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Case study

Barça Foundation

FutbolNet, a methodology thought
for its target group

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By using a simple three-part structure, the FutbolNet methodology can be easily utilized in different contexts to conduct S4D sessions with children, especially with those most at risk of marginalization, contributing to their personal development and to overall improved inclusion. The Barça Foundation follows a thorough process of consultations with stakeholders to get to know the reality on the ground before identifying how a new project can be best designed and implemented. This includes gaining a deep understanding of the challenges faced by the target group and adapting the sessions to best address them.

Overview

In 2011, the Barça Foundation started developing FutbolNet, a methodology to facilitate S4D sessions that “uses sport, play and physical activity as tools for social integration to improve the lives of children and young people who are living in vulnerable contexts”.¹ FutbolNet is used in programmes about diversity, violence prevention, social inclusion and refugees. The methodology was first launched in Catalonia, Spain and later scaled up in parts of Latin America and the Mediterranean. As of 2020, the Barça Foundation is present in more than fifty countries and estimates that it has impacted more than 1.5 million beneficiaries. Each project has its specificities, dictated by the local context, logistical constraints and the needs of the target group, but the methodology remains unchanged. The Barça Foundation works with local agencies for the implementation, but the technical team makes regular visits for quality assurance, methodological follow-up and to create a community of practice.

The methodology has a three-part structure (see *Figure 1*). In the first part, children and coaches sit together in a circle, chat about how they feel and set the ground rules for the rest of the session, all accompanied by ludic games. The second part is a game played according to agreed rules. In the final part, children and coaches discuss how the session went, including what went well and what could be improved. All sessions revolve around

five core values, which are also the values of FC Barcelona: effort, respect, teamwork, humility and ambition. The game, with its rules, aims to make the children experience these values, with the discussion afterwards intended to make them reflect on these values.

FutbolNet targets children from vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied minors, refugees, children with disabilities, and children living in difficult and violent contexts. The methodology is used to promote a culture of cooperation, to give children an opportunity for integration, and to acquire life skills and values that will help them be successful in life. As one of the interviewed programme officers stated: “it helps them to forget their problems, make decisions (because in order to play you make decisions all the time), and promotes cooperation”.

Barça Foundation’s programmes work on many levels:

1. Children adopt healthy habits. This is especially true in cases where children are not used to moving and running around, such as girls in the favelas of Brazil, who start becoming healthier thanks to the physical activity.
2. Children begin to express their opinions as during the sessions they are asked how they feel and what they think, which can be something they are not used to.
3. Participants start making friends and learning to live in harmony with others. This can represent a new model of coexistence, particularly for children who live in violent contexts. With this comes an appreciation of rules and discipline that are no longer seen as something imposed but as useful for coexisting with others. The other FutbolNet core values follow and by experiencing, rather than just hearing about their importance, children and youth can internalize them in a lasting way.

A diagnostic to fit the context

When rolling out projects in new locations, a coordinator visits the location and runs a diagnostic exercise to get to know the context, identify the needs and plan on how to adapt the implementation.

- It is first necessary to understand the political and social situation, followed by the local norms and the population living in the area and their needs.

Figure 1: The three-part structure of the FutbolNet methodology



- It is useful to have a list of the service providers available and the challenges faced by existing services. In order to maximize the effects, it is important to consider which organizations are already working in the context, especially sport organizations, and what their approaches and objectives are.
- Meetings with the various stakeholders helps form a well-rounded understanding of the needs, challenges and gaps. FutbolNet representatives always makes sure to talk with organizations working with children and youth in the area, and try to identify if FutbolNet can complement what they are doing or if they can start something new together.
- A safe space is a crucial ingredient; therefore, the diagnostic exercise needs to identify potential physical spaces where the sessions could be conducted.
- Projects cannot be sustained without local government buy-in and approval, so ensuring a functional relationship with local authorities is vital for the success of a project. This can sometimes involve considering the pre-existing role of other organizations on the ground.

When I am at FutbolNet I forget about everything else and focus on enjoying as much as possible.

Participant, 14-year-old boy, Spain

Once these preliminary steps have been taken and a decision made to go ahead with a project, it is necessary to recruit and train coaches, source the materials, mobilize communities to let them know about FutbolNet and collect sign-ups. Sometimes, festivals, which function as an occasion to either launch a new project or to involve the community during or at the end of a season, are organized.

Attention to the children's characteristics

Over the years, there has been a growth in the types of contexts where the FutbolNet methodology is implemented. Most recent implementation contexts are challenging, which has led to greater discovery about the potential of the methodology. This evolution has

been particularly evident in the way inclusion is addressed, as now all activities are adapted to ensure that people with different abilities can participate. “It doesn’t matter where one is from, their physical ability, their gender, we are ready to include anyone. This is notable progress, not because inclusion wasn’t feasible at the beginning, because at first we didn’t know this could be done” (Catalonia coordinator – Ramon).

“Since I joined, I no longer spend much time on the street and I am a better person. When I come back from football, I feel relaxed.”

Participant, 13-year-old boy, Spain

One of the coaches interviewed reported that participants often think “no one understands me, I am alone in all this”, which can result in them feeling excluded, not expressing themselves because they believe no one will listen, and being aggressive. However, “with sustained work they learn that the world listens to them when they express themselves calmly and with respect”. The sessions are occasions where “they are listened to, where someone cares about their worries”.

The methodology allows coaches to work on the children’s specific needs. Each group, and each child, has different characteristics so it is a responsibility of the coach to tailor the sessions to address the most relevant issues. For example, to illustrate the value of teamwork, if a game gets very competitive, the group, encouraged by the coach, can decide to introduce more rules to mitigate the competition. This helps the participants experience a different way to play (together) and then discuss what it was like in the debrief at the end of the session, thus reinforcing the lesson on the field. This an important part of the inclusiveness of the programme.

The logistical aspects of each project are also designed to best address participants’ needs. In Bogota, for example, the project focused on using FutbolNet to improve mathematical skills and to change attitude but was not being effective because the children it targeted

had difficulties attending school (where the sessions were taking place). It was decided to conduct the sessions on the streets instead, and, over time, participants started seeing the mathematics learning as positive. This in turn, favoured a reconciliation with learning and relative school settings.

“Some of the participants are rebels, they don’t like to study and have problems with teachers and other students. In the sessions we always reinforce the positive sides, today ‘I made a friend’, ‘a teacher said well done’, and they focus on that. Participants become more polite over time, now they arrive and greet me by saying ‘Hi, how are you?’ When they arrive for a session, they go look for you and ask how your day is going.”

Coach, male, 29

Focusing on girls

Because football is often seen as a boys’ game, and because in many contexts girls are less involved in sports, FutbolNet projects initially tended to have low female participation. As inclusivity is one of the focuses of the programme, the Barça Foundation started looking for ways to encourage girls’ participation:

- One promising solution was ensuring the presence of female coaches. For example, in Greece, where projects with refugees are conducted, at first, in 2017, there were hardly any girls participating while by 2020, 40 per cent of those participating regularly were girls.
- Another successful solution was conducting sessions in closed venues. Indeed, especially in Latin America, girls are expected to spend most of their time inside the house, because the streets are a place for boys. Whereas girls and their families were hesitant about participating in sessions taking place outdoors, they were more comfortable playing in indoor venues.

These gender norms differ between countries. In Catalonia mixed groups are perfectly acceptable

whereas in Greece, among refugees, for older age groups (above 11 years old) it is believed that boys and girls shouldn't play together. As a result, in Greece, the Barça Foundation looked for an approach that ensured respect for everyone's beliefs but remained loyal to the values of integration and gender equality. To do this, the team started piloting games that didn't involve physical contact to show parents that there are ways for boys and girls to play together.

Change in behaviour

I don't swear and fight [anymore].

13-year-old boy, Brazil

I learnt to respect my schoolmates and play without swearing and hitting.

12-year-old boy, Brazil

Focusing on 16+

Since early 2020 Spain has started to receive more unaccompanied minors who have no social and family networks in the country. Local social protection authorities have not been focusing on this situation. To respond to this emergency, the Catalonia programme has increasingly been working with youth aged 16 and older. Since play can be boring for this age group, and employment and other social challenges are prominent issues for the youth, the Barça Foundation decided to develop a version of FutbolNet to respond to these needs. They piloted it in the 2020 season, with sessions consisting of specific activities aimed at developing employability competences and skills that participants could use in their day-to-day lives, channelled through sport to make them more engaging. The Barça Foundation knew that such sessions could be a useful tool to help adolescents but were not a solution to unemployment, so they also organized events to link the youth with corporate partners and private firms. An 'employability campus' was also organized with a hotel

chain, where the participants shadowed hotel staff in the various tasks related to hotel management. The campus ended with a sports event in which the young people also had interviews with potential employers.

Addressing violence


A recurring theme in many of the locations where the FutbolNet methodology is implemented is that of violence. This is particularly present in Latin American countries, but is also an issue relevant for other regions; indeed, anger and consequent aggression are commonly a product of the marginalization that many FutbolNet participants are subjected to.

A striking example of this violent environment is found in the Favela da Maré in Rio de Janeiro. FutbolNet coaches reported a climate of insecurity where the project is implemented, and that drug-related conflicts are frequent between the two communities living around the project location. In that area, parents of minors are often involved in drug dealing or consumption. Weapons visibly circulate in the community and are even accessible to children. In this context, it is easy for children and young people to get caught up in violence and drug trafficking both because of the high exposure to the two phenomena and the absence of alternative ways out. This all contributes to children feeling unsafe, nervous and anxious, and responding to situations aggressively.

The FutbolNet sessions are an occasion for the children to be shielded from the outside environment for an hour, to feel safe, to relax, and to go back to simply being children and playing. The coaches also provide a positive role model as an alternative to the "idols" from organized crime. Within the Favela, children from different clans do not normally play together, but thanks to the neutral space created by for the programme, all children can play together without creating conflicts between crime groups. As one of the coaches reports, the sessions are only a short time in the participants' lives but they can still make a difference: "you have one hour of the session to build and outside [the programme] there are 23 hours which dismantle. So, in one hour we have to build something which is dismantled for the other 23 hours of the day ... this is difficult, and it's not quick ... you cannot expect them to improve instantly."

Children reported that outside FutbolNet, when they play football with their friends, there is a lot of competition and they often swear and fight with each other. On the other hand, they reported that during the FutbolNet sessions, it doesn't matter who wins, or if you play well or not, but everyone just cares about having fun. This calmer and cooperative environment is carefully created, thanks to the three parts of the sessions. It is not common for children to be asked how they feel, and when they are, such as in the first part of a session, it can help them to feel that there are people who care about their feelings. The rules of the game implemented during the second part help to alleviate the competition and to ensure that the game is fun for all participants. While playing, children are encouraged to treat each other with respect and to play as a team and the debriefing done in the last part of the session offers the possibility to reflect on the values and to consolidate the lessons learned so they can have a more lasting effect.

Coaches report that after taking part in FutbolNet, children behave in a more respectful way, they are better team players, they interact in a more positive way with their parents, their language improves (i.e. they swear less) and they become aware that bullying is not good. Most importantly, this is not limited to the duration of the session but extends to the home. One coach stated that: "they realize the importance of utilizing their lessons at home, including teamwork, working with respect, and all the values of the project can be used at home. How can you work as a team at home? Helping your dad, your mom ... very simple things."²



It's about having fun, it doesn't matter if you don't play well, there is no competition, so they are free to participate and play ... Like other youth, from 10 to 17 years old I played football in a competitive way. When I arrived at the project in 2018, I thought the same way, that I was joining a programme where competition was important, but no, when I saw what it was like, it was very different from what I imagined.

Coach, male

¹ See: <<https://foundation.fcbarcelona.com/futbolnet>>, accessed February 2021.

² Male coach in Brazil.

for every child, answers

UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti

Via degli Alfani, 58

50121 Florence, Italy

Tel: (+39) 055 20 330

Fax: (+39) 055 2033 220

florence@unicef.org

www.unicef-irc.org

@UNICEFInnocenti

facebook.com/UnicefInnocenti/

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