

Sports Policy Implementation on Inclusive Sports: Strategies for Ensuring Equal Opportunities for all

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Abstract

The paper examined the implementation of sport policies in promoting inclusive sports and ensuring equal opportunities for all individuals regardless of gender, disability, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity. It explores how functional sports policies can enhance mass participation and contribute to health promotion, peace, and national integration. The paper highlighted that while many nations, including Nigeria, have developed policies that advocate for inclusion, the practical realization of these policies remains limited due to infrastructural, financial, administrative, and cultural challenges. Using a conceptual review approach, the study identified key obstacles such as inadequate facilities, limited funding, poor policy coordination, lack of trained personnel, and insufficient public awareness. It further outlined strategies for effective inclusion, including policy strengthening, infrastructure development, capacity building, advocacy, and multi-sector collaboration. The conclusion emphasized that inclusive sports are essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those relating to good health, quality education, and reduced inequalities. The paper recommended that effective implementation of inclusive sport policies requires political will, sustainable funding, and community engagement to foster equality, accessibility, and social cohesion in sports.

Keywords: Capacity building, Equal opportunity, Inclusive sports, Infrastructure development and Sport policy implementation

Introduction

World over, the driving force for mass sports participation rests on functional sports policy. Functional sports policy plays a significant role in the promotion of mass sports participation at all levels of the society (Amos, et al., 2019). Mass sports participation, unarguably has been known to contribute to health promotion as well as an instrument for peace, unity and national integration among sports participants and their nations. A country with effective sport policy tends to lay solid foundation for general mass sports participation for its citizens. Mass sports participation by citizens of a country enhances sports development in all spheres.

The Nigerian sports sector is faced with myriad of political and administrative bottle necks which are responsible for the dwindling nature of sports development. It is a well-known fact that the secret behind sports development in the developed and other developing nations today could be traced to their systems of government's sports administration and management. Sports development in every nation depend largely on the quality of leadership in the management of sports organizations. Also, the pace of national sports development is determined by other factors such as availability of competent manpower, good policies and implementation, human resource management and development, proper management of financial and material resources, adequate provision and management of physical infrastructure, proper management of financial and material resources, adequate provision and management of physical infrastructure, proper management of information Communication and Technology (ICT) for sport related researches and dissemination of information and planning. Unfortunately, Nigeria as a nation is lacking in many of the aforementioned aspects of sports development (Zamani & Adeyanju, 2018).

Sport has long been recognized as a universal language capable of breaking barriers, fostering unity, and promoting human development. The concept of inclusive sports emphasizes the right of every individual regardless of gender, disability, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or age to participate and benefit from sporting activities. However, while many nations have adopted policies promoting sports for all, actual implementation often remains weak (Charway & Asare, 2025). Inclusive sport policy implementation focuses on translating policy statements into practical action that ensures access, participation, and equity. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015), sports policies must integrate inclusion as a central component of national development agendas. This paper discusses how sport policy implementation can effectively promote inclusion and ensure equal opportunities for all.

Inclusive Sports

Inclusive sports refer to the systematic effort to provide opportunities for all individuals to participate in sporting activities, irrespective of their physical, mental, social, or economic limitations. It advocates for diversity, equity, and accessibility in sport programs while promoting the idea that everyone should have the opportunity to enjoy the physical, psychological, and social benefits of sports (UNESCO, 2024a). Inclusion in sport requires removing barriers that prevent participation and ensuring that policies, facilities, and programs accommodate individuals of all backgrounds, abilities, and identities. According to Elipe-Lorenzo et al., (2025), inclusive sports initiatives are vital for fostering social cohesion and reducing discrimination by integrating persons with disabilities and marginalized populations into mainstream sporting structures.

Inclusion goes beyond simply allowing participation; it entails creating equitable systems and supportive environments that ensure meaningful engagement for every participant. This means restructuring competition rules, modifying equipment, and training coaches to adopt inclusive practices that recognize the diverse needs of athletes (Işıkgöz et al., 2025). As highlighted by Charway and Grønkjær (2025), the goal of inclusive sports is not only to provide access but to cultivate a sense of belonging and value among participants, regardless of ability or background. When inclusion is successfully implemented, it enhances teamwork, empathy, and respect among participants while promoting broader social integration within communities.

Furthermore, inclusive sports have been recognized as a catalyst for achieving sustainable development goals, particularly those related to quality education, gender equality, reduced inequalities, and good health and well-being (UNESCO, 2024b; World Health Organization (WHO), 2023). The W. H. O. (2023), also emphasized that inclusive sports contribute to improving mental health, enhancing community participation, and empowering vulnerable groups to overcome stigma and exclusion. Therefore, inclusive sports are not merely recreational activities, they represent a social movement that embodies fairness, equality, and human dignity, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of active and meaningful participation in physical activities and sports.

Sport Policy Implementation

Sport policy implementation refers to the process of putting formulated sport policies, strategies, and frameworks into effective practice in order to achieve set objectives such as mass participation, talent development, and inclusion (Houlihan & Green, 2023). It involves

translating policy statements into coordinated actions across government agencies, sport organizations, educational institutions, and communities. Effective sport policy implementation ensures that the goals of equity, accessibility, and participation outlined in national or international frameworks are realized at the grassroots level. According to UNESCO (2024a), sport policy must be grounded in inclusion, sustainability, and accountability to promote equitable participation for all groups within the society.

The success of sport policy implementation depends on several interrelated factors including institutional capacity, leadership, funding, and stakeholder collaboration (Hoye et al., 2024). Weak governance structures, lack of political will, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms often hinder implementation, leading to disparities between policy intentions and real outcomes. For instance, Charway, et al (2025) found that in many African countries, inclusive sport policies exist on paper but fail in practice due to limited financial support and insufficient awareness at local levels. Thus, effective implementation requires not only the presence of well-designed policies but also strong administrative commitment and continuous evaluation to ensure that inclusion goals are met.

Furthermore, sport policy implementation must adopt a participatory approach that engages all stakeholders, including marginalized populations, in decision-making and program delivery (European Commission, 2024; WHO, 2023). W. H. O. (2023), emphasized that successful policy execution involves collaboration between health, education, and sport sectors to promote physical activity and inclusion. E. C. (2024) also stressed the importance of data-driven policy monitoring to measure progress toward equality and access. Ultimately, sport policy implementation should not only aim at increasing participation rates but also at creating sustainable systems that promote fairness, diversity, and human development through sports.

Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Sport Policies

1. **Inadequate Infrastructure:** A major challenge in implementing inclusive sport policies is the lack of disability-friendly infrastructure and facilities. Many sporting venues are not designed to accommodate individuals with physical impairments, often lacking ramps, accessible restrooms, adaptive equipment, or safe entry points (Elife-Lorenzo et al 2025). This infrastructural gap limits participation among persons with disabilities and contradicts the goals of inclusion stated in international frameworks such as the UNESCO Fit for Life initiative. The absence of universal design principles in sports development projects also highlights weak enforcement of accessibility standards at both national and local levels (UNESCO, 2024a).
2. **Limited Funding:** Funding remains a critical barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive sport programs. In many developing nations, budgetary priorities are directed toward elite competitions and professional athletics, leaving limited resources for community-level inclusion initiatives (European Commission, 2024). According to Charway et al (2025), insufficient financial support for adaptive sports, coaching, and facility development hinders the practical realization of inclusive policies. The lack of sustainable financing models also affects the continuity of inclusion programs, making it difficult to procure adaptive equipment or support athletes with disabilities over time.
3. **Cultural and Gender Barriers:** Cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes continue to restrict participation in sports, particularly among women, persons with disabilities, and minority groups. In many societies, sports are still perceived as male-dominated

activities, which discourages female involvement and reinforces systemic discrimination (UNESCO, 2024b). Işıkgöz et al (2025) emphasized that gender norms often determine who participates in physical activity, resulting in unequal opportunities. Similarly, stigmatization of persons with disabilities persists, making it difficult for them to be accepted as active members of sporting communities. Overcoming these barriers requires targeted awareness campaigns and inclusive education programs to reshape cultural perceptions.

4. **Poor Policy Coordination:** Weak institutional coordination among ministries, sport federations, and local authorities significantly undermines the implementation of inclusive sport policies. In many cases, responsibilities for sport inclusion are fragmented across different government sectors, leading to duplication, policy gaps, and poor accountability (Houlihan & Green, 2023). Charway et al. (2025) observed that while some national policies outline inclusive objectives, their execution is often inconsistent due to limited collaboration between agencies. Establishing inter-ministerial committees and clear policy frameworks can help improve synergy and ensure inclusive programs are effectively monitored and evaluated (European Commission, 2024).
5. **Lack of Trained Personnel:** A shortage of trained personnel remains one of the most persistent obstacles to inclusive sport development. Coaches, physical educators, and administrators often lack the technical knowledge and practical experience required to manage adaptive sports or work with athletes with diverse needs (Hoye et al 2024). Without proper training in inclusive coaching methodologies and disability awareness, sport facilitators may unintentionally exclude participants who require specialized support. W. H. O. (2023) recommended continuous capacity-building programs and

inclusive training curricula as essential measures to bridge this skill gap and promote equitable participation in sport.

Furthermore, insufficient public awareness about the value and benefits of inclusive sports also hinders progress. Many communities and educational institutions remain unaware of the positive physical, mental, and social impacts of sports participation among persons with disabilities and marginalized groups (UNESCO, 2024a). According to the WHO (2023), public attitudes and misconceptions often discourage inclusion and perpetuate stigma. Increasing media advocacy, school-based education, and nationwide campaigns can play a vital role in changing perceptions and encouraging communities to embrace inclusive participation across all sporting levels.

Strategies for Ensuring Equal Opportunities for all in Inclusive Sports

1. **Infrastructure Development:** Developing inclusive sports infrastructure is crucial for promoting access and participation for everyone, including persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups. Modern sports facilities should integrate universal design principles, ensuring accessibility through ramps, adaptive equipment, and inclusive changing areas (Elife-Lorenzo et al., 2025). Governments and private investors must prioritize inclusive urban planning to create safe and accessible spaces for recreation. According to UNESCO (2024b), the lack of infrastructure is one of the leading deterrents to participation, particularly in developing nations. Hence, investment in inclusive facilities is both a social and economic imperative that enhances community engagement and supports equitable participation in sports.
2. **Funding and Resource Mobilization:** Sustainable funding remains a cornerstone of inclusive sport implementation. Governments must allocate dedicated budgets for inclusive sports while encouraging private sector participation through corporate social

responsibility (CSR) initiatives and sponsorships (Houlihan & Green, 2023). International organizations, including UNESCO and the International Paralympic Committee, also play key roles in supporting funding for adaptive sports (UNESCO, 2024a). Innovative funding models, such as community grants and crowd funding, can further mobilize resources to develop inclusive programs. As Charway et al. (2025) argue, consistent and equitable funding mechanisms ensure that inclusive sports remain viable and accessible to all participants, regardless of background or ability.

3. **Policy Strengthening and Enforcement:** Effective implementation of inclusive sports begins with the establishment and enforcement of robust policies that explicitly promote equal participation. Governments should revise existing sport policies to include clear anti-discrimination clauses and ensure legal protection for marginalized groups (European Commission, 2024). Enforcing compliance through sanctions for exclusionary practices enhances accountability among sports organizations. UNESCO (2024a) emphasizes that inclusion should not be treated as an optional policy objective but as a human right enshrined in national legislation. When countries align their sports frameworks with international standards such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), they create a policy environment that fosters fairness and inclusivity across all levels of sports.
4. **Capacity Building:** Empowering coaches, educators, and administrators through inclusive training programs is key to ensuring equal opportunities in sports. Many practitioners lack sufficient knowledge about adaptive sports and disability inclusion (Hoye, et al 2024). Therefore, integrating inclusive pedagogy and adaptive coaching techniques into professional development programs can significantly improve

implementation. The World Health Organization (2023) recommends regular workshops, certification schemes, and inclusive curricula at all educational levels to enhance technical capacity. Such initiatives not only strengthen institutional competence but also cultivate empathy and awareness among stakeholders responsible for driving inclusive sports policies.

5. **Public Awareness and Advocacy:** Public awareness and advocacy are vital components of inclusive sports promotion. Changing societal attitudes toward disability, gender, and diversity requires deliberate communication strategies and consistent advocacy campaigns (UNESCO, 2024c). Schools, community organizations, and the media can play transformative roles by highlighting the achievements of marginalized athletes and promoting narratives of inclusion. Işıkgöz, Şahbudak, and Deveci (2025) found that targeted awareness programs significantly reduce stigma and improve public support for gender equality in sports. Consequently, national governments and NGOs should collaborate on multimedia campaigns that reinforce positive perceptions and showcase inclusivity as a shared social value.

Conclusion

Inclusive sports serve as a vital instrument for achieving social equity, national integration, and human development. Despite the presence of well-formulated policies in many nations, the challenges often lies in the effective implementation of these frameworks. In Nigeria and other developing countries, issues such as inadequate infrastructure, weak policy coordination, insufficient funding, and low awareness have limited access to inclusive sports opportunities. Inclusive sport policy implementation must therefore move beyond rhetoric to practice ensuring that the principles of equality, accessibility, and diversity are translated into concrete actions. As

UNESCO (2024a) notes, inclusion in sports is not merely a social objective but a human right that strengthens peace, health, and social cohesion. When implemented effectively, inclusive sports contribute significantly to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to health, education, and reduced inequalities.

Recommendations

1. The Federal Governments should strengthen and periodically review existing sports policies to align with international inclusion standards such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Legal frameworks must explicitly mandate equal access and impose sanctions against discriminatory practices in sports.
2. Public and Private sectors should invest in accessible sports facilities and adaptive equipment. Urban and community sports development projects must adopt universal design principles to ensure participation by all, including persons with disabilities.
3. The National Institute of Sports training programs should be institutionalized to equip coaches, administrators, and teachers with skills in inclusive coaching and adaptive sports. Continuous professional development will enhance their ability to manage diverse participants effectively.
4. Dedicated funding streams for inclusive sports should be created at national and local levels. Partnerships with NGOs, corporate sponsors, and international organizations can provide additional financial support and promote program sustainability.
5. The National Sports Commission should organize nationwide campaigns to change public perceptions about disability and gender in sports. Media platforms, schools, and communities can play a pivotal role in promoting positive narratives about inclusion and equality.

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