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RADICALIZATION PREVENTION THROUGH SPORTS

Lessons Learnt

A brief overview of lessons learnt from local practices in regards to prevention of youth radicalization in sports.





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"SAFE ZONE. Empowering coaches and trainers in sports to prevent youth radicalization and violent extremism" is a project funded by the **Internal Security Fund Police, DG Home, European Commission.**

The project activities were carried out by a Consortium of seven partners in four European countries - Germany, Italy, Portugal and Slovenia – between January 2020 and March 2022.

This booklet presents the major lessons learnt from the project activities – national and transnational exchange seminars, multi-agency meetings, training workshops, focus groups - involving various actors, from sport coaches and managers, to athletes, researchers, youth educators, social workers, and psychologists. Some of the learnt lessons were country specific but many were common to all participating countries and here you find the major ones.

Visit the **SAFE ZONE** project website to learn more about the project results and outputs:

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- 1. Shifting the focus from performance to education in child and youth sports

One of the most important lessons when it comes to thinking of preventing negative behaviours using sports context is that there is an urgent need of shifting the focus from performance to education in child and youth sports. There is a need to build a shared culture of sport as a pedagogical tool as well as a powerful means of inclusion.

Some of the sport managers who participated in the focus groups stated that they value the educational dimension of sport but they have difficulties promoting it because sport coaches are mostly oriented to improving performance and less to the educational dimension. There were also sport managers who pointed out the opposite, recognizing that they are often responsible for the pressure for results felt by the coaches, and that for the coaches of children and youths to be able to focus on the educational dimension, the management should be able to create such a culture within the organization.

Sport coaches who participated in multi-agency meetings stated they would like to focus more on education than on performance, but they do not feel that view in sports managers, so they addressed the need to raise awareness and train sport managers so that they will be more prone to focus on the educative role of child and youth sports (since most of the training and interventions available are focused on the coach).

They also suggested legislation changes that would create mandatory certifications for sports managers in themes related with the role of sports in education for values, social skills and human rights.

In sum, in order to shift the focus from performance to education, we need both a Top-down and a Bottom-Up approach.

- **2. Moving from viewing sport as a complementary activity to recognizing it as a priority for children's and adolescents' development.**

Sport is too often viewed as a complementary activity rather than as a priority for children's and adolescents' development. School systems are insufficiently equipped in this sense, thus leaving the economic weight of sport practice on the families' shoulders. Consequently, many children and teenagers who belong to the most marginalized social sectors are excluded from sports too, thus enforcing these children's exposure to the risks connected to isolation.

Sports provide children and youths opportunities to develop not only physically but also mentally and socially, by experimenting new forms of relationships and cooperation. The sense of belongingness to one or more social groups is a basic psychological need of the human being. The elements of the groups share experiences, interests, values, principles, traditions and/or norms that allow the organization of interpersonal relationships and social roles within the group. In this sense, socialization through sport promotes the general integration of children and youngsters within society, thus fostering social inclusion.

Through sports, children and youths can learn about individual and collective responsibility, and coaches can create moments that demonstrate in practice the importance of respect for others and other fundamental values for individual or collective sports. Within the sports context, coaches have a privileged opportunity to break taboos with the youngsters, opening space for debates on social relevant topics, promoting discussion, and showing themselves available to speak individually about them.

- **3. The power of non-formal education in sports training**

Sport can play a key role in the field of education, promoting social and personal values such as team spirit, discipline, perseverance and fair play and being a platform for empowering people and raising the social capital of society (Kirkeby, 2013).

Non-formal education has been gaining relevance in the field of education in Europe in the last decades, given its efficiency in developing skills in several fields of life such human rights, social inclusion and discrimination, cultural diversity and conflict resolution.

Sports can easily become learning communities for the above fields of life, with the combination of sport and non-formal methodologies, providing an opportunity to learn through activities that are very enjoyable, highly emotional and based on active participation and involvement" (Foldi, 2013).

- **4. The need for national strategic plans for radicalization prevention**

There are already many forms of radicalization prevention in the different countries involved, but there is no national strategic plan or specific program for radicalization prevention. Nevertheless, there is still a need for knowledge transfer, as efforts have only gained momentum in recent years.

The participants stressed the importance to involve other sports agents in addition to sport coaches – sports managers, sport associations and federations - regarding radicalization prevention. There is a need for multi-agency coordination and knowledge transfer of these procedures and good practices.

The need for capacity building processes involving all the sports agents but also including the families was also addressed. Concerning the importance of reaching and involving families, some coaches addressed their role in violence perpetration and incitement during the matches, creating violence and setting negative examples of violence legitimization for their sons and daughters ("sometimes you see parents insulting other kids because they are from a different team, or because they have a different skin colour...").

The importance of including evaluation and follow-up of such capacity building initiatives was also stressed. There are many projects developed locally but not properly tested in order to prove their efficacy and sustain their implementation on a national basis.

- **5. Specific training and certification of radicalization prevention through sports**

One of the major problems detected is that coaches and educators do not have appropriate training to detect radicalization at an early stage, and they are lacking knowledge on how to act if radicalization is already in progress.

They are also very concerned about how to approach the youngster on his/her way of radicalization and who else to involve in the deradicalization process. The coaches and sport workers agreed that there should be training available on this topic and that it should be included in regular training for coaches and sport workers.

Coaches should observe the behavior changes of youngsters and detect early enough if it comes to unusual changes that might indicate radicalization in progress. They should approach the youngster with empathy and do everything not to exclude him/her from the group and sport club. If they cannot solve the problem through conversation with the youngster, they should include other stakeholders like parents, social workers, psychologists, and the police if necessary.

Sport workers and coaches should also have to acquire a license that they are moral and ethical educators, promoting good values in sport and not violence. Nationwide recognition for trainers attending such workshops in the form of licenses or certificates would be desirable.

When asked for examples of good practices within their sport contexts, some of the participants explained the legislation measures taken in order to prevent violence, radicalization, and to promote ethics in sports (e.g. funding of new sports facilities or activities is conditioned by compliance with those rules and norms of conduct); inter-generational events where, for instance, parents have the opportunity to play the role of referees in order to promote empathy with them and prevent insults and other forms of violence towards them.

The role of the universal language of sports for social inclusion of children from different cultures was stressed. It was also stressed that radicalization is related to a lack of human rights training, that training and education on human rights should be at the core of sports contexts in order that true radicalization prevention may be possible.

If we do not educate for human rights, for respect for differences among human beings in sports too, it will be easier for radicalization and violence to emerge. To invest in a human rights culture would be a way to prevent radicalization, according to the participants. Schools and families have major roles in this process of human rights education, but sport entities also have a major responsibility in this matter.

The need to focus on gender discrimination in sports was also addressed, since it is another source of feelings of marginalization and social exclusion that could lead to violence and radicalization.

According with the participants, the issue of radicalization is and will become even a greater problem in the future due to the consequences that the COVID 19 restrictions have left with youths, so education and training on this field is of great importance to detect radicalization at an early stage and try to prevent it.

In sum, only with these general changes of paradigm within child and youth sports – focus on education rather than on performance – prioritization of sports; professionalization and capacity building of sports agents on human rights – will it be possible to prevent radicalization and violence through sports.

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The SAFE ZONE team represents a mix of research centers, universities and sports organizations in Italy, Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia.



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