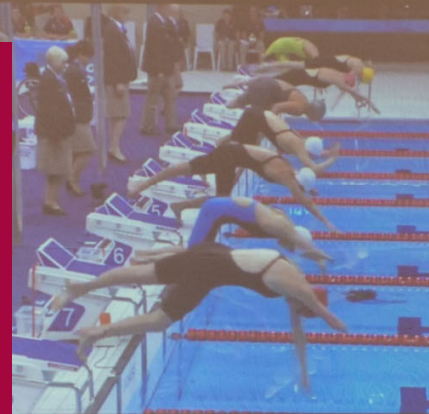


PARA SPORT AGAINST STIGMA

Evidence brief on engaging
communities in Para sport in
Malawi



Delivered by



Part of the AT2030 programme, funded by UK Aid and led by GDI Hub



Overview of this report

Stigma and discrimination are among the most pressing challenges facing persons with disabilities and their families in Malawi. It leads to social exclusion from many areas such as education, employment, and sport. Addressing stigma and other barriers to inclusion must be part of an inter-Ministerial approach to implementing disability policy in Malawi. This report shares findings from a major research study on the potential of Para sport for addressing stigma, and provides a set of recommendations.

Key insights from the research

- Challenging stigma can support wider rights and entitlements access, including improvements to access to disability services and Assistive Technology (AT).
- The Paralympics and para sport can be a powerful platform for addressing local forms of disability stigma.
- Para athletes are powerful role models and can counter internalised stigma.
- Local stories and community engagement Paralympic sport is critical to it's potential to catalyse social change.
- Engaging schools in para sport can advance inclusive education, inclusive sport, and support with the identification of the next generation of Para athletes.

Key recommendations

1. Malawi is leading the way across Sub-Saharan Africa in using Paralympic sport as a platform for social change. Malawi should continue pioneering in this space and advocating for other countries to follow its example in relevant national and international forums.
2. Key ministries and partners across sport, disability and media/ communication need to collaborate to support Para sport and Para sport localization and community engagement.
3. Implementing partners should make use of the *Making Noise* toolkit to foster localisation and community engagement efforts, which are vital enablers of impact.

Research Methodology

This evidence brief is based on an integrated qualitative dataset generated through traditional research methods (interviews, focus groups and content analysis) and action research informed by ethnographic and participatory approaches.

This includes:

- Expert interviews on the broadcast production (n=10)
- TV audience focus groups in three urban centers in Malawi (Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and Zomba) Groups were: men-only, women-only, and a mixed group; with six to ten participants in each (total n=84)
- Content analysis, 13x English-language packages, 2x Chichewa-language packages
- Action research informed by ethnographic action research and participatory approaches.
 - Cycle 1 (July 2021-March 2022): the MBC was funded to produce Chichewa-language commentary; Theatre for Development and Mobile Screenings in three districts across the North, Central and Southern regions. Data collected via participant observation, before and after interviews, and documentation using fieldnotes, photography and video (n= 360 engaged directly, n= 1,800 engaged indirectly through household/family connections).
 - Cycle 2 (June 2022 - December 2022): pilot implementation of the *Making Noise toolkit* including a workshop in Blantyre to create and implement an action plan to use the para sport as a platform for social change; with continuous reflection on action. (n=12 engaged directly).

Thematic Analysis was used to combine interpretations from the data with knowledge from theoretical and critical literatures and ongoing contextual dialogue with partners and participants throughout the research process.

Disability and Sport in Context

Our research investigated the meanings of disability in context in order to understand how disability and Paralympic sport are understood within local frameworks of knowledge. People with disabilities and their families in Malawi often face significant stigma, exclusion and discrimination.

Key points:

- **One of the forces of disability stigma in Malawi is an often fatalistic belief in ‘disability as inability’.** People with disabilities may be seen as a burden, requiring charity. Disability is often associated with disturbances to cultural, economic, spiritual and social orders.
- **Challenging stigma across society is foundational to other rights issues.** The fatalism associated with disability can be a barrier to people with disabilities and their families and communities seeking out rights entitlements, such as access to education, and Assistive Technology.
- **Challenging stigma requires more than awareness raising.** It needs to challenge deeply held prejudices and assumptions that operate at a societal, cultural and emotional level.

“Most of the time people think that people with disabilities are useless and cannot assist the family in their time of need” (urban viewer)



Figure 1 Some of the community engagement activities were preceded by traditional performances by masked dancers, who have connections to ancestral spirits. Disability is often understood in connection to moral and spiritual knowledge frameworks, which tend to foster fatalistic assumptions of ‘disability as inability’.

Impact of watching the Paralympics

THE TOKYO PARALYMPIC BROADCASTS AND COVERAGE OF THE AFRICAN UNION REGION 5 YOUTH GAMES WERE A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PLATFORM FOR CHALLENGING STIGMA IN MALAWI.

The research finds Para sport had strong ‘affective power’ (Pullen 2021) to provoke not just understandings and awareness but feelings and emotions (Ahmed 2004). Participants felt emotionally ‘moved’ and typically reacted with joy, amazement and hope, emotions which are directly in opposition to the fear, pity and prejudice at the root of stigma.

“I have been moved so much. In the past, when I saw a person with a disability I would think about how hard it was to be so limited in life, but now I know that they can do so much more, like playing sports in a wheelchair” (urban viewer)

The audience research with both rural and urban audiences found that the Paralympics and other forms of storytelling on Para sport was a relevant and powerful antidote to the widespread perception of disability as ‘inability’, and of people with disabilities as ‘useless’ and in need of charity and pity.

Participants in the research described how seeing Para athletes achieve can challenge assumptions of inability across all spheres of life, not just sport. It redirected the values of ‘helping’ towards a more rights-based perspective, recognising capabilities. Importantly, this was assimilated with relevant cultural frameworks for understanding disability, especially linked with religion and spirituality, for example, making visible God-given talents. Watching the Tokyo Paralympics was also directly linked to reconsidering of the troubling consequences of stigma, shame, and fear, such as ‘hiding’ or locking people with disabilities in the house.

“The highlights have taught me that disability is not something we need to hide. We can let the relative interact with his friends rather than keep him/her inside a house.” (urban viewer)

There are limitations to what Para sport can achieve, and research elsewhere has indicated that Para sport may not be helpful for all people or all disabilities (Berger 2008; Howe 2011; Purdue and Howe 2012). A variety of disability role models alongside sporting ones is ideal. That said, promoting greater engagement in the Paralympics has significant potential to be impactful in Malawi, responding to disability stigma and promoting a rights-based and capability framework.

“IT HAS LEFT ME SPEECHLESS”: THE UNEXPECTED POWER OF PARA SWIMMING

The research found that Para Swimming was amongst the most striking sports for Malawian audiences. Both rural and urban audiences were ‘amazed’, ‘astonished’ and ‘challenged’.

The clue to understanding this lies in unpacking the local context. In Malawi, swimming is seen as a highly respected skill. For example, during the rainy season people who can swim are relied upon to help other community members cross flooded rivers safely. When audiences saw people with disabilities swimming as part of the screenings there were audible gasps and cheers. Seeing this directly countered widespread assumptions about abilities. In this way, although pool swimming is not a popular or widely accessible sport amongst Malawians, Para Swimming was one of the most emotionally affective and impactful sports for both rural and urban audiences.

This insight demonstrates the value of continued research to inform future broadcasts.





Para athletes as role models for people with disabilities and their families

ENGAGING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT FOR RIGHTS ACQUISITION. PARA ATHLETES OFFER IMPORTANT ROLE MODELS AND A RELEVANT ENTRY POINT FOR ENGAGING FAMILIES.

Promoting greater engagement with the Paralympic Games can be powerful for people with disabilities and their families, who may experience internalised stigma or 'internalised ableism' (Campbell 2018). A father of a boy with a disability facing financial and other struggles said after watching the screenings:

"At first I thought my child had no opportunities in life. But watching his fellow colleagues who have disabilities has given me hope that my child has a lot of opportunities in his life. He has a bright future and all I have to do is encourage him." (rural viewer)

Our research finds that parents and families are a particularly important group to engage with, since they often have experienced considerable stigma and hardship themselves, and because their actions have significant consequences for rights acquisition for their children, including advocating for access to AT.

Localisation of Paralympics and Para sport

LOCAL STORYTELLING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ARE VITAL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE. THE *MAKING NOISE* TOOLKIT HAS BEEN CREATED TO FOSTER LOCALISATION, AND HAS BEEN PROVEN TO BE A VITAL ENABLER OF IMPACT.



Figure 2 After using the 'Making Noise' toolkit, a local commercial TV station in Malawi produced a 30 minute programme featuring a sitting-volleyball player. The research finds that locally produced content is a vital complement to centrally produced highlights packages.

The research strongly indicates that relying on the centrally-produced TV broadcast packages alone will not be enough for the Paralympics Games to have meaningful impact in contexts like Malawi. Barriers to impact can include: commentary in foreign/ colonial languages, use of generic narratives without contextualisation, lack of access to TVs, lack of relatability to high-tech facilities, and unfamiliar sports shown on screen.

Low rates of private TV ownership indicate a need to look at more appropriate distribution options. Depending on the context, community engagement activities such mobile screenings and Theatre for Development in rural areas, as well as radio broadcasts, streaming, and distribution via communal video show rooms (places where Premier League Football is most often consumed) could be effective.

Malawi was part of a pilot to innovate in the area of Paralympic broadcasting, becoming the only Sub-Saharan African country to produce local language commentary for the Tokyo 2020/21 Games. The Malawian commentary team included a sports journalist well known for commentating on local football, and a disability

"The commentators were fun. It was just like I was watching Malawian football"
(rural viewer)

rights reporter, who drew connections between the Tokyo Paralympics and disability experience in Malawi. Their commentary was found to significantly contribute to people's enjoyment and engagement.

Malawi also led the way in using a new '*Making Noise Toolkit*', a practical resource informed by this research. The *Making Noise Toolkit* creates a network of disability sport groups, disability service providers and advocacy groups, the media, and communication practitioners, who come together to use the Paralympic platform to advance local agendas, including through theatre, screenings, festivals, mainstream media, and more. When used in the lead up to the Region 5 Youth Games (2022) it led directly several key impacts (see below).

Therefore, localisation of Paralympic sport coverage not only enables more meaningful engagement and enhances impact but will also support longer term ambitions towards sustainability and commercialization.

Making Noise: Key Impacts

Agreement for scholarships for para athletes at Henry Henderson School of Excellence finally signed after delays - likely prompted by the 'noise'.



Leap forward in quality, relevance, quantity of reporting on para sport. Journalists learn about appropriate language to report on disability.

Two companies interested in corporate sponsorship of MPC activities



Continued partnership between PODCAM and MPC to engage parents and children across Malawi in para sport.



Approx. 300 calls from the public supporting MPC work. 13 parents signed up children for para sport

MAP in discussions with MPC about providing wheelchairs for athletes



Partnership with DIWODE to provide employment support for para athletes post active athletic careers



District government written to ask for more school activities, potential to co-fund.



Introducing Para sport in schools can advance inclusion

ENGAGING WITH SCHOOLS ON PARA SPORT CAN ADVANCE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, INCLUSIVE SPORT, AND CONTRIBUTE TO IDENTIFYING THE NEXT GENERATION OF PARA ATHLETES. I'MPOSSIBLE IS A HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATIONAL TOOL THAT CAN BE USED AS THE BASIS OF MALAWI'S STRATEGY TO IMPLEMENT INCLUSIVE PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORT FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.

The research investigated the experience of implementing of I'mPOSSIBLE in Malawi. I'mPOSSIBLE is an education programme created by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) that has been implemented by a growing number of National Paralympic Committees (NPCs) around the world, including in Malawi. The MPC has trained 130 teachers in 65 schools across three districts of Chiradzulu, Liongwe and Mzimba. The training targeted physical education (PE) teachers and Special Educational Needs teachers.

Teachers who have been trained in the I'mPOSSIBLE programme report an increased motivation to include young people with disabilities in sport and education, and said that the training has transformed their thinking and practice around disability inclusion in schools.

"That [training] changed completely my mind about people with physical challenges." (PE Teacher, Lilongwe, March 14, 2022)



Figure 3 Photo by Ezaius Innocent, IPC



Figure 4 Photo by Ezaius Innocent, IPC

Schools that have participated in the I'mPOSSIBLE programme have reported that it contributed directly to:

- Children with disabilities being included in a mainstream football clubs
- Increased confidence and concentration in classes among learners with disabilities;
- A greater appreciation of the diverse talents and abilities of children with disabilities by teachers, students and the wider community.

"I'mPOSSIBLE was very good for us. We needed to break that attitudinal discrimination, that starts in the family - that our community has - that children [with disabilities] cannot do sport. The knowledge from I'mPOSSIBLE empowered us to involve the community and change the mind of the community, that disability does not mean inability" (PE teacher, Chiradzulu, 2022)

The research indicates that a sustainable, system wide implementation model is needed. The high transfer rate of teachers from school to school limits the impact of the current school-by-school teacher training model.

The MPC has found that engaging with schools is critical to identifying talented young people with potential to be the next generation of Para athletes representing Malawi. Teachers and the MPC agreed that more interschool competition opportunities are needed.

Towards the future

MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM OF MALAWI'S POSITION AS A LEADER IN USING PARALYMPIC SPORT FOR SOCIAL CHANGE WILL REQUIRE ONGOING COMMITMENT TO COLLABORATION AND SUPPORT FROM GOVERNMENT AND OTHER PARTNERS.

There is a virtuous cycle between increasing public engagement in para sport, generating opportunities within schools and communities to participate in disability and inclusive sport, and support to develop Malawi's future elite para-athletes and their coaches. All three areas need integrated support in order for para sport to become an effective platform for social change.

This research indicates that para sport can contribute to the following Priority Areas of the Malawi National Disability Policy:

- **Policy Priority Area 2: Assistive Technology** – para sport can increase community level demand for AT and disability rights. Partnerships between MPC and OPDs/ service providers can increase access to service provision for people living in communities and athletes.
- **Policy Priority Area 4: Education** – the I'MPOSSIBLE education package has been implemented successfully by the MPC to support inclusive education, including physical education, in several schools. It could be included systemically in teacher training curriculum.
- **Policy Priority Area 8: Self-representation and participation** - para sport can be an effective platform for persons with disability to advance advocacy and activism on disability rights in mainstream forums. Para-athletes have engaged with mainstream media and tell their stories, disability reporters contributed sports commentary, and OPDs played active roles in the *Making Noise* activities to further their agenda.
- **Policy Priority Area 9: Sport, Arts, Recreation and Culture** – increasing participation in sport for persons with disabilities through improved and systemic support for para sport at recreational and elite levels.

This indicates a need for ongoing collaboration across ministries/ departments including:

- Department for Disability
- Ministry of Sport
- Ministry of Information
- Ministry of Education

As well as:

- DPOs and disability service providers
- Malawi Paralympic Committee

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About Para Sport Against Stigma

[Para Sport Against Stigma](#) (PSAS) is four-year project (2020-2024) that is delivered by Loughborough University London, in partnership with the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and University of Malawi, Chancellor College. Para Sport Against Stigma is part of AT2030, a programme funded by UK Aid and led by the Global Disability Innovation Hub. AT2030 will test 'what works' to improve access to assistive technology and will invest £20m to support solutions to scale.

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