Transforming an international organization: norm confusion and the International Olympic Committee

Dan Bousfield a & Jean Michel Montsion b

a University of Western Ontario, London, ON, Canada
b Glendon College, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada

Version of record first published: 30 Jul 2012

To cite this article: Dan Bousfield & Jean Michel Montsion (2012): Transforming an international organization: norm confusion and the International Olympic Committee, Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics, DOI:10.1080/17430437.2012.708284

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2012.708284

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Transforming an international organization: norm confusion and the International Olympic Committee

Dan Bousfield\textsuperscript{a*} and Jean Michel Montsion\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}University of Western Ontario, London, ON, Canada; \textsuperscript{b}Glendon College, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada

The progress of the Olympic Movement as a premier international organization has increasingly garnered the prestige and influence accorded to other liberal institutions such as the United Nations (UN). The International Olympic Committee (IOC)'s permanent observer status within the UN raises questions about its seemingly unpredictable decisions and the IOC's incorporation of widely accepted norms within the UN system such as gender equality and sustainable development. In this paper, we present a model highlighting the normative pressures of the IOC's premier status and the subsequent confusion that stems from inherent tensions between three normative arenas that have emerged within the organization over the last century: transnationalism, domesticity and corporatism.

Introduction

In a world where international organizations (IOs) are working towards greater accountability, the Olympic Movement stands alone as a nineteenth-century vestige. Obtaining observer status at the United Nations (UN) in 2009, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is gradually moving towards practices and principles widely accepted by UN programmes and agencies.\textsuperscript{1} However, the Olympic Movement, and especially the IOC, has developed a reputation for secretive and unpredictable decisions, lacking transparency and normative integrity. By focusing on the IOCs decisions since the Olympic Movement has been granted a UN observer status, we intend to address the unpredictability of the IOC decisions to discuss the fundamental differences between the Olympic Movement and any other UN or post-war IO. In contrast to the common perception about the IOC’s lack of transparency and accountability, we aim to understand the unpredictability of these decisions based on the confusion stemming from the tension between three dominant normative arenas of the Olympic Movement: transnationalism, corporatism and domesticity. This will help to shed new light on actions and decisions from the IOC that would otherwise be characterized as seemingly unpredictable decisions.\textsuperscript{2}

Unlike post-Second World War IOs, the Olympic Movement possesses unique organizational characteristics whereby the IOC does not have the power of other central bodies of UN programmes and agencies. The IOC is instead the head of the broad social movement characterized by Olympism which is known as the ‘Olympic Movement’. As stated by the Olympic Charter:

Under the supreme authority of the International Olympic Committee, the Olympic Movement encompasses organizations, athletes and other persons who agree to be guided by

*Corresponding author. Email: dbousfie@uwo.ca

ISSN 1743-0437 print/ISSN 1743-0445 online
© 2012 Taylor & Francis
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2012.708284
http://www.tandfonline.com
the Olympic Charter. The goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practiced in accordance with Olympism and its values.\(^3\)

The IOC oversees the activities of the other organizations associated with the Olympic Movement by ensuring that specific values and ethics are followed. The IOC’s mission is to ‘promote Olympism throughout the world and to lead the Olympic Movement’,\(^4\) which includes logistical and expertise support to the organization of sport competitions; the promotion of norms such as gender equality and sustainable development and maintaining the continuing and independence of the Olympic Movement and celebrations.

The IOC’s ‘supreme authority’ is often perceived as the main problem to ensure transparent, accountable and normatively consistent decisions, despite the importance given to various sport bodies in the decision-making process. However, in opposition to this popular perception, we address the unpredictability of IOCs decisions as stemming from a deeper problem of fundamental norm confusion within the broad social movement.

The status of observer at the UN General Assembly creates expectations and normative pressure on the IOC to more firmly uphold emerging principles such as gender equality and sustainable development. It represents an important move on the part of the IOC to keep its place as the norm entrepreneur for sport on the international stage. This willingness to ‘stay at the centre’ of sport standards is a characteristic attitude of the IOC choices since the nineteenth century and helps shed new light on the increasing normative pressures to reconcile three normative arenas over time (transnationalism, corporatism and domesticity).

This UN observer status can be seen as a move from the IOC to reinforce its role of norm entrepreneur for sport on the world stage and to move closer to the UN model of post-war IOs. With the 2005 International Year of Sport and Physical Education as well as the creation of the Office of Sport for Development and Peace, international pressures increased to make sport part of international cooperation efforts, notably in meeting the Millennium Development Goals.\(^5\) This move is interesting as it follows the increasing normative pressures on the Olympic Movement to uphold widely accepted norms within the UN system, such as gender equality and sustainable development. After discussing the unique normative history of the Olympic Movement, we present the ways in which the IOC is pressured to justify decisions based on contradictory normative clusters, through the use of specific controversies relating to gender equality and sustainable development since the IOC was granted UN observer status in 2009.

**Normative evolutions**

In order to make sense of the IOC’s current decision making, it is beneficial to review the history of the Olympic Movement. The IOC’s normative developments as leader of the Olympic Movement are evaluated in relation to its evolution since its inception at the end of the nineteenth century. Originating in basic universalistic norms such as peace and human progress, the Olympic Movement was one of the early spaces of fostering the benefits of transnationalism as a social movement in an era where state and economic nationalism were rampant. As a consequence, the IOC differs markedly from liberal institutionalism of IOs created after the Second World War, even if it remains the norm entrepreneur for sport at the international level. The ability to both collect new norms and retain preeminent legacy and historical status has not only resulted in some convergence with the UN system as the 2009 rapprochement indicates, but also is the foundation of the current unpredictability of IOC decisions.
Internationalist social movements

The nineteenth-century proliferation of internationalist social movements, also known as new peace movements, such as the Scout Movement, the Red Cross and the Olympic Movement was based on an understanding of the role and nature of IOs that were very different from today. John Boli and George M. Thomas have explored the social context in which organizations such as the IOC have been created. As a *fin de siècle* internationalist movement, the Olympic Movement is associated with a specific culture of acting and functioning as a not-for-profit IO. In their view, the IOC is based on universalistic, individualistic, voluntaristic and rationalist assumptions. Although every human being is deemed to have the same needs, desires and goals allowing for global competition in sport to fulfil some important sense of accomplishment, this universalistic stand is conceived in individualistic terms, as individuals and associations of individuals are the only members and are the key components of the Olympic Movement. The Olympic Movement is also deemed to be inherently voluntaristic which is exemplified in its decentralized character: ‘This model (voluntaristic authority) holds that responsible individuals acting collectively through rational procedures can determine cultural rules that are just, equitable, and efficient, and that no external authority is required for their legitimation.’ This decentralization is also based on the belief in rationality and human progress, through which technical expertise and the professionalization of procedures and programmes are considered to be the ‘route to equality, comfort, and the good life’.

Moreover, John Hoberman has contrasted the IOC’s normative framework to the others in place at its inception. He notably speaks of idealism, anti-Socialism, cosmopolitan ethnocentrism and elitism. In his view, the nineteenth-century internationalist movements such as the Olympic Movement are characterized by bourgeois nationalist ideals of peace and anxieties towards the Socialist alternative model of political organization. The diffusion of social progress in the form of sport, arts and science was conceived as a way of avoiding war and promoting universal, apolitical and pacifist values from a Eurocentric and bourgeois nationalist point of view. The transnational norms of the Olympic Movement were able to adapt more easily to changing dynamics of the international system unlike their Socialist counterparts, by using arts and science as a way to bond humanity together in Modern ideas of progress. These idealistic movements were not only ideologically opposed to the Marxist-inspired internationalist movements, but also led by individuals and social groupings highly linked together at a personal level. This elitism is couched in what Boli and Thomas refer to as the cosmopolitan discourse of ‘world citizenship’, where the class-based privileges of transnational mobility support the values of similar intent. These relationships, such as the one between Pierre de Coubertin and pre-war Nobel Prize winners at the head of other pacifist internationalist movements at the time, gave the Olympic Movement fortuitous access to influence, power and resources.

Normative convergence and divergence

The importance of transnationalism as a norm in the Olympic Movement has played a central role in the IOC’s ability to promote norm diffusion and liberal internationalist values. The normative foundations that underpin both the Olympic Movement and UN programmes and agencies rest on a liberal institutional understanding of world affairs. In a context where institutions can help states maintain order, promote peace and human progress, both the international social movements and the UN system compliment the fundamental workings of international institutions in bringing order to the chaos of interstate relations. As such, it is easy to find similar normative foundations in institutions
and sport at the international level. The IOC has often championed the possibilities of development and improvement in human rights that can accompany the hosting Olympic Games in less liberal societies such as in Mexico, South Korea and in the People’s Republic of China. The success towards these ends can be seen in the replication of such efforts in the UN involvement in Sport for Development and Peace movement.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, this convergence explains well the wide use of institutionalism as conceptual and methodological approach to analyse internationalist social movements and UN programmes and agencies alike.\textsuperscript{15}

However, international social movements are normatively different from IOs developed after the Second World War, which makes it difficult to achieve a normative rapprochement between the IOC and the UN system. Despite a similar liberal institutionalist foundation in both organizations, the Olympic Movement comes from a social context in which IOs were not necessarily thought of in the functionalist framework developed and practiced in the twentieth century. In other words, ‘One might also say that all of these movements offered to their members a philosophy of creative international action amounting to a way of life for those possessing the necessary dedication and financial independence to pursue it.’\textsuperscript{16} The international movements that emerged in the late nineteenth century can be seen as more fluid and all-encompassing in their engagement with norms. The IOC in particular has positioned itself to interpret the emergence of new norms as a whole, while retaining a relatively bourgeois and transnational understanding of IOs.

The three-legged stool model of the Olympic Movement – IOC, International Federations (IFs) and National Organizing Committees (NOCs) – is characteristically federalist as are the other pre-Second World War IOs which still remain, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and its tripartite model.\textsuperscript{17} With deeper connections and involvement of national bodies in the decision-making process of the organization, the IOC should not be compared to the central body of a functionalist IO, with centralized powers and clear normative priorities. Neither international nor state based, both the IFs and NOCs are independent bodies from national governments and, to some extent, from the IOC, as they are given spheres of competence in the Olympic Charter, resulting in the technical decisions of IFs and the national organization and mobilization of Olympism for the NOCs. For example, despite the IOC’s normative stand against ageism in the Olympic Movement, the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) was responsible for the final decision in December 2009 to allow older soccer players to participate in international sporting competitions, despite pressures for European NOCs in the matter.\textsuperscript{18}

The persistence of transnationalism as a foundational normative arena of the Olympic Movement stems from its primary importance in distinguishing the IOC’s role from that of the UN system or other post-war IOs. In the three normative arenas outlined in this paper, transnationalism allowed the IOC to reinforce the separation of its role from domestic actors (without creating the representative infrastructure of a one-state-one-vote international institution). This is also linked to further developments in the norms of corporatism, as the IOC’s current status as a not-for-profit international corporation has allowed it to transnationally arbitrate corporate sponsorship and funding from a space outside national law and regulation (as is discussed below). This specific form of transnational liberalism supported by the Olympic Movement has important ramifications for the adoption and diffusion of norms over time. As a bottom-up process, the Olympic Movement may serve a liberal institutional understanding of sport management at the international level, but the organizational structure of the organization does not give the same normative powers and clarity of post-war IOs.
**Norm entrepreneur for sport**

This normative path is not only a challenge for this internationalist social movement, it has also created unique difficulties for these IOs as they attempt to adapt to the twentieth-century social developments. The IOC and the Olympic Movement have maintained a consistent and unshakable pretention of leading sport and athletes at the international level through decades of social and political change. From the 1936 Nazi Games to the Cold War boycotts, Pierre de Coubertin’s main precepts found various political rationales and justifications for the Olympic Movement to remain in charge of sport. The IOC’s choice to remain the norm entrepreneur for sport at the international level – or to be the leader in setting the standards in terms of sport, peace and the promotion of the international spirit of Olympism – has resulted in increasing normative pressures on the Olympic Movement through the gradual incorporation of a number of contradictory norms. The IOC may be the normative authority of the Olympic Movement but many of the core norms are overlapping and sometimes contradictory.

The IOC’s desire to remain norm entrepreneur has not evolved from its *fin de siècle* mentality, as it attempts to defend its original norms while attempting to develop a framework responsive to new ones. In light of Finnemore and Sikkink’s work, we argue that there are increasing pressures on norm entrepreneurs to reconcile contradictory normative arenas, the dominant of which are transnationalism, domesticity and corporatism. Some of the transnational norms of the IOC are relatively stable over time and serve to guide the development of the Olympic Movement, such as promoting peace and human progress. However, through the IOC’s pragmatic efforts to remain a norm entrepreneur have also resulted in adoption of new norms no matter to what extent they may be relatively tangential to the transnational movement, such as local economic and infrastructure development (in developing positive legacies for host cities) or corporatist goals (such as the expansion and enforcement of intellectual property rights).

In an effort to remain a norm entrepreneur, the IOC exempts itself from the norms it seeks to cultivate producing norm confusion and seemingly unpredictable decisions. For example, the creation of the Olympics Ethics Commission in 1999 following the scandals of host bidding and doping allegations serves to reinforce the seemingly unpredictable process of decision making within the Olympic Movement. The oversight and regulatory mechanisms that would have been part of a domestic regulatory environment were absent from the transnational norms of the IOC. The ethics code built for the Olympic Movement created by the commission incorporated more of these norms including that no discrimination based on race, gender, religion, philosophical or political opinions will be practiced. By doing so, it established a rule-based order upon which universal and transnational norms would be integrated and enforced. On the other hand, in an effort to protect its ultimate authority, the Ethics commission also included a clause that no party would be able to claim an ideology that opposes the Charter and the Ethics code. The transnational arena of the Olympic Movement helped to create the scandals that prompted the creation of the Ethics code, a code which makes the transnational norms of the charter exempt from its regulation. These situations foster norm confusion as the defense of the IOC’s decision-making authority strains the creation of a rule-based order.

**Towards norm confusion**

Inherent tensions between the incorporation of norms over time and the pressures on the three-legged stool model of the Olympic Movement decision-making process can be explored in further detail by looking at the three normative arenas in which new norms are
incorporated to the Olympic Movement: (1) transnationalism, (2) domesticity and (3) corporatism (see Figure 1). It is through these normative arenas that one can better frame norm acceptance and norm confusion in order to shed new light on seemingly unpredictable decisions on the part of the IOC.

The indiscriminate incorporation of norms over time exacerbates the unique three-legged stool model of the Olympic Movement decision-making process. There is an inherent tension between the decision-making authority of the IOC and the multitude of interests and rights involved in the Olympic Movement. As demonstrated in Figure 1, the three broad normative arenas of the Olympic Movement draw upon different normative logics, as well as sources of power and authority. When the IOC must address a situation at the intersection of two of these normative arenas, various – and often contradictory – decisions can be equally defendable and justifiable from within the Olympic Charter. Moreover, the three-legged stool governance structure allows for other actors within the Movement to disagree and highlight a different – and equally justifiable – position within this framework.

As such, case-by-case reactions and seemingly unpredictable decisions come from situations where overlapping and contradictory claims made by competing norms within the Olympic Charter can be made, notably by actors other than the IOC. The incorporation of many norms into the Olympic Charter throughout the twentieth century, such as fighting any forms of racial, religious, political and gender discrimination, stems from reciprocal pressures between the norms of transnationalism and domesticity. As transnational pressures push for expansion of the prohibition of discrimination, these are met by support in the individual nations and participating governments with varying levels of success and failure. The strength of this approach is the flexibility it provides in dealing with different IFs and NOCs, but its weakness is that the IOC can just as easily use spheres of responsibility to abdicate decision making, such as requiring the host nation to deal with problems, or differing judgement to corporate actors.

![Figure 1. Modeling Norm Confusion.](image-url)
Transnationalism

The transnational arena is composed of the original liberal institutional goals of the Olympic Movement. Universalistic and embedded in the framework of human rights, Olympism represents the moral leadership of the IOC. Olympism incorporates very broad and overarching norms that are often utilized directly as part of the democratizing impulse of the Olympic Movement, providing the justification for the selection of sites (Nazi Germany, Seoul and Beijing) that would otherwise seem opposed to these very principles. This desire may be overly optimistic, but as Black and Bezanson have argued in the case of 1988 Games in South Korea, the addition of the Games to the democratization movements was beneficial because of the transnational pressures (media and other states) placed on the country.23 However, in the case of China in 2008, the issue of Tibet was one that persistently dogged the IOC’s decision, exasperated by China’s perceived recalcitrance on assurances to human rights during the bidding process.24

Transnational norms thus employ a broad array of actors and motives that can lead to norm acceptance and internalization or greater norm contestation and confusion.25 The transnationalism is the most explicit and oldest form of the Olympic Movement’s influence, shaping states and people’s perception of the international sporting arena. However, it has also created problems as the IOC increasingly involves itself in the complex regulatory and legal regimes of the NOCs and the IFs – particularly, in the cases of doping and corruption – as the corporate and domestic requirements lead to conflict and ambiguity in regulation. Thus, embedding of transnational norms is necessarily determined in relation to other actors and their normative contexts. In the broadest sense, Sreberney has characterized this as ‘contradictions in the globalizing moment’, whereby the civilizing universalism of the Olympic Movement also exposes the limits of its implementation.26 As a transnational social movement, the Olympic Movement struggles with the tension inherent in the transnational liberal norms of human rights and democratization, and the definitional and specific struggles of its implementation.

Domesticity

Domesticity as a normative arena is perhaps the most complicated element of the contemporary Olympic Movement. The Movement emerges from the local sports events, leagues and tournaments which establish the foundation for NOCs, IFs and the impetus for the Games themselves. A key aspect of domesticity is the way that it both encourages Olympism, yet is reproduced as a separate normative arena from transnational and corporate elements.

The primary and most prominent domestic support for the Games comes from the traditionally defined notions of self-interest, where the host state becomes the focus of international media attention, providing prestige and increased awareness of the state’s activity and providing increased international influence (at least for the period leading up to the games Andranovich, Burbank and Heying 2002). The organization and logistics of sponsoring an Olympic bid often require such a large undertaking that the process itself can establish the foundation for other organizing and local efforts to develop business and political ties (as in Toronto’s failed 2008 Olympic bid which resulted in the 2015 Pan American Games). As Andranovich, Burbank and Heying argue, in some cases this involves the creation of local business and government relationships where none previously existed (as in the case of Atlanta in 1996) drawing on the strengths in local leadership to push for national endorsement for the bid process.27 The emergence of these ‘regime politics’ strengthens local political power, requiring convergence of business, political and local legitimacy to develop infrastructure and
support for the Games. While the ongoing benefits of the Games often depend on the specifics of the site and the idiosyncrasies of local political leadership, the increased centralizing and organizing power of the games functions as a potent political process.

As it is increasingly the case with the contemporary expansion of the Olympic Games and the expectations that accompany them, local domestic resistance has also become a regularized process of the bidding and hosting of the Games. It is perhaps unsurprising that as a social movement, the Olympic Movement has increasingly become the focus of political and social contestation. Domesticity is important in shaping nationalist responses to the transnationalism of the Olympic Movement, as they draw upon existing problems and resources to define the problems with Olympic bids. Importantly then, the IOC has increasingly included the national political legacy as part of the mission and role of the IOC.

Corporatism

The corporatist normative arena is an integral part of understanding the contemporary problems facing the IOC in terms of norm confusion. Here, the ambiguity of the concept of corporatism is important, as it bridges national, transnational and business concerns, and the IOC is itself a corporation based in Switzerland. A key moment of the contemporary corporatist norms of the IOC was the decision of the IOC in 1960 to sell television rights to the Games and the beginning of corporate sponsorship. Though loudly resisted by IOC President Avery Brundage (he famously wanted to keep the Olympic Movement free of ‘political intrigue and dollar signs’), this marked the rapid and exponential expansion of the games and the direction of decision-making process at the IOC.

The increasing importance of corporate sponsorship and television rights has also resulted in heavy control of intellectual property and the increasing emphasis on expenditures, branding and oversight of the complex regulatory and business decisions that accompany the Olympiad. In turn, this has increasingly conflicted with the broader goals of the Olympics as a social movement, and created new issues (such as corruption) that may not have otherwise emerged. Indeed, a key motivation behind investigating the charges of corruption during the 2002 Salt Lake City Games in the IOC was not illegality per se, but rather the perception that corruption would disrupt corporate sponsorship and the brand image of the Games.

Thinking of the corporatist arena of the IOC in these terms allows us to understand the disciplining influence and powerful conflation of interests introduced by corporate sponsorship. Thus, while the IOC promotes transnational norms of the Olympic sites, this has to be balanced against the idea that the largest and most prolific corporations are the primary sponsors of the Games. Moreover, with bidding and competitive pricing on television distribution rights, the need for ever expanding promotion and financial support through advertising and sales often dwarfs the budgets of amateur and marginal sporting events. When Games such as Atlanta receive over 70% of revenue from corporate sponsorship and television rights, the impact of corporate influence should not be understated. Contrasting the problems in Atlanta with the unprecedented organizational capacity of 2008, Beijing Olympics demonstrates how emphasis on corporatist norms can be fulfilled in different domestic environments at the expense of transnational and domestic norms.

Framing norm confusion

The expansion of certain normative arenas was not envisioned at the inception of the Modern Games and one can denote that norm confusion grows stronger in areas that fall
further from the core Olympic values. While ‘norm acceptance’ refers to core principles very much in line with the core values of the IOC, we call ‘norm confusion’ instances where decisions can be equally based on different normative arenas, as overlapping and contradictory norms can legitimately influence the decision-making process. As Figure 2 illustrates, degrees of norm confusion and acceptance can be thematically separated, depending on the likelihood that norm confusion will stem from the different normative arenas involved in IOC’s decision making. Many of these themes are themselves the object of scrutiny and criticism of the IOC, but others have become commonplace and are increasingly part of the IOC’s vision of its role in international sport. The issues of sustainable development and gender equality examined below are particularly useful in demonstrating the confusion that arises from overlapping normative arenas. Thus, even as the IOC seeks to expand and include increasingly relevant issues in the Games, the further a norm is from the original role of the IOC, the more confusion it brings to the decision-making process.

![Figure 2: Normative Priorities.](image-url)
For example, the current spirit of Olympism within the Olympic Movement is very close to the original intent of this transnational norm, as it represents the right to participate in sports in a fair environment. Transnational norms added over the years such as sustainable development and environmentalism bring the IOC decision-making process closer to norm confusion, as they do not pertain directly to the original intent of the Olympic Movement and they create room for various interpretations of what should be the core priorities of the Movement. Similarly, it is easier for the IOC to incorporate decision-making corporatist norms in relation to business sponsorships, as they are deemed necessary for the continued support of the Games. However, questions of utilizing professional athletes rather than amateurs, in order to increase sponsorship and render the Games more profitable, move closer to norm confusion, as it does not reflect the original intent of the Olympic Movement. Furthermore, core principles related to domestic political organization, such as the hosting and bidding process for the Olympic Games, are part of the decision-making process, even if they involve incorporating cultural differences and respecting national jurisdictions. However, the IOC’s firm stand for specific interpretations of human rights, and democracy pushes the IOC closer to norm confusion.

**Norm confusion in specific contexts**

Since 2009, the IOC possesses permanent observer status of the UN General Assembly. In a context where this rapprochement has been explained as allowing normative convergence and cross-fertilization, the IOC dealings with the operationalization of norms such as gender equality and sustainable development within the Olympic Movement have been complicated. Through the use of selected decisions since 2009, one may illustrate the workings of seemingly unpredictable decisions as resulting from norm confusion. The contribution of this analysis is to explore the concept of norm confusion to explain the unpredictability of decision making. By exploring the linkages between the three normative arenas as the locations of operating principles and procedures, we hope to provide a framework to better understand this ‘unpredictability’.

**Sustainable development**

Sustainable development became an important feature of the IOC’s normative framework at the end of the 1990s, in order to keep pace with normative developments in other IOs and international social movements. As the Olympic Games have been seen as a way to support development of less privileged cities by inciting the development of infrastructure, tourism and international media, concerns for environmentally friendly Games arose to minimize its ecological footprints, especially because of the scale and scope of the contemporary Olympiads. This concern for sustainable development is especially important with the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games and the 2010 first Youth Olympic Games (YOG) held in Singapore, which were both branded as the ‘first’ eco-friendly Games. In contrast to other normative stands of the movement, the IOC’s decision to uphold or forego sustainable development was deemed unpredictable and confused, especially when it clashed with actors from other normative arenas.

On the one hand, the agreements between the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games and 25 corporate partners to make the Games carbon neutral were heralded as a new form of governance based on corporate social responsibility and the importance of consensual
rather than regulative mechanisms of decision making. The 2010 Olympic partners, ‘including corporate sponsors, governments and broadcasters, have volunteered to offset some of their own carbon emissions related to the Games, such as emissions generated by delegations travelling to and from the Games region’. Unfortunately, this objective was later revised, as the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC) announced 2 weeks prior to the Games that it would be impossible to reach offset targets without the help of the local populace and non-signatory corporate actors. As such, the normative footing of sustainable development changed from elite agreements to individual responsibility quickly, with little to no justification. In this context, it seems easier for the IOC to explain – without creating controversy – the failure in achieving eco-targets, as it became a responsibility associated with tourists and populations participating to events in Vancouver and Whistler. Moving from the highly politicizing and confusing normative association the transnationalism and sustainable development, the IOC decision based on democratic and individual participation moved the failure of eco-targets to the less politicizing and controversial domestic normative arena, and issues related to hosting the event.

On the other hand, the Singapore Youth Olympic Games Organizing Committee (SYOGOC) decided in February 2010 to announce eco-friendly Games and set an example for this new form of Olympic event. Based on partnerships with local NGOs and a focus on technology and everyday practices, the city state was to host the first YOG in an environmentally friendly, economically viable and socially responsible manner. With the help of government and non-government organizations, the first YOG were given a particularly green mandate through a series of awareness campaigns, including the Singapore 2010 Friendship Camp, during which athletes and local youth engage in conservation and clean energy activities. This strategy of drawing on domestic support and actors was more easily integrated into the planning and organization of the Games from the outset and became accepted into domestic and transnational normative compliance. Through Living Green @ Youth Olympic Village (YOV), athletes and visitors to Singapore during the Olympics were asked to adopt green habits as well.

These actions can be contrasted with the IOC’s decision to award the broadcasting rights for the event the Channel News Asia, the Media Corporation of Singapore, StarHub and SingTel. As phone companies making much of their profits through the sale of cellular phones, SingTel and StarHub have been criticized for creating unnecessary pollution and construction in their refusal to share phone line infrastructures prior to the Games. Combined with SingTel’s primary sponsorship of Singapore’s first Formula 1 Grand Prix (with more considerable environmental concerns), and the aggressive marketing strategies targeting Singaporean elite consumers, actions taken in the transnational and domestic arenas are being offset by corporate obligations. While addressing the domestic area more effectively in the organization and planning of the games, the apparent disconnection of corporate strategies and branding are creating the contradictions that appear as norm confusion.

**Gender equality**

Similarly, commitments to fight gender discrimination were incorporated into the Olympic Charter in the 1980s, relatively late in the history of the social movement. However, the ability to enforce gender equality while maintaining gender-segregated sports has led to new controversies, especially when the IOC decisions seem to actively encourage gender discrimination. Some current examples include the women’s ski jumping controversy at
the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games, as well as gender verification testing and the case of Caster Semenya, the South Africa middle-distance runner and world champion.

On the one hand, the IOC’s decision not to organize a women’s ski jump event at the 2010 Games was portrayed in the media as opposing gender equality in sport. Three female athletes argued that the IOC’s 2008 decision to exclude women’s ski jump was contrary to the Canadian Charter of Rights and brought the case on the basis on gender discrimination. In late 2009, the British Columbia Supreme Court Decision supported the IOC and VANOC decisions to exclude a women’s ski jump event at the 2010 Games, based largely on the IOC’s transnational authority. Thus, the court’s decision was based on VANOC’s requirements to meet Olympic Charter as it stood, the lack of Canada’s authority over the IOC and the IOC’s authority to override gender equity requirements and grandfather ski jumping as an event that would not meet current eligibility requirements. Despite the preponderance of evidence that the issue stemmed directly from the IOC’s decisions, VANOC took much of the criticism even as the Olympic Charter specifically promotes gender equality.

Here, the transnational foundation of the IOC’s decision-making structure allowed it to defer responsibility, but also undermine its commitment to transnational norms. The IOC’s position was that it would be impossible to accommodate the request in the 2010 timeframe. As stated by John Furlong, VANOC Chief Executive Officer (CEO):

We recognize that the women ski jumpers are committed and passionate athletes and appreciate how hard they are working to have their sport included in the Olympic Winter Games. The IOC has indicated that there is a possibility that they could compete in the 2014 Games; we will continue to do everything we can to help these athletes achieve inclusion in future Games.45

Despite the arbitrary exclusion, the IOC also emphasized the growing significance of media coverage in decision making. As a male only event for 80 years at the Olympics, the IOC argued that there was not an audience interested in following women’s ski jump, which took precedence over gender equality. The IOC drew upon both the corporate (revenue and media concerns) and domestic (logistical) normative arenas to justify their decision to differ gender equality, insisting on their commitment to action in the future.46

On the other hand, recent revelations over the gender testing of Caster Semenya reveal another interested confusion over the promotion of gender equality within the Olympic Movement. Although the traditional gender verification test was removed in 2000 because it was considered particularly discriminatory towards women with sexual development disorders, the Olympic Movement moved towards acceptance of transsexual athletes, especially for the 2004 Olympic Games, to prevent discrimination and harassment.47 However, there is no mention of transgender discrimination in the most recent version of the Olympic Charter, and the IOC still assigns ad hoc medical panels for evaluating the gender claims of athletes rather than establishing set protocols.48

The IOC resisted using its transnational authority to establish institutional structures to systematically deal with its commitment to gender equality, in part, because ‘fairness’ in sport is being challenged by increasing technology capabilities in gender verification, but also domestic recognition of the complexity of gender itself. Previous testing methods were seen as unreliable and unethical, which led to the deinstitution of gender verification, but the IOC is now promoting international gender testing centres for athletes with gender disorders.49 In the case of Caster Semenya, the South African runner and world champion, whose gender became an issue after her record-winning performance at the 2009 World Championship, after which she was declared a hermaphrodite. Until 2010, Semenya was not allowed to participate to events as her gender was still being under investigation and, even after being cleared by the gender testing committee, results of the analysis were not
revealed. The tension between norms of non-discrimination and the core principles of fairness in sport is challenged in this case, where the IOC has yet to offer a reason to explain the process other than the importance of determining who can participate in a ‘women’s event’. The desire to gather new norms, whether they be transnational, domestic or corporate, reinforces the pre-war mentality of IOC’s decision making as secretive and private, rather than establishing a clear and consistent basis for norm diffusion.

Conclusion

Any transnational social movement that is as large or as old as the Olympic Movement will inevitably encounter problems, issues and questions of governance. However, the issues facing the IOC have to do with the expanding role, capacity and expectation of reconciling transnational, domestic and corporate normative arenas. It seems clear to us that the current position of the IOC as justifying decisions from an intersecting position of the three normative arenas is untenable. In the case of sustainable development and gender equality, the persistent intersection of different normative arenas is increasing the normative confusion within IOC’s decision making. With the growing number of norms as well as the increasing complexity of issues brought up to the IOC, a clear and consistent normative vision ought to be chosen, through a process of refining the Olympic Charter and decentralizing some of the normative decisions to the IFs, NOCs and Olympic Comitees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs) in order to delegate some normative responsibility, especially in the domestic arena, to other organizations. As a nineteenth-century organization, a clear restructuring of normative responsibilities would help in making the decision-making process more transparent, clear and consistent. In their capacity as official UN observer, it would benefit the IOC to recognize some of the strengths of contemporary liberal institutions in these areas and the legitimacy derived from consistency. While the persistence of corruption may be inevitable given the factors involved in organizing the contemporary Games, the main problem we identify with the current position of the organization is the inability to provide consistent and clear normative leadership. This does not only hinder the organization’s reputation and provide fertile ground for corruption claims, but also impede more innovative and proactive normative developments for sport governance.

Notes

1 Tardy, ‘UN Special Advisor’.
2 See Weier, *The Invisible Constitution of Politics* for a discussion of the difference between norms and organizing principles.
4 Ibid., 14.
6 Boli and Thomas, ‘World Culture’, 173.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 180.
9 Ibid., 181.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Boli and Thomas, ‘World Culture’, 182; see also Quanz, ‘Formatting Power’, 12.
References


