

Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship

Report on how culture, beliefs and tradition in the Pacific region influence behaviours affecting participation of Pacific people with a disability in sport and physical activity

Executive Summary

The Pacific region is characterised by diverse cultures, languages, and traditions. Whilst sport and physical activity is integral to many Pacific societies, participation among people with a disability is often limited due to various cultural and societal factors.

This report highlights how culture, beliefs and traditions may influence behaviours that may affect the participation of Pacific people with a disability in sport and physical activity.

Pacific people with a disability often encounter a multitude of challenges and barriers that hinder their full inclusion. Limited access to education, employment, healthcare, and social opportunities further exacerbates their marginalisation.

Pacific cultures deeply influence the participation of people with disabilities in sport and physical activity, often limiting inclusion due to cultural beliefs, accessibility issues, and economic constraints. Addressing these challenges through education, awareness, and infrastructure development is essential to promote inclusivity and empower disabled individuals within Pacific communities both regionally and in New Zealand.

The challenges faced by Pacific people with a disability participating in sport and physical activity are multifaceted and deeply rooted in cultural attitudes and behaviours. By addressing these issues through awareness, education, and infrastructure development, we can create a more inclusive environment that encourages and supports the participation of all individuals.



Photo 1 and Photo 2 - Solomon Islands – visiting a school and talking to teachers about inclusion of Caroline who uses a wheelchair. *"When all our children even Caroline can join in the games that brings joy. It shows that all our students has a place. We try our best to include her as much as possible"* .

Key Observations

In New Zealand, Pacific people are less likely to participate in sport and physical activity. In addition, Pacific disabled people are even more unlikely to participate.

In the Pacific, people with a disability are less likely to participate in sport and physical activity.

Pacific disabled people often encounter a multitude of challenges and barriers that hinder their full inclusion. Limited access to education, employment, healthcare, and social opportunities further exacerbates their marginalisation.

Reduced participation may be categorised into three main areas:

1. Cultural Attitudes and Beliefs toward Disability - In Pacific cultures, there are prevalent misconceptions regarding disability that are related to inherent beliefs and traditions.

2. Accessibility and Infrastructure — In Pacific nations, there is a lack of accessible sports facilities, equipment, and specific programming tailored for people with a disability. National Sports Organisations do not prioritise inclusion of people with a disability and community leaders and

coaches are not trained on inclusion and are often scared of including a person with a disability.

3.Economic - Economic constraints reduce support: Limited funding and prioritisation of other areas leave disability inclusion programs under-resourced, further hindering participation.



Photo 1 - Tonga – Coaching people with a disability *“I have never had the opportunity to participate in this sport previously” - Norman Tupoi, athlete*

Photo 2 – Tonga – Inspiring the next Generation

Photo 3 – Tonga – Limited specialised equipment however people with a disability improvise and utilise a chair rather than a specific throwing chair

A key focus of this report is to consider the cultural attitudes and beliefs towards disability to identify key recommendations to consider for future inclusion of people with a disability within the Pacific and also the inclusion of Pacific people with a disability in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Misconceptions shaped by historical beliefs, societal norms, and traditional values were identified. Discussions highlighted that people with disabilities were frequently seen as a source of shame for families and were therefore viewed as a burden. In some cases, from the people that I spoke with, they were somewhat seen as less capable, or ‘normal’ and there was an element of fear or level of discomfort around some people with disabilities, leading to avoidance. In some nations people with a disability are hidden away from society and their disability was seen as a supernatural force or a curse, or seen as a punishment for past wrongdoings. Disability was perceived as temporary or curable, leading to a lack of understanding and acceptance of people who had a permanent disability. It was identified that communal responsibility sometimes leads to overprotection, discouraging participation due to fears of injury or rejection, and reliance on spiritual or traditional healing over medical intervention.

This exclusion from society leads to some individuals with a disability not thinking that they deserved an opportunity, or that were capable of an opportunity, and some did not even aspire to be involved due to the social stigma and negative perception leading to low self-esteem, lack of

confidence and the fear of judgment or exclusion.

There is a strong belief in communal responsibility towards people with disabilities. This however leads to some families being overly protective and discouraging their family members with a disability from participating due to fear of them being injured or from fear of them being rejected. There was the consideration that there could be a possibility of healing or curing disabilities through spiritual practices, traditional medicine, or rituals which sometimes leads to a neglect of medical intervention.



Photo 1 - Meeting with Tonga Government officials

Photo 2 - Attending Church with President of Tonga Paralympic Committee – Viliami Tufui and his family

Photo 3 – Presented with a Tonga gift

Case study - The Hidden people in Vanuatu: Disabled individuals are often hidden due to stigma, lacking access to education, healthcare, and mobility. However, Paralympic athletes are helping change perceptions by demonstrating potential and promoting inclusion through sport.

The Government of Vanuatu does not know how many people with a disability exist in Vanuatu. The 2020 Census failed to capture the data because families deliberately 'hide' their family members with a disability in back rooms or they are left tied up in mountain gardens until the enumerators leave. A child born with a disability has been viewed as a curse from God, they are considered as being Black Magic, a "kastom" curse. They are hidden away, languishing at home. They have no access to safe reliable & accessible transport, no access to wheelchairs, no access to medical support i.e. physiotherapy, they rarely attend school, and are not part of an incoming earning economy – and as a consequence they are usually illiterate and innumerate unable to

contribute to family and community endeavours. “The Hidden People” live in dark corners.



However, through the efforts of the Vanuatu Paralympic Committee and their support to identify and support disabled people to become athletes, these athletes through the example that they set, are bringing disabled people out of their homes to participate in sport. These ‘athletes’ are showing what is possible for a healthier, more inclusive lifestyle, and through doing so are

contributing meaningfully to community activities, including the attendance at Church and community meetings. Through the focus on potential athletic ability, not disability they are truly changing lives.

A number of factors can be considered, based upon the insights identified, to help increase participation of Pacific people with a disability in sport and physical activity within Aotearoa New Zealand. Some key recommendations are:

- ❖ Implement community awareness programs to challenge stigma and educate the public about disability rights and the benefits of inclusion of people with disability.
- ❖ Highlight success stories of people with disabilities who excel in various fields. Promote sport role models with a disability to help these campaigns have a greater connection and impact in communities.
- ❖ Provide education and inclusive training for coaches, community leaders, and educators on inclusive practices and training on how to support disabled athletes.
- ❖ Promote family engagement to foster a supportive environment for people with a disability to be included. Support groups can provide a space for families to share experiences and reduce feelings of shame.
- ❖ Promote narratives that celebrate diversity and the strengths of people with disabilities.
- ❖ Target resources and marketing campaigns to specifically target pacific people with a disability.
- ❖ Education about the medical and social models of disability can help dispel societal myths. Community workshops led by healthcare professionals can provide accurate information.
- ❖ Encourage representation of diverse disabilities in media and advocacy. Tailored programs that consider the individual’ s specific needs and circumstances can improve accessibility and inclusion.



Photo 1 - Elie Enock, Athlete from Vanuatu – inspiring the next generation of Pacific athletes as a role model. *“I am just so proud of what sport has brought to me life. I have travelled to places I never dreamed I would travel to and I have met lots of friends. I hope that people with a disability can see me compete and that they know that they can do it too” .*

Implementing recommendations plan

Work is underway to implement the recommended implementation strategies for increased inclusion of Pacific disabled people. This includes:



- ❖ Attendance at the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games to support the six Pacific Nations. My key role was to build awareness within the Pacific via Governments and Media highlighting the success stories of the Paralympians, promoting their participation at the Games and showcasing their achievements as sporting role models with a disability to help change beliefs and societal perceptions within their nations.

Photo: Irene Mar, and Solomon Tagiri, Taekwondo athletes, Fiji

- ❖ Working with Oceania Paralympic Committee and Oceania National Olympic Committee to support the inclusion of people with a disability. An MOU has been signed for the first time ever to work together with the Regional and National Sports Organisations and promote education initiatives.



Photo – Pacific Sports Ministers Forum

- ❖ Working with Ministry of Foreign Affairs to increase education in the Pacific and create opportunities for greater inclusion of people with a disability.

- ❖ Working with supporting National Paralympic Committees within the Pacific.

- ❖ Attendance at the Pacific Sports Ministers Forum and presentation on inclusion of people with a disability within the Pacific.

Conclusion

Understanding the beliefs surrounding disabilities within different cultures is crucial for inclusivity and acceptance. By addressing misconceptions and fostering dialogue, Pacific societies can create environments that empower individuals with disabilities and recognise their rights and contributions.

Education and awareness initiatives play a significant role in changing negative beliefs and promoting a more inclusive perspective on what it means for a person to have a disability.

Sport is a powerful tool to help change perceptions of people with disabilities. There is support into the Pacific via sport diplomacy to assist.