

RESEARCH BRIEF

## Sports Governance: Issues, Challenges and Perspectives

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Sports is a fact of life. It makes individual, families, and communities grow strong and healthy in so many ways—physically, emotionally, socially, and economically. Without sports activities, life appears to be dull, boring, and uneventful. With the advent of globalization of sports, the need to value it as a way of life becomes even more challenging and perplexing among nation-states, local institutions, sports organizations, and other sports stakeholders and actors, particularly in the field of governance.

More importantly, sports governance enables national sports to achieve greater heights—a source of national pride, joy, and honor for country and its people. Sports governance is an outstanding precondition and prerequisite for global prestige and reputation as sports excellence highly equates with social, economic, and political growth and development even making countries a sports haven for tourism.

In addition, sports governance envisions a condition in which sports serve as a catalyst for national and international peace, solidarity, and reconciliation, making sports a great equalizer, pacifier, and unifier for people and for all nations. A case in point, Shearer (2014) deeply emphasized when he espouse that:

Sport is one of the great commonalities of human beings. More people watch or play sports than almost any other human activity. Sport reflects

and affects ideas of race, sex, class, as well as national pride and identity. Sport can change a country's "brand", and, as I've learned from my career, sports can be an effective tool in the diplomat's playbook. (p. 53)

Sports governance is an emerging paradigm which implies the act of governing sports through the participation of various multiple actors and stakeholders such as the government, business and industry leaders, academe, and civil society organizations in the formulation, legitimization, and implementation of sports programs, policies, and projects for sports excellence and development. As sports organizations are required to become more professional and adopt a more transparent and accountable approach to their operations, it has become important for all students, researchers, and professionals working in sports to understand what governance is and how it should be achieved (O'Boyle & Bradbury, 2013).

Thereby, sports governance provides a significant means of renewing and reinvigorating people's interest and passion to actively engage in sports through projects, policies, and programs which can provide a source of motivation and encouragement for them, especially the young. Sports are often recognized as an opportunity to actively engage young people in a leisure context, and not just in terms of participation in

sport activities, but across a range of issues including education, employment and training, community leadership, and healthy lifestyles (Coalter, 2010).

Sports governance is an act of orchestrating, maneuvering, facilitating, and mobilizing the pool of talents, resources, approaches, and processes in a much broader, fuller, and wider continuum of sports actors, agents, and stakeholders across various sectors of society. It presupposes the interplay of policy-makers and policy-implementers, in the realm of sports, in determining the achievement of excellence in sports not only in an individual or local basis but more importantly on a collective and national level.

Clearly, the importance of sports organizations adopting good governance practices has become increasingly recognized by governments which often provide significant amounts of funding to these organizations. The guidelines and resources developed by the governments have tended to draw on the expertise of corporate governance experts or consultants from the non-profit field (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007, pp. 1-2).

Given these premises and assumptions, the paper will analyze and reflect on three selected issues and challenges which sports governance faces such as the sport and politics mix, centralization, and decentralization of sport governance; and the world and national legacy of sports, together with the various agents, actors, and stakeholders engage in the theory and practice of sports governance. Then, the paper will attempt to offer policy-opportunities and directions on sports governance as an implication and contribution to the field of sports studies literature.

Literature on sport governance was sought via electronic database EBSCO and Amazon.com searches and journal hand searching in the identification of the papers to be utilized and reviewed for the period of January 2000 to January 2015. The search was limited to articles and books on sport published in English. Integrative review was utilized based on the methodology of Whittenmore and Knafel (2005). An integrative literature review is sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of a topic and produce new knowledge through the synthesis of existing information.

## **Issues and Challenges in Sports Governance: Perspectives and Reflections**

### *On Sport and Politics Mix*

There is a concept in the world of sports that politics and sports do not mix. Just like the classical paradigm of Wilsonian doctrine in public administration, that administration should be freed from the hurry and strife of politics, same thing can be said of sports governance and administration—it should be emancipated and liberated from the array and conflict of politics. Sports governance is the domain of coaches, managers, trainers, players, athletes, and other sports actors and stakeholders devoid of rift, factionalism, and divisiveness which politicization process and mechanism brings.

In the national level, some national sports leaders and head of sports governing bodies quarreling or wrestling with the leadership are headlining the news in their quest for political power and authority. Sometimes, this results to political stalemates and deadlocks that results to sanctions and penalties, withdrawal of recognition accreditation, suspension, and, worst, preventive or lifetime bans from participating in sports events or tournaments. Such withdrawal and withholding of suspensions, penalties, and bans are dependent on the cessation of internal political tension and conflict within and among sports leaders, coaches, and trainers.

In theory, sports and politics do not really mix but in praxis, it is a fact that sports and politics do mix. Sports itself is an activity of contestation, competition, and clash of both human mind, body, and spirit not only among players but even among sports leaders, managers, coaches, and policy-implementers and policy-makers. Rather, sport is a social and political construction. That is, how sport is constituted and what is defined as sport are the outcomes of struggles, contests, and decisions that occur within particular societies at particular moments (Marjoribanks & Farquharson, 2011, p. 6).

To state that divorce and separation of sports and politics is possible, is itself a violation of nature. Sports cannot insulate and alienate itself from the rigors, intricacies, and complexities of politics because sports itself thrives under the world of politics, which

consists of men and women who tries to jostle, wrestle, influence, and compete for sports glory and supremacy as well as vying for the much coveted leadership, power, and authority.

But the idea of sports being freed from politics is in itself achievable, if one has to consider the degree of commitment and sacrifice one entails in relinquishing power, prestige, and position for the greater good instead of acquiring power motivated by greed, power, and ambition. There are also instances where, in the international and national sports, leaders have been there in power for the longest time but finds difficulty in letting go and hand over the new mantle of leadership to the new breed and new blood of sporting leaders, governors, and managers.

This is where the conflict arises, when the hordes of loyal supporters and followers of the long time reigning sports leaders are threatened by the emergence of new brand and innovative sports leaders. The former would do everything to wield its influence and power as well as charisma and connections to national government leaders and even going beyond the extent of getting the blessing and recognition of the leader of the world or international sports governing bodies where the national sports associations and organizations are affiliated with. Some sports disputes are even elevated to a legal battle, a competition done not in the basketball, volleyball, baseball, and football courts but in the courts of law in which sports are drag into legal and oftentimes a painful controversy.

As a result, contestations between national sports federations and associations—which is the legitimate and officially accredited association of the world sanctioning and governing bodies—and a breakaway and splinter sports federations, which also seeks the recognition and accreditation of the world governing body in which the sports event are affiliated will occur. Under such scenario, the world governing bodies issue sanctions, penalties, suspension, and in extreme cases, temporary or lifetime bans on national teams from competing and hosting international, national, and local competition sanctioned by such world governing bodies.

### *On Centralization and Decentralization System of Governance*

Sports governance also concerns itself with the appropriate structure and system which would best fit an effective and efficient sports program, projects, and policies. But such governance arrangement or structure will also depend on the nature, forms, and classifications of the government and the political system which a nation-state adheres upon.

The answer as to which is the best ideal structure of governance, whether a highly-centralized system or a decentralized mode of governance, varies from country to country as such success of a sports development program is measured from both microeconomic and macroeconomic standpoint. From a macro sports standpoint, centralized sports governance may be viewed as more effective in countries that adopt a unified and presidential system of government. The particular tendency of the national or central government to concentrate and centralize the powers, functions, responsibilities, and resources of sports governing bodies results in the development of elite sports which translates to winning numerous gold and medals in the Olympics and World Games.

The concept of a centralized system of sports governance implies that sports development must come from the top with a yearning that such sports development downstreams to the local communities—the grassroot level in particular. The centralized sports governance adopts a top to bottom approach which seeks to strengthen and solidify sports governors, leaders, and policy-makers at the top to provide long-term stability of sports development thrusts. It starts and builds up sports governance at the national level and ends and influences at the local or grassroot levels.

The centralization of sports governance allows sports leaders and governors greater control, command, and influence in the scouting, recruitment, and training of athletes and players, in the choice of trainers and coaches, but more importantly, in the utilization of funds and resources. A centralized form of sports governance provides sports governors a wider, fuller, and larger access to available funds and resources coming from the national or central government as sports governors and leaders are within the party structure of the government.

The degree of proximity and closeness of the sports leaders to the president, vice-president, and any cabinet officials for that matter also makes allocation and allotment for sports development funds more possible especially in elite sports or in events in which the country has a strong chance of winning. Such friendly and familial relationships, which exist between political and sports leaders, also result with the latter enjoying greater leverage to lobby and request for adequate funding on the construction of sports infrastructures such as sports stadiums and other sports halls and venues.

But the challenge of a centralized form of sports governance rests on its ability to make sports development and sports success more inclusive and equitable on the local and community level, particularly that of the grassroots level. Some national sports programs fail because local trainers, coaches, players, and athletes are not given the chance and exposure to show their wares as the choice of players, athletes, trainers, and coaches to don the national jersey and flag are made exclusive to the national training pool, mostly coming from the nation's capital, urban centers, and reputable universities and colleges.

A centralized structure of sports governance possesses the propensity and tendency to exclude outstanding players and athletes, coaches, and trainers in the selection process as excessive patronage and spoilage can be the dominant and influential behaviors in the selection of such. This is due to the deeply entrenched political relationships between sports leaders and political leaders, which weaken the participation and involvement of the local government in sports policy development.

Another challenge for a centralized structure of sports governance lies on its tendency to have a myopic vision of sports development. It is mainly concentrated and preoccupied with sports events in which the country has a strong chance of winning an Olympic gold, but may overlook the development of mass sports and other sports which have the potential and promises to deliver an Olympic gold in the future. The fixation to elite and popular sports as a matter of priority in terms of development and funding could actually undermine and stunt other less popular sports

to grow and flourish under a centralized system of sports governance.

A decentralized system of sports governance can be effective on a micro sports standpoint under a federalist form of government in which greater autonomy and freedom are given to sports governors, leaders, and associations in the determination of policy-choices and policy-opportunities. There will be decentralization and devolution of authorities, functions, and responsibilities that matched with decentralization and devolution of financial, material, logistical, manpower, and capability-building resources. A decentralized system of sports governance results in the development of mass-based sports rather than of elite sports.

Such sports governance system veers away from the populist and elitist brand of sport governance and instead focuses on the development of sports through the grassroots level with a hope that such development in the grassroots stream up to the regional and national sports development, and when sustained, can produce new breed of sporting heroes and icon in the international sports stage. It is like a bottom-up approach in sports governance where empowerment, participatory, deliberative, and stakeholdership approaches start and sprout in the grassroots level and end and blossom in the national and international sports arena.

A decentralized system of sports governance operates and thrives on a self-reliant, self-progressive, and self-independent manner of sports governance and has a certain degree of autonomy with regards to functions, authorities, and funding. It does not depend and rely entirely on the national or central government but also to the local government unit which is self-sufficient and self-efficacious in itself. Since it operates on a more independent manner, it is not beholden to the whims and caprices of any national sports leader and runs its sports clubs and organizations with relative freedom and ease on the local level.

A challenge on the decentralized system of sports governance lies on the sustainability and continuity of grassroots sports development as it may struggle to seek viable funding and subsidies to keep the grassroots sports development program in place. It can also lose hindsight of the fact that sports events which

are popular among the masses may not necessarily translate into winning gold in major international competition and events.

For example, basketball, which is tall man's game, may be a top priority agenda in some countries because of its immense popularity, but because height does matter in playing basketball. It may force some sports policy leaders to rethink and redirect their priorities on sports which do not require height as comparative edge in winning games, like bowling, billiards, baseball, soccer, and boxing and not insist on basketball as a top sports agenda.

Another challenge for a decentralized system of sports governance rests on its ability to establish and create networks with both private and public sector as a matter of reinvention. It cannot entirely close its doors on the opportunity to seek the assistance of private corporations as a form of public-private partnership in the promotion of sports development in the grassroots level. Neither can it afford to think that it is in itself sufficient to be well-governed without the support of the national or central government. Because with the advent of globalization of sports, a sports development program without adequate financial support is bound to fail.

#### *On World and National Legacy*

A host country staging an Olympic Games or a World Championships brings honor and pride to the nation and its people. After all, bidding to host the games is not an easy task. What more if the award is given to the host country or city to stage the games? It also becomes a source of joy among its citizens and galvanizes their collective efforts to make such event a resounding success through voluntary action to help the games in whatever capacities they can perform.

But hosting games entail a lot of challenges on the part of the host country or city—like the construction of sports structures or mega structures such as the Olympic village, sports stadium, scheduling of games and its venue, crowd control, security concerns, budget and financial requirements, and more importantly, it has to contend with the national and international opinion on their performance in staging such prestigious

event from the opening ceremony up to the closing ceremony. The key elements for consideration in such an approach include: the idea of sustainable sport development legacy; assigning functions to Olympic sports development; collective intentionality; collective rules; and the human capacity to deal with the environment (Girginov & Hills, 2009).

On a global opinion level, the host country may be scrutinized and evaluated on the basis of quality of its sports facilities and infrastructures; efficiency of transport and mobility; fair and impartial officiating; adequate food, housing, and accommodation; friendliness of its people; effective security measures; efficient communication systems; and other variables or indicators which represent either the success or debacle of hosting such games of such grand proportion. Grix (2013) enunciated the possible issues and questions which can arise in holding Olympic Games when he stated that:

The Games offer an ideal test case in questions around resource allocation, political intrigue and corruption, hegemonic and 'manufactured consent' about the positive aspects of such events, private versus public service provision, the corporatisation of publicly funded sports events, and the ability of an unelected, non-transparent organisation to impose legislative changes on the host state relating to tax, regeneration and sponsorship – in short, much more than simply the study of sport. (p. 22)

On a national public opinion level, the host city may be criticized not only in terms of how the world or other countries rate the performance on the above-mentioned indicators but also at home on whether the hosting of the event provided tangible benefits and value to the economic progress of the country. Some may inquire on whether staging the games in their own city is worth-hosting given the huge amount of money spent for the sports buildings and structures like an Olympic Stadium or a World Cup Soccer Stadium, which amount could be allotted for basic social services such as constructing roads and bridges, textbooks and school buildings, homes and shelters, water and

sanitation facilities, and other basic services to promote the common good of the people in a long-term basis.

There are instances wherein Olympic or world cup projects turn into ghost stadiums in which such stadiums are left under-utilized after being maximized during the games or worse, left the city in financial woes after staging the event. In addition, some cause-oriented or civil society groups may expose the luxurious and extravagant massive spending of the government at the expense of public funds to show to the world the grandest hosting of the event while overlooking the much more pressing needs of their citizens for increase sports participation.

Other sectors on their part may cite that hosting an Olympic and World game further pronounces and exacerbates social justice and equity issues. Ticket prices can only be afforded by the rich and the middle class while the poor masses cannot afford to buy such tickets, hence, depriving them to watch the games. If they were able to watch the games, it is only from afar, usually from the bleachers or general admission area, as prices in the lower box, upper box, or ringside are beyond their financial capacity.

## Conclusion

Sports is an important field of governance. Sports mirrors and reflects the particular nation or society's values, character, spirit, and excellence. It is becoming more essential that sports are managed, governed and administered on the basis of the knowledge on the issues and challenges at hand. Acquiring a sense of awareness on the prevailing concerns of sports governance provides them the ability to regulate, moderate, control, and balance the excesses or absences of politics, decentralization, centralization, unification, and division, as well as world and national public opinion.

Sports stakeholders and players for instance can settle difference and disagreements on a participatory, stakeholdership, deliberative, and consensual form of governance in which all voices are taken into consideration before arriving on sports policy decision. Sports governance, which is anchored on trust, accountability, transparency, and honesty,

also diminishes the prospect of factionalism and divisiveness brought about by differences in sports philosophy, culture, and geography.

As to the manner of sports governance, sports policy-makers can consider under the principle of complementation, as to when decentralization and centralization system of sports governance can co-exist. It is a necessity to search and find the equilibrium as to when to centralize and decentralize the system of sports governance as a result of a sports consultative assembly or sports summit that would tackle such matter.

Finally, sports stakeholders need to carefully weigh the public opinion and sentiment first before actually attempting to enter the bidding process of hosting an Olympic or World Games to ensure that the community, people, and society are united in such endeavor. Olympic and World legacy could bring momentous and transient feeling of pride and honor but national disgust and frustration as an aftermath could generate longer impact on people's confidence on the government especially if there is a disconnect and dichotomy of public opinion with that of the government opinion on holding a sporting event of such magnitude. The exceptional case of international exposure through sport mega-events lies within a political agenda that seeks more than just the purported economic and social gains these events may bring (Cornelissen, 2010).

In the end, sports governance legitimacy involves the collective and cooperative efforts of all the sports stakeholders such as the government, civil society, private sectors, and industry in the quest for a viable sport policies, programs, and projects which entirely benefit all citizenry regardless of their socio-economic class, cultural outlook, geo-political arrangement, and physical attributes. Sports governance that includes all and excludes no one makes everybody within the loop and makes sports for all is its true hallmark for its effectiveness and legitimacy.

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