

Social & Cultural Committee, PRAMUN 2026 Synopsis

Topic 2: Ensuring human rights compliance in the governance of international sporting events

I. Background Information

The 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar engaged over 5 billion fans across all internet media channels, with the highest ever viewing for a Final match at 1.42 billion viewers. FIFA and the Olympic Games are among the largest international sporting events on Earth. As such, they often involve collaboration with host nations and labor supply chains, major infrastructure development, and raised security measures. These “mega sporting events,” as defined by various academic and political papers, are possibly humanity’s biggest global gatherings, bringing together athletes, sponsors, viewers, and nations, and as a result they garner immense media reach, and political and economic significance. Yet in achieving the execution of such enormously influential events, many elite international sporting organizations have amassed a dark track record of trampling human rights standards.

Most international organizations agree with the generally upheld United Nations definition of human rights compliance as requiring all actors to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights. In the context of the implementation of mega sporting events by states and organizers, this means acknowledging, mitigating, and preventing issues that have been all too prevalent in the past, ranging from labor exploitation, to forced evictions for the construction of venues, to suppression of journalistic and free speech, to discrimination and violations of athletes rights, not to mention past issues of police violence as a consequence of heightened security measures.

Perhaps the most well known example of blatant disregard for human rights is the Qatar World Cup, which was held in a country with a long track record of human rights abuses, and for which the construction exploited hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, who suffered harsh working conditions in extreme heat, wage theft, failure to redress, and unaddressed deaths. FIFA has still refused to compensate these workers. Unfortunately, Qatar is not the only example of human rights violations in the aftermath of mega international sporting events; the 2016 Rio De Janeiro Olympics saw police violence that killed 8 people in suppression of peaceful protests, and forced evictions to construct the operation. Prior to these horrors, the 2012 London Olympics saw problematic conduct in merchandise supply chains, with evidence of child labor, poverty pay, and unsafe working conditions in factories. These examples are not isolated incidents, but rather illustrations of an inhumane trend that must be addressed.

The governance of international sporting events is an intricate process involving a plethora of entities, from international sports governing bodies, to host states, local governments, and private sector sponsors and companies. Sports governing bodies the likes of FIFA and the International Olympic Committee typically have authority over event regulations, bidding processes, or

contracts with the host city, and sponsors and construction firms pitch in to help realize the event. Meanwhile the host countries themselves are responsible for actual implementation, and overall benefit from improved image, a phenomenon known as “Sportswashing,” which often is a problematic mask over underlying issues, much like the Qatar World Cup. While one could look at organization of international sporting events as inspiring examples of human collaboration across borders, the byproduct of this multi-actor governance structure is a lack of systemic accountability for the all too frequent occurrences of exploitation of the more powerless people involved.

II. United Nations Involvement

The United Nations has not shied away from addressing the very real abuses many international sporting events have wrought. The very office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has commented during the last Olympic Games that “Sports, like human rights, are a common language of humanity,” and as such “States have the primary responsibility to address these issues, ensure access to remedies, and prevent further violations. This includes zero tolerance for racism and all forms of discrimination in sport.” This year’s annual report of the UN High Commissioner (A/HRC/60/69) on the progress in implementing Human Rights Council resolution 54/25 affirms the responsibility of states to protect human rights.

To uphold these responsibilities, the UN employs a host of complimenting, symbiotic organizations that have established various guidelines and frameworks to standardize international standards that apply to the realm of human rights compliance in international sporting events. For example, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights has established guidelines for states and companies to “prevent, address, and remedy human rights abuses committed in business operations.” It is based on the three pillars “respect, protect, and remedy,” in the context of mega sporting events; hosting nations have a duty to protect human rights, and sporting associations have a duty to respect those rights, and both have a duty to provide remedies when human rights abuses happen.

Furthermore, the United Nations employs connections with external organizations like the International Labor Organization. The ILO’s standards for international labor are deeply applicable to the construction of sporting event infrastructure that employs migrant workers and construction labor businesses. Additionally, UNESCO’s International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity, and Sport pronounces sport as a fundamental right while calling upon the responsibilities of governments, sports leagues, and society to squash discrimination and promote inclusive participation. Sport specific non-state organizations such as the Centre for Sport and Human Rights exist to emphasize this necessity for the integration of human rights, labor rights, and freedom of speech into principles for the governance of international sport.

Nonetheless, human rights abuses and a lack of compensation for these abuses continues to occur; both FIFA and Qatar failed to compensate exploited migrant workers. In light of these failures and the severity of the consequences, it must be acknowledged that United Nations involvement is closer to symbolic in nature. United Nations principles, while providing strong frameworks for entities to follow, are not so easily enforceable. This is particularly true for independent bodies such as the IOC or FIFA, as while both may have some degree of internal standards, with the IOC referencing Olympic Charter principles, neither possess or have attempted to obtain the legal means to enforce these standards when host nations do not comply, and violations inevitably occur. To sum up, for these organizations, the adoption of and compliance to human rights is essentially voluntary.

III. Bloc Positions

The bloc of nations typically referred to as “Western nations,” or more developed countries, the likes of the EU, America, Australia, the UK, and so forth, are usually the nations that advocate for the implementation of human rights standards when bidding for hosting contracts for major sporting events. These states tend to uphold and support embedding due diligence and human rights impact assessments into the bidding and event planning phase of these mega international sport operations, as well as emphasize inclusivity in sports. Football associations that originate from this bloc typically dedicate greater efforts to affirming “human rights are universal and apply everywhere,” a statement that 10 European FA’s made in response to a FIFA statement.

In contrast to the Western and more developed bloc, are the states with a record of criticism from the international community for their compliance, or lack thereof, to human rights standards. These states may argue against such scrutiny with the case that hosting these events provides a gateway to policy changes that strengthen human rights compliance. After hosting the World Cup, Qatar was even praised by the UN Human Rights body for improving labor laws before the event, although the state was still urged to do more to abolish the exploitative employment system for migrant workers. Furthermore, the argument that it would be unfair to disqualify these states from the social and economic benefits of hosting an international sporting event does hold merit. If only developed nations were to host these sporting events, it would only further global inequality.

IV. Questions To Consider

When conducting country research and if writing position papers or resolutions, consider the following:

- Has my country hosted any significant international sporting events?

- What is my country's official stance on human rights compliance in the governance of international sporting events?
- Is there evidence or data supporting my country's stance?
- Have any human rights abuses occurred in my country? Both in general and in the realm of operations related to sporting events?
- Which aspects of this issue are most important to your country?
- What are the existing barriers that have prevented the enforcement of international human rights standards in the operations and construction of mega sporting events?
- What human rights stipulations are missing in contracts and what entities are not being held accountable?
- Why have existing international efforts failed to address the issue?

Please remember you will likely need more than an overall understanding of the problem. Particularly if writing a resolution, attempt to consider the gap in UN legislation or international accords that has allowed human rights abuses in sporting events to proliferate, and try to learn what are the most significant prior events of relevance to the topic.

You can all do this!

IV. Sources & Potential Useful Links

United Nations Resources:

[A/HRC/60/69: Human Rights Council Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#)

[A/HRC/RES/54/25: Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on achieving A world of sports free from racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance](#)

[The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#)

[The UN High Commissioner addresses panel on promoting human rights through sport and the Olympic ideal](#)

Quicker-read articles explaining past incidents or specific issues in human rights controversies:

[Amnesty International: Brazil: Rio's Olympic legacy shattered with killings by police](#)

[Amnesty International: Report on Qatar in 2024](#)

[BBC: London 2012: 'Exploitation' of factory workers prompts action](#)

[AP News: After hosting World Cup, Qatar praised by UN rights body for labor law reforms but urged to do more](#)

[IHRB: Major Sporting Events and Human Rights \(Incidents during the 2012 Winter Olympic Games\)](#)

[The Guardian: Report takes aim at Fifa and IOC over policies for athletes convicted of sexual assault](#)

Longer resources with a focus on solution-based frameworks related to human rights (most useful to identify what a resolution could focus on):

[SportHumanRights: The Mega Sporting Event Lifecycle - Embedding Human Rights from Vision to Legacy](#)

[Harvard Undergraduate Law Review: Reforming Legal Accountability for Human Rights Violations in Global Sports](#)

[International Olympic Committee: Strategic Framework on Human Rights](#)

[IHRB: Championing Human Rights in the Governance of Sports Bodies](#)

Various other related articles:

[FIFA and Human Rights: Introduction to the Symposium](#)

[Sport Resolutions: Ten European FA's say "human rights are universal and apply everywhere" after FIFA ask teams to "now focus on the football"](#)

[Outright International: In the Contest Over Sports as a Human Right, Will Inclusion or Exclusion Prevail?](#)

[Danish Institute for Human Rights: Human Rights Due Diligence and Mega Sporting Events](#)

[Human Constanta: Sport and Human Rights: overview July-September 2024](#)

[Sport and Rights Alliance: UEFA Fails Test on Human Rights Strategy](#)

[Inside FIFA: Audience Reports from Qatar](#)

[Human Rights Watch: The Establishment of the Global Centre of Sport and Human Rights](#)

Full Research papers that provide empirical data or policy recommendations:

[Springer Link the International Sports Law Journal: Human rights and the Olympic Charter](#)

[ScienceDirect: Upholding human rights in mega sports: A study of governance practices within the IOC and FIFA through the lens of the Ruggie Principle](#)

[Taylor&Francis: Sport mega-event governance and human rights: the 'Ruggie Principles', responsibility and directions](#)