INTEGRATION THROUGH FOOTBALL PROJECT
- FIRST PHASE EVALUATION

What do we know so far?
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## INTRODUCTION

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THE CHALLENGE OF LIVING TOGETHER IN INCREASINGLY DIVERSE SOCIETIES IS ONE SET TO REMAIN INTO THE FUTURE AND SOME RESPONSES HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED TO THIS AT EUROPEAN UNION (EU) LEVEL. INCREASED FOCUS HAS BEEN PLACED ON HOW MIGRANTS ADAPT TO THE RECEIVING SOCIETY AND HOW THE SOCIETY ADAPTS TO ACCOMMODATE THEM, NAMELY INTEGRATION WHICH IS A COMPLEX AND CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE. DEVELOPMENTS AT EU LEVEL HAVE HAD AN INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLICY IN IRELAND ACROSS A VARIETY OF SECTORS. ATTENTION HAS SHIFTED TO THE SOCIETAL ROLE OF SPORT AND THE POTENTIAL PART IT HAS TO PLAY IN THE INTEGRATION PROCESS. IN THE CONTEXT OF DEVELOPMENTS REFERRED TO ABOVE, THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION INTRODUCED THE ASYLUM MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION FUND (AMIF) TO COVER THE TIME PERIOD

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\(^{1}\) Asylum seekers are people who have made an application to gain protection as a refugee under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and are waiting for a decision to be made regarding their case. Refugees cannot return to their country due to fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. A convention refugee is someone who meets the definition of a refugee as defined in the 1951 Convention. A programme refugee is someone who is invited to Ireland, in the event of a humanitarian crisis, to gain temporary protection or resettle. For more information see www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie.

\(^{2}\) The number of asylum seekers in Ireland grew by 53% in 2014 and 126% in 2015. Syrians comprised the biggest group of asylum applicants in 2016 (ORAC 2017).

\(^{3}\) By the end of March 2018 Ireland had received 1022 people under the EU Relocation programme, mainly Syrian nationals relocated from Greece, and 792 programme refugees under the Resettlement programme (Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service 2018).
from 2014 to 2020. The Football Association of Ireland (FAI) was successful in obtaining finance through it for their *Integration through Football* project.

This report presents the findings of the first phase of an evaluation of the *Integration through Football* project one year after its introduction. In Section (i) a brief background will be provided to contextualise the *Integration through Football* project. Policy developments at EU level will be traced before moving to the Irish context, where the role of sport and the FAI in terms of Irish state integration policy will be described. In Section (ii) the methodology used will be succinctly outlined before the findings from the thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the surveys are discussed. Section (iii) will address elements working well, Section (iv) will outline challenges experienced and Section (v) will discuss integration and other benefits of the programmes. Finally, Section (vi) will focus on suggestions for improvement from the survey respondents as part of the conclusion.
THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The integration of migrants has become firmly established on the EU policy agenda. The European Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy (CBPs) recognise the permanency of immigration as a characteristic of the Member States (EU 2004). While the EU does not define integration, the framework for strategies on integration to be developed at national and local level emanates from the CBPs. The current dominant definition of integration is ‘a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of Member States’ to cite the first of the CBPs (EU 2004). CBP number seven recognises ‘frequent interaction between immigrants and Member State citizens’ as a key ‘mechanism for integration’ (EU 2004). Shared forums and intercultural dialogue are amongst those mechanisms listed as encouraging exchange between migrants and EU citizens.

In terms of sport, the European Commission produced a White Paper on Sport in 2007 which concentrates on the social function of sport and highlights the huge opportunity that sport has to bring people together across the EU (European Commission 2007). The benefits of sport are not just limited to health but are envisioned as far broader ranging, having an impact socially and culturally, as well as educationally and recreationally. Sport is a place where migrants and members of the receiving society come into contact and a space where dialogue and interaction can take place between people from diverse backgrounds. Thus the potential of sport to enable ‘integration’ and encourage ‘inter-cultural dialogue’ across European societies is acknowledged:

Sport promotes a shared sense of belonging and participation and may therefore also be an important tool for the integration of immigrants. It is in this context that making available spaces for sport and supporting sport-related activities is important for allowing immigrants and the host society to interact together in a positive way (2007, p.7).

As will be demonstrated in this report, the Integration through Football project aims to build on the social potential of sport to contribute to promoting integration.

In light of growing cultural diversity, 2008 was designated the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The Council of Europe’s White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue “Living together as equals in dignity” was key in driving the ‘intercultural approach’ in terms of a ‘model for managing cultural diversity’ (2008, p.4). Dialogue and interaction are considered a fundamental component of interculturalism (Taylor 2016).
Interculturalism, to cite Zapata-Barrero, (2016, p. 57) ‘promotes contact zones among people who share certain characteristics (reinforcing bonds) and facilitates relations between individuals from different backgrounds (building bridges), such as when it promotes interactions between people across different religions, languages, and so on’. Examples of these ‘contact zones’ include neighbourhoods, public spaces such as libraries, schools, and indeed sporting clubs and organisations, as referred to in the White Paper on Sport (European Commission 2007).

The huge increase in migratory flows to Europe led to some developments. Expanding on the 2015 European Agenda on Migration, the European Commission agreed an Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals (European Commission 2016). This provides an overall policy framework for integration and outlines the assistance that the Commission will offer to Member States, including help at a financial level. While it acknowledges that successful integration constitutes a process which involves various policy areas, in terms of active participation and social inclusion, sports activities are listed as one of the activities where ‘real people-to-people contacts’ can be encouraged and sustained as part of the integration process (2016, p.12):

Promoting exchanges with the receiving society through volunteering, sport and culture activities from the very beginning facilitates dialogue and mutual understanding. It can have benefits both on newly arrived third country nationals (by making them feel part of their new community and helping the understanding of key values and norms), and on the host society, increasing acceptance and helping building a welcoming attitude.

The Commission subsequently launched a call for projects under the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) to promote participation in sports through which the FAI successfully obtained funding for their Integration through Football project.

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4 Third country nationals are nationals from countries which are not members of the European Union.
THE FAI AND THE IRISH CONTEXT

In light of the changing demographics of Irish society as a result of inward migration, the 2000s witnessed some responses on State and societal level. *A Charter against Racism in Sport* was developed in 2003 and ratified by the FAI amongst other sporting bodies in Ireland. *Planning for Diversity*, the *National Action Plan against Racism* (NPAR) which was launched in 2005 adopted an ‘intercultural framework’. The NPAR aspired to work towards producing ‘reasonable and common sense measures to accommodate cultural diversity in Ireland’ (DJELR 2005, p.27). An expected outcome of the NPAR listed under Objective Four Recognition was to ‘develop the potential of sports and leisure to promote interaction and understanding of cultural diversity’ (DJELR 2005, p.138). One of the accompanying measures cited was the provision of ‘support for strategic initiatives to promote intercultural participation in sport and to combating racism’ (DJELR 2005, p.138). On the strategic front, the FAI produced Intercultural *Football Plan Many Voices One Goal* through the NPAR framework, whose main objectives are as follows (FAI 2007, p.4):

1. Combat racism in football
2. Promote participation among minority ethnic and multicultural communities
3. Develop a culture of football which is dynamic and globally competitive
4. Contribute to the wider process of integration

The approach to be adopted is an intercultural one and sport is identified as a ‘key vehicle to bring people together’ (FAI 2007, p.15) with football described as specifically important due to the universal nature of the game. With the *Intercultural Football Plan* the FAI looks to play a role in the wider European interculturalist project (2007, p.28) which was outlined earlier. The FAI’s Intercultural programme was established in 2006 with a remit of promoting increased participation in football of people from diverse backgrounds (ethnic, cultural, national backgrounds) thereby using football to support the process of integration. The Intercultural Football programme also has the remit of challenging racism in football via education, policy and campaigns. It has been developed in order to meet the aims and objectives of the FAI *Intercultural Football Plan*.

The FAI made a submission to integration policy being developed in Ireland in 2014. In it the organisation recognized the challenges to integration and one of the barriers acknowledged is the difficulty of creating ‘effective Community Partnerships’ (FAI 2014). This recognises that sport cannot work in isolation but needs partners in the community. The need to develop connections between clubs and communities was also highlighted in the *Intercultural Football Plan* (FAI 2007, p.23) and this comprises one of the foundations of the Integration through Football project.
Ireland’s *Migrant Integration Strategy A Blueprint for the Future* was produced in 2017. In his foreword to it, David Stanton, Minister of State with special responsibility for Equality, Integration and Immigration, outlines the need to ‘engage sporting organisations, faith-based groups, cultural organisations and community groups more actively in the integration process’ (Department of Justice and Equality 2017, p.3). One of the fundamental components of the Migrant Integration Strategy’s vision is the fact that migrants and members of the local community interact and take part together in sporting amongst other activities (2017, p.10). It acknowledges the important role that sporting organisations amongst others have to play in promoting integration. One of the actions cited is more investigation of ‘the potential of sport in the integration of migrants ... through encouraging active participation, volunteering and involvement in governance’ (2017, p.34).

Hence the FAI project compliments State policy in terms of the NPAR and the *Migrant Integration Strategy*. The FAI secured funding in 2017 for a three year funded project which is co-financed by the European Commission under the AMIF fund and supported by the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration in the Department of Justice and Equality. The *Integration through Football* project builds on the previous work of the FAI including a focus on the potential social impact of sport in terms of encouraging the participation of ethnic minorities and promoting the broader integration process. The aim of the project is to bring community groups and grassroots football clubs together to build Alliances and support programmes. The project uses football as a tool for integration and target groups include refugees, asylum seekers and third country nationals. The programmes offered include: Futsal, Volunteering in Football, Football and Language and After-school/Club open day. In quantitative terms, between May 2017 and May 2018 14 Alliances were established, including four community based Futsal programmes, four football and English language skills programmes were delivered, seven after-school programmes and two open training or open day programmes were run.

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5 An Alliance is formed between a sporting body, namely local football clubs, leagues or the FAI and community stakeholders such as NGOs, local authorities, organisations working with migrants and ethnic minorities or schools.
Following a series of exploratory meetings, the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown agreed to work with the FAI on a first phase evaluation of the Integration through Football programmes. Since quantitative data is already collected in terms of numbers of participants from target groups on the various programmes, various means of gathering more qualitative data were considered. A short survey was drawn up collaboratively to gather data for this exploratory piece of work. A survey was chosen given that participants are dispersed geographically throughout the country and it lowered the administration costs. The aim of the survey was to gain insights into participants’ (clubs, community groups and programme participants) experiences of the FAI Integration through Football programmes. Five open-ended questions were included to allow participants describe their experiences of what is working well currently on the programmes, what challenges they are facing and benefits the programme brings. In keeping with Booth et al’s pilot study (2014, p.7) on the use of sport to promote the integration of asylum seekers and refugees, specific questions were chosen as opposed to a broader reflection on integration. Ethical clearance was obtained from the ITB’s Ethics Committee for the research. An information sheet was also drawn up which outlined details around the rational, use of the information collected, the voluntary and confidential nature of participation and the fact that participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

The information sheets and surveys were distributed at the first network meeting which was held in Athlone on 17th February 2018 which representatives from football clubs, community groups or NGOs and programme participants from six different Alliances attended. The FAI Development Officers involved in the Alliances were subsequently invited to give their input via the survey. Football clubs and community partners from the Alliances not represented at the network meeting were also contacted and invited to fill out a survey. In total 26 surveys were collected which included a representation from 14 Alliances (8 from football clubs, 11 from a community group/NGO, 1 developing an Alliance and 6 participants, 2 of whom were also involved with a community group/NGO).

The qualitative data gathered from these surveys was inputted into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, and then analysed thematically. Furthermore, a World Café style discussion was run at the network meeting where participants deliberated the same five open-ended questions. These discussions, as well as comments written by participants on paper tablecloths, were also taken into consideration in the first phase evaluation of the Integration through Football project.
During the UEFA study visit on Football and Refugees held in Ireland in April 2018 and hosted by the FAI, Des Tomlinson and Bríd Ní Chonaill took part in a panel discussion on the evaluation of the programmes, sharing their experience of the process to date.

FINDINGS

The following themes emerged from the analysis of the data: roles on the programme, elements working, challenges, benefits including integration and suggestions for improvement. These will be discussed in the following sections. First, in terms of roles, those surveyed carried out a variety of roles in the Integration through Football programmes which can be grouped together as follows: an organisational role, a link role, a role in terms of programme provision or finally a role as a participant. In terms of the organisational role, respondents were responsible for organising a programme either individually, as part of a committee or in conjunction with the FAI Development Officer or other partners. Functions included the organisation of the league, the venue, contacts, and meetings between various parties or the promotion of the programme. In the second instance, as regards playing a link role, some respondents were the link between the football club and an emergency orientation and reception or direct provision centre where refugees and asylum seekers are accommodated, a link to a community partner, a link to various stakeholders or a link between participants such as refugees and the Football and Language programme. In terms of programme provision, respondents delivered various programmes such as the language component or the football component, the after-school programme, ran football programmes in direct provision centres for example or assisted the FAI Development Officer in the delivery of a programme. Finally, six respondents described their role as that of a programme participant, as a player on a Futsal league for example or a volunteer.

\* See www.theworldcafe.com for an outline of the methodology.
In order to gauge how the programme is working, respondents were asked what they felt was working well with the programme they were involved in. The four elements that were most frequently cited were the programme itself, participation on the programme, integration and the Alliances. Respondents were very positive and numerous examples provided show how they saw the programme itself or various components working well: ‘the language programme, along with the sports skills sessions, are exciting and motivating’ (R8), ‘the programme is working really well in X with the participants really engaged within the programme and are benefiting from both aspects of the programme (language and football) (R21); ‘I thought the whole [Futsal] programme was brilliant. The games were competitive and it brought so many people together to play from so many backgrounds’ (R26). The Volunteer Open House meeting (R17; R18) and the ‘tournament, training’ (R12) were also cited as working well.

Participants on programmes were described as ‘engaged’ which is linked to the second element identified as working well which was attendance or participation: ‘the participation of various groups’ (R2) with children particularly being highlighted; ‘children attend, children do a “normal” activity’ (R3). The number of teams involved in Futsal was also commented on, eight in one league, five in another. These were equated to the success of the programme or the full house attendance in the case of the Volunteer Open House meeting. Integration, which will be discussed as a theme in more detail subsequently, was also listed as something working well, ‘integration with the community’ (R1).

Lastly the Alliances were identified as working well. The Alliances and meetings held were listed, the fact that there were ‘strong alliances with clear responsibilities for each partner’ (R14) and ‘very good buy-in from stakeholders i.e. asylum shelter liaison officer, local school accommodating after school programme and local club who will facilitate open day’ (R15). The creation of Alliances is based on the principle of creating effective community partnerships that was highlighted in the FAI’s *Intercultural Football Plan* (2007) and the difficulty of achieving these subsequently acknowledged (FAI 2014). This is part of the reason for the first phase evaluation, namely to gather information from different perspectives on their experience of the Alliances.
FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMMES

The factors identified as contributing to the successful functioning of the programmes included the support received by the FAI, the ‘strategic support’ of the FAI (R4) and also their input into marketing, ‘we really appreciated the support received by FAI in regards to design and print of marketing material’ (R18). Furthermore, ‘having a designated [FAI] Development Officer locally’ was seen as ‘a great asset’ (R20). Support or collaboration from members of the Alliance was also acknowledged, for example one respondent from a local football club cited the example of co-operation from a school which resulted in ‘encourag[ing] children to participate’ (R19). Additional factors that helped included the advertising of the event or programme, ‘an excellent venue and reliable co-ordinator’ (R13) and transport to the venue (R20).
Section (iv)

CHALLENGES

The final factor cited, namely transport, brings us onto the question of challenges experienced. While a variety of issues were distinguished, by far the most prominent one cited was transport, followed closely by participation. Other challenges named include information/communication, funding and time.

Transport

Starting with ‘transport’, twelve respondents cited it as a challenge: ‘the main challenge was transport for the students to X FC and funding has helped with this issue’ (R16) or the ‘travelling distance for some potential participants to get to the open day venue’ (R15). Distance from the direct provision centre and the cost of getting asylum seekers to the programme venue were also recognised. While we will return to costs in more detail below, it is important to acknowledge the limited disposable income of asylum seekers in particular who are only entitled to a weekly allowance of €20.60 on top of their bed and board in direct provision in Ireland. The challenges facing this group financially have been well documented (Arnold 2012; Ni Raghallaigh et al 2016). One respondent recognised transport as a potential problem for the future should the number of children participating in the programme rise: ‘For now the challenge is weather, in future it could be transport if number of kids is increase’ (R9). While one of the solutions to the transport issue is funding, another one cited by a member of a community group was to ‘work on organising lifts with other parents’ (R3).

Participation

As discussed above, while participation was identified on the one hand as an element of the Integration through Football programmes working well, it was also the second most cited challenge. An analysis of the responses reveals a number of different aspects to participation. The biggest challenge cited was that of reaching out to target participants, namely ‘attracting ‘non-nationals’ and refugees to come out and attend community event’ (R17); ‘reaching out to the specific demographics of new communities in X’ (R18). Indeed another respondent working specifically with one group of programme refugees noted the difficulty of recruiting participants outside of
this specific migrant group, ‘It was difficult to reach migrant families outside of the Syrian group, who had not had previous contact with myself or X’ (R24).

‘Maintaining regular attendance and participation’ (R8) was cited by a few respondents as a challenge, or in the case of one Football and Language programme a challenge was ‘to ensure that all take part in both the language and football’ (R7), namely both components of the programme. In terms of factors that impacted on participation, one was to ‘ensure a suitable level of games for all teams so that they have an enjoyable experience’ (R13). In another instance lack of familiarity with Futsal tested teams at first: Initially a problem for two of the teams was that some of them did not play Futsal and that took a bit of selling to come back for the second, third week. They did not realise how quick the game was’ (R25). Finally, the weather was cited in two cases as a challenge which does impact on participation as many asylum seekers or refugees come to Ireland from very different climatic conditions. Weather, particularly during the winter, meant that indoor venues were required or preferable although these are not always available. One respondent noted that ‘sourcing a venue with 4 available hours per week was a challenge and would have been unlikely if this was run in winter times for a hall being available’ (R13).

Information

Information was the next most cited challenge which can be further broken down into two components. One challenge identified was to get information to the target group: ‘the challenge was in the first instance getting the word out there about the programme and when it started’ (R13); ‘communication was an issue to ensure the message was being communicated to the target group’ (R20). Language was cited as a factor impeding communication for some migrant groups: ‘the challenge with the language and football programme was to promote the programme with migrant families whose first language isn’t English’ (R24). ‘Retrieving information’ (R22) from asylum seekers and refugees was the second part of the challenge recognised around communication and some of this was also linked to language difficulties. One suggestion made to overcome this was to seek ‘more assistance from the staff working with residents of the direct provision centre to assist them with compiling the information required for registration’ (R22).
Funding

The next challenge acknowledged was funding which can be subdivided into current costs such as gear, club membership, transport, but is also linked to future funding. In addition to transport, costs are another barrier identified in the academic literature to the participation of refugees and migrants in sports (Block and Gibbs 2017). Training gear or lack of was a challenge cited by a number of respondents, both from football clubs and community groups or NGOs. In the case of one football club a participant at the World Café explained how he organised a boot bin and the community came together to donate gear which was redistributed among participants. Registration costs are another barrier identified, as one programme participant outlined ‘in the past local clubs never accepted our kids. If they did they made us pay registration fees, knowingly we are on Direct Provision we get paid €20.60 a week’ (R26). Lack of training facilities was only cited in one instance as the creation of Alliances ensured that partners such as football clubs for example offered their facilities to community groups for the duration of the programme. As regards future funding, the question of ‘sustainability’ was also listed as a challenge (R2; R5), namely what would happen once the AMIF funding ceases.

Time/Timing

Finally, the timing of events or programmes was also included as a challenge, the need to verify the timing with partners or the timing of events. At the World Café one participant spoke of the club’s learning around not timetabling events at bank holiday weekends. Lack of time was also cited as a challenge for one Futsal programme: ‘the league is under time constraints as there is only one hour available. Two hours per night would have ensured more time for games and would allow more time between games’ (R22) but time constraints are linked to availability of facilities.
INTEGRATION AS A BENEFIT

Moving on to discuss the items grouped under the broader theme of benefits, integration as a theme featured prominently in the data and merits attention in its own right. As discussed earlier, integration was identified as one of the elements working well on the programme. More prominently ‘the integration of other communities in the area’ (R11) was named as a benefit that participants, clubs or organisation get from the programme. The potential of sport to promote integration was discussed earlier in the Irish and European policy context. In a few cases respondents linked integration explicitly to social inclusion: ‘Integration – in turn leads to social inclusion’ (R11). This mirrors Anastasovski et al’s assertion that the concepts of social integration, social inclusion and indeed social cohesion are interconnected (2016, p.19). Inclusion was also recognised as a benefit: ‘it is very encouraging to work with a broad community and to see new members arrive and be welcomed and included’ (R8).

At the World Café one participant spoke of his experience with Syrian programme refugees, the big challenge being to get people to integrate and the fact that ‘sport offered a vehicle to do that’. Some of the comments documented by participants such as ‘sport is a tremendous unifier’, ‘football encourages one language’ and ‘sport is universal and all inclusive’, echo the earlier discussion regarding the Irish and European policy context and the potential of sport to promote integration. These were also reflected in the survey responses, to cite one programme participant ‘everybody speaks football language’ (R26). Programmes were seen as ‘providing the opportunity for people to integrate through football’ (R16). As Hertting and Karlefors (2013, p.35) argue, sport can be ‘an important arena for integration’, it is a space where different cultures come into contact and where relationships can be developed. In Ager and Strang’s conceptual model of social integration, social connections constitute one of the four main domains of integration (2008). The social bonds and bridges referred to earlier in terms of interculturalism build on Putnam’s theory of social capital (2000) as well as Ager and Strang’s social connections’ domain. In addition to social bonds and bridges this also includes the concept of social links, namely links between an individual and the structures of the state.

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7 In the EU the term inclusion is generally used with regard to ethnic minorities while the term integration is employed in relation to third country nationals (ENGSO 2012, p.7).
Hand in hand with integration and inclusion is social interaction, and football or sport in general is a space where people can come together, come in contact and interact, building bonds, bridges and developing friendships (R4; R12). Numerous respondents described the benefits of the Integration through Football programmes in such terms: ‘it has helped build relationships between students in schools’ (R16); the Futsal programme gave residents in direct provision ‘the opportunity to meet other groups with similar interests from the area’ (R22); participants had an opportunity to ‘mix with locals’ (R10) or in the words of one programme participant who volunteers: ‘Is benefit for the children they are very excited and for us to meet Irish parents’ (R9). All of the examples here relate to the idea of building bridges between migrants or children from ethnic minority backgrounds and the wider Irish majority ethnic group. The Integration through Football programmes offer an opportunity to meet and interact with local Irish. This is particularly welcome in the case of asylum seekers living in direct provision who can be at risk of social exclusion (Arnold 2012). A number of respondents named ‘new contacts/friends’ (R4) and ‘friendship developed’ (R12) as a benefit of a programme. In the case of one area where a Football and Language programme and an after-school programme were run, the respondent expands on their contribution to integration with peers, describing the development of language competency as well as friendships:

The after-school programme was delivered as a follow on to the language and skills programme, to give the migrant children a chance to practise their skills and to assist integration with peers. In this respect, the programmes were very successful: the language group was a small group and enabled the migrant children to develop confidence; the after-school group was a large group of 60 children from a broad range of backgrounds including Irish Traveller, Settled Irish, migrants and refugees from 3 local schools, and enabled the children to develop their skills and to make new friends (R24).

While language competency influences the social integration of migrants, Darmody and Smyth (2017, p.422) also underline the significant function of friendships in the process. What is being described in the last quotation is not only the power of sport to bring people together, football as a space for interaction between migrants and members of the receiving society, but also following Putnam’s (2000) model of social capital, an opportunity for bridging and indeed bonding. Hence in terms of benefits of the programmes, respondents brought up concepts that are linked to integration in the academic literature. Moreover, one of the goals delineated in the FAI’s Intercultural Football Plan is to ‘build bridges and make connections’ recognising that football is a vehicle to create bonds (2007, p.11).

While bonding is seen as benefit, one respondent did note the challenge of ‘getting other participants outside of the Accommodation Centre to engage with the pro-
gramme and to integrate as many people as possible, rather than a stand-alone group’ (R21). In its submission on integration policy to the Department of Justice and Equality the FAI observe that if football brings people of similar backgrounds together by choice for ‘reasons of commonality’ that constitutes a ‘facet of integration’ (2014, p.12). However, as seen in the case of asylum seekers from a particular Direct Provision centre, there may be a need to recruit outside the group to provide the opportunity for interaction with the majority ethnic group.

BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS

In terms of other benefits derived from the programmes, these will be examined firstly from the participant’s perspective and then from the organisational perspective. Benefits for participants acknowledged by respondents include the physical benefits of football as ‘It is good physically and mentally’, it provides an ‘Exercise and outlet for children and adults’ (R1) and there is ‘satisfaction that children can do “normal” activities’ (R3). Participating increases the amount of football played and gives children in school an opportunity to play sport (R23). Furthermore, it also gives participants a chance to ‘improve on football skills’ (R6) and increased playing has ‘improved their skill level and confidence’ (R22). The benefits for asylum seekers in particular were noted as a group where their inability to work until recently has restricted their activities: ‘It has provided residents in the direct provision with an organised and structured activity for a number of weeks until they take part in our summer programme’ (R22). This is in-keeping with Stone’s (2013, p.22) argument that football provides a ‘structure’ or ‘routine activity’ for asylum seekers and a diversion from their daily challenges.

In addition to the physical benefit of the programmes are psychological benefits such as ‘improving your wellbeing’ (R6); ‘it is good physically and mentally’ (R3) or the programmes ‘make [participants] feel valuable, important’ (R10). These were seen as specifically relevant to asylum seekers and research has highlighted the negative repercussions of the Direct Provision system on their physical and mental health (Ní Raghallaigh et al 2016, p.12). Moreover, in terms of both children and adults the ‘fun aspect’ (R13) of taking part was named. Other benefits are the possibility that the parents of children have to ‘become a volunteer with the club and become active in the community’ (R16) which is linked to broader questions of inclusion and integration.

Also, as was alluded to previously, those on the Football and Language programme were seen as gaining from both aspects including increasing English language competency which is seen as a prerequisite for integration: ‘the language element is
proving to be really beneficial with our group as their English is really improving every week, but also for the participants to be learning on the pitch and combining both theory and practical together’ (R21).

ORGANISATIONAL BENEFITS

The gains that organisation make from the programmes can be classified in terms of new players, new partnerships and an increased awareness of the organisation. One respondent outlined how the Integration through Football programme ‘fulfils the objective in the strategic plan to increase participation with disadvantage groups’ (R2) in terms of the target participants. Four other respondents listed ‘new players’ (R1) or ‘an increase in participation numbers in our sport’ (R15) as benefits reaped from the programme. The pathway the programme provides to formal football structures, namely the local club, was also acknowledged: ‘it provides the children with the opportunity to sign for X FC’ (R16); ‘The link to the local club was important for the after-school programme, as children attended who had never been to their local club before, but then expressed an interest in continuing to attend’ (R24).

Hand in hand with this is the increased ‘awareness among minority groups of the work done by the association’ (R15) be it the FAI, community groups/NGOs or the local football club. One respondent acknowledged the club’s learning from involvement in the programme dealing with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, the fact that they ‘learned a lot about the culture of people involved. Club learned a lot about what would be needed going forward’ (R7).

A final benefit from the organisational perspective identified is the development of partnerships, ‘partnerships created between local sports partnerships and asylum seekers’ (R14) and the establishing of ‘good relations with local stakeholders and the community in general’ (R15). Indeed in terms of the benefits reaped from the programme discussed above from the participant and organisational perspective, some of these also have broader ramifications for the wider community and society in general.
Finally respondents were asked for suggestions to improve the programme and their responses have been grouped below under the following headings: funding and additional resources, information sharing, recognition/promotion of the programme, the Alliances, and miscellaneous.

A number of respondents raised the issue of funding: ‘funding opportunities’ (R4); ‘Possibly have a funded mandatory end of programme festival/party for family and friends of participants to attend and to see the activity’ (R2); ‘Continue the programme to include follow on funding’ (R1). A programme participant alluded to funding sources for acquiring training gear: ‘we come from the direct provision, training kits can be expensive, if we can get donations or sponsorship’ (R 26). Another respondent felt that ‘sustainability should be of paramount importance’ (R12). Their responses concern specific funding or in more general terms keeping funding going for the programmes. The issue of funding and sustainability was also discussed amongst challenges identified earlier as the AMIF funding is for a limited duration.

A number of respondents suggested the need for additional resources such as the ‘recruit[ment] of a volunteer co-ordinator/admin support’ (R18), or another respondent who was responsible for overall co-ordination of a programme noted that it was ‘quite a workload’ and suggested ‘even though I enjoyed it, someone else to share the burden would be good’ (R25). Increased playing time was also referenced ‘more time allocated to the contact hours’, in addition to more help from the staff in the asylum accommodation centres with filling the registration forms (R22).

Next a number of respondents referred to the idea of information sharing in terms of a need for ‘More information sharing or networking’ (R5) or practical suggestions such as a ‘contact list for all other active programmes’ (R11). Another respondent echoed the function of a contact list while also alluding to communicating the initiative to a broader audience which is linked to the next point, namely the promotion and recognition of the programme: ‘we wish to continue the good work by communicating the initiative to relevant stakeholders while drawing out a list of bridging links [contacts] to community partnerships, groups/clubs and associations’ (R18).

Suggestions were also made around promoting and recognising the value of the programme: ‘Better coverage of all the good work being done with all the programmes for a better understanding of the general public. Keep up the good work!’ (R10 ); ‘Overall, this is a very good initiative. It is enabling important success at grass roots
level and needs to be acknowledged and valued for what it does’ (R8). The challenge of targeting participants was discussed earlier and was reiterated by one respondent, ‘Promotion of program is critical and not easy, how to target adult groups and making them aware of program an issue’ (R13). Recognising the value of the programme and promoting it also involves replicating it elsewhere: ‘This volunteer open house meeting was a success and this format should be run throughout the country. Coaches, parents from all clubs would benefit from it and it can only help volunteering in this country which is a big challenge in today’s society’ (R17). Extending the programme elsewhere and involving more clubs was acknowledged as contributing to promoting integration: ‘The more the clubs we can involve in the programme the better opportunity there is for integration through football’ (R16).

A few suggestions were made regarding the Alliances and the functioning of them. While one respondent recognised the depth of ‘knowledge and experience’ among the partners, the need to ‘have a better understanding of what those on the Alliance can bring to the group and what they want to get of the programme’ (R19) was noted.

In terms of the functioning of Alliances another respondent spoke about getting the main stakeholders on board the programme right from the start as opposed to at the funding application stage. As s/he outlined, ‘I would recommend the programmes being ‘embedded’ within the club from the beginning in the future, with support from the FAI to enable them to do this’ (R24). Another respondent, while very positive about the programme, referenced the need to examine local relations: ‘the programme itself is excellent and no changes required but locally we need to look at the relationships between partners and clients to improve’ (R20).

A few miscellaneous suggestions related to specific programmes. One respondent’s advice on a Language and Football programme was to ensure participation in both football and language (R7). A suggestion for one area was to add to the existing programme where younger children were involved and ‘put on programme for children aged 7-10 years’ (R9). Another respondent’s advice on practicalities was to ‘always check the time with partner organisation’ (R6).

While two final additional comments made are both positive regarding the programmes, the second one also refers to a sense of belonging and identity in an increasingly diverse Irish society: ‘I think the programme is brilliant and is very beneficial, as the participants are really gaining a learning outcome through the classroom environment and are able to put it into practice on the pitch’ (R21); ‘We are very grateful for these positive programmes that are being rolled out by the FAI and they are very welcome in our school. A noticeable change over the last 2-3 years in our school is that more kids are now Irish by birth and it’s their parents who come from different countries. The children really see themselves as Irish but with parents of a
The importance of sport as a component in intercultural relations has been underlined in European sports policy and Irish integration policy. In terms of an intercultural approach, football offers a space for creating dialogue between people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Current research has started to question the acknowledgement of football as an ‘uncritical source of social cohesion and integration’ (Stone 2013, p.9) and seeks more evidence of sport’s potential in the process. In terms of good practices for the social inclusion of migrants and ethnic minorities in sport, the ENGSO guide underlines the importance of evaluation as a ‘continuous process’ (2012, p.37). However, formal evaluation to demonstrate the value of projects and initiatives linked to the social inclusion of migrants through sport remains uncommon (Bertram et al 2016, p.27). Furthermore, the challenge of evaluating the social impact of sport for inclusion projects has been recognised (Bertram et al 2016, p.27). This first phase evaluation is a starting point in that direction.

A survey was used to gain insights into participants’ (clubs, community groups and programme participants) experiences of the FAI Integration through Football programmes one year after their introduction. Five main thematic areas emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data generated from the surveys, namely roles on the programme, elements working, challenges, benefits including integration and suggestions. Respondents felt that the programmes, participation on the programmes, integration and the Alliances were working well. Support from the FAI and partners in the Alliances were recognised as some of the contributing factors. In terms of challenges, transport was by far the most prominent challenge cited by respondents, followed by participation, namely how to attract migrants and various issues impeding participation. Other challenges identified included information, namely how to get information to the target group and accessing necessary information from asylum seekers and refugees. Funding and the cost of gear were cited as further barriers, in addition to time.

Integration was named as an element working well but also as a benefit of the programmes. Numerous respondents described the benefits of the Integration through Football programmes relating to the idea of building bonds and bridges, migrants meeting Irish parents through football, developing relationships, building friendships
amongst migrants or between migrants and the wider majority ethnic group.

In addition to integration and inclusion, respondents acknowledged physical and mental benefits that participants derived from the programme, as well as increased skills and an outlet for asylum seekers. It was also recognised that adults and children have fun on the Integration through Football programmes. Other benefits include increased language competency or an opportunity to volunteer and engage with the community. At an organisational level, respondents found football clubs benefit from the programme in terms of new players, partnerships that were created in the Alliances and there was an increased awareness amongst migrants of the work done by organisations nationally such as the FAI or by football clubs at a local level.

Finally, as regards suggestions to improve the programmes, a number of respondents sought continued funding for the programmes or some additional resources. Funding is obviously linked to the continuity of such programmes which are currently financed by AMIF. One suggestion that merits reiteration in the context of a more long term or sustainable approach is to ‘embed’ the programmes within the football club from the start, for example to have a dedicated person with an intercultural remit That person could be responsible for developing links with local partners to target and recruit players from diverse backgrounds. Respondents also highlighted the need for information sharing and suggested a contact list of organisations. Respondents also suggested greater recognition for the programmes and acknowledgement of the value of the initiatives. It was also suggested that specific programmes should be rolled out elsewhere and the number of football clubs involved should increase to improve the opportunities for integration. Finally, a few suggestions were made regarding the functioning of the Alliances, the need to clarify the roles of various partners and have key stakeholders on board from the start. Any of the additional comments were positive regarding the programmes.

This evaluation was exploratory in nature and focused more predominantly on the partners (the football clubs and the community groups or NGOs) involved than on the participants. Another phase could focus more on the participants’ perspective. The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data could be used to inform the design of a subsequent evaluation phase. In order to provide an evidence base for the potential link between football and integration, it would be useful to carry out more in-depth qualitative research on programme participants to examine their experiences regarding the building of social connections, bonds and bridges and also to consider if engagement in programmes has contributed to a sense of belonging. This could involve examining if football is a space where migrants feel ‘at home’, a necessary factor in the broader process of integration. Diversity is a permanent feature of Irish society, hence the role that sport and initiatives such as the Integration through Football programmes play in the integration process merits further investigation.
REFERENCES


FAI (2014) FAI Intercultural Football Programme Submission on Integration Policy to the Department of Justice and Equality, Dublin: FAI.


INTEGRATION THROUGH FOOTBALL PROJECT - FIRST PHASE EVALUATION

What do we know so far?