

Special Olympics opens doors of inclusion in Ntungamo District

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

KAMPALA. Children with disabilities in Ntungamo District are getting new opportunities to participate in sports thanks to Special Olympics Uganda, which recently carried out athlete screenings at Rwera Mixed Primary School Unit of the Deaf. Competing in sports at your highest potential requires more than just hard work and determination. It also requires a healthy lifestyle away from the practice field, as well as reliable access to healthcare. As the world's largest sports organization for people with intellectual disabilities, Special Olympics recognises this need. Through its work, Special Olympics advances inclusion in health care, wellness and health systems.

One key mechanism for improving the health of Special Olympics athletes is the Special Olympics Healthy Athletes initiative, first started in 1997. Through free health screenings, it keeps athletes up to date on components of living a healthy lifestyle, and provides a welcoming, fun and educational environment.

"Health screenings help identify opportunities and challenges that impact athlete performance in sports competitions. Too often, health issues are mistakenly being directly attributed to the person's diagnosis of intellectual disability," said Bashir Ssekandi, National Clinical Director of Fun-Fitness. The Ntungamo Sub-Program, introduced last year, identifies persons with intellectual disabilities and trains coaches. Healthy Athletes screenings at Rwera included eye and dental checks as well as fitness assessments.

"These tests also allow us to design fitness programs that help athletes excel in their chosen sports," Ssekandi said.

Big opportunity

The program at Rwera included flexibility, balance and strength assessments. These tests help identify which sports a child is best suited for, footballers benefit from hip flexibility, volleyball players from shoulder mobility and swimmers from overall range of motion.

According to Genevieve Bamwidhukire, National Director of Special Olympics Uganda, the screenings are part of the Healthy Athletes program, which provides free health checks and education in a fun and welcoming environment, while also helping recruit athletes for Special Olympics programs. Sister Josephine Owomukama, in-charge of the Unit for the Deaf, said the facility, home to over 150 children with various disabilities, faces challenges such as limited staffing, nine teachers and three private teachers for a large student body, and high operational costs.

"Education gives these children hope and teaches them to live happily despite their disabilities. The health screening is crucial because it allows us to understand each child's medical needs, which in turn supports their participation in sports," she said. Special Olympics uses sports as a tool to promote inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities, helping them develop confidence, social skills and physical fitness through sporting disciplines.