



SPORTS FOR REFUGEES

**Challenges for instructors
and their support needs**

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***“You help refugees to overcome the problems
they have passed and give them new horizons.”***

*(cycling coach with a migration background
working in Greek refugee camps)*

INTRODUCTION

Which kind of support do sports instructors need, if they offer sports for refugee children, adolescents and adults in sports clubs, youth facilities, schools, neighbourhood centres, etc.? What motivates them to engage? Which problems, difficulties and challenges do they face? Which strategies can they recommend and which attitudes and practices do they consider important in working with refugees? In order to explore these issues, nine focus groups were created in eight countries and within this context, approximately 70 representatives of sports associations, clubs and initiatives, refugee homes and initiatives, migrant organizations and further NGOs were interviewed on the challenges associated with working with refugees. Focus groups were surveyed in Austria (Vienna), Finland (Helsinki), Germany (Berlin), Greece (Athens), Hungary (Budapest), Ireland (Sligo and Mayo), Italy (Rome) and Portugal (Lisbon).

The following summary presents selected key results from the focus group survey. The findings from the different countries show many similarities; it is, above all, with respect to the challenges that they are presented as pertaining to particular focus groups, whereas the support needs and the recommendations refer to all, since they are based on general conclusions. In the following, “sports instructors” is used as a superordinate term comprising not only licensed coaches and training supervisors, but also special needs teachers, further specialized staff and volunteers who run training sessions.



MOTIVATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Focus group participants engage to help refugees settle in and become part of the new society, to facilitate their inclusion via their integration in a sports team or sports club. The interviewees are sports enthusiasts and well aware of the positive impact that playing sports can have on a person's physical and mental development; they want to share these experiences with others.

Interviewees state that they are convinced that sports has the potential to mobilize and inspire people, to impart values such as fairness and respect and to build bridges among people of different origin (Finland). Some interviewees have a migration background themselves and relate that playing sports and the integration in a sports club helped them gain new perspectives, more self-confidence and new contacts (Hungary).



CHALLENGES

Language barriers

Sports instructors are unfamiliar with the situation of having to work with groups who do not understand their native language. They tend to speak too fast and to give explanations that are too long and too complicated, instead of expressing themselves non-verbally, by demonstrating or visualizing what they want (Ireland). There is a general lack of methods when it comes to guiding people through exercises without using too many words. Often, existing training programmes prove too difficult to understand for people with limited language skills (Austria).

Language barriers also have to be overcome beyond training sessions, during joint social activities, for instance. They often result in a situation in which instructors have more contact with those who already have a better command of the language – which can have a negative impact on team dynamics (Austria).

Lack of contact and access to homes

Focus group participants report that reaching refugees and establishing stable groups or teams can be challenging. One of the reasons given is that the cooperation with the refugee homes is difficult to begin with, since successful



cooperation often depends on the commitment of an individual contact person within a home, with whom *personal* contact is maintained (Austria, Germany). There is a lack of communication between refugee camps on the periphery and those who provide sporting opportunities in town centres; as a result, staff in the camps know very little about existing opportunities for refugees to play sports (Greece). In some countries, training sessions can be offered on the premises of the collective centres themselves, whereas in others, most refugee homes lack the necessary infrastructure (Italy).

Reaching women and girls

Both refugee and sports initiatives and sports clubs report that they encounter more difficulties when it comes to reaching women and girls (as opposed to males). On the one side, this is due to male-dominated structures, for instance in football, many clubs do not even maintain a female team and there is a pronounced lack of female instructors (Ireland). On the other side, refugee women and girls hardly find any role-models in sports in their countries of origin, in some of which sports is not normally supposed to be part of their lives; as a consequence, they have made no or hardly any experiences in this area and clubs or initiatives have to contact them actively (Austria, Germany). However, it also happens that refugee homes reject the idea of offering football trial sessions for girls, presupposing that girls would not be interested in football anyway – which does not reflect reality (Germany). Sporting activities targeting both sexes can be problematic, because women (and to a lesser extent, girls) will not accept them (Germany). Women who travelled alone have often been exposed to sexual abuse and violence during their flight; as a result, they are unwilling to play sports in the evening, since they are no longer prepared to leave homes after dark – which collides with the schedules of volunteer initiatives, which offer most of their activities in the evening (Italy).

The legal situation of refugees

Sports instructors lack a sound knowledge on the legal situation of refugees, including information on the different stages of asylum procedures, restrictions on their freedom of movement and insurance and liability issues. The legal situation of refugees has certain implications for the organization of sporting activities, for instance, if they lose contact with the sports club due to repeated changes of accommodation (Germany), if they are unable to participate in away games or training camps in different locations, because the supervisory duties



concerning unaccompanied minor refugees have to be fulfilled (Austria), if it takes a long time to obtain “player passports” for non-EU players (Germany) or if players are not granted permission to play (Italy).

Anti-migration sentiment

This aspect was brought up by the Hungarian focus group: In Hungary, anti-migration sentiment has spread to an extent that sports clubs are afraid to accept refugees or migrants as members, because they fear losing native players if they do. Many state-run schools and municipalities avoid being associated with the topics of refugees and migration, since they fear they might lose government funding. As a result, migrant sports clubs and initiatives face difficulties when it comes to renting a gym.

The refugees’ circumstances

As a rule, refugees encounter themselves in an unstable situation. During asylum procedures, their residency status is still undetermined. Migrants who have no legal right to stay and no chance to be recognized as refugees or asylum seekers face an even more precarious situation. In some countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal), many refugees are in transit, planning to continue their journey to Northern Europe. These aspects can impede a continuous participation in sporting activities: Sessions are not attended on a regular basis and/or on schedule, because refugees are busy obtaining documents, because they have not yet found a daily routine in the new country or because playing sports is simply not a priority, considering the many problems that have to be solved (including housing, work, language acquisition, residence permits, etc.). This can result in disappointment on the part of the sports instructors, who might feel that their offer is underappreciated.

The refugees’ circumstances have a serious impact on their participation, which contradicts common sports club traditions, since these are based on the assumption that the members’ leisure time is largely spent at the club, an aspect that is considered highly important (Germany). In addition, the fear of being deported may block performance in sports as much as in other areas (Finland).

Lack of resources, transport and equipment

Refugees have poor financial means; consequently, sports clubs and initiatives have to provide the necessary garments and footwear, which can be a challenge, if they lack resources or good relationships with sponsors. Where the means



for public transport are lacking or transport options do not exist, children and adolescents have to walk long distances in all weathers in order to participate in training sessions or competition games, if the club does not manage to organize transport with the help of volunteers (Ireland). Distances can be a hurdle that completely prevents people from participating. A limited number of opportunities and volunteer sports instructors can also result in a situation in which some sports enthusiasts may have to be excluded, since demand exceeds supply. Both initiatives and sports clubs report such experiences (Austria, Germany).

Different experiences and expectations

Initiatives offering sporting activities for refugees observe that they have to deal with different motivations and expectations on the part of the participants: Some regard playing sports as a leisure activity, whereas others had already reached a competitive level, want to further improve their performance and establish themselves in professional sports. The latter, however, is not normally an option volunteer initiatives and non-professional instructors can offer (Austria). Sometimes, they are confronted with unrealistic expectations regarding a career in professional sports that do not match the opportunities existing in the host country (Austria, Italy).

Representatives of sports clubs mention the challenge of improving the skills of beginners up to a level that allows them to keep up with experienced athletes or players (Ireland). Ultimately, the integration of refugees into sports clubs can also fail, because the latter expect a certain level of performance before they will allow refugees to join regular teams; on the other hand, they tend to offer very few leisure level activities that are open to all, since they either lack the corresponding volunteer capacities, gyms or playing fields (Austria, Germany), or focus on performance and competition rather than activities aimed at social inclusion.

Doubts regarding the positive impact of sports

Focus group participants working with children report that sports has little significance for some parents, which is why it can be difficult to convince them of the fact that playing sports would be good for their children. In these cases, the parents will either refuse consent or the lack of support on the part of their family will demotivate the children so that they do not attend sports sessions (Greece). Parents from some ethnic communities tend to regard sports as a waste of time and prefer to see their children spend more time



on their school education (Italy). The cultural notion of sports as a means of personal development and as an empowerment strategy is something that can be difficult to convey to refugee families (Italy).

Respect for uniform rules

Interviewees state that it can be a challenge to reach a point at which everyone is willing to accept and comply with a common set of rules. This applies to matters of discipline and the acceptance of referee decisions, but also to the rules of the game themselves, if a different version is used in the home country (Italy). Football instructors report that children socialized in street football tend to have a rather individualistic approach to the game and have to start from scratch when it comes to playing as a team member (Ireland).

Traumatic experiences of refugees

Physical pain and certain forms of social behaviour can indicate traumatic experiences; however, most instructors lack the knowledge to recognize and understand these signs. Moreover, traumatic experiences have to be distinguished from other mental disorders, such as depression, which is too much to ask of a normal sports instructor. Water sports in particular can evoke memories of traumatic experiences (Germany, Italy). Specific training situations can act as a trigger; above all, this concerns activities that release tension and involve increased physical contact with one's own body, such as yoga (Italy), not so much team sports. However, the term "trauma" is used somewhat excessively; on the part of the instructors, it can evoke fears of aggression and prejudices regarding refugee behaviour, since the actions of refugees are usually interpreted against this backdrop (Germany).



SPORTS INSTRUCTORS' SUPPORT NEEDS

Knowledge and Information

- In order to gain a better understanding of their circumstances, sports instructors need more information regarding **refugees' every-day lives**. They also need a sound knowledge of the different stages of **asylum procedures** and the corresponding regulations. This can help them reflect on and adapt their own expectations, e.g. regarding regular attendance.
- A deepened knowledge on **cultural and religious characteristics**, including dietary habits, Ramadan, social norms regarding physical contact, physicality and shame. Information about the countries the refugees come from, can help instructors adapt to the group's needs.
- It is crucial that sports instructors are able to recognize **signs of traumatization** and to react appropriately in acute situations, e.g. in dealing with aggression, panic or cases of extreme reticence. It is essential that they do not exceed their authority: Sports instructors are not trauma experts and do not have to become trauma experts. What they need to know is which experts to contact in order to obtain professional assistance.



Brochures, guidelines and tools

- Sports associations should provide information on **legal matters**, including insurance and liability issues, restrictions concerning the freedom of movement of refugees and the application for playing permits; this should take the form of a well-organized brochure that explains matters in a clear, comprehensible style.
- An **Internet platform** listing refugee organizations and initiatives involved in sports could be useful to improve the flow of information and provide refugees and volunteers with details concerning the offered activities, performance levels, training hours and contact persons.
- When it comes to **dealing with racism and discrimination**, instructors should be provided with guidelines outlining the club's and/or the association's coordinated approach towards such incidents, enabling them to handle corresponding situations quickly, appropriately and in accordance with the club's and/or the association's stance.

Methodological expertise and training manuals

- In order to overcome language barriers, sports instructors need a range of methods enabling them to **explain sports non-verbally** and to combine language acquisition and exercise, e.g. by including language games or by repeating key words or sentences.
- Sports instructors need assistance regarding the **development of training goals** and methodical exercises that go beyond sporting skills, e.g. by enhancing self-confidence, fostering personal development and promoting social inclusion. **Team building measures** are essential when it comes to forming a new group and fostering team development. Before learning these new methods, instructors should reflect on the significance and impact of sports beyond performance and competition.
- In order to adapt to the fluctuation within their groups and to the participants' tendency of arriving late, instructors need methodological expertise as well: They could, for instance, include training units tailored to **different performance levels** and preliminary games and exercises, allowing participants to **join later** than scheduled.



- Instructors need to be able to **motivate** groups and prevent their dissolution in case some members leave. Moreover, they need **communication skills**, for instance, with a view to addressing parents and explaining the impact sports can have on a person's health and personal development.
- They also need support when it comes to dealing with conflicts within the team (including conflicts based on ethnicity), regarding the use of **conflict resolution strategies** and regarding the issue of how to promote respect for rules and how to react in case of infringement.

Establishing networks and cooperation

- Sports instructors need a network of contacts in social organizations, counselling facilities and community initiatives in order to refer refugees with **psychosocial problems or issues pertaining to their residence status** to the appropriate experts.
- Personal **contacts in refugee homes** and further cooperation partners (such as migrant organizations and refugee initiatives) are required in order to obtain access to refugees. Contact persons within the ethnic communities who can serve as **translators and cultural mediators** also provide crucial support.
- In order to reach **women and girls**, special networks are required: It is useful to look beyond refugee homes when it comes to finding people who support the cause of offering sports for female refugees, e.g. at “women's cafés”, venues for mothers, girls' clubs and in language courses targeting women in particular.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORKING WITH REFUGEES

Attitudes and behaviour

- **Establishing trust and a personal relationship:** Apart from “official” contacts with the authorities, sports instructors are often the first native people refugees become acquainted with; this is one of the reasons why establishing a personal relationship is so important.
- **Developing an understanding for the difficult situation of refugees and consequently, realistic expectations:** Open-mindedness and the necessary knowledge help to see matters from a different point of view, i.e. through the eyes of refugees – which in turn makes it easier to reflect on one’s own expectations, regarding, for instance, regular training attendance.
- **Remaining patient and persistent:** Sports instructors tend to feel frustrated, if they engage in volunteer work, but do not succeed in establishing stable groups. However, it takes time and requires a great deal of commitment on the part of the volunteers to reach refugees and build teams.



- **Being prepared to help, but not weighed down by the refugees' problems:** In this respect, it is crucial to recognize one's own limits, regarding the psychological burden as well as regarding one's competences, and to refer refugees to the appropriate experts, if necessary.
- **Facilitating empowerment:** Instead of sympathizing with refugees over their fate and organizing everything for them, it is essential to foster individual initiative and commitment among them and to encourage them to assume responsibility as early as possible.
- **Clarifying what the project can achieve and what it cannot:** Within this context, the structures of organized sports in the host country should be outlined, the limitations of the sports offer should be described and a realistic picture of the prerequisites for entering professional sports should be drawn.
- **Adapting to different performance levels:** Within the context of the sports club, it is particularly important to give all players or athletes a chance, even if it can be to the detriment of sporting success in competitions.
- **Developing intercultural competence:** This comprises open-mindedness regarding different practices and perspectives just as much as confronting one's own stereotypical ideas and prejudices.
- **Being aware of the refugees' circumstances, while insisting on compliance with key rules:** Playing sports (and especially team sports) will only work, if certain rules and values, such as fairness and respect for the opponent, can be taken for granted. While one may understand the difficult situation the refugees face, in sports, everyone must respect the key rules; special treatment is inappropriate and detrimental.
- **Being cautious with regard to personal questions:** Questions concerning the reasons why someone fled their country or their personal situation can be unpleasant or straining for refugees, also because they might suspect that information could be passed on to the authorities; therefore, restraint is necessary.



Reaching refugees (and female refugees in particular)

- **Selecting female instructors and making use of female role models:** It is recommendable to select female instructors and to make reference to female role models who are successful in the discipline in question, since women and girls with no or little experience in sports often lack such female idols. Within this context, digital media showing women as active athletes or players (e.g. videos of female Syrian rugby team) can be used.
- **Offering parallel sessions for women and children:** If sporting activities for women and children are scheduled to take place at the same time, women can bring their children and still concentrate on playing sports. Organizing child care can be a useful alternative.
- **Accepting dress codes based on religious rules:** In the sports club, it is important to accept the women's ideas as to what constitutes appropriate sports dress and to fathom in how far the sport's requirements can be reconciled with these dress codes.
- **Reaching parents via their children:** Children who are already participating in sporting activities make it much easier to reach their parents and to arouse their interest in the sports club. However, this means that opportunities to reach out to parents (including parent-instructor meetings, conversations at pick-up time, club festivities) have to be created in the first place.
- **Using digital communication channels:** Very positive experiences have been made with Facebook and WhatsApp groups. Sending a reminder before each training session can be useful. If instructors change, new staff can be introduced by way of a picture, which results in a stronger personal connection and a stronger sense of commitment.
- **Organizing transport or an escort, if required or requested:** This concerns mostly women who are otherwise unwilling to leave homes in the evening, but also children or unaccompanied minors, in whose cases certain supervisory duties have to be fulfilled.
- **Establishing contacts in refugee homes and wider support networks:** Very positive experiences have been made with personal contacts in refugee homes – both among the staff and among the refugees – who promote sporting activities. In order to reach women and girls, contact persons working with these groups (organizing “women's breakfasts” or girls' clubs, for instance) are particularly significant.



Which shape should the sporting activities take?

- **Refugees' wishes and ideas should be taken into account when it comes to developing new offers:** Before any activities are planned, the target group should be consulted (at the local refugee home, for instance) as to which type of training would interest the refugees and which experiences they bring along regarding the discipline in question.
- **Rather than performance-oriented training, sports clubs should offer leisure level activities and sessions that are open to all:** Currently, it is initiatives rather than sports clubs that provide this type of activity. However, such offers can facilitate entry, especially for children, adolescents and adults with little experience, and serve as a springboard to join regular club teams.
- **Mixing refugees and locals:** Refugees have an interest in establishing contact with native inhabitants of the host country; therefore, mixed groups can be useful. Activities that are open to all are particularly recommendable with a view to encouraging both groups to mingle (during hiking trips for families, for instance).



- **Avoiding frequent changes of instructor:** Since instructors are key contacts, with whom, ideally, a relationship of trust is established, it is advisable to avoid frequent changes of instructor. This can, however, be a challenge, if volunteer work is concerned.

Communication and intercultural exchange

- **Learning a few words of the language of the others:** This helps when it comes to building personal relationships and creating a relaxed training atmosphere. It also demonstrates an interest in understanding one's counterpart and their circumstances.
- **Addressing each participant at least once during each session:** This strategy has proven useful with a view to establishing personal relationships with all members of a group, irrespective of their language skills. In working with children, it is particularly important to make them feel that the instructor takes an interest in them and that their participation matters.
- **Combining sports and further social activities:** This is important to foster team spirit and to create opportunities for conversations and exchange. Particularly useful activities include the joint preparation of meals, for instance, within the context of cooking projects, and the organization of festivities.
- **Working with translators and cultural mediators:** Volunteers or qualified professionals from different ethnic communities can help provide information on sporting activities and help overcome intercultural misunderstandings and difficulties in communication.
- **Training refugees to become instructors:** With the help of suitable training programmes, refugees can become instructors themselves and assume greater responsibility as volunteers within the club, e.g. as assistant coaches. This also boosts their self-esteem and facilitates a change of perception on the part of native club members, as they see refugees play an active part.
- **Offering introductions to the rules and values of the sport, of the club, of the sports system and of the host society in general:** This could take the form of conversations held with club officials as a part of the admission process; alternatively, the club could organize workshops in cooperation with external partners.

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