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Promoting physical activity for mental health in a refugee camp: the Skaramagas project

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1 **Promoting physical activity for mental health in a refugee camp: the Skaramagas project**

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10 **Background**

11 Many refugee and migrant children and adolescents are in urgent need of shelter, care, and
12 protection. Greece has been a major entry point in Europe, receiving over a million refugees
13 and migrants (37% children) since the beginning of 2015. These children and their families
14 face a range of risks, such as violence, exploitation, and abuse in their country of origin, during
15 their journey, and upon arrival. It is estimated that 22% of individuals living in displacement
16 experience a mental disorder such as depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, bipolar
17 disorder, or schizophrenia.¹ Promising examples of community-based initiatives, which use
18 culturally sensitive learning materials,² to encourage participation in physical activity for the
19 purpose of promoting mental health are emerging.^{3,4} This Service Spotlight focuses on one
20 such initiative: the Skaramagas project.

22 **The Skaramagas project**

23 Skaramagas is an old navy base located 11 km west of Athens. During the summer of 2016,
24 Skaramagas accommodated 3,000 refugees, of whom 96% were families from Syria, Iraq, and
25 Afghanistan. From November 2016 to May 2018, an educational programme sponsored by
26 UNICEF and the British Council of Greece was created for refugee and migrant adolescents
27 living in the camp by providing access to and/or facilitating their education, school readiness,
28 psychosocial support, and the development of resilience. Educators planned a series of lessons
29 based on common themes, such as safety, goals and inspirations, self-care and hygiene
30 measures, Olympic games, and physical activity.

31 In total, 269 adolescents (50% girls) aged 12 to 17 years old participated, with an average
32 weekly attendance of 125 students. Students originated from Syria (47%), Iraq (39%),
33 Afghanistan (13%) and Iran (1%). The students' native languages included Kurdish (53%),

34 Arabic (34%) and Dari/Farsi (13%). On average, the participants in the programme had missed
35 2.5 years of schooling, while some had never attended formal education at all.

37 **Purpose of the physical activity programme**

38 The physical activity programme, which was part of the Skaramagas project, was developed to
39 promote physical and mental health of adolescent refugees and migrants through structured
40 sport, physical activity, and play. The main aims were to offer suitable participation
41 opportunities for adolescents, increase the physical activity level of the participants, as well as
42 introduce them to unfamiliar sports, and the respective new sport skills. In addition, the
43 programme intended to create a supportive and inclusive environment within a culturally
44 sensitive approach. Further objectives were the promotion of mental health and psychosocial
45 wellbeing through physical activity and sport participation, with minimum emphasis on
46 performance and competition. Prior to the programme's implementation, participants had
47 limited or no opportunities to be physically active and had not participated in structured
48 physical activity sessions for many years.

49 The programme consisted primarily of football, basketball, volleyball, and a combination of
50 endurance and weight training. Calisthenics, and weight training using sand-filled bottles, big
51 water bottles, and body weight were key, especially for older students. The physical education
52 teacher determined the session's activities with no specifications regarding the intensity of
53 activities. The programme was delivered three times per week with each exercise session
54 lasting 50 minutes, and participants were free to choose the intensity they preferred.

56 **Challenges faced and lessons learned**

57 The initial plan was to implement the Sport Education model because it is a student-centred
58 educational approach that contains cooperative learning, meaningful game experiences, and
59 various role tasks for students, and has a positive impact on adolescents' physical and
60 psychological variables.⁵ However, this approach was abandoned early because the tension and
61 emotional involvement attached to competitions obscured the attainment of social goals and
62 values, and countered the psychosocial support and resilience development goals of the
63 programme. Thus, the Sport Education model was replaced by the Teaching Personal and
64 Social Responsibility (TPSR) through Physical Activity model.⁶ The TPSR model promotes
65 self-direction, empathy, respect for others' rights, cooperation, and leadership skills by giving
66 students increased amounts of responsibility and decision-making. A student-centred

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3 67 methodology through skill building and increased physical activity has fostered independence
4 68 and improved decision-making skills for students.

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6 69 Another challenge was developing mixed-cultural and mixed-gender groups. This was
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10 71 cultural tensions of the various communities' historical background were overcome by open-
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12 72 minded students who embraced multi-cultural/multi-gender small-group exercising
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14 73 experiences.

15 74 16 17 75 **The impact of the programme on the community**

18 76 A climate of acceptance, diversity and gender equality was created through positive
19 77 engagement in physical activity, and participants reported improvement of their mental health
20 78 and psychosocial wellbeing. Older students exercised without direct supervision and took
21 79 responsibility for their actions. The programme successfully fostered an active participatory
22 80 role, promoting empowerment, self-confidence, and eagerness to take an initiative in physical
23 81 activities. It also developed team-building and intercultural understanding, breaking gender
24 82 barriers and fostering tolerance and social cohesion. Most of the girls had never played sports
25 83 before and were reluctant to participate in mixed gender groups, so playing together was
26 84 emphasized to include girls safely and appropriately. Over time, students self-organized mixed-
27 85 gender and nationality groups to play outdoor games and sports (e.g., volleyball) during breaks
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29 86 and afternoon recess.

30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 88 **Sustainability and replicability elements of the programme**

40 89 This physical activity programme was based on the Sport for Protection Toolkit developed by
41 90 UNHCR, the International Olympic Committee and Terre des Hommes.⁷ It was integrated in a
42 91 holistic approach to facilitate refugee and migrant adolescent education, school readiness,
43 92 psychosocial support, physical and mental health, and resilience. Delivered by a specialized
44 93 physical educator with the assistance of a school psychologist, the programme established
45 94 meaningful team sport participation opportunities for young women across nationalities.

46 47 48 49 50 96 **Conclusion**

51 97 The Skaramagas project showed that physical activity interventions appropriately implemented
52 98 by adequately trained physical activity professionals can promote the physical and mental
53 99 health of adolescent refugees and migrants. Sport and exercise professionals should bear in
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35 104 **Figure 1** Participants in the physical activity programme supervised by the physical education
36 105 teacher at Skaramagas refugee camp.
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22 131 **Competing interests:** None declared.

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26 133 **Data availability statement:** No data are available. Not applicable.
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Figure 1 Participants in the physical activity programme supervised by the physical education teacher at Skaramagas refugee camp.

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