



STILLNESS TO RESCUE THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE POSTPONEMENT OF TOKYO 2020

Abstract – The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the decision of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to postpone the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, which is an unprecedented decision that is bringing about colossal challenges to every institutional stakeholder in the Olympic System. The IOC has launched a robust taskforce to assess the reach and impact of the postponement, and provide guidance to adapt the project of the Games to a new timeline, which is addressing the logistical, managerial and financial aspects of this endeavor. This paper, however, aims to approach this unprecedented challenge from a perspective that privileges the opportunities it creates to shift the course of the Olympic Movement towards a better alignment with Olympic ideals, based on some recommendations of Agenda 2020 as well.

Keywords: agenda 2020; Tokyo 2020; Olympic ideals.

CALMA PARA RESGATAR O MOVIMENTO OLÍMPICO: EXPLORANDO OPORTUNIDADES NO ADIAMENTO DE TÓQUIO 2020

Resumo - A pandemia do COVID-19 resultou na decisão do Comitê Olímpico Internacional (COI) de adiar os Jogos Olímpicos de Tóquio 2020, é uma decisão sem precedentes que está trazendo desafios colossais para todas as partes institucionais interessadas no Sistema Olímpico. O COI lançou uma força-tarefa robusta para avaliar o alcance e o impacto do adiamento e fornecer orientações para adaptar o projeto dos Jogos a uma nova linha do tempo, que trata dos aspectos logísticos, gerenciais e financeiros desse empreendimento. Este artigo, no entanto, visa abordar esse desafio sem precedentes de uma perspectiva que privilegia as oportunidades criadas para mudar o curso do Movimento Olímpico em direção a um melhor alinhamento dos ideais olímpicos, com base em algumas recomendações da Agenda 2020.

Palavras-chave: agenda 2020; Tóquio 2020; ideais Olímpicos.

TRANQUILIDAD PARA RESCATAR EL MOVIMIENTO OLÍMPICO: EXPLORANDO LAS OPORTUNIDADES DEL APLAZAMIENTO DE TOKIO 2020

Resumen - La pandemia de COVID-19 resultó en la decisión del Comité Olímpico Internacional (COI) de posponer los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio 2020, es una decisión sin precedentes que trae desafíos colosales a todas las partes institucionales interesadas en el Sistema Olímpico. El COI lanzó un grupo de trabajo sólido para evaluar el alcance y el impacto del aplazamiento y proporcionar orientación para adaptar el proyecto de los Juegos a una nueva línea de tiempo, que aborde los aspectos logísticos, administrativos y financieros de esta empresa. Sin embargo, este artículo tiene como objetivo abordar este desafío sin precedentes desde una perspectiva que privilegia las oportunidades creadas para cambiar el curso del Movimiento Olímpico hacia una mejor alineación de los ideales olímpicos, en base a algunas recomendaciones de la Agenda 2020.

Palabras-clave: agenda 2020; Tokio 2020; ideales olímpicos.

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Introduction

We need to change because sport today is too important in society to ignore the rest of society. We are not living on an island, we are living in the middle of a modern, diverse, digital society. If we want to continue to put Olympic Sport at the service of society, which is part of our Olympic Principles, we must engage with this society, we must be in a respectful dialogue with this society. This society is changing faster than ever. This society will not wait for sport to change. If we want our values of Olympism - the values of excellence, respect, friendship, dialogue, diversity, non-discrimination, tolerance, fair-play, solidarity, development and peace - if we want these values to remain relevant in society, the time for change is now*.

This excerpt is from a speech given by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach during the Opening Ceremony of the 127th IOC Session, held on December 7th 2014, which set the tone for the consolidation of an action plan to put in motion the 40 recommendations that comprise the Agenda 2020. Those 40 recommendations are the result of a robust, thorough process spearheaded by the IOC to try to ensure the long-term sustainability and relevance of the Olympic Movement, especially regarding its most prominent output - the Olympic Games. As outlined in Bach's speech, it was paramount for the Olympic Movement to change so as to be in tune with the society it aims to serve; better yet, it was key for the Olympic Movement to try to foresee which issues and values would be relevant for society in the future. The plan and recommendations were indeed on par with the route society seemed to be taking in 2014, at least in theory; the way the IOC has been responding to the challenges arising in 2020, however, shows that it has yet to learn how to dialogue, effectively and empathetically, with this society.

It is a fact that the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games have been postponed for at least one year; it is also a fact that it is not possible to just put the Games on hold, and pick them up from where we left off a year from now. While acknowledging this truth is difficult, because it confirms that there are big, irreparable losses to be expected in the process of rescheduling the Games, it is also possible to see this as a unique opportunity to take a step back, and be inspired by Agenda 2020 to try to get the Olympic Movement

* Speech by IOC President Thomas Bach on the occasion of the Opening Ceremony, 127th IOC Session, Monaco, 2014 [cited 13 Apr 2020]. Available at: https://stillmed.olympic.org/Documents/Olympic_Agenda_2020/Olympic_Agenda_2020-20-20_Recommendations-ENG.pdf.

to remain sustainable and relevant to a society that is now set to undergo massive changes in the aftermath of a crisis of unprecedented reach and proportions.

The Olympic Charter defines Olympism as

[...] a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for the universal fundamental ethical principles¹ (p. 11).

The mission of the Olympic Movement is to “[...] contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised in accordance with Olympism and its values¹ (p. 15)”. Even though there seems to be a strong reinforcement of the educational aspects of Olympism, its most visible output, the Olympic Games remains in the spotlight for society at large among the many components from the Olympic Movement that were affected by this pandemic.

IOC President Thomas Bach said it will be necessary to count on everyone’s support to make these Games a symbol of hope. It is hoped that it can become a celebration of humanity, and that the Olympic Flame can symbolically guide our way out of this dark tunnel; it is hoped as well that the famous and often quoted Olympic Creed be taken into consideration: “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well² (n.p)”. The postponement, however, brings new challenges. In order to confront the present situation, the IOC has formed a task force called ‘Here We Go’, in collaboration with the Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee³. It will work closely with all stakeholders within the Olympic Movement to find a solution to the problems coming their way.

This paper aims to explore, based on a few of the recommendations in Agenda 2020, how this crisis can be used as an opportunity for the Olympic Movement to steer towards a direction that truly serves and represents what is regarded as Olympic values. While this exploration is certainly not exhaustive, this is an attempt by authors from five different countries to converge towards an approach that is, albeit critical, driven by a shared perception that there is still much potential for the Olympic Movement to be truly integrated into society, and to contribute to its holistic development.

The ripple effect of rescheduling the Games

Recommendation 6 of Olympic Agenda 2020 says the IOC ought to cooperate closely with other sports events organizers, which is exactly the need of the hour. Many international and national federations have to change dates of pre-planned events and adjust according to the new dates of the summer Olympics in 2021. For instance, the World Athletics Championship, which was scheduled to be held in Eugene, Oregon, in the summer of 2021 has been shifted to 2022[†]. The 2021 Aquatics Championships is scheduled in almost the same time slot of the Olympics and it has launched a survey among athletes to find their preferences on the rearrangement⁴. So, many International Federations (IF) have had to cancel or shift their tournaments to allow their best athletes to participate in the Olympics. This generated a snowball effect that has been impacting the sports calendar worldwide. If IFs will shift their tournaments to 2022, then what about the tournaments which are already scheduled for 2022? Major events like the Asian Games and Commonwealth Games are already scheduled for that year. Amidst all the shifts and delays, there is also the expected economic crisis to be taken into consideration. IOC and IFs have to look for sustainable and financially feasible solutions.

However, this is not the only challenge which the IOC, event organizers and IFs have to face. Due to lockdown and social distancing policies being enforced in most of the countries, at the moment most athletes are unable to properly train. Most athletes were training based on programs that planned for them to peak in Tokyo and, amidst this COVID-19 crisis, they have had to stop their training and take a step back. This is quite disheartening as no one knows when training conditions are going to be normal again. Also, when the situation does stabilize, it is obvious that IFs will be organizing back-to-back tournaments to recover some of that lost time. In such cases, how can athletes who are not training normally at this time get back to their typical fitness levels and properly perform in a more stretched out calendar leading up to the Olympic Games in 2021? This, however, is not the case in every country. By the time the rescheduling of the Olympic Games was announced, some countries were still holding training camps, so the training constraints did not hit every nation simultaneously; it may be the case that athletes who have been impacted by social distancing guidelines for a shorter period will end up having

[†]Available at: <https://worldathleticschamps.com/oregon21/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Press-Release-World-Athletics-Championships-Oregon21.pdf> [cited 13 Apr 2020].

a considerable advantage over athletes who will have been devoid of proper training conditions for longer. The same advantage may be present in the future when social distancing rules become gradually looser depending on each country's success in containing the spread of COVID-19. Will it be possible to say that the principle of fairness was not violated in the process of handling this crisis to have the Olympic Games in 2021?

Another intersection between the challenges posed by rescheduling the Games and the issue of fairness is the fact that this one year of postponement calls for difficult decisions regarding the age eligibility criteria for some sports. This can impact athletes in opposite situations: in football, for example, traditionally the participation of young athletes is enforced by the imposition of age limits by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) for the men's Olympic football tournament[‡]. In response to this new scenario, FIFA for instance has extended the age limit, but there is no guarantee this will be the case for all International Federations who imposed age limits for participation in the Olympic Games. On the flipside of that, some athletes are approaching the end of their careers, and will have to evaluate the actual possibility of continuing to train to keep themselves ready, also taking into account personal and also financial commitment it entails[§]. In all sports, athletes who are currently too young, or recovering from injuries, or who are waiting for the outcome of appeals, have maybe gained an unexpected opportunity to be in the Olympic Games in 2021^{**}.

All countries are fighting a battle against COVID-19, which is expectedly also impacting all NOCs financially. This will directly affect funds which are applied every year to the training and development of athletes. Many countries are using funds from all sectors to combat the present economic scenario efficiently. IFs and the IOC have to keep themselves well prepared to face such challenges put forward by NOCs worldwide. Everyone is aware that these are challenging times, and IFs and NOCs are supporting the IOC in its decision of postponement. Athletes worldwide are tweeting their opinion and

[‡] FIFA has a dedicated working group to address the issues arising from the COVID-19 crisis. Available at: <https://www.fifa.com/who-we-are/news/dedicated-covid-19-working-group-proposes-recommendations-after-first-meeting> [cited 23 Apr 2020].

[§] For instance, the diver Steele Johnson said it would be a challenge to survive an extra year financially as an athlete in training. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/sports/olympics/coronavirus-olympics-athletes-reaction.html> [cited 23 Apr 2020].

^{**} This is the case of Alex Schwazer. Available at: https://www.corriere.it/sport/20_marzo_24/tokyo-2020-rinviata-nuova-chance-alex-schwazer-donati-talento-intatto-9149daa4-6df1-11ea-9b88-27b94f5268fe.shtml [cited 23 Apr 2020].

most of them agree to the idea that ‘a dream postponed is still better than a dream cancelled’.

Flexibility and mission-alignment: making the Olympic Games possible, and prioritizing Olympic ideals

Many of the recommendations contained in the Agenda 2020 have a close connection with the need to amend the Olympic Games in order to make them sustainable (financially and otherwise) in the long run. For instance, recommendation 12 of the Agenda 2020 is directed at finding methods to decrease the cost of this international mega event while having management be moldable to different situations that arise. Recommendation 39 looks at ways to strengthen the dialogue between the Olympic Movement and society at large, so as to maintain its relevance and strengthen its presence across the globe in increasingly complex and challenging scenarios. With the first ever postponed Games in modern Olympic history approaching, this paper will explore ways in which the founding values of Olympism can themselves provide hints on ways to transform the challenges caused by the pandemic into opportunities to contribute to building a better world through sport.

The complexity of ensuring the rescheduled Olympic Games will be fair

As the consequences and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have engulfed every continent, arguably leaving no dimension of social life untouched across the globe, it is clear that contagion by COVID-19 itself is not socially determined like many other diseases (tuberculosis and cholera, for instance, are still lurking around some countries in the developing world, but have practically been eradicated in wealthier nations). This can create a romanticized notion that there will also be some sort of isonomy in the outcomes, and consequences of the pandemic will be similar for different countries and for people from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. This notion finds echo in many manifestations on social media claiming that ‘we are all in the same boat’, or that everyone, everywhere, is going through the same process. However, as the conditions and resources available for each person in each country to go through this crisis vary dramatically, it would be ludicrous to assume that there is any isonomy in the experiences lived in this period.

The COVID-19 pandemic will have taken a large toll on economies across the globe. Whilst some countries will overcome the difficulties faster and/or with greater ease, many will be maneuvering the predicaments that remain for an extended period of time, and it may be problematic to convince those nations to invest money and effort on sport, let alone for the benefit of few elite athletes. With finances being directed to assisting the economy and providing healthcare, there will be little remaining from said countries to support their athletes with their journey to the world-renowned Games. In accordance with the Olympic principles of non-discrimination and fair play, the Olympic Committee, the International Olympic Committee and the National Olympic Committees should come together in order to face these unprecedented circumstances. It would be beneficial, for instance, to develop a relief fund allotted to supporting NOCs with resources so they can provide conditions for the preparation of their athletes prior to and during Tokyo 2020. This relief fund could be a joint effort of Top Olympic Partners and wealthier NOCs, thus not relying solely on the funds already available through Olympic Solidarity. This could be a display of friendship and international solidarity, reinforcing the sometimes-forlorn idea that the Olympic Games ought to be an ode to participation and inclusion, not just performance. It may also serve as a symbol of perseverance and beam of hope for those watching the Games after such hard times.

As athletes will arguably be the most affected group of stakeholders of the Olympic Movement, they should be given voice and authority so that they are an active part in the decisions going forward. More than ever, they will be called on the international stage to inspire society at large, reinforcing the importance of sport and international events like the Olympic Games. As philosopher Heather Reid reflects on being able to witness Usain Bolt smashing the world record in Beijing, his "[...] fantastic feat gave me a qualitative feeling of what humanity is capable of and how we are all interconnected⁵ (p. 163)". While those experiences may not be likely to happen in Tokyo, the sheer presence of the athletes united and competing can provoke the same enthusiasm.

The aim is to increase the relevance of athletes as examples to follow as personification of the Olympic spirit through direct involvement in activities other than participation in the sports events. It is time, once again, for the Olympic Movement to prove its main role is not only to showcase the best athlete or the strongest nation, but to overcome hurdles, help each other, and unite in face of adversity. Athletes have a chance,

more than ever in modern times, to serve as role models for the whole world, from small children to the people in power. Some are already taking this role unto themselves, helping those in need or calling for a better world^{††}, and the Olympic Games are a perfect platform to inspire people to pursue deeper and bigger changes in a society that will have been deeply transformed by the challenges derived from the COVID-19 crisis.

Heroes in solidarity

The Olympic Games continue to be universally known as the sport hub where hundreds of nations gather and respectfully coexist for the duration of the event. As all nations will, to some extent, be recovering from an unprecedented collective trauma, the Olympic Games in 2021 can be a prime moment to spread ideas from the Olympic Charter and Agenda 2020 which emphasize the importance of being socially responsible and assisting others to create a unified world.

While it is certainly not within the reach of the Olympic Movement to cure the issues of contemporary society, or to balance out the many inequalities that scourge the world, the Olympic Games can continue to be a symbolic aspiration, a truce from many manifestations of intolerance, inequality, and hopelessness. Moreover, the display of positive attitudes and examples can arguably foster feelings of moral elevation.

Different historical periods have their own heroes. In Ancient Greece, these heroes were either the victors of wars or Olympic victors. During the present global crisis, society has been acknowledging those on the front lines of the battle against this pandemic as our contemporary heroes: healthcare personnel, care workers, and the scientists working on potential treatments and vaccines have been increasingly gaining the spotlight in many manifestations of support from society at large. They have themselves been embodying the Olympic values of solidarity, courage, and excellence, which is one of many examples of how these values are not restricted to sports, but translatable to a wide variety of work areas. In addition to those highly specialized individuals, essential workers who have hitherto been invisibilized are also being increasingly noticed (albeit perhaps still not properly acknowledged): truck drivers, grocery store workers, delivery

^{††} As the case of tennis player Nick Kyrgios, who after donating a large sum of money to combat bushfires in Australia this January used social media to organize delivery of food and supplies to those in need. Available at: <https://www.sportingnews.com/au/tennis/news/coronavirus-nick-kyrgios-keeps-promise-delivers-food-to-those-in-need/16dsy26k8eul31agy5lon69cry> [cited 13 Apr 2020].

people, to name a few, are being directly responsible for avoiding the shortage of supplies and food as many people try to abide to social distancing guidelines. It would not be unthinkable to propose that representatives of these selfless individuals should be considered to be carriers of the Olympic Flag during the Opening Ceremony. As they have made the difference locally to tackle issues that are global, those should be the guests of honor in what is set to be a celebration of the overcoming of unprecedented challenges; this could be symbolically achieved through the distribution of tickets to the competitions, for instance, or by paying homage to their many sacrifices and acts of service, without which it would have been impossible to even consider holding the Olympic Games one year later. It would also be an opportunity to re-signify what it means to be a ‘VIP’ in the Olympic Movement.

It is impossible to ignore the political importance and dimension of the Olympic Games, but the expected financial burden of rescheduling the Games, and their delivery amidst what is expected to be a global recession puts into perspective the need to have a large number of VIPs (and their escorts) present in the Games; moreover, this may reopen the discussion about who could and should be paying for the costs of transporting, feeding and lodging VIPs who would have clearly been able to cover their own costs to attend the Games. This discussion is not new - but like many other aspects, it may become more pressing as challenges grow and resources dwindle. Aside from the previously mentioned relief fund, a second pool of resources could be made from limiting the number of tickets given to VIPs, and downgrading the number of officials, VIPs and IOC members invited to Tokyo. The expenses that would be spent with their flights, accommodations and food would allow the Games to operate on a smaller scale allowing for easier management and an ease to the financial burden of hosting the rescheduled Games. With the resources that remain, the money can be used to support communities across the globe affected by COVID-19. For instance, this fund could be used as additional relief for citizens in need of economic help or towards disease prevention. These initiatives will provide a platform to launch awareness about the Olympic Movement around the world, hopefully inspiring people to act in similar ways.

Respect and friendship at the core of the Games

The recent editions of the Games have been heavily sponsored by The Olympic Partner Programme (TOP). This collection of global companies provides the finances needed to put forth both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. TOP sponsors also assist with presenting the Olympic values through their marketing strategies. A fundamental principle of the Olympic movement prioritizes respect to competitors, the environment and regulations. Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort and use the sport along with its athletes to model ideal human characteristics⁶. Thus, it would be beneficial for them to discuss how to ensure that the focus of the Games are on the Olympic values of the joy of effort instead of focusing on performance outcomes. After having athletes undergo a delay in their training towards peak performance during this pandemic, this switch in focus may remove some of the pressure from these competitors. The sponsors could provide support to the IOC as they undergo radical actions to change the dynamic of the execution of the Games with the replacement of valuable medals with symbolic awards and reducing the focus on breaking records or reaching the podium.

It is unclear what the world will look like after the COVID-19 pandemic has been overcome. After overcoming emergency measures such as lockdowns and closed borders to contain the virus, ‘Tokyo 2020’ can be a moment in which the world will have a chance to rejoice together, in a spirit of hope and friendship. This moment should not be tarnished by fear or discrimination, and there could be community based events that are organized to create enthusiasm for the Games after overcoming a global pandemic, and to help reintroduce people to an internationally diverse setting after months of travel bans and social distancing practices; the background of those initiatives could be the Olympic value of friendship, for instance. Presentations and activities can be in place to engage the public on all of the Olympic values. Revenue can be brought in through memorabilia being sold or auctioned off to support the execution of ‘Tokyo 2020’. These events can serve as an instrument to show citizens of the world that we can be (re)united as one, in a world that we choose to build based on values and higher ideals.

Conclusion

As stated by the IOC President Thomas Bach, these Games can be a ray of hope for humanity, a celebration of diverse cultures and unity which symbolizes that our strength lies in ‘hoping together’, ‘hoping’ for a better future, ‘hoping for happiness’ and the never-ending virtue of ‘trying’. After this daunting period, the Olympic Games can bring this whole world together under one umbrella of friendship and love to celebrate the Olympic spirit.

The Olympic Movement has faced a number of obstacles before. From the Paris and St. Louis Editions that almost ended the revival of Olympic Games, to the World Wars caused the cancellation of three summer and two winter editions of the Games, to the series of boycotts in the 1970s and 1980s, to the terrorist attacks in 1972 and 1996, many have jumped on the bandwagon to call the Olympics as something outdated.

A Montreal correspondent for *THE AWAKE* wrote in 1977 that "because of so many growing problems, many observers acknowledged that the future of the Games is in doubt⁷ (p. 8)", posing the question "are the Games as they were played here in Montreal dead?⁷ (p. 8)". Not only were they alive, but the Games had an even bigger crisis - the boycotts in 1980 and 1984 - and overcame them. Therefore, one can assume that this crisis may also serve as a steppingstone for the IOC to reevaluate itself and think of new ways to keep Olympism alive and functioning in a profoundly changed modern society.

The IOC has to come to terms with the challenge ahead and call for all spheres of society to help, from athletes to physical educators, from politicians to citizens from Host Cities to IFs. Olympism has the potential to keep inspiring people around the world, and those will be the people who will carry it further into the future. In the end, Olympism is a human movement that does not live in records, data, stadium or events, but in humanity itself, from Olympic medalists to spectators. In order for the Olympic flame to keep burning as a reminder of the many beautiful values fostered by Olympism, the Olympic Movement must face those unprecedented challenges with an open mind, candid intentions, and with a special attention to what society has to say. It may be impossible to know what the world will be like after this crisis is over - but it is not impossible to ensure that Olympism will remain as relevant and inspiring in a profoundly changed world.

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