



# ENGSO

THE EUROPEAN SPORTS NGO

---

## White paper

### THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCESSIBLE SPORTS



WEBSITE  
[www.engso.eu](http://www.engso.eu)



CONTACT  
[policy@engso.eu](mailto:policy@engso.eu)

---

## Introduction

### ***What if, your life would start over, and you woke up in a random family in Europe. Would you find a fitting place to be active in sport more easily or not?***

According to 2020 data, on average, 24,2% of children in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Therefore, children with at least one parent with migrant background have increased risk of poverty of 32,9%. Over half (50,5%) of children were at risk of poverty who live in households in which the highest level of education obtained by parents is lower secondary level.

When measuring sport participation, consistent pattern emerges that people from low-income households or low level of education are significantly less active. Finally, social context is an important indicator for sport participation – place of birth, family circumstances, urban versus non-urban residence, have considerably high impact on a healthy and active lifestyle.

#### ***That is why we strive to enhance:***

- ***Physical accessibility of sports***
- ***Geographical accessibility of sports***
- ***Socio-economic accessibility of sports***

Accessibility of and to sport infrastructure is of immense importance taking into account that the provision of sport facilities offers much more than opportunities for participation and the physical health benefits of participation. Sport facilities play a role in being the social anchor within communities and increasing social capital. This is especially notable for rural areas where sport is seen as a vehicle for the development of social capital. Not least, making sure the accessibility criteria are embedded in the planning and design of sports facilities and sport programmes is essential in order to tap into the benefits associated with sport, such as physical health, psychological well-being and social health. Furthermore, this analysis presents three accessibility dimensions that have been explored in detail, namely – physical accessibility, geographical accessibility and the socio-economic dimension of accessibility. By means of introducing academic articles in each of the sections and putting forward best practices, this document aims to further emphasize the importance of accessibility and steer the debate on policies dealing with accessibility of sport infrastructure and sport as a whole in Europe. This document gives an impression of available research and findings, but does not strive to be complete, since there are many relevant studies in this field of expertise. This document however presents analysis as a valuable starting point for further debates and policy making.

---

The analysis makes the relevance of availability of sport provision clear; it is directly linked to the level of sport participation. With the aid of making sport facilities disability friendly, bringing sport infrastructure close to residential areas both in metropolitan and rural regions and providing increased opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds - it is the way forward to making Europe the most sportive and healthy continent globally. Just as importantly, ENGSO is in the position of furthering the discussion at the European level on how to strengthen the accessibility of sport for all, regardless of sex, (dis)ability, socioeconomic status, religion, national origin and sexual orientation.

## 1. Physical accessibility

In Europe, a wide variety of initiatives are aimed at improving the accessibility of sport facilities and infrastructure for people with disabilities and reduced mobility. The means employed to tackle the problem range from digital solutions (creation of webpages), to building new and improving old infrastructure in order to increase the number of disabled people participating in sports. On the other hand, to a varying degree, the responsibility to make the accessibility criteria embedded in the development of programmes and facilities lies upon the cooperation between local, regional and central public authorities. Not least, sports movement organisations, including national Olympic committees, federations, associations and other non-for-profit sport actors, complement the effort in making sport facilities and programmes available to people with disabilities. Moreover, an insight into the state of accessibility of sport infrastructure in Portugal and the motivations of people with reduced mobility for participating in sporting activities, have been explored in the study conducted by Azevedo, Martins, Machado & Tavares (2012). In summary, the study has analysed the degree of compliance of the legal requirements with pre-established accessibility criteria as set out by the Portuguese law, together with an investigation of motivations for physical exercise. The results have indicated that all the participants with reduced mobility are aware of physical activity benefits, however, at the same time they are prevented from fully exercising their right to sport, due to several architectural barriers. In a nutshell, the study has highlighted the apparent mismatch of the reality, between existing legislation aimed at ensuring accessibility and the situation on the ground.

An illustration of a list of good practices and examples is presented below:

- A memorandum of understanding has been signed between the Lithuanian Paralympic Committee and the Association of Lithuanian Municipalities with a view to adapting existing and building new infrastructure accessible for people with impaired mobility and/or disabilities. The agreement which was signed between the organisation representing Lithuanian Paralympic sport and the national public authority agreed to further the collaboration between various national authorities in order to increase funding available for building accessible sport infrastructure in Lithuania. Thus, the certification marked by the sign of *acorn* will be given to sport facilities in Lithuania that are compatible with established accessibility criteria. In 2021, the sport centrum of Vytautas Magnus University received one of the first *acorn* certifications, marking the sport facility fully accessible for people with disabilities and reduced mobility.

---

The acorn certification, on the other hand, will be the base to create a website tracking the existence of various public and private sport facilities that are compatible with accessibility criteria established by the Lithuanian Paralympic Committee. Just as importantly, the Lithuanian Paralympic Committee has been tasked to consult municipalities on how to conform with acorn certification criteria for the purpose of developing sport infrastructure that meets the needs of every sport and physical activity practitioner. Finally, hyperlinks are included following detailed information on [memorandum of understanding](#), [acorn certificate](#) and [Vytautas Magnus university awarded the accessibility certificate](#) (available in Lithuanian)

- The municipality of Evergem in Belgium has made a commitment to install adapted outdoor fitness equipment at their main sporting sites. The identified target group to benefit from the improvement of sporting facilities is people with disabilities, including wheelchair users and convalescents. The adapted fitness equipment is installed on accessible flooring, to allow people in wheelchairs or who have trouble walking to easily access the outdoor fitness. The equipment is installed at the same location as the general outdoor fitness equipment, allowing people with a disability to participate in physical activity and sport on an equal footing. The municipality of Evergem can be reached at [sport@evergem.be](mailto:sport@evergem.be) for more information.
- The National Dutch government funds a variety of programmes targeting people with disabilities in order to increase the accessibility of sport infrastructure for this target group. Nationally designed and regionally implemented programme carried by the name of *Active without Borders*, ran from 2015 to 2018 in an effort to make sport facilities available and accessible for all people with disabilities. The programme is supported by 6.6€ million funding from the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports over the three-year period. Moreover, people with disabilities can also benefit from the Sports Transports Regulation provisions, which provide financial reimbursement for transport expenses to people affected by severe physical disabilities participating in a team sport affiliated with one of the nationally recognized federations. *Active without Border* programme aims to create inter-sectoral collaborations by setting up regional structures which would allow to flourish partnerships between different organisations, varying from primary health providers, rehabilitation centres, schools, sport and physical activity providers to local government agencies. Another successful story of the programme was uncovering that using coaches who are embedded within the local community helps to encourage people with disabilities to participate in physical activity programmes devised by the *Active without Border* initiative. Finally, while one of the goals of the programme was to increase the accessibility of sport infrastructure, the overarching objective was to raise the number of sport participation for people with reduced mobility and/or disabilities. More in-depth information is accessible via the [hyperlink](#).

## 2. Geographical accessibility

The following section deals with the accessibility of sport infrastructure in rural areas and how it impacts the level of participation in physical activity and sport. The study on youth

---

sports participation in rural communities was carried out by Kellstedt et al. (2021). The findings of the research shed the light on contributing factors to youth participation in sport as well as what form of intervention is the most suitable to improve the accessibility of sport infrastructure in the rural areas. While geographical accessibility is an important driver to take into account for participation in sports, other factors such as sex, age and family income play an important role as well. It is suggested to enlarge the availability and accessibility of youth sport programming due to a pattern of engaging in sports in an out-of-school setting. Therefore, the continuation of academic inquiry into reaching sport facilities in rural areas has been further inspected by Marcen, Piedrafita, Olivan & Arbones (2021). In conclusion, the recommended strategies aimed at enhancing the accessibility of sporting facilities and sport participation have been found to concentrate on a cognitive level, segmentation of activities and continual training of trainers. Concerning the cognitive measures, campaigns focused on the benefits and fun of engaging in the physical activity shall be established to change the perception of potential participants. Segmentation of activities stands for offering different sporting activities according to population motives. Lastly, research has found that mere installation of facilities or resources can have limited success in raising the level of sport participation. In addition to sport infrastructure, the key is continual training of trainers in order to introduce newcomers to sport and maintain the existing sport participants.

A number of good practices in regard to geographical accessibility are presented below:

- Good practice example from the study on *Physical Activity Participation in Rural Areas: a Case Study* has illustrated how to make use of the natural environment in order to meet the objectives of increasing accessibility of sport infrastructure in rural areas. Organizing of orienteering, MTB, Nordic walking, trail running and many more sport that could be undertaken in open spaces took place in the area of Zuera municipality, Spain. The result was a great engagement of all participating audiences, from youth to adults. In addition, taking into account the rural setting of the location, the example has shown that the needs and demands for physical activities in rural areas are specific. Sport facilities are not a prerequisite requirement to achieve the above mentioned. The research article and good practice example are accessible via the [link](#).
- A consortium of partners coming from four European countries have set up a project (funded by European Union) to encourage and facilitate sport participation in rural areas. The project by means of offering practical support to develop methodologies on how to engage citizens to practice physical activity is aiming to enable rural communities to organize attractive sports events and thus trigger local community building. One of the innovative solutions to enhance the effectiveness of the project is to delegate ambassadors who would facilitate communication, ideas and knowledge among participants and all interested parties. The overarching goal, on the other hand, is to enable local communities in rural areas to have the agency in building long-term participation in sports.

### 3. Socio-economic dimension

Socio-economic factors can and do have a compounding effect on the objective and subjective sport participation levels. A study conducted on the outskirts of Cologne by researchers Schneider, D'Agostino, Weyers, Diehl & Gruber (2015) has posed a *deprivation amplification hypothesis* stating that individuals who are already socially disadvantaged experience a further contextual disadvantage regarding their access to sport facilities. As results have indicated, no support for the hypothesis was found due to the availability of physical activity facilities significantly better for children and adolescents in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The same is applicable to the adult population, but the relationship is slightly weaker and statistically not significant. Furthermore, the findings are consistent with the Australian study organized by Eime et al. (2017) which emphasized that in the metropolitan regions higher levels of participation were associated with higher socioeconomic status (SES), however, the opposite was true for non-metropolitan regions. In short, it can be concluded that scientific findings point to the direction that people with lower socioeconomic status coming from socially disadvantaged communities have equal or better access to sport facilities in many countries both in Europe and beyond.

In connection to socio-economic

The following section provides several good practices in regard to the socio-economic dimension of sport infrastructure accessibility:

- A well-established project in the Netherlands documents the diverse range of opportunities that sport and physical activity can provide for children from disadvantaged families. Since 1999, the Youth Sports & Culture Fund Netherlands has offered children from disadvantaged families a chance to participate in sports and creative activities. About 10% of the pupils in every average classroom in the Netherlands are growing up in a family with financial worries. These children miss opportunities to enjoy sports and creative activities, which are very important for their physical, mental, and social development and have a lasting impact on their lives. The Youth Sports & Culture Fund Netherlands helps by paying the contribution fees, sports outfits, sports equipment, and creative equipment for children of families living below the poverty threshold in the Netherlands. Lastly, in terms of targeting children in need, families are relieved from the burden of applying for the grant themselves. This is being taken care of by professionals, such as teachers, youth care workers, or the family's doctor. These intermediaries are key to the success of the Fund. In recent years, applications have been growing steadily by more than 10% per year. In 2019, 81.936 children were offered a chance to play sports or participate in creative activities. More information on the project is accessible [here](#).
- Rugby in Alta de Lisboa (Portugal) provides twice a week training sessions for children/youths, from 6 to 14 years old, boys and girls, distributed according to age groups. The training takes place at the Alto do Lumiar Sports Complex. In order to finance this project, ARAL (Alto do Lumiar Residents Association) launched a Sponsorship Project allowing any person or organization to contribute. Thanks to these



---

contributions, ARAL is able to ensure the coverage of expenses such as monthly fees, training, equipment (shoes, clothing), school material for the study room, extra-school support, promotion of human training, medical consultations and trips to tournaments, etc. This contributes to a better social integration of these children and young people. More information on the project and its methodologies is at hand by clicking on the [hyperlink](#).

- Fritidsbanken (Sweden) is a library with sports and leisure items. Everyone can borrow leisure equipment, such as skis, skates, inline skates, life jackets, snowboards and much more. The lending period is 14 days and it is free from charges for everyone. The initiative started in 2013 in Forshaga (Värmland) and has now spread across the country. Fritidsbanken wants to give people access to play and leisure through exercise and health. Further information is readily available [here](#).