



Monitoring discrimination and racism in sport

The case of Belgium



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1. Introduction

Belgium has a multicultural, polyethnic, and increasingly diversified population. Apart from being a multilingual state located at the Romance-Germanic language border, hosting Dutch-French- and German-speaking communities, it is also a country of permanent immigration¹ where immigrants from Southern Europe, Africa, the Middle East and beyond have settled in since the post-war years.² Sport is also a main feature of the Belgian population, that not only has an important engagement in physical activity in general, but also shows a relatively high membership in sport clubs.³ Even though the Belgium's federated governments have built an extensive framework of legislation to fight against discrimination and racism, such problems are still persistent in the society. Sport is not an exception, and instances regularly recur in football, which is by far the most practiced and represented sport, but also in other sports where the participation of people with different ethnocultural backgrounds is high.

This report wants to take stock of the issue of discrimination and racism in Belgian sport, focusing on the specific aspect of monitoring these phenomena. Indeed, if policies and practices designed to prevent and sanction are in place, as we will see, mechanisms that allow to monitor and intercept cases are still in an embryonic stage. In the first section we will introduce the problems of discrimination and racism in Belgium as they have evolved in recent times, by lingering on the diversity debate and socio-cultural and political trends in the country. We will also focus on the specific context of sport, drawing on information gathered from the media and specialized press, policy documents and other documentary sources, but also from a primary dataset of original interviews. In the second section, we will have a narrow focus on policies and practices, underlying gaps and pitfalls but also presenting some good practices. It is important to highlight that people might be discriminated against or find obstacle to

¹ See for example: Petrovic M., Belgium: A Country of Permanent Immigration. *MPI - Migration Information Source*. November 15, 2012. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/belgium-country-permanent-immigration> accessed on 9/9/2023.

² As of January the 1st 2022, about one-third of the population in Belgium is composed of people with a foreign background. See: <https://statbel.fgov.be/en/news/diversity-according-origin-belgium-0> accessed on 5/9/2023.

³ The latest Eurobarometer on sport and physical activity shows that 16% of respondents are members of sport clubs (EU28 average is 12%) and 5% are members of socio-cultural clubs that include sport in its activities (EU28 average is 3%). See: https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/s2164_88_4_472_eng?locale=en accessed on 1/9/2023.

participate in sport for many personal factors such as gender, sexual orientation or disability, for example. While acknowledging this, In this report we will focus more specifically on race and ethnicity or, more generally, on migration-related diversity (ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, other) .

2. The debate on discrimination and racism in Belgium

If migration-related diversity is highly relevant in the Belgian context, so it is the diversity debate. This encompasses a broad range of topics pertaining to migration governance such as integration and diversity policies, as well as anti-discrimination and anti-racism strategies. Likewise, discrimination and racism are recurrent topics also in the broader societal debate, that is influenced by two main historical factors. These are global migration that, as said, led numerous national and ethno-racial minorities to settle in the Belgian territory, and the Country's controversial colonial past.⁴ Mass migration flows especially from Southern European countries and North Africa shaped the socio-economic and demographic evolution of Belgium since the post-war. While official statistics are not easily available due to the lack of ethnic data, national origin data show that important minority communities have been formed by the settlement of post-war immigrant workers and their descendants, particularly Italian, Moroccan and Turkish nationalities.⁵ Migration intake continued to the present days with newcomers from both European and non-European countries, which increased diversity also within immigrant groups and ethnic minorities, and made Belgium a *superdiverse* country by definition.⁶ Brussels, in particular, is a city with a highly mobile and international population and it is often ranked as the European city with the highest share of foreigners in population,

⁴ Belgium controlled territories above all in the modern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi up to the 1960s.

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also due to its role as the capital of the EU.⁷ The colonial past, on the other side, is a controversial and typically unresolved issue in the public debate. Although being a main factor in the country's economic development in the 20th century, and determining a main role for Belgium as a destination of Congolese migration after independence, it is widely recognized that Belgium's colonial exploitation was characterized by great violence and atrocities. The Congolese issue resurfaced periodically in the last decades, but it was never really addressed as a national public issue. It is more recently, particularly following the Black Lives Matter movement, that public opinion has become concerned by the colonial past and particularly with an idea of decolonization of the public space.⁸

The issues presented above have had a strong impact not only on the demographic diversification of the country, but also and above all on the relevance of the debate on diversity, discrimination and racism. This because the demographic growth of immigrant communities has been matched by a gradual but constant growth of their participation in the public and political life. Over the last 50 years, immigrants moved forward from being mere workforce, and took different roles in society including leading positions in culture, economics or politics, and also in sport. Such a process of progressive integration, although involving the country as a whole, has a specifically localized articulation in terms of public debate and opinion in the two main cultural-language communities, Flanders and Wallonia, and in the bilingual Brussels Region. Flanders has a more center-right public opinion than Wallonia, where the center-left and socialist tradition is historically dominant. The diversity-migration debate is thus more heated in Flanders, where there has also been a relatively strong representation of xenophobic and anti-immigration demands of the far-right.⁹ On the other side, Wallonia is a predominantly left-wing socialist area, has experienced strong recession in the last decades and has a longer history of industrial and post-industrial immigration from European and extra-

⁷ See for example : <https://mayorsofeurope.eu/reports-analyses/eu-cities-with-most-immigrants/> accessed on 7/9/2023.

⁸ See : <https://www.lesoir.be/310010/article/2020-06-28/generation-decolonisation-ces-militants-qui-font-trembler-leopold-ii> accessed on 7/9/2023.

⁹ The Flemish *Vlaams Belang* is one of Europe's proportionally stronger far-right and anti-immigration parties, scoring its best electoral results in the mid-2000s. After a decline in support, the party was able to poll second in the Flemish region with 18.6% in the 2019 Federal and Regional elections.

European countries.¹⁰ In spite of that, research highlights that minority rights are generally more advanced in Flanders than in Wallonia, where colour-blind and radical secular approaches predominate.¹¹ In general, however, Belgium has rather been reluctant in targeting specific ethnic or racial minorities for policy purposes, in order to avoid the risks of homogenization and essentialism.¹² Brussels is a thirds space where discrimination and racism are particularly relevant issues, but there also a strong focus on the identification of mitigation and contrast strategies.

An crucial role, particularly in Brussels but also in Flanders and Wallonia, is played by the organizations of the civil society involving immigrant and ethno-cultural minorities and/or pursuing an anti-discrimination and anti-racism agenda. These are direct interlocutors of public institutions and governance, and their role includes advocacy, consultancy and representation, but also an active involvement in anti-discrimination and integration practices. The Brussels' CSO universe is often the starting point for mobilizations and campaigns reaching national and international attention, it is able to influence public governance, and it is involved in street-level practices such as the reception of immigrant newcomers (including asylum seekers), and in a wide range of activities aimed to identify and combat discrimination and support inter-cultural contact and collaboration.

To give an example of the importance of the civil society in the anti-discrimination debate, and of the synergy between CSOs and public governance in Belgium, we highlight the Anti-racism plan 2023-2026 that the Brussels Government adopted on December 2022.¹³ The plan is a response to the EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025¹⁴ and covers about fifty measures in

¹⁰ A recent article explains the differences between the political environment in Flanders and Wallonia in tolerating populist radical-right parties: The Curious Case of Belgium: de Jonge L. (2020), Why is There no Right-Wing Populism in Wallonia?, *Government and Opposition*, 56, 598–614.

¹¹ In an article appeared in the 15th volume of the Belgian political review *Fédéralisme Régionalisme*, the authors speak of a real 'Belgian Cultural Diversity Paradox': Adam I. and C. Torrekens (2015). Different Regional Approaches to Cultural diversity. Interpreting the Belgian Cultural Diversity Policy Paradox, *Fédéralisme Régionalisme*, vol. 15: 2015.

¹² This is true also for Flanders, where, however, the community is often divided between autochthonous and allochthonous in policy documents, which often provokes heated controversy in the public debate.

¹³ *Plan de lutte contre le racisme 2023-2026* in French; *Antiracismeplan 2023-2026* in Dutch. See : <https://www.unia.be/fr/articles/plan-bruxellois-de-lutte-contre-le-racisme-un-pas-dans-la-bonne-direction> accessed on 9/9/2023.

¹⁴ See : https://commission.europa.eu/document/beb25da4-e6b9-459e-89f7-bcddb3a8f0c8_en accessed on 9/9/2023.

different domains including prevention, awareness, housing, employment, public service, social affairs, health, public space and mobility. A key role in the development of the plan is played by the NAPAR coalition, a network of about sixty CSOs. NAPAR was not only among the main promoters of the plan, but also participated in its definition, insisting in particular on the need for a clear definition of structural racism.¹⁵ The coalition is currently claiming for the adoption of the plan at the Belgian inter-Federal level, denoting the role of Brussels as a site of multivocality and struggle, where often anti-discrimination claim begin, and then spread across the other communities.

Despite a public opinion that is relatively open to the inclusion of diversity and in favor of fighting discrimination, problems persist in Belgium, in both main communities and in Brussels. According to the Belgian Inter-federal Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (Unia),¹⁶ there has been a striking rise of reports of discrimination in the 2010-2020 decade.¹⁷ Particularly recurrent are cases of hate speech, both in social media and in public places. Racism is the main criteria for discrimination, over disability, religious or philosophical beliefs, and sexual orientation (TABLE). Sadly, cases of discrimination are not limited to hate speech, but include deliberately criminal acts such as the arson attack at a asylum seeker reception centre in the town of Bilzen in 2019.¹⁸

3. Discrimination and racism in Belgian sport

As well as the other areas of society, sport reflects the process of progressive integration of ethno-cultural minorities in Belgium, and this is visible in both professional and amateur sport.

¹⁵ NAPA also demanded the definition of concrete objectives and an operational timeline, the provision of adequate means and the identification of a person responsible for the implementation of the plan. See: <https://naparbelgium.org/fr/a-propos-de-nous/> accessed on 9/9/2023.

¹⁶ Uni is an independent public body whose tasks include dealing with individual reports of discrimination and racism. A more specific description of Unia's functions is provided below in section 2 of the report.

¹⁷ See : <https://www.unia.be/en/articles/number-of-reports-of-discrimination-rises-by-over-13> accessed on 11/9/23.

¹⁸ See : <https://www.brusselstimes.com/78455/arson-in-housing-centre-for-asylum-seekers-was-act-of-political-terror-flemish-interior-minister-says> accessed on 11/9/23.

About half of the football national team at the 2018 World Cup was made of sons of immigrants, for example, and two of the seven Belgian medals at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics were achieved by athletes from a migration background, including two-time heptathlon gold medalist Nafissatou Thiam,¹⁹ born to a Belgian mother and Senegalese father, and Somali-born runner Bashir Abdi.

Nevertheless, discrimination and racism are present and relevant in Belgian sport. Racist, xenophobic, and homophobic rants can be regularly heard in football stadiums, where anti-Belgian claims are also often present.²⁰ Apart from racist incidents happening in elite competition, that normally get much of the attention from the media and public opinion, there is an alarming situation beyond the context of professional sport. As denounced by Unia's Director Patrick Charlier, three out of four reported cases of discrimination concern amateur sport, and racism is an everyday problem involving athletes and spectators, but also parents and coaches.²¹ Even more complex is the question of structural discrimination restricting the opportunities of minorities at all levels. Structural discrimination is the most complicated form of discrimination to intercept, point on which all participants interviewed for this report agree, and it is a problem that has a cultural basis in the society that can be also reflected in sport organizations. In line with the approach described above, those CSOs pursuing an anti-discrimination and anti-racism agenda, or more simply addressing social inclusion, play a main role also in sport. As reported by Thierry Witsel, member of the Parliament of Wallonia for the Socialist Party, former football player and coach, and father of Belgian international Axel Witsel, associations have a key role in Belgium in the popularization of anti-discrimination practices and the establishment a culture of respect for diversity, especially among young people and families.²²

¹⁹ Nafissatou Thiam was also the flag bearer for Belgium at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

²⁰ See : <https://www.rtbf.be/article/trop-d-actes-intolerables-dans-les-stades-le-football-belge-doit-reagir-9820620> accessed on 11/9/23.

²¹ See : <https://www.lesoir.be/509472/article/2023-04-25/trois-dossiers-sur-quat-le-racisme-persiste-dans-le-sport-amateur-en-belgique> accessed on 11/9/23.

²² Original interview collected on 8/6/23.

As we will see below, in Belgium there exist both a normative and a policy framework to fight racism and discrimination in sport, and these are relatively up to date. The prevention and sanctioning mechanisms in place have the objective to raise awareness in society and to sanction cases of discrimination. However, all the participants interviewed for this report affirmed that the Belgian context lacks monitoring mechanisms, and that the specific activity of intercepting cases and at risk situations is among the most complex in the sector.

As a sub-area of culture in Belgium, sport as a societal practice is considered to fall under the responsibility of the 3 Belgian communities. This structure determines differences in terms of governance and practices across the territory. Exceptions to this are those instances in which a sport is a public security matter, such as in the case of football and particularly the normative and policy concerning football stadiums. The Federal Government, indeed, has a specific Football Cell²³ attached to the Security and Prevention department dedicated to control of the infrastructures. As noted by Didier Vanbesien, officer at the Football Cell, in principles the government has control over racism and discrimination when these are matters of the Prevention and Security Department.²⁴ Although the Football Cell makes important efforts and implements initiatives also to actively promote a non-discriminatory environment in and around football stadiums, its main role is to enforce the so-called Football Law and to intercept and sanction offences. The Football Law, in its most recent version dated 2023, has been shaped to give an important consideration to the fight against discrimination, by toughening penalties for behaviors involving racism or xenophobia, as equal to offences such as physical violence and the use of pyrotechnic material.

Although the Football Law contributes to combating racism and xenophobia especially at professional football level, and such norms certainly also have an impact on public opinion, there are no specific instruments in Belgium to directly monitor discrimination in the context of sport. In general, the anti-discrimination normative framework is constituted around three specific laws: the Gender Act, the Antidiscrimination Act and the Antiracism Act. These laws

²³ So called Cellule Football in French and Voetbalcel in Dutch. See : <https://www.ibz.be/fr/securete-et-prevention#cellule-football> accessed on 20/9/23.

²⁴ Original interview collected on 15/6/23.

identify a series of protected criteria that are transversal to all societal contexts, including sport. The Gender Act protects gender identity and expression, but also several criteria related to motherhood. The Antidiscrimination Act has a wider application covering disability, religious or ideological beliefs, sexual orientation, age, wealth, civil status, political and trade union beliefs, health status, physical or genetic characteristics, birth, social background and language. The Antiracism Act, the most relevant for the themes of this report, pushes criteria towards elements of nationality, national or ethnic origin, 'race', skin colour and cultural background. The normative framework also distinguishes direct and indirect discrimination, instruction and incitement to discrimination, and discriminatory harassment. In practice, the Antiracism Act is implemented by an independent public body that was created in 1993 as a Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism by the Chamber of Representatives. The Centre became an inter-federal institution with an agreement that Belgium's federated entities ratified in 2013, and changed its name to Unia. If the competencies of the centre were at first focused on ethno-racial discrimination and foreigner's rights, today it covers all forms of discrimination with the exception of gender equality and language.²⁵

Unia is thus the main public institution that fights discrimination in Belgium. Unia's mission covers three specific departments labelled Prevention, Protection and Politics & Monitoring. The Prevention department provides case-specific support to private and public organizations to implement actions such as sensibilization campaigns, specific training, internal and public communication, or to develop an anti-discrimination action plan. The Protection department is in charge of receiving, monitoring and processing all reported cases of discrimination, hate crimes or hate speech. The department provides fact-checking, redirects reported complaints to relevant public services and authorities, provides information on individual rights with regard to the legal framework, and seeks solutions to reported cases. Thirdly, Unia has an

²⁵ The Institute for the Equality of Women and Men is a dedicated body in Belgium for gender-based discrimination (including transgender people). No designated public body has competence in the area of language.

important advocacy and consultancy role with respect to issues of discrimination and racism through the Politics & Monitoring²⁶ department.

Although sport is an area in which the incidence of cases is relatively limited, compared to other areas such as employment, services or housing, Unia is the most important stakeholder with regards to the central theme of this report because it also functions as a hub for sport federations and organizations on matters of discrimination and racism. The Protection department is therefore the entity that has the most direct connection to the question of monitoring, as it is the intermediary between reported cases and possible procedures to resolve or mitigate them. According to Martin Fortez, jurist at the Protection department, based on reported cases and available data, there exist three different contexts of potential discrimination in Belgian sport. Firstly, and more visibly, a collective dimension in which a group carries out discriminatory or racist acts towards another group or individual. This is typically the context of racist chanting and singing in stadiums, towards one or more players, or more generally against a group (eg: an ethnic or religious minority, etc.). Although it is much more widespread in professional sport, this collective dimension also exists in non-professional sport. Secondly, discrimination and racism happen on an individual dimension, between two players for example, but also between payers and referees, coaches, and even involving one individual supporter during a match. This dimension is much more evident in non-professional sport, including youth sport, and represents the majority of reported cases at Unia. Thirdly, there is a structural dimension of discrimination and racism in Belgian sport. This dimension pertains to diversity management and equal opportunities within sport clubs and institutions. All levels and dimensions are concerned, from smaller grassroots clubs to national institutions, although reported cases at Unia come mostly from small and mid-size sport clubs.²⁷ All these three contexts considered, football is by far the most relevant sport.

The normative/policy framework in Belgium, as described above, remains relatively generalized although having an objective in fighting discrimination and racism in the society

²⁶ “Monitoring” here does not refer to the central theme of the report, that is monitoring of discrimination and racism as a societal problem, but rather to the role of Unia as an observer and evaluator of equal opportunity policies at the federal and local level.

²⁷ Original interview collected on 29/3/23.

and in sport in particular. Stakeholders like sport federations and umbrella organizations are invited to play a central role in implementing various activity including sensibilization and campaigns, but also a series of practices that can be identified as monitoring activity. However, no systematic form of active monitoring is currently present in Belgian sport on matters like discrimination and racism. One example of how practices remains generalized and relatively non-systematic concerns the role of so-called ethical referents. These are part of an Observatory of ethics in physical and sporting activities designated through a decree that the sport committee of the Parliament of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation issued in 2019. The decree also defines ethics in sport as a broad field including not only person-related matters such as gender equality or discrimination, fair play and any form of misconduct, but also very general matters such as good governance or sustainable development. The Observatory centralizes the work of ethics referents, whose appointment is an obligation for all sport federations and organizations. The Observatory and referents have the responsibility to collect information and analyze trends, with the aim to prevent problems and formulate recommendations on matters related to the notion of sports ethics described above.

The role of the ethical referents, in particular, can be generally connected to a form of non-systematic monitoring of discrimination and racism. Ethical referents can have different backgrounds and positions in federations and organizations, and they have the main task to collect information on problematic contexts and situations, and to report them to their federation. They are also invited to constitute networks of referents in clubs and organizations, in order to have a more effective control over a number of sport events. Ethical referents also work as contact points for sport practitioners to report cases or discuss problems related to ethics. Despite representing a clear effort on the part of public institutions to guarantee a safe and inclusive environment in sports, the functions of the ethical referents face two main obstacles. Firstly, resources allocated to the function are scarce. Designated ethical referents are generally overwhelmed by their tasks as they are too few to cover a high number of events and activities. As described by Freddy Merlot, ethical referent for the French-Speaking Futsal Federation and President of the Futsal Federation in the Belgian Region of Luxembourg, the work of ethical referents is almost like a voluntary job, since they all have other professional commitments. As it is put into practice, the system cannot be effective in intercepting

problems, since this would entail a systematic coverage of the territory where a given federation is operating and a specific workforce.²⁸ Secondly, but not less importantly, concerning the specific issues of discrimination and racism, the main obstacle that prevents ethical referents from being an effective monitoring tool is that the definition of sport ethics is too broad and generalized. This results not only in a lack of focus and efficiency of the system itself, but above all in the impossibility for the ethical referent to handle extremely different circumstances and situations where they are supposed to trace irregular or at-risk behaviors. As noted by Merlot, without a specific focus and training, ethical referents may often lack an adequate level of experience and expertise on such complicate matters like discrimination and racism.

4. Formal and informal monitoring in Belgian football

In the absence of systematic practices and specific policy at the institutional political level, responsibility of monitoring activity on discrimination and racism in sport generally falls on federations and clubs. For a matter of clarity, it must be underlined that practices directly oriented towards active monitoring are not currently present in the Belgian sports field. The examples collected in this report, however, embed more or less systematic monitoring practices within larger and more structured anti-discrimination actions involving awareness raising campaigns, communication and training, but also within their internal mechanisms of control, identification and sanction of illicit conducts.

4.1 Royal Belgian Football Association

One of the main examples of monitoring embedded in a larger multi-dimensional action, is provided by the Royal Belgian Football Association (RBFA) within the Come Together action

²⁸ Original interview collected on 15/5/23.

plan. Launched in 2021 by RBFA in collaboration with the Dutch- and French-speaking association of Belgian football clubs,²⁹ Come Together has the explicit objective to eradicate discrimination, racism, homophobia, and other forms of inequality from Belgian football. As from the information available on the RBFA website, Come Together is based on five different pillars: listening to people who are confronted with racism in sport; representation and inclusion of diversity within football associations; training on diversity and tackling discrimination, prevention and awareness-raising; measuring diversity, discrimination and racism; communication of anti-discrimination activity and support instruments. Around these five pillars, the action plan implements specific activity and projects such as the diversity inclusion campaign Football for All³⁰ or the project Everyone on the Pitch³¹ for the access of refugees in football activity. Through the plan, RBFA also aims at diversifying its own structures and workforce, by reshaping its recruitment strategy along a more inclusive agenda, and by establishing a Diversity Board as a guarantor for the protection of minorities and the respect of diversity within the federation.

Despite being born in the midst of the Covid period, Come Together managed over the course of two years to establish important tools for the fight against discrimination and racism in football, and to go beyond the awareness campaign from which it generated. These tools can be regarded as having a monitoring function, although not explicitly or exclusively dedicated to this practice. Besides the Diversity Board mentioned above, a National Chamber for Discrimination and Racism was established within the action plan. This body has a direct decision-making and sanctioning function with respect to incidents of discrimination involving members of the RBFA. The Chamber is periodically called to judge facts reported by members of the federation in the context of sporting activities at all levels. The reporting system is based on the referees and match delegates reports, but it can also function through a dedicated reporting point available on the RBFA website.³²

²⁹ *Voetbal Vlaanderen* and *Association des Clubs Francophones de Football ACFF*.

³⁰ See : <https://www.rbfa.be/en/over-ons/onze-sociale-projecten/football-for-all> accessed on 28/9/23.

³¹ See : <https://www.rbfa.be/en/about-us/football-social-responsibility-strategy/come-together/inclusion-refugees-through-football> accessed on 28/9/23.

³² See : <https://www.rbfa.be/en/cometogether> accessed on 28/9/23.

The operation of the reporting point is similar to the functions of Unia described above, but specific to football. Incidents and other cases are reported through an IT system that collects preliminary data on the people involved and the events that occurred. Aside from recording logistical, chronological and general context data, the system invites reporters to choose a reason for the report among different pre-determined options including: discrimination (racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, sexism, ...); transgressive behaviour (physical, psychological and/or sexual violence, bullying); competition distortion, doping; lack of integrity (from RBFA representatives/employees). The system also asks details about the people involved and informed about the fact, and actions taken, if any. In 2021 the reporting point collected 590 verified cases of discrimination, of which 85% concerned racism and 15% homophobia. As affirmed by inclusion specialist at RBFA Samia Ahrouch, these cases represent a minority of the total cases reported, and RBFA has not been able to take action in all of them since its competences are limited to its affiliated members. In the event that a supporter is responsible for a discriminatory act, for example, the possibility for direct action from RBFA is limited.³³ Nevertheless, the reporting point represent an useful attempt to put in place a generalized system of monitoring, although in a mostly passive and non-systematic form, in a specific sport discipline in Belgium.

4.2 City Pirates

As anticipated, examples of monitoring exist also in individual sport clubs, embedded in different anti-discrimination activity. It is not unusual that sport clubs at all levels, for example, put in place internal mechanisms to control their own activity and prevent discrimination to take place. Although such mechanisms are mostly informal, they end up being particularly effective in shaping the internal culture of the clubs that adopt them towards an inclusive and anti-discrimination approach. Different are the examples in Belgium of football clubs that can be included in this trend. In this report, we included the cases of City Pirates, from Antwerp's district of Merksem, and FC Kraainem.

³³ Original interview collected on 30/3/23.

City Pirates is recognized in Belgium as a diversity-concerned football club. President Michel Pradolini defined this as a characteristic that emerged spontaneously, given the location of the club near the port of Antwerp and the focus on low-income and deprived families.³⁴ Even if the original club was founded in 1921, it is in 2014 that it shaped itself as a social activity for the inclusion of disadvantaged people, and it soon grew a highly multicultural and multi-ethnic membership. City Pirates count today over 1,500 members in 68 teams and 2,000 registered youth, from over 120 nationalities.

President Pradolini described the monitoring of discrimination and racism at City Pirates as an informal and non-structured practice that results from the establishment of a specific culture of the club, as a form of social impact on its members. Pradolini started from affirming that his club, while recognized as a multi-cultural organization, is also seen as a risky context for the other clubs. The other clubs would be afraid to play against City Pirates for the risk of being sanctioned. According to Pradolini, what is needed to really monitor the field and intercept problematic contexts and behaviors is a dialogical mechanisms based on two principles. Firstly, the club aims to educate its members to combat ethno-racial or cultural polarization in the sport practice. Members are invited to informally report cases of discrimination as an alternative to any possible reaction, to avoid violent behaviors and prevent incidents. Club representatives and coaches function as referent points for club members. Secondly, City Pirates adopt specific strategies to pacify conflict on matters of discrimination and racism. Although this cannot be identified as a monitoring practice in itself, it helps establishing a specific mentality among club members. In particular, President Pradolini stressed the fact that the system of sanctions that is in place at the national or organizational level (eg: at the RBFA level) would be too generalized and randomized and, as a consequence, would prevent positive change to happen in the sector and a systematic reporting of incidents and other problems. According to the City Pirates President, when a whole club is sanctioned for the wrong or illicit behavior of one supporter, for example, even people and structures that engage in anti-discrimination practices often end up penalized. Instead, City Pirates opt for solutions based

³⁴ Original interview collected on 3/5/23.

on dialogue and avoid direct sanctions. If on the one hand this results in an overriding of the structures and mechanisms made available by the federations, it nevertheless allows to develop a pacified culture of intervention on the problem, and to raise awareness of all parties to be vigilant.

4.2 FC Kraainem

The second example of informal monitoring in a Belgian sport club concerns FC Kraainem, a football club located in a town near Brussels. Another historical Belgian club founded in 1924, FC Kraainem is known for implementing diversity inclusion activity within its sport practice, and in particular for its involvement in refugee inclusion projects following the 2015 migration crisis.³⁵ Similarly to City Pirates, the club does not have a formalized monitoring in place, but implements various actions to keep constant control over its delegates, members and activities.

FC Kraainem's manager and player Benjamin Renaud described the system of monitoring within the club as based on a constant training of professional members and volunteers, also including parents and other people who are not directly included in the club's organizational chart, and recurrent informal meetings.³⁶ For the training, the club relies on a network of CSOs, but also on the support of public bodies such as Unia, or the management and staff of refugee reception centres. Renaud stressed the importance to create synergies and collaboration in the field, in order to establish a multi-stakeholder network of diversity-concerned actors able to provide support on a wide range of topics. In parallel, the club put much stress on the creation of a community, both as a local community in the areas where the club structures are located, and in the larger football milieu. Particularly important is the development and circulation of field knowledge about those mechanisms of discrimination that are often hidden or trivialized in the everyday sport practice. Interestingly, forms of training also exist internally at FC Kraainem in the form of peer shadowing and other one-to-one relationships among

³⁵ See for example the project "We welcome young refugees" targeting unaccompanied minors in particular: <https://www.kraainemfootball.be/we-welcome-young-refugees/> accessed on 29/9/23.

³⁶ Original interview collected on 21/6/23.

members, particularly between older and newer members. According to Renauld, this allows contextualized and up-to-date knowledge to circulate, that is extremely beneficial to the identification of new complex problems and situations.

Apart from training, FC Kraainem has in place recurrent meetings and group activity to exchange and debate problems of discrimination. Benjamin Renauld described these meetings as informal and non-compulsory, but also as a constant activity for members, useful to update knowledge and internal monitoring. Discrimination and racism are central in these meetings, although not the only items on the agenda in general. The main function is to share problems and propose solutions in the form of recommendations, for example to coaches and parents, or presentation of best practices, and also external stakeholders can be invited to this scope. Again, the form of monitoring provided is mainly informal, although Renauld affirmed that action is systematically taken in the case of incidents, and solutions can be undertaken both internally and externally, when more serious cases overtake the club's responsibility. FC Kraainem's internal meetings also helped establishing a culture of sharing issues within the club community, that is extremely helpful to intercept forms of micro- and everyday discrimination that are often hidden, commonly accepted or not recognized as such.

Closing remarks

As highlighted in this report, racism and discrimination are well recognized as problems in Belgian sport. Governance structures and policy exist to face such problems, and efforts and resources have been devoted to put some mitigation strategies in place. However, no formalized and systematic monitoring exists at the moment, although field actors and stakeholders are little by little developing strategies, such as in the case of the RBFA reporting system. In any case, the trends in terms of governance are clearly going towards greater attention to understanding, intercepting and sanctioning discrimination, as the establishment of the National Chamber demonstrates. However, Belgium is still missing a unified approach

that would allow federations and organizations to work together and beyond the limits of their own membership. The adoption of an inter-federal anti-discrimination plan would probably be the first step towards the establishment of a Belgian approach, but such changes require time and debate, particularly in a multi-governance federal context. This would definitely help to address the even more complicate problem of structural discrimination in groups and organizations, that is a relevant issue in Belgian sport structures, still white-male dominated in spite of many efforts to diversify boards.

Field actors agree that without clear and shared categories to identify discrimination and racism, the work of those involved in scanning the field and adopting mitigation measures is made very complicated. In general, what is urgently perceived as needed is a change on the cultural level, that would allow all actors concerned to educate and train sport practitioners and structures to be able to support a safe and sustainable environment. If victims of racism in sport can now report abuses through various channels, this form of passive monitoring is not sufficient to solve the problem, nor to mitigate it in a systematic and egalitarian way. Procedures are long, and decision over individual cases is complex, while on the other hand discrimination acts in rapid and often invisible ways, and it is therefore often difficult to prove. As maintained by our interviewees, most people discriminated against are probably invisible, discouraged by a complex structure to navigate or simply accustomed to being abused. The Belgian solution, at the moment, takes shape through the commitment of individuals, field actors who make the fight against inequalities their operating principle. More support, structures and training is needed for these actors, towards the realization of a better, more inclusive and diversified sport world.



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