Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy Journal

Vol. 2 / No. 1 (2024)

UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA, FACULTY OF LAW
Institute of Sports Law, Sports Policies and Sports Diplomacy &
Jean Monnet Chair in EU Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy

in partnership with

Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy Journal

ISSN (*Online*) 2975-6235

UDC 3:796
DOI https://doi.org/10.30925/slpdj

Vol. 2 **No. 1**

Rijeka, 2024

Co-funded by
the European Union

REFUGEES IN EUROPEAN GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL: FROM ASSUMPTIONS TO EVIDENCE

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UDC 341.43::796
DOI https://doi.org/10.30925/slpdj.2.1.2
Received on July 5, 2024
Accepted on July 16, 2024
Original scientific paper

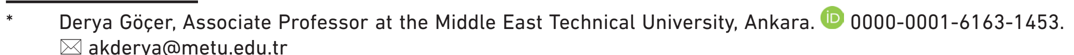
Abstract

Since 2015-2016, when the European continent underwent an unprecedented peak in demands for asylum, grassroots football clubs have been at the forefront in offering refugees a place of first contact with their new host society. The perception of the impact that their initiatives may have had on their target population is however almost exclusively based on some widely shared basic assumptions drawn from anecdotal evidence and, marginally, on a small body of literature grounded in local studies of ethnographic nature.
The article recapitulates the inception and implementation of an original mixed-method research survey within the framework of two successive practice-oriented projects led by civil society actors and supported by the ERASMUS+ Sport funding scheme. Following a literature review, it describes the survey design, analyses the findings, and discusses the added value and limits of this research focused on the principal target group of volunteers in European grassroots football.

Keywords: Grassroots Football, Volunteers, Migration, Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Integration, Inclusion, ERASMUS+

1. INTRODUCTION: FOOTBALL AND MIGRANTS

Since the invention of modern football in England in 1863, the game has been indissociable from the phenomenon of migration. As Matthew Taylor and Pierre Lanfranchi recalled in the title of their book published in 2001, humans have always been "moving with the ball."[1] At the same time, the ball itself was moving with the people who kicked it. It travelled in the suitcases of businessmen and engineers, entrepreneurs and teachers, first from the British Isles, but also very soon from Switzerland and Central Europe, who were instrumental in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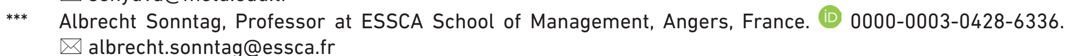
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1 Matthew Taylor and Pierre Lanfranchi, *Moving with the Ball* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

spreading the game around the world.[2]

The fast dissemination of football was greatly helped by the globalisation wave of the end of the 19th century. International business underwent a massive expansion, for a good part directly linked to the economic and human flows generated by colonialism, but also facilitated by innovations and cost reduction in the field of transport, and by an increasing number of free trade agreements.

Since then, football has never ceased to be a profoundly cross-cultural and transnational social practice.

On the one hand, the remarkably quick professionalisation of football created a whole new labour market with opportunities for those willing to seize lucrative opportunities to sell their talent elsewhere. As early as in the first decades of the 20th century, the international circulation of players became a major issue, especially in Europe, to which foreign players tended to converge. Today the screening of this market, as carried out on a regular basis by the CIES Football Observatory in its reports on expatriate players, delivers evidence for continued growth.[3]

On the other hand, for all those who had migrated for other reasons, amateur grassroots football provided an avenue for social integration. All over the twentieth century, labour migration – often, though not exclusively, in the direction of Western Europe – raised the question of the social integration of these migrants and their families in the host societies. Among historians, there is a consensus today that football, together with other sports and cultural activities on the local level, was one of the major fields of everyday culture in which such integration could be successfully negotiated over longer periods of time.[4]

In the 21st century, European countries – many of which had been emigration countries for centuries – encounter a very different kind of human migration flow: a massive increase of what is referred to as "forced migration,"[5] stemming from a large variety of countries of origin and reaching Europe both over the Mediterranean and the so-called "Balkan route."

2 Paul Dietschy, *Histoire du football* (Paris: Perrin, 2010).

3 Raffaele Poli, Loïc Ravenel, Roger Besson, "Global study of football expatriates (2017-2023)," *CIES Football Observatory Monthly Report*, n°8 (May 2023), https://football-observatory.com/MonthlyReport85, consulted June 2024. See also the interactive «Atlas of Migration» by the same authors https://football-observatory.com/Tool-Migration.

4 See for instance Dietmar Hüser and Ansbert Baumann, "Fußfassen durch Fußball in der Fremde? Arbeitsmigration und Amateurfußball im Frankreich und Westdeutschland der langen 60er Jahre," *Lendemains* 41, no. 161 (2016): 7-18; or Daniel Huhn and Stefan Mezger, "Von Kuzorra bis Özil. Der Ruhrgebietsfußball als Aushandlungsort von Zugehörigkeit," *Lendemains* 41, No. 161 (2016): 38-50. See also Diethelm Blecking, "Integration through Sports? Polish Migrants in the Ruhr", *International Review of Social History* 23, no. S1 (2015): 275–293, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859015000401, and in the same publication, Marion Fontaine, "Football, Migration, and Coalmining in Northern France, 1920s–1980s", *International Review of Social History* 23, no. S1 (2015): 253–273, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859015000395. For the importance of football fandom for 2nd and 3rd generation migrants, see Nina Szogs, *Football Fandom and Migration. An Ethnography of Transnational Practices and Narratives in Vienna and Istanbul* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017).

5 Defined by the European Commission as "A migratory movement in which an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes," https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/forced-migration_en, consulted June 2024.

The term almost systematically used by media and politicians to describe this unprecedented challenge is "refugee crisis," a term that is, however, somewhat misleading, since it implicitly blames refugees for the political and logistical crisis that their arrival provoked in a Europe that was politically unprepared and not up to the task[6].

Since 2015-2016, when the European continent underwent an unprecedented peak in demands for asylum, the reception of refugees has consistently remained present in the minds of policymakers, media, and public opinion across all member-states, whatever their respective governments' attitudes and policies in the field. Since February 2022, the sudden need to welcome additional millions of refugees fleeing the Ukrainian territory following the Russian aggression, has further increased the salience of the issue.

Given the number of individuals asking for asylum and protection, many governments, however well-meaning and organised they may be, are overwhelmed with the burden, and strongly dependent on the reactivity, goodwill, and humanist values of civil society when it comes to initiating and accompanying the integration of the newcomers in their new environment.

Needless to say, one of the most widespread and visible components of organised civil society, whether in city centres, suburban districts, or rural areas, are football clubs, set up, administered, and kept alive by countless volunteers.

When the great anthropologist Desmond Morris, at the end of the 1970s, set out to describe *The Soccer Tribe*, he jokingly wondered what the pilot of an alien spaceship would make of all the rectangular green patches spread across the European territory.[7] Their omnipresence is, of course, due to the immense popularity of the game, which has made football, and most of all the clubs or associations that organise its practice locally, an integral aspect of cultural and social life. In some places, people would go so far as to regard them as the backbone of the local community.

These football clubs and the volunteers who drive them are at the focus of the research for this article. Over the last ten years, they have responded with remarkable reactivity, motivation, and determination to the challenge of offering refugees a place of first contact with their new host society outside state administration and bureaucracy. To no one's surprise, it turned out that football's popularity and simplicity, as well as its accessibility without significant language skills and the emotions of pleasure and joy that are associated with the game, were conducive to a large variety of initiatives, some of which were actively (and financially) supported by federations or public authorities, others entirely shouldered by the clubs themselves.

Based on a large variety of anecdotal evidence, such as spontaneous feedback on successful initiatives, individual testimonies by beneficiaries and/or volunteers, self-reporting by federations and foundations, or credible claims by activist NGOs, both policymakers and civil society actors, as well as the football community in its largest sense, have formed a consensus over recent years on the potential of football for facilitating the integration of newcomers in their host society.

6 Andrea Réa, Marco Martiniello, Allessandra Mazzola, Bart Meuleman. *The refugee reception crisis: Polarized opinions and mobilizations* (Brussels: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2019).

7 Desmond Morris, *The Soccer Tribe* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981).

When a major political stakeholder like Aydan Özoğuz, Commissioner for Immigration, Refugees and Integration at the German Chancellery from 2013 to 2018, declares that football has "the special power of bringing together people across cultural differences and thus strengthen social cohesion,"[8] she simultaneously draws on and gives further credit to a commonly held assumption. Well-known civil society organisations, especially of transnational nature, such as the FARE network (Football Against Racism), ISCA (the International Sport and Culture Association), or the European Sport and Citizenship think-tank, regularly insist on the use of football as a powerful "vehicle" or "tool" for social inclusion.[9]

The aim of this contribution is to question these shared assumptions and verify their validity through research conducted within the work programme of two successive ERASMUS+ projects carried out over a period of 54 months by consortia mainly composed of civil society organisations from a significant variety of European countries bus also including the three individuals from academia who co-author this article.

The overarching goal of our research was to change perspective. Rather than conducting participant observation or interviewing refugees, we chose as target group of our research the individuals who, as volunteers in clubs, associations, or other civil society organisations, are actively involved in offering football activities to refugees. A significant number of preparatory meetings and interviews (2019-2021) allowed us to verify that the members of this target group are perfectly capable of adopting a posture of critical distance to their own work and the potential impact it may produce.

Our main research question was to verify whether the critical reflection on football activities for refugees by those who put them into place would confirm the widely shared assumptions about their benefits mainly based on anecdotal evidence.

A secondary research question was whether, based on data collected among the volunteers, scenarios of successful outcome could be identified, enabling the project consortium to formulate meaningful recommendations to policymakers.

We start with a few terminological clarifications, followed by a short summary of the two projects, and a literature review including both scientific studies – sociological or ethnographical approaches that have critically investigated the benefits and limits of football activities for refugees – and available reports of "good practices" in the field. We then describe and justify our methodological approaches to the topic, before moving on to present the findings of a survey that, hopefully, provides a meaningful analysis of the perception that grassroots football actors themselves may have of the impact of their own volunteering activities.

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8 As quoted in Deutscher Fußball-Bund (DFB), *Willkommen im Verein! Fussball mit Flüchtlingen* (Frankfurt: DFB, 2016):3, https://www.dfb.de/fileadmin/_dfbdam/117987-115339-DFB_Fluechtlingsfussball_barrierefrei_2016.pdf, consulted June 2024.

9 See for instance FARE network, *Inspire toolkit to working with refugee women through football* (London: FARE, 2017) :3, https://refugeesandfootball.org/wp-content/uploads/INSPIRE4ALL_Toolkit_.pdf, consulted June 2024; or the numerous occurrences of the term "tool" in the *Sport and Citizenship Review No. 56* (June 2023). In the UNHCR Sport Strategy 2022-2026, entitled "More than a Game", the term "tool," in its singular and plural form, occurs 28 times (https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/our-partners/sport-partners/unhcr-sport-strategy-2022-2026), consulted June 2024.

2. THE DELICATE SEMANTICS OF INTEGRATION AND MIGRATION

Football as a tool for the social integration of migrants brings together two semantic fields – "integration" and "migration" – which are characterised by a good deal of conceptual confusion. Key terms are regularly misunderstood and misused, most often for lack of knowledge, without bad intention, but also frequently for ideological purposes depending on political agendas.

Both semantic fields are also treacherous lexical grounds: in principle they consist in international words borrowed from Latin, yet, they have very different connotations and nuances in different national (and political) environments.

To start with, the word "migrant" is supposed to be a perfectly neutral term, since it does not refer to reasons for which an individual has moved to another country, but it is important to take into account that today it carries, in various political and linguistic contexts, a negative undertone. Moreover, it does not have any legal meaning and does not make a person eligible to any judiciary status.

For practical purposes, this article will use the term "refugee" as a convenient and semantically neutral[10] umbrella term for newly arrived migrants of different categories. It is also the term most frequently used by the football volunteers and associative structures who were part of our investigation. We are of course well aware that "refugee" refers to a legal status, which many of the individuals seeking asylum may not be granted yet.

There is also a quite some semantic confusion when it comes to describing the ultimate objective of using football as a gateway to a new society. Words like "inclusion," "integration," or "assimilation" have a sensitive history and give way to multiple interpretations. This article will use both "integration," understood as a two-way process engaging both the newcomers and the host society, implying rights and obligations on both sides, and necessarily affecting both sides and "inclusion," understood as the desirable goal of a process of social integration of newcomers in their host society. "Inclusion" enables newcomers to fully take part in society, on an equal footing with locals.

Finally, the article uses the term "football club" as a generic term for all types of grassroots football organisations, where the game is played on an amateur level. "Club" is used as a shortcut for all kinds of local associations, registered or not, which organise football activities of any kind, on a regular and competitive basis, or spontaneously, outside competition. No terminological difference is made between clubs that are solely focused on football and clubs that also offer other sports.

Grassroots football clubs are generally run by volunteers, the principal target group of our research. "Volunteers" are understood as individuals who commit time and energy for the benefit of their club and the people who participate in its football activities. By definition,

10 Just how sensitive the entire semantic field has become may be illustrated by a lexical shift in Germany, where the literal translation of refugee, "*Flüchtling,*" ended up being perceived as possessing a condescending undertone and was replaced in many documents and speeches by "*Geflüchtete*" (literally: "people who have fled").

volunteering activities are undertaken of an individual's free will, without payment or remuneration.

3. THE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT: FOUR AND A HALF YEARS ON FIRE

The research at the basis of this article was carried out within the framework of two successive projects, the idea of which was elaborated following an international event on refugees in grassroots football that brought together NGO activists, an interdisciplinary mix of scholars, and refugee football players in October 2017 in Nantes University. The result was the "FIRE" project, FIRE standing for "Football Including Refugees in Europe," The project was designed in 2018 and carried out between January 2019 and June 2021, and it led to a follow-up project named "FIRE+," launched in January 2021 and concluded in June 2023.[11] Both projects were funded by the ERASMUS+ Sport Programme, and coordinated by the European think-tank Sport and Citizenship.

Like the coordinator, all partners were not-for-profit civil society organisations – football federations, foundations, NGOs, and associations – with a keen interest in the pragmatic, concrete results of the project work, such as benchmarking and exchange of good practices, the testing of so-called "pilot interventions" (selected and monitored grassroots football initiatives for the benefit of a refugee public), the organisation of public "multiplier" events in their respective national or regional constituencies, and the development of a "Massive Open Online Course" (MOOC), a free open-access self-learning tool targeted at European volunteers willing to engage in refugee-related activities but unsure how to go about it and eager to develop their relevant knowledge and skills.[12]

The authors of this article were the only academics among the fourteen members of the two successive project consortia, one of them being implied from the very initiation of the first project, the two others joining the FIRE+ project in 2021. As is quite often the case in such projects, academic research is not the primary purpose of the endeavour. Scientific expertise is expected to serve the overall societal objectives of the project, rather than being a goal in itself. While it is rewarding, and actually impactful, to make knowledge, methods, empirical work, and findings available to end users in civil society, researchers have to put up with a variety of difficulties, such as "diverging temporalities, heterogeneity of expectations and roles, a technical evaluation and validation framework,", as Noemi Garcia-Arjona and Pim Verschuuren recently summarised it in an unpublished conference paper.[13] According to Matthieu Delalandre and Julie Demeslay, reporting on their experience of a project with the French fencing federation, the "stance of the expert-researcher in an environment of social pressure" permanently raises issues of "legitimacy," requiring frequent efforts of

11 The six-month overlap of the two projects in the first semester of 2021 is solely due to the contingencies of the COVID-19 pandemic.

12 The MOOC is accessible on the international CANVAS platform. It includes seven complete learning modules corresponding to a learning experience of seven weeks, based on a previously elaborated needs assessment, with a total of 40 original video clips of a total duration of 4h20, 23 quizzes and tests, and 20 application exercises in a booklet named "personal toolkit."

13 Noemi Garcia-Arjona and Pim Verschuuren, "Challenges of scientific participation in European projects: the SCORE experience (Sporting Cities Opposing Racism in Europe)," unpublished conference paper, 18th Sport&EU conference, Angers, 25 June 2024.

"justification."[14]

The initial FIRE project did not have any plans for a scientific outcome. Academic expertise and input were certainly more than welcome, and there was no doubt that pedagogical expertise and know-how were indispensable for creating a full-fledged MOOC, but there was no component of a genuine research project. At the same time, the project allowed for multifarious opportunities of original data collection, both in the form of expert interviews and testimonies from actors of the field. This data was collected in a structured way during the preparation of expert video scripts or recording of spontaneous testimonials for the MOOC (involving a total of 38 different international interlocutors who happened to respect a perfect gender parity), but also in a more informal manner during keynotes, symposiums and roundtable discussions with a significant number of individuals attending the ten public events in a variety of European cities,[15] as well as in the feedback from grassroots clubs that conducted a "pilot intervention." The data thus collected was fed into the different modules of the MOOC, but it also underpinned the research conducted when the follow-up project FIRE+ decided to include an original survey into its work programme and flag it as one if its main "intellectual outcomes." The objective, methodology and findings of this survey are discussed in sections 5 and 6 of this article.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the field of football and the social inclusion of refugees comes in two formats. On the one hand there is a flurry of non-academic reports on good practices, especially on a European level, as well as so-called "toolkits," a term that is omnipresent in the ERASMUS+ Sport ecosystem and refers to good-practices guidelines published and circulated by civil society actors as the tangible outcome and legacy of a collaborative transnational project. On the other hand, there is a relatively small number of academic publications grounded in solid theoretical frameworks, most often based on local case studies, and applying ethnographic fieldwork or similar methods.

4.1. NON-ACADEMIC REPORTS

One of the first good-practices reports that were published immediately in the wake of the vast influx of refugees in 2015/16 was aptly entitled *Mapping of good practices relating to social inclusion of migrants through sport.*[16] Commissioned by the DG Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture of the European Commission, it was produced by the ECORYS consultancy located in Rotterdam. Following a concise literature review and some expert interviews, the report assesses 63 projects and interventions carried out between 2008 and 2016 aiming at the social inclusion of migrants, with a strong focus on the link between sport and employability (educational and vocational training, personal and social development, or volunteering

14 Matthieu Delalandre and Julie Demeslay, "Concilier recherche académique et expertise: retour sur une expérience d'enquête auprès du pôle France d'escrime," *Sciences sociales et sport*, 2021/2 (N° 18): 21-38.

15 Besides Brussels (four times), events were held in Glasgow, Bucharest, Madrid, Rome, Dublin, and Frankfurt.

16 Ecorys, *Mapping of good practices relating to social inclusion of migrants through sport. Final report to the DG Education and Culture of the European Commission*, (Brussels: European Commission, 2016), 99 pages, https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f1174f30-7975-11e6-b076-01aa75ed71a1, consulted June 2024.

capacity building in sport).

Two years later, on the occasion of the FARE network's 2018 *#FootballPeople* action weeks, UEFA followed suit with a similar report named *"Football and Refugees. Addressing key challenges."*[17] It was the outcome of a seminar held in Ireland by a UEFA Study Group Scheme on the issue, presenting 33 good practices from a total of 14 member federations, all from Western European countries plus Malta and Greece). The most interesting aspect of the report is its structure, with eight sections responding to what are perceived as the most pressing needs by actors of the field and presenting useful takeaways from these initiatives by national federations.

Beyond such reports, there is, as mentioned above, a remarkable number of "toolkits" or "guides" produced by beneficiaries of public funding streams. Two of them may be mentioned here as illustrations for this type of publications. The first one was authored in 2018 by the Berlin-based NGO Camino on behalf of the partners of the Erasmus+ Project "Sport Welcomes Refugees," coordinated by the Sport Inclusion Network (SPIN).[18] Through 40 pages, it provides insight into the political context of the project partners' home countries (Finland, Portugal, Ireland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Austria, and Hungary), before presenting 33 good practices from these countries, a third of which includes football. Beyond the description of the very heterogeneous sample of initiatives, the document also provides a concise "checklist" that lists criteria for successful attempts to "include refugees in and through sports," meant to "serve as guidelines for high-quality sports activities."

Even prior to the migration peak of 2015, the European Organisation for Grassroots Sports (ENGSO), published a guide on the "Social inclusion of migrants and ethnic minorities,"[19] resulting from a transnational project conducted within the framework of the EU Preparatory Actions in the Field of Sport between 2011 and 2012 (these were the days before the launch of ERASMUS+ Sport). The document, which is based on surveys, interactive workshops, and interviews with stakeholders, identifies "key elements of successful diversity management" and illustrates them with a total of 13 different projects that are presented as examples of good practice.

Finally, there are also online bottom-up platforms that bring together a large variety of individual local practices for the purposes of benchmarking and inspiration. The best example is no doubt the FARE network's "Refugees and Football" database,[20] which refers to an impressive number of small-scale initiatives from 26 countries. Contrary to the majority of good-practices guides or reports that adopt a multisport perspective, this platform is, like the research carried out within the FIRE+ project, entirely focused on football.

17 UEFA, *Football and Refugees. Addressing key challenges*, (Nyon: UEFA, 2018), 44 pages, https://www.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/uefaorg/General/02/57/60/20/2576020_DOWNLOAD.pdf, consulted June 2024.

18 Victoria Schwenzer, *Sport Welcomes Refugees: A Guide to Good Practice in Europe* (Berlin: Camino, 2018), 44 pages, https://sportinclusion.net/files/SWR_Camino_GoodPracticeGuide_2018_web.pdf, consulted June 2024.

19 ENGSO, *Creating a Level Playing Field. Social Inclusion of Migrants and Ethnic Minorities in Sport,* (Brussels: Drifosett, 2012), 48 pages, https://adsdatabase.ohchr.org/IssueLibrary/EUROPEAN%20COMMISSION_Creating%20a%20level%20playing%20field%20project.%20Social%20Inclusion%20of%20Migrants%20and%20Ethnic%20Minorities%20in%20Sport.pdf, consulted June 2024.

20 FARE network, "Refugees and Football database", https://farenet.org/our-work/refugees-and-football, consulted June 2024.

While there is no doubt that all these reports on good practices may provide an added value to volunteers wishing to take example on apparently successful initiatives, they are of little help to academic research, as they simply add to the anecdotal evidence that feeds the shared assumptions about the benefits of sport/football for refugees, without including a reflective evaluation of the intended impact of the activities on their target group. All of the reports, without exception, are published by organisations that have a vested interest in promoting the assumptions rather than questioning them.

4.2. ACADEMIC LITERATURE

As Enrico Michelini rightly observed in the conclusion of his recent book on the sporting practices of forced migrants, "the landscape of research is fragmented in a multitude of small-scale studies."[21] Needless to say, the sheer diversity of these explorative projects embedded in small local communities makes it difficult to aggregate findings or exploit the comparative potential of this patchwork. Moreover, national approaches to the issue vary widely,[22] backed by "contrasting political philosophies"[23] that pursue different aims and use different vocabularies.

Still, some patterns emerge from a handful of studies that have been influential in shaping the academic discussion of the impact of sport in general, or football in particular, on forced migrants in their new host society.

One of the most-quoted publications was written by the British cultural sociologist Chris Stone following an ethnographic three-year study (2010-2013) in Sheffield on behalf of the NGO *Football Unites, Racism Divides* (FURD). He gave his carefully crafted *Report on the Role of Football in the Lives of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers* the title *A shared sense of belonging*[24], an outcome which he understood as "the interconnection between cultural, communal and personal aspects of life that make people feel able to express themselves freely and see themselves as an equal" (page 75). In detail, he identified five major benefits of football for forced migrants: routine (consistency, regularity, normality), catharsis (evacuation of stress, relief from pressure), sociality (channels of interaction, in-group cohesion), empowerment (control, self-confidence), and plurality (the coexistence of difference and sameness, repetitiveness and unpredictability, challenge and comfort, frustration and success).

In a more distinctly Bourdieusian approach, applied to the Australian environment, Ramón

21 Enrico Michelini, *Sport, Forced Migration and the 'Refugee Crisis'* (Abington: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2023), 89.

22 William Gasparini and Giovanna Russo, "Integration by Sport and Physical Activities in Europe: An Introduction", *Culture e Studi del Sociale* 6, no. 2 (2021): 229–44, https://www.cussoc.it/journal/article/view/203.

23 Julien Puech, François Le Yondre, Jane Freedman, "Typology of European Sports Programmes for Welcoming Migrants: Contrasting Political Philosophies," *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 24, (2023): 1381–1411. See also the remarkable French-German comparative ethnographic study on the inclusion of refugees in grassroots football by Julien Puech, "L'accueil des migrants par le sport. Les philosophies politiques des dispositifs d'accueil par le sport en Europe et leurs réceptions sensibles par les migrants" (PhD diss., Université de Rennes, 2024), https://theses.hal.science/tel-04642277, consulted June 2024.

24 Chris Stone, *Football – A shared sense of belonging* (Sheffield: FURD, 2014), 88 pages, https://furd.org/uploads/files/Final_Research_Report-_low_res.pdf, consulted June 2024. See also Chris Stone, "Utopian community football? Sport, hope, and belongingness in the lives of refugees and asylum-seekers", *Leisure Studies* 37, no 2 (2018): 171-183, https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2017.1329336.

Spaaij (Victoria University Melbourne), draws on concepts like "habitus" and "capital" to make sense of his observations of sport in the lives of refugees. Like Stone, Spaaij and his co-authors structure their findings in a series of identifiable benefits, such as relief (to alleviate exclusion and alienation), connectedness (to experience group solidarity), self-esteem (to gain new social and cultural capital), transferable benefits (to find access to non-football related spaces). [25] Their findings are confirmed by other interesting small-scale studies in very different local settings like the ones collected in a recent special issue of the Italian journal *Culture e Studi del Sociale*[26] published in 2021.

It is worth mentioning, though, that the authors also insist on the undeniable ambiguity of sport's capacity to foster social integration of migrants, which is always "conditional and context-dependent." For them, "any attempt to use sport to promote social inclusion must be informed by a critical awareness of its strengths and limitations as a social practice and cultural form."[27]

A more modest, but rather revealing, 2014 research working paper based on fieldwork conducted in Glasgow by a collective of master students from the Oxford-based Refugees Studies Centre,[28] explicitly draws on Robert Putnam's theory of social capital,[29] differentiating between "inward social capital" (emotional resources and ability for capacity building in the social environment) and "outward social capital" (which includes both the capacity of bonding within a social group and bridging between different groups). As will be seen later, in the discussion of the survey findings, this distinction becomes particularly meaningful in the eyes of the volunteers when evaluating the impact on the target group of the football activities they offer.

In a more recent (2022) ethnographic study informed by feminist concepts and covering three years of participant observation in Leeds, Chris Webster[30] came to understand bodily, cognitive and social pleasures derived from the footballing activity not only as benefits but as political acts of resistance to an increasingly hostile asylum environment.

Overall, the literature that deals explicitly with football rather than sport in the largest sense, is not particularly rich in quantity. This scarcity is most likely due to the time-consuming character of meaningful ethnographic field work and, therefore, issues of funding.

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25 Brent McDonald, Ramón Spaaij & Darko Dukic, "Moments of social inclusion: asylum seekers, football and solidarity", *Sport in Society* 22, no. 6 (2019): 935-949, https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1504774. See also Ramón Spaaij, "Refugee Youth, Belonging and Community Sport", *Leisure Studies* 34, no. 3 (2015): 303-318, https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.893006.

26 See for instance Stéphanie Boyer and Béatrice Bertho, "'J'ai totalement confiance en mon équipe!'. Des filles issues de la migration s'engagent dans le football en Suisse romande", *Culture e Studi del Sociale* 6, no. 2 (2021): 301-320, https://www.cussoc.it/journal/article/view/194; Anna Elia and Valentina Feddele, "Calcio, soggettività e immaginari nell'esperienza dei "minori nonaccompagnati", *Culture e Studi del Sociale* 6, no. 2 (2021): 283-299, https://www.cussoc.it/journal/article/view/195.

27 Ramón Spaaij, "The Ambiguities of Sport and Community Engagement", *Ethos* 21, no. 2 (2013): 8-11.

28 Olivia Booth et al., "United Glasgow Football Club. A pilot study in sport's facilitation of integration," *Refugees Studies Centre Working Paper No. 99,* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2014).

29 Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital", *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (1995): 65-78.

30 Chris Webster, "The (In)Significance of Footballing Pleasures in the Lives of Forced Migrant Men", Sport in Society 25, no. 3 (2022): 523–536., https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2017815.

What the findings of these studies have in common is their focus on the potential benefits observed and conceptualized by the researchers among the refugee group they accompanied.[31] They seem to validate at least partly the widely shared and oft-repeated assumptions of the positive impact of sport and/or football on vulnerable migrant communities, drawing on impressions and feedback collected from the refugees themselves. What they do much less (or not at all in some cases) is draw on the evaluative feedback of the volunteers who are at the origin of the initiatives.

This gap in the existing research is problematic, especially considering that volunteers have by the far the best oversight on football-related initiatives for refugees. Most of the time, they are themselves the initiators of the activities or have been present at their inception. They are responsible of implementation and have a keen sense of what produces the intended outcomes, and, in case of perceived suboptimal outcomes, what would be needed to improve the impact of the activities.

At the same time, contrary to participant researchers in ethnographic fieldwork, not only do they invariably develop personal relationships with the individuals of their target group, are engaged in conflict-resolving, and serve, more often than they would wish, as confident for some of the individuals, but they are also embedded in their local communities with a keen sensibility for issues of perception of their own activity by the community concerned.

Finally, the gap is of course also particularly relevant in an action-research perspective. It should not be forgotten that this survey was embedded in a practice-oriented project and was carried out with the aim to provide findings in the form of evidence-based recommendations to be addressed to policymakers who rely on the active contribution by civil society actors in the first place.

5. METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES AND LIMITS

5.1. SURVEY DESIGN

The FIRE°+ survey was based on the need for a policy-relevant survey that would allow an evidence-based evaluation of the impact different local football initiatives have had on both the beneficiaries and the grassroots organisations themselves. It sought to provide a meaningful analysis of the perception that grassroots football actors themselves may have of the impact of their own volunteering activities.

To do so, the authors designed a survey aiming at providing responses to their overarching research questions (as formulated at the end of section 1), through understanding

1. the types of support generally received by the football clubs and their volunteers from local, regional and national governments;

31 An interesting overview of recent empirical literature and impact evaluation studies is provided by Jondis Schwartzkopff, *Integration of Refugees through Sport* (Vienna: Sport Inclusion Network, 2022), 24 pages. The report is available online under https://sportinclusion.net/files/SPIN_Refugees_Review-Study_2022_final.pdf, consulted June 2024.

2. the volunteers' perception of the experience of football encounters with refugees and the subsequent interpretation of these encounters;
3. the short and mid-term outcomes of football activities conducted for and with refugees.

We opted for a mixed-method survey, entailing not only traditional survey questions the results of which can be quantified, but also qualitative questions.[32]

There were open-ended questions inquiring what these football events meant for those involved; the meanings they attach to their experience of multi-cultural encounters with the newcomers, and there were more classical survey questions asking them to rate the change that they experienced due to the football events they organized.

In the questions that inquired about different types of support received by the respondents' organizations, support refers to the funding of projects, seed funding for long-term projects, but also one-off support such as equipment sponsoring. The open-ended answers were processed through qualitative data analysis, using research question-oriented coding.

Our investigation spanned diverse contexts and structures across various European regions, with a keen focus on the multitude of realities encountered by those working directly with refugees.

The development of our survey necessitated a nuanced approach. We wanted to ensure that the questionnaire would resonate with our respondents, offering them a comfortable platform to share their experiences and insights. As such, the wording and sampling strategy was meticulously discussed with all project partners.

We employed a purposive sampling strategy for our survey, which, basically means that we specifically targeted individuals who were relevant to our study – those who are working with refugees within grassroots football clubs. This approach allowed us to focus on respondents who had rich, first-hand experiences and narratives to share, thus ensuring the valuable substance in our data.

The survey was designed to be multilingual and tested to cater to a wide range of respondents across Europe. This guaranteed that potential respondents could comfortably participate and contribute to our research in one of the working languages: English; French; German and Italian.

An essential factor that guided the design of our survey was the European Commission's framework of "Key competences for lifelong learning." [33] Adopted by the Council of the European Union in May 2018, this framework identifies eight crucial competences deemed essential for every citizen's personal fulfilment, employability, active citizenship, and social inclusion. The key competences range from literacy, multilingual, and digital competences to personal,

32 On the importance and use of multiple ways of collecting data, see Norman K. Denzin's entry on "Triangulation" in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (New York: John Wiley, 2015), 5083-5088.

33 European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Key competences for lifelong learning* (EU Publications Office, 2019), 20 pages, https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/297a33c8-a1f3-11e9-9d01-01aa75ed71a1/language-en, consulted June 2024.

social, and learning to learn competences, and also include citizenship, entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness and expression competences.

The relevance of these competences to our survey was rooted in the understanding that football-based projects serve as non-formal and informal learning opportunities. They contribute significantly to the competence development of refugees, local participants, and both volunteer and professional staff. Thus, incorporating this framework in our survey helped highlight the transformative potential of these football projects, underscoring their role not just as a sportive activity, but also as an educational tool fostering lifelong learning and competence development.

In the survey, in line with the entire FIRE+ project and this article, we used "refugees" as an umbrella term that includes people with or seeking international protection status (asylum seekers). The respondents were given a brief description in the consent section, with a link to the project site where a detailed explanation is available for those seeking further clarification.

The data of the survey was treated in accordance with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. The survey has been approved by the Human Subjects Ethics Committee of Middle East Technical University (approval number: 0452-ODTUIAEK-2022). No personal data was collected through the survey, overtly or covertly.

Our online survey was open for responses over a period of seven months. We received the very first response in August 2022 and collected valuable inputs until the last response was received in February 2023.

5.2. THE PRINCIPAL TARGET PUBLIC OF THE SURVEY

The involvement of multiple stakeholders in football activities welcoming refugees produces a **multi-layered experience**. The layers come from the simultaneous presence of multiple actors: clubs (with their volunteers, trainers, players, etc.), refugees, as well as peripheral actors initially not necessarily foreseen, such as local pub owners, schools or individual teachers, different segments of local communities, local media, as well as the regional, national and supranational football governance bodies, and various levels of political-administrative governing bodies, ranging from sub-local to supranational.

The survey chose to address one segment of this layer – arguably the one on which all these activities are hinged: the individuals who organise meaningful football contacts with refugees, be it structured or unstructured one-off encounters (tournaments, etc.) or regular, structured training sessions.

These encounters are generally peaceful and friendly, and they go deeper than the level of a simple introduction and superficial meeting, since they share a common goal, such as training together and enjoying the collective and individual pleasure football provides. They may lead to building long-term relationships and contribute to the overall integration.

The principal target segment thus includes all actors in grassroots football clubs, with their staff of various levels of commitment, as well as at times civil society organisations who work closely with these clubs.

The rationale for this choice of target respondents to the survey is threefold.
First, it is in line with the overall outlook of the FIRE+ Project, which was first and foremost aimed at the community of European grassroots football in the largest sense, and local football volunteers in particular.

Second, the organisers of grassroots football initiatives for the refugee public are well-placed to observe the results, successes, and failures of their activities, with regard to the progress in their target public's integration process and other changes with regard to attitudes or skills. As many testimonies collected for the MOOC or at the international conferences organised by the partner organisations have clearly shown, those among them who have already engaged with a refugee public for several years, are capable of adopting a reflective distance to the outcome of their own work.

Third, this choice of respondents is also influenced by the fact that over recent years the refugee communities clearly have been over-solicited, almost to the point of abuse, by scholarly field research on all levels. It is not exaggerated to say that they are tired of the incessant data requests from academia. As Göçer and Şenyuva have shown in detail for the Turkish case,[34] research on refugees has various ethical issues, one of which is the over-surveying of the same refugee segments, which may lead to thin data. It is also not ethically responsible to always put the burden of the research on the same segment of the society when the phenomenon under scrutiny has multiple stakeholders.

For all these reasons, this survey conducted under the FIRE+ project was designed for the stakeholder group of European football volunteers to respond. Their observations and experiences do represent the point of view of the initiators and organisers of the football encounters. They have repeated experiences of playing football with refugees, and are familiar with the process and the challenge of welcoming refugees through the sport. In terms of the diversity of their roles or functions within their organisations, the survey reveals, as expected, a wide variety. They include presidents, administrators, trainers, players, diverse volunteering functions, project officers of clubs, and even referees. So, although the main stakeholders of the survey are the clubs that organize football events and projects, there is a multiplicity of voices within that group.

Since we did not narrow down the sample according to the size or impact of the football project or event, we had a chance to include a variety of football encounters from simple plays in the local park to structured training with uniform kits. The variety of the events is as important as the choice of respondents, since different types of events and projects lead to different outcomes. As a result, this choice in methodology allows us to observe different patterns of refugee integration/non-integration through the sport of football emerge from the collected data.

The strong qualitative component of the survey allows us to account for all this multiplicity in the type of actors and events sampled in the survey. In other words, the survey was designed

34 Derya Göçer and Özgehan Şenyuva, "Uluslararası İlişkiler Disiplini ve Niteliksel Yöntem: Türkiye'de Göç Çalışmaları Örneği" [The Discipline of International Relations and Qualitative Methods: The case of migration research in Turkey], *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 18, no. 72 (2021): 19-36, https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.1000762. consulted June 2024.

to collect "thick data," [35]of not just what happened or generally happens on the pitch or in the locker rooms, but also how these interactions are perceived. Perception and interpretation of facts are crucial in understanding processes of encounters through sport, as sport in this context is precisely a tool of changing, transforming perceptions in the first place.

5.3. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SURVEY

Our pursuit of 'thick description' necessarily prolonged the time it took to fill out the survey and was demanding on the respondents. The average time spent by respondents on the survey turned out to be 38 minutes, which is impressive.

This burden placed on the respondents also explains why despite collective efforts to circulate the survey widely, the number of fully exploitable responses was 135 (with answers from eleven different European countries).

Given the density of the data, the number of responses was perfectly sufficient, though slightly below initial expectations and doubtlessly showing one of the limits of such "labour-intensive" qualitative research.

There was also unequal implication by the project partners in the dissemination process of the invitation to participate in the survey (also provided in four different languages). Roughly half of the complete responses are of German origin, which is no doubt due to the remarkable outreach of the German partner, the DFB-associated Egidius-Braun-Stiftung, which has implemented successive waves of support schemes to the grassroots football community.

All in all, despite the obvious limits due to the framework within which the survey was conducted, the quality of the exploitable data has enabled us to gather insightful data on the extent to which the assumption of the power of football as a tool for social integration is indeed backed up by experience from the field. Our research underscores the value of football-based projects in enhancing refugees' ability to thrive in their new communities and contribute positively to society. It's not just about playing the game; it's about empowering individuals and transforming societies.

6. RESULTS OF THE FIRE SURVEY

6.1. OBSERVED IMPACT ON REFUGEES – QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

The survey results indicate a significant positive impact of football-based integration projects on the personal development and social skills of the refugee participants, as evaluated by

35 Here, "thick description" is a reference to the detailed stories that the survey required from the respondents. In academic literature it also refers to the thick description of the researcher of an issue in the context of which the researcher immerses him or herself (such as in ethnographic field work). The common point lies in going beyond just asking 'how often' or 'where' do you meet the refugees but teasing out stories from the respondents. Thickness in qualitative research in the form of evidence-based story telling goes well with social causes since "stories allow others to visualize and empathize with certain situation or plights." See Sarah Tracey, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact.* (New York: John Wiley, 2020), 9.

the respondents, who had the opportunity to observe their personal development over time. A majority of volunteer project managers have thus reported an increase in various essential qualities among the participants after their involvement in these projects. The data suggests that these programmes are not only beneficial for the development of social skills but also foster intellectual, creative, and communicative growth among participants.

The increased respect for commitments (60.9%) and adaptation capacity to new social norms (64.1%) that were observed by the volunteers indicate that refugee participants are learning to navigate the complexities of their new environment more effectively. Additionally, the data highlights the development of key sportsmanship values, with 70.6% of participants showing improved fair play.

One of the most striking outcomes is the reported growth in trust in others (78.3%), which is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and social cohesion among refugees and host communities. Furthermore, 82.1% of participants showed increased respect for those with different cultural, ethnic, or language backgrounds.

The highest increase observed is in self-confidence (86.6%), which confirms its importance as one of the major aspects identified in the ethnographic research studies mentioned in the literature review above.

Significantly, these initiatives are promoting collaborative problem-solving, as 61.1% of participants were reported to improve their skills in negotiating joint solutions with people holding different viewpoints. This is further supported by the high percentage of participants (75.0%) who are said to have gained confidence in expressing their opinions in discussions. At the same time, the highest increase observed is in the ability to get along with people from different cultural backgrounds (95.0%), arguably an essential skill for successful two-way integration and harmonious coexistence in diverse societies.

Particularly notable results focus on community engagement, language, and teamwork. A striking 80.7% of respondents reported an increased ability of the newcomers to contribute to the interests of their community or society. Additionally, 88.1% improved their communication skills with people who speak another language, and an impressive 90.2% showcased better cooperation within a team.

Respondents also report positive improvement effects in attitudes, such as non-violence (81.7%), understanding and appreciation for cultural diversity (72.4% and 83.6%, respectively), awareness of health and well-being (69.6%) as well as human rights and fundamental rights (71.7%). Finally, 91.7% of respondents reported increased solidarity with people facing difficulties.

6.2. TYPES OF REFUGEE INTERACTIONS – QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

There is a three-tier pattern that emerges from the responses to the qualitative survey questions regarding interaction with refugees.

The **first-tier experience** consists of immediate socialising in the local community,

encountering locals in football places, wearing the club jersey or insignia and hence achieving visible mingling (i.e. not looking any different from the locals), attending social events after or before the football events, or simply chatting after a training session. This first-tier experience is necessary to make initial contact and probe feelings of "welcome" and "safety" in a new country. However, if these types of interactions rely exclusively on volunteers in the club, the circulation of people (refugees and volunteers) without building meaningful relationships may tend to be tiring. As a respondent from Ireland put it (echoing others), "we found that once a partnership was developed and working, then these people were moved to their new homes and everything. We as a club had to start again from the beginning. As relying on volunteers to do this, after time it can become frustrating to lose this relationship and have to do it all over again." In the absence of a strong club, long-term funding or seed funding, refugee experiences risk staying at this tier only.

The **second-tier experience** is when the newcomers start to attend regularly and end up bringing their immediate or extended families, or their friends either as observers or players. This is a crucial stage, and it is only possible if the refugees continue to stay in the same locality and if the club is able to offer continuous opportunities for interaction. This is when the play continues in a regular fashion, so observations of this kind can be made: "I noticed how accommodating and helpful the refugee children are during the warm-up and practice sessions. They integrate and take hints from German players'' (coach of a youth team in Germany). This second-tier experience in the sport of football may cross paths with other experiences, such as language classes: ''The teachers from the language classes have asked us to offer football after class'' (a respondent from Germany). Once the second-tier experiences get regular they also integrate into other segments in the locality that do not have a pre-defined role in integration: ''the inhabitants near our field have had the opportunity to meet and make friends with the boys of our team'' (a respondent from Italy).

The **third-tier experience** that seems to give the most contentment or gratification to the European respondents is establishing meaningful relationships and friendships on and off the field; attending each other's birthday parties, engagement or marriage ceremonies, celebrating the start of a new job, removing hierarchical barriers between the locals and the refugees. It is at this level that the trainers, organisers, and officials feel the most pride in reporting the outcome of football encounters. In the words of one respondent from Germany, ''One of our participants once said: the club is his new family.'' This kind of feeling of unity cannot be achieved in the absence of sustained interactions. The results even lead to a higher level impact that goes beyond mingling at the local level: ''We take our [refugee] children to other cities and show them our country. For once, they can concentrate mentally on other things. They also hear other dialects'' (another respondent from Germany).

This third-tier experience incorporates many elements that the survey asked quantitatively to the respondents, such as attitude change towards cultural issues, one of which is gender. ''It still gives me goosebumps that many women now have a job, a driving licence and their own car and speak very, very good German, go to parties styled. Some even have a new boyfriend and are without a headscarf'' (a respondent from Germany). These changes, in attitude, language skills, and the building of lasting relationships then lead to the final and desired outcome of successful integration: ''95% of the refugees who have passed through our association – over 2,000 refugees – have successfully built their lives here in Germany

and are very well integrated into work, study and self-employment'' (a respondent from very strongly engaged club). So, if the interaction reaches this third tier, then there is a very high chance of achieving lasting results.

6.3. OBSERVED IMPACT ON VOLUNTEERS/PROJECT COLLABORATORS – QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

A small number of quantitative questions targeted the perceived impact of their own activities on the group of respondents themselves.

Quite significantly, and not entirely unexpectedly, these initiatives are successful in nurturing active citizenship and social responsibility among the volunteers. The data shows that as a result of their experience, they see themselves as even more inclined to engage in civil society (51.7%), voluntary activities (64.4%), and work against discrimination, intolerance, xenophobia, or racism (61.0%). The results also demonstrate that a majority of respondents (63.8%) consider themselves more committed to active citizenship and participation in democratic life after their involvement in these projects.

6.4. OBSERVED IMPACT ON THE LOCAL COMMUNITY'S PERCEPTION – QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

In the responses to the open-ended questions, three types of local communities are portrayed.

1. One type is where the local community is very much in sync with the local club in terms of the spirit with which to approach refugees.
2. A second type of local community is where the locals are not that much aware of the existence of the refugees since there is a very real physical segregation and lack of crossing paths.
3. A third type is where the local community is aware of newcomers but is cautious towards them.

Trying to identify the impact of local football activities is obviously most interesting with regard to the second and third type of community.

The second type of local community is either unaware of or uninterested in the presence, circulation, and possible integration of the refugees. Here, the football club can foster awareness: "Some locals did not know about refugees, and it made them aware of how hard a life can be" (a respondent from Latvia). Mixing locals with refugees in football games or events ensures first that there is more information flowing and fewer uninformed prejudices.

The third type is showing reservations, many of which seem to revolve around the issue of religion. In several contexts, the Muslim headscarf is mentioned explicitly. So, planning projects with gender inclusivity or at least gender mainstreaming might prove to be highly beneficial and efficient in having an impact on not only refugee attitudes but also locals' attitudes. That women with headscarf can play football seems to be an important fact that percolates through to the locals thanks to first-hand experience. After interacting with the refugees, positive results are reported: "a more positive image towards refugees, they could see that refugees do voluntary work and especially that women and men celebrate and play

football together with local people. Especially that women with headscarves play football and actively participate in sports" (a respondent from Germany).

For communities of the third type, a football club that can target, realise, and sustain third-tier experiences with the refugees, the outcomes are no different than with the first or second type of local communities. The survey results suggest that it is the quality of experiences that make the lasting impact, not necessarily the starting points in terms of attitudes and culture.

It deserves to be noted that organising events with the specific group of Ukrainian newcomers felt easier due to the common religious background. There seems to be more of a collective agreement on the support towards the Ukrainians.

6.5. SUCCESSFUL SCENARIOS

The survey allows to detect patterns or scenarios of successful outcomes of partial or full integration of refugees thanks to the actions of football clubs.

The first scenario is found in the presence of a **strong club**, which is well established in the local community, with independent funding and **one continuous football project for the refugees** (one year and older). In such a context, refugees

a. feel welcome and safe;
b. mingle with the football community and then the larger local community;
c. integrate through employment, schooling and/or marriage.

The second scenario requires **seed funding from an external source**, the kind that results in **longer and various projects** and allows for staff to be hired for the long term. The supporting bodies are mostly local governments and football federations. Funding from regional and national governments are scarce. This scenario also leads to successful integration outcomes.

Both scenarios also involve attitude change in the local community towards the refugees, with increased openness to welcome newcomers.

When funding is on a short-term basis and football initiatives rely heavily on volunteers, integration outcomes are weaker. Contrary to the assumption that high refugee mobility may result in fragile integration outcomes, the survey results indicate that the mobility of organisers and instructors has a greater impact on the integration experience and outcome. At least, this is the consensus among European grassroots football stakeholders.

Sometimes, the most successful scenarios do not lead to successful football outcomes! Some of the refugees who settled with the solidarity shown from the football community may drop out of football events. The reasons for this dropping out lie in the way they are integrated. ''The majority of the refugees have arrived in the community, have regular jobs and a regular daily routine. Their initial boredom and foreignness are no longer present. They were supported in their integration and are an integral part of the community. They were simply too tired to be active in sports in the evenings and on weekends'' (a respondent from Germany). With a slight touch of irony, this phenomenon could be referred to as a "paradoxical success indicator."

The scenarios that emerged from the findings are of course first and foremost policy-relevant. They should help policymakers on all levels to become more sensitive for the factors that condition the success of their civil society's initiatives and help them to channel project funding or other types of support in the most efficient way.

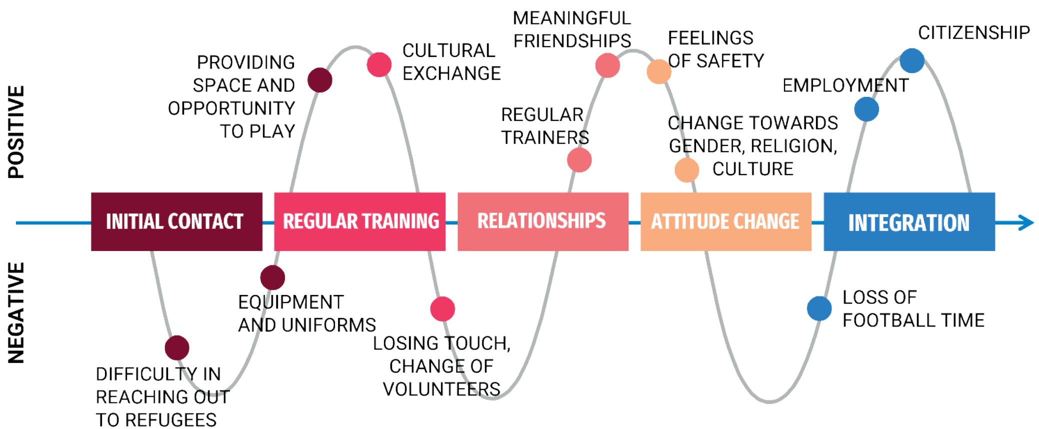
But they are also research-relevant, as they provide a starting point for further academic research. We strongly recommend to civil society actors to engage in future project with academics capable of adopting a more differentiated approach than we were able to, distinguishing from the outset between the different variables (types of clubs, offers, funding, etc.). We also encourage them to embed open-ended academic research in their future project proposals in a more proactive manner. The cooperation between civil society actors and researchers has the potential to be mutually beneficial, but in order to be so, it requires efforts of understanding from both sides.

7. CONCLUSION: WHAT A DIFFERENCE A GAME MAKES!

7.1. Mapping the refugee's journey

Football clubs that offer activities geared towards refugees kick off a journey. Based on the survey results we can wrap up that journey in a comprehensive graph, discerning the more challenging and more comfortable parts of the "travel." In Figure 1 below, the "positive" part refers to experiences along the way that are easy to establish, and the impact of which is relatively high. The "negative" part refers to experiences that are more challenging and the impact of which may not always be as intended.

Figure 1: The refugee's football journey



Source: Derya Göçer, based on the FIRE+ survey results.

As the oscillations in the graph indicate, the journey is far from easy, and not every individual journey will reach the **integration** stage, which refers to the visible results of the whole process, when jobs are found, citizenship applications are filed and approved, or a separate flat is rented for a young adult. A significant number of cases never go beyond the initial contact, for various reasons (absence of equipment, administrative change of placement,

high turnover of volunteers, etc.). But those who reach the second stage, take root in regular training, and manage to achieve a certain stability, have good chances to move further.

7.2. PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the survey and all the complementary data collected over the 54 months of the two projects, we were in a position to formulate a series of practical recommendations to policy-makers, with the objective of addressing the needs of the grassroots football volunteers and increasing the number of refugees who manage to get to the endpoint of the journey. To no surprise, these recommendations – which can be consulted in the dedicated issue of the *Sport & Citizenship Review* of summer 2023[36] – boil down to issues of sustainable funding, training of mediators, specific actions for particularly vulnerable target groups such as women and girls, as well as unaccompanied minors, and assistance in partnerships between clubs and reception centres.

7.3. CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITERATURE

In reflection of the above, from the inception of the projects and the (relatively timid and late) integration of research questions and methods into the project objectives to the discussion of the findings of an original and, despite its limits, rather innovative survey, we conclude that this article makes a valuable contribution to a body of academic literature that is still very much limited to small-scale local ethnographic studies. It does so by introducing the first impact survey on an international scale that has so far been dedicated to the issue. It opens avenues for further, more differentiated studies on the topic, as suggested at the end of section 6.

In being transparent about the inherent difficulties for research in practice-oriented projects, the article also contributes to a better understanding of how the ERASMUS+ sport programme could be used to stimulate better synergies between civil society and academia. In a recent interview with the president of a prominent international sport association, it appeared that civil society actors are weary about fully academic consortia applying for project funding under ERASMUS+ sport and would rather appreciate more fruitful interaction with academic partners in future projects. At the same time, they struggle to fully appreciate what researchers need to make this cooperation beneficial to all parties involved.

7.4. CONCLUSION

Our own journey as researchers across European grassroots football was a fascinating, eye-opening one. The sheer amount of sincere compassion, spontaneous helpfulness, pragmatic solidarity, and positive spirit that grassroots football, in the most diverse places, is able to mobilise despite limited means and often insufficient support, was overwhelming and gave testimony to deeply interiorised humanist values.

36 *Sport and Citizenship Review no. 56,* special issue "Conclusions of the FIRE+ project," (July 2023): 36-37. Available under https://footballwithrefugees.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/revue_56_sport-et-citoyennete_web.pdf, consulted June 2024.

A simple sentence may sum up the experience: A football club is something to integrate into.

This statement is not only factually correct, but also a very powerful emotional claim. A football club is a place where the long and difficult process of inclusion in a new society may find a beginning. The contribution that football makes to resolving the huge challenge of integrating refugees in Europe is necessarily a modest one. But it occurs at a crucial moment in that process, where the impact is high.

In the best of all cases, as shown by the testimonies gathered all over the two projects, the football club accompanies the process from the beginning to the end: from the first after-training chats with the locals to becoming – often years later – a volunteer in the same club or another one, in another city. From participation to equal access and opportunity. Of course, grassroots football is unable to give any kind of integration guarantee – things may go wrong on the way, and they often do. But if it did not exist, European societies would be the poorer for it.

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