

# Promises of Accessibility for the Tokyo 2020 Games

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**Abstract:** The Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games are promising comprehensive changes to accessibility for all who will be attending, including athletes, coaches, spectators, volunteers and organizers. The promises of accessibility will have impact on disability sport, society and culture, and the economy. This article examines accessible design features for promotional materials, training venues, hotel accommodations and local transportation, followed by a report on the progress made towards the accessibility goals for the Tokyo 2020 Games

The Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games are expecting athletes, volunteers, spectators and tourists from around the world. To deliver an excellent set of games, the organizing committee has created three guiding principles. The three core concepts of the Tokyo 2020 Games are: achieving personal best, unity in diversity, and connecting to tomorrow. These concepts can offer a way to investigate how the vision and impact for the games can be analyzed from a disability studies lens. To achieve personal best, is the organizing committee preparing the most accessible games for the athletes? Are the organizers and volunteers being prepared to welcome a diverse population of athletes and spectators? For unity in diversity, are the citizens of Japan gaining the knowledge and skills to be able to be more welcoming and inclusive of different individuals and cultures? For the concept of connecting with tomorrow,

will a positive legacy include an increased accessible, barrier-free society?

With the initial bid for the games, accessibility is a critical factor in the mounting of the games. The hosting of the games is intended to have an impact on disability sport, social-cultural attitudes and the economy. Disability sport relates to an increased awareness of recreational and competitive options for persons with visible and invisible impairments. Social-cultural shifts pay attention to the acceptance and respect of individuals with impairments and disability rights. The impact on the economy focuses on access to transportation, use of technology, and barrier-free tourism. This paper reviews selected aspects of the Tokyo 2020 Games preparations and investigates these promises for accessibility and the progress made thus far. This material includes official documents of the organizing committee, the Tokyo 2020 website, and local media coverage.



**Figure 1: Emblems of the Tokyo 2020 Games © Tokyo2020**

(Tokyo2020, 2020a)

## Impact on Disability Sport

Beginning with the bid to host the Tokyo 2020 Games, the approach was to provide one bid, one city - an integrated approach to host both the Olympic and Paralympic Games. This is symbolized in the emblems of the Tokyo 2020 Games (Figure 1). The official website - Tokyo2020.org - provides a detailed description of the development of the emblems through images, text and video. The harmonized checkered pattern, which is reminiscent of a Japanese pattern called "ichimatsu moyo" from the Edo period (1603 - 1867), was designed by Tokyo artist Tokolo Asao, and chosen from 10,666 entries (Tokyo2020, 2020a). The design is composed of three different rectangles to represent different countries, cultures and ways of thinking. The narration from the Tokyo 2020 emblems concept video states:

Three different rectangular shapes represent diversity.

Diversity makes the world a vibrant place.

It sets us apart but can bring us together.

With mutual respect and support, diversity becomes unity.

These two emblems are made of the same number of shapes.

They remind us that all people are equal.

That regardless of our ability or disability, we are united in our humanity.

The thrill and excitement of sports inspires us and makes our hearts around the world beat as one. This is where a dazzling future begins.

The images of the emblems convey one of the three operating principles, namely "unity in diversity," and specifically addresses ability and disability. Through the inclusion of the word "disability" within the artist's concept, it provides a constant reminder to the planning, promotions, implementation and legacy of the games. Through sport, "unity in diversity" can become a reality. This operating concept embraces the acceptance and respect for difference, inclusive of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, political, national or social origin, property, birth, or level of ability. The Tokyo 2020 Games promises to "foster a welcoming environment and raise awareness of unity in diversity among citizens of the world" (Tokyo2020, 2020b).

To realize this promise, the *TOKYO 2020 Accessibility Guidelines* (Tokyo2020, 2020c) is a 153-page document that outlines the fundamentals of equity, dignity and functionality, and focuses on a range of individuals who can benefit from a more accessible environment. In addition to people who have mobility impairments, visual impairments, people who are hard of hearing, people with intellectual challenges and mental impairments, individuals who can benefit from changes include people with injuries, older adults and seniors, pregnant women, people with infant children, people who speak languages other than Japanese, and people travelling with a service dog. For individuals who will be connected to the games, which include athletes, spectators, volunteers, staff, tourists, and citizens, they will all be able to benefit from the technical requirements specified in the accessibility guidelines.

Within this accessibility document, technical specifications are for doorways, ramps, venues, washrooms, hotels, publications, communications, transportation and training.

The document provides specifics on infrastructure, communications and training. The specifications for infrastructure detail the measurements in numbers, words and diagrams required for barrier-free access, such as ramps leading into venues, doorway widths for motorized wheelchairs, accessible washrooms, and counter heights for reception and information booths. Information needs to be communicated through different formats including audio, large print and braille. These guidelines are detailed to ensure that these standards can be implemented for the games, in anticipating and welcoming persons with and without impairments who are participating in the games, organizing the games, or attending the games as mega-sport fans.

In thinking of unity in diversity in preparation for the games, para-athletes in Japan have had challenges in finding the space and time for their training. Recently, while there are 25 sports centers which are accessible for individuals with impairments in Japan, there are not guaranteed training times for para-athletes. The sports centers are often used for rehabilitation and recreation purposes. The new Para Arena, located next to the museum of Maritime Science in Tokyo's Shinagawa Ward – a 3,187 square meter facility – is now available as a training space for para-athletes (Ikezawa, 2018). Built by the Nippon Foundation Paralympic Support, the new Para Arena includes three courts for wheelchair basketball or rugby, eight for boccia, two for sitting volleyball, and one for blind soccer or goal ball. Additionally there are barrier-free entrances and multiple areas featuring universal design elements such as high contrast wall and floor colors to support individuals with visual impairments. Air conditioning is important since athletes with spinal cord injuries may have difficulty cooling the body, plus a huge parking space for accessible parking. Despite the state-of-the-art facilities that are now available for para-athletes through the Para Arena, there is an uncertainty as to the

continued operations of the facility after the games.

Despite the uncertainty of training venues, the para-athletes are in high gear, training both as amateur and sponsored athletes. An elite group of 17 Japanese para-athletes are sponsored to train five days per week without having to worry about work responsibilities (McKirby, 2020). While there is a focus on winning gold medals, the greatest impact for many of the para-athletes will be the positive transformation on perspectives. Hirose Makoto, a retired para-judoka said, "I would like the Tokyo Paralympics to be a turning point for the way Japanese people think about people with disabilities" (McKirby, 2020). This hopeful goal goes beyond transforming the perceptions of the Japanese people. Disability sport through the mounting of the Paralympics and the advancement of accessibility goals for both of the Tokyo 2020 Games, will be instrumental in changing people's perspectives, through spectatorship at the games, and via screening broadcasts around the world.

## Impact on Society and Culture



**Figure 2: Mami Tani, Paralympian © Tokyo 2020**

The Tokyo 2020 Games offers a short two-minute video entitled “*Sports Connects Us.*” (Tokyo 2020, 2020d). Wheelchairs, amputees, sign language, Paralympics logo, and para-activities including tennis, archery, racing, dancing, basketball and badminton are featured. In addition to this promotional video, the #1yeartogo campaign invites the world to see the para-athletes and to visit Tokyo. In the #1yeartogo campaign initiated by the Tokyo 2020 organizing committee, athletes were selected to be ambassadors for the Paralympics and the host city.

Tani Mami, who will be competing in the para-triathlon, is featured with her bike and prosthetic blade against the backdrop of the Rainbow Bridge in Odaiba, which will be the venue for the triathlon events in Tokyo (Figure 2). Iranian Siamand Rahman, Paralympian in powerlifting in the London 2012 and the Rio 2016 games, is the world record holder in the over 107kg category and lifts 310 kg (683lbs). He is photographed in front of the Kabuki-za Theatre in Tokyo (Figure 3). These two images, along with three others in the campaign, provide a spotlight on exceptional athletes who have physical impairments posing in front of iconic landmarks in Tokyo.



**Figure 3: Siamand Rahman, Paralympian © Tokyo 2020**

By design, these individuals look athletic with their competition gear. With detailed information on the websites and through social media, the narratives of these athletes can inspire through commitment to years of training, achievements with their competitive standings, and connection to the Tokyo landmarks. While these images can inspire, there could also be a tendency towards a “supercrip” (Zhang & Haller, 2013) model that showcases these athletes as superhuman. These Paralympians may be perceived as the exception, rather than a part of mainstream society. Despite a “supercrip” tendency for this current campaign, the message is still positive and can re-affirm the disability identity of individuals living with impairments (Zhang & Haller, 2013). Consequently, these #1yeartogo campaign images need to be balanced with ones that can connect to more people, to build awareness and to shape their perceptions of disability sport and disability in general. It is essential to convey the idea that disability is embedded in everyday living, and not just in high performance sport.

This balance can be attributed to the various nationwide programs that were created to engage more citizens of Japan, starting with the very young. The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) developed *I’m Possible* in 2017, as their official education program. The IPC partners with national Paralympic committees and ministries of education, with Japan being the first country to launch the program. With an initial target of distributing 20,000 teacher toolkits, the actual distribution was 36,000 packs by February 2019 (Tokyo2020, 2020e). The packs were initially launched for 6 to 12 year olds, but with an intention to provide “reverse education” these tool kits have set the stage for discussion among family members and across generations to promote the Paralympic values of courage, determination, inspiration and quality. The

teacher toolkits consist of 15 lesson plans, which include learning activities, power points, questions and quizzes for 45-minute sessions. The *I'm Possible* toolkits also featured six inspirational films. In addition to the toolkits, schools have hosted Parasport exchange conferences to showcase specific disability sports such as boccia and floor volleyball. Over 80 universities and junior colleges have signed collaboration agreements to learn more about the Tokyo 2020 Games (Tokyo2020, 2020e). Annual para-sport events have also been held to promote greater awareness and knowledge about disability sport.

Changes in attitude take time and the organizing committee has created a nationwide program to engage the citizens of Japan. Starting with the design of the mascots, collection of metals for the medal project program, recruitment of volunteers as torchbearers and for the games, Japan's citizens have been engaged. They gathered 78,985 tons of small electronic devices and 6.21 million cell phones for recycling to create the 5,000 gold, silver and bronze medals for the games (Tokyo2020, 2020e). To increase awareness amongst spectators for the Paralympic Games, ticket prices have been set at a reasonable, family-friendly rate. For example, tickets for five sports, including goal ball start at 900 Yen (\$11 CDN), while family and group tickets start at 500 Yen (\$6 CDN) (Kyodo Press, 2019a).

To support all these nationwide programs, staff is required for the implementation of the thousands of activities. Despite intentions to employ more persons with impairments, the actual rates are below the standards within the government institutions. Nearly 40% (17 out of 44) of government entities missed the hiring targets for persons with impairments as of June 2019 even though 3,623 were hired since October 2018. (Jiji Press, 2019). The proportion of persons with impairments across the 44 government entities stood at 2.31%, which is

still below the legally required level of 2.5% (Jiji Press, 2019). Decreasing the unemployment rates among persons with impairments can make a difference in meeting their basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing, and enhancing their independence. By decreasing underemployment or fully utilizing the skills of the individuals with impairments, these actions will provide for retention and satisfaction in their current jobs. Greater recruitment needs to take place from a larger pool of candidates. Once hired, employers need to have discussions with their new employees on what can be achieved with a professional development plan to ensure that all skills are being nurtured and utilized.

## Impact on the Economy

The Tokyo 2020 Games is intended to have an impact on the economy in the areas of transportation, accommodations and tourism. While the Tokyo 1964 Games modernized the transportation infrastructure with improved rail lines and the debut of the shinkansen bullet trains, the *Accessibility Guidelines* promise greater barrier-free options for all modes of transportation. For public buses, the guidelines recommend wide doorways, installation of a minimum of two wheelchair spaces within vehicles, and announcements in voice and text regarding service stops. To ensure that individuals have easy access to their surrounding environments, there should be accessible pathways. For rail transportation, there should be step-free access to platforms, minimal gaps between trains and platforms, wheelchair spaces within carriages, accessible toilets near the wheelchair spaces, and companion seats near the wheelchair spaces. Accessible airports need to include information to be offered in multiple formats such as large print, audio and electronic, with counter heights at levels that can be useful for individuals who use wheelchairs. In all of these

modes of transportation, disability awareness training was emphasized. For the Tokyo 2020 Games, there is a need to focus on general awareness training on how to communicate and offer assistance for individuals with a wide range of impairments. To build the skills and knowledge of the staff and volunteers to better prepare for the games, the *Accessibility Guidelines* encourage interaction with individuals with impairments, in addition to the use of role-play. Disability training is provided for the organizing staff, with modules on equity, diversity and inclusion. On the Tokyo2020 Games website, there are specific handouts on how to support persons with mobility, visual and hearing impairments, and individuals who use service dogs. Specific venue training includes tours to learn more about the accessible features and emergency procedures of the various facilities.

While the official games will have more accessible vehicles, taxis around the city still need improvement. More accessible taxis are being produced for the games, but the taxi drivers need more technical and empathy training. To transition the taxis into barrier-free vehicles, the drivers need to reduce the time to fold the seats, install slope plates and secure the wheelchair, since the current process can take upwards to an hour to complete (Japan Times, 2019). Unfortunately, some taxi drivers have admitted to not stopping for individuals who use wheelchairs, especially if it was a short distance ride. The accessibility of taxis will affect individuals with impairments living in Tokyo and those who are tourists.

To ensure there are sufficient accommodations for Tokyo 2020 Games' tourists with disabilities, hotels need to provide more accessible rooms per night. Specifically, there is a projected 300 rooms short of the 850 needed; 35% of the required accessible rooms are missing (Kyodo, 2019b). Although 900 out of the 240,000 available rooms are listed as barrier-free, certain features such as a raised

entryway, a narrow bathroom door, and a long commute render the accommodations inaccessible for individuals with impairments. Currently, 0.4% of Japan's hotel rooms are accessible (Bookman, 2019). New standards will be implemented to address the concerns of limited accessible hotel rooms. Under the new standards, hotels with 50 or more rooms will need to design 1% of their hotel rooms to be accessible. For example, 300 room hotels need to build three accessible rooms. A barrier-free room must have an entrance wider than 80 cm (30 inches), a bathroom with handrails, and no steps dividing rooms. Still, even with this new law, this percentage is far below the number of persons with impairments in the general population, which is 15% according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2011).

While accessibility standards are detailed for the training and competition venues, this is not the case for restaurants and tourist sites. In addition to attending the competitions at the Tokyo 2020 games, tourists will need to find places to dine and are keen on enhancing their Japan experiences by visiting tourist sites. Unfortunately, steps at restaurant entrances can limit the eating options. In a video interview between BBC disability news correspondent Nikki Fox and Josh Grisdale, founder of Accessible Japan, who both use electric wheelchairs, they spoke about not being able to enter a restaurant in Tokyo (BBC, 2019). Their alternative option was to eat in the food court located in the nearest department store that had elevator access. Grisdale believes that accessibility can be advanced by pressuring the government to support persons with impairments, by highlighting positive accessibility strategies implemented by organizations, and by promoting the economic benefits of becoming more accessible. Increased access can raise the potential number of customers, which would include persons with impairments and the aging population. With his focus on accessible tourism, Grisdale (2019) concludes a recent

interview based on his lived experiences:

Travel is essential to the human experience and is important for enrichment, learning and seeing beauty/horror in the world. People coming to Japan can share their experiences on accessibility, and travelers can also learn from Japan. Communication is vital for understanding problems and discussing solutions.

Accessible tourism is expected to increase across Japan, as a result of the Tokyo 2020 Games. More importantly, the daily lives of individuals with impairments are expected to improve.

## Moving Forward

The Tokyo2020 Games promise much change to disability sport, social-cultural attitudes, and the contemporary economy. From the initial bid to host the games to the *Tokyo 2020 Accessibility Guidelines* to the current progress reports through official channels and the local media, there is much to celebrate. Accessibility is being woven into every stage of the planning, implementation, promotional and evaluation processes from the vantage point of the organizing committee. Every stage of the education system will be influenced, from the *I'm Possible* teacher kits to the experiential parasport events for the elementary schools to research on the Olympic and Paralympic Games with universities. Citizens of Japan have already engaged with the preparation of the Tokyo2020 Games through the medal project, participated in countdown events, and have signed up as games volunteers to host tourists from around the globe. Commendable progress on accessibility has been reported by the Tokyo2020 Games organizing committee, and yet there are shortfalls and work still needs to

be done.

There is still time before the opening of the official games to enhance professional development for staff and volunteers to prepare and offer the most inclusive set of games. Taxi drivers can practice drills to accommodate passengers who use wheelchairs more quickly. Educational institutions can continue to teach and provide opportunities to learn about disability sport. Official communications need to convey information in multiple formats to promote accessibility. Hotel operators need to consider going beyond minimum accessibility standards. More individuals with impairments need to be present during the planning, promotion and delivery of the games. Government, public and private organizations need to channel more resources into the recruitment, training and retention of employees with impairments. Hiring legislation targets need to be adhered to. Thus, the presence of individuals with impairments need to be go beyond the Paralympian performances within the sports facilities, and become mainstream, for disability to be accepted and respected as an everyday difference.

The accessibility changes implemented so far offers the groundwork for optimism, for change and for inclusion. No doubt, measurable changes are also dependent on standards, legislation, resources, and accountability. Knowing that the promises of accessibility generated from the *Accessibility Guidelines* are also accompanied by another strategic document entitled *Tokyo 2020 Action and Legacy Plan* offers optimism for change. Additionally, this companion document confirms the accountability process. Key stakeholders including the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, the Government of Japan, Economic organizations, and the Japan Olympic Committee and Japan Paralympic Committee will be reporting on additional progress to advance accessibility as an action and legacy following the Tokyo 2020 Games

With all these actions in place, awareness and knowledge of accessibility is going to be at an all-time high to provide two mega-sports events that are characterized as barrier-free and accessible for all to enjoy and to remember as staff, volunteers, visitors and stakeholders. More importantly, accessibility as a planned legacy of the Tokyo 2020 games can ultimately improve the lives of individuals with impairments as they live, work and thrive in Japan, and play a critical role in transforming a society to realize the operating principle of “unity in diversity.”

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