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Organised sport in Niamey's refugee sites: a multilevel analysis of changes between 2019 and 2022

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ABSTRACT

Refugee sites are a central mean of managing large-scale forced migrations. Despite their life-saving scope, they are 'liminal spaces' that re-create 'time bubble' feelings. In such settings, sport activities are standardly organised and believed to be beneficial for site residents. Against this background, the guestion 'Which factors do influence organised sport in refugee sites over time?' is assessed through ethnographic studies conducted in 2019 and 2022 at a refugee site complex in Niger. The collected data is analysed using qualitative content analysis and interpreted using ecological systems theory. The multi-level analysis identifies the organisation level as the most influential for the sport activities provided. Particularly the frequent changes of the organisations in charge of sport imply the restart of programmes that should be delivering long-term outcomes for individuals and thus cannot achieve their objectives. Although difficult to implement, the development of a system for transferring sport-related knowledge is identified as a way to alleviate this problem.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Forced migration; leisure; management development; ecological systems theory; ethnography

1. Introduction

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2024), there are more than 117 million forced migrants, who have been displaced by persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and other life-threatening risks. Health, climate, and war crises contribute to the expectation that forced displacement will continue to rise in the near future (Palinkas 2020).

As a fundamental means of managing forced migration, refugee sites are facilities built to provide immediate protection and assistance to people who have been forced to flee their homes due to war, persecution or violence' (UNHCR 2020). This article uses the term 'refugee site' as an umbrella term for a wide range of settlements with the same purpose, but which includes other types of shelter solutions in addition to camps. The number and population of such sites is growing, even if the UNHCR itself states that these should be a last resort and that other solutions should



be preferred. Despite their lifesaving function, a refugee site is a liminal space, which recreates limbo effects through a mandatory spatiality and a possibly unknown duration of residency for their populations (Turner 2016). 'Limbo' is the afterlife condition of people in an area between Heaven and Hell, who die in original sin. Its residents experience the refugee camp as a limbo because there they live 'in a time pocket where time grinds to a halt inside the camp while normal time continues outside the camp' (Turner 2016, p. 142). Importantly, refugee sites 'are conceived and planned as a hole in time as much as in space, a temporary suspension of the time sequence of identity building and territorial ascription' (Bauman 2013, p. 142). Bauman sharply criticises refugee sites as 'the dumping grounds for the undisposed of and as yet unrecycled waste of the global frontier-land' (2013, p. 136).

Sport is here defined as 'all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels' (Council of Europe 2020). A broadly accepted discourse, which is also heralded by the 'Sport for Development and Peace' (SDP) movement, portrays sport as having great potential to help, heal and empower refugees, including those living in refugee sites (Darnell 2012, Schulenkorf and Adair 2013, Young 2017, Collison et al. 2019). Despite the existence of a large body of research on this topic, nearly all existing literature reviews (SDP International Working Group Ed. 2007, Cronin 2011, van Eekeren et al. 2013, Langer 2015, Svensson and Woods 2017) agree that the available research has several limitations (Darnell 2010, 2012, Giulianotti 2011, Kidd 2013): most of it is evaluative, cross-sectional and relies primarily on case studies or interventions that take these positive expectations as their starting point. Recent reviews of scientific literature reveal that an abundance of sport sociological research on the topic of forced migration has been carried out in recent years (Spaaij et al. 2019, 2021, Michelini 2020, Middleton et al. 2020), which, however, mostly ignores the topic of refugee sites.¹ This article expands the few existing research on this specific topic (Russell and Stage 1996, Harris 2007, Wright 2009, Koopmans and Doidge 2022, Michelini 2022, Holmes 2023) by analysing data of an exploratory and longitudinal ethnographic study (Michelini 2022, 2023, Michelini and Schreiner 2022).

As time in refugee sites is no longer history and instead barred to qualitative change (Bauman 2013), the question 'Which factors do influence organised sport in refugee sites over time?' is assessed here through the data of two ethnographic studies conducted in 2019 and 2022. While this research project focuses broadly on the role of sport in the refugee sites of Niamey (Niger), this article considers particularly the topic of change. The element of change is a central question for the management of sport in this setting (Massey et al. 2015, Schulenkorf et al. 2016, Svensson et al. 2018) but has been rarely explored in its policy and politics implication (Hayhurst 2009, Lindsey and Grattan 2012, Thorpe 2016). This study can therefore help to understand the apparently time bounded concept of change for actors operating in a 'timeless space' such as refugee sites.

The factors that may have led to a change in the ETM of Niamey and its sport activities in the course of these three years were assessed in a multi-level perspective through a theoretical framework based on the ecological systems theory (EST). After presenting the EST, the article describes its methodological approach. Finally, the article examines the changes in sport activities in refugee sites over the three years considered and concludes by formulating recommendations for policy actions for organisations and groups interested in improving sport in refugee sites. The advantage of employing this broad framework is to capture the complexity of processes, which are influenced by changes in multiple layers of interaction, ranging from individual behaviours to broader socio-political contexts.

2. Theoretical framework

This study applies a purposeful version of the EST (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1992) to examine the way sport activities have changed at the refugee sites of Niamey between 2019 and 2022. This framework outlines the relationships, interactions, and bidirectional influences between different societal levels from a person-centred perspective. The environment is where social interactions occur, and in this case, as anticipated in the introduction, it is a liminal space, roughly defined as a place 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1987). We contend that refugee sites can be categorised as liminal spaces in a strict sense for three fundamental reasons (Howarth and Ibrahim 2012, Arvanitis et al. 2019, Yahya 2021): First, in terms of time, these sites represent transitional phases for refugees, who are often waiting indefinitely for resettlement or the chance to return home. This prolonged uncertainty places them in a state of 'in-betweenness', where their future remains unclear. Second, from a spatial perspective, refugee camps are physically isolated from regular urban spaces. They are often temporary, geographically marginalised, and separated from mainstream society, reinforcing the refugees' status as outsiders. Finally, the concept of exception highlights how refugees exist outside the normal legal and political frameworks. They are governed by special rules that suspend many rights, placing them in a state of legal and social exception, which at the ETM can end with an identity transformation due to a positive acknowledgement of their refugee status. This combination of temporal, spatial, and legal marginalisation solidifies refugee camps as liminal spaces where normal boundaries and definitions are blurred.

According to the EST, an environment is made of five different systems, named microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Figure 1). With the individual being at the centre of the environment, each system is represented by key actors that interact both with the individual and with other systems. Thereby, the microsystem is populated by actors, who have direct individuals and relationships with the sport activities; the mesosystem consists in interactions that occur between the different individuals within the microsystem in relation to the individual; the exosystem comprises the organisations that influence the activities; and the macrosystem concerns the overall legislative, political and cultural elements affecting the sport activities. Finally, the chronosystem considers changes in the environment happening over time that affect the activities. In this case, the chronosystem represents shifts occurring between 2019 and 2022.

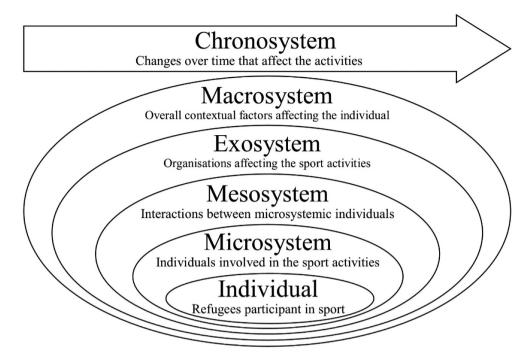


Figure 1. Ecologic system theory applied to 'sport activities in refugee sites'. Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979)

Individuals are influenced by the system in which they live, but at the same time are influencing their surrounding environment. Different systems should be understood as networked rather than nested (Neal and Neal 2013), meaning that systems overlap and therefore interact with each other through the social interactions of the individuals within them. These interlink not only with their proximal system but also across different systems. When we look at interactions that happen through sports, this framework provides structure within, and positioning of, the various multidimensional elements that compose the social interactions of refugees within refugee sites. At the same time, it allows the flexibility to explore that same scenario, zooming in and out of relevant interactions that signify the changing role of sport in refugee sites (Paat 2013, Arakelyan and Ager 2021). Precisely, this allows such lens to be helpful in connecting interaction at the individual level with policy-related issues.

Further expanding on the chronosystem is important to put this concept in dialogue with existing studies looking at liminality, sports, and refugee sites. Waardenburg *et al.* (2018) focus on the meaning of sport activities in refugee sites, used to overcome boredom and meet others.

Their conceptualisation of refugee sites as liminal spaces helps us connect the spatiotemporal uncertainty of such sites with the function of sport activities. Similarly, Genovesi (2024) posits football as a tool of resistance among policy-imposed liminality. Instead of focusing on the spatial dimension, Genovesi (2024) looks at the individual dimension as it interplays with the macrosystem, emphasising how sport goes beyond the momentary. Norrito and Mason (2023) also present a further function of football among refugees crossing the Mediterranean, that of providing a direction for their life, both physically and emotionally. These studies suggest that sport has a role in combating and surpassing a liminal chronosystem, which is a period of the life of refugees characterised by uncertainty towards the future. Nonetheless, we still don't know how multiple systems within the environment may interplay in shaping barriers or facilitators to surpass such liminal chronosystems.

The article focuses on two particular frames within a single chronosystem, that is, two specific time periods put in relation with each other. First, it looks at the one examined in the first visit of 2019 and the one in the second visit in 2022. As chronosystems are signified by changes that occur over time, the article examines both the chronosystems around the activities and the relationship between the sport activities and the environment. For example, within the child development tradition, chronosystems refer to the passing of age of the individual (Darling 2007). This sociological analysis focuses instead on chronosystems as the continued time period in the refugee site where the sport activities are delivered. Conceptually, this implies that refugee sites, while being 'timeless spaces' for the individuals who experience them, still undergo a constant process of becoming, with necessities of organisation and change management.

This article prefers 'change' over the term 'development' because it better describes a process of social evolution without implying progress in a positivist manner (Luhmann et al. 1982). From a constructivist perspective and following the theoretical reflections of Koselleck (1979) on the timeframes 'past, present and future', time is not only a subjective but also a changing concept. Social phenomena are dynamic because they continuously produce and reproduce themselves but also interact with and adapt to their respective environments (Luhmann 1987, 1997, Stichweh 2018). New elements, innovations, variations, and crises act as events that impact this ongoing process of reproduction. An event unveils the difference between the 'before' and 'after' and may disclose a range of contingent or rather potential alternative possibilities (Baraldi et al. 1997). Events may be intentional or casual but their impacts can't be completely foreseen since adaptation is a process that includes coincidences and unexpected outcomes. Time also serves as a prerequisite for the establishment of expectations that are a means of orientation for the analysis of change concerning structure, organisation and processes (Schwanitz 1995) as well as concerning synchronic (daily routine) and diachronic (biography) times (Hurrelmann and Bauer 2018). Possible causes of change, which might have impacted sport activities at the individual, micro-, exo-, meso- and macro-systems (Dopfer et al. 2004), are formulated in the sub-questions below:

- (1) Individual: Who are the individuals partaking in sport within the sites?
- (2) Microsystem: How do individuals influence sport of the sites?
- (3) Mesosystem: How do interactions between individuals impact sport of the sites?
- (4) Exosystem: How do organisations influence sport of the sites?
- (5) Macrosystem: How does the context outline sport of the sites?

3. Methods

This study focuses on sport in the context of UNHCR's ETM of Niamey based on data collected in 2019 as well as on data collected in 2022 in the same refugee sites. In both cases, data was collected using ethnographic methods and focussed on the perspective of the refugees (Jackson 2017).²

The ETM of Niamey was built in 2017 'for the evacuation of vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers from detention in Libya to Niger. The programme was established in order to facilitate the processing of refugees and asylum seekers trapped in detention and to ensure access to protection and to durable solutions' (UNHCR 2019). While it differs from emergency camps and stable encampments due to the higher turnover of its residents, it recreates limbo effects through a mandatory spatiality and a short but unknown (and often longer than planned, expected and desired) time. The refugee site complex comprises some houses in the city and Hamdallaye, a medium size camp outside the city. The relatively small population, isolated location, and secure environment of the ETM makes it a good subject for research, which has been also carried out intensively by another research group (Veronese et al. 2022, 2023, Fiscone et al. 2024), although in a context unrelated to sport. Besides providing basic necessities (water, food, medicine, shelter and clothing), the ETM also offers psychological assistance, language classes and leisure activities. Organised sport activities such as football, volleyball, dancing, athletics and Taekwondo take place regularly despite discouraging conditions (e.g. hot weather). The support of UNHCR Niger was fundamental premise for the security of the researcher during the data collection in this setting.

During a 4-week research visit in 2019, the first author participated for the first time in organised sports activities offered at the Niamey's ETM. As usual in ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019), data collection activities included observations, interviews and complementary forms of data collection. Approximately 60 hours of participant observations were spent actively taking part in sports activities with refugees, some of these hours as one of the coaches in a football-based project (20 hours) and the rest (40 hours) as an active participant in other sports activities offered at the sites (swimming and Taekwondo). An equal amount of time was spent at the ETM before and after participation in the given sports activities. Exchanges before, during and after the sports activities, including conversations, answers to individual questions and informal chats mostly with refugees, but also with sport staff and people working at the sites also took place. Interviews were another relevant source of information. Narrative interviews (n = 10)focussed on the topic of sport in Niamey's refugee sites and were conducted with staff working at the sites. The interviewees were three interpreters who had a refugee background, four managers with European roots employed with UNHCR and three trainers from Niger. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted formally by appointment, after the participants had been informed of the objectives of the study and their consent had been obtained. Finally, complementary information was collected through document analysis. Documents in this regard are understood as any piece of information (image, text, audio or video) that are available independently from the study's research activities. The materials on sports activities issued by the organisations, journalists or individuals involved in making the activities possible were considered complementary sources.

The follow-up study has the same approach, length and goals but ended up in a slightly different way. Approximately 40 hours of participant observation were spent actively taking part in sports activities with refugees. This time, the leading researcher did not take any coach role and participated exclusively in football and taekwondo activities

Table 1. Da	ta collected	in Niamev's	refugee sites.
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Data collected	2019	2022			
Observations	1 Month	1 Month			
	60h on site	80h on site			
	60h sport	40h sport			
Interviews	3 translators	3 refugees			
	4 officers	1 officer			
	3 coaches	2 coaches			
Documents	UHCR's documents				
	and official news				

(40 hours) as an active participant. In 2022, much more time was spent at the sites without practicing PA and sport, sometimes several hours were spent informally chatting with refugees at different sites. Overall, it was a much more communicative experience, particularly with the refugees. Mnemonic notes of the most intensive talks with three refugees were taken, which were met several times and with whom the researcher had conversations for hours, amongst other on their PA practices. In addition, formal interviews were further carried out. Four narrative interviews focussed on the topic of sport in Niamey's refugee sites and were conducted with staff working at the sites following the same modalities of 2019. The interviewees were two managers with European roots employed by UNHCR and by an NGO and two trainers from Niger. Finally, complementary information was collected through document analysis as in 2019 (Table 1).

In both cases, the data collected through these methods consisted of field notes, transcriptions and document analysis, which were used to compile two ethnographic diaries of 100 pages each. After the visits, the notes and diaries were integrated and adapted but not reworked or interpreted. The factors that may have led to a change in the ETM of Niamey and its sport activities in the course of three years were assessed through an iterative inductive-deductive approach. The previous inductive analyses of the first author were interpreted in the perspective of the EST, using the concepts beyond the theory's levels for generating new questions and analytical categories. Thereby, the material was analysed using qualitative content analysis techniques (Krippendorff 2013) and reflected through dialectic interaction with the second author.

4. Results

After sketching a prototypical participant in sport at refugee sites, the following sections focus on exploring the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems in the two points considered within the chronosystem. These different societal levels play a relevant role and influence the experiences of individuals at organised sports activities in refugee sites.

4.1. Individual: who are the refugees partaking in sport within the sites?

Just let's say that I got to be in Europe and I wanted to make a test with Bayern München team, which mean in the premier division of Germany, so is it possible and if it was possible can you make for me? Project material

The participants' perspective is crucial for understanding sport at refugee sites, as individuals represent the embodiment of that experience. Despite being an extremely

heterogeneous group, this section describes some common characteristics of the residents of the refugee sites and then a typical participant in football and taekwondo activities as these two sports could be followed in both 2019 and 2022.

All the residents of the ETM in Niamey have a background of forced migration and have experienced critical adverse events before inhabiting the sites. However, not all of them had similar experiences of migration, nor they all have psychosocial traumas. Furthermore, it is important to stress diversity in terms of age (mainly children and young adults), marital status (a mix of unmarried males and families), sex (balanced between male and female) and nationality (predominantly Eritrean and Somalian but also Sudanese, Ethiopian and Nigerian). Despite being a safe place, the ETM is also destructive space, linked to vulnerability and suffering – whether physical, psychological, or social (Howarth and Ibrahim 2012). These liminal spaces are marked by forced immobility, limited opportunities, and pervasive boredom. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the desire to leave the ETM for a country in the 'Global North' is both widespread and intense, or that sport is frequently practiced, whether formally or informally.

Football is the most popular sport at the ETM of Niamey and boys (male, 15-25 years old) usually take part in the organised activities. They may have different reasons for playing football more or less intensively, including socialising, escaping boredom and having fun. Some of them – usually the most skilled and dedicated – dream of a career as a professional footballer. While the chances of becoming professional from such a disadvantaged positions are rather slim (but not impossible) and can lead to huge diappontment after the resettlement, this dream can be a positive drive for the time spent in refugee sites. The intermediate to advanced level of football activities in the ETM deters participants, who do not meet the required skill level.

The typical Taekwondo participant is also a teenager or young adult, but the participants are more heterogeneous and may include women and children. The motives of the participants don't comprise a future career in Taekwondo, but rather the ability to defend themselves. The practice of combat sports might contribute to (the feeling of) being safe, which is very important in the context of the often troubled past and present situation of the sites' inhabitants. However, the core activities are physical exercise and kata (choreographies of moves and hits), instead of fighting and self-defence. Moreover, the sometimes unnecessary 'martial' and rigorous nature of the activities present an issue to some of the participants, who may prefer a more relaxed, interactive and causal atmosphere.

These findings emphasise the significance of incorporating the diverse perspectives, aspirations, and perceived benefits of participants into the provision of sport. Each sport is practiced with unique motivations, making it challenging to define an 'ideal' approach to sport delivery. This underscores the need to differentiate activities and address the diverse needs and values of participants. While resource limitations make such targeted offerings impossible, recognising these varying perspectives is crucial for effective sport delivery. Moreover, it highlights the importance of continuous change management to adapt to the dynamic nature of the ETM.



4.2. Microsystem: how do coaches and sport managers influence the sport experience in the sites?

I am the coach for [sport] at the ETM. In my youth, I was a national athlete for the Niger team, and later I also coached the national team. Project material

Within the microsystem, the primary individuals directly responsible for sports delivery and programming are the coaches and managers. The focus is here on how they interact with each others and the resident refugees. From 2019 to 2022, all the staff delivering sport programmes in the ETM in Niamey has changed. Although three different NGOs were contracted to deliver the activities, they all recruited local sport personnel with successful backgrounds as professional athlete and/or coach. The coaches carried out the activities in the form of training sessions planned to improve fitness, technique and tactics of the participants. Very less was planned directly for other objectives, although educational and health aspects were always mentioned by both coaches and managers as the main goals of the activities. In both periods, the work at the sites was a well-paid side job for the coaches, important but not essential. Most of the coaches used to arrive at the sites, run the activities and leave shortly afterwards. However, this cannot be seen as a lack of interest for the participants, as they were also involved in organising extra activities like tournaments and friendly matches. These extra activities were very much liked by the participants, but they were again based on the competitive logic.

The group dynamics within the activities are also very similar, with a permanent and strong 'kick-off' character that is explainable with the liminal features of refugee sites. Given the high fluctuation, the participants can be very heterogeneous and their presence in the activities for a long time cannot be taken for granted. This also means that the activities are frequently conducted with new participants, making it challenging to achieve consistent group skill improvement. Only few exceptions could be noticed through small details. For example, in the Taekwondo activity, the youths who participated in an event some months before my visit in 2022 received a kimono to wear during the training sessions. These participants formed the front line of the training group and set an example for the other less experienced participants.

Despite changes in much of the staff, the UNHCR team responsible for managing the sites and organising sports remained deeply committed to the coordination of sports activities in both 2019 and 2022. Although not directly tied to the core mission of refugee care, sport was regarded as the most relevant leisure activity by those in leadership roles. Nonetheless, the people in charge of the delivery had different and specific ideas concerning sport that changed with their succession, thus having a significant fingerprint in the organisation of sport. Concretely, 'flourishing' –a concept that was used in 2019 a lot also in relation to sport – lost some of its centrality and therefore the activities were less loaded with expectations in 2022. However, the health and educative expectations remained very high and utopian.

The relationship between the coaches and the participants was complex in both 2019 and 2022. The trainers were well liked, and the activities were better attended than other leisure activities. Nevertheless, there were frequent complaints about the cancellations, delays and discontinuations of training sessions and about the lack of sport equipment, which was also a major barrier to formal and informal practice. For example, footballs

were treated as a scarce and valuable commodity. One training session was cancelled after 10 minutes because one of the two (supposedly indestructible) available balls was damaged and the other was kicked high off the pitch and stolen by local children. To encourage informal training, the coaches were instructed to lend one ball to each training group. The responisble could only get a new ball only if he/her could bring the broken ball to the coach, but not if the ball got lost, which led to many discussions among the players and with the coach. This created tensions, which were settled because of the fundamental interest in the activities of both the coaches and the participants. It is also clear, that refugees were excluded from the coaching positions, although many of them would have the skills and the interest to carry them out.

The discrepancy between the goals of coaches and managers, as well as the gap between coaches' talk and action, is inherent and appears to be strategically overlooked or even accepted. After all, an experienced coach focused on performance will deliver solid sessions with their strengths and weaknesses. Conversely, the sessions of a coach prioritising health or education might lack appeal among skilled refugees, who thrive on competition. Since coaches play a pivotal role in shaping how sports are delivered and experienced, addressing this discrepancy would require retaining and training coaches to align their approach with the organisation's broader objectives.

4.3. Mesosystem: how do interactions between coaches, sensitisers, and the researcher impact the sport experience in the sites?

My name is [anonymised], my role is to inform and motivate the inhabitants of the site about the organised activities, including sports. Project material

This section examines how the sport activities are influenced by further interactions between the individuals among the microsystem. These processes are exemplified through the relationships of trainers with the researcher, the so-called sensitisers and the managers.

The first author conducted the study openly, stating his role as a sociologist and the aims of the research. While this indubitably posed an issue to the ecological validity of the observations at the sites, in both 2019 and 2022 it created a slight Hawthorne effect: it revitalised and improved the activities, thus benefitting the refugee population. However, this positive change was minimal, and its legacy could not be acknowledged in the second visit. Knowing the scientific aim of the study, the sport staff often treated the author as a colleague sometimes aiming to demonstrate their professionalism or success. Evidently, some of the sport and other activities observed were extra prepared to make a good impression, and refugees were extra recruited for them. Nevertheless, there were in both stays several cases of spontaneously cancelled training sessions. Moreover, the foreign appearance of the researcher influenced further the interactions with the locals, the staff and the refugees. In particular, the social construction of 'whiteness' (Allen 1997, David 2007, Hooks 2014) played a relevant role in the setting. Niger has a past as French colony with clear repercussions on the present (highlighted by the coup d'état of 26 July 2023) and the absolute majority of UNHCR (especially at the highest positions) is white. Being the researcher sometimes the only white person³ in the setting created



feelings of curiosity, sympathy (or hostility when he was mistakenly taken for French) and hope for positive change among both the trainers and the participants.

The organisation chart of the ETM includes a specific professional profile, the sensitiser, whose task is to socialise, inform and motivate the refugees to participate in the so called psychosocial activities. In 2019, this recruitment process was very visible and central to the organisation of the activities. For example, the sensitisers made the rounds of the site or centres entering in some shelters or rooms to motivate and convince people to participate in sport. This recruitment was sometimes quite invasive and clearly based on a power imbalance between sensitisers and refugees. In 2022 instead, while still existing, they were almost inactive in the recruiting of residents for sport and other leisure activities. In turn, this created disappointment among the sport staff and conflicts between them and the sensitisers. The first author was unable to find any explanation for this shift.

Finally, the trainers were also entrusted with the practical organisation of the activities at the sites, in direct relationship with the site managers. Particularly, the rooms but also their condition and the use of materials as well as the scheduling of the activities had to be negotiated between them. While the trainers were mostly (very) dissatisfied with the conditions of the activities, the communication between them and the centre managers was mostly harmonious or at least polite. Despite a theoretically inferior position of power, trainers were treated with great deal of respect, probably because of their notorious involvement in elite sport. The managers of the centres supported where possible the activities of the trainers.

This section highlights that focusing solely on the trainer-participant dyad is insufficient to fully understand the sport-related dynamics within the ETM. Further mesosystemic interactions shape sport in the refugee sites in ways that are rather complex and sometimes unexpected. The diversity, path-dependency and serendipity of these interactions pose a major challenge to the study of changes in sport in refugee sites, particularly when looking for causal mechanisms. Nonetheless, the possibility to position these interactions and roles in the mesosystem helps identify key nodes to consider for the provision of sport.

4.4. Exosystem: how do organisations such as the UNHCR and sport NGOs impact the sport experience in the site?

The NGO in charge of the ETM's sports activities changed immediately after your departure in 2019. We [UNHCR] were not satisfied with their work. Also the following NGO didn't meet our expectations. But we are now happy with the work of [name of a third NGO]. Project material

In the effort to reconstruct the situational complexity of the topic, several organisations at the exosystem level directly or indirectly influence sports at the ETM. This section focuses on the most influential ones: the UNHCR, and the NGO in charge of sport, highlighting their (difficult) relationship.

Between 2019 and 2022, UNHCR has undergone several changes, some of which are related to contextual macro-factors and others of a purely organisational nature, which are discussed in this section. UNHCR is an organisation with a high turnover of staff, which involved during the time examined also highest hierarchical positions. While these changes did not imply radical differences in the goals and management style, they were an obstacle to the routinisation and stabilisation of the situation of the sites and their inhabitants. According to some workers, there has been a further move away from charity towards more rational forms of subsistence for refugees. This is tangible in the progressive closure of refugee shelters in the city and the expansion of the role of Hamdallaye, a large refugee site built outside the city. In 2019, Hamdallaye, the main site of the ETM, was newly built, not fully inhabited and many refugees were hosted in the city. In 2022, Hamdallaye was more populated and more developed. Although Hamdallaye has many advantages for its inhabitants, the refugees there struggle more with boredom and exclusion than the refugees in the houses located in the city. This, in addition to a (for some) longer than expected residency time at the site, has been a source of frustration for the refugees. As a result, security measures were tightened and the site became less accessible than in 2019. In terms of sport, the concentration of the refugee population on one site and the availability of the new facilities (further discussed below) opens up the possibility of diversified and 'mass' activities, which were still only partially exploited in 2022.

The NGOs appointed for carrying out sport at the sites changed three times between 2019 and 2022. An international charitable organisation, an international NGO for Sport for Development and Peace, and a local NGO of Niamey alternated the responsibility to organise sport in the site over the years. While the work of the international NGO for Sport for Development and Peace could not be assessed in this research, the main characteristics of the other two organisations are commented below. In 2019, the charitable organisation had a close cooperation with UNHCR and a psychological and medical focus, which partly influenced the activities. The local NGO of Niamey was characterised by good relations with the municipality and a much stronger artistic attitude, which had some impact on other organised leisure activities, but not particularly on the sport activities. Despite these differences, in both cases, sport remained substantially similar in the timeframes analysed. This suggests that the orientation of the personnel, rather than the organisations beyond them, is the strongest factor in explaining the performance orientation of the activities.

The reason for the rapid change in the NGOs responsible for the sport activities at the sites commented above must be sought in the interaction between the NGOs and UNHCR. While a contract with UNHCR is highly desirable because it is a generous, reliable and prestigious payer, the working relationship deteriorated rapidly in all cases. This issue evidently impedes the continuity of the activities and has important consequences at the micro systemic level. Allegedly, after a positive start, a discrepancy between expected and delivered services led to the termination of the contract. No information could be found to explain the mechanisms beyond this recurring pattern, which might also be caused by power issues. Instead, what could be observed was the uncritical acceptance by the NGOs and their staff of the overloaded goals of UNHCR for sport, and their disregard for these in the implementation of the activities.

This clearly demonstrates how unstable and occasionally conflictual organisational processes can hinder the continuity and progress of sports activities. Interestingly, the influence of the responsible NGOs is marginal and limited to the role of a contractor. As



personal know-how and preferences overcome (fragmented) organisational guidelines, coaches hold the greatest capacity to shape the sport activities.

4.5. Macrosystem: how does the context outline sport of the sites?

The refugees' route through Agadez has become less important and the routes are more diversified today than in 2019. However, Niger still plays a central role in the management of mass migration from South and Central Africa to Europe. Project material

The macrosystem is the most complex level, and its exhaustive analysis is beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, only the most important changes with a significant impact on the sport activities will be commented on, by distinguishing between the physical environment and the socioeconomic, political, security and health dimensions.

Obviously, the topic at hand could be researched because refugee sites are present in Niger's territory for complex geopolitical reasons. Among other issues, the country has been facing an influx of refugees fleeing conflicts, particularly in Nigeria and Mali, for several years. It is estimated that in 2022, Niger hosts around 250,000 refugees and more than 276,000 forcedly displaced persons, most of whom want to cross the country with the goal to reach North Africa and from there the 'Global North' (UNHCR 2023).

Indeed, Niger is implementing international programmes to manage mass migration for humanitarian purposes, but also as a way of getting international aid and reinforcing its political legacy. The country's context is relevant to understand why and how. The main socioeconomic challenges have remained the same over the period analysed. Like other countries in the Sahel, Niger faces problems inherited from its recent colonial past, droughts, internal and external political issues and widespread poverty (Bond 2015, BBC News 2021). Niger is relying on resources – especially uranium, oil and gold – to modernise its economy, but between 2019 and 2022, the intersections of health, climate, and security issues hampered significantly its economic growth, which remains with positive projections (The World Bank 2023). This information is fundamentally confirmed by among others Officer 1 (2022) 'Economically, Niger has slowed down and it is still one of the poorest countries in the world, but it hasn't got worse'.

In terms of the political situation, Niger has experienced a complex but relatively stable political situation (The World Bank 2023). In 2021, the country lived its first ever democratic transition of power, which was followed by an attempted coup (Aljazeera 2021, BBC News 2021).⁴ One interviewed (Coach 1 2022) thinks that 'The country has gained more stability with the new president. I like his philosophy. His political programme puts peace, development and education at the first place and this is indeed what the country needs. Since he is in chief some things are getting better, for example there are less internally displaced people and refugees from neighbouring countries because the situation at the borders has improved.' This last sentence refers to the multiple security crises in the areas bordering Nigeria, Mali and particularly Burkina Faso, where armed groups have repeatedly attacked security forces and civilians (The World Bank 2023). To address these treats, Niger relies on international aid and programmes, including the EUCAP Sahel Niger (European Council 2022). According to Officer 1 (2022), there is a geopolitical war ('an African Risiko! Game') in Sahel and many countries turned to Russia, while Niger became the main French ally in the area (Officer 1 2022). Moreover, the consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war caused additional economic issues and further limited the UNHCR' ability to resettle the refugees of the examined sites.

Concerning the sportive macrosystems, through the foundation of a professional sport club UNHCR was able to raise funds to finance the construction of various sport facilities in Hamdallaye in 2020: two concrete pitches that can be used for basketball, handball, volleyball and football, and a grass football pitch with one side tribune. This greatly increased the possibilities to implement sport in 2022 in comparison with 2019. However, the decision to build a grass pitch quickly proved to be wrong, as it dries out in the hot season and floods in the rainy season. This, together with the use of some materials that cannot withstand Niger's high temperatures, partially compromised the functionality of the facilities. Overall, these facilities have had a positive impact on both formal and informal sport in Hamdallaye, but their costs-benefit ratio could have been maximised.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic caused important changes between 2019 and 2022. This well-known disruptive event negatively influenced economies and mobility around the world. Allegedly (Coach 1 2022), 'the COVID-19 pandemic was also a big deal in Niger although there were far fewer deaths and infections than on other continents. For 14 months, people had to wear a mask and stay at home. Organisations and business were closed. The poorest people were helped by the government. For example, they received food. Also all sport events were cancelled and sport organisations were closed. This was dramatic for our sport system.' Importantly, this had a major impact on the possibilities for refugees to leave the ETM, whose resettlement rate slowed down (Officer 1 2022). Moreover, the virus raised problems for the international humanitarian staff, who were impelled in their work and seen as possible spreaders. Allegedly (Officer 1 2022) 'tests, masks and vaccines were available, nevertheless, the sport was suspended for almost one year in the refugee centres and it was difficult to restart it, because the routines were lost'.

This partial description of the macro system underscores the vulnerabilities impacting both the provision and experience of sport within the site. The ETM, as a liminal space, is not only subject to a 'bubble effect' but also faces constant threats to its homoeostasis due to radical and uncontrollable changes. In this context, organising sports activities becomes a Sisyphean endeavour, characterised by a tension between stagnation and extreme crises, ultimately impeding long-term progress and the sustainability of sports.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This paper has addressed how the experience of sport changes overtime in a 'timeless space' such as the ETM of Niamey, taking into account two studies in 2019 and 2022 and comparing their results at different societal levels. At the microsystem, the staff, the participants and the management involved in the activities changed radically over the period analysed. Despite this fluctuation, sport activities are relevant and well attended and local staff with a professional sport background continue to run them with a focus on performance and limited attention to educational and health objectives. At the mesosystem, interactions between the researcher, the sensitisers and the managers show how cooperation and conflict might complicate the sport-related interactions. At the exosystem, Hamdallaye, the main refugee site of the ETM, was newly built in 2019, not fully inhabited and a part of the refugees were accommodated in the city. In 2022, the ETM was more important, routed and full. UNHCR experienced a massive staff turnover and a shift towards more rational forms of refugee subsistence. The NGOs appointed for sport changed three times, but the activities remained similar, suggesting that personnel is the primary factor influencing the orientation of the activities. At the macrosystem, UNHCR was able to build sport facilities, which improved the possibilities to do sport at the sites despite several functionality issues, the socio-political situation of Niger and global events like the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war impacted relevantly sport. Furthermore, although the 'European refugee crisis' has been declared over, Niger continues to play a key role in managing global mass migration, maintaining an externalised control function (de Blasis and Pitzalis 2023, Van Dessel 2023).

While sometimes interrupted by external radical changes, the liminal characteristics of the ETM have been largely observed also in relation to sport. In terms of time, organised sport exists in a time bubble, which hinders processes of development. From a spatial perspective, sports occur both in makeshift and sport areas, which are separated by those of the Nigeriens. Finally, regarding exceptions, sport activities often provide a temporary escape but no resolution from the state of waiting and uncertainty that define life in refugee sites.

Sport is generally relevant for forced migrants as an act of normality in an abnormal situation (Spaaij et al. 2019). The nuanced liminality examined at the ETM amplifies this relevance and imbues it with additional layers of meaning, which are connected to the physicality of the bare life of refugee sites' residents (Agamben 1998). While many conditions changed and relevant resources were invested, sport remained widely unchanged, with the opportunities offered by the new sport facilities being the most relevant positive change. This immobility and the minor changes in the sport practices are both noteworthy and indicates potential implications for practice.

Concerning direct implications for policy, we adopt a multi-level approach to the refugee experience (Boenigk et al. 2021), highlighting how the ETM of Niamey is a refugee site that navigates a liminal chronosystem, affecting and affected by multiple dimension of the environment. With policies being a significant element of influence within the macrosystem, such policies directly concern the operations of exosystemic actors. From the macro-system, these organisations are heavily influenced by political and policy-related decision-making at a transnational level through refugee-related policies while still being connected to organisational policies. Such top-down effects, often dominated by UNHCR policies, along with a scarcity of resources, overshadow the interests of the refugees when it comes to sport programming. Using EST as a political lense and entering in dialogue with the concept of liminality, we see an effective conflict between the exosystem and mesosystem, which creates an environmental disconnect of detriment to the refugees. The policy-imposed liminality is here replicated in sport programming (Genovesi 2024), effectively annulling the possibility of fighting and surpassing such situation (Norrito and Mason 2023), and therefore relegating sport to a diversion within the camp (Waardenburg et al. 2018). While this pallative function of sport is still important, with research documenting its relieving benefits for refugee populations, it does indeed question the 'transformativity' of such programmes and their ability to withstand change. As such, when we go back to the research question

on what factors influence the provision of organised sports in refugee sites, the continued political shift at macro and exosystemic level creates an interactive barrier that sees actors from the mesosystem towards the individual navigating the same political shifts with material necessities and volatile resources. For example, the high fluctuation of the people involved in sport is the strongest explanation for the immobility of the activities, which have a perpetual kick-off character. While this feature may be advantageous to integrate newcomers and to cushion the loss of expert participants, the particular features of the setting would allow for intensive and productive work, which permits progress in the quality and quantity of the activities and the partial achievement of the (multiple) objectives associated with them.

Given the liminal and dynamic features of this setting, sport policy action, sitting within a wider array of transnational policies, needs to be adaptive and resource oriented, much like the transitional refugees' identity. We propose therefore implications for policy concerning resources, perspectives and organisations that can help to develop sport activities, and help micro and mesosystemic actors navigate contextual hostilities. Whenever resources are available, investment in space, infrastructure and equipment have an immediate positive impact on the activities. Like the other leisure activities organised on the sites (DIY, music and drama), sport can be easily and cheaply implemented, but it is more popular and better attended. Therefore, without suggesting any superiority of sport over the other leisure activities, we argue that resources are well placed in sport. To maximise the impact of such an investment, information with local experts and the refugee community needs to be exchanged, as tastes, concurring activities, weather and many other factors can influence radically the sport practice.

We also believe that the benefits of prioritising refugees' perspectives of sport outweigh the existing risks (Hayhurst 2009), as they are the target of the activities but are at the same time in the weakest position. As argued elsewhere (Kreitzer 2002, Straume and Hasselgård 2014, Manley et al. 2016), greater refugee involvement in the planning, implementing and controlling of the activities is expected to slow down the decisionmaking process but also to have beneficial effects on the participation, sustainability and overall success of sport. Importantly, even if they were so far excluded from such a responsibility, refugees have the potential to organise their own sports activities if they have the necessary freedom and support. The authors' experiences suggest that establishing an independent self-management of sport is possible. The main obstacles lie in power-related organisational processes rather than in the competence and commitment of the refugees. This said, shifting the burden of organisation to participants, especially in situations of precarity such as those experienced by refugees, may not always be easy, equitable or desirable. Overall, while it's important to promote participation and empowerment among refugees, it's equally important to recognise and address the structural barriers and inequalities they face.

To assess the problem of the fluctuation in coaches and participants, a system of knowledge transfer through the inhabitants of the sites might be the most promising organisational strategy. A 'coach the coach' system (Jones et al. 2010), in which a pool of coaches - preferably with a refugee background - are contracted and trained in advance to avoid the loss of routines, knowledge, and automatisms, could be the most viable way to ensure continuity in the activities. Instead of running the activities, the paid sport staff



could instead support and teach the coaches, ensure the inclusivity and democracy within the activities, and act as mediators between the refugees and the site management.

We would also like to acknowledge relevant methodological limitations of this project, such as the dominance of the lead researcher's perspective, the comparatively short time invested in the fieldwork and the focus on only one refugee site. Moreover, the ecological validity of the ethnographic research might be biased by the fact that the first author conducted the study overtly and indicated his role as a sociologist and research goals.⁵ This choice was taken according to ethical recommendations for ethnographic research in general (European Commission 2013) and in the setting of refugee settings (Weima and Brankamp 2022).

To refine and expand these results, concretise the empirically-based recommendations, and alleviate the above commented limitations, a broader follow-up study should be conducted. Through mixed research methods and a participatory approach (Spaaii et al. 2018, Enderle and Mashreghi 2021, Luquetti et al. 2021), an interdisciplinary team of researchers with diverse backgrounds could carry out such a project in different refugee sites, which not only examines the sport activities but also aim to assist organisations in including the refugees' perspectives.

Notes

- 1. This applies also to the latest non-systematic research on topic (Spaaij et al. 2023).
- 2. While the longitudinal aspect adds some breadth to the research, the project faces typical limitations of short-term ethnography (Sugden et al. 2019).
- 3. This perception is exclusively situational and bonded to the foreign viewpoint. The first author actually don't identify as white, has a migration background and has pretty dark skin and hair, which make him look foreign in his country of residence.
- 4. The coup of August 2023 succeeds the period examined and it is not contemplated in this article.
- 5. This topic is discussed also in the section 5.3

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