

EX POST PAPER

The role of sports and leisure activities in preventing and countering violent extremism

Sports events and organisations are too precious for society to allow extremists to misuse them for their hideous activities. A mixture of repressive and positive measures can safeguard sports. Since extremism is a societal problem, it makes sense that sports clubs do not have to do it on their own, and that localised solutions are delivered by local partners of sports organisations.

On a positive note, sports and leisure activities can contribute substantially to the prevention of radicalisation. Cooperating with youth professionals and applying pedagogical methods can create opportunities for youngsters to work on the attitudes and life skills that make them resilient to ideological exploitation and the lure of extremist violence.

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Sports, extremism and PVE

There are two reasons to discuss sports and leisure activities in the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). The first one is because extremists misuse the sports stages for their propaganda and recruitment. This should be countered to safeguard sports and its participants and spectators, and to push back on extremist manifestation and capacity building.

The second reason lies in the promising potentials inherent to sports. Sports and leisure activities are a well-appreciated tool in the toolbox of youth workers and others working with youngsters. The question is, under which conditions can sports and leisure activities contribute to the different levels of prevention of radicalisation and extremism?

The intended audience for this paper is those who care for sports, shared fundamental values and the prevention of violent extremism (PVE). The paper provides practical suggestions that can be copied or implemented in the organisation of sports activities. They can also feed into local approaches that combine youth welfare and safeguarding of youth. The document is based on an expert session organised by the RAN Youth, Families and Communities Working Group (RAN YF&C). It also takes stock of a RAN study trip to Poland ⁽¹⁾ that looked into hooligans and extremism.

Extremists misusing the sports stage

Taking part in sports, or passively enjoying others in sports activities, is of great value to society. Professional and amateur sports have great value in terms of health and socio-culturally. Furthermore, sports represent an important economic value. When seen in this light, it is a shame that the beautiful stage that sports create is being used by people with extremist intentions or behaviour hurting society.

Sometimes sports 'fan groups' or clubs have a long history of being rooted in bigger socio-political groups in society. It becomes problematic if, for instance, violent hooligan groups have contact, cooperate or overlap with aggressive political organisations, violent motor gangs or crime.

"[The European Parliament] calls on the Member States and national sports federations, in particular football clubs, to counteract the scourge of racism, fascism and xenophobia in stadiums and in the sports culture by condemning and punishing those responsible and by promoting positive educational activities targeting young fans, in cooperation with schools and the relevant civil society organisations".

(European Parliament, Joint Motion for a Resolution, 2018, pp. 6)

Over the years, there have been many examples of sports clubs suffering from nuisance from extremist supporters. Chelsea forcefully had to condemn actions of supporters singing anti-Semitic chants and holding a flag with a Nazi symbol, and the Italian football club Lazio had to pay a EUR 50 000 fine after supporters left Anne Frank leaflets and had been making monkey sounds towards black football players earlier on. In addition, Real Madrid recently replaced extreme-right Ultras Sur with younger, better-behaving supporters

⁽¹⁾ RAN CoE, [Learning from adjacent fields: The relation between extremism and hooliganism – Study visit to Warsaw \(PL\)](#), Ex post paper. Warsaw, Poland, 25–26 October 2018.

who receive training on how to be a good supporter. They have the best seats in the stadium now. The above-described apparent overlap between specifically hooliganism and extremism was explored by RAN in a Warsaw study visit in October 2018 ⁽²⁾.

Recently, violent hooligan gangs have been shown to play a political role. Some hooligan groups portray themselves as defenders of their national heritage and identity. Examples are the German Hooligans gegen Salafismus (HoGeSa), the hooligans of the Chemnitz football club who played a role in the local riots ⁽³⁾, and the English “Democratic Football Lads Association” ⁽⁴⁾ who despite their name have links to far-right actions and individuals. Their actions are not restricted to the football stadiums anymore.

The lure of fan groups and matches

There are several ways in which sports and forms of extremism or radicalisation are related. Sports have many pull factors that make them attractive: for example, they can provide a sense of belonging to a certain group. In essence, a football match is about us and them, and do we support our own team in defeating and humiliating the other. We are better – or at least that’s what we like to think. Sports are a battleground, embedded in identity and group dynamics. Sports can give structure and social support. In some places the ultra or hooligan groups are the only place for joining a group and experiencing brotherhood or a substitute for family bonds.

These pull factors can be used for recruitment in sports stadiums (e.g. belonging to a certain far-right group). This clearly comes back in the story of Shprygin, who was young, isolated and had few career aspects when he was approached to join the first ‘football firm’ in Russia at the age of 14 ⁽⁵⁾. These firms have been a machine for recruiting and radicalising young men to the far right, which has seeded racist ideology at the centre of the country’s football culture.

Muscles, mirrors and male aggression

The phenomenon of recruitment is not only apparent in football, but also, for instance, in mixed martial arts. Far-right groups across Europe and North America use martial arts clubs to swell their numbers and boost

“Are you training your muscles for vanity, just looking good, or do you want to contribute to a bigger and just cause?”

Example of how grooming can take place, given by an expert of gyms.

their ideology and their capacity to fight their perceived enemies ⁽⁶⁾. Extremists have an obsession with defending their identity group that is under threat. Their call to action is to wake up and prepare to defend the interest of the group. Gyms and clubs for martial arts have some qualities that make them interesting for extremist recruiters and mobilisers. Besides the obvious element of violence, and even acquiring and practicing defensive violence, there is also the masculine culture of

⁽²⁾ RAN CoE, [Learning from adjacent fields: The relation between extremism and hooliganism – Study visit to Warsaw \(PL\)](#), Ex post paper. Warsaw, Poland, 25–26 October 2018.

⁽³⁾ Ford, M., [From the stands to the streets: What does Chemnitz violence have to do with football?](#) DW.com, 28 August 2018.

⁽⁴⁾ Gayle, D., [Anti-fascists block route of Democratic Football Lads Alliance London march](#). The Guardian, 13 October 2018.

⁽⁵⁾ Parkin, S., [The rise of Russia’s neo-Nazi football hooligans](#). The Guardian, 24 April 2018.

⁽⁶⁾ Parkin, S., [The rise of Russia’s neo-Nazi football hooligans](#). The Guardian, 24 April 2018.

muscles, mirrors and machismo⁽⁷⁾. There are also concerns about the relation between the use of anabolic steroids and other illegal sports drugs and mental vulnerabilities⁽⁸⁾. Other sports clubs and facilities can furthermore function as a meeting and recruitment place for persons who are already extremist or radicalised. A swimming pool in Amsterdam, for example, was a meeting place for a jihadist radical network for a long time⁽⁹⁾.

Societal problem and local approaches

It is fair to say that the far-right hooligan problems are not solely a football problem. It is a problem that sometimes can be explained since in some areas the local infrastructure is so poor, that the only club a young man can join is the local football hooligan scene. They can join for personal mixture of friendship, protection, belonging and brotherhood. Therefore, football clubs have a point if they say it is not their problem. If ultras or hooligans dominate the fan culture and provide a gym or social centre, developing an alternative by the club or municipality can be quite a challenge. An official alternative will likely have tighter rules, a different feel and, moreover, the diehard fans will lose their sense of ownership and agency. And then there is the economic factor; sometimes the hooligans are the ones buying tickets and shirts. When this line of argument is used, the fact that other potential spectators might be scared away and potential sponsors and financiers shy away because of reputation damage, is neglected.

As discussed during the meeting, there are more (and differing) reasons for clubs to look away from the problem. It includes influence of violent hooligans on clubs, police and politics which can be high. Also, clubs can be afraid of a boycott resulting in less income from tickets. And unfortunately, board managers are sometimes simply scared of the hooligans because of personal threats and intimidation. In eastern Europe, clubs face other difficulties than the ones in western Europe. Responses and solutions therefore have to be local.

The FIFA

The approach that the world football association FIFA takes is an interesting one. Their PVE actions falls under broader policy of diversity and anti-discrimination⁽¹⁰⁾. Only a part of discriminatory acts in stadiums are related to an extremist ideology or groups. Diversity and anti-discrimination are an integral part of FIFA's social responsibility and sustainability policy.

In FIFA's day-to-day operations, the preventive approach involves five key and intersecting elements that are crucial to embrace diversity and anti-discrimination in world football.

- **Regulations:** Regular reviews and updates of regulations and documents, FIFA Disciplinary Committee, Independent Ethics Committee.



⁽⁷⁾ Zidan, K., [Fascist fight clubs: How white nationalists use MMA as a recruiting tool](#). The Guardian, 11 September 2018.

⁽⁸⁾ NIDA, [Steroids and other appearance and performance enhancing drugs \(APEDs\)](#). National Institute on Drug Abuse, 21 February 2018.

⁽⁹⁾ Kouwenhoven, A., & Chorus, J., [Hoe Amsterdam potentiële terroristen probeert bij te sturen](#). NRC, 4 January 2019.

⁽¹⁰⁾ FIFA, [Diversity and anti-discrimination at FIFA](#). March 2018.

- **Controls and sanctions:** Monitoring system, three-step procedure for referees.
- **Education:** Good practice guide and advice for member associations, training for FIFA officials and FIFA staff, Female Leadership Development Programme, FIFA Foundation Community Programme, FIFA Forward Programme.
- **Networking and cooperation:** Constant exchange with relevant organisations and contributing to external events.
- **Communications:** Diversity Award, Anti-Discrimination Days, Conference on Equality and Inclusion, tournament-related campaigns (#ENDviolence, etc.).

Some examples of how FIFA's anti-discrimination policy was implemented at the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia:

- There was a three-step procedure for referees in case of discriminatory behaviour (1: stop, 2: suspend and 3: abandon).
- Three specially trained anti-discrimination match observers were present per match. Observing fans from team A, team B and neutral spectators, taking into account their respective languages, regional characteristics and fan culture.
- All security staff and stewards were tasked to support dialogue with conspicuous fans and to intervene.
- Fans were informed that they were entering a discrimination-free zone and rules apply. There were ticket guides, spectator guides and stadium announcements.
- Special training and briefings were provided for FIFA and local organising committee staff, referees, volunteers, stewards, and food & beverage staff.
- The participating member organisations received a special briefing and were requested to ensure that their fans respect diversity and are aware of all measures. FIFA provided advice and additional guidelines such as FIFA's Good practice guide on diversity and anti-discrimination.

Recommendations

- Raise awareness and provide training courses for clubs, police officers, local authorities and other local actors
FARE has got a very practical guidebook 'Monitoring discriminatory signs and symbols in European football' ⁽¹¹⁾ which can be useful for the development of these training courses.

⁽¹¹⁾ FARE, [Monitoring discriminatory signs and symbols in European football](#). Fare Network, June 2016.

- Problem of society: So clubs don't have to do it alone
Acknowledge that it is a societal problem. Clubs can be held accountable for what goes on at their premises, but other partners should be invited to cover the rest. Police, local authorities, and youth and social workers should all be part of a local solution.
- Mobilise and invest in the normal, non-extremist fans
Reward fans for good behaviour, by giving higher levels of service and privileges. Engage with the fans of good will. The 'FIFA Good practice guide on diversity and anti-discrimination' gives many examples of good practices ⁽¹²⁾.
- Acknowledge social commitment of fans and engage with them
For some, fan groups are an opportunity for social action, which they lack in the rest of their life. The challenge is to direct their need for action away from unwanted behaviour in the stadium by providing an alternative opportunity to express their needs.
- Stress the effect on the brand and audience of the football club
Make clubs aware that if people do not feel safe or do not want to be associated with hooligans, they might be avoiding the stadium. Furthermore, there is the risk of sponsors and other financiers distinguishing themselves from the tainted club brand.

Sports and leisure activity supporting prevention

Mens sana in corpore sano. Juvenalis' old wisdom tells us that a healthy body is good for the mind. Sports and active leisure adventures can indeed have a positive effect on the social-psychological well-being of a person. And in that sense, we can expect a contribution to the goals of PVE.

Sports and extremism are intertwined in several ways. A useful way to discuss the different ways sports and extremism are related is given by the 'prevention pyramid' of Johan Declerck ⁽¹³⁾. He distinguishes different levels of prevention.

The higher the level, the more specifically oriented to a certain 'problem' the intervention is. Very specific measures – e.g. appointing police officers to monitor hooligans – are very different to having a community-based sports programme aimed at improving communities.

This model is specifically relevant to analyse certain problems/phenomena in the field of sports, since radicalisation is never taking place at one level at once: levels are not that separate and influence and constitute each other on a high level. Proper prevention is thus about cohesion at all the levels. As Declerck points out, "without a profound analysis of a problem on all underlying levels, you take the risk of only doing symptom management". Therefore, it is highly relevant to discuss prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) and sports with actors from these different levels.

⁽¹²⁾ FIFA, [FIFA Good practice guide on diversity and anti-discrimination](#). September 2017.

⁽¹³⁾ Described in the RAN Collection [The Prevention Pyramid](#), 2018.

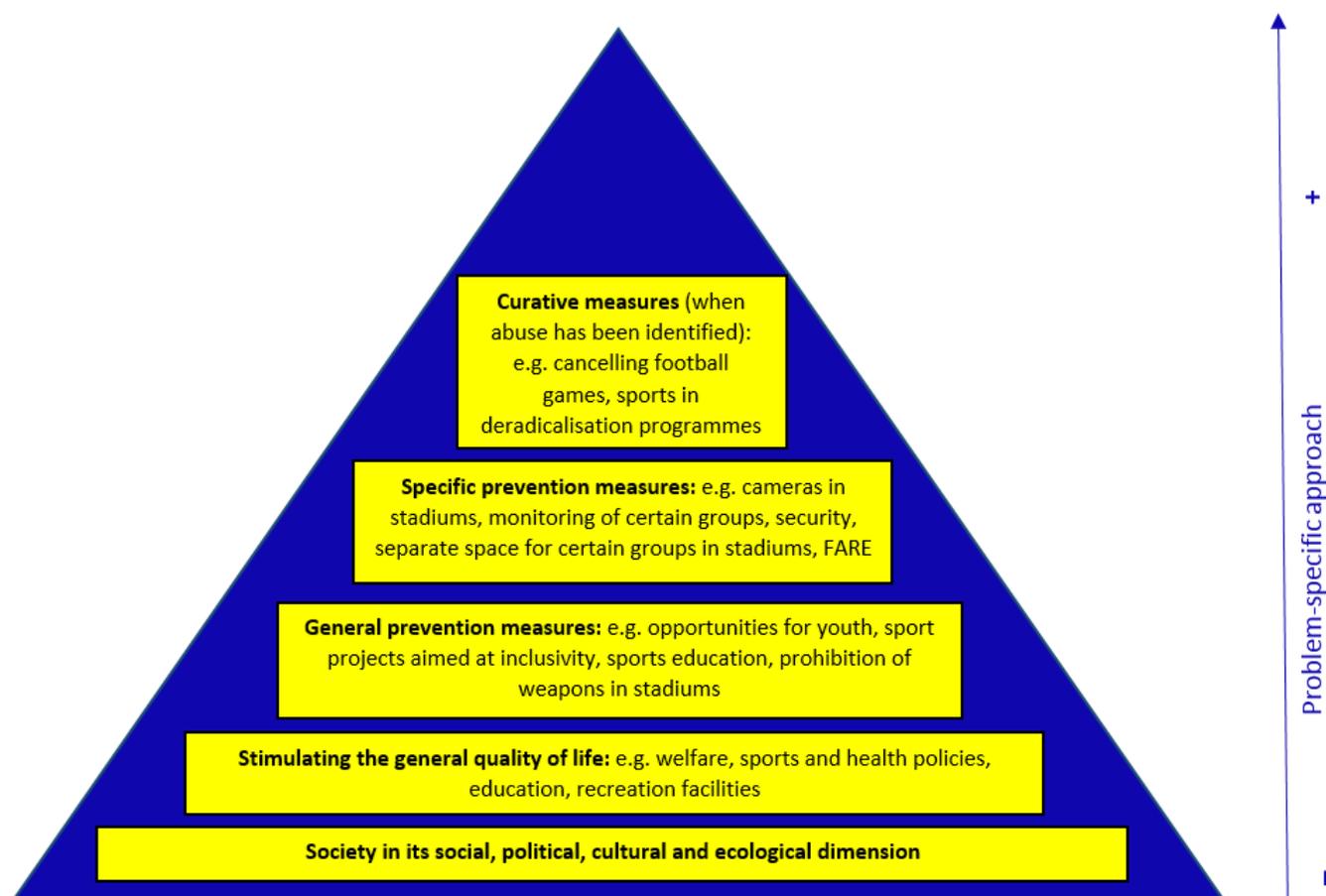


Figure 1: Sports prevention pyramid, based on Declerck (2018)

Sports in first and secondary prevention

Sports can contribute in a constructive way, as a medicine or remedy. Sports are a diversionary activity from violent or illicit activity⁽¹⁴⁾. Richardson, Cameron and Berlouis presented literature where sports play a role in crime prevention. Within Europe, there are many initiatives to bring youngsters (from different backgrounds) together in sports tournaments, aimed at finding common ground between the groups and reduction of risks of radicalisation.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Richardson, C., Cameron, P. A., & Berlouis, K. M., [The role of sport in deradicalisation and crime diversion](#). Journal for Deradicalization, 13, Winter 2017/2018, 29–48.

Role models

When it comes to role models, it's a risk to focus only on the winners and success. A world champion kick-boxer, for example, can be a very ineffective role model. The thing is that losing is actually more interesting. Not everyone can be a winner. The way the role model deals with losses, frustration and doubt is more relevant from a pedagogical viewpoint. In this sense, the approach of WildX (NO, <http://www.wildx.no/>) is also interesting. In their outdoor, hunting and fishing activities it is more about the necessary cooperation in a team. Whatever the background of the youngsters, they need to work together or they won't have food. This is a different ball game than winning and identity. Values and learning goals like cooperation, trying and contributing are more important than success with the biggest fish, for instance.

SARI's project 'Living Together Through Football' ⁽¹⁵⁾ is such a programme that has its origins in addressing the sectarian and alienation issues in Belfast, Ireland. RheinFlanke's project 'Spiel dich frei!' ⁽¹⁶⁾ is also an example of tackling radicalisation by youngsters by means of sports, in a very early stage.

Effect and challenges

These preventive projects do face several challenges. The first is getting in contact with certain groups, which is very hard with some groups.

Another challenge is a lack of resources, specifically finding enough funding for long-term projects. You cannot achieve sustainable results in youth development with quick hit-and-run projects. Finding trainers who are multilinguistic and also good trainers can also be challenging: the trainer needs to be good in group relationships, but also be capable of dealing with psychological issues of youngsters to a certain degree. The reality is that many clubs are happy they can find a volunteer to do the training. Therefore, you can't ask too much from the trainers.

The challenge of professional standards in sports and P/CVE

Sports can offer an interesting chance to engage with others and create learning and growing opportunities beneficial to P/CVE. But this requires the expertise to work on positive identity building, dealing with gender issues, in- and out-groups, and with conflict requires standards. Finding (local) partnerships between different organisations is one of the ways to overcome these challenges. Within these partnerships, organisations should be clear about what they can do, and what they cannot do. Also, they should communicate clearly about what sports and leisure activities can and cannot do for P/CVE.

Another challenge regards the role of trust building with trainers and other first-line practitioners in the field of sports. Trainers, just like teachers in school, are the ones who can identify certain problems and attitudes by the youngsters they train. Nevertheless, doing something with worrying signals can be challenging: they don't want to harm the trust the boys and girls have in them, or they do not feel they are in the right position to do so. The city of Antwerp designed policy for this, inspired by the already existing policy in education.

⁽¹⁵⁾ SARI. [Living Together Through Football](#). 2019.

⁽¹⁶⁾ See: [Ein Handbuch für Multiplikator*innen: Spiel dich frei!](#) 2017.

Youth work organisations and sports clubs can now sign up young persons to receive proper care and assistance for positive development of identity. In the name of protected trust relationships between sports worker and youngster, they do so under the banner of important principles of transparency and voluntariness.

These principles are an important aspect, since critical notes can be placed for using leisure and sports activities openly for prevention of radicalisation, as it can lead to suspicion towards youth workers and can work counterproductively. As Nina Henkens argues⁽¹⁷⁾, in this way, subjects are already set aside as a potential danger that needs to be taken care of in order not to become a real danger, instead of being seen as a person who needs to be encouraged to work on a positive identity. Thus, the projects in Antwerp don't use the 'R' word (radicalisation) in their project strategies, and their projects have the broad aim to support people in certain neighbourhoods under the banner of broad positive self-development. Sports trainers and volunteers are trained in training courses and can reach out to points of contact in case of serious worries about individuals, after which several paths of cooperation with other organisations can be established.

Sports as an element in de-radicalisation or resocialisation

In the top tier, tertiary prevention, sports can play a role. Within the RAN EXIT working group, sports hasn't been identified as a key or leading activity in exit programmes. There are some examples of intervention deliverers with a sports profile, but there are no sports methods defining or carrying exit programmes. That doesn't mean that sports cannot offer valuable contributions. Exiting an extremist lifestyle and milieu calls for alternative social contacts, success experiences and daily activities. In combination with meeting people from other backgrounds or ideologies, these positive elements can support an exit programme – like other social, educational, work or creative activities can do.

In short, key recommendations and lessons are:

- Choose relevant key elements of PVE as goals for sports if the intention is to contribute to PVE.
- Use sports as a tool in projects about positive self-development for youngsters and communities, rather than openly using it as an anti-radicalisation tool.
- Respect the relationship of trust and the anonymity for youth workers and trainers to prevent them from harming the (trust) relationship between them and youngsters.
- Coach the coaches. Finding good trainers and role models for youngsters is key. They should be able to build up longer-term relationships and acknowledge their failures and struggles in life. Support role models in developing the skills they need.
- Develop and provide training courses and embed sound procedures to equip youth workers and trainers with the right skills to identify and help youngsters who are at risk of radicalisation.
- For preventive sports projects, values and learning goals like cooperation, trying and contributing are more important than success.
- Finding (local) partnerships with different organisations is one of the ways to overcome challenges such as money, duration and getting in contact with certain groups. Clubs have the youth and

⁽¹⁷⁾ Henkens, N., [Radicaal voor Jongeren : de impact van het \(de\)radicaliseringsbeleid op jongeren en jeugdwelzijnswerk](#). Welwijs : wisselwerking onderwijs en welzijnswerk, Vol. 28, Iss. 1, 2017, 11–13.

sports and youth workers the expertise on PVE elements.

Additional reading

FIFA, [Diversity and anti-discrimination at FIFA](#). March 2018.

FIFA, [Good practice guide on diversity and anti-discrimination](#). September 2017.

FARE, [Monitoring discriminatory signs and symbols in European football](#). Fare Network, June 2016.

Richardson, C., Cameron, P. A., & Berlouis, K. M., [The role of sport in deradicalisation and crime diversion](#). Journal for Deradicalization, Vol. 13, Winter 2017/2018, 29–48.

RAN, Ex post paper: Learning from adjacent fields: the relation between extremism and hooliganism Study visit to Warsaw (PL). October 2018.

Annex 1 The sports department city of Antwerp example

The city of Antwerp developed in 2015 a new, broad approach combining the social role of sports, learning from how in education youngsters with problems are being referred and offered care. The municipality is working towards using the education protocols also in youth work and sports clubs, in order to provide the young persons with the proper care.

After discussions about roles and goals, the following choice was made:

- Sports organisations can internalise a preventive role, but not specifically on radicalisation, rather on the positive development of identity of young people.
- Because of the protected trust relationships between sports worker and youngster, to work with important principles of transparency and voluntariness.

Antwerp perceives radicalisation in a broad sense – not only the violent extremism within ISIS, but also the right-wing radicalisation or even polarisation coming from parents on the side-line. During the process the vision evolved from prevention of radicalisation to positive identity development as a method to strengthen young people and support them, in order to grow into resilient persons and critical citizens, regardless of their ideological background.

This process resulted in:

- Information sessions with 1st line sports workers for the professional and voluntarily field (30 attendees): explaining terminology, informing about the city policy about radicalisation and asking needs concerning radicalisation.
- Training 50 professional and voluntary sports workers in cooperation with ATLAS (a government organisation that is responsible for the integration of newcomers).
- Protocol for 1st line sports workers (only those who followed the above training) with serious (and broad = positive identity development) concerns about youngsters in their sports activities that contains a point of contact and three paths to follow in cooperation with the expert referral and advice point, developed within the education department:
 1. asking anonymous advice for the sports worker at the central help desk,
 2. asking non-anonymous advice for the sports worker at the central help desk.