SIMCAS
Sport Beyond Borders
NEWSLETTER

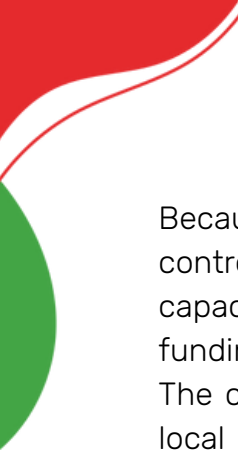*Report on stakeholder interview*

DOING SUCH A HARD JOB
The Making of Migrant and Refugees Integration Through Sportin Six European Countries

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

The report is SIMCAS' second research output and it focuses on the main issues that practitioners and scholars dealing with these practices are facing in six European countries. Very briefly, these topics 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.

Main Findings

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 civil 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.

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.