

## On the importance of sport as political action: Reasons and governance measures

**A**s acknowledged in the Comisión Europea (2007) White Paper on Sport, sport can be understood as “all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels.” (2007, p. 2). Thus, considering that sport is a social phenomenon of enormous dimensions, the absence of public debate on sport policy results remarkable, especially when compared with the ideological exchange aroused by other areas of culture or education. Let’s recall, for example, the social discussion produced by the introduction of the subject Education for Citizenship and Human Rights in the educational system. In sharp contrast, without considering if it is positive or negative, advisable or inadvisable, when one talks about sport, it is usually from the position of a spectator, a practicing amateur, or a professional involved in sports as a journalist or technician, but it is unusual, with a few exceptions, to approach sport from a political standpoint. This will not be the case this Editorial, where four reasons will be presented as to why sport should be a fundamental line of political action, while postulating governance measures in regards to sport policy. Accordingly, it is worth noting that it is not the writer’s objective to politicize sport in the sense of promoting a partisan use of it, but to emphasize what sport can do positively for the development of peoples, in this case the Spanish people.

First reason: sport increases the physical, mental, and social well-being of citizens, improving quality of life and promoting the public welfare. The beneficial effects of regular physical activity are well known in sports science and are empirically validated, effects that positively impact both the functioning of the systems of the human body, such as the cardiovascular system, the respiratory system, the muscular system, the skeletal system, the endocrine system, or nervous system, and other areas of closely related to wellbeing, including the quality sleep, the reduction of anxiety, or the improvement of social relationships. Some policy measures that will increase the quality of life of citizens are the following: to assess in a decisive way the inclusion of a third weekly session of physical education throughout the different educational stages; to encourage that educational centres become at the same time institutions promoting physical activity and health, in order to guarantee the human right to the practice of sports for all people transitioning through the school years and, in parallel, to develop strategies to increase family awareness about the benefits of leading an active lifestyle; to intensify health programs and strategies where sport is one of the cornerstones of action, favoring the presence of multidisciplinary teams in the healthcare system that comprise, among others, sport doctors, physiotherapists, and graduates from physical activity and sport science; to implement healthy physical activity programs directed at businesses and government bodies, leading the introduction of sport in the workplace; to promote the practice of sports in universities; and, ultimately, to guarantee the right of citizens to the practice of sport, regardless of gender, age, socio-economic status, political or religious ideology, functional diversity, or country of origin.

Second reason: sport facilitates the unity and cohesion of society. Some examples such as the success of many athletes and sports teams or the organization of high-level sports events in Spain make this point clear: sport has the ability to motivate a sense of pride and social identity. And as such, both athletes and sport talent should be valued as a matter of interest for the state, which should be manifested in political intention to implement measures such as these: to offer support with adequate human and financial resources to both popular sports and minority sports, while coordinating with Olympic federations, non-Olympic federations, and adapted sport federations; to ensure the educational support and the welfare of high-level athletes throughout their lives, during and after their sport careers, adopting measures for the attainment social recognition and economic salaries; to firmly fight for the fair practice of sport without doping, protecting the rights and responsibilities of athletes; to promote the success in sport as a cultural heritage of the whole society and not for partisan purposes; and to strengthen, and in some cases create, inter-territorial committees for the coordination and cooperation in sport policies.

Third reason: sport greatly promotes the values and principles of democratic societies. The experiential nature of sport and physical activity and the interest they awaken turn them into a means of socialization with an enormous potential for the transmission of values and principles, which moreover, are consistent with those advocated by democratic societies. Among others: compliance with social norms, sense of justice, success based on merit and effort, the spirit of unity, and the solidarity and social integration of all people. Unfortunately however, reality has shown that sport can also be a source of corruption and malpractice. The following policy measures will help to achieve greater democratic quality in sport: to adopt and promote good governance practices in the management of sport; to elaborate a governmental system of indicators for transparency in sport that publicly and firmly denounce corruption in the sport sector; to develop sport programs based on interculturalism and social inclusion; and to encourage the implementation of sport observatories to ensure the prevention and correction of the negative aspects that may be found in the practice of sport, especially those concerning violence and xenophobia, sexual abuse, doping, inequality based on gender, unsustainable sport practices, excessive materialism, and sport practices that are disrespectful to the principles and fundamental universal ethical values.

Fourth reason: sport is an opportunity for economic development and recovery. The practice of sport in its entirety, from the amateur to the professional level and including the management of sport leisure activities, is a social phenomenon embracing all social classes, which creates a large economic demand leading to the creation of jobs and economic rehabilitation. Just to cite a few examples, the sport industry results in the economic activation in infrastructure and sport facilities, the provision of sport-related learning services and health support, the management of sport entertainment, communication or journalism, the labour market of professional sports, advertising, lotteries and gambling, and so on. Furthermore, the nature of Spain as a tourist destination of relevance, with a wealth in natural environments and good weather, brings in added value to the sport industry. However, despite the veracity of the reasons presented above, there are still at least two major gaps: first, the absence of a common legislative framework or at least one that bears similarity between autonomic regions to organize the exercise of sport professions, and second, the vast underground economy linked to sport. The following policy measures for economic recovery are proposed: to support entrepreneurship of self-employed workers in the sector of sports; to encourage the creation of cooperatives and the union of sport associations with the purpose of professional enterprise; to promote the financial instruments offered by the European Union for the competitiveness of organizations; to change the tax paid on sport services to a reduced rate, particularly the tax associated to the initiative "sport for all"; to create incentives in the form of tax benefits for the practice of sport and physical activities, providing special assistance to individuals from low and middle income status; to promote active sport tourism; to lead a harmonious and equal development among the different autonomic communities with regard to the legislative regulation of the practice of sport professions; to promote new legislation related to the sponsorship and patronage of sport; to analyze the quality, use, and social-economic productivity of sport infrastructures, without limiting the right of citizens to the use of appropriate sport and recreational spaces; and to encourage public and private policies that promote research studies, development, and innovation in sport, incrementing investment in research and making research a cross-sectional action for the rest of the sport areas, including: physical activity and health, sport-related leisure and recreational, school physical education, sport training, sport medicine, adapted sport, and sport management.

Politics, by definition, is a process in which all citizens, organizations, and government bodies participate to address collective objectives within a framework of rules that allow us to reach joint solutions, resolve conflicts, and improve our quality of life. Sport is no exception. As Nelson Mandela (2011) said: "Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does." (2011, p. 135).

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