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## 'Integration is a lot of work.'—A study of integration policies in Norwegian football clubs

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### ABSTRACT

The Norwegian civil society holds a welfare mandate to promote the integration of migrants. Included in this mandate is a belief that sport holds a particular potential to facilitate integration. Voluntary sports clubs are perceived as open, democratic, and inclusive arenas in which children and youth can form togetherness and community building regardless of social background. This notion is reflected in national policy documents, stating that today's sports policy is expected to reflect the diversity of Norwegian society. Leaning on different and critical perspectives on sports-related integration, this study will explore how voluntary football clubs in Norway translate their political mandate of integrating migrant children and youth and discuss the potential impacts of different perceptions and practices of integration. Nine directors of inclusion of different demographical areas in one of the largest cities in Norway were interviewed. The result seems to trace different discourses and types of integration policies, illustrating how sports clubs translate their integration mandate. Both functional and moral approaches were identified, and the study demonstrates how migrants encounter different opportunities and conditions to be integrated into sports as well as other social spheres of the civil society.

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After the so-called 'migration crisis' in 2015 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Europe is experiencing a record-high transnational migration (Mooyaart & Valk, 2020; UNCHR, 2022). With the change to neoliberal governance in most European nation-states, there seems to be an explicit political expectation that the civil society should take increasing responsibility for the social integration of newly arrived migrants<sup>1</sup> (Skinner et al., 2008). Sports organisations as democratic and community-building institutions are considered central civil society institutions in most European countries. We, therefore, find a widespread political assumption that participation in sports leads to

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social integration, and voluntary sports clubs are thus expected to take a leading role in promoting the social integration of migrants (Agergaard, 2018; Doidge et al., 2020).

Norway is one of the European countries where the civil society has a long tradition of service provision in various welfare areas (Loga, 2018). In 1988, an 'Official Norwegian Report' by the 'Ministry of Finance and Customs' (1988) on the role of voluntary organisations in the Norwegian welfare state stated a need for closer cooperation between municipalities and local voluntary organisations to meet the population's health and social services demands. The report emphasised the role of voluntary organisations as safeguards of democratic functions with an emphasis on developing healthy individuals, building social relationships and networks, laying the groundwork for committed communities, empowering people, and developing social capital (Seippel, 2002). This welfare mandate is followed up in several policy documents (e.g. Ministry of Finance & Customs, 1988; Ministry of Justice & Public Security, 2017; Ministry of Local Government & Labour, 1996; The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Culture, 2012), including the latest white paper 'National minorities in Norway: A comprehensive policy' (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2021) which emphasise that '*cultural policy must facilitate that art and cultural life, sports and volunteering reflect the diversity that characterises today's society. The goal is an effort for diversity*' (p. 44). This notion indicates that integration in sports is more than just participation in sports; it is also a question of structural, social-cultural, and social-affective integration (Elling et al., 2001).

The responsibility of integration is highlighted as one of four core values in the strategy document of the umbrella organisation of Norwegian sports organisations: 'The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF)' (2019). In this document, NIF states that it '*aims to reflect the diversity of the Norwegian society where no one is to be excluded*' and that '*sports clubs are unifying for local communities*' (p. 8). Similar values are also seen within the Norwegian Football Association (NFF), the largest Norwegian sports Federation, which for the last 10 years, has increased its political attention towards promoting the inclusion of migrants in their activities by turning its attention to the '*barriers, discrimination and exclusion*' (Norwegian Football Federation [NFF], 2016, p. 32) migrants may experience when engaging in football clubs.

Regarding participation and inclusion in sports, most studies (Agergaard et al., 2016; Elofsson et al., 2014; Van Bottenburg et al., 2005; van Haaften, 2019) indicate that migrants both in Norway and other European countries tend to be less active in sports than the majority population and less likely to participate in sports clubs. For example, studies of youth (13–19 years old) in Norway (Andersen & Bakken, 2015) show that 51% of the majority boys and 38% of the majority girls participated in local sports clubs. In comparison, 42% of the migrant boys and 16% of the migrant girls did the same. In the body of research on sport and integration, the attention to barriers to sports participation is well explored (e.g. Smith et al., 2019; Spaaij et al., 2019). Hovden et al. (2015) and Bakke et al. (2016) found, for example, that the cost of sporting activities often prevented migrant families from participating and that migrant families experienced that their local sports clubs took few initiatives to include them in their activities. This minority-majority gap in sports participation is thus mainly

explained due to the importance of socioeconomic status and cultural differences (Strandbu et al., 2019).

However, few studies seem to focus on voluntary sports clubs' integration strategies and policies (Doidge et al., 2020). Among the exceptions are Friberg and Gautun (2007), who studied the inclusion of ethnic minorities in voluntary football clubs in Norway. They found that most clubs were aware of their mandate to promote integration, but most clubs did not feel they had succeeded in their integration work. Likewise, Bjerregaard et al.'s (2009) study indicated that sports clubs often were unwilling to follow up on integration objectives and welfare tasks due to a perceived lack of facilities, resources, and time. Flensner et al. (2021) reported similar findings, showing that, although sports clubs are aware of their welfare responsibility of integration, they mostly perceive it as something beyond their most important work tasks.

Furthermore, studies have highlighted how voluntary sports clubs are characterised as organisations that aim to fulfil the interest of their members, often in terms of competitive sports, and thus mainly build upon assimilationist ideas that can exclude, rather than integrate, migrants (Hertting & Karlefors, 2021). Dowling (2020) showed how alternative visions, such as two-way processes of integration or ideas about celebrating cultural diversity, were rationally marginalised in the everyday business of most voluntary sports clubs in favour of competitive sports. In their study of Swedish sports clubs' integration efforts with children and youth, Hertting and Karlefors (2021) also found that clubs in multicultural areas had been transformed into multicultural clubs over the years, practising alternative visions of integration. These clubs emphasised intercultural meetings and integration in their everyday activities, making the sports club a bridge between the community and its migrant members.

From this point of departure, this paper aims to contribute to the literature on sports clubs' policies for the social integration of migrants in voluntary sports clubs. Accordingly, the paper explores how voluntary football clubs in Norway translate their political mandate of integrating migrant children and youth and discuss the potential impacts of the club's perceptions and practices of integration and the role of sport as a prominent civil society arena for the integration of migrants. The data material is based on semi-structured interviews with the representatives responsible for recruiting and including migrant children and youth in the clubs. All clubs are voluntary sports clubs. To support our analysis and understand the patterns and complexity surrounding integration and sports, we draw on a theoretical framework based on contemporary and critical perspectives on sports-related integration, such as Agergaard (2018) and Elling and Claringbould (2005).

## Theoretical framework

The field of research on sports and integration of migrants has grown considerably in recent years, parallel with an increased political attention on the integration of minority groups in Western societies (Massao & Fasting, 2014; Smith et al., 2019). The scholarship covers a broad spectrum of issues, experiences, and impacts, including health promotion, barriers and facilitators to participation, the role of sports and physical activity, and policy development (Skille, 2011; Spaaij et al., 2019). However, most of

the studies' alignment with policy-driven questions and frameworks seem to look at narrow-defined questions when addressing migrants' sporting experiences (Kataria & de Martini Ugolotti, 2022). This point of departure seems to result in process-oriented studies, looking at output, not impact (Nathan et al., 2013). To accommodate this challenge, we will in this article lean on critical perspectives that discuss different approaches and strategies to integration as well as shortcomings in the political belief of sports-related integration.

As already mentioned, there seems to be a strong political belief that integration processes automatically take place in voluntary sports clubs. However, most voluntary sports clubs do not have the same goals as the national authorities (Stenling & Fahlén, 2016). This discrepancy could be seen as a result of what Elling and Claringbould (2005) refer to as functional and moral legitimations of integration. The functional approach highlights the importance of including all potentially interested and talented individuals, in line with the club's overall aim to improve their sporting quality. As such, a functional approach emphasises that all, regardless of, e.g. gender or ethnicity, should have equal formal access to participate in the club's activities. This often means an integration policy focussing on recruitment processes and talented athletes, characterised by what Guttmann (2004) conceptualises as the inner rationality of sports, in which meritocratic thinking, specialisation, and competition are central. However, according to Elling and Claringbould (2005), many actors dealing with inclusion policies and diversity management finds this approach reductionist and narrow, representing a policy that, in the long run, leads to drop-out rather than integration. Still, a functional approach can make sports attractive to the migrants able to adapt to the dominant sporting norms in the club. However, to accommodate the political belief in 'sports for all' and integration, it is expected that the sports clubs' policy promotes an external rationality based on moral legitimations emphasising equal sporting opportunities by non-discriminatory practices, equal distributions of resources, and equal valuation of sporting performances (Elling & Claringbould, 2005).

With the political assumption that voluntary sports clubs share a moral responsibility to contribute to social welfare, integration policies in sports are often vague, with vital questions on promoting integrative behaviour mostly lacking (Agergaard, 2018). Furthermore, the dominant framing of integration seems to convey a normative approach to integration where migrants and descendants must undertake the labour of 'fitting in' and adapt to the nationally inherited ideas and practices of sport themselves (Nunn et al., 2021). This notion shows how the focus and aims of initially well-intentioned sport-for-integration initiatives unwittingly contribute to concealing how migrant's integration in voluntary sports clubs proceed through a constant differentiation that distinguishes between those able to fit in and thus assumed integrated and those contingently and precariously included (Kataria & de Martini Ugolotti, 2022). According to Agergaard (2011, 2018), this emphasis on *the right way* to do integration is in line with an assimilation approach, in which integration is understood as a linear process of adapting to an unchanging host society with a static endpoint- making integration something one is doing or not doing.

Agergaard (2018) argues that the traditional understanding of integration often is ambiguous and may need to be reconceptualized. She underlines that integration

should be defined as temporal processes having no endpoint and achieved in and within everyday practices. This understanding makes integration a social-relational process in which various groups and individuals are related to each other in mutual interdependency. Accordingly, integration can thus be described as a multi-level process: on a micro-level, it evolves interactions between individuals with various backgrounds; at the meso-level, it shapes relationships between institutions and sub-groups; and at the macro-level, it develops relationships supported by dominating political and socio-economic structures. In other words, integration implies different velocities, variable trajectories, and outcomes depending on the context.

By framing integration as a multi-level process, Agergaard (2018) maintains that it is essential to distinguish between integration processes directed towards supporting migrants to participate in sports and those related to the broader system integration processes. Accordingly, Agergaard (2018) refers to *integration into sports* as a micro-level integration that only involves sports participation, while *integration through sports* refers to a system of integration that enables migrants to participate in other societal spheres, such as the job market and higher education. She also points out that social integration through sports is difficult to achieve because the relationship between the sub-field of organised sport and other social fields is loosely coupled.

In this paper, we will use these critical perspectives on sports policy and integration to identify how sports clubs translate their integration mandate and to discuss how they facilitate the integration of migrants and the role of sport as a prominent arena for societal integration. Through this framework, we will enlighten how the clubs perceive integration and how they legitimise their practices.

## Methodology

The study underpinning this paper relies on data from semi-structured interviews of representatives of voluntary Norwegian football clubs responsible for the social integration of migrants. By adopting a '*maximum variation sampling*' strategy (Markula & Silk, 2011), ten informants were recruited and interviewed, representing nine clubs of different sizes located in different demographical areas of one of the largest cities in Norway. The informants were recruited to the study by email containing an information letter and a consent statement. We focussed merely on clubs representing one urban area to get a sense of how clubs that share the same organisational structures, facilities, and infrastructures, such as belonging to the same municipality and the same regional level, differ in their approach to integrating migrants. We found this fruitful as it opens the possibility to refer to specific conditions and cases characterising this urban area and for the clubs to compare themselves with other clubs in the sample.

The informants recruited had various roles in the clubs, such as general manager, director of sport, board member, and director of inclusion, but all had a role in their club to work with the social integration of migrants. As we can see from Table 1. below, eight of the nine clubs are football clubs, while club 8. is a multi-sport club with a large football department. In addition to the football department, the club also offers sports such as handball, basketball, track and field, and cross-country skiing.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of informants and clubs.

Informant	Role in the club	Type of club	Size of the club	Migrants in the local area of the club (%)
1.	General Manager	Football Club	Above 1000 members	3
2.	Director of sport	Football Club	500–750 members	8
3.	Board member and deputy head of the club	Football Club	750–1000 members	5
4.	General manager and director of sport	Football Club	500–750 members	4
5.	Board director	Football Club	500–750 members	9
6.	Director of Integration Former board director and is now the finance manager	Football Club	750–1000 members	12
7.	Board director	Football Club	250–500 members	8
8.	General manager	Multi-sport club	750–1000 members in the football department	8
9.	General manager and director of the youth department	Football Club	250–500 members	16

Regarding demographic characteristics, clubs 6. and 9. stand out in terms of a relatively high proportion of migrants in their local area, while clubs 1., 3., and 4. have a relatively low proportion of migrants.

After the sampling, we constructed an interview guide consisting of three main topics: (i) The mandate of integration, (ii) measures and practices to promote the integration of migrant children and youths, and (iii) cooperation and contact with other organisations and institutions in the local community to promote the integration of migrants. The theoretical framework was integrated into questions of the interview guide by asking about how they approached their integration mandate and why. The latter topics aimed mainly to explore how the integration process was conducted at different organisational levels and their reflection on their choices and possibilities. Due to the restrictions related to Covid-19, three interviews were conducted by phone, and six were face-to-face. The interviews lasted between 35 and 90 min.

In the analysis of the data material, we used the six steps proposed by Braun et al. (2012) to conduct an interpretative thematic analysis. Firstly, the interview data were transcribed manually. Secondly, features were identified, and the following codes were developed from across the dataset in an inductive and systemic reading of the interviews: 'sports participation', 'an elite perspective', 'sports for all', 'drop-out', 'the need for resources', 'children are colour-blind', 'it's a matter of family or religion', 'we have villas, not apartment buildings', and 'you have to train to perform'. The first five codes are considered descriptive, while the latter was more interpretive. Thirdly, these codes contributed to identifying three broader themes inspired by a deductive content analysis based on our theoretical framework: 'interpretations of integration', 'implementation of integration', and 'relationship to the local community'. In this process, we also developed sub-themes such as 'recruitment', 'talent development', and 'non-member activities'. The final phase involved reviewing potential themes occurring throughout the coding process and developing the themes into a format facilitating the writing-up phase of the article. The latter included selecting compelling extracts in

the form of direct quotes from the original data and relating these back to the research question and literature.

Regarding ethical considerations, the study proposal has been guided by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), which evaluates proposals from scholars at Norwegian universities. Accordingly, the participants were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and guaranteed confidentiality. This included a de-identification strategy to secure the informant's and their clubs' anonymity by giving them fictive names and removing all references to their club, other clubs, coaches, and neighbourhoods. These measures are considered enough as the position of leader of voluntary sports clubs is, among other things, characterised by a high turnover (Seippel, 2003), making our informants one of many even in a short period.

### ***Analysis: translations of the welfare mandate of integration: perceptions and practices***

This section presents our findings on how voluntary sports clubs in Norway translate their political mandate of integrating migrant children and youth. To discuss the potential impact of the club's perception and practices and the role of sports as a prominent civil society arena for the integration of migrants, we present our findings across two broad subsections. The first highlights how the welfare mandate is perceived, while the second focus on the club's integration practices. The analyses are conducted in direct and indirect dialogue with our theoretical framework.

#### ***Perceptions of sports and integration: a burden for some and a primary mission for others***

As previously outlined, Norwegian football clubs are given a mandate to work for sport-related integration (NFF, 2012, 2016). The interview data showed that the clubs were aware of this mandate. Most interviewees translated this mandate emphasising that the club should be open for everyone, facilitate equal opportunities, and create a community for all participants through inclusive attitudes, values, and practices. All the clubs pinpointed that they shared '*...the vision of 'sport for all' and all that follows*'. One of them talked about it this way:

I am so glad that, today, our values mirror the good intentions of NIF and NFF. In my opinion, this is all about inclusion and community, and I think the current values in our sports plan reflect this.

However, their expressions were mainly vague when challenged to elaborate on how 'the good intentions of NIF and NFF' were reflected and materialised in their everyday activities. In addition, their perceptions of promoting and facilitating integrative behaviour were mostly lacking. Furthermore, most informants admitted that integrating migrants into the club was hard work and required more resources in terms of competence and organisational infrastructure to succeed. The most prominent example was the need for someone who had extensive knowledge of the migrant's situation and language and could work full-time with the welfare mandate of integration. Such competencies were, however, seen as both different and additional to the



general competence of running a football club. For example, one of the informants described it this way:

Integration is a lot of work. Multicultural experience and knowing another language are entirely different from knowing how to be a coach. However, I think that one needs such knowledge to succeed with integration. Nevertheless, that is not something every club has; it is a lot to demand from our volunteers to acquire such competence.

This understanding indicates that the welfare mandate of integration is perceived as something outside of a football club's general activities, commitments, and responsibilities (Flensner et al., 2021). Thus, most clubs considered the responsibility of integrating migrants as an extra burden put on them by the civil society. In practice, this meant that the clubs did not facilitate the participation of migrants in any other way than facilitating the participation of children and youth in general. This meant that once the migrants became members and part of a football team, there were no more integrative measures from the clubs, indicating that the migrants had to adapt to the dominating norms and conduct. Integration is thus obviously marginalised in favour of the club's primary goal, football activity (Dowling, 2020). This reflects a liberal approach where everyone is given equal chances to participate, and thus the responsibility of integration is left to the migrants themselves (Kataria & de Martini Ugolotti, 2022; Nunn et al., 2021). This way of thinking shows how the integration mandate is seen as an individual and linear process, not a natural part of the football clubs' mission (Agergaard, 2018). Since migrants involved in football activities also have to adapt to dominating norms and practices, this approach includes assimilation processes, where all individuals should be treated equally, independent of ethnic and sociocultural backgrounds (Agergaard, 2018).

However, the data material also reflects other perceptions of the welfare mandate and, thus, other approaches to promote integration. For example, unlike the clubs that perceived the welfare mandate as an extra burden, others stated that integration was the centre of attention in policy and practices.

We are not a big football club. But in terms of integration, we are in the Champions League. We prioritize integration! Our annual goal is to complete the season with more players than we started with, and we evaluate our season and our trainers on how many new players we have recruited and how they prosper. Heck! If they are a member or not is not that important. We arrange many different activities, not only football, for members and non-members. The most important thing is that the children and youth have a place to meet and know that we care for them.

These clubs further underlined that the integration of migrants and other minority groups was a responsibility they shared with other central institutions in the local society:

We want to show how great of a place this is, so we started a still-ongoing cooperation with other local institutions. Today we work closely with the school, the church, the mosque, and housing associations. For us, it is not crucial if migrants play football in our club or do something completely different. The most important thing is that they make friends and feel like a part of our local community.

Accordingly, these clubs argued that they, as civil society actors, need to be involved in combating and solving social problems in their local communities. Their

policy provided individuals of various social and ethnic backgrounds with support, resources, and opportunities to develop as athletes and citizens (Hertting & Karlefors, 2021). It was underlined that their policy was shaped by continuous attention to the integration of minority children and youth and thus constituted an essential part of their activity profile. Unlike several other clubs, they do not hesitate to submit to policy goals defined by outside political institutions (Stenling & Fahlén, 2016).

These two translations of the integration mandate in the clubs studied point to at least two different understandings: Most clubs described the welfare mandate of integration as an extra burden put upon them from above and not something they perceived as an essential part of their general and daily priorities as a football club (Agergaard, 2018). On the other hand, the clubs stating a different view perceived their integration mandate as part of their moral responsibility as a sports club and welfare contributor (Elling & Claringbould, 2005). The following section will describe and analyse how the two approaches play out in practice.

### ***Integration practices: a matter of equality in chances and equality in outcome***

The interviewee's descriptions of their practices showed a multifaceted landscape. One of the most prominent differences was how the different translations of the welfare mandate resulted in different recruitment processes. Following a liberal understanding of equality, the clubs who found integration an extra burden promoted a recruitment strategy based upon participation on equal terms. This meant, for example, holding a welcoming event during the first few days of the school year. One of the interviewees talked about their initiatives this way:

We arrange an annual 'football school' for our members every September. The primary goal is to recruit the six-year-olds who have just started at the local elementary school. While the kids play football, we meet with the parents and try to figure out who can take it upon themselves to be coaches, social contact, and so on. We promote this 'football school' mainly in the local kindergarten, on Facebook, and on our web page. Except for that, we do not do much. Everyone seems to know of it. It usually goes to plan.

At the parental meeting, the club informed about different subsidising schemes, including how the club could cover training fees for children living in low-income households. The clubs found this measure of integration easy to prioritise as they usually received financial support from public subsidy schemes. One of the interviewees pinpointed the situation this way: *'As long as we get funding from the Sport City Program, we subsidise training fees for those in need'*.

Such practices indicate a micro-level understanding of integration where the goal is to open for recruiting migrant children and youth into sports (Agergaard, 2018). This approach highly differs from the clubs that see integration as the centre of attention and an ongoing process, as they invested extensive efforts in communicating with migrant children and families on their terms. For example, they produced brochures in different languages and appointed persons with particular language skills, so-called *'club ambassadors'* to help them reach out to migrant families who found joining a (Norwegian) football club complex and challenging:

We have two club ambassadors. They both have migrant backgrounds. They work towards the multicultural community and help us spread the correct information about sports participation and other events we host. Why? Because we had to acknowledge that we did not manage to do so ourselves.

The club ambassador follows up on three families—ten children in total. Two of the families have analphabetic parents, so we would not be able to reach out to them without the club ambassador. Previously, we used a translator, but misunderstandings often came up because the translator did not have a good enough understanding of what sports participation is about in Norway. However, when the family spoke to our club ambassador, everything changed. They understood it. They became eager and wanted to join. It made me so happy.

These voices demonstrate how the clubs try to adapt to migrant families' conditions, prerequisites, and resources based on an acknowledgement that migrant families, especially non-western, often seem to lack sufficient social and cultural capital to be included in voluntary sports clubs (Smith et al., 2019; Strandbu et al., 2019). Accordingly, these clubs found it insufficient to rely on a recruitment strategy that only offered an 'opening day' through social media and/or (Norwegian) social networks. Following Dowling (2020), such practices aim to eliminate the expectations and demands of resources that often shape Norwegian football clubs and support migrants and other minority groups that do not possess sufficient cultural resources to take responsibility for their own recruitment. This reflects recruitment practices aiming to create equality in outcome rather than an equality in chances (Borchorst & Dahlerup, 2003; Hovden, 2000).

Even though all the club representatives interviewed referred to their club as a community club, compared to what they labelled a 'talent factory', many stated that their club's primary goal was to prioritise skill and performance development for talented players. It was also, in some respects, experienced that the welfare mandate of integration tends to conflict with their sporting goals.

We see that playing football demands more now than before. You need a higher level of skillset. And if you do not have it, it is not easy to keep on participating. We also see that migrants tend to drop out due to family obligations or religion. Stuff like that prevents them from training.

This expression indicates that migrants less often than the majority group succeed in their development as athletes. When migrants are unable or unwilling to assimilate into the dominant (Norwegian) expectations of sports participation, such as following the coach's ruling, they often drop out (Ødegård et al., 2016). This points to the dominant expectations of doing sports '*the right way*' (Agergaard, 2018). Despite this, most clubs insisted that all their players, including migrants, were given the same chances and opportunities to develop their talents. Therefore, it was up to the migrants to undertake the labour of 'fitting in':

Everyone is welcome at our club. Everyone has the same opportunity to succeed and be a part of the team. I don't care if they are migrants or not. However, the club needs to prioritise the most talented players. We must focus on those we believe can take the next step and sign for a professional team.

This liberal mindset of equality (see Borchorst & Dahlerup, 2003; Hovden, 2000), where the migrants themselves hold the responsibility of integration (Kataria & de

Martini Ugolotti, 2022; Nunn et al., 2021), enables the clubs to prioritise the most talented players, implying that the 'drop-out problem' becomes an individual concern where the migrants are the only ones to blame. This framing often results in significant challenges for long-term participation for most migrants (Agergaard, 2018) and can be interpreted as a functional legitimisation of the integration mandate (Elling & Claringbould, 2005). Despite proven weaknesses, however, this approach can still facilitate integration. Nevertheless, the integrative potential in such clubs is highly dependent on the individual coach and their ability to encourage positive behaviour, organise events and programmes, and build 'teachable moments' (Doidge et al., 2020). On the other hand, the interviewees of the clubs that translated their integration mandate as the centre of attention in policy and practice demonstrated more inclusive and alternative practices and interpreted the 'drop-out problem' differently:

Many kids choose their primary sport at a young age to pursue the dream of becoming an elite. Then, when they are 13-16 years old, it suddenly becomes too professionalized. And they quit. This early specialization also has consequences for those who want to play for fun because they suddenly find themselves in a team that trains 4-6 times a week. So, of course, they also quit. I think it's just sad. One must remember that kids dropping out does not necessarily mean they don't want to be a part of the club. It could mean that they don't want to play football every time. Alternatively, they want to play just for fun. To accommodate this, we have started to arrange 'allidrett',<sup>2</sup> a type of activity where participants can decide what they want to do and how often they want to do it.

'Allidrett' is here introduced as a more inclusive alternative to the regular football activity, mainly aiming to showcase a variety of low-threshold activities. This alternative illustrates that practicing integration and social inclusion also requires facilitating measures and activities for those who do not feel at home in regular football activity and prefer less emphasis on achievements and competition. Such adjustments emphasise practices that can generate social interactions and mutual interdependency among various groups and individuals. This reflects an understanding of integration as something that does not happen immediately or has an endpoint (Agergaard, 2018). The clubs with an overall focus on integration also facilitated activities that included support and mastering with a broader scope than just integration in sporting activities:

One of our main activities is our activity center, where we, the football club, organize activities for children aged 10-12 years old. Here, they can get help with their homework and play board games or PlayStation. Moreover, they get a free meal. All this is for free. It is pretty popular; we usually have 50-60 kids every Monday and Wednesday. You do not have to bring any gear or even be a club member. You only need to be between 10-12 years old.

The activity centre showcases how the clubs offer differentiated and multileveled integration measures, and thus a policy with a much broader scope than safeguarding talent selection. Thus, it challenges the 'sportificated' and dominant discourses on integration and sports-specific volunteering in many respects. Furthermore, this may stimulate a rethinking of what civil involvement can include, for example, facilitating meeting places, such as an activity centre, point to a moral legitimisation of the integration mandate, where developing skills, capacities, and relationships of importance for

integration in the civil society at large are the most essential (Agergaard, 2018; Elling & Claringbould, 2005).

## Discussion and concluding remarks

As the analyses indicate, all the studied clubs were aware of their welfare mandate of integration and underlined that they, in all their efforts, were emphasising inclusive attitudes, values, and practices. Despite this, the data material demonstrates that the clubs translated their mandate of integration quite differently, indicating different impacts on the migrant's opportunity to be included in their sporting activities and on the role of the clubs as facilitators of welfare in their local communities. We will briefly discuss some main aspects and impacts of such policy issues.

As mentioned previously, most clubs translated their integration mandate as an additional mission for a football club. The responsibility to promote the integration of migrants was perceived as an external task put on them by the civil society. Some expressed hesitation and ambiguity linked to their welfare mandate (Ibsen & Levinson, 2019). It was perceived as hard work that required extra resources and as something outside the core business of a football club. It was also reported conflicts between the ambitions of successfully integrating migrants and the ambitions to develop football talents and skills. This conflict of interest seems to result in a functional legitimisation of their integration work since their integration efforts were linked mainly to the recruitment process and to facilitate equal opportunities to participate for those already interested in the sporting activities offered.

This functional approach to integration mirrors a liberal integration policy based on formal equal access and equality in chances (Borchorst & Dahlerup, 2003; Hovden, 2000). It includes the notion that migrants are given similar conditions as the majority group to be involved and, therefore, must take individual responsibility for their own integration process (Kataria & de Martini Ugolotti, 2022; Nunn et al., 2021). This demonstrates an integration policy in line with a functional understanding of integration (Elling & Claringbould, 2005) and an understanding of integration as a linear process with a clear endpoint, as posited by Agergaard's (2018) conceptualisation of 'integration into sport'. This mindset gives priority to providing possibilities to practice the subsequent football activities according to their primary tasks as a football club with an emphasis on developing talented players and thus improving the sporting quality of the club (Elling & Claringbould, 2005). In this approach, the clubs also seem to avoid the conflicting and incompatible logics related to integration and selection that characterise the everyday business in most sports clubs and organisations (Stenling & Fahlén, 2016; Tangen, 2004). This integration strategy opens, for example, for the legitimisation of meritocratic selection strategies in football practices, in which the dominant logic is to prioritise the best players independent of social and ethnic background (Agergaard, 2018; Elling & Claringbould, 2005). However, according to Agergaard (2018), this way of thinking also implies assimilation and often results in significant challenges for the social integration of migrants (Agergaard, 2018; Elling & Claringbould, 2005).

Nevertheless, the analyses also uncovered that some of the studied clubs translated their mandate in moral terms, as they shared the view that sports clubs have great potential to contribute to the social integration of migrants (Elling & Claringbould, 2005). Their policy targeted migrants at the centre of attention, and their practices were anchored on creating equality in results rather than just equality in chances, which implies a distribution of support and resources relative to the migrants' starting point (Hovden, 2000). Moreover, the integration mandate was translated as a shared moral responsibility with other central institutions in the local community, for example, the schools. This way of thinking reflects an understanding of integration as a broader system integration process, which implies 'integration through sport' (Agergaard, 2018). One of the clubs demonstrated this mindset by reporting how they had created the activity centre as a multicultural meeting place for children and youth of different ages, where sporting activities were only one part of the activity offered. Such integration practices mark a distance to a functional and liberal understanding of integration (Elling & Claringbould, 2005) based on the acknowledgement that integration and social inclusion must be an ongoing and multi-level process that can make a difference for migrant children and youth (Agergaard, 2018).

Accordingly, our study seems to trace two dominant discourses, illustrating how sports clubs translate their integration mandate very differently. The discourses reflect different types of integration policies, resulting in different opportunities and conditions for migrants' involvement in sports as well as in other social spheres of the civil society. Against this backdrop, it becomes adequate to question if all sports clubs represent excellent arenas for the social integration of migrants and other minority groups (Krange & Strandbu, 2004; Lorentzen, 2004). According to our analyses, it may, for example, be relevant to ask if clubs, looking at their integration mandate as a burden put upon them by the civil society, are fulfilling their civil mandate of integration. The study exemplifies how this attitude seems to have quite different impacts on migrant sport participation than for those involved in clubs looking at their integration mandate as an essential moral task and target. A crucial question is whether voluntary sports clubs, in general, can be trusted to safeguard the integration of migrants as a broader system integration? Critical studies (Agergaard, 2018; van Haafden, 2019; Hertting & Karlefors, 2021; Smith et al., 2019; Strandbu et al., 2019) find that migrants experience a variety of barriers to sports participation, including pressure to participate on clubs' terms, which all seem to lead to exclusion.

Recent studies of modern sports (e.g. Fahlén & Stenling, 2016; Norberg, 2011) have indicated an increasing instrumentalization of sports clubs and other civil society organisations, even though these are self-regulatory and seemingly autonomous from intervention by the state (Ashenden, 2015). In other words, it is assumed that sports organisations are increasingly utilised to attain overall societal objectives such as social inclusion and integration of migrants (Ekholm & Dahlstedt, 2017). Our study, as others (e.g. Ibsen & Levinsen, 2019; Stenling & Fahlén, 2016), indicates, however, a certain hesitancy and resistance among some clubs to submit to social policy goals defined by external political institutions. This may point to conflicts and tensions an increasing instrumentalization of sport may create.

As previously indicated, this study has a limited scope and a limited data basis for exploring the complexity of social integration processes in the clubs more in-depth since it is only based on interview data and data from informants that often were handed the responsibility for integration tasks by the board of the club. More extensive studies are needed to grasp a broader scope of the sports club's integration policy, including ideological conflicts, tensions and power struggles directed at political priorities and integration strategies. This includes studies based on mixed-methods design, where participant observation is part of the design. The civil welfare mandate is also concerned about the possible societal outcomes of the club's integration policy and the outcomes of integration through sport. This study has to a limited degree, contributed to new or extensive knowledge about such outcomes, for example, insight into the impacts on migrants' opportunities in higher education and at the job market. Due to the limitations of this study and the lack of studies on sports clubs' integration strategies, we need more studies that aim to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how the sports clubs experience, handle and react to their outside welfare mandate. For example, how sports clubs experience and possibly resist the increased instrumentalization of sport and how safeguarding their autonomy may influence their attitudes towards fulfilling their potential as civil integration arenas.

## Notes

1. *Migrants* are persons who immigrate into societies other than where they were born, while also emigrating away from places that they often continue to describe as home. The category covers a diverse group, including economic migrants as well as refugees and asylum-seekers. These types of voluntary and forced migration are sometimes described as separate categories, yet the various types of migrants share the transnational experience (Agergaard, 2018, p. 4).
2. *Allidrett* is a sport for children that facilitates various activities, allowing children to try several different sports in different environments. 'Allidrett' emphasises the development of basic motor skills through play and activities adapted to the children's level of development (NIF, n.d.).

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