

# PROBLEMATIZING THE “POWER OF SPORT”

A semi-systematic literature review on the capacity of sport to overcome the migrant’s social exclusion in critical areas

## Executive Summary



SIMCAS - Social Inclusion Methodology in Critical Area via Sport Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020 - Collaborative Partnerships in the field of Sport (AGREEMENT n° 612967-EPP-1-2019-1-IT-SPO-SCP)  
**Output No. 1 – Report on the Bibliographic Review**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

The report on the literature review is **SIMCAS' first research output**; it is a preliminary exploration of discussion regarding the role of sport in the social inclusion of ethnic minorities – migrants and refugees. The report focuses on the main issues about the subject that scholars have been debating in the last years. In particular, the academic community has been concerned with identifying and determining the effects of sport on social integration, socialization, acculturation, the overcoming of structural disadvantage, and the improvement of people's well-being. Sport, and access to leisure and cultural activities in general, remains a relevant policy goal of Western democracies and is a mirror of a society's inclusiveness and attention for its citizens' non-material needs.

### Main results

While the psychological effects of sport are widely researched and supportive of the hypothesis of a positive impact of these practices on individual's well-being and health, the social implications of sport are still undergoing a debate and lack a more defined theoretical framework. The core of the discussion is whether sport can mitigate social inequalities and social marginality. The complexity of the task at hand – determining the relation between a set of practices and the micro and macro changes it contributes to – is reflected in scholars' conflicting opinions.

There is evidence of sport contributing to feelings of **belonging**, to bonding and bridging **social capital**, and to migrants' **acculturation**. However, evidence about these benefits is ambiguous, with some other researchers finding the opposite, as well as susceptible to different methodological approaches (if not anecdotal) and usually not framed within a theoretical framework. Nevertheless, sport, as a cultural practice, can become a **habitus** and thus contribute to a persona's character development. Moreover, it has been reported how participants to sport activities develop a sense of **connectedness** with other players which might later translate into a feeling of belonging to a community or a place.

However, the most evident contribution of sport is in **overcoming isolation** and in providing a context where **meaningful bonds** with other people can be shaped. Sport indeed has the potential to encourage individuals' participation to a meaningful and active social life by providing a *locus* where to interact with people from diverse social contexts. However, some argue that the inter-cultural connections that might be vehiculated with sport activities are often limited to such instances and do not spill over to other life domains. Moreover, the precarity and short life span of many social programs does hinder these dynamics.

Another important argument is related to sport's capability to be a means for the **rebuilding** of **social networks** disrupted by migration, to bring people with similar origins together. It is noticed that a solid national or ethnic community can be a pre-requisite for later interconnections with other communities and the whole society. On top of that, there is the possibility of developing ties with grassroots organizations and voluntary associations, which might act as intermediaries between foreign people and other society's institutions.

Physical and leisure activities, being spheres of life partially detached from mundanity, also offer a place where there is potential for both the re-enactment of **migrant-specific cultural capitals** and the establishment of new, integrative, forms of culture originating from the **interaction** between autochthonous and foreign **cultures**. At the same time, sport can be a place of acculturation, where the acquisition of traits from the host culture is facilitated, a place of **dialogue** between cultures, or a place for the **reproduction** of a waning heritage. Concerning the latter possibility, sport can become a privileged field where to show an otherwise-hidden cultural identity, or to valorize an aspect of one's culture.

There are of course some **critical issues**. For instance, refugees' most pressing concerns are often related to the material dimensions, discussed in the literature in terms of 'markers': affordable housing, access to education, especially for their children, employment and the possibility of economic independence. While a person's wellness is a necessary condition to a wider and more active civic participation and socio-economic inclusion, cultural and sport activities can be seen as **secondary priorities**. On top of that, sport as a cultural practice can contribute to reinstate impermeable ethnic borders or conflictual inter-group dynamics.

The last topic that has been considered is the **role of professionals**. An important contribution is often attributed to reflexive coaching styles and specific attitudes to be valued when coordinating sport activities in ethnically diverse contexts. Since sport has to be considered here as a means to social inclusion, a **motivational climate** has to be preferred to a competitive climate; the focus will be on individual skills development and participants have to be encouraged to take themselves as a point of reference to compare their performances over time. Participants' **empowerment** is often discussed as the ideal outcome of these activities, as well as an increased sociability, engagement, and self-esteem. To do so, the coach must not only be aware of the dynamics of the group (passive role) but must also be able to put in motion positive group processes (active role). A specific attention must be dedicated to create a **supportive environment** and to the reception of participants' ways of living and thinking. In some other cases, **charisma** will be particularly successful, as it has been shown when working with people in prisons or marginal youth. In the end, the role of professionals in the field of sport for social inclusion is a complex one. It requires a self-reflective attitude as well as elements of psychology and pedagogy, and the ability to mediate conflicts and encourage engagement.