

SPOTLIGHT ON A REGION

# **Knowledge on the Nordics**

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# Sports Clubs in Sweden and Integration

*19 May 2022 by Tony Mickelsson Blomqvist*

## Summary

Associational life is a key element of civic engagement in the Nordic countries, with voluntary organisations creating networks that facilitate social inclusion and community cohesion, and contribute to a resilient public sphere. The sports movement has a strong political presence in Sweden, notably to do with migrants' integration. Sport has been touted as a “universal” language where individuals from diverse backgrounds can take part in something meaningful that does not require particular linguistic skills. This context is examined through a detailed case study of a local martial arts club, which reveals the potential and the limitations of sport clubs as integration projects, and outlines key considerations when engaging with marginalised groups.

The existing structure of sport clubs in the Nordic countries provides a tremendous opportunity to contribute towards migrants' well-being and their feelings of belonging and to provide meaningful leisure time. This is invaluable in a migration context where previous social networks may have been eroded, and barriers at school and in the labour market may be overwhelming. Exploring Nordic sport clubs in conjunction with refugee projects can shed light on the integration process. While integration is a contested concept, I use it in this article to refer not only to inclusion in the local sporting sphere, but also to the broader process of fostering strong communal bonds, empowering individuals, and ensuring equitable access to healthy, fulfilling lifestyles.

## Sports clubs in the Nordic countries

Sport clubs in the Nordic countries make up a significant share of the voluntary sector – they are run by members, for members. Although there is some variation in how sports systems in the Nordic countries operate and are constructed and influenced by government, they share key common features. Most sport clubs are run on a non-profit, voluntary basis by individuals. Besides membership fees and some limited commercial revenues, they are supported by government funding and are governed by their respective national sports federations. Federations can function as the government’s extended arm in the sphere of sport, attempting to steer sport clubs in ways that are conducive to social policy.

Associational life is strong in the Nordic countries and this is no different in sport clubs. In international comparisons, the Nordic countries frequently top listings measuring both sport club membership generally and the number of volunteers in sport. Accordingly, there is a prevalent understanding of how sport is to be carried out in the Nordic countries, building on a long tradition of bureaucracy, organisation and volunteerism.

## Sports for all?

One key consideration is that the Nordic countries adopt a “sport-for-all” notion, meaning everyone should have the opportunity to partake in sport equally. This idea coincides with the growing political significance that has been attributed to sport in the Nordic countries, namely, that it combats a range of social ills, including crime, by promoting public health, social cohesion and migrants’ “integration”. Sports clubs are often perceived as vehicles for social change that can help alleviate problems which are generally the responsibility of the public sector.

However, while sport-for-all is an honourable idea, sport – like any other sphere of society – is conditioned by a range of factors including socio-economic status, ethnicity, sex, gender, and age. Moreover, inclusion in Nordic sport has often been seen as linked to different forms of cultural and physical capital. Individuals who understand the bureaucracy of Nordic sport and have the physical skill necessary to participate in a satisfactory manner (that is, are able to compete) are more likely to partake in sports clubs than others. In this sense, access is not quite as equal as it seems at first. Limited sporting access is an important public health issue, notably with respect to people in the low socio-economic bracket or with a migration background.

Nordic migration policies reflect this context. In Sweden, where my own research has been based, a shift has gradually occurred where the country has gone from being a strong defender of human rights and multiculturalism

towards more populist ideas emphasising migrants' integration. These ideas influence the Swedish sporting sphere as well, where implicit or explicit learning practices are used to "include" – or rather assimilate – migrants into mainstream sports. While sport can provide meaningful leisure time and improve mental and physical health, it can also function as a mediator for less obvious aims and agendas.

### **Academic approaches that help show hidden inequalities**

Sport and social inclusion in the migration context has been the primary focus of my research and I have drawn extensively from the theoretical principles of critical realism – a perspective which places itself between interpretivism and positivism. These principles provide a framework for analysing societal behaviours and trends, which can be carried out in a variety of ways.

Focusing on structure, such as that of organisations, state initiatives or policy-making, can overlook the importance of a particular individual's own agency. On the other hand, focusing too much on the individual's perspective and their decision-making power plays down the importance of structural aspects. A book by Margaret Archer from 1995 helpfully coins the term "morphogenetics", which is an analytical tool enabling both of these aspects as well as others, to be included when analysing what is going on in a particular social situation.

Archer is a foundational author within the critical realist-inspired branch of social science, and her morphogenetic approach illustrates how actors within a given setting both exert agency but are simultaneously limited by their surroundings. That is, actors negotiate with their surroundings in a conscious way in pursuit of their goals. Accordingly, some individuals are more limited by their surroundings than others and may be more vulnerable to power dynamics. For instance, some individuals may wish to maintain a hegemonic status and further contribute toward inequalities, whereas others struggle to break such cycles. This perspective is particularly useful when examining the conditions of social inclusion and integration in migration research, and was helpful when I sought to investigate a martial arts sports club and how it incorporates new members like refugees.

### **A refugee project at a martial arts club**

I carried out research on a Swedish martial arts club through an analysis of the club's relevant paperwork, five interviews with key volunteers, and a three-month ethnographical observation. My research took place in the aftermath of a project where refugees were permitted to train free of charge

and they were integrated into the existing club structure. Guided by the principles of critical realism and the morphogenetic approach, my main findings were as follows:

First, the guiding principles of the sports club itself consisted of a mix of traditionally “Nordic” ideals such as democracy, social solidarity and equality (specifically gender equality). Unsurprisingly, these were also mixed with Asian influences, as martial arts have a solid cultural foundation in this region. These influences entailed matters such as discipline, respect, etiquette in the gym (such as bowing before stepping on to the mat) as well as others. All in all, these values were supposed to guide members of the martial arts club in both their organisational and individual behaviour.

Secondly, since this organisational and philosophical foundation set out a normative framework for the sports club’s members, this culture also served as a gateway in and out of the club. Throughout the interviews with key volunteers, it was clear that they benefitted greatly from this framework. It was consistent with their way of life, their perception of how sport should be conducted, and served to maintain a kind of social order. In other words, these members had a structure around them that they actively upheld.

This became very salient when the club received refugees. Despite the high level of good will that existed within the club towards the refugees, there was also a substantial expectation that they would adapt to the sports club’s etiquette and practices. This was not without issues. The refugees had difficulties with the language and with adapting to the level at which martial arts training was perceived as “satisfactory”, and they failed to understand implicit rules about volunteering. This was problematic for the existing members in the sports club who seemed to believe that the migrants had failed to integrate properly. Little thought was given to how difficult it may be to adapt to existing norms which were new to them, or how the refugees could have contributed in a variety of other ways. While much was said about what organisational measures had been taken to accommodate the refugees (for example, lowered fees, free equipment), little attention was paid to understanding these new individuals entering the club.

The refugee project ultimately failed to include the refugees in the existing organisation, and by the time the research was concluded, most of them had left. In the words of one coach, the majority of the members believed that “those who wished to stay, stayed”; only one refugee remained in the club.

My study focused on the voices of already existing members – in other words, the people who tend to be the agenda-setters with powerful voices. It is also imperative that further research elucidates the refugees’ stories in order to accommodate better their sporting experiences.

## Sports clubs more complex than “universal” appeal

Sport clubs in Sweden have a unique opportunity to contribute towards migrants’ well-being when their previous social networks may have eroded and social and structural barriers may exist in other parts of society. Yet, as evidenced in this case study, enforcing norms and agendas upon migrants may cause the opposite of social inclusion and integration, even in the sporting sphere. Accordingly, sports (practice) is not an isolated island unaffected by other societal influences, but resembles much of the political rhetoric found elsewhere that has to do with migrants’ integration.

### Further reading

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