

CLEAR Football

Ian Cook

An intercultural football team made up of Asylum seekers from different nations formed after coming together at CLEAR an NGO working in Southampton UK. The football team gives asylum seekers the possibility to take part in an enjoyable social activity, a chance to improve their English and creates a gel between people of different ethnicities.

Abstract italiano

A partire dall'iniziativa di CLEAR, una ONG di Southampton (Regno Unito), è stata creata una squadra di calcio internazionale, formata da richiedenti asilo di diverse nazioni. Ques'iniziativa dà ai richiedenti asilo la possibilità di prendere parte a un'attività sociale divertente e di migliorare il proprio inglese, e crea coesione tra persone di etnie differenti.

Area	Sports
Kind-category of project	<i>football team</i>
Kind-category of actor	<i>NGO</i>
Country	UK
Year	2004 - ongoing
5 key-words	football, multi-national, asylum, interaction, sport

1.1 Description of the project

Project Initiators

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The objectives of the project were in part initially to satisfy the requests of those asylum seekers who were utilising the CLEAR project, who asked about the possibility of playing football. John Linford, the refugee integration worker at the project, explains “We started the football in summer 2004 to create a social activity for asylum seekers as often they miss out on these sorts of activities”

CLEAR organised a regular refugee 5-a-side league. The players are made up of people from many different countries all living in Southampton. As many of the asylum seekers live in the inner city the team, according to manager Denzil Emerson, by bringing together many different nationalities “really helps the social cohesion of the city”. Last year they sent a team to the 'Kick It Out' Unity Cup in Leeds, and

entered Southampton Community Cohesion Cup, as well as running their own winter league and Refugee Week tournament.

1.2 When and how long: structure and steps of the project

A local church in Southampton (City Life Church) began in 2001 to discuss to the problems facing asylum seekers who were being dispersed to the city and what they could do to address their needs. Utilising a grant from a bank to research the needs of asylum seekers they decided to set up CLEAR which began to provide English lessons and one-to-one advice.

CLEAR has grown since then and now provides different services and initiates varied projects. One such project is the **multi-national asylum football team** which began in July 2004 after requests from some of its members. John Linford explains that “We initially began very informally, just with jumpers for goal posts in the local park. However we soon had 30 or 40 people turning up so we thought we should get a bit more organized and so bought some bibs and cones and so on.”

They now have around 50 people turning up regularly to training sessions. There are plans to eventually field a full 11-a-side team to compete in a local league.

1.3 Place and context

Southampton has been a designated Asylum dispersal town since the late 1990's and consequently it has a high number of asylum seekers and refugees in the city. The dispersal policy was developed in response to a high number of asylum seekers choosing London or the surrounded area as their destination. As asylum was seen as a national responsibility the government decided to spread out the 'burden' of supporting asylum seekers whilst their claims were being processed across the country. This has meant high numbers of asylum seekers in particular towns and cities across the UK where before there were none or relatively few people seeking asylum. Often there is not the social support and infrastructure in the places to support the large influx of new people (often who have little English language skills).

It was in this context that the City Life Church set up CLEAR after researching the needs of asylum seekers in the city. The football project addresses the specific problem of lack of social activity. Often when people arrive in a new town where they don't speak the language and have no friends or family it can be very hard to become socially involved in the life of the city, which is very important in regards to integration and exclusion.

1.4 Methodology

The project had developed and changed with the needs of the participants. As it is a social activity it is important that the activity is fun and inclusive. Social activity was seen as an important facet missing from many asylum seekers and refugees lives. The importance of social activity is easy to over look when faced with the immediate

language or economic problems but recognised by CLEAR as important in the integration and well being of asylum seekers and refugees. This, needless to say, impacts upon the entire city.

The 'squad' is made up of over 50 players, so in this sense everybody can play no matter what their skill level, which is important for inclusiveness. However at the same time there is a 'best-11' for playing in competitive matches which is equally important because, at the end of the day, football is a competitive sport. For the better players to get something out of the game they must play at a higher level where the competition is real. Also people do not like to be seen as a joke or novelty team but one which can seriously play. For example I was told by a member of 'Village United' a gay football team that they feel the need to be especially 'hard' in the way they play so people do not see them as a soft option because of their sexuality.

1.5 Authors, funding, and networks

CLEAR is funded by the following grant giving bodies as well as through individual donations:

- Allen Lane Foundation www.allenlane.org.uk
- Big Lottery Fund www.biglotteryfund.org
- City Life Church www.citylife.org.uk
- Community Legal Service www.legalservices.gov.uk
- Commission for Racial Equality www.cre.gov.uk
- Connexions www.connexions-southcentral.org
- The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk
- Paul Lunn-Rockliffe Charitable Trust
- Southampton City Council www.southampton.gov.uk
- St Faith's Mission Room Charity
- Southampton Voluntary Services www.southamptonvs.org.uk
- Tearfund www.tearfund.org
- The Tudor Trust www.tudortrust.org.uk
- TimeBank www.timebank.org.uk

Originally as the games took place in the local park and no additional funding was needed, other than that already received by CLEAR as detailed above. Funding received from "Kick It Out", the UK-wide campaign to kick racism out of football, allowed the hire of a sports hall during the winter months so the games could continue.

"Kick it out" was established in 1993 and has led a high profile campaign for over ten years. On their website they state that they, "work throughout the football, educational and community sectors to challenge racism and work for positive change. The campaign is supported and funded by the game's governing bodies, including founding body the Professional Footballers Association (PFA), the FA Premier League, the Football Foundation and The Football Association."

However further funding is proving to be a problem, as John explains, "The main barrier has been funding. We want to play in the local 11-a-side league but it's really

hard to get into them. It costs a fair amount and the players themselves can't afford it. Some of our players have been refused asylum so they get no support from the government. We can't ask people to pay subs." 'Subs' are what players of a football team would pay to cover the cost of refereeing, kit etc.

There might be new possibilities for funding however, "The Football Foundation is somewhere that we will be looking for grants into the future. They have just appointed a diversity officer so there might be a possibility there."

2.1. Strengths

It is a truly intercultural project in the sense that the team is made up from people of many different nationalities. The current 5-a-side team is made up of people from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa. This can help to calm any inter-ethnic tensions that might exist in cities like Southampton, where many different groups are put together under the Home Office dispersal scheme.

Furthermore apart from bringing together the different nationalities it also helps asylum seekers to have contact with native inhabitants from Southampton on an informal level. Contact before, during and after the football games is an especially important way for residents of Southampton to interact in a way which they might not normally be able to. As asylum seekers are not allowed to work there is often little opportunity for 'natives' to meet and become friends with them. Football is often touted as the truly 'international' sport as it is played almost everywhere in the world and requires very little apparatus to play (only a ball). For this reason people know the rules across the globe and so it is relatively easy to start a game amongst people of different nationalities even if they cannot speak the same language.

It has had a real positive impact on the improving of language skills, as John points out, "The team is made up of Kurds, Afghans, Congolese, Kosovan and Syrians... I think that's it... it's really help to improve everybody's English because they have to communicate with each other." It is not a dry or boring way to learn the language but lively and, in the middle of an important game, vital that players need to communicate. With this sort of impetus it is far more likely that people will learn the language.

2.2. Critical points

It might be argued that having a team made up of only asylum seekers and refugees further isolates them from society. However it could equally be argued that the project is more of a stepping stone into mainstream society and without it then the asylum seekers involved in the project might be involved in no social activity.

2.3. Conclusion: what is "exportable" in the project

Universal themes, such as music or sport can bring people together from many different cultures. The enjoyment of a certain sport is only to a small extent related to culture, as those who play sport enjoy the competition, tactics and physical release no

matter what different variations they play. When trying to bring together people from different cultures there are certain themes which though in existence all over the globe and so can unite people also have interesting cultural variation.

A labour migrant to Britain from Eastern Europe, now returned, described his favourite moment as “this time when me and my friend were kicking a ball around in the park and there were a group of Albanian asylum seekers. They didn’t really speak English but we started having a game with them. Then a group of Pakistan guys walked past so we invited them in. Some English guys soon joined in and suddenly there were loads of us playing on a full sized pitch, everyone speaking different languages but we all understood each other. Being England it started to rain but nobody minded and we played for ages. It makes you realize how universal football is.”

Football can really bring people together. When playing in a team, similar to working in a team in a job, there develops a natural ‘gel’ between people as they begin to look after and defend one another from the opposing team. It is also a way for men, especially as lots of young men come to Britain as asylum seekers and refugees, to work off all of the excess energy which they build up. Especially in cases where they are not allowed to work it is important that the energy is put to a productive rather than a negative use.

3. OTHER COMMENTS

Audio interviews with the organisers and participants at a training session (taken from the BBC)

http://www.bbc.co.uk/hampshire/content/articles/2006/04/13/clear_feature.shtml

4. LINKS

Kick It Out: the football anti-racism campaign

www.kickitout.org

The CLEAR webpage:

www.clearproject.org.uk

A report on the project from the local news:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/hampshire/content/articles/2006/04/13/clear_feature.shtml