PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS WITH REFUGEES ON SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

BASED ON PEER-TO-PEER ADVICE FROM THE MOVE BEYOND PROJECT PARTNERS
**INTRODUCTION**

This document\(^1\) is intended as a guide for sports and social organisations who want to conduct focus groups with refugees and asylum seekers\(^2\) about their participation in sport and physical activity. It draws on general methodological approaches for focus groups as well as on the specific experiences of the MOVE Beyond project partners when conducting focus groups in 2019-2020.

You can find out more about the MOVE Beyond project at the Integration of Refugees Through Sport website and listen to our podcasts to hear first-hand experiences from our pilot project partners: DGI and the Danish Red Cross (Denmark), UISP and ATAS (Italy), RF-SISU and Save the Children (Sweden), and StreetGames, SPARC and Cornwall & Devon Refugee Support (UK). Some useful tips from these partners are presented in boxes throughout the document.

**Why conduct focus groups?**

Listening to refugee voices is critical. Indeed, it is a starting point for any useful work with refugees that their experiences and reflections are heard and taken seriously. But focus groups are not just about learning from refugees; they can also form the basis for empowering them to participate in sports in the manner of their choosing. In other words, focus groups can ideally foster both knowledge and engagement.

**When should you NOT conduct focus groups?**

Focus groups take time and require a certain commitment from the organisers to ensure that their results are taken seriously and are reflected in practice. If you are not able to take the time needed to do them, think twice about going ahead with them or you will risk producing unsatisfying results. Similarly, if you do not have the flexibility to reshape your practice based on the focus group outcomes, you risk alienating the participants, who may rightly feel that their voices were not taken seriously.

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1 Compiled and written by Zachary Whyte, University of Copenhagen, as an outcome of focus groups conducted for the MOVE Beyond project’s Intellectual Output 2 (focus groups) and 3 (pilot projects in Denmark, Italy, Sweden and the UK).

2 In the following, we will largely use “refugees” to include both refugees and asylum seekers, unless otherwise noted.
CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

Focus groups normally involve a moderated conversation between 6-8 participants on a specific topic lasting no more than a couple of hours. Our purpose is to encourage conversation among the participants to reflect on and nuance issues of integration and sports.

PREPARATION

Here are some things to consider when preparing the focus group.

Who should we recruit?
This depends, of course, fundamentally on the purpose of the focus group. In general, focus groups aim at a certain degree of homogeneity in the participants, simply because people with similar backgrounds often have an easier time talking openly to each other. Note that refugees are of course not a homogenous group per se.

It may be useful to recruit focus groups based on language (e.g. recruit people who share a language – or speak the local language well), interest (e.g. in a certain sport or activity), gender or age, as women and young people, for example, are likely to face different barriers to participation than other groups.

Take care to stay aware of the mental health of the participants. Asylum seekers in particular, but also refugees and other migrants, may find the focus group environment stressful and potentially harmful, and it is ethically incumbent on the organisers to keep an eye on this issue.

Finally, focus group organisers should try to ensure that they do not only recruit “easy” participants, e.g. people with good language and communication skills, confident public speakers, etc. While this will obviously make the focus groups run more smoothly, it also risks biasing the results of the focus groups.

How many should we recruit?
Aim for 6-8 participants. This may mean trying to recruit 10 or so in case not all can make it on the day.

Where should we find the participants and how should we approach them?
No doubt the partner organisations will have some contacts you can use. You can also work through other sports and social organisations, possibly refugee organisations, language schools, and indeed municipalities.

Successfully recruiting refugees to participate rests to a large extent on the establishment of trust. How to go about this depends on your current contact with refugees. For those who work directly with asylum seekers or refugees, personal contacts can help, as these will often be based on some degree of trust. For others, you may need a mediating link. Those who used indirect contacts as a sort of bridge pointed out that the kinds of contacts matter and that it may be useful to present yourself and the aims of the focus group to the target group to build trust. Different groups will require different kinds of groundwork, from in-person presentations to informal networking.

In the UK, the MOVE Beyond project partners already worked directly with asylum seekers and were able to draw on their existing networks to recruit participants. In Sweden, the partners built trust by presenting the project and the aims of the focus group to a variety of actors before they started recruiting participants.
Prepare a brief explanation aimed at refugees to describe who you are, what you want to do, and why it is important. This can be an actual piece of paper (translated as needed), but can also just be a prepared list of points to use when approaching potential participants. Underline at least these three points:

- You are an association or club. You are not working with the authorities and will not share information from the interviews with them.
- The importance of hearing the points of views of refugees, so you can tailor your work to better fit their needs.
- Emphasise that the interview will be anonymised, so their names will not appear anywhere. They are free to say whatever they think.

**What kind of venue should we look for?**
Try to find a space that is private and removed from the view of authorities, so that the refugees feel free to express themselves. It should be large enough that you can all sit around one table. Provide drinks and snacks to support an informal, relaxed atmosphere. It could certainly be at a sports club, if that is available to you.

**When should we schedule the focus group for?**
Think about the refugees’ schedules. If they are attending language school, have a job, or have small children certain times may be difficult. It is always a good idea to simply ask some of the refugees you are looking to recruit.

**How do we encourage the refugees to actually attend, once they have signed up?**
Remember to get contact details (e.g. phone, email, WhatsApp or Facebook) so that you can send out reminders.

A key suggestion from the partners was repeatedly reminding participants about the focus group on multiple platforms (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook, text message) a week before, three days before, and a day before.

Arrange for transportation (e.g. cars, public transport, bicycle) and consider picking your participants up and arriving together. Arrange for logistics like meals or childcare if it is relevant.

The Italian MOVE Beyond partners found that driving their participants to the venue built trust but also allowed them to gauge things like which of their participants were the most talkative. In the focus groups, they could then ask those people to speak last, to ensure that everyone had a chance to voice their perspectives without being overwhelmed by those who were most comfortable speaking.

How many focus groups should we conduct?
The rule of thumb in focus group interviews is that you should keep conducting them until you are not hearing new input. This may not be practical in your situation, depending on how many refugees are willing to participate, and which refugees you are targeting, but you should strive for as many as is feasible.
**FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW**

Here are some things to consider when it comes to conducting the focus group interview.

**How many do we need to be?**

Generally, you should be able to make do with two people in addition to the participants. A moderator to open the proceedings and guide the discussion and a co-moderator in charge of recording the interview and supporting the moderator.

**How should we start?**

The opening of the focus group is quite important, as it sets the stage and tone for the following discussion. A key point to set out at the very beginning is that the refugee participants are the experts that you hope to learn from, and that the focus group outcomes will make a difference to how you work. This serves three functions:

- It encourages participants to speak their minds and to share experiences in the knowledge that they will be taken seriously.
- It helps establish that you want the participants to be honest and not too polite that they don’t mention problems they think might hurt someone’s feelings.
- It makes clear the expectations and purpose of the exercise: namely to try to help others.

**It may be necessary to clear up misunderstandings at this stage. For example, in Sweden it was necessary to underline that the focus group organisers could not help participants get passports, and in Italy it was useful to make explicit to participants that they would not be paid for their participation.**

There are also important practical matters and ground rules that should be mentioned early on. Be sure to underline that:

- The focus group will be recorded, as you really want to remember everything that will be said, but you can’t write fast enough to do so.
- The results will be anonymised – no one will be identifiable – and you will delete the recordings once you are done.
- The goal of the focus group is discussion, so please be respectful of each other so everyone feels they can speak freely.
- The role of the moderator is to guide discussion, so you will mainly ask some broad questions and possibly a few follow-up questions to clarify points.

Finally, before you start, make sure that everyone is on board with the focus group and feels comfortable being recorded.

**The partners recommended trying to create an informal atmosphere, conducive to easy conversation. One good starting point is to provide food and eat together. The commonality and informality of a shared meal was found to help create a basis of trust for the focus group.**
What questions should we ask?
Attached is a list of possible questions (page 8). The key is to ask open-ended questions that encourage participation. But you should also adapt the questions to your specific purposes. In particular, it might be useful to ask questions that address any specifically planned activities directly. Try not to have more than 10 questions. Go from general questions to specifics. If you don’t get much response to a question, try to give examples of what you might mean (there are some examples in the ‘Sample questions’ section). Ask about past experiences more than guessing about the future. Try to imagine how you yourself would answer the questions you pose to see if they are easy to start answering.

How should we go about managing the discussion?
Remember that the purpose of the focus group is to encourage conversation among the participants as much as it is to answer specific questions.

• Ask open questions – avoid closed questions that may be answered yes or no.
• Ask for examples (e.g. ‘Have you had an experience where this was an issue?’).
• Try to let the participants do most of the talking.

In general, it is important to keep an eye on the dynamic of the focus group to ensure that all voices are heard.

• Try to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak. Often one or two people will dominate, so it can be useful to ask others directly (e.g. ‘What do you think of this issue?’ or ‘Have you had any similar experiences?’), or to let the most talkative speak last.
• Sometimes certain issues may keep recurring from certain participants and risk derailing the conversation. Using a “parking lot” approach, these issues can be “parked” until later. This shows respect to the person bringing them up, but also ensures that the conversation can continue and stay on topic.

How should we deal with language and translation?
A key issue in most focus groups with asylum seekers and refugees is the question of translation, as there will often not be a common language spoken equally well by all participants and facilitators. The vast majority of focus groups will not involve the use of professional interpreters, but will instead rely on either informal translation or simply the help of whoever speaks the common language the best. This can cause issues:

• In some cases, it can be hard simply to understand the points the various parties are making. It may be useful to ask the same question in different ways, but be careful not to frustrate or discourage participants from speaking.
• Interpreters may insert their own ideas or filter others’ comments, just as other participants may defer to them, reducing the range of voices in the conversation. It is thus important to speak to them beforehand about their role, and ask them to please translate everything, even things that seem silly or wrong to them. Explaining the purpose and process of the focus group and their central role in making it work can help them understand the importance of this.

In Sweden, the MOVE Beyond partners actively trained asylum seekers to be moderators of focus groups. This has a number of advantages. They often share a language with some other asylum seekers, allowing them to converse more freely. They often know social codes and conventions, meaning they can act in a respectful manner. They share some practical experience of what it is like to be an asylum seeker, so they may be able to address relevant issues more directly. And finally, it builds capacity for the moderators, teaching skills that they may find useful in their later lives.
Do not take the reading and writing ability of refugees and asylum seekers for granted. If you are using something like Post-its to gather up responses or handing out written information, this needs to be taken into account, both because some participants may not be able to join in the conversation and because it can put them in an awkward and embarrassing situation in the focus group. One way of avoiding this issue is by using visual aids.

*The Danish partners drew a road map showing different stages in the process of refugees approaching a sports association, which could serve as a basis for discussing issues at various stages of this process.*

**How should we wrap up?**
Finish off by running through some of the main points raised to ensure that there is agreement on them. It may be useful, for example, to ask participants to pick the single biggest barrier or opportunity they see or to formulate one piece of advice to sports organisations wanting to include refugees. This will help prioritise the answers heard in the focus group. Be sure to thank them for their participation, of course. And try to have some relevant information available for them, if they are interested in pursuing sports or being connected with a club, or at least take down their contact information and get back to them.
SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Use this list of example questions as inspiration for your focus group interviews. Adapt the questions to your specific purposes.

- What surprised you the most about the local community here?
- What kinds of sports do you like to do?
- Have you played any sports here?
  - What kinds of sports or ways of being active? (Football, fitness, etc?)
  - How was it organised? (Pickup games with friends, alone, associations?)
  - Where and when do you do your sports?
  - What do you like about it? Or, what has it helped you do? (Examples could be to hang out with friends/meet new people/practice language/learn about local community/access to exercise/something to do, etc.)
- What is your experience with organised sport or fitness here?
  - What do you know about it, and how did you hear of it?
  - What was your first impression of the sports association?
  - If you were to try to convince a friend to join you, what would you say to them?
- Can you think of some reasons why refugees might not participate in sports activities (Examples: no time, too far, too expensive, don’t know about possibilities, afraid or embarrassed, language issues, etc.)
  - Please describe your experiences in detail
- You’ve described some problems refugees in participating in sports like [examples given]. What could be done to help overcome this?
  - What could sports associations do? What could social associations do? What could other refugees do? What could authorities do?
- If you could go back and talk to yourself when you first arrived here, what advice would you give yourself?
Erasmus+ Sport Collaborative Partnership MOVE Beyond project partners
ISCA (project lead), University of Copenhagen Advanced Migration Studies (Denmark), Demos (Belgium); Implementation pairs: DGI and Danish Red Cross (Denmark), UISP Trentino and ATAS (Italy), Västra Götalands Idrottsförbund and Save the Children Sweden (Region West) (Sweden), and StreetGames, SPARC Sport and Devon & Cornwall Refugee Support (UK).