

Event Review:

The IOC's International Forum on Sport, Peace and Development (IFSPD), Lausanne, 2009.

Ana Adi

In May 2009, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) hosted its first Forum on Sport, Peace and Development at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.

The event brought together over 250 representatives from National Olympic Committees (NOCs), International Sports Federations, Non-Governmental Organizations, Olympic cities and academic institutions, along with high ranking officials from the United Nations, UNESCO, World Trade Organization, World Health Organization, UNICEF, UNHabitat, the Red Cross, Olympic Solidarity and the IOC, along others.

The IOC indicated that the conclusions of the forum would be presented at the 2009 Olympic Congress in Copenhagen and that the event intended to find progressive solutions 'to use the enormous potential of sport, its power of communication, its

reach, its effect on the community and young people in particular, and its influence' (IOC, 2009b). While the mode of delivery was similar to other IOC organized conferences, the IFSPD was new on several grounds. First, it was transmitted live on the web and second, it indirectly promised to approach a topic that provokes many debates about the IOCs humanitarian mission and its role in promoting human rights.



IOC President Jacques Rogge, Lausanne 2009

The programme showed no clear connection between sport, peace and development talks and human rights. However, its participants and many speakers

came from institutions and organisations that work towards the improvement of human rights. Furthermore, it was apparent within the speakers' language that the absence of peace precludes the enjoyment of fundamental human rights and so work towards peace should also be seen as work towards promoting human rights.

The IOC is regularly asked to address aspects of human rights. Rights issues arise when awarding the Games to a new city, in part due to the range of conflicts the decision often gives rise to, such as the frequent 'forced evictions' that occur through urban planning around Olympic venues. It also arises in the context of employment rights, as venues construction can often generate concerns about how the operation takes place. For example, in the building of Athens 2004 venues, an excessive number of workers died in the process in work-related incidents and there was some concern that the intense work conditions had put them at risk. Rights issues are also present in a range of other matters, such as the presence of ethnic minorities at the Games, or gender equality.

However, ever since 2001, when Beijing was awarded the 2008 Olympic Summer Games, many groups – most of which are based in the Western world – called for boycotts and protests against Beijing arguing that an organization with such high

ideals as the IOC should not have awarded the Games to a country whose human rights record is left wanting. The most virulent exemplars of this concern were made manifest in 2008, particularly during the Torch Lighting Ceremony in Olympia and the International Torch Relay, where opposing groups met in the streets in various parts of the world. Furthermore, repeated requests from accredited and non-accredited media representatives in Beijing for an open Internet and freedom of movement added more pressure to this controversial and sensitive topic. As further evidence of the challenge facing the IOC in promoting peace and human rights, global political events can often arise around Games time, thus jeopardizing its mission. For example, shortly after the Beijing 2008 Games started, the Republic of Georgia and Russia interrupted their diplomatic relations and resorted to armed conflict over the South Osetia region, thus breaking the Olympic Truce agreement made by Olympic nations.

A peaceful society requires the respectful recognition of human rights, while also permitting a negotiation of those rights to take place at a domestic level. Promoting peace and a peaceful society through sport appears to be one of the IOC's core concerns and, insofar as sports are practices of intercultural dialogue, it seems reasonable that

sport can offer a unique potential to further peace promotion.

The IFSPD sessions focused on a variety of topics ranging from the potential of sport in peace work, the promotion of a culture of peace among young people or sport for community and youth development, to Olympic education, healthy lifestyles, Olympic legacy and networking. Each of these areas stressed the catalytic power of sport in uniting people for a common cause as well as the positive example it can provide to youth.

After a short film about the Olympic values and some introductory remarks from IOC Director General, Urs Lacroix, the session was officially opened by Jacques Rogge, President of the IOC. His speech focused on the symbolic power of sport and its potential to promote peace. However, he also indicated that sport alone cannot bring about peace, which is why special thanks were given to Wilfried Lemke, Special Adviser of the UN Secretary General on Sport for Development and Peace, and his colleagues from the UN system arguing that 'the successful delivery of the Olympic Values depends largely on the cooperation with the UN system' (IOC, 2009a). Numerous examples were given to highlight the fruitful and smooth working relationship and common goals that exist between the IOC and the UN, including the Sports for Peace programme that took place

in various African countries like Liberia and Kenya.

President Rogge stressed that the Olympic Movement is a people movement, about young people especially, who must have the opportunity to practice sport in the Olympic spirit of friendship and fair play. Yet, while it seemed that Rogge would suggest that the IOC would work more with the UN in supporting peace, he concluded that sport is the IOC's main business.

The presentations that followed reinforced Rogge's ideas, by bringing case studies in support. They focused on how short-term campaigns happening in schools from poverty or conflict stricken areas have made sport available, without discrimination, to any individual. These opportunities have provided children with positive examples and a sense of purpose in life, taking them away from guns and drugs. This was the message delivered by, among others, Wilfried Lemke, HRH Prince Faisal Al Hussein of Jordan, Edwin Odur-Luru, Social Worker, and Ernst Suur, Project Advisor from Warchild Uganda, and HE Suleyman Olad Roble, Minister of Youth and Sport of the Somalian Government.

Alternatively, Dr Timothy Armstrong, representing the WHO, discussed the current trends of youth physical activity. He indicated that there has been a drastic decrease in youth's involvement in physical activities and the increase in non-

communicable diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes all over the world, not only in the urban agglomerations in the north-western hemisphere. It is, in some spheres, considered that such trends, together with the IOC's faith in the power of sport for peace promotion, that inspired the organization of the Youth Olympic Games in Singapore next year. Prof. Margaret Talbot, President of the International Council on Sport Sciences and Physical Education (ICSSPE) described changing gender norms and stereotypes that are emerging through sport. She described the ongoing involuntary discrimination that takes place both in the arena and outside of it. Her talk called for more cultural awareness and more tolerance, values that are integral to the fundamental principles of Olympism.

Within the programme, only one keynote address responded directly to the human rights topic, and that was the intervention of Hein Verbruggen, President of the General Association of International Sports Federations and former Chairman of the Coordination Commission of the Beijing Olympic Games. He started from the DNA of the Olympic brand and the long-lasting positive legacy the Games leave to education, environment, infrastructure, culture and economy of the host cities and countries.

He continued by giving a series of examples that emphasized the positive impact of the Olympic Games in China, bringing about transformations in physical education, which now reaches more than 40% of the Chinese population. He also spoke about the Olympic education programmes' popularity among youth and a "special kind of legacy" resulting from the promotion of Olympic values in an effort of the IOC to make a better a world by promoting peace and a peaceful society. He added:

The IOC has a set of ideals that are based upon classical virtues having to do with tolerance, solidarity, respect, fair play, non-discrimination, inclusivity, friendship, character, courage, dedication, loyalty and things like that, so it is with these virtues that we are striving to fulfill the potential of the Olympic Games and to realize a peaceful society and this means that what we, the IOC, are striving for is not based upon rights that people have according to let's say the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That is not our role. We believe that sport practiced in line with the classical virtues I just mentioned contributed to the harmonious development of mankind which promotes in turn a peaceful society (IOC, 2009a).

Looking back through Olympic history and the IOC's relationship with the UN, affirming that the IOC values have nothing to do with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights seems unnecessarily divisive. Certainly, the founder of the Modern Olympic Movement, Pierre de

Coubertin wanted sports to be available for all, an aspiration that the IOC has continuously attempted to facilitate and provide.

Yet, it is also true that the first non-discrimination clause in the Olympic Charter appears in 1949, less than a year after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was voted. Furthermore, based on this non-discrimination clause, the IOC, closely supported by the UN, has led its fight against apartheid in South Africa. Therefore, Mr Verbruggen's statement, although attempting to set Olympism apart from the Western-centric liberal interpretations of human rights, seems to be at odds with the important role that the UN has played in shaping the spirit of the Olympic rules and regulations.

Mr Verbruggen's supported his argument on the expressed IOC mission:

The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity (IOC, 2007:11)

Thus, Verbruggen emphasized that the IOC is happy if legacy goes beyond the promotion of a peaceful society, as is sometimes evident in the long-term changes in a city and country. Yet, he also emphasizes that the IOC's role is not to promote human rights

arguing that "certain NGOs have taken that out of context and filled it in with their definition of human dignity" (IOC, 2009a).

Yet, Mr Verbruggen did not address the fact that Article 4 of the Fundamental Principles in the Olympic Charter describes sport participation as a *human right* as well as to make mentions to the first article.

1. Olympism is 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 and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles

4. The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play. The organisation, administration and management of sport must be controlled by independent sports organizations (IOC, 2007:11).

These Articles emphasize universal fundamental ethical principles, which were also used by certain NGOs (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters without Border, PEN – among the most active) when calling for support from the IOC.

Therefore, while Mr Verbruggen's claim that each

institution has its agenda, which it will use to appropriate the Olympic Games for its own ends, it is also true that the Olympic principles, together with the strong relationship that it has with the UN, gives ground to activist groups to expect more action from the IOC in the direction of supporting and protecting human rights.

Mr Verbruggen also commented that the IOC is a non-political organization that works with politicians because it needs to in order to see its mission and goals attained. Further clarification into whether the IOC's work with politicians is a mere result of an instrumental need or of an analysis that deems political relationships profitable for the IOC. Similarly, some explanations on why the IOC seeks and considers political support is so important for the promotion of values that are universally recognized were needed as well. Undoubtedly, the Olympic Games requires considerable political cooperation, though how much of this quiet diplomacy extends beyond sport?

The forum concluded with the Forum's recommendations, one of which highlights the broader role that the Olympic Movement plays in producing opportunities for social development:

To emphasize that the Olympic Movement will commit itself to using its influence to build support among political, community and civil society leaders in order to mobilize action around sport and recreational initiatives, promoting peace, development and the integration of sport and recreational programmes into all schools, ensuring, where applicable, that schools engage with the Olympic family, community groups, sports federations, government authorities and local clubs to maximize opportunities for sport and physical activity (IOC, 2009c).

Despite not going far enough, Mr Verbruggen's articulation of the IOC's role in human rights promotion is an unequivocal and important contribution to the debate. It is perhaps the first time that the IOC has openly faced opposing positions and has engaged a dialogue, even if indirect about the future work in this area. To this end, Verbruggen's remarks might signify a change in how the IOC communicates and interacts with its supporters and critics. Yet, after the Beijing Olympics, the activism and protests that took place alongside the international leg of the torch relay has led to this component of the Olympic Games being suspended and one might conclude that this is a major lost opportunity to facilitate more dialogue across nations.

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