

The puzzle of ‘good’ sport governance in a multicultural world

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As the world has become more interconnected over recent decades, sport has emerged as an important medium for cultural exchange, diplomacy, and social unity. Inherently international, sport is played between countries and, as the Olympic Charter prescribes, aims to foster friendship among nations. The responsibility of international sports governing bodies in this global context is to establish governance frameworks that are both consistent and fair for the diverse range of organisations and actors that participate in sport.³

Establishing and enforcing uniform governance arrangements across different cultural contexts has proven to be a difficult challenge, however. For example, organisations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) strive for sport to be independent of political interference, but this has been complicated in countries where sport and society are closely controlled by the government, particularly when local customs and norms are in play.⁴ Moreover, Western ideals commonly advocate for gender equality in sport governance, including equal pay and opportunities; however, such initiatives encounter resistance in some non-Western cultures where traditional gender roles remain deeply ingrained.⁵ Further, while Western sports bodies often prioritise transparency and open governance, those in Confucian societies like China may prefer a more discreet

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³ Geeraert (2019).

⁴ McLeod and Star (2020).

⁵ De Soysa and Zipp (2019).

approach, grounded in relational trust.⁶ These divergences can complicate cooperative governance efforts.

These cultural tensions highlight the complex relationship between universal governance standards and localised norms in contemporary sport. The issue raises pivotal questions about the feasibility and implications of applying standardised governance frameworks within culturally diverse settings.

The central thesis of this editorial is that ‘good’ sport governance in a multicultural world requires a nuanced balance between global standards and local cultural norms. Henry (2021) alluded to this argument, noting that Western principles — which primarily include democratic processes, transparency, accountability mechanisms, and social responsibility⁷ — should not be considered universally transferable to non-Western contexts.⁸ Henry cautioned against the global imposition of these principles by international sports governing bodies and introduced the concept of ‘multiple modernities’. This means that modern good governance in sport can take different forms, and that local cultural norms can and should influence how governance is implemented in sport. Henry’s argument suggests that acknowledging these ‘multiple modernities’ allows for a more culturally sensitive approach to governance that respects and integrates local customs.⁹

The concept of multiple modernities in sport governance requires further exploration and understanding — what exactly do multiple modernities of sport governance look like in the contemporary sport environment? Previous issues of this journal have offered some insight on this topic.¹⁰ A series of articles examined divergence in the composition of boards in national sports federations. Specifically, board size, diversity, and occupational backgrounds of directors in sports federations were found to vary significantly across national contexts. This literature broadly concluded that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to effective board composition. That is, no one approach is inherently better than another and context is key.¹¹

⁶ Girginov (2019).

⁷ See Geeraert (2018) for a detailed discussion.

⁸ Henry (2021).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Star and McLeod (2021).

¹¹ See the Journal of Sports Law, Policy and Governance 2021 issue. See also, McLeod et al. (2021); McKeag et al. (2023).

Other literature has analysed and compared data on board composition in national sport federations across Western and Eastern countries.¹² The authors advocate for further empirical research to compare and contrast the realities of board composition across cultures and countries, allowing for scholars to better understand how, and importantly why, various governance practices are applied in different jurisdictions.

Beyond board composition, the concept of multiple modernities would appear to extend into systemic and organisational governance structures. Different cultures have distinct approaches to governance structures that reflect their unique values, traditions, and social norms. For example, Western culture emphasises democratic decision-making, while Asian cultures lean more towards hierarchical authority. The challenge lies in integrating these divergent approaches when a global sport governance model is necessary.¹³ An uncritical imposition of Western democratic norms across varied cultural landscapes requires thoughtful consideration in terms of what it seeks to achieve and the values that underpin it. Communication practices also present an arena for cultural variance, and are influenced by values related to inclusivity, hierarchy, or individual autonomy. Transparency may not necessarily be a one-size-fits-all concept; rather, it may need to be adapted to local cultural contexts. However, arguably, this adaptation should not compromise overarching goals of accountability.¹⁴ The question of what transparency is, and how universal it is as a governance principle, is a significant question for sport governance practitioners and leaders to consider.

While the argument for multiple modernities of sport governance seems strong to us, its boundaries require careful critique. Emphasis on cultural difference might lead to relativism, where all cultural practices are seen as equally valid. This perspective may be problematic, especially when addressing practices that might conflict with human rights principles or ethical standards. Additionally, without careful consideration, the concept might be misused to justify practices deemed unethical or discriminatory under the guise of cultural uniqueness. These criticisms demand careful reflection and balanced consideration in pursuing a multicultural approach to sports governance.

¹² McLeod et al. (2021); McKeag et al. (2023).

¹³ Wang et al. (2005).

¹⁴ Henne (2015).

Based on the aforementioned perspectives and critiques, there is a great need for further investigation of this topic. Key areas for future research include understanding the interaction between local and global norms, mapping how local practices interact with global standards, and developing a nuanced appreciation of cultural differences in sport governance. As discussed above, this should include evidence-based research across Western countries and countries in the Global South. It is critical that voices of different stakeholders involved in sport governance are brought out through qualitative research methods. Research could also focus on developing culturally specific best practices that resonate with local cultures without compromising globally accepted ethical and governance principles. Another avenue could be to further build on research that examines the ethical boundaries of cultural relativism.¹⁵

It should be noted that the framing of international sport regulations and governance norms by Western stakeholders has been criticised in other areas of sport policy (including in the context of international anti-doping policy).¹⁶ Striking a balance between recognising cultural differences and local practices on the one hand, and the need for consistency and harmonisation on the other, is an enduring challenge for sport policy makers.¹⁷

In conclusion, the quest for ‘good’ sport governance in a multicultural world is a complex yet significant puzzle. Understanding how to govern sports effectively in a global context is not a task that can be accomplished without in-depth research and a genuine commitment to recognising the complexities of various cultural landscapes. A core ambition of the *Journal of Sports Law, Policy and Governance* is to build knowledge in this area. Indeed, the articles in this issue — and recent issues — provide insights into the development of policy and governance across diverse national contexts. These explorations collectively contribute to a richer understanding of the world of sport governance, embracing the opportunities and challenges presented by the multiculturalism that characterises our global society.

¹⁵ Giulianotti (2014).

¹⁶ See, Star (2023); Dimeo and Møller (2018).

¹⁷ Henry (2021).

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