



Evolution of the Olympic Movement: Adapting to Contemporary Global Challenges

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Abstract: This paper explores the diverse impact of the Olympic Movement on society, emphasizing core values like ‘excellence’, ‘friendship’, and ‘respect’. Traditionally, the Olympic Movement actively promotes global sport through initiatives such as Olympic education programs, instilling moral dimensions, cultural values, and essential life skills. Recent Olympic Games are scrutinized for their organizers’ focus on safety, pandemic management, environmental sustainability, and gender equality. This paper addresses crucial policy options, spanning human rights, social inclusion through sport, and the pervasive issue of inactivity affecting public health. Noteworthy successes in leveraging sports for refugees and combating substance use disorders are discussed, alongside joint efforts by the World Health Organization and the International Olympic Committee, to combat inactivity and promote health through sports. Exploration of gender equality in the Olympic Movement recognizes challenges and suggests actions, including increasing female participation and addressing sexual harassment. The intersection of sports, climate change, and environmental responsibility is examined, with a focus on the ambitious ‘climate-positive’ goals of the Paris 2024 Olympics. However, since most of the IOC actions are rather symbolic and not substantial, many organizations are called upon to take active initiatives. Actionable recommendations urge countries to prioritize physical activity policies, organize exercise programs, and collaborate across sectors for health and environmental sustainability. The Olympic Games should focus on promoting mass sports participation, fostering positive attitudes, enhancing public health through sports, education, peace, and societal values, advocating for a holistic approach that champions ethical values, and promoting Olympic education to build a better world through sports.

Keywords: Olympic Games; Olympic values; health; inactivity; inclusion; gender equality; environment; sustainability



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1. Introduction

The fundamental values of the Olympic Movement have an essential influence on the organization of sport at national and international levels, the image of major sporting events and the impact they have on societies, and the philosophy of sport. Today, therefore, the Olympic Movement appears to consider three core Olympic values as important for its goals: ‘excellence’, ‘friendship’, and ‘respect’. Based on these, the Olympic Movement claims that it organizes its actions to promote sport and to disseminate it in culture and education for the benefit of a better world. The value of “excellence” wants to emphasize that competing athletes should constantly strive to become better, and this is an example that all people should follow in their daily lives, i.e., constantly strive to become better. ‘Friendship’ is also a dominant value in sport, as it is through sport that young people and people of all ages come closer together. Moreover, nations are also coming closer and cooperating, not only in sports venues and major sporting events but also in everyday

life on a political, economic, and social level. “Respect” wants to remind us that through sports, one learns to respect oneself, the opponents, the rules, the environment, and society, and, of course, everyone should do the same in their daily life ([International Olympic Committee 2023a](#)). Thus, Olympism, despite the negative criticism it receives, is considered to symbolically emanate a philosophy and a way of life for a peaceful, better world with fair play, understanding, solidarity, and honesty.

Olympic values are cultivated in many ways and one of them is through Olympic Education programs. The basic idea of Olympic education programs is to link the school with society and its institutions, emphasizing the humanistic and moral dimensions of Olympism. The programs aim to inspire and raise awareness among students and to promote positive attitudes and values, such as cooperation, empowerment, critical thinking, and non-discriminatory responsibility. These programs highlight the educational and cultural value of the Olympic Games. Sport, culture, Olympic Truce, fighting social exclusion, respect for multiculturalism, and volunteering are the key elements of these programs. Olympic education seeks to combine the cultivation of physical and social skills, life skills, and moral values, as well as raise awareness on gender equality, environmental protection, combating racism, etc. ([Georgiadis 2010, 2020](#)). However, Olympic education programs have not been developed as they should and are implemented sporadically for a short period before the Olympic Games by the host countries.

At each Olympiad, the organizers emphasize some of these Olympic values and define their actions. At the 2016 Rio Olympics, under the Olympic flag, ten refugee athletes participated, giving hope to people displaced by war and social unrest around the world. The IOC stated that it wanted to send the message that sports can bring people together in a spirit of friendship and respect without discrimination, that refugees are our fellow human beings and enrich society, and that they can contribute to society with their talent, skills, and strength of spirit ([International Olympic Committee 2016a](#)).

At the Tokyo Olympics, emphasis was placed on equality issues, as for the first time, pressure was put on countries to ensure greater representation of women in the event. Thus, for the first time, the participation of female athletes was 48% at the Olympic Games and 42% at the Paralympics ([Tokyo 2020 2020](#)).

The organizers of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games proclaimed their wish to use the event to highlight values that strengthen the cohesion of societies, improve health, contribute to social inclusion, and encourage everyone to take up sports ([Paris 2024 2023a](#)). Their aim is to halve the CO₂ emissions resulting from the event and to accelerate the pace of environmental transition in sport, considering climate and environmental concerns. For Paris 2024, using 95% of existing or temporary venues, they have chosen to minimize their environmental impact. Reducing the number of new construction projects means they are able to significantly reduce their carbon footprint and showcase the richness of French architecture. They also plan to use 100% renewable energy sources during the Games, a circular economy, sustainable food procurement, responsible digital technology, clean mobility solutions for the Olympic fleet, public transport and environmentally friendly transport for spectators, biodiversity protection, and water management ([Paris 2024 2023a, 2023b](#)).

In any case, many want to believe that sporting mega-events contribute to the idea of respect and exchange of ideas between countries, common celebration, reconciliation, mutual respect, and social peace. The concept of reconciliation through sport is linked to education, human rights, human dignity, and the improvement of human beings through their own efforts. When human rights violations occur in various parts of the world, the Olympic Movement has an obligation to intervene. The goals of the Olympic Movement are to put sport at the service of the harmonious development of human beings, the promotion of a peaceful society, and the protection of human dignity, and to contribute to building a better world by educating youth through sports in accordance with Olympism and its values ([Georgiadis 2020](#)).

Certainly, many doubts are constantly expressed about whether the Olympic Movement achieves its goals, whether it is on the right track, and how it should redefine its role given its significant global influence. The purpose of this work is to provide a new critical perspective adapted to the challenges of the current era on the trajectory of the Olympic Movement and to suggest new views, issues, policies, and actionable recommendations.

2. Bridging Divides: The Role of Sports in Advancing Human Rights and Social Inclusion

From human rights to social inclusion through sport. After the presentation of the Olympic Refugee Team in Rio, some refugee training programs began to appear. The primary objectives of these programs are to actively engage refugees in sports and foster their integration into society. Simultaneously, the initiatives aim to instill values such as respect for human rights, acceptance of diversity, intercultural communication, and the promotion of teamwork and cooperation, which transcend gender, race, religion, and cultural differences. The overarching goal is to advocate for equality and solidarity and combat racial discrimination and prejudice through the powerful medium of sports. The implementation of targeted intervention exercise programs has yielded positive outcomes, particularly in enhancing mental health within refugee reception centers (Filippou et al. 2024; Knappe et al. 2023). By leveraging the influence of sports, these initiatives contribute significantly to dismantling social barriers and fostering a sense of belonging for marginalized groups. Sports, in a broader context, wield the transformative power to facilitate social inclusion for various marginalized communities, with numerous success stories. Another example of inclusion in society relates to the integration of sports into recovery programs for individuals grappling with substance use disorders. The positive impact includes giving individuals opportunities to integrate into the world of sports within these programs, as well as stress and depression regulation, improved quality of life, heightened self-confidence, and enhanced self-esteem (Panagiotounis et al. 2022). Recognizing the potential and authority of the Olympic Movement, it could become a pivotal force capable of mobilizing states, institutions, and organizations at multiple levels to champion such inclusive efforts. The convergence of human rights, social inclusion, and sports not only strengthens communities but also serves as a beacon of change in challenging societal norms.

Beyond a few research studies in the area and isolated programs, there has been little progress on these issues. Social exclusion exists in sports, and high-performance and talented young athletes do not have an equal opportunity to reach the Olympic podium. Although today sport seems to be available for everyone and participation in sport is perceived as a human right, there are still some categories of people who have difficulty accessing it or are excluded from it. These excluded groups include ethnic minorities, poor people, persons with disabilities, older people, and sexual minorities. Several constraints, such as a poor social environment, lack of transport, lack of time, and fears for safety, are associated with this issue (Campos et al. 2024; Collins and Buller 2003; Collins and Kay 2003). It seems that the role of sports in social inclusion is still in its infancy.

Exercise as medicine and the problem of inactivity. Scientific evidence highlights the pervasive threat of inactivity to public health, with both children and adults failing to meet recommended physical activity guidelines (World Health Organization 2022). Governments worldwide are falling short in promoting systematic exercise, especially for women, older individuals, and adolescents, leading to a concerning decline in physical activity from age 15 to 25 (van Sluijs et al. 2021). People with disabilities are at increased risk due to low exercise levels (Ginis et al. 2021). Participation in physical activities is crucial for improving both physical and mental health. Adequate physical activity is linked to reduced all-cause mortality and increased life expectancy, and offers protection against various diseases, including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and mental health conditions (Lee et al. 2022; Onerup et al. 2023). The global cost of health issues related to inactivity is estimated at approximately USD 47.6 billion annually (Santos et al. 2023). The growing movement of

“exercise is medicine” is supported by documented exercise prescription guidelines from the scientific community ([American College of Sports Medicine 2022](#); [Pedersen and Saltin 2015](#)). Finally, studies during the pandemic showed that participation in physical activities was associated with lower rates of hospitalization, severe illness, and death associated with COVID ([Ezzatvar et al. 2022](#)). Despite the World Health Organization’s (WHO) recommendations on physical activity, there is a notable gap in implementation ([World Health Organization 2020a](#)). Simple solutions, like walking, remain underutilized, even though studies link higher daily step counts to lower all-cause mortality ([Jayedi et al. 2022](#); [Saint-Maurice et al. 2020](#)). Recognizing the urgency, the WHO and International Olympic Committee collaboratively committed to promoting health through sports and physical activity. Their joint initiatives aim to combat inactivity by integrating physical activity into daily life, leveraging technology, and promoting public health ([World Health Organization 2020b](#)). These organizations collectively provide guidance, education, and tools to health and sports organizations, striving to encourage broader participation in sports. The IOC, aligning with its ‘Olympism 365’ initiative, emphasizes the transformative power of sports in fostering global well-being. By strengthening the role of sport and aligning with Olympic values, this initiative advocates for health, education, gender equality, reduced inequality, sustainable communities, responsible consumption, climate action, peace, and justice ([International Olympic Committee 2023b](#)). We consider the issue of sedentary behavior a global problem. The IOC and WHO can simply remind people of it, but their initiatives are not sufficient. Many more stakeholders need to be involved in addressing this.

The Olympic Movement and gender equality: Navigating challenges. Aligned with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Goal 5 prioritizes achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls, advocating for the elimination of discrimination and violence ([United Nations 2015](#)). These concerns extend to the realm of sports, where, despite a growing number of women and girls participating, gender inequalities persist. Recognizing this challenge, institutions emphasize that enhancing access for women and girls in sports will positively impact society and public health ([Council of Europe 2019](#)). The IOC, in line with the Olympic Charter, urges international and national sports federations to develop action plans for increasing female participation. The Charter underscores the importance of promoting women in sports at all levels to uphold the principle of gender equality. National awareness campaigns and initiatives supporting gender equality in sports should be actively encouraged. Concrete examples of progress include the mixed 4 × 400 relay in the Tokyo Olympics and the upcoming mixed marathon relay in the Paris Olympics ([International Olympic Committee 2023c](#)). Addressing the pervasive issues of sexual harassment and abuse in sports, there is a collective call for those with responsibilities in sports to identify and prevent such behaviors, fostering a culture of dignity, respect, and safety ([International Olympic Committee 2016b](#)).

It is concerning that women and girls generally are less active than men and boys ([World Health Organization 2022](#)), and significant gaps persist between men and women regarding their involvement in sports and physical activities, as well as in the portrayal of elite sports in mass media and the management of sports governance. Additionally, for sexual minorities and other societal groups, the issue is even more pronounced. Furthermore, women with disabilities often face notably low rates of participation ([Giulianotti 2018](#)).

Sports, climate change, and environmental responsibility. The organizers of Paris 2024 have set forth ambitious environmental goals, aiming for a ‘climate-positive’ event. Acknowledging the profound impact of climate change and the vital role of physical activity in health, sports offer a unique platform to unite nations, enhance quality of life, promote healthy lifestyles, and foster social cohesion. However, climate change poses threats to athletes’ health and performance, with extreme weather events impacting competitions. Major sporting events contribute significantly to the CO₂ footprint through factors like transportation, stadium construction, equipment manufacturing, and participant-generated waste. Despite this, sports possess unparalleled social reach, engaging billions of spectators globally. They can serve as catalysts for awareness, attitude change, and the promotion of

high-impact climate solutions (European Union 2023). In alignment with global climate efforts, the Olympic Games ought to be ‘climate-positive,’ reducing its carbon footprint. A relevant metanalysis indicated that climate change impacts physical activity at a worldwide scale and plays both a mitigation and an amplification role in climate change (Bernard et al. 2021). The Olympic Movement should contribute to public awareness and educate younger generations on global sustainability challenges, echoing its vision of building a better world through sport.

3. Redefining Olympism: Embracing Sustainability, Equality, and Active Lifestyles in the Modern Olympic Movement

A common critique often voiced is that most of the IOC initiatives are rather symbolic and lack substance. It is time for everyone to engage more systematically with modern global issues, such as social inclusion through sport, gender equality, physical inactivity, and climate change. The Olympic Games should promote mass sports participation and active lifestyles, support public health through sports, adopt a holistic approach that champions ethical values and anti-doping efforts, and redefine the principles of Olympic education. Scientists have highlighted the unique and powerful status of sport in society, particularly within the brave new world of global business. New challenges and threats to global sport have emerged, including the integrity of sporting competition, athlete welfare, discrimination, human rights, the impact on the environment, terrorism, and corporatization (Jackson and Dawson 2021).

Within the framework of the Olympic Movement and the prestige of the Olympic Games, numerous initiatives can be undertaken. For instance, in addressing issues of inactivity, an exemplary practice was introduced by the organizers of the Paris 2024 Olympics through the implementation of the engaging program “Get France Moving More”. The program aims to get everyone in France moving more and is reaching, as a priority, schoolchildren, women, people with disabilities, senior citizens, and other groups who tend to be less active or socially excluded. Various initiatives have been implemented, such as moving more at school, moving more in cities, moving more at work, and swimming (Paris 2024 2024a). In combination with sustained social marketing campaigns to raise population awareness about physical activity, the original Olympic idea may provide a key leverage point for public health measures attempting to improve active lifestyles by fostering future widespread community participation in sports (Lange 2022). However, such categories of actions are usually temporary. The correct approach is for these initiatives to have permanent operation rather than operating only for certain months before and after the date of the Olympic Games in the hosting country.

Another significant advancement is the increasing participation of women athletes in the Olympics. Since their debut at the 1900 Paris Olympic Games, women have progressively become integral to the event. In the upcoming 2024 Games, an impressive 5250 female athletes will compete, comprising 50% of all participants. This marks a notable achievement in gender equality throughout the history of the Games (Paris 2024 2024b). However, the issue is not the ratio of men to women during the Games, but rather the real equal access to exercise spaces, the promotion of daily exercise for women and girls in all sports, and the implementation of WHO guidelines for an active lifestyle for all genders. All major organizations must contribute to this.

Sport can use its unique profile and platform to influence the attitudes of sports fans and consumers, to promote positive social and environmental action around the world, and to contribute to sustainable development in areas such as health and well-being, poverty, education, gender equality, decent work, responsible consumption, and climate action (McCullough et al. 2022). The Olympic Values Education Program (OVEP) aims to guide young people to find common ground and engage in activities that embrace the core Olympic values of Excellence, Respect, and Friendship and to focus on promoting universal participation in sports and physical activity, as well as the development of appropriate educational tools to engage and empower young people (International Olympic Committee

2016c). However, Olympic education programs have not been developed as they should and are implemented sporadically for a short period before the Olympic Games by the host countries. Olympism could be transformed into a philosophy that has the flexibility to be adapted to varying contexts and serve as a motivation for learning activities in all aspects of life (Binder 2012; Chatziefstathiou 2012). Education for sustainable development is essential and can be promoted through the Olympic Value Education Program (OVEP). The OVEP can act as a tool for sustainable development and has the potential to allow for the effective acquisition of sustainability capabilities (Park and Lim 2022). Now, it is time for this program to be enriched with new topics and initiatives against inactivity and other sustainable development goals.

The Olympic ideals can be seen as living concepts, regarding sports as a cultural and developmental pursuit for individuals who aspire to be well-balanced, educated, and ethical. This encompasses moral considerations and equality, aiming at the cultivation of virtuous dispositions (Parry 1998). The UNESCO initiative to actively engage in dialogue with the Olympic and Paralympic authorities and relevant stakeholders to identify synergies in a spirit of complementarity and to promote sport and Olympic values through already-launched initiatives on education, peace, quality physical education, social inclusion, dialogue, and respect for human rights, is of particular interest (UNESCO 2023).

4. Recommendations

The Global Status Report on Physical Activity (World Health Organization 2022) underscores the impending health challenges for nearly 500 million people from 2020 to 2030, which can be mitigated through increased physical activity. Countries must prioritize the development and implementation of policies, national guidelines, and monitoring systems for sports and physical activity across all age groups. It was suggested that organizations involved in sports could benefit from applying a deeper, more critical perspective to their activities (Giulianotti 2015) and that we need strategies that effectively lead large segments of the population to question and call for evidence-based planning, transparency, and accountability in sports (Coakley 2015). The shift of sports organizations towards promoting public health through sports and physical activity deserves support from everyone, and the critical analysis of social responsibility in sports deserves focused attention.

In the new era, more effort by policymakers, sports stakeholders, and civil society is needed to mobilize sports towards the goals of development and peace—such as gender empowerment, health promotion, education, poverty reduction, and conflict resolution—and to organize sports in socially and politically beneficial ways (Darnell 2018).

To combat inactivity, the IOC, sports organizations, and international bodies should focus on organizing exercise programs. National health systems must provide advice and support and adopt ‘exercise as medicine’ policies. Policymakers should employ behavioral theories to boost sports participation rates, utilizing Olympic-level athletes as ambassadors for WHO-recommended exercise programs. Sports and active lifestyle are interconnected with medicine, education, happiness, performance, business and innovation, history, society, culture, and politics. The development of appropriate policy and practice recommendations for sport and active living is crucial for making a more sustainable world (Millet and Giulianotti 2019).

Collaboration among environmental, urban planning, education, and recreation sectors is essential to promote physical activity, healthy lifestyles, and mobility. For example, designing or transforming urban environments to incorporate pedestrian-friendly spaces and cycling infrastructure is crucial for societal well-being, fostering environments that actively encourage and support an active lifestyle.

The Olympic Games present an opportune time for national campaigns promoting physical activity, as they attract millions of spectators, inspiring them to follow the examples of athletes to strive in sport and life. The two weeks of exposure to sports images and stories encourage viewers to engage in sports and have an impact on creating positive attitudes towards sports and physical activity (Sallis et al. 2016). It is time to leverage it

effectively, given the strong influence of TV and social media on shaping public opinion. The Olympic Movement should extend its focus beyond sports, emphasizing daily exercise for everyone. National Olympic Academies and Committees, policymakers, and sports organizations should champion social inclusion programs, exercise initiatives, and gender equality policies; promote exercise programs for health and quality of life; develop strategies for all age groups and individuals with disabilities to increase participation in sport; and introduce action plans and recommendations for educational, sporting, and governmental bodies. National government agencies can support policies to promote gender equality and greater sports participation for girls and women.

National Olympic Academies and Committees should utilize internet and mobile technologies to promote active lifestyles. They should also support school-based programs involving parents to encourage physical education, individualized activity plans, and active breaks to address sedentary behavior (van Sluijs et al. 2021; Edwardson et al. 2023).

Environmental sustainability efforts must align with sports mega-events and infrastructure projects, prioritizing walking and cycling access. Raising awareness of climate change, combined with health promotion through sports and physical activity, is a critical challenge for the next decade (Cain 2023). It has been proposed that to lower agency costs, the IOC should involve qualified third parties in host selection, clarify mandates in the Host City Contract, and introduce significant sanctions for failing to meet environmental objectives (Geeraert and Gauthier 2017). Finally, ethical values in sports, anti-doping efforts, and Olympic education should be integral goals for all Olympic Movement stakeholders, fostering a holistic approach to sports and societal well-being.

5. Conclusions

The Olympic Games have an important impact on societies. The prestige and momentum of the Olympic Games and the Olympic Movement have not been fully utilized up to now, as they can contribute to public health by promoting physical activity and supporting the implementation of similar initiatives by the World Health Organization. Mass participation in sports is a strategy not only for health promotion and disease prevention but also for education, peace, promoting the ideas of equality, acceptance, respect, tolerance, justice, and solidarity in society, as well as raising awareness of climate change issues. National Olympic Academies and Committees should encourage exercise programs for health and quality of life, promote strategies for all age groups, and develop action plans for educational, sporting, and governmental bodies. Given society's increasing concern for human rights and environmentally sustainable Olympic Games, the IOC will need to truly embrace and practice its core values to avoid increasing criticism about its complicity in prioritizing power and profit over human rights and the environment (Boykoff 2019; Chappelet 2021; Davidson and McDonald 2018; Geeraert and Gauthier 2017). The IOC and Olympics have a lot of potential to contribute to advancing health and education, improving equity, inclusion, and sustainability, and to global development and peace initiatives.

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