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Why good governance should be a priority for each sport organisation

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In recent years, corruption and other integrity-related scandals in sport have tainted the image of sport. More and more stakeholders – sponsors, media, public authorities and even the general public – have raised questions on the current way in which federations and sport organisations are run in their countries and around the world. In some countries, public authorities have even made compliance with minimum standards of good governance mandatory for sport federations in order to be able to receive public subsidies.

Is sport as a sector more prone to integrity scandals?

Sport is no better or worse than any other part of society. The possibility of a scandal or an individual attempting a malicious practice cannot entirely be excluded. The challenge is in making sure that procedures are in place to mitigate the risk of such events to happen and to deal adequately with the outcomes when occurring. Nevertheless, sport has also other features that makes it more difficult to compare it with other sectors. It is for instance traditionally largely run by volunteers. Considering what sport means to society and how crucial sport is for tackling various societal challenges, sport can even be considered as a kind of public good. Another feature is that sport is based on clear values, such as the values of Olympism. Taking all these elements into consideration, in particular when such an emphasis is put on values and with a clear demand by the sport sector for autonomous self-regulation, it is logical that stakeholders demand that these values are embodied in all aspects.

How did sport organisations reply to these challenges?

More and more sport organisations have recently undertaken initiatives to enhance the governance of sport and thus to regain the trust of its stakeholders. One of the initiatives is the Olympic Agenda 2020 of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Within this Olympic Agenda, which can be seen as a strategic roadmap for the Olympic and sports movement, the IOC has included a number of recommendations related to good governance principles. In recommendation 27, the IOC calls upon all organisations belonging to the Olympic Movement to accept and comply with the Basic Universal Principles of Good Governance. The IOC has been developing tools for the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) to facilitate a process of self-assessment.



Another example is the Association of the Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF) that has set-up a Governance Taskforce to support its International Federations. Following a process of self-assessment, the ASOIF published a report in April 2017. In its next steps, it will compile good practices and will meet the Federations to individually review their assessments. Other steps, such as a certification system for IFs, might be considered as a follow-up in the near future.

But what about the national sport federations?

The EU Office of the European Olympic Committees (EOC EU Office) has implemented a number of good governance projects in recent years with a focus on national sport organisations.

One of these projects was the SIGGS Project (“Support the Implementation of Good Governance in Sport”). The outcome of this project was a self-assessment tool for National Olympic Committees and national sport federations. This tool is based on four key principles and allows each federation to evaluate their organisation by answering around 45 questions. The questions are to be answered by selecting the applicable scenarios. These five different levels enable the tool to take into consideration the current level of development.



The innovative element about the tool is that it allows each organisation to identify its weaknesses and to generate a customised Action Plan, tailored to the specific situation of the organisation, on concrete measures that can be taken to work on these weaknesses. It applies a step-by-step approach as the recommendations will allow each organisation to proceed from the current level to the next level (e.g. from level 2 to 3) rather than striving directly for the highest level, which might only be attainable for professional International Federations. Furthermore, the tool provides advice on key instruments that can be considered to support this process. Furthermore, more than a 100 good practice examples from national, European and international sport organisations have been combined to provide further guidance. The tool is freely available via: siggs.novagov.com.



What is there to gain for national sport federations?

While some might think that good governance is only a topic for European and international federations, it should be clear that there is a lot to gain from having solid governance arrangements. First of all, it can significantly increase the efficiency of your organisation. In an environment where all federations are fighting for the same resources – for instance from governments or sponsors – an efficient organisation will allow a federation to save resource, to provide better services for its members and athletes, and eventually, to get better sporting results. There are various examples of national federations that have reviewed their internal structures, adopted new strategies and developed new visions, which has put them on the pathway to sporting success. Another element is that good governance is essential for the stability and even the sustainability of the organisation. Without long-term thinking, succession planning for Board members, educational programmes for volunteers and staff members or risk management procedures, a successful future for the federation cannot be guaranteed. And finally, with more and more stakeholders demanding well-run organisations, it is important to lead by example and to be a trustworthy partner, rather than to have to deal with negative consequences of not taking any initiative.

Good governance should not be a mere compliance issue. It does not require additional activities that can only be undertaken by professional organisations with paid staff. Smaller organisations can equally consider certain actions or changes. Regular self-assessment will allow the organisation to consider what is feasible and what is desirable. It allows your organisation to be a frontrunner rather than one chasing the pack. And in sport, only the first ones fight for the medals.

