuing each individual for their contribution to the team.

*'The very interesting thing about this is that this project promotes everyone. As a coach this is what you work for. Everyone is a member of the team and you do not have to look on the team and see who is with and who is without intellectual disability, it is the team, the whole that counts.'* (SK-I-C04)

Not alone is the role of the coach and their approach to training evidently shaped by the wider ethos of the organisation, this in turn influences the attitudes of the young people and is recognised by them as standing in contrast to other experiences in mainstream clubs where the culture is predicated on competition and winning rather than the team and the effort in taking part.

*'What the coach does in training sessions is very important. Look the thing is in Unified Sports we love the sport but we also care about the people who are taking part. We think these sports activities, I mean being involved, can change things for people. We approach our training in a way that will encourage the young people to share in the experience with each other, to be a team, sure a team that can win but first to all be part of something that they care about. This of course influences how we go about things, how we talk to them and show them the game –the big game.'* (G-I-C04)

## **2. Established position within the community**

The Unified Sports programmes, which took part in the evaluation, were typically sited within existing and established Special Olympics clubs either in schools or as independent local community organisations. The programmes benefited from the profile that the clubs had already established in their local communities and regions. The benefits had a tangible impact in terms of integration and inclusion as the leaders and coaches were demonstrably able to tap into sources of support and networks that enabled the development of the project within their area. The passage of time influenced attitudes towards participation and the support the club receives from parents is well described by this participating coach:

*'In the beginning it was more difficult to convince people that this (Unified Sports) was a good idea. In general – you have to explain to parents about what you are asking of their children, both athletes and partners, because both of them are scared, .... parents of athletes worry that their child would not be able to achieve as good as the partners are, and parents of partners, they don't want their kids to be on a team that might not be able to offer their child to develop to their full potential as a sports person. Today it is completely different. It is all in the spirit of Special Olympics as I like to say, parents come, they come with their friends, they come to cheer and they often ask if they can help with something, if they can volunteer at events. It is getting better all the time. (SP-I-C01)*

A further example can be found in the links with mainstream schools, which in many cases pre-dated the establishment of the Unified Sports programme. They were often a source of support in two ways. First, through the use of the school's sports pitches for training: a consequence of which was the increased visibility of athletes in their local community through their regular visits to train in mainstream school premises. Second, the partnership with the schools extended to mainstream sports teachers becoming Unified Sports coaches and partners were recruited from the school pupils .

The value available to the programme through being part of an organisation already established within the local community was also evident in terms of accessing financial or in-kind support through local statutory departments. One example of this was in terms of funding made available to a Unified Sports programme as an extension of the money already pledged to support the parent Special Olympics club:

*The [local] government gives its support to this school and to the Special Olympics club here, the club has a lot of benefits for the athletes and we see that Unified Sports helps these kids develop more as individuals and develop in ways they didn't even know they could, we hope that there will be more money next year to support Unified Sports in this club'. (SC-I-CR01)*

Unified Sports programmes were therefore found to benefit through being part of an established network of support and with an existing profile within the community. This should be understood as a form of social capital that offered an already fertile ground on which ideas of inclusion were planted.

For instance in the course of the evaluation local programme set up tournaments, inviting young people and other stakeholders to attend. They were able to draw on a pool of volunteers from amongst University students, leisure centre staff and parents to staff and support the success of these events.

Another example is that of a head teacher in special school who has made a commitment to keep his school building open every day of the year for young people to

use as a recreation facility as he had witnessed the value of sport in the lives of the young people at his school.

Moreover, as one Community Representative identified, the links with the community lead to the establishment of links with a regional mainstream sporting organisation:

*Unified Sports is a very good, important and noble project because it helps people with intellectual disabilities become more socially included and to become involved in different spheres of society through sports. Because of this when the Special Olympics programme asked me to contribute of course I agreed. We started the collaboration with this organisation and we tried to help them out as much as possible. We provided them with equipment, sports facilities. There is no doubt that we want to continue to collaborate with this organisation.’ (UL-I-CR04) – Representative of the basketball federation of Lvov, Ukraine.*

### **3. Enduring programme**

Many of the Unified Sports programmes that took part in the evaluation had been operating for several years and many players, particularly athletes had played on the team since its inception. Partners tended to stay in the team for a shorter period than athletes, nevertheless they frequently remained for over two years and their departure from the team was commonly linked to changes in their lives such as leaving school or going to university. It was uncommon for them to leave the team because they did not want to be part of the team any longer. In fact many partners maintained contact with the club after their departure. One ex-partner told the researchers how much the team meant to him; as a university student now living in another city he attended the tournament held on the day of data collection in order to support his old team, he said:

*‘There are very few things that would get me up at 7am but Unified Sports is one of them!’ (G-I-exP01)*

The evaluation found that coaches also remained within the club and continued coaching their teams over considerable periods of time.

*‘I have been a PE teacher at this special school for 26 years, I was one of the founders of the SO club and we are celebrating our 6<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, and I have been coaching Unified Sports for the past 2 years. (SC-I-C03)*

Many coaches with whom we spoke had been responsible for bringing the Unified teams together and had then continued as their coaches. There was a strong commitment to the programme and to the players.

*‘These activities bring about changes for these kids. I have seen very big changes in them in their game, their physique and how they act with others. This is something that I want to continue, I have a strong commitment to these kids.’ (HD-I-C01)*

The enduring nature of the programme is important in creating social inclusion. It provides for the ongoing building of relationships based on mutual trust and shared values. Because of the enduring nature of this programme strong ties were developed between team members. From these, participation in networks within the community were also built. A good example is the links made between one Unified Sports programme and a mainstream school in the same village. Here the head teacher states:

*‘Amongst the kids they are really fascinated and they want to take part, and I have noticed that through these connections that the pupils here don’t have so much trouble making connections with kids with disabilities. At our school*

*anniversaries for example we invite these kids and the people here include the kids with disabilities as much as any other kids. (G-I-CR01) Head teacher in a mainstream senior school.*

Another example was given by a coach:

*'For the third year our Unified Sports programme has a collaboration agreement with a mainstream school. Not only do we recruit many of our partners from this school they also let us use their 25 seat bus and their playing fields.'* (HP-I-C02)

Whilst a third described the long term involvement of some partners:

*Sometimes the situation is that we have more healthy players than deficient ones, they come back after a study break, why not, they love it.'* (HP-I-C01)

#### **4. Focus – players shared interest in sport**

The motivation of athletes and partners to participate in a Unified team was to some extent based on a shared interest in a particular sport – in the case of our evaluation either football or basketball.. As one athlete stated:

*'I like playing sports and I wanted to be a member of group sports and this is the best way I knew how.'* (SK-I-A07)

Although for many partners their initial motivation to take part had been based on both an interest in sport as well as in the programme itself, a partner reported:

*'I heard about this programme and I heard that the sports are great and the atmosphere and people are great too, so I thought, why not, give it a go.'* (SP-I-P01)

Another stated:

*'I like football and I like making new friends so becoming part of this project was a good idea for me.'* (HD-I-P01)

However, the sport provided a meeting point for players who in most instances had no previous contact with one another, largely due to segregated education or institutional living arrangements amongst athletes. Having a shared interest in sport quickly helped to dissolve barriers to communication and indeed the playing of the game of sport in itself provided an opening forum of communication between athletes and partners.

*'We talk about sports, what teams we support and games that we have watched. We could do this straight away because sport is something we are all interested in.'* (UL-I-P02)

The focus on sport also helped to dissolve some of the prevailing fears and negative stereotypes held by wider society, which many partners had absorbed, in relation to people with intellectual disabilities. Partners remarked how they quickly realised that they had much more in common with athletes than they had anticipated and this was drawn from their shared interest and abilities in the game. Indeed many players also talked of their surprise at the level of skill that athletes displayed.

*'When they [partners] first came they weren't sure and then one guy said they are actually really good players, and things changed - the next time they came they were smiling.'* (HP-I-C02)

Athletes in turn were proud to show the skill that they had and to be accepted by this new peer group as valued members of the team.

## *Unified Gives Us A Chance*

*'You could see some of them were surprised that we were playing so well, now they learn from us and we learn from them.'* (SP-I-A01)

The sport in which the young people were engaged was found to be more important to them than the supposed differences between them and their partners, as one coach confirmed:

*'Unified Sports, it is not about abilities and winning, it is about playing together.'* (G-I-C03)

Whilst a partner said:

*I have told lots of people that I am a member of the Unified team. Lots of them don't know what Unified Sports is and I have to explain the rules, and that we play together – kids with disabilities and some without, and then I tell them what is the same – that is that we have great fun and we do lots of fun things together in our team and that I have met very many new people. And then in the end I tell them about the sports, because we are here for the same goal and this is to achieve something as a football team.* (SC-I-P02)

## **5. Unique opportunities to travel and compete**

Team members both athletes and partners made particular mention of the travel opportunities which arise as a result of playing on a Unified team. In many ways this relates to the fact that Unified Sports as a programme is part of a large international organisation. The benefits to athletes and to partners are considerable; not least in relation to social inclusion and integration of athletes into the wider community. This can be seen in a number of areas:

Firstly, through the development of a profile within the local community as the athletes travel to represent their locality in competitions either regionally, nationally or internationally:

*'Our team is well known in our community, when we came back from a tournament (abroad) we were on TV and in the paper then people some people recognised me, that was really a great feeling.'* (P-K-A02)

The profile has developed as time has gone on, another attribute of the enduring nature of the programme:

*'Athletes are really proud when they come back home with medals; we try to show them to society either in the press or the local TV. Some years ago at the beginning of the movement it was hard but now the media are more interested in what we do and achieve.'* (P-I-C03)

Secondly, as athletes have the opportunity to get to know and form deeper bonds with their team-mates;

*'We visited Kyiv as a team, we came to know each other better at this time, we became even friendlier – and we won which made us all very happy!'* (UL-I-A04)

*'My son went to Romania and I feel that he has become closer to the people that he went with, I hear him talking about them and being in contact with them after he came back from Romania.'* ((SP-I-Par02)

Finally, athletes are reported to develop increased independence when they travel and this adds to the skills, which they gain through their participation in Unified Sports, (this theme will be discussed in detail in section 3, below).

*'I look at the athletes who travel and who compete and you see the difference, they come back a different person, confident and independent, like you never thought they would be. And they are popular in school, like celebrities!' (SC-I-CR01)*

Others spoke of their ambitions in national and international competitions:

*'I want my guys to win in Bremen and in Athens, even if I am not playing (not picked for the team) I want this achievement for my team.'* (G-LS-A01)

## **6. Individual and programme financial costs**

Funding to develop the Unified Sports Programme has been sourced nationally and internationally. Moreover efforts are made to keep costs low, e.g. through the use of community facilities and having local teams. Nonetheless it was reported in several locations that a shortage of money to finance programmes leads to challenges in maintaining the current provision or indeed in terms of extending it beyond what is already available. As one coach stated:

*'Of course money is always a problem, we have to rely on the good will of others because we cannot spend money that we do not have. It is a challenge to the club and the team but somehow we manage it. (P-I-C03)*

At an individual level there are costs involved in taking part, this may be the purchase of equipment – e.g. football boots and shin guards – or it may be in terms of funding trips to compete in national or international competitions, or it can be with regard to having insufficient funds to pay fares for public transport to travel to training on a regular basis. These financial constraints were also highlighted as a problem but much more so for athletes than it was for partners. Shortage of available money impacted on a day to day level:

*'Sometimes I do not have enough money to pay the bus fare to go to training, sometimes I walk there, but it is a long way and a long way to walk home. I try to always go to training, but it is money that stops me, my family are not wealthy, we live off the land.'* (S-I-A02)

### **Concluding comments**

Here we have identified the core themes that created social capital and promoted social inclusion within the Unified Sports programmes we visited. Central to this is the ethos of inclusion within the wider Special Olympics organisation. It is the extension of this ethos within the Unified Sports programme that has been influential in the approach taken by coaches to training and to bringing together Unified teams.

The programme also draws on existing community links made by the Special Olympics clubs in which they are sited. Were these not to be present, the creation of Unified teams would be even more challenging.

Moreover in the chosen locations, the teams have now an established track-record and their continuance over time enables the development of these teams, the establishment of bonds between team members and trainers, and helps build a strong community profile.

The focus on sport helps to cement relationships between team members and the opportunity to compete in national and international competitions raises the profile of the programme in the eyes of participants and enabling young people to benefit from the experience of travel away from home.

### *Unified Gives Us A Chance*

The elements described above, which are built into the structure of Unified Sports, provide a strong basis on which the programme can build upon its aims of promoting social inclusion to people with intellectual disabilities through sport.

There is already significant financial investment in the programme which both recognizes and addresses its integral costs. The Unified programme will need ongoing investment to enable its continuation and further growth, so that it can continue to promote the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in their wider communities. The extent to which the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities is evident beyond the Sports field is the theme of the next two parts.

## Part 6. The Social Connectedness of the Team members

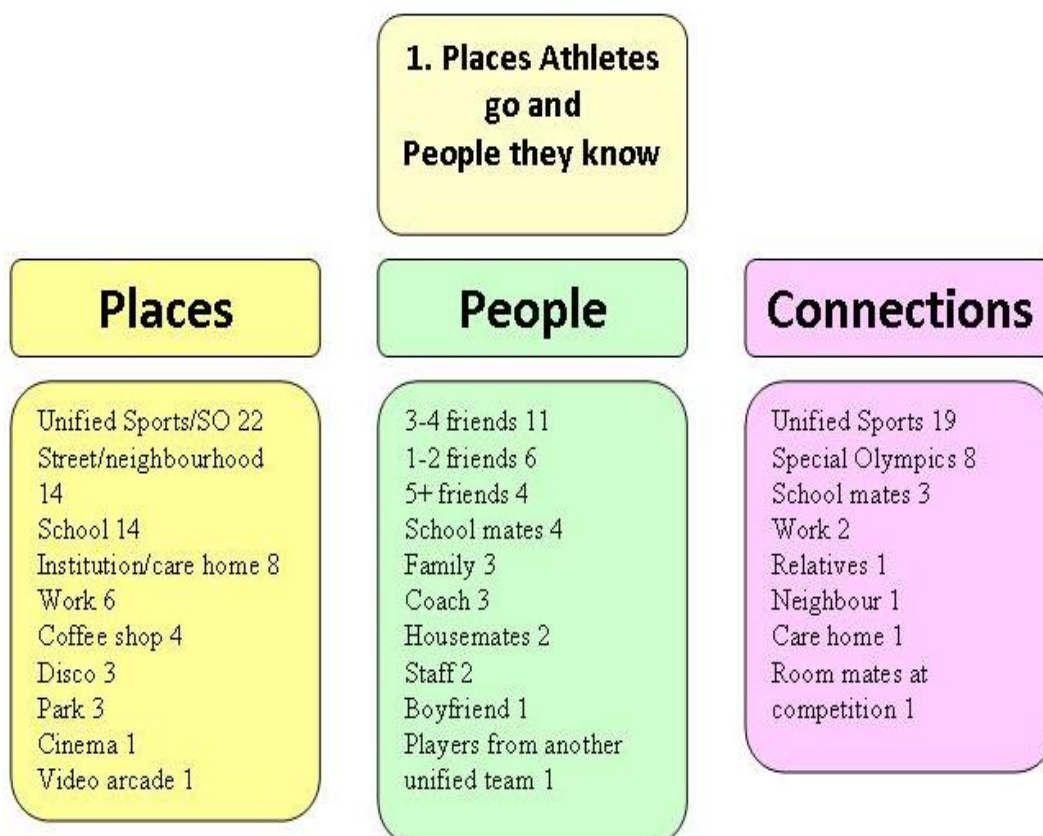
In addition to the interview data, 23 athletes and 19 partners completed connections charts during our visits across the five participating countries. The purpose of this method of data collection was to gain further understandings of the extent of participants' social networks – the range and breadth of their connections within their local community and how individuals develop connections with people and places.

By collecting this data from both partners and athletes we were able to draw comparisons between them, which had added weight as the young people in each location shared the same community with the only tangible difference being whether they do or do not have an intellectual disability. By charting not only the places that people regularly go to and the people they regularly see, but also the way in which connections are made, we were able to identify the influences in young people's lives in terms of how they construct their social world.

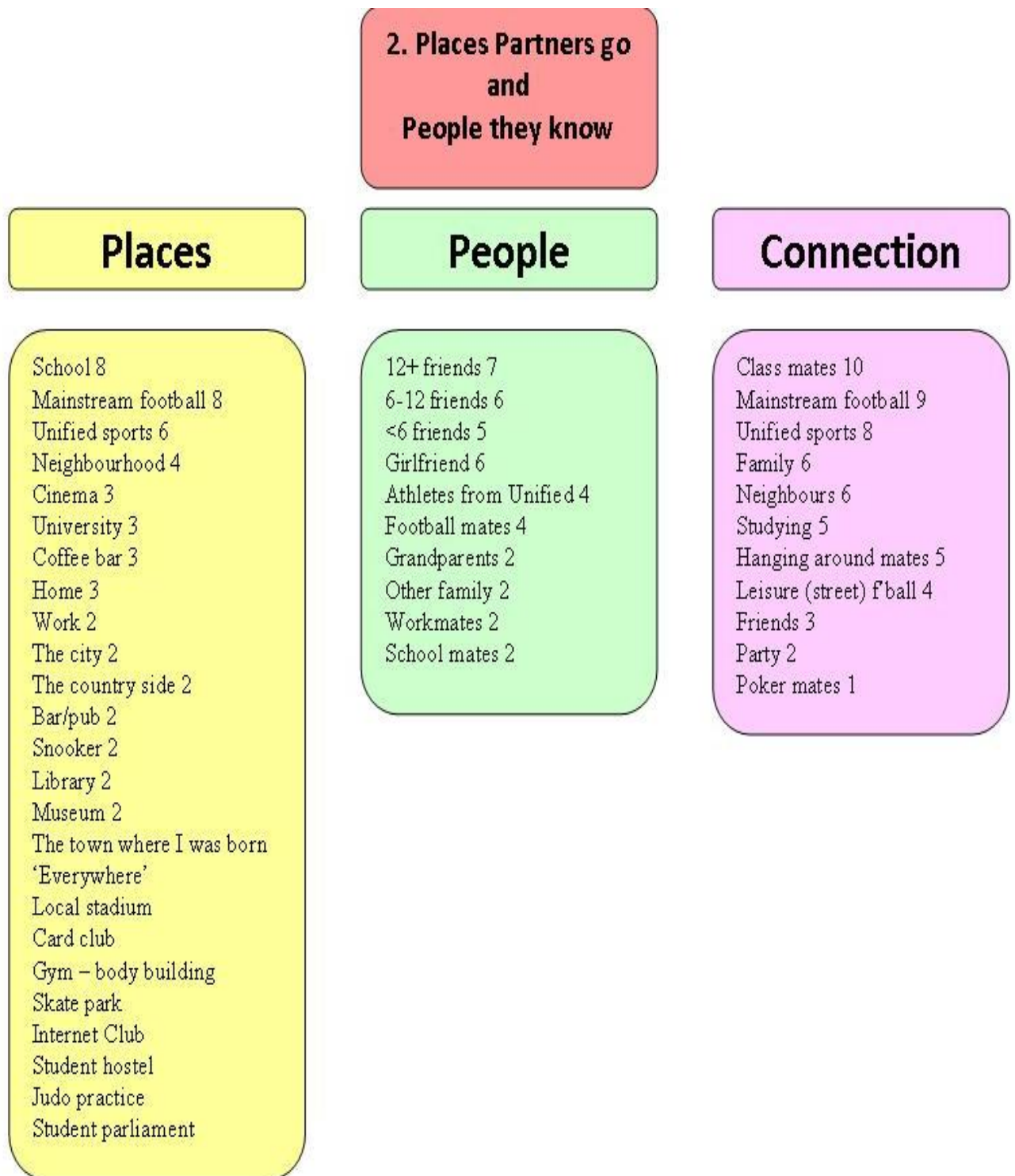
### Reading the data

Two charts are presented below. Chart 1 summarises the data gathered from athletes while Chart 2 summarises that gathered from partners. In each column a list of places, people and connections is shown, the number after each item denotes the number of people who named that particular item. For instance in Chart 1, Places – Unified Sports 22 – twenty-two participants identified Unified Sports as a place where they regularly go.

In the connections column, people and places are also mentioned; this means that participants have identified particular people or places as the mode in which social connections have been made. Therefore Unified Sports may also appear in this column, with the meaning that participants have developed social connections through taking part in the programme.







### Interpreting the data

Comparison between the two charts presented clearly shows that the number and range of places regularly frequented by participants is much greater for partners than it is for athletes. Moreover, the numbers of people known to partners is also greater in number, with many mentioning more than 12 friends, while athletes typically mentioned 3-4 friends.

Almost all athletes highlight Unified Sports /Special Olympics as somewhere that they regularly go, and identify Unified Sports as a principle point of connection to other people and places.

## *Unified Gives Us A Chance*

Athletes' charts, besides their references to Unified Sports and Special Olympics revolve mainly around home, family, care home, staff and their neighbourhood, with only a few highlighting connections in the wider community through use of coffee shops or other leisure facilities. Partners identify a much wider range of places that they go to and are connected through a wider range of people and activities.

### **Conclusions - what we can learn from this data**

Data drawn from Connections Charts show that athletes' social networks are more restricted by comparison to those of partners, with fewer connections, and a more limited range of places where they meet with people they know. The limited networks experienced and reported by athletes would indicate that athletes have a poorer social network than their partner-peers and that they experience social exclusion in their day-to-day lives.

The Charts also demonstrate that the majority of athletes establish connections through their participation in Unified Sports, this contrasts with partners which show only about a fifth of their connections are made in this way. This points to the importance for athletes of their participation in Unified Sports in creating a greater network of social connectedness for them.

The data also suggests that Unified Sports also plays some role – a minor one admittedly – in expanding the social network of partners, something perhaps they would be denied where they not actively involved in the programme and certainly their contact with persons who have intellectual disabilities would be much less.

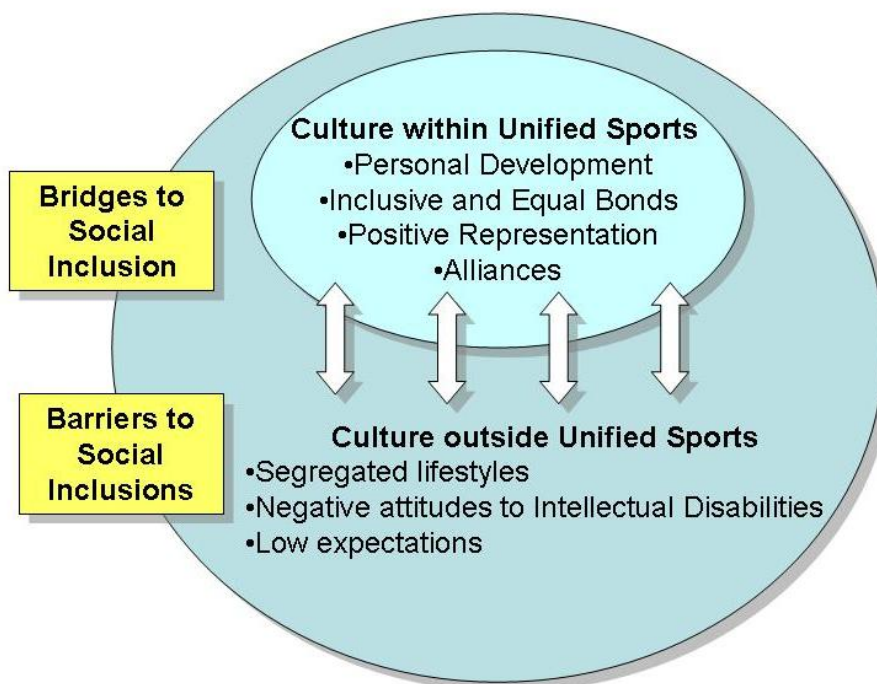


## Part 7. Unified Sports: a micro-culture within the wider dominant culture

### Introduction

In this section we draw on the concepts around social capital to reflect on the barriers and bridges to the wider inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in their local communities and societies beyond Unified Sports. The findings drawn from interview data suggest that the culture of inclusion that prevails within the Unified Sports programme (see section 5) can offer tangible challenges to the barriers to social inclusion, which exist within the wider cultural and social realm within which the participating programmes operated. Equally these barriers can inhibit the development of Unified Sports in other locations. Quotations from the interview data are presented to illustrate the themes, which are reported here in detail and summarised in Figure 5 and the Box below. These findings confirm many of comments made by the National Co-ordinators which were reported in Section 3.

Figure 5: The cultural realms in which Unified Sports operate.



### Summary of Key Messages

- The community within Unified Sports forms a micro-culture based on an ethos of inclusion and integration of people with intellectual disabilities.
- The wider societies in which Unified programmes operate continue to present both structural and attitudinal barriers to the inclusion and integration of people with intellectual disabilities.
- The Unified Sports programme presents challenges to the obstacles to social inclusion through gradual yet continual tests of negative attitudes and actions, positive representations of people with intellectual disabilities and through enabling the development of parent alliance and advocacy.

## **The Community Culture Outside of Unified Sports**

In the interviews, participants from all stakeholder groups across the five countries discussed the challenges within wider society to the routine inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities in the daily lives of their communities. They are at the 'cutting-edge' of discriminatory practices and well placed to make comment. They discussed the obstacles or barriers to inclusion and identified these to exist at both a structural level and within the endemic attitude of the wider society. Participants drew a contrast between, what we have described through the emergent themes of this evaluation, the *culture* within Unified Sports and that in the wider social world within which Special Olympics operates. Of course it is not an absolute contrast, these are simply the dominant brush strokes, which nevertheless have a significant impact on the social worlds of individuals with intellectual disabilities in their communities.

### **Attitudes to intellectual disability**

The dominant attitudes in wider society were seen to influence the social experiences of people with intellectual disabilities. One parent talked of the challenges to inclusion to be found at a high social level:

*'In our society there is less attention to people with disabilities [...] this is a problem of our society, our state and our politics, we are seeking positive changes so that we can have inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities.'*  
(UL-I-P02)

Whilst others highlighted how attitude can influence action:

*'I am ashamed to say that I used to laugh at these people (people with intellectual disabilities), now I will tell anybody to stop laughing if I see it and I will stand up for people if I can. It is wrong to laugh at these people, but I didn't know much before I just did what everyone else did.'* (HP-I-P04)

These negative attitudes contribute to the segregated lifestyles which athletes and families described allied to the low expectations that others hold of people with intellectual disabilities and indeed, which they hold of themselves.

### **Segregated lifestyles**

Schools within the countries in which we worked are often segregated so that young people with intellectual disabilities commonly attend special schools where they did not meet young people who do not have an intellectual disability. One school teacher told us:

*'we do not have the opportunity for integrated education here, we could not include these kids in mainstream schools, we could not teach them there.'* (SK-I-CR01)

The outcome of segregated education was limited chances available to athletes or partners to meet each other before their involvement in Unified Sports.

*'I know for sure I would not have had the possibility to meet these kids from the mainstream school except because of Unified Sports.'* (SP-I-A03)

Participants contrasted the inclusive culture within Unified Sports to that in wider society, one example being when one parent advocated for change within wider society which would mirror that found in Unified Sports:

*'The integration should exist in schools as it does in unified sports.'* (P-I-Par01)

However, one coach challenged the reality of inclusion for young people with intellectual disabilities who are placed in mainstream schools:

*'Anyone can come to our (special) school and see that these children are happy, [...]. If they go to a normal school they will sit in the back bench and they will be isolated because their mental capacities will not be enough for them to join in. (HP-I-C02)*

The interview data did offer some evidence of changes within wider society to the exclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities, as one parent said:

*'...people must stop being ashamed of these kids, people in our society still have strange reactions to disabled people, sometimes they are ashamed, sometimes they are scared. But we have to talk with these people more, we have to inform them, disability has been taboo for many years, it is changing right now, but it is not enough, people need to have free access to information on this subject.' (PSO-I-Par05)*

There was acknowledgement of the importance of the Unified Sports programme in providing a challenge to the negative attitudes reported.

### **The impact of the dominant culture on the Unified Programme**

There were examples in the data of the culture in the wider community dominating the work of the Unified programme. These were isolated, however the purpose of highlighting this data is to underline the importance of adhering to the principles which are followed when Unified Teams are found to be working well towards the programme goals. It also shows the challenges faced by the programmes which are embedded within the wider community where the dominant culture may contrast to that which guides the Unified programme. One coach identified a problem when the importance of winning supersedes the emphasis on the value in taking part and team work:

*'Well the athletes and partners should co-operate as good as it is possible, but what I observe is a big problem, because coaches think too much about the result, so coaches pick partners who are good players but have problems co-operating with disabled people, they play only between themselves. Athletes stay on defence and partners attack not passing the ball to athletes. It is not always a problem but it is a very common problem. The main idea of Unified Sports is that partners should be on the same level of football skills as athletes and often there is a difference between them.' (P-I-C05)*

This coach goes on to describe his own team as follows:

*This is a group of individualists, it is difficult to play together, each one of them would like to be the best, be the star, they have a problem passing and they try to use technical tricks at the worst moment of the game.' (P-I-C05)*

In terms of this team meeting up beyond the sports field we are told:

*'I observe that they talk to each other, but I don't think that their relations can be so deep that they would do anything else together.' (P-I-C05)*

And in relation to the coaches own relationship with his team:

*'I don't have such a big contact with partners to affirm this [if their attitudes to ID have altered]'. (P-I-C05)*

What is apparent from this data is that the community within Unified Sports can be influenced by non-inclusive attitudes that may be more dominant within the wider community. And that when this happens there is potential that the success of the

particular Unified team is diminished. That is the success of the overall concept and goals, rather than success measured by winning. This emphasises the value and need for a guiding philosophy of practice within the project, which has stated social aims using sports as a tool to achieve them. Whilst winning is set in second place to taking part within the Unified programme, it was apparent that when the competitiveness of sport takes precedence the inclusive potential of the programme is challenged.

## **Unified Sports Challenges Barriers to Social Inclusion**

The data revealed four principle ways in which participants regarded the Unified Sports programme to have a role in challenging routine obstacles to social inclusion from community life. These have been described in more detail in earlier parts of the report but they are included here in relation to the counter-culture that Unified Teams nurtures.

### **1. Personal Development of the Athletes and Partners**

The emphasis in Unified Sports is on ability rather disability. There were many reports in the data of the progress athletes had made not only in their sporting competence but also in other key aspects needed for participation in community life and for forging social networks, such as self-confidence, self-esteem and communication skills. It is debatable the extent to which the special education system inculcates these competences in young people but in any case, Unified Sports manages to do so in a natural and practical manner. In short, the young people gained the necessary skills for social inclusivity.

Equally important though is the developments reported within the partners. Their confidence and self-esteem also develops but so too did their attitudes and perceptions of athletes. For many it was their first opportunity to appreciate the talents of their 'disabled' peers with whom they had little previous contact, largely because of segregated schooling. They too were being prepared to respond positively to the inclusion of people labeled as different in their society.

### **2. Inclusive and Equal Bonds**

Unified Sports goes further than just developing the skills of the athletes and partners. It creates social capital through bonding athletes, partners, coaches and families together in an inclusive and equal partnership. In all the countries and regions we visited in the course of this evaluation, we found the same positive and inclusive attitude to people with intellectual disability. This attitude is so embedded that it can be understood as a micro-culture within local communities and perhaps within the wider Organisation of Special Olympics.

The interview data shows that the approach adopted by leaders and coaches and absorbed by athletes and partners as well as their families, provides a challenge to the barriers to social inclusion that prevail to some degree within wider society. Hence a central finding of this research is that nurturing a micro-culture of inclusion is an essential first step to the development of social capital and social inclusion. Central to this bonding process is the role of the coach. Here we repeat some of the key facets of their contribution but with the emphasis here on how they create the micro-culture of inclusion.

Themes of inclusion and equality recurred throughout the interviews with young participants, both athletes and partners. The inclusive culture they report as prevailing within Unified Sports is found both in the approach to the team and in the interactions between individuals which makes for a particular atmosphere of respect for each other.

## *Unified Gives Us A Chance*

The teams are reported to work as a unit where everyone has a role, there is no place for a single outstanding player on a Unified team, as one young athlete remarked:

*‘We are all needed on the team, there are no star players, we are a great team and the team is the star.’ (H-I-A02)*

While a partner stated:

*‘This team includes everyone, we play as one, we work together, that is the best way for Unified teams.’ (UK-I-P02)*

Beyond the sport, the inclusive ethos was also picked up on by young people:

*‘There are no differences here between athletes and partners, we are all the same, the coach treats us the same and we treat each other the same.’ (G-I-P01)*

An athlete remarked on how this affected their experience of the being a member of the club:

*‘I am part of the team. I love being in this team and I am an important part of it. I have good football skills and I have good friends here.’ (UL-I-A03)*

Young people reported how the approach that coaches take to training impacted on their experience of Unified Sports. Some compared this to past experiences they had had in mainstream sports clubs:

*‘The training we have here is much better and much nicer than I had before in my table tennis (mainstream) club. I enjoy it much more here. If you cannot do something then you are advised by the coaches calmly of it, how you can do work to make – for instance if you are a goalkeeper you are advised of how you can guard your goal better. (SK-I-P01)*

The same young person goes on to describe how the approach taken by coaches affects the atmosphere in the team:

*‘The atmosphere here is very warm, people understand each other, there is no shouting, no screaming and no yelling at each other and everything is calm. (SK-I-P01)*

Parents also report in the inclusive culture of Unified Sports and often attribute this to leaders and coaches, one parent stated:

*‘I want to talk about the healthy attitude of partners, because their attitude is very good, there is no negative attitude to children with disabilities, they do not go ahead with the ball, they give athletes every opportunity to show their skills so that everyone is involved in the game. This is how the coaches teach them and this is really working well’. (UK-I-Par01group)*

Whilst another said:

*‘Through Unified Sports my son has learnt that he is a worthwhile person and that he meet with the kids without disabilities and have fun with them. He listens to what they say, that he is equal and important on the team and he comes home very happy. Unified Sports has taught my son that he can be included and he doesn’t have to hide anymore. (SK-I-P02)*

Parents themselves often become involved in the programme as volunteers, or find the community of parents of athletes and partners to be a support to them in facing the challenges they face as parents. This is discussed in more detail in the section relating to the challenges to barriers to inclusion below.



## **The contribution of coaches to building inclusivity**

The core drivers of Unified Sports in each country are the National Co-ordinators assisted by the sports directors, however at the frontline, the role of coaches both provides the impetus to teams and steers the course of their development. Their roles were found to be complex and multi-faceted, as one coach said:

*'In a Unified team the coach is the main person who has to connect all the blocks of the team.'* ((SP-I-C01)

As noted earlier, the coaches' role typically included the usual work involved in training and coaching players in the sport. However, there were additional tasks which result from the aims and nature of the Unified project and which are expanded on here.

The coaches had to make clear the concept of Unified Sports and encourage the development of a unit of players who prize the performance of the team as a whole rather than the skill of individuals.

*'The idea is that we are all the same, that there are no differences between us and it is the motor under which we work.'* (SK-I-C05)

Another coach explained this:

*'The coach has several main tasks, to teach and then to create the conditions in which a person with intellectual disabilities can feel equal rights to other people without problems.'* (UL-I-C03)

### **Support beyond sport - mentor**

Coaches also commonly emphasised that they needed to know all players on the team and to assess their strengths and needs and be able to offer support that may be beyond what is commonly expected from a sports coach:

*'It is important to really know your team, all of them as individuals, because they often need some help with something that is not a sports problem but maybe something at school or at home. We include them and they have belief in us - it is part of what we do as unified coaches.'* (HD-I-C02)

Another stated:

*'Also you realise that the role of the coach, as well as a sports person should be someone that athletes and partners can come to talk to if they have a problem and that the coach has to know each one of them.'* (SP-I-C01)

### **Role model**

A further aspect of the role described by coaches was that of a role model to young people in the team. This was in relation to the development of positive relations within the team. Coaches were aware of the initial uncertainty felt by many players on first meeting one another, given that these were young people from two groups in society who had previously had little or no contact with one another, but who had been exposed to the social myths pertaining to people with intellectual disabilities.

*'I treat everybody equally right from the start, it is important for players and athletes to see that they are the same in the team. I am also careful to talk to them in a pleasant way, and to joke with them, I do not give athletes special treatment and I do not give partners special treatment and they all see this and it affects how they treat each other, they too are willing to behave as an group of equals. In a Unified team we are all the same.'* (UL-I-C03)



### **Encouraging relationships within the team**

Some coaches also highlighted a further aspect of their work with young people on the unified teams, which was to – *'initiate bonds between partners and athletes'* (G-I-C01).

Another coach described this part of the work in more detail:

*'We in the club push people together to do different sports activities, and we want them to hang around together after school [...] we organise for different sports activities, rafting, rowing, swimming and we have lots of non-sports activities to connect people and everyone is invited and welcome.'* (SK-I-C05)

This aspect of the work was not mentioned by all coaches as a part of the role, however, when it was mentioned it was supported by evidence of a greater degree of interaction between athletes and partners outside of the playing field as reported in their interviews. It would seem that the approach of coaches in relation to motivating partners and athletes to form friendships, which extended beyond their training and competition was one factor influencing the development of these relationships. As one coach stated:

*I know that friendships exist off the field between athletes and partners and I have to tell you that we in the club push people together to do different activities, not sports activities and we want them to hang around together after school, go to dances, go to discos, go to towns, and we also organise for nature walks, and we invite everyone to participate in this. So we have lots of different non-sports activities that connect people and this helps them to spend more time together.* (SK-I-C05)

Coaches themselves also often described another aspect of their relationship with players on their Unified team as one of friendship. Coaches recognised that they needed to be able to adapt their role in response to varying situations and contexts in their work with players:

*'Sometimes you are their trainer, but sometimes you are also responsible for them. It is the same when we travel, then we form a special bond together, which is something quite unique. So they see you as a coach and while we play they listen to your instructions, but after training or competition is over you somehow become a different person to them, you take a different role, you have to know what is going on with your team and your team members, of someone has a problem or if there are any questions or is there something they need to do, so I think through being a coach you become a friend.'* (SK-I-C04)

### **Selecting partners**

Coaches also mentioned the selection of partners as a crucial aspect of their role: in relation to the success of the team as a whole rather than simply a sporting entity. They typically looked for particular characteristics in partners, which were considered necessary to enable them to work successfully within the Unified structure. Such characteristics included having an attitude which is likely to be amenable to the Unified project, one coach stated:

*'They should be good friends and have an open mind'* (SP-I-C02)

Another said:

*'I do not select kids just for their sporting ability, I want to know what they are like on the inside, that they are open and kind.'* (SC-I-C03)

A third reported:

*'Partners should be a particular personality, not a champion who has to be first but someone who will co-operate and be will put another before themselves'. (HP-I-C01) because as another coach described it:*

*'If the partner is too ambitious it will be hard for them to play on a Unified team.' (G-I-C03)*

Being a good pupil in school was another attribute mentioned in selecting partners:

*'I choose good [those with good grades] students because I think it is important for our team members to have good working skills, they have to keep up their grades, both the athletes and the partners if they want to stay in the team and this motivates them in their school work too.' (SP-I-C02)*

### **Matched Talents**

However the rules of Unified Sport stress that the abilities of players – athletes and partners – should be roughly equivalent. This is often assessed during training where players are matched to teams of similar skill:

*'...we have a few training sessions and try to match up the team according to the rules. This is something that you learn from the seminars and training about his sport, that all of the people in the team have to be of the same ability and more or less have to be on the same level of playing'. (SP-I-C02)*

Working with partners is as important to coaches as working with athletes in the creation of the Unified team, and developments in partners ability to co-operate on such a team is reported as they develop – *'now they are calm, helpful and patient, at the beginning they didn't co-operate much with athletes, now it has changed.'* (P-I-C01)

### **Summary of the coaches' role in relation to social inclusion**

These findings illustrate the multi-faceted role of coaches working with Unified Sports teams. This evaluation suggests that this complex role is of crucial importance in promoting the concept and reality of social inclusion for players with intellectual disabilities in sports. This is seen through:

- their pedagogic approach to training
- as a role model for attitude and behaviour towards people with intellectual disabilities,
- in working within the framework of the Unified programme thus promoting the group over the individual in playing a team sport,
- and in consciously promoting the development of inclusion for athletes through both changes in attitude and through encouraging the active involvement of athletes and partners outside of the playing field.

The coaches in large part therefore were found to instigate and maintain what is described here as the micro-culture of inclusion within the programme.

### **3. Positive Representations of People with Intellectual Disabilities**

The third major contribution that Unified Teams make to the creation of social capital is by challenging negative attitudes through informing people more widely about intellectual disability so as to subvert the myths and stereotypes, which underpin ongoing exclusion. The idea was expressed by various informants that the programme would be a forum through which a gradual challenge to the limits to social inclusion could be extended, through informing wider society about people with intellectual

disabilities. The aim was to create a kind of ripple effect so that eventually inclusion would be seamless and unquestioned.

*'The great merit of Unified Sports is that they increase the number of people who understand the needs of people with disabilities, so yesterday for example there were 10 people, today there will be 100 people and tomorrow there will be 1000 of us and then there will be the whole country who understands the needs of people with disabilities and then the society will be able to organise normal conditions for them.'* (UK-I-Par01group)

Likewise the coach who provided a strong challenge to ideas of integrated education reported above, did reflect on the positive side of integration as he had experienced it through Unified Sports:

*'Where I see that integration makes sense – I see these guys from the mainstream school coming here for the first time, and I saw it in their faces that they have to play football with the kids who have disabilities and then this outspoken guy said these guys are really cool actually and they are really good players. And the next time they came smiling. And now to think that they meet up. I don't mean that all of them meet all the time. But they are good friends, they keep in touch with each other on the internet and they have a laugh together.'* (HP-I-C02)

Some parents talked about how the young people's change in attitudes and challenges to exclusion had influenced wider family and friends:

*'He has taught us all really. He tells us, his family and also his friends at school about what he is learning about people with intellectual disabilities, about being good at football, about being good friends, and so we have all learnt so much. Some of his friends have joined the team and I have become a volunteer when I can at events they have. His getting involved changed something for us all.'* (SK-I-Par02)

The data also asserted the importance of the Unified Sports programme in raising awareness not just of the needs of people with intellectual disabilities, but also of their strengths and abilities. This was achieved through media coverage of Unified competitions and celebration of achievements of the Unified team. One young person recognised the direct impact of this on his life:

*'Lots of people say they saw me on TV because of winning the competition, and these are nice people taking to me about being a good footballer. This is because I am the goalie on the Unified team and I am really a good goalie.'* (SC-I-A01)

Through taking part in the Unified programme this young person experienced the impact of being visible in his community, not because of any perceived difference, but because of his success. Raising awareness in a positive way was in this way shown to have a direct impact in feeling like a valued part of community life.

#### **4. Building Alliances**

Finally, the data revealed that connections made by parents because their sons and daughters with intellectual disabilities are part of the Unified programme, have evolved into parent support and advocacy networks. Parents emphasised the well of support they have experienced from other parents of young people involved as both athletes and partners in the unified programme. As one mother stated:

*'This union of parents is very important because we understand each other sometimes better than our own relatives do. Parents understand and support each other, these parents know why I do so much for my son, and this helps me to keep fighting for his life.'* (UK-I-Par01group)

Likewise in certain regions good links have been established with mainstream schools, local government officials and with the media. More widely the links with the wider Special Olympics movement provide opportunities for travel and competition as noted in Section 5. Alliances have been built with Sports Federations, Government Ministries, sport/youth clubs etc; this work is critical to the further generation of social capital beyond Unified Sports and requires sustained and increased focus from national and regional programmes.

### **Concluding comments**

The themes reported in this section have described how the Unified Sports programmes which participated in this evaluation have a common culture of inclusion which impacts both on attitude and action amongst those who take part. Leaders play a crucial role in establishing and perpetuating this micro-culture.

Yet challenges to social inclusion can be found in the attitudes and actions of the wider cultural realm within which programmes work. But the data also revealed how the programmes present a challenge to the dominant culture in three ways: bonding athletes and partners into an inclusive team, the positive portrayal of people with intellectual disabilities and via parental and other alliances and through advocacy.

Participants reported much need for greater change in society to enable the routine inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in the community. The Unified Sports programme has a significant role to play in this, as one coach put it:



*'I think there are lots of barriers to inclusion in our community and I would like to feel that I and my colleagues are somehow contributing to breaking down the barriers when it comes to inclusion'* (SP-I-C02)

### **Inclusion in action**

In the data we found examples of social inclusion, which were reported to be a direct result of participation in Unified Sports. Moreover there were certain clear examples of where participation in Unified Sports made a tangible difference in the lives of athletes and partners, through direct experience of real social inclusion, as well as evidence of the difference that being part of Unified Sports has made in their lives. These examples were not manifold, however they were striking and they are summarised in Table 14 below. This seems an appropriate way of concluding the findings of this evaluation as it offers the promise of yet more benefits in the future.

**Table 14: Examples of social inclusion reported in the interviews and life stories**

<p>Active friendship – joint goals and shared work towards achieving goals.</p>	<p><i>'Apart from playing sport I help some of the members with their everyday activities, sometimes I help them with their homework and some other work that they need to do when they come to the club. What motivates me is that the people on my team have exactly the same goals as me, to win, in sport and in life, and they work hard to do that and if they have some limitations then it is not a burden for me to help, they are my friends as well as my team mates. (SK-I-P01)</i></p>
<p>Finding employment</p>	<p><i>'My son [athlete] works part time in one of the places near where we live where he cleans horses and works with them, that way he earns some extra pocket money. He got that job through the fact that some people heard that he was a member of the unified team and they employed him'. (SP-I=Par02)</i></p>
<p>Finding employment</p>	<p><i>From field notes in Germany: An athlete was successful in finding employment in a restaurant, and he was supported in this by the team coaches, ho continue to ensure that he keeps his job by checking on him, that he is getting up for work and attending his employment regularly. This mentoring support has meant that this athlete has found and kept mainstream employment.</i></p>
<p>Influence of the programme on young people's life choices</p>	<p><i>My son has decided to enrol in the sports academy and one day to become a PE teacher. He likes working with kids and he likes sports, so he thought this was the best way to combine the two. One day I am hoping he can join such a club as a trainer not a competitor and then he can one day work with children with and without Intellectual Disabilities and transfer what he has learnt through his own personal experience. (SP-I-Par01)</i></p>



## **Section 4: Discussion and conclusions**

### **Introduction**

The findings of this study are based on a data which is extensive in terms of the numbers of interviews completed and is wide ranging in relation to the diversity of stakeholders who were interviewed and from whom other types of data, such as questionnaires and social connections, were collected.

The data demonstrated that the main themes were consistent both within and among countries. Their responses were strikingly similar although they came from differing standpoints and cultural backgrounds. This indicates the success of our methods and provides validation of the findings which were further confirmed when they were shared with key informants from the participating countries. The data suggests a common response to the experience of taking part in or being involved with a Unified Sports team albeit with some cultural and situational variations.

### **Our population**

As is widely reported in the literature relating to populations of people with intellectual disabilities reviewed in Section 2, we found from the demographic data collected, that the unified athletes taking part in participating programmes in the selected countries, were more likely to be at risk of social exclusion than their partnering team mates. This was manifested in various ways. The athletes mostly attended segregated schools with many also living in institutions. They also tended to come from more economically deprived family backgrounds than did partners and many athletes also lacked the support of their families in their participation in Unified Sports. Data which mapped the social networks of athletes and partners also demonstrated that they had fewer friends or social connections and attended a more limited range of leisure activities on a regular basis. Hence Unified Sports had engaged with athletes for whom social inclusion was unlikely to occur through their own initiatives or those of their families. The athletes could be considered disadvantaged in various ways with an accumulating effect and hence were at a much greater risk of ongoing social exclusion from their communities.

### **A model for creating social inclusion and social capital**

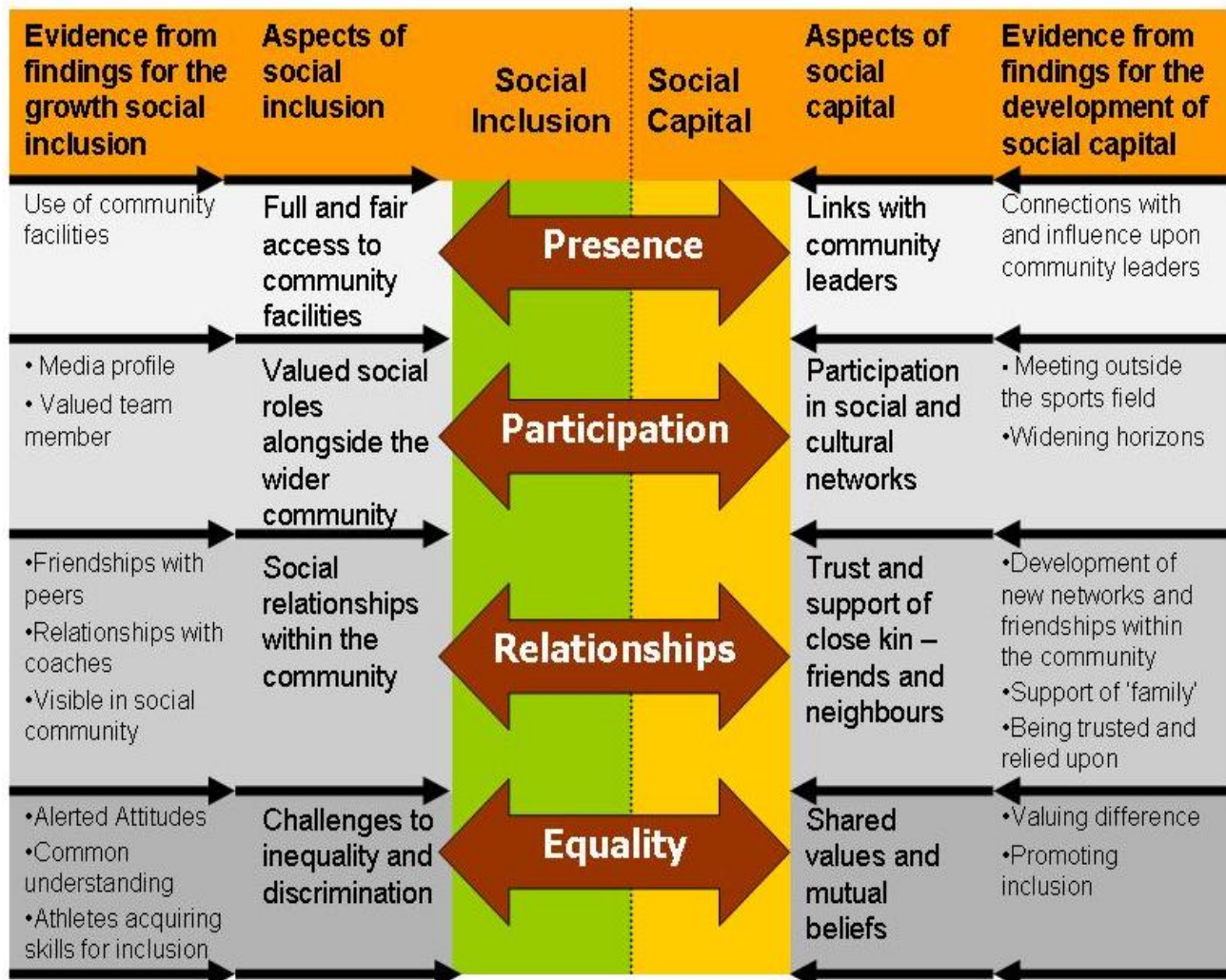
In this section we present an explanatory model as to how Unified Sports address the dual challenge of creating social inclusion and building social capital - see Figure 6. This identifies the effective processes and strategies unveiled by the data analysis. Such a model serves two main purposes.

First, it analyses and names the core elements so that a common language is created across stakeholders for translating intention into action. This will have applicability primarily within Unified Sports and should assist advocates of it to articulate more concisely the critical aspects of the Programme. However it also contains important lessons for other programmes with similar objectives.

Secondly, the model provides an evaluative framework against which programmes can be assessed and areas for improvement identified. Although our concern throughout this report has been to draw out commonalities across Unified Sports within the countries who participated in the evaluation, nonetheless there are individual variations which can be more easily identified by measuring the programmes against a common framework. Such close inspection would help local and national programmes devise an ongoing improvement programme that will increase the effectiveness of Unified Sports in achieving its wider goals of social inclusion.



Figure 6: A model for creating social inclusion and social capital within Unified Sports



### Social inclusion and social capital

The development of social inclusion for participating athletes is best understood we would argue within the theoretical edifice of social capital. This provides a means of understanding the types of inclusion found in the data and to illuminate their potential impact in terms of real and sustained inclusion within the wider community. Figure 6 shows where we have found a link between social inclusion and social capital and where evidence exists for this within our data. These are grouped into four layers of strengthening social capital with a concomitant deepening of social inclusion. The following discussion will bring our findings together within this framework before going on to offer conclusions as to the impact of Unified sports in promoting the social inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities in wider society.

#### Presence

At the most basic and simplest level, young people with intellectual disabilities can become more visible in their local communities through taking part in Unified Sports, gaining increased access to community resources such as sports facilities, mainstream schools and leisure centres. Likewise links to community leaders are facilitated through the contacts which the programme makes with senior figures in the local community – in sports, education, local government and church leaders.

These are important avenues through which the potential for increased understanding about intellectual disability as well as opportunities for personal contact could grow.

Both could be described as 'bridging social capital' albeit based around 'weak ties' (see Table 1). These require Unified Sports personnel to be outward looking and seeking ways for the resourceful interaction of diverse groups which usually lead separated lives. The ties created through access and contacts, which may appear superficial, may in fact help to form a foundation for the development of networks of inclusion beyond the playing field.

### **Participation**

At a somewhat deeper level, the findings show how athletes develop a role within their local communities which is valued and is based on a recognition of ability rather than disability. The opportunity to play in competitions, and more importantly to represent the club, town, region or country in which they live, provides an interface through which the wider public can connect with individuals with intellectual disabilities. Although people in the community may lack an understanding of intellectual disability per se and be unsure as to how best to relate to such persons, they are more likely to have an understanding of sport and can relate to the players in this way. The game of sport therefore provides a connecting focus for the community to the sports team, and the fact that the team is unified – that is with the inclusion of non-disabled players - a broader section of the wider community will be personally engaged, such as the parents, neighbours and friends of partners.

Athletes also develop an increased profile in their community through the media attention which comes with the coverage of local, national and international competitions. Indeed such publicity also serves to elevate their status as they are accorded the same recognition as other sports teams within the local media. It is interesting that partners too valued this recognition.

We see here a second type of social capital growing, that which acknowledges sport as the basis for the common shared norms, again through bridging via the media, previously uninformed and unconnected groups together.

### **Relationships**

Relationships and friendships formed between team members and between players and their coaches, where they were found, are a clear pathway through which young people with intellectual disabilities were able to become more connected with non-disabled persons from their local communities. The process of bonding is core to the creation of social capital and in this respect, friendships made with partners are important to athletes and are valued by them.

However, the friendships between young people with intellectual disabilities and those without, should not be regarded as any more important than friendships between athletes which is another form of bonding. Strengthening these bonds - in this instance through sports - provides discriminated groups with the confidence and growth in self-esteem needed to advocate for their rights. This mirrors the reported experiences of advocacy groups as well as the impact on athletes of being members of Special Olympics clubs around the world.

Unified Sports provides a further form of bonding, namely with peer partners who offer athletes access to areas of community life which they alone had not been able to access and would be unlikely to do so left to themselves and their families. Through taking part in activities outside of the playing field with partners, athletes become more visible in their local communities. This helps to break down divisions and to challenge negative attitudes.



Also, the athletes learn more about youth culture, through sharing ideas with partners about music, sport or games which may not happen to the same extent as with their disabled friends. Hence the degree of difference between the athletes and their peer group is decreased; an essential component of bonding. Moreover the bonding within teams, makes it more feasible for athletes to go on developing connections with other people within their wider communities as they have more shared interests and experiences.

Similarly, the growth of relationships between families, the development of their networks of advocacy and mutual support also demonstrate the growth of social capital as an outcome of the Unified Sports programme and the bringing together of different sections of the community through new bonds and bridges (Delaney 2005).

Relationships are the glue that bonds people: a reminder that this type of social capital is said to be critical to the development of community cohesion. But relationships cannot develop in the abstract. Rather sport provides a natural medium for individuals to form a friendship base. This is all the more significant for persons with intellectual disabilities, when other potential contexts for building relationships – such as education and employment – are denied to them. Given the emphasis in the literature as to the importance they attach to making and having friends, then Unified Sports offers a valued and unique opportunity.

### **Equality**

Within all the teams we met, athletes and partners identify themselves within these groupings and they recognise the reason for these separate terms for themselves and each other. However, in some instances both groups - but partners particularly - also say that there is no difference between them on the sports field and more widely – that they are equal as people as well as players.

This stands in contrast to what is evident amongst some participants, where athletes talk of being supported by partners in their play on the field and of recognising that partners have a more full life outside of Unified Sports. Partners in these instances tend to see themselves in more of a supportive role to athletes, in some circumstances they also say that they feel sorry for athletes and are motivated to join the team in order to do some social good. Nonetheless they do advocate for the equal rights of people with intellectual disabilities and challenge the wider social order where the social exclusion of, and discrimination against people with intellectual disabilities is common. However it is the move from perceptions of inequality towards equality that enables mutual bonding to occur. We suspect that where there is preponderance of partners adopting supportive roles then the likelihood of creating social capital beyond the sport is much reduced.

This fourth layer of social capital building is arguably the hardest to achieve as many of the young people with disability lead very different lives to those of the partners, particularly those living within institutional settings. Additionally the dominant paradigms of culturally prescribed perceptions of people with intellectual disability frequently challenge the aims of the Unified programme and can (as described in section 4) present barriers to the achievement of its aims. It is not a question of ignoring these differences but rather of nurturing cultures that respect diversity and accord all citizens equality of opportunity. Internationally we are a long way from achieving this outcome but at least Unified Sports does provide a model as to how it may come about through time.

## **Drivers of change**

A model that describes the structures around which social capital and inclusion are built is only part of the story. We also need to understand what drives these developments. We focus on two in particular – the development of the young people and the role of coaches.

### **Personal growth and development – the impact is more than superficial**

We report on two areas in where we found consistent changes across the range of young people in our sample. Firstly, the development of personal skills in terms of confidence and self esteem, as well as improved communication skills. These developments were most widely reported amongst athletes but they were also found in participating partners. Secondly, the marked change in attitude towards people with intellectual disabilities experienced by partners through getting to appreciate the talents of the athletes on their teams. This was rooted in increased ability in the chosen sports but extended into other competences beyond sporting prowess.

These findings are striking because of the extensive degree to which they were reported, and in their validation of previous research carried out in this area (Norins-Barden 2006). Whilst they are valuable in and of themselves, they are also critical to social inclusion.

The social and communication skills developed by athletes prepare them to take part in their local communities and social worlds. This is a reminder that social inclusion is not something which is *done for* people with intellectual disability, but rather it comes about through people becoming active agents in a shared social life. Skills forged through taking part in the Unified Sports programme such as personal tools of communication and confidence, shared experiences, skill development in the sporting arena as well as familiarity with people and places – all encourage active participation and an unconscious journey towards empowerment and inclusion. We suggest therefore that Unified Sports promotes social inclusion as a *relationship*, which at its best, is meaningful and potentially sustainable for athletes both within the teams and into local communities.

Likewise the attitude change reported amongst partners taking part in the programme holds more than personal significance. As highlighted in the literature review in Section 2, attitudes have a firm relationship with action and are known to guide behaviour. Attitude change therefore impacts at the level of social as well as personal beliefs and where positive attitudes to people with intellectual disabilities are created, positive actions are more likely to result. Indeed there is evidence within the data that actions can extend to very tangible social inclusion in employment and other community opportunities amongst athletes. But attitude change takes time most likely because it progresses incrementally within consistent contexts rather than through sudden transformations. Unified Sports provides a continuing context for attitude change to occur which are less likely when contacts are occasional and unstructured.

### **The leadership of coaches – a critical factor**

Thus far we have identified the context of Unified Sports as vital to the building of social capital but of equal, if not more importance is the role played by coaches. It was very apparent from all the data gathered that coaches are the instigators and sustainers of the social capital generated by Unified Sports. Theirs is an intricate task. On the one hand they have to be true to their sport and set high standards of attainment for their teams and all the players as well as engendering a joy for the sport. Yet these efforts

have to be complemented by careful attention to the building of relationships, the bonding within teams and the creation of the bridges into the wider community.

Many coaches as well as other informants articulated for us how they merged these dual functions into a coherent whole. But we did note that where the coaches actively promoted team members meeting outside the sports field, these players were more likely to develop relationships which brought them into the local community and extended the sporting bonds into wider social networks. By contrast when coaches took a more passive approach to the development of friendships between team mates beyond the sport, then the relationships were more likely to be limited to the training and competition environments.

## **Identifying improvements**

There is clear evidence from this evaluation of many positive aspects of the Unified Sports programme in supporting the development of networks of inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities built upon a foundation of increased social capital. We have identified four layers in the creation of social capital and the extent of the social inclusion associated with it: namely presence, participation, relationships and equality. The personal development of the young people allied with the leadership of the coaches are crucial factors within the supportive context that Unified Sports provides.

Yet as noted at the outset, this framework has another use, namely as a yardstick against which recommendations for improvements in the operationalising of Unified Sports can occur. First and foremost this needs to happen at the local club level. Although we have focussed on the commonalities across teams there is no denying the subtle – and sometimes not so subtle – variation in practices within and across countries. These may not be apparent to the stake-holders on the ground whose knowledge of how teams operate in other places is limited. Hence the value of having an explicit framework that invites each team to assess the extent to which they are realising the potential that Unified Teams offer rather than providing them with a ‘one-size fits all’ model. Thus we would recommend that Special Olympics reviews the information provided to participants – but coaches especially - regarding the underlying rationale for Unified Sports and the key factors that have been identified as successful strategies for attaining the societal impact it espouses. We would hope that the content of this report provides much material that could be used in training and promotional materials in relation to Unified Sports.

More broadly the framework identifies a number of strategic priorities that Special Olympics needs to manage in the coming years to both sustain and extend Unified Sports within and across countries. These were expressed in varying degrees by our informants and have already been alluded to within this report. Primarily they include: the recruitment and retention of volunteer coaches and the means to replace partners as they move on to other activities and life experiences. Additionally the challenge of working within the context of discriminatory attitudes and unequal policy and practices within social and cultural settings is an ongoing challenge to the programme. The concern is that a culture of inclusion constructed within the Unified programme could give a false sense of concomitant change within wider society unless this aspect is critically reviewed. Hence consideration might be given to the following recommendations at local, national and international levels within Special Olympics. The thrust of many of them is to extend the promise that Unified Sports offers into more systematic engagement with local communities.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations should be understood as supporting the expansion, and strengthening of a growing programme in many European/Eurasian countries which this research has found to be a positive force in the promotion of social inclusion amongst people with intellectual disabilities. They derive from the evidence gathered across the five countries and draw on the direct experiences of various stake-holders. However particular recommendations may be more pertinent in certain locations than others. We would encourage personnel involved with Unified Sports at all levels to consider the implications for their situation.

**Table 15: Summary of recommendations**

- **Expand Unified Sports within and across countries**
- **Increase the community profile of Unified Sports**
- **Greater involvement of mainstream schools**
- **More outreach into the community**
- **Extend the recruitment and training of coaches.**
- **Establish a training programme for assistant coaches.**
- **Increase financial support to the programmes**
- **Include athletes with higher needs**
- **Inclusion of more females players**

### **Expansion of Unified Sports**

There is strong evidence of the benefits of the programme in relation to social inclusion and the raised potential for the integration of people with intellectual disabilities in their communities. The further growth and expansion of the programme is therefore recommended based on the findings of this research. However, this is with the proviso that the guiding principles of the programme are not diluted through any expansion activities as the need to adhere to these is critical to the overall success of the programme.

For expansion to occur nationally and inter-nationally, there needs to be a greater appreciation of what Unified Sports can achieve and how it operates. One approach is a heightened profile within Special Olympics. Other options include connections with national sports organisations, which is already happening successfully in some regions - other areas could benefit through the development of such links. Further connections within secondary schools and with local sports clubs who have an active programme of training for youth.

### **Increasing the community profile**

Many participants – mainly parents – recommend that the programme expands its active role in promoting positive images of people with intellectual disabilities. This could be through community outreach activities such as inviting people to attend tournaments to see the teams in action, as well as using the media to greater effect to challenge latent attitudes. Participants largely endorse the view that to change attitudes people need to have direct experience of meeting people with intellectual disabilities and that attitudes must change in order that the wider social order be challenged and

the routine inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities enabled. Hence these publicity initiatives should be aimed also at recruiting partners, prospective coaches or more generally, volunteer supporters who could fulfil a number of supportive tasks.

### **Links with mainstream schools**

The development of links to mainstream schools is recommended as this was found to benefit the existing programmes. It is apparent as a result of our investigations that there is a strong willingness on the part of head teachers, physical education instructors and indeed students to further develop links with local educational institutions catering for young people with intellectual disabilities. To that end a simple dialogue between both parties would be a useful place to start, designed to examine areas of mutual interest and opportunity.

Contact with mainstream schools may be even more crucial when the athletes predominantly attend special schools. The use of mainstream school facilities also enables the profile of athletes to grow as they become regular faces in school as they go there to train. This may be a useful means of further developing the presence of athletes in typical community settings.

### **Outreach into the community.**

For existing Teams, consideration should be given to increasing the connections with the community which athletes could access. Given the complex nature of the work already being undertaken by the coaches, and in some cases their assistants, it may be unrealistic for this expectation to be placed on coaches. An alternative would be the appointment of a dedicated 'sports outreach officer' within Unified Teams or within the National Special Olympics Programme whose role would be to facilitate further engagement with local communities and civic partners.

In the absence of such appointments, nominated personnel within the Teams such as coaches, assistant coaches, family members – could take on facets of the role, the aim of which is to promote within the Teams an increased awareness of the outreach opportunities that do exist and devising a programme of action to realise the potential. An example would be forging a relationship with a mainstream national governing body of sport with the expressed intention of sharing knowledge, contacts and facilities locally. Nationally this has already happened in many instances and would benefit from further strengthening and expansion.

### **The recruitment and training of coaches.**

There is no doubt that the coaches involved in the Unified Sports programme do an exceptional job. They are truly the unsung heroes of the entire initiative. In some cases coaches may also fulfill the role of a referee or sports administrator and even do so on consecutive days in different locations! It is evident therefore that a dedicated programme of recruitment, training and ongoing professional development of coaches within Unified Sports is an ongoing need. The sustainability of the Unified Sports concept is almost entirely dependent upon the goodwill of the current, limited number of coaches. Increased numbers of coaches will be required if the programme is to extend to other localities and regions.

Strategies for recruitment of coaches are in place and these should continue to be supported and encouraged, not only through alliance building at a local level but also through the development of a national level action plan aimed at recruiting a minimum number of coaches each year. One approach is that these individuals could then be appointed to local Unified teams with an opportunity to 'shadow' established coaches for a minimum period of six months. This may assist in the development of new sporting

opportunities for the athletes and their partners and thereby contribute to the continued vibrancy of the programme going forward.

### **Establishment of a training programme for coaching assistants.**

This develops the foregoing theme in a little more detail in that a further means of increasing the number of coaches is by instituting a programme for the training and mentoring of 'coaching assistants' who might be drawn from players. Hence former participants in Youth Unified Sports, could be actively encouraged to take a coaching role and in this regard a dedicated coaching assistant training scheme would meet their needs in the first instance.

Equally young men and women from all ages and backgrounds, might be newly recruited on to a pathway that leads them to becoming coaches in their own right within the current structures of Unified Sports. For example they could be designated as coaching assistants with opportunities offered to undertake a dedicated training schedule. Of course some of these individuals may not aspire to be coaches in their own right and may be content to act as an assistant on an ongoing basis. In the latter case these individuals might typically be parents or guardians of participants but who may not have sufficient confidence in sport pedagogy to assume the role of lead coach for a sport.

### **Financial support to the programmes**

Whilst there had been significant inward investment to the Unified programme, which has to a large extent supported its development to date, there are remaining financial challenges for programmes in relation to their further growth and the purchase of equipment and space for training and competition. Sustained funding would assist the programme to grow and further develop its reach and range of activities.

Some participants reported a lack of money as a barrier to their ongoing participation in the programme, such as money for travel expenses to take part in regular training. Teams might explore with their supporters, opportunities to undertake their own fund-raising in culturally appropriate ways, such as car washing, growing and selling vegetables and animal husbandry. A sub-committee of interested persons drawn from parents and community leaders might take on the role of fund raising for the team.

### **Inclusion of athletes with higher needs**

The main beneficiaries thus far of Youth Unified Sports are more able athletes whose sporting skills are more on par with those of the partners in the chosen sports. However those with greater needs arising from their disabilities are arguably at a higher risk of social exclusion and hence might benefit even more from participating in Unified Sports. It is not immediately clear how this might come about as the careful matching of the athletes with partners is key to the programme's success. One approach may be to focus the engagement of partners with athletes who have higher needs in the context of different and less demanding sports that feature in traditional Special Olympics and to focus more on non-competitive activities.

### **Inclusion of female players**

As the Unified programmes develop and strengthen, attention should be given to the development of strategies to encourage more female players to take part. The lower ratio of female players may be related to the choice of sports played, since in countries where basketball was played by Unified teams a higher ratio of female players was found by comparison with those countries where football was the focus. A wider range of sports and particularly those which include more female players is one strategy to encourage the development of girls teams.

## **Concluding remarks**

Unified Sports is an exciting initiative that holds much promise in transforming the life experiences of young athletes with intellectual disabilities. It does this in a natural and highly cost-effective manner due to the mobilisation of volunteers. Our evaluation suggests that its concepts and modes of operations transcend national boundaries and cultures at least within a European context. There is no doubt around its feasibility – it does achieve its aims. Our recommendations are directed at enhancing its viability both in terms of sustaining existing Teams but more crucially in extending its reach within countries and across regions. In the words of the athlete from Serbia who provided the title for this report – *Unified gives us a chance* – many more persons around Europe & Eurasia deserve and want that chance.



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