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OPINION

“FIFA-gate”: an opportunity to clean up international sports governance

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Corruption scandals within international sport are nothing new, but the arrests in Zurich have shaken world soccer to the core. FIFA is in crisis, with allegations of systemic failures of governance creating shock waves throughout the soccer ‘family’, from the continental confederations and national associations that administer soccer to the television networks and sponsors who have helped fund the expansion of the ‘beautiful game’. The most recent events go much deeper than the 2012 scandal, when FIFA was forced to sack or suspend several of its members. Reluctant to wash its dirty linen in public, soccer’s governing body took internal steps to reform its governance by adopting codes of ethics and conduct and setting up an independent audit and compliance commission. It also made the process for selecting World Cup host countries more democratic by submitting the choice to a vote by all 209 national associations, rather than just the executive committee. In addition, FIFA’s executive committee gained its first woman members with the election of Lydia Nsekera for a 4-year term and the co-option of Moya Dodd and Sonia Bien-Aimé for 1-year terms (without voting rights).

These measures enabled FIFA to regain a semblance of legitimacy, but they did little to sweep away the federation’s clannish customs, back-scratching ways and conflicts of interest. FIFA had failed to understand that only by transforming the federation’s culture would it meet the pressing demand for greater control, transparency and efficacy in the governance of world soccer. Many FIFA members were happy for the status quo to continue, renewing their faith in a president who had overseen a period of unprecedented financial growth. In fact, under Sepp Blatter, FIFA had seen its revenues soar, with the federation reporting record receipts of \$5.7 billion for 2011–2014, mostly obtained from the sale of World Cup television rights (\$2.45 billion in 2014, a 200-fold increase compared with 1998) and sponsorship deals (\$1.6 billion).

With such large sums of money at its disposal, FIFA has been able to redistribute, between 2011 and 2014, more than \$1 billion to its national associations. This money is mostly intended for ‘development projects’, but the opaque system under which FIFA re-distributes funds means that the impacts of individual projects are often questionable and difficult-to-measure. What is more, the national associations are

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entirely independent from FIFA, so this is not a case of an international company imposing a strategy on national subsidiaries that it can control. As many national associations have done little to adopt professional managerial practices, and because checks and balances are sometimes non-existent, it is fair to ask if all the money FIFA provides goes to developing soccer.

The crisis currently sweeping through FIFA has severely damaged the federation's reputation and image and led to intense pressure, most notably from sponsors, for the organization to introduce visible and meaningful reform. But, for these reforms to be successful, they will have to change FIFA's deeply engrained culture of insider privilege and autocratic government. How can this be achieved?

First, FIFA must follow the International Olympic Committee's example and limit presidential terms of office. Restricting the presidents of FIFA, the continental confederations and the national associations to two eight-year terms would improve democracy throughout the organization and prevent cults building up around omnipotent, lifelong leaders. In addition, the president's powers must be controlled more effectively by a remodeled executive committee that meets regularly, not just four times a year, as is currently the case. The new executive committee should be reduced in size, contain more women, be more professional and include independent administrators with skills in areas such as marketing, law and finance. As a further safeguard, a 'Soccer Supervisory Council' should be created to oversee the work of soccer's administrative bodies. This council would consist of representatives of all of soccer's key stakeholders (players' unions, managers' associations, referees' associations, professional leagues, professional clubs, continental confederations), together with independent experts.

The ways in which FIFA handles and redistributes its huge revenues must also be reformed by separating the management of funds for developing soccer (e.g. through the 'Goal' program) from the political system. Entrusting the control of these projects to an independent organization, such as a foundation, would lead to more effective evaluation and reporting of their implementation and success. At the same time, it is essential to improve solidarity between professional and amateur soccer by, for example, introducing a levy on transfer fees, salaries, TV contracts or sponsorship deals. The money raised could then be used to finance innovative soccer-based social and economic development projects.

Going beyond soccer, FIFA could bolster its image by helping create a world agency for regulating sports governance. This new agency could be modeled on the World Anti-Doping Agency, which was founded in 1999 as a partnership between the international sports movement and governments, and would facilitate the implementation of new forms of governance and regulatory mechanisms.

'FIFA-gate', like many other scandals that have shaken international sport (the Salt Lake City affair in Olympic sport, the Armstrong affair in cycling), could provide a springboard for introducing the reforms that are so badly needed at FIFA and at many other organizations in the olympic movement. Only by 'cleaning up' their governance can sport federations truly serve the interests of sport and develop its enormous potential as a force for good.