Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln
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FOOTBALL FOR A CHANCE

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Football 4 a Chance

WP2 T2.1 Literature research on Inclusivity and Football

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1 Introduction

In a global context where approximately one in eight people is currently on the move due to forced migration, the challenge of social integration has become a central concern for international policymakers and local communities alike (Duan, Hou, Liang, Kavussanu & Chen, 2025). Social integration is defined as the inclusion of all individuals within a social system, and sport is frequently positioned as a 'universal language' that can bring people together regardless of their origin, religious beliefs, or economic status (Schwartzkopff, 2022). While the practice of sport is officially recognized as a tool for achieving several Sustainable Development Goals, including health, education, and equality, recent academic literature emphasizes that sport is not an automatic panacea (Shevchuk, Lorenzetti, Kohut, Marynych & Mytko, 2024; Duan et al., 2025). Instead, it is a complex social arena where mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion often operate simultaneously, requiring a critical examination of its efficacy (McDonald, Spaaij & Dukic, 2018). This literature review synthesizes current empirical evidence and evaluation studies to illuminate the benefits of sport-based programs, identify best practices for implementation, analyze persistent gaps and challenges, and specifically explore the unique role of football as a vehicle for social inclusion.

2 Benefits of Sport-Based Inclusion Programs

The literature highlights a comprehensive array of psychosocial, physical, and structural benefits that marginalized populations can reap through participation in sport-based initiatives. One of the most significant areas of impact is psychosocial development, particularly for refugees who have experienced trauma during their migration journeys (Arpadari, 2023). Studies indicate that a high percentage of exiled people, up to 64% in some reports, suffer from psycho-traumatic syndromes, and sport serves as an effective 'healer' by providing a structured environment where individuals can 'switch off' from their daily worries and traumatic memories (Arpadari, 2023). Participation is linked to a marked increase in self-confidence, trust in others, and resilience, which are foundational for successfully navigating a new society (Fire+ Football including refugees in Europe, 2023).

Beyond individual well-being, sport programs significantly enhance social capital, which is often analyzed through Esser's framework of integration (Duan et al., 2025). Interaction and identification are identified as the most prominent dimensions of this process. Sport facilitates the accumulation of bonding capital, which strengthens ties within the newcomer's own community and reduces feelings of isolation (Blanco-Ayala, Galvaan, Fernández-Gavira, 2025). More importantly, heterogeneous sport settings encourage the development of 'bridging capital' by bringing together individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, thereby fostering cultural learning and interpersonal trust (Ehnold et al., 2023). For some

participants, these social connections act as a stepping stone to other domains of civic life, such as education, employment, and stable housing (Duan et al., 2025). Finally, Mickelsson (2025) highlights that grassroots football clubs function as important community hubs. Through regular training sessions, competitions, and social events, clubs provide opportunities for informal interaction between refugees and host community members. These interactions can foster trust, language acquisition, and access to social resources.

Furthermore, sport promotes community cohesion by shifting the host society's narrative regarding migrants and refugees (Arpadari, 2023). Evaluated programs show that 82.1% of participants reported increased respect for people from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds, demonstrating that sport can effectively reduce stereotypes and change perceptions within the local community. By co-operatively pursuing common goals, both locals and newcomers build trust bonds that minimize disparities and prevent further marginalization (Arpadari, 2023).

3 Best Practices in Program Design and Implementation

The successful implementation of inclusion programs requires an intentional shift away from purely performance-oriented logic toward a process-oriented, community-focused approach (Schwartzkopff, 2022). A central best practice is the cultivation of a welcoming culture from the very first point of contact. This includes visible signs of openness, such as multilingual refugees welcome banners or world maps on the walls, and a philosophy that prioritizes fun and social interaction over elite sporting skills (Doidge, Keech & Sandri, 2020). The concept of active integration emphasizes that clubs must adopt deliberate inclusion strategies. Thereby, Doidge et al. (2025) identify mentoring systems, diversity training, and community outreach as effective measures. The Brighton Table Tennis Club serves as a primary example where staff and volunteers are specifically trained to manage social dynamics, prevent the formation of cliques, and ensure that new members feel valued as individuals rather than just 'newcomers' (Doidge et al., 2020).

Another critical factor for success is the active involvement of role models and mentors, especially those who share a refugee background or represent underrepresented groups like women and girls (Schwenzer, 2025). The presence of female coaches who wear headscarves, for example, has been shown to be a powerful driver of change, encouraging higher participation rates among refugee women and challenging the patriarchal norms that often dominate sports spaces (Arpadari, 2023). Mentoring programs help individuals navigate the complex social codes of a new society and provide the support necessary to transition from being a player to taking on responsibilities as an assistant, coach, or board member (Schwenzer, 2021).

Holistic program design is also identified as a best practice, where sport is used as a hook to connect participants with other essential services. Successful initiatives often combine physical activity with language classes, legal assistance, psychological counselling, or educational support (Schwartzkopff, 2022). Flexible attendance policies that account for the unstable living conditions of refugees such as residency status changes or family duties are essential for maintaining sustained participation. Furthermore, the adaptation of rules to emphasize fair play over traditional winning criteria helps to create an inclusive environment where individuals of all skill levels feel comfortable participating (Schwartzkopff, 2022).

4 Gaps and Challenges in the Sporting Landscape

Despite the potential for inclusion, the literature identifies several significant gaps and structural barriers that continue to hinder the participation of disadvantaged groups (Spaaij et al., 2019). Resource constraints are a primary challenge, as many programs rely on short-term public funding or the dedication of individual volunteers, leading to fragile integration outcomes that are difficult to sustain over time. Bureaucratic hurdles, such as high registration fees for foreign athletes which can be six to ten times higher than for locals in some federations act as a major structural barrier to equal access (Schwenzer, 2025). Thus, structural barriers such as membership fees, language obstacles, and informal social norms hinder the inclusion of refugees.

A particularly large gap exists regarding the participation of refugee women and girls (Keulen, 2021). Traditionally masculine sport cultures, such as those found in football, often exclude women through a lack of gender-segregated facilities or the imposition of dress codes that conflict with religious practices, such as burkini bans in public pools (Blanco-Ayala et al., 2025). Socio-cultural norms within both the host and refugee communities can further restrict women's access, as they are often burdened with caretaking responsibilities and domestic duties that leave little time for leisure activities. Research confirms that almost no football programs for refugees achieve a 50-50 gender balance, with many reporting only 5% to 20% female participation (Keulen, 2021).

Moreover, the literature warns against an assimilationist logic in many inclusion policies, where refugees are expected to adapt unilaterally to the host culture's norms without any corresponding adaptation from the host society (Karin, Korp & Lindgren, 2020). This one-way process can lead to 'othering', where refugees are valued only for their sporting talent while their personal backgrounds and challenges are ignored or stigmatized (Mickelsson, 2024). Direct experiences of racism and discrimination on the pitch remain a harsh reality, often causing individuals to drop out of programs or feel further alienated from the community they are trying to join (Doidge et al., 2020).

The inclusion of other marginalized identities, such as individuals with disabilities or members of the LGBTQI+ community, remains a vastly under-studied and under-funded area (Shevchuk, 2024, Braumüller, Schlunski & Hartmann-Tews, 2025). People with disabilities face physical barriers and often report lower levels of social capital due to a lack of acceptance within mainstream clubs (Scharfenkamp, Wicker & Davies, 2025). LGBTQI+ individuals frequently encounter a negative societal climate and a lack of institutional support, which necessitates the creation of specific safe spaces to protect them from discrimination and violence (Braumüller et al, 2025).

5 The Specific Role of Football for Inclusion

Football occupies a unique and dominant position in the field of Sport for Development due to its immense global popularity and the football habitus that many refugees bring from their home countries (Keulen, 2021). Because the rules and symbols of the game are consistent across borders, football serves as a shared language that facilitates connection even when participants do not yet speak the host country's language (Schartzkopff, 2022). For many refugees, playing football provides a vital sense of continuity and normality during the stressful process of resettlement.

Research on football initiatives identifies a tiered refugee's journey within clubs, starting with the first tier of welcome and safety where individuals probe their environment. This is followed by a tier of regularity and mingling with local players, leading eventually to a tier of meaningful relationships where the club becomes a new family that provides support off the pitch. Football also functions as a mobile, transnational sphere of belonging for youth, who use fandom and informal kick-abouts in parks to maintain a sense of identity and agency throughout their migration journey (Nunn, Spaaij & Luguetti; Duan et al., 2025).

However, football’s dominance also brings risks related to hegemonic masculinity and intense competitiveness (Acikgöz, Haudenhuyse & Hacisoftaoglu, 2022). The ‘winning at all costs’ mentality can reinforce hierarchies based on talent and exclude those who do not meet elite standards (Mickelsson, 2024). In some under-resourced settings, the excessive aspiration to become a professional footballer can lead to what is termed ‘cruel optimism’, an unrealistic hope that prevents young people from pursuing broader educational or professional development. To counter these risks, practitioners are encouraged to use football as a platform for moral socialization, focusing on cooperation and respect rather than just physical performance (Wirén & Ekholm, 2023; Corvino, Palumbo, Morozzi & Gozzoli, 2026).

6 Conclusion

The current literature confirms that sport, and football in particular, has significant potential to enhance the social inclusion of refugees and disadvantaged populations by fostering resilience, building social capital, and creating a sense of community belonging (Duan et al., 2025). However, these benefits are not inherent to sport itself; they depend on the active and conscious management of programs by trained coaches and managers who prioritize inclusion over competition (Schwenzer, 2025). Future efforts must focus on removing structural and financial barriers, specifically targeting the inclusion of underrepresented groups such as women, individuals with disabilities, and the LGBTQI+ community Braumüller et al., 2025). Ultimately, social inclusion must be understood as a two-way reciprocal process of mutual adaptation, where the host society and its sporting institutions are as committed to change as the newcomers they seek to welcome.

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