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Journal article

Structure and organization of sport for people with intellectual disabilities across Europe

Marin-Urquiza, A., Morgulec-Adamowicz, N., Burns, J. and Van Biesen, D.

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Structure and Organisation of Sport for People with Intellectual Disabilities across Europe

Abstract

Opportunities to participate and compete in sports for athletes with intellectual disabilities have increased, however, this group still encounters limitations in accessing a comprehensive range of sports. This study aimed to reveal the current knowledge on how sport for people with intellectual disabilities is organised and the relationships between the major sport organisations for people with intellectual disabilities across 10 European countries. Twenty-nine national sport organisations for people with intellectual disabilities participated in this study. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with representatives from the key organisations and analysed thematically. Results described two areas of focus: (a) connection and networking between these sport organisations; and (b) organisational landscape of each nation (i.e., intellectual-disability, multi-disability, or mainstream). These results are of value to those involved in sport for people with intellectual disabilities to better understand the situation in their home nation and across Europe, and to illuminate examples of good practice.

Keywords: intellectual disability; intellectual impairment; disability; sports; social inclusion

Structure and Organisation of Sport for People with Intellectual Disabilities across Europe

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (Schalock et al., 2021) defines intellectual disability (ID) as ‘a condition characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour that originates before the age of 22’. The prevalence of people with ID varies around the world, with a global prevalence estimated at 1.74% (range 0.33% -2.42%), the higher prevalence rates occurring in

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27 the low-middle socio-demographic index (SDI disadvantaged) regions and the lowest in the
28 higher SDI (advantaged) regions (Nair et al., 2022).

29 The beneficial and protective effects of regular physical activity (PA) for physical and
30 mental health are well-known (Diana, 2012; WHO, 2020). However, people with ID are
31 considerably less physically active compared to people without disabilities (Robertson et al.,
32 2018). Dairo and colleagues (2016) conducted a systematic review of the PA literature and
33 found that only 9% of adults with ID met the minimum levels of PA recommended by the
34 World Health Organisation (WHO, 2018). Hence, the negative consequences that physical
35 inactivity has on health (i.e., physical, psychological and social well-being) are likely to be
36 more significant for this population.

37 The European Commission recognises sport and PA as drivers of active social
38 inclusion and has promoted initiatives to grow sport for all in Europe (European Commission,
39 n.d.). However, the societal contribution of sport and PA does not always attain its potential
40 for certain marginalised groups such as people with disabilities. Specifically, whilst sport for
41 people with ID (ID-sport) has improved throughout the last years, people with ID are still
42 encountering barriers for full and equal participation in the sport of their choice in Europe and
43 worldwide (IDEAL project Erasmus+, 2020; Jacinto et al., 2021). The organisational context
44 supporting ID-sport play a significant role in this progression.

45 **Historical context of sport for individuals with intellectual disabilities**

46 Organisations that promote and provide participation opportunities in ID-sport have
47 been evolving and operating since the end of the 1960s. Their general aim is to enhance the
48 opportunities of people with ID to have physically active lifestyles, participate, train, and
49 compete in sports at all levels (Lantz & Marcellini, 2018). The research evidence
50 demonstrating that the delivery of sport and PA through such organisations contributes to
51 improving the lives of people with ID is now substantial (Burns et al., 2022). Health gains
52 have been demonstrated on the physical, psychological, and social well-being of athletes with

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53 ID, and also on the athletes' families and on societal attitudes (e.g., McConkey & Menke,
54 2022; St John et al., 2020).

55 The start of developing organisations to promote ID-sport can be traced back to 1946
56 when the Kennedy family established the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. foundation to help people
57 with ID, including sports-based interventions. This organisation was then established by
58 Eunice Shriver as the Special Olympics (SO) in 1968 (Special Olympics, 2020). Nowadays,
59 SO International is involved in ID-sport worldwide (e.g., 251 national and state programmes,
60 3.7 million participants, 1,050 sports partners) (Special Olympics, 2021). The SO movement
61 promotes the right to participation for all and encourages participation at all levels of
62 performance (i.e., from recreational in local club to international high performance
63 competition level at events such as the SO world games).

64 In order to promote the participation of athletes with ID in high-performance sports,
65 the International Association for Sport for Persons with Mental Handicap (INAS-FMH) was
66 founded in 1986 and joined the International Coordinating Committee of World Sports
67 Organisations for the Disabled (ICC) (i.e., the current International Paralympic Committee
68 [IPC]). As a result, athletes with ID were included for the first time in the Paralympic
69 Movement (Tweedy & Howe, 2011; Virtus, 2019). The former INAS-FMH, later renamed
70 INAS-FID, then INAS, and currently known as Virtus (World Intellectual Impairment Sport),
71 has progressively grown to increase the sport offer, including competition in 12 sports, under
72 the international sport federation rules, and now has a global presence (Virtus, 2019).

73 Although athletes with ID were included in the Paralympic Movement in 1986, they
74 were not able to compete at the Paralympic Games (PG) until Atlanta 1996 (Virtus, 2019).
75 Unfortunately, due to a scandal when a nation purposely fielded basketball players who did
76 not have ID, the whole competition group of athletes with ID was excluded after the Sydney
77 2000 PG, until a more reliable system of eligibility and classification could be put in place.
78 This requirement was met in 2009 and athletes with ID were allowed to compete again at the

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79 PG held in London 2012, although fewer athletes competed (i.e., 118) compared to Sydney
80 2000 (i.e., 244) (Lantz & Marcellini, 2018). Furthermore, only three sports were re-included
81 (athletics, table tennis, and swimming) due to the changing IPC requirements of a fully
82 evidence-based classification systems (Van Biesen et al., 2021).

83 In 2012, the Sport Union for athletes with Down Syndrome (SUDS) was founded as
84 an international multi-sport federation specifically for athletes with Down Syndrome (DS)
85 and in 2016 SUDS organised the first Trisome Games to increase the competitive
86 opportunities for athletes with DS (Lantz & Marcellini, 2018). In contrast to the other
87 organisations described above SUDS caters for a specific sub-group of people with ID, those
88 with DS, who because of the genetic phenotype commonly have additional characteristics
89 which impact on their sports performance.

90 Whilst these ID-sport specific organisations have played a major role in developing
91 sport and PA opportunities for people with ID, more mainstream sport organisations or
92 federations (i.e., traditionally involved in sport for people without a disability) have started to
93 play an increasingly important role in disability sport inclusion (including ID-sport),
94 prompted by the implementation of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of
95 Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2008 (UN General Assembly, 2007).

96 In summary, SO International, Virtus, IPC, and SUDS are currently the major
97 international sport organisations involved in ID-sport worldwide and facilitate wider access
98 and a variety of sport opportunities including all levels of participation from recreational to
99 high-performance competition (Lantz & Marcellini, 2018). In each European country in
100 which these organisations are present, there are national sport organisations or federations that
101 represent the international governing bodies. Moreover, these main international ID-sport
102 organisations stage large-scale global competitive events for athletes with ID, such as the SO
103 World Games (that held 24 sports in Abu Dhabi 2019), the Virtus Global Games (that held 10
104 sports in Brisbane 2019), the PG (that held three ID-sports in Tokyo 2020), and the Trisome

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105 Games (that held seven sports in Florence 2016). Each of the international organisations have
106 both overlapping and differing roles and goals in ID-sport, leading to some clear differences
107 but also some confusion. For example, SO is commonly considered to play a larger role in
108 terms of participation and recreational competition, whereas the IPC and Virtus are
109 considered pathways of high-performance sports and competitions (Burns, 2018). However,
110 the SO supports high level competition where routes through the ICP or Virtus are not
111 supported due to non-inclusion of that sport. Nevertheless, an important distinction can be
112 made in terms of the rules under which the sport is performed which is under International
113 Federation rules for Virtus and the IPC, but not usually so for SO events, where more
114 adaptation occurs.

115 Whilst such organisations exist people with ID and their families still report
116 difficulties in accessing sport and PA opportunities and research shows low levels of activity
117 (Burns et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022). In addition, that only three sports have a full Paralympic
118 pathway available limits the support for the development of a comprehensive offer of sports
119 disciplines as national resources tend to be orientated towards the Paralympic sports. Further
120 information on the roles and different sport pathways offered by SO, Virtus, and the IPC can
121 be found in Burns (2018) and in Lantz and Marcellini (2018).

122 It is recognised that connection and coordination between the different national sport
123 bodies could benefit provision and promote participation in sport and PA (Cousens et al.,
124 2012). Consequently, to increase the quality and quantity of sport opportunities for people
125 with ID, it is important to know more about how these different ID-sport organisations are
126 represented at national level and how they relate to each other.

127 The purpose of this study was to examine how ID-sport is organised and structured
128 across Europe and to compare similarities and differences across 10 European nations in their
129 ID-sport organisations. Additionally, the study focus was to identify strengths, limitations and

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130 examples of good practice, that can serve to improve the structures, offer and quality of ID-
131 sport provision in other nations worldwide.

132 **Method**

133 **Study design**

134 The present study was developed as part of the European Erasmus+ funded IDEAL
135 project “Intellectual Disability and Equal opportunities for Active and Long-term
136 participation in sport”. A qualitative approach was taken using semi-structured individual
137 interviews, employing a pre-determined questionnaire focussed around the aims of the study.
138 The research received ethical scrutiny and approval through a University ethical panel
139 (Canterbury Christ Church University, ref. 18-SAS-08C).

140 The type of organisations which represent ID-sport in each country have developed
141 organically, influenced by the nation’s unique geographical, economical, and socio-cultural
142 characteristics. Such contexts are open to change and interpretation, hence the ontological
143 framework adopted was interpretivism, as the research endeavoured to understand perceptions
144 of the organisational structure in its context, and compare and contrast with perceptions of
145 other national structures. To meet this aim a constructionist approach to epistemology was
146 appropriate, using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to elicit understandings and
147 beliefs about the development and function of organisations relevant to the development of
148 ID-sport (Al-Ababneh, 2020). The purpose of prior circulation of the questionnaire was to
149 enable the participant to be thoroughly prepared for the interview, by for example discussing
150 the questions with other staff members, retrieving information in advance.

151 Although it is possible to obtain detailed information by means of a questionnaire, the
152 purpose of using a semi-structured interview, following a prescribed questionnaire was to
153 explore the provided answers in depth, especially when clarification was needed, but also to
154 retain comprehensiveness and relevance. Such approach exists in the literature, for example in
155 Chilton and Collett (2008). Moreover, the interviews facilitated a richer understanding of the

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156 responsibilities of the ID-sport organisation, the structure of ID-sport in each country and how
157 this may relate to the existing relevant international organisations. A thematic approach to
158 analysis was then adopted which fitted with the ontological and epistemological assumptions,
159 as described by Braun et al.(2016).

160 Participants

161 The ID-sport organisations targeted by the present study were (a) the national
162 representation of the IPC (i.e., the National Paralympic Committee [NPC]), (b) the national
163 representation of Virtus, and (c) the national SO. In some countries, two or more of these
164 organisations are merged into one organisation. When applicable, additional relevant
165 organisations responsible for the management of ID-sport in that country were also included.
166 Although SUDS is also involved in ID-sport, it was excluded since it represents only people
167 with DS and does not include people with other types of ID.

168 To recruit the sample, researchers contacted the major ID-sport organisations by email
169 and/or personal contacts from the targeted countries. These emails provided a detailed
170 description of the research purpose and informed consent for study participation and data
171 protection. Once identified that an ID-sport organisation was interested in engaging in the
172 study, they were asked to identify an individual (i.e., a participant) who could represent and
173 provide information on behalf of the ID-sport organisation. As a result, the sample consisted
174 of 29 individuals (15 males and 14 females) from 29 different targeted ID-sport organisations.
175 It was made clear to the interviewees that they represented the organisation, not their personal
176 views, and could consult wider within the organisation on the questions contained in the
177 questionnaire, supplied in advance of the interview.

178 Measures

179 A comprehensive questionnaire, including open- and close-ended questions, was
180 developed for the purpose of this study in collaboration with expert researchers to retrieve
181 relevant information from the ID-sport organisations. The expert team consisted of highly

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182 recognised academics and practitioners with more than 10 years of expertise of researching,
183 organising, coaching and collaborating in the field of ID, PA, health, and sport (including
184 IDEAL project consortium representatives).

185 In developing the questionnaire, the nominal group technique (NGT) was employed to
186 attain expert consensus on the content (Harvey & Holmes, 2012). This technique was
187 employed in a series of structured on-line and face-to-face meetings, developing iterations of
188 the questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the role,
189 functioning and context of the organisation.

190 The areas covered by the agreed questionnaire were: type, size and nature of the
191 organisation (e.g., public or private, for profit or non-profit, etc.); the organisational role (e.g.,
192 mission and goals); the offer (e.g., amount and type of sports or PA); the number of athletes
193 with ID registered; the organisation's action level (i.e., international, national and/or regional
194 level); and information about the organisational participant. The final section focussed on the
195 connections between the ID-sport organisations. Organisations were asked about the presence,
196 type, strength and nature of the connection with other organisations in their countries. A
197 connection was defined as a formal bilateral relationship and/or partnership on a regular basis
198 between these organisations. These questions are provided in the Supplemental Material.

199 The questionnaire was revised and agreed by the expert panel and then translated into
200 five languages (i.e., Dutch, French, Italian, Polish and Spanish), from the original English
201 version. Each translation was reviewed by a second native speaker for comprehension.
202 Translations into Icelandic, Swedish, and German were not needed, since the participants in
203 those countries evidenced a proficient level of English.

204 **Data collection**

205 The participants were the respondents appointed by the ID-sport organisation and they
206 gave informed consent on behalf of the organisation to voluntarily participate in the study.

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207 The questionnaire was then sent prior to the interview to prepare the necessary information,
208 consult and pre-fill some questions.

209 Interviews were carried out by phone and/or online calls. There was no time limit for
210 completing the interview. The total time ranged between 60 and 90 minutes ($M = 73.89$
211 minutes). During the interview, the interviewee and the interviewer both had access to the
212 questionnaire which may have some pre-filled content supplied by the interviewee. It was
213 decided not to record the interviews, because all the items and the pre-filled answers were
214 read and clarified when necessary (for instance, when the answers were ambiguous or vague);
215 and missing data were typed verbatim into the questionnaire by the interviewer. The
216 interviewer employed clarifying, reflecting and summarising strategies during the semi-
217 structured interviews in order to facilitate the discussion and to retrieve more detailed
218 information if necessary. Interviewees were able to leave any question blank, when they did
219 not want to answer a certain question or had a lack of information to answer appropriately.

220 After the interview, the completed questionnaire was sent to the participants at the ID-
221 sport organisation to verify the retrieved responses and allow checking within the organisation
222 if required, prior to data analysis. When necessary, follow-up phone calls or emails were used
223 if further clarification or verification of information was needed. Data collection took place
224 from September 2018 to June 2019.

225 **Data Analysis**

226 Two researchers carried out a systematic approach to independently extract the data
227 from the questionnaires. All data retrieved prior and during the interview (typed verbatim)
228 was collected in the questionnaire. When necessary, data were translated into English to
229 facilitate data analysis. Each researcher analysed thematically and interpreted the data initially
230 independently following Creswell's steps (Creswell, 2009, pp. 171 – 176). Firstly, the
231 retrieved information from the questionnaires was read and re-read to become familiar with
232 the content and to be able reflect on it. Then, to reduce the amount of data and reorganise it

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233 into manageable and meaningful text segments, data were coded by segmenting the
234 information into categories and then labelling those categories with a term. As a result, the
235 coding process generated different categories and subcategories. The two researchers then met
236 to discuss, refine, operationally define and finalise the categories and subcategories of the
237 study. Finally, reflection was carried out to identify common patterns and differences in data
238 and interpret the meanings in relation to each nation and across nations.

239 In keeping with the constructionist approach a number of processes were adopted to
240 maximise the rigor and trustworthiness of the data. Criticism has been directed at member
241 checking as a form of ‘truth validation’ (Smith & McGannon, 2018), but in this study
242 participants were given the opportunity to reflect on their responses, as advised by Braun and
243 Clarke (2013). This process was enhanced by providing the opportunity to see the
244 questionnaire in advance, discuss with colleagues, and also reflect on their answers post
245 interview. The combination of a pre-prepared questionnaire with a semi-structured interview
246 also facilitated a greater depth of enquiry and exploration of similarities and differences
247 between respondents. The also allowed participants to acknowledge and explore
248 contradictions which may exist, both in their understanding and that represented in their
249 organisation (Schinke et al., 2013).

250 The relevance of the research was also a criteria perceived to be important in this
251 study to ensure that the data most pertinent to the stakeholder was captured. This was
252 facilitated by using and expert groups as ‘critical friends’ to develop and evaluate the
253 questionnaire and through providing an opportunity to the participants to add any additional
254 comments at the end of the interview (Levitt et al., 2017). Finally, to promote interpretive
255 validity as described by Maxwell (2012) a number of steps were taken. The analysis of the
256 data into themes was carried out independently, and then reviewed for consistency, accuracy
257 and negative cases by the two researchers. This process was recorded so there was a clear
258 audit trail from data to themes which was then reviewed and questioned by the ‘critical

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259 friends', by reviewing the coding process and its analysis to further elucidate meaning and
260 consensus about category and subcategory interpretation. Post analysis the main findings of
261 the study were shared with the participants to test credibility with the target group and further
262 facilitate reflection on the positioning of their organisation within the wider context.
263 Comments were invited, although there was not additional material to be incorporated into the
264 interpretation of the results.

265 Results

266 Twenty-nine organisations participated in the study, each selecting a participant to
267 provide the data through an interview. Further details about these organisations and
268 participants are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

269 [Table 1]

270 [Table 2]

271 Two main categories were found from the inductive analysis of the data and are
272 described in the following sections: (a) network between the national ID-sport organisations;
273 and (b) organisational ID-sport landscape. Examples of specific answers are shown to
274 illustrate the study findings and summarised in Table 3. To preserve anonymity the names of
275 each ID-sport organisation have been given an alternative name (ORG#) which does not
276 match with those in Table 3.

277 A. Network between the national ID-sport organisations

278 The different types of connections between the participants and other national sport
279 organisations involved in ID-sport (i.e., "network"), were categorised into three
280 subcategories:

- 281 1. "Member connections", when one organisation was a member of another organisation.
- 282 2. "Main official connections", when the organisations reported a formal bilateral
283 partnership collaboration. However, to be considered as an official connection, the
284 collaboration needed to happen on a regular basis (consistently throughout the year). This

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285 type of connection was found in all the assessed countries, for example when
286 organisations were working and supporting each other to provide a wider offer and better
287 opportunities for people with ID (and in some cases also for people with other types of
288 disabilities) to practise sports or to compete.

289 ORG.P: we enable the activity and sport provision for all disability groups, including
290 people with ID, across [country], [ORG.P] works closely together with the [other
291 national ID-sport and disability-sport organisations], which are the real competence
292 for sport delivery for people with disabilities in [country].

293 These connections were also found when the organisations were actively working
294 together towards ID-sport inclusion (into disability or mainstream sport):

295 ORG.C: [ORG.C] has 15 own [para-]sports at this moment, which might be less in the
296 future, because [ORG.C] is in the process to transfer all the para-sports to their
297 specific mainstream federations, for the federations to be in charge of delivering their
298 sport (...) [ORG.C] want[s] to do it for all the sports and once achieved it, [ORG.C]
299 will focus on the pure management, development and the education part.

300 A solid network was reported as a strength, although some ID-sport organisations
301 reported problems in these networks, for example in collaborating with other partners, who
302 may not hold the same status or mission:

303 ORG.W: good communication with [other national disability sport organisation],
304 although sometimes [ORG.W] find some discrepancies with them due to the different
305 sport pathways and missions that are different; that is, different sport aims and
306 different power.

307 3. “Informal connections or sporadic collaborations”, when organisations reported a small or
308 an informal connection between organisations due to occasional annual events, such as a
309 shared competition, or when both organisations collaborated on a certain project or
310 mission but not on a regular basis. ID-sport organisations from five assessed countries

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311 reported this type of connection with other national organisations involved in ID-sport.

312 For example:

313 ORG. E: [referring to other national disability sport organisation] we just collaborate
314 together in certain national championships per year.

315 One of these organisations, who organised a camp for people with disabilities
316 (including ID) together with the national organisation that coordinates (mainstream) sport,
317 reported the reason for not having any type of connection with another national ID-sport
318 organisation:

319 ORG.L: [other national ID-sport organisation] and [ORG.L] attend to the same core
320 courses to become a trainer. But [they] don't work together and don't have a
321 collaborative relationship (...) [they have] different trajectories since their objectives
322 and actions are different.

323 [Table 3]

324 In all the 10 included countries, a formal connection (i.e., a formal bilateral connection
325 as members and/or partnership collaboration) at national level was found between either two
326 or all three of these major national ID-sport organisations (i.e., NPC, the national
327 representation of Virtus and the national SO). Table 3 provides further information about the
328 reported types of connections with the diverse ID-sport organisations on each country. Figure
329 1 illustrates the different found collaborative scenarios across the 10 assessed European
330 countries.

331 Results showed that in all the countries the NPC was collaborating with the national
332 sport federation that was linked to Virtus. In addition, in six countries (i.e., Germany, Iceland,
333 Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden) the NPC was also connected with the national SO
334 body. However, the national representation of Virtus and SO were usually not connected; this
335 connection mostly happened when the three major ID-sport organisations were working under
336 the same roof as a unique sport organisation. As a result, three different situations from the

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337 fullest to the least connective networks can be found: (1) A three-way connection between all
338 the three major ID-sport organisations was found in Germany, Iceland, and Sweden.
339 However, specific different situations were found among these countries. For instance, in
340 Iceland and in Sweden the three major ID-sport organisations were merged in a unique sport
341 organisation; while in Germany one organisation represented the NPC and Virtus, with SO
342 being a separate organisation. (2) A two-way connection between the NPC and Virtus, and
343 between the NPC and SO was found in Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain. (3) A one-way
344 connection between the NPC and Virtus was found in Belgium, France, and Poland.
345 Moreover, a special case was found in Belgium where the same organisation represented both
346 the NPC and the national representation of Virtus.

347 Since Great Britain is formed by three different nations (i.e., England, Scotland, and
348 Wales) a special connective network was found there. In Great Britain (as a whole) the NPC
349 and Virtus were connected but they were not directly connected to SO (i.e., one-way
350 connection situation); however, the disability sport federation of each nation (connected to
351 Virtus) was connected with SO Great Britain.

352 [Figure 1]

353 Additionally, mainstream sport federations from these 10 countries were also playing a
354 role in ID-sport, as they have started to integrate some ID-sport disciplines into mainstream
355 sport federations. Although, most of the major ID-sport organisations included mainstream
356 sport federations (or some of them) in their connective networks, the process of integration
357 into mainstream sport was slower in some countries compared to others, in terms of the
358 amount of sport disciplines that were governed by the mainstream federations. For instance,
359 France, Germany, Poland, and Spain, presented an initial phase of an integration process,
360 where a small number of sport disciplines and/or certain specific tasks in relation to ID-sport
361 were fully integrated into the mainstream sport, leaving the ID-specific or the multi-disability
362 sport organisations to manage the rest of the sport disciplines. In contrast, in Belgium, Great

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363 Britain, Iceland, Italy, and Sweden, several ID-sport disciplines were fully integrated into the
364 mainstream sport federations, with the ID-specific or multi-disability sport organisations
365 managing the remaining non-included sport disciplines. The Netherlands was the only
366 participating country that presented an almost full integration of disability sport (i.e., sport
367 practised by people with any type of disability), and consequently of ID-sport is embedded in
368 mainstream sport in this nation.

369 Furthermore, most of the ID-sport organisations (n = 26) included schools among their
370 networks. These ID-organisations provided different activities at schools, such as: sports or
371 PA for people with ID (e.g., SO clubs being located in the schools), inclusive sports or PA for
372 people with and without disabilities (e.g., unified sports), disability inclusion courses, or
373 activities to increase visibility and awareness. For example:

374 ORG.O: Most of them are regular schools with an inclusive setting, there are only a
375 few special schools. [ORG.O] has a network of schools in [country] and try them to
376 engage in sports and become more active for health. Arrangement of sport-specific
377 days, programs of disability awareness inclusion training.

378 Fifteen of these ID-sport organisations reported that they were providing training,
379 education courses and/or seminars for physical education teachers, sport assistants and
380 volunteers in initiatives to support inclusive sport or PA sessions for children with and
381 without disabilities.

382 **B. Organisational ID-sport landscape**

383 From the category “landscape”, three subcategories were identified representing the
384 type of ID-sport or activity provider in each country: “ID-specific”, “multi-disability-
385 oriented” and “mainstream-oriented” (Figure 2).

386 1. ID-specific organisations, such as SO which was present in all the assessed countries, and
387 ID-specific sport federations present in some countries. This ID-oriented landscape was
388 found in France, Italy, Poland, and Spain. In these countries, in addition to the national SO

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389 there was also a sport federation exclusive for people with ID that offers sport
390 opportunities for all levels and was the main driver of high-performance ID-sport
391 participation.

392 ORG.X: the [ORG.X] is the sport federation to which [the NPC] entrusted the
393 management, organisation and development of sports for athletes with intellectual and
394 relational disabilities.

395 2. Multi-disability-oriented organisations, such as the NPC which was present in nine
396 assessed countries (the Netherlands is the only country where the NPC and the National
397 Olympic Committee are unified), and national disability-sport federations, in the countries
398 where ID-sport has been integrated into disability sport. This multi-disability-oriented
399 landscape was found in Belgium, Great Britain (when considering the two nations where
400 there is a stronger and more organised structure of ID-sport, i.e., Scotland and Wales),
401 Iceland, and Sweden. In these countries, although there is a national SO, ID-sport was
402 mainly embedded in disability-sport federations which were responsible for its
403 management and offer for all levels.

404 ORG.B: [there is] one office for all sports for all disability groups in [country].

405 However, the situation differed slightly across nations; for example, in Iceland and
406 Sweden, all ID-sport drivers were under the same national disability-sport umbrella
407 organisation, while in Belgium and Great Britain there were several similar organisations in a
408 decentralised landscape. Moreover, in Great Britain, it was found that Scotland and Wales
409 developed a more disability –orientated structure (with disability-sport federations as main
410 drivers) than England, where ID-specific organisations and some mainstream sport
411 federations were involved in ID-sport.

412 3. Mainstream-oriented organisations, which traditionally were sport federations for athletes
413 without a disability and are now integrating disability-sport, and consequently ID-sport.

414 This mainstream landscape was found in the Netherlands, where disability sport

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415 (including ID-sport) was embedded in mainstream sport. This situation has been almost
416 fully accomplished since 2000, with only one organised-ID-sport (bocce) and one PA
417 programme (the SO Motor Activity Training Program) remaining not integrated. This
418 landscape seemed to result from a policy decision which was then quickly operationalised.

419 ORG.AC: [ORG.AC] is the umbrella sport organisation for all mainstream sport (...)
420 in 2000 the government decided to integrate all disability sport in the mainstream sport
421 by law without considering the mainstream sports federations' opinion. So, people
422 from the federations needed to handle this by themselves, finding their own education
423 on disability sport to include it.

424 Only Germany presented a non-specific landscape since the three main types of
425 organisations (mainstream, disability, and ID-oriented) coexisted and worked together in
426 partnership. However, when considering the main drivers of the ID-sport offer and provision,
427 the landscape could be located in-between ID-oriented and disability-oriented.

428 [Figure 2]

429 **Discussion**

430 Every European country in has its own diverse and organically developed
431 characteristics that make it complex to define a specific and comprehensive European model
432 of sport governance across all the different existing sport disciplines (European Commission,
433 2011). Therefore, the aim of the present study was to provide insight regarding the structure
434 and organisation of ID-sport across Europe, and to compare similarities and differences
435 between the different assessed countries. Ten European nations from different historical
436 beginnings were selected to have a wide view of ID-sport across Europe.

437 Results showed that the major international sport organisations involved in ID-sport
438 were represented at national level in all the assessed countries. However, the way they were
439 represented varied among the countries, resulting in different structural scenarios. Moreover,
440 results showed different network systems between these main national ID-sport organisations.

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441 Although each country had its unique system, similarities were found among some groups of
442 countries in terms of networking, organisational landscape, and integration of ID-sport into
443 disability sport and mainstream sport.

444 It has been recognised that sport provision can be negatively affected by the lack of
445 connection and coordination between the associated sport bodies (Cousens et al., 2012;
446 Robson, 2001). On the contrary, levels of PA and sport participation rates can increase by
447 establishing collaborations or connections and strengthening partnerships between those
448 bodies (Baker et al., 2017). For example, such a strategy has been implemented by the
449 Canadian Sport System with the aim of strengthening their fragmented system and enhancing
450 sport participation (Cousens et al., 2012). Hence, to promote growth it seems vital that
451 national governing bodies involved in ID-sport (including ID-sport, disability sport and
452 mainstream sport organisations) develop powerful connections and work in partnership to
453 develop a well-grounded network between organisations. Even when the goals and strategies
454 of each organisation differ, such a network can help to build a more solid and coordinated
455 national ID-sport system, which ultimately might enhance the effectiveness of targeting
456 athletes and providing them the best opportunities in accord with their aims, needs, and
457 performance levels. Furthermore, if a national sport system is well-organised, within and
458 between the different main sport drivers, it might facilitate the development of an
459 infrastructure which provides a long-term sustainable developmental trajectory for talented
460 athletes (from grassroots to elite level).

461 The present study showed that in the 10 assessed countries there was at least one
462 formal connection (i.e., bilateral connection as members and/or work in partnership) between
463 two of the major ID-sport organisations. This connection was found between the NPC and the
464 national representation of Virtus, which were the two main national drivers of high-
465 performance ID-sport in all the assessed countries. Working in partnership can be difficult
466 when the goals or performance levels are different, or when there is a big gap in terms of

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467 funding or influential power between the different organisations. Our findings showed that the
468 assessed countries were spread along a continuum with not all the ID-sport organisations
469 actively working in partnership, compared to other countries where comprehensive
470 connective network between all the major ID-sport organisations had been established. Both
471 the Icelandic and Swedish ID-sport organisations positively valued that all their national
472 organisations were working under the same roof in a unique disability-sport organisation. It
473 should be noted that these two countries are the least populated of the sample (Eurostat, n.d.),
474 which might have facilitated this situation. Nevertheless, in a highly populated country like
475 Germany, it was found that the three main national ID-sport organisations were working in
476 partnership. It is normal that there might be a certain degree of discrepancy and challenge
477 between different sport organisations but through trust and commitment to shared outcomes
478 obstacles can be overcome (Robson, 2001). Indeed, the array of organisational networks
479 found in this study demonstrates that there are no organisations which cannot work together,
480 such collaboration depends on other factors.

481 Although each European country has its own geographical and socio-cultural
482 particularities, a collaborative environment between the major ID-sport organisations (even if
483 they have different target goals and performance levels), like in Iceland, Sweden, or Germany,
484 might serve to inspire other European countries. Sharing such examples of good practise
485 might stimulate other countries to strengthen their current partnerships or to create new
486 formal connections with the other organisations involved in ID-sport. For instance, to build a
487 more solid national structure (e.g., in countries with a decentralised and fragmented
488 landscape, like Belgium and Great Britain); and/or to develop new connections with the other
489 ID-sport organisations, such as with SO, which frequently remains apart in the national ID-
490 sport network (i.e., in Belgium, France, and Poland). Moreover, the inclusion of SO as a
491 partner in a connected landscape might play an important role on young athletes' sport
492 engagement and development at grassroots (Favazza et al., 2013; Special Olympics Sweden,

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493 2021). As stated above, even if there are different sport organisations coexisting in a country,
494 a strong partner network could benefit the coordination and provision of sports at all levels
495 (Cousens et al., 2012) for people with ID.

496 Another strategy to enhance ID-sport participation can be achieved by encouraging
497 and promoting inclusion in mainstream sport, since such a strategy might increase the number
498 of opportunities for athletes with ID to practise the sport of their choice at any level (Misener
499 & Darcy, 2014). Moreover, sport and PA are considered drivers of active social inclusion
500 (Burns, 2018; European Commission, n.d.; Harada et al., 2011) resulting in European
501 mainstream sport organisations progressively increasing their involvement in disability sport,
502 including ID-sport, encouraged by the implementation of the CRPD in 2008 (UN General
503 Assembly, 2007), and European Commission inclusion strategies (European Commission,
504 2011; European Union, 2021).

505 All the assessed European countries have started to work towards the inclusion of
506 disability sport (including ID-sport) in mainstream sport. Accordingly, results showed that
507 most of the major national ID-sport organisations included national mainstream sport
508 federations among their networks in order to work towards sport inclusion. However, the
509 extent of ID-sport inclusion varied among the assessed countries. It was found that some
510 European countries reported a more premature process of inclusion compared to others that
511 already included or delegated some sport disciplines into mainstream sport. Nevertheless, in
512 most of the countries, there was an active plan to increase the number of sport disciplines to
513 be included in the mainstream and some also developed further national supportive policies
514 concerning disability sport.

515 It is important to establish supportive policies and laws that enhance the recognition of
516 disability sport (including ID-sport) and contribute to ensuring equal rights for sport
517 participation at all levels (Misener & Darcy, 2014; UN General Assembly, 2007). However, it
518 has been suggested by participants in this study that the process of inclusion might be more

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519 likely to succeed with an in-depth preparation phase (where ID-sport and multi-disability-
520 sport federations can play an important role to transform mainstream sport federations),
521 followed by progressive implementation and regular monitoring. For instance, the CRPD
522 implementation (UN General Assembly, 2007) is monitored in each country every five years
523 (UN Human Rights Council, 2022).

524 A systematic, comprehensive and well-evidenced inclusion strategy might better meet
525 the needs of people with disabilities to ensure a successful and high-quality inclusion process.
526 However, it should consider the diverse needs of people with different types of disabilities
527 (Misener & Darcy, 2014), to avoid any potential disadvantages amongst groups with different
528 types of disabilities, which have typically been unfavourable for people with ID and/or for
529 people with severe disabilities. The adoption of an international framework on which to base
530 inclusion may be helpful. For example, the International Classification of Functioning,
531 Disability and Health (ICF) model (WHO, 2001) offers a framework that is based on function
532 not on diagnosis, and as such identifies challenges to inclusion on which to base inclusive
533 practices. This model already underpins the IPC approach to classification and provides a
534 proven cross-disability approach to sport inclusion (Tweedy, 2002). It should also be noted
535 that research has been critical of inclusion monitoring strategies which do not specify the type
536 of disability, as people with ID can be ‘lost’ in generic disability statistics resulting in possible
537 increases in inclusion for ‘disabled’ people but not necessarily for those with ID (Krahn,
538 2019).

539 Limitations and future research directions

540 Ten European nations were assessed; however, results cannot be interpreted for all
541 Europe, and neither a unique model for ID-sport can be suggested as an optimal one since
542 each country has its unique social and environmental differences. Nevertheless, different
543 strategies and examples of good practise can be shared to improve the current ID-sport
544 models. Therefore, it might be interesting to analyse the situation of ID-sport in other nations,

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545 especially those who are seen as most successful, taking a wider audit of operational context
546 including their funding arrangements.

547 Single representatives on behalf of each organisation were interviewed, perhaps
548 limiting the range of perspectives. However, the questionnaire was sent in advance to all the
549 organisations, so they had the opportunity to discuss it with other staff members and to choose
550 their representative person. In addition, the study involved several organisations in each
551 country, so data could be triangulated to mitigate this limitation. Future studies might
552 consider sampling multiple participants from a diagonal slice across the organisational
553 structure to elicit views from the strategic to the operational within each organisation.

554 Finally, this study aimed to focus on the organisational structure of ID-sport (i.e., the
555 organisational ID-sport landscape attending to the nature of the main ID-sport organisations,
556 and their level of connection and network). Nevertheless, it might be interesting that future
557 studies analyse the national situation of ID-sport by looking at the outcomes of the different
558 structures. For instance, how the different national models translate into participation rates
559 across the recreational to high-performance continuum; and/or, how different funding sources
560 and economic investment in ID-sport might have an impact on participation. For nations
561 which are moving to more inclusive practice within mainstream sport it is also important to
562 identify if the specific needs of participants with ID are being met, and they are not being
563 subsumed under wider disability initiatives, which do not make the required adaptations. This
564 is especially important for this group who may need greater support to advocate for their
565 needs.

566 **Conclusions**

567 The present study included countries from different European geographical areas to
568 get a broad view of ID-sport structures in Europe. Every country has its own characteristics
569 (e.g., geographical location, politics, economics, history, culture, etc.), which will have an

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570 impact on the development, management, and provision of ID-sport. Consequently, it is
571 important to acknowledge that these results are limited to the 10 countries sampled.

572 Attending to the main drivers of ID-sport in each country, the results identified a more
573 ID-specific landscape in France, Italy, Poland, and Spain. Other countries like Belgium, Great
574 Britain, Iceland, and Sweden showed a multi-disability-oriented landscape. Only the
575 Netherlands had a fully mainstream-oriented landscape, although results suggested that the
576 inclusion of disability sport in the Netherlands happened quite abruptly without a studied
577 implementation strategy. Nevertheless, in all assessed countries, the mainstream sport
578 federations were playing a role in providing ID-sport opportunities.

579 Connections between the major ID-sport organisations also varied between the
580 different assessed countries. In these 10 countries, the NPC was connected with the national
581 representation of Virtus, and in six of these 10 countries, the NPC also connected with the
582 national SO. However, Virtus and SO were usually not working in partnership; such
583 connection mostly happened when the three major ID-sport organisations worked together
584 under a unique umbrella sport organisation.

585 Results from this study might help stakeholders and bodies involved in the
586 management, organisation, and/or provision of ID-sport to better understand the situation of
587 ID-sport in their home countries and across Europe. Examples of good practice among
588 different countries might be useful for a positive evolution of ID-sport and for people with ID
589 to have equal opportunities for sport participation at any level. However, for such successful
590 inclusion to be evidenced more robust data on participation rates by disability is needed.

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727

728 **Table 1**729 *Organisational Characteristics*

Demographics	ID-sport organisations (n = 29)
Organisations' national representation	
NPC	3
Virtus	5
SO	7
NPC-Virtus	4
NPC-Virtus-SO	1
Others	9
ID-sport organisation according to the type of disability	
ID specific	15
Multi-disability	13
Mainstream	1
Sport umbrella-organisation	
Yes	25
No	4
Focused only on competition	11
Focused only on recreation	4
Focused on both competition and recreation	14
Types of sports and/o PA	
Focused on organised-sports ^a	15
Focused on non-organised-sports ^b and other activities ^c	
Focussed on both organised- and non-organised-sports and other activities	14
Sports included in the organisation	
Single sport	
Multi-sports	29
Frequency of sport or PA provision	
On a regular basis throughout the year	24
Occasionally ^d	5
Non-profit organisations	28
For-profit organisations	1

730 *Note.* ^aOrganised-sports meant as sports with structured rules. ^bNon-organised sports meant as physical731 activity without structured sport-rules, fitness, etc. ^cOther activities meant as games, social activities,732 etc. ^dOccasional sport activities, events or an annual competition.

733 ID = Intellectual Disabilities. NPC = National Paralympic Committee. SO = Special Olympics. ID-

734 sport = sports for people with intellectual disabilities. PA = Physical Activities.

735

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736 **Table 2**737 *Participant characteristics*

Organisational position	N	Country	N
Chief Executive Officer	3	Belgium	5
President/Director	4	France	1
Vice President	1	Germany	2
Managing Director	2	Great Britain	6
Sport Director	6	Iceland	2
Sport Manager	2	Italy	3
Sport Co-ordinator	3	Netherlands	2
Spokesperson	2	Poland	3
General Secretary	3	Spain	4
Technical Counsellor	1	Sweden	1
National Partnership Advisor	1		
Head of Strategy, evidence and insight	1		
Funding			
State funded	11		
Private (charity of self-funding)	15		
Neither	3		

738

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739 **Table 3**740 *Connections Between the ID-sport Organisations and Other National Sport Organisations Involved in ID-Sport*

Countries (n = 10)	ID-sport organisations (n = 29)	Organisations' representation at national level	Member connection between the ID-sport organisations and/or other NSO	Main official connections between the ID- sport organisations	Main official connections between other NSO	Connections to certain extent and / or sporadically collaborations	Connections with schools
Belgium	P1	NPC – Virtus	NPC	P2	Other NSOD		Yes
	P2	NPC – Virtus	NPC	P1	Mainstreams		Yes
	P3	Other ^a			Mainstreams	Other NSOD	Yes
	P4	Other ^a				Mainstreams	Yes
	P5	SO				Other NSOD	Yes
France	P6	Virtus	NPC		Mainstreams	Other NSOD	Yes
Germany	P7	NPC – Virtus	Mainstream ^b		Mainstreams		Yes
	P8	SO	Mainstream ^b		Mainstreams		Yes
Great Britain	P9	Virtus	NPC	P11 P12 P13 P14	Mainstreams Other NSOD Other NSOID		Yes
	P10	SO	P12	P11 P13 P14	Mainstreams Others NSOD		Yes
England	P11	Other ^c	P12	P9 P10	Mainstreams		No
	P12	Other ^a	P10 P11 Others NSOD	P9 P13 P14	Others NSOD Other NSOID Mainstreams		No
Scotland	P13	Other ^a	NPC Others NSOD	P9 P10 P12 P14	Others NSOD Mainstreams		Yes
Wales	P14	Other ^a	Other NSOID	P9	Mainstreams		Yes

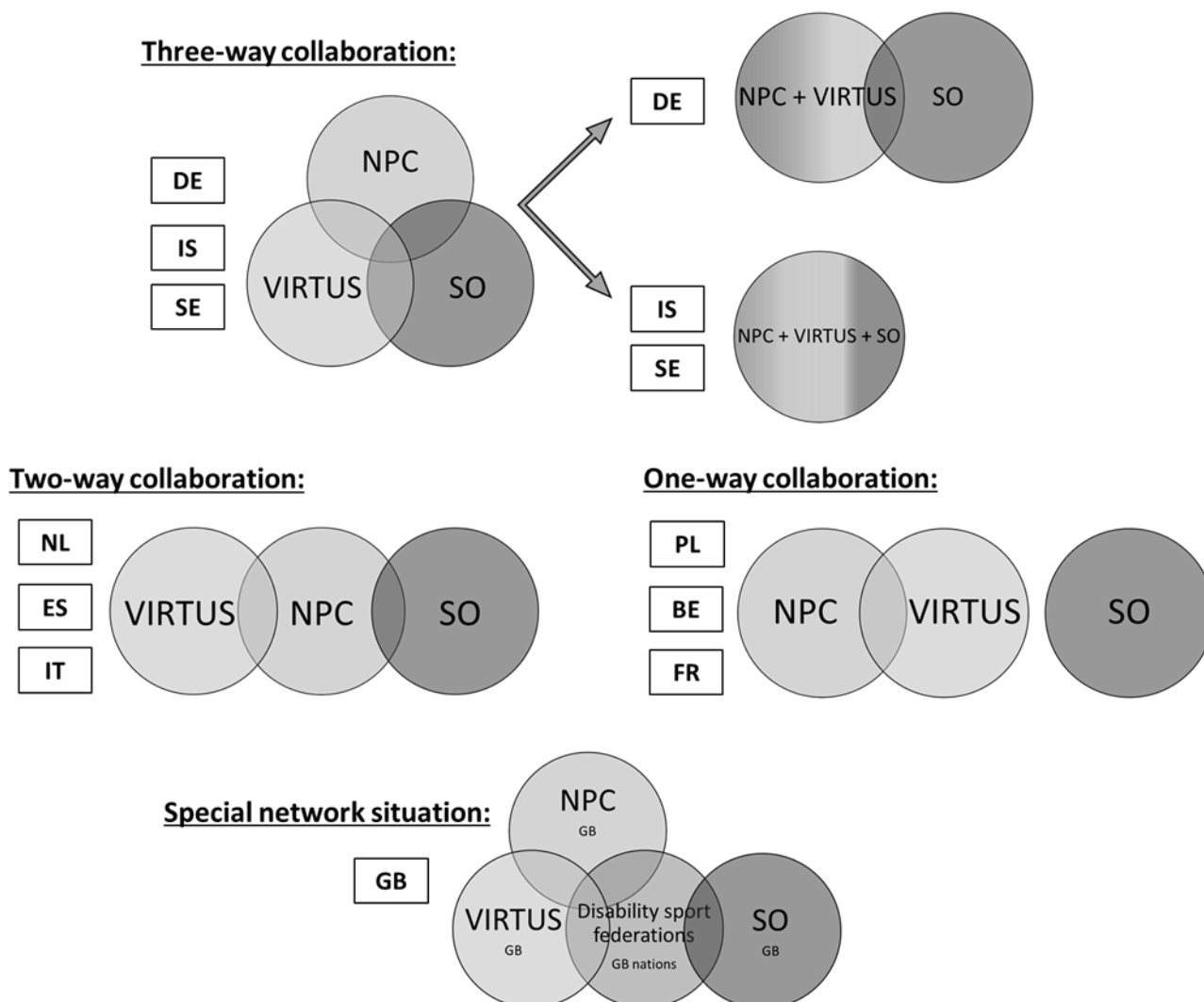
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			Others NSOD	P10 P12 P13	Others NSOD NPC	
Iceland	P15	NPC – Virtus – SO SO ^d	P16		Mainstreams	Yes
	P16		P15		Mainstreams	Yes
Italy	P17	Virtus	NPC P18		Mainstreams Others NSOD Other NSOID	Yes
	P18	Other ^c	NPC P17 Mainstream		Other NSOID Others NOASD Mainstreams	Mainstreams NOC NPC Yes
	P19	SO	NPC		Mainstreams	Yes
Netherlands	P20	NPC	NOC Mainstreams P21		SO Others NSOD Mainstreams	Yes
	P21	Other ^a	P20		Mainstreams	SO Other NSOD Yes
Poland	P22	NPC	P23 Others NSOD		Mainstreams	Yes
	P23	Virtus	P22		Mainstreams	Yes
	P24	SO			Other NSOID	Yes
Spain	P25	NPC	P26 P27 Mainstreams Others NSOD		Mainstream ^b Mainstreams Others NSOD NOC	Yes
	P26	Virtus	P25 P28		Others NSOD Mainstream ^b	Other NSOD No
	P27	SO	P25		Other NSOID Mainstreams	Mainstreams Yes
	P28	Other ^c	P26		Mainstreams	SO Yes
	Sweden	P29	NPC – Virtus – SO	Others NSOD Mainstream ^b		Mainstreams

- 741 *Note.* Other: refers to a sport organisation/federation/association that does not represent the National Paralympic Committee, the national representation of Virtus, or the
- 742 national Special Olympics. Mainstreams: refers to the sport organisations/federations/associations/foundations that traditionally managed or provided sport for people without
- 743 a disability and now are also including disability-sport (and ID-sport).

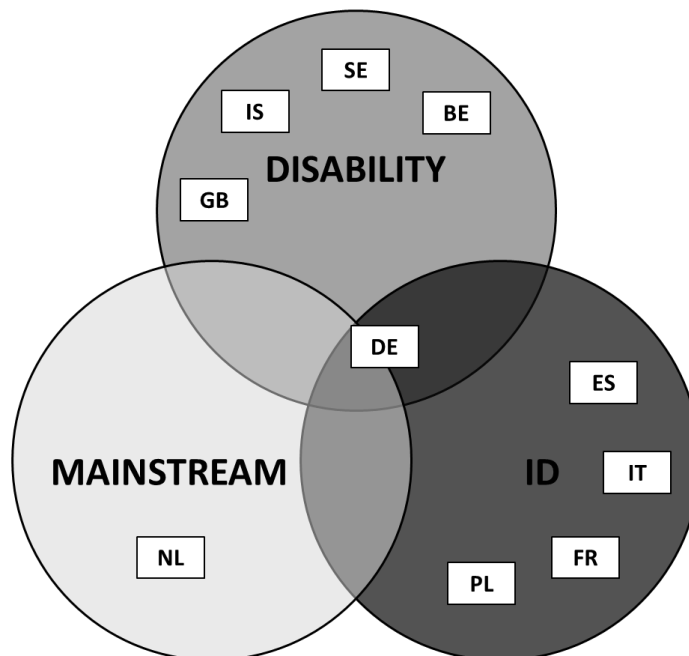
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744 ^aSport organisation/federation/association for people with different types of disabilities. ^bNational Confederation for all sports. ^cSport organisation/federation/association
745 specific for people with intellectual disabilities. ^dThere is one disability sport organisation that covers all disability sport at all levels in Iceland; however, Special Olympics
746 Iceland decided to participate separately as they reported to have different duties, projects, and records of registered athletes with intellectual disabilities.
747 ID = Intellectual disabilities. NSO = National Sport Organisations involved in the management, organisation or provision of ID-sport. P = participant. NPC = National
748 Paralympic Committee. NSOD = National Sport Organisation for people with Disabilities. SO = Special Olympics. NSOID = National Sport Organisation for people with
749 Intellectual Disabilities. NOASD = National Organisation specific for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder. NOC = National Olympic Committee.
750
751

752 **Figure 1**753 *Graphical Representation of the Different Connective Scenarios Between the Main*754 *National ID-Sport Organisations Across Europe*

755 *Note.* DE = Germany; IS = Iceland; SE = Sweden; NPC = National Paralympic Committee; SO =
 756 Special Olympics; NL = the Netherlands; ES = Spain; IT = Italy; PL = Poland; BE = Belgium; FR =
 757 France; GB = Great Britain.

758

759 **Figure 2**760 *Graphical Representation of the General Landscape According to the Type of the*761 *Main ID-Sport Providers Across Europe*

762

763 *Note.* There are three general-oriented landscapes: mainstream-oriented landscape; disability-oriented
764 landscape; and Intellectual Disability (ID)-oriented landscape.

765 SE = Sweden; IS = Iceland; BE = Belgium; GB = Great Britain; DE = Germany; ES = Spain; ID =

766 Intellectual disabilities (oriented landscape); IT = Italy; NL = the Netherlands; FR = France; PL =

767 Poland.

768 For GB, the three different nations' landscapes (i.e., England, Scotland and Wales) were considered for

769 the analysis.