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The role of the Olympic Movement in the refugee crisis. An exercise program for refugees

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This lecture aims to examine the role of the Olympic Movement in the refugee crisis, and to present an exercise program for refugees organized by the University of Thessaly. The focus of the "exercise program for refugees" is on the promotion of equality in society, against xenophobia and racism, through sports and physical activities, in order to struggle against all forms of intolerance. The active participation of refugees in sports and physical activities, promotes the ideas of equality in the society, the respect for human rights, the acceptance of others, the intracultural communication, the inclusion, the cooperation, and team building, regardless of sex, race, religion, minority groups, culture, etc. In sports and life, all people are different and at the same time all people are equal. Any initiative of the Olympic movement in this direction is in accordance with its values. The International Olympic Academy can play a leading role in implementing and coordinating exercise programs for refugees.

General introduction

According to the declaration on the occasion of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the European Union is founded on the basis of equal rights and supportive cooperation, enriched by open borders and a lively variety of languages, cultures and regions, it aims to work towards peace and freedom, democracy and the rule of law, respect and shared responsibility, prosperity and security, tolerance and participation, justice and solidarity. However, modern societies are suffering from a number of racist hostilities as well as various incidents of intolerance towards minorities (European Commission, 2007). In addition to this, the European Youth Campaign "all different, all equal" against racism, xenophobia, anti-semitism and intolerance seeks to bring these people together and give extra momentum to the struggle against all forms of intolerance. Many people across the continent, via public bodies, non-governmental associations and local initiatives, are trying to tackle these problems. The aim of this campaign was to sensitize and mobilize people towards tolerance, equality, dignity, human rights and democracy (European Youth Center, 1995, 1996).

Multicultural societies is a common phenomenon in many countries. As a consequence, new challenges emerge at both national and international levels whereas the successful adaptation to the phenomena of migration and violent displacement of refugees, arises as a fundamental and pressing issue. Sport has always been regarded as a vehicle for bringing people together, and there has been an increasing interest to use sports as a tool to promote integration in multicultural societies. Relevant studies in the area, indicated that sport can play an important role

in young migrants' acculturation process and in the promotion of social integration in today's multicultural societies (Morela, 2016; Morela et al., 2016).

In Greece, an exercise program focused on the promotion of equality in society through sports and physical activities was implemented, and its title was "The Kallipateira project: from sports to everyday life, all different, all equal". The program was developed on the principles of sports and the Olympic values, emphasizing on the promotion of the ideals of equality in the school community, as well as the promotion of equal participation in the social and cultural sphere. The aim of this project was to help and encourage teachers and students to promote a healthy, extroverted and tolerant society through Physical Education and sports. The program also focused on gender equality, and how to live and work together in a spirit of cooperation and equality, against racism, xenophobia, and intolerance. In this program, a number of educational materials were developed, which consisted of a teacher's book and 3 students' activities books, for elementary and secondary schools (Theodorakis et al., 2008).

The thematic units developed in this educational material are related to the following topics: a) human rights, b) cultural diversity, c) racism and xenophobia, d) gender equality in education and society e) social inequalities and social discrimination. The project succeeded to use sports against xenophobia, discrimination, racism and prejudice, and to apply and incorporate, the values of equality in the society, through sports and physical education environment.

The role of the Olympic movement on the refugee crisis

During the last Olympic Games, 10 refugee athletes competed in Rio 2016, inspiring hope to people displaced by war and social unrest all over the world. These athletes acted as symbols of hope for refugees worldwide, attracting global attention to the magnitude of the refugee crisis when they participated in the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. "We are equal now", said marathon runner Yonas Kinde, who is originally from Ethiopia. "We compete like human beings, like the others" (Heather, 2016; International Olympic Committee, 2016a).

The IOC president Thomas Bach, during the opening ceremony of the 2016 Olympic Games, commented that *"It is a signal to the international community that refugees are our fellow human beings and are an enrichment to society. These refugee athletes will show the world that, anyone can contribute to society through their talent, skills and strength of the human spirit."* In the same vein was Pope Francis' message: *"In a world thirsting for peace, tolerance, and reconciliation (acceptance of others, re-established good relations) we hope that the spirit of the Olympic Games inspires all – participants and spectators – to "fight the good fight" and finish the race together, desiring to obtain as a prize, not a medal, but something much more precious: the construction of a civilization in which solidarity reigns and is based upon the recognition that we are all members of the same human family, regardless of the differences of culture, skin color, or religion"*.

Of course, the main questions such how feasible is to promote these Olympic values in society through sports remain. Nevertheless, the Olympic Games themselves appear as an example of peaceful social coexistence of athletes from different sporting and cultural backgrounds. Olympism's general philosophy and Olympic values are based on the principles of peace, fair play and fair contest aiming to create a peaceful society with less violence and competition (International Olympic Committee (2016a). Finally, the Olympic Games are a major public event, with millions of spectators and with more than 4 billion viewers on television. Sport professionals hope that 2 weeks of exposure to images and stories of athletics will

lead viewers to make increased efforts to be physically active in their own lives, even if at a much lower level than the athletes (Sallis et al., 2016).

The “Exercise and Sport program for refugees”

Based on the above ascertainments, and in accordance to the spirit of the Olympic movement, we started running the “Exercise and Sport program for refugees” at the University of Thessaly, and the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science. The program is running in cooperation with the UN High Commissionaire for Refugees in Greece.

The aim of this program is threefold: First, to teach university students how to work with young refugees in sports and exercise programs. Second, to encourage young refugees from the greater area of Thessaly through the program to actively participate in sports and physical activities. Third, this program is part of an effort of the University of Thessaly in order to help refugees in their incorporation and inclusion to the Greek society and to inspire the ideas of equality in society, the interaction, the respect of human rights, the acceptance of others and cultural communication, cooperation, and team building, regardless of sex, race, religion, minority groups, culture, etc. Other aims of the program are:

- the promotion of intercultural education. To help young refugees to participate in sports and games in the spirit of fair play. During their participation in sports and physical activities to express their respect for other participants like teammates, or opponents, to accept the rules of the games, the decisions of the judges, to control their emotions, to play fairly, to enjoy the game, to learn from the game, to improve their communication skills, to be positive and confident, to gain new friends and to learn the Greek language.
- To have fun, and play games, including all participants, regardless of age, sex, size, or ability level, ethnic, racial or cultural groups. To promote the ideas of equality, solidarity, cooperation, against racial and sex discrimination, and gender bias. To encourage the dialogue among cultures and among different minority groups. To accept that everyone is on the same level by accepting equality of rights, values, and abilities.
- Getting to know each other better, doing things together, reaching mutual agreement as well as taking decisions together.
- Finally, to send a message to the Hellenic society that, in sport and life, all people are different and all people are equal.

Practically speaking

In this program we are applying an active and dynamic methodology, by:

- Introducing games and activities which will help form and strengthen the group. These activities will help the creation of a good group atmosphere and reinforce communication skills and group dynamics.
- Introducing activities which will provide an insight into our images of people from cultures, countries or social origins different from our own.
- Introducing activities which will enable people to discover and get to know each other’s education, culture, name, etc.
- Introducing activities which raise awareness on the possibilities for individuals and groups to act in order to bring about or to pursue social changes based on solidarity, respect, acceptance of difference and free exchange of ideas.

- Introducing sport activities and games which will give people the opportunity to discover, on knowing each other, and understand that people from different cultures and societies may see the world in different perspectives and be open to learn from the participants.

In general, in this program we are introduced through games, sports and activities, to the spirit of fair play with team building games, games that lead to mutual understanding all in the spirit of the Olympic values (Hassandra et al., 2008; International Fair Play Committee, 2016; International Olympic Committee 2016b; Webb & Pearson, 2008).

In conclusion, although we live in a confusing world, sports can promote the ideas of equality, acceptance, respect, prosperity, security, tolerance, justice and solidarity in society. Sports can encourage interaction among people who have different lifestyles, values and cultures. Sports can promote the relationships between majorities and minorities in our societies. The Olympic movement, as well as the national and governmental bodies can move forward an increased participation in sports in refugee groups. Policymakers, stakeholders, and ministries of education should adopt policies in order to encourage physical activities among refugee groups. Finally, the message of the last Olympics “together we can change the world” is vital, in enabling the inclusion of refugees in society through sports and physical activities (International Olympic Committee, 2016c). Moreover, the International Olympic Academy may play a leading role in promoting an innovative program for refugees in a broad network of European countries.

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