



by Anne Storz

SPORTRIO: INTEGRATION

The YOUTH programme has enabled a large-scale European project known as SporTrio II to be started for young persons with disabilities.

This programme is essentially based on exchanges between young students, enabling them to widen their horizons and find out more about cultural and social matters, travel and sport.

Thus they can relate to the world, transcending all differences, and open up to Europe, including tomorrow's Europe.

All too often, young people with disabilities are forgotten, pushed to one side, and sometimes even kept hidden by their own families. Enabling them to meet one another and learn about the cultures and lifestyles of young people of their own age in another country, and helping them to grow up together through brief but intense exchanges, may give them a new lease of life. The European Commission, thanks to financing programmes for the benefit of young people, has made it possible for youngsters from eight nations to get to know each other and to travel together for a short while along the same path.

The SporTrio II project takes up where the first edition (1999-2000) left off. Three partner countries had been involved in the first edition, Italy, Belgium and Sweden, and the aim had been to make it possible for young persons with disabilities to exchange experience, culture and knowledge through recreational activity with a strong element of social integration, in other words, through sport (of a non-competitive nature, of course).

The idea underlying the project is both to give young people with disabilities an opportunity to enjoy new experiences throughout Europe through strictly non-competitive tournaments, so that they acquire knowledge about sport, travel and culture, and to convey a strong social message against discrimination, so as to lay the foundations for a better understanding of the lives of persons with disabilities, providing a basis for a new culture.

With the year 2003 having been declared by the Council of the European Union to be European Year of People with Disabilities, but also with a view to preparing for 2004, the Year of Education

through Sport, the SporTrio II project, building on the success of the project's first edition, is intended to repeat this experiment with a larger number of partner countries, and, in particular, with direct involvement of the candidate countries which will be joining the European Union, so as to enable more young people to embark on a process of personal growth and self-enrichment.

The need to make young people aware of discrimination

As the new millennium begins, hallmarked by new technologies and the globalisation of information, we have every reason to believe that discrimination problems relating to opportunities for travel, work, culture and sport and leisure activities for persons with disabilities are now a thing of the past.

While, on the one hand, the European Union enthusiastically promotes numerous schemes to raise public awareness of discrimination against persons with disabilities (through information and awareness-raising campaigns, through joint funding programmes relating to equal opportunities in employment, through various initiatives such as the European Day of Disabled People, to be held on 3 December, and the European Year of People with Disabilities 2003, and through the European Parliament and Council Decision concerning the year 2004, on exactly the same themes as the project, sport as an instrument of integration and education), on the other hand, much remains to be done at national, regional and local level in the various member states of the Union and in the candidate countries.

Approximately one citizen of Europe in ten (counting members of every age group) currently suffers from a disability, giving a total of more than 37 million such persons in Europe. To be more precise, there are over 100 million if we take into account those who suffer from reduced mobility. The needs of those who have a disability are still in fact misunderstood by most of the population, and they are frequently underestimated. The problem takes on a significantly worse dimension if the concept of disability is extended to encompass older people, pregnant women, young children, victims of illnesses, persons who have undergone organ transplants, etc.

According to a January 2001 Eurobarometer survey for which over 16 000 people were questioned, virtually all Europeans are aware of this reality and consider that persons with disabilities still have great difficulty in obtaining access to community facilities and in playing a part in the life of society. Furthermore, 60% of those polled said that they knew at least one person with a disability, who, for one in four, was a member of their own family.

AN EXAMPLE OF SOCIAL THROUGH SPORT

The Eurobarometer survey reveals that European citizens are overwhelmingly (97%) in favour of further measures being taken to improve the integration of persons with disabilities. Some 93% of those questioned also said that more money should be spent on eliminating the physical obstacles encountered by persons with disabilities.

► Are young people ready to meet this challenge?

Thus we face a real challenge, that of combating discrimination. This does not mean isolating persons with disabilities and highlighting their differences, but simply making it easier for them to lead independent lives and promoting better social integration.

Of course much remains to be done to change current behaviour towards those persons who suffer from disabilities. Discrimination is still widespread in the spheres of transport (or rather mobility), tourism, fashion, education and sport.

The SporTrio project is intended to make young people give serious thought to the issue, thanks to intercultural exchanges, so as to create a basis for a new culture, a culture not of "ghetto-building" by members of minorities, but one of acceptance of differences. There are approximately 75 million young persons (aged between 15 and 25) in Europe. The number will be much larger after the admission of the candidate countries to the European Union. These young people represent our society's future, and it is to them, first and foremost, and consequently to their families, that it is vital for this new culture to be transmitted, and it is with them that it must be created and disseminated.

Sport: a way of fostering social integration through leisure activities

The first aim of the project is to highlight the **social value of sport** through intercultural exchanges. Numerous obstacles still all too often face persons with disabilities, particularly young persons. The project is intended to show the role that sport can play as an instrument of integration, particularly, but not exclusively, for young persons with disabilities. Sport signifies coming together, across differences.

The aims of the project include demonstrating how important it is to make room for everyone, something that will be done through the discussions at the Final Conference, in Slovenia, and through promotional material (such as the video spot), thus getting the

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message across to the very families which often hide their own children because of their disabilities (thereby denying them any possibility of contact with the outside world).



► Results and hopes

The use of sport as an instrument of social integration, and not just an instrument of competition: identification of new ways of studying sport and turning it to advantage in the context of other themes without any competitive element.

Encouragement of discussion and raising of awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities, thanks to sport's social and educational function.

Consequent raising of awareness in schools and families of the importance of sport and recreational activities for young persons with disabilities.

Creation of a new culture acknowledging differences and promotion of new integration measures and a better understanding of the needs at every level.

It is the intention that the project should lay the foundations for a new culture, a culture of acknowledgement of differences, rather than a culture of non-discrimination in itself. And for this, we need you young people, you who will build our future society.

► Promotion and dissemination ... a considerable asset

As the purpose of the project is to lay the foundations for a new European culture and for a better understanding of the world of young persons with disabilities, through awareness-raising and thanks to the visibility of projects like this one, we shall place a particular emphasis on promotional material: creating a website, producing and distributing CD-ROMs covering every phase of the project, making a VHS video on the project theme and issuing class newspapers bearing the project logo and including descriptions of the YOUTH programme, of those European Union initiatives focusing particularly on young persons with disabilities (especially the initiatives during the Year of Education through Sport, 2004), and of the SporTrio II project. The class newspaper is a necessary, fundamental tool for students. It is through class newspapers that the target group, young people, will directly receive the project's message, which will be kept in the forefront of their minds every single day of the year.

► The importance of new technologies: everyone can contribute

During the Final Conference, an innovative Internet link will be set up with the schools in each partner country (the partners may choose the schools concerned), using videoconferencing technology. In practice, a videoconferencing link will be set up between the conference venue (in Slovenia) and seven schools, one in each partner country (selected by that partner). The young people from these seven schools, whether they have disabilities or not, will be able to follow the conference in real time, while sitting quietly in

their classrooms, thanks to an Internet connection. They will be able to put questions and, if the schools have a webcam and the appropriate software available, they will also be able to make an appearance on the screen in the conference room.

► Widening our horizons beyond Europe

There is no doubt whatsoever that sport is a passion shared every day by millions of people worldwide.

Whether we take part ourselves or watch, all of us are, at one stage or another, involved in the phenomenon which is sport. While it can have a recreational dimension, sport is first and foremost an instrument of integration, personal development and better health, and it helps to improve quality of life across all ethnic, geographical and cultural boundaries.

Also involved in the project are young Africans with disabilities. The «Sport for Africa» section is intended primarily to foster the promotion of understanding between peoples, particularly Africans, cutting across every border and helping young Africans with disabilities to visit new horizons, meet young Europeans and take part in cultural exchanges in the various countries involved in the project. They can be helped to get away from their marginal position through sport and thanks to relations with others across borders.

The word "sport" is not synonymous with competition! What it means first and foremost is enjoyment, recreation and interaction with fellow team members.

You may ask what our aim is. It is to enable young Africans on the margins of society to take part in the SporTrio project, and to help them to forge relationships with young people of their own age in the various partner countries.

This, of course, is just a foretaste of the "Sport for Africa» project, which would merit an article of its own ... an article which may perhaps appear in a future issue... ■

References and contact :



• Eurobarometer No 54, 2001

See the website: www.sportrio.org

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