



More than a Game - Football Including Refugees

National conference

Proximus basecamp

Royal Belgian Football Association

Wednesday 12 October 2022

The "**More Than a Game**" conference is one of the four national conferences organised within the framework of the **Further Football Including Refugees in Europe (FIRE+)** project, a project funded by the Erasmus + programme. The FIRE+ project aims to promote the use of football as a lever for social inclusion for refugee and migrant populations in their host communities.

The Brussels conference brought together local and national actors involved in the promotion of football as a tool for social inclusion for refugee and migrant populations, representatives of civil society organisations working with the target group and experts.

After a presentation of the project and the issues at stake, a panel discussion with four speakers allowed us to explore the issue of the inclusion of young refugees and unaccompanied foreign minors (UFMs) in and through football. In this respect, the various presentations allowed us to take stock of practices in Belgium, to identify the obstacles encountered as well as the good practices that can help overcome these obstacles.

The floor was then given to the players of the Younited Belgium teams, a pioneering organisation in the use of football for social purposes in Belgium.

The conference was concluded by the words of Laurent Thieule, President of the Think Tank [Sport and Citizenship](#) and of the Royal Europa Kraainem Football Club, whose "[We Welcome Young Refugees](#)" programme has been running since 2015.

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Programme

14: 00 – 14: 30: Welcoming and networking

14: 30 – 14: 35: Welcome words

14: 35 – 14: 50: Opening speech & presentation of the FIRE+ project

14: 50 – 15 : 00 : The RBFA affiliation process for refugee populations

15: 00 – 15: 20 : Presentation of the Younited Belgium organisation

BREAK

15: 35 – 16: 20: Panel discussion: Inclusion of young refugees and unaccompanied minors in and through football: needs, barriers and successes

16: 20 – 16: 25: Testimonies from Younited teams players

16: 25 – 16: 30: Conclusion and closing of the conference

Part 1: Introduction to the subject

Opening

The conference was moderated by Marvin OLAWAIYE - Football Social Responsibility Advisor at the Association des clubs de football francophones (ACFF).

After a few words about the conference, the floor was given to Sophie LOPEZ - in charge of the FIRE+ project within the Think Tank Sport and Citizenship. This was an opportunity to recall that the FIRE+ project had the ambition to **mobilise the world of football to face the crisis of reception and inclusion of refugee and migrant populations** that the European Union has been experiencing since 2015. The football club is an interesting social circle in which locals and newcomers can meet, get to know each other and share things. The FIRE+ project aims to **support amateur football clubs, sports staff and all organisations that want to use football to participate in the social inclusion process of refugee and migrant populations**. To this end, the FIRE+ project financially supports eight initiatives across Europe. One of them, organised by [Younited Belgium](#), took place on the morning of Tuesday 11 October on the Proximus Basecamp

facilities. Support for football clubs is also provided through the modules offered in the [FIRE MOOC](#). This online training programme enables its users to acquire knowledge and understand how to create their own inclusion programme. Four modules are already available. Three new modules are being developed to complement the FIRE MOOC, including one on the inclusion of children and MENA which was one of the main topics of our conference.

The process of affiliation of refugee populations to the RBFA

The floor was then given again to Marvin OLAWAIYE to present the process of affiliation of refugee populations to the [Royal Belgian Football Association](#) (RBFA). It was recalled that a proof of identity is sufficient. For minors, the procedure may be more complex to protect the best interests of the child. In this respect, the regulations of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) are strict. Indeed, international affiliations and transfers of minors are, in principle, prohibited. However, there are exceptions, for example in the case of unaccompanied refugees who have left their country of origin for humanitarian reasons. In this case, the RBFA does not have to submit the application for affiliation to the FIFA Court of Arbitration for Sport for approval. The said affiliation of the unaccompanied minor may be approved by the federation itself after verification of the necessary documents.

Focus on Younited Belgium

The floor was then given to [Younited Belgium](#) through Marine POLIART, coordinator in the Walloon region. Marine POLIART explained to the audience the philosophy of the association, its activities, and achievements as well as its future prospects.

[Younited Belgium](#) supports the creation of "Younited" football teams. The players are "experts in daily survival". Football is used to (re)integrate vulnerable and disadvantaged people into society. Some teams welcome refugees.

Younited teams are the result of alliances between two types of structures: social organisations (such as reception centres, detox centres, shelters, social services of cities and municipalities) and football clubs, both professional and amateur. From now, more than twenty Younited teams have been created.

The players are supervised by social workers. In addition to acquiring football skills, these special coaches work with their teams on self-confidence, team spirit and any kind of strength. For the beneficiaries, the Younited team is like a new home where they can escape from stress, develop a positive identity, and get back into a healthy daily routine. The coaches are trained and accompanied by Younited throughout the process.

Part 2: Experts contributions

Panel discussion: Inclusion of young refugees and MENA in and through football needs, barriers, and successes

The second part of the conference allowed different experts to discuss on the inclusion of unaccompanied minors in and through football. Each speaker shared his/her experiences and provided interesting insights for the module "Children and unaccompanied" of the FIRE MOOC. Moderator: Albrecht SONNTAG, Professor of European Studies at ESSCA and FIRE MOOC teacher

Speakers:

- Mouâd SALHI, Deputy Director of the Fedasil reception centre in Mouscron
- Maximilien ZIMMERMANN, Clinical psychologist at [SOLENTRA](#)
- Christine ROISIN, Unaccompanied Children coordinator [SOS Jeunes](#)
- Pierre WILLEM, President of [JUNA Foot](#), organiser of the "Footons nous des préjugés - Balle Au pied" (Let's get rid of prejudices by kicking balls) football tournament

Pierre WILLEM began by presenting the work of the [JUNA Foot](#), which brings together three football clubs in a football academy for young footballers. [JUNA Foot](#) has recognised that football had a role that goes beyond just sport for several years. As such, [JUNA Foot](#) sets up activities allowing the development of the social aspect of football. Within this framework, the clubs wanted to include young refugees who were staying in the Fedasil centres. Although membership of the club is sometimes an obstacle, these young players can nevertheless take part in the football activities often offered during the holidays. As football goes beyond sport in the clubs, it also offers other types of activities, such as cooking lessons or hiking trips. [JUNA Foot](#) wanted to take this process of inclusion a step further by organising the " Let's get rid of

prejudices by kicking balls" football tournament in June 2022. Registration for the tournament was individual. The idea was to organise allow the participants from different background to meet, some of whom were young people from Fedasil centres, so that they could get to know each other before forming teams.

What are the benefits for the host community? According to Pierre WILLEM, volunteers are more sensitive to inclusion issues and are increasingly more involved. Each of them develops "social skills" that can be used within the club but also in their daily lives. The biggest barriers encountered by [JUNA Foot](#) are financial. There are still too few funding opportunities for such initiatives. Pierre WILLEM concluded by reminding us that although football brings a lot to the table, it is important to combine it with other activities to allow the creation social ties. Working in synergy with social actors is an excellent way to stimulate social inclusion in amateur football clubs.

The floor was then given to Mouâd SALHI. The deputy director of the Fedasil centre of Mouscron already noticed a few years ago that the possibilities to practice sport for the beneficiaries of the Fedasil centres were very limited, even though many of them wished to practice sports, and particularly football. Mouâd SALHI acts now as a "mediator" towards the football clubs to provide them with information and raise awareness on the inclusion of these populations and their specificities (status given by the "orange card" in Belgium, difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker, awareness of the specific profile of the unaccompanied minors, etc.) Through his action, he also helps to combat social bias and fears. The Fedasil centre in Mouscron also took a big step forward when two Younited teams were created, a woman and a man team. During training sessions, the idea is always to go beyond football: it is a moment of cultural exchange for both male and female players and an opportunity to informally discuss on some sensitive topics. The teams also travel together on cultural outings. Young refugees join local football clubs with children of their own age. Parents are also invited to participate in the "life of the club" around their children's activities. Indeed, by accompanying their children to training sessions and matches, parents acquire a routine similar to the one of the Belgian parents and are sideline of the pitch with other parent: this is an excellent way of stimulating inclusion and building social ties.

The initiatives of the Fedasil centre of Mouscron have set the tone and encouraged other centres to follow this path. It is important to shed light on these commitments to inspire other

structures. One of the major difficulties encountered socio-sport mediators of Fedasil is managing uncertainty and emotions. Some administrative decisions lead to young people leaving from one day to the next and can cause disappointment and incomprehension among the volunteers and members of the clubs. Once again, supporting and raising the awareness among volunteers can help them to better manage and understand these procedures.

Christine Roisin then explained in more detail the profile of a young unaccompanied minor. She emphasised that they are young people with very different backgrounds who have had to face various forms of violence. Once they arrive, they are on “survival mode”. Their support then focuses on primary needs, such as housing. Once they are sheltered, the question of inclusion in the host community may arise, and why not starting with football. Joining a team means being put into a framework with rules and obligations. This requires the young unaccompanied minor to find reference and to stick to a new healthy routine. Beyond the overall well-being, there is also the question of belonging: joining a football team with young people of his or her own age allows a young unaccompanied minor to get associate to a group and to feel valued, both in his or her own eyes and in the eyes of others.

Three young unaccompanied minors supervised by the Brussels-based association were recently able to join a football club. Despite these successes, the [SOS Jeunes](#) team face several administrative hurdles. Beyond the “classic” barriers linked to the regularisation of situation, other problems arise: who is going to pay the membership fee, the equipment, the insurance? Finally, Christine Roisin stressed the importance of bringing together social and sports actors. If the association is ready to accompany its young people towards sports activities, it does not necessarily have access to all the information concerning existing opportunities. A mapping of relevant organisations (identifying services and actors on the ground who can connect shelters and football clubs) is necessary.

Finally, the clinical psychologist Maximilien ZIMMERMANN recalled that young unaccompanied minors are a particularly vulnerable group. They underwent numerous traumatic events at different stages of their journey: in their country of origin, on the way to exile, and in the host country, where these traumas persist and are linked to stress. It is essential to be cautious in the accompaniment and supervision of these young people in all structures. In addition, cultural

sensitivity is necessary. With this in mind, [SOLENTRA](#) uses a special method, transcultural psychology. Transcultural psychology considers the cultural context of the person in order to accompany him or her on the road to recovery from the suffering caused by exile. The body is put back in the middle of the therapy in transcultural psychology. Sport and thus football can become an interesting tool.

According to Maximilien ZIMMERMANN, it is interesting to use sport in therapy to get the body moving again. Beyond the physical aspect, football is linked to this notion of inclusion and can help create new social ties. In this context, it is necessary to raise the awareness of football club volunteers to prevent any gesture or action that could trigger certain traumas in young MENA. There is also the question of how to react in the event that a young person, once in confidence, entrusts his/her traumas to the club volunteers. It is therefore necessary to accompany them in the supervision of vulnerable young refugees.

Testimonies from Younited teams' players

The floor was then given to the players of the Younited teams. The survival experts spoke about the importance of football in their lives. The players find a new family in the team. Beyond the laughter and good humour, joining a Younited team also puts them in a framework with rules and obligations and gives them a new routine. For Fedasil beneficiaries, going to training is also a way to get out of the centre, even for a few hours, to get to know new people and to share things with other cultures.

Conclusion and closing of the conference

The conference was closed by Laurent THIEULE, President of the Think tank Sport and Citizenship and of the Royal Europa Kraainem Football Club. The Royal Europa Kraainem Football Club is an amateur football club stating to be "the club of diversity" in Belgium. This multicultural diversity is everywhere within the club in Kraainem. Laurent THIEULE went back over the context of the creation of the "[We Welcome Young Refugees](#)" programme.

Aware of the power of football to stimulate social inclusion, the club opened its doors to young refugees living in the Fedasil centre of Woluwe Saint Pierre in 2015. This initiative was a way to participate in welcoming arriving refugees in Belgium in a burning context of the "migration crisis".

Over the past 7 years, the Kraainem football club has welcomed more than 4,000 young refugees. For its president, each time a new player arrives, it is a new smile. Allowing these young people to play football on the Kraainem pitches is a way of giving them back some happiness and dignity.

The Kraainem club is an example both in Belgium and throughout Europe. By joining forces with Sport and Citizenship, the objective was to allow other clubs to replicate the Kraainem model, to "teach" them how to do it. From this idea were born the FIRE and FIRE+ projects and more particularly, the [FIRE MOOC](#).

Conclusions:

The conclusions of this Belgian national conference are similar to those of previous conferences.

Welcoming and affiliating refugees, and particularly unaccompanied minors, can be a source of apprehension for amateur football clubs. Some obstacles and fears already observed previously remain. Many clubs stress the fear of complicated administrative procedures. Better information for clubs on this matter would help to remove these barriers.

In addition, it is important to **raise awareness** to explain, for example, the asylum application process, the role and appointment of the guardian and the specificity of the unaccompanied profile. When clubs are informed and accompanied, they are more inclined, and even very enthusiastic, to welcome young refugees.

To achieve this, it is necessary to facilitate the connection between reception centres and their social workers with nearby football clubs. This connection can be made by a "**socio sporting mediator**" who can be volunteers in the club. His or her role would be to support the clubs in their projects and to act as a "bridge" with the reception centres. Training and raising awareness of sporting volunteers to the specificities of the unaccompanied minors is therefore a decisive issue.



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