

Report of the meetings on the state of affairs and priorities for the continued development of Paralympic sports

The Netherlands Sports Council (NLSportraad) organised four meetings in connection with the consultative process on the advice 'Continued Development of Paralympic Sports' (*Doorontwikkeling paralympische sport*). This report contains a summary of the outcomes of those discussions. The meeting schedule was as follows:

1. An international meeting: on 29 September, the Committee had an online meeting with international researchers and representatives from various national Paralympics committees and sports organisations.
2. A meeting with stakeholders: on 7 October, the Committee met Dutch stakeholders from the sports, media and events sectors and local authorities.
3. A meeting with experts: on 8 October, representatives from the Dutch science and policy research community gave their input.
4. A meeting with elite para athletes and coaches: on 28 October, elite athletes in Paralympic sport and their coaches shared their thoughts on the priorities for continued development.

Structure of the meetings

At the request of the Netherlands Sports Council, during each meeting the participants performed a SWOT analysis of the current state of affairs in Paralympic sports. They reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of Paralympic sports, both in a Dutch and international context. Next, the participants discussed the opportunities and threats they identified in the continued development of Paralympic sports. These discussions centred around the following three themes:

- the governance, organisation and funding of Paralympic sports;
- the sports careers of and guidance for Paralympic athletes;
- the societal impact of Paralympic sports.

In the Dutch meetings, the participants then identified what they believed to be the most important issues surrounding the continued development of Paralympic sports. The meetings ended with a discussion on the priorities, focusing in particular on the question of who should organise and fund the associated activities. The focus during the international meeting was on the potential role of the Netherlands (including the Dutch government) as a model country in the international development of Paralympic sports.

Organisational integration, the climate for elite sports, and integrity

Most participants agreed that the organisational integration of Paralympic sports within NOC*NSF and the sports federations has contributed to the development of Paralympic sports in the Netherlands. One example is the availability of equivalent facilities for all elite athletes within a single TeamNL, such as a grant for A-status athletes. However, the participants also

identified the risks of organisational integration, such as fragmentation of knowledge and conflicts of interest within both the sports federations and NOC*NSF.

Due to their relatively small target groups, disability sports and Paralympic sports in particular have to fight for attention. According to the participants in the meetings, there are no sufficient guarantees to ensure specific knowledge of and permanent attention for Paralympic sports – not within NOC*NSF and the national sports federations nor among local authorities. International experts identified a similar risk in the international context. The further integration of Paralympic sports into international federations or even within the IOC calls for a continued awareness of their unique character. This concerns the difference between integration and inclusion: have Paralympic sports merely been integrated at the organisational level, or are they truly assimilated and recognised?

What emerges from the meetings is that certain preconditions in the organisation of Paralympic sports are not yet sufficiently guaranteed. Issues mentioned include the vulnerable position of elite Paralympians, integrity issues in the selection of athletes for the Paralympics, and supervision of resource spending. This has given rise to undesirable situations in Paralympic sports, including abuse of power.

Attracting and developing talent

Many participants believe that attracting and developing talent is crucial for the continued development of Paralympic sports. Both in absolute and relative terms, the number of talented Paralympians is small compared with the numbers of athletes without disabilities. And when we look at children with a disability, their participation in sports is less than that of children without a disability. The participants identified a number of important preconditions for the continued development of Paralympic sports. These include more attention for sports and physical activity during rehabilitation, high-quality physical exercise lessons for all children, and measures to ensure the social and physical accessibility of sports for the disabled.

Sports federations and NOC*NSF make choices about the spending of funds for elite sports programmes and training programmes. For this they depend on the budget available for both Olympic and Paralympic sports. During the meetings, several opinions were voiced in connection with those choices. Some participants stated that there are not enough training programmes for talented athletes with a disability and, moreover, that such programmes depend on foundations or private resources for their funding. In addition, scouting talented athletes during Talent Days is extremely important to ensure good results for the Dutch team. However, some participants claimed there has been a decline in both the funding and organisation of those Talent Days. Finally, the current funding of 'focus sports' has contributed to the position of Paralympic sports in the Netherlands today. Even so, some participants doubted whether this is the best way forward to ensure the broad development of Paralympic sports and elite results.

The lack of access to and the funding of sports equipment (such as wheelchairs, prostheses, handbikes, sit-skis etc.) were recurrent topics during the meetings. Sports equipment is important first and foremost to support the introduction of people with disabilities to sport and physical exercise. There is considerable confusion regarding the provision and funding of such equipment by municipalities / under the Social Support Act or via healthcare insurers. Talented athletes depend on sports equipment for their development into elite performers. For this reason, the equipment should be adapted to their individual level of performance. This also means that they regularly need new equipment, much of which will have to be tailor-made. Aside from availability and funding, this calls for considerable technical know-how. Several participants pointed out that each of these three aspects represents a weakness in the context of continued development of Paralympic sports.

Classification

The classification of Paralympians is aimed to ensure fair competition. In other words, the individual athlete's disability should not influence the result of the competition. A major issue in this regard is how to objectively determine the extent to which a disability affects an athlete's performance. Another challenge is to ensure classification of athletes in classes that are not only fair, but also sufficiently interesting for competitive sports. In some sports, including athletics and swimming, a wide range of different classes have been defined, but many of those attract few participants. This makes it difficult for audiences to understand the sport and for the media to present it in an attractive manner.

According to some of the participants, the way Paralympic sports are currently classified is definitely a weakness. There is a need for further professionalisation of the classification system, both in the Netherlands and at the international level – for example as regards technical and organisational issues. One issue is that the classification of athletes for matches is currently done by volunteers. Weaknesses identified by the participants are the lack of funds for a professional organisation of classification, and the lack of knowledge exchange among classifiers, resulting in the risk of arbitrary classification.

Public image and visibility

Those who attended the meetings agreed that during the Paralympics, the media generate a great deal of attention for Paralympic sports, providing extra momentum for sports stimulation efforts. However, the attention wanes as soon as the games are over. The participants also agreed that Paralympians can serve as important role models for the elite athletes of the future and help to promote the inclusion of people with a disability in society. Nevertheless, there was a lot of debate on the best way to capitalise on this role model function. For example, a clear focus on the identity and unique story behind each Paralympian is vital. That includes the story behind his or her disability, which is particularly important for promoting athlete branding

and attracting sponsors. At the same time, athletes want to be seen as people deserving of admiration for their sports rather than pity for their handicap, so that aspect should not dominate the story.

Knowledge sharing and innovation

The Netherlands has a good infrastructure for Paralympic sports. In addition, there is a lot of knowledge in the Netherlands, for instance about innovation. There is room for improvement however in how that knowledge is being utilised. What is lacking, according to the experts, is a structural link between science and practice. One way to provide such a link is to promote the use of 'embedded scientists', a practice already established in Olympic sports settings. The sports sector would also benefit from increased utilisation of the knowledge and knowledge facilities available in research universities and universities of applied sciences. Besides knowledge about sport, those institutions also have a great deal of knowledge about rehabilitation in a broader sense. There is also room for improvement in the development and utilisation of technical and organisational expertise about movement technology and equipment for athletes.

Dutch knowledge about Paralympic sports could contribute to the development of sport for people with a disability in other countries. EU programmes and other aid programmes can help to unlock the vast potential in this area. One example is Erasmus+, which can be used to establish post-career programmes for athletes and to encourage international research efforts.

The Netherlands abroad

When it comes to the state of development of Paralympic sports, the international experts pointed to the huge gap between (mostly Western) developed countries on the one hand and less developed countries on the other. In many Western countries, the government plays a role in the funding of Paralympic sports. In those countries, the degree of organisational integration tends to be lower than in the Netherlands. If we wish to strengthen worldwide competition and performance levels in Paralympic sports, we will need to help the less developed countries in their efforts to stimulate sports for people with a disability. The Netherlands could serve as a model country in this regard. One example of this type of development cooperation is the Tokyo 2020 Game Changer Project. The Netherlands could also serve as a model thanks to its know-how in the field of innovation, as in the development of affordable blades.

If the Netherlands is to perform this task effectively, it is important for Dutch representatives to take up an active role in international federations and in the IPC and IOC. It is the international federations that prepare the classification codes for each branch of sport. Anyone who wants to influence this process will need to participate in the committees or boards of those federations.

Finally, the experts pointed out that a country cannot simply declare itself to be a model. This calls for long-term process of building relationships, recognition of local customs and a tailor-made approach. Things that work well in the Netherlands may prove counterproductive elsewhere. In addition, it will remain crucial to also critically assess the situation in the Netherlands itself, such as the degree of inclusion of people with a disability in Dutch society.

Follow-up

The Netherlands Sports Council will use the information gathered during the meetings as input for a definitive analysis of the current state of affairs in Paralympic sports. After that, the Council will consider recommendations and draft an advisory document for the Minister for Medical Affairs and Sport. The advisory document is scheduled to be presented in late February 2022, in the period between the Winter Olympics and Paralympics.

If you have any questions about the consultative process or have any information that you think might be of interest to the Council, please do not hesitate to email info@nlsportraad.nl or call 070-3407273 and ask for Annet Tiessen-Raaphorst or Lennart Langbroek.