



Sports as a Tool for Empowerment of (Dis)Abled & Displaced Youth

Policy recommendations





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PROJECT: Sport as a Tool for Empowerment of (Dis)Abled & Displaced Youth – “STEADY”

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1. Brief presentation of the project

The vision of the STEADY project is to increase sport participation of Displaced Youth with Disabilities (DYD) by promoting volunteering and equal access of migrants and minorities to organised and grassroots sport. The project focuses on changing the paradigm, bringing migrants and refugees with disabilities from the margins to become integral members of the sporting community. In this respect, the project will promote voluntary activities in sport, together with social inclusion, equal opportunities, and awareness of the importance of health-enhancing physical activity through increased participation in, and equal access to sport for all; and tackle cross-border threats to the integrity of sport, in that case, violence and all kinds of intolerance and discrimination.

The STEADY project has a duration of four years (2019 – 2022) and is funded by the Erasmus+ Sport programme of the European Commission. The partnership is composed of:

- Hellenic Paralympic Committee (Coordinator)
- Agitos Foundation
- GEA Cooperativa Sociale
- Centro Social de Soutelo
- Equal Society
- Footura
- Play and Train
- Serbian Paralympic Committee
- Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation.

2. Context

According to Eurostat¹, in 2021, asylum seekers came from around 140 countries. 630,500 applications, including 535,000 first time applications, were lodged in the EU in 2021. An increase of 33% in comparison to 2020, but 10% less than in 2019 before Covid and far from the levels of 2015-2016. Syria (more than 25% of asylum seekers in 2021) and Afghanistan (18%) led the nations of origin of the asylum seekers in Europe. Most of the applications were lodged in Germany (148,200), France (103,800), Spain (62,100), Italy (43,900) and Austria (36,700).

The pandemic reduced the number of asylum seeker arrivals to the EU in 2020, however statistics from 2021 show a significant increase. The post-pandemic situation in developing countries, where poverty is rising according to the 2022 Global Humanitarian Overview², and the crisis in Afghanistan and Ukraine show an upward trend that suggest an increase to the pre-pandemic levels of asylum seekers. The 2022 number will go beyond the period 2015-2016, when 2.6 million of asylum seekers requested refugee status. Although the current crisis has a different scenario, on 2 March 2022, the European Commission rapidly activated the [Temporary Protection Directive](#)³ giving those fleeing the war in Ukraine the right to temporary protection, providing liberty of movement, education, right to work, social welfare and medical care. According to United Nations data, almost 4 million people have left Ukraine since February 2022. In 2016, the European Commission stated that the number of refugees arriving in Europe (1.2 million) represented one of the greatest challenges facing the EU. If the current numbers are confirmed and keep increasing due to the conflict in Ukraine, the post-pandemic new levels of poverty in developing regions, the ongoing conflict in Syria and the situation of Afghanistan, the EU will be facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

The pre-pandemic scenario led the EU and the Member States to setting the influx of refugees and migrants high on the political agenda. Several initiatives were implemented with the aim to facilitate the inclusion/integration of refugees and migrants in the host countries. Despite the efforts made, several challenges remain unaddressed. The

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe_en

² <https://gho.unocha.org/>

³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_1469

European economic recovery has slowed down, fuel prices are at record highs, millions of Ukrainian citizens are arriving to the European Union, the Syrian conflict is still ongoing, the situation in Afghanistan and rising poverty levels around the world make a cocktail that fuels the mass movement of citizens fleeing their countries towards a turbulent Europe.

It is hard to know the number of migrants and refugees with disabilities, but according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimation, there were 82 million displaced people in 2020, 12 million or 15% of them, living with a disability.

3. Sport as a tool to promote social inclusion

In this context, sport has been an important aspect of civil life and its power to educate, share values and help the participants to gain self-confidence and abilities has been officially recognized by the United Nations in 1993 with the acknowledgement of the role of the Olympic Movement. Former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon said that the Paralympic Games are a powerful force to achieve human rights and development for all; they inspire not only athletes, but all of us, to recognize the unlimited potential of all persons. UNICEF⁴ (2013) emphasizes that:

“Sport has helped overcome many societal prejudices. Physical activity can be a powerful means of promoting respect – it is inspirational to see a child surmount the physical and psychological barriers to participation, including lack of encouragement and support or limited adaptive equipment. Sport has also been helpful in campaigns to reduce stigma. Athletes with disabilities are often among the most recognized representatives of people with disabilities, and many use such platforms as the Paralympics (Games) to campaign and to become role models for children with impairments.”

At the Second International Forum for Development and Peace (Geneva, 2011), the International Federations of Sport (IFs), National Olympic Committees (NOC), and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), agreed to establish effective policies to use

⁴ UNICEF 2013. State of the World’s Children Report

sport as a tool for development and peace that can help achieve international development goals.

In further support, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (Article 30.5), states that people with disabilities have the right to participate in sport on an equal basis in both mainstream and disability specific sport.

Hence, it is recognized the importance of sport and its ability to contribute to national development and to influence public policies that are favourable to the most vulnerable groups, specifically those addressed to persons with disabilities for them to become more active in their societies and host communities.

Most recently in 2019, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Olympic Refuge Foundation (ORF), in collaboration with the UNHCR, announced the creation of an unprecedented global initiative: A Sport Coalition committed to building a better world for refugees through sport. The IPC and Agitos Foundation joined this coalition together with many International Federations and sport organisations, aiming to:

- Promote and ensure access for all refugees, without distinction of any kind, to safe and inclusive sporting facilities.
- Increase availability and access to organised sport and sport-based initiatives for refugees and hosting communities, actively considering age, gender, ability and other diversity needs.
- Promote and facilitate equal access to and participation of refugees in sporting events and competitions at all levels.

This document presents the most important barriers and solutions to integrate migrants with disabilities through sport. Later, the report presents a common summary of the policy recommendations from STEADY's countries and partners.

4. Before we talk about sport

4.1. Basic needs of the person come first

According to the European Commission and its report ‘Mapping of good practices relating to social inclusion of migrants through sport’, *“sport alone cannot solve all of the issues related to the migration crisis, in conjunction with other measures, sport has the potential to contribute to integration and social inclusion of migrants and refugees. What sport can offer is a ‘universal language’, which is able to transcend social, cultural and national boundaries. At its best it can bring people together, no matter what their origin, background, religious beliefs or economic status.”*⁵

Thus, the first limitation we encounter trying to provide sport opportunities for migrants and refugees is to understand the challenges and prevention of rights they face daily in their host community. Specially the transition between the asylum application and the granted international protection and the transition from childhood to adulthood are identified as critical. Following the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights’ (FRA) report for the Integration of Young Refugees⁶, during these transitions *“people experience gaps in rights and services, which risk undermining their pathway to social inclusion.”* Systematic support in aspects like family reunification, housing, legal and social assistance, or education are fundamental to provide a safe environment before we can think on providing sport opportunities. All those risks and barriers to have access to social inclusion pathways are multiplied when we refer to persons with disabilities, which often need special assistance to have access to their rights.

Therefore, all the organisations addressing our target population in sport activities must consider the personal challenges of refugees and migrants with disabilities. As stated in the STEADY Recommendations Manual on social inclusion of DYD through sport, their level of attendance may not be a matter of choice but may be limited by factors such as access to transport or the availability of a personal assistant. In this context, the possibility of traumatic experiences should be taken into consideration and supporting mechanisms

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/sites/default/files/2016-09/NC0416616ENN_002.pdf

⁶ https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2019-integration-young-refugees_en.pdf

and procedures should be put in place, such as establishing cooperation with relevant professionals and organisations.

4.2. Invisible population

All the STEADY member organisations and a deep desk review reported the difficulties to identify refugees with disability and that here is no or very little data of refugees with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities remain among the most hidden, neglected and socially excluded of all displaced people, being often literally and programmatically “invisible” in refugee and assistance programs. Migrants and refugees with disabilities are not identified or registered as persons with disabilities; they do not have access to mainstream assistance programs and do not receive specialized and targeted services; and they are ignored in the appointment of camp leadership and community management structures⁷. In words of António Guterres, UN Secretary General, they are *“too often invisible, too often forgotten and too often overlooked.”*

Thus, migrants and refugees with disabilities constitute a hidden problem which needs particular attention and action from the Member States. Early identification of migrants with disabilities is an essential step for ensuring that special care is provided where required.

According to the Women Refugee Commissions⁸, it is recommended to set up a standard, centralized data collection system to collect disaggregated data on the number, age, gender, and profile of displaced persons with disabilities to enhance their protection and assistance. Disability awareness training should also be provided to all data collection officers for them to correctly identify persons with disabilities.

⁷ <https://cms.emergency.unhcr.org/documents/11982/43580/Disability+among+refugees+and+conflict-affected+populations/2700f6f2-1e65-4ea5-9e86-cb86aada7462>

⁸ <https://cms.emergency.unhcr.org/documents/11982/43580/Disability+among+refugees+and+conflict-affected+populations/2700f6f2-1e65-4ea5-9e86-cb86aada7462>

4.3. Women participation

The female participation in the STEADY project has been very challenging in all the pilot actions of the project, according to the feedback of the partner organisations. Only one out six members of the Paralympic Refugee team that competed in Tokyo 2020 were female. This aspect is not a specific problem of the migrant and refugee population, it correlates with the statistics from the Agitos Foundation when it comes to female participation at international competitions, sport technical courses and female coaches participating in Paralympic Games, where the women participation varies from 15% to 20%, being even less from developing regions.

While it takes time to influence perceptions, social conditions and cultural beliefs that prevent participation of women in sport, we should act to create appropriate conditions for their inclusion. Women in sport, and particularly refugees with disability, require a space where they can feel safe and build trust, sharing it with other female peer athletes, coaches and activists. The gap in female representation and media attention, in sports in general, still plays a negative role in the engagement of women from minorities or groups that face higher barriers in accessing social activities.

We need to empower and project a strong image of female athletes from minority groups as role models that can act as a catalyst and inspiration for other women to break down stigma and promote participation. Videos, news, and awareness campaigns should promote and give visibility to best practices and women with a protagonist role in sport.

Also, continue to target the training and inclusion of women at all levels of structures surrounding the sport activities; as volunteers, coaches, assistants and decision-making positions among others.

5. How to use effective and efficient tools to promote sport as a mechanism of integration of migrants and refugees with disability

5.1. A national response and State Policy with cross-European coordination to use sport as a tool for inclusion

There have been many initiatives, strategies, coalitions, agreements, policies and even funding opportunities to use sport as a tool for social inclusion across the European Union. However, there is a lack of top to bottom coordination to actively promote these types of activities and events in host communities. Often neither community-based organisations are involved in those high-level roadmaps, nor refugees themselves are included in designing initiatives to promote the power of sport for the social inclusion of refugees.

The reality is that there is a lack of specific organisations dedicated to the topic of inclusion of refugees with disabilities through sport. Moreover, this topic can be considered a “niche” in which not many volunteers, project managers, coaches and decision makers of community-based organisations have expertise. Therefore, the diverse high-level commitments and roadmaps made by UN organisations, IOC, IPC, IFs and National Governments are difficult to land and benefit those refugees with disabilities and the rest of the citizens in host communities if they do not involve and engage social organisations that are directly in contact with the targeted individuals. Primary organisations and local governments providing support and services to the target population are too often not engaged in these high-level policies, do not have expertise on the subject and/or do not count with the resources to deliver activities needed, that may be seen to an additional burden to their already stretched resources.

National strategies coordinated at the European level should:

5.1.1 Involve refugees as part of the decision-making processes

Participatory approaches for the development of policies and strategies are needed, as it will allow refugees and migrants with disabilities not only to express their needs but to take an active role in the design of relevant activities. Consultation with the local communities, with people with disabilities, disability organisations and migrants and refugees' organisations can lead to the design of activities that meet the specific needs of the target groups and the local community. Such activities can bring together people with and without disabilities and have a real impact in the lives of the target groups and in the promotion of their inclusion.

Trainings and tools for migrants and refugees are essential to promote their effective participation, given that they may have not been involved in decision making process or participatory approaches previously.

5.1.2 Interaction between sport and social sectors

A high level of interaction between the national sport sectors and social organisations is needed to overcome the fragmented nature of the efforts implemented to attract and increase the participation of migrants and refugees in sport activities. In this context, Member States need to develop comprehensive National Frameworks for the inclusion of migrants and refugees in and through sport, which will make specific reference to persons with disabilities and be coherent with the EU legislative framework.

5.1.3 Multi-agency working group

As part of the strategy, and as mentioned in the STEADY Recommendations Manual on social inclusion of DYD through sport it is recommended to create a multi-agency working group that will promote cross-disciplinary planning and collaboration, consisting of representatives from relevant government departments, sport organisations, voluntary bodies, disability organisations and migrant and refugees' organisations. In addition, it could include guidelines for the design and implementation of relevant policies and measures, establishing or proposing funding mechanisms and linking sport with other national, regional, and local policies.

5.1.4 The role of the organised sport

National Paralympic and Olympic Committees, National Federations, clubs and the entire national sport system of the European countries should have a robust plan involving social sector organisations and experts in refugee and social inclusion issues to use sport as a tool for social inclusion, understanding the needs of the migrants and refugees that result in providing a coordinated and financed national and European response, taking advantage of the full potential of the power of sport.

Moreover, IFs should recommend to their national associations to promote migrant and refugee participation among their affiliated clubs, allowing refugees to have equal access to national competitions and increase access to organised sport together with the hosting community.

5.1.5 European network of clubs committed to the inclusion of migrants and refugees through sport

According to the available statistics, the country of arrival of migrants and asylum seekers is not necessarily the final European destination. STEADY and other project beneficiaries of the Agitos Foundation and the Hellenic Paralympic Committee joined sport when they arrived in Greece but it has been difficult to provide opportunities when they relocate to other European countries.

We believe the clubs should be placed at the middle of the strategy, they have the sport infrastructure and the human resources needed to carry out sport activities.

The set-up of a European network of clubs that offers sport for migrants and refugees with disabilities together with the local community, would consolidate a European offer of sport for this target population. A database of these clubs would favour the dissemination of opportunities for the refugees in the different Member States, inspiring other clubs to be part of it and creating a coalition of clubs committed to inclusion that could be given a seal of “friendly clubs of migrants and refugees with and without disabilities” to recognise their contribution to a more inclusive European society and a platform to share best practices and attract media attention.

Besides the social recognition, funding mechanisms should be put in place to provide the clubs that are part of the network resources for the provision of services like transport, sport equipment, sport facilities and qualified specialists, positioning the clubs in the middle of the agenda to promote inclusion of refugees through sport.

5.2. Raise awareness about the potential of sport

It is important to raise awareness about the power of sport to promote inclusion of refugees with disabilities among community-based organisations such as clubs, sport associations, youth organisations, cultural centres and municipalities (the closest government to the citizen) and provide them with educational tools and economic resources to put in place sport opportunities that include our target population.

The pilot actions organised by the partners of the STEADY project have proven to be a great opportunity to give visibility to migrants and refugees with disability and raise awareness among organisations working through sport as a tool of social inclusion at community level, local communities, and the refugee population itself. These festivals and open sport events where persons with and without disabilities, locals and migrants were involved with local sport clubs and community-based organisations allowed the STEADY project to create a welcoming and open environment to show the power of sport as a tool for inclusion of our target population.

It is widely acknowledged that refugees and migrants have multiple needs, and several barriers must be dealt with to promote their inclusion in and through sport. Factors such as the lack of knowledge concerning the sport opportunities and the sport clubs, the requirements and process to be registered in the sport clubs/organisations or the lack/limited knowledge of the native language hinder the participation of refugees and migrants in sports. However, over recent years, projects and initiatives have identified such challenges and attempted to overcome them by designing and implementing activities that will provide support to refugees and migrants in various areas, such as language courses, legal assistance, information and awareness-raising campaigns for promoting the role of sport in social inclusion, or information concerning welfare issues.

5.2.1 Paralympic Refugee team

The participation of a team of refugees in the Paralympic Games of Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2020, sent a message of hope and unity to the world's 82.4 million displaced people and the 12 million among them with disabilities. Filippo Grandi (UN High Commissioner for Refugees) said: *"Their presence on the world stage at this Paralympic Games marks a historic moment of representation for over 12 million displaced people living with a disability around the world"*, bringing hope and inspiration to millions worldwide showing the power of sport to help displaced people rebuild their lives.

The sport performance of the six refugee athletes in Tokyo 2020 (five male and one female athlete) inspired millions of people around the world, attracted media attention and reached many refugees with disabilities through TV, which realized they can be part of sport.

5.3. Provision of knowledge and capacity building for volunteers and workers of community-based organisations with regards to sport participation of migrants and refugees

As indicated in the STEADY Recommendations Manual on social inclusion of DYD through sport, the role of coaches and facilitators for the successful participation of refugees and migrants with disabilities in sport and in particular for young persons with disabilities is of high importance. Indeed, well-trained coaches, professionals and volunteers are essential for the successful implementation of sport activities and the retention of the target group in the activities. However, academic literature suggests that there seems to be a lack of essential competencies such as intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes among coaches, professionals and volunteers.

Sport clubs by and large are run by volunteers with a variety of roles to fulfil, including the administrative and managerial side as well as the coaching side. Studies for instance on the diversity of the teaching profession have shown that ethnic minority teachers function as role models and are thus uniquely positioned to raise aspirations and act as mediators between the different cultural worlds of the home and host count. Sport can fulfil a similar function when integrating refugees and individuals with a migration background into the coaching and organisation functions of sport clubs. Some of the stakeholders viewed the participation opportunities as a three-step process that started

with participation in open activities, led to joining a club and then led to volunteer engagement.

Further, the organisation of capacity building activities for coaches, professionals, and volunteers for the successful delivery of sport activities for refugees and migrants with disabilities is recommended. These capacity building activities should be organised for meeting the needs, challenges, and potential expectations of the target groups. These trainings could include:

- Development of disability and intercultural awareness modules.
- Sport as a Tool for Empowerment of (Dis)Able & Displaced Youth.
- Implementation of formal and informal education and training for organisations, sport associations, public authorities and individuals on the basis of the disability and intercultural awareness modules.
- Organisation of cooperative training initiatives between Disability Sport Organisations, 'Mainstream Sport Organisations' and Organisations of/for migrants and refugees with the support of training providers and public authorities.
- Delivery of educational courses on sports that are common in the countries of origin of the migrants and refugees. Organisation of information and training sessions targeting the communities of migrants and refugees, and in particular for the newcomers, with the aim to help families understand the sport system and opportunities.

5.4. Funding

Feedback from stakeholders as well as from research suggests that project funding is generally available for a one- or two-year cycle which leaves smaller organisations with a lack of capacity vulnerable when funding expires. Often this triggers a constant cycle of searching for funding, continuous changes to programmes so that long-term programme effects are difficult to observe.

A key issue that was highlighted by the stakeholders with regards to the sustainability of clubs and projects was enhancing their administrative capacity. Clubs and small charitable organisations tend to be run by volunteers and some of the initiatives that were created

in immediate response to the refugee crisis do not have an organised structure at all and are entirely run by individuals or small groups of volunteers, according to stakeholders.

Within the creation of national strategies as part of a State policy, Member States should dedicate sustainable funding to clubs and local organisations carrying out activities for the inclusion of refugees through sport. As indicated above, clubs and small organisations tend to be volunteer-led and start up at the very grassroots level and therefore knowledge where funding was available or how to apply for it did not exist. Capacity building activities to identify revenue sources from grant makers, local, regional and European Governments, as well as training on how to apply for those should improve the access to funding of community-based organisations and clubs.

Another good practise, reported in Scandinavian countries, is to team up with other community organisations to combine funding streams and enhance what they could offer, thus sharing resources, knowledge and capacity.

Member States should provide sustainable and significant funding through their national strategies and State policy to use sport as a tool of inclusion, use and engage the network of clubs, community organisations and municipalities in contact with the target population, maximizing existing resources and contributing to provide specific initiatives spread around the country.

6. Final conclusions

We recognize there are some limiting factors that prevent the full potential to use sport as a tool for social inclusion of migrants and refugees with disability. We have identified the following:

- The basic needs of the person come first. Before we provide sport activities, we need to understand the challenges and prevention of rights they face daily in their host community. Specially the transition between the asylum application and the granted international protection and the transition from childhood to adulthood are identified as critical.
- All the STEADY member organisations and a deep desk review reported the difficulties to identify refugees with disability, and that here is no or very little data of refugees with disabilities. Therefore, it is hard to reach directly refugees and migrants with disabilities making them invisible and difficult to engage them in different programmes designed to support the refugee population. Early identification and quicker asylum resolutions granted are key factors to consider.
- Women in sport, and particularly refugees with disability, require a space in which they can feel safe and build trust, sharing it with other female peer athletes, coaches, and activists. All projects that intend to work with refugees and sport should put more efforts to create appropriate conditions for women's participation.

Yet, we believe in the power of sport to make for a more inclusive European society and continue to strengthen the Member State efforts to build a more efficient and robust approach to use sport as a tool for inclusion of migrants and refugees, especially those with disabilities, through:

1. Creation of a national response or State policy with cross-European coordination to use sport as a tool for inclusion involving refugees as part of the decision-making processes, promoting interactions between sport and social sectors, creating multi-agency working groups and using the potential of organised sport for refugees to have equal access to national competitions and increase access to organised and non-

organised sport activities together with the hosting community, especially those with disabilities.

2. Raise awareness about the potential of sport continuing to be an important outcome to pursue at different levels, namely community-based organisations, host community and migrant community, to disseminate the power of sport as a tool of inclusion and to break down stigma and discrimination.
3. Provision of knowledge and capacity building activities for volunteers and workers of community-based organisations with regards to sport participation of migrants and refugees and to the target population itself to play a more active role as volunteers, coaches and professionals of the organisations working in the field.
4. Advance strategies to provide tools and sustainable funding for community-based organisations that allow longer programmatic approaches and more efficient and coordinated initiatives at national and European level.

As a final remark, it is important to mention that the refugee flow will be a central theme on Europe's agenda, as it has been in the continent's recent and distant history but more intensely due to the current conflict in Ukraine. NGOs, civil organisations, media, and governments should contribute to provide a coordinated response, maximizing existing resources and avoiding the instrumentalization of this crisis, keeping the attention to all types of refugees and the rest of the countries experiencing conflicts, economic crises and climate emergencies to continue to work towards coordinated solutions that sport can provide to those migrant and asylum seekers arriving in Europe.