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SAFE PARA SPORT ALLIES

“Mapping the needs”

Analyses report

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Safe Para Sport Allies - Analysis report 'Mapping the needs'

Introduction

Research shows that sport participants with disabilities have difficulties to find access to sport, and that they, when in sport, experience more harassment and abuse compared to sport participants without disabilities (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2020). This clearly demonstrates the need for creating a safe sport environments for people with a disability. Para sport coaches play a crucial role in the prevention of harassment and abuse, as they are often the first point of contact for the sport participants.

This project aims to adapt the existing Safe Sport Allies educational prevention program to the specific context of para sport coaches¹ working with sport participants with an **intellectual disability (ID) and/or cerebral palsy (CP)**. Available prevention materials do not sufficiently take into account their specific needs and context. Our objectives are to: (1) interview para sport coaches on their needs with regard to safe coaching practices; (2) raise knowledge and awareness on harassment and abuse in para sport; (3) support para sport coaches to identify signs of harassment and abuse; and (4) stimulate positive coach-bystander behaviour.

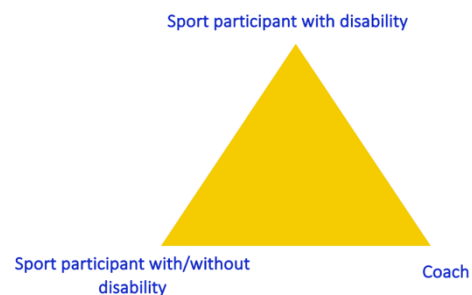
The current report focuses on the first objective of the project and provides an overview of the para sport coaches' needs, as well as incorporating feedback gathered from experts from the LFB and the associated partners.

First, six online focus groups were conducted with para sport 25 para sport coaches (15 woman, 10 men) from Flanders (BE) who coached sport participants with ID and/or CP. They were involved in karate, boccia, football, athletics, basketball, equestrian, and dancing. Secondly, the results of the focus groups with para sport coaches were presented and discussed with 12 experts of experience from the Landelijk Federatie Belangenverenigingen Onderling Sterk (LFB; NL). They all had an intellectual disability with strong verbal skills and a link with sport. Thirdly, seven experts gave their input on the results gathered from the focus groups during the 2nd transnational meeting in Antwerp (BE).

1. Harassment and abuse in para sport

Formulating how harassment and abuse manifest in para sport proved to be a challenging task for the para sport coaches. It is important to highlight that definitions were not provided beforehand, and the participants' understanding of the different forms of harassment and abuse was not evaluated. According to the results of the focus groups the same forms (physical, psychological, sexual violence and neglect) of harassment and abuse, which are present in mainstream sport, also appear in the context of para sport. However, certain forms such as sexual harassment and abuse, as well as bullying, are found to be more common depending on the type of disability, according to the participants. They unanimously acknowledged that bullying frequently occurs. Para sport coaches regularly noted that sport participants with disabilities are excluded, for example. The experts from the LFB emphasized the difficulties faced by sport participants with disabilities when attempting to engage in sport within mainstream clubs. They often encounter challenges in being accepted and commonly experience subtle instances of bullying behavior. Based on the information provided we cannot conclude that these forms of harassment and abuse are also actually more prevalent.

The para sport coaches agreed that harassment and abuse happen among sport participants with disabilities and without disabilities, as well between sport participants with disabilities and coaches, in both directions (see Figure 1). The para sport coaches strongly formulated distinctions when comparing sport participants without disabilities and/or coaches with participants with disabilities, particularly in terms of intentions and their perception of their own behavior and the behavior of others. Often, sport participants with disabilities do not intend to overstep someone's boundaries, or they struggle to understand other's limits or boundaries, leading to a lack of awareness regarding their inappropriate actions. Such behavior can be rooted in their disability. In contrast, para sport coaches pointed out that sport participants with disabilities occasionally misinterpret certain behaviors as harassment and abuse,



¹ This study specifically focusses on individuals with intellectual disability (ID) and/or cerebral palsy (CP). The terms "para sport coaches" and "sport participants with disabilities" are used to refer to this particular group (ID and/or CP), this can be either in a competitive or recreational context. It is important to note that these groups do not encompass the entire population of sport participants with disabilities.

when strictly speaking it does not meet the criteria of harassment and abuse, for example a coach that touches the shoulder to explain a sport specific movement.

2. Signs

The para sport coaches participating in the focus groups and the experts from the LFB both emphasized the importance of knowing the sport participants with disabilities well. As one para sport coach said: *“When you know them long enough, you recognize even the smallest changes in their behavior that can indicate any form of discomfort with a particular situation”*. However, it is important to note that these behavioral changes can vary depending on the type of disability and the individual. Para sport coaches pointed out two specific manifestations of discomfort by sport participants with disabilities: (1) *communication* and (2) *behavior*.

In terms of *communication*, some sport participants with disabilities can communicate very well and can verbally explain when something feels wrong. They may express their feelings either calmly or through more assertive and verbally aggressive means. On the other hand, persons with cerebral palsy or acquired brain injury for example, may be unable to articulate their discomfort verbally and start shouting or displaying other forms of non-verbal communication when they experience a situation that feels wrong or uncomfortable. Additionally, para sport coaches explained that there is a group of sport participants with disabilities who use communication tools, such as emotion cards or social media platforms (e.g., messenger or WhatsApp) to convey their feelings.

The second manifestation of sport participants with disabilities to reflect their discomfort is through expressing specific *behavior*. They might distance themselves from the group, run away, exhibit tics of repetitive movements, display altered facial expressions, or even discontinue their participation in sport altogether. These behaviors serve as indications that sport participants with disabilities experience some form of distress. In reality, sport participants with disabilities use a combination of these behaviors to communicate their discomfort within a given situation.

3. Risk factors

Research shows that sport participants with disabilities (including ID and CP) are at risk of experiencing harassment and abuse in the broader community but also in a sport environment (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2020). Para sport coaches from the focus groups, experts from the LFB and the associated partners pointed out several risk factors. Firstly, they addressed **vulnerabilities inherent to disabilities**, including: (1) physical behavior, (2) self-reliance and support, (3) trust, (4) inhibitions, and (5) verbal skills. Secondly, inclusive sport participation and finally, the level of experience of the para sport coach was addressed.

3.1 Vulnerabilities inherent to disabilities

Para sport coaches and the associated partners characterized some sport participants with disabilities as being *“very physical”*. This characterization acknowledges that some sport participants with disabilities genuinely enjoy hugging, while others may exploit this behavior to their advantage. There is a common perception in society that individuals with intellectual disabilities, and especially those with Down syndrome, are seen as persons who enjoy hugging. Conversely, persons with cerebral palsy, often require physical assistance due to their physical disability and may have no choice but to undergo these physical interactions. However, the experts from the LFB expressed their dissatisfaction with this assumption. They emphasized that people with disabilities do not universally enjoy hugging and such assumptions lead to underestimation and not being taken seriously. As one expert stated: *“This assumption frequently undermines our capabilities”*.

Self-reliance and support refer to the ability of an individual to take care of themselves, meet their own needs, and being independent in various aspects of life. Para sport coaches, the associated partners and the experts from the LFB agreed that sport participants with disabilities often have lower levels of self-reliance and (thus) higher needs of support and care. This dependency is seen as a risk factor, as it exposes sport participants with disabilities to potential harassment and abuse. For example, they may require help with changing clothes, going to the restroom and other similar activities. However, the associated partners raised an important point regarding the high levels of trust parents or caregivers place in the relationship between the coach and the sport participant. This trust is sometimes established to the extent that parents and caregivers may not be present during training or events. Someone described it as *“a close community, that feels like a small family”*, which can be a protective factor, but it can also be recognized as a risk factor because parents or caregivers do not pay sufficient attention to what is happening.

Para sport coaches and associated partners agreed that sport participants with disabilities have a tendency to form connections and establish trust with others quite easily. Once trust is established, they are willing to put a lot of effort to support and assist those they trust. However, this inherent trustfulness can render them more vulnerable to negative influences and having their boundaries violated without their awareness. It should be noted that the experts from the LFB held a different perspective on this matter. They did not perceive this characteristic as a specific factor related to people with disabilities. The dynamics of trust between sport participants with disabilities and their coaches often lean towards one-way traffic, as the participants are required to put their trust in the coach. However, it is important to note that the experts from the LFB generally express discomfort with this arrangement.

Another inherent factor that was mentioned is the deficit in inhibitions. Para sport coaches explained that sport participants with disabilities may experience (sexual) inhibition deficits. For instance, they may develop feelings of love or attraction more quickly. This vulnerability can make them more prone for displaying behaviors that can be

categorized as harassment and abuse while they are not being aware of the impact of their actions. One of the experts from the LFB highlighted the issue of the often overlooked and taboo nature of sexual needs among people with disabilities. They emphasized that individuals with disabilities have legitimate sexual needs that deserve attention and recognition. When these needs are neglected or suppressed, they can manifest in various ways, including in the context of sport.

The last risk factor includes the verbal skills of sport participants with disabilities. As discussed, verbal communication can be a sign to express their discomfort, but only a small group of people with disabilities have these verbal skills. The experts from the LFB emphasized the importance of strong verbal skills, stating that they are crucial to defend yourself. As one expert put it, *"If you lack verbal skills, it will be a challenge to thrive"*.

3.2 Inclusive sport activities

Inclusive sport activities refer to the approach of a sport organization that actively includes and accommodates individuals with disabilities, ensuring equal opportunities, accessibility, and participation for all sport participants. Within inclusive sport activities two themes were discussed: (1) *acceptance* and (2) *the voice of sport participants with disabilities*.

Acceptance was identified as an important risk factor by the para sport coaches and the experts from the LFB. Sport participants without disabilities do not always accept individuals with disabilities, leading to exclusion and a lack of acceptance during shared activities. According to the associated partners in this project, acceptance among sport participants with disabilities is also not always guaranteed. This is often due to the diverse nature of the group, as individuals may clash with each other's limitations and face challenges in accepting and understanding one another.

Within inclusive sport activities, *the voice of sport participants with disabilities* refers to the aspect of giving all participants the attention they deserve. However, the associated partners pointed out that in many situations, decisions are made without seeking input from the sport participants with disabilities or their opinions are not valued. This lack of inclusion undermines their participation and fails to recognize the valuable perspectives and insights they can contribute.

3.3 Level of experience

Lastly, the level of experience of the coach was identified as a risk factor by all actors. It becomes challenging to monitor all signs and dynamics when a coach lacks experience in coaching and/or working with the specific target group. Furthermore, building a thorough understanding of each sport participant requires time and effort, making it more demanding for less experienced coaches to establish effective connections and support systems.

4. Protective factors

Next to the risk factor, several protective factors were highlighted: (1) *communication*, (2) *knowledge*, (3) *reflection*.

Communication was one of the protective factors highlighted by all actors in the project and mentioned multiple times. Effective communication plays an important role in various aspects. Firstly, according to the experts from the LFB clear and open communication with new members is necessary. Welcoming them to a team or sport club involves a proper introduction and making the necessary arrangements to ensure smooth integration. The involvement of parents and/or caregivers in this process is also emphasized as important by the experts from the LFB. Secondly, para sport coaches communicating with their sport participants when physical contact is required is also seen as essential to respect personal boundaries and to ensure a safe environment. Thirdly, according to the experts it is crucial to ensure that sport participants with disabilities have their voice heard and actively listened to. Their inclusion in decision-making processes is important and acts as a protective factor. Lastly, experts suggested that para sport coaches need to be encouraged to openly discuss the topic with their sport participants.

Having *knowledge* about disabilities, as well as about safe sport practices and the prevention of harassment and abuse, is considered as a protective factor. Being well-informed about the different disabilities of the sport participants they coach enables para sport coaches to better anticipate potential risks and adapt their coaching techniques and approaches accordingly. This knowledge helps them to recognize the diverse abilities and limitations of the sport participants with disabilities, fostering a supportive and empowering atmosphere that respects individual boundaries and promotes equal opportunities. In addition, according to the experts it is essential to familiarize sport participants with the reporting channels and safeguarding officer of the club.

Reflection is the last protective factor which was discussed by para sport coaches. According to the para sport coaches and the experts it entails a conscious awareness of various aspects by para sport coaches, including their own appearance and personal boundaries. When reflecting about their own appearance, coaches aim to create a positive and respectful environment that fosters trust and confidence. Moreover, maintaining personal boundaries is also important. By being mindful of their own boundaries, coaches ensure a safe and respectful coaching environment.

5. Cases

During the focus groups with para sport coaches and the experts from the LFB several examples and cases of harassment and abuse were discussed. These examples and cases will be integrated in the workshop and will not be further discussed in this report. The examples do cover all forms of harassment and abuse.

6. The workshop

In order to adapt the currently existing Safe Sport Allies workshop for coaches, the input from para sport coaches was used and supplemented with the feedback of the associated partners. In what follows, an overview is provided regarding the (1) *content*, (2) *the profile of the facilitator*, (3) *practicalities related to the workshop* and (4) *the recruitment of participants*.

6.1 Content

During the different focus groups, para sport coaches highlighted several topics they believed are important to consider when developing the content for a workshop for para sport coaches about harassment and abuse. First, most para sport coaches emphasized the importance of incorporating theoretical knowledge. According to them, this includes understanding the definition of harassment and abuse, recognizing the signs, understanding the concept of respect, and learning to assess the severity of situations. However, the associated partners, agreed that the workshop should include a theoretical component, it should not be overly extensive. They also suggested incorporating the criteria of the Flag System (Frans, 2018) to the para sport context.

Secondly, and in accordance with the associated partners, the majority of the para sport coaches emphasized that the workshop should have an interactive component. This would involve engaging in discussing several cases related to the context of para sport with fellow coaches. Para sport coaches and associated partners highlighted the importance of including all forms of harassment and abuse. Specifically, there should be a focus on the milder forms (*'the grey zones'*) of harassment and abuse, the cases should be adjusted to the different types of disabilities and should cover both individual and team sport. Additionally, the use of cases ensures a tangible connection between, sometimes hypothetical, concepts and the own training context. This makes it easier to transfer and translate the theoretical component into practice and train themselves in assessing and responding to cases of harassment and abuse. Both groups, para sport coaches and associated partners, agreed on providing practical tools and guidelines on how to respond is essential (e.g., emoticons or icons).

Thirdly, the para sport coaches discussed whether including *communication techniques* in the workshop would be beneficial. They suggested using testimonials from experts of experience, such as sport participants with disabilities or victims. These testimonials can provide valuable insights on effective communication strategies. For example, how you as a coach can communicate about the topic of harassment and abuse, before or after a situation. Such testimonials could be live or pre-recorded, depending on the situation and/or availability of the experts. The use of visuals, knowledge clips or images was often highlighted by the associated partners, also to present several cases for instance.

Fourth, another topic that needs to be included in the workshop according to both para sport coaches and associated partners is the topic of *reporting channels and the role of the club/federation safeguarding officer*. Both said that learning more about these channels is important. Also, it was also highlighted that coaches need to learn how to communicate about these channels to their sport participants.

Lastly and overall, it was indicated by the associated partners that the current methodology used in the Safe Sport Allies workshop should be used, but that the cases and examples should be adjusted in order to target the context of sport participants with disabilities. The current Safe Sport Allies workshop already includes knowledge about harassment and abuse, assessing situations via the Flag System (Frans, 2018) learning how to respond to situations and the role of the club safeguarding officer. All these topics are addressed by the para sport coaches and associated partners, though, the workshop should be adjusted in order to fit the context of para sport. One general workshop would be sufficient, if a broad variance of cases is presented so the facilitator of the workshop can use cases that fit the coaches their context.

6.2 Profile of the facilitator

The workshop will be led by a trained facilitator, this could be the para sport coach, the safeguarding officer, etc. Para sport coaches can have an interesting profile as a trained facilitator. Para sport coaches are often parents of sport participants with disabilities or paramedical professionals (e.g., physiotherapists). They sometimes have limited sport technical skills and experience, but are often more compassionate. According to the associated experts, the facilitator should have a strong affiliation with (1) the target group, (2) the topic harassment and abuse, or (3) giving training. If the facilitator lacks experience in one of these domains, it is essential to educate themselves. However, in the current project a training of trainers will be provided to offer guidance and support. One suggestion of the associated experts was to train the group of existing facilitators of the Safe Sport Allies workshop. Another suggestion put forward was to form a duo with a sport participant with a disability and give the workshop together. One of the experts from the LFB emphasized it is important to learn directly from someone with experience (i.e., sport participants with disabilities).

6.3 Practicalities

One of the challenges in the project is to decide whether the workshop will be online or in person. The para sport coaches and the associated experts expressed mixed opinions on this matter. However, both parties agreed on several aspects. More specifically, regardless of the format, the workshop should be interactive, must be conducted in small groups, and must ensure a safe environment for meaningful discussions.

An associated expert highlighted the importance of a physical workshop stating that it must offer a significant added value. The advantages of a physical workshop, as identified by the para sport coaches and the associated experts, include the ability to foster interaction, facilitate networking opportunities among coaches, and create a more immersive experience. On the other hand, an online workshop offers the benefits of eliminating the need for travelling, requiring less time investment, and reaching a wider audience. It also provides an opportunity for individuals who may be more reluctant to speak openly about the topic by using the chat function. In case of an online workshop, participants must be encouraged to use their cameras to enhance engagement and foster a sense of connection.

Para sport coaches suggested that a workshop could span a duration of two to three hours, recognizing that time constraints can be an important factor. To maximize engagement and participation, they suggested linking the workshop to an existing event, such as a training session, a sporting event, or a team meeting. The associated experts emphasized the importance of multiple moments within the workshop or exploring the option of blended learning. By providing multiple moments, the chances of fostering meaningful behavior change are enhanced. One of the ideas of blending learning was to pre-activate the participants through a video before the actual workshop, followed by a live workshop.

6.4 Recruitment of participants

Recruiting para sport coaches to participate in the workshop is another challenge in this project. Various solutions were proposed to address this issue. One solution involved the use of incentives, which can serve as a motivation for para sport coaches or sport clubs to participate. Secondly, positive testimonials from coaches who already attended the workshop can influence others to participate. Additionally, providing a certificate is often highly valued by participants and sport clubs, as it recognizes their commitment and achievement in completing the workshop.

Conclusion

After consulting para sport coaches, experts from the LFB and the associated partners, valuable information has been collected. The problem of harassment and abuse in sport is complex, and this complexity is heightened within the para sport context due to an additional vulnerable component. Research indicated that sport participants with disabilities experience higher levels of harassment and abuse compared to sport participants without disabilities (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2020). However, the specific reasons behind this increased vulnerability are not yet fully understood. Through this study, we have identified specific signs (i.e., communication and behavior), risk factors (i.e., vulnerabilities inherent to disabilities, inclusive sport activities and level of experience) and protective factors (i.e., communication, knowledge, and reflection) that are crucial to integrate in the workshop. This study only focuses on the context of sport participants with intellectual disabilities or cerebral palsy, which is a heterogeneous group. This means that the findings and conclusions of this report may not apply to every sport participant with ID and/or CP.

Considering all the input we received, several key topics were highlighted regarding the content of the workshop: the importance of theoretical knowledge, interactive components, communication techniques and learning about reporting channels. Overall, while the methodology used in the existing Safe Sport Allies workshops seemed suitable, adjustments are necessary to make it suitable to the context of para sport. Including relevant cases and examples will be crucial to make it fit to the context of para sport. A single comprehensive workshop would be sufficient, as long as it incorporates a diverse range of cases, allowing the facilitator to select examples that align with the coaches' specific context (e.g., team sport vs individual sport, sport participants with intellectual disabilities vs. sport participants with cerebral palsy). It can be concluded that the existing Safe Sport Allies workshop serves as a good starting point to create a workshop that meets the specific context of para sport.

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