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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive sports can be a powerful force for change – demonstrating the value of diversity by breaking down barriers, empowering persons with disabilities (PWDs), and promoting acceptance and understanding. Inclusive sports reinforces the message that sports is a fundamental right for everyone. The health benefits of inclusive sports are substantial and wide ranging. Regular physical activity reduces the risk of the onset of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes and heart disease, and improves muscle strength and flexibility. For mental health, sports enhances self-esteem and promotes social acceptance and a sense of community. However, despite these positive impacts, PWDs have a markedly lower participation in sports, often due to significant barriers in accessing inclusive, structured, or well-managed facilities.

This report chronicles the journey of the Ability Friendly Program (AFP), a remarkable Qatar-based initiative that functions as a sustainable platform for the future of inclusive sports in Qatar. The AFP succeeds with a combination of engaging PWDs in sport, innovative approaches to creating inclusive programs, and an enabling environment. The report highlights the strengths and challenges of the program, showcasing how, by designing a program that engages PWDs while understanding their fundamental right to participate as equals, we can create a lasting legacy for change that empowers PWDs and society as a whole.

As this program seeks to expand and evolve, we hope that its transformative structure will help to provide a foundation for governments and organizations in the region to replicate it, and to realize the potential of creating programs that encompass the message of *sports for all*.

BACKGROUND TO INCLUSIVE SPORTS IN QATAR

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 1.3 billion people (about one in six people worldwide) are living with significant disabilities.³ PWDs face a range of barriers when seeking to access necessary goods and services, and much more effort is required to ensure that all people are able to reach their full potential. 4 The State of Qatar seeks to foster an inclusive society for all. an ambition that was reaffirmed when it became a signatory to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2007. This commitment is further articulated in the Qatar National Vision 2030, and the most recent National Development Strategy. For example, in seeking to enhance social cohesion, the strategy aims to ensure a decent standard of living for everyone, and has set targets for labor force participation for PWDs. Achieving this aim requires holistic approaches to social inclusion, as well as creating pathways and enablers to employment. The strategy also "bolster[s] its commitment to youth engagement through sports... activities"⁵ and has set targets for 2030. This paper explores how the adoption of a community-based sports program for PWDs is helping the State of Qatar contribute to improving their quality of life, fostering greater social cohesion, and enabling the country to deliver on its 2030 ambitions.

Since its inception, Qatar Foundation* has piloted innovations that have been scaled throughout the country and generated significant positive impact. One of its initiatives is the Ability Friendly Program (AFP), which offers a range of sports and related activities that are designed to be inclusive and culturally appropriate. The program has demonstrated significant life outcomes for its participants and their families and is leading a larger movement to broaden the adaptive sports landscape in Qatar. This report draws on the lessons learned from the AFP and aims to provide policy recommendations to guide the development and implementation of policies and programs that provide adaptive sports opportunities for PWDs. It also informs entities in the education, health, and sports sectors, and provides points for stakeholders in the sports and disability communities to consider.

Section 2 of the report gives an overview of the disability and sports landscape in Qatar. Section 3 details the AFP and its impact. Finally, Section 4 shares practical policy recommendations for those looking to replicate adaptive sports programming and enhance its impact in the region.

^{*} Qatar Foundation (QF) is the largest private non-profit organization in Qatar and is chaired by Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser. It is dedicated to advancing education, research, and community development to help build human capital and establish a knowledge-based society.

SECTION 1. THE DISABILITY AND SPORTS LANDSCAPE IN QATAR

OVERVIEW

The State of Qatar in the Arabian Gulf is home to about 2.9 million people, of which 13 percent are Qatari nationals. In its Third National Development Strategy (NDS3), the Strategic National Outcome 5 on Quality of Life explicitly highlights increasing sports participation across the country. The country recognizes sports as a powerful medium it can use to encourage a healthier lifestyle and help reduce the increasing burden of NCDs among its population, and encourage country-wide behavioral change. This drive has led to initiatives such as the School Olympics Program, the annually celebrated National Sports Day, and the development of Aspire Zone as Qatar's 'Sports City'. 10,11

Unprecedented for the region, Qatar hosted the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022TM, which was also seen as having transformative potential for accessibility and inclusion legacies. ¹² In 2016, the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy established an Accessibility Forum, comprising a diverse group of PWDs and other stakeholders, to help co-design an inclusive fan experience. This led to widespread advancements for the tournament as well as infrastructure, transportation, and services in the country.

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN QATAR

Accounting for the number of PWDs has been a substantial challenge, one that is not unique to Qatar, but for the wider Middle East region too.¹³ The latest census data marks the disability prevalence rate at 0.7 percent in Qatar, ¹⁴ equating to just under 20,000 people. The definition of disability and its reporting vary widely globally due to a number of factors, including disparate methodologies, high reliance on medical diagnoses, as well as cultural beliefs and social stigmas.¹⁵ Inconsistent and insufficient data lead to deepening inequalities, as barriers are invisible. As a result, inclusive services are underdeveloped. Ensuring that the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 Agenda is achieved requires that no one is left behind, and doing so calls for robust and consistent data for effective policies, programs, and services.¹⁶ Research can support the prioritization of approaches at every level, including within the sports domain. Evidence can also help mitigate some of the imbalances and produce multiple benefits for PWDs and society at large.

WHY SPORTS ARE CRITICAL FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Sports and physical activities are proven to have a wide range of benefits for PWDs and their communities.¹⁷ Physiologically, increased physical activity can improve fitness and mobility, strengthen muscles and bones, prevent chronic disease, and increase independence and 'physical literacy' – lifelong learning through movement and physical activity.^{18,19} Psychosocially, physical activity improves mental wellbeing, strengthens the sense of belonging and acceptance, builds mentor-mentee relationships, creates opportunities for social encounters and reframing

prejudices against children and adults with disabilities, encourages cross-cultural ability-diverse engagements, and promotes self-esteem, self-discovery, and confidence for social resilience.^{20,21} Inclusive and culturally appropriate activities within sports can enable pathways to community integration and a cohesive society, which directly supports NDS3 in the State of Qatar.

Despite the associated health and social benefits, studies have shown that most individuals with physical disabilities²² and intellectual disabilities²³ do not regularly engage in sports and, as a result, their risk of developing NCDs is about three times higher than for people without disabilities. 24,25 Their reduced participation is visible across genders and geographies, marked by less vigorous activities, less variety, and less participation in formal sports. 26 For instance, in one Saudi Arabian study, 80 percent of people with multiple sclerosis maintained only low to moderate levels of physical activity. 27 In another Saudi study, about 40 percent of individuals with physical disabilities failed to meet WHO's minimum standard for physical activity. 28 More broadly, in a US study, only 20 percent of American children with developmental disabilities were found to meet the national standard of daily physical activity of 60 minutes, 29 whereas in an Icelandic study, no children met the daily standard.³⁰ Statistics indicate that individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are 40 percent more likely to be overweight or obese compared to their typically developing peers, underscoring the importance of promoting sporting activities for those on the spectrum, and those with other disabilities.³¹ Research on the physical activity levels for PWDs in Qatar or the region is fairly limited and is an area that requires attention.



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PWDs encounter barriers to accessing sports and recreational services, 32 as design and support may need to be tailored to enable participation. Challenges exist in developing more programs for adaptive sports, including: low personal motivation and confidence; broad range of disability types and support needs; social stigma; lack of policies, budget, resources and opportunities; lack of qualified and available coaches and trainers; and inaccessible training environments. 33-35

ACCESSIBLE SPORTS IN QATAR

UNESCO's Charter recognizes that "the practice of physical education, physical activity, and sport is a fundamental right for all... [and] must be made available to all human beings, notably [among others] persons with disabilities..."³⁶ Qatar has recognized the importance of adaptive sports for several decades, starting in 1993 with the launch of the Qatari Sports Club for the Disabled.³⁷ Since then, various institutions have been established, including the Qatar Paralympic Committee (QPC). The QPC is responsible for managing athletes with disabilities and their participation in local and international competitions. It also provides sporting pathways for PWDs in Qatar. Since 1996 and to date, very few male and even fewer female athletes from

Qatar have participated in the Paralympic Games, although they have secured several medals among them.³⁸ However, the low level of participation is not surprising given the limited sporting opportunities currently provided for PWDs.

The Qatar Olympic Committee, as part of its new strategy map 2023–2030, continues its mission to develop sporting activities and events for PWDs and pave the way for equal opportunities to participate in sports trainings and tournaments.³⁹ It holds an annual Sports Festival for People with Special Needs to promote awareness, integration, and motivation for more adaptive sports programs.⁴⁰ Other adaptive sporting programs have emerged in recent decades. However, adaptive recreational sports – and recreational activities in general – are very limited (see Appendix on page 16). Access is further constrained for most PWDs due to lack of availability, logistics, finance, language, culturally responsive options, and more.⁴¹

SECTION 2. THE ABILITY FRIENDLY PROGRAM

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The Ability Friendly Program (AFP) was conceptually developed in early 2018, with an exclusive focus on providing adapted swimming and football programs for children and adults with ASD. The proposition of a program offering unique inclusive sports, leisure, and social opportunities for children and young adults with autism stemmed directly from the recommendations of the World Innovation Summit

Global and national developments guiding the evolution of the AFP

2007

Global awareness for autism

- UN General Assembly unanimously adopts a proposal by the State of Qatar to declare 2 April each year as World Autism Day.
- Qatar Foundation celebrates the day through unique community-bridging events.

2008

Qatar National Vision 2030

• The Qatar National Vision 2030 is launched, which includes a Social Development pillar.

2016

Policy publication and local demand for services

- WISH report *Autism: A Global Framework for Action* highlights root causes and challenges for children with ASD and the role of communities in providing support.
- In parallel, Qatar witnesses a powerful grassroots campaign from a group of mothers who collectively call for greater inclusion opportunities for their children with ASD.

School for students with ASD

• Qatar Foundation launches Renad Academy, a school catering to children aged three to five years with mild to moderate ASD.

First Accessibility Forum for FIFA Qatar 2022

- FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 is deemed to be the most accessible World Cup event in FIFA history.
- The First Accessibility Forum is launched to engage PWDs and stakeholders from the disability community to design an inclusive fan experience.

2017

National Autism Strategy

• The Qatar National Autism Plan 2017–2021 is launched, which forms a roadmap to improve the lives of individuals with autism and their families. The Plan is based on six pillars: (1) public and professional, (2) early screening and detection, (3) timely diagnosis, (4) effective interventions, (5) role of schools, and (6) transition to adulthood.

2018

Sports program for ASD community

• The concept of a sports-based program for children with ASD is approved.

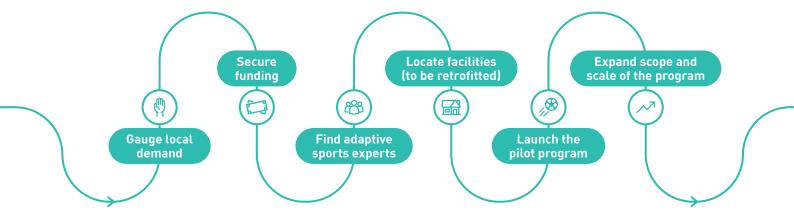
2019

Launch of the AFP

- Qatar Foundation launches the Ability Friendly Program.
- The mandate expands to include all disabilities within the same year.

for Health (WISH) policy report, *Autism: A Global Framework for Action*, which emphasized the need for more social inclusion opportunities.⁴² (The figure above shows the evolution of the program.)

The concept evolved into a community program (see the development stages in the figure below) and was launched in early 2019. After a term's operation, it was clear that the program had the potential to impact a much broader community, and so the AFP was expanded to cater to all disabilities from the age of four years onwards.



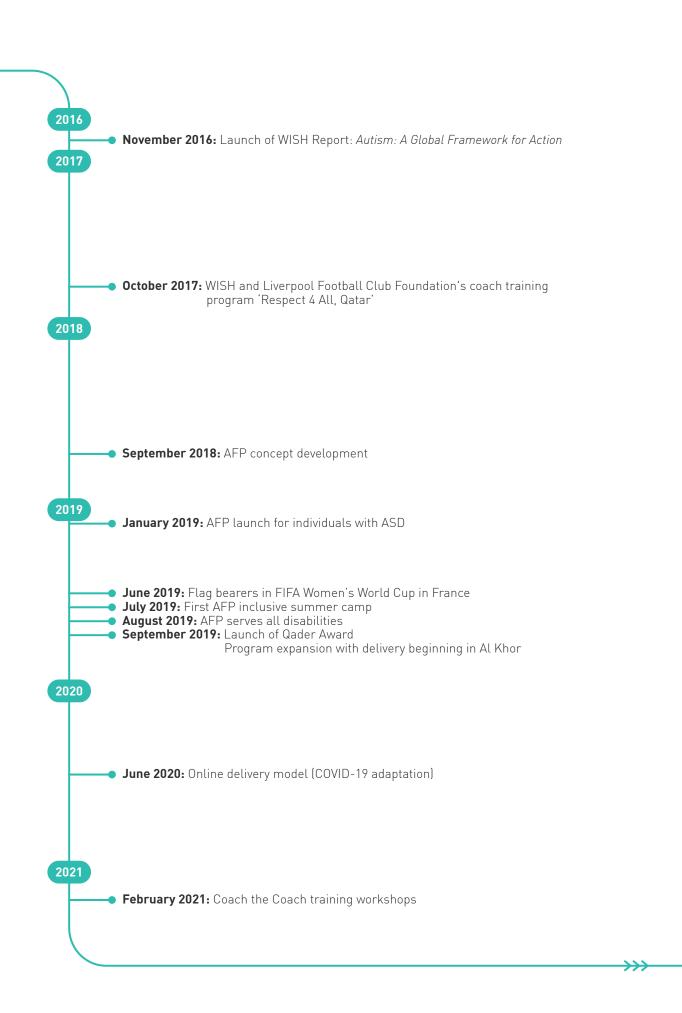
The AFP has been in operation for six years to date (see timeline on the following page), with an annual expansion in scope, quality, and variety of service to the disability community in Qatar. It started with a singular stream of community programming, which is offered at a subsidized rate to encourage financial inclusion of families residing in Qatar. It then developed two additional streams: an in-school offering within and outside Qatar Foundation; and a capacity-building stream to increase inclusive sports opportunities in Qatar.

All community sessions involve small groups of participants with disabilities. They are led by a specialized coach, complemented with many assistants and volunteers. Some activities, such as football, have one coach for five participants, alongside three assistants or volunteers. These sessions are organized by age and/or ability, including wheelchair users, deaf and visually impaired participants, and children and adults with developmental disabilities. Swimming is delivered one-to-one.



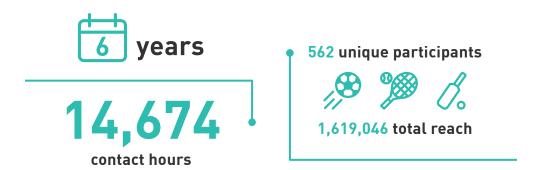
The AFP has become an essential actor in Qatar's disability landscape, fulfilling a critical societal requirement for inclusive sports-based education.

Ultimately, the AFP has become an essential actor in Qatar's disability landscape, fulfilling a critical societal requirement for inclusive sports-based education. The AFP has grown rapidly in response to community demand for adaptive sports programs in Qatar. It is also leading multiple impact-driven activities, including disability awareness workshops and training, professional capacity-building programs, volunteer programs, inclusion provision for events, and inclusive camps and classes.



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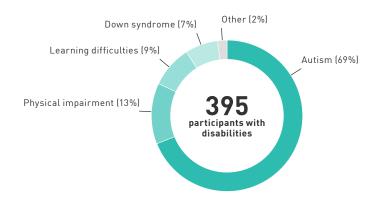
GROWTH OF THE PROGRAM: SIX YEARS ON



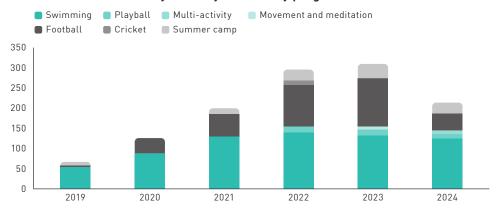
Community programming

Highlights:

- AFP community sports programs have impacted 395 PWDs of varying abilities and demographic groups in Qatar, and many stay with the AFP after registering with the program. The AFP provides a safe and welcome space to develop athletic capacity alongside personal and social development.
- Adaptive football and swimming are core offerings, while the balance of the community portfolio reflects changing institutional capacity and evolving community demands each year.



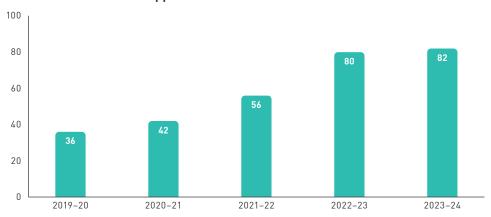
Annual evolution of ability-friendly community programs



The Qader Award

The Qader Award enhances financial accessibility for vulnerable families by offering a select number of families from a low socioeconomic bracket one AFP offering for one full academic year without charge. The aim is to make the program more financially accessible for PWDs whose opportunities are restricted by their financial capacity.

Growth of Qader Award applications

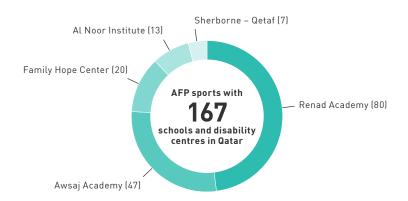


More families apply for the Qader Award every year. Each applicant's file is carefully assessed, and final selections are made based on the severity of their financial and physiological profile.

In-school programs

Highlights:

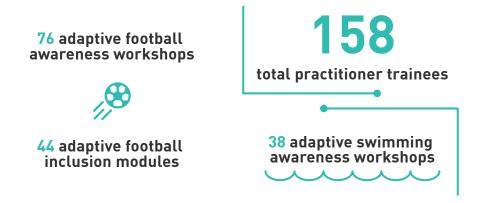
 The AFP provides adaptive football and swimming programs to 167 unique participants in specialized schools for the blind community and for those with developmental disabilities.



Capacity-building programming

Highlights:

- The AFP provides capacity-building opportunities in the form of awareness training, workshops and training courses for football and swimming coaches in Qatar.
 - The AFP is developing structured curricula for the Coach Education Program. This will include three levels of specialized and sport-specific workshops, modules and courses for swimming and football coaches.
 - It also delivered football and swimming disability awareness workshops for relevant audiences, as well as the Football and Inclusion Coaching Module for sports coaches, in collaboration with the Generation Amazing Foundation.



SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE ABILITY FRIENDLY PROGRAM

An analysis of the AFP's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis) showcases the significant need and demand for the program, driven by the positive impact that it offers at both an individual level and at the community level. However, it also highlights critical areas that can potentially jeopardize its feasibility, and opportunities for stakeholders to contribute meaningful support to ensure PWDs are provided equitable access to sport, ultimately enhancing their overall health and wellbeing.

SWOT analysis



- Strong brand reputation shown through program participation
- High demand for access to AFP
- Well established services/proven track record
- Passionate, dedicated and qualified coaching team
- Flagship QF program



- Long waiting lists (200+) and extended waiting times (years) lead to frustrated potential participants and negative perception of AFP in the community
- Inefficient procedures and lack of infrastructure support need to be streamlined to be effective and increase productivity
- Lack of social media presence and missed opportunities
- Facilities are largely inaccessible (parking, pathways, lack of family changing rooms, program has lack of priority to access sports facilities)
- Organisation chart infrastructure has reduced opportunity for growth



- Multiversity to increase impact across QF, Qatar and Gulf Cooperation Council
- Program expansion of coaching staff and broader geographic reach
- International partnerships and collaborations for sponsorships, professional development, participant opportunities and relationship building
- Regional leaders in coach education to deliver certification courses and expand the knowledge base
- Raise the profile of the impact of QF if AFP is given the resources to grow

Threats

- Lack of funding and difficulty securing sponsors
- Instability of staff contracts (female and grade 9)
- Staff/coaching retention and insufficient headcount
- · Extended operational delays within QF
- Reputation damage and unsustainable operations if not prioritized for support

IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM

To assess the AFP's impact, WISH collaborated with the AFP team in 2021 to design and disseminate a short survey to the existing database of parents and caregivers at the time. ⁴³ The survey explored and assessed the parent/caregiver perceptions of changes in their child's overall behavior and wellbeing following their enrollment in the program. Some of the findings can be seen below.







Data collection is a significant part of the AFP's self-assessment. In an iterative process, the AFP disseminates an annual survey at the end of each academic year. The survey gathers feedback, areas of achievement, and aspects to further develop, which informs the implementation of gradual, incremental advancements

in response to participants' needs. The development of annual reports also marks an important point at which testimonials are collated to understand the multidimensionality of the program's impact.



"[The coaches] know how to deal with [my daughter], how to build up her personality, how to give her strength, know her weak points, and how to develop them further, and help me as well to work with my daughter."

Parent of swimming participant, age 8, Down syndrome



"He is independent now; he is walking and running better. ... It's a lot of improvement for Ammar. Before he could not do a zig-zag but now he can do the zig-zag with a ball... He is more friendly outside and he is more confident to talk with others."

Parent of football participant, age 11, cerebral palsy



"Michelle uses a wheelchair full-time, so being able to get in the water and have her body do things that she normally can't do is a really great experience for her. And this has been a wonderful opportunity for her and for our family."

Parent of swimming participant, age 13, multiple disabilities

The AFP collectively highlights its innovative approach to providing adaptive sports offerings for PWDs, through the combination of expert inclusive sports professionals, targeted funding, and community venues. Its gradually broadening portfolio showcases a continuous evolution of the program that responds to diverse ability needs, while playing its role in the country to create a lasting legacy and build tangible pathways for encouraging inclusion and accessibility measures.

SECTION 3. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

Increased physical activity and participation in recreational sports in general have been shown to have a positive impact on growth and development. For PWDs in particular, participation in sports activities is associated with improved health-related outcomes, and can also influence all levels of functioning positively. The AFP is a unique organization in Qatar and, while there is much more to be done, the lessons learned from this program and the recommendations shared in the study can help guide the design and development of similar initiatives to meet the ever-increasing demand for such services in Qatar and the region.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the worldwide shortage of opportunities and services for PWDs, exchanging ideas and best practices in these areas is crucial. While exact replication of programs and models may not be feasible due to context-specific factors such as setting, culture or funding, there are several key, generalizable lessons and recommendations from the AFP that are universally applicable.

- 1. **Enabling environment:** Use multiple ministries to co-curate an environment that enables and incentivizes accessible, inclusive, and/or adaptive sports programs for PWDs in Qatar.
 - a. Enhance data collection and analysis: Develop comprehensive data and statistics based on a broader conceptualization of disability and improved understanding of diverse disability needs. This can inform the planning and scaling of services, the required resource mix, and effective supply and delivery of targeted sports programs.⁴⁴
 - b. Institutionalize accessibility standards for sports facilities: Establish and enforce standards on accessibility for programming and infrastructure based on global best practices. Mandate that existing sports facilities be retrofitted to meet these standards, and ensure that all new facilities are purpose-built to be fully accessible. Lessons can be drawn from the experiences of curating an accessible FIFA fan experience, which involved ensuring that facilities were needs-responsive, flexible, convenient, accommodating and realistic.⁴⁵
 - c. Incentivize inclusive sports programs: Provide incentives for the establishment of programs that offer adaptive and inclusive sports models to ensure broad accessibility.
 - **d. Source specialized sports equipment:** Facilitate the procurement and distribution of specialized sports equipment necessary for adaptive sports programs to operate.

- 2. **External partnerships:** Draw on the expertise and experiences of diverse disability groups, relevant ministries, governmental entities, non-profit organizations, private corporations and community projects to collaboratively design solutions to ensure greater sustainability for adaptive sports.
 - a. **Develop strategic funding mechanisms:** Financial sustainability is a key factor to ensure resilience and impact. 46 Ideally, programs should be funded through regular funding streams as part of annual business planning. Where this is not feasible, assess innovative external funding opportunities, including corporate social responsibility avenues. Explore the creation of strategic funding streams specifically for programs aimed at building sports capacity within the local disability population.
 - b. Promote inclusive practices in professional sports: Require professional sports clubs, national governing bodies and private businesses to adopt inclusive practices for PWDs. Sport providers need to account for constraint factors, such as developing community support, sourcing accessible equipment, ensuring financial inclusion, and calling for more accessible transport options to advance transformational opportunities through their programs.⁴⁷ Programs and facilities should be evidence-based and reviewed on a regular basis (for example, every three years).
- **3. Program-level enhancements:** Continuous efforts should be made to strengthen and enhance the AFP, ensuring that it remains a leading example for accessible sports providers to learn from and share locally adapted best practices.
 - a. Increase investment in human resources: Allocate time and resources to find the right coaches and recruit willing volunteers. The effectiveness of programs depends on the quality of the individuals involved.
 - **b. Evaluate impact and efficacy:** Continuously assess the impact and efficacy of programs. Ongoing evaluation and data collection are essential for building credibility, securing and sustaining funding, and fostering new partnerships.
 - c. Enhance capacity building: For programs facing high, unmet demand, focus on capacity building to ensure equitable access for those in need, and to guarantee programs' longevity. Training programs, collaborations with Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) networks, recruiting and training volunteer support, and connecting with regular clinics for upskilling can boost confidence and knowledge for sports trainers. 48
 - d. Formalize AFP training modules into curricula: Awareness and inclusion modules developed by the AFP can be disseminated more widely through university programs, training centers and sports hubs. These can greatly benefit existing programs such as Qatar University's Bachelor of Science in Sport Coaching, which will offer a minor in Sport Coaching for Special Needs, and Hamad Bin Khalifa University's Master of Science in Sport and Entertainment Management.
- 4. Ensure that adaptive sports programs are integrated into wider organizational programs: Respond to any identified resistance to integration through collaborations between sports organizations to enhance offerings that are well-designed for PWDs, in disability-specialized and all-ability-inclusive formats.⁴⁹

APPENDIX. ADAPTIVE SPORTS IN QATAR

Establishment year	Sport provider	Sport type	Target group
2012	Freestyle aquatics	Swimming and scuba diving	All disabilities, 4 years-plus
2013	Qatar Little League: Challenger Division (baseball)	Baseball	All disabilities, children and youth
2018	Ability Friendly Program	Swimming, football, playball, multiactivity program, and more	All disabilities, 4 years-plus
2021	Deaf Cricket Sports Center in Qatar	Cricket	Deaf/hearing impaired, youth and adults

Sources: Marhaba (2017); 50 Qatar Little League (n.d.); 51 Qatar Tribune (2021) 52

ABBREVIATIONS

AFP Ability Friendly Program

ASD autism spectrum disorder

NCDs non-communicable diseases

NDS3 Third National Development Strategy

PWDs persons with disabilities

QF Qatar Foundation

QPC Qatar Paralympic Committee

SENCO Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator

SWOT strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

WHO World Health Organization

WISH World Innovation Summit for Health

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Sincere thanks to **Slim Slama** and **Didi Thompson** from the WISH team for their support and editorial guidance in preparing this report.

Any errors or omissions remain the responsibility of the authors.

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WISH gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ministry of Public Health











































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