



## POSTPONING THE TOKYO 2020 OLYMPIC GAMES: STRESS-TESTING GOVERNANCE IN THE OLYMPIC SYSTEM AND LIMITATIONS TO AGENDA 2020

**Abstract** – The global emergency imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the first months of 2020 has been disrupting virtually every aspect in society, and has caused the postponement of the Olympic Games for the first time ever. While the decision to postpone the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games was absolutely reasonable, and potentially inevitable, the process that led to this decision demands some careful observation. This paper aims to briefly analyze this process, based on the sequence of official statements provided by the International Olympic Committee, and the movements by other relevant stakeholders within the Olympic System that could be observed in the media, using a critical approach based on the expectations created by some of the recommendations in Agenda 2020.

**Keywords:** Tokyo 2020; postponement; sport governance.

## ADIAMENTO DOS JOGOS OLÍMPICOS DE TÓQUIO 2020: GOVERNANÇA EM TESTE NO SISTEMA OLÍMPICO E LIMITAÇÕES À AGENDA 2020

**Resumo** - A emergência global imposta pela pandemia do COVID-19 nos primeiros meses de 2020 tem motivado transtornos em praticamente todos os aspectos da sociedade e causou o adiamento dos Jogos Olímpicos pela primeira vez. Embora a decisão de adiar os Jogos Olímpicos de Tóquio 2020 seja absolutamente razoável e potencialmente inevitável, o processo que levou a essa decisão exige uma observação cuidadosa. Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar brevemente esse processo, com base na sequência de declarações oficiais fornecidas pelo Comitê Olímpico Internacional e nos movimentos de outras partes interessadas dentro do Sistema Olímpico que podem ser observados na mídia, usando uma abordagem crítica baseada nas expectativas criado por algumas das recomendações da Agenda 2020.

**Palavras-chave:** Tóquio 2020; adiamento; governança esportiva.

## APLAZAMIENTO DE LOS JUEGOS OLÍMPICOS DE TOKIO 2020: PRUEBA DE GOBERNANZA EN PRUEBA EN EL SISTEMA OLÍMPICO Y LIMITACIONES A LA AGENDA 2020

**Resumen** - La emergencia global impuesta por la pandemia de COVID-19 en los primeros meses de 2020 ha causado interrupciones en prácticamente todos los aspectos de la sociedad y ha provocado el aplazamiento de los Juegos Olímpicos por primera vez. Si bien la decisión de posponer los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio 2020 es absolutamente razonable y potencialmente inevitable, el proceso que condujo a esa decisión requiere una observación cuidadosa. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar brevemente este proceso, basado en la secuencia de declaraciones oficiales proporcionadas por el Comité Olímpico Internacional y los movimientos de otras partes interesadas dentro del Sistema Olímpico que se pueden observar en los medios de comunicación, utilizando un enfoque crítico basado en las expectativas creadas por algunos de las recomendaciones de la Agenda 2020.

**Palabras-clave:** Tokio 2020; aplazamiento; gobernanza deportiva.

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## **Introduction**

For the first time ever, since the revival of the Olympic Movement in the 19th Century, an edition of the Olympic Games will be postponed. While war caused three editions of the Games to be canceled, and boycotts posed serious threats to the Games, never before had the postponement of the event been an option - particularly because it would break the very periodization on which the Games are based. As awareness of the proportions of the COVID-19 crisis grows, and the first effects and outcomes of it take shape confirming the worst projections made by virologists and epidemiologists, the weight of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)'s delay in reaching a decision gave additional nuances to something that could otherwise have been understood simply as an issue with the tone used in public announcements and releases. Timing and tone have indeed been the two main aspects criticized by the media in the days leading up to, and immediately following the announcement of the decision to postpone the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. This paper, however, will make an attempt to analyze this process through a more thorough, conceptual approach.

Governance and leadership management were severely tested by media, spectators, athletes, National Olympic Committees and International Federations during the leading up to this decision. This paper will discuss the implications that the whole process had regarding Agenda 2020<sup>1</sup>, presented as a "[...] strategic roadmap for the future of the Olympic Movement (n.p)", that supposedly "[...] shows the IOC safeguarding the uniqueness of the Olympic Games and strengthening sport in society (n.p)".

Given the little time that transpired since the news about the postponement came out, it is possible that this perceived delay is a result of hindsight bias, i.e., as things change at a frantic pace, it is hard to grasp what data was available at what time to endorse the IOC's decision-making process. However, had the IOC managed this crisis in a different way, this episode could have been a symbol of how the Olympic Movement can be in tune with, and aware of its place in society.

## **Making a history of the present time: challenges and opportunities**

While many decades since the revival of the Olympic Games in the 19th Century brought a considerable number of challenges to the continuation of the Olympic Games, and even to the pertinence of the Olympic Movement, it was only in 2020 that the decision

to postpone the event for the first time ever actually materialized. Wars, terrorist attacks, and increasing waves of violence and intolerance caused three editions of the Olympic Games to be canceled during the 20th Century, but this is the first time the event is being postponed. It is also the first time that virtually the whole world is directly involved in a catastrophe of such proportions and reach. It is too soon to analyze or project the extent and weight of the impact (financial, symbolic and otherwise) this postponement will have for the Olympic Games and for the Olympic Movement; a comprehensive awareness of the many outcomes and unfolding of this unprecedented chain of events will only be possible after a considerable effort of historical reasoning, which demands temporal distancing. Nevertheless, the effort to construct a contemporary narrative of those events is not merely a journalistic endeavor: conducting a critical analysis of the processes entailed in the unfolding of this narrative allows the inclusion of this particular episode within broader historical processes pertaining to the Olympic Movement. Moreover, it can help retrieve lessons to be learned from this very unique experience, which can be applicable to a variety of future scenarios.

The postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games was the result of a seemingly long-lasting process, especially in comparison to other major (sport) events that were cancelled after the first indications that it would be impossible to contain the global spread of Covid-19. While the decision itself is not to be discussed, given it is the only reasonable decision regarding the Pandemic the world is facing based on the input of experts and the World Health Organization (WHO), the process itself has to be questioned - particularly regarding the Agenda 2020 and its recommendations 18, entitled "Strengthen support to athletes<sup>2</sup> (p. 17)", and 27, in which the IOC aims to reinforce good practices in governance for itself, as well as for "All organisations belonging to the Olympic Movement to accept [...] (p. 21)". The IOC defines good governance in their code of ethics, pointing out as main attributes "transparency, responsibility, and accountability<sup>3</sup> (n.p)". The IOC claims that there was transparency in the process that led to the decision to reschedule the Games, at least through their official statements. The main reason for the postponement mentioned was the need "[...] to safeguard the health of the athletes, everybody involved in the Olympic Games and the international community<sup>4</sup> (n.p)", and this paper by no means aims to question the relevance of this reason either.

The question to be asked is, to which extent were this community and the people involved in the decision process, at least through their representatives? The timing of the statements also raises questions: why did the tone change so dramatically from one day to the other, as the IOC worked in cooperation with the Japanese authorities to make the decision to postpone the Games? It is still unclear whether all relevant stakeholders were directly involved in the discussions leading up to the announcement of the decision, particularly considering the amount of expressions of discontent that could be observed in public statements from entities that are technically included in the Olympic system. With this matter being so critical, and with so much attention being paid to every move made in the sport industry, it would have been appropriate to expect this process to be scrutinized to the core - an additional motivation to ensure that all the correct governance processes and procedures were being implemented.

Just ten days before the postponement was announced, the Games were still being marketed as a symbol of hope for a global victory against Covid-19<sup>5</sup>. The authors themselves were part of the torch relay in Sparta on the day after the lighting ceremony took place - the same day the remainder of the torch relay in Greece was also called off - , and it felt strange and unreal to push for a celebratory mood during times like these.

A couple of days later, prominent National Olympic Committees like the Canadian and the Australian, announced that they would not send any athletes to Japan, if the Games were kept on the same dates as originally planned<sup>6,7</sup>. Several others were not satisfied as well, which led to criticism against the apparent decision of maintaining the original dates. The reaction of those NOCs to the IOC's reluctance in admitting that postponing the Games was a possibility, and the fact that their dissatisfaction was manifested to the press and on social media indicates that their position may not have been duly represented through the official channels within the IOC.

Many questions were being raised on when and how the IOC would acknowledge the current situation. Sport journalists, professionals and obviously the athletes were on hold, speculating on the issue daily. During a couple of days in which the pandemic forced athletes to stay indoors until the postponement, the IOC exploited images of athletes training in adapted conditions as a way of marketing the idea that the preparations for the Tokyo Games were still in full swing. Not only the idea was to normalize such an extraordinary event, but to create media content since sports events were not taking place.

The swimming champion and Minister of Sports of Zimbabwe, Kirsty Coventry took the spotlight and difficult decision as the Chairperson of the IOC Athletes' Commission, declaring several times that some athletes "[...] want the Games to continue<sup>8</sup> (n.p)" in July of this year, encouraging them to "[...] keep doing what they're doing<sup>8</sup> (n.p)", something that was criticized by several colleagues like the Brazilian World Championships medalist Bruno Fratus\*, who has declared that "[...] postponing the Olympic Games would not only give the world peace of mind but also allow that everyone could prepare properly, ensure fairness and maintain the technical level of the competition (n.p)", a message echoed by dozens if not hundreds of Olympians, with former champion Roland Schoeman† to go as far to accuse that "[...] yet again this isn't a stand for athletes it's a stand for money (n.p) " and "Athlete reps may not necessarily still be athletes (n.p)", as is the case of Coventry and several members of the Athletes' Commission‡, and "[...] who is to say that these athlete reps have the actual best interest of the athletes in mind. Is there anyone that actually challenges the IOC and isn't just a 'Yes' person? (n.p)".

It could be pointed out, therefore, that the process left many with the impression that not only the IOC had taken too long to reach this decision, but that such delay had been motivated by the wrong reasons, without listening carefully to the athletes. But how could it have been done differently?

### **An ever more challenging Olympic System**

It is a common slip to think of traditional institutions as immutable organisms that have been conceived in a vacuum of social historical context, instead of seeing them as organic entities that tend to evolve and respond to ever more fickle circumstances. The IOC, for instance, was created in 1894 - for historical perspective, that is less than a decade after slavery was made illegal in Brazil, less than three decades after Germany

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\* Published originally on Fratus' twitter account [<https://twitter.com/bfratus/status/1240488183214858240>]

† With a reply by Schoeman in [<https://twitter.com/Rolandschoeman/status/1240687468816424961>] and [<https://twitter.com/Rolandschoeman/status/1240688371422257153>]

‡ An exchange echoed by the media, like in a piece by Daniel Etchells for Inside the Games [<https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1092136/fratus-questions-coventry-tokyo-2020>]. All of them published on March 19th, 2020 with Last Access on April 10th 2020

and Italy were consolidated as nations, and almost half a century before the first African nation was consolidated in the period after the many wars of independence in the African continent. Some of the sports now included in the Olympic Program did not even exist at the time the IOC was first created, and the notions of “human universality” were drastically different.

The Olympic Movement, officially defined as “[...] the concerted, organised, universal and permanent action, carried out under the supreme authority of the IOC, of all individuals and entities who are inspired by the values of Olympism<sup>9</sup> (n.p)”, is not the same as the Olympic System; the latter refers to the system of interrelations between institutional bodies connected to the IOC. In the classic system, those were limited to International Federations, National Olympic Committees, National Federations, and Organizing Committees of the Olympic Games<sup>10</sup>. This system, however, has been rapidly expanding as a consequence of society’s and corporation’s awakening to the importance of the Olympic System, particularly after the 1970s (a decade marked by the geopolitical challenges incurring from Cold War) and the 1980s (when the Los Angeles 1984 Olympic Games turned a considerable profit and the ban on professionalism in the Olympic Games was lifted). The 21st century and the advent of social media have brought even more challenges to the so called ‘supreme authority of the IOC’, as online platforms have been used as an outlet for dissenting voices.

Historically, athletes haven’t had much power on big decisions at the Olympic Movement. The Olympics Athletes Commission was founded in 1981, and is currently composed of 24 members, between elected ones and those appointed by the IOC to ensure that sportspeople from all over the world are represented. The majority of them are already retired, however, which brings relevance to Schoeman's plea.

The Athletes’ Commission is just one of the several endeavors created and managed by the IOC to make sure that the sportspeople are represented. Arguably, the main endeavor would be the Athletes 365 portal<sup>§</sup>, which serves as an umbrella on many projects designed to help athletes, either on educational or financial level. At the moment of publication of this paper, it offered opportunities for online learning, advice on coronavirus, and updates from the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and the International Testing Agency (ITA), possibilities for athletes to apply for grants and

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<sup>§</sup> See more in <https://www.olympic.org/athlete365/>

scholarships, boost their ‘personal brand’, or even become hosts through Airbnb - which has recently become an official Olympic partner.

With the high strains of a competitive career, during which athletes often juggle training, education, other projects, pressure from sponsors, while trying to maintain a private life, how could it be possible to ensure that the dozens of thousands of Olympic athletes manage to have not only a voice in political debates – which would be hard already –, but to know how to hone their ability to actively voice their concerns? This example is one of several that showcase the inefficiency of sport institutions in actively acknowledging the limitations of the reforms proposed to their potentially exclusionary or conservative power structures; recommendations like those contained in the Agenda 2020 may support the creation of new spaces within the governance structure to be occupied by athlete representatives, but they fall short in changing the deep roots of the organization.

This crisis, with all its implications, can be seen as a chance to improve structures, to prepare for a better future. In this case, the IOC has the chance to improve their governance, by implementing new and better-defined forms of ensuring transparency. The first step would be to be transparent in the disclosure of the aforementioned processes, followed by a self-evaluation, as defined in their own Recommendation 27 of their Agenda 2020<sup>2</sup>, entitled "comply with basic principles of good governance (p. 21)". This should be used to find any cracks in the structure and to define new guidelines, in which the IOC could define the roles, responsibilities and competence of authorities and stakeholders in decision-making processes in normal times, but also and foremost in critical situations.

In the beginning, through statements and Thomas Bach's public appearances, the IOC tried to act as a protagonist in an imaginary battle between the Olympic Games and COVID-19, using the Olympic flame as a symbol against the virus and symbolically setting July 24th as a deadline to stop the pandemic. Acknowledging the importance, status and significance of the Olympic Games, the IOC should take the opportunity and transform this crisis into a possible win for the world of sports, by facing inwards to learn from their own honest mishaps in those unprecedented challenging times. And this also includes bringing the athletes closer and enforcing the recommendation 18 on the Agenda 2020<sup>2</sup>, "Strengthen support to athletes (p. 17)".

An example on how the progression of statements seems to have missed the mark is how the torch relay affairs were managed. The lighting ceremony of the Olympic Flame took place in Ancient Olympia on March 12th, under limitations, but for some it came across as if the IOC was trying to hold on to the meager possibility that the Games would not be disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis, and thus oftentimes sounded disconnected from the grim reality taking shape all around the world.

Said IOC President Thomas Bach<sup>11</sup> during the lighting ceremony

This ceremony demonstrates once more our commitment to the success of the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020. Nineteen weeks before the Opening Ceremony, we are strengthened in this commitment by the many authorities and sports organisations around the world which are taking so many significant measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus (n.p).

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At the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 we will stand together, united in all our diversity. We will be united by our commitment to the Olympic values. We will be united by our emotions. This makes each and every one of us a member of this unique Olympic community. This Olympic community will show the entire world that our shared humanity is stronger than all the forces that want to divide us (n.p).

On March 16th, five days after the disease was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), there was only one major international sport tournament still in play, and it was the Boxing Olympic Qualifier, organized by IOC itself. Following the many scandals by the International Boxing Association (AIBA) "[...] as it has struggled to answer questions about its finances, governance and refereeing standards<sup>12</sup> (n.p)" showcasing a consistent lack of good governance and transparency, the IOC, in a major case that showed its intentions to clear up the International Federations, penalized the major boxing entity and took over the organization of the Boxing Olympic Tournament\*\*.

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\*\* It was one of many recent actions undertaken by the IOC in an effort to clean its image. Other examples can be found at the ban on countries with multiple doping cases offences by the International Weightlifting Federation<sup>13,14</sup>

The COVID-19 crisis started to change the location, postpone or cancel all together several sports events from January onward. In March the situation got out of control, prompting the end of the Greek run of the torch relay on Friday the 13th, and virtually all international tournaments were either cancelled or about to finish on the same weekend. Nevertheless, in what seemed to be a 180 degree turn on what the IOC had been saying and supporting thus far, they decided to move on with the European Boxing Qualification Tournament, which started in London on March 14th. It was a clear, but unfruitful movement from the IOC to present an unchanging world, using sports as a tool to unite the world in face of the virus, denying reality even when it was hitting on its face, until it was too late and it was finally cancelled one week before it was due to finish, on March 17th. Afterward athletes and staff members from Turkey and Russia were diagnosed with coronavirus caught on this road to the Olympic Games<sup>15,16</sup>.

It can be argued that to change, cancel or postpone the original dates for the Olympics is a major episode, and should have been thought of with time, not a hasty decision. But, as illustrated by the cases presented in this paper, in which many prominent Olympians came up complaining either on the delay of the announcement or on the form of announcement itself, it is clear that their perception was that the decision-making process was not transparent to the public, nor to the athletes. The burden of one extra year of training was not lost, with many hundreds of stories coming to surface of athletes delaying retirement or deciding to let go of their Olympic dreams<sup>††</sup>, facing one year extra of hard training. Simone Bile, one of the major sports stars nowadays, winner of 4 Olympic gold medals and 19 World Championship titles, reflected that "ultimately it was the right decision<sup>‡‡</sup>", but the American, just shy of her 23rd birthday, expressed bitterly that the decision fell like a burden to her: "Another year of dealing with (the) U.S.A.G.?"<sup>18</sup>.

Biles<sup>19</sup> added that the mental pressure on athletes will become a huge factor, it will "[...] take the toll on [...] [me] and all of us and most of the athletes. We have to stay in shape mentally just as much as physically. That will play a big factor moving forward, listening to your body and your mind".

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<sup>††</sup> As the British rower Tom Ransley, part of the boat gold medallist in the Men's Eight at the 2016 Olympic Games<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>‡‡</sup> As in an interview to NBC's Today Show [cited 3 Apr 2020]. Published on April 1st, 2020. Available at: <https://twitter.com/TODAYshow/status/1245332265351217152>.

Biles' quote speaks to the ancient Greek concept of arete, translated as excellence; excellence means being the best of yourself. Aristoteles, one of the most important philosophers of ancient times, goes a little bit further. He embraces training and the use of one's body, mind and soul to have the ability of reaching excellence<sup>20</sup>. Rearranging preparations to have athletes peak one year from now, as opposed to a couple of months (which is the set date based on which their whole Olympic cycle is normally planned) shall be one of the most difficult challenges for most Olympic hopefuls. To achieve this goal athletes have subordinated their whole life, building a competitive daily structure, a routine. Covid-19, with all its impacts is taking these routines from the athletes. Kyle Chalmers, an Australian gold medal winner, mentioned that not being able to do what he loves for an uncertain time was his biggest fear. These "unknowns are quite challenging, especially for athletes whose days are mapped out from the minute they wake up to the minute they go to sleep<sup>21</sup>", Chalmers added. Isolation as well as the uncertainty is putting huge psychological pressure on them. Thus, it is even more important that the "athletes experience<sup>21</sup>" (IOC Agenda) has to be included in all decisions.

Instagram, Facebook and other social media are well-known for enabling a platform on which to disclose a carefully curated fabricated world, in which everything works perfectly well, and people wake up with brilliant ideas and show their outstanding day, supposedly unfiltered, to the world. This may be alienating for athletes who are more aware of and honest about their dissatisfactions and frustrations and, according to researchers, people will probably remember the negative parts of the postponement longer and will create long lasting negative connections with it<sup>22</sup>, regardless of the narrative built around it on social media.

The IOC should be aware of the negativity bias and do not hide it out or feel it's shameful to be worried or blue about the current situation. They should not only ask the athletes to train at home, and reinforce the plea for athletes to stay active and healthy, but also to talk candidly to fans on how to take care of their mental health and try to curb any negative effects of the postponement this will certainly cause on these additional 12 months, acknowledging that the process of acceptance of this new scenario will be different for each person. This would show that the IOC is not only trying to create a positive and ideal world – and sometimes even comical – in which athletes are

overcoming obstacles to train in their living rooms, but to actively confront the problems caused by COVID-19 and eventually bring positive changes for the Olympic Movement.

### **By athletes, for athletes, not just with athletes**

The Olympic Games are, or at least should be, a celebration of athletes. In the midst of all political decisions, it is easy sometimes to lose sight of the fact that they are the reason that the Games take place after all. It is a policy of the IOC to not only take into consideration the best athletes and teams in the world to be invited to the Olympic Games, but also to include athletes from hundreds of countries and territories, representing all the National Olympic Committees in the world, through wild cards and Tripartite Commission Invitation, ensuring Universality across the sports.

While several athletes are also complaining that they don't know when they are going back to tournaments, therefore facing financial difficulties, there is a growing concern if the athletes will even be able to perform at their peak or even at a high performance level during the Olympics due to this time off - the duration of which is still unclear. Much of the burden of the postponement is being taken up by athletes themselves, not only due to the psychological strain this creates, but also because of the impact it has in their plans for the longer term, or even in the likelihood that they will be able to fulfill their dreams to compete in the Olympic Games. Those concerns were likely voiced by the Athlete's Commission, but it doesn't seem to play a major role in decision-making within the Olympic Movement. It is hard to fathom that any structure within the Olympic movement would have athletes play a minor role in decisions that impact them directly - if not in terms of their position within the structure, in their ability de facto to make a difference in such a position. That athletes are key stakeholders who can bring unmatched insight to discussions at the governance level is not disputed in this paper: the issue lies in the lack of fertile grounds where such insight can actually be leveraged, and in athletes' preparedness to package and deliver such insights.

Some of the initiatives the IOC recently started are very interesting for focusing on the promotion of continued education for athletes, mostly focused on "empowering athletes" to pursue meaningful careers and maximize their employment opportunities. This is certainly a much needed step towards a less exploitative and more considerate relationship with athletes, however, there isn't much being done to empower athletes to

be aware of their potential, the meaning of what they do, and their social responsibility while they are still active. It is as if subjectivity awareness and dedication to athleticism were mutually exclusive, at least as far as Olympic education initiatives are concerned.

In that sense, the inclusion or ‘empowerment’ of athletes has been fairly limited to initiatives that open up spaces for athletes at the governance level, without necessarily ensuring they have the skills needed to make the most of the opportunity to occupy spaces of power, or programs that - at best - are a one-way street to pass on information about Olympism for athletes to replicate through their platforms. Any consideration about the senses in which athletes can serve as moral educators should intersect a discussion about whether athletes are granted, or possess, the minimum tools required to pursue such endeavor on their own terms, and not just as props or amplifiers of messages concocted by others, and if is really desired by them, or if they (still) don't realize this as a part of their professional trajectories.

Thus, ensuring athletes are effectively represented at the governance level is a two-way challenge: it is up to sport institutions to ensure the spaces are there to be occupied by athletes, but it is also paramount for athletes to be more well-prepared to understand what being in a position of power entails, and which tools they can dispose of to confront more experiment and assertive stakeholders, should the need arise.

## **Conclusion**

As mentioned previously, the decision to not keep the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in the originally planned dates is hard to dispute; what is cause for criticism, though, is the fact that it is not clear who exactly was involved in this decision, and to which extent, and which rites and processes were used to reach it. Whether all national committees were included, how the athletes were included in the decision, what scenarios were presented, whether ballots were cast or a show of hands used to support the IOC's unilateral decision, if the green light came from sponsors, or from the Japanese government, are some of the questions raised by people within the Olympic Movement. On top of that, the declaration of the new dates was also not fully transparent; there is no thorough explanation to endorse this reasoning, considering for example the fact that having the Games during the summer time had already been criticized before, due to the heat and humidity common at that time of the year in Tokyo; one can read into this

decision as something motivated by the need to minimize the disruption to the international sports calendar – which is understandable –, and demands from broadcasters, but this is exactly why it would have been important for the IOC to be transparent about the possible scenarios presented, and which of the many stakeholders within the Olympic system had a say in it. It may be too forceful to assume the IOC ended up putting commercial needs (theirs and those of different IFs) before what would have been the best option in terms of the athletes' welfare, but the absence of clarity regarding the proposed scenarios and what ultimately tilted the decision to one side rather than the other does not exclude this as a possibility. This, by itself, should be seen as a concern. It is important to stress that identifying those perceptions does not stem from unwarranted empty criticism, but can be a first step in finding solutions to ensure a more transparent process can be carried out in the future, which is deemed a priority by the IOC for themselves and all their stakeholders.

Combining good and transparent governance and empowerment and strength to the athletes is a foreseeable path for the revival of the Olympic spirit. Those needs were already at the core of the Agenda 2020, highlighting the existence of such concerns at the top of the IOC management, but although good intentions may have been in place, the last few weeks exposed some limitations in a way that one could only hope to serve as inspiration for future changes.

Former American President John F. Kennedy once famously said that "when written in Chinese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity<sup>§§</sup>". Regardless of the accuracy of his interpretation of Chinese language (which has already been disputed<sup>\*\*\*</sup>), this illustration is brought to support the fact that seeing opportunities in critical situations is not something new; this specific episode faced by the Olympic Movement with all its implications provides a

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<sup>§§</sup> Speeches at United Negro College Fund fundraiser, Indianapolis, Indiana, 12 April 1959, and Valley Forge Country Club, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 29 October 1960. See in <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy/john-f-kennedy-quotations#C>

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Although challenged by some linguistics, indeed 危机 (crisis) is composed of two characters and 危 alone means danger and 机 can sometimes be understood as opportunity (or machine). Nonetheless, the chinese don't read the characters as Kennedy pointed out, and don't see crisis as an "opportunity" moment, only as a dangerous one. An explanation can be found on: <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/2363/is-the-chinese-word-for-crisis-a-combination-of-danger-and-opportunity/>. Cited 12 Apr 2020.

chance for many institutions to step back, reflect and improve its structures, preparing themselves and the athletes whose interests they represent for a better future.

The IOC, in particular, has the chance to improve their governance, by implementing new and better-defined forms of ensuring transparency. It is important to acknowledge that such a big movement will need time and effort to change its course, but it should begin with a thorough, honest, assessment of shortcomings in the processes used in this case, welcoming the input from society and inviting athletes to play a bigger and more decisive role in them.

After the world recovers from COVID-19, history will assess the decisions made in unprecedented times - and the lack of decisions, as well. If there is one thing that has been symbolically permeating all the unfolding and episodes related to the COVID-19 crisis, is a general awakening to the truth that we are all inevitably, inexorably, connected. The society that will look back at the events narrated in this paper will likely be very different from the society that produced such events, and it will be interesting to see how the IOC will adapt and respond to it - and how the Olympic Movement will incorporate, and be integrated into, this society. Many Olympic symbols, and the pertinence of the Olympic movement itself, have survived major changes throughout the 20th century, but successes from the past are not enough to project a successful future. More than ever, and faster than ever, ‘the times they are a-changin’ - and institutions must change with it.

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