CONFERENCE ROUNDUP

‘Sport and Migration: what contribution for football?’

On September 12th 2016 in the prestigious venue of the Gothic Room in Brussels' Town Hall, and as part of the 2016 European Week of Sport, the think tank Sport and Citizenship organised a roundtable on the topics of sport and migration at the conference ‘Physical activity: tomorrow’s cure,’ coordinated by the House of Sport.

With Europe being plagued by shockingly high levels of inactivity across all ages and social groups, it is a top priority to raise awareness on the fact that physical activity is an important contributor to a wide range of domains, including human health, well-being and social inclusion. Representatives from the European Commission, international NGOs and local actors were present on the day.

Today, the EU is facing the largest migratory flux in its history. In total, nearly 1,1 million asylum seekers have been granted protection status in the EU since 2008.2 So far, debates on the subject of refugees’ place in Europe have focused on their numerical distribution across countries. There now is a necessity to ensure the smooth societal welcoming of refugees in towns across Europe. Because sport enables people from different backgrounds, religious beliefs and languages to play together and discover each other’s cultures, its potential to integrate migrants in European society is promising.

The think tank Sport and Citizenship chose the topic ‘Sport and migration: which contribution for football?’ for its roundtable, in order to create a seldom discussed subject. Football was the concrete example used in the round table’s heading, because of the sport’s status as one of the world’s major sports. Its potential to bring migrants and locals into contact is therefore of high relevance.

Were present around the table for this debate, chaired by Laurent THIEULE, President, Think tank Sport and Citizenship:

- Ignacio PACKER, Secretary General, Terre des Hommes International Federation
- Kurt WACHTER, Project Coordinator, Sport Inclusion Network, Austria
- Benjamin RENAULD, Project Manager, Kraainem Football Club, Belgium
- Yves LE LOSTECQUE, Head of the European Commission’s Sport Unit.
- Thierry ZINTZ, Université Catholique du Louvain / Member of Sport and Citizenship.

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1 [www.europeactive.eu/blog/house-sport-presents-physical-activity-tomorrows-cure](http://www.europeactive.eu/blog/house-sport-presents-physical-activity-tomorrows-cure)
SUMMARY OF THE ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS

In order to fully understand what steps have already been taken with regards to football’s contribution to the integration of migrants, Mr. Thieule asked Mr. Renault to kick off with a case study of Kraainem FC’s involvement in the matter. The club, based just outside Brussels, is deploying all its experience and resources to welcome twenty young asylum seekers (between 14 and 17 years old) per week, in order to provide them with clothing, food, language courses and football practices. This on-going process has yielded remarks concerning the refugees’ desire to play their native sport: cricket. Responding flexibly to this issue, Kraainem F.C is actively seeking to connect with local cricket clubs to help refugees play cricket with Europeans.

Mr. Thieule then invited Mr. Packer to give his experience and point of view concerning how sport could be used to help integrate migrants. Analogising xenophobia to ‘the cancer of our societies,’ the Secretary General of Terre des Hommes called for civil society initiatives to create bonds between refugees and locals. Packer spoke of his neighbour in Lausanne who had launched an initiative whereby locals could organise a jog with a refugee. In this instance, Sport is the initial point of contact but a spill over into other areas of life has been registered, as encounters whilst jogging are followed by meet-ups within other structures such as coffee shops, bars and the home.

‘Xenophobia is the cancer of our societies’ – I. Packer

Turning to the current obstacles facing the financial support of sport for the inclusion of migrants, Mr. Thieule prompted Mr. Le Lostèque to give his analysis. Referring to Article 165 of the Lisbon Treaty and the EU’s commitment to promoting a European dimension in sport, the Head of the European Commission’s sport unit exposed the lack of structures dedicated to financing the use sport as a tool of integration. Kurt Wachter, who agreed with football’s (as well as Sport’s in general) power to avoid the social exclusion of migrants, thereafter called for a refreshed structure at the level of the European institutions. Wachter’s point was supported by Packer, who rhetorically asked what the consequences of not striving for the social integration of migrants today could represent financially to the EU in the future.

‘Sport is a tool of inclusion, not a factor’ – T. Zintz

To round up the debate Thierry Zintz gave a speech, in which he clarified the use of the words ‘inclusion’ and ‘integration.’ In his opinion, integration ominously echoed assimilation, yet inclusion meant respecting each other’s values. In ensuring that inclusion is successful in today’s context, the professor enounced that Sport was a vital tool, due to its potential for removing barriers and enabling people to respect each other. Finally, Zintz concluded optimistically with the words of the late Nelson Mandela: ‘Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination.’

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