



# SPORT TOGETHER

**BASELINE STUDY REPORT**



**SPORT TOGETHER-STRENGTHENING  
CROSS-COMMUNITY SOCIAL INCLUSION IN  
POST-CONFLICT REGIONS**

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## Project Partners

**Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC)** / fairplay Initiative (Austria)

**Football Association of Ireland (FAI)** (Ireland)

**Irish Football Association (IFA)** (Northern Ireland / UK)

**Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR)** (Bosnia & Herzegovina)

**NGO Atina** – Citizens' Association for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and all Forms of Gender-Based Violence (Serbia)

**University of Thessaly (UTH)** (Greece)

**Donegal Sports Partnership (DSP)** (Ireland)

**Football Club "Zagreb 041"** (Croatia)

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Editors: **University of Thessaly (Greece)** & **Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC)** – fairplay Initiative

Authors: Papageorgiou Eleftheria, Papaioannou Athanasios, Wachter Kurt, Hudelist David

Photos: fairplay-VIDC; Lea Pelc; Andrey Popov/Depositphotos

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## Executive summary

The present study is a collaborative process among seven European countries that have been affected by conflict and war and recently experienced the influx of refugees and newly arrived migrants. This study aims to gain a better understanding of sport as a mediating tool to strengthen social cohesion in such communities. A qualitative approach was followed through focus groups discussions that were conducted to each country member. Specific challenges were mentioned by the participants. The lack of official policies regarding the participation of minorities in sports clubs, the absence of organised training offered to sport profes-

sionals as well as everyday issues such as dealing with racist behaviours and limited access services of minorities to sport facilities are some of the factors that impede the work of professionals. An additional sharing is the importance of programmes designed to address the needs of multicultural groups through sports and their prospects of sustainability. Further implications are discussed to frame the role of sport and the need for more effective future programmes design, by including cross-cultural workshops, more interactive activities like role-playing, and taking advantage of the special cultural aspects of each group such as music and language.

## Introduction: goals and methods

The global reputation of sports events leads to the large participation of people who are eventually inspired by the values of equality and peace promoted in this framework (Right to Play, 2008). According to the European Commission (2011), the benefits derived from participation in sports are numerous and widespread – enhancing health, lifelong social skills, community cohesion, and prevention of violence. Though living in a world where physical activity is highly linked to healthy development and well-being, while also participating in sport is a means of social inclusion, still in many countries the largest number of children, youth and

women have no opportunities to benefit from sport and physical activity for a variety of causes (e.g., low socioeconomic status, forced mobility, war-zones, health pandemics). This is the reason why it is an urgent need to focus on this issue, aiming to increase opportunities for all (Kidd, 2011). Besides, it remains a fundamental right for everyone to practice in both physical education and sport (Unesco, 1978).

Over the past few years, sport has been broadly acknowledged as a powerful tool to promote social development and build peace in vulnerable regions, known as the sport



**Table 1** \_Participants per country

Partner Country	Participants	Dates and ways of focus groups' conduction
Austria	12	(21/7/2021) – face to face
Serbia	7	(13/9/2021) – face to face
Bosnia & Herzegovina	6	(24/8/2021) – online
Greece	6	(16/6/2021) – online
Donegal	6	(7/7/2021) online
Northern Ireland	6	(20/9/2021) online
Croatia	5	(9/7/2021) – face to face

for development and peace (SDP) approach. This certain viewpoint highlights sports as socio-cultural tools to eliminate social tensions and prejudices, by generating dialogue and promoting equal participation for all, especially in post-conflict regions (Sekulić et al., 2006). The importance of peace-making is not a contemporary idea, instead, it was highlighted in the mentality of the ancient Greek Olympic Truce (Ekecheiria). It was the first documented way of reconciliation based on sports, confessing the intention of building peace and cooperation during the Olympic Games (Syrgios, 2009).

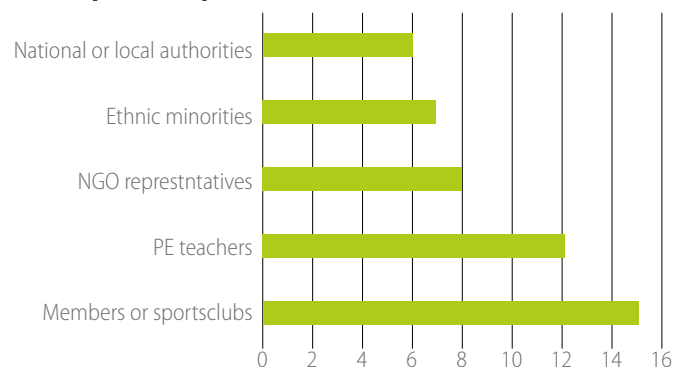
Although it has been recognized that sport can improve communication, assist in overcoming prejudice and discrimination, and improve social integration for people coming from conflict environments, it seems that sport professionals still seek for educational training. When sport meets adequate management and design, then it can play a decisive role in the peace-building process for regions affected by conflicts (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2005). Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), inter-governmental organisations, transnational corporations (Giulianotti, 2011), academic research, and local groups could be the key contributors to this endeavor.

### **Aim of this study and initiatives**

The present study/report aimed to gain a better understanding of the current situation regarding social and sports inclusion of minorities and vulnerable populations

**Graph 1** \_Amounts and roles of the participants

#### **Participants' capacities**



and to explore the needs and the tips of people working with ethnic/cultural minorities through sports across European regions and especially in post-conflict areas. More specifically, 48 professionals (27 males and 21 females) working with minorities from seven countries participated in the present study through either online or face to face focus group discussions, seven in total, conducted by two people responsible for each country, based on the guidelines of Kitzinger (1994) and Turner III (2010). The professionals voluntarily participated in this study and were selected depending on the social network of each country partner and according to their field of experience (e.g., sports, gender equality, human rights, and peacebuilding). Aspects of their role are distinguished in national/local authorities, members of sports clubs (e.g., coaches), PE teachers, NGO representatives, ethnic minorities. More details for the participants are described in the appendix (see Table 1 and Graph 1).

The content of the focus group discussions was similar for all and included four main areas: (a) introductory questions – feelings of people working on multicultural sports contexts, (b) opportunities and challenges across their work, (c) behaviours they meet on this field and (d) special training – good practices – additional sharings.



## Definitions: vulnerable groups

Starting by framing our study of reference, it is important to define vulnerable populations, who eventually depending on the context could be any group of people that is at high risk of any kind of hardship. According to the Glossary

on Migration of the International Organisation for Migration (2019) the concepts of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are presented below:

### **Migrants**

People who move away from their place of residence either temporarily or permanently for a variety of reasons. Their movements are legally defined and determined by personal choice.

### **Asylum seekers**

People who seek for international protection after the submission of a relative request to a certain country. The fact is that not every asylum seeker will eventually be recognized as a refugee, while every individual recognized as refugee was a prior asylum seeker.

### **Refugees**

People who are outside the country of their nationality and are unable to return to it, due to a well-founded fear of persecution for various reasons such as race, religion, nationality, political beliefs. As a result, they can no longer benefit from the protection of their country.

## Peacebuilding through sport

### **Sport mechanisms for social inclusion**

If we mean to define and build peace, then we should first define its opposite, conflict, which is not an easy process considering the complexity of this term and its dynamic. People or groups are involved in competitive behaviour, known as "conflict" when they view each other's goals as adversaries (Kriesberg, 2007). To understand conflicts and ways of dealing with them, the approach of Galtung (1998) could be an effective starting point. His understanding of conflicts identifies three basic aspects known as the "conflict triangle":

- (A) *Attitudes*, which could be hostile towards others and affect their action
- (B) *Behaviour* in its' violent expression
- (C) *Contradiction* behind the conflict and its causes.

Capturing the sensation of a conflict as a repeated phenomenon, he mentioned three major problems arising from our effort to turn from "the vicious cycles into virtuous cycles" (Galtung, 1998, p. 7). More specifically, he referred to the 3R of building-peace:

- (r) *e*construction after the initial violence
- (r) *e*conciliation of the parties involved
- (r) *e*solution of the causes of conflict

A concluding outcome of this approach is to combine the effort of finding solutions for all the caused problems, otherwise, the healing process will never be completed.

Accordingly, it seems that the context of organised sporting activities is ideal for experiencing healthy ways to resolve conflicts and deal with competition. Taking into consideration the meaning of “sport” given by the Council of Europe (2001), which includes all forms of physical activity, either with a casual or organised participation, the aim for people participating in sport is to express and improve their physical fitness and mental well-being through socialization. The fact that the access of all people regardless of their nationality, gender, language, religion, or any other personal characteristic to the sports facilities is officially recognized, makes the field of sports even more suitable for achieving social inclusion for all.

The concept of social inclusion in sports is presented by Bailey (2005) through four dimensions:

- *Spatial*: people from various social and economic backgrounds are coming closer, sharing their common interest in inherently valuable activities. For example, people that do not meet each other and do not even talk the same language might prefer to play volleyball and that brings them together.
- *Relational*: people feel a sense of belonging and being accepted to a team. That means that people who are strangers might shape a group, sharing the same emotions while playing a football game.
- *Functional*: people are reinforced to develop competences such as understanding, knowledge, and communication skills. While participating in a sports activity, people are offered the opportunity to get to know about their performance improvement techniques, to understand each other’s feelings, and build up their relationships.
- *Power*: people are extending their social networks; thus, communities’ cohesion is positively affected through their dynamic relations. Through sports improvement and success, people cultivate a sense of pride and interaction, outcomes that have the power to change their lives.

Sport participation in addition to the promotion of sporting capital (technical and sports knowledge) also highlights the value of human capital (social skills and self-estimation) leading to emotional and social growth and ultimately to smoother social inclusion for all (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008). Nonetheless, sport alone could not be that promising since there is also the dark side that needs to be faced.

### ***Threats for social and sports inclusion of vulnerable populations: The next dawn***

In situations involving severe conflicts, such as war, people suffer from a variety of linked problems like loss of beloved ones, death, violations of bodily integrity – sexual violence, PTSD, disability poverty, and criminality. Individuals who had prolonged exposition to traumatic experiences (e.g., forced migration, loss, violence) are also at high risk of mental health disorders (e.g., anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders – PTSD, depression) (Hebebrand et al., 2016). According to the Social Exclusion Unit (2001), conflicts are often connected to social exclusion formed as lack of knowledge, facilities, opportunities, and access to power. Consequently, it is a fact that vulnerable populations need to deal with many difficulties to be included in society.

In response to post-conflicts periods, social problems, physical disasters, or even pandemics, sport-based programmes are being introduced to provide social inclusion, which requires special attention and expertise skills (Henley, 2007), while organised sport and physical activities actions could have great potential benefits (Ley and Barrio, 2019). More specifically, carefully designed intervention sports programmes may not only provide social inclusion of vulnerable groups but also empower social health (Giulianotti, 2011) as well as economic development and cultural negotiation (Alrashid et al., 2017). However, several factors impede the social inclusion of vulnerable populations through sports. Their socioeconomic background (Agergaard et al., 2015), natives’ prejudices towards them (Norman et al., 2014), unfamiliarity with the sports context of the host country, and the rules that natives adopt in sports (Forde et al., 2015) have often been recorded as such barriers.



Sport professionals are also facing severe challenges within multicultural contexts. Organisational difficulties have been reported such as insufficient resources to support the target communities, unclear policies, and inadequate training in various strategies and group activities to make all the participants feel comfortable (Forde et al., 2015). They also have to deal with cultural or religious restrictions like contact issues (Caldeborg, 2020), gender issues, dress codes, parents' prejudices (Dagkas & Benn, 2006), and lack of sensitivity in sporting environments both from people of the working staff (Gibbs & Block, 2017) and the peers' covered discriminative behaviours (Norman et al, 2014).

Sports professionals are the main characters in decision-making (Alrashid et al., 2017), while attempting to achieve reconciliation and stability. According to Bloomfield and his colleagues (2003), the reconciliation process needs time and is divided into three stages: (a) eliminating fear and replacing it with peaceful coexistence between the opponents, (b) cultivating trust and confidence, and (c) recognizing a common ground moving toward empathy. Sport could be effective in this direction because of the opportunities that are created for negotiation, mutual understanding, and space for reflection (Serena, 2009). Indeed, further steps need to be considered. Easier access for vulnerable populations to sports facilities, adequate information about sporting activities in their region, and organised training for professional staff on cultural, emotional, and pedagogical issues (Forde et al., 2015), could converge to a better sports impact on social inclusion.

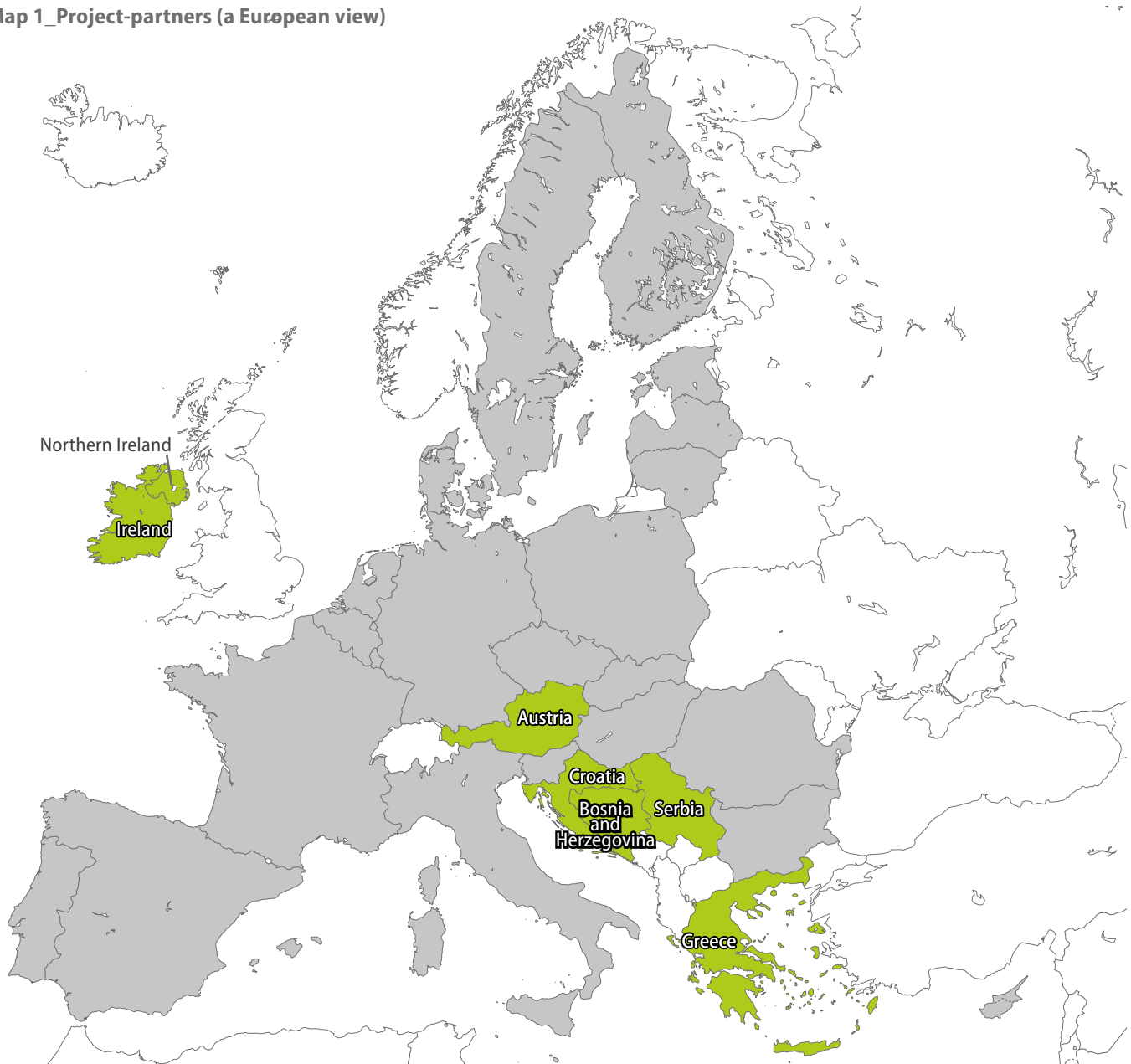
Resting on the idea of sporting benefits on social inclusion especially for vulnerable populations, the next part of this study is a mapping of seven European countries' contexts. Those countries' have been recently affected by war or/and the influx of refugees and newly arrived migrants. An effort is made to collect the perspectives of the stakeholders (national/local authority members, NGOs representatives, coaches/PE teachers, minorities) to shed light on the challenges that minorities are experiencing regarding their participation in sport, as well as the respective challenges that the stakeholders is facing. Further, suggestions for well-organised training and sports practices based on stakeholders' contributions are provided.

### Country partners – context of minorities

Various perspectives emerge when the term “minorities” comes to the forefront.

- In **Austria**, several minority groups are officially existing. Croats, Slovene, Hungarian, Czech, Slovakian and Roma minorities. In the past migrants from the Ex-Yugoslavian countries and Turkey were coming to Austria. Recently migrants and refugees from Afghanistan and Syria are arriving. They face several challenges in sport (culture, access to clubs, registrations, finance). Especially women of the last-named countries show limited participation in sports by now.
- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina** there are 17 recognized ethnic minorities (e.g., Albanians, Roma, Montenegrins, Czechs, Italians) and due to the nature of the war in the 90s where sides in the conflict were mostly divided into ethnic lines, this is also reflected in the educational system. This is divided on a political and ethnic basis which prevents most of the youth to have an opportunity to interact with their peers of different ethnic backgrounds. Further, due to economic problems and the lack of competitive leagues the participation of minorities and women respectively in sports clubs is limited.
- For **Croatia**, Serb are referred to as the biggest minority followed by the Italian, Roma, Albanian and Bosniak minorities. The Bosniak and Serb minorities are largely depicted as connected to religion: Bosniak are depicted as Muslims and Serbs as Orthodox. Croatia is also affected by the middle eastern migration wave, especially since the middle eastern wars started, while this recent refugee wave has been depicted as an economic and a threat to the national identity and security. It seems that minorities are participating ordinarily in the same sports clubs as the natives, while the Roma minority has around 20 sports organisations, mostly in areas with a high Roma population.
- The Irish Republic of Ireland, **Donegal** has a small proportion of “non-Irish nationals” (7.3% in 2016) about half of them of UK origin and the rest from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia. Those are mostly the ones that are reflected as “minorities”. Considering sports participation, there is a small gender gap thanks to

Map 1 \_Project-partners (a European view)



the investment in women in sports programmes, while for the same reasons and the lack of initiatives' development that engages many of the minorities, they are not fully participating in sports.

- **Greece** was always a place that hosted various nationalities from Africa, Asia, and Europe. Since 2014, due to the "refugees' crisis" and the unstable conditions of some neighboring countries, large numbers of migrants and refugees arrived in Greece, the large majority of whom were coming from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. By the general idea captured from the country, Roma, Albanians, Syrians, and

generally, migrants and refugees are the groups that are mostly considered as the major "minorities". Their participation in sports is depicted as limited. Although there are some endeavors from minorities themselves to shape their teams in sports like football or participate in organised sports clubs, these are in an amateur level and without an organised plan supported by the state.

- For **Northern Ireland** integral migration during the last decade has supplemented existing minority ethnic communities and changed the ethnic mix of many places, both urban and rural. The largest





minority ethnic communities are likely from Eastern Europe – particularly Poland and Lithuania – followed by Chinese, Irish Travellers, and migrants from Portugal, the Philippines, Somalia, and other African countries. Sports clubs work harder than ever to become more inclusive. Many new clubs were formed previously to specifically accommodate only certain ethnic minorities; however, this has improved significantly in football and across the sporting codes. Adult Female ethnic minority participation remains the biggest challenge.

- **Serbia** has officially 21 national minorities, among which are Montenegrins, Croats, Bunjevci, Bulgarians, Bosniaks, Hungarians, and Roma. The Republic of Serbia has been in the epicenter of the European refugee and migrant crisis which erupted in mid-2015, as a Balkan root to central and western Europe. Based on public opinion research from NDI (2018), it seems that among the Serbian-majority population there is a lack of personal interethnic interactions and lingering negative perceptions of minority communities. Discrimination against women in sports, lack of motivation, economic issues and fear of prejudiced behaviours are mostly the reasons why certain groups of youth do not participate in organised sports.

### Challenges for minorities' participation in the sports

#### context

The chapter on challenges regarding minorities' participation in a sports context is open and still written with daily facts and constantly emerging information. A general overview from the seven country-members of the present study depicts the limited participation of minorities in the field of organised sports, their need for inclusion, and the shortcomings in terms of state manipulations that are largely responsible for this condition. This reality is not based on a simple exploration of factors that impede minorities' participation in sports, instead, it remains a multifactorial phenomenon.

As reported by the Austrian participants, minorities' difficulties in terms of living to appropriate and permanent accommodation, food, and working issues are just the starting points of the conditions they must deal with. Moreover,

when it comes to refugees, their unstable state of citizenship, as "neither refugees nor guests" (poster of World Refugee Day), make them seek for securing their way of life, by settling in a country that could protect their rights and provide them with opportunities (Baban et al., 2016).

Sports speak the kind of language without words (Schinke et al., 2016), and they can positively contribute to racial equality (Green & Hardman, 2000), understanding and respect of cultural diversity (Culp, 2013), and as a result to the inclusion of vulnerable groups such as refugees or migrants (Whitley et al., 2016). Still, for the country-members of the present study, many recorded challenges keep minorities out of the sports clubs. Problems related to unequal access to sports clubs are included in those challenges, since *"there is a clear issue related to urban/rural divide, where children from urban areas have a much easier access to training, infrastructure and other means of sports activities, while children from rural areas have many difficulties starting from transportation and time management"* (participant from Bosnia and Herzegovina). These kinds of situations lead to discrimination regarding the available resources, the equipment, and the general accessibility level in organised sports activities. Lack of facilities is also a problem if we take into consideration the personal experience of an Austrian sports educator *"...we pay 500€ per semester for a basketball hall which is a lot, how could a refugee afford that?"*

Issues related to religion or culture are also captured and tend to lead to division and stereotypical thoughts either by the parents of natives or minorities. Although the aspect that *"children do not see the differences adults make..."* (participant from Serbia), native parents' great resistance on refugee children to attend ordinary schools or sports clubs is still a fact in Serbia and Greece, while it has been referred as a barrier in Bosnia and Herzegovina as "inherited ethnic issues" have an impact on parents' behaviour during sports events. Religious segregation is one of the main problems that mostly referred from Northern Ireland and Donegal and seems to be apparent both in the school system

and sports clubs. Differences in cultural issues have been reported as blockers for minorities' participation in sports clubs across all the country-members of this study, while



*“language is one of the biggest barriers, especially with the older kids”* as was highlighted by one of the PE teachers from Donegal. The same aspect is also shared by one of the refugee participants that live in Croatia as she focused on the lack of understanding of the natives’ language and the importance of that need by stating that *“...I’m somebody who had to communicate, who did not have the channels of communication. I understand that I can be different, and that was the point when I said I want to know, understand this language because that’s the only key for me”*.

Gender differences are also key points here as *“women cannot do sport for various reasons such as education, family, cultural, religious and/or personal reasons and do less sport”* (participant from Austria). In addition, participants from Serbia highlighted gender stereotypes as one of the main challenges for minorities, especially females, to participate in sports activities due to discriminatory practices that are dominant in the family, especially when it comes to mixed teams involving boys and girls together. Especially for the Syrian females, the lack of their participation in parts of social life is huge as *“not just children but also adults, and not only in sport but also for example attending English classes”*, taking into consideration the aspect of a community support worker in Donegal. However, the case of cricket seems to be a more balanced sport choice in Donegal, where *“... with female cricket players, don’t see much difference in terms of equal opportunities”* (community support workers from Donegal).

Another factor that also has an impact on the participation of minorities in sports clubs is the racist behaviours that

usually take place against them from the natives and are not so rare from the coaching or educational staff. Those kinds of behaviours have been recorded from participants representing all the country members of the present study. This problematic phenomenon starts from the level of the offered education as *“...professionals are not equipped to deal with cultural diversity and not only in sports, in kinder garden, in physics, in math... There are very few courses in universities that prepare future professionals on how to become teachers and then once they get in the working system, there is also very little in-service training in these topics”* (national authority participant from Greece). Racism is present in society and sports, but if they will not be highlighted and no effort is made to deal with it, perpetuation will simply continue. It was stressed by a coach who is working for an Austrian minority sports club as follows: *“We must confront people more with problems like racism and also show them that such problems exist because as long as they don’t see them, they think that they don’t exist”*.

**Main challenges for minorities’ participation in sports contexts**

- Unstable state of citizenship
- Unequal access to sport clubs (transportation, infrastructure)
- Lack of facilities
- Too expensive participation
- Communication problems
- Religious, cultural and gender issues
- Parents’ prejudices

**When sports professionals are working with cultural minorities**

**Feelings**

A professional environment with participants from a variety of cultures poses professional challenges. There are a lot of moments when working in multicultural sports contexts feels productive. Especially because *“... you learn about new things, meet new people, you grow as a person. It is also*

*encouraging to think in a more compassionate way for others and to grow also professionally...”* (coach from Croatia). One of the participants from Donegal highlighted personal values and the way that coaches or instructors choose to approach their athletes or students respectively determines the level of their professionalism. Respect, empathy, and



positive energy can always be helpful and creators of a nice climate and pleasant feelings during training according to the same participant.

Working in multicultural contexts and with vulnerable groups often brings up feelings of empowerment, hope, happiness, fulfillment, and enrichment. Sport is not only healing but also *"...does wonders when it comes to interethnic interaction among participating children especially in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its numerous issues on interethnic divide and problems derived from war and post-war period. Sport can be seen as a proper method of interaction among children/kids/youngsters that are coming from different ethnic backgrounds in terms of basic interaction, let alone the bigger picture in terms of the reconciliation process in Bosnia and Herzegovina"* (coach from Bosnia and Herzegovina).

There is also another perspective that is based on the lack of support and resources in the working base and creates conditions of disappointment, uncertainty, or burn-out. This feeling is best expressed by an NGO representative from Austria when he confessed that *"The NGOs can't do much either because they lack resources, I have worked 180 hours for my association in the last two months, and I lost this time in my private life"*. Further, a coach from a minority sports club in Austria referred that *"...the Ministry of Sport says they want to support and promote women's teams, but the applications are so difficult that many refrain from doing so"*.

The same feelings were depicted from the Serbian participants, who are working in sports contexts with vulnerable populations, and stated that there have been efforts to provide support to those

people and to make them feel accepted, however, it is still at an individual level. Feeling lonely and having no support of the community in their work make them often explain even to their closest environment why they chose to work with refugees and vulnerable groups at all. One of the most common occasions is the media reports on crimes committed against the local population by migrants. Such news is often false, and in a few cases when they are indeed true,

the crime is exaggerated to spread xenophobia and hate speech among the local population and create an unfavorable environment for the integration of minorities. That could maybe explain also native parents' distant behaviours and their reluctance to accept the joint attendance of their children and minorities children either at school or in sports clubs. Therefore, the work of people either in schools or in sports clubs where children of minorities also attend to becomes very difficult and causes unpleasant feelings and even anger.

A similar condition is also detected in Greece where anger and disappointment also arise because there are so many things that need to be different in society to be more inclusive. Starting by the educational system, the values that children are working with, the state's support on various programmes that promote social inclusion, and *"...the need to inform people [hosts] why refugee people are here, because there are a lot of stereotypes, for example, that they are going to steal our jobs, or they take advantage of the whole situation"* (coach from Greece). An NGO representative from Greece highlighted that most of the people working in multicultural sports contexts love their work and as a result, there are contradicted feelings emerging by enjoying the climate of diversity and having an initial interest or enthusiasm but having also to deal with some severe challenges that need to be faced within this working system make them deeply disappointed ending up becoming indifferent.

### **Challenges and causes**

In line with the unpleasant feelings already mentioned, an attempt will be made to record their causes. Participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina pointed out the little to no support (financial, infrastructural, and any other) coming from authorities on a state level with very few positive examples on a local level. The lack of support and funding is even more accentuated in rural areas and there is even a legislative obstacle in terms of the non-existence of law on sport on state, entity, or local level, that could help the sports structure development. Participants from Croatia also brought up the lack of financial support that often ends up all the responsibilities of sports programmes fall-



ing on the backs of the volunteers. They also recognize a similar lack of systematic policies at a state level and the delay based on the bureaucracy stated by one refugee adolescent who lives in Croatia claiming that *“We started going to school after Christmas, not right away, at the end of January. The first semester we didn’t go to school at all because we had to sort out the paperwork...”*

The long-term impact of sports programmes or else the black dot of what is called sustainability is present in all the country-members of this study. Participants from Austria and Greece mostly brought up the problem of short-term periods of sports programmes and the lack of opportunities for extension or repetition. This problem brings about disaffection as policies and not practices establishing multicultural contexts are needed. This is better described by a national authority participant from Greece who stated that *“...we feel so bad when we offer to some people an idea of how a sports programme should be and then we leave. So, sometimes I am wondering if it is worth working with some people for a short time, to raise their expectations and then leave them... It’s bad, to give them a piece of paradise and then send them back to hell!”*

All the participants highlighted the lack of policies and rules of sports clubs as well as the lack of system access services (e.g., educators, translators, equipment, materials, training in cultural understanding). Participants from Serbia focused on the lack of legal regulations. As an example, they cited the impossibility to register a foreigner as a professional athlete in a category of youth, and the fact that at an early-stage children from different populations are not provided with the same opportunities.

These challenges are now more highlighted than ever since the Covid-19 pandemic changed the landscape. This dimension mentioned by some participants from Northern Ireland, where people during the lockdowns discovered new ways of wasting their free time and sporting outside was one of them. People also are afraid of indoors and as a result, most of the organised sports clubs were down-graded. An additional point was made by the participants of Donegal for the after-pandemic era. Although they emphasized the importance of devoting the time that sports

activities deserve, they seemed skeptical about whether it would be a challenge to enlist volunteers as they will be used to getting their own time back.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for educated and sensitive professionals to work in sports clubs to promote equality and encourage the participation of every individual since *“...when a child is introduced to diversity from an early age, they cannot adopt any prejudices or express discrimination. When someone grows up in a multicultural community or is trained in a multicultural club, it is much easier for them to become versatile”* (NGO representative from Serbia).

Feelings of sport professionals
Professional growth (learning new things, feelings of encouragement)
Respect, empathy, positive energy
Empowerment, fulfilment, enrichment
Uncertainty, disappointment (bureaucracy, lack of economical support and staff)
Anger (scattering false news that create xenophobia)
Contradicted feelings (enthusiasm at first but after a short time dissatisfaction and/or indifference)
Challenges of sport professionals
Lack of systematic policies at state level
Absence of predictions for sustainability of sport programmes
Issues with system access services (equipment, educators, translators, organised materials)
Pandemic (Covid-19), people avoid indoors organised sports.
Lack of organised training for sport staff



## Key points of special training

Searching for the ideal coach/educator model is not the pathway here as knowledge, experience and personality can always create unique combinations. What we are looking for is to provide people working in multicultural contexts with our experience and knowledge to help them evolve personally and professionally. All the participants of the present study offered their pieces to this puzzle. One of the first issues that people working in such contexts should have in mind is always finding a way to

build up bridges of communication and recognize any flaws that seek solutions. More specifically, a sports educator from Austria underlined that *"...despite all the differences, we should build on what we have in common, we have to acknowledge the problems and not exclude them"*. Participants from Austria also valued the art of encouraging interaction and inclusiveness among the members of one group as well as the skill of providing them with the appropriate time to reflect on the activities they experienced.

A significant component of such training, according to the participants from Serbia, should be the possibility of follow-up and mentoring to address potential challenges at the moment they occur. These are called "teachable moments" and may not be in line with the predetermined goals of the instructor's everyday teaching plan, instead, they arise spontaneously. More interestingly, that kind of moment could be any socioculturally just or unjust incident that is revealed in or outside the class and is detected by the instructor. The main goal here for the instructor is to transform these moments into opportunities for reflection and learning for children. However, danger lurks for these moments to be considered irrelevant by the children, so the way that they are managed by the instructors remains always a challenge (Walton-Fisette et al., 2018).

Participants from Northern Ireland prioritized knowledge on specific cultural issues like gender issues, diets, dress codes, touching issues, or even language characteristics depending on the respective group. They also focused on internal work which encourages understanding of others' different

backgrounds and valued the contribution of the experiences that each member of a multicultural group can provide, as one of the coaches in Northern Ireland explained: *"...I did a lot of courses, but I believe in the value of learning from other people and bringing our experience to situations"*.

The inner will and desire that people should have when they work in such environments combined with learning to be patient, open to receiving new information, and willing to apply them to action are the main contributions from the Croatian participants. Further, participants from Donegal discussed a precious point, they shared as "positive leadership" and more specifically **having people who can represent and positively support the minority groups, while also creating a link to the various agencies and breaking down the barriers. Those people are so important as they build trust and relationships with marginalized groups, and they help agencies to understand more about diversity and cultural differences.**

The need for developing communication skills like active listening, positive reinforcement, and empathy were added from the participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Empathy was highlighted by the participants from each country member with a coach from Donegal underlying the distance from empathy to sympathy stating that *"...there is a very thin line between offering support in an empathic rather than sympathetic way, it is important to have an empathy of understanding the trauma that some groups have gone through"*.

Following the architecture of empathy that emerged from Decety and Jackson (2004), empathy is captured as a flexible skill or a method through which people can better understand the emotions of others combined with self-awareness and self-regulation. The good news is that empathy is cultivated through appropriate training and by investing time for inner development. Consequently, understanding of empathy mechanisms through which people express or block their emotions is generally important in coaching/teaching how much rather in training for dealing with culturally diverse contexts, as present participants also detected.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 1997, “life skills” have been valued as high contributors regarding social cohesion and resilience. Those kinds of skills can also encourage both well-being and interaction of children in multicultural contexts. Decision-making, effective communication, critical thinking, empathy, self-awareness, and dealing with emotions and stress are some of those skills that the participants of the present study also highlighted when it comes to working in multicultural sports contexts. For example, a coach from Greece explained that “...when you are working in a multicultural context, you need to be a professional of adaptation...for example you constantly need to adapt your skills, your communication and be prepared that you might have a plan which could be completely changed... you just jump into the unknown sometimes...”. She also added the importance of mental support to the professionals saying that “...professionals also need support in mental challenges”, a note that also came up from Austrian participants.

It seems like special training on teaching/coaching in multicultural sports contexts is nothing but simple. Participants’ contributions broadened the landscape, and they could be categorized in the model of cross-cultural skilled counseling that was developed by Sue and his colleagues (1982). Although in its original appearance it was

addressed to psychologists, it can be applied to any professional who desires to work in a multicultural context. Three competence domains are identified in this model to help professionals: (a) *attitudes* (e.g., biases, beliefs, personal awareness), (b) *knowledge* (e.g., receiving information about sociopolitical systems and restrictions that other people might face), and (c) *skills* (e.g., ways of developing communication, encouraging interaction, empathy). As such, for training professionals who work in multicultural contexts as comprehensively as possible, it would be wise to include strategies and practices that will cover all three areas mentioned above.

Special training – key points
Building communication skills (active listening, empathy, positive reinforcement)
Encouraging interaction and inclusiveness
Capturing and taking advantage of “teachable moments”
Focusing on the knowledge of various cultural issues (gender restrictions, nutrition, dress codes, touching issues)
Cultivating self-awareness and critical thinking
Developing positive leadership

## Ideas for good practices

After mapping the feelings and the challenges of the participants, this could be the right moment to present their suggestions regarding the kind of training they think is ideal for people who work in multicultural sports contexts to receive. Repeating the words of an NGO representative from Greece saying that “*Sports does work, even within different political or cultural contexts...not sports per se, only if somebody knows how to use sports.... It’s like a knife, it can cut bread, but it’s also wounding.*”

*It depends on what sport we are talking about and on what activities...It’s not football that unites, it’s certain forms...”,* an effort will be conducted to promote the healing side of sports. Participants’ suggestions will be presented regard-

ing good practices for the social inclusion of vulnerable populations through sports.

Starting by approaching a traditional aspect of the culture of the group members, participants from Donegal proposed to use moving activities like dance, combined with the rhythm of various traditional music, to make individuals feel more comfortable. That way, individuals will also learn about new kinds of music, and this could create intimacy among the group. The goal of specific sessions could always be to exchange experiences either athletic ones or not and learn about each other’s cultures, religions, beliefs, and identities. That was an issue captured by the participants of Northern Ireland. Additionally, using keywords from different languages to also serve the same goal of



feeling intimate and welcomed was aroused by the participants from Croatia. They also proposed professionals create mixed groups of individuals (either of gender and nationality) and if we are talking about children's groups to also find ways to cooperate with parents, because of their huge impact on their children. Following the same rules for all, so that no one feels underprivileged was an additional point of the Croatian participants, which was broadened by the Austrians with the trust-building and role-playing activities that could sometimes serve the aim of marginalization on purpose. Through these kinds of activities, various behaviours can be triggered; thus, professionals could create open discussions by analyzing occasions of winning or losing and guide individuals to self-awareness and self-development (Samalot-Rivera, 2014).

One certain kind of methodology used on football but could also be flexible for use in other areas is the "football three", which was pinned up by an NGO representative from Greece. This methodology is separated into three parts: (a) all individuals decide in advance the rules of how they wish to play football; (b) they play and (c) they score each other. The special about this method is the combination of fair play and scoring, after which the self-reflection process could follow through open or group discussions.

The aspect of a PE teacher from Serbia who revealed that the deeper and proper intention of sports professionals working in multicultural contexts "...cannot only be to create a football legend, it is more important to create legendary personalities among those children", represents the need for well-educated professionals with fresh ideas on the spot. For example, inviting players from the national team to meet individuals in our multicultural group and talk about their experiences or answer their questions, as participants from Serbia suggested, could provide them with the opportunity to develop their self-awareness, empathy, and goal-setting skills. Other ideas came up from the participants of Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina, who proposed the organisation of cross country or inter-country meetings, workshops, and training with multiethnic and multicultural children mixed, under the umbrella of a sports event. Finally, what professionals should always have in mind is the impact of each event on their group, while being flexible and adaptive is

an extra advantage to their work. Participant's ideas of good practices are also presented in tip-reminder forms as follows:

#### "Football three"

1. Participants decide about the rules
2. They play
3. They score each other

(Greek participant)

Allowing different cultures to showcase a **sport/dance** from their culture.  
(Participant from Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Activities of:

**Role-playing**  
**Trusting building**

(Austrian participant)

Use of:  
Traditional **music**  
**Dance** activities  
**Rhythm**  
(Participant from Donegal)

Organising cross country or inter country meetings, **workshops** and trainings with multiethnic and **multicultural children mixed**.

(Participants from Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Inviting **athletes** from national teams to **share experiences**.

(Serbian participant)

- Using **key words** from various cultural backgrounds.
- Cooperation with **parents**.
- **Same rules** for everyone.

(Croatian participant)

## Additional sharings – Policies

The journey of exploring participants' perspectives on social inclusion of minorities through sports around the seven country-members of Europe that participated in the present study is almost completed. Some additional thoughts of them are expressed here to help the role of sports professionals in the process of inclusion.

Despite the mixed feelings that are captured from participants in Northern Ireland, an encouraging tone is generally eavesdropped, where inclusion and opportunities in sports are greater than ever. Coaches expressed that there is not enough authority action to assist inclusion with challenges of racism. Their feeling was about more funding and education that could assist this issue. On the other side, PE teachers seemed more optimistic concerning access and inclusion of pupils from diverse cultural backgrounds into schools. Participants were in the same line regarding the action of NGOs, as multiple programmes are taking place challenging racism and sectarianism and promoting inclusion, mostly through football. Some sports such as hockey, golf, and cricket, deemed middle-class sports, would need to improve in this area. Although it seems that much of the programmes are deemed to be Belfast-centric, more programmes around the whole of Northern Ireland would be beneficial. Knowledge of both inclusion issues and opportunities are considered of high importance since some communities do not realize what is available on their doorstep. This is more obvious from the comment of an authority representative who referred that *"...there is superb work going on within communities, but it is not known, we must make people aware of the opportunities that are available"*.

The suggestions of participants from Donegal regarding authorities' activities include opening doors for employment opportunities, easier access to the educational system, where introduction is vital for the learning process of people from different cultures, and more representation from different communities (e.g., in the Sports Governing Council, from ethnic minority group). They count as crucial to broaden the channels of contact and inform people about the available support for sports participation, while

there is the feeling of *"...a discrimination between sports that the government is not dealing with"*, as reported by one of the coaches. It is also observed that the action of certain NGOs is influenced by national or religious issues and as a result, some sports (e.g., rugby, cricket) are less inclusive. A suggested idea on that is working towards having more exposure to different sports, different cultures, different traditions on communities' level and bringing groups together to work and create better relationships with each other.

In Serbia, participants believe that it is necessary for the state to take responsibility when it comes to financing programmes that have a component of multiculturalism, and to prioritize them over

other projects and programmes in the field of sports. They also reminded that the Ministry in charge of sports is also in charge of youth and that these two components need to be better connected and help create a space for youth work, not just for support to professional athletes. Participants also recognize the efforts of NGOs in this field but point out that a particular challenge lies in the fact of sustainability of related programmes that mostly discourage refugee children from future participation. Additionally, they pointed out that it is necessary to work on popularising sports activities, regardless of the sport in question, especially at the time when classes are held online which limits physical contact and social connections among children. They noticed that many children exchanged physical activity for the activity on social networks and feel that a campaign to promote sports could maybe start on social networks.

Participants from Croatia highlighted the need for more organised authorities' action through providing financial support to sports institutions and educating professionals who work in multicultural sports contexts. They observed that Croatia is considered as a temporary place of staying or a stop on the way for Western Europe for many minorities and as a result, it leads to less motivation for programmes to provide their social inclusion. Further, they





underlined the key role of NGOs' action for social inclusion and their support mostly by volunteers. This is also the case of minorities' sports clubs in Bosnia and Herzegovina whose work is depending on one or few persons' enthusiasm, without sustainable infrastructure, so there are cases when an individual can't or won't continue with this work and the club basically stops working. Even though sport can overcome divisions, especially ethnic-based divisions that are omnipresent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, participants report minimal support from the national state on a financial or infrastructural level with very few positive examples on a local level.

The need for a more organised action both at a local and a national level is declared by the Greek participants. Lack of coordinated policies and laws for minorities' inclusion and multicultural sports clubs has been reported, while there are plenty of suggestions for various programmes. Still, the sustainability of these programmes remains a dark spot. Some efforts, especially from NGOs, are present using street sports like football, or activities celebrating diversity like local festivals where minorities introduce to the natives

their sports culture combined with traditional music and food, but still, organised national support is missing. That was also supported by an NGO representative saying that *"...I see that there is not that kind of tendency to create steady programmes or curriculum changes, based on policies that exist"*. On a similar vibe, participants from Austria express disappointment when it comes to organised and stable support from the state. They focus on the lack of training offered to the professionals or their trainers that work in multicultural sports contexts from the authorities' level. They referred little funding for sustainable programmes, but they also underline the lack of interest from the professionals' side (e.g., coaches/teachers) to develop their role regarding their work in multicultural sports contexts. An Austrian coach on a female football team clarified that *"The training for trainers contains almost no pedagogical approaches"*, which is a strong missing tool for the professionals, while an NGO representative comparing this situation to some years before, added that *"...there are positive changes compared to 5 years ago, but still too few."*

## Concluding remarks

Social inclusion of minorities maintains a current issue that always seeks its' development, especially through sports which can play a decisive role. However, this depends on the organisation and the support of people who have key positions but also on the willingness and the effort of all. Sport Together is a project co-funded by Erasmus+ of the European Union aimed to strengthen social inclusion of vulnerable groups with a focus on young people and girls and to increase participation of those groups – in particular refugees, migrants, and minorities – in grass-roots sport through training, education, awareness-raising, capacity-building of sport stakeholders and cross-community youth sport interventions. Therefore, the first step was to detect information from the seven countries-partners of the project (Austria, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Donegal, Northern Ireland, and Croatia), regarding the context of minorities' participation in sports and the missing points that need to be improved to each region.

Following participants' sharings regarding authorities or NGOs' action on the field, it is observed that across various European countries the landscape does not differ that much. There is still the need for more actions, better organisation, guarantees for sustainable programmes, greater emphasis on the quality of education that people working in multicultural sports contexts receive, and generally moving to the mentality of more inclusive societies to which sports activities can play a decisive role.

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