

It's about inspiring the greater community to continue supporting this sector: Elite sport success as a main policy objective for disability sport promotion in ASEAN member states

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It's about inspiring the greater community to continue supporting this sector: Elite Sport Success as a Main Policy Objective for Disability Sport Promotion in ASEAN Member States

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Abstract

Promoting sport participation among people with disabilities is often counted as one of the policy priorities of the national government as well as a main activity of sport for development initiatives to aid the Global South. However, little is known about specific systems, policy, history, and plans for disability sport promotion understood by disability sport administrators in the Global South. The current study focused on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and aimed to explore how ASEAN government officials perceive the status of sport for people with disabilities. Representatives from nine ASEAN member countries participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The results of thematic analysis generated three themes: (1) Perceived lack of disability awareness and disability sport recognition; (2) Elite sport successes address problems at hand; and (3) Elite sport success to motivate funders. These themes suggest that successes in elite sports are of central importance for sport promotion among people with disabilities in ASEAN countries because they perceive that elite sport success can raise disability awareness, popularise disability sport, and motivate funders. Also, Paralympic success is viewed as an opportunity for them to demonstrate success otherwise unattainable in the Olympics. Some of the participants' accounts appear to go against the current knowledge generated in the Global North; however, as funding is important to develop disability sport administration, it might be inevitable for them to continue promoting elite sport success for now.

Keywords: Global South; Disability Sport; ASEAN; Sport Policy

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Introduction

Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure, and sport is viewed as a basic human right, regardless of having a disability, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD: The United Nations 2006). In addition, the health of people with disabilities is often seen as problematic, in part due to inaccessibility and exclusion in society, there has been a global push for increasing physical activity among people with disabilities (Carty *et al.* 2021). Policy makers, thus, are eager to develop a system of *disability sport*, which is a term to describe sport for people with disability, inclusive of grassroots to elite level participation (DePauw and Gavron 2005), to ensure opportunities to play sport for those who have disabilities.

As people with disabilities are marginalised in various cultural contexts, both in the Global North and Global South (Grue 2016, Hanass-Hancock and Mitra 2016), numerous policies aimed at promoting sport participation for people with disabilities have been developed, at least in the Global North context (Christiansen *et al.* 2014). However, even within the Global North sport policies, there is varied implementation due to the different contextual factors such as disability sport awareness (Patatas *et al.* 2018). Despite this, there is a growing academic literature focusing on disability sport policy in the Global North, but we know little about the development and implementation of disability sport policies in the Global South context.

As part of a relatively new social movement, so called sport for development and peace (Kidd 2013), increasing attention is given to global collaborations. Systematic reviews in this field (Svensson and Woods 2017) revealed that disability is one area with considerable scope to

be expanded. However, there is, currently, very little published about the status of disability sport policies in the Global South. The focus of our paper on the Global South is on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which is consisted of Brunei Darussalam (Brunei), Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos), Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Although the degree and speed of the growth varies, ASEAN countries overall have experienced great economic growth (ASEAN 2021). This might suggest there is increased means to fund people with disabilities, and to strive to actualizing international sport for development initiatives (e.g., Dao and Darnell 2021, Okada and Young 2013). While ASEAN countries gain attention from sport for development initiatives, both research and practice in the field of disability sport is largely lacking. The current study, therefore, aimed to gain a better understanding about how administrators of disability sport view their disability sport policies and its implementation.

Understanding of Disability in Global North vs. ASEAN

To better understand the policy of disability sport among ASEAN countries – as an example of Global South – it is important to highlight the differences in understanding of disability between the Global North and ASEAN countries. In the Global North, disability has been understood in two ways: the medical model and social model of disability (Berghs et al., 2019; Marks, 1997; Oliver, 2009). The medical model determines a person has a disability based on an impairment such as the loss of psychological, physiological or anatomical function, and the policy goals are to 'correct' the impairment through medical treatment. The social model determines a person has a disability based on how one encounters inaccessible social infrastructures that prevent them from participating, which links to policy goals to remove

barriers in the society. The social model has been considered as socially just and enables people with disabilities to have equal opportunities just like everyone else, thus it is the foundation of inclusive society (Burghs et al., 2019).

On the other hand, in ASEAN countries, in the main, disability continues to carry a great stigma. For example, in Cambodia and Vietnam, which has a strong influence of Buddhist teachings, many people believe disability as *karma*, or the consequences of a bad deed in the previous life (Kalyanpur, 2011; Ha et al., 2014). In Laos, Malaysia, and Vietnam, disability of children is believed by many to be a fault of parents, either genetics or home education (Ha et al., 2014; Low et al., 2019; Marshall et al., 2018). Even in more economically advanced countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, the belief that people with disabilities are incapable and unemployable is widespread (Bualar, 2014; Marshall et al., 2018; Yeam & Brooke, 2016). Disability is understood in the medical model in ASEAN countries, at least at local population as well as local politics. Politically, all ASEAN countries signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) to promote the social model of disability (Cogburn and Reuter, 2017). Article 33 of the UNCRPD mandates implementation of disability-rights policies at both national and regional levels. However, a policy analysis found that the most member states use approaches based on the medical model of disability such as provision of corrective treatment for people with disabilities, which is unlikely to contribute to achieve disability-rights (Cogburn and Reuter, 2017). This highlights a gap between policy goals and the foundational understanding of disability.

We acknowledge that the economic status, religion, and culture vary across ASEAN countries. However, there are a number of similarities, including the grassroots level understanding of disability, as even Singapore, the most economically developed ASEAN

country, typically disability is understood from the medical model and with associated levels of stigma (Yeam and Brooke, 2016). Furthermore, ASEAN countries have been engaging in disability-rights projects together since their ratification in the UNCRPD (Cogburn and Reuter, 2017). Therefore, we think they share certain similarities of local conditions.

Sport Policy on Disability Sport

While sport policy in able-bodied sport has been studied for years, Thomas and Guett (2014) reported that sport policy studies in disability sport has largely been neglected. However, many governments have written policy objectives related to both grassroots and elite level disability sport (e.g., Hammond and Jeanes 2018, McBeans *et al.* 2022, Thomas and Guett 2014). These governments identify social inclusion and mainstreaming, defined as including disabled athletes within the able-bodied sporting programmes, as a key policy objective; however, researchers observed limited progress toward the achievement of the objective (Hammond and Jeanes 2018, McBeans *et al.* 2022, Thomas and Guett 2014). McBeans *et al.* (2022), for example, blamed the lack of New Zealand's governmental intervention and its overreliance on unwilling disability sport organizations for unachieved social inclusion objectives. Hammond and Jeanes (2018), on the other hand, criticised narrow-minded Australian governmental leadership that only focused on mainstreaming Paralympic athletes because grassroots-level non-competitive athletes and sports are left unsupported. Furthermore, funding is identified as an area of attention, as the Australian government used performance-based funding, meaning the performance ranking results were associated with the funding a sport organization received. This scheme can be problematic in terms of social inclusion because it creates exclusion of underperforming disabled athletes (Hammond and Jeanes 2018).

As the history of disability sport is short, sport policy research that focuses on disability sport is still in its infancy (Patatas *et al.* 2018). Existing literature, based in the Global North, points out that policy makers cannot use a one-size-fits-all approach for developing elite level disability sport because of numerous contextual factors. One factor is social structures that influence where to find eligible athletes. In the Paralympics, each sport has its own classification system, and participating athletes must meet its eligibility criteria. To engage in talent identification of these potential athletes, disability sport administrators must know where they are. For example, in some countries, people with disabilities may stay at home or may be institutionalised, while in other countries they live with greater links with the community (Ngo *et al.* 2012). Thus, talent identification programmes must engage with wider family networks and social communities. Another contextual factor is awareness about disability sport. This includes societal interest of disability sport, as people in some countries are more familiar with disability sport than other countries (Bruce 2014). This can be critical to get buy-in from the potential athletes and their families, and the disability sport administrators would need to raise awareness along with the talent identification programmes. The above are not an exhaustive list, but these would be enough to show that sport policies can look different due to contextual factors. Given the differing social context, and the need to understand the impact of such ‘local’ conditions, it is likely that disability sport policies in the ASEAN region would provide further differences than those found, thus far, in the Global North.

Disability Sport in ASEAN Countries

Information about disability sport in the ASEAN member countries is limited. Existing literature focuses mostly on a single country, and most do not explore policy. However, focus on

disability sport has increased in at least some ASEAN member countries, for example in Malaysia (Abdullah *et al.* 2021, Brooke and Khoo 2021) and Singapore (Brooke and Khoo 2021, Yeam and Brooke 2016). Nevertheless, Wee *et al.* (2021) reported that 70% of people with disabilities in Malaysia did not participate in any form of moderate or vigorous physical activity, while another study found that there was, typically, a strong desire to play sport amongst people with disabilities in Malaysia (Hairiel and Diah 2019). Researchers also claim that there is a lack of funding from the government (Abdullah *et al.* 2021, Kardiyanto *et al.* 2017, Wilson *et al.* 2013, Yeam and Brooke 2016), which has contributed to a lack of accessibility of facilities, availability of sport equipment, and of relevant sport programmes. This all might help explain relatively low participation in sport among people with disabilities (Abdullah *et al.* 2021, Wilson *et al.* 2013). In addition, stigma and discrimination appear to be additional issues across these countries that further adversely impact on participation in sport (Petrola 2017, Yeam and Brooke 2016).

In ASEAN countries, sports are a sphere of recognition for people with disabilities (Petrola 2017). It has been argued that there may be scope, if Paralympic type events are given greater exposure, for the general population, who may not have prior knowledge about disability, or watch disability sport, to change their perception of understanding of people with disabilities – from being weak and protected to being strong and able to contribute. For example, in Malaysia and Singapore, Paralympic medal successes appears to be associated with societal recognition (Brooke and Khoo 2021). Such perceived change in opinion can lead to recognition of people with disabilities as a member of the society.

It would seem based on the small available literature, that disability sport in ASEAN countries is not as well established, with a concomitant relative lack of participation, funding and

policy, as sport for the able-bodied. There is a lack of literature on how policy makers and those involved in developing sport in the ASEAN countries approach developing systems of disability sport. The available sources of information that do exist are typically from the more economically developed nations within ASEAN member countries, Malaysia and Singapore, and information from other countries, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam are almost nonexistent.

Aim of the Study

Considering the lack of current research in this area, the aim of this paper was to establish greater knowledge about the development and implementation of sport policy in the ASEAN countries, specifically focusing on people with disabilities. Such macro-view understanding is worthwhile as it can identify common issues across ASEAN members. The central aim of the current study, thus, was to explore how ASEAN government officials perceive the status of sport for people with disabilities. We aimed to examine this via in-depth interviews with ASEAN representatives involved in disability sport administration.

Method

Research Design

This study utilised an in-depth, semi structured interview approach (Seidman 1998). The intent of using the interview method was to describe and explain administrators' views about adapted sport and physical activities in ASEAN countries. The descriptive-qualitative design is an appropriate methodology, not only because of the small sample size but because this research design helped us describe a comprehensive summary of specific systems, policy, history, and

future plans by individuals or groups of administrators. The research protocol was approved by the [blinded for peer review] Institutional Review Board [blinded for peer review]. All participants provided informed consent.

Reflexivity

The lead author is an Asian, Japanese researcher who has engaged in sport for people with disabilities for more than 20 years. Professionally, he has engaged in international cooperation activities between Japan and Global South countries on numerous occasions. The focus of the professional work has been knowledge co-creation, which aims to create a new and useful knowledge in the target context of the country based on the knowledge brought by Japanese professionals. Thus, he always pays attention to the social contexts people live in and how that influences how they perceive things. He has received a bachelor's degree in disability studies from a Japanese university, and Master's and Ph.D. degrees in recreational therapy in universities in the United States. Thus, he understands a Global North lens to see sport for people with disability. His contribution to the current study was being the main interviewer, conducting thematic analysis, and writing the manuscript. The co-authors of the paper all contributed in terms of developing the interview schedule, analysing the interview transcripts, and writing up the paper. This enabled various inputs from contributors with differing involvement in the actual case. We feel that this contributed to more adequate data analysis, and 'encouraged greater reflexivity and detachment with regard to the lines of enquiry that were developed' (Powell *et al.* 2017, p. 558) because there was a suitable blend of greater and lesser involvement in the data collected. Accordingly, the lead author was able to discuss their thoughts about the paper and reflect more carefully on ideas generated from the interviews.

Participants

A total of nine individuals, each representing an ASEAN member country, participated in the study. The participants were originally recruited for an international collaboration project, aiming to explore the status of the ASEAN countries and help generate an action plan to develop sport for people with disabilities in their country. The ASEAN Secretariat Office initiated the recruitment, sending requests for appropriate participants to the government of each ASEAN country. This purposive sampling used the following criteria to identify potential candidates: an individual with experience in governmental office to promote sport for people with disability, who (a) is involved in a decision-making platform; (b) possesses knowledge of sports governance in their respective country; (c) possesses good understanding of the current situation in sport for people with disabilities in their respective country; and (d) is involved in and possesses good understanding on the implementation of strategic measures and/or initiatives related to sport for people with disability in their respective country. Based on the above criteria, the government of each ASEAN country chose a representative. The participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 around here

Interviews

Semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted online using a videotelephony software Zoom, and the interviews were recorded with the Zoom recording function. The interview was part of a wider project mentioned above, assisting the generation of action plans to develop sport for people with disabilities in ASEAN countries. As part of that, the interviews

focused on their views about the development, implementation, and barriers to sport policy for people with disabilities in their country. The interviews also included discussions on the purposes behind their sport policies as well as the interviewees' views and impressions about how effective their policies were. All participants, except the one from Singapore, were non-native English speakers, thus the list of questions was shared with the participants in advance of the interview. All interviews were conducted by the first and third authors. All participants except Laos and Thailand representatives participated in the interview alone. Participants from Laos and Thailand responded to interview questions via an interpreter who worked for the same organisation as the participants. The interviews lasted for approximately 75 to 90 minutes. The interview audio was transcribed by a professional, third-party audio-transcribing company. We conducted member checking with the transcript to ensure accuracy of the data (Merriam 1998). The participants received an e-mail with a copy of the interview transcript and were given an opportunity to examine the accuracy and to make amendments to the transcript if they considered it appropriate. However, only one out of nine requested for any edits to be made.

Data analysis

We aimed to interpret informants' comments in the round because there is a sense of truth but that is dependent on researchers' interpretation (Madill *et al.* 2000). It acknowledges the nuances and ambiguity of the information that are influenced by the contexts the informants' live in. Thus, we took every opportunity to learn about the informant and their country, by interacting with them on at least three occasions prior to the interview.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) was used to analyse the interview data. First, the authors read all the transcripts become familiar with the narratives. Then the authors

discussed the potential codes. Then, the transcripts were coded independently by the researchers, and the differences were discussed until agreement was reached in relation to themes. After that, the first author coded the entire transcript again to review and refine the theme. Finally, the authors discussed the definition and the name of the themes.

Results and Discussion

Our thematic analysis generated three major themes: (1) They don't know, they don't care: Perceived lack of disability awareness and disability sport recognition; (2) It is a panacea: Elite sport successes address problems at hand; and (3) There is no other way: Elite sport success to motivate funders. These themes suggest that successes in elite sports are of central importance for sport promotion among people with disabilities in ASEAN countries. This is related to the idea that many felt that elite sport success can solve problems at hand and also motivate funders. As funding is important to move the disability sport administration, it might be inevitable for them to continue promoting elite sport success for now. This felt need, however, was strongly linked with the notion that many felt that there was, otherwise, a lack of awareness or interest in disabled people and elite disability sports. It is to this theme that we now turn.

Theme 1: They don't know, they don't care: Perceived lack of disability awareness and disability sport recognition

While there are no particularly discriminatory laws for people with disabilities that have been reported among ASEAN countries (Abd Samad et al., 2018), supposedly due to the ratification of UNCRPD (Cogburn and Reuter, 2017), ASEAN representatives were aware of ignorance among the general population. The perceived lack of interest of the wider population

in many ASEAN countries toward people with disabilities is captured by the Cambodian representative who stated that: “... *in our country, their [non-disabled individuals] mindset is that if they are disabled, they cannot do anything, and the family also, their parents do not allow them to go to school if they are disabled.*” Stigma of disability at the grassroots level in ASEAN countries is significant as disability is understood as a result of bad deeds in the previous life as well as low abilities (Bualar, 2014; Kalyanpur, 2011; Ha et al., 2014), and people with disabilities are frequently marginalised and discriminated (Wilson *et al.* 2013, Wee *et al.* 2021). In addition, awareness of disability sport is generally low, as media exposure is quite limited (Brooke and Khoo 2021). These conditions create circumstances that contribute to a lack of support even from family members of people with disabilities. As the Brunei representative reported:

There is no support from the parents to bring the children to participate in disability sports. Actually, for example, the Paralympics, Special Olympics, they do form a team in the sports disability, but it depends on the people, especially from the parents. There is no support from them.

The Malaysian representative similarly noted:

... because our challenge now is how we encourage parents to involve in our programme, ... our challenge now the student want to join our programme, but maybe kind of they have a challenge which their parents didn't support. So, our challenge here is how we encourage the parents to involve together with our programme.

Support from family members is known as a predictor of disability sport participation (DePauw and Gavron 2005), as family members tend to be the main caregivers and gatekeepers for out-of-

home activities. Raising disability awareness and increasing public interest in disability sport are, thus, important targets for sport promotion in this region.

Related to this lack of awareness and/or interest in people with disabilities, some participants said that their society is not designed for people with disabilities in the first place. The Thai representative mentioned the lack of disability awareness among city planners, saying “... *the people who made the plan, – who built the road, they don't know about disability, they cannot plan together. The builders don't have knowledge...*”. This is, perhaps, not because of the lack of construction accessibility policy because the Ministerial Regulation on Facilities for the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities (BE 2548) was established in 2005, but it is likely due to poor law enforcement (Srisuppaphon et al., 2017). Similarly, the Malaysia representative reported:

My concern here is more like a facility because I know all the developer is focusing on the profit, but now we have to think about the welfare of the disabled, because how we want to make sure that the disabled can access all the facility. I think it's time for all developer, all the architects, all the engineers have to focus, also involve in this part of the welfare of the accessible for the disabled.

There are initiatives and laws related to physical accessibility of the building such as the Street, Drainage, Building Act (UBBL 34-A) and People with Disabilities Action Plan of 2016-2022. However, no penalty is associated with violations, and there has been criticism that there are problems enforcing them (Abd Samad et al., 2018). Of course, sport facilities are not immune from such lack of appropriate facility provision. The Vietnam representative mentioned a challenge that people with disabilities must use inaccessible sport facilities that are not built for them:

Especially for sports, I think they don't have available policy for the people with disability. Now, the people with disability, they train and compete at the sport facility for the 'normal' people. They don't have private, separate places for the training and competition. This is why I said to you people with disability are not (given) attention from people in the society.

As Sano (2021) suggests, the lack of disability awareness among the wider society is apparent in the narratives. Also, such lack of awareness led to the lack of accessible facilities, and the problem seems common in many ASEAN countries. As the lack of accessible facilities has been identified as a problem that contributes to low sport participation (Abdullah *et al.* 2021, Wilson *et al.* 2013), public education on disability might be needed. As Stiker (1999, p. 3) points out, 'the onset of a disability creates a disorganisation that is both concrete and social'. In relation to this point, we found that people with disabilities in ASEAN countries were 'more' disabled by the infrastructure, as well as the broader social attitudes toward them. Further, the ignorance by the public and policy, which cause a social inaccessibility, amplifies the stigmatized images of people with disabilities, being not capable of doing things (Link and Phelan 2001). To remedy such circumstances, politically, accessibility laws shown above such as BE 2548 in Thailand and UBBL 34-A in Malaysia are in place, and in sport, as mentioned by our participants, governments host sport events to increase exposure of people with disabilities in public.

Given that societal awareness on disability is low, it might not be surprising to hear that people in ASEAN countries have little knowledge of, or concern for, sport for people with disabilities. The Cambodian representative said: "*You know, in here, there are not many people involved in disability sport. I mean, the disability sport is not popular in here.*" This is because very few disability sport organizations (e.g., the National Paralympic Committee of Cambodia) exist, and most of them are located only in the capital city, Phnom Penh (Bailey and Nguon,

2014). When the Laos representative was asked why there were very few people involved in disability sport, he explained that “*people who actually do [disability] sport or understand sport are very limited. There are not many people who have the special knowledge or deep interest in [disability] sport yet.*” The lack of disability sport awareness among higher government officials was mentioned by the Vietnam representative as “*they do not have enough information, they don't care [about disability sport].*” These narratives suggest that disability sport is not well known among the general population or even among policy makers in some ASEAN countries. While some have found that Malaysians and Singaporeans have recently seen increased interest in disability sports (Brooke and Khoo 2021, Yeam and Brooke 2016), our findings demonstrate that people in other ASEAN countries are not as interested in disability sport. This low disability sport awareness can be challenging as it impacts on the generation of support – whether that be political or financial.

These findings suggest that the general population in some ASEAN countries, such as Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thai, and Vietnam, have little knowledge and acknowledgement of people with disabilities. Such low awareness seems to contribute to the general exclusion of people with disabilities. The findings of the current study is that disability sport administrators of ASEAN countries understand that stigma and exclusion are still significant problems at the grassroots level in their countries. This lack of disability awareness among the general population is arguably not an independent phenomenon from ignorance of disability sport because if they do not care about people with disabilities, they are less likely to be active seekers of disability sport information (Yeam & Brooke, 2016). Given this lack of awareness or interest in disabled people generally in some ASEAN countries, there was a perception among our participants that ‘sport’ may help to address the problems this created. We will examine these perceptions now.

Theme 2: It is a panacea: Elite sport successes address problems at hand

ASEAN representatives felt that elite sport success can reduce the stigma of disability. The Thai representative mentioned that “*(w)hen the successful disabled sportsman came back to our country, they can inspire not only the disabled but also the ‘normal’ people.*”. Furthermore, the Malaysian representative argued that:

In a Paralympic we have a gold and then even our world game, Disabled World Game also we champion. So, I know nowadays that – before this it was since Olympic Brazil that we get gold for our Paralympic. So, awareness in public in our Malaysia kind of there ... they have kind of awareness is like open their eye.

While Malaysia at the 2016 Rio Olympics won no gold medal, they achieved three gold medals in the 2016 Rio Paralympics. The Vietnam representative similarly pointed out that achievements of people with disabilities in the media can improve the stereotypical views of people with disabilities. The Cambodian representative felt that a large event was an opportunity to raise awareness. When he was asked why they will host a disability sport event, he pointed out that disability sport awareness is not yet there and said “*So that's why we plan to have 2023, the ASEAN Para Games in Cambodia. We will have the Games, so we want to develop, I mean, to promote the para sport in our society.*” These findings are in line with a previous study which reported that increased visibility of people with disabilities had a positive effect on public awareness (de Souza and Brittain, 2022). The mainstream media coverage can increase visibility to the public; however, in ASEAN countries, the mainstream media do not cover Paralympic sport unless their athletes achieve a high ranking in the Games (Brooke and Khoo, 2021; Bruce 2014). Even in the most economically advanced ASEAN country, Singapore, the mainstream

media covered Rio Paralympics only two hours per day compared to 12 hours of the Rio Olympics (Brooke, 2018). The little media coverage is, of course, not a unique problem of ASEAN, as other Global South countries like United Arab Emirates reported the lack of Paralympics media coverage (Perkin and Howe 2017). If there is not much coverage in the media, the public may not be that familiar with elite disability sport. On the other hand, the quality of media coverage must also be considered as the ‘superhuman’ depiction of elite disability athletes can establish unrealistic functional expectations for people with disabilities, which may exacerbate discrimination against people who do not meet such functional expectations (Silva & Howe, 2012). Reference can be made to the shifts in parasport coverage in the United Kingdom from evening highlights to live broadcasting, as well as from inspiration porn to featuring medal-winning athletes, has successfully ‘educate’ the public (Pullen et al. 2020). Of course, the effects and concerns around disability sport media exposure were based on Global North literature, thus, with a great difference in social contexts in the ASEAN countries, in particular, little social inclusion and greater stigma of people with disability, effects and concerns may look different.

A focus on elite sport success to reduce stigma and discrimination for people with disabilities has been criticised because the impression such elite athletes provide becomes a norm, and those who cannot meet such expectations can be further marginalised (Silva and Howe 2012). Considering that most people with disabilities cannot perform as well as those successful elite athletes, such unrealistic societal expectations can hinder social inclusion of people with disabilities. However, the above logic originated from the Global North, where people with disabilities are relatively more integrated within mainstream society. In the Global South, such as the ASEAN countries, on the other hand, stigma and discrimination of people

with disabilities are major problems in the society (Cogburn and Reuter 2017). It is also different from Global North that people with disabilities have received greater acknowledgements when there has been greater levels of success within certain elite disability sport contexts (Bourgeois 2013, Petrola 2017). As such, raising awareness through demonstrating elite sport success may not be a completely illogical approach at this point, in the particular context of the ASEAN countries.

While ASEAN countries engage in grassroots level sport promotion, our participants acknowledged that they placed emphasis on success in elite sports. A common justification among our participants was that elite sport success can inspire the grassroots to participate. They believed that those funding and making policies in their country felt that elite sporting success can inspire those who are not yet involved in sport, and medalists can be great role models. For example, the Cambodian representative said:

If you got the medal, they got the prize from the government. So, we promote all the grassroots to know that he is the hero, he also Paralympics athlete, Paralympian, he'd been there and he got many gold, he got silver, he got medal. So, we try to promote all the grassroots to become like him. So, this is what we are doing to promote the para sport in grassroots.

The Singaporean representative also felt that those successful athletes can spark interests of those with disabilities who are not yet participating in sport:

And of course, you have representing [unclear] at high performance levels, which is like Asian [Para Games] levels and above, your Paralympic Games. You then become national inspirations that people can identify very easily with, and then you become influencers for the rest of the levels.

With an agreement with the idea that elite success can influence grassroots participation, the Thai representative responded to a question about whether grassroots promotion or elite sport success is more important, he said *“The second one [elite success] is more important, to succeed in Thailand. Because we can learn from that part. When we learn from that part, we can apply for the [grassroots] promotion.”*

While people with disabilities can see these successful athletes and may feel relatedness and be inspired to participate in sport (Coates and Vickerman 2016), researchers argue that most people with disabilities would not experience inspiration from Paralympic achievements as they do not regard the Paralympians as a similar other (Silva and Howe 2012). Thus, much of the evidence suggests promoting elite sport success is not the most appropriate approach for grassroots sport promotion. The assumption of the above is that high-functioning people are already engaging in sport, and the image of Paralympians is too distant from those who have more severe disabilities. However, considering very few people participated in sport in ASEAN countries (Wee *et al.* 2021), which is different from Global North, perhaps there are still many people with disabilities who have potential for elite sport waiting to be inspired. While elite success inspiration strategy might be a more effective approach for these potential elite sport participants, its influence, at least according to the existing data would dwindle as disability sport became widely known in the society and such inspiration for the potential elite sport participants to get involved in disability sport was no longer as important as a showcase for wider awareness. On the contrary, the elite success inspiration strategy may disinterest potential grassroots sport participants. In fact, Brooke and Khoo (2021) found that media coverage of the Paralympics in Malaysia and Singapore tended to spread the image of the Paralympians as “superhuman”, which, they argued, might encourage viewers to feel that they are not that similar to themselves

anymore. In addition to that, it may be ethically problematic to use elite disability athletes as a vehicle for equality by making them role models to inspire other people with disabilities and the general public.

Our participants mentioned that athletes can have a better life because of the comparatively more generous support from their government. Thailand, for example, provides significant financial support for top-level Paralympic athletes, including financial reward for getting a medal, which was described by the Thai representative as helping to contribute to “*a better life*” for those individuals. Such support is significant because in some of the ASEAN countries people with disabilities have limited opportunities for education and competitive employment (Takasaki 2020). For example, the Cambodian representative said:

Some of my athletes, before, they never doing anything, so they - I mean, like, they got nothing, no education, no study, just staying home, doing like the field, something, but now, they come and play sport. I mean, they can get a lot of like allowance, they get budget and the living standard is much higher than before.

Similarly, the Indonesian government supports students with disabilities in the aim of helping them achieve, not only in competitive sports, but also for their future life by providing “*the food, the boarding school, accommodation, competition, also the study.*” The Indonesian representative felt that:

I think to us the sport, the people with disabilities can live better than before. Yeah, I think I told you actually before that, they can doing business after finish the post-career athlete. ... They can be the teacher. They can be another province, so like advocate or anything as different of the competence of the student athletes.

In addition to a financially better life, the Myanmar representative suggested they also enjoyed greater empowerment, which “*they can get the courage and they can get the determination and inspiration and equality.*”

There are limited opportunities for education and employment, and little chance to get out of poverty for people with disabilities in many ASEAN countries, and this is related to stigma and discrimination of disability in these countries (Takasaki 2020). Thus, there was a strong perception that, if not for sport, those with disabilities might otherwise be largely confined to their home, receiving care or, at best, engaging in low-wage, unskilled jobs that are unlikely to provide future growth in income. However, athletes are not only provided financial incentives, but in some cases, they also received greater levels of education with the view of enabling them to engage in more skilled jobs with better prospects. Our data demonstrate that in the context of some ASEAN countries, sport may be an attractive opportunity for people with disabilities to have a better life by moving up the socioeconomic ladder. Furthermore, in many cases, it was felt that there was little alternative to adopting such a focus on elite sport policy regarding people with disabilities. We will explore this theme next.

Theme 3: There is no other way: Elite sport success to motivate funders

Our participants considered that the focus on elite sport success is important because it makes their funders happy. The Vietnam representative pointed out that key political leaders will make decisions in terms of what gets funded. When asked what can make a change in policy, he said “*awareness of the people who has high responsibility with the society.*” This issue could be serious as ASEAN countries are often criticised as less democratic as few people, often those who are at the higher position in the government, are involved in decision-making (Curato and

Fossati 2020). Changes in policy of disability sport administration also requires involvement of those in higher authority, who might not be aware of the particular issues in the administration of disability sport. Thus, administrators must educate these decision makers in some way, and many felt that success within international elite disability sport competitions helped them in this process.

Some representatives implied that their government was more motivated to fund elite sports for people with disabilities because their country have a higher chance to demonstrate their presence in Paralympics than in the Olympic Games. For example, the Malaysia representative said “... *because, you know, that in our country for our athlete to have a good performance. ... the Paralympic bring our gold, but the able, I mean, the normal athlete until now didn't get the gold for our Olympics.*” The Myanmar government also paid close attention to competitive sports, as their Paralympians achieved more medals than Olympians as demonstrated in the Rio Olympics and Paralympics. The Myanmar representative said “... *Minister of the Sport pay a visit to us. ... He [has been] seeing the cases and is very happy because we are trying hard.*” Myanmar at the Olympics has never got a medal, while they got two gold medals in the Paralympics in the past. Politicians of some ASEAN countries regard demonstrating their presence in international sport competitions as national progress (Creak 2013). This might be because politicians believe that Paralympic medal success gave the impression of a country’s social and economic development, which in fact is not always accurate (Brittain 2006). While such international sporting achievements are regarded as being important to having more focused policy attention, ASEAN countries are at a much greater disadvantage, due, in large part, to comparatively little resource for winning Olympic medals (Hoffmann *et al.* 2004). Competition in Paralympics is relatively less fierce, compared to the Olympics, hence why many of our

participants considered the success on this stage was more achievable and a potential key focus of policy.

Success in elite sport can attract government leaders' attention, which can result in increased funding. The Indonesian representative reported that the government support has increased:

Because in 2018, Indonesian is a success to be number one in the Asian (Para) Games in Kuala Lumpur in 2018. So, the President of Indonesia, Mr. Jokowi, has a policy sought to back up the senior player from the disabilities.

Related to this, the Singapore representative stated during the interview, and evidenced by their annual report (Singapore Disability Sports Council, 2020), that the government fund only 60% of the total budget of her organization, and they must find donors by themselves. In other words, their funders are everyday Singaporeans. Elite sport success can spread inspiration and enthusiasm for support from them. The Singapore representative said:

Okay, I will tell you usually, right, a lot of Singaporeans will suddenly voice support for Para Sports or para-athletes when there are major game achievements, okay? Especially for the Paralympic, when our athlete actually comes back, they have a medal, it becomes a very, very big media event, a public event. And that is when a lot of Singaporeans will start to say, oh, we should do something more for Para Sports, para-athletes.

This is consistent with the findings from a study from the Global North (Patatas *et al.* 2018) arguing that awareness of policy makers is essential for increased funding. Furthermore, without funding, it is difficult to win medals at the Paralympic Games in the first place (Kardiyanto *et al.* 2017). To achieve equal opportunities for people with disabilities, as stated in UNCRPD, disability sport must be developed. They need more awareness of disability sport, more coaches,

and more accessible facilities, and it takes years to be developed. To continue to develop disability sport in their country, it might be inevitable for disability sport administrators in ASEAN countries to focus on elite sport success at this point, as it helps gaining attention and funding this sector. However, it goes without saying that they must continue developing a system that ensures equal opportunities for people with disabilities toward the future. Having discussed our key findings, we now turn to a brief discussion of the policy implications of this research.

Policy Implications

There are several key policy implications from this research, and we highlight three in particular. Firstly, although, as discussed above, there is little evidence in many Global North countries for inherent inspiration coming from elite sporting success, in the ASEAN countries, where there is such a low level of involvement of people with disabilities in mainstream society, never mind also sport, some, even limited success in Paralympic-type events does appear to be a possible route to reducing stigma within wider society, and potentially, then contributing to greater sporting involvement for people with disabilities. This is particularly important because social stigma around families of people with disabilities can prompt them to hide the ‘disabled’ family members and may further increase barriers as they close doors for participation opportunities. As such, low- and lower-middle-income countries may also find some benefit in targeting elite sport competition for people with disabilities. This is further reinforced because, as identified above, there seems much less chance that such countries would enjoy significant success in able-bodied international sporting competitions, because the level of competition, and the resource implications therein, is so much higher.

Secondly, and related to this point, the provision of aid – financially and in terms of

human and physical resources – to support the development of sport for people with disabilities is a crucial launchpad for growing involvement in sport, and contributing, potentially, to reducing stigma around the involvement of people with disabilities. The aid provided from the Japanese government to the ASEAN countries in this respect has had significant, positive, policy implications, not least because there was a lack of funding available from the ASEAN governments themselves.

Finally, any developments in the provision of sport for people with disabilities is limited to the physical access that can be achieved. As such, no matter what efforts are put in from a sport for development policy point of view, without changes to the wider infrastructure, any developments are bound to be limited. This is perhaps a matter of implementation and enforcement, as the basic laws for physical accessibility are installed thanks to the UNCRPD. As such, this means that policies must also be developed beyond sport if such developments are to be realised in the most significant way.

Of course, a homogeneous approach cannot be taken due to differences in their economic status, religion, and culture. For example, economically developing countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam may need to put more effort in establishing accessible infrastructure. Whereas economically more developed countries, such as Singapore and Malaysia, may consider collaborating with aid projects in the other ASEAN countries and share the technical resources from the aid providers, as economically developed countries may not attract direct aids.

Limitations

While the current study had some informative findings, some limitations should be acknowledged. In particular, the interviews were conducted in English, which is an official

common language in ASEAN countries but not the first recognised language, except in Singapore. While there were several actions taken to remediate, such as providing the list of questions that formed the basis of the interviews prior to the interview, allowing an interpreter to accompany the participant, if needed, and having interviewees check the transcript, there may have been some misunderstanding and some aspects may have got lost in translation.

Conclusion

Regarding sport for people with disabilities, elite sports tend to be the main focus within the ASEAN countries. This is because our participants felt that elite sport success can begin to address two major political problems in their countries: (a) the considerable stigma and discrimination of people with disabilities generally, that significantly contributed to fewer chances for education and employment, and; (b) greater promotion of disability sport and the broader recognition of PWD of their countries on the international stage that may not be accomplished from competing in ‘able-bodied’ international sporting events. As such, contrary to the majority of academic literature – mostly focused on Global North sport policy, that elite sport success does not correspond with sustainable growth in sport participation at the grassroots level – in ASEAN countries, and others in the Global South, where such success in able-bodied sporting competition is rare, achieving success in international sporting competition for people with disabilities does provide some sort of exposure internationally. This then seems to have some impact on domestic awareness of people with disabilities. In addition, given the relative global exposure enjoyed, it has also been key to generating more funding for disability sport participation in a way that would, perhaps, otherwise be unlikely without the relative international success. As such, whilst most literature from the Global North disagrees that elite

sport success would expand grassroots level sport participation, it might have greater impact in the context of ASEAN countries because the current level of exposure is so low. Furthermore, given this, there are likely to be much greater levels of ‘untapped’ potential amongst the wider population of people with disabilities in these countries given the extent to which they have been marginalised in mainstream society.

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Table 1. Basic information of participants

Representing Country	World Economic Ranking	Country GDP (Billion)	GDP per Capita	Representing Organization	Gender Identity of the representative	Position
Cambodia	102	\$25.19	\$1,467	National Paralympic Committee of Cambodia	Male	Director of Planning, Protocol and Events Management
Brunei Darussalam	135	\$12.00	\$26,947	Ministry of Education	Female	Education officer
Indonesia	16	\$1,060.00	\$3,797	The Ministry of Youth and Sports	Male	Head of Subdivision Sports School
Lao People's Democratic Republic	115	\$18.52	\$2,476	Ministry of Education and Sports	Male	Department Director of Sports for People with Disabilities
Malaysia	40	\$337.28	\$10,165	National Youth and Sports Department	Female	Assistant Director
Myanmar	66	\$81.26	\$1,471	Myanmar Paralympic Sports Federation	Female	Vice President
Singapore	37	\$345.29	\$58,094	Singapore Disability Sports Council	Female	Executive Director
Thailand	26	\$500.29	\$7,139	Department of Physical Education, Ministry of Tourism and Sports	Male	Director of Bureau of Recreation
Viet Nam	39	\$342.94	\$3,446	Viet Name Sports Administration	Male	International Cooperation Officer