



# Sport and Refugees: **Learning Lessons and Practical Takeaways** from Four European Cases of **Good Practice**

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For detailed information on the SPIN network, visit [www.sportinclusion.net](http://www.sportinclusion.net)

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# 1. Introduction

This Good Practice Guide was developed within the framework of the SPIN Refugees project “Sport Inclusion of Refugees across Europe”. The SPIN Refugees project ran between January 2020 and December 2022 and was co-funded through the European Commission Call 2019 - Sport as a tool for the integration and social inclusion of refugees. The project was initiated by the Sport Inclusion Network (SPIN) and carried out through transnational co-operation between nine European partner organizations:

- ◆ Lead organization: The Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC)
- ◆ Implementing partners: FAI – Football Association of Ireland, UISP – Unione Italiana Sport Per Tutti, SJPF – Portuguese Players Union, Huis voor Beweging, Liikukkaa – Sport for all, Mahatma Gandhi Human Rights Organization, ISCA – International Sport and Culture Association, Camino, a practice-oriented research institution from Germany.

While sports can be a viable tool to include newly arrived migrants and refugees into society, grassroots organizations often lack experience in implementing well-grounded and socially responsible integrative programs for this target group. Hence, the SPIN Refugees project seeks to promote the social inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in sports through training, education, and capacity building of local sports stakeholders. In addition, the project also aims to contribute to the generation of evidence-based knowledge regarding effective methods and approaches for inclusion to direct future action.

To realize this endeavor, a comprehensive mapping study was carried out by Camino, which reviews a total of seventeen evaluations of sports programs for refugees and provides a comparative overview of their impact and outcome (Schwartzkopff, 2022). Moreover, several study reports and good practice guides have emerged from past SPIN projects that identify the necessary preconditions for facilitating access to sports and formulate recommendations for effectively implementing socially responsible programs (Schwenzer, 2016; Schwenzer, 2017; Schwenzer, 2020). These recommendations for action were not only developed from the viewpoint of the implementing organizations, but also from the perspective of various participants. For example, collaborative action research has been published which, in cooperation with female migrant and refugee participants and researchers, illustrates various shortcomings in sports and reflects the wishes and suggestions for improvement from

the participants’ perspective (Hohmann et al., 2021). Another central contribution is Camino’s “Guide to Good Practice in Europe” (Schwenzer, 2018), which brings forward the SPIN Quality Criteria for Good Practice developed within a complex evaluation process between the representative SPIN organizations. These empirically grounded quality criteria have also been transformed into an online self-assessment tool for grassroots organizations and sports clubs to evaluate the quality of their program and check areas for improvement. While these previous contributions provide general recommendations and guidelines for future action, the present study aims to look at the hands-on learning experiences of exemplary cases of good practice in further detail.

## Purpose of this Guide

This Good Practice Guide features four European sports projects from the Netherlands, Austria, Italy, and Finland that employ unique strategies of inclusion. It takes a closer look at the implementation difficulties the organizations have faced and the solutions they found to counteract them. As several publications already point out entry barriers and obstacles for refugee sports projects (Schwenzer, 2018; Schwartzkopff, 2022), this work focuses on specific practical problems that arise throughout the realization of a project, and the creative answers and strategies developed to solve them. The study draws on interviews with representatives of each selected case and will work out the practical takeaways and learning lessons they have acquired over time. These experiential learning lessons range from enhancing students’ active participation by giving incentives to micro issues, such as offering on-site medical services for refugees to facilitate their participation opportunities. By sharing the hands-on experiences of four successful projects, this work ultimately seeks to guide other grassroots organizations and local sports clubs in solving practical difficulties that may arise in the execution of integrative sports projects for refugees and asylum seekers.

## Case Selection and Thematic Focus

Following internal recommendations by representatives of the SPIN organizations, four projects were selected as examples of good practice that specifically comply with the quality standard determined by the SPIN quality criteria for good practice (see Schwenzer 2018, p. 39-42). These empirically grounded criteria were developed within an interactive evaluation process based on the analysis of different European sports projects, focus group surveys,

and discussions between the cooperating partners. The SPIN criteria consist of eight components, each of which contribute to the overall quality and impact of a project:

- ◆ Project conception and access
- ◆ Cooperation and networking
- ◆ Qualification and training
- ◆ Gender sensitivity
- ◆ Intercultural awareness, anti-racism, and anti-discrimination
- ◆ Inclusion and active participation
- ◆ Communication and transparency
- ◆ Participation over performance

Based upon these criteria, four European projects from the SPIN cooperating countries Netherlands, Italy, Finland, and Austria were chosen that serve as examples of good practice in terms of their overall adherence to the quality standards. The selected projects are very diverse, both in terms of the type of sport and conceptualization. As such, each case complies with different areas of the quality criteria to a particularly high degree. The four chosen examples all employ unique approaches to promote the inclusion of their target group and follow either a particularistic strategy directed explicitly at refugees or a holistic approach that seeks to integrate refugees alongside other participants of the same overarching group.

1) Italy. UISP Torino:

#### **Massari Swimming Pool Project**

A weekly, female-only swimming offer for refugees, migrants, and Italian women.

2) Austria. SPIELERPASS:

#### **DAHEIMKICKER** (“Homekickers”)

Football training for people with impairments of all backgrounds, ages, and genders who live in assisted housing facilities.

3) Finland. Monaliiku:

#### **Fit4Life**

A fitness group for migrant and refugee women that promotes physical, emotional, and social well-being through sports and educational offers.

4) The Netherlands. Huis voor Beweging:

#### **Wereldmeiden** (“Worldgirls”)

A buddy project directed at refugee girls and Dutch girls who try different sports together.

All four projects have in common that they are directed at marginalized individuals with particularly high access barriers to sports and recreational activities. In all four cases, the participants are part of a broader group largely underrepresented within sports and faced with scarce participation opportunities. While women are generally underrepresented in sports, there is a substan-

tial lack of well-grounded and socially sensible programs for migrant women, and even more so for female refugees (see Schwenzer 2018). Therefore, three diverse cases were selected that facilitate access and promote participation in sports for different female subgroups.

The **Massari Swimming Pool project** seeks to connect female asylum seekers and refugees with other Italian and migrant women by providing them a safer space to exercise and socialize in.

The program **Fit4Life** promotes the physical and emotional well-being of migrant and refugee women from predominantly Muslim-majority countries through fitness exercise and educational offers.

**Wereldmeiden** is directed at refugee schoolgirls and Dutch girls (mainly students) aiming to strengthen the social exchange between them.

While these three cases target different female audiences, the featured case from Austria is directed at people with impairments of different genders, backgrounds, and ages. Since offers for people with impairments are very few and almost non-existent for migrants and refugees, **DAHEIMKICKER** addresses people with impairments as a whole group and attempts to support their participation in sports.

## Methods

This study draws on qualitative interviewing research. For each case, two interviews were conducted with the project leader/organizer and one of the sports instructors. The interviews were held in English and German. In one project, only one interview was conducted due to language barriers. In this particular case, further exchange happened via written and translated Q&As with the project implementer. The interviews took place over Zoom, lasted around one hour each, and were centered around the learning experiences the interview partners obtained throughout the organization of the program or during the practice itself. Based on a thick description of the interviewing notes, the conversations with the interview partners were evaluated through thematic analysis. The following descriptions of the respective projects are primarily based on the narrative accounts of the interview partners. In addition, further search was conducted on the projects' websites and additional publications featuring the projects.

Because this study seeks to explore implementation-related difficulties and solutions, the interviews were only held with project managers. As this work does not seek to evaluate the impact of a program, participants were not directly included in the empirical data conduction. Even though the participants were not interviewed, they are part of the data insofar as the interviewees talk about a number of problems that arose in the practical implementation,

meaning in the encounter with the participants. As such, the project implementers describe from their own perspective how participants received a program which was decisive to whether and how it had to be modified to better adapt to the participants.

## Outline

In the following, each of the four projects will be presented in two parts. The first half will focus on a detailed description of the projects, their strategy for inclusion, and the structure in which the program is implemented. The second half illustrates the central difficulties the projects were confronted with and describes as neatly as possible how they were resolved. For each project, either one practical example is outlined in detail, or two learning lessons are described more compactly. This is because the projects went through a process of trial and error which cannot be

presented here in its full range. Instead, the focus lies on those lessons learned that other projects and organizations can benefit from the most.

It is also worth noting that the presented projects have been running for different lengths of time and vary in their outreach. For example, one of the projects, DAHEIMKICKER, was implemented only for a few months during the pandemic with a small number of participants. In comparison, the Italian swimming project has been running for twelve years and counts almost two hundred members. While the practical takeaways the projects have obtained vary in character and scope, each project can pass down crucial learning lessons that may guide other grassroots organizations that face similar difficulties. The guide concludes with a summary of the lesson learned and their commonalities.

## 2. Project Descriptions and Learning Lessons

### Project 1: Massari Swimming Pool Project

**Organization: UISP Torino**  
 (“Italian Union of Sport for all”)  
[www.uisp.it/torino2](http://www.uisp.it/torino2)

The Massari Swimming Pool Project was created by UISP Torino and provides weekly swimming courses and water-based sports activities in a swimming pool exclusively reserved for women of all ages and backgrounds. The offer is exclusively for women – besides the participants, the sports instructors and the pool’s staff are all also women.

UISP is a national Italian sports association that advocates for equal access to sports for all Italian residents. The Swimming Pool Initiative was launched in 2011 following the suggestions of a Moroccan woman interested in any sports activity taking place in a female-only environment. Initially, the project intended to cater to the needs of female Muslim migrants and refugees by offering swimming courses in a sports facility screened off from the outside, where the participants could exercise in a safer space away from the public eye. However, shortly after the program’s launch, many Italian women were also compelled by the idea of swimming in a female environment. For more than eleven years, a diverse community of women has been swimming together every Sunday. Italian natives, women from immigrant communities, and newly arrived refugees from kindergarten to senior age participate in the program, which consists of swimming practice and socializing events. From the beginning, Muslim women from North and Sub-Saharan Africa have been strongly represented among the swimmers. However, the group is constantly expanding as many participants bring along their children or invite friends and members of their communities. In addition, new groups of refugees, recently being women from Ukraine, learn about the project through social workers or initiatives. All classes and social events are held in Italian. Whenever a new group of immigrants joins that do not speak Italian or a language that the participants understand, such as Arabic or Farsi, UISP hires a translator for a short period until the participants can understand basic instructions and communicate with each other. Participation is based on a yearly membership fee (around 100 Euro), which is covered entirely by sponsorship for those who cannot afford it. The initiative’s overall aim is to promote opportunities for social participation and inclusion – for migrants and refugees as much as for the native Italian participants. Creating a safer space is the fundamental prerequisite for providing all women access to the swimming practice, as it enables a framework that allows women to exercise and socialize in a protected and familiar environment. The project consists

of swimming practice, scheduled socializing events, and qualification opportunities. Only recently, UISP also started to offer qualification opportunities for young swimmers to become swimming instructors.

Every Sunday of the week, the premises of the local sports center “Massari Centro Polisportivo”, a multipurpose sports facility in Turin, are exclusively open for female participants of all age groups. The participants can join swimming courses for three levels and other water-sports such as aqua fitness and recreational water activities. The swimming pool is completely shielded from the outside. There are no windows through which one could look inside. The changing rooms are away from the entrance so that the legs and feet do not show when changing. In addition, the premises of the Massari center also provide a playing ground for children, meeting areas, workshop rooms, and a vegetable and movement garden. The participants can use the entire facility on Sundays and often stay on the premises for multiple hours with their children and befriended participants. Moreover, UISP also plans regular social activities that take place outside of the pool. The participants go on walks, have communal meals, and visit sports tournaments, such as the traditional UISP race *Vivicità* in Turin. These social events have greatly enhanced the cohesion between them. For example, there is a regular lunch where the women bring their favorite dishes. Because the participants are not only from various countries but also come from different regions, even within Italy, all participants have been interested in tasting and learning about each other’s food customs. Even the Italian participants are eager to present the cuisine of their respective regions to others. While men cannot join any activity that takes place during swimming time, they are welcome in all other events. Many women invite male friends and relatives like sons, brothers, or husbands.

For many participants, the project has become a part of their family routine. In some cases, three generations – grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter – participate in the program. Because a significant number of the participants have been a part of the project since the very beginning, an established social network and long-term friendships have formed between the swimmers and their families. Some women even live together in the same apartment and other young swimmers attend the same school. Over the years, the participants have built a strong community inside and outside the swimming pool. Today, the experienced members are committed to integrating newcomers into the group, guiding them through the program, and in the case of newly arrived refugees and migrants, also helping them to navigate their lives.



One of the swimmers standing next to the pool



Some of the younger swimmers together with adult participants and instructors in front of the Massari sports center

### Building a safer space by forging relationships of trust between participants and instructors

An essential feature of the Swimming Pool Project is providing a protective environment for women of different cultural and religious backgrounds to swim together. Throughout the many years that the project has been running, the implementers have made the experience that the development of mutual trust significantly influences the creation of a safer space. An important lesson learned was that the women's sense of comfort and safety depended not only on the (quality of) interpersonal relationships among the group. Rather, it was also affected by the level of trust the participants developed toward the instructors. It was particularly upon them to convince the participants of the sincerity of their intentions over time.

To give one of many examples, some Muslim women initially felt uncomfortable partaking in a swimming project where most participants wore skin-revealing attire. In addition to not wanting to show their skin to others, the Muslim participants felt unsure if they could trust the instructors' promise that the offer would really be exclusively for women. As a result, many wore leggings and long sleeve shirts under their bathing suits, did not change their clothes in the communal area, and preferred showering at home. In the project's beginning phases, this sometimes led to an uneasy atmosphere within the overall group as some participants felt shy and others were unsure about how to conduct themselves in an unfamiliar situation. While the project implementers could not directly intervene in the women's sense of discomfort, they provided slight modifications that catered to the needs of those who did not want to reveal their skin.

To begin with, the project implementers made individual changing cabins available. They ensured that those cabins would be completely opaque so that the participants could change in comfort without being watched by the others. Further, the swimming instructors permitted the women to leave a couple of minutes before the end of practice so they could shower by themselves. In addition, those participants who wore regular clothes under their swimsuits to cover their bodies were educated about modest options for swim gear and provided with the necessary resources to buy one, if necessary.

Over the years, most participants decided to swim in bathing suits and started to shower comfortably in the communal area. While a variety of factors came together that allowed the women to develop a sense of comfort, one of the contributing aspects was that their instructors took the women's needs and clothing choices seriously. Because the Muslim participants saw that the instructors were committed to building a safer environment for all participants, they began to involve themselves actively not only in practice but also at the social events.

The most crucial factor was that the body autonomy of those participants who wear modest swimwear was respected as much as the choice to reveal one's skin. The instructors communicated clearly with all participants that it is not expected that the women would adapt their clothing choices or shower preferences over time. Instead of expecting the participants to ultimately 'open up' to the idea of wearing only a bathing suit or shower with the others, all swimmers are free to wear whatever they like (as long it is made of appropriate swimming material) and can shower either at the facilities or at home.

Second, the women could see for themselves that the instructors would keep their promise of protecting the women's privacy. Throughout the project's first months, the participants could see for themselves that the instructors prevented men from entering the premises of the facility and that there were no male spectators. Besides keeping male staff and bystanders away from the pool, the participants also saw that the instructors did not take any unwanted pictures and kept the participants' personal data private, for instance, by running all communication over a female-only Facebook group. As such, the instructors actively demonstrated that they would keep their word of protecting the women's privacy and that they felt truly committed to creating a safer environment for them.

Over many months and years, the participants saw that the project instructors did not try to 'trick' them into changing their clothing choices and comfort levels but felt respected in their needs. Although this development took time and patience, the project instructors managed to convince the participants of the sincerity of their intentions. This gradual development of trust has occurred primarily in the project's initial phases. Since many of the Muslim women have been involved in the project for years, when new Muslim participants who have similar doubts about exposing their skin join the group, they most often trust the experience of the more experienced Muslim participants.

#### **Learning lesson:**

While project organizers can create the preconditions for an inclusive and protective environment, a safer space only builds over time. It significantly depends on the development of mutually trustful relationships. However, the participants' comfort and feeling of safety depend not only on the interpersonal relationships among the participants but are significantly affected by the level of trust they build towards the staff and instructors of the project. Particularly in the case of marginalized groups who might fear that their religious and cultural needs are not taken seriously, participants prefer to see whether a program has been designed in their favor. Since it takes time for participants to become convinced, project instructors must continuously demonstrate their intentions' sincerity.

Since this learning lesson can only take place gradually due to the time involved and may be difficult to implement for other organizations, a concrete practice-related learning lesson is described below.

### **Facilitating access by offering on-site medical services and community support**

A central goal of the project is to make swimming accessible to as many participants as possible. The refugee participants, however, have different access requirements than the other women who have lived in Italy for a long time. Because most newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers have very restricted financial resources, the UISP hoped to facilitate their access to the swimming offer by covering the cost of the annual membership fee. However, the project organizers had not foreseen that the mandatory health check initially became an unplanned entry barrier for the refugee participants.

Before participating in the first swimming lesson, interested individuals are required to undergo a comprehensive health check. Participation will be permitted only with such a certificate, which is issued in Italy by a doctor or health center. This requirement is to ensure that the participants do not have any significant health restrictions, such as cardiovascular problems, that could endanger their swimming. Not only could many of the newly arrived women not afford this checkup, which costs about 25 euros, but they also had several additional access barriers that prevented them from taking the physical examination. What was not a problem for most Italian and migrant participants was that the newly arrived women often lacked the information about how to obtain a health certificate or undergo a medical checkup in the first place. Not only did the women experience hurdles in finding their way to the nearest health center, navigating transportation, or communicating with the doctor's office. In addition, some refugees felt anxious about visiting a doctor, and others did not want to be examined by male medical staff.

In search of a solution that would be more compatible with the structural and emotional situation of the refugee women, UISP decided to establish an agreement with a local health center. For several years now, a female doctor has been coming to the Massari Center on Sundays who conducts a complete health checkup on-site at the facility. This examination is not only less expensive for all interested participants (about 15 euros) but is held in a safe, female-only environment. Offering access to a health checkup is also particularly important for refugees because many are being examined medically for the first time. Some women have health problems they were unaware of before or could not afford to get treated in their home country. If a participant needs further treatment, the doctor refers them to a health facility and arranges all necessary procedures. The other participants or UISP staff help the women to make appointments and find a person, perhaps someone from



the group, to go with them to the doctor, guide them, and translate for them.

Besides making the checkup more accessible, offering the medical service right on-site at the sports center has been an essential adaptation to making the refugee participants feel more welcome as the women can feel protected and cared for on the premises of the facility. As such, their first contact with the group is accompanied by the important message that the participants will be in an environment of women who care for and support each other.

**Learning lesson:**

Sometimes ‘minor’ entry requirements such as a health checkup become unexpected hurdles for refu-

gee participants. Apart from their financial restrictions, refugees are faced with several structural and emotional entry barriers that come along with being new in a foreign country and the extraordinary circumstances of experiencing flight. Even a doctor’s visit can present an obstacle that makes it much more challenging to participate in any sports or recreational activity. Therefore, organizations need to think of access not just as a financial restriction but as a matter of emotional safety. A possible solution to promoting better access is to make sure that any additional admission requirements, such as the provision of a health certificate, can be completed during the training time or at the organization’s premises.

## Project 2: DAHEIMKICKER (“Homekickers“)

Organization: SPIELERPASS,  
Daheim im Verein e.V.

[verein.respekt.net/daheimkicker-fussball-zuhause](http://verein.respekt.net/daheimkicker-fussball-zuhause)

DAHEIMKICKER (“Homekickers”) was a sports initiative that provided soccer training for people with impairments on-site at their assisted housing facility during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The project was brought to life by SPIELERPASS, aiming to find a fast solution to the social isolation many residents of assisted homes experienced during the pandemic. SPIELERPASS is a non-profit organization that promotes the inclusion of people with impairments in soccer. In Austria, around 15,000 people with impairments live in fully assisted housing facilities, many of whom had limited access to sports offers even before the pandemic. Adding to this, the security measures and exit restrictions during COVID-19 significantly worsened their participation opportunities in sports and social life. In addition, many residents were regarded as a special risk group and could not leave their homes for multiple weeks and months. To counteract the residents’ social isolation and offer a change of pace in their daily routines, DAHEIMKICKER administered weekly soccer training in the immediate proximity of housing facilities. Since the circumstances of the pandemic could not be foreseen and, therefore, no funding for the project could be applied for in advance, the organizers had to find a funding solution in the shortest possible time. The project was 100% funded through a crowdfunding campaign which raised 7,000 EUR within three weeks. The money raised was used to pay for the training equipment of the participants and the instructors’ compensation. The project’s immediate goal was to improve the social, motoric, and cognitive skills of

people with impairments and promote their health within the framework of the Covid safety regulations. In the long term, the initiative aimed to facilitate the participation of people with impairments in soccer.

The project ran between May 2020 and September 2021 and was implemented in two phases: soccer practice and the subsequent integration of interested participants into local clubs. The participants took soccer lessons for three to four months in the first phase. The training was held in groups of as small as three players who were all residents of the same housing. The participating residents were of different ages, genders, and backgrounds, so the project brought together migrant, refugee, and non-migrant players as well as soccer instructors. In addition, the participants all had different levels of fitness and knowledge of the rules of soccer; some had never played sports, and others were familiar with soccer. While the team was composed of a diverse group of individuals, the initiative’s primary objective was the holistic inclusion of people with impairments into soccer.

The instructors trained each group according to their fitness level and individual needs. One of the project’s significant features was that some coaches were professional athletes from the Austrian national soccer team and the Austrian pro soccer league. These professional athletes were not only the project’s public face but also had a special motivational effect on the participants. In another case, the training was led by a refugee sports instructor who had previously trained people with impairments in other projects of SPIELERPASS. All instructors underwent preliminary preparation before their first training. Since the entire program had to meet the pandemic regulations, a vital feature of the initiative was that the soccer lessons were held right on-site at the housing facilities. Participants had



**Project organizer Nikolas Wachter and participants in backyard of housing facility**

to wear face masks and keep the specified safety distance. Holding the practice sessions right on-site of the housing provided a solution in line with the Corona restrictions and allowed the participants to train in an environment familiar to them. The entire practice was designed to follow the distancing regulations. The training ground, for instance, had to be at least 15 square meters and was most often the garden or backyard of the housing facility.

In the second phase, the project organizers and instructors guided interested players through their transition into a local soccer team. For this purpose, the organization established contact with clubs that offer activities for players with impairments and supported a local soccer organization in building a new team. In fact, most participants were eager to continue playing soccer after the on-site training concluded. Currently, more than two-thirds of the former participants regularly play soccer.

### Reaching the target group by drawing back on networks

An initial problem encountered in the project implementation was reaching the target group. As a first step, the project organizers reached out to the administration of selected residential facilities. DAHEIMKICKER took over the training costs and organizational duties, such as coordinating appointments between the instructor and the facility. As the organizers had no direct contact with the residents, the supervisor of the respective home, most often caretakers or social workers, were supposed to take over a facilitating role. The supervisors were supposed to inform the residents about the project and, in the best case, motivate them to participate. In addition, they had to be present during the training or at least close to the training ground.



**Instructor Mohammed Alkurushi and soccer team on the soccer field**

However, the supervisors' stakeholder role turned out differently than desired. Some were too busy; others felt their residents would not be interested in the offer and others disregarded it as irrelevant. Because the residents were often not informed of the offer's existence, or at least inadequately, only a small number of participants showed up for the training. Therefore, the organizers devised a new strategy to reach the target group.

To inform the residents about the offer in a different way and convince them of it, the organizers contacted trainers who were already working for SPIELERPASS and who had previously trained people with impairments as part of earlier projects. These coaches, in turn, reached out to their former players, told them about the training, and asked them to inform other interested parties. These former participants either were themselves residents of an assisted home or were able to establish contact with some residents. In this way, not only could the offer be spread to a broader range of interested people, but by having familiar people motivate them to participate, some participants were also more willing to come to the training. As such, the organizers of DAHEIMKICKER could benefit from drawing back on the connections and networks that their organization SPIELERPASS had previously established.

This contact method was not necessary in every case; at large, the supervisors considered the offer meaningful and thus supported the organizers in realizing the project.

#### Learning lesson:

When facilitators are not establishing the desired connection to the target group, it can be beneficial to draw back on existing social networks. However, since not every organization has already established a network through previous projects, it is helpful to proceed

according to a snowball system. This means that when acquiring new participants, the networks of other organizations and projects that have offered programs for a similar target group could be mobilized. In this way, trainers and project representatives can reach out to previous participants who, in turn, may know other interested parties. People who have already participated in a similar project may even be in a better position to motivate interested parties to take part in the offer because they themselves have had a positive experience.

### Promoting long-term integration into soccer

Since the initiative's long-term goal is to promote the participation of players with impairments in soccer, a principal challenge the project organizers had to tackle was facilitating the participants' long-term integration into local clubs. For this purpose, the organization first contacted other initiatives and clubs that offered soccer training for people with impairments. Representatives of the project then took over all organizational tasks on behalf of participants interested in pursuing soccer. They registered the players with the club and established communication between the organization and their former participants. To familiarize the players with the new environment, representatives of the project accompanied their proteges to the training sessions, stayed beside the field for support, and were at their disposal for help. Although the soccer players now join the practice alone, the instructors involved in the DAHEIMKICKER project still act as confidants to their former participants and are in regular contact with them.

While the organization could integrate some participants into external sports clubs, participation opportunities for people with impairments in popular sports remained sparse. To ensure that all participants interested in pursuing soccer would also get access to adequate offers, SPIELERPASS decided it was fundamental to promote long-term offer structures. They did so in two ways: by administering the creation of a new team within an established soccer club and by building up their soccer team within their organization.

First, SPIELERPASS administered the establishment of a new team designed specifically for players with impairments within an established Viennese soccer club that has a longstanding tradition. Since this sports club did not have any offer directed at players with impairments, SPIELERPASS planned and conceptualized the entire program, recruited the players, and provided sports instructors who have the required expertise in training people with impairments. In return, the sports club provided all the necessary infrastructure so that

the training could take place on the facilities of the local sports club. A significant benefit of building up a soccer team for impaired players within an already established soccer club was that the new players became members of the club and started to identify with it. Not only are the participants wearing the club jersey, but many also regularly attend their tournaments and mingle with soccer players from other teams. The soccer players pay a yearly membership fee to take part in the program. For those who cannot afford it, SPIELERPASS provides the necessary sponsorship to cover the fee. The team consists of participants of former projects administered by the organization, and new members. The offer is designed for players who are stronger in their performance and who wish to train regularly.

In addition, SPIELERPASS has also created new participation opportunities for players with a lower performance level. For this purpose, the organization designed an in-house offer to promote soccer as a recreational activity to a broader group of participants. Besides promoting the participants' physical health, strengthening the group's cohesion and having fun in the game are the primary goals of the in-home offer. The majority of former DAHEIMKICKER players participate in the soccer training provided by the organization. In addition to the training, the "Champions team" is partaking in the annually planned football cup for players with impairments organized by SPIELERPASS.

#### Learning lesson:

For target groups whose access to sports is highly restricted and participation opportunities are particularly scarce, organizations need to find long-term offers that participants can engage in when the project has ended. For this purpose, organizations should assist former participants throughout their transition into new clubs and organizations. As participants may need more information or feel unsure about practicing in an unfamiliar environment, it is imperative to provide support and guidance throughout the initial phases.

Moreover, the organization may also actively contribute to creating new supply structures. When there are little to no participation options for the target group, organizations might slowly build up their own team. Cooperating with a local sports club can be a viable solution if this option is unavailable. Most grassroots organizations and initiatives have specific expertise in working with their target group and a network of instructors and interested participants, all of which established sports clubs often yet need to improve. As such, grassroots organizations can 'lend' their knowledge and networks to local sports clubs in return for the provision of their infrastructure.

### Project 3: Fit4Life

Organization: Monaliiku, “Well-being and Sports for Multicultural Women“

[www.monaliiku.fi/mita-teemme/hankkeet-projects/elamani-kunnossa-fit4life](http://www.monaliiku.fi/mita-teemme/hankkeet-projects/elamani-kunnossa-fit4life)

Fit4Life was initiated by the Finnish nongovernmental sports organization Monaliiku, “Well-being and Sports for Multicultural Women“, which seeks to facilitate migrant and refugee women’s social inclusion in society and create possibilities for social participation through sports and recreational activities. Fit4Life is a sports and educational project for women of diverse immigrant backgrounds that consists of weekly fitness training, communal events, and educational offers. The program follows a holistic approach to health and seeks to improve the participant’s overall quality of life. This means that boosting the participants’ social and mental well-being is an equally important objective as promoting their physical health. The project is exclusively designed for migrant women of different ages and religious or cultural backgrounds and aims to provide them with a safer space to work out, learn, and discuss together. Since Fit4Life follows a multidimensional understanding of health, engaging in conversations about emotional well-being and encouraging the participants to share intimate thoughts and emotions is a central component of the project. A unique characteristic of the Fit4Life project is the collaboration between Monaliiku staff (the majority of which are migrant women as well), former participants of the sports groups, and volunteers, who all work together with great effort. Over time, the project organizers have built up a team structure in which each member has a vital role in the successful realization of the project- from organizing the program, planning the activities, taking care of the participants’ children during practice and team days, and providing catering.

There are currently four active groups of around 15-20 participants in the Helsinki area and Espoo, each group running for a period of six months. Interested parties can sign up for participation on Monaliiku’s website in five different languages (Finish, English, Arabic, Somali, and Kurdish). While a significant number of the participant have migrated to Finland from Muslim-majority countries, the participants bring together a broad range of religious practices, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as stories of migration. Some participants have been living in Finland for a longer time, whereas others have migrated or applied for asylum more recently. The project leaders try to group together participants from different backgrounds and nationalities. For a duration of six months, the women participate in weekly fitness training and so-called ‘theme days’, where they listen to educational presentations and participate in workshops.

At the beginning of each term, each participant undergoes a health assessment that captures, among other things, their vital functions and physical parameters. The assessment is to show the participants the improvement of their health condition and to motivate them to remain active after completing the project.

The program is free for the participants; however, regular participation in the training and theme days is mandatory. The groups meet once a week for around two to three hours, the first of which they do light to medium-intensity fitness exercises tailored to the group’s overall fitness level. All groups follow a set training schedule exercising different muscle and body areas in sequence. Each exercise unit is repeated so that participants can get used to the activity and those who might miss out on the training have the chance to keep up with the group. In addition, the instructor hands out informative material, such as flyers or videos, that teach the participants how to perform the exercise at home. The fitness instructors are vital to the project and significantly contribute to its success. Not only do they guide the women through the practice, as former pro-athletes who are themselves women of immigrant backgrounds they also serve a role model function. As immigrant women who are physically active and committed to living a healthy lifestyle, they show the participants that sports and well-being are essential components of their quality of life for all women. In addition, the fitness instructors are committed to building relationships of trust and care towards the participants and will often establish individual relationships with them. The instructors directly talk to many participants after practice, ask about their well-being, and are available to listen to or advise them.

After each training, the women share a healthy snack or meal on-site at the training ground and can stay with the group as long as they like to chat and socialize. Besides facilitating social connections, communal meals also aim to show the participants the importance of eating a balanced and nutritious diet, drinking enough, and resting well. In addition to the weekly training and snack time, the women participate in three to four theme days throughout the entire term. These theme days take place during multiple hours of a day and consist of educational workshops, presentations by expert speakers, and joint discussion rounds. The presented topics cover various aspects of emotional, physical, and social well-being, including women’s health, nutrition, stress-free sleep, parenting, and much more. The topics discussed follow a guidebook but can be adjusted to the participants’ interests. At the end of the six months phase, most women measurably improve their physical health condition and gain the understanding that their emotional and social well-being is essential to their quality of life. The project is so popular that registration is always full.

## Communicating about mental health

One of the key learning lessons that the project organizers and instructors obtained was how to talk about mental health. The engagement with the topic was originally intended to occur in the context of thematic group discussions that took place immediately after practice. However, the women were reluctant to participate in these conversations and only sparsely shared their thoughts and opinions. While some participants considered mental health too intimate to speak about in public, others felt that the topic was too controversial and feared the group's judgment, and others believed that there would be nothing they could improve about emotional well-being. Although their reasons for not participating were manifold, as a result, most of the women refrained from engaging in the post-practice talking rounds. To find another way to initiate conversations about mental health, the project organizers implemented two essential adaptations:

First, they changed the context and format of the discussions, separating practice time from educational 'theme days'. Second, instructors and workshop speakers switched the terminology and approach. Instead of employing the term mental health, they now talk about 'well-being' and approach discussions about mental health from a low-threshold manner.

The initially chosen format of group discussions appeared too formal and had a high threshold for the participants to feel comfortable opening up. Therefore, the project organizers decided to separate the training sessions from the educational part of the program. Instead of having discussion rounds right after practice, the weekly meetings are now dedicated entirely to training and socializing. After the training session, the participants share a meal and get to know each other. The women now do not have to debate a fixed topic but can freely engage in chat and social exchange. They often talk about their food customs and cooking styles or show each other pictures of their children. Hence, the women now have the chance to warm up to each other and slowly build relationships of mutual trust. Dedicating the post-practice time to socializing has contributed significantly to building up a social and familiar atmosphere in which the women feel comfortable sharing their opinions and emotions. Further, socializing time has also opened a new gateway to slowly approach the topic of mental health from a low-threshold manner. The instructors occasionally include themselves in the chat and open new topics of conversation, such as the importance of eating nutritious meals, drinking sufficient water, or getting restful sleep.

Participants are more willing to talk about their sleeping patterns, for instance, as it is less controversial

or intimate. At the same time, talking about sleep habits is a sensible and light way to open up about one's emotional state. Some participants might have trouble falling asleep, feel restless during the night, or get overcome by worries when falling asleep. As in the given example, the participants start to reflect upon their daily routines and see that they might not be the only ones struggling in some areas of their life. In this way, the women learn that their emotional well-being affects various facets of their life, which can gradually be improved by taking small steps.

The previous discussions now take place during separate theme days, during which the women listen to presentations, join workshops, and exchange thoughts. The participants now show much more interest in the topics presented and take part in the discussions. Their willingness to participate has also been influenced by the fact that theme days only take place about three times a term, so the women put more energy and focus into participating on a single day than they do directly after the training. On the other hand, it is also due to the way the topic of mental health is approached within the theme days:

Instead of using the term 'mental health,' the instructors and invited speakers now employ the terminology of 'well-being.' Utilizing this new term had two effects. First, well-being is a less loaded concept and evokes fewer negative imaginations on behalf of the participants. Second, it allows dealing with mental health as one component of a person's overall well-being. For the participants, speaking and learning about improving psychological distress does not mean they would have a 'mental disorder.' Instead, the participants realize that mental health is integral to their overall health. This adaptation of the terminology caters to the participants' comfort zones. It creates a more accessible format to talk about the otherwise often stigmatized topic of mental health. Changing the terminology and presenting mental health as a matter of an individual's overall well-being has been helpful since it allows women to share without fear of being stigmatized. It also shows them that their health includes many different areas, such as nutrition, social relations, and physical endurance.

### Learning lesson:

When talking about mental health, both the choice of setting and the employed terminology matter. It makes sense to prioritize training and socializing activities in the initial phases of a program and then implement educational offers at a later stage. In this way, participants have the chance to gradually get to know each other and build a certain level of familiarity that allows them to share their emotions and intimate thoughts with the

groups. Moreover, participants should not feel overwhelmed by a sensible topic of discussion but be comfortable enough to open up. Hence, it might be fruitful to approach controversial and emotionally loaded discussion points, such as conversation revolving around

mental health, from a low-threshold manner. Here, it can be beneficial to talk about everyday items such as sleep schedules and thus facilitate a different approach to addressing mental health.

#### **Project 4: Wereldmeiden (“Worldgirls”)**

**Organization: Huis voor Beweging,  
 (“House for Movement”)**

[www.huisvoorbeweging.nl](http://www.huisvoorbeweging.nl)

Wereldmeiden (“Worldgirls”) is a buddy project aiming for the socio-cultural inclusion of newly arrived refugee girls into Dutch society through sports. The project was initiated by the association Huis voor Beweging and is currently being implemented by project leaders in ten provinces and over fifty municipalities all over the Netherlands. Worldgirls is subsidized by the Dutch government and runs under the national action program ‘The Alternative Citizen Service.’ In addition to the girls-edition, there is an equivalent program for young refugee boys of the same age group called “Worldboys.” The two projects are carried out independently of each other. The Worldgirls project works with two target groups. Young refugee girls between 14-20 years who have recently acquired residency in a Dutch municipality, and the buddy group, predominantly Dutch girls between 14-20 years. The buddies must have lived in the Netherlands for some time and be familiar with the Dutch sports system. The project follows a two-stage sports circuit in which the refugee students and buddies first try out different sports together. In the second stage, the refugee participants choose a sport to get to know better with an assigned buddy. At the end of the two phases, the refugee girl can sign up for membership in a local sports club. Throughout the program, the refugee girls and their buddies get to know each other, work out together, and create social connections. The overall goal of Worldgirls is to facilitate the participation of young female refugees in sports and society, as well as to establish social networks between the Dutch and refugee youth. As such, sports serve as a means to achieve socio-cultural inclusion. Moreover, the project aims to benefit the buddies by incorporating them into a socially relevant project and showing them the benefits of voluntary work.

The program runs for a school term of about six months. First, the provincial project leaders put together a group of ten buddies and ten refugee participants. The participating refugee girls can sign up at their preparatory ‘international schools’ that teach refugees the language and prepare them to join a Dutch educational institution.

In some cases, local project leaders also promote the project in language schools and social work campaigns initiated by the local government. Participant acquisition on the part of the refugee participants is running smoothly, and the students are showing great interest in taking part in the project. Buddy acquisition varies according to the province, but in most cases, the project gets promoted at local high schools, where interested parties can sign up for participation. The buddies get previously trained for their role through practical workshops and supervision. After the preparatory workshops, the buddies meet the refugee students in a warm-up gathering. The entire group then goes on a ‘sports carousel’ to try out a different kind of sport once a week for ten weeks. During this phase, the participants try various sporting activities, from football and handball to horseback riding or skating. The participants can also suggest a type of sport they are interested in getting to know. Each week, the group either participates in the regular practice of a local sports club or can use its facilities to train by themselves. During this initial trial phase, the refugees and buddies get to know each other, form social bonds, and engage in a fun leisure activity together.

After the initial trial phase, the refugee participants pick a sport they want to explore. Together with a buddy, they then join the practice of a local sports club for another ten weeks. Often, the assigned buddy is playing the selected type of sport or is familiar with it. Throughout this trial, the refugee girl practices her chosen sports in more depth and gets to know the club members. In addition, the buddy will support the refugee participant with any challenge she might encounter, such as transport to the sport activities, the right sports clothing, understanding the rules of the game or practicing her skills. The project ends with a self-organized cooling-down event where the participants reflect on their time together and conclude the project with a joint social activity. If interested, the refugee student can sign up for membership in the sports club of her choice. The annual membership costs are covered by external sponsorship, which Worldgirls administers. However, the ultimate goal of the project is to enable the refugee youth to participate more independently in society and to promote their social inclusion, with or without sporting activity.



One of the buddies and a refugee participant cheering



Buddies and participants during training

### Buddy acquisition and active participation of target group

A central lesson learned that the project implementers made over time revolves around encouraging the active participation of the buddies. Convincing young people to volunteer and showing them that it enriches not only others but also themselves is a continuous challenge many volunteer projects face. Worldgirls encountered two interconnected difficulties in this realm:

First, it was (and still can be) a challenge to recruit buddies, and second, to ensure that they participate regularly and actively in the activities over the entire term of the project.

Most often, students would find the project and its cause compelling but ultimately did not sign up for participation. In addition, the attendance and active commitment of those who became buddies would get sparse toward the end of the term. To find adequate solutions to this problem, the project leaders first had to determine what hindered the students from joining the practice (regularly). After talking with the buddies directly, it became evident that many do not have sufficient time to commit to the project as their daily schedules are filled with classes, extracurricular projects, and sports. As most Dutch students are predominantly occupied with school-related tasks, the project organizers had to find a solution that would fit the target group's time capacities. Three approaches have been undertaken here that vary according to the structural circumstances of the provinces.

The most crucial conceptual change was to turn the program into an extracurricular activity offered at schools. In the Netherlands, students not only take classes at school but also engage in various extracurricular activities on the premises of their educational

institution. These activities are an integral part of the teaching program and get rewarded with study credits. In cases where the school's administration agrees to include the buddy project in their extracurricular program, Worldgirls is now offered alongside a range of other extracurricular activities at local high schools and secondary education institutions. Students are not obligated to participate but can select the program from various offers listed by their school. Incorporating the project as an extracurricular activity has significantly counteracted the low number of participants and the irregular attendance, as the project activities now take place during school hours. Since the buddies join the project as part of their daily routine, participation is less of a time burden. Moreover, because their participation is credited with study points, the buddies also feel more compelled to participate with greater commitment.

Each provincial project leader had to find different solutions in schools where this option was unavailable. Two adaptations have proven successful in bettering the buddies' motivation: First, acquiring interested participants at educational institutions (for example directed at sports or social work) and utilizing teachers as stakeholders. Second, offering buddies incentives that fit their structural circumstances.

Some project leaders now recruit interested participants at educational facilities with a specific educational focus that aligns with the target group or activities of the program. There are different kinds of secondary education institutes in the Netherlands, such as vocational institutes, which prepare students for a specific future occupation. In some municipalities, local sports schools train students for future careers as sports teachers or fitness instructors; other schools offer a vocational program for social work. Recruiting potential participants has been proven to be particularly fruitful here as stu-

dents feel keener to join sports-related or target-group related activities. In addition, the students' incentive to participate is further enhanced when teachers serve as stakeholders who explain to their students that joining the project is profitable for their careers. When teachers tell students they will gain essential practical skills for their future occupations, students feel generally more compelled to participate in the program. Asking teachers to motivate students has been proven more effective because students regard their teachers as authoritative figures whose words they consider more seriously than a project leader unknown to them. The recruitment of participants at vocational schools and the implementation of teachers as stakeholders have been among the most critical changes in motivating the students to sign up and come to practice regularly.

Lastly, in cases where the project can neither be offered as an extracurricular activity in high schools nor at a sports institute, the last resort to enhance participation is to offer incentives. When the project remains an additional activity that requires students to spend time, the project implementers realized it is necessary to provide concrete incentives and show the students a direct benefit from their participation. Since the buddies' involvement at school remains their primary concern, the project organizers had to devise rewards that are valuable to their time schedules and involvement at school. Several reward options are available here. For instance, the project leaders can issue internship certificates that the schools will credit. Another option is to get credited with study points, which the students would also

acquire for other extracurricular activities. For this, the provincial project leaders directly communicate with the school to ensure that the respective institution credits the internship or points. While students still must carve out extra time to participate in this third scenario, they still get rewarded in a form that is worthwhile for their needs at school.

**Learning lesson:**

While participating in a project with a good cause may be compelling to the target group, practical constraints such as limited time capacity can prevent interested parties from signing up and stand in the way of committing regularly to the activities. When conceptualizing a buddy project, organizations should keep in mind that socio-emotional rewards should be accompanied by structural incentives.

The ideal solution is to conceptualize the offer in a way compatible with the target group's time capacities. In cases where changes in offer conceptualization are not available, it can be fruitful to offer incentives that fit the target group's structural constraints. Participants will feel more compelled to commit to a project when they see that their investment is worthwhile, meaning that the target group must see a benefit from their participation. These incentives can be in the form of long-term rewards, such as obtaining valuable skills for a future occupation, or concrete short-term structural rewards, in the form of study points or internship certificates.



### 3. Summary and Conclusion

In the preceding section, the experiential learning lessons of four examples of good practice were presented. The focus lay on a dense description of the adaptations and solutions the selected organizations have found in response to

various problems they encountered in implementing their programs.

The table below creates a concluding summary of all illustrated examples in an abstract form:

Implementation Issue	Learning Lesson	Dimension	Quality Criteria
Stakeholders do not establish contact with the target group; potential participants are not properly informed about the offer	Instructors and participants of previous projects can establish contact with interested parties by activating their social networks. Former participants who are members of the same group/community can motivate people to join by sharing their positive experiences.	Reaching the target group through a snowball system	Project Conceptualization (target group)
Participants feel overwhelmed by the task of providing all necessary documents to participate in the offer	If participation in the program depends on the submission of additional documents, the procedures for obtaining them should be as accessible as possible. Through external cooperation, services can be provided on the organization's premises to create easier access and a protected environment.	Decreasing access barriers	Project Conceptualization (facilitating access)
Participants are very time-strapped and therefore do not participate in the program at all or do so irregularly	The program should be realigned with the time constraints of the target group; Participants must see a direct benefit of their involvement which can be achieved by giving incentives for participation that are beneficial to the participants' structural conditions.	Promoting participation and enhancing regular commitment	Active Participation and Inclusion
Participants are not sure if the program was designed in their best interest and fear that their religious/cultural needs are not taken seriously	Instructors should continuously demonstrate their integrity by respecting the participants' individual needs for privacy. It takes time for participants to assure themselves of a project's sincerity.	Building a safer space	Gender Sensitivity; Intercultural Awareness
Participants are not willing to talk about controversial and sensitive topics	Prioritize socializing at the beginning of a program and integrate educational components later. Further, sensible topics can best be approached in a low-threshold manner and by employing terminology that is accessible to the participants.	Creating the right environment for communication about sensitive topics	Communication and Transparency
After the project concludes, there are not enough offers that allow the participants' long-term involvement in sports	Grassroots organizations can contribute to building supply structures by cooperating with established sports associations. They can offer their expertise in dealing with a specific target group and their networks in exchange for the infrastructure of a larger association.	Ensuring the long-term effect of the program	Project Conceptualization (long-term impact)

The table above shows that all learning experiences of the projects correspond to one of the dimensions of the SPIN quality criteria listed in the introduction of this guide. A key takeaway from the examples presented here is that a project cannot necessarily meet all the specified quality criteria in advance but rather that project implementers can find suitable adaptations throughout the implementations of their programs that contribute to the improvement of each dimension.

When looking at the presented learning lessons, it becomes evident that implementation difficulties are a natural part of the practice. Even well-designed projects encounter practical difficulties and are faced with the challenge of modifying their practice. This insight is also underlined by the fact that the majority of the described 'problems' could not be foreseen in advance as they depended on how participants received and reacted towards a program. In many of the illustrated examples, the activities of a project could not be carried out as planned because participants had varying needs, constraints, and comfort levels of which the projects first had to become aware. For instance, even though all organizations were well informed about the framework conditions of their target groups, participants sometimes had different emotional needs or varying feelings of safety. Even if these problems were not due to conceptual shortcomings, the project implementers still had to develop a way to respond to the participants' feedback and modify the offer so that all participants would feel included and listened to. A significant takeaway that can be seen in all four described projects is that good practice can

only develop in interaction with participants and is thus grounded within a continuous process of trial and error.

## Outlook

Since the purpose of this action guide was to take a closer look at how four examples of good practice effectively overcame implementation issues, this work features those cases in which the project implementers obtained learning experiences from past 'problems'. At this point, it should be noted that the selected projects have excelled in many dimensions of the quality criteria. Due to the thematic focus of this study, only those examples were described in which the project implementers changed and improved their practice over time. This means that this guide could not describe strategies and methods that proved to be successful from the very beginning. While the originality and good performance of the projects are also reflected in the detailed project descriptions, it would be worthwhile to examine the lessons learned together with the implementation methods that have worked well from the beginning in the context of a broader and more comprehensive study. It would also be interesting to compare the lessons learned with an evaluation of the impact the change had on the participants.

Even though the present study only focuses on those observed changes identified and carried out by the project implementers, this Good Practice Guide still hopes to provide fruitful impulses for action that will benefit other grassroots organizations and initiatives.

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# Executive Summary

## Sport and Refugees: Learning Lessons and Practical Takeaways from Four European Cases of Good Practice

The Good Practice Guide contributes to evidence-based knowledge regarding effective methods and approaches for promoting social inclusion by sharing the hands-on learning experiences of four exemplary good practice cases. The work features four diverse sports projects from the SPIN cooperating countries Netherlands, Austria, Italy, and Finland that target marginalized groups with high entry restrictions to sports. The empirical study draws on qualitative interviews with project leaders and sports instructors of the selected projects and describes the practical difficulties they have faced throughout the realization of the program and the creative solutions developed to counteract them. By working out the central practical takeaways and lessons learned that the projects acquired over time, the guide seeks to assist grassroots organizations in solving practical difficulties that may arise in the execution of integrative sports projects for refugees and asylum seekers.



[www.sportinclusion.net](http://www.sportinclusion.net)