



INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

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December 13, 2022

Sustainability Case Study: The International Olympic Committee

Definition of Sustainability in the International Olympic Committee

In 2018, the UN declared “sports as an enabler of sustainable development” and highlighted the importance of the Olympic Games contributing to the UN SDGs. As already mentioned, sustainability is one of the three pillars of the IOC’s Olympic Agenda 2020, aka its roadmap for the future, and has a significant role in the IOC Executive Board’s new strategic roadmap, the Olympic Agenda 2020+5. Overall, the IOC’s primary approach is to “ensure the Olympic Games are at the forefront in the field of sustainability” (IOC Sustainability Report 2021)□

According to the IOC, the definition of sustainability follows a “standard” definition, meaning the organization focuses on using renewable energy, reducing carbon emissions and single-use plastic, and protecting biodiversity. However, the IOC must cover three spheres of responsibility as an organization, as the owner of the Olympic Games, and as the leader of the Olympic Movement. In 2017, the non-profit published its Sustainability Strategy report, which included common sustainable areas with a sports focus. This strategy is formulated around its three spheres of responsibility as well as five interconnected focus areas: infrastructure and natural sites, sourcing and resource management, mobility, workforce, and climate, which acts as a cross-cutting area.

In addition to a strong environmental focus, the IOC’s Strategy includes non-environmental factors, such as social and DEI reporting. First, regarding the social factor, the IOC built a new headquarters building, the Olympic House, in 2019. The new building was applauded for its sustainable construction standards but also for innovatively rethinking working practices and promoting employees’ health and wellness. For example, the new office offered ergonomic workstations, improved indoor air quality, more natural light, and access to outdoor spaces. Then, the pandemic substantially impacted many people’s mental health. To ensure the well-being of its staff, the IOC developed a wellness program, Health@Work, which included many incentives to promote healthy and active lifestyles and conducted multiple surveys to check its employees’ needs. It also offered health and resilience webinars, and according to the 2021 Sustainability Report, 84 percent of managers attended a health training. On another side, the IOC also heavily focused on reducing its travel impact by providing diverse incentives for sustainable, active mobility like electric vehicle charging stations, preferential access to car parks for carpoolers and low-emission cars, and secured bike parking spaces. All these initiatives were also provided to the Madrid office.

In terms of DEI initiatives, the IOC is continually increasing the gender and geographical diversity of its hiring pool. From 2017 to 2020, the IOC improved its gender staff diversity at various organizational levels. As a result, the overall proportion of women increased from 55 to 62 percent. However, when looking more specifically at senior positions, the percentage of women on the IOC Board of Directors or Executive Board barely reaches 30 percent, showing room for improvement. Also, the organization made significant progress in geographical diversity but does not share any information on its hiring progress among minority groups, which should also be given a high priority. Then the IOC also has initiatives to support climate resilience and gender inequalities in developing countries. For example, the organization developed the Olympic Forest initiative, part of an existing UN-backed one, to help the desertification of an African region. The project primarily focuses on working with women to “build local capacity to regenerate and sustainably manage forests and land” (Elton, 2022)□

Reporting and transparency are crucial to the IOC. The organization has a detailed sustainability website disclosing its Sustainability Strategy, Sustainability Reports, Environmental Impact Evaluation, Carbon Footprint Methodology, Supplier Code, an Olympic Games guide on sustainable sourcing, and more. All these documents are often updated and are at most five years old. All these strategies and documents are easily accessible to show the IOC's commitment to putting the OGs at the forefront of the sustainability field but also to show its transition to a collaborative model. The IOC Sustainability Team has been given increasing responsibility over the last few years, and the IOC empowered that team to develop the critical projects mentioned in the previous paragraphs. To achieve all these initiatives, the Sustainability Team heavily collaborates within the organization and with external partners. For example, the IOC Sustainability Team significantly interacts with specialist advisors and OG candidature teams to select the most appropriate host for future Games. By openly sharing its metrics and initiatives, the IOC also hopes to promote effective partnerships between its stakeholders, so those join efforts to come up with the most sustainable practices.

Finally, safety-wise, the IOC, as the owner of the OGs, is responsible for ensuring fair labor conditions when building new infrastructure for upcoming OGs as well as protecting the athletes' well-being. The organization could do better regarding this non-environmental factor, but it also confronts political constraints. First, in 2021, a report on the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics raised concerns about “ongoing patterns of dangerous and illegal overwork on the construction site for the new national stadium and Olympic village.” Even though the IOC is not directly supervising these activities, as the central leader, it is its responsibility that the organizations under its umbrella ensure proper and safe conditions for all workers. Thus, when concerns were raised, the IOC documented these, and an IOC spokesperson said on the news, “We take these issues very seriously and are committed to working with the relevant stakeholders to address them and find the appropriate solutions” and that it will further investigate this situation with the International Labor Organization as well as the Japanese Authority and Games Organizations (Bisson, 2021). This situation shows how as a parent company, it is essential to properly communicate and manage all relevant stakeholders as well as clear accountability. On the athlete-safety side, the IOC struggled to place its athletes' safety and well-being first during the 2022 Beijing OGs. The pandemic was still very much present, especially in Asia, and the IOC failed to procure the necessary conditions to manage the constant stress of exposure to COVID-19. For example, it did not provide any quarantine facilities information or any details on mental health and well-being support and forced athletes to sign a COVID-19 liability waiver in order to compete. Then, these Olympics being held in China added additional stress as this country is well known for its human rights violations. By picking Beijing as the hosting city, the IOC made athletes feel like pawns in a geopolitical fight with no freedom of expression (Global Athlete, 2022). The Beijing Olympics show how management must consider how all macro-environmental factors can impact its various stakeholders, including the public, its partners, but most importantly, the athletes and the local communities.

Strategy and Metrics

As previously mentioned, the IOC first launched its Sustainability Strategy in 2017 with 18 initial objectives to be achieved by 2020. It then published its first Sustainability Report in 2018, which was a “full, detailed report written according to Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards and third-party verified by ERM CVS” (IOC Sustainability Report 2021). To share the

progress on the 2020 objectives, it issued a 2019 Report (the IOC Sustainability Progress Update) which comprised a brief annual progress update. In 2021, the IOC published a third Sustainability Report which presented its achievements and challenges in meeting the 18 objectives set four years prior. Out of the 18 objectives, 15 had been fully achieved, while three were partially completed. Two out of the three required further work and thus were closed and integrated into the 17 new objectives for the period of 2021-2024, while one (i.e., objective #9 – include sustainability in corporate events) remained open since the pandemic was the sole reason delaying the implementation of many of the planned sustainability measures.

The 17 new objectives set in the IOC Sustainability Report 2021 include the IOC’s flagship commitment for the organization to be climate positive by 2024, to reduce its carbon footprint by 59 percent by 2030, and for the wider Olympic Movement, and thus the Olympic Games, to be climate positive from 2030 onwards. These are high-achieving goals, but the organization has already completed significant achievements and believes to be on the right track. For example, the IOC collaborated with the UN Climate Change organization (UNFCCC) to launch the Sport for Climate Action Framework and pledged to “make significant steps to reduce climate impact and to educate, promote, and advocate for climate action across their spheres of influence.” Additionally, in 2018, the IOC joined the UN Environment Program (UNEP) Clean Seas Campaign and pledged to eliminate all single-use plastic from all its organizations and events worldwide.

The Olympic Games being such a prominent event worldwide, it is crucial for the IOC to meet these goals and reduce its environmental impact. These sports events heavily depend on a healthy natural environment, and thus its organizers should take serious actions to protect it. Since the organization of an OGs edition requires the involvement of many stakeholders, the IOC believes it is crucial today to be fully transparent and have a knowledge-sharing platform. Thus, on its Sustainability Website (olympics.com/ioc/sustainability), the IOC published multiple technical and guidance documents (e.g., detailed methodologies on OGs’ carbon footprint and sustainable sourcing for the OCOGs). Additionally, the website provides Sustainability Essential series, which provides intro-level guidance across various topics for the NOCs, IFs, and the wider sport sector. Furthermore, the IOC partnered with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) on a range of guides on sports and biodiversity, as well as with the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) and the Ocean Face “on an environmental impact study and sustainable sourcing guidelines for branding and signage materials for events” (IOC Sustainability Report 2021).

IOC’s Relations with the Wider Olympic Movement and its Suppliers

The IOC heavily values its partners within the Olympic Movement and external agencies and believes that the progress it has made over the last five years would not have been possible without the collaboration and close support from these stakeholders. Furthermore, the IOC believes such partnerships gave the IOC Executive Board enough confidence to commit to its climate-positive and emission-reduction goals.

The IOC does not require these partners to meet specific sustainability requirements but closely monitors their activities. For example, in its IOC Sustainability Report 2021, it noticed an increase in NOCs and IFs developing their own sustainability programs and athletes taking more

advocacy stances to fight for sustainability-related issues. Its relationship with the Organizing Committees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs) also significantly improved over time as it evolved from audit feel-like processes with a lack of interactive engagement to a continual collaboration process between the IOC Sustainability team and the counterparts in the respective OCOGs. Since then, both organizations have built more efficient plans, preventing the OCOGs from falling into pitfalls or more critical problems. Also, the IOC has been promoting collaboration between OCOGs, which has been quite tricky in the past because of cultural, linguistic, and time-zone disparities. However, the pandemic made it easier for global teams to collaborate virtually. For example, the OGs edition of 2032 (Brisbane, Australia) has been able to efficiently collaborate with the OGs edition of 2024 (Paris, France) to share best practices to achieve climate-positive Games. Even though there are no strict requirements or deadlines for these partners, some of the IOC 2021-2024 objectives are to monitor the OCOGs' implementation of sustainability-related bid commitments closely as well as with the Host City Contracts so that an OG edition can act as a catalyst for sustainable development within the host city and region.

An external partner vital to the IOC's success is its Worldwide Olympic Partners, aka



The IOC's TOP Partners as of 2022

sponsorship partners, which are part of the TOP Program Marketing Rights, and thus generate 30 percent of the IOC's total revenue. This initially was supposed to be a group of twelve sponsors. However, today, 14 top sponsors (see the list on the left) invest around \$100 million each to acquire the highest level of Olympic sponsorship. The IOC President once said these sponsors' contributions "are critical for the staging of the Olympic Games and their global reach and understanding help us communicate the Olympic values to people around the world" (Inside the Games, 2022). In 2019, both parties built a purpose-led collaboration to leverage these sponsors' capability to help the IOC reinforce the role of sport in society. This collaboration aims to speed up actions across the Sustainability Strategy's five focus areas mentioned previously and launch co-created initiatives. As of today, according to the IOC Sustainability Report 2021, some of the outcomes of this collaboration are:

1. Coca-Cola addressing the plastic pollution, wastewater, and gender inequality issues across the OGs.
2. Airbnb shaping the future of sustainable travel and tourism within the Olympic Movement.
3. Intel supporting the decarbonization of the IOC's and the OGs' digital activities.
4. P&G acts as a role model to decrease consumption and home plastic waste habits and to drive awareness towards mitigating climate change across the Movement via the advancement of natural climate solutions.

Finally, a sustainable supply chain is crucial for the IOC as its Supplier Code and Sustainability Strategy ensures suppliers follow "a responsible sourcing approach by which the sourcing of products and services is carried out with environmental, social, and ethical issues in mind" (2022).

However, the organization of an OG edition still requires a massive amount of material flow from construction, land use, transport, the industrial manufacture of equipment and ancillary goods, waste disposal, etc. On the positive side, this means that OGs have employed many people. However, even with ethical sourcing, it is not apparent to associate the organization of such a mega-event with sustainability.

The Future of Sustainability at the International Olympic Committee

Environmental and social issues are very well present in our everyday lives. It has cut through the sports sector unprecedentedly, with increasing numbers of organizations reviewing their impacts and taking new measures to address sustainability challenges. The Olympic Games' significant expenses and unique political leverage present a chance to pioneer sustainability transformations beyond the trillion-dollar event industry. With outstanding visibility, the Olympic Games provide a unique platform to reach a global audience. They could be a model for cities, countries, and other events worldwide. Even though the last few pages promoted IOC's impressive commitments to sustainability, there are still doubts about whether the Olympics will ever be sustainable. Its business model predominantly plays to elite interests, global consumption, and transnational investment flows, and the organization still has room for improvements on various environmental and non-environmental factors.

First, from a climate and social point of view, there are many adverse effects from the constant construction of massive new venues and other infrastructure, which usually become redundant after any major sports event. Environment-wise, the increased demand for energy, travel, water, and food and the new infrastructure development have provoked severe environmental disasters such as significant air pollution in Beijing and illegal waste dumping in Sochi, Russia (Mahoney, 2021). Social-wise, many of the OGs displaced many residents to develop Olympics-related infrastructure. To be more specific, the Tokyo Games displaced more than 500 people (Muller et al. 2021). Displacements started long ago with the Los Angeles 1984 Olympics, and will still occur in the future as many residents are currently being moved out of their current neighborhoods for the Los Angeles 2028 Games. This is a significant environmental justice issue since the communities impacted are often communities of color with lower-income backgrounds. Many argue that the Olympics economically benefit cities, and it indeed brings short-term economic opportunities. However, when looking at long-term impacts, the Los Angeles 1984 Olympics are a perfect example of environmental damages that were exacerbated by the mega-event. This edition brought about 70 thousand job opportunities, but these were temporary, while the social and environmental impacts were not. The aftermath of these Games was worsened air quality, massive unemployment rates, riots, and police militarization for at least ten years (Mahoney, 2021). Los Angeles is just one example, but many other cities experienced similar situations with the Olympics or other mega-events, such as the Football World Cup in South Africa.

Consequently, new cities cannot keep hosting and building whole new infrastructure, which requires massive material flow, as mentioned previously, and substantial negative social impacts every four years and call itself sustainable. Thus, the IOC should investigate its host city selection further and consider a recurring rotation between a set list of cities. This list could include cities from each continent to maintain the global inclusivity of the Games. With such a system, all necessary infrastructure would already be built. Thus, Olympic Games could be

organized with much lower social and ecological disruptions and minimal costs and prioritize long-term overall effects over short-term economic benefits, which any management should prefer for the firm's success.

Next, one of the IOC's partially achieved objectives from 2017-2020 and thus part of the Agenda2020+5 roadmap is to "integrate sustainability in the sourcing of goods and services, including those from TOP Partners and official licensees." As of today, the IOC does not have stringent requirements from its partners, and more specifically, TOP Partners (i.e., sponsors). However, the IOC alone cannot reach its climate-positive commitment and expect partners to prioritize sustainable practices without incentives. The IOC knows that "to achieve greater integration of sustainability principles and practices within the day-to-day decision-making and working practices of organizations," it needs its TOP partners to provide more focus, time, and measurable commitments to get actual actions and achieve future planned goals. Also, it is a bit hypocritical for the IOC to promote the role of sport in sustainability while partnering with some of the biggest carbon emitters (e.g., Toyota, Ali Baba, Coca-Cola). Thus, if the IOC wants to keep these multinationals as top partners and maintain its credibility within the organization but also towards the public, it should require more tangible requirements as well as implement sustainability evaluations that show these companies' commitments to reducing their environmental and social impacts, not only through the Games but also in their day-to-day operations.

The IOC must make significant progress regarding DEI goals and further increase staff diversity. This is part of its 2021-2024 objectives, and the organization states in its Sustainability Report 2021 that it plans to "strengthen goals related to gender equality and inclusion, and to human rights, for which new dedicated teams have been established." This team has plans to develop a procurement risk analysis framework and provide additional training and education of staff in order to create a more homogeneous network and ensure that sustainability principles and practices are being well implemented across all internal operations.

Another sustainability area of improvement for the IOC would be to push the use of athletes further to raise sustainability awareness in the sports industry and among the younger generation. The IOC has excellent potential to be a "major global environmental awareness and educator" (Tiainen, 2022). As the chairman and vice-chairman of Protect Our Winters Finland emphasized in a guest commentary (2022), "This is the new social justification for the Olympic movement in an era of climate crisis. The Games reach billions of spectators and have a fantastic unifying power. It is absolutely worth harnessing this power to mobilize people to fight the climate crisis." Thus, the IOC should strongly incentivize its athletes to either join the IOC's ambassador program or independently use their voices to raise awareness among all generations. Other mega-events organizations, such as the International Federation of Association Football or the Super Bowl, could potentially get inspired and follow suit with their own athletes.

Finally, a few years ago, it was quite hard to find data on sustainability within the sports industry. However, today, it is no longer a problem thanks to the IOC's transparency and open-source documents and guidelines. In the near future, the IOC should ensure that all these resources are available in other languages, especially in the host countries' languages, such as Spanish, French, and Mandarin, as these hosting committees would be responsible for applying

these guidelines when organizing such mega-events. These metrics should constantly be updated as many sports organizations have started relying on these documents to organize their unique goals internally. Also, there is an opportunity for the IOC to improve sustainability governance. Currently, the Olympic host city is responsible for setting its sustainability goals, but it is unaccountable when it does not achieve them. Thus, the IOC should consider developing and mandating an independent body or team to create, evaluate, and enforce certain sustainability standards (Muller et al. 2021).

To conclude, the IOC has a robust sustainability foundation and is clearly committed to protecting the environment while promoting the role of sports as an enabler of the UN SDGs. Moreover, it has an achievable and measurable plan to grow its sustainability efforts into all areas of the wider Olympic Movement. Right now, the organization is in the middle of its new future roadmap, Olympic Agenda 2020+5, which has concrete goals. However, it also recognizes the importance of taking action to deepen the integration of sustainability principles and practice in how they operate across all spheres of its activities and become a leader for other organizations to follow suit and protect sports by taking care of biodiversity, society, and the planet as a whole.

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