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Sport mega-event governance and human rights: the ‘Ruggie Principles’, responsibility and directions

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the discourses surrounding human rights and sport mega-events (SMEs) have grown immensely. These are often directed towards sport's governing bodies responsible for the administration of these mega-events. Tapping into the growing scholarship, this article aims to advance the fields of sport, leisure and human rights. By reconsidering the commercial nature of sports' governing bodies (focusing on IOC and FIFA), we argue that what is commonly referred to as the ‘Ruggie Principles’ both can and should be applied to FIFA and IOC's practices and event-related operations. In this context, and by reflecting on the practical applications of human rights impact assessments in the context of sport governing bodies who are the awarding bodies of hosting rights, the paper argues that due diligence and human rights impact assessments should become an organisational mainstay of FIFA and IOC's event-related operations. Whilst our normative argument can have implications for policy and practice, we also provide further directions for research in what remains a pivotal era of SMEs globally.

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Introduction

The governance of mega-events cuts across diverse leisure-related settings speaking to tourism, sport, leisure facilities, consumption and sport participation. By building on the growing literature on sport mega-events (SMEs) and human rights (Caudwell & McGee, 2018; Horne, 2018; McGillivray et al., 2019, 2022) and the United Nations ‘Protect, Respect and Remedy’ framework¹ (the ‘Ruggie Principles’), this article examines the practical operationalisation of human rights impact assessments (HRIAs) in the context of *Federation Internationale de Football Association's* (FIFA) and the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) SMEs. HRIAs can, following De Beco (2009, p. 140), be ‘understood as the assessment of both the potential human rights impact of future policies and the actual human rights impact of implemented policies in a way ensuring the participation of various actors’.

The intersection of *sport* and *human rights* generates several profound and challenging claims. Indeed, emanating from contrasting conceptual and legal paradigms, sport and human rights would appear to have little in common. Supporting such charges are the well-established claims of complicity by sport governing bodies in host nations' human rights abuses. These include allegations of human displacement in the preparation of sporting events (Morel, 2012), the use of forced labour in the construction of the stadia and SME's wider infrastructure, a perceived culture of impunity which sporting bodies appear to adopt when awarding

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SMEs to particular countries (Amnesty International, 2021a; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Millward, 2017; Ruggie, 2015) and the apparent inability of national and international sporting bodies to effectively combat racism (Hylton, 2010) and homophobia within sport (Davidson & McDonald, 2018).

Subsequently, scholars have called for further research on the nexus between SMEs and human rights (Horne, 2018; McGillivray et al., 2019) and specifically this paper builds on McGillivray et al.'s (2019) recent academic and policy-oriented research agenda. We seek to shed light on and fill the research gap related to the *practical* application of HRIAs in the context of sport governing bodies who are the awarding authority for mega-event hosting rights. This article's approach is conceptual and draws upon insights from the sociology of sport, leisure studies, event studies, human rights, socio-legal research and official reports. The two key research questions the article poses are as follows: (1) how can human rights principles become operationalised within the IOC and FIFA in their event-related operations and (2) what are the implications of human rights mainstreaming becoming an operational priority for the aforementioned organisations?

In the context of the 'Ruggie Principles', the paper argues that due diligence and HRIAs should become an organisational mainstay of FIFA and IOC's event-related operations. Borrowing guidance from international human rights bodies, we also provide tentative directions for *how* this could be operationalised, to better ensure that sport's governing bodies apply increased pressure on host countries to abide by their legal responsibilities *vis-à-vis* human rights. We contend that this should be underpinned by a systematic process of human rights mainstreaming, which should occur throughout the entirety of both organisations; throughout an event's life-cycle (McGillivray et al., 2019).

Literature review: governance, commercialism and human rights

Upon proceeding, we remain concerned with the non-governmental organisations of FIFA and IOC. Ultimately, these organisations are responsible for overseeing the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic and Paralympic Games, respectively. Thus, our focus on these organisations may be justified since these are two of the largest, most influential sporting organisations that administer two of the biggest SMEs in the world.

The IOC and FIFA are located in Switzerland and have status as non-governmental non-profit organisations. Thus, although bereft of legal status under international law, they do, however, possess and exert a growing influence on international developments. Nowrot (1999, p. 586) argues that such organisations 'have gained more influence in international relations and are more active in global policymaking than ever before'. FIFA can even be considered one of the largest non-profit organisations in the world (Eick, 2010). Despite this, FIFA and IOC remain characterised by a commercial nature. This is visible not only from their (hyper-)commercial activities but also from their economic profits, although this cannot be shared with its shareholders or members. Other scholars and commentators have pointed towards this earlier, and FIFA and IOC have been subject to extensive academic (Chappelet, 2022; Lenskyj, 2004) and journalistic criticism (Jennings, 2011). Whilst diverse, the critiques of these organisations have related to, *inter alia*, their lack of 'accountability' and 'transparency', allegations of corruption and bribery (Philippou, 2021) and most relevant in this article's context, widespread concerns with regard to human rights abuses (Horne, 2018). In this context, Horne (2018) called for increased awareness and critical approaches towards the hosting of SMEs, which is a call we reflect in this paper.

The commercial nature of the IOC and FIFA must be seen in light of the neoliberal policies that have moulded global sport over the last number of decades. This has turned elite sport into a lucrative industry for investors, sponsors and broadcasters. The Olympics and the World Cup – representing global brands – have, for the two organisations, become key products that generate

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