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Action Research on Sport and Inclusion

Summary Report Paper

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1 INTRODUCTION

Access to sport is not equal for everyone, as certain groups remain significantly underrepresented. This is shown by several national studies as well as on a European level, by the Eurobarometer survey “Sport and Physical Activity” (Eurobarometer Report 2022). The Eurobarometer report provides an overview of the inequalities present in EU-wide sports culture along various dimensions.

The Eurobarometer shows that access to sport is closely linked to social inequality and, furthermore, the gender gap between those who regularly exercise sports remains in favour of men. In addition to class and gender, another important dimension of inequality in sport concerns migration background.

A study from Germany highlights the underrepresentation of people with a migration background in sports clubs: while 27% of the general German population have a migration background, only 10% of club members do (Breuer/Feiler 2022, p. 48). A Dutch study focusing on the organizational level of leadership positions within sports clubs shows that very few people with a migration background hold board positions (Hoejmakers/Elling 2019).

There are various ways to address these inequalities in sport. One effective approach to promoting equality is the use of role models. As mentioned, inequalities in sport are visible not only in participation levels but especially in leadership roles within clubs. Role models in such positions can therefore have a significant impact on club culture.

The project “Empower Diverse Youth – Build up Youth Participation and Inclusion in Sport Organisations” (SPIN Youth) uses the impact of role models to address inequalities in sport and to increase the participation of young people from diverse backgrounds.

SPIN Youth contributes to the creation of inclusive, discrimination-free sporting environments that actively pro-

mote diversity and equality. The aim is to develop methods to increase sports participation among diverse youth, in particular young refugees and migrants.

Various project activities support the goal of empowering young people from diverse backgrounds through sport. Eight European countries are involved in the project: Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ireland, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal. Two youth coordinators between the ages of 18 and 27 with ties to organized sport were trained for their roles during a Youth Training Academy in Rome in October 2024. They established youth panels in their respective countries to accompany the project process; these panels consist of five to eight members, all young people with diverse backgrounds. The youth coordinators, usually with support from the youth panels, conducted action research.

As part of our project, the young people developed their own topic and research question, selected suitable empirical methods, and independently carried out the research. They were supported throughout this process by the national SPIN coordinators. This youth-led research formed the foundation for the measures that the young people, with the support of the youth panels, will implement in various sports clubs or neighbourhoods. Based on the findings from the action research, they are developing an action plan. The overarching goal is to increase inclusion and reduce inequalities.

The following report paper summarizes the results and experiences from the action research conducted in the different countries. It provides insights into the empirical research carried out by the young people. The report highlights the wide range of questions they explored based on their own interests and the answers they found in the process.

What is action research?

(Hohmann et al. 2021,p.1)

Action research explicitly aims to achieve social change: It relies on the perspective of those affected by a particular set of social circumstances in order to come up with solutions for a specific set of problems (Somegkh 1995, p. 339), i.e. the target group of the research assumes responsibility for finding solutions. Research findings are directly fed back into the real setting, where they help improve social practice.

Action Research constitutes a participatory, practice-oriented approach that allows affected individuals to assume an active role in research and to make their own, often collective contribution. Action research differs from „traditional“ research in that it suspends or at least

significantly reduces the hierarchical separation between the researchers and their subjects of investigation. The approach is not necessarily associated with any method in particular, but rather describes a methodology and an attitude (Feldman/Minstrell 2000, p.1).

The approach is based on the ideas of German social psychologist Kurt Lewin: In the late 30s, after his flight to the US, he began to use quasi-experimental research designs to study democratic participation in the workplace and the interrelation of democratic management styles and productivity. In the following decades, the approach was revisited, further developed and used to investigate a wide range of topics: One study on education, for instance, had teachers examine the impact of their own teaching methods (Adelman 1993).



2 SPORT AND INCLUSION: RESEARCH QUESTIONS & TOPICS

All action researches focused on the overarching theme of sport and inclusion, while placing different emphases depending on research interests and regional context. Many of the action researches addressed the issue of barriers to access in sport for people from diverse backgrounds, with a particular focus on young people.

For example, the Austrian study asked: “What do minority youth perceive as the greatest hindrances to participation in sport in Austria?” The Finnish research also explored questions related to barriers to participation in sports and examined different aspects of inclusion in sports – such as how to create more inclusive policies within sports clubs, how to promote diversity in coaching, and how to ensure open-mindedness among coaches.

While some of the action researches focused broadly on barriers to access, others concentrated on a specific club or project context. For instance, the Dutch study explored the “Wereldmeiden-Wereldgozers MDT project” (Worldsgirls and Worldboys), a social-sportive programme that connects young people with and without a refugee background through sport. The study examined how to improve the project to enhance youth participation in the

project in a specific region in the Netherlands. The research question aimed to identify barriers preventing young people from participating in the project and to explore ways to motivate them to join.

The action research from Germany focused on a football club in Berlin and asked how the club’s range of activities could be further developed to include young people with a migration background and to foster their long-term engagement. This question sought to understand the reasons behind limited integration and to identify measures to improve inclusion and engagement.

Two further action researches focused on specific target groups. The Portuguese study from Lisbon explored how Roma women can be motivated to participate in sports activities. This question seeks to explore cultural, social, and accessibility-related barriers to encourage their engagement in sport. The action research from Ireland did not focus on the inclusion of (young) people with a migration background but was instead motivated by findings from a survey of sports clubs. It investigated how to develop a support system for individuals with additional needs, particularly within a local football club.

Another study from Portugal, this time from the northern part of the country, examined a specific case to understand what are the specific difficulties faced by an immigrant athlete trying to get registered in Portugal, and how can these challenges be overcome. The focus was on identifying bureaucratic and financial barriers that prevent migrant youth from participating in federated sports.

While all of these studies focus more closely on participation in sports activities — that is, on involvement as athletes in organized club sports or sport-related projects — the study from Italy goes one step further by addressing the lack of representation of people with a migration background in leadership roles in sport. Their research question was: “Why aren’t more people with migrant backgrounds transitioning into leadership roles in sport, and what can be done to change that?”

The study from Bosnia and Herzegovina took a unique approach by examining the role of sport as a means of rec-

onciliation and acceptance between different ethnic communities, against the backdrop of ongoing ethnic tensions in the region. More specifically, the study asked: “To what extent and in what way can this initiative and sporting events serve as a platform for reconciliation and acceptance between different ethnic communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina?”

This action research aimed to investigate the possible role of sports in resolving interethnic conflicts within local clubs and beyond — engaging wider society, local schools, clubs, and organizations — by fostering understanding, addressing ethnic prejudice, and breaking societal taboos.

This brief overview highlights the diversity of research questions developed by the youth coordinators and their youth panels. The following presents the methodologies of the different action research projects, their results, and initial approaches for action that were developed based on these results.

3 METHODOLOGY IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE ACTION RESEARCH

All action researches dealt with youth led data-collection coordinated by the youth coordinators and supported (in most cases) by their youth panels. The research methods employed across the provided reports demonstrate a diverse and tailored approach to understanding the issues being studied.

As part of the project’s qualitative research approach, individual interviews were conducted with (young) athletes with and without migrant backgrounds, as well as with parents and members of sports clubs – such as coaches and club officials. In Italy, for example, the youth coordinators carried out seven in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 90 minutes, with athletes and former athletes with migrant backgrounds.

In addition to interviews, focus group discussions were held with different target groups, applying various creative and participatory methods. The Austrian youth coordinators conducted their focus group directly with the youth panel members, prioritising and discussing barriers to access in sport.

In contrast, the youth coordinators in Bosnia and Herzegovina engaged their youth panel members as multipli-

ers. Prior to implementation, they were given intensive training on the methodology, including guidance materials with tailored questions and tools for different target groups (coaches, players, parents). During one-on-one preparatory sessions, the youth coordinators supported the panel members and clarified the research approach. Equipped with this knowledge, the panelists carried out their own focus groups within their local clubs, all of which explored sport as a tool for reconciliation.

In addition to qualitative methods, the young research teams also implemented online surveys and questionnaires, in some cases using a mixed methods approach by combining them with qualitative interviews. The Irish team, for example, distributed the questionnaires both online and in match day programmes to collect broad-based feedback. They also engaged directly with participants during matches, conducting interviews on site to gather insights and perspectives.

A particularly noteworthy example of the mixed methods approach comes from the Dutch research team, who considered the specific needs and potential access barriers of their target group in designing their survey. The youth



coordinators visited schools and conducted the survey on site with students, using a multilingual questionnaire to ensure accessibility. To contextualize responses, they asked follow-up questions during the completion process. The young researchers were also supported by an interpreter, helping to overcome language barriers. In addition to engaging with potential young athletes, the youth coordinators also interviewed project coordinators to better understand the day-to-day implementation of the sports project under investigation.

The Portuguese researchers from Lisbon, who focused on barriers to sport participation for Roma women, emphasized in their report the importance of creating a safe space during their focus group discussions. Their aim was to protect and empower this target group, which is particularly affected by racism and discrimination, and to enable

an open and respectful exchange on the topic of access to sport.

A distinct approach was taken by the Portuguese research from the northern region of the country, which conducted a case study on the real-life experience of an immigrant athlete. This work focused primarily on desk research and analysis, including the collection of information from sport federations, the review of relevant regulations, and engagement with sports organizations.

Several reports also mention challenges encountered during the implementation of action research methods — such as low response rates to questionnaires or difficulties in recruiting interviewees. However, the youth coordinators, with the support of the youth panels and the national coordinators within the SPIN Youth project, consistently found solutions to overcome these obstacles.

4 ACTION RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 Barriers for participation in sports

Many of the action research projects addressed barriers to participation in organised sports from various perspectives. This included both access barriers to sports clubs — as explored in the German action research — and barriers to participation in sports-related projects and initiatives, as investigated by the Dutch research team.

4.1.1 Financial and logistical barriers

Several studies — including the action research in Finland and Austria — identified financial barriers as a major obstacle for refugees and individuals with a migration background, as these groups are disproportionately affected by poverty. Key issues reported included costs for club fees, travel expenses, and a lack of appropriate sportswear and equipment.

Moreover, economic pressure can also discourage athletes from continuing their voluntary engagement in leadership roles, such as coaching or serving as board members — a concern highlighted in the action research Italy. The Austrian action research will explicitly prioritise financial barriers in the development of its action plan. The study makes the following argument:

„While club culture, diversity strategies, and social inclusion measures are undoubtedly critical, financial accessibility appears to be a basic and foundational requirement. Without removing financial barriers, broader inclusion efforts may have limited success, as cost remains a decisive factor for initial participation.“
(Action research Austria)

The action research in the Netherlands identified a logistical barrier in accessing the specific sports initiative. Students surveyed reported that they either live too far away to attend or do not know where the facilities are or how to reach them.

These transportation challenges are often linked to high travel costs, but they also reflect broader issues of social inequality — particularly affecting individuals or families without access to a car, which can significantly limit mobility in rural areas. At the same time, the findings may point to a possible lack of accessible information about available transport options, highlighting the need for improved communication and/or improved infrastructure.

4.1.2 Bureaucratic barriers

The action research from Northern Portugal focused on a specific case study involving an athlete, in which

bureaucratic barriers were closely linked to financial demands. The research revealed that *„that the Portuguese Handball Federation requires the athlete to be released by both the national and international federations, a process that makes the registration fee 6 to 10 times more expensive than for a Portuguese athlete.“* This practice was identified as unfair, particularly for athletes from countries of the Global South, and is described in the report as a structural barrier.

4.1.3 Language barriers and cultural constraints

Several studies — including the action research in Germany and Finland — identified language barriers as a key obstacle for participation in organised sport. These barriers complicate communication with coaches and teammates, and can hinder access to essential club-related information, as also highlighted by the Austrian research team.

However, the challenge extends beyond language comprehension. It also involves a lack of orientation knowledge — that is, understanding how both visible and invisible cultural rules operate within a club context. In particular, new arrivals often struggle to navigate club rules, training schedules, and informal social dynamics within teams, as reported in the action research from Austria.

Additional cultural challenges relate to different understandings of how sport is practised. The action research in the Netherlands found that mixed-gender groups were one of the main reasons girls hesitated to participate in the sports activity offered. Similarly, the Portuguese study from Lisbon reported that mixed-gender settings posed a significant barrier for the Roma women they interviewed.

These findings underline the need for sports clubs and initiatives to develop tailored offers if they aim to reach girls and women who express such needs. Creating gender-sensitive environments can play a crucial role in making sport more inclusive and accessible.

In this context, the Portuguese action research from Lisbon offers an important perspective: while Roma girls and women face particular barriers to participation, the study stresses that these obstacles are not primarily rooted in cultural factors. Instead, the main barrier to participation is linked to patriarchal structures in the broader society.

„Through the research conducted, we found that the most important factor to consider is the role of women in society — whether they are Roma or not.“
(Action research Portugal/Lisbon)

4.1.4 Exclusion and lack of a welcoming culture

Several reports point to barriers linked directly to sports clubs themselves and their lack of a welcoming culture. These include the inadequacy of sports offers in meeting the needs of people with refugee or migration backgrounds. A lack of focus on recreational sports and family-oriented programmes, including holiday activities, can present significant hurdles — especially for those with limited prior experience in sport, as highlighted in the action research Germany.

The action research from Austria notes that “*cultural misunderstandings and unwelcoming environments contributed to feelings of isolation of newcomers.*” Furthermore, exclusion is not only caused by an absence of active inclusion, but also by direct experiences of racism and discrimination. Such experiences can cause individuals to feel uncomfortable within sports clubs and can even reduce their motivation to engage in sport at all. The action research from Finland reported that athletes interviewed shared such experiences of discrimination and racism.

4.1.5 Lack of role models and invisible barriers

The Portuguese action research from Lisbon, which focused on barriers faced by Roma women, highlighted the absence of role models as a key obstacle to participation and empowerment in sport. This insight gains further relevance when viewed alongside findings from the Italian action research, which explored access to leadership roles in sport.

The Italian study found that the lack of diversity in leadership positions was not due to a lack of interest or motivation. On the contrary, the athletes interviewed expressed a strong desire to stay involved in sport, including in leadership roles. However, access was limited by informal networks that created invisible barriers, making it difficult for individuals from migrant backgrounds to move into decision-making positions within sport organisations.

„Nearly every participant expressed a strong desire to stay involved in sport beyond playing. They want to coach, mentor, and give back. But they’ve often found doors closed — without understanding why.“

(Action research Italy)

The Italian action research also pointed to a lack of transparency in how leadership roles are distributed within sports organisations. In addition, instances of subtle exclusion — such as being overlooked for training opportunities or sidelined during meetings — were found to undermine confidence and discourage continued engagement.

These invisible mechanisms of exclusion can prevent athletes from accessing leadership roles in their clubs. This is not only problematic because it limits the individual development of the affected athletes, but it also has a broader impact: when leadership lacks diversity, it reduces the presence of visible role models who might otherwise motivate others to participate in sport and take on active roles in sports clubs.

4.2 Sport as a tool for reconciliation

The action research from Bosnia and Herzegovina focused on a specific and sensitive topic: to what extent and in what way sport initiatives and events can serve as a platform for reconciliation and acceptance between different ethnic communities. This research question directly relates to the post-war context in the region and, according to the authors, touches on a taboo subject within the country.

Despite ongoing political tensions and social prejudices, the findings from the focus group discussions revealed a desire for change and a growing awareness of the importance of addressing the topic of reconciliation. The research identified several factors contributing to social prejudice, including lack of knowledge, upbringing, and environmental influences. At the same time, researchers observed a strong curiosity among young people to learn about other religions and cultures — an interest often hindered by parental advice to avoid such topics.

While some participants shared positive examples of overcoming ethnic prejudice, there was also uncertainty about the role of sport in the reconciliation process. This doubt was particularly connected to the observation that, although sport can unite, it is also sometimes perceived as a source of conflict, especially during competitions.

The action research team will continue exploring this complex issue and, through the development of their action plan, aims to implement measures that demonstrate the potential of sport as a tool for reconciliation.

5 IDEAS TO OVERCOME BARRIERS AND CONCLUSIONS

Several action research teams have already developed initial ideas and proposals for how the identified barriers could be addressed and inclusion promoted. These proposed solutions and ideas vary depending on the nature of the barriers in each context. They support the creation of inclusive, responsive sport structures.

For example, the youth panel from Austria, which identified financial accessibility as a fundamental prerequisite for broader inclusion, has begun dialogue with a local sports club to explore possible ways to reduce or cover participation costs. Proposed measures include subsidy models, fundraising activities, and the establishment of sponsorship programme.

To prevent exclusion, foster a welcoming culture, and tailor sport offers to the needs of the target groups, several youth panels have already developed concrete proposals as part of their action research.

The German youth panel proposed a series of initiatives, including a pilot holiday football camp, translating club materials into multiple languages, a buddy system for new members, and community events to strengthen social ties. These ideas form the basis of an action plan to be implemented within a local football club.

The Dutch youth panel, which investigated access barriers to a specific regional project, recommends measures to address cultural sensitivities, improve recruitment strategies, and ensure that participants feel safe and welcome throughout the programme.

Focusing on the inclusion of Roma women, the Portuguese youth panel from Lisbon highlighted that motivation and participation require the creation of culturally and family-sensitive initiatives. Their proposed strategies include organising women-only activities, involving female community leaders in the planning process, ensuring privacy in sport environments and working in close collaboration with the Roma community.

Building on the importance of role models, the Italian youth panel emphasised that highlighting leaders from underrepresented backgrounds helps to inspire others and normalises diversity in leadership structures. In their action research, the panel identified a lack of transparency in the allocation of leadership roles and the existence of invisible barriers as key obstacles to achieving more diverse

leadership within sports clubs. As a strategic response, the youth panel proposes to open the recruitment process. This includes encouraging clubs to advertise leadership roles publicly, to apply transparent and objective selection criteria, and to involve diverse groups in the recruitment process. The youth panel is currently in the process of defining the concrete steps for implementing some of these strategies in their action plan, with the aim of supporting structural change and fostering inclusive leadership practices.

The Irish youth panel developed a set of proposals aimed at improving the inclusion of individuals with special needs in sports club settings. One of their key ideas is to conduct an accessibility audit within the club, and to involve individuals who represent the broad group of people with additional needs in carrying out this audit in cooperation with the youth panel. In addition, the panel proposes the organisation of a specialised staff training programme to raise awareness and build practical skills for inclusive practice. As a public measure, they also plan to host an inclusion event during the European Week of Sport, creating visibility for the topic and strengthening the club's commitment to inclusion.

The findings from these action research projects confirm many insights from existing academic reviews (Schwartzkopff 2022), while also offering distinct contributions through their focus on specific barriers (such as financial obstacles), their attention to particularly marginalised groups (such as Roma women), and their exploration of targeted research themes (such as leadership roles or accessibility for persons with special needs).

The action researches analyzed here from eight different countries impressively demonstrate how youth-led research is capable of addressing a wide range of topics within the overarching theme of sport and inclusion, and the various approaches taken by the different youth panels to conduct empirical research.

The SPIN Youth project will continue to support and accompany the work of the individual youth panels and looks forward to seeing how the action plans evolve from these empirical findings. We extend our thanks to all youth coordinators involved for their dedicated and inspiring work.



6 LITERATURE

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SUMMARY

Despite the many positive effects of sport, certain groups remain underrepresented. The project “Empower Diverse Youth – Build up Youth Participation and Inclusion in Sport Organisations” (SPIN Youth) aims to increase the sport participation of young people from diverse backgrounds – in particular young refugees and migrants – and to create inclusive, non-discriminatory sport environments that actively promote diversity and equality.

This Report Paper summarizes the results and experiences from the action research conducted in eight different countries including Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands and Portugal. It provides insights into the empirical research carried out by the young people. The report highlights the wide range of questions they explored based on their own interests and the answers they found in the process. The overarching goal is to increase inclusion and reduce inequalities in and through sport.

