

## **INCLUSION & GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH SOFTBALL (IGETS)**

The Ghajnsielem Redcoats, a sports club established in 2012, has secured a grant of over €58,000 through Erasmus+ Sports: Small Collaborative Partnerships, for a project aimed to improve gender equality in sport, especially softball. The project titled ***Inclusion and Gender Equality Through Softball (IGETS)*** will bring together three softball clubs coming from different parts of Europe – Ghajnsielem Redcoats from Gozo, Malta, Olympia Haarlem from the Netherlands and Softball Klub Princ Zagreb from Croatia.

IGETS involves the exchange of best practices relevant to gender equality in sports, efforts to encourage youths to play softball and sports in general, and to increase the participation rate in sports, especially among women and girls by working with key stakeholders. IGETS aims to increase the capacity-building of the respective organisations and staff. The project also aims to create a lasting network of cooperation among the three project partners. IGETS includes four transnational activities along with activities implemented by each partner in their respective country spread over two years.

In the first transnational activity coaches from the three clubs will meet in Gozo, Malta, to explore ways how to get children as young as four years old to participate in sports. The coaches will observe how the Ghajnsielem Redcoats manage to have a high participation rate in the 4 to 9 age group. Three highly successful programmes of the club will be studied. The programmes are, *ACTIVE START – Young Multisport Athletes*, *Fundamental Skills Academy*, and *#BEACTIVE*. During the visit to Gozo the coaches will also conduct practice sessions for the youth softball team of the Redcoats, including specialised practice sessions for pitchers, in order to enhance capacity.

In the second transnational meeting, the representatives from the three clubs will meet in Haarlem, the Netherlands. The main objective of this meeting will be to continue to work on capacity building especially insights for pitching coaches. There will be two practice sessions for pitchers as part of the pitching coaching clinic. Another objective of this activity is to study the administrative side of running a softball club and explore ways to enhance the running of the organisation including methods to generate funds.

The third transnational activity will be held in Zagreb, Croatia. This will be a joint softball training camp for the three U17 teams of the participating clubs including a triangular tournament. The principal goal of this activity is to explore ways to keep teenage players engaged in this sport so that they continue to play softball even while they attend post-secondary education or after they start working.

The final transnational meeting will be a conference for the project partners with the participation of members of their respective associations and officials of the European Softball Federation. During this conference the results of the project will be announced and a document will also be presented to the European Softball Federation for further dissemination to the associations affiliated with it and their respective clubs. In this manner the findings and recommendations that will result from the IGETS project will be communicated to everyone associated with softball throughout Europe.

IGETS is designed in a manner so that all three clubs will contribute to the success of the project with each partner benefiting from the strengths and experiences of the other clubs.

### **The Aims of IGETS**

**Shortage of volunteers in sports** – IGETS will try to promote voluntary activities in softball with the female youth players of each of the three participating organisation. By instilling in them a love for

the game and by forging friendships with others who play softball there is a better chance that the participants will continue to play the game as they grow older and face new challenges in life. This would increase the likelihood that some of them would dedicate their free time to help in the coaching and administration of their respective clubs.

**Social inclusion** – More than any other sport, in softball girls of varying physical attributes can excel making softball more accessible than other sports. By participating in a team sport such as softball, girls who might otherwise be left out have an opportunity to be part of a group. IGETS aims to introduce innovative ideas on how the three partner organisations can increase the rate of female participation in sports especially at the primary school level.

**Gender Equality** - By increasing accessibility for girls to play softball there will be a corresponding increase in the rate of female participation. The experience of playing softball helps in the physical and mental development of females. In addition, being physically active by playing a team sport is a source of empowerment, and facilitates social inclusion. This enhances gender equality. Encouraging and making it easier for females to take up coaching as well as administrative roles at sports clubs has the dual effect of reducing gender imbalance and having female role models for girls. By promoting the multisport approach for the younger age groups, IGETS aims to help the project partners with an innovative approach to change the attitude of girls towards sports and to increase female participation. With a shift in focus towards enhancing physical literacy (competence, confidence and motivation) and long term athlete development rather than winning or losing, participants are more likely to grow up to love softball and sports in general and to stay physically active later on in life. IGETS will also explore ways and make efforts to improve the media coverage of women in sports.

**Health Enhancing Physical Activity:** With obesity in children and females at unacceptably high levels, sport can contribute with efforts to reverse this trend. Increasing the rate of participation in sports will help combat obesity and the health issues related to this problem. Efforts are needed to increase awareness of this problem and at the same time to increase accessibility so that those who decide to take up a sport, once they become aware of the negative health consequences of inactivity, find it easy to practice it. IGETS aims to make the three participating organisations more aware of their social responsibility. Rather than just recruit the best athletes and those with the most potential to reach the elite level, clubs should have programmes that encourage everyone to participate irrespective of their physical attributes. In addition, periodic seminars on nutrition should also be held for members of the clubs, players, and their parents.

**Networking between softball clubs:** Although European clubs have been playing softball for several decades, and European national teams have managed to achieve important results in international competitions, one can say that the game is still at the grassroots level in Europe. Lack of financial resources, a shortage of qualified coaches, and clubs who do not have a proper administrative structure means that the game is struggling to grow. IGETS is putting together three very diverse clubs coming from different backgrounds and operating in distinct environments in an effort to start a mutually-beneficial relationship that would lead to further cooperation. Such cooperation should lead to a strengthening of the respective organisational structures, capacity building for the coaching staff, and maybe also identification of methods to increase the financial resources available to each organisation.

**Identification, sharing & promotion of best practices:** The benefit of having three very diverse organisations participating in a collaborative partnership is that each partner will have strengths and weaknesses as well as experiences that are completely different from those of the others. This applies to those individuals involved in the administration of the club as well as the coaches. The

objective of IGETS is to provide the three organisations with the opportunity to observe how each partner operates, how practices are conducted and what efforts are being made to improve the standing of each club respectively. At each exchange, opportunities will be provided to share experiences so that best practices will be identified and shared among the partners. The involvement of the personnel of Left Field University, who are professional coaches with international experience, will ensure that the right practices are shared and promoted.

These aims make IGETS an innovative project and has value added not only for the three clubs and their respective countries but for all of Europe. It is for this reason that IGETS was selected out of 350 other competing projects.

IGETS was conceived thanks to the efforts of MEPs Dr Therese Comodini Cachia and Ms Marlene Mizzi, who last February invited the Gozo Sports Board to Brussels to explore ways how sports organisations in Gozo can access EU funding opportunities. The support of the Malta EU Steering and Action Committee, MEUSAC, was indispensable during the application process. Without the dedicated assistance from MEUSAC personnel, IGETS would not have been possible.

We were also fortunate that our project was endorsed by the General Secretary of the European Softball Federation, Mr Ami Baran. Now that IGETS has been granted funding, everyone associated with the Ghajnsielem Redcoats is very much looking forward to start implementing the project which is expected to improve the level of our game and the popularity of softball in Gozo.