

The IOC and FIFA have the power and the leverage to make the Olympic Games and the World Cup more ‘socially responsible’.

It is (unfortunately) a recurring phenomenon: every time a new country is assigned for the organization of a major sports event (Olympics, Football World Cups), serious questions are raised about the way the games are assigned and voices are raised about the ‘inappropriate’ influence of the decision makers. These allegations are a serious blow for the image and reputation of these international sports federations.

Even more worrying is the fact that fundamental human rights, fair labour practices and the impact on the local communities that such mega-events entail do not seem to be given the priority they deserve in the allocation of the Olympic Games and the World Cup to the candidate countries. The Olympic Games in China (2008), were supposed to lead to a “positive change” and more attention to human rights and individual freedoms. 5 years later, these claims can now be seriously questioned. Earlier this year Brazil (World Cup 2014 and Olympics 2016) was confronted with social protests and public discontent. Favelas were ‘cleaned up’, with security forces using disproportionate violence. The discontent among the Brazilian population grew because of the deficient infrastructure of schools and hospitals, while billions are being invested in new sports infrastructure. Recently, the Brazilian Labour Ministry denounced that the World Cup airport expansion is confronted with workers in ‘slave-like’ conditions.

The Winter Olympics in Russia's Sochi (2014) have long been under attack, firstly because of the negative social and economic impact on the local population to make way for new infrastructure, and linked to this accusations of corruption. Now the Games are under attack because of the controversial ‘anti-gay’ legislation, which is being criticized by several governments and human rights NGO's. Furthermore the limited economic return for the local populations, and the monopoly of the big sponsors at the expense of local retailers (e.g. the controversy on the World Cup in South Africa and the current debate in Brazil about the sale of the international beer brands during the World Cup) continue to be under scrutiny.

And then there is Qatar. Although still far away (World Cup 2022), the organization is already facing serious allegations. While a discussion is going on if the World Cup, given the extreme heat during the summer, should not be better organized during the winter (in the interest of players and public), an investigation from ‘The Guardian’ highlighted several deaths & injuries of Nepalese workers, as a consequence of dehydration and heat. Inhumane working conditions, exploitation and outright ‘slave labor’ are part of the game in Qatar according to several NGO's, while the International Trade Union Confederation pleads for greater reforms. Meanwhile, Lusail Real Estate Development, Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee and Qatar's Labour Ministry deny the allegations. FIFA states that it is ‘very concerned’.

Whilst in the business world and within large multinational companies, ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ is more and more embedded in their business strategy, it seems that world sports federations are still lagging behind and fail to adequately manage human rights related risks.

The United Nations ‘Protect, Respect & Remedy’ framework, the UN Global Compact, and the ‘OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises’ all agree that companies have a responsibility in the area of human rights. Even if the human rights violations are committed by States or state related entities, companies and big organizations can and should use their power and influence to reduce these violations as much as possible and avoid to be involved directly or indirectly, in human rights violations that can be linked to their activities.

The IOC states that it is proud that the Olympic Games are becoming more and more 'green' games, with a reduced ecological footprints. This is obviously to be welcomed, and a big step forward. But the 'triple bottom line (people, planet and profit) of the IOC and FIFA is not yet balanced. Social and human rights aspects seem still to be overruled by financial (or political) considerations.

When allocating the Olympic Games or the World Cup to a given country, do both organizations ask hard guarantees or requirements in the field of human rights, respect for labor rights, respect for local cultures and communities, or specific requirements for suppliers who provide for example sports clothing and accessories? This is a question both organizations should better answer. But for the moment, it seems – given the recurrent controversies - that it is not enough. The IOC and FIFA - as international and widely respected organizations - have the necessary power, leverage and influence to impose their demands. For many countries being chosen to organize the World Cup or the Olympics is the ultimate dream and a stepping stone to international recognition and prestige.

We can wonder why the international sports world is procrastinating about the implementation of a more thorough corporate social responsibility strategy. Multinational companies have already understood that they must take into account all stakeholders (employees, customers, the public, local community, suppliers ...). If they do not, their reputation, image and license to operate are at stake, impacting their financial performances and with the potential loss of market share as a result. The pressure of the public opinion should not be underestimated. Sport fans want to see 'games'. But they don't like to think about child labour or exploitation when watching a football match.

The integration of social and human rights considerations into the policies and governance structure of the IOC and FIFA is also in their own interest. Indeed, there is growing evidence that good practices in this field enhance reputation, resulting in improved staff morale, leading to higher motivation, and the ability to attract and retain the best skills. It strengthens also the 'license to operate' of the IOC and FIFA, while it creates more stable operating environments and promotes better community relations. Conversely, the recurrent allegations of human rights disputes negatively impact the reputation and brand image of these organizations, which can lead to boycotts. If the IOC and FIFA will adopt more explicit and appropriate human rights principles and goals alongside mechanisms for their implementation, they will be better prepared to prevent human rights abuses (by third parties) and to deal effectively with allegations of wrongdoing that may arise.

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