Moving the Para Sport Movement: A Capacity Assessment of Parasport Delivery and Potential in the Caribbean

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The Commonwealth Games (CG) attracts 7000 participants from 54 member states of the Commonwealth of Nations and is one of the largest global multi-sport events in the world. Organized by the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF), the Games are the only multi-sport event of this size and scale to integrate able-bodied and parasport athletes. While the CG actively pursues inclusion and equity of opportunity in high-performance sport, the CGF has a broader vision that goes beyond the Games to use sport to drive positive economic, social and environmental development, to support health and wellbeing, and enhance social progress. Despite CGF’s commitment to access and inclusion in its member nations, numerous lower resource Commonwealth nations in the Caribbean rarely send parasport athletes to the Commonwealth Games.

In many nations in the Caribbean region, disability is a contested notion and poorly understood, resulting in few opportunities for parasport participation (Schmidt et al., 2008). Historically it is assumed that a lack of sporting infrastructure and financial resources necessary to support mass participation in sport for persons with disabilities are responsible (Kaufman et al., 2013). Concurrently, societal attitudes, norms and practices create deterrents to successful participation of persons with disabilities and further exacerbate social inequities (Stephenson, 2019). More nuanced explanations for the lack of sporting inclusion for people with impairment in the Caribbean nations and how to systematically identify, mitigate and eliminate existing hindrances do not yet exist.

In collaboration with CGF, the research addresses this issue, and focuses on current structural, cultural, and organizational inequities that have contributed to low parasport participation in Caribbean Commonwealth countries. Drawing upon Truyens et al. (2014) Organisational Resources and First Order Capabilities (ORFOC) framework, we employed a three phased approach. Phase I involved the construction of preliminary sport development profiles of all CG nations in the Caribbean. Phase II identified key personnel related to sport development in these nations and interviews were conducted with members of national sport governing bodies, sport development officers, and support systems personnel (e.g. disability organizations, leisure centre managers). Phase III will focus on organizational readiness for parasport programming.

Preliminary findings from the first two phases of this project suggest social stigmatization of persons with disabilities persist, impacting resource allocation and the prioritization of PA and sporting opportunities. Rates of participation and athlete development are negatively affected by social understandings of disability, limited access to athlete classification, and advocacy fatigue of those who work with and support person with disabilities. Increasing in-situ coaching with parasport expertise and/or interest, culturally informed media highlighting parasport, and fulsome partnerships with higher resource CG nations were identified as remedies to support and enhance the development of parasport in the Caribbean.

Informed by the research and in collaboration with CGF and interested Caribbean and partners, the final phase of the project will develop a culturally informed program to be delivered in situ, that enhances parasport development, increases parasport participation, and to fill the most pertinent gaps in the delivery of parasport in the Caribbean as identified by the research.