
Inclusive Sports in Urban Spaces: A Social Logistics Approach

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study examines how contemporary cities can integrate inclusive sports into urban development to strengthen accessibility, participation, and well-being, particularly for people with disabilities. Using the analytical lens of social logistics, the paper investigates how planning, policy design and community engagement contribute to inclusive urban environments that support equality and social cohesion.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The research applies a qualitative, comparative approach combining the analysis of more than 30 international, national and municipal policy documents with case studies from major European cities (e.g. Helsinki, Barcelona, London) and medium-sized Polish cities (e.g. Tychy, Gdynia, Katowice). The analytical framework draws on WHO and UN-Habitat indicators related to accessibility, governance coherence and integrated policy design. This multi-scalar approach enables an assessment of how inclusive sports are embedded within broader urban health, education and social policies.

Findings: Findings indicate that cities most advanced in promoting inclusivity treat sport as a public good and strategically integrate universal design, cross-sectoral cooperation and community participation. Despite progress, persistent challenges – such as fragmented governance, limited monitoring, insufficient staff training and financial constraints – continue to hinder coherent implementation. The study identifies a set of transferable principles that support effective development of inclusive sport ecosystems across diverse urban contexts..

Practical Implications: The practical contribution of this research lies in providing evidence-based guidance for local governments and planners, particularly metropolitan networks requiring coordinated action across municipalities. The paper offers a structured set of insights for mainstreaming universal design, strengthening collaborative governance and embedding measurable indicators into urban inclusion strategies.

Originality/Value: The study contributes original value by combining social logistics with inclusive urban planning and disability-oriented sport policy, offering an interdisciplinary framework for analysing and operationalising inclusion in contemporary cities.

Keywords: Social logistics, adaptive physical activity, universal design, disability inclusion, accessible environments.

JEL codes: R12, I18, Z28.

Paper type: Research paper.

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1. Introduction

Cities are everyday environments where people work, learn, rest and interact — but also where they experience well-being, belonging and personal development. The mission of an urban system is to provide residents with conditions that support quality of life, happiness, and security (Layard 2005; Florida 2014; Szoltysek 2024).

Such conditions arise where acceptance, respect and empathy are encouraged, and where exclusion, loneliness and discrimination are consciously prevented. When people are denied access to urban services, education, or public life because they differ from others, the quality of life and the sense of security of the entire community are undermined (Grima *et al.*, 2017; 2018).

Creating inclusive urban environments requires strong social capital grounded in trust, cooperation and reciprocity (Putnam 2000; Szoltysek and Trzpiot 2019). Sport — traditionally perceived as recreation or competition — can act as a social platform that strengthens relationships, shared values and community cohesion. If cities aspire to genuine inclusivity, they must provide open, accessible urban spaces that enable shared physical activity for people with different abilities, ages and health conditions.

The well-known Polish proverb “a healthy mind in a healthy body” aptly expresses the link between physical and mental well-being – both of which shape social attitudes and the willingness to act in the spirit of mutual acceptance.

However, inclusive social mechanisms rarely develop spontaneously. They depend on coordinated actions by municipal authorities, civic organisations and community groups, grounded in formal strategies and operational plans. As highlighted by WHO (2022), UN-Habitat (2023) and UNESCO (2024), inclusion becomes real only when well-being and participation are embedded across urban policies. This is especially important for people with disabilities, who have historically been excluded from mainstream sport, urban design and public life.

Yet despite growing attention to inclusivity, cities still lack coherent frameworks for systematically integrating accessible sport into urban development. The challenge extends beyond the physical adaptation of infrastructure: it concerns governance, cultural attitudes, funding systems and cross-sectoral coordination.

The problem we are seeking to address concerns how cities can adapt their environments to support accessible sports for people with disabilities — from physical education lessons to professional sports. This study examines how contemporary cities integrate inclusive sports into planning frameworks to support accessibility, participation and well-being. By drawing on urban planning, public health and social logistics, it identifies practical solutions for redesigning urban spaces into environments of equality, participation and collective well-being.

2. Literature Review

The city functions as both a spatial and a social organism. Its vitality depends not only on infrastructure but also on the quality of relationships among residents (Jacobs, 1961; Lefebvre, 1991). Inclusive cities recognise diversity as a resource and design systems that enable participation for all, regardless of age, ability, or socioeconomic background (UN-Habitat, 2020).

High levels of social capital-trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement-are prerequisites for inclusive urban development (Putnam, 2000). Overall, previous research highlights that inclusive urban development depends on the interaction between spatial design, social relations and institutional arrangements that support participation.

Cities that invest in universal design not only improve accessibility but also foster empathy, solidarity and shared identity among residents (Gehl, 2010; Richelieu, 2018; WHO, 2018). Universal design frameworks emphasise barrier-free infrastructure, multisensory accessibility and spatial continuity as fundamental components of inclusive urban systems.

Studies on universal design converge on the view that designing for accessibility from the outset is more effective than retrofitting existing environments, although implementation remains uneven across cities.

Within this framework, inclusive sports are seen as a form of social infrastructure that supports health, trust, and cooperation among residents.

The notion of social logistics-originally derived from military and business applications-has been adapted to describe the coordination of urban flows of people, information and services to enhance societal well-being (Szołtysek, 2017; 2021).

Social logistics highlights relationality, interdependence and the systemic alignment of institutions, infrastructures and community initiatives. Existing research suggests that social logistics provides a valuable framework for analysing how urban systems support inclusion, but it is rarely applied directly to sport or accessibility studies.

International urban frameworks increasingly promote integrated, health- and inclusion-oriented approaches. WHO advocates Health-in-All-Policies, UN-Habitat emphasises inclusive urban prosperity, and OECD frameworks highlight cross-sectoral coordination. These approaches stress accessibility, governance coherence and citizen engagement as foundations of equitable cities.

Across these frameworks, inclusion is framed as a systemic priority, yet operational guidance for embedding inclusive sport into urban strategies remains limited.

Despite substantial research on accessibility, universal design and disability-oriented sport policy, these strands remain largely disconnected. Existing studies do not integrate universal design, disability-inclusive sport approaches and the concept of social logistics into a single analytical framework, limiting the understanding of how inclusive sport ecosystems function within urban systems. This study addresses this gap by offering an interdisciplinary framework that links these domains and explains how cities operationalise inclusion across planning, governance and service delivery.

The study relies on a multi-layered comparative analysis involving three main research components:

Document and Policy Analysis:

A systematic review of over 30 strategic and policy documents at the international, national, and municipal levels was conducted.

These included the WHO Global Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities (2022), UNESCO Creating Inclusive Cities Through Sport (2024), European Union Physical Activity Guidelines 2023 (Hussey and Gupta, 2023), and Sport New Zealand Disability Futures Report (2025), as well as municipal strategies from Helsinki, Barcelona, Warsaw, Tychy, and Kraków.

The documents were analysed through content analysis to identify recurring policy frameworks, accessibility standards, and implementation mechanisms.

Case Study Analysis:

Selected case studies from both large metropolitan areas (e.g., Barcelona, Helsinki, London) and medium-sized Polish cities (e.g., Tychy, Gdynia, Katowice) were examined.

The cases were chosen according to three criteria:

- explicit inclusion of disability-oriented sport policies;
- existence of public or semi-public facilities adapted for diverse users;
- evidence of cooperation between public authorities, NGOs, and citizens.

Case studies included urban sports complexes, community parks, inclusive education initiatives, and wheelchair/adaptive sports programs.

Expert Consultations and Literature Review:

A qualitative review of scholarly works and reports from urban planners, disability advocates, and policy analysts was carried out to complement the document analysis.

Key theoretical frameworks were drawn from Lefebvre's Right to the City (1991), Harvey's Social Justice and the City (2018), Imrie and Hall's (2001) Inclusive Design and the Built Environment, and Szoltysek and Trzpiot's (2019) concept of social

logistics.

Expert consultations were conducted informally through academic networks and practitioner workshops, focusing on governance models, funding mechanisms, and the cultural dimension of inclusion in sport.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopts an interdisciplinary comparative approach combining desk research, qualitative content analysis and contextual interpretation. This approach is aligned with the research gap and the systemic nature of inclusivity in urban sport ecosystems. The methodology focuses on understanding how inclusive sport is embedded in broader urban systems and how cities coordinate spatial, institutional and community dimensions of participation.

3.1 Scope and Research Questions

The research focuses on cities that have incorporated inclusive sport principles into their strategic urban policies, infrastructure planning, and public engagement programs.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do cities conceptualize and operationalize inclusivity in their sports policies and spatial planning?
2. What kinds of infrastructure, programs, and governance models promote participation of people with disabilities in sports and recreation?
3. Which factors-social, spatial, and institutional-foster or hinder the development of inclusive urban sports ecosystems?
4. How can lessons from leading cities be transferred to emerging or mid-sized urban areas seeking to improve their inclusivity strategies?

3.2 Research Design and Data Sources

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Expert Consultations and Literature Review:

Insights were collected through semi-structured exchanges within academic networks and practitioner workshops. These provided perspectives on governance models, cultural factors and implementation challenges.

Key theoretical frameworks were drawn from Lefebvre's Right to the City (1991), Harvey's Social Justice and the City (2012), Imrie and Hall's (2001) Inclusive Design and the Built Environment, and Szoltysek and Trzpiot's (2019) concept of social logistics.

Expert consultations were conducted informally through academic networks and practitioner workshops, focusing on governance models, funding mechanisms, and the cultural dimension of inclusion in sport.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The collected materials were analysed using a qualitative content analysis approach supported by thematic coding.

The analysis followed a three-step procedure:

Identification of key inclusion categories:

The first analytical stage involves identifying the principal dimensions of inclusion relevant to the participation of persons with disabilities in urban sport systems. These dimensions include, but are not limited to, accessibility, participation, community engagement, and policy integration. Accessibility refers not only to the physical availability of infrastructure and sport facilities but also to informational and

communicative accessibility, ensuring that all citizens are aware of opportunities and can make use of them without barriers.

Participation encompasses the degree to which persons with disabilities are involved in sport activities as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries, with attention to both recreational and competitive contexts. Community engagement highlights the collective involvement of residents, organisations, and social networks in promoting inclusive practices, while policy integration concerns the alignment of inclusion-oriented actions with municipal strategies, legal frameworks, and funding mechanisms.

Comparative synthesis:

The second step entails a comparative synthesis, aiming to evaluate the similarities and differences among cities in their approaches to inclusive sport. This comparative perspective allows for the identification of both convergent tendencies—such as shared policy goals, adoption of international standards, or common challenges—and divergent practices shaped by local socio-economic, cultural, and institutional conditions.

Through this synthesis, the study explores how diverse governance models, stakeholder coalitions, and civic movements influence the development of inclusive sport ecosystems. The comparison also provides insight into contextual determinants of success, revealing how metropolitan, medium-sized, and smaller urban centres interpret and operationalise inclusivity within their sport and recreation policies.

Evaluation of systemic coherence:

The final analytical dimension focuses on evaluating the systemic coherence of inclusive sport strategies within the broader framework of urban development. This involves assessing whether inclusive practices are not merely isolated initiatives but are structurally embedded in comprehensive city policies related to health promotion, education, mobility, and social cohesion. A coherent system implies the presence of cross-sectoral linkages and a governance culture that recognises inclusivity as a transversal principle guiding spatial planning, social policy, and public investment.

The evaluation also considers the long-term sustainability of these practices, examining whether institutional continuity, stakeholder collaboration, and adequate resource allocation ensure the persistence of inclusivity beyond short-term political cycles or project-based interventions.

To ensure methodological consistency, the analysis adopted criteria adapted from the WHO Health in All Policies Framework for Country Action (2014), UN-Habitat's City Prosperity Index and UN-Habitat Measurement of City Prosperity. Methodology and Metadata.

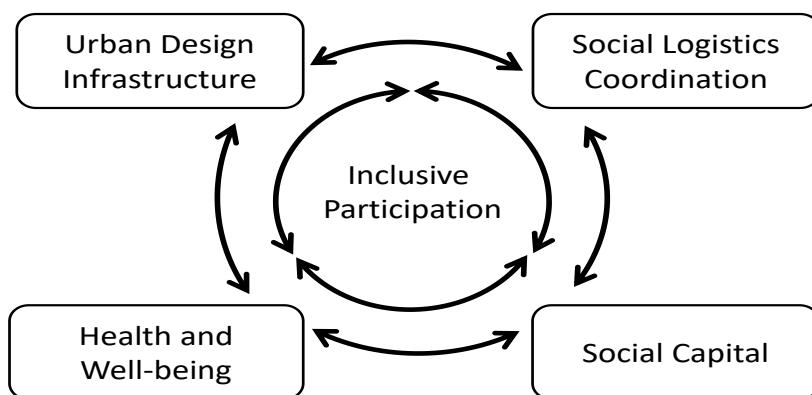
These criteria provided a basis for evaluating the strategic, spatial, and operational dimensions of inclusion.

3.4 Limitations and Reflexive Perspective

The research recognizes its interpretative nature and the contextual variability of urban inclusion policies. Differences in legal frameworks, funding capacities, and cultural contexts make direct comparison challenging. However, the use of multi-scalar analysis (international–national–local) allows for the identification of transferable patterns and principles, rather than prescriptive models.

This aligns with the philosophy of social logistics (Szoltysek, 2024), which emphasizes coordination, relationality, and mutual adaptation between urban systems and their users.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Inclusive Sports in Urban Spaces



Source: Own elaboration.

This diagram illustrates the relationship between inclusive sports, accessibility, social logistics, and urban well-being.

At the centre lies inclusive participation, supported by four interacting domains:

1. Urban Design and Infrastructure – barrier-free, accessible, multifunctional spaces for sport and movement;
2. Social Logistics Coordination – alignment of institutions, community initiatives, and local governance toward inclusivity;
3. Health and Well-Being – physical and mental benefits derived from participation in everyday activity;
4. Social Capital – trust, reciprocity, and shared values enhanced through sport-based interactions.

Together these elements form a feedback loop, where inclusive sport strengthens social capital and, in turn, increases participation and equity in urban life.

This conceptual framework illustrates how inclusive sports interact with accessibility, social logistics, social capital and urban well-being. It serves as an analytical guide for understanding how inclusive sport ecosystems function within contemporary urban environments.

5. Results and Discussion

4.1 Conceptualising and Operationalising Inclusivity

Across the analysed cities, inclusivity in sports is increasingly framed not as an “add-on” but as a core element of urban well-being policies.

Helsinki’s Vision for Sport Services 2024-2033 and Barcelona: The power of sport as a tool for social inclusion (Diplocat, 2022), iSport. Inclusion in sport. Case studies. (2023), The current model of sports organization for people with disabilities in Spain (Benito-Colio *et al.*, 2025) explicitly define sport as a public good linked to health, education, and community cohesion.

Polish cities such as Tychy and Gdynia also integrate sport into broader social inclusion agendas, though often at a smaller scale and with limited funding. This confirms that inclusive sport policies are most effective when embedded in overarching urban development strategies rather than isolated projects.

4.2 Infrastructure, Programs, and Governance Models

All reviewed cities show growing investment in universal design of sports facilities - accessible entrances, adaptive equipment, tactile signage, and multi-sensory environments.

Helsinki and Barcelona lead in integrating community parks, sports complexes, and school facilities into a continuous network of inclusive spaces.

In Poland, positive examples include Tychy’s Sport and Recreation Strategy 2021–2025 (Cieślikowski, 2022), which links inclusive sport to local health and education policies.

Successful governance models share three features:

- multi-actor partnerships between municipal authorities, NGOs, and local businesses;
- community co-design processes that involve people with disabilities at the planning stage;
- sustainable funding streams from both public budgets and corporate social responsibility initiatives.

4.3 Factors Fostering Participation of People with Disabilities

Three key factors emerged as crucial for increasing participation:

1. Physical accessibility – barrier-free design of facilities and public transport links;
2. Cultural acceptance – inclusive messaging, training of staff, and joint activities between disabled and non-disabled participants (“reverse inclusion”);
3. Affordable or free access – lowering financial barriers to participation, especially in public spaces.

Cities that combine all three see significantly higher rates of adaptive sport participation (WHO, 2022; Sport NZ 2025).

4.4 Barriers and Challenges

Despite progress, several barriers persist:

1. Fragmentation of policies – inclusive sport often handled by separate departments without coordination;
2. Insufficient monitoring and evaluation – lack of data on participation rates and facility accessibility;
3. Cultural inertia – lingering stereotypes and lack of trained staff in sports organisations;
4. Financial constraints – especially in mid-sized cities, where funding for inclusive infrastructure competes with other priorities.

These barriers highlight the need for formalised strategies and operational plans, to ensure sustainability and coherence.

Considering the above, urban inclusiveness in the context of sport participation by persons with disabilities is limited by a number of significant factors that may be described as imperfections in the functioning of the city. These include the low awareness of local leaders – both among city authorities, who are responsible for managing the city, and among civic representatives – who often overlook the existence of groups of persons with disabilities who may be interested in participating in sport, including recreational forms of physical activity.

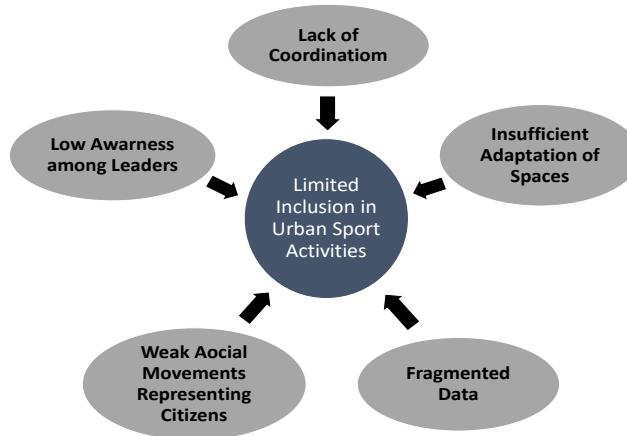
Equally insufficient are the initiatives undertaken by social movements representing urban residents. The available data that could support evidence-based decision-making, as well as provide insights into the situation of persons with disabilities in the city – particularly in the domain of social spaces – are highly fragmented, frequently incomplete, and difficult to process or utilise.

Under such conditions, these data become ineffective or are sometimes used manipulatively in decision-making processes at various administrative levels. Moreover, attempts to adapt urban spaces to the needs of persons with disabilities are largely absent, and when they do occur, they are often insufficient and carried out without genuine conviction regarding the necessity and legitimacy of such measures.

Finally, there is a lack of coordination among all the aforementioned activities, resulting in the absence of a driving force that could stimulate and organise comprehensive actions aimed at enhancing the inclusiveness of urban spaces and actively integrating persons with disabilities into the urban community.

These interrelations are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Limited inclusion of Inclusive Sports in Urban Spaces



Source: Own elaboration.

5. Transferable Lessons and Principles

Transferable principles serve as conceptual bridges that allow successful practices from one urban context to be adapted and implemented in another. Their identification and application require a systematic understanding of the underlying social, spatial, and institutional conditions that enable a given solution to function effectively. By distilling generalisable insights from local experiences, cities can avoid replicating context-specific mistakes and instead cultivate adaptive learning across diverse environments.

The process of transferring principles should be accompanied by contextual calibration, ensuring that imported ideas are aligned with local governance cultures, resources, and community needs. When properly applied, transferable principles enhance urban resilience, foster innovation, and contribute to the creation of more inclusive, efficient, and sustainable cities.

From the comparative analysis, five transferable principles emerge:

1. Inclusion by design – universal design as the baseline standard in all sport facilities, ensuring barrier-free access and multisensory usability;
2. Integrated policy frameworks – linking sport, health, education and social inclusion into a coherent system that reinforces reciprocal objectives;
3. Multi-level partnerships – collaboration among civic organisations, municipal authorities, private actors and, where applicable, national agencies;
4. Participatory governance – meaningful involvement of people with disabilities in planning, implementation and evaluation, ensuring legitimacy and real responsiveness to needs;
5. Monitoring and learning – systematic evaluation, transparent reporting and iterative improvements that build accountability and sustain long-term progress.

6. Policy Implications

Urban policies supporting inclusive sport must extend beyond organised or elite activities and ensure that opportunities for participation are accessible to all residents. Cities should prioritise universal accessibility, the design of multi-purpose spaces supporting spontaneous physical activity, and intergenerational participation, recognising that low-cost, inclusive public environments can significantly reduce social isolation while improving overall health outcomes (WHO, 2018).

The inclusion of people with disabilities in sport and physical activity is fundamental to building equitable, resilient and empathetic urban communities (Ribeiro et al. 2020). Integrating inclusive sport design within broader urban planning and logistics systems strengthens efficiency and fairness in resource distribution. This approach aligns with the principles of social logistics, emphasising coordinated flows of people, services and information to enhance societal well-being (Szoltysek, 2017; Szoltysek, & Trzpiot 2022).

The conceptual approach proposed here may be particularly relevant for metropolitan areas composed of small and medium-sized cities seeking to harmonize their development, such as the Górnou Śląsko-Zagłębiowska Metropolis (GZM) in Poland.

Regarding a joint sports strategy, the Metropolis (GZM) does not currently possess one. Instead, individual sports strategies exist within selected member cities of the Metropolis; however, these are neither coordinated nor harmonised beyond the scope of specific local conditions.

In some cases, they are differentiated or partially aligned to reflect territorial and infrastructural particularities. This situation represents, to a certain extent, a neglect and a missed opportunity to exploit the potential synergy effects that the Metropolis could generate in this domain.

With 2.13 million inhabitants across 41 municipalities and a density of 903 people per km², GZM represents the largest metropolitan area in Poland.

Its efforts to combine the advantages of large urban centres with the community-oriented characteristics of smaller towns provide a living laboratory for inclusive urban strategies.

Redesigning public spaces for inclusive sports, particularly within such complex and multi-municipal metropolitan areas, could enhance both territorial cohesion and the quality of life of residents. Strengthening cooperation across municipalities, sharing best practices and establishing joint metropolitan frameworks for inclusive sport would significantly enhance the region's capacity to deliver equitable access to physical activity.

Figure 3. Narrative map of social logistics in urban inclusion



Source: Own elaboration.

This mind map visualises how social logistics supports the redesign of cities for inclusive participation. It shows three levels of coordination:

1. Strategic – long-term vision and policy frameworks (e.g., municipal inclusion strategies, health promotion plans);
2. Tactical – partnerships among civic organisations, schools, and community groups implementing inclusive sports programmes;
3. Operational – actions in public spaces: adapted playgrounds, mobility-friendly parks, and community-driven events.

Each level feeds back into urban happiness and collective well-being, reflecting the holistic approach of social logistics.

7. Conclusions

The study demonstrates that inclusive sport has become a defining feature of the contemporary city's capacity to foster well-being, cohesion, and equality.

While inclusion is often discussed in the context of education or social care, its embodiment through physical activity and shared urban space offers a powerful means of transforming everyday life.

Sport, in its most inclusive form, is not merely about physical performance; it becomes a social mechanism of recognition, participation, and belonging. Findings indicate that cities advancing most effectively toward inclusivity share several structural and cultural traits.

They treat accessibility and diversity not as technical requirements but as core values of urban citizenship.

In these cities, universal design principles are embedded in all new developments, sports facilities are conceived as community hubs, and inclusion is institutionalised through coordinated governance and participatory planning.

At the same time, challenges remain – particularly in mid-sized and resource-limited cities – where inclusion often depends on individual enthusiasm rather than systemic frameworks.

To address these limitations, the study proposes the following recommendations for policy and practice:

1. *Institutionalise Inclusive Sport Policies:*

Local governments should formalise inclusive sport as part of their strategic planning frameworks, ensuring that it aligns with urban health, education, and mobility goals. This includes defining measurable objectives and securing long-term funding mechanisms.

2. *Design for Universal Accessibility:*

All public and private sports facilities should adopt universal design standards. Accessibility must be integrated from the earliest design stages, encompassing physical space, transportation links, and communication channels.

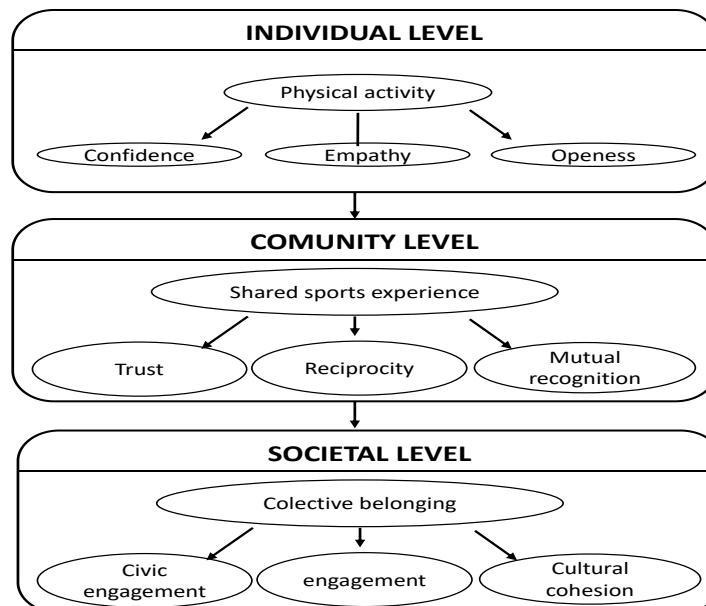
3. *Foster Multi-Actor Collaboration:*

Successful inclusive ecosystems require coordination between municipal authorities, NGOs, schools, universities, and private partners. City

administrations should act as conveners, providing platforms for cooperation and knowledge exchange.

4. *Promote Cultural Change through Education:*
Inclusion is not only about infrastructure but about mindset. Training programs for teachers, coaches, and public officials should emphasise empathy, diversity awareness, and adaptive methods of physical activity.
5. *Empower Communities and Co-Design*
People with disabilities and other underrepresented groups must be engaged directly in the design, management, and evaluation of sports programmes and facilities. Participatory governance builds legitimacy, accountability, and a shared sense of ownership.
6. *Integrate Monitoring and Evaluation*
Cities should develop measurable indicators to assess the inclusiveness of their sports systems. Transparent reporting supports learning, benchmarking, and public trust.

Figure 4. Role of Sports in Building Urban Social Capital



Source: Own elaboration.

This diagram depicts how participation in inclusive sports contributes to the formation of social capital within urban environments. At the individual level, physical activity fosters confidence, empathy, and openness. At the community level, shared sports experiences generate trust, reciprocity, and mutual recognition among diverse groups.

At the societal level, these local networks scale up into collective belonging, civic engagement, and cultural cohesion.

Sport thus operates as a social logistics mechanism – circulating trust and cooperation through movement, dialogue, and shared achievement. Ultimately, inclusive sport is not a niche policy but a reflection of a city's moral and civic maturity. As Szoltysek (2024) notes, "*the city is a shared affair, whose meaning is realised through relationships between people and through care for the common good.*"

Cities that design for inclusion design for the future – places where diversity is not a challenge to manage, but a resource to celebrate. By embedding inclusive sport into urban strategies, local governments can turn physical activity into a catalyst of empathy, health, and social cohesion – the essence of a truly human city.

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