



« Intégrer les réfugiés grâce au football »

FIRE+ final conference

Brussels, Stade Roi Baudouin -

Tuesday 20 June 2023

The conference "**Intégrer les réfugiés grâce au football**"¹ is the final conference of the European project Further Football Including Refugees in Europe (FIRE+), a project funded by the Erasmus + programme. The FIRE+ project aims to promote the use of football as a lever for social inclusion for refugees and migrants in their host communities. This final conference had several objectives. By presenting the results, it was the occasion to evaluate all the activities carried out for two-years-and-a-half. Presenting the results also allowed the consortium members to report to political decision-makers and football governing bodies the difficulties encountered by those involved in the field. Finally, the idea was to open further discussions. The conference was held in French, with two speeches by consortium members in English, in order to adapt the conference to the local context (French being a language mainly spoken by amateur sport in the Brussels region of Belgium).

The final conference was held on Tuesday 20 June 2023, on **World Refugee Day**. Therefore, this date was not randomly chosen. The FIRE+ consortium wanted to show its commitment to defending the rights of people in exile by organising an impacting conference on this special day.

After a brief presentation of the project timeline and the main issues at stake, task leader successively took the floor to present the intellectual outputs and most importantly, their results and conclusions.

The floor was then given to two special guests to open the discussions on our project topic. First of all, the Fedasil centre of Mouscron -the co-organiser of the conference- presented the role of sport in the well-being of its residents. Then, the former international football player Mbo Mpenza took the floor to present the innovative method of the "Mbo Mpenza Challenge". This challenge aims to raise kids' awareness on discriminations by using football activities.

Finally, the conference was closed by Luciano Di Fonzo, Deputy Head of the Sport Unit at the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).

¹ "Integrating refugees through football"

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Programme

16:45 - 17:00: Registration of participants

17:00 - 17:10: Opening of the conference and presentation of the FIRE+ project - Sophie LOPEZ, in charge of the FIRE+ project, Sport and Citizenship Think tank

17:10 - 17:30: From assumptions to evidence: results of the European FIRE+ survey on the use of football as a tool for integrating refugees - Özgehan ŞENYUVA, Middle East Technical University (METU)

17:30 - 17:40: On the pitch! Presentation of the pilot interventions of the FIRE+ project - Niels van MUIJDEN - Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE Network)

17:40 - 17:55: How to act on the ground? Presentation of the FIRE MOOC - Albrecht SONNTAG, ESSCA Ecole de Management

17:55 - 18:00: Conclusions of FIRE+ and recommendations for the future - Sophie LOPEZ, in charge of the FIRE+ project, Sport and Citizenship Think tank

18:00 - 18:20: Voices from the field: Sport as a tool for inclusion and empowerment at the Fedasil reception centre in Mouscron - Yohann MIESSEN - Mediator, Fedasil reception centre in Mouscron

18:20 - 18:35 : Key note speaker - The "Mbo Mpenza Challenge": Promoting the values of sport to combat all forms of discrimination and exclusion - Mbo MPENZA - former Belgian international footballer - initiator of the "Mbo Mpenza Challenge" method

18:35 - 18:45 : Q&A

18:45 - 19:00: Closing speech - Luciano DI FONZO, Deputy Head of the Sport Unit at the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA)

19:00 : End of conference and networking around a coffee break

Part 1: Results and conclusions of the FIRE+ project

The final conference of the FIRE+ project was held at the Stade Roi Baudouin, a temple of Belgian sport, on World Refugee Day, on 20 June 2023.

To open the conference in front of a very diverse audience (representatives of social structures; amateur sport; international NGOs; institutional representatives), Sophie Lopez, project manager of the FIRE+ project, recalled the main objectives of and presented the timeline of the activities carried out. After that, the floor was successively given to the task leaders to present the results of each activity.

From assumptions to evidence: results of the European FIRE+ survey

This final conference of the FIRE+ project provided a better understanding of the role of football as a tool for integrating refugees, thanks to the presentation of the results of the European FIRE+ survey on the use of football as a tool for integrating refugees.

The survey was conducted by professor Özgehan Senyuva (METU). At the beginning of his presentation, professor Senyuva reminded why and how the survey was conducted. The task started with the following statement: there was a lack of significant and tangible proofs that football was an efficient tool for the social inclusion of refugees. In fact, what was absent from the literature was a scientifically robust and policy-relevant survey that would allow an evidence-based evaluation of the impact different local initiatives have had on both the beneficiaries and, equally important, on the grassroots organisations themselves.

In his presentation, professor Özgehan Senyuva specifically focused on the results of the survey and the conclusion that can be drawn from it. The obvious conclusion was “Football works”: in short, these football projects are not just games, they change lives. They help refugees to adapt, stand up and score goals, not just on the pitch, but also in life. By developing key skills and understanding new environments, these projects equip refugees to contribute to their new communities. They do not just survive, they thrive, and that is a “win” for both locals and refugees.

A few key figures are worth mentioning. According to the respondents, 86.6% of the participants gained in self-confidence. With these initiatives, we do not just train players. We help to develop confident and responsible individuals. Half of the participants have improved their cognitive abilities, and more than half are better able to carry out an idea/project. They learn to communicate, negotiate, and express themselves - they become active citizens. Furthermore, Football is a great “teacher”. Through the projects, 71% have acquired knowledge of human rights, and 69.9% have become more aware of health and well-being issues. According to the conclusions, the real “victory” is that the projects encourage solidarity. 91.7% of respondents noted an increase in solidarity with people in difficulty. Football projects promote a culture of mutual support.

The data collected during the survey enabled to identify two successful scenarios: The first concerns a well-established Community Club with stable, independent resources and an ongoing football project with refugees (one year or more). The second has initial funding from the authorities (local government or national federations) to enable the recruitment of long-term staff.

At the end, professor Özgehan Senyuva insisted on the crucial importance of sharing these results, particularly with the public authorities and football governing bodies, to release more funds and support these projects.

On the pitch! Presentation of the pilot interventions of the FIRE+ project

After this presentation of the academic part of the project, the practical part of FIRE+ was presented. Niels van Muijden (FARE network) presented the 7 pilot interventions carried out as part of the FIRE+ project.

The 7 pilot projects took place in Belgium, Ireland, Germany, and in the Netherlands. The organisers were closely supported by the football federations which were members of the consortium and selected by an independent jury. In total, over 1,000 people have taken part in the FIRE+ pilot interventions, including over 350 refugees and migrants.

FARE had to point out the difficulties that the organisers may have encountered. First of all, although the projects took place two years after the start of the worldwide COVID19 pandemic,

amateur clubs are still suffering the consequences. Volunteers no longer have enough time to get involved in the clubs. Without volunteers, it remains hard for projects to get off the ground.

However, the organisers are unequivocal. These initiatives highly are important, impactful, and necessary, particularly given the tense political context surrounding migration issues in Europe.

How to act on the ground? Presentation of the FIRE MOOC

Furthermore, this conference was an opportunity for Albrecht Sonntag (professor at ESSCA School of Management and initiator of the FIRE MOOC) to present the [FIRE MOOC](#). The FIRE MOOC is the main deliverable of the FIRE+ project. This e-learning course taught by Professor Sonntag aims to train and raise awareness among club volunteers wishing to use football as a tool for integrating refugees and asylum seekers.

The FIRE MOOC is the result of four and a half years of dialogue with the field and the collection of best practices. The FIRE MOOC is a multimedia and interactive self-learning tool open to anyone, at any time, free of charge multimedia and interactive easily accessible on the web. It has been designed to encourage football volunteers to get involved with refugees (*the “Yes, you can!”*); to pass on knowledge and know-how (*to learn how to do it*); and to share experiences from the field (*what works and what doesn’t*).

The FIRE MOOC contains, above all, knowledge in a variety of formats (videos, explanatory texts, quizzes). The FIRE MOOC currently comprises 7 modules:

1. Preparing an initiative
2. Communicating with the target group
3. Running and evaluating a project
4. Finding resources
5. Include refugee women and refugee girls
6. Include unaccompanied foreign minors
7. Volunteering for refugees

The FIRE MOOC welcomed the participation of 38 contributors representing 11 different nationalities.

The FIRE MOOC is available in English and subtitles. The Polish and French versions will be uploaded by the end of 2023. Other translations are planned to be done.

Recommendations from the FIRE+ project

After presenting the intellectual outputs, Sophie Lopez outlined the 5 recommendations arising from the FIRE+ project. They are the following:

- Recommendation 1: To support inclusion through sport programmes with long-term fundings.
- Recommendation 2: To identify and provide training for "socio-sport mediators" in grassroots football clubs
- Recommendation 3: To offer specific sessions for refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls
- Recommendation 4: To allow the organisations which manage unaccompanied foreign minors' guardianship to cover the costs of their sports membership
- Recommendation 5: Establish partnerships between reception centres for asylum seekers and grassroots football clubs to discover volunteering.

Part 2: Opening for further discussions

The floor was then given to three special guests.

Voices from the field: Sport as a tool for inclusion and empowerment at the Fedasil reception centre in Mouscron

Following Sophie Lopez's contribution on the FIRE+ recommendations, Yohann Miessen, mediator at the [Fedasil Centre of Mouscron](#) took the floor.

As a field actor, Yohann Miessen explained the importance of sport as a tool for inclusion and empowerment. He pointed out that sport in the centre was above all a vehicle for social well-being. Then, sport and especially football are a way to bring different nationalities and cultures together around a common activity. Finally, these football activities at the centre provide an opportunity for inclusion with an audience outside the centre.

Yohann Miessen reminded the history and the stages in the creation of the football teams at the Fedasil centre in Mouscron. In partnership with the Royal Excel Mouscron football club, Fedasil decided to create a team of refugees. It was a success as not less than 40 refugees expressed their willingness to play. If they were men at first, Fedasil also managed to develop a female team. However, it was more difficult to recruit refugee women from the centre as most of them never had played football. Thus, the idea with this female team was to create a feeling of union and to not talk about competitiveness, which is a factor for not-engaging in sport or physical activities. There were other interesting initiatives as the teams built by Fedasil were giving the opportunity to play in leagues or tournaments. For instance, they participated in the Younded league, a league which includes a social dimension. It allowed the teams to have access to complementary equipment, to participate in tournaments, and to be valued. Indeed, the last element is important. The idea behind the creation of those football teams is to favour the integration of refugees' population in the local communities. However, the residents of the Fedasil Centre in Mouscron also wanted to be seen as more than refugees.

As recalled by Yohann Miessen, the press had its role to play in the integration of those refugees within the local community. Indeed, by showing interest for the initiatives developed, it contributed to the consideration of the refugees as normal actors and not only passengers in the city. Moreover, those football teams had an immediate effect for the individual integration of some refugees of the Fedasil Centre in Mouscron. Indeed, playing games in leagues and tournaments has allowed to put visibility on the players and some of them were recruited by regional clubs, and also became coach.

Another interesting element regarding football as a powerful inclusion tool is about the distrust between the police, the hospital, the staff of the Fedasil Centre of Mouscron and the residents. Through a tournament opposing police, firefighters, hospital personnel, to teams of refugees on the pitch, the mindset changed. It helped to work on the existing distrust. In fact, football as allowed the refugees to be accepted and considered in Mouscron' local community.

Other sport teams were created within the centre. Indeed, football is not necessarily the most popular sport in the countries where the residents are from. For instance, cricket is the national pride of numerous Afghans refugees. A competition between several Fedasil centres has been organised in this regard. It also led to multisport sessions in collaboration with the sports'

department of the city of Mouscron. Some of those sessions allowed unaccompanied foreign minors to initiate other children to cricket or other sports.

The "Mbo Mpenza Challenge": Promoting the values of sport to combat all forms of discrimination and exclusion

The final FIRE+ conference had the privilege of having as a guest of honour the former Belgian football international player Mbo Mpenza. Mbo Mpenza is nowadays committed to combating all forms of discrimination in sport.

Mbo Mpenza gave us an insight into his personal experience and professional career when he was a football player. He explained how his experience of discrimination helped him to launch the develop the "[Mbo Mpenza challenge](#)". The "Mbo Mpenza Challenge" seeks to promote the values of sport, particularly football, in order to combat all forms of discrimination and exclusion. The Challenge aims to raise young people's awareness of the problem of all forms of discrimination as early as possible, and also to contribute to the education of young people through sport. The activities are organised to entertain children, but above all to create team spirit by breaking down the barriers of difference. During the sessions, the children take part in football challenges in which they want to surpass themselves in which they are put on an equal footing. The challenges on the pitch enable us to encourage and develop the children's self-esteem and get a message across through play.

Mbo Mpenza is also working with the Belgian education authorities to get his method into the classroom. The method is taught in a fun way in the books "*Drôles de P'tits diables*".

Conclusion

The conference closed with a speech by Luciano Di Fonzo, Deputy Head of the Sport Unit at the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Luciano Di Fonzo pointed out that the EACEA selects socially innovative projects, notably as part of the Erasmus+ Sport programme. Through this programme, sports clubs and all sports organisations developing projects for social inclusion through sport receive grants to set up their projects. The Deputy

Head of the Sport Unit welcomed the results of the FIRE+ project and congratulated the FIRE+ consortium on the important recommendations made at the end of the project.

This conference rounded off two and a half years of project implementation. The audience was very interested, as evidenced by the questions asked to the various speakers. Everyone agreed that the project should not stop there, particularly because of the educational and transformative power that the FIRE MOOC can bring. As far as the results of the FIRE+ survey are concerned, the conclusions and recommendations are to be presented to the relevant authorities in order to bring about change.

These comments have been heard by the FIRE+ consortium, whose members aim to continue their advocacy in favour of an inclusive football for refugees and migrants. A task force to work on the legacy of FIRE+ will be set up next autumn.



FIRE⁺

FOOTBALL INCLUDING
REFUGEES IN EUROPE