



## Refugee Youth Soccer Development Program (Football United)

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*This project also relates to:*

-  Families
-  Youth
-  Community Harmony
-  Education

The *Refugee Youth Soccer Development Program*, or *Football United* provides advice and assistance to existing soccer programs to facilitate the recruitment and participation of refugees. New coaching and referee clinics are established under the program to provide special opportunities for refugee youth to build their skills and social networks.

Vacation camps and community events are held to build social cohesion by enabling participants to attend regular gatherings and develop friendships. The program particularly targets refugee youth who have recently arrived in Australia. The 200 or so program participants to date have been from a wide range of countries including Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Burma.

*Football United* aims to empower and develop the refugee community. One-off sporting events have their place but can create additional problems because individuals can participate in them on the day, but may feel even more isolated than before when the event is over. By building a strong support base within the community and the soccer fraternity so that a long-term sustainable program can be run, refugees can create new social and support networks for themselves.

This community building is particularly important for newly arrived refugees who face a range of challenges such as isolation, language barriers, trauma, and the need to learn about Australian culture and values.

*Football United* uses a multi-program long-term approach that facilitates working with individuals and communities with varying needs. The program does not take a one-size-fits-all approach. The refugees not only participate, but also create opportunities for themselves and their communities. This fosters in them a sense of contributing and belonging.

*Football United* aims to:

- build social cohesion within refugee communities
- promote social inclusion and address issues of disaffection among refugees
- build harmony and social integration across communities within New South Wales through support for soccer development
- provide empowerment, develop leadership, and build resilience in young refugees
- contribute to promoting health in refugee youth
- contribute to the body of research on youth resilience and social cohesion in refugee communities
- contribute to the growth and development of soccer in Australia.

Key partners in the program are the Auburn Migrant Resource Centre, Blacktown City Council, Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre, Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre, Liverpool Migrant Resource Centre, the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), Police and Community Youth Clubs, football coaches and clubs throughout Sydney.



photo > Godfrey Mfashingabo from Auburn Migrant Resource Centre with project director Anne Bunde-Birouste

### Identifying a need by undertaking research

The program began its one year development phase in April 2006. The program director, Anne Bunde-Birouste, was interested in working with vulnerable populations in post-conflict situations around the issue of health. Encouraging participation in sport would, she believed, improve the health of the refugee community.

Research indicates that regular participation in sport not only improves physical health and fitness, but also builds stronger communities by offering positive role models and mentors for young people from disadvantaged communities, and providing them with opportunities to meet and socialise.

Soccer was chosen for this program because it:

- strongly fosters socialisation among its players and supporters

- enjoys worldwide appeal and is thus already familiar to most refugees (soccer may be one of the few familiar aspects of their new life in Australia)
- is relatively inexpensive
- is a non-contact, non-violent sport
- can be played by both genders.

It can be difficult for 'outsiders' to gain access to Sydney's soccer-playing world. It was important to discover, therefore, if refugee populations were successfully finding and accessing opportunities to play the game.

As part of the program's strategic planning, refugee communities were mapped according to age, gender and location and existing soccer opportunities were mapped and explored. In addition, research was conducted on who was already participating and what the barriers were to involvement.

## Consulting with the refugee community

Initial consultations took the form of interviews with stakeholders within the refugee community and groups working to support them, such as the organisers of the African Australian Youth Soccer Tournament and the Auburn Migrant Resource Centre's sports program. More and more people became interested and were consulted. Interpreters and bilingual workers were involved when needed.

Members of the community were asked if they were interested in football opportunities, whether they knew what was available and how to participate and what the barriers were to their participation. They were also asked what opportunities most interested them and whether they would like to participate if such opportunities were made available.

Young refugee men were invited to share their ideas at focus groups and approximately 100 participants completed a questionnaire at the launch in August 2006.

## The Program

The program was started in the Liverpool, Parramatta, Auburn, Fairfield and Blacktown areas and, while it has grown to include all of Sydney, it is particularly strong in the South West and Western regions, including Blacktown and Liverpool.

All *Football United* projects are run in partnership with different community-based groups such as Migrant Resource Centres, STARTTS, and Police and Community Youth Clubs.

*Football United* provides strategic direction, capacity building and mentoring support, football capacity and support, and partial funds. The University of New South Wales supports much of the logistics for the program as well as the director's time. The Migrant Resource Centres and STARTTS contribute resources and liaise with refugee community groups to promote the program and liaise with football clubs to encourage children to participate in the different soccer programs. *Football United* has also benefited from a large number of enthusiastic football coaches and young people who have heard about the program and who volunteer their time in various ways.

The program is designed to break down barriers to participation, not just financial, but also

emotional and logistical. Refugees are trained on the rules of the game, and registration and insurance requirements are explained. When the cost of registration proves a barrier, *Football United* provides conduits to organised football clubs and alternative playing opportunities.

Refugees are taught about how soccer is organised in Australia and are given the opportunity to meet and talk with current referees and hear about their experiences. Experienced coaches and referees mentor the trainees whenever possible and provide them with emotional support. They improve the young refugees' self-esteem and confidence and empower them to develop leadership skills as coaches and referees.

Some parents have had negative experiences in their countries of origin and are, therefore, suspicious of extracurricular activities and are cautious about letting their children participate in activities with people they do not know. To overcome this barrier, parents are informed and reassured when activities are organised. *Football United* encourages and fosters opportunities for parental involvement and transport is organised for the players when necessary and feasible.

## Launching the program

A one-day gala event was held on 20 August 2006 to launch the program.

## Activities

The major activities to date have included:

- several events, such as the Sudan Youth Soccer Gala Day and the Refugee Week Gala Day, held in conjunction with Migrant Resource Centres, STARTTS and the New South Wales Community Relations Commission
- Level 1 Coaching Clinic held in December 2006 with the Auburn Migrant Resource Centre (13 young men and older boys were certified as coaches)
- a summer and winter camp (2007) for boys aged 14 to 16
- a development program in the Blacktown City Council area in collaboration with the Police Citizens Youth Club and the Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre

- volunteer recruitment and training
- partnership development with the Blacktown City Demons professional team
- collaboration with the FIFA *Football for Hope* program
- partnership with the Blacktown and District Soccer Football Association
- partnership with the Kellyville and Maryang Futsal clubs.

## Achievements

Around 200 refugee youth have benefited from opportunities provided by the program over the past 18 months and improved their physical and mental health.

Thirteen young men and older boys have been trained and certified as Level 1 coaches.

Volunteers across the program have benefited from grassroots training. A volunteer and coach training package was developed as a result of Football in the Park.

*Football United* has generated enthusiasm and support from communities, volunteers, Migrant Resource Centres and other partners.

The soccer program capitalises on soccer as an existing part of many societies and as a means of restoring the way communities work.

A (former) youth worker at Liverpool Migrant Resource Centre, Naomi Kemmerer, said:

What I love about this program is that it's organic and addresses gaps in community cohesion. It addresses barriers that refugee youth face in getting into soccer. It benefits them and opens them up to soccer and therefore the community. This is soccer development but also community development.

The first refugee soccer camp held in January 2007 was a great success. It was a joint initiative of the University of New South Wales, the Auburn Migrant Resource Centre and STARTTS. Thirty boys from Sudan, Sierra Leone, Iraq and Afghanistan between the ages of 14 and 18 attended the camp. Participants enjoyed meeting people from other cultures, and particularly appreciated receiving some training from a Socceroos player. They also learnt about coaching and said it has helped them understand the game.

## Challenges

Many soccer clubs tend to be very traditional and unaware of the particular needs of refugee youth. This has been a significant barrier to increasing access for refugee youth.

The program's uncertain funding source is a considerable barrier to achieving long-term goals and maintaining sustainability. It has proven difficult to explain the importance of the program's community development aspect, which necessitates a long-term approach to potential partners and funding bodies. Program director, Anne Bunde-Birouste, said:

Communities exist in a very complicated way and we need to work **with** them not **for** them in a complicated way to ensure they are empowered.

During the development stage funding covered one worker for one day per week for six months. Currently there are no paid support staff. The program depends on the goodwill of staff at partner organisations working beyond their work plans, and the generosity of volunteers. The program ideally needs a remunerated coordinator to ensure it is adequately developed and additional funding to pay core coaching staff to ensure the program's growth and sustainability.

## Key factors in the project's success

Extra sessions are added to standard coaching courses run by Football New South Wales to cater for the refugees' different experiences of the sport.

It was crucial to adequately explain to soccer officials the barriers that need to be overcome to enable refugees to fully participate.

It was important to ensure an appropriate ratio of paid project and youth workers to volunteers, as volunteers require additional supervision.

## Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

Ideally, anyone setting up a similar project should:

- employ a dedicated coordinator
- develop specific written partnership agreements to ensure each partner is clear about what they bring to the project and their responsibilities

- anticipate changes in personnel in partner organisations and plan accordingly
- build in detailed consultation and preparation with participants
- secure some significant seed money before launching the program
- designate someone to specifically manage volunteer support
- be aware that it is very difficult to obtain funding for sustained capacity-building programs.

## Funding

Currently *Football United* operates on approximately \$100 000 per year. This includes cash and in-kind support from the University of New South Wales (85 per cent), Mary MacKillop Foundation, Sisters of Charity Foundation, Macquarie Bank Sports Foundation (5 per cent), STARTTS and Migrant Resource Centres (10 per cent).

All staff working on the program are volunteers, including those responsible for day-to-day management and development.

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## Profile > Sharif and Saa

**Sharif**, 15 when interviewed, was born in Afghanistan and has been living in Australia since late 2005. When asked what he liked about the program, Sharif said, 'When I'm playing soccer I forget about my problems.'

Another young man, **Saa** from Sierra Leone, described how the program had helped his self-esteem. He said, 'Playing soccer makes me realise I am not a lazy person.'

The young men interviewed also highlighted the differences in the experiences of playing soccer in Australia and playing it in their home countries. The universal experience of playing soccer in their countries of origin was that of meeting casually, playing on any available ground and using whatever equipment they had. They ran around the whole field and had no referees or any particular rules.

Participating in soccer in Sydney was a much more complex event, involving clubs, registration, insurance, training, rules, on-field positions and so on. Involvement in *Football United* has given them valuable access to coaches, referees, funds for registration and uniforms, as well as an expanded friendship group with whom to play soccer on training-free afternoons.

photo > Saa from Sierra Leone with former Socceroos striker, David Zdrilic at the Football United/STARTTS/LMRC winter 2007 soccer camp