The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 4 | Issue 10 | October 2026
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online), SJIF IF(2026): 5.6
Website: www.theacademic.in

Inclusion And Diversity In Sports Management: Policies, Practice, And Performance

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DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24492425

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 17-10-2026

Accepted: 06-11-2026

Published: 20-11-2026

Keywords:

Sports management, Inclusion, Diversity, Gender Equality, Disability Sport, Governance, Accessibility, Performance, Safeguarding.

ABSTRACT

In recent years Inclusion and Diversity has become an important aspect of sports management. However, having policies aimed at creating equality, doesn't necessarily mean everyone will have equal opportunities, be in a safe environment or have diverse leadership. This paper will look at how inclusion and diversity can impact sports management performance. This will be done by using a conceptual methodology with examples of sports policies from around the world, Indian legislation and examples from organisations. Examples such as UNESCO's International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport, Kazan Action Plan, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Gender Equality Reports, IOC Fairness and Non-Discrimination Framework. And Indian legislation examples such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. Examples of inclusion and diversity from organisations can show there has been improvements in certain roles within the IOC for women between 2013-2024. The Indian government have also shown improvements from 2023-2025 with greater participation in the Khelo India Para Games. However, you cannot just look at these examples to prove everyone has equal opportunities, they are just indicators. This paper will propose a framework to help create inclusion to performance. This will be done using a rights-based approach, creating accessible facilities, diverse

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leadership, creating safe environments, having inclusive communication, equitable resources and monitoring. If inclusion and diversity is well implemented it can help create legitimacy within the organisation, increase talent spotting, make better decisions and create sustainable performance. Recommendations and monitoring framework will also be provided for sports federations, universities, clubs and public sectors.

Introduction:

Sport is often seen as a universal language however opportunities aren't always available to everyone. Often factors such as accessibility, affordability, family and community expectations, school, transport, safety, coaching culture, media and decision making can impact how much someone participates. Even if an organisation advertises they want equality there could still be issues with how they select people, budget, leadership, facilities or communication meaning people aren't getting equal opportunities. In order to create inclusion you need to look at how you can change the systems so underrepresented people can participate.

Sports management can help create change within these areas. It involves strategic planning, human resources, financial management, marketing, facility management, event management, athlete development, governance and performance evaluation. All of these areas can lead to inclusion. If a facility isn't step free people can't participate. If an event isn't planned with transport and care responsibilities in mind it can disadvantage women and those on a low income. If the federation board isn't diverse then they may not consider the experiences of the community.

The updated International Charter by UNESCO recognise physical education, physical activity and sport as a right. It promotes non-discrimination, inclusion, gender equality, safe opportunities and using research to create effective policy. It specifically states women and girls, older people, disabled people and indigenous people need inclusive opportunities (UNESCO, 2015). In India section 30 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 states governments and sports authorities have a duty to support effective participation, inclusive opportunities, accessible facilities, supportive technology and disability specific events. However, this depends on the organisations ability, budget, skilled staff.

The main point of this paper is to show that inclusion isn't separate to sports performance. If inclusion is well designed it can increase talent spotting, improve athlete welfare, build trust with the community, encourage innovation and create legitimacy within the sports industry. However, if inclusion is just

tokenistic, the opportunities may not be accessible, wasting human potential. The challenge for sports managers is to turn policy into measurable practices.

Conceptualising Inclusion and Diversity in Sports Management:

- **Diversity**

Diversity can be defined as differences between individuals and groups. Within sports this can involve differences in gender, disability, age, ethnicity, language, religion, caste, socioeconomic status, geographical area, sexual orientation, gender identity, migrant background and sporting background. Equality is having equal rights and removing unfair discrimination. Equity is understanding that some people may need different levels of support to have equal opportunities. Inclusion is ensuring people feel welcome, valued and able to contribute.

It is important to understand these terms aren't just numbers. A club may have diverse people joining but there may not be accessible changing rooms, culturally sensitive communication or protection from harassment. A board may have met the targets for gender but women may not have much influence over the budget. To create meaningful inclusion you need to ensure people feel included, valued, have a voice, feel safe and progress.

- **Intersectionality**

People will have different experiences of sport due to the different identities they have. For example a girl from a rural area with a disability may face challenges due to gender, transport, poverty, inaccessible facilities and lack of specialist coaching. If we only think about disability or gender we may miss the impact it has. Intersectionality means as a manager you need to understand how policy and practice can impact those at different intersections. We shouldn't assume everyone from a group will have the same experience.

- **Access to Influence**

An effective inclusion continuum can be broken down into 5 stages. Access, participation, retention, progression and influence. Access means opportunities are available physically, financially and socially. Participation means people are participating in a quality way. Retention means people are continuing to participate. Progression means people are developing to compete at a higher level, coach, officiate or administrate. Influence means diverse people are influencing decisions and have control over resources. If people aren't staying in a programme after a few months then inclusion hasn't been achieved.

Policy and Literature Review:

International policy has increasingly recognised sport as a right and a tool for development. The UNESCO Charter states everyone should have the opportunity to play sport without discrimination. It also states sport should be adapted to create safe opportunities, everyone should have equal opportunities to supervise and make decisions, facilities and equipment should be sufficient. It also recognises research, evidence and evaluation are essential for effective policy. The charter is important as it shows inclusion isn't just to encourage participation but to ensure everyone has access to governance, skilled workforce, facilities and accountability (UNESCO, 2015).

The Kazan Action Plan links sport policy to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. It outlines policy follow up should include inclusive opportunities, gender equality, empowering girls and women, youth involvement in decision making, safeguarding, good governance and protecting vulnerable groups. It encourages partnerships between stakeholders and using research to create policy (UNESCO, 2017). This shows an inclusive approach is needed across the whole sports system.

Within the Olympic Movement the IOC have created goals for gender equality and inclusion. They have created guidelines to ensure people are portrayed correctly, tools to safeguard and resources to encourage best practice within National Olympic Committees. The IOC have published indicators that show between 2013-2024 there was an increase in women in many roles within the organisation. There was an increase from 21% to 43% of IOC members, 27% to 47% of Executive Board members, 18% to 42% of Commission Chair roles and 20% to 50% of Commission roles (IOC, n.d.). This shows progress has been made within organisations but you need to monitor representation at different levels.

The IOC have created a framework for fairness, inclusion and non-discrimination based on gender identity and sex variations. It promotes dignity, safety, fairness and consulting stakeholders. It doesn't state everyone should have the same criteria for eligibility but asks international federations to look at evidence specific to the sport and consider a wide range of ethical, legal, scientific and human rights factors (Pitsiladis et al., 2023). As a sports manager you can see that complex inclusion issues should be handled with transparency, the right expertise, consulting athletes and preventing discrimination.

Research has shown just because policies are adopted doesn't mean they will change the culture of an organisation. Huang analysed gender equality strategies within the Olympic Movement and highlighted how policies may just be fitted into current systems without changing power dynamics, resource distribution or masculine culture (Huang, 2026).

In India the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 provides a legal framework to ensure disabled people are included in sport. Section 30 states there should be measures to ensure effective participation. This includes inclusive opportunities, facilities should be redesigned, assistive tech should be used, multisensory elements should be used, funding and disability specific events. The Khelo India programme has also included support for disabled people in sport. The Government of India have stated there were 1068 para athletes in the 2023 Khelo India Para Games and 1233 in the 2025 games (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2026). This shows there have been improvements however we don't know how they are distributed by gender, region, impairment type or socioeconomic background. We also don't know how many are staying in.

Overall from research and policy we can see inclusion is a right and the organisations have a duty to ensure it. Policies depend on the organisations to make them work and resources. Monitoring should be carried out to ensure there is quantitative and qualitative inclusion.

Objectives and Research Questions:

To explore the relationship between inclusion, diversity and sports management performance. Identify the key international and Indian policies relating to inclusive sport. Understand how organisational barriers can prevent equal participation and leadership. Provide practical strategies for managing inclusion. Create an evaluation framework.

How can sports organisations understand inclusion beyond just numbers? What policies and practices can help reduce systemic barriers? How can diversity improve organisation and sport performance? What indicators can help managers to evaluate?

Research Methodology:

This paper will use a conceptual design with qualitative data analysis and descriptive data analysis. This will be done by looking at international policies, Indian legislation, official sports governance documents and some academic literature. The sources were chosen as they were relevant to inclusion, gender equality, disability sport, safeguarding, governance and performance.

The data was analysed in 4 ways. Firstly policy documents were analysed to identify principles, duties and suggested methods. Themes were then identified and grouped into categories. These categories were governance, accessibility and facilities, workforce and leadership, safeguarding and culture, communication

and representation and monitoring. Some published indicators were analysed descriptively. Finally themes were brought together to create an inclusion to performance framework and recommendations.

The data used is secondary data. Numbers are taken from published documents. The percentages from the IOC relate to specific roles within the IOC and shouldn't be generalised to all sports organisations. The numbers from Khelo India relate to reported participation and don't give us any insight into why there has been a change. No inferential statistics were conducted. As this is a conceptual paper there is no claim of causation that diversity will increase medals, revenue or productivity. However, this paper does provide an integrated framework and practical propositions to be tested in future empirical studies.

Analysis: Policies, Practices and Performance:

- **Policy and governance: moving from commitment to accountability:** The inclusion policy should outline its aims, scope and clarify who is responsible for what. It is vital to ensure that generic statements such as "everyone is welcome", are supported by clear standards. Objectives should be defined by governing boards and should be measurable. The policy should have a named senior person responsible and include requirements around regular reports. Consider how you will select, recruit, purchase, and schedule events. Consider how grant decisions could lead to unintentionally excluding people.

  Ensure there is genuine representation from women, people with disabilities, young people and other under-represented groups. Include the diversity of your group within decision making, ensuring that there is a named leadership position on the committee and that they have voting rights, access to information and budgets. By having clear processes around nominations, limits to how long they can serve, an open recruitment process and mentoring, this will reduce reliance on personal networks. The IOC have reported their progress in relation to women, showing how much better breaking down roles will help.

- **Accessible infrastructure and inclusive programme design:** Ensuring accessibility is at the core of participation. Consider all aspects of the sports environment including transport, arrival, access to buildings, pathways, playing areas, seating, toilet facilities, changing rooms, signage, emergency exits and digital resources. Ensure universal design principles are considered within your plans as remedial work can be expensive and may not fully achieve what you want. This may include providing ramps, accessible toilets, touch or high contrast signage, hearing support, quiet rooms, adapted equipment and flexible options.

Consider designing your programmes to have a variety of ways in which people can participate including recreational, adapted, disability and competitive. Ensure coaches have been trained to adapt rules, equipment, communication and progression whilst maintaining expectations. Within disability sport, classification and adaptations should be managed by those with the correct training. Within a community setting you may have inclusive sessions but also specific pathways if required.

- **Workforce diversity and inclusive leadership:** Coaches, officials, administrators, physiotherapists, classifiers, volunteers and facility staff shape the daily culture of sport. Recruitment should reach beyond established networks, use transparent criteria and offer accessible application processes. Organisations should audit gender and diversity patterns across coaching, technical officiating, management and senior leadership. Mentoring, paid internships, leadership development and return-to-work pathways can help address progression barriers.

  Training should address disability awareness, gender sensitivity, cultural competence, communication access, safeguarding, unconscious bias and inclusive coaching methods. One-off awareness sessions are not sufficient. Professional development should be linked to job expectations, supervision and performance appraisal. Diverse staff should not be expected to perform unpaid inclusion work in addition to their normal duties.

- **Safeguarding, dignity and psychological safety:** An inclusive environment must also be safe. Organisations should maintain clear codes of conduct, accessible complaint channels, trained safeguarding leads, risk assessments, confidentiality protections and fair investigation procedures. Policies should address bullying, sexual harassment, abuse, discrimination, hazing, online abuse and retaliation. Reporting mechanisms must be usable by children and adults with different communication needs, including sign-language users and people who require supported communication.

  Safeguarding should be proactive. This includes safe recruitment, reference checks where appropriate, supervision standards, transport and accommodation protocols, clear coach-athlete boundaries and procedures for responding to disclosures. Athletes should be involved in policy design and review. A policy that exists only on a website but is unknown to participants does not provide meaningful protection.

- **Communication, media and representation:** Communication influences who is seen as a legitimate athlete. Sports organisations should use language and images that represent athletes as

competitors and decision-makers rather than as stereotypes or inspirational objects. Coverage should focus on performance, preparation, expertise and achievement. Materials should be accessible through captions, alternative text, readable layouts and appropriate language formats. IOC portrayal guidance recognises that media representation can reinforce or challenge gender norms (IOC, 2024).

- **Resource equity and financial access:** Inclusion requires budget decisions. Managers should examine how funding is distributed across men's and women's programmes, para-sport, grassroots development, travel, equipment, coaching, medical support and facility time. Fees, kit costs, transport and accommodation can exclude low-income participants even when registration is technically open. Scholarships, equipment libraries, transport support and needs-based fee waivers can reduce these barriers. Resource allocation should be transparent and linked to identified needs rather than historical spending patterns alone.
- **How inclusion can affect performance:** Performance should be understood at three levels. Athlete performance includes skill development, health, confidence, retention and competitive outcomes. Organisational performance includes talent identification, staff capability, innovation, event quality, community trust and financial sustainability. Social performance includes belonging, public health, social connection and reduced discrimination. Inclusion can contribute to each level through broader recruitment, better programme fit and improved decision-making.

  Diversity does not automatically produce better results. Benefits depend on whether different perspectives are heard and integrated, whether staff have the skills to manage difference, and whether systems provide fair opportunities. Without psychological safety, diverse teams may experience conflict or marginalisation. The management task is therefore to build conditions in which difference becomes a source of learning and innovation.

Descriptive Evidence and Illustrative Graphs

Figure 2 summarises selected IOC indicators reported for 2013 and 2024. All four categories show higher female representation in 2024. The largest absolute change in this selected set is commission positions, increasing from 20% to 50%. These data are institutional indicators, not a complete measure of gender equality across the Olympic Movement.

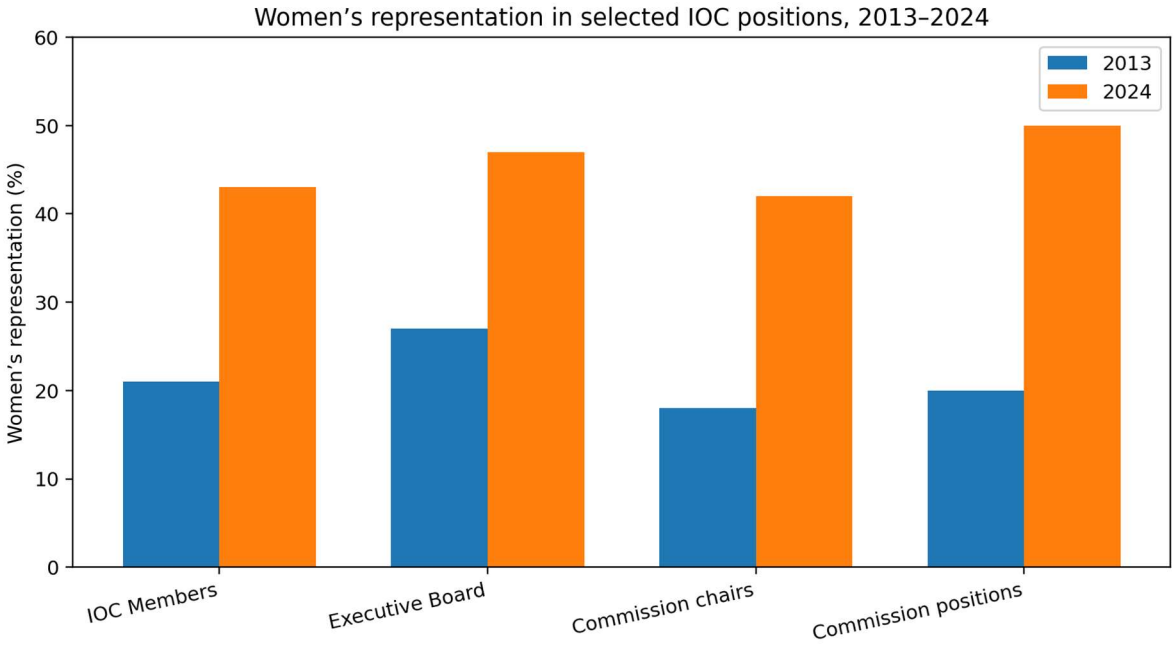

Figure 2. Women's representation in selected IOC positions, 2013–2024. Source: IOC gender-equality reporting (IOC, n.d.).

IOC position	2013	2024	Change (percentage points)
IOC Members	21%	43%	+22
Executive Board	27%	47%	+20
Commission chairs	18%	42%	+24
Commission positions	20%	50%	+30

A second indicator concerns participation in the Khelo India Para Games. Government reporting recorded 1,068 para-athletes in 2023 and 1,233 in 2025, an increase of 165 participants (approximately 15.4%). The figures suggest increased event participation across the two editions. They should be interpreted cautiously: they do not show whether participation opportunities are equally distributed, whether athletes return in later years, or whether local pathways and training resources have improved.

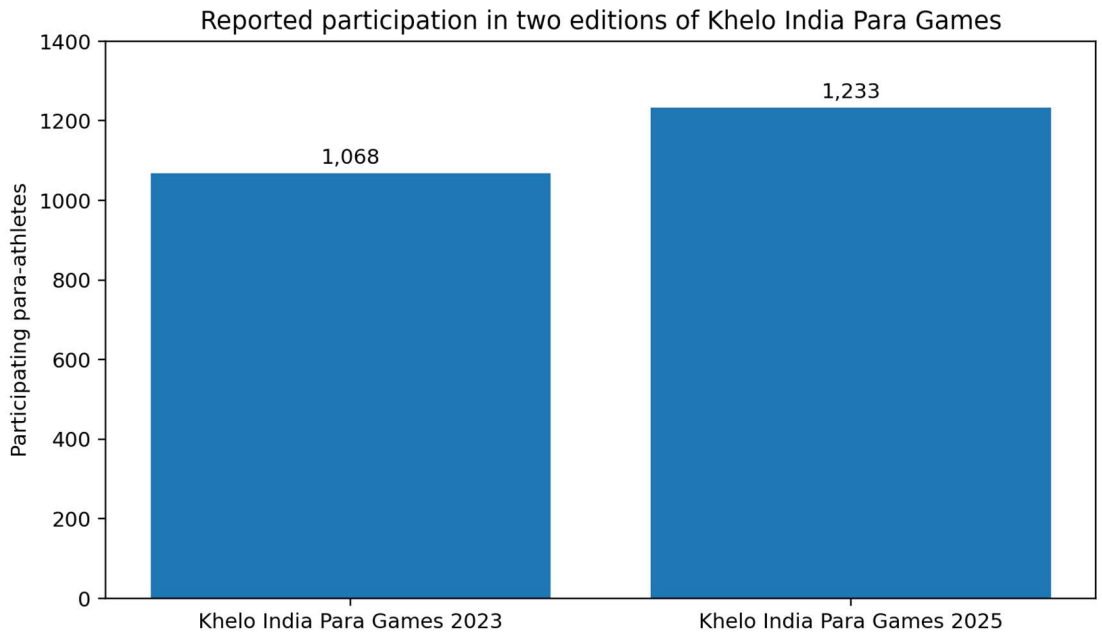

Figure 3. Reported para-athlete participation in the 2023 and 2025 Khelo India Para Games. Source: Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (2026).

Proposed Integrated Inclusion-to-Performance Framework:

The framework proposed in this paper links five domains. The first is policy and governance: rights-based commitments, leadership accountability, transparent procedures and dedicated budgets. The second is practice and delivery: accessible venues, inclusive coaching, adaptive equipment, safe programmes and affordable participation. The third is participation and voice: recruitment, retention, progression, representation and athlete consultation. The fourth is performance: participation quality, wellbeing, skill development and competitive outcomes. The fifth is organisational value: talent development, innovation, trust, legitimacy and sustainability. The domains operate as a cycle: evaluation should inform policy revision, and participants should help interpret the evidence.

An Integrated Inclusion – to Performance Framework

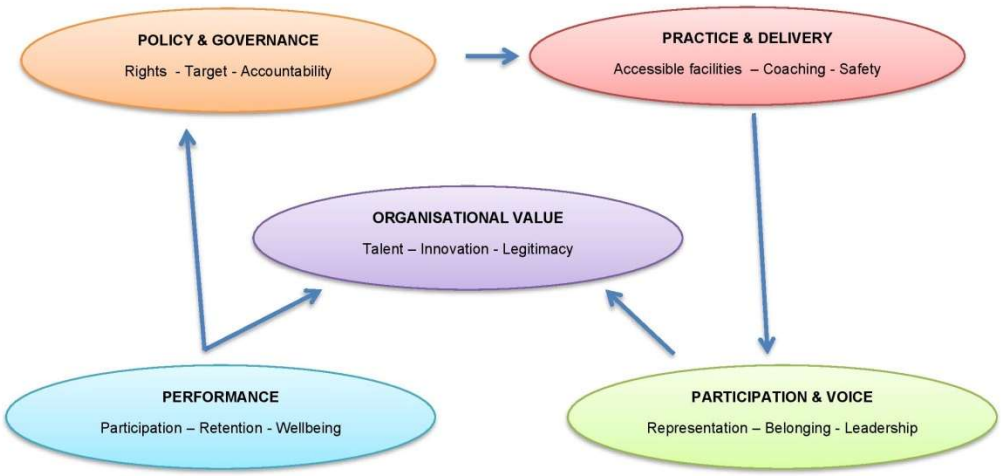

Figure 4. Proposed inclusion-to-performance framework (author-developed conceptual model).

9. Practical Recommendations for Sports Organisations

Management area	Recommended action	Illustrative performance indicator
Governance	Adopt an inclusion policy with named accountability, annual targets	Policy implementation rate; diversity of board and committee membership.
Facilities	Conduct access audits and prioritise universal design and reasonable	Percentage of venues meeting accessibility checklist; unresolved
Participation	Offer affordable entry routes and adapted programme options.	Enrolment, attendance, retention and progression disaggregated by
Workforce	Use open recruitment, mentoring and inclusive professional development.	Representation by role and seniority; training completion; promotion rates.
Safeguarding	Provide accessible reporting channels, trained leads and survivor-	Awareness of reporting routes; response time; participant safety and
Communication	Use inclusive language, accessible formats and equitable media	Accessibility compliance; share of coverage; participant feedback.
Resources	Review budgets, facility time, equipment and travel support for	Per-participant spending by programme; unmet equipment and
Evaluation	Publish an annual inclusion dashboard and involve participants in	Data completeness; actions closed; year-on-year improvement.

Firstly before implementing any targets an inclusion audit should be performed. This can be done using administrative data, observation, interviews and confidential participant feedback. Secondly create measurable realistic targets which have a timeframe and are resource based. Thirdly embed athlete voice into governance by having a representative council and accessible consultation. Fourthly, form partnerships

with disability organisations, schools, local government, community groups and health professionals. Lastly, monitor progression and publish in an accessible way for participants and the public each year.

For universities and educational institutions inclusion should be ensured at all stages of the process from admissions, course design, to assessment, sport within the campus, internships and leadership. Within the PE courses, inclusion practices could include adapted physical activity, inclusive coaching, disability sport, gender focussed teaching, safeguarding and sports governance. Students should also receive hands on experience of planning inclusive events and auditing facilities. This ensures they are well prepared for the future workforce and brings together academic knowledge with community needs.

Monitoring and Evaluation Framework:

A valid evaluation strategy will use input indicators (budget/staff/equipment), process indicators (accessibility audits, consultation sessions, training provided), output indicators (inclusive sessions provided, events adapted, staff trained), outcome indicators (retention, progression, sense of belonging, safety, leadership). Impact indicators could include improved sustainability, reducing disparities and improved organisational trust. Ensure any data collected is broken down into subgroups only where it would be ethical and legal to. All participants must give their informed consent, have their privacy protected and any cells with low numbers suppressed.

Evaluation level	**Example indicators**	**Suggested frequency**
Inputs	Dedicated inclusion budget; trained staff, adaptive equipment availability.	Annual budget cycle
Processes	Access audits; consultation sessions, safeguarding training, policy reviews.	Quarterly / annual
Outputs	Inclusive sessions delivered, participants reached, staff trained, accessible events.	Quarterly
Outcomes	Retention, progression, satisfaction, safety, leadership representation.	Annual

Impact	Reduced participation gaps, sustained athlete pathways, organisational trust.	Every 2–3 years

Evaluation should not incentivize organisations purely for increasing numeracy. A high number of participants may not reflect good retention, satisfaction or equality in accessing coaching opportunities. Combining quantitative and qualitative data will give a more complete picture. This can include interviews, focus groups, accessibility walk throughs and anonymous feedback. Asking who has gained from the programme, who has dropped out and why and what has changed based on participant feedback will provide the most useful data.

Discussion:

Our analysis showed there was a mediating relationship between inclusion and performance. Rights based policies define what should happen, however, having good governance will ensure there is accountability. This will be supported by having the right resources available and workforce capabilities. Evaluation will show if the desired outcomes are being achieved. Within this process if any element falls down it can affect the entire system. A lack of resources such as no budget allocated to the policy can cause it to become aspirational. No trained workforce in the facility makes it hard to use. No safety measures put in place for a targeted number of people participating.

Our analysis shows we should not assume a direct link between representation and inclusion. While the IOC numbers have shown improvements on some leadership positions. Having top level representation does not ensure equity in coaching, participation, pay, media and athlete experiences. Increased participation within a national para sport event is positive. We do not know if those within rural areas, women with disability or from low income communities have equal opportunities available to them. We need more detailed comparable data.

For sports institutes in India there are clear policies defined in the statutory guidance of the RPwD Act. There are national programmes that can help to increase participation. However there is a division of responsibilities between the central and state government, sporting bodies, educational institutions and local organisations. Locally it is important that the national commitments are translated into facility standards, coach training, inclusive competitions and sustainable talent pathways.

This has implications around what excellence means. If your organisation is winning medals but are excluding large amounts of potential talent, allowing harassment to occur or not keeping athletes safe you have a narrow definition of excellence. A wider definition of performance includes winning but also

ensuring fairness, safety, progression, society contribution and integrity. Inclusion should not be seen as something that compromises excellence. It is an enabler for sustainable excellence.

Conclusion:

Inclusion and diversity are core components of effective sport management. A strong foundation exists in international policy and Indian legislation to ensure equal opportunities, inclusivity, accessibility, protection, and inclusion in decision making. This has reflected positively within some key indicators of the organisation. In relation to inclusion there is increased representation of women in IOC roles and increased participation of para athletes in national events. However, this must also be analysed in terms of the quality of inclusion.

This paper suggests that sports organisations should implement an accountability framework to ensure policies are applied across the organisation. To ensure inclusivity the organisation must ensure inclusive leadership, universal design, trained and diverse staffing, safe working environments, fair distribution of resources, inclusive communication and transparency. Diversity will enhance talent development, organisational learning, increase public confidence and improve long term performance.

To further research this theory more should be done to investigate this framework. This could include using case study methodology to compare inclusion within universities, sport federations and community programmes. Longitudinal research could be used to determine if inclusive infrastructure, training and leadership within the organisation leads to increased retention, well-being and progression in staff. Within the Indian context, particular attention should be placed on how inclusion or exclusion affects different demographics (gender, disability, rural, socio-economic). Ultimately an effective inclusive system should mean everyone has real opportunities to get involved, develop, lead and succeed in sport in line with their interests and capabilities.

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