

# Environmentally Sustainable Initiatives in Sport

Subjects: [Social Issues](#) | [Environmental Studies](#)

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Environmentally Sustainable Initiatives in Sport (ESIS) are all the initiatives that sport organisations conceptualize, plan, execute, and report concerning the environmental dimension. As one element of the triple bottom line (TBL) dimension (social, environmental and economic) these environmental sustainable initiatives go far beyond the typical cost-cutting objective. The achievement, communication, and awareness of ESIS are an effective economic and social asset for sports organizations, their stakeholders and society at general.

environmentally sustainable initiatives in sports (ESIS)

sports organizations (SO)

health and well-being

stakeholders

## 1. Introduction

Sports industry, in particular professional sports organizations, has an enormous capacity to influence consumer behaviour <sup>[2]</sup><sup>[3]</sup><sup>[4]</sup>.

Professional sports organizations, concerning environmental sustainability, have gradually come to carry out initiatives with the aim of sensitizing their stakeholders, thus expecting direct and indirect gains. However, there is a huge lack of knowledge of these initiatives regarding the results <sup>[6]</sup>, and further analysis and strategies should be followed <sup>[7]</sup>.

The visibility that sport has allows reaching an audience of millions of people, from all social classes, relating the possibility of doing business in the most varied sectors <sup>[9]</sup>. Professional sports organizations are extremely powerful in the world <sup>[10]</sup>, being able to influence the environmental behavior of the various stakeholders <sup>[2]</sup><sup>[3]</sup><sup>[4]</sup>. In fact, due to its past of community involvement, civic engagement, and social well-being, the more frequent carrying out of sustainability initiatives by professional sports organizations “can be seen as an extension of their social responsibility” <sup>[11]</sup> (p. 76).

Every day, millions of users take advantage of the services provided by sports organizations <sup>[7]</sup>. The characteristics of the sports industry, with the high number of fans traveling to the games, the various consumptions made during the events (i.e., energy, food), the construction of large infrastructures with the consequent necessary maintenance, the trips of the teams and all the associated logistics, among others, make this industry highly impacting on the environment <sup>[12]</sup>.

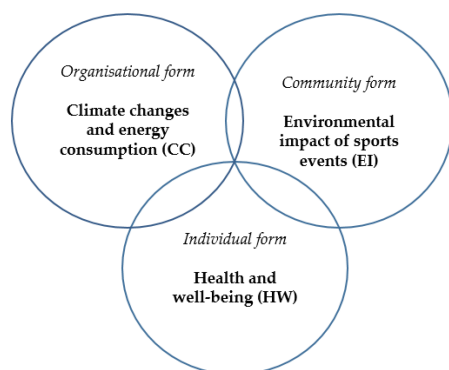
At the level of sports organizations, sustainability appears as a strategy that aims to improve economic and social objectives <sup>[13]</sup>. The implementation of sustainability initiatives allows not only a boost in the experience lived by the fans, but also a closer relationship with the community <sup>[11]</sup>. Spectators, due to the relationship with their favorite team, through their behavior are the main contributors of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions <sup>[14]</sup><sup>[15]</sup>. The study of sport ecology, although it has a special focus on North America and Europe <sup>[9]</sup>, has been consolidated in all parts of the globe, as shown by studies in the Asia-Pacific region <sup>[16]</sup><sup>[17]</sup> and South America <sup>[18]</sup><sup>[19]</sup>.

Increasingly, the general public is interested in climate change. Regardless of the industry, consumers tend to value sustainable products and brands <sup>[5]</sup>. As a result, organizations frequently publish sustainability reports that support their sustainability-related efforts. The authors conclude that, curiously, in the sports sector, this does not happen. The same goes for teaching environmental sports sustainability, with academic organizations being slow in designing and implementing pro-environmental strategies <sup>[17]</sup><sup>[20]</sup><sup>[21]</sup><sup>[22]</sup><sup>[23]</sup>. Extending previous investigations <sup>[24]</sup><sup>[25]</sup>, Wall-Tweedie and Nguyen (2018) claim that “the academic literature pertaining to Environmental Sustainability (ES) and sport has been reported to be in its infancy” <sup>[17]</sup> (p. 743).

## 2. The Importance of Environmentally Sustainable Initiatives in Sport

Sport can be an instrument for constructive societal transformation. As a significant symbol of popular culture, professional football, “has the potential to transform how we view and practice sustainability” [27] (p. 396). Sports organizations increasingly engage in environmentally friendly business practices. For McCullough and Cunningham (2010) [28], there are several pressures (functional, political, social) that can positively influence the adoption of environmental sustainability practices by sports organizations. The authors conclude that in addition to immediate advantages (cost reduction, increased competitive advantage, perceptions of goodwill on the part of consumers), such initiatives can increase fan identification, one of the main objectives of the sports industry. Extending past research [7][12][28][29][30][31][32], it is our goal to acknowledge how stakeholders (i.e., members, employees, and sponsors) feel the perceived effects regarding relevant topics of action for a sport organization in the scope of environmental sustainability.

In research of the concept of sustainability in sports development, Lindsey (2008) [26] found a similarity between different authors and their respective proposals. After identifying a lack of clarity and little theory, it presents an applicable proposal to sustainability in sports development based on concepts of health literature. This is established on a model that identifies four forms of sustainability, hierarchically equal, without levels: individual, community, organisational, and institutional. Following the same line of reasoning [26] the concepts will be adjusted and adapted to a format that allows analysis of the results of different stakeholders in the panorama of environmental sustainability of a sports organization. In this way, taking into account that Lindsey (2008) [26] defines institutional sustainability as requiring more time and a broader context, it will not be used. The forms of individual, community, and organisational environmental sustainability will be used, properly framed with the topics analysed. In the questionnaire carried out, several topics were addressed. For this study, concerning environmental sustainability, the topics considered were: (a) climate changes and energy consumption (CC); (b) environmental impact of sporting events (EI); (c) promotion of health and well-being (HW) (see **Figure 1**).



**Figure 1.** Sustainability forms in sports organizations' initiatives, adapted from

Lindsey (2008) [26].

### 2.1. Environmental Impact of Sporting Events

With regard to major sporting events held on a seasonal basis (e.g., every four years), such as the Federation International Football Association (FIFA), the World Cup, or the Olympic Games, studies show that around three million spectators travel an average of 4000 km to be able to be present at these major events [33]. It is an indisputable fact that in recent years there has been an exponentially increasing number of spectators who travel to see a sports show [34], whether this is frequent or seasonal. This trend is also seen in the increase in the number of spectators who follow their favorite teams, in addition to home games [35].

Considering sport ecology research, Thibault (2009) [36] has developed several studies to understand not only the production of different forms of pollution, but also the environmental effect that sporting events produce. One of the characteristics of sports is related to its enormous variety and organizational and performance complexity, which can be studied from the point of view of the spectator itself or of the practitioner. The environmental impact related to the attitude of the spectators has been the subject of several studies, in the field of football, rugby, or the Tour de France [37]. In baseball, a mass sport in the United

States, a research was made concerning the influence that the spectator has on the local air pollution, and was considered irrelevant [38]. At the university level, the effects of transportation that football spectators produce on air quality were also studied [39]. As for the study of the carbon footprint of sport participants, there is the paradox that individuals with a greater environmental awareness (i.e., participants in sports in nature) are not the ones who most protect the environment due to the essence of their own activity [40].

Strategies to reduce environmental impact have also been the focus of attention by researchers. The holding of major sporting events has associated costs with regard to the environment. Regardless of the pressure exerted by environmental activists [41], the results of environmental sustainability initiatives often fall short of expectations. In a top-down logic, the promise of a positive inheritance in what concerns the environment is faced with several difficulties in its execution (e.g., due to the complexity of the project itself, or the measurability of the environmental impact itself) [42]. In a bottom-up approach, although there are examples of organizations that show proactivity in the construction of environmentally friendly stadiums [43], there are several factors that contribute to a slow diffusion in the adoption of a sustainable design of new installations by the decision makers, such as narrow financing or inadequate manpower [44]. In addition to the aforementioned, the very implementation of pro-environmental initiatives is struggling with the difficulty of collecting information and subsequent appropriate planning [45]. As far as fans are concerned, from a perspective of attracting new fans [46] or permanence of current fans [15] in terms of environmental sustainability, a lot has been done by the academy in order to understand what are the best methods to seduce fans [47].

## 2.2. Promotion of Health and Well-Being

Sport can be seen as an instrument that generates dynamics that integrate wills, enhance changes, and create great impacts on the cultural, social, and environmental environment. In this way, sport, represented by the respective organizations and companies, public or private, can be considered an important agent in terms of sustainability, acting according to the principles inherent to the concept, and promoting a set of initiatives in this area, including the health and well-being dimension [48]. Throughout human history, the pursuit of health has been among the primary aims of individuals, communities, national governments, and international initiatives [49].

The social and political context of the 1980s, such as the rise of economic globalization, influenced health policy directions as much as other aspects of modern life [50], underlining the importance of health for the contemporary societies. “The Ottawa Charter” of 1986 marked the innovative approach of public health from traditional epidemiological and surveillance methods towards a more environmental and social model [51]. This new ecological approach emphasizes the interconnections between humans and their physical and social environments and their health.

The concepts of health and well-being converge and diverge, both theoretically and in practice [52]. Throughout time, there have been changing philosophies and attitudes to health [50]. The concept of health has been enlarged by WHO (1948) [53], stating that “health is a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (p. 1). This enlarged definition of the concept expresses the contemporary perspective of health, defined in the mid-twentieth century, when the human population struggled less with communicable diseases and more with lifestyle-related conditions.

In the last decades, the search for health has been increasingly considered as a synonym for well-being, happiness, and long life [54]. Currently, health is part of a social framework where there is a growing awareness of the body and mind. The so-called “diseases of civilization” abound, which lead many people to seek new ways of being and feeling, both on a physical and psychological level, privileging the paradigm of health and well-being recommended by WHO (World Health Organization), where sports occupy an important role [53]. The connection between health, well-being and sports has been recently reported by the literature in the field of health, although it remains necessary to systematize the approach between the two concepts [55][56].

The importance of health in sports organizations is fully in harmony with the sustainable development agenda, clearly expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) stated by “Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” [57] (p. 18). Considering this statement, sport organizations should consider enlarging their strategic and

operational goals, focused on their potential to contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities [58]; ESIS fit in this scenario.

However, the emergence of COVID-19 came to reinforce this statement. The pandemic provoked a health crisis and a global financial decline, due also to the lockdown policies that restricted the individual and collective mobility, forcing important changes to lifestyle [59]. These general restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic provoked significant social changes and affected several sectors at the global scale, including the sport industry by having an impact and altering the normal development of sport competitions and events [60]. Due to social distance being one of the most important rules to control the virus proliferation, leisure activities, namely the participation on sports manifestations, were suspended, significantly influencing the psychological state of individuals [61] at an individual and social level.

Considering sport contributes to well-being, that fact also affected the psychological health of sports organizations stakeholders [62]. The new situation also represented a challenge in terms of managing the multiplicity of companies linked to the sports sector, forcing them to define new business models compatible with the changes imposed, namely in terms of entrepreneurship [63]. This climate of change may also represent the emergence of new opportunities, where the health and sustainability factors will be inseparable in the future.

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