



# **Inclusive Winter Sport Activities for Children with Disabilities and Disadvantages:** Outcomes from the COOPERATION

Scientific paper



Prona



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# Abstract

This paper presents the outcomes of the COOPERATION Sport4all project, funded by Erasmus+, which aimed to foster inclusion of children with disabilities and disadvantages through winter sports activities and capacity building of trainers in the Balkan region. The study combines quantitative data from national research on barriers to children's physical activity participation in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Montenegro, with qualitative data from two extensive "Training for Trainers" programmes and implementation of the "Mountain Games for Everyone" event.

The project educated over 40 trainers on inclusive practices, social intelligence, and adaptive physical activities, and engaged over 55 children in inclusive snow-based games and ski school activities. Key findings indicate trainers' increased readiness to facilitate inclusive sports and significant social empowerment of participating children. However, systemic barriers such as lack of equipment, infrastructure, and sustainable programme funding remain.

The paper concludes by recommending multisectoral cooperation, enhanced national curricula integration, and targeted policy actions to improve inclusivity in children's sport activities across the region.

# Introduction

Physical activity and sports are powerful tools for fostering children's physical, emotional, and social development. Globally, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 16% of the world's population lives with some form of disability, with numbers increasing due to ageing populations and non-communicable diseases. Despite the well-established benefits of sports, children with disabilities and disadvantages are significantly less likely to participate in structured physical activities compared to their peers.

In the Balkan region, barriers to participation are further intensified by limited resources, infrastructural inadequacies, and societal perceptions of disability. The European Commission's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 emphasises the need for full societal inclusion, with sport recognised as an effective driver of empowerment, inclusion, and wellbeing.

The COOPERATION project, funded under ERASMUS-SPORT-2023-CB (Project No. 101134681), addresses these challenges through a holistic approach: empowering trainers with knowledge and tools for inclusion, and creating opportunities for children to engage in winter sports activities in a safe, adapted, and socially enriching environment.

Implemented in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Montenegro, the COOPERATION project focuses on:

- Educating trainers through structured Training for Trainers programmes, integrating social inclusion, emotional intelligence, and adaptive sports.

- Designing and implementing Mountain Games, offering children with disabilities and disadvantages an inclusive sports experience.
- Conducting national research to identify barriers and inform evidence-based programme development.

The aim of this study is to explore how inclusive winter sports programmes can enhance participation, empowerment, and social inclusion for children with disabilities and disadvantages in the Balkans. Specifically, this paper examines the outcomes of the COOPERATION project, which integrated capacity-building of trainers and implementation of inclusive winter sports activities to address barriers to participation.

To achieve this aim, the paper will address the following research questions:

1. What are the key barriers preventing children with disabilities and disadvantages from participating in physical activities, as identified in the COOPERATION national research?
2. How effective were the Training for Trainers programmes in increasing trainers' capacity for inclusive sports delivery?
3. What impacts did the "Mountain Games for Everyone" have on children's participation, confidence, and social empowerment?



# Theoretical Background

## **Inclusive sport: definitions, global frameworks, and regional relevance**

Inclusive sport is increasingly recognised in policy and practice as a fundamental right and a catalyst for holistic development. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) stipulates that persons with disabilities must have equal opportunities to participate in recreational, leisure, and sporting activities, both individually and collectively (UNCRPD, Article 30). In Europe, the EU Work Plan for Sport (2021-2024) identifies sport as a driver of social inclusion, community development, and personal empowerment (Council of the EU, 2020).

In defining inclusive sport, Misener and Darcy (2014) highlight that it involves intentional design and delivery of programmes that remove participation barriers, actively adapt environments, and promote meaningful engagement for all, regardless of disability, background, or socio-economic status. Inclusive sport is therefore not merely about integration into existing structures, but about reshaping those structures to accommodate diverse needs.

Globally, however, the inclusion gap remains wide. For instance, a Canadian study by Rimmer et al. (2004) found that children with disabilities are three times more likely to be inactive than their peers without disabilities, leading to compounded health and psychosocial disparities. Similarly, Sport England (2020) reported that only 47% of children with disabilities engage in weekly physical activity, compared to 60% of non-disabled children. Such patterns underline systemic issues that transcend national contexts.

## **Barriers to participation: COOPERATION project findings and international comparison**

The COOPERATION project conducted extensive national research across Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Montenegro to identify barriers preventing children with disabilities and disadvantages from participating in physical activity. The findings revealed a complex interplay of physical, social, structural, and personal barriers, aligned with international literature on the topic (WHO, 2011).

Physical barriers emerged as a prominent theme, particularly the lack of adapted equipment and accessible infrastructure. Only around 50% of practitioners surveyed reported having access to special equipment necessary to run inclusive programmes (COOPERATION\_D2.1 Results, p.7). This echoes findings in Australia, where prior to the implementation of Sport Australia's "Inclusive Sport Practices" guidelines, participation of children with disabilities was severely limited by infrastructural inaccessibility (Sport Australia, 2020). Following the guidelines' rollout, participation increased in targeted regions, demonstrating the impact of structural adaptations.

Social barriers were also prominent in COOPERATION's research. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, approximately 40% of children were reported to feel embarrassed exercising with others (COOPERATION\_D2.1 Results, p.9). This reflects international evidence that stigma and negative peer perceptions significantly deter participation (Blinde & McCallister, 1998). Moreover, trainers often lacked the confidence or knowledge to address such social barriers, further entrenching exclusion.

Structural barriers such as curriculum limitations were highlighted, with 60% of respondents across countries agreeing that school programmes do not include sufficient time for physical activity (COOPERATION\_D2.1 Results, p.8). Similar concerns have been raised in Finland, where despite strong national PE policies, teachers re-



ported needing more curricular flexibility to implement inclusive activities effectively (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022).

Personal barriers, including lack of time, interest, or motivation, were also observed. For instance, in Montenegro, 46.8% of respondents indicated that children were too tired or had too many other commitments to practice physical activity regularly (COOPERATION\_D2.1 Results, p.10). Internationally, these patterns are recognised as secondary barriers exacerbated by systemic and social exclusions (WHO, 2011).

## **Theoretical frameworks underpinning inclusion in sports**

The COOPERATION project's approach is underpinned by two main theoretical frameworks: the social model of disability and empowerment theory.

The social model of disability, proposed by Oliver (1996), conceptualises disability as a product of societal and environmental barriers rather than solely individual impairments. This model argues that exclusion results from inaccessible environments, negative attitudes, and institutional structures, rather than the limitations of the person themselves. COOPERATION's activities – particularly its Training for Trainers programmes – reflect this paradigm by focusing on equipping trainers with knowledge and skills to adapt activities, change attitudes, and remove participation barriers.

Empowerment theory, articulated by Zimmerman (1995), emphasises the process by which individuals gain control over their lives, acquire valued skills, and achieve meaningful social participation. The COOPERATION project applied this through its capacity-building initiatives for trainers, who in turn fostered empowerment among children. For example, during the Mountain Games in Kopaonik, Serbia,

children with disabilities engaged in adapted winter sports activities, building confidence and social skills within inclusive settings. Trainers reported feeling more confident in designing inclusive programmes, reflecting empowerment at the facilitator level.

## **International comparative examples of inclusive sports implementation**

In Australia, Sport Australia's Inclusive Sport Practices guidelines (2020) have led to systematic increases in participation by embedding universal design principles across national sports organisations. Similarly, Finland's integration of inclusion modules within physical education teacher training has enhanced teacher confidence and practical capacity to include students with disabilities (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). The United Kingdom's Youth Sport Trust "Inclusive PE" programme yielded measurable increases in participation rates and improvements in teacher attitudes toward inclusive practice (Morley et al., 2005).

These international experiences highlight a common thread: sustainable inclusion requires system-level changes encompassing policy, training, resources, and societal attitudes. Isolated activities, though impactful in the short term, fail to achieve structural inclusion without supportive systemic frameworks.

## **Theoretical insights informing COOPERATION project implementation**

The COOPERATION project's multi-layered approach – combining national research, capacity building for trainers, and implementation of inclusive sports events – aligns closely with international best practices in inclusive sports promotion. Its findings reaffirm that training trainers, adapting environments, and reshaping social attitudes are

interdependent processes necessary for meaningful and sustainable inclusion (Misener & Darcy, 2014).

By embracing the social model of disability and empowerment theory, COOPERATION has contributed not only to immediate improvements in children's participation experiences but also to laying foundations for systemic change in sports inclusion practices within the Western Balkan region.

Inclusive sport is not achieved through integration alone; it requires active adaptation, empowerment, and systemic transformation to dismantle barriers and promote equitable participation for all children. (Misener & Darcy, 2014; COOPERATION\_D2.1 Results, 2024)

# Methods

This study utilised a mixed-methods evaluation design, combining quantitative secondary data analysis and qualitative document analysis to assess the COOPERATION project's contribution to fostering inclusive winter sports practices for children with disabilities and disadvantages in the Balkans. Mixed-methods designs are recommended for programme evaluations that aim to integrate statistical trends with contextual, experiential insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

The evaluation focused on three main components of the project: the national research on barriers to participation, the Training for Trainers programmes, and the implementation of the Mountain Games for Everyone.

Data for this study derived from multiple project activities and documents. Table 1 provides an overview of the data sources included in the evaluation.

**Table 1. Overview of data sources analysed**

Data Source	Content	Sample Size/ Scope	Reference
National survey on barriers to participation	Questionnaire responses from parents and practitioners across four countries	n = 1,028 (668 parents; 360 practitioners)	COOPERATION_ D2.1 Results (2024)
Training for Trainers evaluations	Evaluation forms and feedback from two training events	Training #1: 24 participants; Training #2: 27 participants	D3.1; D3.2
Mountain Games implementation report	Programme description, participation records, trainer reflections, child feedback	55 children participants	D4.2 Mountain Games (2025)
Project milestone reports and presentations	Documentation of project implementation fidelity, context, deliverables	–	Milestone 2; Scientific Paper Creation

Quantitative data analysis focused on the national survey results. The survey, designed using the International Physical Activity Questionnaire framework, assessed perceptions of barriers preventing children aged 4–14 from engaging in physical activity. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to identify frequencies and distributions across four countries: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Montenegro. Metrics analysed included perceptions of equipment adequacy, curriculum time allocated for physical activity, and social attitudes towards children with disabilities in sports contexts.

Qualitative data were analysed using framework analysis, which is suitable for applied policy and programme evaluation studies. The analytical framework was informed by the social model of disability (Oliver, 1996), which emphasises societal barriers rather than individual impairments, and empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 1995), focusing on individual and community capacities to effect change.

Analysis included open-ended responses from training evaluation forms, trainer reflections documented in implementation reports, and child feedback from the Mountain Games. Data were coded inductively to identify recurring themes such as trainer empowerment, practical inclusion strategies, social cohesion, and barriers to implementation. Themes were then mapped against the theoretical framework to interpret findings within broader inclusion and empowerment paradigms.



## **Ethical Considerations**

All data analysed were collected as part of the COOPERATION project's implementation under ERASMUS-SPORT-2023-CB (Project No. 101134681). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. For this evaluation study, only anonymised data were analysed, and no personally identifiable information was used. The evaluation adhered to ethical principles of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and responsible reporting in line with EU research standards and national regulations in partner countries.

## **Limitations**

This evaluation is subject to several limitations. First, reliance on self-reported survey data introduces potential biases, including social desirability effects. Second, training evaluation forms may reflect positive response tendencies due to participant gratitude or perceived expectations. Third, the absence of direct interviews with child participants limits triangulation of outcomes from their perspective. Future studies could integrate direct qualitative interviews with children and longitudinal follow-up to assess sustained impacts.

# Results

This chapter presents the findings of the COOPERATION project, integrating quantitative data from the national research on barriers to children's participation in physical activity with qualitative insights from the Training for Trainers evaluations and the implementation of the Mountain Games for Everyone. The results are structured to first outline the scope and key findings from the national survey, followed by an analysis of trainer capacity-building outcomes under Milestone 2, and concluding with the impacts of the Mountain Games as an applied demonstration of inclusive sports programming. This integrated presentation aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the project's multi-layered interventions collectively addressed barriers to inclusion and enhanced participation opportunities for children with disabilities and disadvantages across the partner countries.

## National Research Findings

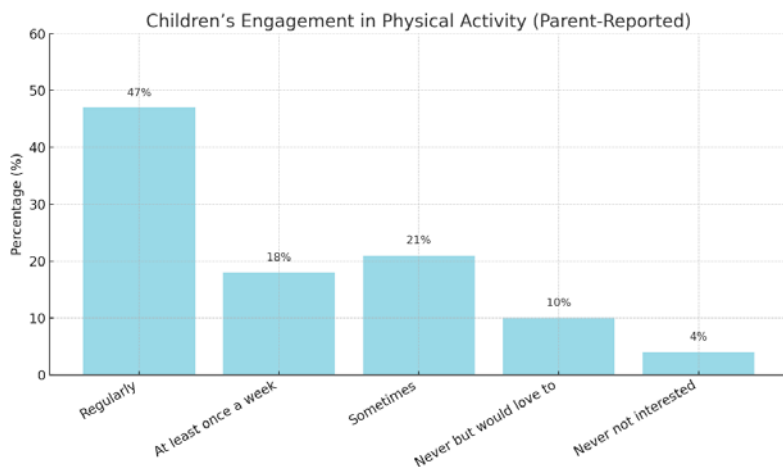
The COOPERATION project's national survey collected 1,028 responses across Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Montenegro. Of these, 65% were parents and 35% practitioners (trainers, coaches, teachers). As summarised in Table 2, Bulgaria had the highest number of responses (n=349), while Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro each contributed over 200 responses.

**Table 2. Respondent distribution by country and role**

Country	Total responses	Parents	Practitioners
Bulgaria	349	218 (62%)	131 (38%)
Serbia	251	184 (73%)	67 (27%)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	216	94 (44%)	122 (56%)
Montenegro	212	172 (81%)	40 (19%)
Total	1028	668 (65%)	360 (35%)

Analysis of children’s physical activity engagement (Figure 1) shows that 47% of parents reported their child engaged regularly (at least two to three times per week), while 21% reported only occasional engagement, and 10% indicated their child never engaged despite wanting to. These patterns were more pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, where regular participation rates were lowest.

**Figure 1. Children's engagement in physical activity (parent-reported)**



Barriers to participation clustered into four categories:

- Physical activity perception factors: Only 30–40% believed children had a good general fitness level.
- External factors: Around 60% agreed school curricula lacked sufficient time for physical activity, and lack of adequate equipment was reported by over half, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina (65%) and Montenegro (60%).
- Social factors: In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, 38–42% of children reportedly felt embarrassed exercising with peers, compared to 14–18% in Serbia and Bulgaria.
- Personal factors: Between 35–47% reported children were too tired or busy with other commitments to practice physical activity regularly.

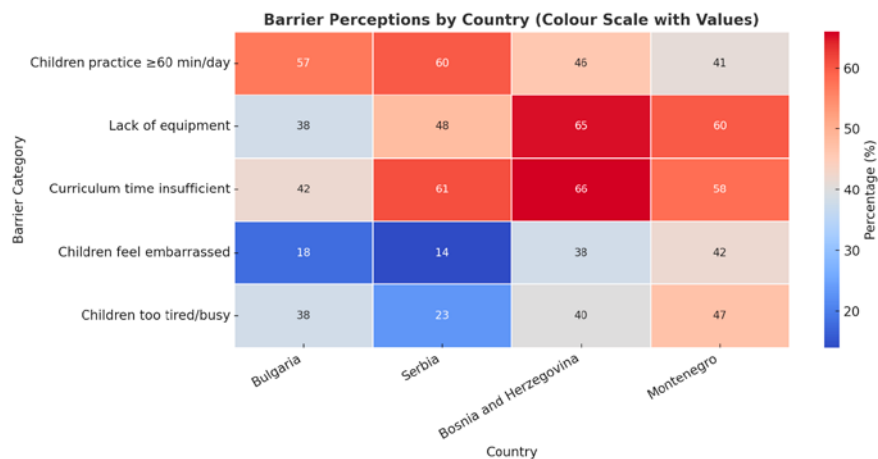
**Table 3. Selected key barrier perceptions across countries**

Barrier category	Bulgaria	Serbia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Montenegro
Children practice at least 60 min/day	57%	60%	46%	41%
Lack of equipment for certain groups	38%	48%	65%	60%
Curriculum time insufficient	42%	61%	66%	58%
Children feel embarrassed	18%	14%	38%	42%
Children too tired/busy	38%	23%	40%	47%

These findings highlight three interconnected reasons underpinning the barriers to children's participation in physical activity. Firstly, environmental and infrastructural limitations, such as the lack of adapted equipment and accessible facilities, directly prevent children with disabilities or disadvantages from engaging meaningfully in sports. Without proper resources, even motivated trainers and children face practical exclusion. Secondly, institutional and structural barriers, including insufficient curriculum time allocated for physical education, reflect systemic undervaluing of inclusive sports within educational frameworks. When schools prioritise academic subjects without integrating structured, adapted physical activities, children miss critical opportunities for skill development, health benefits, and social interaction. Thirdly, deeply rooted social attitudes and cultural norms

continue to shape children's experiences, with embarrassment or fear of stigma preventing active participation, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. This social exclusion interacts with environmental and structural limitations to create compounded barriers that cannot be addressed by isolated interventions alone. Instead, these results emphasise the need for multi-level strategies targeting equipment provision, policy reform, and inclusive mindset development to transform sports into an equitable, empowering space for all children.

**Figure 2. Barrier perceptions by country – heat map**





## Training for Trainers Outcomes (Milestone 2)

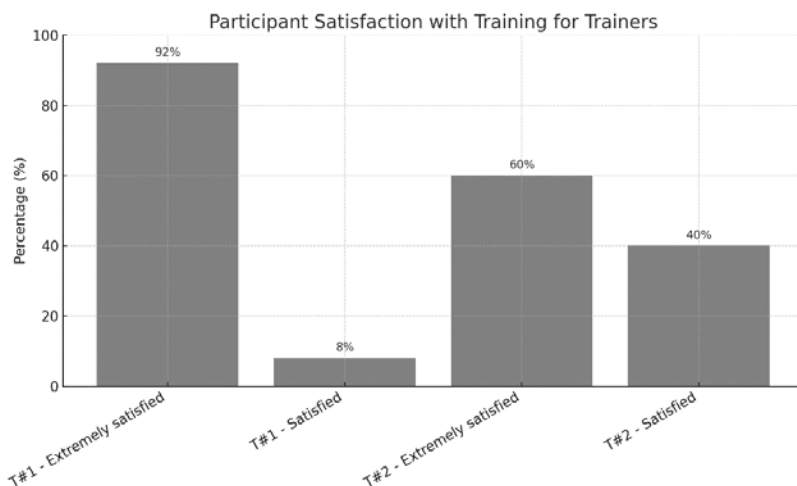
Milestone 2 of the COOPERATION project focused on educating trainers to implement inclusive sports activities. Over 20 trainers were directly trained at the two main sessions, and an additional 20 trainers were educated through local activities in partner countries.

### Training participation and satisfaction

- Training #1 (Kopaonik, March 2024): 24 trainers participated, learning inclusive snow-based sports and emotional intelligence approaches.
- Training #2 (Sarajevo, October 2024): 27 trainers participated, focusing on creative game design and effective facilitation for diverse groups.

Evaluation data revealed high satisfaction rates. In Training #1, 92% of participants reported being extremely satisfied, while Training #2 had 60% extremely satisfied and 40% satisfied (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Participant satisfaction with Training for Trainers**



## ***Knowledge and skills gained***

Trainers reported that the combination of theoretical learning (social inclusion, emotional intelligence, adaptive strategies) and practical activities (inclusive games and workshops) significantly increased their readiness to implement inclusive sports activities. They emphasised:

- The importance of active listening, understanding children's needs, and promoting participation
- The role of creativity in designing inclusive games with limited resources
- Partnerships with parents, local governments, and communities as crucial for sustainable inclusion
- The impact of inclusive sports on children's social empowerment, confidence, and motivation

**Table 4. Training Module Summary**

Module	Covered in	Perceived usefulness (summary)
Social inclusion theory	Training #1 & #2	High
Emotional intelligence	Training #1 & #2	High
Adaptive physical activities	Training #1 & #2	Very High
Creative inclusive games	Training #2	Very High
Facilitation skills	Training #2	High
Olympic values and ecology	Mountain Games workshops	High

## Local activity follow-up

Following the trainings, local activities were conducted in all partner countries. Trainers applied their newly acquired knowledge to train additional local trainers and implement inclusive workshops. According to Milestone 2 reporting, these follow-ups ensured that project impacts extended beyond initial training participants, creating a broader network of trainers equipped to deliver inclusive activities sustainably.

## Mountain Games Implementation Results

The Mountain Games for Everyone, held in March 2025 at Kopaonik, Serbia, engaged 55 children aged 4–14 years from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. The programme included:

- Adapted snow games (e.g. snow volleyball with Pilates balls, snowshoeing, tug of war)
- Ski school sessions grouped by age and skill levels
- Workshops on Olympic values, ecological awareness, and fair play
- Creative activities such as drawing, painting sports scenes, and making medals

Trainers reported that children, particularly those with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds, demonstrated increased confidence, motivation, and social cohesion during the activities. Inclusive workshops and group games fostered teamwork and reduced social barriers among diverse participants.

# Integrated Interpretation

The findings from the COOPERATION project reveal a multi-layered and interconnected set of outcomes, each building upon the previous intervention to create a holistic approach to fostering inclusive sports participation in the Balkans.

Firstly, the national research results highlight the complex barriers preventing children with disabilities and disadvantages from engaging in physical activity. While nearly half of parents reported that their children participated in sports regularly, there remained significant proportions – particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro – where participation was irregular or absent despite interest. This highlights systemic environmental, infrastructural, and societal constraints beyond individual motivation.

For example, the perceived lack of equipment and inadequate curriculum time allocation, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina (65% citing equipment barriers, 66% curriculum barriers) and Montenegro (60% and 58% respectively), indicates structural limitations that directly inhibit children's opportunities for physical activity. Additionally, the notable levels of social embarrassment reported by children in these two countries (38–42%) suggest deeply rooted societal attitudes towards disability and difference that manifest as participation barriers.

These findings contextualise the rationale for the project's Training for Trainers interventions. The two major training sessions, alongside local follow-up activities, effectively addressed the need for human resource capacity building. Trainers reported substantial gains in knowledge, confidence, and practical skills, particularly in

applying active listening, creative adaptation of games, and effective facilitation techniques to include all children regardless of ability or disadvantage. The overwhelmingly positive evaluation results (92% extremely satisfied in Training #1; 60% extremely satisfied and 40% satisfied in Training #2) further reinforce the effectiveness of the training design, combining theoretical inputs with experiential learning.

Moreover, the Milestone 2 data confirm that project impact extended beyond direct training participants. Local follow-up activities enabled trained trainers to cascade knowledge to other colleagues within their networks. This approach aligns with international best practices emphasising that sustainable inclusion requires capacity development beyond isolated interventions, fostering communities of practice committed to inclusion.

Finally, the Mountain Games for Everyone represented the practical culmination of these capacity-building efforts. The event served as a demonstration of inclusive sports programming, integrating adapted physical activities, ecological awareness, Olympic values, and creative arts to engage children holistically. Trainers' reflections noted that children with disabilities or disadvantages, who often faced social or environmental exclusion in mainstream sports, were active, confident participants throughout the games. The creation of mixed groups for activities such as snow volleyball, skiing, and ecological workshops fostered social cohesion, empathy, and teamwork among diverse participants, directly addressing the social barriers identified in the national research.

Additionally, the inclusion of workshops on topics such as fair play and ecological responsibility extended beyond physical inclusion to promote broader values-based education, fostering children's holistic development. This approach resonates with empowerment theory, which highlights the importance of equipping individuals with both



skills and confidence to participate meaningfully within their communities (Zimmerman, 1995).

In summary, the integrated analysis of the COOPERATION project demonstrates that:

- ✓ Systemic barriers identified in national research necessitate interventions targeting both environmental and human factors.
- ✓ Training for Trainers programmes effectively enhanced trainers' capacities, enabling them to create inclusive environments and activities tailored to children's diverse needs.
- ✓ Implementation of inclusive sports events like the Mountain Games translates theory into practice, directly impacting children's participation, confidence, and social integration.

These findings affirm that multi-level interventions – combining research, capacity building, and practical inclusive programmes – are essential to overcoming entrenched barriers and achieving sustainable inclusion in sport. Moreover, they highlight the replicability potential of the COOPERATION approach for other contexts seeking to enhance sports inclusion for children with disabilities and disadvantages.

# Conclusion

This study evaluated the COOPERATION project's multi-layered approach to promoting inclusive winter sports for children with disabilities and disadvantages across Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Montenegro. The national research findings highlighted persistent systemic, social, and personal barriers preventing equitable participation in physical activities. These included lack of adapted equipment, insufficient curriculum time for physical activity, and high levels of social embarrassment among children with disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro.

The Training for Trainers programmes effectively addressed these barriers by building trainer capacity in inclusion strategies, emotional intelligence, and creative adaptation of activities. Evaluation results demonstrated significant improvements in trainers' confidence and skills, with high levels of participant satisfaction and positive reflections on active listening, creativity, and partnership-building as critical inclusion enablers. Furthermore, the Mountain Games for Everyone served as a practical demonstration of inclusive programming, creating opportunities for over 50 children to engage confidently in winter sports and fostering social cohesion and empowerment.

These outcomes reaffirm that addressing exclusion in sports requires interventions at multiple levels: structural changes to equipment availability and curriculum integration; social changes to dismantle stigma and build inclusive attitudes; and individual empowerment of trainers to design and facilitate adapted, inclusive programmes. The COOPERATION project exemplifies a replicable model combining research, capacity-building, and practical implementation to promote systemic inclusion in sports education and community programmes.

## ***Recommendations***

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, educational institutions, and programme implementers:

1. Integrate inclusive sports modules into teacher and trainer education curricula, emphasising practical adaptation strategies, emotional intelligence, and active listening techniques.
2. Invest in adapted sports equipment and accessible infrastructure, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, where physical barriers remain pronounced.
3. Develop national policies that mandate minimum curriculum time allocations for physical education, with explicit guidelines on inclusion for children with disabilities.
4. Support community-based inclusive sports events, such as Mountain Games, to provide practical opportunities for participation, confidence building, and social integration.
5. Encourage partnerships between schools, sport clubs, local governments, and disability organisations to ensure holistic and sustainable inclusion practices.

Future research should integrate direct interviews with child participants to assess their perspectives more deeply and conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the sustainability of capacity-building interventions and inclusive programming impacts.

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