

The democratic noise of sport

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Distinguished guests, colleagues, friends, ladies and gentlemen

The most high-ranking host of the next year's FIFA World Cup, the Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, has a motto that I heard her use when she opened an international anti-corruption conference in the capital Brasilia one year ago.

She, who endured torture and imprisonment under the Brazilian military rule, said that she always prefers the noise from the free press to the funeral silence of dictatorships.

She described the fight against corruption as a part of the fight for democracy, and – at a conference where sport only played a minor role - she even linked this fight to the late national football icon, Socrates, and his struggle for democracy in sport.

With regard to democratic noise, it is fair to say that Brazil has added its share to the international football and sports community lately. It was no coincidence that FIFA's Confederations Cup in June this year gave rise to some of the biggest political demonstrations in modern Brazil, where hundreds of thousands took to the streets. In the eyes of the protesters, the global football events embodied all the shortcomings of the Brazilian society: the widespread corruption, the social inequality, the wrong use of public money.

The protests made such an impact that two months ago the very mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Eduardo Paes, called it "a shame that Brazil is hosting the Olympic Games". The shock couldn't have been bigger if the Pope started to swear in his sermons on Saint Peter's Square.

And if we thought we heard it all, we were struck by surprise again last week when news were out that Brazilian prosecutors will now sue FIFA for 106 million US-dollars spent on temporary stadium constructions during the Confederations Cup.

Whether or not you agree with Brazil or the international sports organisations in their specific conflict issues, this country is undeniably playing a lead role in breaking the funeral silence that dominated world sports politics for too many decades.

No matter how solid documentation whistleblowers and investigative journalists could put forward in the news media and at Play the Game conferences, exposing massive corruption in the sports federations, breath-taking match-fixing scandals, failed anti-doping policies, massive budget overruns for mega-events – the greater the scandal was, the deeper the silence from the Olympic family.

But over the past three years, taboos have fallen in great numbers. In my view the turning point was the autumn of 2010.

First the Sunday Times revealed that FIFA Exco members were ready to sell their votes for the hosting of the World Cup. The revelation opened a rift in the curtains that allowed the public to get a glimpse of the dubious state of affairs inside world football's leadership.

This rift was soon after widened by BBC's naming of FIFA leaders involved in the ISL scandal that implied bribes for over 100 million US-dollars. And when a few days later FIFA chose as World Cup hosts the two least transparent countries whose bids had received the poorest technical evaluation by FIFA itself, Russia and Qatar, a ball of disbelief started rolling that nobody has been able to control yet.

Simultaneously we saw a growing global awareness of how organised crime has invaded football and other sports with match-fixing and other illegal activities, and you will understand that the ground was prepared for a seismic shift in global sports policy.

This shift can be summarized in very few words:

A worldwide demand for better governance in sport.

This demand is on top of the agenda of transnational institutions like the European Union, the Council of Europe and the Commonwealth countries. Later at this conference, you can hear a representative of Russia's presidency of the G20-countries explain why this group should also demand a global alliance against corruption in sport.

Good governance was also a top priority on the agenda when UNESCO gathered sport ministries from 137 countries in Berlin in May.

All these governmental institutions understand that good governance is the indispensable premise if sports organisations are to be trusted and relevant partners in meeting the challenges that dominate the international world of sport, and also dominate the agenda of the next four days of Play the Game:

These challenges are

- Socially and financially responsible mega-events with a true legacy for sport and society
- Match-fixing and illegal betting which constitute a threat not only to sport's values, but to the rule of law in general
- The need for increased physical activity worldwide – a problem that sports organisations has ignored for long, thereby becoming increasingly irrelevant for ordinary citizens

Without more democratic, transparent and accountable structures, sports organisations will remain part of the problems rather than drivers of the solutions.

It is encouraging that some sports leaders are actually stepping up to the task. In a handful of sports organisations, suspicions of corruption at the top have led to contested elections for the presidency.

Also FIFA says it has concluded a reform process although the result is a matter of hefty dispute, as you will witness yourself in our debate the day after tomorrow.

The picture is still far from rosy. The contested elections I mentioned all ended in victory for the sitting president in spite of well-documented charges – exception taken for the recent shift of powers in the international cycling union UCI.

Once you have been elected president of an international sports organisation, you have access to tools that can secure your position for life.

In the case of the International Weightlifting Federation, as you will hear this week, the IOC has refused to support those desperate sports leaders who did not accept that IOC's own grants to

their sport for almost two decades ended up in two secret bank accounts in Switzerland to which only the President had access.

At least five million US-dollars seem to be missing, but the IOC has ignored the motto that its former president Jacques Rogge so often repeated: Sport's money must go to sport.

Without backing from the IOC, the media or public authorities, honest sports leaders who fight for transparency and democracy, will soon disappear – either thrown out by almighty presidents or pulling out in a mood of resignation.

To illustrate the price that whistleblowers and reformers risk to pay, let me mention the case of Mario Goijman from Argentina, well-known to some of you who have attended Play the Game before.

Since Mario Goijman appeared at our last conference in 2011, he has been forcibly evicted from his home, and on the 10 October this month his last belongings were put on compulsory sale.

The reason for his ruin? When Argentina hosted the volleyball's World Championships in 2002, Goijman guaranteed personally for loans worth hundreds of thousands of dollars in his function as national volleyball president.

At the same time he started questioning the style of the president of the International Volleyball Federation the FIVB, the Mexican Ruben Acosta. Consequently, Acosta threw out Mario Goijman and the Argentine federation and refused to pay 800.000 US-dollars owed after the world event.

It is of little use to Mario Goijman that we in 2005 gave him the Play the Game Award for exposing what was later confirmed by the FIVB itself, that Acosta in his last ten years as FIVB President took 33 million USD dollars in personal commissions.

Since then two consecutive FIVB presidents have had the chance to repair what Acosta destroyed, but instead they have left Mario Goijman is financially ruined and psychologically broken.

To add insult to injury, Ruben Acosta has taken the FIVB to court in order to release further five million dollars which he believes he is entitled to. Legally speaking, he might have a strong case.

This would make an incredible soap opera if it was not a deeply tragic reality. Play the Game has for years appealed to the FIVB, to the IOC, and recently to the Pan American Sports Organisation. So far without any success.

The unspoken message is clear: Sports leader, don't betray your family, for you shall never be forgiven. Don't blow the whistle.

As you will understand and as this week will show, the noise of democracy has not yet reached every corner of international sport.

Nevertheless, I insist that the situation has changed fundamentally over the past years. It is now legitimate to ask for democracy, transparency and freedom of expression, such as Play the Game has done since 1997.

But even though the change is encouraging, it is also a risky situation where good governance can end up as a buzzword that will make politicians, sports leaders and conference organisers feel good – without any consequence in reality.

To ensure that ideas are put into practice and that our experiences are not wasted, Play the Game has to redefine its role. We must still serve as a platform for exposure of sport's darkest sides, but we must also engage more with those forces who wish to shape a better sports community.

In that spirit, we concluded our 2011 conference by asking the conference delegates to back up behind the "Cologne Consensus" which called upon the IOC to organize a world conference in the preparation of a "Global Code for Governance in Sport".

The IOC reacted with a letter saying neither yes nor no. Today we can safely conclude that the answer was really no.

I can say without exaggeration that we have had more luck with other partners. Together with six European universities and the European Journalism Centre, we applied for a grant to carry out a so-called Preparatory Action for the European Commission's Sports Unit.

The grant allowed us to start our project entitled "Action for Good Governance in International Sports Organisations" where we set out to create a scientifically based tool to measure sports

governance at the global level. We call this tool the Sports Governance Observer, and you will soon be introduced to it.'

For Play the Game as well as for many other small institutions and NGO's in international sport, the key to impact and useful results is fruitful partnerships.

This conference is an example, and I would like to add my personal thanks to the many partners that have already been mentioned as decisive for the content and the financing of Play the Game 2013.

If the line-up of speakers and delegates looks impressive, it is only because so many impressive speakers and delegates have made an effort to come here this week, and we are most grateful for that.

As token of our gratitude, we now leave the responsibility for the rest of the week to you. The success of this conference does not rely on a programme on paper, because paper is after all – silent.

It is your turn to drive the funeral silence out of sport.

We know you have the expertise and the personal commitment to enrich your fellow conference delegates. And in the spirit of constructive dialogue, we kindly ask you also to lend an ear to what is presented by others. Even your strongest adversary may possess that bit of information that can make your truth more complete.

Let's make a bit of democratic noise. Let's Play the Game.