Human Rights and the Olympic Movement: Another Pillar of Good Governance?

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The prevailing topic at the recent XIII Olympic Congress in October 2009 in Copenhagen was the Olympic Movement in society. Within this topic, the Congress addressed five main themes: (a) the athletes, (b) the Olympic Games, (c) the structure of the Olympic Movement, (d) Olympism and youth, and (e) the digital revolution (International Olympic Committee, 2009a). A sub-theme underneath the structure of the Olympic Movement topic was good governance and ethics. The United Nations (2006, ¶3) defines governance as “the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented).” Sport governance is defined as “the exercise of power and authority in sport organizations, including policy making, to determine organizational mission, membership, eligibility, and regulatory power, within the organization’s appropriate local, national, or international scope” (Hums & MacLean, 2008, p. 4). Over the past years, many International Olympic Committee (IOC) policy decisions have come under scrutiny, including the method of choosing the host city for the Games, athlete eligibility standards, and the role of the IOC in the realm of human rights.

Researchers are beginning to address sport and human rights generally (Bhuvanendra, 1998/9; Corbett, 2006; Kidd & Donnelly, 2000; Lapchick, 1975; McArdle & Giulianotti, 2003) and human rights and the Olympic Movement particularly (DaCosta, Abreu, & Miragaya, 2006; Hums, 2009; Kidd, 2008; Liu, 2007; Wolff & Hums, 2006). In addition, the IOC has been granted official observer status by the United Nations. “By using sport as a tool, the IOC and its partners implement various activities across the globe in fields such as humanitarian assistance, peace-building, education, and gender. The IOC now has the possibility of attending all UN General Assembly meetings where it can take the floor and thus promote sport at a new level” (IOC, 2009b, ¶1-2).

At the 2009 Olympic Congress, the issue of human rights emerged again. Human Rights Watch (HRW) called on the IOC to adopt a new standing committee or similar mechanism to monitor human rights in host cities. HRW suggested that the main responsibilities of such a standing committee would be to monitor a host country’s (a) media freedom benchmarks, (b) labor rights benchmarks, (c) freedom of expression and association benchmarks, and (d) civil liberties benchmarks (Human Rights Watch, 2009). However, the recommendations issued from the Olympic Congress contained no direct mention of human rights. The closest language was in Recommendation 30, which reads, “The preservation of human dignity is a fundamental tenet of the Olympic Movement. All members of the Olympic Movement should work together in pursuit of the harmonious development of men and women in order to promote through sport a peaceful society based on the most fundamental common principles and values inherent in a civilized society” (International Olympic Committee, 2009c, p. 12). When queried at a press conference about the fact that the IOC decided not to initiate discussion of the standing committee on Human Rights, IOC President Jacques Rogge replied “We cannot be held responsible for everything that happens in the world, but when it comes within the sphere of sport, of course we have that responsibility. And we are going to see how first of all we can get the best possible objective unbiased information. The IOC is not expert in human rights. We will rely on the advice of human rights organizations. It can be Amnesty International. It can be Human Rights Watch. It can be others. It can be the United Nations Human Rights Council. And we want to gather information from these organizations, and we are going to see how we can best act upon that within the organization” (Sports Illustrated, 2009).

According to the Olympic Charter, the primary governing document of the Olympic Movement, “the practice of sport is a human right” (International Olympic Committee, 2007, p. 11). Despite this, the IOC has repeatedly come under fire for its stance on human rights. The 2008 Beijing Olympic Torch Relay served as a flashpoint for international protests about China’s human rights record. The Olympic Flame’s route to future Games sites will be restricted to domestic status only. After the Olympic Flame for the 2012 Summer Olympic Games is lit in Olympia, it will travel directly from Greece to Britain where it will remain (Guardian, 2009). The decision was not a financial one, as the international Torch Relay was fully sponsored by Coca-Cola, Samsung, and Lenovo. Clearly the human rights issues revolving around the Beijing Games contributed to this change (O’Connor, 2008; Peterkin, 2008).
Questions are now beginning to surface concerning potential human rights abuses associated with preparations for the 2014 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in Sochi, Russia. Two issues, lack of transparency around expropriating property for Olympic sites, and the conditions for workers building Olympics-related facilities, loom as potential areas for human rights abuses. “Human Rights Watch also has expressed its concern to the IOC about the worsening human rights climate in Russia, where several journalists and civil society activists have been murdered since the beginning of the year” (Huffington Post, 2009, ¶9). Now that Rio de Janeiro has been awarded the 2016 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, similar issues are beginning to arise, including actions by local police authorities and the government’s silence on global human rights issues (CBS News, 2009; Margolis, 2009).

So the question remains, should the IOC establish a standing committee to address human rights? The purposes of this presentation are to (a) discuss recent human rights issues within the Olympic Movement, (b) open the dialogue about whether or not the IOC, or any other sport governing body, should establish a standing committee or similar mechanism to monitor human rights in host cities, and (c) whether sport governing bodies generally should have a mechanism to monitor human rights.