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The positive inclusion of refugee and migrant communities in and through football: A toolkit

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26th October 2015



Background to the project

As part of the 2014 Football People Event weeks sponsored by FARE, the Centre for the Study of Football and its Communities facilitated a Roundtable event, hosted at the Etihad stadium on 22nd October, addressing the positive inclusion of refugee and migrant communities in and through football.

Participants included football clubs, local authorities, football trusts, governing bodies, grassroots community organisations and academics. The Roundtable event marked the launch of a six month research project aimed at developing this toolkit.

The research consisted of a series of interviews and focus groups with a range of stakeholders in three major UK cities, Glasgow, London and Manchester, all of which are important centres of football and which have been shaped by a rich history of migration.

What is this toolkit?

The toolkit provides an overview of key examples of good practice in using football as a mechanism for inclusion of refugees and migrants, and offers recommendations for how football's stakeholders can continue to develop better practice.

On a practical level, the toolkit puts forward guidelines for policy planning, strategic developments, funding priorities and can serve as a checklist for evaluating current and future provision.

Who is it for?

All those with a stake in football becoming a more positive, proactive and inclusive community partner; this includes football clubs, governing bodies, local authorities and those with a role in decision making.

Existing good practice

Football in the UK has made some significant improvements in particular aspects of inclusion, for example Kick it Out, which attempt to embed the inclusion agenda in the game's everyday working practices. The formal game does not take a similarly confident lead on what is currently the more politically charged and contested issue of refugee and migrant inclusion; however, there is a wealth of good practice in the game, notably at the grassroots level.



A&M Training Participant Glasgow

“Language is a barrier, but put them on a football pitch or in an art class and they can express themselves”

Main barriers

Language

Access and inclusion is predicated on communication and mutual understanding. Although there is growing awareness that language is an issue which needs addressing for refugee and migrant communities, it was still found to be a recurring barrier in a number of contexts. These include the promotion of activities and events on websites, leaflets and posters, coaching session delivery, as well as the match day environment via signage, public address announcements and catering.

Lack of Resources

A common barrier reported by community participants was a general lack of resources. As well as equipment, transport and spaces for practical interventions, our research found that participants particularly valued visible symbols of belonging that football clubs are in a strong position to provide via club staff and badged training kits.

Myths

Football is an active part of wider society, and myths and stereotypes about minorities and excluded groups remain a social and cultural reality within the context of the sport. Football's high profile, both locally and globally, provides opportunities for exclusionary discourse to be challenged. Our research found that this agenda is being led by grassroots organisations, but all of football's stakeholders have a responsibility to determine their role within this.

Targeting of provision

Participants consistently reported that they didn't want to be exclusively labelled as migrant, asylum seeker or refugee footballers. Accurate age assessment is a problem for those who want to engage with the formal game; player registration is complex due to a lack of documentation and differing bureaucratic and legal avenues for adults and children, and is exacerbated by a relative lack of provision for adults.

Clubs knowing who is in their neighbourhood

It was found that clubs usually do not know which groups or individuals are currently living within their neighbourhood. This is linked to the dispersement strategies of local authorities but also the ongoing transitory nature of migrants' lives. This makes engagement with communities more difficult. A lack of an effective system or forum for clubs to access this information tends to result in a less tailored offer and a lack of forward planning.

Ongoing engagement

While overcoming the above barriers is key to prolonging engagement, there are broader concerns about the consistency and sustainability of provision. Research found that there are both benefits and limits to participation in the formal structures of the game. No single approach can currently meet the structural contradictions faced – hence the important role played by grassroots organisations like United Glasgow FC in providing relatively informal opportunities for inclusive football.

FC Romania, London

Ionut Vintila, Chairman of FC Romania, said that despite his club's name they do not just represent one migrant group. The club's name was chosen because they are not attached to a particular neighbourhood as most English clubs are – the link to Romania shared by the

chairman and many of the players is the most tangible sense of identity that they currently have. Nevertheless, the club is not just for migrants from Romania, and welcomes members of all communities.

Football Supporter Culture

The culture of football fandom represents a crucial context that, for practical rather than conceptual reasons, has remained in the background rather than foreground of this toolkit. The remit and scope of the research has placed a clear emphasis on ways in which migrant and refugee communities might be more positively included as football players rather than as fans. It is acknowledged however that being a football supporter is one of the ways that a sense of cultural identity and belonging can be experienced through the everyday lives of people in contemporary Britain, and certainly so in the three cities in which the research took place.

Football fandom is a complex mix of both inclusive and exclusive identity formations, often predicated at least in part on attachment to a particular place – this can be a country, region, city or town, and sometimes a suburb or other geographical proximity within a city. Globalisation and other social, cultural and political processes may have to an extent ‘deterritorialised’ some aspects of contemporary football fandom, but sensibilities and discourses of authenticity around place and belonging continue to play a prominent role in cultures of inclusion and exclusion within football supporter culture.

There are of course clear connections between the community provision of playing opportunities by football clubs and other key stakeholders, and the affiliative cultural capital that such a high profile and engaging sport brings to the social inclusion agenda. Similarly, some of the barriers outlined in

the previous section, especially concerned with the match day environment, language, myths and labelling, stand in part within the sphere of football fandom.

It is recommended therefore that in order to meaningfully tackle these barriers, ongoing dialogue with representatives of independent supporter groups and associations will be essential. This will mitigate against the risk of a disconnect or lag emerging between well-meaning social inclusion strategies and the cultural sensibilities and concerns of fans, and help ensure that a wider range of football’s communities are accounted for and given a voice in social inclusion strategies. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that some of UK football’s previous attempts at the positive inclusion of minorities or the previously marginalised have, however inadvertently, set the interests of different supporter demographics against each other.

The independent supporter movement has though, in recent years, demonstrated that a progressive articulation of long-standing fans’ concerns need not be set against the interests of previously marginalised groups. By providing a meaningful platform for a diverse range of voices to be heard, football supporter groups have demonstrated that football fandom can be inclusive and retain cultural authenticity, something that may not be achieved when cultural implications are not accounted for in the implementations of more top-down interventions.

Fan Inclusion

The social inclusion strategies of football clubs have, at times, come into conflict with football supporter culture. This certainly doesn’t mean that football fandom is antagonistic to moves towards the inclusion of previously excluded groups. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence to show that independent supporter organisations can be more progressive than clubs and authorities in pursuing an inclusionary agenda. There are, however, some cultural sensitivities that clubs in particular can pay attention.

to when looking to alter the match-day environment for whatever purpose. For example, this can include the forced displacement of regular supporters from a favoured or culturally valued area of the stadium to make way for disabled facilities.

Though this toolkit recommends that clubs consider the match-day environment in light of language and other cultural barriers reported, cohesion between all a club’s communities is better served by meaningful inclusion in sensitive planning decisions.

Recommendations

These recommendations are directly informed by the findings of the research based on the experiences of participants and delivery organisations across a range of contexts. These includes football clubs, governing bodies, local and national authorities as well as grassroots and community organisations. The project focused on three major UK cities and has therefore captured both good practice and an understanding of the limitations of current provision for refugee and migrant community inclusion in what is relatively new territory for UK football.

These recommendations will also help inform an expansion of the scope of future research beyond just the UK experience.

Recommendation 1

Language - translation

Organisations should ensure that all communications are available in as many appropriate languages as possible. Information about match arrangements, venues for playing football, local teams and leagues need to be accessible to the diverse range of communities in a particular locale. Further, ongoing participation and engagement with communities can be facilitated by including translators in coaching, managing and playing. This can be embraced as an enhancement of resources through embedding translation projects as a core part of the community delivery. This also ties together football participation as an end in itself and football as a vehicle for raising broader aspirations, enabling diversity and providing volunteering, training or employment opportunities.

Recommendation 2

Challenge Myths and Stereotypes

Football of course enjoys a high profile, particularly at the top levels, so clubs are in a position to lead by example in positively including refugee and migrant communities. Building on the innovative approaches to inclusion found in grassroots football, football organisations across all levels of the game should engage positively with the issues and priorities surrounding migrant and refugee community inclusion. Specifically, there are myths around some faith, ethnic and national groups and their attitudes, aptitudes and access to the game, which can and should be proactively challenged. Organisations should make themselves aware of different cultural needs and wants in terms of a local football offer; one example of good practice is opening sports facilities at late or non-traditional hours during fasting periods.

Inclusive Language: found in translation

An example of good practice in embedding diversity and cultural inclusion was reported by the Manchester FA in an unorthodox yet enlightening solution to overcoming language barriers.

Upon recognising the limitations of releasing communications only in English, Chief Executive Colin Bridgford took their latest press release into local classrooms and asked the children to translate it into their first language.

By the end of the lesson, the Manchester FA had the message translated into several of the most widely spoken languages in the city. While this specific method cannot by itself be relied upon for publicly facing and accountable organisations, it represents a salutary lesson in the advantages of seeing the diversity of local communities as a strength, as an opportunity for partnership working in the co-production of community resources, rather than as a problem to be overcome.

Recommendation 3

Stigma and Cultural Capital

Our research found that there is often a stigma attached to accessing football through local authority provision. Similarly the most proactive delivery of broadly inclusive training, coaching and playing is delivered by community based football organisations. Although larger football clubs at the higher levels of the game run community football projects, these tend to be targeted at younger age groups and do not specifically target their offer around the diversity of local neighbourhoods. Football clubs, local authorities and grassroots football organisations should develop some collaborative provision to meet shared priorities around inclusion, which is more meaningful when based on access to resources and quality of experience. Community football projects, irrespective of the delivery agent, should aim for the widest forms of inclusion rather than labelling types of offer, for example 'refugee and migrant football'. Football should capitalise on the social, cultural and symbolic capital it can bring to projects, thus helping to overcome the stigma reported by participants.

Recommendation 4

Clubs knowing neighbourhoods

Clubs need to engage in regular dialogue with other stakeholders in the local area to have a comprehensive understanding of changing neighbourhood demographics, particularly when there is a dispersement action by local or national government. Communication between football organisations and relevant agencies is key to tackling this. Local football forums are one way of including all appropriate stakeholders in sharing knowledge and best practice about refugee and migrant community needs. It is important that football is seen as a tool for inclusion and can where appropriate be one part of local settlement packages for families, or via the foster care provision involved with unaccompanied young migrants.

Fostering Cultural Bonds Through Football

Paula Duffy has experience of working with foster families and with unaccompanied young migrants in Manchester via CAFRASS (Children and Families Refugee and Asylum Seeker Services), and has seen the benefits, as well as the limitations, of using football as a tool for positive inclusion.

Accessible coaching sessions organised by FC United of Manchester proved very popular with young migrants in her care, and on that initial wave of enthusiasm a visit to a home match of FC United was arranged. Paula reported that while the club and fans were extremely welcoming, the group nevertheless felt disconnected from the match-day environment and atmosphere. On reflection therefore, the match visit was seen as a step too far, too soon.

It was felt that a more gradual, organic approach to building on the cultural appeal of football fandom would be more appropriate, perhaps by encouraging foster families who take in unaccompanied young migrants to see football as one possible way to share cultural interests and overcome language or other social barriers.

Recommendation 5

Build in flexibility

Organisations should build in a degree of flexibility around bureaucratic regulations that can limit or hinder the participation of migrant and refugee communities. For example, deadlines on player registrations and caps on squad numbers within the formal game have been found to present a barrier to participation. While it is appreciated that regulations are there for good reasons, the inclusion of some more accessible parallel routes to participation should be explored.

Recommendation 6

Ongoing engagement

Sustaining inclusive participation is very much predicated upon the careful consideration and successful implementation of each of the above recommendations. While there will be circumstances and issues that lie largely outside of the influence of football clubs and authorities, it is important to ensure that football is playing an active role in being part of the solution rather than part of the problem. This requires critical reflective practice to be embedded within everyday organisational culture, and this can be further strengthened via regular monitoring and evaluation that includes relevant community representatives, as well as utilising the expertise of outside agencies.





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