

INFORMAL MEETING OF EU SPORT MINISTERS **Rome, 20-21 October 2014**

Presidency discussion paper

Using sport to make our societies more inclusive

Introduction

The problem of social exclusion has increased over recent years. Among the key risk factors, are poverty, being from an ethnic minority, living in a deprived urban neighbourhood, health problems and disability. To give an indication of just one of these factors, in 2012 those at risk of poverty and social exclusion accounted for more than 123 million people, nearly 25% of the overall European population. This is an increase of 3.7 million¹ compared to 2007.

The Council of the European Union first sought to address this issue at its meeting of 18 November 2010, when it adopted a text of conclusions on the role of sport as a source of and a driver for active social inclusion². At the same Council, Ministers held a policy debate³ to exchange experiences and best practices on social inclusion in and through sport. All Ministers, who intervened, underlined that sport is an activity that can bring people together and be a powerful tool to strengthen cohesion in European societies, with professional athletes being role models for society. They mentioned that relevant activities in their countries were targeted at youth, disabled sportsmen, the elderly and those from disadvantaged and migrant communities⁴.

Who are those at most risk of exclusion?

Migrants, the disabled and those living in deprived urban areas still remain the major three areas in which sport can play a major role in fostering social inclusion.

In 2011, approximately 33.3 million foreign citizens lived in the 27 EU Member States, which is 6.6% of overall population⁵.

¹ Eurostat (2013), European social statistics. 2013 Edition.

² OJ C 326, 3.12.2010, p.5

³ 15227/10

⁴ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/educ/117839.pdf

⁵ Eurostat (2011), Migrants in Europe. A statistical portrait of the first and second generation. 2011 Edition

The level of integration is different in every Member State, but generally problems related to poverty and integration among immigrants have increased in the last few years. Official statistics indicate that migrants show lower income levels and are at a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion compared to the average of the overall population.

The removal of all barriers in the lives of the disabled in order to help them to participate fully in society and in the economy is another priority action area for the EU. This is a widely shared objective and a strategic aim of social inclusion.

About 80 million people in the EU, or one citizen out of six⁶, are affected by mild or serious disabilities. In the vast majority of cases, being disabled brings a higher risk of social exclusion. EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU SILC) demonstrate that the poverty rate for the disabled is 70% higher than the average and this is also due to difficulties in accessing the labour market. Furthermore, the current long-lasting economic and social crisis is likely to exacerbate this already desperate situation, thus worsening further the living conditions of the weakest parts of the population.

Deprived urban areas are a third priority action area. It is not easy to give a simple and unequivocal definition of deprived urban area, due to the differences in urban planning among the Member States. However, we can identify some common features.

Generally, there is a higher concentration of families living in a state of poverty in such areas than in the rest of the city. Moreover, the urban decay, crime and abandoned public spaces – that are a typical feature of these areas – increase the feeling of insecurity. Such contexts risk to widen the gap that citizens perceive between them and the public institutions.

This feeling is usually more accentuated among young people; if they are not effectively involved in the social, economic and cultural life of the community, they are more likely to be exposed to various forms of social deviance or exclusion.

The role of sport

Sport is uniquely placed - for a number of reasons - to make a major contribution to addressing this problem. Why is this the case?

First, sport has tremendous outreach. It attracts people because it is first and foremost about fun. All people, whatever their level, can derive pleasure and benefits from sport. Even those that cannot participate as players, still feel a connection in roles as organisers or even supporters.

Second, sport by its very nature connects people. Sports is social - there are very few sports that you can play alone - and thus brings people together in teams, or as groups of individuals training together. Sport is universal in its appeal, without boundaries linked to class, ethnicity, nationality, and the connections made through sport therefore transcend such divisions.

⁶ European Commission (2010). European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe. COM(2010) 636 final

Third, sport teaches basic values of tolerance and mutual respect. Because whilst sport is based on play and fun, it also has rules, ethics, and codes of behaviour.

Fourthly, it can provide structure, aims and objectives, and even meaning to the lives of people who are struggling in other areas of life.

Intention of the Italian Presidency

Given the worsening situation with regard to social exclusion, the Italian Presidency considers it opportune to exchange views on the role that sport can play to combat this phenomenon, particular with regard to migrants, to the disabled, and to those (especially young) people from deprived urban areas.

With this in mind, the Presidency invites Delegations to address the following questions:

- 1. What is it about sport that makes it such a powerful means of bringing people together ?**
 - 2. Can you highlight a particular project from your Country which demonstrates the difference that sport can make to socially excluded groups ? What lessons can be learned from this success story?**
 - 3. How, at EU level, can we best share experience to maximise the effectiveness of sport as an agent of social inclusion ?**
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