

## **Transnational Unities, Challenges and Opportunities for Sport Volunteering: Lessons from the European PlayGreen Project**

### **Abstract**

Within global sport, volunteering has been identified as a fundamental resource to the effective operation and continuity of operations. However, investments in, and the success of, sport volunteering is contingent on amiable socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions. In Europe, the context of this paper, the vibrancy of sport volunteering remains a concern since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Notwithstanding the pandemic, some transnational sport networks and regional governmental partnerships have been making more dedicated investments to fortify volunteer cultures in the region. In addition, collaborative ventures are finding ways to connect sport volunteering with wider international issues to support its growth across all sectors. Here, sustainability and environmental change have provided a key issue platform for sport volunteer leverage. As the pandemic continues to confront the existence and practices of sport organisations, and specifically their ability to engage volunteers, these issues have become salient. We present a commentary of the *Erasmus+ Sport*-funded, pan-European, sport volunteering and sustainability focused, PlayGreen consortia and its organisation members responses to the unfolding pandemic across Europe. Our commentary is guided by spatial theory and internal administration insights. The pandemic has brought new ideas and cohesion into sport volunteer communities, challenged, and changed modes of production, and led to new forms of social transformation and action vis-à-vis environmental and sustainability issues. As sport organisations continue to find viable ways of existing, the experiences within the PlayGreen consortia evidence creative potential for future volunteer engagements.

**Keywords:** sustainability, spatial theory, volunteering, Europe, sport communities

## Introduction

Organisations worldwide increasingly use sport as a tool to tackle various economic, social and environmental challenges (Jane & Gibson, 2017; Kohe & Collison, 2019; Powell, 2015; 2018).

One way to achieve such widespread objectives is through sport volunteering. Across the world, voluntary sport associations (particularly, local sport clubs) help bind communities together through organizing and coordinating grassroots sport (Benson & Wise, 2017; Garamvölgyi et al., 2020). The latest Eurobarometer report on sport suggests three in ten European Union (EU) citizens participate in sport and recreational activities as members of a voluntary sport club, while 6% of these also volunteer in grassroots sport, whereby they develop camaraderie, sociability and a sense of ownership toward club values (European Commission, 2018). Such research points to a vibrant volunteer landscape and committed and passionate individuals, communities, and clubs. Yet, the sector still exists on a fragile combination of individual willingness and community assets that are susceptible to external forces (e.g., economic uncertainty, political changes that alter sport funding, community development priorities) (Benson & Wise, 2017; Griffiths & Armour, 2014; Lachance, 2020).

As such, sport volunteering remains a precarious space where issues of resourcing and sustainability prevail. Nonetheless, in Europe several organisations are working toward more unified approaches that develop stronger sport volunteer cultures through establishing collaborative networks, standardised organisational frameworks and enhanced professional training pathways, and links between the sport sector and wider regional development agendas. The European Observatoire for Sport Employment (EOSE), for example, has implemented various transnational projects to enhance grassroots sports (see Lowther et al., 2016 for further definition) and pan-European volunteer cultures (particularly with regards to youth and female participants) (<https://eose.org/>). Similarly, the European Olympic Committees EU office (EOC EU), the European branch of the Federation of International Football Professional (FIFPro

Europe), European Union of Football Association (EUFA), European Non-Governmental Sports Organisation (ENGSO) have all demonstrated commitment to supporting volunteer education and sustaining life-long learning through volunteerism. Organisational efforts here have emphasised the altruistic values of volunteering, possibilities for skill acquisition (often linked to economic, business, administrative, coaching or leadership skills), and development of social and political capital.

Harmonising with wider ambitions of volunteer cultures elsewhere (Benson & Wise, 2017; Duguid, Mündel & Schugurensky, 2007), a strong theme of sport volunteering in Europe has been on the capacity of sport to improve ones' life trajectory, and the potential of sport volunteering to contribute to wider EU 2020 goals related to community activism and sustainability. Part of this discussion has included interrogating ways environmental, organisational and programme sustainability are innately intertwined, and exploring ways to improve sport practice by finding innovative and creative approaches to operations (McCullough & Cunningham, 2020; Trendafilova et al., 2013). While sport organisations, clubs and nations may differ in interpretations and responses, there are degrees of consensus within the debate. There is particular unity with regards to the idea that without organisational and programme sustainability there may not be a viable and willing volunteer workforce able to carry out the goals, objectives and daily operations of sport bodies, or enable sport to achieve environmentally progressive aspirations. Similarly, without environmental sustainability organisations may not be well equipped to exist longer term (particularly spaces that are energy and resource-heavy). Thus, further commentary and analysis to advance understanding of current approaches within the grassroots sport sector remains of value. We subsequently offer our insights and reflections here on one key transnational sport volunteer initiative to help

illustrate some of the complexities sport sector stakeholders face at this shared historical juncture.

This current commentary evaluates the early impacts of COVID-19 on a particular cohort of sport volunteers within a distinct volunteer-led grassroots level initiative; specifically, the EU-collaborative venture PlayGreen (discussed in detail shortly). To understand the construction of the project as site of specific ideas, production and actions, we employ a spatial theoretical framework (Lefebvre, 1991; 2003; Lefebvre & Régulier, 1986/2004; Shields, 1999; van Ingen, 2003; van Ingen, Sharpe & Lashua, 2018), and draw on insights derived from the lead author's involvement and experiences within PlayGreen administration over the past two-years. Additionally, while discursive rather than empirically driven, we draw upon knowledge gleaned from our wider case study and programme-centered analysis methodologies (see, e.g., Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Greene, 2014; Yin, 2018) adopted in a larger sport volunteer project. Although insights have been garnered from an insider's perspective through personal communications, participation in project meetings, internal document analysis, and external project communications (i.e. social media and website), in keeping with Greene's (2014) approach to 'insider' positionality, we adopt a critical stance to interrogate a key stakeholder in the European sport volunteer space. We do not aim to test the efficiency and effectiveness of the selected case study at this stage, rather we offer an analysis of the challenges and opportunities by COVID-19 for PlayGreen. In doing so, the paper contributes to needed debates over alternative ways for grassroots sport organisations to harness volunteer workforces in similar moments of crises in the future.

### **Current and Evolving Volunteering landscapes**

Across Europe the social, economic and cultural value of volunteering has been identified as fundamental to the effective operation, development and sustainability of the sport sector and its participants (Downward, Lera-Lopez & Rasciute, 2014; Erturan-Ogut, 2014; Hoekman, van der Werff, Nagel & Breur, 2015; Wicker & Downward, 2019). Reflecting global observations of sport volunteering (e.g. Benson & Wise, 2017; Parnell et al., 2019), scholars in the region have noted sport-related volunteering not only provides substantive resource for a sector where financial and structural precarity and austerities exist, but also can contribute to positive professional and personal development, social inclusion, mobility and capital, civic improvement and community cohesion (Hoekman et al., 2015; Koutrou & Downward, 2016; Kiernan & Porter, 2014; Parnell, et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the creation of meaningful spaces in which to volunteer relies on a range of factors. These include: amiable socio-cultural, political and economic conditions; adequate state, organisation, and/or private investment; appropriate management and administrative support; relevant infrastructure and economic resource; mutual goodwill and understanding between volunteer and paid-workers; and, viable opportunities and spaces in which to volunteer. In addition, to widen the appeal of volunteering, and address recruitment and retention issues, sport organisations have also needed to think beyond the physical and performance areas of traditional volunteering (e.g., playing, coaching, managing or officiating), and craft themselves as spaces of wider educational, personal and professional opportunities (Livingston et al., 2020; Morgan, 2013; Parker et al., 2019).

In this vein, to attract volunteers many sport organisations have widened roles and underscored opportunities for personal and professional enrichment, educational attainment, and ways involvement may contribute to other areas of social, cultural and political life (e.g., local activism, community development, gender and participation promotion, and sustainability and environmentalism imperatives) (Benson & Wise, 2017; Kiernan & Porter, 2014; Meir &

Fletcher, 2019). Ultimately, there remains a degree of consensus among members of the European sport community to provide more enriching volunteer spaces. Moreover, there appears (certainly within the networks we work in and with) a commitment to forging strong progressive transnational partnerships that might build more robust and resilient frameworks to support volunteerism and better protect the sector from adversities. Yet, as encouraging as efforts have been, even in 'regular' times maintaining volunteering is difficult and, as explained below, sport organisations in Europe have now also recognised volunteer investment as a priority for future proofing. Now, as the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic enforce sport sector change, a transnational approach to galvanising volunteering has become ever more prescient.

Since the coronavirus outbreak prevailing media, academic and political attention has been on economic impacts; especially, the global economic downturn related to the loss of employment and income. While Covid-19 has caused many sport volunteering activities worldwide to be suspended or postponed, currently, the impact of the pandemic on unpaid leisure activities including volunteering at local and regional levels has been less explored. In addition to direct economic impacts on sport volunteering, the pandemic has threatened a traditional mode of civic participation that at its core has been based largely on in-person interaction. Biddle and Gray (2020), for example, reported that in Australia approximately 12.2 million hours spent volunteering per week were lost since the beginning of the lockdown. This decline in volunteering activity was noted to be greater for females and individuals aged 65 or older. Volunteer activity cessation has also brought about an increase in psychological distress and decrease in life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing for the volunteers due to lack of social interaction (Biddle and Gray, 2020).

While the effects of social distancing rules and the postponement or cancellation of non-essential sport event and sport club activity on traditional sport volunteering are noted, many organisations responded by temporarily freeze their operations or transition some of those activities including scheduled meetings online through the use of virtual spaces (e.g. skype, Microsoft teams and Zoom). This created momentum for rises in virtual volunteering opportunities, as in many cases was the only viable option for civil action since the COVID-19 outbreak (Lachance, 2020). As research has already identified, virtual volunteering is a flexible and accessible way to complement and substitute in-person volunteering, while also transcending geographical barriers. However, virtual engagement varies, and it has been noted younger males with lower work-experience or skills are more likely to favour this form of volunteering compared to other groups (Liu et al., 2016; Lachance 2020). Virtual volunteering, however, offers a space for some to extend skills and knowledge, and gain work experience, while at the same time contribute to a cause they believe in. Despite the benefits to the volunteers and organisations of this form of volunteering, research suggests that the use of technology and of virtual spaces by grassroots sport associations in the recruitment, management, deployment and retention of sport volunteers has been limited to date (Lachance, 2020). Virtual volunteering offers opportunities for long-term volunteer engagement with meaningful roles to encourage retention and may avoid additional valuable organisation time spent in volunteer recruitment (Lachance, 2020). Virtual volunteer management strategies, however, are often overlooked as sport organisations focus on filling practical operational gaps rather than exploring alternative volunteer recruitment and retention approaches. We return to these ideas later in the paper.

### **PlayGreen, Erasmus+ and European Union Sport Structures**

With the Adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the European Commission (EC) was granted the authority to carry out actions and support, coordinate or supplement member states in variety of areas (including sport). This then led the creation of a budget line to support future EU actions on sport from 2014 onwards. Inevitably, this was the stepping stone for the emergence of EU Sports policy by offering it some form of strategic direction (for cogent and detail examination of the financial and human scale of the EU sport and sport volunteer sector see, for example, Benson & Wise, 2017; Erturan-Ogut. 2014; Garcia & de Wolff, 2018; Partington, 2018; Wicker & Downard, 2019). Between 2014 to 2020, the *Erasmus+ Programme* was chosen to integrate sport in its funding stream to facilitate EU budget distribution for the implementation of a plethora of EU actions focused on education, training and youth. This was an attempt to frame sport as a policy area of value that could also contribute to the wider Europe 2020 strategic priorities to improve employability, mobility, social cohesion and sustainable living (Garcia & de Wolff, 2018). Established in January 2019, PlayGreen is one such *Erasmus+ Sport* initiative aimed at increasing volunteering opportunities and capacities for young people across Europe, and to advocate for the use of sport as a tool to fight climate crisis. PlayGreen is managed by a consortium of six organisations that either have a national or European remit. These include project leaders Ecoserveis (Spain), a non-for-profit sustainability and energy agency, ENGSO (Principally Sweden-led but with a European focus) that aims to advocate and promote voluntary/grassroots sports across Europe, and the football associations of Malta, Flanders in Belgium, Estonia and Lithuania. The project is also endorsed by UEFA as part of wider social responsibility agendas toward environmental sustainability practices in European football.

Essentially, PlayGreen aims to increase both knowledge at local levels and enhance cross-border EU dialogue by being a platform to develop formal learning communities and young



volunteer capacities through mentoring, training and leadership. In doing so, the project enables participants to also work together for a significant cause (e.g., climate action) (playgreenproject.eu, nd). Specifically, the project is focused on helping reduce the environmental impacts of grassroots football events, while at the same time raise awareness and promote environmentally sustainable behaviours within local communities. Under this scope, PlayGreen has recruited volunteers from Malta, Estonia, Lithuania and Belgium to organise green sport events in their respective countries supported by national football associations. The countries that form part of the PlayGreen consortium are appropriate contexts to test such impacts, as their citizens' engagement in volunteering is generally considered limited (European Commission, 2018). COVID-19 resulted in most of PlayGreen activities being postponed with only virtual training and meetings possible. Additionally, the grassroots football events in the four European countries that were key to the project's goals had to be temporarily postponed with no clear view as to when and if these could eventually take place. This has resulted in most of the volunteers who were already recruited in each different country to feel a loss of purpose and engagement. The above situation led Project leaders to request a three-month extension of the project that was supposed to be completed in December 2020. Articulating this work further, the following section outlines a theoretical framework that is useful for exploring how PlayGreen evolved across the pandemic and is sustaining volunteer cultures and spaces.

### **PlayGreen and Conceptualising Volunteer Spaces**

The examination of PlayGreen is guided by our wider work examining sport volunteer spaces in other European context (see Koutrou & Kohe, in press). In this paper, we draw on theoretical critiques of space offered by Henri Lefebvre and colleagues (Lefebvre, 1991; 2003; Lefebvre & Régulier, 2004; Shields, 1999), and the more recent concomitant use of Lefebvrian analysis

within sport, to reveal connections between meta-physical, physical and transcendental domains of space (Hayday & Collison, 2020; Kohe & Collison, 2019; Van Ingen, 2003). Such an approach to analysis, to summarise, requires first focusing not on the fixed and temporal anchoring of space, but on the conceptualisation of space in a holistic and ideological sense (specifically, articulating thoughts, intangible beliefs, value systems and discourses). From this it is then possible to understand the notion of space (or *L'space*) as political and politicised, modes of production and reproductions of space, and acts of spatial consumption and transformation. For Lefebvre, there was value in articulating the connection between thought, production and action, not only for understanding how spaces operate and effect constituents within, but also for developing spaces as sights of action, empowerment, activism and transformation. In regards to sport, volunteering and the COVID-19 pandemic the utility of such an analysis is threefold. First, it enables us to articulate the ideals that bring sport volunteer communities together and how the pandemic has introduced new thoughts into what it means to volunteer. Second, the approach provides ways to see how volunteer ideologies have contributed to collaborative transnational forms of production in the PlayGreen project. Lastly, and cohering with social transformative research elsewhere (Alhadeff-Jones, 2016; Ford, 2016), by appreciating Lefebvre's emphasis on spaces' transformative potential we can highlight where sport volunteering may contribute to broader regional and global social change. To this end, we proceed by articulating some of the thought, production and action aspects that comprise PlayGreen's work and its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **PlayGreen and COVID-19 Thought: Ideas and ideals in the sport volunteer space**

As is well established (Griffiths & Armour, 2014; Morgan, 2013), there are existing ideas that have come to characterise sport volunteer cultures and what values are shared and endorsed among participants at the local, national or international levels. While specific experiences of

volunteering vary across sports and communities, ideas that define volunteering include notions of camaraderie, fraternity, love for sport and/or the club, commitments to making social contributions and altruism, willingness to be a part of positive, safe and self-/identity-affirming environments, seeking personal and professional development, and learning new skills (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Duguid, Mündel & Schugurensky, 2007). These values reflect those found in other volunteering contexts, but also mirror prevailing attitudes toward sport engagement (Downward, Lera-Lopez & Rasciute, 2014). The emergent COVID-19 situation has not only added new ideas to this mix, but also galvanised existing ideas and concerns, and introduced alternative principles that might underpin and propel volunteering in the future. Here, most significant have been ideas related to public health and safety, the protection of individual welfare, and fears around contamination, virus contraction, social distancing measures and the ‘unsafe’ practice of being in sport environments. Individual and club trepidations have been compounded further by varied and increasingly modified national responses by State governments which have challenged clubs to re-evaluate the purpose and function of their sport community, what their club does, how it does it, and who it does it for. Consequently, the rapid pace of change, and continued flux and uncertainty in national/local conditions, has led to confusion over how clubs might best respond. At the most extreme, as we have encountered in PlayGreen discussions, has a been either a sense of reluctance to act or highly varied approaches in sport organisations’ responses. In the most significant cases, some clubs have entirely ceased operation for the foreseeable future, others have been more embracing.

Some clubs have, however, seen ways to harness the context to create new ways of thinking, progressing practical and cultural change, and adapting volunteering practices. For some members, maintaining the social aspect of volunteering remains a valuable and current

imperative, [as highlighted in the Estonian, Lithuanian, and Maltese PlayGreen context](#). Here, in the absence of physical social connection, volunteers appear to appreciate opportunities for virtual connectivity and interaction. Although the online world may never replicate fully the *in situ* practical experience, PlayGreen members have recognised it still serves as a means to sustain the social and camaraderie ethos within sport volunteer communities. Through the maintenance of social connection volunteers can still feel that they have a purpose to promote sport as something valued and meaningful, and to reassert the ingrained social assumption that people ‘need’ sport (Bartle & Craig, 2017; Misener, Doherty & Hamm-Kerwin, 2010). Concomitant with the promotion of sport as a social good, there has been for some a reemphasis on sport/physical activity as a mechanism of ensuring ‘good health and wellbeing’. Prominent here have been sport organisations reasserting and advocating prevailing discourse around the need to resume sport participation for physical and mental health improvement (Kelly, Erickson & Turnnbridge, 2020; Parnell et al., 2020). Although through the progression of COVID-19 these discussions have assumed new saliency because of public and personal health and safety fears, the ideas have also been part of ongoing holistic discussion on the imperative to create ‘safe’ spaces in sport and safe spaces for volunteers. In regards to the pandemic specifically, this has led to debate over ensuring safe working environments and ways to keep sport/volunteer spaces virus-free. In some areas, this combines with existing ‘safe’ sport and ethics of care discourse; for instance, around removing violence and anti-social behaviour, abusive language, bullying, enforcing social controls.

Beyond the safe sport ethos, pressing concerns have arisen related to the general sustainability of local, national and regional sport endeavours and the volunteer cultures that they rely upon. Concerns over the continuity and future of sport have received significant attention in recent years (see, for example, Benson & Gray, 2020; Doherty, Millar & Misener, 2020; Duguid,

Mündel & Schugurensky, 2007; McCullough & Cunningham, 2010; Parnell et al., 2020) particularly in light of grand declarations between organisations such the IOC, United Nations and World Health Organisation with regards to the importance of sport/physical activity in achieving a broad range of social, environmental, cultural and economic endeavours, and the established Sustainable Development Goals (Kohe & Collison, 2019; United Nations, 2020). To these ends, COVID-19, and the heightened sense of social responsibility that the pandemic has brought about, has provided some leverage for clubs to promote volunteer involvement as a means of contributing to a collective good. COVID-19 has brought new light onto these discussions and reignited questions around the physical resources sport requires, the human labour costs involved in sport production, environmental impacts of sport facilities and fan consumption, repurposing of facilities for other community uses, and innovative strategies for fan and volunteer participation (see, for example, any number of most recent journal special issues of variations of the ‘Sport and Covid-19’ genre. **Within which are noted contributions the echo our experiences here vis-à-vis sustainability, volunteer retention and the continued fragilities of the sport sector (e.g., Evans et al., 2021; Parnell, 2020).** For PlayGreen, and other European organisations such as EOSE, ENGSO and EOC EU, the underlying issue to sustainability is the safeguarding of job security and continuity that has become more pressing amid the wider paucity of sport activity across the EU resulted by COVID-19 (Bardocz-Bencsik et al., 2021). Given the known retention and recruitment in volunteering (Livingston et al., 2020), such concerns are a key focus within the region that further draws and unites individuals and clubs together.

One further feature of the thought space has been the disconnect in communication, intentions and management (and community understanding) between national governing bodies and grassroots sport providers. The situation has re-highlighted existing disconnects (see Renfree

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& Kohe, 2018) between levels of the sports hierarchy. For example, in some European national setting NGBS adopted national/universal measures to cancel fixtures following government guidelines and compelled clubs to resource COVID-19-changes. While many clubs complied, others responded by establishing what they considered the best approaches for their communities. Notwithstanding different ways ideas within the sport volunteer space have been understood and interpreted, and whether they reflect positive characteristics or problematic issues, they are significant features of the thought space that have consolidated what sport volunteerism is and could be. Pre-, during, and in a potential post-COVID-19 world, these ideals provide a fulcrum upon which new forms of production have been emerging.

#### **PlayGreen and COVID-19 Production: Opportunity creation in the sport volunteer space**

To varying degrees, PlayGreen has mirrored other sports organisations across Europe and the rest of the world forced to adapt practices due to the pandemic. While COVID-19 has presented challenges for many sport clubs, the rapid move to online/virtual initiatives, and the way in which some clubs and their members have approached change, is evidence that capacities to modernise are valued, but perhaps needed a catalyst to bring about the necessary cultural, ideological and practical shifts. In PlayGreen, consequently, adaptations have occurred in administration, personnel, organisation practices, marketing, and communications. Additionally, in the interest of sustaining the organisation and ensuring sport continues in some sort of capacity during or 'after' the pandemic, there have also been new forms/modes of production related to how to be in and develop volunteer spaces and volunteers. PlayGreen's initial discussions, for example, evolved slowly and focused on how best to respond to and support volunteers' concerns. The relatively slow response was largely a by-product of the rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic, the constantly changing government guidelines within

each country, and the different interpretation and understandings of restrictions and regulations among PlayGreen members and European sport organisations.

While PlayGreen was a pan-European organisation, it operated on the overarching Erasmus+ principles (which fosters transnational collaboration but emphasises maintaining national identity and autonomy in initiative implementation). With the onset of the pandemic, there was no immediate coordinated response within group as each country adopted its own approach based on its local context. Moreover, in early weeks and following the pandemic developing at different rates in each country, the situation within PlayGreen was slightly chaotic and there were conflicting messages and limited communication between organisations. For example, PlayGreen were able to request a time-line extension for their work from the EU; however, there was still no clear guidance on the specific actions to take and how to proceed with meeting the goals of the project under the pandemic conditions. Eventually, over the course of monthly virtual meetings and increased email exchange, the consortium agreed that the best way to engage volunteers and keep them motivated to work for the project was to enhance the knowledge transfer activities online to the volunteers.

Several initiatives arose as a result. These included: developing online volunteer training seminars with prominent leaders in sport and sustainability; creating virtual training and mentoring opportunities using virtual places (e.g., Zoom, Skype and Microsoft teams); involving existing volunteers in the production of informative and motivational videos about the project; encouraging volunteers to share experience via social media; [photoshoots with volunteers to raise awareness about the programme's scope](#); inviting volunteers to be involved in online meetings with the project consortium; engaging volunteers in mentoring opportunities within the home-nations and prompting them to reflect on their work and develop creative ways

to continue through the pandemic. Nonetheless, the ‘new normal’ was not always accepted, and some PlayGreen members encountered challenges. As one of the volunteer managers from one consortium member football association suggests:

Our plan was to work with an existing big tournament to help them ‘green’ their activities with PlayGreen volunteers. We made all the preparations and had a comprehensive communication plan to recruit volunteers but then we were struck by COVID-19 and volunteers dropped out. When we are able to resume our activities...we are going to relaunch with a more targeted group of volunteers in our efforts to organise green sport events.

The above comment is illustrative of the difficulties ahead in reinvigorating volunteering and fulfilling PlayGreen’s goals once COVID-19 restrictions are eased. PlayGreen leaders are also aware of the implication that sport clubs may prioritise existing volunteers, or members who are either familiar with the club, the organisation or the sport more broadly, and/or had some prior training or relevant experience. Such concern have been confirmed in research that suggests sport volunteers are relatively homogenous in terms of their demographic profile, with white, male, highly educated, and people in professional occupations being more likely to volunteer in sport than others (Koutrou & Downward, 2016; Women in Sport, 2018). To this end, existing inequalities in sport volunteering may be reinforced, as sport organisations may focus on attracting their existing volunteer pool and excluding others to complete their activities.

Further to countering these concerns, the desire for PlayGreen leaders has been to sustain and grow the sense of community that has been fostered within the group over the course of its first



year. Here, PlayGreen's approach in productions has been to instil in volunteers that they were not only valued, but also part of something much larger than themselves and their local sport organisation. Moreover, that their ideas, local knowledge, and shared contributions can have real and meaningful impact and lead to discernible changes within the sport sector and across the continent. For example, the pandemic – and concerns over organisational resource and austerity – crystallised that climate action through sports remains a key priority to be addressed through collective action. One area of collaboration has been research done with the youth branch of ENGSO. This work has focused on investigating the impacts and best practices of pan-European youth sport-based programmes and their roles on increasing participants' and volunteers soft skills through cooperative ventures, and building youth sport capacity and transferable employability skills (<https://www.youth-sport.net/sk4ys>). This work also informs part of a wider collaborative project with sport partners in Europe to evaluate three European sport volunteer programmes (these include, PlayGreen, ENGSO youth *Young Delegates Programme*, and the *EYVOL* sport volunteer initiatives). The initiatives, networks, productions are individually and collectively designed to improve the current landscape of volunteering within Europe and status of volunteers within each respective partner country.

The collaborative projects above are relatively new, yet they join an enduring legacy of volunteer sport development on the continent. Moreover, the ongoing research and discussion among members and across projects have continued to illustrate that sport volunteer spaces are meaningful sites worthy of investment and resource. PlayGreen's work, in particular, has been useful in evidencing roles individuals and clubs play in addressing environmental and broader sustainability concerns. As explored below, and harmonising scholarship that has identified sport volunteers' perceptions of limited opportunities, part of PlayGreen's novelty here has been demonstrating wider areas in the sport sector where volunteer contributions can be made

beyond conventional routes (e.g., playing, refereeing and coaching). In addition, PlayGreen has also sought to bridge the gap in the gendered dynamics of male-dominated sport volunteering and female-dominated environmental/sustainability volunteering (Caiazza & Barrett; 2003; Women in Sport 2018). Notwithstanding this progress, the production space is fragile, and there remain uncertainties around volunteer engagement, perceptions of volunteering's exclusivity, and the longer-term sustainability of human resources.

### **PlayGreen and COVID-19 Action: Enabling agency and sustaining sport volunteer action**

In developing a space of meaningful action, PlayGreen is well placed. From the outset the scope of the project is to instill positive social change through advocating for sports' sustainability at all levels. The initiative emerges from an underlying global concern about human impacts upon the environment and desire among its transnational members to create localized/regionalized responses to environmental concerns. More specifically, to also enact change in line with EU *Green Deal* (European Commission, nd) agenda and related EU environmental and sustainable development policy and situate these within wider achievements towards UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2020). As part of doing so, PlayGreen endeavours to also foster attitudinal and behavioural shifts within existing and future sport communities that will enable sport organisations to adopt more unified/unifiable approaches to operations and day-to-day practices that are more sustainable. Congruent with Lefebvre's notion of the third space, social transformation and individual and collective empowerment are already fundamental to how and why PlayGreen exists and operates. These ideas are integral to the way PlayGreen organisers have envisioned volunteer engagement strategies and projects. However important having progressive ideas and project has been, the success and ultimate sustainability of PlayGreen's actions cannot be guaranteed and remains

contingent upon appropriate resourcing, effective management and communication, and the collective good-will and momentum of its members. In pre-COVID-19 times, fulfilling the socially transformative imperatives of the project was already a noted challenge. Not least of all, because of the substantial economic, socio-cultural and political and policy variances within and across the 6 member countries. Whereas now the onset of COVID-19 has crystalised the difficulties the sport sector faces with regards to volunteering, the situation has also reaffirmed the relevance and need for new forms of activism and advocacy and social change.

At present, as identified in the production space, PlayGreen members have seen a blank canvas for thinking and creating differently. Foremost has been seizing opportunities to adopt alternative strategies to engage volunteers; which at a central level have been coordinated by Ecoserveis and ENGSO. In the interest of democratising access and improving external transparency and engagement with sustainability discussions, for example, the consortium has established regular virtual training sessions with selected Guest Speakers and sustainability advocates (e.g. Matthew Campelli (Editor of the *Sustainability Report*), Albert Bosch and UltraCleanMarathon) that are open to all project volunteers and the general public. Nationally, while there some country specific conditions and restriction, there were innovative attempts to keep the project momentum and high levels of volunteer engagement (which at the pre-COVID-19 juncture equated to approximately 250-300 volunteers). In Malta, for example, in response to restrictions on public meetings new local ventures emerged to involve volunteers in the rejuvenation of neglected urban sport spaces. In the absence of spectators and players during the pandemic, volunteers are still able to maintain connections to the physical space (social distancing notwithstanding) and clubs can still demonstrate a community function. In addition, Maltese football athletes produced short testimonials that were disseminated on

various social media platforms to raise awareness about volunteering for sport and the environment, and to attract further volunteers to the PlayGreen network.

In Estonia, the onset of a second wave of COVID-19 has forced the cancellation of *in-situ* meetings and sport events with audiences. The Estonian Football Association had planned to host a ‘Green Football Tournament’ in July 2020, with the help of PlayGreen volunteers, in conjunction with the final games of the Estonian National Cup. Prior to the event, the country had not been affected as significantly with COVID-19 as other countries in the region. When situation changed the event was modified to take place with appropriate social distancing, and volunteers still went ahead with creating environmentally-friendly market stalls, waste monitoring initiatives, among others, to illustrate the importance of sustainable environments, living and sport. In Belgium, while the original plan was to co-organise a *Keizer Karel Cup* national football tournament to be run along sustainability principles, due to the pandemic the entire event had to be cancelled. Presently, the ongoing uncertainties of the situation have stymied any further development leading volunteers’ enthusiasm to ‘a point below zero’ (internal communications) pointing towards the relevance of the physical space for maintaining connections and motivation in sport. Yet, in the absence of consortia advice and direction, some volunteers in Belgium took initiative to develop social media posts and online videos, and mentoring sessions to continue PlayGreen promotion and recruitment. In contrast, actions in Lithuania were slightly different. The country had only joined PlayGreen in July 2020 due to the pandemic diverting attention and priorities within the sport sector. At present, some live sport and social gathering in the country are still possible. With the situation in flux, Lithuanian members are only in the early stages of volunteering recruitment and awareness development about the project. However, the local Association focused on forming quality relationships with the newly recruited volunteers instead of reaching large numbers of individuals. To this end,

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they organised photoshoot sessions with them to increase a sense of belonging and identity. They also involved their volunteers in developing sustainability initiatives to be used from grassroots clubs in the region such as offering discounts to spectators who come to venues to attend matches sharing vehicles and signing agreements with public-transport companies to offer discounts to spectators. Nonetheless, there is recognition that this is a challenging situation and there is a need for immediate responses to sustain the country grassroots and community sport volunteering.

As each country has developed its own strategies, transnational dialogue within the project has continued. Herein lies the learning, collaborative and empowerment opportunities whereby countries can learn from each other and share practices that reflect the unity of ideals, purpose and visions for more sustainable sporting futures. While the pandemic has presented challenges to maintaining regional cohesion, utilising Ecoserveis and ENGSO's existing organisational structures and virtual platforms has, to this end, been beneficial in aiding cross-cultural exchange and coheres with the ethos of Pan-European/European Union/Erasmus partnerships. At present, some member nations and their volunteers are more equipped or well-placed to respond to the current situation. Others, we have observed, are more reserved to commit to immediate or wholesale change either out of lack of resources, willingness, capacity, or continued uncertainties over how the pandemic would unfold. Regardless, there is an awareness among the consortia, and new members looking to join, that a) sustainable sport requires enhanced volunteer engagement and resourcing through programs with clear, concrete goals, perspectives and time-frames, and b) that appropriate exit routes for volunteers beyond PlayGreen or other specific projects are needed to transform the region's volunteer landscape.

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### **Re-landscaping the pitch**

We recognise that addressing volunteer sustainability is a significant challenge and requires substantial resource and collaboration across the European sport space. Moreover, not all organisations and clubs are necessarily well-placed or equipped, at least at present, to undertake the types of holistic or practical changes that may be necessary for their survival. Nonetheless, there are small steps that may be taken as clubs/communities adopt individualised strategies and approaches that best suit their sports, contexts and memberships. To these ends, as the example of PlayGreen demonstrates, there are existing transnational platforms for organisations and clubs to engage with to share experiences, garner resources and ideas, and facilitate shared volunteer work. Engagement in such platforms may also help organisations develop more consistent approaches to communicate with and network their volunteers, and also show volunteers their involvements are valued within the sport's wider community of stakeholders. While such altruistic and connected experiences may not be suitable or desired by all volunteers, it does (particularly at a time of socially-distanced measures and inabilities to physically participate in sport) afford opportunities for community connection and identity formation. Beyond the funded Erasmus project life-cycle, the PlayGreen model affords a framework for establishing sustainable and meaningful international sport volunteer networks that might drive social and geographic mobility (e.g., enable individuals to participate in sport administration, decision-making, and/or volunteer beyond one's national borders), promote wider volunteering and contributing to broader local, regional or global goals, and maintain momentum of shared volunteer activities on the continent. Here, the conditions created as a result of COVID-19 may be considered useful in that the expenses associated with practical, in-person, physical meetings and events is drastically reduced and offset, and opens up new creative possibilities in the digital realm. For example, online resource creation, social group formation, multi-lingual multi-media projects, cultural exchange, and sharing of resource and

expertise, may aid creation of more equitable and inclusive experiences and may reduce some of the existing inequalities that are evident in/at club sport level across the continent.

The move of sport volunteering into virtual spaces is advantageous in providing needed work opportunities for organisations and their members, and a platform for further engagement. However, there remain issues with virtual volunteering. For example, the need for financial investment, appropriate management oversight and training (particularly if clubs are not yet set up well in the online world), and potential culture shifts in organisations toward acknowledging the value of [alternative strategic approaches to volunteering recruitment and engagement](#).

Moreover, there are no guarantees virtual volunteer will be beneficial for the types of work and sport community development clubs may desire. As our experiences within and across the European sport sector have enlightened us, individuals' and clubs' proclivities toward virtual volunteering (and associated technological adaptation) are highly varied, inconsistent and inequitable. Whereas some sport clubs and their members have the necessary skills to embrace and take advantage of a shift to virtual volunteer work, there remains a spectrum of technophilia and evident generational divides across the sector. For example, as mundane and ubiquitous as asking volunteers to manage clubs' social media may be, there is still associated labour costs. In addition, there may also exist assumptions about the readiness, technological capacity, and skill-level of sports' younger demographic – frequently referred to as 'digital natives' – (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008; Jones, 2011; Gleason, 2018), to undertake these roles successfully.

One way to make these new virtual opportunities meaningful, sustainable, and inclusive will require supporting structures (e.g., funding and organisation support) to be modified. At present, PlayGreen relies largely on external support (e.g. EU funding), but also on the internal

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good will and contribution of members (who are academics, industry professionals, sustainability and energy consultants, researchers, and sport development stakeholders). While the Erasmus+ scheme provides some foundational level of support and has extended the time period of cover during COVID-19, the administration and running of events is still the responsibility of its members; which as a non-profit agency is largely left to its own devices. Currently, PlayGreen and the consortia, in particular ENGSO, operates in lieu of any alternative to a transnational European sport volunteering partnership. As such, there remains the need to reach wider audiences, develop events and enhance awareness about the organisation. For the foreseeable future, some amalgam of physical and virtual events will be needed to both provide opportunities to volunteers, but also serve the fundamental goals of the organisation to grow awareness of sustainability agendas and change practice in sport. There are positive signs in this regard. PlayGreen has future plans to hold conferences, symposia and workshop on contemporary and enduring sustainability issues for its volunteers. Such a move may hopefully enhance continental sport volunteering interest, but also address some of the socio-economic inequalities and barriers volunteers may have encountered accessing these sorts of opportunities in a physical iteration previously.

One other factor regarding the development of safe volunteer spaces and communities are concerns regarding sport organisational duties and ethical responsibility for care, welfare and safeguarding. Wide-ranging ethical, legal and political debate in Europe (and beyond) has drawn attention to strengthening and extending local, national and regional sport clubs' health, safety and welfare responsibilities toward players, coaches, referees and parents. In our recent examination of football volunteering in the UK (prior to COVID-19), there was recognition that the sport organisations (either the Football Association or local clubs) had not always provided the best/safest conditions in which to volunteer or practice the sport. Accordingly,



community members called on clubs and NGBs to invest more heavily in health and safety training, widespread educational development opportunities, improved physical, social and virtual environments and cultural changes. In cultivating safe space, the hope was that the sport would become more attractive (particularly to young female participants and young volunteers) and aid organisational sustainability aspirations. Agreement on what safe space effectively 'looks' like on and off the pitch varied, yet there was acknowledgement that cultural change necessitated careful navigation and resolution at all levels of the sport structure. Considering these perspectives, as debates proceed, we believe what is needed is further collection of the perspectives of grassroots participants, volunteers and clubs. Moreover, young peoples' voices on health, safety and welfare issues also remain underrepresented. Now, amid the COVID-19 context, this focus on ensuring safe(r) spaces in sport at all levels has become ever more paramount.

## **Conclusion**

The pandemic has challenged the sport sector to rethink what it does, how it does it and who it does it for. Fundamental in this rethinking have been reinvigorated discussions about the substantive value volunteers play in creating and sustaining the sporting landscape. Moreover, beyond the focus on sport continuity, the pandemic has illustrated the potential and opportunities for sport volunteers to be integral in addressing wider social, political, economic and environmental challenges. Foremost of which, certainly from PlayGreen's perspective, is the power of volunteering as a means to raise awareness and enact change about regional European and global environmental sustainability goals. Yet, as current experiences within the PlayGreen project reveal, producing initiatives and enacting social transformation cannot necessarily be guaranteed, and with the ongoing cessation and/or adaptation of physical sport

events in many places and prevailing financial uncertainties (Parnell et al., 2019), there remains challenges ahead in reinvigorating volunteering. Where PlayGreen has taken initiative to move its activities online where possible, and maintain a commitment to promoting sustainable sport agenda, support volunteer learning and professional development, and contribute to re-starting volunteer involvements in sport, more work remains to be done.

The experiences of a collective and transnational consortium such as PlayGreen provide a new perspective outside of the club sport and sport mega-event frameworks as to how sport may operate and be unifying in and beyond the pandemic. Through PlayGreen, its member states have been able to also illustrate how impacts of COVID-19-related changes are ongoing and necessitate continued thinking, working and reflection in and beyond country borders. Here, we note the shared histories and European alliances (buoyed by European 2020 Goals (European Commission, 2020) are beneficial to supporting project creation, continuity, and provide a point of reference that other regional networks may wish to consider emulating. Overall, and notwithstanding its limitations and challenge, the nascent efforts of PlayGreen show the value of not always having sport events for sports sake. More specifically, that if resources and volunteer capacities will remain limited in the future because of the pandemic, it may be beneficial to find creative ways to use sport to bring people together to connect with global and local issues. These ideas are not necessarily novel (and have been rehearsed in sport-for-development research previously) (Collison, 2016; Collison, Darnell, Giulianotti & Howe, 2017). However, the current conditions have emphasised how integral organisations like PlayGreen and ENGSO are within the community framework and national and regional sport landscape. Ultimately, PlayGreen offers a way to appreciate how important localised sporting communities are for the promotion of social values and ideals [harnessing the volunteers' enthusiasm](#) (in this case related to environmental sustainability, but also extending to social

justice, inclusivity, non-violent participation, civic duty and care ethics) (Bowen et al., 2017; Schailleé, Haudenhuyse & Bradt, 2019; Ubaidulloev, 2018), and not just for the promotion of sport.

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