

WORKING WITH ASYLUM SEEKERS

Etnoliga has been organising sport events for migrants since 2005. We have never regarded it as a challenge and it was natural interest in other people that made us get started. Nonetheless there are several specific issues worth taking into consideration when addressing migrants. Below are some of our experience and recommendations.

It is important to note that this is not an universal manual. Any activity is always implemented in a local context, which will necessarily shape the growth of a project. We do not discuss here general issues of project design, such as setting the long-term goals, logistics, personnel, funding, promotion, etc. Rather we focus only on the strategy towards beneficiaries – how to engage them successfully in sport projects.

If you do not have a developed idea of what to do, you should look for advice at local organisations or volunteers working with migrants and refugees on daily basis. In Poland we recommend <http://uchodzcy.info> where you can find the comprehensive and accessible list of valuable activities and organisations.

DEFINITIONS

An asylum seeker is a person who crosses the border and requests protection, refuge, and recognition as a refugee claiming to be unable to go back to his or her country of origin. Under international law, asylum seekers must be protected and afforded humane treatment while their applications are processed by the state. A refugee is recognized as having been rendered stateless due to armed conflict or out of fear for their life because of political, ethnic, religious or other forms of persecution. Refugee status is protected by the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and is based primarily on the (<http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>). A migrant is a person who has moved to another country voluntarily (usually for economic reasons). Here we focus on the first and most vulnerable group. Nonetheless the strategy towards migrants is contiguous in many parts.

BASIC FACTS ABOUT ASYLUM PROCEDURE

In Poland an asylum seeker addresses his/her case to the border guards and is obligatory sent to reception hubs. He/she undergoes medical examination and has a possibility to apply for welfare benefit. He/she cannot leave Poland unless to join the family in other of the EU countries. According to the law the procedure should take up to 6 months but the average is about 14 months (2015). During

this time the state offers an asylum seeker an accommodation in one of 12 open centres for foreigners (meals, one-time financial assistance and basic materials for learning language) either a small regular allowance. The asylum seeker cannot work unless the procedure takes more than 6 months. If the decision is negative he/she has right to appeal and if still negative he/she must leave Poland within 30 days. If the decision of The Office for Foreigners and The Internal Security Agency is positive, the asylum seeker becomes a refugee. In Poland 80% of applicants are rejected and considered as economic migrants. The luckiest ones can apply for 12-months-long individual integration programme. In any case, they cannot stay in the centre for foreigners any more (<http://udsc.gov.pl/en/uchodzczy-2/uchodzczy>).

RECRUITING ASYLUM SEEKERS

Given the above, you should first contact dedicated centres where asylum seekers live while their applications are processed. As you are probably not allowed to enter these facilities freely, address the proper office for clearance and permission (The Office For Foreigners in Poland). Before you do that, organisers should prepare an official letter explaining the motivation and aims of your visit and programme. In addition, you should prepare an information leaflet for potential beneficiaries. Prepare it

in English and/or another language intelligible to most of them (in Poland it would be Russian). For the best results, try to imagine yourself as your beneficiary, considering as best as possible their needs and desires. Include only important information: when, where, why and how one could take part in your project as well as a map of where it would take place.

The next and essential step is a face-to-face meeting with your potential participants. Be yourself. Be honest. Show interest and you will receive it back. Give your contact details but do not expect a massive response at first; asylum seekers and refugees have other vital problems, and they may not trust you after a first meeting. They are just humans after all. Go back to prove your interest. Do not give up easily. It usually takes time, so plan your activities well in advance!

Contact local communities, too: shops, temples, markets, departments for foreigners, high schools. Migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees often live and work in same communities. Therefore, be observant and flexible; some migrants might introduce you to refugees and asylum seekers that live outside the camps, but might nevertheless be interested in your programme. A recommendation by word-of-mouth can be much more effective than any ad. Consider, also, opening your project to participants beyond a strict definition of asylum seekers. After all, if the goal is integration, - why would you want to limit the project to asylum seekers only? Finally, unless the sponsor really requires this, it

is best to avoid collecting personal data and legal status information. Respect for people's privacy can go a long way to building trust and strong participation.

SAFETY

Foreigners are now often victims of hate speech and crime. But you are not building a fortress, so avoid renting security guards. Try to predict dangers instead, by consulting the local community about the dangers they face on a regular basis, avoiding selling alcohol, and checking the safety of your location like emergency exits, etc. If you're expecting trouble, it is a bad sign – contact the police. It may be time to rethink elements of the project and its organisation.

STRENGTHENING INNER COHESION

When planning your sport-project you must take into consideration that people usually want to play in teams that represent communities. This is natural but can run counter to and question the goal of openness; do community teams lead to meaningful contacts or rather to rivalry? We witnessed how it deepens prejudices, in the worst cases. Consider mixing people then. Promoting integration and

intermingling is not an easy task at first, but as participants become more acquainted with you and project, they are likely to be more keen to this proposal. As always, be patient and very clear in explaining your goals.

Time is essential. For the best results, plan regular activities. One-off events are good to get started, to encourage media coverage and further interest. But refugees do not only need attention. Rather, if you want to substantively help them you should aim at social inclusion and this can be achieved only through long-term projects.

Rivalry, of course, is part of the game, so do not worry unless it takes an extreme form. Also, you can help prevent serious rivalries, by introducing a sports psychologist and explaining to the participants that mental training sessions improve abilities of different kinds as well as individual and team spirit. Furthermore, be on the look out for leaders and, on the other hand, people who have a tendency to spoil the matches – the “bad sport.” In *Etnoliga* there were even cases when football helped recover from postwar traumas through its great inclusive power.

Good communication means a lot of social work, and investing and participating from your heart. Obviously use social media. But also, run the project democratically and engage participants in decisions (discussion forums, councils, etc.). The more links between people the less the chances someone disappears without a trace, leaving you to wonder if an asylum seeker has been deported or

just took a day off. You will quickly notice that not everyone is equally engaged. Some are there just for football, and some may want to take part in other activities, too. Newcomers are happy to join in sport as it offers a low threshold of competence to start off. Later, however, some will show interest in language classes, legal or job assistance, or cultural events. Organise events for smaller groups, so everyone can have their needs met. If participants are asking for services you cannot provide, try to establish partnerships with institutions that work in these areas and can help provide services to asylum seekers and refugees.

Last but not least, is the issue of gender. Even if this is not your priority, you may want to engage women. On the one hand, for some coeducation may cause misunderstandings, especially if you deal with football as it is still seen as a masculine sport. Moreover, different cultures see gender roles in different ways. On the other hand, women are enthusiastic participants and enhance competitions with emotional intelligence. Their presence influences general openness and thus leads to better integration, not only between ethnic, national or religious groups, but also between genders. In *Etnoliga* we require 1 woman on the field at all times and generally 3 women per team. Training sessions for women enhance their football skills and self-esteem, and help earn respect of men, too.