



Needs Assessment – Comparative Analysis and Recommendation Report

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Partners

KMOP – Greece

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CESIE – Italy

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Executive summary

- ACTIVE is a transnational project that aims to promote the embedding of child protection policies in sports organisations, including clubs, academies and associations. This needs assessment summarises and compares findings from the four countries involved in the project: Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Portugal.
- Data were collected through desk and empirical research. Primary evidence was obtained through interviews, focus groups and online questionnaires. A total of 244 persons participated in the study, including key stakeholders and three target groups: children participating in sports activities, their family members, and professionals working in sports organisations.
- A general concern with violence against children is reflected on national legal frameworks and public policy active measures. Growing awareness of violence in sports is indicated by initiatives of public and private organisations about this issue in recent years, especially campaigns, courses, conferences and events.
- However, the countries still lack specific standards to effectively prevent, monitor and report violence against children in sports. Insufficiencies in the legal frameworks, either because provisions do not exist or are too generic and broad, create difficulties in detecting, monitoring and intervening in situations of violence.
- There is also a lack of policies at the level of sports organisations. Given the scarcity of formal policies or mechanisms within these organisations, the responsibility to prevent violence against children remains on individuals and the greater or lesser capacity of the coach, the child or the parents to deal with each situation.
- Situations of psychological and physical violence against children in sports are reported by the participants in the study. These situations pertain to violence committed by professionals against children, by children's family members against children and professionals, or by a child against another child.
- While some situations are triggered by a circumstantial and/or escalating conflict, others are related with broader forms of violence and discrimination in society. This is especially apparent in the descriptions of violence based on gender stereotypes, racist acts and discourses, and exclusion of children with disabilities.



- Specific improvements are suggested by the study participants, including the adoption of mechanisms to detect and intervene in situations of violence, changes in the approach of sports organisations to violence, ameliorating the information and training of professionals, children and families, and raising awareness in society at large.
- This needs assessment points out concrete aspects that shall be taken into consideration in the upcoming stages of the ACTIVE project, such as ensuring that violence in sports is adequately recognised by organisations, professionals, families and children, clarifying that sports organisations are also responsible for promoting the children’s personal and social development, introducing formal regulations, providing children and parents with information on child protection mechanisms, and improving the training of professionals.

1. Introduction

Sports activities play an important role in child development. Besides physical exercise *per se*, they provide opportunities for children to learn and experience social values and skills such as empathy, working in group and accepting defeat with fair-play. However, violence can also occur in the context of sports activities. A former Secretary of the Committee on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations estimates that 10% of children involved in “competitive sports” have undergone human rights abuse and another 20% are at risk.

ACTIVE is a transnational project coordinated by KMOP (Greece) with the involvement of CARDET (Cyprus), CESIE (Italy), CESIS (Portugal) and Children’s 1st (Scotland). The overall aim of the project is to promote the embedding of child protection policies in sports organisations, including clubs, academies and associations. It covers competitive sports organisations as well as organisations developing leisure sports activities at a local level and/or in a more informal environment.

The needs assessment presented in this document is based on the national reports produced by the project partners in the four countries under study: Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Portugal. National reports can be consulted for more details on each particular country. The collection of data took place between early February and mid-April 2020.

At this stage of the ACTIVE project, the purpose is threefold:



- Improving data collection and knowledge generation on existing child protection policies in sports clubs and organisations;
- Identifying gaps and enabling more strengthened child protection systems in this field;
- Analysing and recommending the most effective ways to prevent violence against children as well as good practices.

This needs assessment will provide the basis for upcoming deliverables of the project, which include an online self-assessment tool allowing sports and leisure organisations to identify and address gaps in the implementation of child protection policies, training workshops for sports professionals to enhance their skills and competences on the prevention of violence, and guidelines for the creation of multi-agency networks to establish safer environments for children in sports activities.

We begin with a description of the national frameworks concerning child protection in sports. Afterwards, we outline the research methodology and the profile of participants in our study. Finally, we present the main results drawing on the perspectives of key stakeholders, professionals, children and their families about the existence and prevention of violence in sports activities. We highlight commonalities and differences between the four countries, as well as suggestions by participants on how to improve child protection in this context. A summary of our findings and implications for the upcoming stages of the ACTIVE project can be found in the conclusion.

2. National frameworks

In the four countries under study, a general concern with violence against children is reflected on legislation and public policy active measures to prevent it. However, most of the existing laws and measures are quite broad, referring for instance to the promotion of ethical values or to the rejection of all forms of violence, discrimination and harassment. While they certainly cover violence against children in sports activities, their application in practical situations can be difficult.

2.1. Legal provisions



The countries still lack specific standards to effectively prevent, monitor and report this particular type of violence, especially in some of its manifestations such as gender-based violence. In practice, violence against children in sports is covered by a combination of legal provisions:

- Legal provisions on the rights of children and their protection from violence and abuse, which apply to the context of sports activities even if this is not explicitly mentioned.
- Legal provisions on the prevention of violence in sports, which apply to children even if this is not explicitly mentioned.

For instance, in Greece, the Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure sanction the simple physical damage (article 308 para. 1 point a), the dangerous physical damage (article 309), the serious physical injury (article 310 para. 1), the torture of the victim that causes psychological distress (article 310 para. 3), the provocation of physical injuries to children (article 312), the unlawful assault (article 330), the unlawful threat (article 333) and sexual assault (337). All of the above provisions apply to children and the fact that an act of violence is committed against a child renders an eventual sanction even higher.

Regarding violence in sports, the Law 2725/1999 on professional and amateur sports was one of the first Greek laws to fight against violence in sports. It still remains the main law applied in the domain of sports protection. Specifically, it includes provisions incriminating criminal offences that take place during sports events or in places promoting sports. It is important to mention that it has been modified many times since its institution in order to more effectively apply to the existing social needs in Greece. In 2015, the Law no. 4326/2015 on urgent measures against sports violence was established. This law introduced new provisions for the prevention of sports violence. It establishes new control methods for supporters' clubs, it includes provisions preventing and sanctioning violent crimes in sports and it created new public entities for the prevention of criminal offences in sports. On one hand, the Constant Committee for the prevention of violence; and, on the other hand, the Special observers entity providing assistance to the Committee.

In Portugal, the national Constitution includes not only a clause on the right of the child to protection by society and the State with regard to his/her integral development (article 69, para. 1) but also a clause mentioning that the State, in cooperation with schools, sports associations and clubs, should promote, stimulate, orient and support the sports and physical activities and prevent violence in sport (article 79, para. 2). In addition, there is a



specific law to tackle violence, racism, xenophobia and intolerance in sports events (Law 39/2009, amended by Decree Law 114/2011 and republished by Law 52/2013).

In both Italy and Portugal, there are also legal provisions on the suitability of employees and volunteers whose tasks involve children. In particular, employers are required to check the criminal record of employees to ensure that sexual offenders will not undertake such positions (Decree of the President of the Republic 14/11/2002 n° 313, art 25 bis, in Italy; Law 103/2015, in Portugal).

Our study confirms the relevance of international instruments, in particular the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), ratified by the four countries under analysis, and the Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography. The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2007) has also been subscribed by the four countries.

Several of these countries have recently adopted public policy active measures to prevent violence against children in sports. This is the case in Cyprus, with the National Strategy and Action Plan to Combat Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children and Child Pornography 2016-2019, in which the Cyprus Sports Organisation (CSO), as the highest national sports authority, has been committed to undertake particular tasks: to request from any employee whose work entails frequent contact with children (schools, sports clubs etc.) to have a clear criminal record certificate in respect of these offences, and to be forbidden from working if the employee does not produce such a certificate; to prepare a manual that will be distributed to employees and those supervised by the Cyprus Sports Organisation to help identify incidents of abuse and exploitation, to identify children who are likely to be at increased risk of suffering some form of sexual abuse and exploitation and to explain the procedure of tackling these incidents (this falls under the "Voice" 2016-2019 programme); to cooperate with the "Voice" for the design and promotion of programmes / training seminars for adults dealing with children through the sports, focusing on coaches who usually have a closer relationship with the children; and to send a wide information campaign to the Sports Federations on their legal obligations, for example on the need for federal and association coaches to produce a clear criminal record certificate in respect of sexual offences against children and the obligation of any person concerned to report to the competent authorities when he has been informed, or was a witness in an incident of causing "harm" to a child.



In Portugal, the Action Plan against Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sexual Characteristics 2018-2021 includes a specific reference to the prevention of violence in sports. In November 2019, a public consultation was launched in order to receive comments and contributions for a Strategy for Children Rights 2019-2022. One of the priorities of this Strategy will be the prevention and fight against violence addressed to children and young people. One of the activities foreseen in this domain is the elaboration of didactic materials about sexual violence in sports activities against children and young people.

2.2. Child safeguarding initiatives

The growing awareness about this issue is also apparent in a variety of initiatives developed by public and private organizations, especially campaigns, courses, conferences and events. Internationally, the Council of Europe campaign Start to Talk was launched in 2019 to draw attention to child sexual abuse in sports. Portugal and Greece are among the countries that joined and incorporated materials from this campaign. One of the outcomes is a *Training Kit* to support those who have influence on decision-making and practices in sports concerning the prevention of sexual abuses. In Greece, videos associated with this campaign were shown on the television.

At the national level, the Cyprus National Committee of UNESCO in cooperation with the CSO organised a conference on “Fighting Sexual Violence against Children: The Role of Athletes in the Prevention and Management of the Phenomenon”. In Greece, several activities were organized by the NGO Smile of the Child with the slogan “It remains a secret”, including media campaigns and web-online advocacy, press announcements, participation to public events, awareness-raising activities and preventative interactive sessions for the school communities nationwide about child abuse and maltreatment in general and in sports in particular.

In Italy, a number of initiatives have been reported too. A good practice that shows efforts to ensure sustainable initiatives is the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2013 between the Ministry for Equal Opportunities, Sport and Youth Policies and the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI) establishing an annual “sport week against gender-based violence in and through sport”. The Unione Italiana Sport Per Tutti (UISP), which has 1,335,000 people associated, 18,020,046 sports clubs (2015 data) and a presence in every regions and provinces in Italy through 157 local committees and 25 Leagues and areas of activity, as well



as the Italian Sports Centre (CSI), joined the Save the Children campaign “Adults in Place”, adopting a policy for the protection of children in sport. This policy provides specific criteria for recruiting appropriate staff, the adoption of a Code of Conduct that is recognised and signed by all adults working with children, awareness campaigns about the rights and protection of children, and an assessment of the risk of abuse in sport activities.

The UISP has also developed the “UISP Policy to protect Children and Adolescents”, which includes duties of the association, its employers and employees, a definition of abuse, and standards on prevention and protection. Whenever UISP intends to work in collaboration with other partners, it first verifies that they have a Policy and it may also ask them to comply with the principles of UISP policy. In addition, UISP has promoted the so-called “healthy” sport, which involves events against gender-based violence in sport, e.g. “Bike in Pink”, “Take the Field against Homophobia”, and “Running Hearts”.

The Mal.Ab Group (Expert Inter-Institutional Group against severe Maltreatment and Child Abuse), CONI of Trieste and Regional School of Sport Representatives developed and delivered a training course for coaches and sports instructors to raise awareness on the fight against bullying, violence, maltreatment and sexual abuse of children in sport and other community environments. The training course covered several themes, among them the consequences of violence, abuse, bullying and homophobia on children, but also referral mechanisms for reporting and managing incidents of violence and abuse against children; and information on services for child protection in Italy.

Last, the transnational EU-funded project “Sport respects your rights – empowering young Europeans in sport for a culture of respect and integrity against sexualised violence and gender harassment” gave young people aged 16-22 years old the opportunity to design their own online campaigns through a platform developed by partners. The campaigns served the purpose of making youngsters promoters of social change through reflection and peer learning against gender-based violence.

3. Methodology

This needs assessment is based on desk and empirical research conducted at the national level by the partners of the ACTIVE project. The collection of primary data involved key stakeholders and persons from three target groups:



- Children (<18 years old) participating in sports activities;
- Members of the family of children participating in sports activities;
- Professionals working in sports organisations.

In each country, two cities were selected for empirical research according to a pre-defined set of criteria:

- The strategic importance of the cities in that country;
- The relation with important stakeholders and their geographical influence;
- The placement of key organisations for the project development, such as sports clubs, leisure organisations and others;
- The placement of possible facilitators for the project development process;
- The placement of organisations with recognised good practices;
- Time consumption and travel costs to implement the activities.

The cities selected were: Nicosia and Limassol, in Cyprus; Athens and Thessaloniki, in Greece; Rome and Palermo, in Italy; Lisbon and Matosinhos, in Portugal.

The research originally included two methodologies for data collection: individual interviews with stakeholders; and focus groups with professionals and with children and their families.

While conducting the research, governments announced lockdown measures to limit the spread of Covid-19. Adaptations had to be introduced as agreed with the European Commission Project Officer responsible for the follow-up of the ACTIVE project. In particular, some interviews were conducted by phone or in written form, rather than face-to-face; and an online questionnaire was used whenever necessary to complement or replace the focus groups when these were not possible. While the use of the online method entailed limitations for the depth of information collected, it allowed our study to reach a larger number of participants than originally expected.

The interviews with stakeholders followed a semi-structured script and they took between 30 and 45 minutes. The questions covered the interviewee's knowledge and opinions about child rights in sports, existence of violence, role of the organisations in preventing violence, existence of child protection policies, training of professionals on these matters, efforts to



assess the children's experiences and satisfaction, non-discrimination and suggestions of improvement, among other issues.

Focus groups were conducted in Portugal and Cyprus. In Portugal, two focus groups were organised with parents and one with children. In Cyprus, two focus groups were carried out with the participation of professionals and two focus groups with parents and children.

Focus groups were designed to take between 50 and 90 minutes, with different questions depending on the target group involved. In the focus groups with professionals, the questions covered the existence of child protection policies in the organisations and its effective implementation, gaps and good practices, experiences of witnessing or hearing about violence, role of the organisation in ensuring a safe environment for children, children's participation and information, non-discrimination, and training of professionals on these matters. In the focus groups with children and their family members, the questions covered activities done in leisure time, feelings about sports organisations and spaces, and experiences of witnessing or hearing about violence.

Following the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the project perspective is that a child is every human being from birth to 18 years old. However, considering the purposes of the focus groups, it seemed reasonable to involve children from 6 to 18 years old. In this perspective, a balance was maintained between the evolving capacities of the participants and the need to have different age groups participating. Special concerns were taken with the participation of children, in particular ensuring that they were fully informed about the objectives of the focus group, expressed their own perspectives and viewpoints, and felt safe and comfortable at all moments.

The online questionnaire was used in Greece, Italy and Portugal to complement data collection from children, professionals and families. Anonymity and right to privacy were fully ensured.

4. Participants' characteristics

As shown in Table 1, a total of 244 persons participated in the study considering the various methods used for data collection, profile of participants and countries.



Table 1: Number of participants by method of data collection, profile and country

Method	Profile	Country				Total
		Cyprus	Greece	Italy	Portugal	
Interviews	Stakeholders	10	10	10 ^a	12	42
Focus groups	Children	12	–	–	6	18
	Families	11	–	–	14	25
	Professionals	16	–	–	–	16
Online questionnaires (or phone interviews)	Children	–	35	13	19	67
	Families	–	15	13 ^b	12	40
	Professionals	–	21	12	3	36
Total		49	81	48	66	244

Stakeholders for the interviews were defined at the outset of the project as those who have an interest and are involved in the protection of children or in the management and coordination of sports and recreational organisations attended by children. The interviewees included representatives of relevant organisations (authorities, clubs and NGOs), public officials, athletes, managers, coaches, trainers, instructors, organisers of leisure activities for children, psychologists, social workers and lawyers.

The focus groups and the online questionnaires involved children, their family members and professionals involved in one or several of the following sports: basketball, capoeira, dance, fencing, football, futsal, gymnastics, handball, karate, sailing, skating, swimming, taekwondo, tennis and volleyball.

Regarding the profile of participants in the focus groups:

- In Cyprus: the children were 7 girls and 5 boys, aged between 10 and 15 years old; family members were 5 mothers and 6 fathers; professionals were 1 women and 15 men, including coaches, trainers, educators, a psychologist and a trainer for physical conditioning;
- In Portugal: all 6 children were girls, aged between 9 and 16 years old; family members were 14 mothers and 4 fathers.

^a 1 stakeholder answered via online questionnaire.

^b 12 families and children were interviewed through phone interview, 1 via online questionnaire.



As to the participants in the online questionnaire:

- In Italy: family members were 9 mothers and 4 fathers; professionals were 4 women and 8 men, including trainers, educators, sports teachers, gym instructors and a social worker at a sports club;
- In Greece: children were all over 15 years old, as required by the Greek legal system;
- In Portugal: 19 children, 12 parents and 3 professionals (2 women and 1 men).

5. Results

5.1. Perspectives on violence in sports and against children

Key message

Situations of violence against children in sports are reported in the four countries, most frequently referring to verbal and/or psychological violence. Although to smaller extents, situations of physical and sexual violence are also mentioned. Violence can be committed by professionals against children, by adult family members of children against other children and professionals, or by a child against another child. More competitive sports contexts seem to be more prone to the occurrence of violence, a pattern that the study participants ascribe to an excessive focus on winning with detriment to the principles of fairplay and mutual respect.

The participants in the study report various situations of violence against children in sports. With regard to the forms of violence, they can be organised as follows:

- The most frequently reported situations in the four countries refer to verbal and / or psychological violence. This occurs in the context of training and in the context of competitions / events.
- Situations of physical violence are reported as well, although less frequently and mainly restricted to episodes where both aggressor and victim are children.
- Sexual violence is explicitly reported by study participants only in Greece. In particular, one stakeholder in this country describes a case in which a girl was sexually abused by



her coach but was afraid to tell her parents, as he had been her coach for more than a decade and was like family to her.

Concerning the profile of aggressors and victims, three types of situations are reported in all countries:

- Violence committed by a trainer/coach against a child or children, mostly in verbal and psychological forms, but involving physical violence in some cases too. For instance, in Portugal, children participating in the focus group experienced this form of violence in a club they used to attend; and five out of the 19 respondents in the questionnaire know about unpleasant situations in the club they currently attend, these situations being mainly violence toward some of their colleagues by coaches, sometimes leading to abandonment of the activity.
- Violence committed by a parent against their child, other children, a coach or a referee. Aggressive behaviours by parents when attending competitions/events are a source of concern in all countries. Participants in Greece and Italy underline the negative influence that such behaviours have on children, legitimating or even inciting them to violent behaviours against one another. Especially in Italy and in Portugal, the participants establish a connection between acts of violence and pressure put on children and/or coaches by parents who do not see sports as an activity to promote their children's well-being and physical, social and emotional development, but rather as an activity that creates winners, social visibility and recognition. According to the study participants, this happens typically in the most competitive sports, in particular football.
- Violence committed by a child or children against a child or children. This is also more frequent in more competitive sports or contexts. Most of the situations mentioned by the study participants refer to verbal violence, but physical violence is also reported, being typically described as a result of situations of verbal violence that escalated.

In both Portugal and Cyprus, children and/or parents highlight the existence of verbal and psychological violence based on gender stereotyping. Physical appearance is a major pretext for violence against girls, in particular with respect to overweight or other aspects in which a girl may be abusively considered by coaches or children as not being "feminine enough"; similarly, boys are mocked or insulted for behaviours which are not "masculine enough", such as expressing feelings.



In Greece, the prevalence of violence between boys and girls as well as violence based on racism against migrant children is underscored by stakeholders.

Difficulties in recognising situations of violence are apparent. For instance, in Portugal, children participating in the focus group and the online questionnaire mention the existence of forms of violence against children in sports activities that are not seen as violence by the organisations, by the coaches/trainers and even by the families, including situations of bullying, mocking, insulting and making jokes.

This is also a problem reported in the other countries, sometimes by parents who criticise sports professionals for their lack of attention or sensitivity to situations of violence, sometimes by sports professionals criticising parents for the very same reason. In both cases, violence seems to go unnoticed because adults (either professionals or parents) understand it as a normal thing to happen in contexts of children and sports. There are also professionals arguing that parents are over-protective. According to these professionals, children are expected to solve situations of violence among themselves and this can even be considered part of the learning process.

For instance, only two stakeholders in Italy mention the existence of psychological violence against children by sports professionals that undermine their self-esteem and do not respect their times of learning and abilities. In these interviewees' viewpoint, such behaviour would make children give up sports but it does not have serious repercussions on them. Professionals in the same country report insults or small fights between children but these episodes are not considered alarming.

Violence is also justified or naturalised in the heat of the competition, when the pressure to achieve good results can incite violent behaviours by parents, professionals or children. Some participants in Portugal believe that a "winning at all costs" mind-set is increasingly present in children's sports because athletes today can attain social status and earn large amounts of money from quite an early age, while some participants in Cyprus believe that the competitive pressure is decreasing as a result of a greater intervention of science in sports, especially psychology. Study participants in several countries believe that sports organisations should pay more attention to situations of violence and their prevention, namely by ensuring the presence of qualified coaches/trainers and psychologists on the ground.



5.2. Existence and characterisation of practices preventing violence against children in sports

Key message

Child protection policies at the national level or within sports organisations are very rare. Professionals and families rely chiefly on trust, common sense and informal communication to detect and prevent violence. To a large extent, this remains a matter of individual responsibility and coaches or trainers are expected to play a key role in detecting and acting upon situations of violence, even if they have little or no training on how to do it.

While the general perception is that sports organisations and their professionals today are more concerned with violence against children than before, child protection policies – either at the national level or at the organisation level – are still very rare in the four countries covered in our study. Most of the study participants do not know about any formal instrument in place for this purpose (regulation, code of conduct or other). Instead, they refer to trust, common sense and informal communication as ensuring child protection in the contexts of sports activities.

These informal mechanisms are considered enough by some participants – professionals, families or children. However, others believe that more should be done to effectively prevent situations of violence. Professionals tend to have a more positive view on the current overall picture than parents.

According to the study participants, the primary responsibility on this issue belongs to the administrators of sports clubs and to coaches/trainers. Sports clubs are described as broadly ensuring a safe environment for children, but this impression is focused on physical violence. Coaches are expected to be sensitive to this issue and pass on values of respect and empathy to children, even if they have little or no training on how to detect and act upon situations of violence.

The exceptions are noteworthy. In Cyprus, some athletic academies, but not all, implement their own child safeguarding practices and policies; one nautical club requires coaches to sign a document clearly stating the procedure, consequences and communication circuit in cases of violence. In Italy, a “Manifesto of Values” concerning rules of conduct and their impact on all children is shared among sports clubs through a Memorandum of Understanding.



In Greece, an NGO has established a practice of evaluation of its projects, including sports projects. Through this evaluation system, parents and children are asked to give their opinion concerning the project anonymously. A representative of another NGO in Greece mentions however that no sports academies have called the organization to train their personnel on violence and child protection. According to her point of view, this situation is caused by the fact that the bigger sports academies are afraid of what they would find in terms of attitude by the professionals. In turn, athletes in Greece point out that they believe there are not any good practices implemented when an athlete is doing competitive sports, especially basketball or football.

Another promising practice adopted by an NGO in Greece is that their coaches have “positive” cards. At the end of every match, they decide which child had the best attitude and they give him/her something extra in order to motivate them. According to the interviewees, this helps especially children with behavioural problems.

Sports professionals, in particular coaches or trainers, play a key role according to all target groups in our study. This role can be positive or negative. For instance, most of the parents in Greece state that their children are able to share their views in the academy and that coaches and the personnel listen to them. They also mention that the professionalism of these academies was the reason why they chose them for their children. In turn, 20% of the participants mentioned that they do not believe that coaches listen to their children’s opinion on matters related to sports. None of them was aware of any child protection policies implemented in sports academies, clubs or organisations. The teenagers participating in the online survey mentioned some things that they do not like in the academy they are attending: strong competition mostly between athletes, but also between coach and athletes; very bad and competitive relations between some athletes; and the promotion of specific players by some coaches depending on their own personal interest.

In Italy, a case of preventive practices was highlighted by several families within the same dance school, including the ability of the teacher to scold their students when appropriate and of raising awareness through a dance recital performance on the fight of violence against women, aimed at sensitizing dancers and spectators who attended. In turn, a karate teacher reported to have witnessed a case of a teacher inciting a child to incorrectly behave with the opposing team; the interviewee intervened directly by stopping the conversation. Other significant prevention experiences concern the participation of a sport organisation in social initiatives in the area and the practice of actively involving children who are used to bullying by entrusting them with responsibilities during group activities and avoiding in every



way to isolate them; in this way, it is possible to keep them engaged and eliminate negative behaviours.

In Portugal, the girls and their parents in the focus group reported a case in which the coach was repeatedly violent against the children, insulting and humiliating them. The parents' approach to the coach was totally ineffective. The aggressor is a well-recognised trainer and represents a well-known club in Portugal, which intimidated the parents and ended up leading them to the removal of the children from the activities of this particular club. According to them, this would be the only solution that would protect their children from future reprisals by that coach.

The study participants in the four countries mention several things that they believe to be positive for detecting and intervening in situations of violence: specific training to professionals on children's rights and how to prevent violence; presence of psychologists in sports, which is described as having increased in recent years but still very insufficient; more attention paid by sports organisations to human and social skills when recruiting their professionals; regular communication and open dialogue between professionals and children; and regular communication between professionals and parents, not only enabling the two parties to report situations and concerns but also giving the professionals an opportunity to sensitize parents not to commit or incite to violence when attending sports competitions.

5.3. Existence and characterisation of practices preventing discrimination against children in sports

Key message

The acknowledgement of equality as a basic principle by the sports organisations contrasts with the existence of few concrete policies or practices of prevention. Relevant initiatives are carried out by some organisations or individual professionals, but they are not placed within a consistent framework that would be beneficial to ensure coherence and continuity.

It is important to highlight that various situations of discrimination are reported by the study participants. These situations refer to different grounds for discrimination, in particular gender, class, income, ethnicity and disability. Gender-based discrimination is especially



prevalent and takes on several forms: an understanding that some sports are for girls and some sports are for boys; a different treatment of girls and boys within the same sport; and a different treatment of particular girls or particular boys explained by prejudice about their physical appearance or gender expression.

In Cyprus, there are a few guidelines by the CSO but no standardised tools are provided to organisations. The members of a major football organisation in Cyprus explain that they adopt practices to prevent discrimination against children in sports. One of the examples they give is to adopt fairness and quality within the team, applying “equal-play” time for all young athletes as a set rule that all coaches within the organisation follow. In turn, a basketball coach of girls explains that their organisation deliberately develops practices to incorporate participation of all athletes, for instance obese children, by bringing two coaches and arranging friendly games in which victory is guaranteed to encourage the girls and increase their confidence.

Parents and children in Cyprus express dissatisfaction with the capacity of sports clubs to prevent discrimination. This usually takes the form of not giving the child the opportunity to play as much time as the others or receiving exaggerated punishments for wrongdoings. It was clear that for children there is a feeling of “risk” that comes with reporting discrimination. Coaches, on the other hand, believe that they ensure open communication channels with their athletes to ensure that they can speak to them about what they may be experiencing and are not afraid to do so.

In Greece, representatives of NGOs are in direct and constant contact with social services and with parents in order to inform them as long as they see a discriminatory attitude from a child. They also mention that training and education on discrimination can help eliminate this kind of attitude among children. Boys also learn that when they play, they should play with girls and that if they do not pass the ball to a girl, they have to start playing from the beginning in order to learn that it is essential that they play with girls as equals. The representative from the General Secretariat of Sports stated that they are not allowed to adopt any positive discrimination measures but there are some good practices established and implemented by sports academies and clubs related to counselling. They try to raise awareness and inform citizens and sports entities about discrimination and the need to prevent it.

Also in Greece, two athletes mention specific practices adopted by coaches to prevent discrimination. One of them consists in particular dedication to ensure every new player is



well integrated in the team, which reduces the probability of discrimination. These two athletes agree that the implementation of all these practices depends exclusively on the coach who can profoundly help children if he/she is not indifferent.

The findings from the online surveys in Greece are very interesting as professionals state that in their academy there are no cases of discrimination among children and that they do whatever they can in order to prevent any such cases. One participant states that equality is one of the pillars of their organization and this is the reason why during the matches they encourage boys and girls to play together. Another participant also states that the basis of their academy is equality, underscoring that it provides a very encouraging and positive environment among children and coaches. However, when asked if their organisation takes specific measures for children with a disability, 40% of the respondents reply that no such measures are adopted and children with a disability do not have access to the equipment of the academy. Some participants mention that their academy has specific facilities for disabled children. One participant points out that they want to ensure the access of the disabled children to sports but they cannot do it due to the absence of specific facilities in their academy.

In two interviews in Italy, episodes of discrimination among children (for reasons related to different skin colour) were reported and promptly blocked and discouraged through the intervention of adults: in one of the cases, considered particularly serious, through the intervention of the coach, with a “sports” warning to the child; in another case, the solution was found with the involvement of parents to solve the issue through dialogue. From another interview it emerges a significant consideration: how some sports of “foreign” origin and practiced throughout the Italian national territory, such as capoeira and kung fu, implicitly promote openness, inclusion and equality because those who practice them (perhaps without being fully aware of it) are willingly accepting this inherent “diversity”.

Regarding the knowledge of interviewees on active measures to promote openness and inclusion of marginalised children, all of the stakeholders in Italy consider this as an aspect that is getting stronger and growingly affirmed. This is corroborated by the reported participation of the organisations involved in the ACTIVE project, through their managers or directors, in various relevant initiatives such as matches organized against bullying, racism or violence against women, as well as multi-ethnic integration projects and projects aimed at people with disabilities. One of the stakeholders points out that his/her club was born as a Paralympic sports club and over time also opened an Olympic sector, implementing what is



referred to as a “reverse inclusion”, within which it encourages comparison and aggregation between young people with and without disabilities, for example through common training.

In Portugal, the study participants had difficulties in identifying structured or formal practices and initiatives preventing discrimination of children in sports. The few initiatives and practices mentioned are promoted in an individual way, by a specific coach or a specific managers, and do not represent the line of action of the organisation that they are part of.

5.4. Existence and characterisation of practices promoting the participation of children in sports

Key message

Most of the study participants in the four countries consider that children are free to express their feelings and opinions about sports activities and methods, even if no structured practices are implemented by organisations to ensure this.

Most of the study participants in the four countries consider that children are free to express their feelings and opinions about sports activities and methods, even if no structured practices are implemented by organisations to ensure this. Important insight is provided by the participants with regard to the situation in their country.

Some organisations in Cyprus adopt open communication practices with their young athletes, such as providing a sport psychologist and/or directly asking them about their concerns. This gives the children the opportunity to express their opinion, thus enabling their participation. A good practice implemented by a sport psychologist was the administration of questionnaires for children to express their opinions anonymously. Most of the responses demonstrated that children’s participation in sports mainly comes through the involvement of the parent. Some children expressed that “being heard” is not always achievable. Although they understand that the coach is the decision-maker, they would like to have more channels of communication with regard to game-related decisions.

A relevant practice to promote the participation of children in sports, as stated by almost all participants in Greece, is the fact that they can share their views with their coaches and the personnel of the academy, expressing their opinion on everything that could concern them.



It is encouraging that almost all children that participated in the online survey in this country state that not only they are able to express their views but they feel that the coaches and the personnel listen to them. Consequently, it seems that the fact that children can share their views with their coaches and the rest of the personnel plays a positive role making them feel that the environment is friendlier. Children's responses are consonant with this description, showing that they value very much the environment in an organisation and the communication with coaches. The existence of a friendly and secure environment where everyone can express their views seems to be the principal factor that could encourage children to participate in sports.

In turn, the representatives of the NGOs in Greece mention that campaigns with famous athletes would promote the prevention of violence and discrimination and, consequently, help children and raise awareness on this sensitive issue. The representatives of an NGO also state that, during the matches, they organize for the implementation of their sports projects, they encourage girls and boys, foreigners and Greeks, to play all together in order to promote their participation and prevent any kind of discrimination that could arise.

In Italy, all of the stakeholders interviewed recognise the importance of children's opinion and involvement but their opinions on what happens in reality are diversified, though mainly positive. Some believe this varies according to the coach, the size of the organisation (less involvement of children in more structured and big organisations) and the age of the children (less involvement of younger children). On the adoption of procedures aimed at assessing the degree of satisfaction of the child with the services of which he or she is the recipient, almost all of the interviewees (8 out of 10) state that they do not adopt any of them. Each organisation, in a diversified way, seems to use different indicators which are never explicit for those directly involved but provide the basis for self-assessment: some believe in the children's attendance/frequency of activities as measure of satisfaction, others prefer to rely on dialogue with the parents.

When it comes to professionals in Italy, most of them (10 out of 12) state that there is great consideration for the opinion of the youngest and that this aspect is encouraged through the constant dialogue with the child. As far as the participation of children in the elaboration of the rules in force in the organisation, almost all the interviewees do not specify any position – five of them suggest that there is a tendency to the constant involvement of the smallest ones. On the use in organisations of procedures to assess the degree of satisfaction of children with the activities, it emerges that none of the professionals uses standard tools or procedures, instead collecting information through dialogue with parents and children or



through their assessment of children's attendance, attitudes and behaviours during the activities. All of parents participating in Italy describe the sports organisations attended by their children as welcoming and inclusive places. Similarly, parents were asked if they perceive that there is consideration and listening for their child's point of view and opinions, and they all answered yes; a mother believes, however, that more attention is paid to adults than to children.

In Portugal, most of the children and all of the parents feel that they can express their opinions freely and that their opinions are taken in consideration. Communication, dialogue and a close follow-up of the children are the examples of practices for the promotion of child participation in sports activities. However, structured practices of participation, for example involving an evaluation with the participation of the children, were not found. The president of one of the federation of associations mentions that the promotion of children's participation varies across organisations, but in general they are not proactive in this matter and, in most cases, participation happens due to the curiosity of the children and not given the existence of this objective in the organisations. On the other hand, it was pointed that typically organisations use, as an indicator of satisfaction, the permanence of the children in the organisation. Other indicators or type of evaluation are not valued.

5.5. Existence (and consistence) of child protection policies

Key message:

Individual voluntarism and unconscious or implicit protection seem to be the rule, except for some organisations that follow internal rules in more or less formal configurations. Most children and parents participating in our study do not know about the existence of such policies in the particular organisation they are involved in, including to whom situations of violence should be reported if they occur.

With regard to specific child protection policies in sports organisations, individual voluntarism and unconscious or implicit protection seem to be the rule, except for some organisations that follow internal rules in more or less formal configurations. A common trend in the four countries is the lack of knowledge by most children and parents about the existence of such policies in the particular organisation they are involved in, including to whom situations of violence should be reported.



Several professionals in Cyprus believe it would be positive if the national sports authorities would set standard rules for this purpose, for instance on the training of professionals, the presence of sport psychologists or the personality assessment of trainers and not just their certificates. The role of referees was also mentioned in Cyprus, with some participants mentioning that referees should punish the athletes when they swear at one another but this is not what happens in reality.

An NGO in Greece implements sports projects through a method called “football field” for adolescents of 12 to 16 years old, boys and girls, in order to promote values such as integration, respect, cooperation and equality. Furthermore, the whole perspective of the projects carried out by this NGO is concentrated on the idea of equality among children. They have trained personnel and coaches with an educational background as well as psychologists who help children, parents and professionals in case of violent incidents that may arise. They also have a specific code of conduct and they train their personnel in managing difficult cases. Other NGO representatives point out a policy implemented by the Prosecution of Rethymnon in Greece after the revelation of one of the biggest scandals of violence against children in sports. The prosecution was inviting parents to call them and share their stories as well as to report other cases. However, she mentioned that even if it was helpful, it was not enough taking into consideration that Rethymnon is a small city and that other measures should have been adopted, such as the implication of the Mayor who could encourage citizens to speak and protect their children.

According to the professionals participating in the online survey in Greece, all academies, clubs and organisations have an internal procedure and a person that is responsible for the reporting of violent or discriminatory incidents, an element that could be very beneficial and helpful to the protection of children in sports. In most cases, children can report incidents to their coaches who are trying to establish a friendly relationship with their athletes so that they can easily talk to them about all incidents. Another representative mentions that every team has a responsible person that is also a member of the Council of Administration of the academy who listens to all problems and receives eventual complaints. Only one representative mentions that there is no-one responsible of the reporting of violent cases. What is necessary to point out is that all representatives underline the importance of the creation of a close relationship with their students in order to encourage them to speak freely about their views and their problems.

All of the parents in Greece reply that they are not aware of any such policy apart from one parent who replies that he/she knows that there are some child protection policies, without



providing any supplementary information on the content and the results of these policies. One participant states that he/she does not know of any child protection policies and he/she has never asked the specific academy where his/her child is playing sports if there is any. However, 70% of the participants mention that there is a specific person competent to receive complaints by their children in every academy. In one case, a parent points out that a coach seems to have undertaken the role of receiving all forms of complaints by children and another parent mentions the existence of a psychologist who helps them manage difficult situations.

The stakeholders involved in Italy show opposing views regarding the existence of a child protection policy in sports organisations. One of them believes that there is a growing attention to the issue, especially at managerial level of sports organisations, and that within their own society parents take a look at the internal codes and rules when subscribing their children. On the contrary, there are those who claim that a code does not exist at all, that everything is left to the choice of the individual professionals within the organisation, who can decide to apply good practices in this regard. Only in one case is it declared that the organisations have a code of conduct, thanks to the provisions of Memoranda of Understanding between one association and individual organisations, promoting the adoption of a formal act (Manual of Values).

Also divided are the responses of professionals in Italy when asked about the existence of a child protection policy in the sports organisation where they work. Four of them state that it exists but do not specify its content; two of the three interviewees state that practices for the protection of children are intrinsic in their organisations; two say that there is no real policy – in one case the professional believes that the organisation cannot provide a protection policy because there are no particularly qualified professionals who can write it. When asked whether there is a member of the organisation with the role of receiving reports of violence to whom children can refer, eight of the twelve interviewees assert that there is a member of the staff with such role (president or a particular teacher or coach). Regarding the parents' opinion on the same issues, interviewees answered they do not know anything about any child protection policy in the organisations attended by their children.

In Portugal, the study participants inform us that most sports organisation do not have a formal child protection policy, not even a code of conduct for professionals – actions and attitudes are totally depending on the coach him/herself (informality). With the exception of five (out of the 12 parents respondents to the questionnaire), most parents do not know about the existence of child protection policies in the organisation where their children are



practicing sports. In addition, parents never questioned the organisation about it. In case of a violent event, coaches and the director or president of the organisation is the person identified to report it. A question mark remains however on what happens when the aggressor is the coach.

5.6. Changes that can be introduced

Key message:

The participants in our study suggest a variety of improvements to better address violence against children in sports. The suggestions can be organised in four distinct though interconnected topics: specific mechanisms to detect and intervene in situations of violence; changes in the approach of sports organisations to violence; improving information and training about violence to professionals, children and families; and raising awareness in society at large.

Specific mechanisms to detect and intervene in situations of violence

Participants in several countries recommend the adoption of specific mechanisms that enable organisations, professionals and families to better detect, report and intervene when situations of violence occur, including formal policies or regulations, and preferably with some kind of standards or guidelines established at the national level. According to the participants, these measures should cover all forms of violence and discrimination and ensure a constant monitoring of violent behaviours by children and professionals.

In particular, a stakeholder in Greece mentions the need to create a protocol which could be the guide provided to all professionals and especially to coaches for the management of violent incidents against children, and another one recommends a constant contact with social services when violent incidents arise. The establishment of specific helplines for reporting violent incidents in sports and informing children and parents about legal rights and procedures is also suggested by stakeholders in Greece. From Cyprus comes the suggestion that the adherence of sports organisations to a state-wide child safeguarding policy should be ensured, as well as the observation that independent controllers should be sent by national authorities to monitor, supervise and advice sport organisations. The



creation of more formal and unitary protection body that specifically deals with child protection in sports was also suggested in Cyprus.

Changes in the approach of sports organisations to violence

Study participants believe that a positive transformation in the approach of sports organisations to violence would include a greater presence of psychologists, promote multidisciplinary work in sports organisations, and implement evaluation procedures involving children and parents and including indicators that could give information not only about results but also about child well-being and development through sports. Stakeholders in Cyprus remark that national sports authorities should incorporate more inclusive practices for athletes, considering for example that some athletes in this country undergo psychological marginalization due to their lower financial capacity which prevents them from entering international competitions.

Improving information and training about violence to professionals, children and families

Stakeholders suggest investing in training and information about violence to professionals, children and families, with particular contents adapted according to the target group. Professionals, especially managers and coaches, would benefit from specific training on prevention of violence and children's rights. Stakeholders, professionals and parents in several countries point out that little or no training at all is required to coaches before they take the position and only some of them have advanced training for the job. Some sport club managers in Cyprus report that they currently offer training courses/lectures to children and parents on topics like healthy eating and psychological abuse.

Another important suggestion is the existence of qualified support provided to sports professionals, for instance by psychologists, on how to deal with concrete cases or behaviours they encounter. In Italy, for example, nine out of the twelve professionals participating in our study state that they would like to have more information or targeted training on the topics of child protection and how to approach and manage difficult situations with a valid psychological support; who to refer to in cases of emergency; and how to enhance the access of young people with disabilities in sports environments, perhaps through the creation of "integrated classes". Parents in Italy mentioned the importance of training sports professionals on trans-cultural aspects too.



In the case of children and families, training or information should be mainly about how to detect and act when violence occurs. It could be also appropriate to clarify to children and parents that sport should not be centred on winning or losing, but rather experienced as an opportunity to discover and develop one's abilities and to obtain results through collaboration with others. Study participants in Greece also recommend improvements in the communication between sports organisations, their professionals, children and families, in particular constant meetings in order to inform parents as well as the establishment of a better relation between coaches and their students.

Raising awareness in society at large

Concerning society at large, the promotion of an understanding of sport that goes beyond competition is also recommended. Some stakeholders argue for more cooperation between sports organisations and schools on this matter, always ensuring that the connection between sports and positive values (respect, equality, etc.) is observed and promoted. The organisation of campaigns for raising awareness about violence in sports involving famous athletes and their personal stories is suggested by stakeholders in Greece.

6. Conclusions

Our needs assessment confirms the importance of improving policies and practices of child protection in sports in the four countries examined: Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Portugal.

Most of the participants in our study acknowledge the existence of violence and discrimination in sports. Violence can be psychological or physical; and it can be committed by professionals against children, by children's family members against children and professionals, or by a child against another child. The participants also report situations of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and disability, among others. Gender-based stereotyping imposes and reproduces prejudice and stigma with uncalculated consequences for the mental and physical well-being of children.

Insufficiencies in the legal frameworks, either because provisions do not exist or are too generic and broad, create difficulties in detecting, monitoring and intervening in situations of violence. Many of those situations fall between the responsibilities of various institutional actors: child protection institutions, sports authorities, polices, courts and others. A further difficulty in the application of the legislation is that these forms of violence are often seen –



by institutional representatives, sports professionals, and to a lesser extent by families and children – as inevitable, acceptable or unimportant behaviours in sports, even if legislation criminalises such violence. It is essential that the ACTIVE project keeps on contributing to enhance the abilities of all target groups to recognise violence and the serious implications it can have.

There is also a lack of policies at the level of the sports organisation. Given the scarcity of formal policies or mechanisms (codes of conduct, protocols or other), the responsibility remains on individuals and the greater or less capacity of the coach, the child or the parents to deal with the situation. Demands and expectations of prevention are put on coaches who nevertheless lack adequate training or support by other professionals to fulfil such role. The crucial relevance of a timely intervention in situations of violence is underscored by the very frequent risks of escalation, typically from verbal to physical violence, or from isolated aggressions to bullying.

Our assessment also uncovers promising practices to prevent violence, mainly developed by particular sports organisations or NGOs. Others are implemented by individual professionals with a special concern about violence. It would be beneficial if the public sector could learn more from such practices and consider their extension, reinforcement or adaptation.

Other gaps include a lack of effective measures to monitor and punish violent behaviour, absence of sports psychologists in many contexts and organisations, unclear rules on the involvement of parents in and outside the sports organisation, and not enough information provided to children and parents about child protection mechanisms. For these reasons, parents ought to be involved in the following stages of the ACTIVE project and understood not as spectators (outsiders who act only on their interest) but as participants (insiders with an important role in ensuring the well-being of all children participating in the activities).

Based on this needs assessment, particular attention should be paid to ensure that the following aspects are contemplated in the self-evaluation tool developed in the upcoming stage of the ACTIVE project:

- Violence in sports cannot be naturalised, but instead recognised and valued by the organisation, its professionals, families and children;
- Clarification on which behaviours are to be considered violent, including practical examples;



- Clarification that the mission of the organisation includes the promotion of the child's personal and social development;
- Existence of Codes of Conduct or other formal regulations.
- Providing information on child protection mechanisms to children and parents, as well as promoting the participation of children and parents in decisions and evaluations, through more formalised mechanisms that also make sure parents take on the responsibility of looking for information and acting whenever necessary;
- Knowledge about the training provided to professionals beyond strictly technical aspects, recognising the importance of other skills that enable them to better prevent and deal with situations of violence.

It is important to remember that sports organisations in these four countries are very diverse with regard to size, formality and resources. Given this landscape, the tool developed in the ACTIVE project must be conceived in a way that makes it applicable to all organisations, including the largest and more formal ones (e.g. big sports clubs) as well as the smallest and more informal (e.g. local associations with recreational purposes). Especially in the case of the latter, official bodies at the national or local levels, such as sports authorities, federations or municipalities, can play an important role in disseminating or even applying the tool themselves.

The design of training to professionals will also benefit from this assessment of needs. In particular, the contents of the training should include informal and formal measures – including legal ones – for child protection, prevention of violence against children in sports, codes of conduct, privacy of children, psycho-pedagogical and transcultural aspects in training/working with children, management of difficult situations, evaluation of the children's satisfaction within the sports-recreational activities, management of the relationship with parents, and involvement of children in decision-making processes that affect them within the sports organisation.



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