

Policy Forum Report

Disability and sport research in Japan

Policy forum held at House of Councillors, 1-7-1 Nagatacho. Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan
Friday 28 June 2019, 9.30am–12.30pm

Partners:

University of
Kent

 University
of Worcester

UNIVERSITY OF THE
WEST of SCOTLAND
UWS

Funder:

 **Economic
and Social
Research Council**

The Policy Forum formed part of a project entitled 'Building Japanese research capacity around disability studies and sport to positively impact the lives of people with disabilities - 2020 and beyond'. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

About the project

The aim of the project was to expand international collaboration and foster a long-term sustainable multi-partner network, in order to further develop our understanding in the field of disability studies and sport. The context for this development could not be more pertinent, given that Japan will host the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games in 2020, providing an ideal opportunity to pursue an agenda concentrated on leveraging this event to the benefit of people with disabilities in Japan, and for future events. As Misener et al. (2018) have suggested, when significant investments in infrastructure, facilities, transport and sporting support is made to host a mega sport event like the Paralympic Games, then there needs to be clear evidence that the proposed beneficiaries have indeed benefited.

Focus of the Policy Forum

In many ways, the Paralympic Games, and their forerunner the Stoke Mandeville Games, were founded on the idea of using sport as a process designed to improve the lives of people with disabilities. This idea has become increasingly prominent in the legacy narratives relating to recent Paralympic Games (Weed and Dowse, 2009). This is also clearly reflected in the narrative of the International Paralympic Committee's (IPC) Strategic Plan (2019-2022), which states that the ultimate vision of the Paralympic Movement is to 'make for inclusive world through Para sport' (IPC, 2019: p.6). They follow this up with the claim that:

'Thanks to the unique combination of ever-improving athletic performance and increasing global awareness, the Paralympic Games are today firmly established as the world's number one sport event for driving social inclusion. The event boasts a strong track record for transforming attitudes, cities, countries and the lives of millions of people around the world.'

(IPC, 2019: p.6)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the plans for the Paralympic Games in Tokyo 2020 build upon the narrative outlined by the IPC, stating in their candidature file:

'The overall philosophy of the Tokyo 2020 proposal is to deliver a Paralympic Games which will show how social inclusion and non-discrimination, and full consideration of the needs and interests of people with a disability, can create a better world and provide a brighter future for the entire community.'

(Tokyo 2020, 2013: p.66)

These statements by the IPC and Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (TOCOG) above lead to a number of key questions that are fundamental to the success, or otherwise, of any social legacy plans put forward by host cities and it was these questions that were discussed at the Policy Forum. They were as follows:

1. What barriers to inclusion for people with disabilities exist in Japan and how can they be overcome in a sustainable manner, exploiting the catalyst of the 2020 Paralympic Games?
2. What constitutes 'social inclusion' for people with disabilities in Japan and how can it be effectively achieved through investments made in association with the Paralympic Games?
3. How do we ensure that all people with disabilities can benefit from the hosting of the Paralympic Games and not just athletes with disabilities and the elite sport system that supports them?
4. What education and training provision is necessary to ensure greater inclusion of people with disabilities in Japan in sport and, in particular, physical activity that is not linked to sport pathways?
5. How can we ensure sustainability of any positive changes to the lives of people with disabilities in Japan beyond 2020 that occur as a result of the hosting of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games?

Format of the Policy Forum

The Policy Forum offered a high-level space for discussion between invited participants to consider a specific issue in relation to the use of Para sport events to achieve meaningful change to the lives of people with disabilities and to seek solutions in the area.

Individuals were invited based upon their interest and experience in the area, their ability to use this forum to suggest solutions for the way forward and their ability to participate in making change happen.

The format for the forum was a round table discussion amongst the participants, debating each of the five questions in turn. The forum was chaired by Dr Ian Brittain, Principal Investigator for the wider project, and the aim was to identify a series of suggested ways forward and to highlight possible next steps, including this report, which will not attribute any particular suggestion or quote to any individual participant. This was done in order to support free flowing discussion throughout the forum.

List of forum participants

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Co-Innovation Laboratory

Yoshihiro Hayasaka
Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly

Yuta Saito
Hokkaido College of Sport and Medicine

Hiromi Nakamura
Japan Sports Council

Professor David McGillivray
University of the West of Scotland, UK

Satoshi Sato
Disabled People's International - Japan

Professor Gayle McPherson
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Rebecca Foster MBE
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The discussion

Question 1: what barriers to inclusion for people with disabilities exist in Japan and how can they be overcome in a sustainable manner, exploiting the catalyst of the 2020 Paralympic Games?

For the purposes of this report, the discussion around this question has been split into two themes – people with disabilities in general and people with disabilities and sport.

People with disabilities in general

It was felt that currently Japan is not an inclusive society and that a major contributing factor to this is that they still have **segregated education** that means Japanese people with disabilities go to special schools and non-disabled children go to separate mainstream schools. This leads to a lack of understanding within the non-disabled of how to interact with people with disabilities. As people with disabilities are kept separate and, therefore, marked out as being different, non-disabled people become very nervous about approaching and interacting with them. This lack of contact is a primary cause that can lead to a lack of inclusion within the wider society.

There appears to currently be **lack of clarity about what inclusion means and who gets to define it**. There is a lot of talk about and focus upon barrier free environments in Tokyo at the moment, but many barrier reduction methods employed actually still require that the person with a disability needs someone to assist them, which is disempowering for the person with a disability. In addition, the individuals who are meant to help may not have received the correct training or may hold disablist attitudes, meaning that they may actually refuse to assist. **Barrier removal without a change in attitudes often means that the barrier still remains.**

In addition, the barrier removal has focused upon the transport system, but there is not much point assisting a person with a disability to get somewhere if, when they arrive, they cannot access it or are made to feel unwelcome whilst there. Many shops, restaurants and especially hotel rooms are completely inaccessible to some people with disabilities.

It was also highlighted that **disability is a form of social oppression**, due to the attitudes of non-disabled people towards people with disabilities and an environment built with only non-disabled people in mind, but that this not well understood in Japan where awareness of the social model of disability is still not widespread.

Part of the problem was perceived to be that **the legal and policy framework** regarding the treatment of and accommodation for people with disabilities in Japan is **viewed by many as being optional**. If attitudes are to change and understanding is to improve, then such policies and laws need to be have legally enforceable consequences for those who choose to ignore them.

There is also an apparent **lack of participatory policy development** in Japan. People with disabilities are being involved in policy development processes either too tokenistically or too late in the process to make any difference in the way plans are implemented. However, it was acknowledged that the diverse nature of disability can make it extremely difficult to include views from as wide a variety of impairment groups as possible. This make organisations such as Disabled Persons International – Japan important points of contact when developing policy plans.

Finally, it was pointed out that **accountability fragmentation** was a key problem in all countries, whereby different organisations or government ministries with responsibilities for aspects of lives of people with disabilities do not communicate or collaborate effectively, leading to poor policy development and implementation.

People with disabilities and sport

In general, it was perceived that the **current level of interest in the Paralympic Games within Japan is quite low with a great deal of indifference**. This possibly largely stems from the issues highlighted in the first theme discussed above. How to overcome this indifference is a key issue that needs to be investigated in more detail.

The segregated schooling system in Japan impacts heavily upon sports participation for children with disabilities for a variety of reasons. Teachers are often not trained to provide sporting opportunities for children with disabilities. A lot of school sports activities are also held as after school activities, but the rigid bus timetables that the children rely on to get them to school and back often make participation impossible. Those that do manage to take part in sports activities at school often have to give up playing once they leave school due to lack of opportunities and lack of accessible facilities.

The segregation discussed above also extends to the sporting arena. There are more than twenty disability sports centres in Japan, often with a rehabilitation focus and feeling more like hospitals than sports centres, where people with disabilities are encouraged to go and play sport. There also appears, in some cases, to be a tacit discouragement for them to play sport in sports centres designed for the non-disabled. Indeed, there are a number of sports facilities that are promoted as barrier free, where new floors have been laid in the sports halls and, as a result, wheelchair users are prohibited from using them, even though in one instance non-disabled people on unicycles were allowed to use the hall. One example of where a sports centre had taken an inclusive approach is the Yokohama Rapport, which is considered to have a very positive atmosphere where people with disabilities can mix with and play alongside non-disabled people in an inclusive and secure environment.

The issues of people with disabilities and access to sport will be discussed further in question 4.

Question 2: what constitutes 'social inclusion' for people with disabilities in Japan and how can it be effectively achieved through investments made in association with the Paralympic Games?

As outlined in the discussion around question 1, exactly **what constitutes inclusion and who defines what it means remains vague, complex and somewhat ambiguous**. This makes achieving inclusion of people with disabilities in Japan difficult, especially if different organisations and government ministries are working from slightly different definitions.

The medical model of disability, which attributes problems people with disabilities face within their day-to-day lives to their impairments, **still appears to be very strong within Japanese society**. The social model of disability, which attributes problems people with disabilities face within their day-to-day lives primarily to the built environment and the attitudes of the non-disabled population towards people with disabilities, is still relatively unknown in Japan. There appears to be very little understanding in Japan that disability is actually a form of social oppression.

It was suggested that the majority of the non-disabled population in Japan are of the belief that people with disabilities in Japan just live off the taxes that they pay. Indeed, even some people with disabilities hold this same belief. These beliefs partly stem from the lack of interaction between people with disabilities and the non-disabled population brought about by segregation and a fear of the unknown as **non-disabled Japanese often fear approaching people with disabilities**.

Possibly due to a lack of knowledge and awareness regarding the social model of disability, **the majority of the focus upon inclusion initiatives has been around environmental barrier removal** (particularly in the transport system in and around Tokyo). However, there has been very little done to try and effectively change negative attitudes and perceptions of what it means to be disabled amongst the non-disabled Japanese population. Disability, as a form of social oppression, therefore still remains a major problem.

The role of the Paralympic Games

The most important thing that needs to be understood is that **inclusion is a long term goal that will not be achieved simply by hosting the Paralympic Games**. The Paralympic Games can be used as a major catalyst to kick-start the process, but achieving inclusion is a process that will stretch way beyond Tokyo 2020.

The importance of the media in this process cannot be underestimated. This relates not only to the amount of coverage, but also to what is presented and the way it is presented. If the focus is purely upon Paralympians and medal success at the Paralympic Games, this will actually have little impact upon the wider population of people with disabilities. The Paralympic Games need to be used as a platform to start a wider debate around the issues faced by people with disabilities within the wider society and possible solutions for these issues. The media can play a key role in raising this awareness and promoting debate on the issues.

It was suggested that by raising awareness of the issues and the needs of people with disabilities the inclusion process will become easier. It was pointed out that the London 2012 Olympics volunteer programme had to learn quickly that if they were to include people with disabilities as volunteers, not all of them could work eight or 12 hour shifts and some would actually need a carer or personal assistant working alongside them to help them fulfil their roles.

The discussion continued

Question 3: how do we ensure that all people with disabilities can benefit from the hosting of the Paralympic Games and not just athletes with disabilities and the elite sport system that supports them?

Closely related to the segregation issues highlighted above, it was suggested that using contact theory is very **important to try and encourage interactions and exchanges between different people with different backgrounds** in convivial atmospheres within public settings and public spaces. Ending the segregation of people with disabilities and facilitating contact with the rest of society in safe and friendly environments will play a key role in breaking down many of the current barriers, both physical and perceptual, that currently exist.

It was also suggested that a greater variety of mediums than just sport should be used to discuss and raise awareness of issues connected to disability including art, culture and entertainment. **At the London 2012 Olympics, the Cultural Olympiad dealt with a significant number of issues around disability through the commissions it made** and the sorts of performances that were hosted. Numerous disabled artists and performers were commissioned to provide works of art, culture and entertainment that helped showcase the talents and abilities of people with disabilities to the wider public.

It was highlighted that the diversity inherent in disability goes far beyond just those impairment groups contained within the Paralympic Games and that all impairment groups and forms of disability must be given opportunities for inclusion. **People with intellectual disabilities were felt to be particularly at risk of exclusion** and far more needs to be done to cater for their needs.

It needs to be remembered that **not all people with disabilities are interested in sport and physical activity**. Some want to be musicians or academics. It is, therefore, important to consider accessibility and inclusion in all their forms to ensure that people with disabilities have access to all areas of life.

A key aspect of achieving this appears to be gaining **a wider understanding of the human rights of people with disabilities**, given that Japan ratified the United Nations' Charter on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2014, and increased awareness of the idea of disability as a form of social oppression through greater awareness and understanding of the social model of disability.

Question 4: what education and training provision is necessary to ensure greater inclusion of people with disabilities in Japan in sport and, in particular, physical activity that is not linked to sport pathways?

A key point of concern was the **need to improve understanding of the differences and similarities between elite athletes with disabilities and ordinary people with disabilities** within the wider society. There is a danger that the Paralympian becomes the yardstick by which all other people with disabilities are judged, and then decisions are made on their worthiness, which is very unfair. It is equally important that the ordinary person with a disability understands these differences, otherwise there is a possibility that they might be deterred from taking part in sport and physical activity at a recreational level that can potentially have very positive impacts upon their physical and mental wellbeing.

Too much emphasis is placed upon the elite level of sport for people with disabilities. Opportunities need to be provided at all levels of the sporting spectrum and **far more needs to be done to assist people to become life-long participants in sport and physical activity**. More needs to be done to raise awareness of the opportunities at the recreational level and the benefits of participation. At the same time, more needs to be done to ensure that these opportunities are held in safe welcoming environments with staff who are trained to be inclusive. As mentioned earlier, a good example of this process is the Yokohama Rapport Centre, whose approach also helps break down some of the barriers caused by segregation highlighted above.

It was also highlighted that only 2.4 per cent of those non-disabled Japanese people surveyed were able to name the different impairment categories that participate in the Paralympic Games. It was felt, therefore, that **far more needs to be done to help people understand the classification system used in Paralympic sport as this could also be used as a means to help them understand disability more generally**. However, it should also be noted that not all impairments participate in the Paralympic Games and these groups also need to be included in this educational process.

Overall, the Paralympic Games as an event are probably also the best possible platform at the moment, given their huge media coverage, to actually start those important discussions around the issues of disability.

Conclusions and recommendations

Question 5: how can we ensure sustainability of any positive changes to the lives of people with disabilities in Japan beyond 2020 that occur as a result of the hosting of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games?

As already highlighted, the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games need to be considered as just a catalyst for a much longer term process.

The real challenge will be maintaining the political will and continued resources to keep the process going long after the Paralympic Games have left Tokyo.

However, it is also important to memorialise the event itself in various ways, so that there will always be a reminder as to why the process is important and what started it. It was noted that, despite the fact that **Tokyo is the first city in the world to host the Paralympic Games twice**, there is actually nothing anywhere in the city of Tokyo that memorialises the Paralympic Games of 1964. It is, therefore, very important that this opportunity is not missed for the Paralympic Games of 2020. This can be done in any number of simple ways, such as the gold post boxes that were provided in the hometown of every British Olympian and Paralympian who won a gold medal at the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. By maintaining the memory of the Olympics and Paralympics, it also allows for discussions about why the Paralympic Games were held in Tokyo to continue, especially with respect to the hoped for legacies.

This kind of human interest story provides a direct link between the Paralympic Games and a local community that the media can use to introduce disability related human interest stories that all people with disabilities can relate to. However, in order to achieve this, the **media (in all its formats) needs to improve both the amount of coverage it gives to these issues as well as the quality of their own understanding of the issues before they write about them.**

A further way to maintain the sustainability would be to ensure that all those people who volunteer at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games are not allowed to just be forgotten after the Paralympics. **A database could be formed and maintained that allows volunteers from the Paralympic Games to connect with disability organisations of all types that need volunteer assistance.** This way all those newly found skills are put to good use and continue the inclusion process beyond 2020.

Based upon the discussion, we have come to the following key conclusions and recommendations.

Key conclusions

- There is a lack of clarity as to what inclusion actually means and what it looks like.
- The segregation apparent in many areas of Japanese society is a key barrier to achieving inclusion.
- There is a lack of awareness and understanding of the social model of disability and the fact that disability is actually a form of social oppression.
- There is a lack of effective and timely participatory policy development.
- Achieving any kind of inclusion is a long-term project that needs to run long after the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games are over.
- The importance of the media in this process cannot be underestimated.

Key recommendations

- There needs to be stronger anti-discriminatory laws with much stronger enforceability.
- There needs to be objective measures for highlighting changes (positive or negative).
- Whilst the barrier free programme is important and needs to be widened to encompass all areas of Japanese society, far more needs to be done to change the attitudes and perceptions of non-disabled society regarding people with disabilities.
- There needs to be much clearer and more uniform understanding of what inclusion means.

References

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This report is produced as part of the
Economic and Social Research Council
UK-Japan Social Sciences and Humanities
Connections grant **'Building Japanese and
UK research capacity around disability
studies and sport to positively impact the
lives of disabled people - 2020 and beyond'**.