

A New Beginning in Portugal: Reflections on the Work Fulfilled by the Portuguese Red Cross Temporary Resettlement Centre on the Integration of Afghan Asylum Seekers

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Abstract

Afghans constitute one of the largest refugee populations worldwide. Asylum seekers and refugees leave their countries due to conflict, violence, crises, persecution and human rights violations, poverty, lack of essential services, food insecurity or disasters, and the effects of climate change. Adolescents often migrate unaccompanied by a caregiver, facing specific risks in this process. Middle East citizens make up a minor percentage of migrants arriving in Portugal despite the growing numbers after 2016. Portugal is hosting the fourth-highest number of Middle East and North Africa unaccompanied minors among the EU Member States. Thus, starting the discussion and evaluating integration strategies for this target group is imperative. Sport, artistic and cultural activities have been highlighted by research as peace development, social cohesion, and the rapetual tools. Also, mentoring is identified as a strategy with positive results for youth at risk of developing psychological, social, and behavioural problems. Its application targeting unaccompanied minors (UM) refugees and asylum seekers has gained momentum in a growing number of EU countries receiving refugee citizens from the EU relocation program. This paper aimed to present reflections on the implementing sports, cultural and artistic initiatives as tools of social integration and health promotion within a group of Afghan citizens arriving in Portugal under the international protection law. The reflections and information provided in this publication have

the potential to inform Portuguese professionals, namely social education technicians collaborating within the Portuguese refugee relocation program and encourage discussions about the creation of community-based integration programs for this target group.

Keywords

Asylum Seekers, Unaccompanied Minors, Integration, Portugal

1. Introduction

People flee their home countries for different reasons. Migrants frequently engage in voluntary relocation to improve their quality of life through employment opportunities, educational pursuits, or exploring novel cultural experiences and personal growth. However, asylum seekers and refugees leave their countries due to conflict, violence, crises or emergencies, persecution, human rights violations, poverty, lack of essential services, food insecurity or disasters and effects of climate change (IFRC, 2021; 2022).

Migration can be voluntary or involuntary, but a combination of choices and constraints are usually involved (ICRC, 2015). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) adopted a broad perspective on migration. It identified migrants as “all people who leave or flee their home to seek safety or better prospects abroad, and who may be distressed and need protection or humanitarian assistance”. Refugees and asylum seekers are included in this description and have specific protection under international law (UNICEF, 2017; European Union, 2022). Refugees are people escaping from armed conflicts or persecution (European Union, 2022). This statute is granted in the host country considering a well-supported fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, politics, or membership of a particular member group (European Union, 2022). Asylum seekers are people who have not yet been recognised as refugees. They apply for international protection, for which a definitive decision has yet to be reached (CVP, 2019). The recognition as an asylum seeker is dependent on the national authorities’ decisions (UNICEF, 2017; European Union, 2022).

In the migratory process, children and adolescents unaccompanied by a caregiver face particular risks, including being exposed frequently to discrimination, marginalization, institutionalization, and social exclusion (WHO, 2018). The term “unaccompanied minors” refers to persons under 18 years of age who are separated from their families while moving to the host country and seeking asylum. The World Health Organization outlined the unaccompanied minor refugees and asylum seekers’ risk factors for health problems and poor well-being during the different phases of migration (Figure 1).

Accordingly, we should recognize the urgency to find ways to support these groups in each of the identified phases. During the integration process in the

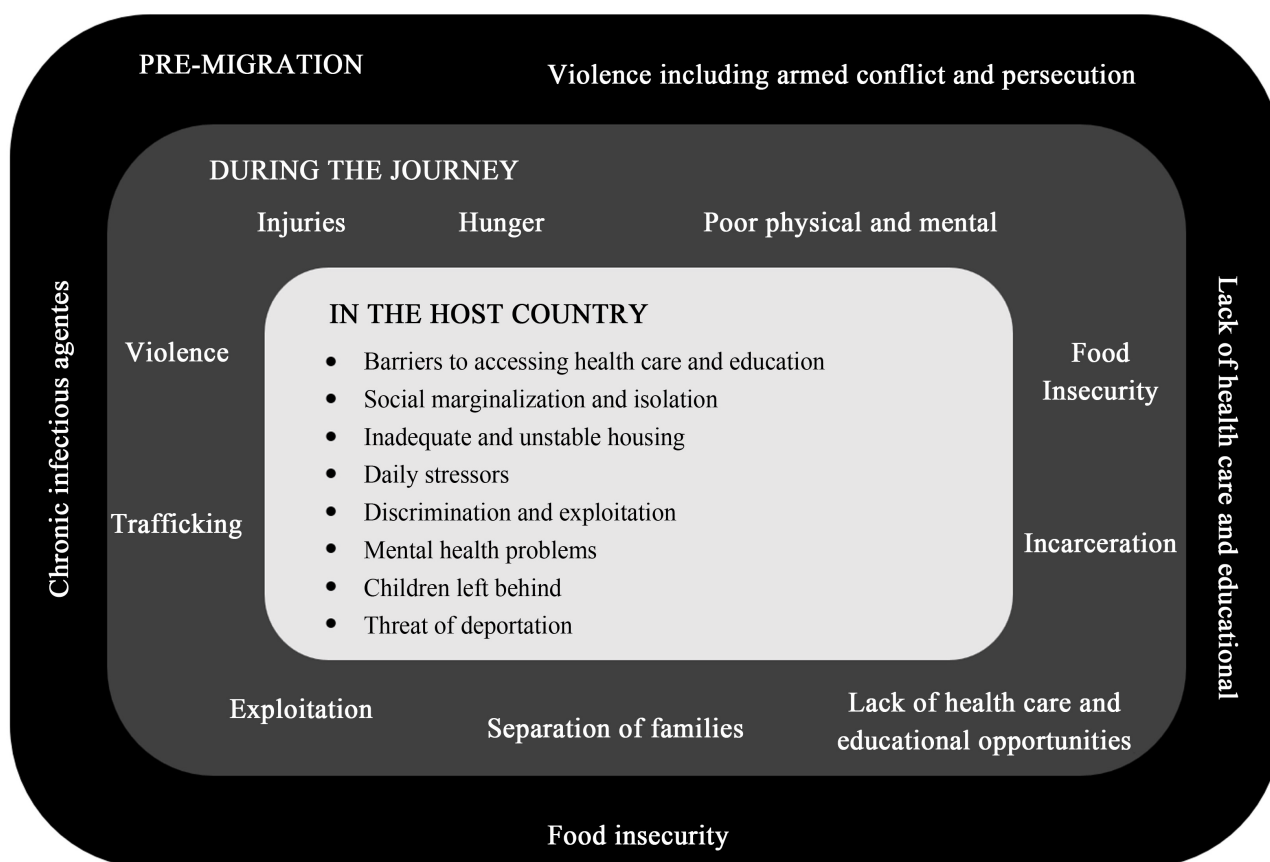


Figure 1. Health and poor well-being risk factor for migrants. Adapted from WHO (2018).

host country, support from central and local authorities, non-governmental institutions, and the general population are crucial to preventing and mitigating further health and social complications and avoiding cultural/social conflicts in refugees' life or in the daily operation of local communities. Specific intervention strategies are needed to both support the integration of refugees and asylum seekers as well as to promote the education and information of the country's inhabitants towards demystification of certain recurrent preconceptions of embodied danger, violence, and trauma (Eide et al., 2018; Varvin, 2017; Vervliet et al., 2014) with a final aim of acknowledging the importance of including this migrant population for a peaceful and sustainable future.

Sport, arts, and mentoring have been referred as relevant peace and development mechanisms (e.g., Hozhabri, Sobry, & Ramzanejad, 2022; Annous, Al-Hroub, & El Zein, 2022; Dhillon, Centeio, & Dillon, 2020; Andonov & Wolfe, 2020; Rodriguez & Dobler, 2021). Engagement in sports is widely acknowledged as a valuable approach to fostering peace since it transcends geographical boundaries, ethnic disparities, and socioeconomic hierarchies (Hozhabri, Sobry, & Ramzanejad, 2022). Sports activities have been valued as a powerful tool to promote reconciliation between communities, facilitate dialogue, and enhance social connections and networks while advocating for peace, fraternity, solidarity, non-violence, tolerance, and justice among diverse ethnic communities (Ade-

sida, de Mora, Wong, Burelli, & Quintana, 2018). Arts (music, drama, and dance) have been integrated in programs aiming the intervention in refugees' health and social integration. There promising evidence that drama therapy approaches support the processes of healing, integration, growth and restore communication via creative and often non-verbal forms (Andonov & Wolfe, 2020). A third integration tool explored in this publication is mentoring. Peer mentoring, particularly, has been a strategy implemented in a few EU countries for the integration of refugees and asylum seekers (Atkinson, 2018; Jaschke et al., 2022; Rodriguez & Dobler, 2021; Thommessen et al., 2015). Youth mentoring programs have been identified as a low-cost strategy for youth at risk of developing a range of psychological, social, and behavioural problems (Burton et al., 2022; Raposa et al., 2019).

Motivated by the experiences of a Portuguese Red Cross team working with Afghan asylum seekers (December 2021-July 2022), this paper aimed to present reflections on the implementation of sports, cultural and artistic initiatives as tools of social integration and health promotion within a group of Afghan citizens arriving in Portugal under the international protection law.

2. Hosting Middle East and North Africa Refugees or Asylum Seekers in Portugal

2.1. Background

Prior to the year 2015/2016, the predominant form of migration in Portugal was driven mainly by familial or labor-related factors (OCDE, 2019: p. 11). The so-called "emigration crisis of 2015/2016" changed the migratory dynamic in the continent while impelling us to question and reflect whether Europe has been confronted with an immigration crisis or a crisis of the European reception system (or/and of European solidarity).

Migration movements from Brazil and African Countries of Portuguese Official Language (PALOP) intensified after the end of the Portuguese dictatorship regime and the colonial war (after the year 1974) (Casquilho-Martins & Ferreira, 2022). During the turn of the 20th century, migration movements from Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Sao Tome and Principe, Brazil, United Kingdom, France, and Italy (OCDE, 2019; Pordata, 2023) continued gaining momentum, while a first wave of work migration arriving from the Eastern and Southeastern European Countries (e.g., Ukraine, Romania), China, India and Nepal was identified between the 2000s and the 2010s (Portada, 2023). The 2021 national census refers to an actual number of 542,165 foreign citizens living in Portugal, from which 36.9% are from Brazil (n = 199,810), 5.8% from Angola (n = 31,556) and 5.0% from Cape Verde (n = 27,144).

Concerning the humanitarian assistance to refugees and asylum seekers, it is noteworthy that Portugal has historically provided limited humanitarian protection to a very modest cohort of citizens compared to its European counterparts (OCDE, 2019). However, in 2015, Portugal was one of the EU members states answering affirmatively to the call for their relocation from the Mediterranean

coast (e.g., Italy and Greece) where the system has been overloaded since this period (CVP, 2019, 2022; FRA, 2022). In sequence, the number of asylum requests tripled in 2017 ($n = 1750$), whereas between 2000 and 2014 the country only received a constant number of 200 asylum requests per year (OCDE, 2019: p. 11). The actual armed conflict in Ukraine generated an unprecedented deployment of Portuguese public authorities, social services and humanitarian aid structures for the reception and integration of displaced Ukrainian citizens (Refer Net Portugal and Cedefop, 2022). Early in 2023, the Foreign and Border Service (SEF) revealed that Portugal has granted 58,043 (14,111 minors) temporary protections to Ukrainian citizens since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Refugees and asylum seekers arrive in Portugal through four possible channels (Figure 2): spontaneous asylum seeking, via EU relocation and resettlement schemes, via EU-Turkey 1:1 agreement, and via Portuguese National Resettlement Program (OCDE, 2019: p. 13).

The relocation of refugees and asylum seekers is framed in the Refugee Relocation and Resettlement Programs (CVP, 2022) and workgroup for the European Agenda on Migration (order no.10041 A/2015), coordinated at a national level by the Portuguese Immigration Border Service (SEF) and the High Commission for Migration (ACM). Receiving asylum seekers within the EU Schemes



Figure 2. Humanitarian migration channels to Portugal. Adapted from OCDE (2019). Created on Mapchart.net.

demanded a systemic reorganization of Portuguese services involved in humanitarian reception and integration. Therefore, Portugal designed an 18-month decentralized integration program, involving several key players [Immigration and Border Services (SEF), Portuguese Refugee Council (CPR), High Commission for Migration (ACM), Institute for Social Security (ISS), Institute for Employment and Professional Training (IEFP), Refugee Support Platform (PAR), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Hosting Entities (municipalities, NGO's and Foundations)], prepared to support the integration of refugees and asylum seekers in areas such as housing, health, education, employment and language (see OCDE, 2019: p. 21).

The Portuguese Red Cross (PRC) is one of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFCR) national societies working in the integration of Middle East and North African refugees or asylum seekers through the European Union relocation program (CVP, 2019, 2022). The PRC strives to prevent and alleviate human suffering in Portugal and globally. Its' mission is to provide humanitarian and social assistance, especially to the most vulnerable, by preventing and repairing suffering and contributing to the safeguarding of life, health, and human dignity [Article 5, Decree-Law No. 281/2007, August 7th]. The PRC develop several action areas such as psych-social support, professional training and education, first aid and emergencies, health interventions, and integration programs. The refugees' reception and integration support is a current central intervention area of the institution in Portugal (CVP, 2022) as well as in other Red Cross' National Societies across the European Union (Le Noach & Atger, 2018).

Middle East citizens make up a minor percentage of migrants arriving in Portugal despite the growing numbers after 2016 and the presence of Syrian and Iraqi citizens in the top rank of nationalities arriving in Portugal under the international protection law as refugees or asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2022b). Of the 2405 Refugees arriving to Portugal in 2020, 1014 were from the Middle East and North Africa regions (UNHCR, 2022b). Hence, the support for refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan has increased in Portugal since 2016 (UNHCR, 2022b) and PRC has been one of the NGOs hosting a major number of refugees and asylum seekers, intervening in the operationalization of the refugee integration efforts alongside governmental administrative bodies and other non-governmental institutions (CVP, 2019).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR), Afghans constitute one of the largest refugee populations worldwide. Globally, Afghanistan's political and social crises generated an estimated 3.4 million refugees and displaced citizens, most of them children, adolescents, and women. Violence, fear, deprivation, the constant threat to the human rights of women and girls, and the economic and health system collapse are the main reasons for Afghans abandoning their country (UNHCR, 2022a). Despite their growing number in Portugal, Afghans are still a minority within the migrant population

which can constitute an additional challenge for the integration process. In 2021, Portugal has received more than two hundred Afghan asylum seekers, most of them unaccompanied minors and women, fleeing Afghanistan under the international protection law after the Taliban occupation of Kabul and rising to power.

Portugal is hosting the fourth-highest number of Middle East and North Africa unaccompanied minors among the EU Member States after France, Germany, and Finland, and despite all the commitment and affirmation of its priority, the central Portuguese government, local authorities, and non-government institutions are facing challenges regarding this highly complex integration progress (European Commission, 2021). Concerning the inclusion process, children and adolescents must be a priority for humanitarian institutions and the Portuguese central and local authorities, since it is known that minors recurrently migrate on their own because their chances of success are considered greater than those of older family members (UNICEF, 2017). Adolescents¹ comprise the majority of citizens arriving in foreign countries with this statute (Randell & Osman, 2021).

Unaccompanied refugee minors are significantly affected by conflicts, natural disasters, poverty, and threats to human rights since they are often exposed to continued violence in their home country and accumulative stress (Keles et al., 2016; Lustig et al., 2004) during a sensitive period of their mental and physical development (Huemer et al., 2009). Some can be victims of human trafficking and other forms of violence during the journey (UNICEF, 2017), and once in a new country, they also face specific stressors and challenges in the resettlement process (Keles et al., 2016). Arriving in a new country without parental presence and support while already carrying a social and health burden, can be stressful and disturbing (Löbel, 2020). This can explain the immediate and subsequent prevalence of mental health problems such as anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression (Mitra & Hodes, 2019; Mohwinkel et al., 2018), substance abuse, conduct and eating disorders (Pumariega et al., 2005) identified in this group. Additionally, uncertainty about their immediate/long-term future (Thommessen et al., 2015) and the often-stressful living conditions in the host country, including frequent housing relocations, limited access to education, social isolation, discrimination from peers and a sense of unprotection, can contribute to poor levels of health and wellbeing in unaccompanied refugee minors (WHO, 2018).

Notwithstanding the diverse instruments available in the EU on a legal, policy and funding level [e.g., EU Asylum Policy, Asylum Information Database, Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)], the operationalization of several intervention programs Europe-wide has revealed various inefficiencies. This is related to shortfalls in the full implementation of the first and guiding basic

¹Adolescence is the phase of life between childhood and adulthood, from ages 10 to 19. It is a unique stage of human development and an important time for laying the foundations of good health. Source: World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/health-topics/adolescent-health#tab=tab_1.

principle of inclusion, which defines it as a “two-way process” (FRA, 2017). The conditions and procedures to provide international protection to citizens arriving in Portuguese territory are established in Portuguese law No. 26/2014, according with the European Union 2011/95/EU directive and the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 1951). Concerning the host of unaccompanied minors, broader guidelines presented by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other normative from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child must be contemplated. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that having a right under European or national law is not sufficient; it ought to be effective in practice (Le Noach & Atger, 2018), which is the actual challenge.

Humanitarian aid is crucial for the survival of displaced and refugee citizens, not only by providing shelter, nutrition, healthcare, and water/sanitation but also for the protection of their human rights through the provision of education opportunities and access to information as the basis for active participation (e.g., integration in the labour market) in the development of modern multicultural societies.

2.2. Refugee and Asylum Seekers Integration Initiatives in Portugal

Portugal is an EU country with strong political and social inclusive measures. This idea is stated in the national constitution. In sequence, it can be stated that there is a consensus among major political parties on the necessity of receiving and integrating refugees as a moral and ethical duty, but also due to the generally positive perception of the immigration effect on the national economy and demographics (OCDE, 2019: p. 43). The perception of the Portuguese civil society regarding the reception of citizens “from a different race or ethnic group than the majority” improved considerably between 2002 and 2018, being the 6th EU country more favourable to the presence of these migrants (Oliveira, 2022).

Despite the apparently favourable environment at different systemic levels, the integration process may often be negatively impacted by the high levels of institutional decentralization and bureaucratization regarding the relocation of refugees and asylum seekers. The coherent implementation and assessment of national integration programs may be hindered because of these two characteristics of the Portuguese system. At a local and regional level, some of the identified challenges are faced with the closer support of city councils and local non-governmental organizations that often mitigate the central government difficulties and faults in the reception, protection, and integration of these citizens (e.g., housing) (Santinho, 2022: p. 147; Boese & Phillips, 2017; Meer et al., 2021).

Since 2015, several governmental and non-governmental organisations have collaborated nationally to implement a strategy known as reversed inclusion. This approach involves the development of public awareness campaigns focused on immigration and the integration of refugees (e.g., “Immigrant Portugal. Tolerant Portugal”; “Welcome Kit”; “What if it were me? Packing a backpack and leaving”; magazine “refugees”) (OCDE, 2019: p. 44). Despite the sustained effort

in raising public awareness to immigration and refugee topics being considered an example of good practice among OECD countries (OCDE, 2019: p. 46), there is more to look after starting the planning and assessment of such campaigns to inform new and more efficient initiatives.

Different initiatives were implemented in Portugal to support the integration process of refugees and asylum seekers. The authors performed a systematic and manual search for Portugal-based interventions. Only one study was identified describing communitarian projects within the arts (Santinho, 2022). Further information regarding the existent integration initiatives was accessed only recurring to an online manual search and data crossing of different information sources, which might lead to a search incompleteness or bias. Admitting this limitation, at the following topics the authors present examples of Portuguese-based integration initiatives directed to refugees and asylum seekers.

2.2.1. Global Platform for Syrian Students

The Global Platform for Syrian Students was established in 2014 by former Portugal president, the late Jorge Sampaio. Since the arrival of the first humanitarian plane to Portugal on the 1st of March 2014, many other groups of Syrian students were accepted into Portuguese Universities and Polytechnic Colleges for protection and continuity of their higher education. For many of these students, the “scholarship was a turning point in their lives”. Nowadays, many of them have completed their studies and started working while well integrated into the Portuguese society. There are already Portuguese-Syrian families, and some are now Portuguese citizens (Global Platform for Syrian Students, 2022).

2.2.2. Artistic Community-Based Projects (Drama, Music, and Dance)

Arts have been applied as a vehicle of integration. Santinho (2022) briefly described examples of Portugal-based integration programs such as the “RefugiActo” Project that began in 2004 within the first resettlement Centre of the Portuguese Council for Refugees (PCR). The main aim of the project was to facilitate the learning of Portuguese and social inclusion through drama activities (Santinho, 2022: p. 150). The “Living Culture Band” derived from another intervention, the “Living in a Different Culture”. This activity was led by a Portuguese language teacher, also an amateur musician. Through what seems to be a natural mentorship process, the teacher mediated proximity and trust bounds between group members, facilitating their integration and the sharing of cultural heritage through the play of Portuguese (fado²), Eritrea and Cameroones traditional music. A third example of integration intervention with refugees and asylum seekers is “Une Histoire Bizarre”, a theatrical play that uses the voice of fifteen migrants and refugee citizens living in Portugal and four Portuguese actors.

²Fado is a performance genre incorporating music and poetry widely practiced by various communities in Lisbon. Fado songs are usually performed by a solo singer, male or female, traditionally accompanied by a wire-strung acoustic guitar and the Portuguese “guitarra”, a pear-shaped cittern with twelve wire strings, unique to Portugal, which also has an extensive solo repertoire. Source: UNESCO <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/fado-urban-popular-song-of-portugal-00563>.

The group was comprised by men and women of different age groups from nine different countries (Sudan, Syria, Pakistan, Mozambique, Iran, Ukraine, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and Gambia), without previous competencies in dramatic performance (<https://www.unehistoirebizarre.pt/>). The play script was developed using their own life stories, memories, dances, songs, and poems from their countries of origin (Santinho, 2022: p. 157). An inquiry to the group members and public revealed that this initiative contributed to the decrease of generalization and negative perception of Portuguese audience towards migrants, the increase of self-esteem, confidence and the breaking down of “cultural gender barriers” within the participants (Santinho, 2022: p. 158).

2.2.3. Sports-Based Initiatives

The “Welcome Sports Club” (Social Innovation Sports), “Welcome Through Football” (Benfica Foundation and social partners) and “Every Club, a Family” (Portuguese Football Federation) are good practice examples within the sports sector. The general aim of the “Welcome Sports Club (WSC)” project is to promote the integration of refugees and beneficiaries of international protection, the youngest, including unaccompanied minors, advocating for their social inclusion, integral development, and promotion of intercultural dialogue. Social Innovation Sports (SIS) is the National Association responsible for this project. SIS’ mission is to “promote sport as an asset of social interest at the service of communities, families, young people and children in vulnerable contexts” (*Positive Benefits & Social Innovation Sports, 2023*). To attain these social goals, SIS apply non-formal education strategies within sport contexts (Football, Cricket, and other physical activities and sports). Moreover, the organization also facilitates the job market integration by accompanying the beneficiaries in the process of preparation for employability, mentoring and exploring/matching the needs of the Portuguese companies. Between 2020 and 2023, SIS supported 91 unaccompanied refugee minors, having weekly activities with 35, from which 27 had professional experiences and 16 have currently part-time (student) or full-time job contracts.

“Welcome Through Football” is funded by Erasmus+ Program of the European Commission and the UEFA Foundation for Children. Sport Lisboa e Benfica-Benfica Foundation (Portugal) is an integrated club alongside other ten European football clubs. The project aims to assist in the integration and inclusion of recently arrived young refugees, asylum seekers and young people with a migrant background (7 - 25 years old) to get them physically and socially active in European communities (*European Football for Development Network, 2023*).

“Every Club, a Family” is another example of a social integration intervention through football. The Portuguese Football Federation and the associated football clubs have created conditions for 70 young athletes from Ukraine to continue to compete. The clubs associated with this program are encouraged to support an adult in finding a job while offering football training opportunities to the children or minors in the household (*Portuguese Football Federation, 2023*).

2.2.4. Mentoring-Based Interventions: Mentors for Migrants' Program

“Mentors for Migrants” is a countrywide program based on experiences exchange, help and support between volunteers (Portuguese citizens) and migrants and/or Refugees. The program aims and responsibilities of both mentors and mentees are well defined on the program webpage (<http://www.mentores.acm.gov.pt/>). The matching process is described and available to potential participants. Nevertheless, the researchers were not able to find program manuals or evaluation reports informing on the mentor profile, overall program structure, timelines or preliminary results.

2.3. Integration Initiatives Developed on the Portuguese Red Cross Temporary Resettlement Centre for Afghan Asylum Seekers (Lisbon, Belém 2022)

In December 2021, Portugal received 273 asylum seekers from Afghanistan. This group, consisting primarily of minors and young adults from a national music institution, migrated to Portugal in search of improved living conditions in terms of safety, health, and education, carrying the hope of being able to “safeguard the musical tradition of Afghanistan for the future”. Since the Taliban’s regime take over the governance of Afghanistan, fundamental human rights such as access to education and culture are under threat. Music and artistic performances were banned, and women lost many of the rights they achieved in the past decade.

The PCR received this group in a Temporary Refugee Reception Centre of the Portuguese Red Cross the (PRC-TRC), assuring safety, shelter, and supporting the beginning of the overall integration process in Portugal (education, housing, jobs, etc.). Recognising the migrant’s risk factors for health problems and poor well-being during different phases of migration (WHO, 2018), the PRC-TRC’s coordination and social-educational team intervened preventively by creating opportunities for education and health protection/promotion besides the traditional actions planned in the relocation program implementation (e.g., psychological support, medical support, school integration).

2.3.1. Education, Health and Cultural Initiatives

Portuguese governmental bodies and PRC promoted school integration early in the integration process. Regarding the process of integration within the Portuguese Educational System, it is noteworthy that a segment of young students had the opportunity to pursue their musical education at the renowned National Music Conservatory of Lisbon. This feature of the formal education integration process may be seen as undeniably favourable. Else ways, regarding the educational opportunities provided by the host public school, it is regrettable to observe a dearth of access to Physical Education (PE) or Arts (Drama, Drawing, Music), regardless of the educational level. The absence of PE and arts within the migrant student’s curriculum may reveal the presence of a reductionist view regarding the educational necessities of this group. This contradicts the education-

al inclusion principles stated at Decree-Law No. 54/2018, which establishes the principles and standards that guarantee educational inclusion, as a process that aims to respond to the diversity of needs and potential of each and every student, through increased participation in learning processes and in the life of the educational community. Our position is informed by the acknowledge that PE, as the sole subject in schools that involves a significant amount of physical activity and interpersonal interactions, plays a distinctive role in facilitating the integration of young individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds into their new environment (Anttila et al., 2018). Furthermore, the arts possess the capacity to facilitate the integration of ethnic minorities. In this context, a strategy of “reverse inclusion” could be employed, wherein Afghan students are included by providing them with opportunities to share their cultural heritage and musical talents with their Portuguese peers.

The learning or mastering of the host society’s language is understood as a fundamental aspect of refugees’ integration (Oliveira, 2021). Language proficiency is vital to increasing job opportunities, being active in society, and preventing inequality and discrimination towards refugees or asylum seekers (Rezaie, 2021). In Portugal the access to Portuguese language classes has been identified as one of the various challenges in refugee support that we, as a country, must overcome (Oliveira, 2021). The leadership of the PRC-TRC had an evident challenge in this regard, which was successfully addressed by partnership with the Portuguese non-governmental organisation “Corações com coroa”. This organisation facilitated the acquisition of the Portuguese language and promoted informal cultural integration activities among the adult beneficiaries. Early in the integration process, children and adolescents had access to language learning opportunities through formal education while being included at the Portuguese Education System, and informal education activities promoted by Social Innovation Sports Association and PRC. Cultural activities were also available to all the beneficiaries aiming the social integration through informal education activities (e.g., guided visits to monuments) that constituted opportunities to learn the national language and interact with the Portuguese society.

In the context of health promotion, an illustrative instance of noteworthy action was facilitated by the “Red Cross Youth group.” This initiative entailed organising a training session focused on the avoidance of addictive behaviour. During their stay at the temporary reception centre, residents participated in health education activities focused on topics such as the need to maintain one’s personal hygiene and practicing sun protection measures.

2.3.2. Promotion of Health through Participation in Physical Activity and Sport Regular Activities

Education and Sport are universal rights that, in emergency situations, guarantee dignity as well as physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection, providing safe learning settings where vulnerable children and young people can be supported. Considering this, a community partnership was celebrated between the PCR and

the Alumni Association of the Faculty of Human Kinetics/University of Lisbon (Rede Alumni INEF-ISEF-FMH). For the implementation of integration initiatives through sport and culture, PRC and Alumni-FMH had the support of Social Innovation Sports (SIS). SIS served as a bridge between the Alumni-FMH volunteers, the PRC technical team and other institutional partners (e.g., Benfica Foundation, Portuguese Sport and Youth Institute, Portuguese Football Federation, County of Alcântara, etc.). This cooperation is perceived by the partnership members involved as crucial for the development and implementation of a Sport Inclusive program.

The first phase consisted of the definition of aims, implementation strategy, resources collection and organization. The strategy for definition of type and organization of the sportive activities' offer was based on the intersection between the beneficiaries' personal interests (e.g., applications of questionnaires and informal conversations) and the availability of volunteer-sport technicians, equipment, and indoor/outdoor convertible sports spaces. Simultaneously, Alumni-FMH organized an open activity at the Jamor National Sport Centre aiming to promote the interaction between the Afghan beneficiaries and the Portuguese community through the experiencing of diverse outdoor sport activities (e.g., Canoeing, Cricket, Soccer, Portuguese traditional games, climbing, etc.). The collection of individual sports equipment was also successfully organized during this phase, allowing to the acquisition of the material requirements (e.g., sport clothes and footwear, sport equipment) to further implementation of the sport internal activities.

The second phase, anticipating the activities implementation, consisted of the baseline assessment of sport interests and competencies of the beneficiaries. Considered this information, the technical team organized a sport activity offer of football (2× week), multisport activities (1× week) and an aquatic competency assessment. Likewise, the team made available dance lessons (1× week) and yoga sessions (1× week) according to the competencies of the volunteers that spontaneously approach the Alumni-FMH recruiters to integrate this initiative. All the activities were mediated by certified Sport Coaches and/or Physical Education Teachers trained at the Faculty of Human Kinetics, University of Lisbon.

Swimming was a sport activity highly appreciated by a high number of beneficiaries. However, was not possible for the team and partners to set the swimming activities due to space restrictions. Despite this difficulties, the team was able to promote an aquatic competence assessment that showed a considerable hiatus between the perceived (e.g., "I know to swim autonomously") and the real ("initial stage of foundational aquatic locomotion skills") aquatic competence of the beneficiaries, which was a point of concern as it represents an increase of drowning risk (Willcox-Pidgeon, Franklin, Leggat, & Devine, 2020). Answering this data, the PRC team decided to promote an evidence-based workshop on Drowning Prevention (Carolo, 2022) and mediated contact with a typical Portuguese beach through a wave sports activity.

Football and dance internal activities were perceived as having a great success among the beneficiaries by generating extensive health promotion and social inclusion opportunities (e.g., integrating Benfica Foundation football teams; playing football with community members regularly; being invited by the board of a Portuguese Public School to a celebration activity of the World Dance Day). Football and Dance lessons facilitated the liberation of emotions in a sublime manner, supporting the celebration of their embodied nature, culture and friendships through movement and energy expenditure. Particularly, the dynamization of Dance lessons revealed a potential for therapeutic impact. In the context of this six-month intervention, the aim of the Dance professor was, firstly, to promote health and well-being by providing a safe space to express themselves and share through dance and visual arts. Secondly, to learn basic movements from classic and contemporary dance, considering their baseline skills and interests.

Moreover, collaboration initiatives between PRC and external community partners allowed answering to the particular interest of the beneficiaries who preferred other sport activities than the ones offered internally (e.g., Gym, Parkour, Boxing).

The volunteer PRC/FMH Alumni team highlights the perceived motivation of the beneficiaries to practice regular sport and physical activities aligned with their interests and motor competency level. The main challenges identified are related to the compatibility between the time availability of the beneficiaries and the availability of space and trained volunteers, as well as communication/coordination with the beneficiaries for the logistical implementation of the activities (e.g., language barrier).

As for future guidance and recommendations, it is considered that the availability of financial and human specialized resources will be important to register the beneficiaries in externally organized activities, for safe transport, and payment for the specialized work of the technicians for a more constant and extended intervention, an aspect that we consider not possible to accomplish fully by means of only consider the intervention of volunteers.

2.3.3. Reflections on Mentoring as a Key Strategy for Social Cohesion and Integration of Afghan Unaccompanied Refugees Minors and Asylum Seekers

Different definitions, understandings and methodologies of “mentoring” have been disseminated as the concept expands in modern times and within several contexts of intervention (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Hence, conceptual confusion about mentoring and other developmental relationship concepts such as coaching, tutoring, induction, and socialization (Domínguez & Kochan, 2020; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021) caused uncertainty and inconsistency in its operationalization mainly within the empirically based research (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021) and hinders the progress of unified efforts of knowledge development on mentoring (Janssen et al., 2016).

Mentoring can function as both, an intervention and a prevention strategy (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014) for different purposes depending on the target group and developmental aims. Traditionally, mentoring is characterized by a strong, caring and supportive relationship between an older or more experienced individual and a younger or less experienced (Rhodes et al., 2006) who share a learning experience over time (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Nevertheless, mentoring can also include peer-to-peer mentoring (e.g., similar age, status and experience) and group mentoring including multiple mentors and mentees (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Performing a literature review of contemporary mentoring tenets, types and applications, Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) extracted nine mentoring alternatives (Table 1) from educational mentoring literature.

Mentoring is being recognized as a positive and low-cost strategy that non-governmental institutions can apply towards the facilitation of social integration and school success of refugee citizens (Jaschke et al., 2022; Oberoi, 2016). If we acknowledge refugee integration in the host country is highly influenced by the way they experience contextual and social connectedness, suitable socio-economic conditions, stable living environments and opportunities to learn the language are achieved (Varvin, 2017; Vervliet et al., 2014), then we believe that a valid argument for the implementation of mentoring programs fostering the integration support of refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal is established.

Mentors with adequate training and cultural competence may influence the quality of mentoring relationships (Oberoi, 2016). The presence of a mentor can help refugees and asylum seekers to set expectations by giving orientation for what to expect from others (including governmental and non-governmental support associations) and what their responsibility is in the resettlement process and adjustment to a new reality; encourage self-efficacy by supporting refugees to obtain the necessary information to allow for autonomy regarding their health care, housing, employment, social services benefits or schooling; and support mentee if there is need of an additional help mainly regarding situation related to mental health problems (EURITA, 2019).

Studies assessing EU-based mentoring programs for Middle East and North African refugees and asylum seekers are scarce. These programs are now gaining momentum in countries such as Sweden (Hosseini & Punzi, 2021) and Germany (Jaschke et al., 2022) and seem to be mainly focused on the support of unaccompanied minors (UM). In Portugal, there is a nationwide mentoring program available. Nevertheless, no published results were found that could inform us about its effectiveness and structure.

Regarding other EU experiences on integrating Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking minors through mentoring, Thommessen et al. (2015) explored the experiences of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking minors from Afghanistan and found that having a mentor (“good man”, a mentor provided by the Sweden State) was a protective factor for these minors that highlight the influence of

Table 1. Classification of mentoring alternatives/types. Adapted from Mullen and Klimaitis (2021).

Mentoring type	Key associated dimension	Definition
Formal mentoring	Planned programmatic interactions.	Planned, structured, and intentional targets gaps and resolves problems in programs and organizations.
Informal mentoring	Spontaneous/natural mentor-mentee interactions.	Occurs in a natural relationship between two people where one gains insight, knowledge, wisdom, friendship, and support from the other.
Diverse mentoring	Relationally mixed demographics and interests.	Mentors and mentees differ in gender, ethnicity, and other demographical characteristics.
Electronic mentoring	Interaction at a distance via technology.	It mediates learning and communication remotely, admitting a cultural shift with technology rapidly changing how people interact.
Collaborative mentoring	Transformative relational development.	Is a dynamic partnership built upon reciprocity, despite differences in knowledge and expertise, status and rank.
Group mentoring	Shared agendas grounded indifferences.	Mentoring program in which a mentor (or small number of mentors) works with multiple individuals within a group setting (Kupersmidt et al., 2020).
Peer mentoring	Peer-based, empowering helping relationship.	A peer-to-peer relationship is built on the assumption that same-generation peers are influential in youth social and cultural development (Burton et al., 2022).
Multilevel mentoring	Mentoring across organizational levels.	Programs can be intentionally programmatic and aligned with institutional mission and policies.
Cultural mentoring	Diverse cultures united in mutual goals.	It nurtures diverse relationships and Cross-cultural relationships within diverse environments.

personal characteristics and the guidance by their mentors and the consequent impact on their life (e.g. "...the friendliness and kindness or humanity she provided."; "get the advice and guidance needed to actually learn for the sake of learning"; "It is important to have one person to talk to, and to have someone to guide you."; "being introduced to this society, so for instance, learning how to deal with practical things"; "Someone to show them the way, and provide support and guidance, like a mentor").

Portuguese Red Cross technicians working with the last emergency resettlement group of young Afghans in Portugal also identified this necessity. Some youngest, mainly the most emotionally vulnerable, naturally elected a technician or facilitator with whom they share some details of their daily routine, share their anxieties, get information about the way the new national systems work,

ask questions about the way of life and their educational or working opportunities in the hosting country as well as ask for advice about the choices and decisions about their future. From the perspective of the PRC technicians, the challenge is to support the emotional and physical health as well as advise the young unaccompanied asylum seekers without getting too attached or personally involved. This is particularly difficult, because of recurring emotional highly loaded situations. A strong personal involvement, despite its best intentions, can hinder the next phase of integration in the host country in which the emotional and functional autonomy of the migrant citizen is crucial.

Hosseini and Punzi (2021) found that UM Afghan refugees in Sweden felt that having Swedish friends and a meaningful and mutual relationship with teachers, social workers and laypersons was an important support in understanding the language and social codes and gave them a sense of connectedness with the hosting society. Another relevant finding of Hosseini and Punzi (2021) is that UM desire to be involved in voluntary work as a way of giving back and wish their experiences could be helpful to other UM refugees arriving in Sweden in the future. This offers a possibility for the development of a future same-culture peer-mentoring project within this geographic area.

In summary, we can acknowledge that, if well-planned, mentoring can be identified as a relevant strategy for national institutions to promote the social inclusion and well-being of refugees or asylum seekers in the pursuit of their free and active participation in society (Atkinson, 2018; EURITA, 2019; Jaschke et al., 2022), particularly for unaccompanied children and adolescents (MENTOR, 2009; Thommessen et al., 2015).

3. Conclusion

Working with young people is always challenging as they experience different sensitive developmental periods where several physical, psychological, social and cognitive changes occur intensely. In this sense, working with unaccompanied minor refugees and asylum seekers requires additional trials because of their often-fragile situation as reported previously. It involves a great deal of empathy, kindness, and care, but also acceptance, perseverance, a sense of mission and adequate specialized training from the part of social educational professionals.

The access to education is key to support unaccompanied minors. Nowadays, Portugal is facing several challenges regarding the organization of the public education system, mainly because the lack of human resources (teachers, education auxiliaries, psychologists), high mobility of professionals and the high load of bureaucratic work of teachers. This occurs while the student population in public schools becomes continuously more heterogenic regarding to socioeconomic status, ethnic origin, and level of learning. Thus, a new model of education is needed, a holistic model that responds to the learning, social and emotional needs of refugee students (OCDE, 2019; Cerna, 2019) increasingly present in Portuguese public schools. Regarding this context of living and integration, the PCR-TRC'

social education team acknowledged with disappointment that the group of Afghan minors would not have access to the curricular areas of Physical Education and Arts in the school context, despite the potential of these areas of knowledge regarding social integration and health promotion. This revealed the presence of a reductionist view regarding the educational necessities of this group.

Acknowledging that sport and the access to culture are universal rights that guarantee dignity as well as physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection to disadvantaged groups by providing safe learning settings, PRC promoted internal and external sport and cultural activities (e.g., through community partnerships) to promote the health and education of the accompanied group asylum seekers. These activities achieved a satisfactory level of impact, nevertheless, objective measures of evaluation are not available as the activity's promoters didn't anticipate this necessity early in the process. In the future, it will be necessary to implement assessment methods to gather data to enhance and advocate for a more comprehensive perspective on integration, whereby the arts and sports serve as transversal and pertinent tools.

Finally, mentoring has now gained momentum within the EU countries receiving more refugee citizens through the EU relocation program. By learning from other EU examples, we believe that formal mentoring programs implemented by non-governmental institutions can be a possible and promising strategy to support the recent Middle East and North African migration wave in Portugal. As reported in this paper, refugees from these regions are a minority within the migrant population in Portugal despite their fast-growing numbers. This means that same-cultural peer mentoring probably cannot be an immediate strategy to support the newest Middle East and North African citizens arriving in Portugal, since the ones belonging to the first group are probably still dealing with different integration challenges in their lives (e.g., finding a decent job, housing, pursue education) and still needing additional support themselves.

Anticipating the possible reception of the next groups of Middle East and North African citizens, it is crucial to contemplate the implementation of a training initiative aimed at equipping potential volunteers, mentors and programme coordinators involved in the reception program. This training program would be facilitated by non-governmental organisations, such as the PRC or the High Commission for Migration. Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasise the significance of fostering community partnerships with universities, research centres, and other institutions. This approach may be pivotal in generating comprehensive insights into the barriers to integration and effective support methods. By conducting research and facilitating the creation of evidence-based integration programmes, these partnerships can contribute significantly to advancing knowledge in this field.

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