

NEWSLETTER

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BEYOND THE PODIUM

Policy Legacies of Para-Sport in South-East Asia

Credit: Jon

Did you know?

In early 2026, para-sport is taking centre stage on both regional and global calendars.

The [13th ASEAN Para Games](#), held from 20–26 January 2026 in Thailand, brought together athletes from across Southeast Asia, while the [Milano Cortina 2026 Paralympic Winter Games](#) will open on 6 March 2026, continuing the global momentum for disability inclusion in sport.

The significance of para-sport extends beyond medals and competition. Major events increasingly act as **policy accelerators**, prompting governments to rethink how communities design sports systems, public spaces, and participation pathways for persons with disabilities. This issue of the newsletter focuses on **community sport and recreation for persons with disabilities**, highlighting how policy and planning decisions can translate elite sport moments into everyday access.

Two country cases from the [WHO South-East Asia Region](#) illustrate how para-sport legacies are being embedded into national and community systems — through **policy reform in India** and **event-driven accessibility planning in Thailand**.

Case Study: India

Embedding Accessibility into National Sports Policy

In 2025, India approved a new [National Sports Policy](#), replacing the 2001 framework and marking a shift toward inclusion as a core principle of sports development. The policy positions sport not only as a pathway to performance, but as a means for health, education, and social participation for all, including persons with disabilities.

Policy Reform Under Khelo Bharat Niti 2025

The [Khelo Bharat Niti 2025](#) explicitly integrates inclusion of the disabled alongside [women, tribal communities, and other marginalized groups](#). Rather than isolating para-sport, the policy embeds accessibility across grassroots, school-based, and community sport systems, aligning sport with the **National Education Policy 2020** and everyday community life .

This approach supports inclusive access to sports infrastructure and encourages participation from an early age, helping to normalise physical activity and recreation for children and youth with disabilities.



Union Cabinet Approves

KHELO BHARAT NITI-2025

Roadmap for India's Journey to Becoming a Global Sporting Powerhouse

POLICY IS ANCHORED ON 5 KEY PillARS

-  *Nation's Excellence on a Global Stage*
-  *Sports for Economic Development*
-  *Sports for Social Development*
-  *Sports as a People's Movement*
-  *Alignment with National Education Policy 2020*

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Strengthening Systems through Domestic Para-classification

A major structural reform in India's para-sport ecosystem has been the development of [domestic para-classification pathways](#), reducing long-standing financial and logistical barriers that previously required athletes to travel abroad for official assessment.

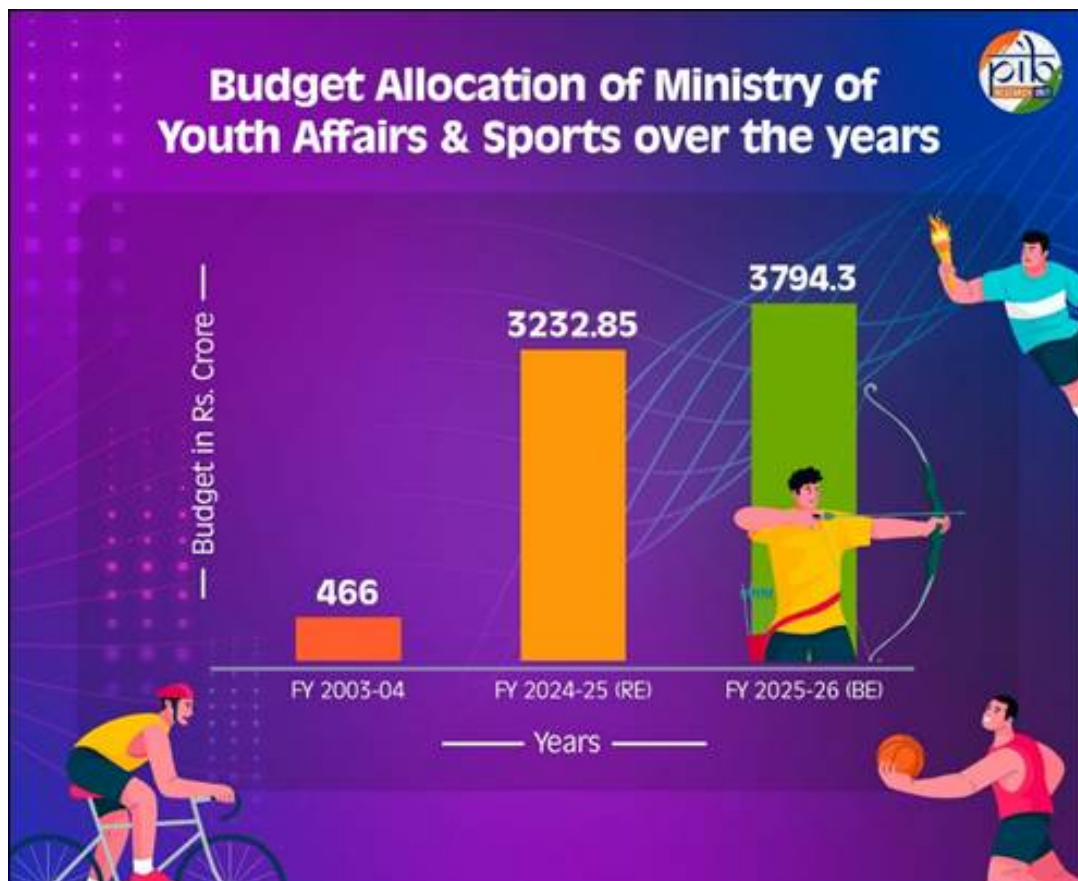
With expanded in-country classification capacity, [athletes can now be assessed earlier and closer to home](#), enabling more timely entry into organised sport and fairer competition. This shift has reduced dependence on international processes while strengthening integrity across para-sport systems.

Crucially, domestic classification has been accompanied by **capacity-building across the system**, including [training for coaches](#), technical officials, and support staff involved in athlete identification and development. Earlier classification allows athletes to access structured training sooner, strengthening pathways from grassroots participation to state and national levels.

Together, these reforms have widened participation, lowered administrative barriers, and reinforced para-sport as an accessible and sustainable option within communities.

Financing Inclusive Participation

The policy shift is backed by increased public financing. For FY 2025–26, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports received expanded allocations, including support for grassroots participation and [Sports and Games for Persons with Disabilities](#). These funding mechanisms prioritise access, facilities, and participation — not only elite performance.



India Government Spending on Sports. Source: [PIB Delhi](#)

Why It Matters

India's experience demonstrates how disability inclusion can be institutionalised through **policy reform, system design, and public financing**, creating conditions for sustained community participation rather than relying on isolated projects.

Case Study: Thailand

From Para-Sport Events to Community Recreation

Over the past two decades, Thailand's experience in hosting regional para-sport events has increasingly shaped how accessibility and inclusion are considered within the country's sports and recreation systems. Beyond competition, these events have provided opportunities to strengthen public infrastructure, policy coordination, and community access for persons with disabilities.

Regional Events as Catalyst for Accessibility

Thailand's hosting of major regional events, including the [ASEAN Para Games in 2008 and 2025](#), has acted as [a catalyst for improving accessibility in sports venues and surrounding public infrastructure](#). Event preparations have highlighted the need for

barrier-free access, accessible circulation, and inclusive facility design, accelerating the application of universal design principles within publicly used sports spaces.

In recent editions, [accessibility considerations have extended beyond athletes to include spectators, officials, and media personnel](#), reinforcing the role of para-sport events in setting broader accessibility benchmarks for public facilities.



Accessible facilities at ASEAN Para Games 2025. Source: [The Station-THAI](#)

Government Leadership and Policy Direction

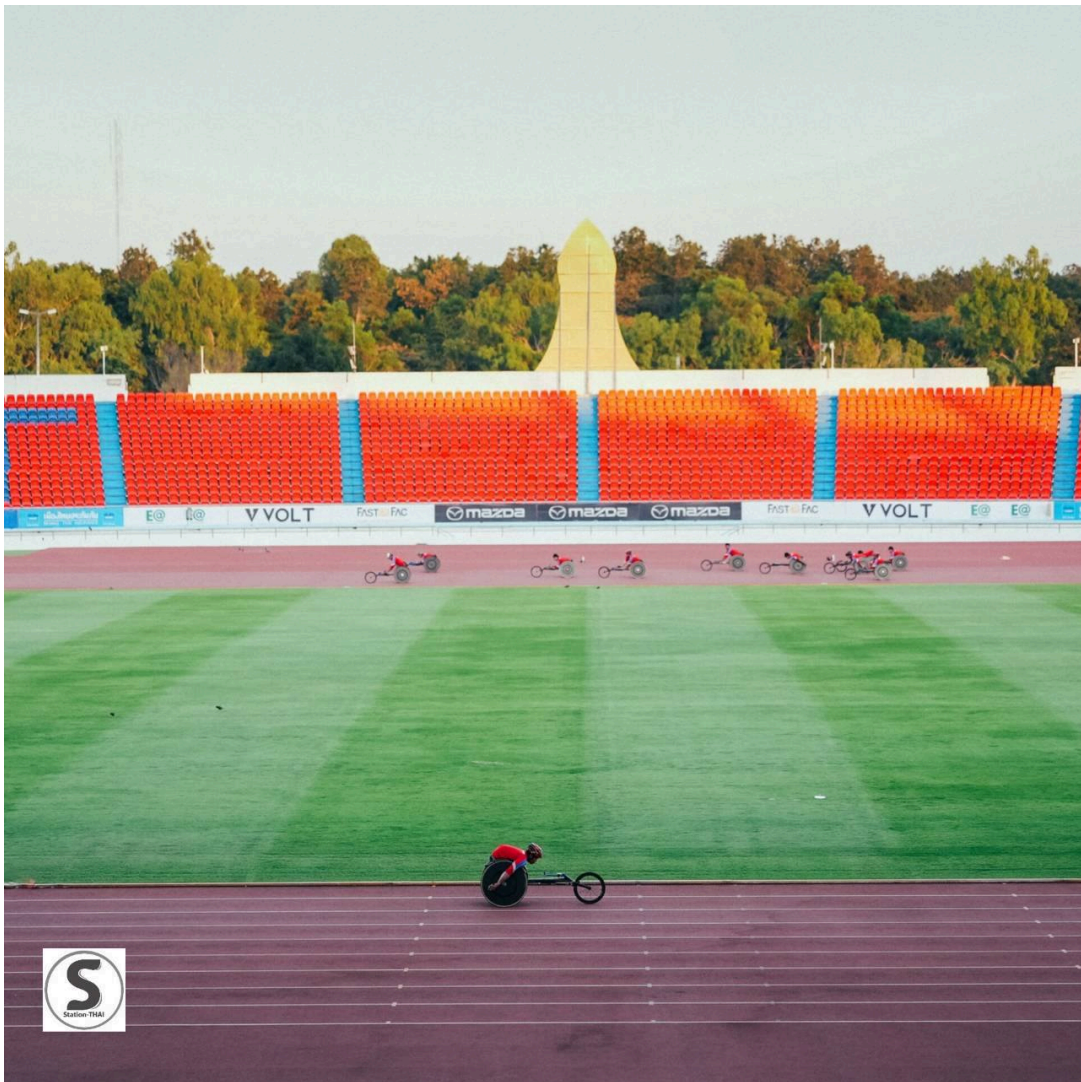
These accessibility efforts have been supported by **government leadership at national and local levels**, particularly through sports development planning and public communication. Thailand's [Sixth National Sports Development Plan](#) emphasises inclusive access, athlete welfare, and the contribution of sport to quality of life, positioning persons with disabilities as part of mainstream sports participation rather than a separate category.

Public-sector coordination around para-sport events has also strengthened alignment between sports policy, urban development, and community recreation planning, helping to embed accessibility considerations into longer-term government agendas.

From Event Readiness to Everyday Participation

Beyond the event cycle, attention has increasingly shifted toward the **legacy use of upgraded facilities**. [Research on sports policy implementation in Thailand](#) suggests that **accessible facilities, combined with effective local-level programmes, are essential for sustaining participation by persons with disabilities**. As a result, facilities developed or improved for para-sport events are increasingly viewed as [shared community assets](#) rather than single-use competition sites.

This shift reflects a broader transition from elite performance to **everyday physical activity and recreation**, supporting inclusion as part of daily life rather than occasional sporting events.



Source: [The Station-THAI](#)

Why it matters

Thailand's experience shows how regional para-sport events can support inclusion beyond competition when accessibility is reinforced through government leadership, policy direction, and legacy planning. By linking event hosting with community use, para-sport becomes a pathway not only to excellence, but to **sustained participation, health, and social inclusion** for persons with disabilities.

Reflections

Across South-East Asia, para-sport is increasingly recognised not only as competition, but as a [policy entry point](#) for building inclusive communities. The cases from India and Thailand show that when governments align events, policies, and systems, the benefits of para-sport can extend well beyond the podium — shaping how communities design spaces, support participation, and enable persons with disabilities to engage in sport and recreation as part of daily life.

Editor's Pick



Governing Technology for Inclusion

As cities digitalise, governments play a critical role in shaping whether technology advances disability inclusion. Explore three global approaches — from innovation and standards to system-wide integration — and what cities can learn from them.

[Read more](#)

Stay tuned for more inspiring stories from our healthy cities network in our next update!

Share with us your city's best practices!

[Email Us](#)

WHO South-East Asia office and Regional Laboratory on Urban Governance for Health and Well-being are pleased to invite you to join South-East Asia Region Healthy Cities Network.

More information and details [here](#)

Recommended Resources

Selected resources supporting this issue's theme

[From one to 29 medals: India's Paralympic revolution](#)

[The long road ahead for Thailand if it wants to host the Paralympics](#)

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