

# Corporate Social Responsibility and Football Clubs

Subjects: Communication

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On October 2020, Real Betis Balompié, a football club located in Seville (Andalucia), presented the Forever Green programme, a global programme of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) that, through the club's foundation, enables the entity to position itself in areas of sustainable development and environment at a global level. This project was preceded by a sponsorship initiative with the Green Earth project, as well as having been the first football club to sign the United Nations' Climate Change Now initiative.

Keywords: sustainability ; environment

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## 1. Social Responsibility and Sponsorship: A Conceptual Delimitation

Research on CSR is not a new field of study. For instance, Bowen <sup>[1]</sup>, Campos <sup>[2]</sup>, Bigné et al. <sup>[3]</sup>, Villagra et al. <sup>[4]</sup>, Sen, Bhattacharya and Korschun <sup>[5]</sup> and Arimany-Serrat and Sabata <sup>[6]</sup> have made some interesting contributions in this regard. They state that CSR actions must be strategically planned in companies, integrated into management systems and their stakeholder relationships <sup>[7][8]</sup>, and chosen in such a way that they are related to the organisation so that the benefits and identification are as close as possible. Further, Villagra et al. <sup>[4]</sup> consider that "the basic problem that CSR communication faces is, in short, a problem of source credibility. If the organisation is perceived as sincere (sincerity) and is capable of doing what it says and with experience in doing it (competence), the message will be accepted by the receiver" (p. 45).

Complementarily, from the perspective of the communication sciences, what interests researchers is the perception that consumers have of the CSR actions <sup>[9]</sup>. It should be noted that there are seminal studies, like that of Bigné et al. <sup>[3]</sup>, which stated that "in the purchasing decisions between two product categories, CSR is not a very relevant criterion". This study was done with young university students from Argentina, Chile, Spain and Portugal. But five years later the concept of CSR had evolved and the position of consumers as well—towards favouring the consumption of products and services that have sustainability and care for the environment among their values.

For this reason, at present, in the choice of brand by consumers it is decisive that "the actions of social responsibility offer visible benefits for the company, and it is important to communicate the implementation of these actions to consumers and the general public" (p. 160) <sup>[10]</sup>. In the third decade of the 21st century, a communication in values linked to sustainability and concern for the environment due to the dire impact of human beings on nature are decisive in purchase choice; and in the legitimization of brands and great sporting events <sup>[11]</sup>. CSR actions, therefore, in their different aspects, are a good choice to vindicate the values of the organisation and recover them for the image they give to their current and potential consumers.

Apart from CSR, we need to bear in mind that there are other very useful marketing instruments for communicating values: for example, sponsorship <sup>[12][13][14][15]</sup>. For Capriotti <sup>[14]</sup>, sponsorship represents a new way of thinking of the organisation, a style of conduct of the sponsoring entity, and a different way of approaching business activity; and not just as one more investment in publicity. That is why through sponsorship the brand acquires a deep bond with the one that is sponsored, be it an event or a football club, such as the one we present in this research (the Real Betis Balompié). A sponsorship is much more than a simple advertisement, and a sponsor too: it is a communication weapon where the advertising organisation and the recipient of the sponsorship create synergies around a common goal through different actions. To conclude, Palencia-Lefler <sup>[13]</sup> states that "sponsors and sponsored must share the successes that good communication brings to the image and reputation of the patron or sponsor" (p. 169).

## 2. Sport, Environmental Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility: The Current Situation

The concept of sustainability, in relation to sport, has been approached in various ways. There is no doubt that what has generated most research is the analysis of financial and economic sustainability. The work of, for example, Andreff <sup>[16]</sup> on

French football, Dantas et al. <sup>[17]</sup> on football in Portugal, Safakly et al. <sup>[18]</sup> on football in Turkey, and Solntsev <sup>[19]</sup> on Russian football stand out. Furthermore, there is extensive literature on the economic sustainability of the FIFA and UEFA football model, and the implementation of regulations to ensure the economic soundness of the clubs <sup>[20][21]</sup>.

Sustainability in sports research has also been linked to architecture and infrastructure design <sup>[22][23]</sup>, physical education and the study of sports performance <sup>[24]</sup> and the management and planning of major sporting events <sup>[11][25]</sup>. In fact, according to González-Serrano, Añó-Sanz and González-García <sup>[26]</sup>, sport mega-events and sustainability is the most developed sub-area of research, based on their bibliometric analysis of the articles about sustainable sports entrepreneurship and innovation published between 2000 and 2009 in the Web of Sciences Core Collection. Paché <sup>[11]</sup>, after analysing the main environmental controversies linked to the celebration of the Qatar 2022 World Cup, considers that the “the 2022 FIFA World Cup is simply an almost idealised representation of the society of the spectacle, it underlines the destructive madness that professional football carries in its irrational use of the planet’s resource” (p. 93) <sup>[11]</sup>. However, he does feel that there are reasons to be optimistic: “Sustainable initiatives are moving in the right direction, even if they remain anecdotal. For example, in April 2019, a football field designed from 50,000 recycled cups was inaugurated in Sochi (Russia). The sports facility, known as the ReCup Arena, was built by one of FIFA’s official sponsors, Budweiser, who recycled cups used during the 2018 FIFA World Cup” (p. 93) <sup>[11]</sup>.

In this field of study, a specific review of the studies that have focused on the intersection between social responsibility and football clubs needs to be carried out <sup>[27][28][29][30][31][32][33][34][35][36][37][38]</sup>. Olabe <sup>[28]</sup> associates the clubs’ CSR strategies with reputation and the generation of business assets, shifting from being sports entities to international brands. Meanwhile, Ordeix and Ginesta <sup>[37]</sup>, using a stakeholders’ approach, analyse the sports foundations of FC Barcelona and RCD Espanyol as the source of their CSR actions, being an added value of the organisation and product, “creating a circle of dependent communication between the commercial and social areas through the corporate path” (p. 191). As Ginesta <sup>[38]</sup> explains, the foundations of FC Barcelona, and also of Real Madrid and Manchester United, were key to the international expansion of the brands and their consequent transformation into “entertainment multinationals”.

The research of Kolyperas et al. <sup>[36]</sup> considers the development of CSR based specifically on examples of Scottish football. Breitbarth and Harris <sup>[34]</sup> propose a conceptual model that describes a greater awareness and integration of CSR in the football business where competitiveness of the game is promoted and additional political, cultural and humanitarian value for the stakeholders is generated. It is based on case studies from four key countries that currently dominate the shaping of the debate on CSR and that are vital to the game itself: England, Germany, Japan and the United States. With respect to English football, Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury <sup>[29]</sup> analyse the particular routines of the managers of the foundations of 21 clubs in the country’s two main leagues (Premier League and the Championship) and the way in which their own strategic vision connects with the complexity inherent in the implementation processes of social responsibility policies in sports organisations. Finally, Moyo et al. <sup>[30]</sup> analyse the impact of CSR actions on the deployment of marketing strategies of six sports organisations in South Africa, including football clubs, concluding with some recommendations to improve their integration.

López-Martínez and Fernández-Fernández <sup>[35]</sup> defend a proactive attitude of ethical and socially responsible management. They also claim that CSR actions have started to be considered for competitive advantage in terms of reputation. In this regard, analysing the Forever Green project, we could mention Real Betis Balompié as a pioneer in establishing a global strategy with respect to sustainability.

Over time, corporate social responsibility has evolved into the need for purposeful branding. Reinforcing this idea, we also have to consider the implementation of a different type of sponsorship from the one that is becoming common in other businesses: so-called solidarity sponsorship. Lobillo, Ginesta and Badia <sup>[15]</sup>, after studying the cases of FC Barcelona and UNICEF and Málaga Club de Fútbol and UNESCO, define it as a contract for which the sponsor (visible, for example, on the shirt) becomes sponsored by receiving income thanks to a reverse sponsorship contract, where the clubs benefit from the image of non-governmental organisations to try to improve their brand positioning and obtain other future income <sup>[15]</sup>.

Beyond solidarity sponsorship, and in line with what are considered “brands with a purpose”, LaLiga also carries out CSR actions essentially related to recycling and the attainment of good practices oriented towards sustainability. In addition to Real Betis Balompié, other Spanish football clubs carry out specific actions <sup>[39]</sup>.

This is the case of Club Deportivo Leganés in collaboration with the recycling company Ecoembes in 2018, with the initiative “We are special, WE RECYCLE” to promote the selective collection of containers at the Butarque stadium. This recycling was linked to a social action through an economic donation to the Spanish Prader-Willi Syndrome Association.

Real Zaragoza collaborates with the Ecodes Foundation to offset the carbon footprint produced during their trips through reforestation projects. This carbon footprint amounts to the equivalent of “33.85 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>” (p. 58) <sup>[39]</sup>. Club Deportivo Numancia is also carrying out a project that aims to evaluate the possibilities of using rainwater to meet the non-potable water requirements of its sports facilities in Soria, specifically for the irrigation of the football pitch.

Real Club Deportivo de La Coruña has signed a contract with the company Ecoalf as sponsor of non-sports clothing that will be worn by the players on their trips, with a sustainable collection with fabric generated from trash from the bottom of the oceans. Finally, Valencia Club de Fútbol offers, through its foundation and training centre, a course to manage the resources of any sports entity in an economically and environmentally sustainable way.

### **3. The Environmental Sustainability as the Basis of the Brand Value**

The disciplines of marketing and branding have also included environmental sustainability in their research. In fact, Menon and Menon <sup>[40]</sup>, Ellen et al. <sup>[41]</sup>, Henderson and Arora <sup>[42]</sup>, Chabowski et al. <sup>[43]</sup>, Hunt <sup>[44]</sup>, Achrol and Kotler <sup>[45]</sup> and Kumar and Christodouloupoulou <sup>[46]</sup> provide interesting contributions where a transdisciplinary perspective on these concepts is key to understanding the importance of environmental sustainability for any marketing or branding strategy of an organisation, including sports.

In fact, the growing importance of sustainability in the creation of brand value is justified because “it is important for companies to recognize that their actions or inactions impact the future prospects and that sustainability is a passport to a secure future” <sup>[46]</sup> (p. 6). Kumar and Christodouloupoulou argue that companies should contribute value to society and thus need to “shift from shareholder capitalism to responsible capitalism. Embracing this responsibility to society and the environment, in addition to the shareholders, is at the core of sustainability” (p. 6) <sup>[46]</sup>.

Kotler <sup>[47]</sup>, Kumar and Christodouloupoulou <sup>[46]</sup>, as well as Grubor and Milovanov <sup>[48]</sup>, explain that integrating the values of environmental sustainability in the design of the brand does not only mean communicating them through advertisements, product packaging and other promotional materials, but also requires a change in company processes and attitudes. The implementation of sustainable attitudes and practices is, therefore, a strategic decision of the company that radiates across all its dimensions, where the results need to be communicated and the brand must be able to value and allow the creation of associations with public objectives <sup>[46]</sup>.

In addition, as Grubor and Milovanov <sup>[48]</sup> point out, brands are powerful instruments of change that allow us to modify the behaviour of consumers. Further, the introduction of “sustainable brand management has the potential to bring together multiple requests between consumers, companies and society, creating win-win situations for all the actors involved” (p. 84) <sup>[48]</sup>.

Corporate values linked to environmental sustainability are not only a powerful asset for commercial brands, but the discipline of place branding has also placed them at the centre of the new narratives of cities, regions and countries that embrace a perspective linked to sustainable development <sup>[49][50][51]</sup>. However, Rinaldi et al. <sup>[49]</sup> warn us that, under the current neoliberal economic system, the principles of environmental sustainability have been dissociated from its practices, leading to what Higgins-Desbiolles <sup>[52]</sup> called “greenwashing”. In this way, in the field of city marketing it could occur that the values of sustainability were simply a communicative façade that are not applied in the practices and actions of the local administration. And the same can happen in the corporate sphere.

This is where Rinaldi et al. <sup>[49]</sup> advocate finding “boundary spanners, that is, agents that carry out boundary work” (p. 2), managing the boundary between two groups and capable of seeking a common space between the interests of different stakeholders. In fact, Rinaldi et al. <sup>[49]</sup>, and also Lundberg <sup>[53]</sup> and Van Meerkerk and Edlendos <sup>[54]</sup>, have highlighted the need to find these change agents to reinforce multi-stakeholder cooperation, as well as when referring to projects of sustainable development. They identify these agents as “skilful networkers that are able to bridge different interests, connect different stakeholders in collaborative environments, and promote dialogue to create shared interests towards common action” <sup>[49]</sup> (p. 3).

### **4. Real Betis Balompié: A Model of Andalusian Football**

Real Betis Balompié is a club based in Seville and founded in 1914 as a result of the merger of two old clubs in the Andalusian capital: Sevilla Balompié and Betis Football Club. The former was founded in 1907 by students of the Polytechnic School who were pursuing a military career or medicine; and the latter was founded in 1909 as a split from the Sevilla Football Club. However, the club adopted 12 September 1907 as its founding date <sup>[55]</sup>.

Its highest awards are a league championship, obtained in the 1934–35 season, and two King's Cups (1977 and 2005). The current stadium of Real Betis is the Benito Villamarín Stadium, with a 60,271-seat capacity, and next to it is the Ciudad Deportiva Luis Del Sol. It is the fourth Spanish football team with the most fan clubs (it currently has more than 450) and has more than 50,000 members. Currently, Real Betis can also be considered a sports club, because apart from football (men and women's) it has a professional basketball team (Coosur Real Betis) and futsal team (Real Betis Futsal) [55].

In sports research, there has been little scientific study on Real Betis Balompié, which can basically be divided into three areas. Aguilar [56][57] has studied the club from its historical perspective, while González [58], Maya and Bohórquez [59] and Aguado-Méndez et al. [60] has provided contributions from the point of view of sports performance and sports psychology, using the club as a case study. Finally, within a field that is closer to that of this article, Ginesta [61], Toledano et al. [62] and Lobillo-Mora and Smolak-Lozano [63] analyzed the way in which the club communicates with its target audiences, based on stakeholder theory or the structural analysis of its corporate media.

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