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(Un)sustainability of the elite parasport development system in a Least Developed Country: an investigation of Cambodian para-Athletic career pathways

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Establishing athletic career pathways is important for the sustainable development of elite parasport, but there is a paucity of literature on parasport athletic career pathways in economically disadvantaged, Least Developed Countries. The current study investigated how para-athletes, coaches, and administrators in Cambodia experience their athletic careers.

Methodology: Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four para-athletics coaches, six para-athletics athletes, and two parasport administrators in Cambodia. The transcripts were analyzed with thematic analysis.

Findings and practical implications: Key themes indicated that the lack of parasport equipment limits new athlete recruitment, the lack of a positive career outlook after athletic retirement is a cause of distress among athletes, and specialized parasport coaches are lacking. These problems suggest a lack of sustainability. The Cambodian government could invest in a clearer retirement preparation system for para-athletes. In this respect, retired para-athletes could continue contributing to parasport development in the country as elite and grassroots-level coaches.

Research contribution: This is the first study examining the experience of para-athletes, coaches, and administrators in a Least Developed Country. Our findings identified recruitment, retirement preparation, and coach training as major areas for development.

Value: The findings would assist evidence-based policy making for more sustainable development of elite parasport.

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Parasport development; Cambodia; athletic career pathway; sustainable policy

Introduction

Developing parasport for people with disabilities is an integral activity for the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs[1]: the United Nations, n.d. a) as it is often claimed to contribute to health and well-being, quality education, and reduced inequalities. Parasport development often focuses on investment in elite sport, which leads to media and research attention, resulting

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in an expanding knowledge base of parasport development (Dowling et al., 2018; Patatas et al., 2020). The tendency to aim for elite parasport success is common not only in the Global North but also in the Global South such as Southeast Asian countries (Nagata et al., 2023), where resources are scarce.

For sustainable success in parasport development, developing a strong foundation for athletic career pathways is important, demonstrating how individuals enter their athletic career, develop their talent, and exit to the next career (Green, 2005; Green & Oakley, 2001). It is known that para-athlete career pathways are influenced by the nature of the disability, sport classification system, and wider sociocultural contexts such as societal views on disability and sport (Dehghansai et al., 2021; Patatas et al., 2020). With that in mind, Patatas et al. (2020, 2021) developed a para-athletic career pathway model. Due to different sociocultural contexts, for example, socio-economic factors, wider gender relations, and, more specifically, in our case, largely negative attitudes toward people with disabilities, athletes' career pathways vary across nations (De Bosscher et al., 2015). However, more research is needed to clarify how para-athletes navigate their athletic career pathways.

The status of athletic career pathways in more disadvantaged countries has been missing from the literature. Such investigations are warranted because parasport requires more resources to develop compared to able-bodied sport (Lui & Lui, 2022). In particular, we argue, Least Developed Countries[2] suffer not only from financial constraints, which might limit their abilities to support athletes, but also from other constraining sociocultural contexts, such as the stigma of disability and ableism. Stigma is defined as socially constructed labels about specific attributes of people who are seen as devalued (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Ableism is defined as beliefs and practices, using the standards of non-disabled as the norm, that produce prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression toward people with disabilities (Bogart & Dunn, 2019; Campbell, 2008). Stigma and ableism are related, as stigma can lead to the belief that people with disabilities are incapable, which further lead to direct discrimination, such as exclusion from education and the job market, as well as negative treatment, such as ignoring or not respecting the stigmatized individuals (Bogart & Dunn, 2019; Major & O'Brien, 2005). The stigma of disability and ableism have continued to spread widely among Least Developed Countries such as Cambodia (Palmer et al., 2019; Ramstrand et al., 2021; Takasaki, 2020), possibly affecting para-athletic career pathways.

The broader sociocultural context is likely to affect entrance to a para-athletic career. People with disabilities in Least Developed Countries, where ableist philosophy is even more apparent, tend to be stigmatized and subsequently excluded and often their families do not encourage them to seek career opportunities (Ramstrand et al., 2021). Furthermore, parasport is not well known among the public, especially in rural areas in Southeast Asian countries where Cambodia is located (Nagata et al., 2023). Disability stigma might also affect retirement from a para-athletic career. While sport is considered a vehicle for people with disabilities to overcome stigma by developing athletic identity (Saxton, 2018), ableism and the stigma of disability is severe in Cambodian society, and discrimination in the labor market has been reported (Palmer et al., 2019; Ramstrand et al., 2021; Takasaki, 2020). Thus, it is not clear if retired para-athletes can climb the

[1] SDGs refer to the collective goals among the United Nations member states in 2015 (the United Nations, n.d. a). The overall aims of the SDGs are prosperity and peace while preserving natural resources. To achieve these aims, 17 major goals such as no poverty, zero hunger, and good health and well-being have been set.

[2] Least Developed Countries is defined by the United Nations (n.d. b) as the most economically disadvantaged countries in the world. Cambodia, the focus of this study, is included in the list of Least Developed Countries created by the United Nations.

social ladder in an environment where disability stigma is so significant.

The literature focusing on the challenges in the athlete career pathways among para-athletes is limited (Patatas et al., 2020). However, the research that has been conducted focused on Brazil, a more economically advanced country than a Least Developed Country (World Bank, 2022). The current study identifies challenges that exist in athletic career pathways in a "Least Developed Country", Cambodia, by examining the experiences of para-athletes, coaches, and administrators. Findings from this investigation provide evidence of the parasport development needs in Cambodia, which can be used by the Cambodian government to develop evidence-based policy-making and possibly facilitate foreign aid. The research question of the current study was: "*What are the experiences and attitudes of parasport athletes, coaches, and administrators in Cambodia as the athletes navigate their athletic career pathways?*"

Background

Theoretical framework: athlete career pathways

In sport management literature, interest in athletes' developmental trajectories emerged from the development of sport systems, which refers to sport development models that demonstrate the setup of sport programs with different orientations (Green, 2005; Green & Oakley, 2001). Sport systems are often shown in diagrams such as the Pyramid Model of Sport Development (Green, 2005) and the Sport Development Pyramid (Eady, 1993). While establishing a sport system is important to ensure sport participation in wider performance levels, it is insufficient in producing a constant supply of high-performing athletes (Dehghansai et al., 2021; Ogden & Edwards, 2016). As such, athlete career development trajectories have gained closer attention. Athletic career pathways demonstrate a sequential path from entry to athletic career through talent development and transition out of sport (De Bosscher et al., 2013; Green, 2005). Research to date has mainly focused on able-bodied athletes and developed various models, such as the Athlete Recruitment, Retention, and Transition Model (Green, 2005), the Attraction, Retention/Transition, and Nurturing model (Sotiriadou et al., 2008), and the Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman, 2019). Researchers have found that these models cannot be easily applied to para-athletes as some acquire a disability and begin playing sport later in the stage and some compete with very few rivals due to sport classification systems (Dehghansai et al., 2021; Patatas et al., 2021).

A recent development is the new, para-athletic athletes' career pathway model, which was developed by focusing on the circumstances of para-athletes (Dehghansai, Lamez et al., 2020; Patatas et al., 2020). The model includes five phases: (1) attraction, (2) retention, (3) competition, talent identification and development, (4) elite, and (5) retirement (Patatas et al., 2020). In the attraction phase, a recruitment effort is made, and potential athletes are introduced to parasport. In the retention phase, there are increasing opportunities to play parasport. In the competition and talent identification phase, competition events are held, and national coaches identify suitably talented athletes. The elite phase sees athletes gain support to aim for national and international achievements. Finally, in the retirement phase, with support, athletes transition to post-athletic careers. The para-athletic career pathway model is unique because it is the only athletic career development model that takes parasport-specific circumstances into consideration. No other model fits the distinctive parasport conditions that are created based on parasport classifications. Therefore, the para-athletic career pathway model is most appropriate for the present study. A key aim of this paper is to use this model as the

theoretical framework to identify parasport development needs in Cambodia as we respond to the call for "future researchers to consider how" their "findings may be translated into … [a different] context" (Patatas et al., 2020, p. 949).

Parasport development within Least Developed Countries

Parasport promotion, including in Least Developed Countries, has become increasingly popular as a policy objective because it is argued that it facilitates social inclusion of people with disabilities (Hammond & Jeanes 2018; McBean et al. 2022; Nagata et al., 2023). To develop parasport, it is of paramount importance to establish an elite sport development system. However, the knowledge base in parasport development in Least Developed Countries is severely lacking (Dehghansai et al., 2021; Patatas et al., 2020). De Bosscher et al. (2015) have identified several policy dimensions they argue contribute to the establishment of an elite sport development system, which included financial support, talent identification and talent development, post-career support, and coaching development. However, these dimensions were generated based on able-bodied sport in the Global North, while only limited knowledge is accumulated concerning parasport in the Global South.

Least Developed Countries may encounter many challenges to developing parasport because it requires considerable resources (Dehghansai, Lamez et al., 2020; Lui & Lui, 2022). Parasport equipment, such as sport wheelchairs and prosthetics, cost thousands of dollars, which is nearly the average yearly income of the individuals who would require them in Least Developed Countries (United Nations, n.d. b). In addition, talent identification can be a challenge because parasport is not well-known, particularly in rural areas in Least Developed Countries (Nagata et al., 2023) and because people with disabilities have fewer opportunities to participate in social activities, including sport, due to disability stigma (Ngo et al. 2012). Disability awareness in Least Developed Countries is still limited, which, combined with ableism and stigma of disability, is likely to result in very limited career opportunities among people with disabilities (Takasaki, 2020) and it is not clear how post-career transition may develop. Furthermore, very little, if anything, is known regarding coaching provision within Least Developed Countries. As such, this paper provides a valuable contribution to the research field as we examine these specific challenges through an empirical study. Before we go into detail about the methods employed in this study, it is important to provide a brief overview of the context of parasport in Cambodia.

Parasport context in Cambodia

Cambodia is listed as one of the Least Developed Countries in the world, with GDP per capita of $1,724 (The United Nations, 2023) and one of the most economically disadvantaged nations among the countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). For many people in Cambodia, physical and mental disabilities are considered as karma, or the consequences of a bad deed in a previous life, which comes from an influence of Buddhist teachings (Kalyanpur, 2014). While there is a law protecting the employment rights of people with disabilities, they are disproportionately unemployed, possibly due to disability stigma (Palmer & Williams, 2023; Takasaki, 2020).

Despite these issues regarding disability stigma in Cambodia, numerous organizations and individuals have played a key role in attempting to support people with disabilities, particularly from the 1990s onwards (Sodany & Monica, 2009). The National Center of Disabled Persons (NCDP) was established in 1995 and has played a key role in developing parasport by creating opportunities for people with disabilities to play sports (Santepheap,

2011). After that, the development of parasport received even more attention with the establishment of a national event, the Angkor Wat International Half Marathon (AWHM). The NCDP was also involved in establishing the National Paralympic Committee of Cambodia in 1997 (International Paralympic Committee, 2018). The following year, in 1998, the Japanese non-governmental organization (NGO), the Hearts of Gold, was established to support the AWHM (Hearts of Gold, 2020). The AWHM originally began as a charity marathon event for landmine victims, and it has steadily expanded to be an event where people with disabilities can participate. Hearts of Gold has held training sessions for people with disabilities with invited Japanese parasport experts, which helped them to participate in the AWHM (Hearts of Gold, 2020). Thanks to this support, the number of participants with disabilities who have taken part in the AWHM has increased from only a few to currently around 70 runners (Hearts of Gold, 2024). Some of those who participated in the AWHM started to compete in international parasport competitions (Hearts of Gold, 2024). As such, significant Japanese involvement can be found in the history of Cambodian parasport development.

In 2000, the Cambodian Men's Volleyball team participated in the Paralympics in Sydney, becoming the first Paralympians to represent Cambodia. Since then, Cambodia has competed in every Paralympic Games. Cambodia has consistently been required to use the Universality Wild Card to participate, which is a quota granted to a Paralympic Committee of a country that failed to obtain a Paralympic Games qualification quota. This quota allocation method was established to ensure maximum participation in accordance with the basic principles of the Paralympic Games. At Tokyo 2020, Mr. Van Von made history as the first Cambodian athlete to achieve the entry standard record in a wheelchair track race.

In sum, while Cambodia struggles with its economic standing, key individuals and organizations have been eager to develop their parasport program. The current study, therefore, explores what challenges Cambodian para-athletes, coaches, and administrators experience in their engagement in parasport and examines it through the lens of the athletic career pathway model.

Methods

Research design

A qualitative research design was chosen to address the research question most appropriately. We used a qualitative case study methodology (Morse & McEvoy, 2014), which aims to understand a target topic with in-depth investigation within a specific boundary: Cambodian para-athletics. A qualitative case study allowed us to explore the areas of the problem and identify the participants' interpretation of their circumstances, triangulated with narratives from different stakeholders, including athletes, parasport coaches, and administrators. As such, taking multiple perspectives into a single story aligns with a constructivist approach, which assumes there is no objective reality; instead, the reality is socially constructed. Regarding the constructivist research process, the researcher is involved in the social construction of knowledge because the reality is observed and written by the researcher, who cannot be free from bias (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexivity of the researcher's background is important, and our reflexivity is shown in the following Researcher Description. We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to analyze the data as it complements the constructivist approach. The findings are reported based on the Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research (Levitt et al., 2018), which outlines major components that should be reported in a qualitative research paper. The research protocol of the current study was approved by the Nippon Sport Science University

Institutional Review Board, and all the participants provided informed consent.

Researcher description

The research team consisted of two Japanese and one British researcher and two Japanese NGO workers in Cambodia. The lead Japanese researcher has a Bachelor's degree in disability studies and Master's and Ph.D. degree in therapeutic recreation, and has experience in disability sport and international development through sport. The first author had personal experience of living with an athlete with a disability. Also, he has professional experience traveling with wheelchair sports teams. The above experiences helped him listen to the interview participants with empathy. Also, his background contributes to his view of disability and sport as human rights issues. He conducted all interviews, led thematic analysis, and developed the first draft of the manuscript. The other Japanese and British researchers contributed to developing the interview guide, being a second interviewer, analyzing the data, and revising the paper. The NGO workers in Cambodia recruited the participants, provided relevant existing literature, and reviewed and revised the paper. Also, the NGO workers helped the first author better understand the local disability context by arranging online and in-person meetings with them and Cambodian athletes with disabilities. As Japanese organizations played a significant role in Cambodian parasport development, the inclusion of the Japanese NGO workers enabled us to gain inputs relevant to the local context.

Participants

The current study included a total of twelve individuals who were stakeholders of Cambodian para-athletics. Participants comprised six para track and field athletes, four para track and field coaches, and two parasport administrators. Participants were verbally asked about their age, gender, and impairments[3], and this self-reported demographic data, along with other relevant information, is summarized in Table 1.

The participant athletes were split evenly between males and females. All the coaches were males, with one male and one female administrator. In terms of impairment, three athletes had an impairment in the upper body due to polio or an amputation, two athletes had an impairment in the lower limbs due to polio or amputations, and one athlete had a visual impairment. One coach had an impairment in his lower limb due to an injury, which was acquired after his athletic career and had no prior experience competing as a para-athlete. The other three coaches and both administrators did not have an impairment. In terms of athletes' experiences, all the athletes had experience competing in international competitions, including the Paralympic Games and/or the ASEAN Para Games.

Data collection

We chose para-athletics (track and field) because more track and field athletes have represented Cambodia in the Paralympics than in other sports since 2004. The recruitment was conducted by one of the researchers, who worked for a Japanese NGO in Cambodia. To approach athletes and coaches, the researcher identified a national para-athletic team that trained in Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia, and selected participants over the age of 18. In addition, athlete participants needed to train for a parasport event for physical or visual impairment and have experience in

[3]We used the term "impairment" because this term is more appropriate than disability. According to Goodley (2016), Impairment is biopsychological abnormality of an individual, which can cause functional difficulties. Disability, on the other hand, is a socially constructed oppression and marginalization imposed by society. As the purpose here is to describe the participants in a non-judgmental, objective way, we decided to use "impairment" over "disability".

Table 1. Summary of interview participant characteristics.

ID	Age	Sex	Role	# of years in the role	Type of impairment	Additional information
A1	24	F	Athlete	5	Visual Impairment	Participated in ASEAN Para Games and some other international competitions
A2	37	M	Athlete	17	Both legs paralysis/Polio/ Wheelchair	Participated in Paralympics and ASEAN Para Games
A3	40	F	Athlete	8	Amputated Leg/Artificial leg	Participated in ASEAN Para Games and some other international competitions
A4	43	F	Athlete	7	Arm Paralysis/Polio	Participated in ASEAN Para Games and some other international competitions
A5	39	M	Athlete	14	Upper limb amputation	Participated in ASEAN Para Games
A6	21	M	Athlete	5	Upper limb amputation	Participated in ASEAN Para Games
C1	64	M	Coach	34	N/A	Head Coach for Para-athletics
C2	54	M	Coach	30	N/A	Coach for Athletics and Para-athletics Training wheelchair athletes
C3	55	M	Coach	23	N/A	Coach for Athletics and Para-athletics Training standing para-athletes
C4	49	M	Coach	4	Leg Length difference/ Injured by accident	Coach for Athletics and Para-athletics Training standing para-athletes
Ad1	30	M	Administrator	10	N/A	National Paralympic Committee of Cambodia
Ad2	31	F	Administrator	6	N/A	NGO Hearts of Gold

Note. M = male. F = female.

international competitions. Participant coaches needed to coach a parasport event for physical or visual impairment and have experience coaching athletes who participated in international competitions. Administrators were selected from the National Paralympic Committee of Cambodia and the Japanese NGO in Cambodia and were involved in the administration of a parasport event or an organization and had experience assisting athletes who have participated in international competitions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The lead and the third authors interviewed all athletes and coaches, and these interviews were conducted in English. To smooth the communication between participants and interviewers, an interpreter was hired at the Cambodian interview site to translate between English and Cambodian. The interpreter was a Cambodian Project Assistant who engaged in parasport development and was fluent in both Khmer and English. One of the administrator interviews was conducted in English without an interpreter because the administrator had a high level of proficiency in the English language. The other administrator interview was conducted in Japanese, as it was the most comfortable language for the interviewers and the interviewee.

Guided by the athletic career pathway model (Patatas et al., 2020), interview questions for para-athletes included how they encountered parasport, support from the government for their athletic career, and their opinions about retirement from their athletic career. For coaches, we asked about their conception of being a "good coach", their experience of coaching development, and their opinions about coaching policy. For administrators, we included questions concerning the status of parasport development in Cambodia and their challenges in developing a supportive environment for para-athletes. The average length of the interviews was approximately 55 minutes, ranging from 48 and 70 minutes.

Data analysis

All the recorded data were transcribed verbatim. Then, we conducted member checking (Merriam, 1998) by requesting that the interview interpreter review all the transcripts. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was chosen to analyze the data because this method complements a constructivist approach. The first,

second, and third authors read the transcripts and coded independently and developed the initial themes. Following this, they discussed the outstanding themes. Based on the chosen codes and themes, the lead author coded the entire transcript again and refined the themes. The refined themes were further reviewed by the second author. Finally, the fourth and fifth authors reviewed the validity of the themes.

Results and discussion

Three themes were developed: (1) resource poverty affects recruiting new athletes; (2) lack of preparation for athlete retirement; and (3) the need for more specialized parasport coaches. We will discuss each in turn now using our chosen theoretical framework, the athletic career pathway model (Patatas et al., 2020). The diagram of the model and the results are shown in Figure 1.

Resource poverty affects recruiting new athletes

This theme represents the challenging status of the athlete development system in Cambodia. Resource poverty appears to be related to all phases of the athletic pathway model (Patatas et al., 2020), but particularly the recruitment phase, with evidence of the reliance of rural provinces for recruitment, the lack of equipment, and inadequate allowances for professional para-athletes. First, the Cambodian para-athletic team relied on people from rural areas for new athletic talents, yet the lack of budget was considered a barrier. Administrator #1 said "*if we have much budget or sponsor, we go into the province, [where] there is more disabled people and youths, so we go there and promote parasport*." Coaches agreed that provinces are important recruiting areas:

> I want to increase athletes … However, recruiting in Phnom Penh is not enough, so I want to go to every province, like having an event to gather people with disability and other NGO who work with people with disability to promote parasport and increase their interest. (Coach #4)

Another coach suggested what they considered would be a potential cost-effective recruitment scheme using international aid experts deployed in Cambodian provinces:

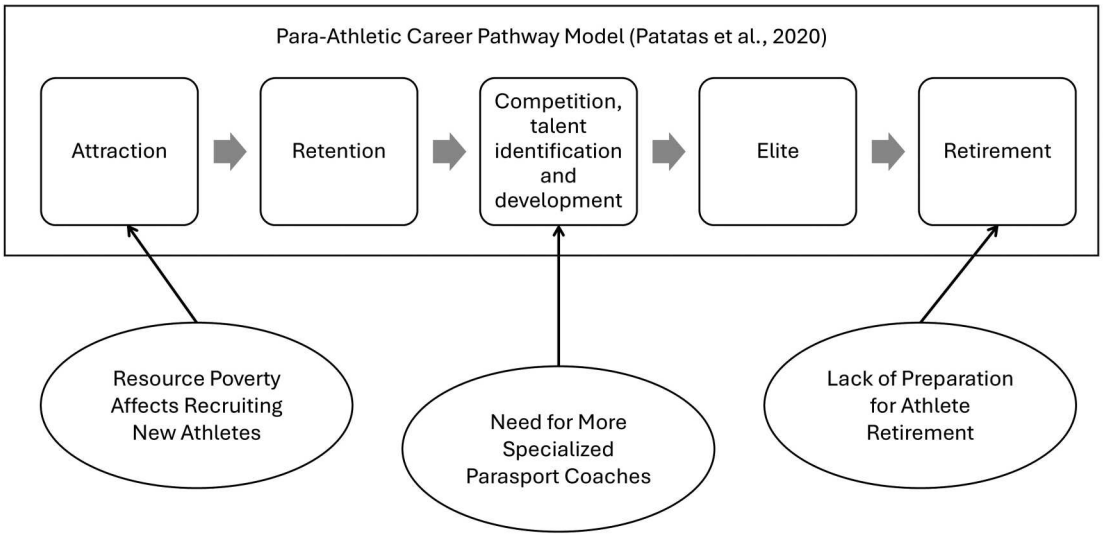

Figure 1. Para athletic Career pathway model and the themes generated from the narratives of the Cambodian parasport stakeholders.

> Right now, there is really lower amount of Para athletes, so I hope we can recruit new athletes using the Cambodia-Japanese cooperation. Because I noticed that many Japanese expert volunteers come to support in Cambodia. And many of them stay in different provinces and we hope that we can make the network together, and with their support, we can nominate many people from provinces who are interested in sport … so that we be able to have more Para athlete. (Coach #1)

The challenge of recruiting new athletes was amplified due to the lack of parasport equipment. In this respect, there was a perceived lack of specialized parasport equipment available to the athletes. Administrator #1 said, "*We cannot buy all the [parasport] equipment by ourselves. In Cambodia, we don't have it. … We never used a new, for example, racing wheelchair. We get secondhand from Japan, or from Korea, they support, yeah."* It was felt that such a lack of equipment greatly hindered parasport sustainability. For example, one coach described how the lack of athletic prosthetic legs undermined the recruitment of new athletes:

> The biggest challenge is the group of artificial legs, because the artificial leg for daily use is different from the ones for training. So, even though we go and recruit them [potential parasport athletes], we don't have any equipment, any [suitable training] artificial leg for them. (Coach #1)

A lack of resources was observed even in the athletes' training environment. Interviewed athletes were considered top para-athletes within Cambodia and were given a stipend to train and compete. However, the allowance was not enough as "it is difficult to cover for all our expenses." (Athlete #5). At the time of the interview, athletes were trained in a newly built stadium located outside of Phnom Penh, and athletes claimed that the greater transportation expenses affected their ability to get adequate nutrition. Athlete #3 said, "We spend so much on travel expenses. … spend too much on transportation, we cannot buy good quality food for nutrition that we really need for training." The tight athlete allowance is particularly problematic because many athletes originally came from rural areas, and they needed accommodation in Phnom Penh:

> Many athletes come from the province to train in Phnom Penh, and they need a place to stay, they need allowances for their food. … If they come, they don't have the place to stay … they are still young, so they still have to study at school. (Athlete #2)

As such, the current lack of parasport resources makes Cambodian parasport unsustainable. There are significant challenges in recruiting new athletes, and even after joining the team, the resources to be a top-level athlete are insufficient.

For the sustainable development of parasport, it is necessary to establish athlete career pathways, which include the entry and subsequent retention of parasport athletes (Patatas et al., 2020). Our data suggest Cambodians particularly struggle in the first phase of the model, recruiting new athletes, due to the lack of financial resources to do outreach work, conduct appropriate marketing and prepare parasport equipment. The financial constraints also affect the maintenance of appropriate living standards as an elite athlete. While suboptimal athletic performance due to inaccessibility of highly individualized, high-performance parasport equipment is well known (Burkett, 2010), our study highlighted that resource poverty can also affect other athlete career development phases. Forgoing an athletic career due to the inaccessibility of sport equipment can be a unique issue among Least Developed Countries, as, in contrast, many Global North countries may suffer from the lack of motivation as a constraint to attract parasport athletes (Ives et al., 2021). Our findings suggest that resource poverty impacts athletic career phases as a whole and further disadvantages the development of parasport in Least Developed Countries.

While resource poverty stands out in this theme, the causes and associated problems may be more complex than money. The challenge in recruitment from rural areas, for example, involves not only the lack of funding for outreach work but also the stigma of disability, ableism, and parasport popularity in rural areas. It is important because people with disabilities would not be given a chance to be educated and excel unless the communities take a more positive view of disability rights (Marks, 1997), which is less apparent in rural Cambodia (Takasaki, 2020).

Another potentially relevant issue our data revealed related to resource poverty is insufficient athlete allowances. This may pose another challenge, as our research participants mentioned they might not be able to afford to travel for training and competitions, and they might not be able to perform to their full capacity due to what they perceived was poorer athlete nutrition. In the past, Global North countries had less financial support for para-athletes, and some athletes had to retire early because they could not make a living as elite athletes (Bundon et al., 2018). It might be argued that having such a negative career outlook may negatively impact potential individuals considering a para-athletic career. Considering the above discussion, resource poverty consequently affects the attraction and retention phases of para-athletes (Patatas et al., 2020). However, the situation of Cambodian athletes may be unique as they are considered professional athletes who gain allowances from the government instead of from other jobs in the community.

Lack of preparation for athlete retirement

This theme is related to the last phase of the athletic career pathway model – retirement (Patatas et al., 2020). Our findings revealed a lack of baseline education among the current para-athletes and, partly related to that, a lack of retirement preparation, which does not benefit either athletes' post-retirement life or Cambodian parasport development. Bundon et al. (2018) reported that professional para-athletes typically fear retirement as they often cannot secure a post-retirement career. The issue of transitioning out of sports is also a problem we find in Cambodia. Participants reported that the current Cambodian athletes do not have much background education. Administrator #2 provided an observation: "many people with disabilities do not attend school. And because they cannot read or write, they are often not accepted. It is very difficult to find places where they can work." Athletes also shared the challenges in retirement transition because of the lack of education. Athlete #2 said, "We cannot even write Khmer language, English, or other language, it is difficult to look for a job. Even after our retirement, we cannot find any job. So, we cannot find anything to earn a salary to support ourselves." Perhaps due to the lack of education, athletes' retirement plans do not provide a very bright outlook. Athlete #5 said: "I would play [parasport] until maybe this year's event and after that I would retire and go to my hometown. And usually in our hometown, we always do farm and grow animals at home." Similarly, Athlete #4 reported that she plans to go back to her hometown:

> After I get retired, I plan to go back to my hometown. Of course, if going back to my hometown, I have to stay with my siblings and grow some vegetables or some animals like chickens or cows to earn for daily living. (Athlete #4)

There is no retirement transition training in place in Cambodian parasport. Athlete #5 said:

> In terms of current [retirement transition] support, there is not any organization or from government … to promote any vocational training skill. So, for me, I just would go to live with my family and look after the house and do business, that's all.

Nevertheless, athletes hoped to gain training that would help their retirement transition. Vocational education might be something that may help their transition:

> Right now, there is no system that helps us after our retirement, but I am hoping, in the future, there were a training. Like, vocational skill training or something that can support us. It would be a good opportunity because many of us don't have any knowledge so we can start learning some skills that we can do to earn money after we get retired. (Athlete #4)

The results suggest that para-athletes would return to their rural homes without any hope of contributing to Cambodian parasport development or of getting better jobs.

In sum, Cambodian para-athletes were generally undereducated, rural individuals and perhaps due to the lack of retirement preparation training or opportunities during their athletic career, their retirement prospects were to go back and rejoin their family business. In other words, they would typically return to their hometown with few career prospects. Particularly in rural Cambodia, multiple challenges exist for inclusive education, such as an inadequate number of trained teachers for inclusive education, limited adaptive equipment available in the area, ableism among teachers and students that can result in discrimination and bullying, and families being reluctant to send their disabled children to school (Ravet & Mtika, 2024). Sport can, in theory, be a vehicle to climb the social ladder (Spaaij, 2013) by reducing the societal and internalized stigma of disability (Petrola, 2017). These are directly related to a part of the athletic career pathway, which Patatas et al. (2022) argue is important for a successful athlete development system. Elsewhere, Patatas et al. (2020) have argued that governments can play a significant role in helping to develop this area. However, currently, in Cambodia, it does not function as such. The challenge in retirement preparation is similarly experienced by professional athletes in the Global North (Bundon et al., 2018). Full-time professional athletes typically sacrifice the time required to gain education or alternative work experience, which may hinder their subsequent career development (Bundon et al., 2018). However, our research demonstrates that the status of people with disabilities in Cambodia can be even more disadvantageous due to their typically low education attainment and the widespread social stigma of being "disabled" (Takasaki, 2020). The stigmatization of people with disabilities in Cambodia could be said to be related to ableism. According to our participants, such attitudes prevailed in Cambodian schools and workplaces. This contributed to a more systematic exclusion of people with disabilities. Furthermore, disablism, which refers to the social imposition of restrictions on the aspirations of people with disabilities (Thomas, 2012), is likely to compound their post-athletic career choices further. Furthermore, if the para-athlete career continues without a positive outlook after retirement, attracting new para-athletes may become more challenging. Solving this problem requires broader societal changes, which might include tackling the issues of disability stigma, ableism, and disablism, so that people with disabilities can be more readily employed, and such change can bring other relevant benefits regarding SDGs – such as reduced inequalities.

The current circumstances are undesirable for the individual athletes and also for Cambodian parasport development because there is no pathway for retired para-athletes to contribute to future parasport development. Retired para-athletes serve as motivational speakers, event facilitators, or disability-rights activists, and their contributions to disability awareness and parasport development has been found to be important in the Global North (Braye, 2016). Para-athletes are often seen, rightly or wrongly, as people who can change perceptions about disability in society (Petrola, 2017).

Therefore, parasport development may be accelerated if the Cambodian government were able and prepared to invest more in exploring new ways for retiring para-athletes to engage in parasport development in the country. For example, retired para-athletes could work promoting grassroots sport in Cambodia. They can use their lived experience of becoming an athlete and be seen as relevant peer mentors (Coalter, 2013). In this respect, their contribution might be especially significant in rural areas. Effective use of talents from retiring athletes is a foundational issue that is closely linked with the next theme – coaching development.

Need for More Specialized Parasport Coaches

This theme is related to coaches, who play a very important role in the talent development phase in athletic career pathways (Patatas et al., 2020). The current roster of top-level para-athletic (track and field) coaches in Cambodia includes former Olympic track and field coaches. Perhaps because of that, coaches typically do not have much knowledge about disability *per se*. Athlete #5 said:

> I want to increase the number of coaches, and not only increasing but also the qualifications that the coaches who have full knowledge related to athletics, especially in each disability. Like, artificial legs or wheelchairs, and more professional [knowledge] about each disability, so they can improve the athletes' abilities.

Athlete #6 felt that the need for specialized coaches was apparent when he met coaches in other ASEAN nations:

> I really want to have specialist coaches. As I joined competitions, I not only meet athletes but meet coaches. We noticed that in Thailand, Indonesia and other countries, there are coaches who have full knowledge about training and technical [for parasport] that can improve or develop the athletic ability and capacity. (Athlete #6)

Coaches also felt that they needed more training. Coach #4 emphasized that "*the training, of course, is not enough.*" Coach #1 acknowledged that he needs more training:

> To be a good coach, I think that we have to learn and research more by ourselves to understand those sports. Especially for me, I trained with only Olympic athletes and then I started training with Paralympic athletes. So, for me, many times that I have been discussing with [name of key individual supporting parasport] together to find the training method that can fit for Para-athletes, and I started to learn about the classification system of the disability like T11, T12, T20 or T44, 46, 47, 52, 53 like that.

One possibility that was commonly discussed was the perceived need for specialist coaches to train former athletes to become coaches themselves. This could also be a useful way to address the issue discussed above, namely, the lack of preparation for transition into retirement. For example, as Coach #3 stated:

> My vision, I will look for athletes who trained for a long time … these athletes can become trainers because they have long time experience related to para-sport or athletics and they can use their learned techniques to train other athletes and become coaches.

Athletes tended to share such a vision that becoming a coach of para-athletes is a potential option for a post-athletic career, as athlete #2 said "*I could retire or could become a coach*". However, some expressed interest in becoming a coach but were still somewhat constrained by the notion of returning home:

> So, for me, about retirement, in the future, I can become a coach assistant or coach to train other athletes so that I can continue working in this sector of Parasport. But when the retirement, I plan to go back to my hometown to stay with my mother and my family. (Athlete #3)

The lack of available training and a clear pathway to becoming a qualified coach may have impacted participant intentions. Administrator #2 said: "*I think it is good to train retired athletes as coaches, and there are many athletes who want to become a coach. However, they have no coaching knowledge, nor teaching method to convey what they have learned*." Linked to the previous theme, the lack of retirement preparation, appropriate training to become a qualified coach may help retired athletes transition into a coaching career, which would, in turn, help reduce the issue of the lack of specialist parasport coaches.

The identified need for parasport specialist coaches is considered urgent because coaches and athletes indicated that it was important. This resonates with the findings from Patatas et al. (2020), who emphasized the importance of coaches in para-athlete career pathways. Our participants, who were originally trained as coaches of able-bodied Olympic athletes, particularly identified the need for more knowledge about the parasport classification system, which is an obvious difference from able-bodied sport (Patatas et al., 2018). However, our athlete participants felt their coaches should also improve their technical and training knowledge. The need for coaches with disability-specific knowledge and parasport knowledge is, in fact, discussed commonly in Global North research (Duarte et al., 2018; Patatas et al., 2020). However, even within the Global North, parasport coaching development and education programs have been quite limited, and it has been reported that parasport coaches develop their knowledge through experience and informal communication with other coaches (Dehghansai, Headrick et al., 2020). However, the results from our study indicate that all stakeholders consider it important to use experienced parasport coaches to establish coaching development and education.

A potential step toward solving this lack of specialist coaches may be to train former athletes to become coaches. Considering that wheelchair racing techniques and biomechanics are still in development (Morriën et al., 2017), and there are not many coaches available even in the Global North (Dehghansai, Headrick et al., 2020; Duarte et al., 2018), those who have lived experiences of training and competing – the former athletes – might be the best fit to be specialist coaches in Cambodia. Such a move might be beneficial not only for Cambodian parasport but also for Cambodian society, as it may reduce the stigma of disability and disablism by demonstrating the appointment of a person with a disability to a socially respected role such as a Paralympic coach. Furthermore, this aligns well with increased diversity among coaches (Bentzen et al., 2020).

Providing coach training to former para-athletes would be reasonable not only for Cambodian parasport development but also beneficial for retiring para-athletes. As we found, many athletes have no other option but to return to their hometowns with little to no career advancement upon retirement. However, training to become a para-athlete coach could advance their post-athletic career by establishing themselves as provincial parasport coaches near their hometown instead of, or even alongside, engaging in their family business. As fewer career opportunities are available in rural areas due to stronger stigma of disability and disablism (Takasaki, 2020), establishing parasport coaches in provinces could be an attractive benefit for some retiring athletes. This could significantly benefit Cambodian parasport development because this might help reach out to people with disabilities in these provinces, allowing new, more efficient athlete recruitment whilst also not relying on sending such potential athletes to Phnom Pehn with the additional issues that brings, as discussed above. This could be particularly effective as potential athletes would see a former elite para-athlete coach as a peer mentor (Coalter, 2013) – not only for an athletic career but also for a post-athletic life.

Implications

This study has many implications for the management and development of para-sport in Least Developed Countries. We found that the recruitment of new athletes from rural provinces is a challenge, as potential individuals often withdraw because of the cost involved in becoming a para-athlete. One way to approach this might be the provision of more support, such as housing, but the Cambodian government should consider an approach that has a vision for the longer term, such as establishing parasport centers in major cities in the provinces. Having such a center could reduce the burden of prospective athletes and increase the exposure of parasport in wider society. The Cambodian government may follow a system established by the Lao People's Democratic Republic, named the Department of Sport for All, which established provincial offices to promote sport for all, including those with disabilities. We recommend that retired para-athletes be employed there, allowing them to continue contributing to Cambodian parasport development. This, in turn, would help address the issue of a lack of career options for retiring para-athletes. Thus, another important implication of the current study relates to retirement preparation for athletes. Perhaps the Cambodian government may need to consider providing some basic vocational training for athletes and encourage having work experience during their athletic careers. Employment experience would also benefit athletes as it provides a second income to support their living, which was another identified struggle among athletes in this study. However, this will clearly be no easy task, as it would require wider societal changes toward greater inclusion, as the stigma of disability has been a significant barrier to employment in Cambodian society (Palmer & Williams, 2023; Takasaki, 2020). This would need to be the focus of two important ministerial departments: the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport and the Ministry of Social Affairs. A more joined-up approach to reducing stigma and disablism in Cambodian society is required for more meaningful change to be possible.

In response to the need for specialist coaches, coaching development courses and education are needed. While systematic and organized training has been increasing, coaching development has been delivered through personal, informal settings (Dehghansai, Headrick et al., 2020). Therefore, the Cambodian government may seek support in several different ways. One is to advance the current relationship with the Japanese government, who continue to provide aid through the dispatching of development specialists. Elite coaching development projects in collaboration with the Japan Sport Agency and the Japanese Para Sports Association might be sought. Another approach might be to seek funding in partnership with sport for development organizations. That way, the Cambodian government may be able to access funding from the Global North more effectively.

In addition to the above, the findings of the current study make a broader contribution to the body of knowledge in sport management. Namely, there is a possibility that some of the knowledge in parasport management from the Global North may be useful in the Global South, but it is unlikely to succeed without consideration of the local social contexts. There is a need for further studies to clarify the trajectory of sport management development in the Global South.

Limitations

While our findings provide many insights into parasport development issues within Least Developed Countries, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the participants were limited to para-athletics. The results may not be generalizable to other parasports. Second, because we had an interpreter in most of the

interviews conducted, there might be some nuances lost in translation. Although we did several safeguarding activities, such as selecting an interpreter who knows parasport, sharing the English-version interview questions with the interpreter prior to the interview, and reviewing the transcript by the interpreter, it is not clear if there were some issues that might have been lost in translation that might not come up in the results. Third, there might be other stakeholders, such as physical education teachers, as well as key individuals working at rehabilitation centers and universities that might have provided us information for a more complete picture of Cambodian parasport.

Conclusion

For sustainable parasport development, it is important to have a solid foundation for athletes to navigate through their athletic career pathway. However, the status of para-athletes' career pathways in disadvantaged countries has rarely been reported. The current study responded to this gap in the literature by investigating the status of parasport development in Cambodia, which is one of the Least Developed Countries, through the theoretical framework of the athletic career pathway model (Patatas et al., 2020). We demonstrated that financial constraints affect many aspects of the athletic career pathway, including attraction and retention. However, a major problem was also seen in retirement, as there was no systematic effort to help the transition out of sport or, indeed, further employment within sport. In addition, the shortage of coaches who are equipped with parasport knowledge was the obvious issue at this point. The problems identified in this paper in terms of provision for elite parasport in Cambodia are all related to the sustainability of parasport development, and perhaps the Cambodian government can approach this issue by investing in better retirement preparation systems for para-athletes. Such efforts should seek to ensure retired para-athletes can continue contributing to parasport development in the country as both elite and grassroots-level coaches, which may also help contribute to addressing some SDGs such as health and well-being, quality education, and reduced inequalities.

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