

II. Special Research Papers

SUSTAINABILITY AND SPORT. TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Anna Di Giandomenico

Professor (Asoc), University of Teramo, Italy

Abstract: *Sports organisations began to think about and engage with the challenges of sustainability much earlier than the adoption of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/Res/701), which identified sport as an important actor in the realisation of development and peace (pt. 37).*

Since 1994, there was a call for the inclusion of a provision in the Olympic Charter emphasising the Olympic Movement's concerns to preserve the environment. This led to the inclusion of a clause on the environment and sustainable development in the 1996 Olympic Charter, confirmed (with variations) in subsequent Olympic Charters. International sports organisations renewed their commitment to foster and promote environmental sustainability by adhering to the UN Sport for Climate Change Framework, aimed at bringing together sports federations, organisations, teams, athletes and fans in a concerted effort to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement. In this regard, the Olympic Agenda 2020 is emblematic: here sustainability is considered as one of the three pillars alongside credibility and youth of IOC's strategic roadmap. The results of the Agenda 2020 led the IOC to draft a new Agenda (named Agenda 2020+5) as a new roadmap determining the IOC and Olympic Movement until 2025, keeping in mind that sport and the value of Olympism can play a key role in turning challenges into opportunities.

1. Introduction

It seems important to recall how in the 80s of the last century the UN took on board concerns about the risks of resource depletion in the persistence of a traditional conception of development, focused on increasing production, which could have led to resource depletion. Hence the mandate for the World Commission on Environment and Development to draw up a report, the subsequent publication of which gives a definition of sustainable development as the “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.¹ After this report, the notion of sustainable development was accepted in the environmental treaties opened for signature in Rio: the

1. World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), *Our Common Future*, Oxford: Oxford Press, p. 43.

*Convention on Climate Change*² and the *Convention on Biological Diversity*³. In a word, concern about resource depletion and commitment to sustainable development have become a common goal for all policies at national, supranational and international level, without excluding the sports sector.

It is emblematic in this sense the recognition by the European Commission of the pedagogical function of sport, clearly outlined in its *White Paper on Sport*,⁴ identifying various functions of sport, including the promotion of volunteering and active citizenship, its use for social inclusion, integration and equal opportunities, the prevention of and fight against racism and violence and, last but not least, the promotion of sustainable development.⁵ In this regard the *White Paper* notes that “European sport organisations and sport event organisers should adopt environmental objectives in order to make their activities environmentally sustainable.”⁶ Sport, therefore, has been considered since 2007 as a privileged channel through which to communicate, but above all promote sustainability.⁷ This is a vision well in advance of the 2015 Resolution *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (A/Res/701) which identified sport as an important actor in the realisation of development and peace.⁸

2. Sport and sustainability in the Olympic Charter

However, sports organisations started thinking about and facing the challenges of sustainability much earlier. Their commitment began in 1994, when, following the work of the IOC session at which sport and the environment were discussed, a request was made to include a provision in the Olympic Charter emphasising the Olympic Movement's concern for preserving the environment.

2. United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change, adopted In New York on May 9th, 1992 and entered into force on March 21st, 1994. Just note how such Convention will give rise to the well-known Kyoto Protocol, adopted on December 11th, 1997 and entered into force on February 16th, 2005.

3. Convention on Biological Diversity, adopted in Rio de Janeiro on June 5th, 1992, and entered into force on December 29th, 1993.

4. *White Paper on Sport* (COM(2007) 391 final), adopted on July 11th, 2007.

5. *White Paper on Sport*, 2. The Societal Role of Sport.

6. 2.8 Supporting sustainable development.

7. Note how this educational function has been confirmed by the TFEU, which recognises European competence in the field of sport, by including the provisions within Title XII: Education, Vocational Training, Youth and Sport. See more specifically the art. 165.

8. “Sport is also an important enabler of sustainable development. We recognize the growing contribution of sport to the realization of development and peace in its promotion of tolerance and respect and the contributions it makes to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives” (pt. 37).

This led to the inclusion of a clause on the environment and sustainable development in the 1996 Olympic Charter,⁹ which was confirmed (with variations) in subsequent Olympic Charters.

A further step forward came in 2004, when the Olympic Charter mentioned sustainability for the first time, within a provision about the IOC role, which was to be “to encourage and support a responsible concern for environmental issues, to promote sustainable development in sport and to require that the Olympic Games are held accordingly.”¹⁰

In 2016 this concern led to the introduction of the criterion of sustainability in the evaluation of candidate cities to host the games, stating that “Each Evaluation Commission shall study the candidatures of all candidate cities, inspect the sites and submit to all IOC members a written report on all candidatures, not later than one month before the opening date of the Session which shall elect the host city of the Olympic Games. Such report shall include an assessment of the opportunities and risks of each candidature, as well as of sustainability and legacy.”¹¹ Not only, the same Olympic Charter authorised that some competition will be held outside the host city “notably for reasons of geography and sustainability.”¹²

This commitment becomes even more stringent in 2020, when the Olympic Charter stipulated that “The construction of new permanent venues or infrastructure for the purposes of the organization of the Olympic Games shall only be considered on the basis of sustainable legacy plans.”¹³

The current Olympic Charter confirmed all that previously stated: that is, the role of IOC in promoting sustainable development in sport,¹⁴ as well as the needed assessment of sustainability in the evaluation of candidate cities¹⁵ and the authorisation to build new venues only on the basis of sustainable legacy plans.¹⁶

9. “Sees to it that the Olympic Games are held in conditions which demonstrate a responsible concern for environmental issues and encourages the Olympic Movement to demonstrate a responsible concern for environmental issues, takes measures to reflect such concern in its activities and educates all those connected with the Olympic Movement as to the importance of sustainable development.” (Chapter 1 – The Olympic Movement, pt. 2.13).

10. Chapter 1 – The Olympic Movement – para 2 Mission and Role of IOC, pt. 13.

11. 2016 Olympic Charter, 33 – Election of the Host City, by-law rule 33 – Candidate cities – Evaluation, pt. 2.2.

12. 2016 Olympic Charter, 34 – Location, sites and venues of the Olympic Games.

13. 2020 Olympic Charter, 34 – Location, sites and venues of the Olympic Games.

14. 2024 Olympic Charter, Chapter 1 - The Olympic Movement – para 2 - Mission and Role of IOC, pt. 14.

15. 2024 Olympic Charter, 33 – Election of the Host of the Olympic Games

16. 2024 Olympic Charter, 34 – Location, sites and venues of the Olympic Games.

3. Sports Organisations' Commitment with Sustainability.

The commitment expressed in the Olympic charters is the prelude and the outcome of a commitment by the International Federations to foster and promote environmental sustainability by adhering to the UN *Sport for Climate Action Framework*, created on 2016 within the UN for Climate Change Framework, involving some of the leading sports organisations like IOC, FIFA, and UEFA, being aware that they can play an important leadership role in stimulating climate action beyond the sporting sector and thus be supportive in countering climate change threats.

In a word, sports organisations can be climate leadership by engaging together in the climate neutrality journey, considering the sports' global interest for billions of fans, and the media coverage generated in response: this provides a strong platform for the sport sector to play an exemplary role in meeting the challenge of climate change, inspiring and engaging large audiences to do the same.

The UNSCAF Declaration identifies two goals, consisting in “a) Achieving a clear trajectory for the global sports community to combat climate change, through commitments and partnerships in congress with verified standards, including measuring, reducing, and reporting greenhouse gas emissions in line with well below 2 degree scenario as set out in the Paris Agreement; b) Using sports as a unifying tool to drive climate awareness and action among global citizens.”¹⁷

The signing sports organisations commit themselves to adhere to five principles, incorporating them into strategies, policies and procedures, as well as mainstreaming them within the sports community. More specifically these principles are: 1. Undertake systematic efforts to promote greater environmental responsibility; 2. Reduce overall climate impact; 3. Educate for climate action; 4. Promote sustainable and responsible consumption; 5. Advocate for climate action through communication.¹⁸

The scope of the signatory parties goes far beyond the narrow field of sporting competitions but extends to spectators and stakeholders. Thus, beyond their commitment to measure their emissions and halve them by 2030, with the goal of reaching net zero by 2040, they have committed to a series of climate actions aimed at educating athletes and spectators and involving all stakeholders in climate issues. Currently, at least 270 sports organisations signed the UNSCAF Declaration.¹⁹

One of the most significant expressions of commitment to sustainability is

17. *UN Sport for Climate Action Declaration*, para 1.2 - Opportunity for sports sector to become a climate leader, pt. 14.

18. UNSCAF, para 2 – Sport for Climate Action Principles, pt.18.

19. The list of signatories parties are available at the link <https://unfccc.int/climate-action/sectoral-engagement/sports-for-climate-action/participants-in-the-sports-for-climate-action-framework#Sports-for-Climate-Action-signatories>.

the IOC Olympic Agenda 2020,²⁰ agreed at the 127th IOC Session in Monaco on December 8th and 9th, 2014.

According to the Agenda, sustainability is one of the three pillars, together with credibility and youth, of IOC strategic roadmap aimed at strengthening IOC and Olympic Movement as well as the role of sport in society, and safeguarding the Olympic values. To achieve these goals 40 different (but interrelated) recommendations were identified after a collaborative and consultative process, which involved Olympic movement, stakeholders and outside experts.²¹

Among these recommendations there are at least two specifically devoted to sustainability: Rec. 4 states the need to “include sustainability in all aspect of Olympic games”, while Rec. 5 states the need to “include sustainability within the Olympic movement’s daily operations”.²² Beside these specific Recommendation, references to sustainability can be found in Rec. 1 (pt. 3 and 4)²³, in Rec. 2 (pt. 6)²⁴, and in Rec. 24 (pt. 2)²⁵.

As regard sustainability, it seems worthy of note how the IOC adopted a holistic approach, working across its three spheres of responsibility: as an organisation, as the owner of the Olympic Games and as the leader of the Olympic Movement. Aware of its responsibility, the IOC therefore outlined a sustainability strategy, identifying five focus areas (infrastructure and natural sites, sourcing and resource management, mobility, workforce and climate), for each of which strategic intents are identified.²⁶

20. Available at the link: https://stillmed.olympic.org/Documents/Olympic_Agenda_2020/Olympic_Agenda_2020-20-20_Recommendations-ENG.pdf.

21. “This Olympic Agenda 2020 is like a jig-saw puzzle. Every piece, every recommendation, has the same importance. Only when you put all these 40 pieces together you see the whole picture. You see progress in ensuring the success of the Olympic Games, progress in safeguarding the Olympic Values and progress in strengthening sport in society.” (from the speech held IOC by President Thomas Bach on the occasion of the Opening Ceremony, 127th IOC Session, Monaco, 7 December 2014).

22. Olympic Agenda. 20+20 Recommendations, p. 12.

23. Pt. 3: “The IOC to allow, for the Olympic Games, the organisation of preliminary competitions outside the host city or, in exceptional cases, outside the host country, notably for reasons of sustainability”; pt. 4: “The IOC to allow, for the Olympic Games, the organisation of entire sports or disciplines outside the host city or, in exceptional cases, outside the host country notably for reasons of geography and sustainability”.

24. Pt. 6: “The Commission to benefit from third-party, independent advice in such areas as social, economic and political conditions, with a special focus on sustainability and legacy.”

25. Pt. 2: “The IOC to develop a sustainable operational model for the two existing Sport for Hope centres and invite other NGOs to contribute their particular areas of expertise, with the goal of having the centres become self-sufficient, managed and operated by another entity, and no longer reliant on the direct heavy investment and support of the IOC.”

26. See *amplius* the *IOC Sustainability Strategy*, October 2017.

The results of the Agenda 2020²⁷ led the IOC to draft a new Agenda (named *Agenda 2020+5*)²⁸ as a new roadmap that determine IOC and Olympic Movement until 2025, with the aim to minimise footprint and maximise positive influence across social, environmental and economic spheres.

The new Agenda confirms the holistic approach of the previous one, and consists of 15 recommendations, based on key trends that have been identified as likely to be decisive in the post-coronavirus world and keeping in mind that sport and the value of Olympism can play a key role in turning challenges into opportunities.²⁹

As the previous, among the recommendations two are especially devoted to sustainability: Rec. 2 states the need to “foster sustainable Olympic games” and Rec. 10 the need to “strengthen the role of sport as an important enabler for the UN Sustainable Development Goals”. However, it is possible to find references to it through other recommendations, like the Rec. 7 (Coordinate the harmonisation of the sports calendar),³⁰ Rec. 13 (Continue to lead by example in corporate citizenship)³¹ and Rec. 15 (Innovate revenue generation models).³²

4. Some considerations

A first general consideration arises as soon as one observes that the strong sustainability conception distinguishes between natural capital and man-made or human capital,³³ and considers them non-fungible because of their essential complementarity.³⁴ So, it would seem very difficult to associate sport and sus-

27. See the Closing Report: <https://stillmed.olympics.com/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/IOC/What-We-Do/Olympic-agenda/Olympic-Agenda-2020-Closing-report.pdf>.

28. International Olympic Committee, Agenda 2020+5, adopted on March 12th, 2021 during the 137th IOC Session, held in virtual format.

29. Available at the link: <https://stillmed.olympics.com/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/IOC/What-We-Do/Olympic-agenda/Olympic-Agenda-2020-5-15-recommendations.pdf>.

30. “Coordinate the harmonisation of multi-sports event planning across the Olympic Movement to ensure sustainability for all stakeholders”

31. About the opportunity to continue to lead by example, some areas of practice are identified like lead in sustainability; as well as inspire and assist the Olympic Movement in developing sustainable sports worldwide

32. “Developing mutually beneficial purpose-led partnerships recognising the role of sport as an important enabler for the Sustainable Development Goals.”

33. “Natural capital is then the totality of nature – resources, plants, species and ecosystems – that is capable of providing human beings with material and non-material utility. [...] Man-made capital is what has traditionally been subsumed under ‘capital’, that is factories, machineries, roads and so on. Human capital is knowledge and human skills” (Neumayer, 2013, pp. 7-8).

34. “Strong sustainability would require maintaining both humanly created and natural capital intact separately, on the assumption that they are complements rather than substitutes in most

tainability if one remains within that perspective, just only considering the great consumption of energy resources required to hold any sporting event (both in terms of facilities, hospitality and the movement of athletes and spectators).

In a weak conception of sustainability, instead, the two types of capital (natural and man-made or human) are considered fungible: it is important to ensure the constancy of their summation, i.e. to guarantee a non-decreasing overall stock of resources.³⁵ In this perspective, therefore, even the exploitation to exhaustion of a natural resource seems acceptable, as long as an equivalent production of constructed capital in terms of economic value is ensured, so as to maintain overall welfare at a constant level. More, in this conception it is possible to extend sustainability to other fields, beyond the original related to ecosystem and/or purely economic approaches. Hence a declination of sustainability pursuing goals as outlined in Agenda 2030, that identify 17 goals, having an economic and/or environmental nature, as well other goals not strictly related to the previous ones:³⁶ among these latter, worthy of note are the SDGs related to the pursuing of good health and well-being (SDG3), quality education (SDG4), gender equality (SDG5), peace justice and strong institutions (SDG16). Within this enlarged scenario the drafting of the aforementioned UNSCAF is fully justified, because of its attention to a range of

production functions” (H. E. Daly, J. B. Cobb J.B and C.W. Cobb (1994), *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, Boston: Beacon Press, p. 72).

35. Without going into detail, it seems important to recall how the weak understanding of sustainability finds its roots in neoclassical economic theories. Among its exponents, particular mention should be made of Solow (*Sustainability: An economist's perspective*, 1992; *An almost practical step towards sustainability*, 1993) and Hartwick (*Intergenerational Equity and the investing of Rents from Exhaustible Resources*, 1977), who developed the homonymous rule, by means of which it would be possible to calculate the amount of ‘constructed’ capital required to exactly compensate for the decrease in reserves of non-renewable resources. In this regard, Solow stated: “a correct principle, a correct general guide is that when we use up something – and by we I mean our society, our country, our civilization, however broadly you want to think – when we use up something that is irreplaceable, whether it is minerals or a fish species, or an environmental amenity, then we should be thinking about providing a substitute of equal value.” (*Sustainability: An economist's perspective* (1991), in S. Nath, J. L. Roberts and Y.N. Madhoo (eds). (2010). *Saving Small Island Developing States. Environmental and Natural Resource Challenges*, London: Commonwealth Secretariat, p. 90).

36. Without claim to be exhaustive, here it suffices to remember how the Agenda 2030 (A/RES/70/1) was adopted by UN General Assembly on September 25th, 2015, and “is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom”, recognising “that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development” (Preamble). According to this perspective, the Agenda identified 17 goals, whose pursuing will lead to the achieving of sustainable development in its three dimensions (economic, social and environmental).

issues, such as respect for human rights and cultures, as well as taking care that sports events leave a legacy in terms of a culture of sustainability.³⁷

A further consideration arises from the UNSCAF itself, as soon as we see the signatory parties: at least 270 parties, even although there are some notable absences (such as some International Sports Federations, and various National Olympic Committees) and, above all, an evident under-representation of the Global South: thus, it would seem that the pursuit of sustainability is still an elitist goal of that ‘rich’ part of the world, effectively excluding the rest one.

Finally, it seems interesting to note how the promotion of sustainability can only arise from a perspective according to the principle of subsidiarity,^{38,39} a perspective that opens unprecedented space for cooperation, worthy of being considered and analysed, also to enucleate some distinctive traits that can be taken up and applied to other spheres, even those not strictly related to sustainability and sport. In a word, what has been experimented in the field of promoting sustainability in sport could be an example of cooperation between states and or-

37. The core mission of the Olympic Movement is aligned with various SDGs, especially in the field of health and well-being (SDG3), quality education (SDG4), gender equality (SDG5), peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16).

38. It seems important to recall how we can find the concept of subsidiarity implicitly in the thought of the philosopher Aristotle, later focused by Thomas Aquinas in his consideration of the relation between state and individuals. A further contribution to the debate was that one of Johannes Althusius. However it had a first full definition within the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, firstly in the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) of Pope Leo XIII (pt. 28) and then in Pope Pius XI's Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), which emphasises the need for the state to exercise its powers correctly, without encroaching on the competences of intermediate bodies (pt. 79-81). In a word, the principle of subsidiarity exalts the value of the so-called intermediate bodies, considered to be the best interpreter of citizens' needs and requirements. Generally speaking, subsidiarity can be defined as that regulatory principle according to which, if a lower body is capable of performing a task well, the higher body does not have to intervene, but may possibly support its action. This principle has found application in the European Union (art. 5 TFEU), which recognises a well-defined division of competences between the EU and the states, including sport as an area in which the European Union intervenes in a subsidiary capacity, leaving the regulatory competence to the states, albeit within a framework of values and principles, taken from the aforementioned *White Paper on Sport*. Without claim to be exhaustive, among several see *amplius* M. Evans and A. Zimmerman (eds.), (2014), *Global Perspective on Subsidiarity*, Springer Netherlands; M. Schlag and B. Koller (eds.), (2024). *Rethinking Subsidiarity*, Springer.

39. In this regard, it is emblematic the *Kazan Action Plan*, adopted by the 6th International Conference of Ministers and Senior Officials Responsible for Physical Education and Sport (MINEPS VI), held in Kazan (13-15 July 2017), where it is recognised that “sport value education and skills development in and through sport are crucial means to prevent threats to sport integrity and to ensure the sustained credibility of sport as a role model for society at large” (Preamble, pt. 20) and it is stated that “the full potential of physical education, physical activity and sport to contribute significantly to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals can only be realized if a broad range of public authorities, sports and educational organizations and other stakeholders are mobilized” (Preamble, pt. 12).

organisations to more effectively promote the achievement of other shared goals as well: it is the opening of an unprecedented path, pointing a way that transforms challenges (the dangers of climate change, of a development that risks depleting resources and multiplying differences and poverty) into opportunities (for change, which can become widespread thanks to the exemplary role played by sport in the world). Are we ready for this challenge?

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