

DOING SUCH A HARD JOB

The Making of Migrant and Refugees Integration through
Sport in Six European Countries

Executive Summary



SIMCAS - Social Inclusion Methodology in Critical Area via
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The report is SIMCAS' second research output and it has been preceded by a review of the scientific literature concerning the role of sport in the social inclusion of ethnic minorities. The report focuses on the main issues that practitioners and scholars¹ dealing with these practices are facing in six European countries. Those issues are the host society's socio-economic and policy contexts; the impact of sport practices on integration and on the improvement of living conditions; and the role of coaches and professionals.

Summary

Migrations have come to be a very divisive topic within the European Union in the last years, both within and between member states. The intertwining of economic crises and humanitarian emergencies has made it very problematic to integrate newcomers in Europe, due also to the spread of feelings of hostility in middle and popular classes, caused by the worsening of economic conditions and uncertainty about the future. In such a polarized opinion climate, growing consensus has been registered by neo-populist or sovereigntist parties in several EU countries. We cannot ignore this context while analysing the function that sport can play in migrants' integration in host societies.

A first way in which the humanitarian crisis impacts on the work on the ground with migrants and refugees concerns the socio-psychological dimension of integration. Those who work in this sector are well aware that people fleeing war or other dramatic events undergo slow periods of readjustment before they can get comfortable with the host society, coping with post-traumatic distress. Overcoming disorientation (and sometimes demotivation) is an integral part of inclusion programs, even of those that are based on sport.

The second effect of the present migratory system is an element that inevitably calls into question sport grass organizations. Briefly speaking, in a frightened and insecure society, where migrations tends to cause forms of closure and intolerance fuelled by neo-populist and sovereign parties, it is important to choose carefully with whom one cooperates to ensure that integration really goes ahead. In a historical period that is anything but favourable to multiculturalism, it is necessary to invest energy in getting in contact with changemakers truly engaged in supporting refugees and migrant, in order to promote their integration in society.

¹ They are: **1. Nicola Porro**, Retired Professor of Sociology at the University of Cassino, Italy. **2. Tina Nobis**, Professor in Sport, Integration and Migration at the Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany. **3. Attilio Lombardo**, Retired Professor in various university faculties of sports sciences, Italy. **4. Will Orben**, Head of Education Program on behalf of FC Nordsjælland, Denmark. **5. Emily V. Ronek**, International partnership manager in GAME Ngo, Denmark. **6. Alex Canals**, Program Coordinator of Barça Foundation in Greece. **7. Thomas Farines**, Former Educator and Consultant of Terre des Hommes Hellas. **8. Vasilis Kalyvas**, Head of Educational Programs of Hellenic Paralympic Committee, Greece. **9. Mohammed EL Ouahhabi**, Sport-Integrations-Coach, Berlin Sport Council, Germany. **10. Mariangela Perito**, Psychologist and deputy president of Acli in Avellino, Italy. **11. Marco Critelli**, US Acli Sports Trainer in the Ferranti Aporti Juvenile Institute and in the Ivrea Prison, Italy. **12. Sabrina Falcone**, Responsible for the Juridical Pedagogical Area of the Velletri Prison House, Italy. **13. David Ekholm**, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Culture and Society, University of Norrköping, Sweden. **14. Friederike Möller Bhering**, Project manager of BENN, municipal program in Berlin, Germany. **15. Fredi Radojkovic**, Hand Ball Coach and School Teacher in Koper, Capodistria, Slovenia. **16. Waare Sander**, Deputy Director of the Cruyff Foundation, Spain. **17. Raquel Lòpez**, Social Education technician in Welfare Department Regional Council PE, Spain. **18. Esther Busquets**, Welfare and Education Counselor of Banyoles Municipality, Spain.

Setting up a sport for inclusion program is, according to the interviewees, a matter of networking, funding, and sustainability. Organizations act as an intermediate level between decision makers and the local civic society, whose interests might be unknown to the administrators, or, in other cases, a top-down approach is pursued, and organizations would first cooperate with institutional actors to later involve the community. Public institutions are a key to successful programs, but the establishment of lasting connections requires expertise and time. Especially concerning funding, it is often required a professional attitude toward accountability and communication. Because of those elements, the project team is especially relevant in ensuring a controlled and adequate development of the activities, in providing flexibility and capacity to adapt to new situations, and in improving the possibility of receiving funding and institutional support. The coach is called to play a fundamental and very demanding role when working in local communities, trying to include migrants through sport activities. Coping with various kind of barriers (economic, social, and cultural) within these borderline contexts (disadvantaged neighbourhoods , refugee camps, prisons) coaching becomes a very challenging task.

Experts have identified several features that can make sports coaching with migrants effective: empathy, social sensitivity, listening, the ability to set boundaries to protect participants and coaches themselves, the capacity to intervene at the right time in group dynamics and interpersonal relationship, knowing how to initiate and develop an intercultural dialogue, manage group dynamics and so forth. In this sense, before being a trainer capable of transferring technical notions on sport, this professional figure (not always paid adequately, sometimes performed on a voluntary basis) must be able to interpret the social and educational needs of people involved in inclusive programs.

The interviews also provided insights on common issues. For instance, sport's potential importance for people in critical areas and, in general, for those in deprived contexts, can be overwritten by other, most pressing, issues. Moreover, it has been noted how demotivation toward sport activities is frequent and it is related to emotionally and psychological vulnerability that migration necessarily brings forth in people's lives. Some interviewees also discussed about some of the hardships that usually arise on the field, such, for instance, participants' conflicting customs and habits, or professionals-participants misunderstandings and cultural distance.

The main challenges thus concern the possibility of developing long-term projects that are sustainable and able to adapt to the many, often peculiar, circumstances. First, or southern Europe countries, as well as second destination countries like Germany and northern Europe, have been conciliating the tension toward restrictive migration policies and attempts at integrating migrants into the economic and civic life. In such political climate sport for integration initiatives often have to deal with scarcity of funds, lack of interest of potential participants, and the burden of a delicate area of intervention.

Conclusions

The capacity of sport in building social networks and contributing to social inclusion is highly susceptible to the social environments the practice takes place in. While it can be a valuable activity in some particularly restrictive and socially deprived contexts such as prisons, sport can become a secondary concern for people – such as refugees and recently-arrived migrants – whose main issues are employment and essential living conditions, or whom participation is hindered by precarious health conditions.

The effects of sport on social cohesion and inclusion are thus not immediately measurable since they pertain, in the first place, to participants' psychological state. In many contexts sport has the indirect effect of contributing to individuals' general well-being and motivation, which are necessary conditions for increasing one's participation to the community and access more and different opportunities of integration. Nevertheless, sport can also have immediate effects and be successfully employed as an emergency measure in critical situations.

In short, sport practices can play an important role as social platforms but must necessarily be embedded into a welfare system that systematically pursue the social integration of minorities and marginal groups. This means that sport's role is, most evidently, that of enhancing and widening the scope and reach of those core policies aiming at structural integration – access to housing, employment, education, culture, healthcare. The impact of sport on social inclusion will likely remain volatile and marginal in a society where new citizens are deprived of equal opportunities to freely determine their life courses. Sport, and cultural activities in general, as meaning-making practices where the participants are asked to freely express themselves, cannot coexist with socio-economic, spatial, and civic segregation, conditions that clearly cannot be addressed by these practices alone.