Global IRTS Scientific report

Co-funded by the European Union

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1. Executive summary

The inclusion of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons through sport (Integration of Refugees Through Sport - IRTS) has emerged as an important area of research and practice over the past decade. This report provides a comprehensive review of the evidence base for IRTS, combining academic literature with insights from practitioners.

Key findings include:

- There has been a significant increase in IRTS research output since 2015, reflecting broader socio-political changes and growing recognition of the complex experiences of forcibly displaced persons.
- Research has evolved from viewing sport primarily as a tool for assimilation to understanding its role in fostering health, inclusion, and learning.
- Sport programs can provide significant mental health and wellbeing benefits for refugees, reducing stress and anxiety and improving overall wellbeing.
- Participation in sport can foster social inclusion by providing opportunities for social connection, cultural understanding, and a sense of belonging.
- Learning through play and sport-based activities can promote imagination, cooperation, confidence, and inclusivity, especially for refugee youth.
- Key factors for successful IRTS programs include: accessible and safe spaces, empathetic coaches/leaders, culturally sensitive program design, and sustained participant engagement.
- Challenges remain around funding models, the use of "refugee" as a policy category, and gaps in serving certain populations (e.g. women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities).
- More research is needed, especially using participatory methods, to understand the long-term impacts and to ensure programs meet the diverse needs of refugee populations.

The report synthesizes this evidence to provide practical recommendations for future IRTS program design and implementation.

Overall, sport shows significant potential as a tool for refugee inclusion, but careful consideration must be given to program approaches to maximize positive impacts.

2. Introduction

The inclusion of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons through sport (henceforth IRTS) has evolved significantly over the past decade, reflecting broader global trends in forced displacement and a growing recognition of sport's potential as a tool for development. For the purposes of this report, we define IRTS as the use of sport and physical activity programs to facilitate inclusion, health, and learning for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. The academic literature on IRTS has grown dramatically in the past decade. At the same time, an increasing number of organizations all over the world have engaged with the field in a variety of ways. The purpose of this report is to review and bring together both the academic literature and experiences from practice of key stakeholders to help build the evidence base for the inclusion of forcibly displaced persons through sport.

The report is structured in four parts. The first two review the academic literature on IRTS. An initial literature search found a significant number of literature reviews on the topic already. These we used in the first section to identify key contributions from the wider literature, including general trends and developments and gaps in the research.

In the second section, we conducted a systematic literature review focusing on academic literature that dealt with specific interventions in the IRTS space. This allowed us to zoom in on how the literature had dealt with more grounded activities and engagements with IRTS, establishing key insights on participants, organisations, and infrastructure.

The third part reports on the 15 stakeholder interviews, which we conducted, drawing on the findings from the literature review. This provides a diversity of practitioner perspectives on the IRTS space as well as contextualizing and expanding on the literature reviews.

The fourth part involves a summary of key texts from the grey literature that have been suggested by Global IRTS project partners. Taken together these four parts provide a strong evidence base for the IRTS, combining a range of sources and generating key findings to take forward.

We acknowledge certain limitations in our approach. The diversity of contexts, program types, and refugee experiences makes it challenging to draw universally applicable conclusions. Additionally, the field of IRTS is rapidly evolving, and new insights and practices are continually emerging. Nevertheless, by bringing together a wide range of perspectives and evidence from around the world, we believe this report offers a valuable resource for stakeholders across the IRTS sector.

Through this comprehensive approach, we seek to address several key questions:

- What are the demonstrated benefits of IRTS programs for refugee participants and host communities across different global contexts?
- What factors contribute to the success of IRTS initiatives in diverse cultural and socio-economic settings?
- What challenges and barriers exist in implementing effective IRTS programs, and how do these vary across regions?
- How can IRTS programme be designed to meet the diverse needs of refugee populations worldwide?
- What gaps remain in our understanding of IRTS, and what areas require further research to enhance global practices?

Terminology

While the title of the project (Integration of Refugees through Sport) includes both the terms "integration" and "refugees", our review of the literature and interviews with stakeholders revealed a preference for more open-ended terminology. In this report, we therefore use the term "inclusion" rather than "integration". This reflects developments in the academic literature, which has problematized the term "integration" as being a state policy term that frames the process of arrival and inclusion in very particular ways (e.g. Rytter 2019, Schinkel 2017). But it also reflects developments in practice, as our project partners preferred the more inclusive terms that better captured the wider work they engaged in. While the term "refugee" has a clear legal definition, and much of the literature and work included in this report relates to refugees, our project partners also worked with people who were not included in that definition. Following UNHCR terminology, which uses forced displacement as an "open-ended term referring to the involuntary movement of people within or out of their country" that includes but is not limited to refugees (UNHCR 2018: 102), we therefore use the term "forcibly displaced persons" to capture the full range of people IRTS programming serves.

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3. Key contributions from the literature

Increased public, political and policy concerns about forced displacement have been paralleled by a rise in research and scholarly publications focused on sport as a context and means for refugee wellbeing, settlement, and inclusion (Spaaij et al. 2019). The increase in scholarly attention has included a number of literature reviews related to forced displacement and sport/physical activity. The following section will delve into these existing syntheses of knowledge by outlining general trends and developments, as well as where research is needed, providing both an overview of the field and a basis to contextualise the findings from the grounded review in Section 3.

3.1. Review characteristics

The reviews included in this overview were sourced from a literature search conducted by the Centre for Advanced Migration Studies, University of Copenhagen, in January 2024. In total, twelve reviews were identified, and an additional review was sourced through cross-referencing (see Table 1 for review characteristics). The reviews span from 2014 to 2023 and include a range of review types that prioritise different aims. For instance, scoping reviews identify the scope of research by mapping existing literature on a topic; critical reviews critically evaluate the quality and validity of existing research; and systematic reviews use a standardised methodology to comprehensively collect and critically analyse multiple research studies.

The reviews all explore the relationship between forced displacement and sport/physical activity, although their specific focuses vary. Generally, the reviews are orientated towards health (e.g. Fernandes et al. 2023; Masri et al. 2022; O'Driscoll et al. 2014; Wang et al. 2023) and integration (e.g. Charles-Rodriguez et al. 2023; Digennaro and Falese 2023; Middleton et al. 2020), although the topics range from nature and wellbeing among migrant populations (Charles-Rodriguez et al. 2023), to the development of games for refugees (Fernandes et al. 2023).

While a portion of the (Australian-based) reviews explore research with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) migrant populations (Masri et al. 2022; O'Driscoll et al. 2014; Wang et al. 2023), the majority of reviews focus on research with forcibly displaced persons (Fernandes et al. 2023; Michelini 2020; Middleton et al. 2020; Spaaij et al. 2019), with some specifying further by focusing on youth with a forced displacement background (Heyeres et al. 2021; Hudson et al. 2023).

As well as defining a migrant population, researchers used other criteria to determine which articles to include in their review. All but three reviews (Charles-Rodriguez et al. 2023; Digennaro and Falese 2023; Spaaij et al. 2019) exclusively drew upon literature written in English. Three reviews (McSweeney and Nakamura 2020; Middleton et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2023) restricted their search to qualitative studies; the remaining reviews included a combination of qualitative and quantitative study designs (none included only quantitative studies). While some reviews chose to include book chapters and dissertations (Spaaij et al. 2019), the majority of reviews are composed of peer-reviewed journal articles.

Table 1: Review characteristics (ordered by publication year)

Author	Year	Review type	Topic	Number of included articles
Christopher Hudson, Carla Luguetti, & Ramon Spaaij	2023	Narrative	Pedagogies implemented with young people with refugee backgrounds in physical education and sport	30
Qiwei Wang et al.	2023	Scoping	Physical activity amongst culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Australia	17
Carla Sílvia Fernandes et al.	2023	Scoping	The potential of games for vulnerable groups like refugees	8
Ulises Charles-Rodriguez et al.	2023	Scoping	The Relationship Between Nature and Immigrants' Integration, Wellbeing and Physical Activity	81
Aymen El Masri, Gregory S. Kolt & Emma S. George	2022	Systematic	Physical activity interventions among culturally and linguistically diverse populations	19
Marion Heyeres et al.	2021	Systematic	Interventions Targeting the Wellbeing of Migrant Youths	28
Thierry R. F. Middleton et al.	2020	Meta-synthesis	Community sport and physical activity programs as sites of integration for forced migrants	23
Enrico Michelini	2020	Systematic	Refugees, Physical Activity and Sport	26
Mitchell McSweeney & Yuka Nakamura	2020	Systematic	The "diaspora" diaspora in sport?	26
Ramon Spaaij et al.	2019	Scoping	Sport, Refugees, and Forced Migration	83
Robyn Smith, Ramon Spaaij, & Brent McDonald	2018	Systematic	Migrant Integration and Cultural Capital in the Context of Sport and Physical Activity	45
Téa O'Driscoll et al.	2014	Systematic	Sport and Physical Activity Participation in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Migrant Populations	72

3.2. General trends and developments

Although integrating refugees through sports (IRTS) literature has typically constituted a small research field, there has been a sharp increase in publications since 2015, though notably by a relatively small pool of authors (Agergaard et al. 2023; Spaaij et al. 2019). As the volume of publications has increased, research priorities have also evolved to reflect broader socio-political changes and increasing awareness of the complexities of migration experiences.

Initially, research focused on the general participation of migrants and refugees in sport and physical activity programs, without much emphasis on the nuances of such engagements. While early studies emphasised sport as a tool to assimilate migrants into their new communities, as research progressed there was a shift towards more holistic understandings of "integration". Research evolved to explore how sport participation can provide opportunities for social interaction, community building, and the development of a sense of belonging (Fernandes et al. 2023; Smith et al. 2019). In recent years, research has increasingly focused on cultural dimensions of migration, such as the expression and preservation of cultural identity (Smith et al. 2019). There has been growing recognition of the diversity within migrant communities, leading to more targeted and nuanced research. Studies have begun to differentiate between various groups of migrants based on factors such as ethnicity, age, gender, legal status, and migration trajectory. Acknowledging that these (and many other) factors can significantly influence experiences in sport related activities has led to the development of sport programs and interventions that are sensitive to the specific needs and preferences of different migrant groups (Fernandes et al. 2023; Smith et al. 2019).

Although generally moving in the same direction, these developments can vary along disciplinary lines. Health sciences, for instance, are primarily concerned with the physical, mental and social health of forcibly displaced persons, whereas social sciences take a broader explorative approach to understanding interactions of refugees in and through sport (Michelini 2020). These disciplinary divisions can lead to disagreements between scholars about the value of sport in addressing social issues (Halilovich et al. 2022). A lack of interdisciplinary communication can also mean that research findings do not always build upon one another (Charles-Rodriguez et al. 2023; Spaaij et al. 2019). However, in general, these reviews reflect the development of a more nuanced approach to addressing the challenges and opportunities that sport programs and physical activity present, highlighting the importance of considering the diverse and dynamic nature of refugee and migrant experiences in designing programs that effectively support inclusion and well-being.

3.3. Where research is needed

Despite developments in emerging literature on sports and refugees and migration, the reviews highlighted some notable research gaps. In the following section, we highlight these gaps in five thematic areas: theory, methodology, geography, demography, and definitions of sport and physical activity.

Theory: Is there a theoretical framework?

A prominent issue in research and interventions with forcibly displaced persons is a lack of theory-based practice. Theory contributes to ensuring that research and interventions with refugees are well-informed, effective, and sustainable. A lack of theoretical grounding can significantly constrain understandings of the nexus between sport and forced displacement, limiting the depth and scope of discussions both at a theoretical and a practical level (O'Driscoll et al. 2014). A prominent issue spanning the reviews was a lack of engagement with theory (Agergaard et al. 2023; Fader et al. 2020; O'Driscoll et al. 2014; Spaaij et al. 2019). In O'Driscoll et al.'s (2014) review, for example, nearly three-quarters of the included studies were a-theoretical in nature. Most reviewers suggested postcolonial theory and intersectionality as essential theoretical frameworks, due to their capacity to address multiple dimensions of differentiation and underlying structures influencing sports and migration issues (Agergaard et al. 2023). According to Smith et al. (2019), it is essential to revise concepts and theories to progress beyond rigid understandings, specifically concerning individual habitus and diverse social spheres. This involves adopting theories that deconstruct colonial ideologies, question Western-centric viewpoints, and analyse how different social identities intersect and interact (O'Driscoll et al. 2014).

Methodology: What kind of methods are being used?

Attention to methodology can enable sensitivity, accuracy, and transparency in research, leading to the development of better practices. For example, innovative methods can improve data collection and intervention strategies, ensuring that research findings are relevant and beneficial to forcibly displaced populations. In IRTS research and interventions there is a need for more diverse methodological approaches, including longitudinal designs, larger sample sizes, as well as participatory and transdisciplinary approaches (Agergaard et al. 2023; Charles-Rodriguez et al. 2023; Heyeres et al. 2021; Hudson et al. 2023; Michelini 2020).

Longitudinal research can capture valuable insights into changes and developments over time, including sports engagement prior to being forced to flee, which allows researchers to identify patterns and long-term effects that cannot be observed in cross-sectional studies (Agergaard et al. 2023). Research at different phases of the displacement calls for international and multi-sited fieldwork, which limits the possibility of funnelling research in the field to particular geographical focuses, avoids the tendency to equate society with a nation-state (Agergaard et al. 2023: Spaaij et al. 2019), and brings into view the diverse itineraries and patterns of movement among migrant populations (McSweeney and Nakamura 2020). Digital methods, i.e. using social media, is one proposed solution to cope with the challenges of multi-sited research (McSweeney and Nakamura 2020).

Participatory research designs, which involve collaboration through methods of co-design and participation, can increase engagement among participants (Agergaard et al. 2023; Spaaij et al. 2019). For instance, studies employing participatory methods or focus groups to culturally adapt and shape interventions, reported enhanced physical activity levels at follow-up (Masri et al. 2022). Although an evidently effective research approach, participatory frameworks remain underutilised in studies. For example, in Heyeres et al.'s (2021) systematic review, there were no reports, among the 28 included studies, of collaborative or co-designed activities.

Geography: Where are the studies based?

Research related to migration and sports is disproportionately situated in high income countries and overwhelmingly includes individuals migrating from the Global South or Eastern Europe (Charles-Rodriguez et al. 2023; Hudson et al. 2023; Spaaij et al. 2019). As nearly 90% of the world's refugees reside in developing countries – in 2020 the five principal countries for refugee asylum were Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan, Uganda, and Germany (UNHCR 2020) – the locations of most displaced people differ significantly from where the majority of research studies are conducted (Spaaij et al. 2019). For instance, Spaaij et al. (2019) found of the 83 publications included in their review, only 5 were situated in the global South, and Charles-Rodriguez et al. (2023) found that no studies examined migration between Global South countries in relation to sport/physical activity. The focus on refugee experience in the Global North can result in a skewed understanding of refugee issues, emphasising aspects that are more relevant to the Global North while neglecting critical challenges faced in the Global South, where most refugees reside.

Demographics: Who is involved and how are they referred to?

The terms used in studies to refer to research participants are applied loosely, often conflating 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers' and rendering invisible important differences in legal status (Spaaij et al. 2019). Where precise definitions are used there is often an overreliance on policy categories, running the risk of framing research around policy priorities (Bakewell 2008; Spaaij et al. 2019). The lack of scholarly attention to the diversity of experiences among different migrant populations has led to important nuances being neglected (O'Driscoll et al. 2014; Spaaij et al. 2019). As identified in one review, these nuances can be significant (O'Driscoll et al. 2014). O'Driscoll et al. (2014) found that psychosocial affects can vary greatly across migrant populations, with a result that what might act as barriers to participation for some individuals are facilitators for others.

The multidimensionality of identity, involving identifiers (such as gender, age, socio-economic position) and their intersections, deserves greater attention in research related to sports and migration (Spaaij et al. 2019). For instance, there is no explicit mention of disability or how it might affect participation in sport and physical activity in the reviews. The studies included in the reviews highlight a stark gender imbalance, as they predominantly draw their research findings from male perspectives. This in part speaks to barriers in accessing female research participants, but also to "the role that gender can play in determining access to sport and physical activity programs" (Middleton et al. 2020: 11). Researchers must acknowledge the intersections of participant identities beyond just being a refugee, which also ensures community programs are both appropriate and necessary (O'Driscoll et al. 2014; Spaaij et al. 2019). An intersectional approach, which recognises refugees and forcibly displaced persons as a heterogeneous group with distinct experiences and backgrounds, provides a lens to fully understand issues affecting refugees (Spaaij et al. 2019).

Sports and physical activity: How are sport and physical activity represented?

There is little diversity in the kinds of sport and physical activity represented in the literature, which overwhelmingly consists of football / soccer. Focusing primarily on popular sports and using limited definitions of physical activity may hinder our comprehension of engagement and participation within refugee and migrant populations. Generally, evidence suggests that refugees and migrants are often expected to fit into existing sporting structures that do not cater to their diverse needs (Smith et al. 2019). For instance, individual sports/physical activity rarely features in the IRTS literature, despite being seemingly popular among different refugee and migrant groups. O'Driscoll et al. (2014) found that walking was a preferred method of physical activity among older adults and women, and Charles-Rodriguez et al. (2023) found that "gardening was the third-ranked physical activity in older immigrants, just after walking to do errands" (p. 199).

By maintaining an openness to definitions of sport and physical activity, research might capture these missing perspectives in the literature on sport and forced displacement. Broader representation of sport and physical activity may also help to maintain cultural ties to participants' homeland and encourage higher levels of participation, as research has shown that the kind of physical activity performed in the home country of immigrants predicts their engagement with physical activity in the new country (O'Driscoll et al. 2014; Smith et al. 2019).

4. Grounded literature review

While the overview of reviews discusses key contributions from the IRTS literature – looking at trends, developments, and research gaps – this literature review provides a ground level perspective through looking at specific interventions. The aim of this literature review is to identify and synthesise what is known about the experiences of individuals with a refugee background participating in sport interventions. The review is unlikely to be exhaustive and can only draw upon the perspectives represented in the literature, but it aims to provide valuable insights in sport interventions with forcibly displaced persons. In this review we have drawn together the particularities that matter the most according to the literature into three themes – participants, organisation, and infrastructure – which we discuss following a description of the methods used.

4.1. Methods

In research on sport and migration, there are generally two 'camps':

- studies of sport *as* migration, concerning "domestic (intra-national) and transnational movements of athletes, coaches and other ancilliary workers in the global sports system",
- studies of sport *in* migration, where "the role that sports play in the everyday lives of various types of migrants, including refugees, who migrate for non-sport reasons as well as those who belong to diasporic groups" is considered (Agergaard et al. 2023: 613).

This literature review is concerned with the latter, aiming to provide an in-depth and critical reading of the scholarly literature on the experiences of people with a forced displacement background in sport/physical activity interventions. We took a systematic approach to the review, as it is well suited to in-depth analysis of qualitative data, complimenting the overview of reviews, which provides a broader scope. To save space, the authors have referenced a few examples for each point, rather than providing all relevant references.

4.2. Identifying relevant articles

The search strategy was aided by several experienced librarians and initially involved identifying relevant search terms and databases. The authors focused on 'refugee' and 'sport' rather than integration descriptors to avoid limiting the search**.** Initially, the authors tested descriptors of 'sport' and 'refugee' to gage the numbers that each search term produced as well as their relevance. The authors searched individual sports as well as overarching terms such as 'physical activity' to get the best results. The authors identified databases through a similar process: by searching the terms refugee* AND sport* in a university library search engine. From the most popular listed databases, six subject specific databases (Anthropology Plus; APA PsycArticles; APA PsycInfo; ERIC; Sociological Abstracts; SPORTdiscus), and two broad databases (Scopus; Web of Science), were chosen to use. The authors searched these databases on January 22, 2024, using two 'search strings' to combine the refugee and sport descriptors (see Table 2 for descriptors). These used Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT), proximity searching, phrase searching, truncations, and other 'wildcards'. Where possible, the researchers also used MeSH terms and subject headings to increase the scope of the search. The search produced 2130 results across the eight databases, which were exported to Zotero where 765 duplicates were removed.

Table 2: Descriptors (as used searching the Web of Science database)

Sports descriptors	Refugee descriptors
"bicyc*"	asylum NEAR/2 seek*
bike*	displaced NEAR/3 (person$ OR people OR migra* OR immigr*)
"cricket"	"forced migra*" OR "forced immigr*"
"cycling"	refugee*
danc* AND integrat*	undocumented NEAR/3 (migra* OR immigra*)
football*	
"martial art*"	
"physical activit*"	
skat*	
sport*	
soccer	

References were exported to Covidence and screened using the inclusion criteria:

(a) publications are peer-reviewed

(b) the full text is written in English

(c) the studies are empirical and based on original data

(d) materials are published between 2015 (inclusive) and 2024 (inclusive)

(e) the majority of data is with refugee and/or asylum-seeking individuals

(f) there is a focus on sport/physical activity and social inclusion/integration/belonging/sense of community

(g) the sport/physical activity involves an intervention.

Using these criteria, the authors screened the 1342 articles progressively by Title, Abstract and then a Full-text review. Articles not meeting the inclusion criteria were excluded at various stages of screening. For example, articles that did not refer to a specific intervention or sport club, or articles that did not delineate between forcibly displaced persons and immigrants, were removed. As a number of existing reviews examine early IRTS literature (see Section 2 for an overview of existing literature), the authors chose to include articles from the year 2015 due to the significant spike in publications (Spaaij et al. 2019).

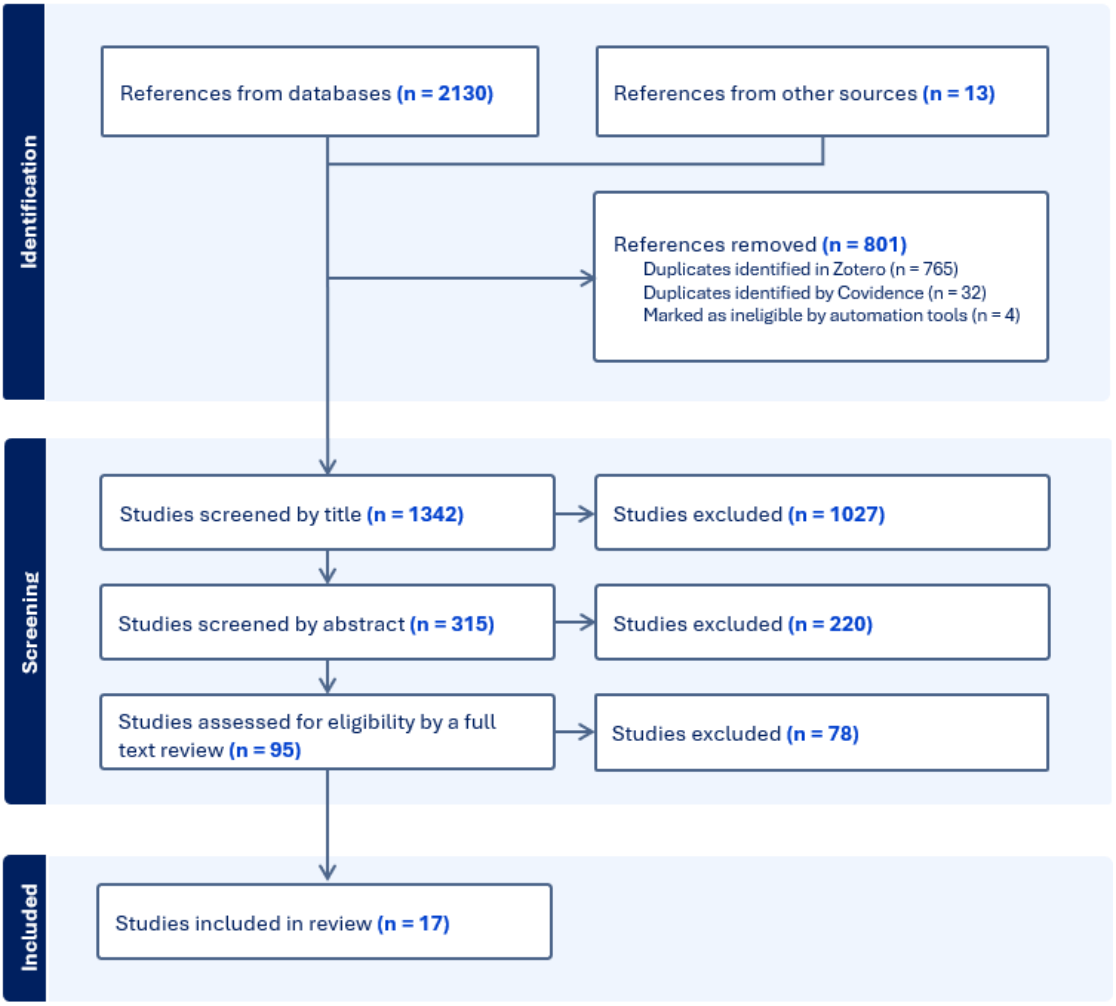

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram

The screening process resulted in 17 included articles (see Figure 1 for an overview of the search process). Table 3 presents characteristics of these articles. There were cases where authors published multiple articles drawn from the same dataset. In these instances, the articles were grouped together and the most relevant included, however, there were exceptions where both articles were included (e.g. Fader et al. 2019; and Fader et al. 2020).

Using Covidence the researchers extracted basic data, which was then downloaded into Microsoft Excel. The qualitative approach to studies limited the possibilities of quantifying information, such as the number of participants in each study, because many studies used ethnographic methods such as observation. However, the authors noted information such as the methods of data collection (Figure 2), the type of sport used in interventions (Figure 3), and the country in which the study was conducted (Figure 4). For the analysis, the researchers used NVivo software to code content from the 17 articles into different themes. The review software Elicit was then used to verify these themes.

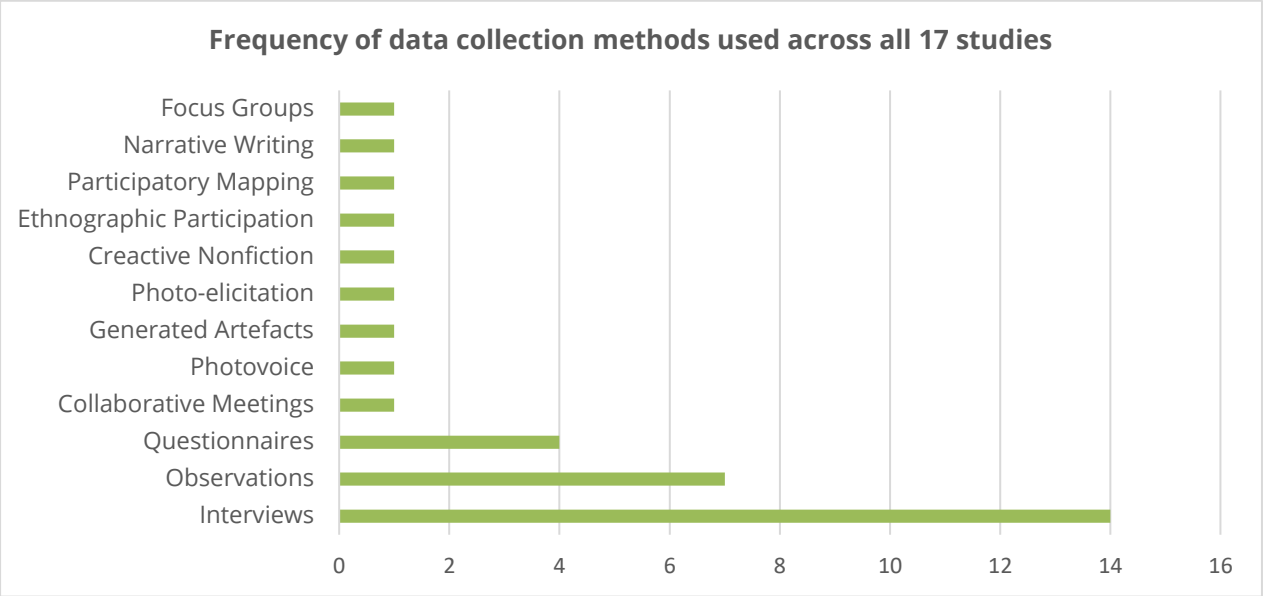

Figure 2

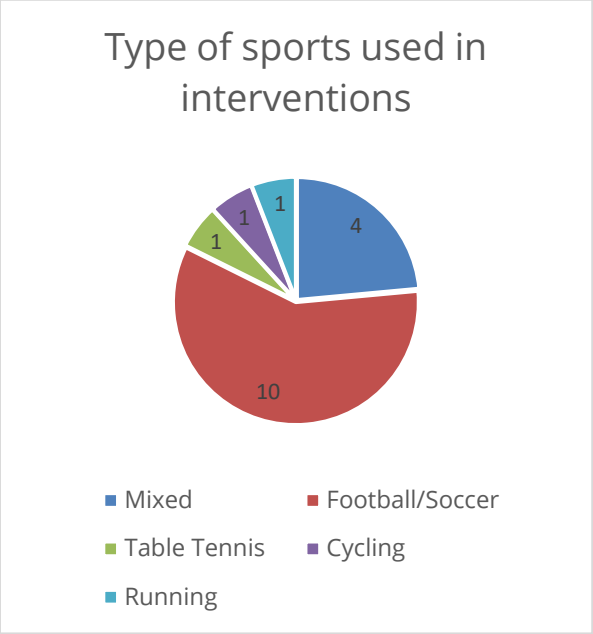

Figure 3

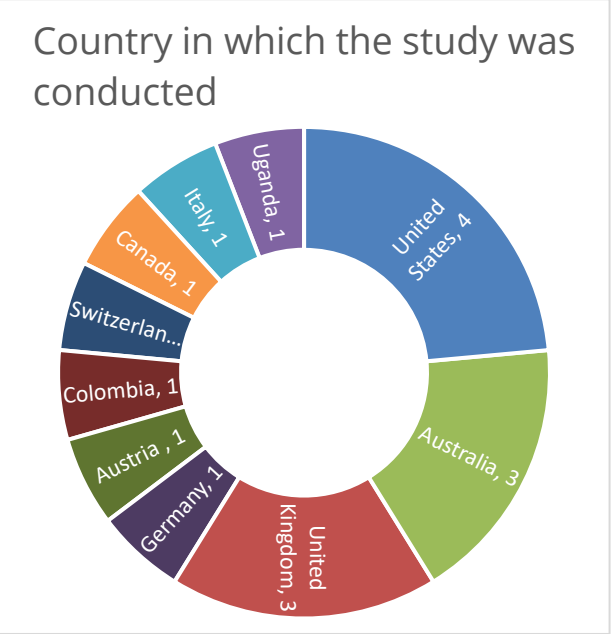

Figure 4

Table 3: Research aims and intervention descriptions (ordered alphabetically by author)

Author	Research aims	Sport intervention
Berber Koopmans & Mark Doidge (2022)	To critique the role of Sport for Development and Peace projects that invariably use sport as a hook to engage participants.	A sport project in Rwamwanja refugee camp, Uganda, run by World at Play, a charity based in Wales that organises sport and play projects for marginalised people with the aim to create joy in their lives.
Brent McDonald et al. (2019)	To consider how football facilitates forms of social inclusion for team members, both in relation to the action of the sport and the political and social context of Australian society more broadly.	The Seekers football team was established as part of an initiative by the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, an independent, non-for-profit human rights organisation.
Carla Luguetti et al. (2022)	To explore the process of co-creating a sport program with refugee-background young women and what they, and the researcher, learned throughout this process.	Football Empowerment is an African Australian football program, established in 2016 by a group of refugee-background young men from Melbourne with the aim to improve the health and wellbeing of young people, as well as to develop youth leaders who can contribute to the social inclusion of their ethno-cultural community.
Chris Stone (2018)	To examine the concept of belonging and provide evidence for the role of community-based sport in social development.	The 'Belonging Group' is a regular feature of Shefield-based community engagement work and involves weekly recreational football session targeted at asylum seekers of all abilities.
Clemens Ley et al. (2021)	To progress conceptual and practical understandings of how asylum seekers, past and present experiences shape their sport participation and relate to various domains of the integration framework, particularly health, social connection, facilitators, and rights.	The Movi Kune (moving together) programme is co-delivered by the University of Vienna and the care centre for torture and war survivors, and uses sport and exercise as tools for psychosocial support.
Federico Genovesi (2024)	To analyse the processes through which people seeking asylum develop senses of belonging through involvement in solidarity grassroots football.	ASD Quadrato Meticcio (QM, Padova) and Africa Academy Calcio (AAC, Livorno) are two solidarity grassroots football projects in Italy. ASD Quadrato Meticcio was constituted by both people seeking asylum and local Italian people, while Africa Academy Calcio was constituted entirely by people seeking asylum from Africa, apart from the three organisers and coaches, who are local Italian people.
Lenka Sobotová et al. (2016)	To uncover the role of sport in the process of social inclusion and peacebuilding in the post-conflict context of Colombia.	Tiempo de Juego is a sport for development organisation which operates in the Soacha municipality, Colombia, and works to support the community and contribute to social changes through developing sport and art programs.
Marianna Pavan (2021)	To critically assess the potential of football as a communication tool and a platform for the creation of friendly relationships.	A Glasgow-based recreational football team run by Street Soccer Scotland, a social enterprise that uses football to achieve positive change in the lives of socially disadvantaged people living in Scotland.
Mark Doidge et al. (2020)	To argue that the active approach of coaches, volunteers and managers to consciously manage inclusive sport activities is central for the successful integration of refugees.	Brighton Table Tennis Club has the mission to use table tennis as a vehicle for community inclusion and wellbeing. It originally focussed on working with marginalised young people from the local community, however, it has grown to work with a variety of demographic groups, including refugees.

Author	Research aims	Sport intervention
Matthew A. Pink et al. (2020)	To explore positive youth development and the potential utility of the Personal Youth Development model through sport.	Kicking Goals Together uses sport as a vehicle for connecting youth with the broader community, and assisting their development of personal and employment related skills.
Meredith A. Whitley (2022)	To discuss the role sport for development interventions can play in the lives of refugees, exploring both their possibilities and their limitations through the narrative of a young refugee woman.	Street Soccer USA offers year-round services for their players and aims to promote growth and through the cultivation of safe spaces, caring and trained coaches and support staff, and an evidence-based, trauma-informed curriculum. The Homeless World Cup is an annual global tournament where Street Soccer players from partnering programs gather to play soccer and engage in event-related programming.
Meredith A. Whitley et al. (2016)	Exploratory evaluation of a sport-based youth development program for refugees.	A sport-based youth development program grounded in the structure, values, and themes of the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility Model.
Mridul Kataria & Nicola De Martini Ugolotti (2022)	To contribute to critical interdisciplinary analyses of the meanings, uses and implications of sport-for-integration initiatives in relation to the contemporary politics of asylum in the Global North.	A sports project based in Geneva, Switzerland, founded in 2017 that employs running as an instrument of inclusion and health improvement for migrants and refugees. The association organises weekly training and running sessions with a mixed group of refugees and locals.
Nina Fader et al. (2019)	To examine the relations of sense of community to both resilience and cultural adjustment for resettled youth refugees who participate in a refugee soccer club.	A refugee youth sports club situated in a metropolitan area in the Southwest United States. The soccer club has approximately eighty members comprised almost exclusively of male refugees.
Nina Fader et al. (2020)	To explore the lived experience of youth refugees in a community sport club, with a specific attention towards the development of sense of community.	A community soccer club that participates in a local recreational level soccer league, and is supported by a local church that provides practice space, and emotional, financial, and logistical support.
Shahrzad Mohammadi (2019)	To examine the potential and limitations of a community sport initiative in fostering social inclusion of newly arrived adult female asylum seekers and refugees in Germany.	Bike Bridge is a local community sports initiative targeting (newly arrived) female asylum seekers and refugees to combat social isolation, and increase physical and social mobility through cycling.
Thierry R. F. Middleton et al. (2022)	To centre the stories of forced immigrant youth around how socially just and integrative sport contexts which sustain their engagement can be developed.	A community sport program in Sudbury, Canada facilitated by the Young Men's Christian Association. The importance of focusing on forced immigrant youth was bolstered when the YMCA settlement services office recorded a 100% increase in the number of forced immigrants they provided services to from 2018 to 2019.

4.3. Limitations

Our limited timeframe resulted in searching databases once rather than periodically, which would have increased the yield and captured the most recent publications. Some emerging literature may have also been missed, such as PhD theses, by only including journal articles. Although both reviewers participated in the screening process, there was not enough time to screen each article separately, increasing the risk of bias. In addition, inclusion criteria are by default limiting. By examining only interventions we may miss the perspectives of refugee-led informal sports (Nesse et al. 2023). Furthermore, by including articles only in English, we risk taking an Anglo-centric focus and missing useful data, as demonstrated by Spaaij *et al.* (2019), who identified relevant publications for ten of the thirteen non-English languages that their search covered. However, it is impossible to capture all experiences and a literature review necessitates some structuring criteria.

4.4. Research themes

4.4.1. Participants - The research participants and their role in interventions

The articles included in this review are primarily based on empirical data with forcibly displaced persons participating in sport interventions, which was the 'target group'. These were predominantly male participants, with the exception of three studies specifically with women (Luguetti et al. 2022; Mohammadi 2019; Whitley 2022). Participants ranged in age, though the majority of interventions were youth targeted (Fader et al. 2019; Fader et al. 2020; Koopmans and Doidge 2022; Luguetti et al. 2022; Middleton et al. 2022; Pink et al. 2020; Sobotová et al. 2016; Whitley et al. 2016; Whitley 2022). While a smaller number of the interventions were with adults (Genovesi 2024; Kataria and Ugolotti 2022; McDonald et al. 2019; Stone 2018), none were with seniors, possibly resulting from restricted definitions of sport and physical activity (Middleton et al. 2020).

Aside from intervention participants, the studies included volunteers, coaches, organisers, parents, and psychologists. These adult leaders had a substantial impact on supporting participants. In the study by Doidge et al. (2020), coaches actively managed inclusive sport activities, creating a safe, enjoyable, and welcoming environment. This approach helped to focus the activities on fun and social interaction, rather than solely on sporting skills. In the study by Luguetti (2016), researchers and organisers co-created programs with young refugee-background women, addressing their needs and aspirations. This participatory approach empowered the young women by emphasising the importance of "speaking up to those in charge", fostering a sense of agency and belonging among the participants (p. 132). In another intervention, coaches and psychologists worked with refugee youth to teach and internalise values such as respect, teamwork, and leadership using the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model (Whitley et al. 2016).

In interventions targeting youth, leadership played a particularly central role. This both came about through specific goals stated by the organisers, i.e. "to develop close, meaningful relationships with adult leaders" (Whitley et al. 2016: 187), as well as participants themselves taking a leadership position as a part of the intervention program (Whitley 2022). Across these programs, empathy and kindness were qualities that participants identified as creating successful adult leaders. Coaches with shared life experience, such as previous participants who over time changed roles to become volunteers (Mohammadi 2019) or individuals with similar experiences of social exclusion (Pavan 2021), were able to better connect with participants. Although underrepresented in the datasets, the parents of participants played a facilitative role. Parents were reported as both supportive and proud of their children's community connections and involvement in programs (Pink et al. 2020: 7-8).

4.4.2. Strength and deficit-based approaches

A strength-based approach focuses on individuals' strengths and resources rather than their deficits and problems. Although research suggests the need for strength-based approaches which recognise and strengthen enabling structures and human agency, the characterisation of forcibly displaced persons in IRTS literature tends towards a deficit perspective, focusing on their lack of abilities, or need for "integration" (Kataria and Ugolotti 2022; Ley et al. 2021). Often, refugee status was associated with depressing circumstances and the refugee experience conflated with trauma (Spaaij et al. 2019). Koopmans and Doidge (2022) discuss 'refugee' as an ascribed label and identity imposed on individuals and groups, where the "image of the traumatised refugee is amplified in order to 'sell' the story of flight and relocation", presenting a veneer of the individuals that ignores ordinary aspects of their lives (p. 539). For instance, by suggesting that "war, violence, torture, persecution, grief, loss, poverty, hunger, displacement" constitute the refugee experience, we fail to recognise the "normality" and agency of forcibly displaced persons (Whitley 2022: 551). These dehumanising affects became overtly apparent in studies where the participants are referred to solely by their legal status, essentialising their identity to the label of refugee (Pavan 2021).

A number of authors, however, avoided imposing stigmatising labels. Genovesi (2024), for example, outlines a rationale for distinguishing between asylum seeking and refugee legal status, describing participants in his study as 'people [individuals/those/men] seeking asylum'. Stone (2018) suggests that distinctions between legal categories are extremely important – particularly the political status assigned to different refugee categories and discourses surrounding such identities – but at the same time may hinder the research process if becoming the initial basis for categorising individual participants. Notably, collaborative processes allow participants to exercise agency by using research and sporting structures as a tool for self-expression and identification. For instance, co-creating programs with participants supported individuals to actively engage in activities that enhanced their personal development (Luguetti 2022; Sobotová et al. 2016). Involving community members and marginalised groups in the research process ensures that their voices and experiences are authentically represented, both by collecting and prioritising personal narratives and testimonies, and critically analysing how labels are constructed and used.

4.4.3. Organisation - Intervention aims and participant experiences

The included articles use different research frameworks. Some are descriptive, where a detailed account of intervention programs and participants are provided, others are analytical, which go beyond descriptions to explore the nuances of these characteristics, and some are evaluative, which assess the effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of specific programs, determining whether the intervention achieves its intended outcomes, how well it is implemented, and what improvements can be made.

The intervention aims vary between policy orientated aims, which relate to specific policy goals such as integration or health improvement (Kataria and Ugolotti 2022), to projects which actively reframe the focus away from specific outcomes and instead aim to promote fun through play (Koopmans and Doidge 2022), to developmental goals, which combine sport with life skills education to improve health and mental issues, socio-emotional connection, and physical development (Ley et al. 2021; Pink et al. 2020; Whitley et al. 2016).

These diverse aims mean that sport interventions with refugees rarely have a sole focus on improving sport abilities, despite this being a primary aim for some participants, who expressed a desire to professionalise their sporting skills, particularly in relation to football. Abdul, for example, was "adamant about seeing his experience as an opportunity to get trained, be seen by scouts, play at a higher level and be paid or get 'monthly tips'" (Genovesi 2024: 91). In some cases, however, interventions aimed to minimise competition and reduce equality gaps to promote inclusivity. This was done by creating new opportunities for success to be celebrated, where "points were scored when every team member had been passed to" or when there had been the "fewest number of fouls, rather than number of goals" (Koopmans and Doidge 2022: 543, 540). In some instances, new sports or games were introduced so that each participant started from the same point, and groups usually marginalised in sports had the opportunity to excel (Koopmans and Doidge 2022).

Where intervention aims and participant experiences often converged was around mental health. Forcibly displaced persons described their participation in sport as a distraction from issues experienced in their daily lives and an outlet to calm down and centre themselves (Fader et al. 2020; Pavan 2021; Whitley 2022).

Where there was a divergence from the intended plans of the organisers, the participants demonstrated agency in how they used sport not just as a recreational activity but as a strategic means to regain control over their lives and identities; for example, using sports spaces to showcase their talents, nurture a positive sense of self, and potentially advance their football career (Genovesi 2024). Generally, differing aims and experiences speak to the areas of focus possible in the contexts of interventions.

For instance, the aim of promoting fun through play was attached to a six-week intervention situated in a Ugandan refugee camp (Koopmans and Doidge 2022), whereas skill building and technique improvement through specialised coaching and team matches were a part of regular club membership and interventions situated in place (Genovesi 2024; McDonald et al. 2019). The longevity of programs is one factor that shapes attention to specific aims, others include the relevance of inclusion goals in transient spaces, the stated priorities of funding bodies, or program leaders' areas of expertise.

4.4.4. Program structures

Where sport intervention aims varied, so did their structures. Learning through play programs involved relatively informal structures, with activities like games designed to encourage imagination and teamwork (Doidge et al. 2020). Aims to empower participants through their active involvement in decision-making processes were reflected by the participants co-creating programs themselves and participating in activities such as photo voice to express their experiences and identify barriers and facilitators to participation (Luguetti 2022). Those with developmental goals generally followed 'sports plus' and 'plus sports' models, the difference being that *sports plus* represents programs where the primary focus is on playing sports and pursuing development goals is secondary, whereas *plus sports* projects focus specifically on development goals (Pavan 2021). Both models share the rationale that sport and physical activity are not intrinsically productive, and coaching sporting skills alone is therefore insufficient for fostering values, respect, and wider integration (Doidge et al. 2020).

This review found particularities within certain structures. For instance, sports plus and plus sports models were found to include participants that might have been missed if the focus of interventions was only sport (Genovesi 2024; Stone 2018). While for some participants sport is the central point of connection to a program, for others, engaging with a sport emerges through building connections via other activities (Stone 2018). It was participants in the latter category that were captured through sports plus and particularly plus sports models (Stone 2018). For instance, Genovesi (2024) found that a female participant became involved with a sports program in his study through her engagement in peripheral activities:

Sarah demonstrated strong belonging to the team, the project and, most notably, to the neighbourhood. However, football itself tended to have a more marginal relevance to her than to her male friends. Arguably, the wider activities organised by QM in the neighbourhood played a central role in her development of belonging. Football was for her a serendipitous encounter with a leisure activity through which she got involved in 'something bigger'. (Genovesi 2024: 97)

The success of spaces for involvement off the pitch – such as a bar area alongside a cinema/sports lounge for TV screenings, debates, and live music performances, as well as activities and cultural events – suggests a need for sites beyond sport (Genovesi 2024).

Another defining structural feature was the composition of the sport interventions. Some interventions were a mix of locals and newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees (Mohammadi 2019), and others were characterised as 'ethnocentric' i.e. for people with similar cultural and/or ethnic backgrounds (Genovesi 2024). Most interventions were designed for and comprised of forcibly displaced persons (McDonald et al. 2019). These distinctions do not necessarily present hard boundaries. For instance, the Brighton Table Tennis Club (BTTC) which housed the Refugee Integration Project, situated the project in spatial proximity with other local users, facilitating interaction in the social spaces dotted around the club (Doidge et al. 2020). At the same time, 'ethnocentric' interventions such as the Africa Academy Calcio in Italy, which aimed to build participants belonging to a diasporic community, experienced diversity in terms of its members, who originated from different African countries (Genovesi 2024).

Teams comprised of local residents and asylum-seeking individuals were found to provide opportunities to move beyond the labels that often characterise teams solely composed of forcibly displaced persons (Doidge et al. 2020). Players at the football club ASD Quadrato Meticcio in Italy, for instance, found that the group belonging negotiated with people from local backgrounds led to a high level of local support at team matches (Genovesi 2024). The positive reception at these matches – including encouraging the players with chants, flares and smoke bombs – produced affective and bodily experiences of belonging that extended beyond the sport, providing players with the feeling of "being part of something bigger than a football team" and a sense of "pride and unity with the teammates" (Genovesi 2024: 94).

The interventions solely composed of participants with a forced displacement background provided feelings of comfort, emotional safety, and spaces where participants did not feel like the 'other' (Fader et al. 2020; Middleton 2022). These feelings manifested from a shared history as refugees and reflected a desire to "play with the other people, like me" (Whitley et al. 2016: 186). A common migratory history among players was found to be important in the period immediately following their re-settlement, as acculturative stresses can be intensified when individuals are initially confronted by feelings of difference and discrimination (Genovesi 2024; Middleton 2022; Whitley et al. 2016).

In spaces where there was a shared experience of forced displacement among participants, practicing a new language became easier, and although players did not necessarily discuss their refugee experience, one participant suggested that "at least I know if I ever wanted to talk about it, someone I trust who understands would be there to listen" (Fader et al. 2020: 104).

These findings align with the review of Middleton et al. (2020), who suggest that teams composed of forcibly displaced persons can simplify social interaction, build connections to home culture, increase confidence and self-efficacy, and positively influence interactions in host communities. However, it is important to note that these perspectives mostly come from studies of interventions comprised of forcibly displaced persons. As the case of ASD Quadrato Meticcio in Italy highlights, in interventions aiming to widen opportunities of interaction and solidarity between locals and people seeking asylum, the presence of local participants can extend a sense of belonging beyond the sport, increasing the transformative potential of the project (Genovesi 2024).

4.4.5. Infrastructure - Access to interventions

Forcibly displaced persons tend to experience barriers to sport participation, particularly in relation to club-based sport. Barriers commonly manifest through logistical difficulties such as transportation to practices and games, as well as through a lack of resources, such as the necessary finances to meet the costs related to sports equipment and club membership (Fader et al. 2020). Sport-related costs are not always a priority for families, as Omar describes: "the cheapest shoes for soccer are probably like $70 or $80. A lot of kids have new shoes, but my dad has other bills to pay and things" (Middleton et al. 2022: 166). These issues regarding access were particularly salient in instances where participants sought to professionalise their skills (Genovesi 2024). Opportunities to improve sport skills through league games in general sports clubs were met with 'pay walls' and logistical difficulties. For example, Pink et al. (2020) found in their study that "few of the families of the participants had the financial or material resources to participate in local club competitions" (p. 7). Professional ambitions proved equally difficult to realise in sport interventions targeting forcibly displaced persons where inclusivity and minimal competition were prioritised over developing technical skills (Koopmans and Doidge 2022).

This review found that having a social history in a particular sport can facilitate connections and cultural capital in a new context, countering some of these barriers. However, the power of sport to alleviate isolation relies on participants' capacity to engage in the sport (McDonald et al. 2019). Depending on where individuals are based, there are often established popular sports that do not necessarily align with the sport habitus of the forcibly displaced individual. In Sudsbury, Canada, ice hockey is extremely popular, but many newly arrived asylum seekers have not played before (Middleton et al. 2022). In the same context, Mohammad described feeling frustrated that the other boys "don't like soccer, they like football or volleyball instead" (Middleton et al. 2022: 163).

Female participants similarly experienced a mis-match between their sport habitus and the physical culture in the receiving country (Mohammadi 2019). This manifested through feelings of "failure and frustration due to lack of previous experiences, physical skills and competencies" (Mohammadi 2019: 1091). Where there were opportunities to participate in sport programs, some women described negative interactions with male players, where they experienced aggression or the men's team took priority on pitch time (Luguetti et al. 2022). The young women participating in the study of Luguetti et al. (2022) stated the need for female coaches and referees, as "they felt that most of the male referees were condescending towards them" (Luguetti et al. 2022: 130). For them, the lack of female representation in sports structures was identified as a significant barrier.

Although most studies focused on the barriers experienced to participation, a few studies analysed facilitators and opportunities (Luguetti et al. 2022; Mohammadi 2019; Pink et al. 2020). Free participation and transportation, as well as logistical assistance, for instance, ensured that participants were able to attend sports programs. Close geographical proximity to housing, and childcare provision, opened possibilities for more women to become involved in local sports activities (Mohammadi 2019). Pink et al. (2020) found that making cultural adaptations as well as recognising and celebrating diversity were key to making participants feel at ease. Initiatives such as "sharing meals that were culturally sensitive (e.g., Halal meat), multi-faith prayers/blessings, in multiple languages delivered by participants at the start of each tournament" created a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere (Pink et al. 2020: 7). As Omar describes, the use of multiple languages or the presence of translators created a particularly high level of inclusion: "one thing that helped me when I was trying a new sport was if the people spoke Arabic like me" (Middleton et al. 2022: 167). It is important, however, to note that the relevance of facilitators and opportunities differ according to, among other factors, gender, age, time in country, and local context (Spaaij at el 2019). For example, in a study based in Soacha, Colombia, physical safety was found to be significant in facilitating access to a sports intervention, compared with other studies, where feelings of emotional safety were highlighted as key (Sobotová et al. 2016).

4.4.6. Sense of community and social networks

A prominent theme from the literature was the social networks developed through sport interventions. These relations extended beyond the playing field to form a sense of community. As soccer player Makena stated: "we are friends, but really, soccer has brought us together like a family. We do more than just play together, are more than just teammates" (Whitley 2022: 558). Relationships and the general atmosphere in interventions, were described by participants as familial, the strength of relationships evident through the lasting contact between players after the season finished or if they relocated (McDonald et al. 2019; Sobotová et al. 2016; Whitley 2022).

Sport programs created occasions for regular interaction, as well as avenues to pursue work and education opportunities. Several participants, for instance, described finding work through their sport networks (Kataria and Ugolotti 2022; Luguetti et al. 2022; McDonald et al. 2019; Mohammadi 2019). In one instance, football player Rahmadan utilised the network developed through his team to conceptualise and then start a travel agency business in Melbourne, Australia (McDonald et al. 2019). Opportunities also arose through interactions with other teams. Imram wanted to go to university and described feeling happy in a match against a university team because: "I saw students and I was talking to them about what they are studying" (Pink et al. 2020: 7). These networks did not only provide support and opportunities for participants, but channels for reciprocation. For example, a member of the Seekers football team, Azizi, started coaching for local children living near the football ground as a way of giving back to the community who had helped him (McDonald et al. 2019). His motivation to reciprocate the opportunities created by the Seekers creates new forms of social inclusion that have the potential to enhance and develop a variety of social relations (McDonald et al. 2019).

Important conditions influence how social networks and a sense of community develop and form, which primarily relate to the duration and durability of participation. Consistent engagement, both in terms of participants and coaches, were found to strengthen social ties (Mohammadi 2019; Pavan 2021). The consistency of coaches allows relationships to form and, because participants know coaches are going to be there every week, they are likely to remain engaged in the program (Pavan 2021). On the flip side, some interventions stumbled into issues because of their transience, as exemplified by the case of Makena, who participated in the 'Homeless World Cup' competition (Whitley 2022). The competition provided Makena with feelings of inclusion, belonging and leadership, which quickly dissipated following the event as "she had minimal decision making authority in her home, was not seen as a leader in her school, and was rarely viewed in a positive light in her society" (Whitley 2022: 561).

Where interventions provided the conditions for social networks to flourish, experiences of belonging extended to spaces in and beyond the intervention. For instance, Genovesi (2024) found in his study of Africa Academy Calcio in Italy that players' attachment to football became deeply rooted to the place where they regularly played and practiced. In another Italian project, ASD Quadrato Meticcio, players "involvement gave the opportunity for people seeking asylum to inhabit with consistency the everyday spaces of the neighbourhood" (Genovesi 2024: 96). These everyday ritualised uses of space form a habitus, where emotional, social, and physical investment, as well as repetitive participation, has the potential to extend and deepen belongingness (McDonald et al. 2019; Stone 2018).

5. Synthesis: A case for IRTS

In gathering an IRTS evidence base, this report has provided a broad overview of IRTS literature (Section 2) as well as a narrower perspective, through focusing on specific interventions (Section 3). In Section 4 we merge these perspectives, drawing from this gathered knowledge to present a case for sport interventions with refugees, which both highlights issues and how to best address them. The case is organised into themes and key findings for best practice.

These themes – mental health and wellbeing, social inclusion, and learning through play – are not disassociated categories, rather they speak to one another. A sense of belonging, for example, can contribute to psychological resilience (Middleton et al. 2022). At the same time, mental health benefits can be attributed to the social aspects of participation, in some cases health acting as a means and marker of integration (Ley et al. 2021; Spaaij 2012; Wang et al. 2023). As such, our key findings speak to each of these themes.

5.1. Mental Health and Wellbeing

Evidence from the literature suggests that physical activity has positive effects on mental health, reducing stress and anxiety, and improving overall well-being among refugees. Sport programs tailored to the needs and preferences of refugees can enhance their sense of identity and self-esteem, and provide spaces for relief and healing (Fernandes et al. 2023; Middleton et al. 2020). Psychological resilience cultivated through sport programs, for instance, developed coping strategies to help with bullying, trauma from distressing events, and negative experiences in the asylum system (Fader et al. 2020; Pavan 2021; Whitley 2022). Sport was found to enhance agency to cope with health issues and the management of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms through improved self-efficacy beliefs (Ley et al. 2021; Middleton et al. 2020; Middleton et al. 2022). Specific program models, such as positive youth development, teaching personal and social responsibility, and action-based transformative pedagogy, cultivated opportunities to exercise these experiences of mastery (Hudson et al. 2023). In some instances, positive prospectives were outweighed by negative internal and external narratives and fluctuation in sports participation due to health issues (Ley et al. 2021). These cases highlighted childhood and adolescence as critical adjustment periods (Heyeres et al. 2021; Middleton et al. 2022; Whitley 2022).

5.2. Social Inclusion

Participation in sport can foster acculturation, integration, and inclusion by providing opportunities for social connectedness, cultural understanding, and a sense of belonging (Spaaij at el 2019). Sport programs facilitate platforms for forcibly displaced persons to engage in activities that promote teamwork, collaboration, and mutual understanding, through which social skills are developed, relationships built, and integration facilitated (Fernandes et al. 2023; O'Driscoll et al. 2014). These experiences of inclusion were evident in the testimonies of migrants, who described the sense of belonging experienced playing team matches (Genovesi 2024), feelings of emotional and physical safety at settings for participation (Middleton et al.; Sobotová et al. 2016), and the employment and educational opportunities realised through their expanded networks (Mohammadi 2019). Sport programs can provide marginalised communities with a platform to respond to dominant societal norms, express cultural identities, and resist assimilation (Hudson et al. 2020; McSweeney and Nakamura 2020). Supportive structures for resettlement that provide avenues of expression and resistance are created through culturally adapted platforms for engagement utilising culturally relevant materials, and collaborative approaches involving community members in program design (Masri et al. 2022).

5.3. Learning Through Play

The key benefits of regular play and sport-based learning activities include promoting imagination, fun relaxation, cooperation, confidence, emotional expression, creativity, and inclusivity (Koopmans and Doidge 2022). These benefits are achieved through the active involvement of staff in creating a welcoming environment, encouraging fun and social interaction, and promoting autonomy and agency through shared power and control (Doidge et al. 2020; Whitley 2022). Evidence suggests that sport can become a more social activity when the focus is not solely on sporting skills (Doidge et al. 2020). Reframing the focus away from fixed goals to having fun can prevent sport from becoming an instrument of specific policy goals (Doidge et al. 2020; Kataria and Ugolotti 2022) and take the pressure off participants, allowing them to make mistakes when they are playing (Fader et al. 2020; Koopmans and Doidge 2022). Games that evoke emotions, ethical dilemmas, and awareness, encourage greater empathy and compassion, improving cultural sensitivity and reducing prejudices (Fernandes et al. 2023). Play opens up imaginary worlds which offers complete immersion, nurturing new possibilities for the player to have more control over what happens and its outcomes, as well as providing channels for emotions to be expressed in different ways (Koopmans and Doidge 2022). Increased confidence and free expression can encourage positive psychosocial growth and character development, providing individuals seeking asylum with a platform to resist dehumanising narratives, and experience moments of joy, laughter and pride (Genovesi 2024; Whitley et al. 2016).

5.4. Key findings

1	The space and infrastructure around interventions matter. Participants that have regular access to spaces that facilitate social activity across different groups are more likely to develop a sense of community that extends beyond the setting of participation (Doidge et al. 2020; Genovesi 2024; Pavan 2021). The safety of these spaces is particularly important in violent contexts (Sobotová et al. 2016). Providing basic infrastructure enables access for a wider range of participants. Among other factors, this includes meeting at a convenient and safe geographical location, childcare provision, fee-free participation, transport organisation, and offering a multi-lingual environment (Mohammadi 2019).
2	The role of coaches and adult leaders is significant to participants, whose experiences in participating can depend on the character of representation among the coaches (Doidge et al. 2020; Koopmans and Doidge 2022). Empathy and kindness are important qualities for successful adult leaders. Participants identify with coaches with similar life experiences, finding it important to have relatable role models (Luguetti et al. 2022; Pavan 2021). Intervention programs should aim to have long-term coaches and/or leaders, in order to develop trusted relationships and meet the emotional safety of participants (Fader et al. 2019; Spaaij et al. 2019), and offer coaching and leadership opportunities for participants (Whiteley 2022).
3	Sports plus/plus sports models are likely to engage participation among underrepresented groups in sports programs by promoting other activities around the sports/physical activity (Genovesi 2024). An important aspect of this inclusion is to create an openness to definitions of sports, for instance by including preferred activities across different cultural, age, and gender groups (O'Driscoll et al. 2014). This can maintain a connection to homeland, creating more security and willingness to engage in intercultural dialogue (Middleton et al. 2020).
4	Collaborative and strength-based approaches that involve community members in program design increase engagement and participation (Masri et al. 2022). Collaboration can encourage refugee leadership and work to culturally adapt sports programs, whilst ensuring that community programs are actually necessary for the group (Masri et al. 2022; O'Driscoll et al. 2014). Strength-based approaches are more likely to create enabling structures that facilitate human agency (Ley et al. 2021; Spaaij et al. 2019), providing opportunities for activism (Luguetti et al. 2022) and reciprocation (McDonald et al. 2019).
5	Teams composed of those with a shared migratory history facilitate a safe environment for newly arrived refugees and individuals seeking asylum (Middleton et al. 2020; Whitley et al. 2016). This is not to suggest that intercultural interaction should be avoided, however, in the period immediately following resettlement, a shared migratory history can simplify social interaction, build confidence, and increase bonding social capital (Middleton et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2019). Hosting teams composed of those with a shared migratory history in shared spaces creates possibilities to interact beyond the team (Doidge et al. 2020).

6. Stakeholder interviews

The empirical material collected for this report is based on interviews conducted with the representatives of 15 organisations, presented in the table below. Most of the organisations (11) invited to the interview were already involved in the *Convening the Global Integration of Refugees through Sport Sector* (UNHCR; SCORT Foundation, GAME Lebanon, Glasswing International; Fútbol Más; Save the Children Sweden; Support Group Network; Terre des Hommes Romania; Ukraine Active; Center for Healing and Justice through Sport [CHJS]).

Three of the organisations which took part in the research were not involved in this Erasmus+ project but were contacted through referrals from the stakeholders interviewed in the first phase of data collection (Waves for Change; Tambai Zimbabwe; Generations for Peace; Yoga and Sport with Refugees). The remaining organisation was identified through online searching (Anantapur Sports Academy).

Table 4: Presentation of Organisations (ordered alphabetically by region)

	Organization	Type of Sport	Specialization	Description
Africa	Tambai Zimbabwe	Mixed	Providing life-skills education through sport	Tambai Zimbabwe is a social development organisation that uses sport and creative activities to positively impact, mobilise, and empower communities. The organisation is a member of the Sport for Refugees Coalition. https://www.facebook.com/tambaizim/
	Waves for Change	Surfing	Providing mental health services utilising Surf Therapy	Waves for Change is a non-profit organization in South Africa. Their Surf Therapy Programme targets children and adolescents from disadvantaged communities using 'The Five Pillar Framework'. https://waves-for-change.org/

	Organization	Type of Sport	Specialization	Description
Europe	Save the Children Sweden Support Group Network (SGN)	Mixed	Providing support to children across Sweden Empowering and supporting refugee initiatives	Save the Children Sweden works to protect, support and advocate for children's rights all over Sweden https://www.raddabarnen.se/ Support Group Network (SGN), based in Sweden, is a migrant-led non-profit NGO working to support refugees focusing on business and higher education, social inclusion, and interculturality. https://supportgroup.se/ These organisations were represented by the same interlocutor during one singular interview
	SCORT Foundation	Football/ Soccer	Developing and implementing educational sports-based projects that empower vulnerable young people	Based in Switzerland, SCORT uses sports-based initiatives in multiple locations around the world to support young people affected by conflict and forced displacement, creating safe spaces online and offline for children, and promoting the inclusion and coach education opportunities for people with disabilities. Through the 'Football Club Social Alliance' they encourage professional football clubs to engage in international development work. https://scort.org/en/
	Terre des Hommes Romania	Mixed	Protecting and supporting children across Romania	A global children's aid organisation, Terre des Hommes Romania works to protect and promote children's rights. The organisation works to support children affected by migration, for example providing support to Ukrainian families in Romania. https://www.tdh.ro/en
	Ukraine Active	Mixed	Promoting an active lifestyle through e.g. educational programs	Ukraine Active is a non-profit public organisation working to support and motivate people to lead an active lifestyle. Through a range of projects, the organisation works across several sectors to promote a healthy and active population. https://ukrainian-active.org.ua/
	UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	Mixed	Protecting refugees, stateless people and forcibly displaced communities	The UNHCR uses sport for development to develop life skills in children and youth, promoting safe and inclusive spaces, and positive role models. Their 'Sport for Protection' approach promotes child protection, youth empowerment, and sport as a tool for peace and development. https://www.unhcr.org/
	Yoga and Sport with Refugees	Mixed	Supporting underprivileged youth in rural areas through sport	An initiative of the NGO Rural Development Trust (RDT), ASA provides rural children and youth with support, infrastructure, and equipment in different sporting disciplines such as cricket, hockey, judo and more. The goal is to promote sport and the socio-educational development of underprivileged youth in the district of Anantapur, India. https://yogasportwithrefugees.org/

Middle East and Southeast Asia

Organization	Type of Sport	Specialization	Description
Anantapur Sports Academy (ASA)	Mixed	Supporting underprivileged youth in rural areas through sport	An initiative of the NGO Rural Development Trust (RDT), ASA provides rural children and youth with support, infrastructure, and equipment in different sporting disciplines such as cricket, hockey, judo and more. The goal is to promote sport and the socio-educational development of underprivileged youth in the district of Anantapur, India. https://anantapursportsacademy.in/
GAME Lebanon	Mixed	Promoting social change through youth-led street sports	GAME is an NGO working for social change through youth-led street sports in several regions around the world. In Lebanon, the organisation focuses on youth entrepreneurship, empowerment and social stability through organising street basketball, football and dance for children across disadvantaged neighbourhoods. https://game.ngo/
Generations for Peace	Mixed	Promoting peacebuilding, youth leadership, and community empower-ment	Based in Jordan, the global non-profit organisation aims to build peace by empowering youth leaders to promote sustainable conflict transformation and tolerance. Utilizing multiple approaches, e.g. sports- and arts-based interventions, the goal is to engage youth and adults in sustainable behavioural. https://www.generationsforpeace.org/

North- Central- and South America

Organization	Type of Sport	Specialization	Description
Center for Healing and Justice through Sport (CHJS)	Mixed	Providing training and consulting coaches, organisations and more, to facilitate a healing-centred approach to sport	Based in the US, CHJS utilises sport to building resilience, support healing, and address issues of systemic injustice. Through a community centred, sports-based youth development approach, CHJS works with coaches, organisations and government agencies to make sport equitable and healing-centred. https://chjs.org/
Fútbol Más	Football/ Soccer	Using sport for development to assist children in vulnerable communities	The NGO based in Chile works to promote wellbeing and happiness in vulnerable children and communities. Using sport, the organisation works in neighbourhoods, schools, and humanitarian crisis zones to positively reinforce the five core values of joy, respect, responsibility, creativity and teamwork. https://futbolmas.org/en/
Glasswing International	Mixed		Glasswing International, based in El Salvador, works to foster sustainable change in local communities. The organisation works across several areas such as health, education, and youth- and community empowerment where they, among others, utilise several sports-based interventions. https://glasswing.org/

The makeup of these organisations varies greatly; it includes a supranational agency, international organisations, and organisations working on a grassroot level. In the process of inviting stakeholders to participate in the interview, considerations regarding the diversification of the geographical scope were made which translated into the inclusion of representatives from different continents. However, the majority of the organisations which took part in the research are headquartered in Europe, though it should be noted that several of the organizations worked in partnership with organizations on other continents. An attempt to include organisations which implement different sports specialities was also made since the literature review identified a predominance of sports intervention based on football.

The interviews were conducted online and lasted an hour on average. Each semi-structured interview was based on an interview guide created prior to the beginning of the data collection. On the one hand, the interview guide provided a degree of comparability across different interviews, on the other hand the semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility in asking questions.

The interview guide was constructed around the three key thematic areas of interest to the project: Mental Health and Wellbeing, Learning through Play, Social Inclusion. The questions mostly aimed to understand better how the organisations themselves work with these notions, and how these are defined in their organisations' programmes. Moreover, the interview guide inquired about the organisations' perspectives on funding and their impact on the programme's design and implementation. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the analysis of the data related to funding has been anonymised.

The following chapters present the major findings from the empirical material collected with the participation of stakeholders. The first part of the analysis covers three key thematic areas, while the second part examines IRTS sector challenges, funding issues, and the implications of using refugee status as a legal category in sports programmes.

6.1. Key Thematic Areas

Before delving into the analysis, it is important to note that the three overarching themes are intertwined and not that easily dissected from each other. Nevertheless, in the following analysis, we will attempt to highlight a few points that can be derived from the interviews.

6.1.1. Learning Through Play

Learning through play is the first key theme that will be analysed. Many of the organisations interviewed worked with learning through play in one way or another, especially the ones targeting youth and children.

Most of the organisations that were interviewed had an explicit focus on working with "youth" (CHJS, Fútbol Más, GAME Lebanon, Generations for Peace, Glasswing International, Save the Children Sweden, SCORT Foundation, Tambai Zimbabwe, Terre des Hommes Romania, Anantapur Sports Academy, Waves for Change, Ukraine Active). Youth was defined differently across the organisations, ranging from legal definitions of childhood (until 18 years) to a looser definition of 25ish years as the end of youth. Some of the programs were available from as early as five years, whereas others were focussed more on teenagers.

Nevertheless, apart from a few exceptions (Yoga and Sport with Refugees; UNHCR; Support Group Network) most of the organisations we interviewed had a focus on offering programmes to young people. This does not necessarily mean that they are working exclusively with young people, for example parents were often included in the activities as well, but the key target groups are children, youth and/or young people.

One of the reasons why there is such a strong focus on youth may be that statistically, it is mostly women and girls that leave areas of conflict and therefore end up on the move (UNHCR). Another reason for the predominance of programs for youth appears to be that this age group may be their accessibility through schools, because schools provide a direct access to the children and teenagers establish sports groups and clubs through pre-existing structures. In contrast, reaching out to adults, especially elderly people who do not have children in the school system anymore is more of a challenge. It seems as if the wording of the theme "Learning through Play" as such is a reflection of "youth" as the primary target group. Children and youth are still learning, and they are arguably also the group of people most easily associate with play. Approaching adults through a program designed to teach them something through play seems to be rather rare. It is important to keep this primary focus on youth in mind to understand how many of the stakeholders describe and engage with the IRTS sector.

Learning through play is a broad field that can accommodate many different skills. On the one hand, we have discovered many different types of sports that are offered through various IRTS programs, and sometimes, playing these sports is interconnected with learning different life skills, such as conflict management or working as a team. Interestingly, these life skills and discussions on learning through sports often arose in the context of competition.

Some of the stakeholders explained competition as a healthy way to promote conflict resolution, to manage situations of stress, and to motivate players (CHJS, Fútbol Más, Tambai Zimbabwe, Anantapur Sports Academy). They facilitate tournaments, leagues or other forms of competition, to encourage the life skills that can be learned through competition, but also because these events can bring people from different places together, and it enables local people and the refugees to join the same activities, thus disregarding the competitiveness character of playing sports (Yoga and Sport for Refugees; Terre des Hommes Romania). Competition can therefore have an impact on the personal level of learning the skills of navigating stress. Competition can then also be an opportunity to organise events that bring refugees and local people together to enjoy sports together – either as participants of the sports or as spectators.

Some of our interlocutors highlighted a third function that competition can take: for people that are professionally interested in sports, competition is a way to be recognized. For example, this can potentially enable the athletes to participate in larger competitions, or in specific contexts, such as the USA, heighten the chances of gaining a scholarship (CHJS; Tambai Zimbabwe).

Overall, some of the stakeholders explained how competition can be an important way of learning life skills through sports, and hence they see healthy competition as a valuable aspect of IRTS programs. Interestingly, there were also voices that highlighted the importance of playing in teams together, rather than competing against each other. Some of our stakeholders put an emphasis on values such as creating safe spaces, team spirit, working together, and enjoying fun (GAME Lebanon; Generations for Peace; Terre des Hommes Romania; Glasswing International; SCORT Foundation; Ukraine Active). This approach was also applied to sports that are normally considered competitive, for example team sports, such as football, where the aim of the game is to score more goals than the other team. Here, these organisations try to focus on other aspects beyond winning or losing. One example is how Glasswing International rewards the best teamplay in a football game, instead of the person that scored the most goals, or Generations for Peace, who focus on talking about the experience of the players after the game, whether they felt included, rather than focussing on who won the game. In some cases, competition as a potential trigger of trauma is explicitly avoided (Terre des Hommes Romania; Ukraine Active). The interviews thus reflected a variety of approaches to competiti0on.

Overall, it seems as if a reflected and contextual approach is key, which considers the aims of the intervention and the people participating in them.

The last point under the learning through play key theme will be the possibilities of career trajectories. As mentioned above, there is a potential opportunity for athletes to pursue a professional career through IRTS programs (CHJS; Tambai Zimbabwe), but it is only an option for a very limited number of people. Instead, the possibility of participants becoming volunteers, coaches, or even employees of the organisations was a much more frequent topic. Many of the organisations described this as a form of empowerment, so that the refugees themselves could have an impact or the decisive power over the programs. Generally, there were two main ways for refugees to become part of the organising team: first, especially in many of the programs focussed on working with youth and children, many of the older participants, or recent alumni had the opportunity to continue being part of the programs as volunteers or coaches (GAME Lebanon; Generations for Peace; Glasswing International). As former participants, they acquired the necessary skills to teach the sports, and to become coaches for the younger generations. Often, becoming a volunteer, a youth leader, or a coach incorporates additional trainings to equip the people with skills of leading and facilitating sports.

The second option to become a coach, or otherwise involved in the sports is by signing up or applying to do so. Organisations like Waves for Change, Save the Children Sweden, Yoga and Sport with Refugees, Anantapur Sports Academy, Tambai Zimbabwe, SCORT Foundation, CHJS, Ukraine Active and Yoga and Sport with Refugees recruit their volunteers from either people that are interested to become a volunteer, or they are looking for athletes who would like to start teaching classes. In some of these programs, this entails training as described above. In the data it is noticeable that these trainings are often emphasised when the programmes are designed for children, so that the coaches/leaders/volunteers are trained and equipped to create safe spaces for children and cater to their needs. Especially becoming the leading coach or having the opportunity to train to become a coach is an empowering measure (Save the Children Sweden; Support Group Network), because it gives the refugees the opportunity to shape the programs, but it is also an achievement that can be seen as a stepping stone of a possible future career. In other words, working in these programs can showcase and improve skills that can be applied more widely, meaning that they can also provide opportunities for capacity building.

In summary of this section, learning through play can be observed on many different levels of the sports programs, and is not only affecting active participants of the programs. Nevertheless, due to the wording of the theme, it seems to be predestined to be primarily focussed on young people.

6.1.2. Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing is the second key theme that was investigated through the interviews. As our interlocutors from the SCORT Foundation said, cultural activities, such as music and art, but also sports are a basic human need. Additionally, sport brings an element of physical movement that can elevate well-being. Terre des Hommes Romania and Anantapur Sports Academy pointed out that especially youth have a tendency to isolate themselves in front of their various digital devices (and the risks this has for their mental health and wellbeing), and that sports programs and clubs are an important way of bringing people together. On the other hand, Ukraine Active described how they are in some cases only able to offer sports programs through digital devices, so they can also have a positive effect on mental health as a tool to participate in IRTS programmes.

Throughout the interviews, two ways of approaching mental health and wellbeing can be broadly distinguished: on the one hand, some of the stakeholders had a very explicit focus on the mental health and wellbeing of the participants, and worked with professional partners and implemented psychological tools to support the mental wellbeing of their participants (CHJS; Waves for Change; Glasswing International; Generations for Peace; SCORT Foundation; Terre des Hommes Romania). On the other hand, we have a group of organisations that do not explicitly work with mental health and psychosocial support, but rather base their programs in the more general knowledge that facilitated sports and physical activity is beneficial to mental health. For example, Yoga and Sport with Refugees explained how they have a strict rule not to tackle mental issues, but to send the affected people to another organisation specialising in psychosocial support.

Hence, some of the stakeholders were equipped and prepared to include psychosocial measurements and tools through their IRTS programs, whereas others offered the general benefits of sports but not going beyond that. Interestingly, there seemed to be quite a clear distinction between these two, either there is a clear focus on mental health, wellbeing and social support, or the programs are seeing wellbeing as an important aspect of sport but are not venturing deeper into the psychological aspects. This reflects the importance of either engaging fully with mental health issues or ensuring that there are directions available to resources that do so. A scattered, uneven approach is likely to end up being more harmful than either.

For both of these approaches to mental health, coaches are playing an important role to facilitate a safe space for the participants. Whether psychosocial support is an explicit goal in the programs or not did not seem to matter that much when it came to the importance of well-educated coaches that know how to facilitate the programs.

As mentioned above, many of the programs facilitate special training for their coaches and staff to support them in their functions. These trainings can again be explicitly about giving psychosocial support, or they can be about facilitating fair play, exercises to enhance teamwork, having talks after the sports, or other aspects that encourage safe spaces and the general wellbeing of the participants.

6.1.3. Social Inclusion

Throughout the interviews, this key theme seemed to be the most emphasised one. Many of the organisations made efforts to foster inclusion and belonging. In relation to the gaps in the literature concerning women, disability, and LGBTQAI+ there has been a range of different replies. Women and girls have been mentioned by most of our interlocutors during the interviews and it seems to be one of the most important aspects in the field of social inclusion. As mentioned above, statistically it is mostly women and children on the move (UNHCR), which does not only explain a focus on youth, but also a focus on the inclusion of women. Indeed, girls and women are often at the forefront when it comes to social inclusion policies and strategies (UNHCR), and therefore funding is often directed towards the inclusion of women and girls. Many of the stakeholders describe different strategies to include girls, for example Glasswing International offering girls clubs to create safe spaces, or Anantapur Sports Academy, that encourages mixed gender teams to fight the stigmatisation of girls. Still, there seem to be surprising obstacles or hindering factors to the participation of girls, as the UNHCR reflected. These can for example include lacking facilities to change, missing equipment made for girls/women (such as fitting clothes or period products), or the lack of safe spaces (UNHCR; Waves for Change; Glasswing International; Anantapur Sports Academy)

Another aspect is the inclusion of disabled people. Here, different capabilities to facilitate this inclusion have been reported. Some of the organisations run specific programs for disabled people (Waves for Change; Glasswing International; Anantapur Sport Academy, Generations for Peace, Save the Children Sweden; SCORT Foundation; Tambai Zimbabwe). One challenge that was pointed out for these programs is that not every person receives an official diagnosis due to a variety of different reasons, and therefore does not have access to specific programs.

Another challenge was mentioned by the organisations that were not able to offer specific programs for the inclusion of disabled people: often, this does not happen due to a lack of consideration, but due to a lack of facilities and resources (Yoga and Sport with Refugees, Terre des Hommes Romania). One explanation for this lack of resources can be found in the funding system towards specific categories of people, which will be considered further in depth below.

Lastly, the inclusion of LGBTQAI+ members has been identified as a gap in the literature. Only one of our stakeholders mentioned the facilitation of a secret program to protect the identities of the participants. The gap that has been identified in the literature seems to be evident in the field as well. However, it is necessary to consider that this is a very sensitive topic, and potentially there are offers and programs that have not been explicitly mentioned during the interviews to protect the identities of refugees in parts of the world where being a member of the LGBTQAI+ community can be a risk to the person.

Apart from social inclusion, the term social cohesion has been brought up throughout some of the interviews (CHJS; GAME Lebanon; Generations for Peace; SCORT Foundation; Tambai Zimbabwe; UNHCR). Social cohesion as a term was often used in the context of bringing groups of refugees together with the host community, so for example offering sports programs for everyone to participate, or the facilitation of sports events days. As the interlocutor from the UNHCR explained, social cohesion is an alternative term to integration. Integration carries the meaning that someone needs to change to fit the society, whereas social cohesion avoids this by focussing on creating an inclusive society for everyone (UNHCR). This poses an example of an overall issue with the field of IRTS that has been observed throughout the interviews: terminologies such as social inclusion, integration, social cohesion, belonging and many more are used to describe similar goals and processes, but they are differentiated only by small nuances or used interchangeably. Overall, it seems like the language of the IRTS sector is unclear in its terms and their use, starting at the term Integration of Refugees through Sports (IRTS) itself.

6.2. Stakeholders' Considerations in Implementing Successful IRTS Programmes

This analytical section explores some of the considerations that arose during the interviews, which yield areas of improvement in the designing and implementation of sports programmes, while also warning of possible challenges.

6.2.1. Navigating Challenges in Refugees Sport Programmes: Transience, Empowerment, Intercultural Competences, and Intentional Coaching

The context in which organisations operate may affect the strategies adopted in the implementation of sports programmes and their execution. The continuity of refugees' presence is a crucial element in the running of a successful sports programme, as this component confers a degree of consistency and stability to the projects. GAME Lebanon and Yoga and Sport with Refugees, which operate respectively in Lebanon and Greece, reported that one of the challenges they encounter is to maintain their sport programmes running in a stable manner. This difficulty is given by the fact that the areas in which the organisations operate are areas of transit, locations where refugees stay only temporarily while they wait to continue their journey further. The fact that the target group of GAME Lebanon and Yoga and Sport with Refugees' projects are often people on the move has implications for the continuity of the sports programmes, especially when the sports classes are led by refugees themselves. Indeed, Yoga and Sport with Refugees explained that the type of sports they offer classes in, is mostly based on the sports skills of the individuals who arrive at the camp and their willingness to teach that sport to others. When the coach proceeds with their displacement trajectory, the class often ends. The unpredictability that characterised the refugees' waiting time, in this case onsports Lesvos, is reflected in the unforeseeable lengths of the sports course. Similarly, since the beneficiaries are people on the move, there might be the risk that the project's objective is not achieved when consistent participation is not applicable (GAME Lebanon).

Despite the challenge related to working with people on the move, the importance of supporting refugees-led programmes was emphasised by multiple organisations (Save the Children Sweden; Support Group Network; Yoga and Sport with Refugees). As mentioned previously, refugees are already equipped with skills and knowledge before fleeing their country. Save the Children Sweden and Support Group Network reflected on how these resources represent refugees' individual power which needs to be channelled into meaningful projects that can aid their own future trajectories. In a European context, host societies often display inauspicious behaviours towards refugees, thus, refugee-led initiatives are believed to help counter feelings of commiseration by attempting to shift the host's society perception: from seeing refugees as victims to considering refugees partners.

Recognising refugees as partners means acknowledging that diversity is a strength, hence, it is a form of enacted inclusion (Save the Children Sweden; Support Group Network). At the core of this understanding there is the need to strengthen coaches' intercultural competences, which sport clubs often lack, to achieve meaningful inclusion while also preventing conflicts and the triggering of trauma (Save the Children Sweden; Support Group Network). In a similar fashion, Terre des Hommes Romania underlined the importance of not underestimating the sensitivity of the questions asked, though they might appear banal or neutral at first glance, when engaging in collective activities with refugees. For instance, inquiring about one's area of originwaiting time has the potential of revealing information which might jeopardise one's safety. The Terre des Hommes Romania interlocutors emphasised that being open to dialogue and engaging in conversation with the people who take part in the sport programme are key steps to debunking assumptions and learning the best approach to adopt in a specific context while also building trust and creating a positive and safe environment.

The attitude and intentionality of coaches, or of the organisation's staff, are paramount in the unfolding of the sport initiatives. Adding on what has already been mentioned, Waves for Change explained how a type of sport such as football can become a stage to showcase aggressive and violent behaviours, which find their crystallisation in toxic masculinity. Therefore, coaches must be well equipped to deliver a sport programme intervention which embraces solid practice guidelines aimed at defusing toxic behaviours, thus directing the intervention towards healthy sportsmanship. The benefits deriving from sports are achieved when those who design and deliver sport projects are intentional about the goal that is meant to be accomplished. For example, the mental health gain linked to practising sports might not be reached if mental wellbeing is not promoted and actively sought out (Waves for Change).

The next section dives into the significance of context-based interventions, providing examples of sports programmes tailored to specific communities' needs, emphasising how different geographical areas require customised approaches based on local knowledge and experiences.

6.2.2. Community-Focused Sport Programmes: Emphasising Context-Specificity

A successful sports programme needs to be designed taking into account the particularities and needs that characterise the target groups as well as the cultural and social-economic environment in which the intervention is localised.

CHJS remarked on the essentiality of integrating local knowledge and local experiences in the designing and implementation phase of the sports programmes. Sports interventions can have a meaningful impact on people when these are tailored to the needs, history, and lifestyle of participants. Hence, the organisation highlighted how interventions are favourable when they employ a bottom-up strategy including the local community. In this regard, the approach of Anantapur Sports Academy towards gender issues and marginalised communities is insightful. The representative from Anantapur Sports Academy explained that including girls from the rural population can be challenging due to the widespread rural conservatism which makes them hesitant to participate. However, once they join the programmes the organisation implements strategies to tackle community issues directly or indirectly. They target specific needs for rural children, such as improving their communication skills or providing education about their menstruation cycle. One effective approach they have implemented to combat gender stereotypes is the creation of mixed-gender teams, which has proven successful as the number of girls participating in the program has increased. The achievement of these interventions would not have been possible without a deep understanding of the context and the ability to effectively engage with the local community.

CHJS further mentioned that sports interventions are mostly based on knowledge produced in institutions such as academia, rather than being constructed integrating local knowledge. Thus, sports programmes run the risk of being dislocated from the beneficiaries' lived experiences and necessities, especially considering that research derives disproportionally from Western countries, as pointed out in the literature review.

Waves for Change illustrated this incongruence by explaining how mental health services in Western countries are designed to aid children overcoming a difficult situation or a trauma, whereas, youth in low-middle income countries living in severely vulnerable areas often experience traumatic events repetitively; here, a mental health intervention must help them develop long term coping mechanisms through, for instance, practising sports with others who share relatable experiences.

6.2.3. Refugee as a policy category and its relevance for funding

During the interview, the UNHCR confirmed that most refugees reside in low- or middle-income countries which, due to their financial situation, are not large UNHCR donors - with the exception of Germany which is one of the major hosting countries and also one of their largest donors. This fact, along with insights from other interviews, reveals organisations' reliance on international donors from the Global North, which inevitably shape the makeup of the sports programmes and their specific outcomes. Nevertheless, organisations based in Western countries also rely on private foundations or supra-national institutions such as the European Union. One interlocutor expressed the difficulty in obtaining international funds for refugees due to the high level of competition throughout the application process, and the general scarcity of fundings for the IRTS sector.

Comprehensively, the lack of resources has direct consequences for the development of sports programmes. For example, the availability of financial resources dictates the sports speciality that organisations launch. Tambai Zimbabwe explained that some of the sports clubs they run, such as football or volleyball, are chosen as they do not require specific infrastructure or equipment, thus they are cost effective. However, the lack of appropriate infrastructure, especially facilities such as changing rooms, largely affect women and girls hindering their sense of safety, which often result in them dropping out (UNHCR; Tambai Zimbabwe).

Another complication in the IRTS sector is the policy relevance of the refugee category and its legal status. The policy category of refugees has implications for both: the host society's perception of national identity; and the target group in the sport program design phase, which affects funding opportunities. One informant noted that difficulties in obtaining official travel documents for refugees hinder their athletic careers by preventing participation in official competitions. This issue is exacerbated by the reluctance of host societies to include refugees in national teams, as their legal status labels them as non-nationals, introducing elements of discrimination tied to national identity and belonging. In line with this, the UNHCR described the creation of the Refugee Olympic Team as a symbol of hope for refugees in camps, which provided them with a sense of purpose and motivation.

Targeting sport programs exclusively for refugees is another focal point. Empirical data suggest that organisations tend to target marginalised communities when operating in vulnerable environments rather than focusing solely on refugees (Glasswing International; Waves for Change; Fútbol Más). In these cases, sports interventions include specific identifiers such as disability, which are more visible than in programmes exclusively for refugees.

As the literature review notes, refugee status is often the sole identity marker used in designing sports programmes for refugee integration. This focus appears driven by political agendas influencing funding allocations, characterised by a lack of an intersectional approach which results in the targeting of an essentialized refugee category.

The empirical data collected show an overwhelming predominance of considerations related to binary understandings of gender which suggests that intersectional thinking does take place within organisations. Although identity markers like women, girls, and youth were prevalent in interviews, other intersecting identifiers such as elderly refugees and LGBTQIA+ individuals did not emerge. This indicates that certain identity markers are excluded when refugee status is the sole reference. Consequently, refugee status and other identifiers appear to be mutually exclusive, making it challenging for organisations to apply intersectionality in their sports programmes.

Lastly, categories such as returnees, IDPs, and host society groups risk being overlooked in the framing of target groups for specific sports programmes (UNHCR; Glasswing International; Ukraine Active), as the legal label of refugee does not apply to them, despite their potential to benefit from the support that derives from the sports sector.

6.3. Conclusion: Collaboration, Networks, Communication

The organisations involved in the interviewing process reported unanimously the positive impact of sports on their beneficiaries. Sports have the potential to improve mental health, foster inclusion and integration, promote skill acquisition, and reduce gender stereotypes and discrimination. In essence, sports can pave the way for a better future and more cohesive societies. The interviewees emphasised the need to further promote the benefits of sports to enhance its influence by identifying effective ways to document and report its positive impacts, thereby strengthening the evidence base behind sports program methodologies (SCORT Foundation; Waves for Change). This can be achieved through creating dialogues across organisations to share knowledge and inspire one another (Tambai Zimbabwe). Furthermore, Generations for Peace highlighted the importance of engaging volunteers from diverse national backgrounds to create shared experiences and knowledge, which can be passed on to future generations, fostering a self-sustaining advocacy model. In summary, a collaborative and well-documented approach can amplify the positive impact of sports, creating enduring benefits for individuals and communities alike.

7. Grey literature

To conduct a comprehensive global review of grey literature would be impossible. In an effort to include as much relevant literature as possible we have relied on suggestions from our partners who are experts in the field. As such, the grey literature presented in this section represents the general interests of our partners, however, the goal when selecting the literature was also to aim to cover some of the knowledge gaps identified in the literature review above.

The aim of this synthesis of grey literature is to functions as a sort of 'resource library' which organizations and actors in the IRTS sector can use to access more information on the themes identified in the above literature review and can use as inspiration to inform their future work.

The literature was collected over a longer period of about 3 months, and as of June 24th, 2024, we had collected a total of 35 paper for review. These were then screened, and a total of 24 papers (including 2 new papers not a part of the original list) where chosen to include in the review. Inclusion criteria were based on English language, and that the paper should ideally add new and interesting perspectives related to the three main themes discussed above: mental health and wellbeing, social inclusion, and learning through play.

Additionally, we removed any articles published in peer-review journals which would fall outside the scope of grey literature.

Based on feedback from our partners, we have included both IRTS and non-IRTS resources, including some which are not specifically related to the work with refugees or with sport and physical activity. This is because we believe that many of the issues that the IRTS sector faces are cross-cutting and have broader relevance. Below, we present the 24 papers identified for this review organized based on the three main themes, and subsequently into sub-themes. Some papers touch upon more than one theme; these have been assigned to the theme most prominent to them.

Additionally, the section 'Other Relevant Material' includes papers and projects which cuts across all three themes or adds perspectives beyond the themes.

Table 5: Grey Literature Synthesis

Themes	Reference Material (ordered by publication year)	Summary
Mental Health and Wellbeing		
Trauma-sensitive Programming	Edgework Consulting (2013). Playing to Heal: Designing a Trauma-Sensitive Sport Program	Presents a practical framework for creating trauma-sensitive youth sports programmes to support the healing process of young people affected by trauma. This is done through the introduction of trauma-sensitive design principles.
Mental Health and MHPSS	UNHCR. (2017). Community-Based Protection & Mental Health & Psychosocial Support	Discusses how UNHCR aims to address the mental health and psychosocial impacts of forced displacement through community-based protection and MHPSS approaches that promote community engagement and empowerment.
	Ventevogel et al. (2015). Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants on the Move in Europe: A Multi-Agency Guidance Note	Describes key principles, interventions, and gives advice for organizations working to support the mental health of refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers in Europe.
	Wiedemann et al. (2014). Moving Together: Promoting psychosocial well-being through sport and physical activity	Discusses the benefits of sport for psychosocial well-being and inclusion in times of crisis, and further advocates for the importance of holistic, inclusive, and contextually- and culturally appropriate approaches.
	UNHCR (2013). Operational Guidance: Mental Health & Psychosocial Support Programming for Refugee Operations	Covers points of good practice to consider when developing MHPSS programming. Highlights the importance of mental health and psychosocial support in refugee settings, the psychological and social impacts of displacement, the disruption of normal community structures, the exacerbation of mental disorders, and more.

Themes	Reference Material (ordered by publication year)	Summary
Social Inclusion		
Inclusion of Migrants, Refugees and Ethnic Minorities	Schwenzer (2017). Sports for Refugees: Challenges for Instructors and Their Support Needs	The paper explores the challenges and recommended strategies for sports instructors working with refugee populations, based on focus group interviews conducted across several countries.
	Doczi et al. (2012). Creating a level playing field: Social inclusion of migrants and ethnic minorities in sport.	Discusses how sport can be used as a tool for the social inclusion of marginalized groups and highlights the importance of the issue of discrimination and unequal access in sports, particularly for migrants and ethnic minorities.
	Sport Inclusion Network (2022). Sport and Refugees: Learning Lessons and Practical Takeaways from Four European Cases of Good Practice. Sport Inclusion Network (2012). Inclusion of Migrants in and through Sports: A Guide to Good Practice.	Makes the distinction between inclusion into and through sport (2012) to provide a guide on good practices, drawing on the work of several European organizations that aim to counter exclusion (2012; 2022).
Refugee Empowerment	Support Group Network and Save the Children (n.d). ReAct: Materials and Methods	ReAct is an initiative designed empower refugees through an intercultural approach. A central element is the self-organized "Support Groups" which empower refugees to become independent agents of their own inclusion.
Inclusion of Women and Girls	Massey et al. (2024). Thriving through sport: The transformative impact on girls' mental health	Examines the relationship between girls' sport participation and mental health. Findings show that sport participation in high-quality environments can lead to improved mental health outcomes, but access remains unequal. The paper presents policy and practice recommendations for a variety of actors.
	Canadian Women & Sport (2021). Engaging Newcomer Girls & Women: Physical Activity & Sport Handbook	Presents the challenges and barriers that newcomer girls and women face in participating in sport and physical activity and provides strategies to better engage and retain newcomer girls and women in sport programs.
Inclusion of LGBTQ+ communities	Laureus Sport for Good Foundation (2022). Beyond the gender binary: A first steps guide toward transgender and non-binary inclusion in Sport for Development	Presents the barriers and challenges that trans youth face in participating in sport, and highlights strategies and best practices for organizations to become more inclusive and supportive of trans participation.
	Advocates for Youth (n.d). Sports Participation and Health of Black Transgender Youth	Summarizes research highlighting barriers, e.g. discriminatory legislation, and the impact of these barriers to sports participation for Black transgender youth. Recommendations for advocates, researchers, educators and policymakers are provided.
Inclusion of persons with disabilities	Juul Rasmussen et al. (2015). Different. Just like you: A psychosocial approach promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities	Aims to create awareness and provide guidance of the importance of inclusion and psychosocial support of persons with disabilities. Features a range of activities and recommendations that give persons with disabilities the opportunity to participate equally.

Themes	Reference Material (ordered by publication year)	Summary
Learning Through Play		
	Trejos et al. (2023). Promising Learning through Play Practices in Emergency Response	Investigates practices of Learning through Play methodologies in emergency contexts. It identifies barriers, benefits, and provides recommendations for ensuring the implementation of LtP practices.
	Zosh et al. (2017). Learning through play: a review of the evidence (white paper)	Presents the importance of learning through play for children's development and the characteristics of optimal learning through play experiences. Explores the need for children to develop "learning-to-learn" skills, and the role of agency and self-direction. Addresses gaps and future directions in research on learning through play.

Themes	Reference Material (ordered by publication year)	Summary
Other Relevant Material		
Frameworks	UNHCR (2022). More than a Game: The UNHCR Sport Strategy 2022 – 2026	Aims to expand the use of sport and strengthen engagement with the sport ecosystem through five strategic objectives related to life skills, protection, and supporting elite refugee athletes.
	Office of Research – Innocenti (2021). Playing the Game: A framework for successful child focused sport for development programmes	Presents a 3-part framework for quality Sport for Development programming to ensure the inclusion, empowerment, and development of life skills for children.
	UNHCR (2021). Framework: Achieving sport for protection outcomes	Presents a framework for the Sport for Protection approach. It centres the role of sport and play in creating a safe environment for forcibly displaced young people, and aims to achieve positive outcomes in psychosocial well-being, social inclusion, and social cohesion.

Handbooks and Toolkits	Yamada & Sanders (2024). Bridging the Divide in Sport and Sustainable Development: A Guide for Translating Policy into Practice and Effective Programme Management (version 1.4)	The guidebook is part of a broader project between JSC and sportanddev which aims to bridge the gap between policy and practice. It contains information about the use of sport for development and guidance on how to design, deliver and assess programmes and policies.
	UNHCR et al. (2018). Sport for Protection Toolkit: Programming with Young People in Forced Displacement Settings	Describes the development and implementation of a "Sport for Protection" toolkit to emphasize the role of sport in protecting and promoting the well-being of refugee and internally displaced young people
Other	Cruces et al. (2023). A Better World for Migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean	Analyses the results of an experiment designed to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of interventions aimed at correcting misconceptions about migration among native populations. The analysis is designed to help countries design contextually specific policies.
	INAMOS (n.d.). Results	The INAMOS project seeks to enhance long term social inclusion and equal opportunities in and through sport and analyses the impact of policy and programme interventions. Their 'results' page presents their findings, among others a summary of main findings, and an analysis of migrants' perspectives of sport for inclusion programmes.

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8. Conclusion

This report highlights the considerable potential of sport as a tool for fostering inclusion, health, and learning for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. The evidence base, drawn from academic research and practitioner experiences, demonstrates the multifaceted benefits of well-designed IRTS programs - from improved mental health and enhanced social inclusion to the development of crucial life skills and community ties.
However, the effectiveness of these programs is contingent on several critical factors: the accessibility and safety of sporting spaces, the involvement of empathetic and relatable coaches/leaders, interculturally sensitive program design, and sustained engagement of participants. Programs that take a collaborative, strength-based approach and empower refugee participants tend to see the most positive outcomes.
While the potential benefits are clear, significant challenges remain. Funding models often reinforce an overly narrow focus on "refugees" as a policy category, overlooking the diverse needs and identities within forcibly displaced populations. There are notable gaps in programming for certain groups, including women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities. Additionally, the transient nature of many refugee situations can make it difficult to implement long-term, stable programs.

To maximize the impact of future IRTS initiatives, several key recommendations emerge:

1. Prioritize collaborative program design that actively involves refugee participants
2. Take an intersectional approach that considers the diverse identities and needs within refugee populations
3. Invest in developing culturally competent coaches and leaders, ideally from within refugee communities
4. Create safe, accessible spaces that facilitate social connection beyond just sport activities
5. Build strong partnerships between sport organizations, refugee services, and local communities
6. Develop better monitoring and evaluation to understand long-term impacts

Further research is also needed to address existing gaps, particularly around theoretical frameworks, innovative methodologies, and the inclusion of underrepresented groups. There is significant opportunity for more participatory research approaches that center refugee voices and experiences.

By addressing these challenges and building on promising practices, stakeholders can ensure that IRTS programs continue to evolve and provide meaningful support to forcibly displaced persons. At its best, sport has the power to transcend barriers, create connections, and foster a sense of belonging. When thoughtfully implemented, IRTS initiatives can play a vital role in supporting the inclusion, wellbeing, and development of refugees in their new communities.

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Global IRTS project and D2.1 (D3) Scientific IRTS report

Global IRTS Scientific report has been prepared in Global IRTS Project (2024-2025) under a WP2
Work package 2 - IRTS societal value research and study

Objective of the WP2: Building the evidence base for IRTS by compiling and communicating the currently available evidence-base and conducting a study on the financial return on investment and societal value of the IRTS initiatives.

Lead organisations: German Sports University (GSU) and Center for Advanced Migration Studies Denmark

More information about the project: https://irts.isca.org/globalirts

Project is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Co-funded by the European Union

GLOBAL IRTS

INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES THROUGH SPORT

Co-funded by the European Union