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Leave No One Behind? Analysing Sport Inclusion Policy-Implementation for Persons With Disabilities in Ghana

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Abstract

Sport inclusion policies for persons with disabilities are prevalent in many countries; however, actual support in local communities is lacking or inadequately addressed. In this article, we analyse the implementation of sport inclusion policies and the extent to which they exclude or include disabled sport associations in Ghana's District Sports Units. Using document analysis, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews, we collected data from representatives of state and non-state organisations, drawing theoretical insights from ableism and policy networks to analyse the implementation of sport inclusion policies. The findings reveal that despite inclusion provisions at the local level, the policy implementation process presents challenges for District Sports Units. These challenges include the lack of funding, conflicts among network actors, deliberate disregard, membership gaps, and the absence of an integrated programme for disabled sport associations. These findings further inform our understanding of collaborative alliances, local autonomy, and the implication of ableism for policy networks.

Keywords

ableism; disability sport; District Sports Units; Ghana; policy implementation; sustainable development

1. Introduction

In recent years, disability issues have been mainstreamed into the global policy agenda, as evidenced in the 2016 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and associated with the slogans "no one will be left behind" and "make sure the furthest behind are reached first" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The two slogans have been central to Ghana's development policy as well as the implementation of its sport policy

(National Development Planning Commission, 2019). It is evident from the Ministry of Youth and Sport's (herein referred to as sport ministry) Medium-Term Expenditure Framework from 2016 to 2021 that the provision for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in sport is being implemented, albeit with limited details. The mainstreaming of disability sport at both the government and NGO levels has been described in studies from several countries (Hammond, 2019; Kitchin et al., 2019; Sørensen & Kahrs, 2006), but few have examined how disability mainstreaming is implemented in practice at the community or district levels. To date, no study has addressed the implementation of sport inclusion policies in Ghanaian communities for persons with disabilities.

A key component of community implementation of the sport inclusion policies is the strategic partnership between government agencies and NGOs (National Development Planning Commission, 2019). It is in light of this that District Sports Units (DSUs) in Ghana play a crucial role in implementing sport inclusion policies for persons with disabilities and associated groups. DSUs function as service delivery mechanisms at the grassroots level, interpreting and implementing government sport policies. They do this while fostering partnerships, navigating cultural and religious barriers, and influencing broader policy analysis and development.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the implementation of sport inclusion policies at the DSUs and the extent to which they exclude or include disabled sport associations (DSAs) in Ghana. In so doing, the study seeks answers to whether the quest for "no one will be left behind" reflects genuine social concern and has a real impact on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in sport. Ableism helps to explain how DSAs or related groups are considered in the DSUs. Moreover, policy network theory as inclusive governance provides the analytical framework to analyse the degree of membership, integration, resource distribution, and power balance when implementing the sport inclusion policies of Ghana's sport ministry. Forming the empirical basis of this research is a textual analysis of sport policies and other relevant documents, a focus group discussion (FGD) with representatives from 15 DSUs and three DSAs, and semi-structured interviews with three regional sport directors.

2. DSUs and Sport Policy Implementation

DSUs in Ghana translate sport policies into action and foster partnerships at the metropolitan, municipal, and district levels (herein referred to as district assemblies). There are 261 DSUs, created under the Sports Act 934 of 2016, which require inter-ministerial cooperation between the sport ministry, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development. Consequently, DSU leadership includes members from these ministries. Funding and resources for DSUs come from both sport ministry, which provides human resources and sport equipment through its regional offices, and the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, which supports DSUs through the District Assembly Common Fund (DACF). The DACF's sport funding is allocated at the discretion of politically appointed district chief executives (Charway et al., 2022).

Additionally, NGOs like the Association of Sports for the Disabled (ASD) and the National Paralympic Committee of Ghana play key roles. The National Paralympic Committee of Ghana focuses on the Paralympic Games and national DSAs under the International Paralympic Committee. The ASD has a wider brief and is crucial for the broader development and implementation of sport policy within communities.

The Ghana Sports Act 934 of 2016 mainstreams disability sport, integrating ASD representatives into the National Sports Authority's governing board and recognising them through the sport ministry (Charway & Houlihan, 2020). ASD members comprise the Ghana Amputee Football Association, Ghana Blind Sports Association, Ghana Deaf Sports Federation, and Ghana Dwarf Sports Association (National Sports Authority, n.d.). Most associations have offices across nearly all regions and districts.

With inclusion and partnership being central to implementing the SDGs in Ghanaian communities, analysing how DSUs collaborate with DSAs is essential. One of the policy objectives of the sport ministry is to "attain the SDGs through youth development, empowerment and promotion of sports" (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2016, p. 1). As a result, the sport ministry mentions in its 2016–2021 Medium-Term Expenditure Framework the success and continued effort to support DSAs in local communities. Such support includes providing disability-friendly facilities for sport in communities, ensuring the capacity and skill development of youth with disabilities, and ensuring collaboration with disability groups in local communities. Despite these commitments, there is a lack of documentation on how DSUs or local communities implement and govern inclusive practices.

Following Ghana's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, the Persons With Disabilities Act 715 of 2006 guarantees the right of persons with disabilities to sport and physical education. According to the Act, district assemblies (through DSUs) must ensure access to sport and cultural events for persons with disabilities and provide necessary support. Despite these legal protections, Ocran (2019) argues that the social, political, and economic rights of persons with disabilities remain inadequately protected. Studies on the experiences of persons with disabilities in Ghana, focusing on health, employment, discrimination, and begging, reveal persistent stigma, social exclusion, and discrimination, influenced by unspoken African norms and myths (Agyei-Okyere et al., 2019; Avoke, 2002; Naami, 2015; Naami & Hayashi, 2012). Although these studies have not focused wholly on sport, they reveal that persons with disabilities continue to face stigma, social exclusion, and discrimination, and continue to be defined by unspoken African norms and myths.

3. Theoretical Insights: Inclusive Policy Implementation

Policy implementation is inherently fragmented, involving complex networks of relationships among various actors, including government and non-governmental organisations, bureaucracies, and civil society groups (Rhodes, 2006). These networks facilitate the interplay of interdependent state and non-state actors, shaping policy outcomes through collective efforts and shared beliefs. In this study, we employ a meso-level analysis using policy network theory (Carlsson, 2000; Rhodes & Marsh, 1992) to examine the implementation of sport policies by DSUs in conjunction with DSAs in Ghana.

Originating in the Global North, policy network theory emerged alongside the rise of pluralism—the shift from government to governance—and the increasing interaction between state and non-state organisations. In the context of African studies, this theory is particularly relevant due to the advent of neoliberal policies and the institutionalisation of SDGs in many African countries including Ghana (Banda, 2017). In Ghana—including the sport sector—the implementation of the SDGs emphasises a pluralistic approach, multi-sectoral collaboration, and the involvement of diverse actors, including state and non-state organisations (Charway et al., 2022; National Development Planning Commission, 2019).

Policy network theory conceptualises policy implementation as a series of formal and informal linkages between government and other actors with vested interests (Rhodes, 2006). Inclusive governance, as described by Hickey (2015), promotes inclusion as a benchmark for institutional performance. This inclusive approach is crucial for implementing sport policies that avoid ableism and promote equitable participation for persons with disabilities. In such networks, there is an "exchange of information, expertise, trust and other policy resources" (Boumans & Ferry, 2019, p. 413). Rhodes and Marsh's (1992) typology of policy networks suggests a continuum between policy communities and issues networks. This is done in relation to the extent to which DSUs' implementation of sport inclusion policies excludes or includes national DSAs in Ghana. Characteristically, the two types of policy network differ in the degree of membership, integration, resource distribution, and power (see Table 1).

The DSUs' role in implementing inclusive sport policies in collaboration with relevant stakeholders underscores the appropriateness of policy network theory for this research. Inclusion is characterised by equitable and participatory experiences. Christiaens and Brittain (2023) identify three types of inclusion: full inclusion, parallel inclusion, and inclusive choice. Full inclusion occurs when persons with disabilities participate equally alongside non-disabled individuals, and often initiated by the persons with disabilities themselves due to the lack of strategies or competencies within community sport organisations to engage them. Parallel inclusion allows participation in the same setting but not the same activities. Inclusive choice emphasises freedom and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities to engage in community sport programmes.

Furthermore, policy network as inclusive governance highlights the importance of addressing ableism, a systemic bias and social oppression that disadvantages persons with disabilities (Beratan, 2006; Ives et al., 2021). The ableist system of dividing practices that is commonly referred to as institutional ableism privileges ability over disability, leading to exclusion and lack of support for persons with disabilities (Campbell, 2019; Lyons, 2013). Studies about ableism also illustrate how inclusive practice and implementation governance (Jeanes et al., 2018) for persons with disabilities "ha[ve] been used by various social groups to justify their

Table 1. Characteristics of policy communities and issue networks.

Dimension	Policy communities	Issue networks
Membership	Very limited number with some groups consciously excluded	Large
Integration	Frequent and high-quality interaction	Limited interaction
	Share basic values and there is continuity over time	Limited access and continuity
	Accept legitimacy of outcome	A measure of agreement exists, but conflict is never present
Resource distribution	All participants have resources	Limited distribution of resources
	Basic relationship is an exchange relationship	Exchange relationship is consultative
Power	Balance of power between members although one group may dominate	Unequal powers reflect unequal resources and unequal access

Source: Adapted from Rhodes and Marsh (1992).

elevated level of rights and status" (Wolbring, 2008, p. 253). This is essential for DSUs that are in a strategic position to implement inclusive sport policies while balancing cooperation with district assemblies, following government objectives, and engaging relevant disability groups or organisations.

This study examines the sport inclusion policies implemented by DSUs, focusing on providing equal opportunities and participatory experiences for DSAs. We use Rhodes and Marsh's (1992) policy network dimensions—membership, integration, resource distribution, and power dynamics—as analytical tools to understand the inclusiveness of DSU programmes in Ghanaian communities. This analysis helps to identify the extent to which DSUs' implementation of inclusive sport policies includes or excludes national DSAs in Ghana, thereby contributing to a more equitable and empowering environment for disabled individuals in sport.

4. Research Design and Methods

The case study approach was used to collect and analyse qualitative data from coordinators within DSUs and DSAs in Ghana. A combination of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and FGDs was employed in the data collection process which took place between 2020 and 2021. Access to research participants was made possible by gatekeepers/mediators the first author has known, both as a sport administrator and researcher in Ghana over the past 10 years. A consent form was also given to each participant prior to the data collection.

Data were purposefully collected from two groups. The first group was from DSUs located in the northern, middle, and southern regions of Ghana. A total of five DSUs were considered for the interviews in each region. It is worth mentioning that Ghana had 10 regions until 2019. Currently, there are 16 regions, but the additional six have limited structures. Accordingly, the research used sport organisations from the previous 10 regions of Ghana. The selection of regions was designed to ensure a balance of data sources in terms of urbanisation, wealth, population density, and culture. The second group from which data were collected involved three DSAs that are formally structured and recognised by the sport ministry. Here, a total of three senior officials and 12 district representatives were interviewed.

4.1. Data Collection

Document analysis included policy documents that aided the implementation of inclusion provisions. Some of the documents were requested from the interviewees, while others were downloaded from the internet (see Table 2). To avoid selective bias, the documents were painstakingly selected and examined based on the study's objectives (Yin, 2009).

The semi-structured interview was used in order to understand implementation from the perspective of key DSU officials (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The semi-structured interviews, unlike FGDs, allowed participants to share in greater depth personal information and experiences that may have been difficult to express in a group setting (Frisina, 2018; see Table 3). Among the key questions were awareness of inclusion as a key policy area for the sport ministry, resource distribution, partnerships, as well as the inclusion of persons with disabilities and DSAs in DSUs' planning and implementation of sport policies. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in accordance with the Covid-19 health and safety protocols in Ghana. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

Table 2. Sourced documents.

Documents	Publishing source (year)
Voluntary National Review Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	National Development Planning Commission (2019)
Sport ministry: Medium-Term Expenditure Framework	Ministry of Finance (2016–2021)
Formula for Sharing the District Assemblies Common Fund—Allocation Statement	Parliament of Ghana Library Repository (2016–2020)
Sports Act 934 of 2016	National Sport Authority/Sport ministry
Persons With Disability Act 715 of 2006	Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection
Local Governance Act 936 of 2016	Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development
Reports, minutes, and publications	DSUs and DSAs (2016–2022)

The purpose of the FGD was to assess whether the sport policy implementation had been inclusive and reflected the characteristics of the policy community or issues network or both. Unlike semi-structured interviews, we were able to gather and analyse a variety of narratives and perspectives simultaneously due to the possibility given to participants to speak freely (Frisina, 2018; Krueger, 2014). Unlike many FGDs where participants are more guarded in what they say, the participants in this study spoke freely without being reticent. An explanation for this is that the FGDs was conducted in a negotiated space/environment conducive to the participants' comfort and where they did not feel the pressure to express themselves. The duration of the FGDs was from 70 to 90 minutes. Participant details are presented in Table 3.

Overall, six FGDs, comprising DSU and DSA coordinators/representatives, provided insights into the communities where they worked (Bryman, 2012). Additionally, given the political nature and the hierarchical order of the district assemblies (where DSUs are located), a neutral location for each of the three FGDs was selected to allow participants to speak more freely (Elwood & Martin, 2000). The FGDs were aided by an interview guide with similar objectives as the semi-structured interviews. The FGDs took the form of face-to-face discussions and we followed Covid-19 health and safety protocols in Ghana, which included

Table 3. Participants for semi-structured interviews and FGDs.

Empirical categories	Semi-structured interviews	FGDs	Participants	Number of persons with disabilities
Regional sport directors	3	—	3	—
DSUs	—	3 (5 DSUs in each)	15	—
DSAs	3	3 (4 DSAs in each)	15 (from DSAs represented in regions/districts)	13
Total	6	6	33	13

wearing a mask and maintaining a minimum distance of one meter (Government of Ghana, 2020; Kenu et al., 2020).

4.2. Reflexivity

As a whole, the research was enriched by the diverse cultural backgrounds of the authors. The first two authors' experiences as Ghanaians and former sport administrators in Ghana offer both opportunities and challenges for data collection and analysis. As Floyd and Arthur (2012, p. 172) state, there are often "deeper level ethical and moral dilemmas that insider researchers have to deal with." This leads us to draw insights from Olmos-Vega et al.'s (2022) intertwined reflexivity approach, which integrates personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual reflexivity. We exercised *personal reflexivity* in order to consider the possibility of interlocutor projection bias in the analysis of the research data and interviews. In this instance, the third author provided outsider insights into the data analysis. In addition, personal reflexivity enabled us to anticipate and avoid being influenced by participants who may wish to discuss personal matters during interviews. Our *interpersonal reflexivity* helped us to examine how our strengths and weaknesses could complement each other. For instance, the first and third authors' experiences in sport policy implementation and management complemented the second author's expertise in disability studies. By doing so, we were able to thoroughly discuss and choose the appropriate theoretical lenses for the research. Through *methodological reflexivity* we were able to, from the outset, "[align] methodological choices with the theoretical framework" of the research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022, p. 245). The participants gave their informed consent. We used pseudonyms to avoid victimisation and job loss among DSU participants and to protect the identity of DSA participants. In addition, we considered the different capabilities of the participants and negotiated interview locations that were appropriate, conducive, and safe for the collection of data. Our *familiarity with the context* gained us the participants' trust and gave us an "easier entrée, a head start" (Berger, 2015, p. 223). Furthermore, our familiarity with the cultural context enabled us to closely attend to non-verbal cues and seek clarification during the interviews (Mapitsa & Ngwato, 2020; Patton, 2014; Yin, 2009).

4.3. Data Processing and Analysis

The data analysed comprised the identified documents, FGDs, and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were manually and digitally analysed. The data processing began with the researchers familiarising themselves with the data by thoroughly reading and re-reading the data, making notes, and forming ideas about coding. By using MAXQDA Plus 2022, researchers extracted initial codes through the open coding method. The extracted codes were then linked together through axial coding to form meaningful organised categories (Gratton & Jones, 2010). The organised categories were downloaded in Excel format for manual analysis to generate main themes and sub-themes where necessary. Further probing and feedback from peer debriefing helped to generate credible themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data analysis was undertaken both inductively and theoretically. First, by using the inductive approach, we engaged in data immersion, pattern matching, and explanation building to generate common themes from the data (Yin, 2009). The data from the document analysis were inductively analysed to extract inclusive provisions from DSU sport policies. The theoretical approach, as the name denotes, adopted the coding strategy based on the theoretical lens used for the research. As a result, the following themes emerged: (a) evidence of sport inclusion policies for persons with disabilities;

(b) composition and membership of DSUs; (c) decision-making and planning of district programmes; (d) distribution of funds and sharing of resources; and (e) conflicts. These five themes are analysed in the next section.

5. Findings

5.1. Evidence of Inclusive Policy Provisions for Persons With Disabilities

At the national or ministerial level are provisions to implement disability policies through sport at the district level. These provisions can be found in the sport, education, and local government ministries that provide joint support for the DSUs.

The DSUs are created under provision 25 of the Sports Act 934 of 2016 and, among other functions, have the responsibility to assist in the formulation and implementation of (inclusive) sport policies, programmes, and activities (25a); advise district assembly authorities on inclusive sport facilities, programmes, and budgetary allocations (25b); organise and promote parasport in districts (25d); and facilitate the work of and provide equipment to sport organisations in the districts (25m).

Specifically, under the core functions of the Sports Act 934 of 2016, provision 3 references inclusive policies even though persons with disabilities are not mentioned (Government of Ghana, 2016a):

> To provide a conducive and enabling environment for national sport associations as well as promote, encourage and secure the adoption of policies of equal opportunity and access to sports. (provision 3)

Furthermore, the Local Governance Act 936 of 2016 which outlines, defines, and regulates all the activities and programmes of district assemblies makes special provisions relating to inclusion (Government of Ghana, 2016b). Among other things, provision 48 of the Act requires district assemblies to include and integrate marginalised groups regardless of their identity. Concerning social and cultural practices such as sport and physical activity, district assemblies (with all its units like DSUs) shall ensure:

> Equal treatment, social protection and promotion of effective participation of marginalised groups in public life. (provision 48)

Moreover, the Persons With Disabilities Act 715 of 2006, which encompasses the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development (DSWCD) as well as the sport ministry, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, among others, promotes equal access to district sporting events, facilities, and programmes (Government of Ghana, 2006):

> The ministry responsible for education and sports [and] the district assemblies...shall as far as practicable ensure, [through] the provision of adequate facilities, programmes and incentives, that persons with disability have access to sports and cultural events. (provision 38)

The above-mentioned policy provisions form the basis for an inclusive policy network in which the DSUs in the local districts play a crucial role. This type of network aims to ensure that its members are representative and

that the network facilitates the sharing of resources and collaboration, integrates disabilities programmes, and maintains frequent interaction among key stakeholders. In spite of the inter-ministerial approach to support DSUs, there is no detailed individual or joint policy guideline from the ministries that defines the inclusion of persons with disability in community sport or allows the DSUs to implement pragmatic inclusive policies that include and complement key partners like DSAs/groups (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992). Having no such policy guideline may reinforce deeply rooted preferences and discretionary practices among DSUs, which may create an environment conducive to ableist tendencies and behaviours (Campbell, 2019). Additionally, the "degree of freedom in interpreting what constitutes inclusion...may have major implications for the experiences of [persons with disabilities]" and DSAs (Christiaens & Brittain, 2023, p. 1049). In the subsequent findings, we will elaborate on this further.

5.2. Composition and Membership of DSUs

In accordance with the Sports Act 934 of 2016, the composition of DSUs is fixed and legitimised. The composition of a DSU consists of a DSU leader nominated by the National Sport Authority through the regional director, two representatives from the sport and education regional offices, and four nominees by the district chief executive. According to the 15 DSU members that we interviewed, the membership as highlighted in the Sports Act does not reflect what happens on the ground. They reported that DSUs are very limited in terms of their actual composition and membership:

> The catchment area of some districts is huge with different sport associations. How can three or four people work well if they have more than 30,000 people to deal with? You cannot do this if you don't have the right expertise and human resources. Besides we are under-resourced. (northern DSU member)

To buttress this, one regional director mentioned:

> Although we involve [persons with disabilities] in many ways, I think we have not done enough to have them instituted as core members in both the regional sport offices (RSOs) and DSUs. At the RSOs we don't have special coaches to support the DSUs. (southern RSO director)

The lack of community coaches with special coaching competencies illustrates a kind of "full inclusion" where the DSUs are willing, but they lack the personnel and appropriate coaching skills (Christiaens & Brittain, 2023). Following our audit of the Sports Act of 934 2016 and discussions with DSU participants, we noticed that neither the DSWCD (which operates in all district assemblies) nor the DSAs were represented in the DSUs. The DSWCD was established by a government legal instrument in 1961 to mainstream persons with disabilities programmes and to assist district assemblies in formulating and implementing social protection and inclusion policies. The DSWCD also provides support services to DSAs. During our visit to DSWCD's headquarters, we noticed that nearly all of the DSAs are housed within their premises. With aims for fostering strategic partnerships and implementing inclusive sport policies (National Development Planning Commission, 2019), excluding DSAs or actors from DSU membership undermines community development and neglects their concerns.

5.3. Planning and Integration of Disability Programmes

Ideally, the planning, budgeting, and implementation of inclusive community sport programmes are done by the DSUs in consultation with the district assemblies and with support from the RSOs. Here we asked members of DSUs, DSAs, and also regional sport directors about inclusive planning of district sport programmes, particularly how they integrate disabled programmes into their implementation plan. The DSUs acknowledge the presence of the DSAs in various districts, but they cannot support them due to budgetary constraints and resource limitations. Instead, they prioritise other "abled" sport programmes—which they think are popular in the community—at the expense of the disabled sport programmes. One DSU member said:

> Let me confess, they come to us and we see them in the communities, but we deliberately ignore them from our programmes. Our hands are tied financially and so we have to prioritise. (southern DSU member)

A similar comment was made by another DSU member:

> There are not many [persons with disabilities] in the districts and so sometimes we forget about them. Also, it is difficult and demanding dealing with them. (northern DSU member)

In response to why it is difficult to deal with persons with disabilities, the DSU member explained that the needs of persons with disabilities are numerous, complex, and require special attention which they cannot give due to financial and human resource constraints. During one of the discussions, DSUs shared the view that DSAs are resilient and persistent in the face of challenges. In addition, interviewees stated that once a decision is made to include persons with disabilities, they begin to request more.

The DSA members interviewed mentioned that their exclusion from the DSU programmes and sport sector as a whole is not a surprise. They said that at the national level, although the government professes to be committed to their programmes, DSAs are constantly ignored when it comes to actual or real support. They provided their reasoning as to why inclusive disability programmes have not been considered by DSUs and the sport sector as a whole:

> We feel that they only involve us as a formality and for the books to fulfil their own goals. But when it comes to implementation at any level, we are completely neglected even though we are present everywhere. (DSA member)

Our analysis of the sport ministry's 2016–2021 Medium-Term Expenditure Framework showed a track record of how disabled sport programmes organised in the various local communities have been prominently featured and prioritised. Unfortunately, and as shown in the interviews, this is the opposite of what happens at the DSU level. Even though DSUs are somewhat responsible for not including DSAs in their programmes, district assembly directors are more culpable since they make final decisions regarding funding for DSUs. Essentially, the deliberate omission of programmes for persons with disabilities and DSAs from the planning process to give preference to "abled" sport programmes illustrates how "ableism privileges ability over disability" (Lyons, 2013, p. 240).

5.4. Distribution of Funds and Sharing of Resources

Here, we analysed DACF distributions and support from RSOs. In addition, we asked DSU participants how they use funds received from district assemblies to implement programmes for persons with disabilities and how they share resources through collaboration with other DSAs.

5.4.1. Distribution of Funds

Both funding and provision of disability-friendly sport facilities in districts and communities come from DACF distributions with support from the sport ministry through the National Sport Authority and RSOs. In Charway et al.'s (2022) analysis of the parliamentary annual authorised "formula for sharing the DACF" from 2016 to 2020, sport and disability are two of the five components under social services through which fund allocations are made that support persons with disabilities in the districts. It is important to note that all fund allocations except sport are mandatory. Also, while the sport allocations are meant for the DSUs, the disability component is used by the district assemblies to provide social welfare and protection services to persons with disabilities within the districts in general.

Against this backdrop, we asked DSU participants how often they receive funds or use funds received from district assemblies or RSOs to support and implement programmes for persons with disabilities in their communities. There was some dissatisfaction among DSU participants due to the limited or non-existent financial support for their programmes. They further claimed that even when they receive support from the DACF, it is woefully insufficient:

> We are involved in the budgeting for the sport programmes, but when it comes to distribution, we are mostly neglected until we insist. And then if we are lucky, we are given peanuts which we have to decide what to do with it. (mid-Ghana DSU member)

Regarding support from the RSOs, a member from another DSU mentioned:

> They support us with the regional sporting facilities, but in terms of funding, they don't give us anything. (southern DSU member)

5.4.2. Sharing of Resources

The DSAs lamented the lack of resource sharing. They mentioned that the RSOs provide them with sport facilities for their community programmes, but they do not receive any collaboration or support from the DSUs:

> We know the DSUs are there in the communities, but they don't support or collaborate with us. In fact, they don't complement our efforts in the communities. (DSA member)

In a nutshell, the absence of a government legal instrument requiring sport funds to be mandatory indicates institutional neglect (Campbell, 2019). Additionally, this undermines the government's Persons With Disabilities Act 715 of 2006 and other well-intended provisions in the Sports Act and the Local Governance Act. This also causes structural challenges that neglect persons with disabilities initiatives/programmes and

further discrimination against persons with disabilities groups (Beratan, 2006). For example, prioritising or using discretion to make decisions due to limited resources may result in what Chouinard and Grant (1995) noted as the "othering" of disabled people.

5.5. Conflicts

The members of the DSUs discussed two types of conflicts arising from the discretion exercised by the district assembly chief executives or authorities when it comes to organising sport programmes for persons with disabilities: conflicts of interest and conflicts with DSAs. They further mentioned that the latter is a consequence of the former.

5.5.1. Conflicts of Interest

According to DSU members, conflicts of interest occur due to the political interests of the district authorities in planning and organising sport programmes for persons with disabilities in the communities. DSU members commented that they are generally not involved in such sport programmes for persons with disabilities; sometimes they are not even aware of them until they are arranged and organised. While their non-involvement is not surprising to them, they cautiously stated the following:

> Sometimes we are handicapped due to politics, which affects our sport programmes and when you challenge the district authorities you can lose your job. (southern DSU member)

Another member made a similar comment:

> This [referring to politics] happens all the time, especially during election year. By the time we realise, the [district] assembly directors are organising, particularly, amputee football tournaments, or making donations to them. (mid-Ghana DSU member)

One DSU member noted that focusing on amputee football, for instance, would undermine the efforts of the DSAs in districts with a variety of disability sport disciplines. These groups include the Ghana Deaf and Dumb Federation and the Ghana Blind Sport Association. According to the DSU members, the political actions of the district assembly authorities make DSUs the target of misconceptions about their work and of conflicts with DSAs. When we asked how they intend to resolve or mitigate the conflict, the DSU participants spoke about the need for a collective and relentless effort by all DSU officials in Ghana to appeal to the sport ministry to provide them with local autonomy free of political interference.

5.5.2. Conflict With the Various DSAs

The DSA members lamented that the DSUs, like the sport ministry, tend to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting disability sport:

> I always feel that they see disability sport to be one sport. For example, when they support physically challenged sport then they will report that they supported all the disab[ility] sport. (DSA member)

Further, the DSAs remarked that there are several disability sport disciplines, including blind sport, physically challenged sport, deaf and dumb sport, para-cycling and para-lifting, among others. One DSA member remarked that collaboration is undermined due to the lack of engagement and consultation to understand their plight in the districts, "resulting in many persons with disabilities remaining idle." In such a policy network, "the absence of consensus and the presence of conflict" is inevitable (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992, p. 184). In light of the conflicts, the DSA participants, in general, were indignant at being neglected and marginalised. One member said, "Sometimes I feel they use us for their political gains and pretend they care." When asked about what steps can be taken to mitigate the neglect, they revealed that the leadership of the ASD has recently held a series of meetings with all the DSAs in Ghana and relevant stakeholders to approach the sport ministry. They intend to do so as a united front and well-composed group. According to them, such an approach will increase awareness of their community sport services and differentiate them from other organisations with a focus on national sport events, such as the National Paralympic Committee of Ghana.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The study aimed to analyse the extent to which DSAs are included in the implementation of inclusive sport policies at DSUs. Using the policy network analytical framework, we found that the policy implementation process presented challenges, despite the inclusion of provisions at the local level. Among the challenges are decision-making at district assemblies, conflicts among network actors, representation gaps, a lack of funding, a lack of partnership opportunities, and an absence of an integrated programme for DSAs. Generally, the findings show that persons with disabilities have been neglected, discriminated against, and left "behind" in DSU programmes. Furthermore, the findings indicate that a policy community exists, but one that excludes disability sport. The decision-making at the district level seems to exhibit many of the characteristics of Rhodes and Marsh's (1992) definition of the policy community, including "limited members with some groups consciously excluded" and "shar[ing] basic values and...continuity over time" (p. 187). In light of this, the discussion concentrates on the collaborative alliance, local autonomy for DSUs, and implications of ableism for policy networks. Lastly, we discuss the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

To address complex societal issues and achieve common objectives, collaborative alliances are formed among a variety of stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit organisations, community groups, and other relevant actors (Ansell & Gash, 2008). These alliances often transcend traditional bureaucratic boundaries and foster innovative solutions to complex policy implementation challenges by promoting information sharing, mutual learning, and collective problem-solving (Emerson et al., 2012). At the local level, DSUs occupy a strategic position to look beyond the bureaucracy (district assembly) and initiate an alliance process with members of the DSAs, the DSWCD, and RSOs. Regrettably, as indicated by the findings, the DSUs have remained inactive, attributing blame to the district assembly authorities, despite their potential to establish an alliance crucial for shaping policy outcomes and advancing social inclusion. Collaborative alliances are closely intertwined with the principles of inclusion, as they emphasise the active participation and representation of all relevant stakeholders, particularly marginalised or underrepresented groups, in decision-making processes (Hendriks, 2007). By fostering partnerships between DSAs, government agencies, and other stakeholders, policy networks can facilitate the exchange of knowledge and resources, build lasting social capital, and influence legislation governing sport funds distribution to DSUs (Peachey et al., 2018; Vail, 2007).

As the core of the policy network, DSUs must have autonomy to govern, implement, and ensure community participation. As the findings demonstrate, DSUs are largely controlled by the district assembly authorities and therefore lack autonomy. The lack thereof, as the findings showed, results in the neglect or underfunding of DSUs and non-prioritisation of sport inclusion policy implementation and DSAs. Although the establishment of the DSUs signifies the sport ministry's decentralised sport policy implementation at the local level, there are, as Olowu (2003, p. 41) states in his review of majority of African local institutions, "considerable institutional and political challenges involved in making it a reality." In addition, this illustrates the challenges associated with "implementation in dispersed governance" where policies do not necessarily align with local delivery (Hudson et al., 2019, p. 3). Furthermore, the lack of autonomy as well as detailed and defined policy guidelines for DSUs leaves the implementation of sport programmes for persons with disabilities in the hands of the bureaucracy (district assemblies). In light of this, the district assembly authorities exercise delegated discretionary authority to make decisions, ultimately resulting in bureaucratic politics (Smith, 2022). As shown in the findings and in accordance with Bach's (2022, p. 11) description of bureaucratic politics, district assembly authorities "pursue distinct or [their own] interests" by organising sport programmes for persons with disabilities without necessarily consulting the DSUs. The result is what Matland (1995) described as political implementation, where certain disabled sport disciplines under some DSAs are favoured over others. As can be seen in the findings, amputee football-related activities (under the Ghana Amputee Football Association) are often organised by the district assemblies at the expense of other disability sport disciplines (under several DSAs). Furthermore, this may lead to conflicts between district assemblies, DSUs, and DSAs that feel overlooked. As a preventative measure, it is essential to have a clearly defined disability sport policy where autonomy, distribution of funds, and actual implementation are backed by government legislation.

The implications of ableism for policy networks in this study are significant. In contexts where power dynamics are often influenced by politics and resource availability, ableism can exacerbate existing exclusion and further marginalise DSAs (Christiaens & Brittain, 2023). For instance, ableism influences policy implementation priorities and deepens exclusionary practices, reinforcing structural discrimination (Campbell, 2009). District assembly directors, as shown in the study findings, use their political position to influence disability sport priorities in ways that align with their interests. This reinforces discriminatory practices that limit opportunities for DSUs and disabled sport groups. This may lead to systemic discrimination against persons with disabilities and DSAs and their inclusion in policy making and implementation processes. As mentioned by the DSA participants, their non-integration and non-involvement leave them with a sense of being used or exploited (Wolbring, 2008), thus undermining the national development agenda for "no one will be left behind" in communities, which is core to achieving the United Nations SDGs. Overall, addressing ableism within policy networks is crucial for promoting inclusive policy communities characterised by shared values, equitable decision-making, and resource distribution. This requires challenging existing power dynamics, amplifying the voices of persons with disabilities, and ensuring that policies and practices are informed by principles of accessibility, equity, and social justice (Christiaens & Brittain, 2023).

Even though the policy network provided valuable theoretical insights into the challenges in the implementation process and the interdependencies among key stakeholders, it provided limited insights into how the challenges may prompt policy change (Sabatier, 1993). As Rhodes (2006) stated, "policy network analysis...does not, and cannot, explain change...[instead it] stresses how networks limit participation." In this

light, drawing on additional theories such as advocacy coalitions may offer a deeper understanding of how power or dominance (of district assembly authorities) and negotiations among and between DSUs and DSAs affect policy outcomes and thus lead to the maintenance of ableist policy and obstruct policy change. Furthermore, the focus on DSUs as the unit of analysis limits the emphasis placed on other relevant actors in the implementation of persons with disabilities sport policies at the community level. This may include the media, non-sport-based NGOs, as well as the private sector. In the policy network, these actors may not be core but are significant in ways that "define, shape, interpret and reinterpret policy outcomes" (Evans, 2001, p. 543).

Despite the limitations, the study provides a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by DSUs when implementing persons with disabilities sport policies in Ghana. Since there has been no empirical research on sport inclusion policies for persons with disabilities in Ghana, the design of this study could be pertinent for analysing the intersectional—structural and sociocultural—challenges persons with disabilities face when participating in community-based sport. Furthermore, this research underscores the significance of transparent and inclusive processes that prioritise the voices, lived experiences, and expertise of persons with disabilities and DSAs. By fostering such transparent and inclusive engagement, the research recommends policies that are not only responsive to the diverse needs of the disability community but also grounded in principles of equity, accountability, and sustainability. Finally, the research opens a window for agenda-setting and policy learning that considers the practical needs of persons with disabilities and DSAs in communities.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
Due to the sensitive nature of participant data, which could risk victimisation and job loss for state employees within the DSU, and to protect the identities of DSA participants, the data for this study are not publicly available.

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