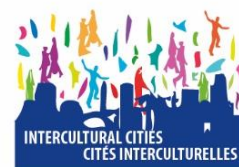




**Mediterranean
Intercultural Cities
Network: Youth - Sports -
Inclusion 2021**

YOUTH – SPORTS – INCLUSION



*The opinions expressed in this work
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Written by Nenad Bogdanovic and Robin Wilson

Cover image:
Cities of Haifa, Ioannina and Limassol

Intercultural Cities Unit,
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Introduction

Sports have a great ability to mobilise young people, to break any boundary and organize them towards a common goal. A sports activity is an encapsulated social activity. Although sport has been seen and recognized as one of the main inclusion drivers, its potential is far from realised in local government. The Intercultural Cities of Limassol, Haifa, and Ioannina, supported by the Intercultural Cities programme of the Council of Europe, have jointly worked during 2021 on unlocking the potential of sports for intercultural inclusion, in terms both of policy and practice.

The framework

Despite the core connection of any sport with physical and mental health, due to its ability to mobilize groups of people and therefore shape a social context, throughout human history it has been used as a tool in political agendas. For example, violence between opposing fans of Dinamo Zagreb and Red Star Belgrade at a football match in May 1990 in the Croatian capital was widely seen as one of the first episodes in the collapse of Yugoslavia into ethnic warfare.

It is not surprising that in modern societies sport has multiple impacts – on the individual (healthy lifestyle, contributing to personal development, work-life balance), economic development (as an industry and a tourism driver), political and social cohesion (national/regional identity and pride) and wider society, especially as a uniting factor in more and more diverse societies – and its leading individuals are role-models for young people. Thinking of the main goals of intercultural/inclusive integration, such as interaction, anti-discrimination and participation, sports are perfectly suited simultaneously to promote all of them.

While sport can be a force for division where competition aligns with ethnic or other fault lines, it can be a much more positive factor for integration for a number of reasons. First, most sports are transnational and even global in scale. This automatically encourages participants in sports to think of themselves beyond the ‘national container’ of the state they inhabit. It may be a very practical way to

become acquainted with the cosmopolitanising experiences a globalised world throws up, including through the movement of peoples across national boundaries.

Secondly, most sports thus also tend to have international codes and rules promoted by supranational, even global, governing bodies. Taking part in sport, therefore, is an education in a way into the universal norm of the ‘rule of law’, which it is the task of referees and umpires to uphold impartially in competitive contexts. And since most sport would be disordered if participants had to be ‘policed’ all the time, it also socialises participants into such spontaneous good behaviour as is conveyed, in football for example, by the notion of ‘fair play’. As the Council of Europe has always recognised, intercultural integration rests on the solid foundation of support for universal norms by all concerned.

Thirdly, selection of participants in competitive sport has to be on individual merit, without discrimination, as a fundamental human right. This was why all-white rugby teams in South Africa under *apartheid* met such worldwide condemnation. Individuals from minority backgrounds may thus find they face fewer barriers to progress in the sporting arena than in the wider society – take American football, for example. Correspondingly, individuals from the dominant majority may have to accommodate themselves to equality in sport, challenging them in a

manner which they might not otherwise experience in their lives.

Last but not least, sport creates an existential relationship between participants. However, they might elsewhere perceive 'the other' – quite likely in a stereotyped fashion, in the absence of real experience – via sport they become individuals united by a common project, part of a team. All forms of intolerance 'work' primarily via psychological affect rather than intellectual impact – playing on fears and insecurities – and sport can be an effective antidote precisely because it also touches participants viscerally, but in a positive way, building bonds of mutual commitment. The water sports at the heart

of this project are a great example, because here the very safety of those who take part depends on their establishing a trust-based interrelationship one with another.

All of these factors explain what might seem a paradox: even though professional involvement in sport requires single-minded dedication, many of the most articulated and committed advocates for the causes of liberty and equality – including gender equality and LGBT+ rights – which are essential to cement an integrated and inclusive society have come from within the sporting world. It's as if such socially aware individuals are saying: 'If only you had had my experience, you would see the world very differently.'

Ioannina – initiation to water sports

In August 2021, the Municipality of Ioannina carried out water sport activities with groups of children from the Katsikas refugee camp aged from 7 to 15 years old, in the presence of the Mayor and city officials. The experienced staff of "Thalassa Services" company held first aid and lifeguarding lessons and informed the children about the immediate response in case of an emergency. The children also learned and tried the sport of stand up paddling (SUP) in the Lake of Ioannina, both theoretically and practically on a basic and intermediate level, with the help of a trained and experienced coach from the "Athletic club Evolution Ioannina" and in the presence of lifeguards. Rowing was also introduced, and the children came in contact with the sport using an indoor rowing facility.

Challenges and obstacles

The full utilization of sport as an inclusion driver however faces a number of obstacles. The participation of young people should not be taken for granted, and very often the barriers to participation are higher than simple marketing outreach, aimed at providing information about available sport activities and opportunities, can overcome.

Strong social stereotypes, especially those associated with gender and sexuality – the ‘embedded’ masculinity of some sports and their high competitiveness – keep a number of young women outside of sporting activities, especially team ones where in theory both genders participate. Unavailability of relevant infrastructure additionally prevents participation by young females. Language barriers, especially in specialized and groups sports, require special attention and preparation.

Finally, in some cases, fear of rejection within minority communities, in the case of

success and bonds being formed with majority-community members, may discourage the participation of young people from culturally different communities and of migrant origin. They might feel outside of their comfort zone and while in the longer term this might yield positive results in the short term it might reduce the number of participating youngsters.

Apart from social barriers, those related to financial support seem to be an important obstacle to participation. They include high fees, as well as the expenses of equipment, transport, refreshment, joint travels (excursions and competitions to other cities and countries) and even free-time activities. It is thus notable that all over the world participation by young people at the bottom of social hierarchies is often highest where entry costs are lowest – street football being the most obvious example.

Haifa – Intercultural sailing

In August 2021, the Arab-Jewish Cultural Center Beit Ha'gefen, working under the Haifa City administration in collaboration with the Mifrasim program, realised a project with a group of 10 students of Jewish and Arab origin, sailing together for five days on a sailboat, operating the boat together and having social workshops of encounter.

The program created a unique and powerful platform providing life changing voyages and creating a need for the participants cooperate and manage a week together sharing tough conditions and many challenges. More information can be found on www.mifrasim.org.il.

The keys to success

In order to encourage participation, engagement and interaction through sports, local authorities are advised to proceed with policy actions that should aim to:

- Strengthen cooperation between local authorities – those responsible for social, integration, cultural, educational and migration issues – from one side and sports stakeholders, including clubs and representative bodies such as sports federations on the other, thus to avoid a silo effect and to develop cross-sectoral collaborations with, but going beyond, local authorities' sports departments.
- Train social and educational workers on inclusive sports practices and vice versa – train sports workers on inclusion methodologies and with tailor-made inclusion programmes.
- Lobby at national levels, including associations of municipalities and responsible ministries, to improve networking and knowledge exchanges on local, national, and international levels in a cross-sectoral manner.
- Support the diffusion of sports infrastructures, especially into areas with an increased diversity of inhabitants, and encourage synergies between sports stakeholders, migration and integration and planning departments.
- Provide incentives for participation by people of migrant background in local and national sports organisations, not only in the activities but in all domains of organizational life, including programme development, committees, management, governance, funding and so on, recognising especially the significance of minority-ethnic individuals being in the boardrooms as well as on the sporting surface.
- Build capacities for intercultural marketing in sports: target and invite diverse populations and make them welcome, by developing recruiting strategies, making good use of social media, and communicating in the right language(s).
- Communicate the need for sports organizations, especially those in receipt of public funds, to think about the programming of their activities in an intercultural way, so that they are genuinely inclusive and equally open to all (which will of course work to their benefit), for example through club open days and multi-ethnic tournaments.
- Make sports and recreation geographically available by organizing site-specific activities: organize sports events on places close to diverse populations, but avoid ghettoization by making them inclusive for cross-neighbourhood exchanges and visits.
- Ensure a culture of experimentation, incubation, and piloting of new actions in the field of interculturalism and sports, using seed-funding, research, and innovative practices, including the use of new technologies.
- Utilize and maximize the role-modelling of sportsmen and sportswomen, especially those of migrant background, as intercultural ambassadors and encourage their participation in intercultural actions, such as anti-rumours campaigns/strategies.

- Provide support and incentives to families and parents in order to facilitate the participation of young people, especially from less-advantaged minority backgrounds, in sporting activities.
- Involve schools and universities in developing special sports curricula targeting youth at risk and recognizing their achievements in terms of academic qualifications.
- Address the tendency for young males especially from minority backgrounds to be disproportionately represented in the criminal-justice system by a proactive, social-work approach, using sport as a vehicle for youngsters to develop the responsible autonomy a sociable adulthood requires of them.

Limassol – Intercultural nautical sports

During October 2021, the Municipality of Limassol, and its Social affairs and Sport departments, in collaboration with the Nautical Clubs of Limassol, Famagusta and Mesa Geitonia, successfully implemented a series of inclusion and participation workshops and presentations, with groups of diverse young people from various communities living in Limassol. In the workshops youngsters have been introduced to water sports. Based on collaboration, dialogue, teamwork and friendship among the participants, the local partner organizations provided an introduction to nautical sports.

Conclusions

Sport is a key domain for the intercultural city, being such an important arena of popular culture. Sports and culture often come together in governance arrangements and the arts do also provide a milieu in which new relations between the self and other can be imagined in a diverse society. But sport may reach a wider audience in this regard – especially as female participation rises exponentially – and offers participants the opportunity to ‘act out’ as well as observe new social relationships, in a manner which is experienced as simply normal and natural rather than threatening.

Take for example one of the most culturally divided regions of Europe – Northern Ireland. Since Europe’s main dividing line – the Berlin wall – collapsed over three decades ago, Northern Ireland has seen many more walls built between Protestant and Catholic urban neighbourhoods.

Yet Northern Ireland also shows how, even in such extreme circumstances, integration can be successfully pursued. In 2000, following notorious sectarian incidents at its international football stadium – in which some of the overwhelmingly Protestant fans supporting the Northern Ireland team had even booed its Catholic players – the Irish Football Association, the governing body in the region, mounted an anti-sectarian campaign called ‘Football for All’.

This campaign was remarkably successful, built on a partnership with those fans who wanted to silence the sectarians, as a webinar in 2020 was able to reflect. New, non-sectarian chants and songs were developed (some very funny) and fans were encouraged to come to the stadium wearing the green and white colours of the team, calling themselves the ‘Green and White Army’ – rather than sporting the red, white, and blue colours of the British Union flag.

Many new fans were thus attracted and the team’s performance improved, qualifying for the European championships in France in 2016. The Ireland team also qualified that year and the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, gave both sets of fans a joint award for their model behaviour during the competition.

This example shows how sports – even competitive sports – can be a vehicle to develop overlapping solidarities among diverse individuals in a globalised world. It reminds us that while ‘identity politics’ can divide people into antagonistic groups in fact our identity is what makes each of us unique: we are all complex combinations of different elements. And so, the commonalities of interest which sport engenders can bring the most unlikely individuals together and build bridges when others want to build walls.

Diversity has become a key feature of societies today and is particularly tangible in urban centres. While people of diverse national, ethnic, linguistic and faith backgrounds have immensely contributed to post-war prosperity, inequalities related to origin, culture and skin colour persist, and anxiety about pluralism, identity and shared values is often politically instrumentalised. The challenge of fostering equity and cohesion in culturally diverse societies has become more acute. Cities are uniquely placed to imagine and test responses to this challenge.

The Council of Europe and its partner cities have developed and validated an intercultural approach to integration and inclusion which enables cities to reap the benefits and minimise the risks related to human mobility and cultural diversity. A decade after the start of this work, there is growing evidence that diversity, when recognised and managed as a resource, produces positive outcomes in terms of creativity, wellbeing, and economic development.

The Intercultural Cities (ICC) Programme invites cities in Europe and beyond to explore and apply policies that harness diversity for personal and societal development.

www.coe.int

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