Globalization Challenges at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London

Every two years when the Olympic season begins, new globalization controversies are brought to light. Many activists view the Olympics as the perfect platform to raise public awareness and pressure governments and corporations to behave more ethically. Battles waged ahead of the Olympics are often extremely controversial as most countries (and corporations) do not want outsiders dictating social mores or policy decisions.

The 2012 Olympic season is no different. In the countdown to the London Olympics, activists from around the world are trying to get the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to reconsider the sponsorship of three corporations because of past and present human rights violations. Others activists successfully pressured Saudi Arabia to agree to send female athletes to the competition. While Syrian official have been banned from attending the games as a sign of displeasure with the Assad regime. Activists have not been successful in banning the attendance of officials from countries with poor records against homosexuals and transgender individuals.

Improvements at home are also on the agenda. Local businesses and environmental organizations are pushing London Olympic officials to live up to their promises that this will be the “The First Green Games.” For many, sustainability is not just about being environmentally friendly, but also about providing long-lasting economic benefits as well.

This news analysis will examine the impacts of various social, political, and sustainability campaigns being carried out ahead of the 2012 Olympics Games in London to improve society at large and strengthen human rights around the world.

Women Athletes from Saudi Arabia

After much outside pressure was exerted, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Brunei agreed to send female athletes to the London Olympics for the first time. While hailed as a success by human rights groups fighting for gender equality around the world, the decision has received mixed reviews in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia does not have a thriving sports culture for men or for women. This lack of sports culture is reinforced by families, many of whom are overprotective of their children and do not encourage their children to participate in sports outside the home. A sports culture is beginning to evolve in the country, particularly as organizations are calling on increased physical activity in girl’s schools to combat obesity.

Women do play sports in clandestine leagues, but public sports events for women are banned; so, there are no national competitions to qualify for international events. Some of the women who play in these leagues do not
want to compete yet because they fear a backlash at home and do not feel that they are ready for the Olympics. The IOC was considering allowing female athletes to participate under special circumstances. Some disagreed with this approach because they felt it was not fair to the Saudi athletes or to athletes in other countries who are better qualified.

While lack of preparedness is a challenge, the larger problem facing Saudi female athletes is changing cultural perspectives. Dr. Abdulrahman Al-Zuhayya, a Saudi academic based in Riyadh, explains that parents fear a broken hymen, which is associated with the loss of female virginity and a loss of honor for the family. He claims this is deeply entrenched in the culture and should be respected.

While this view is prevalent amongst many conservatives, there are young Saudi women who play sports with parental support. These athletes will need to address both structural and cultural challenges to be able to compete on the international stage. So while Saudi Arabia has agreed to allow female athletes, the London team will still be all-male because there are no women who qualify to compete.

**Gay Rights**

While the campaign to include women athletes from all participating countries was successful, the campaign to ban country participation by states that have poor human rights records vis-a-vie homosexuals and transgenders did not achieve any major breakthroughs.

Campaigners realize an outright ban is unachievable, so they pushed London organizers to use their position to raise this topic with the top violating countries. Despite the push, the IOC did not raise this issue. On the other hand, gay activists are urging gay athletes to come out during the games and to seek asylum in Britain if they do not feel safe in their own countries. In reality, there are few openly gay athletes participating in the Olympics, even from countries where homosexuals have many rights. Few expect many declarations to take place.

**“The First Green Games”**

Beyond human rights, campaigners are using the Olympics to strengthen sustainability measures around the world. Olympic planners want the London Olympics to be the greenest games ever, emphasizing sustainability in all aspects of the games. On some fronts, planners have achieved success and, on other fronts, there is room for improvement.

On the positive side, the stadium was built with recycled materials and the temporary stands were designed to reduce to amount of steel in the structures. All 34 Olympic facilities have been trying to be more sustainable,
using 40 percent less water than similar facilities used in past Olympics. The organizers also instituted a ‘zero-waste to landfill’ policy.\textsuperscript{7}

Organizers hope that the games will provide economic sustainability for the local community too. They claim that seventy-five percent of the seven billion pounds being spent on infrastructure will benefit locals with job training, new housing, and a revitalized neighborhood.\textsuperscript{8} The new shopping mall building built next to the entrance-way of the stadium hopes to transform the neighborhood in the years to come.\textsuperscript{9} Only post-Olympics studies will be able to determine if these expectations are met.

Another positive is that some participating teams are carbon-conscious. Canada’s Olympic team and staff plan to be carbon-neutral by purchasing carbon credits from Offsetters Clean Technology Inc., a Canadian carbon offset company that is providing the credits to the team at no cost. These credits are being earmarked for two landfill gas ventures in Canada, a bio-gas project in Thailand, and a wind farm in Turkey.\textsuperscript{10}

On the negative side, game organizers received flack for shipping 4,000 mostly fossil-fueled BMWs to London to be used for escorting dignitaries. To be “green,” some recommend that instead of BMWs, organizers should have purchased electric vehicles, while others recommend that dignitaries use buses like the rest of the attendees. The games also missed their sustainable energy targets, using only nine percent of its energy from sustainable sources, rather than twenty percent.\textsuperscript{11} Finally, the London Olympics is supposed to generate 15,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide. In comparison, the Vancouver’s 2010 Winter Games produced approximately 268,000 tonnes.\textsuperscript{12}

**Corporate Human Rights Violators**

There are three campaigns being waged against corporate sponsors in the London Olympics. These campaigns are tied to the idea of the green games, since these sponsors and corporate participants have poor environmental records.

One campaign involves American AFL-CIO, United Steel Workers and others trade unions around the world who are trying to stop an alliance between the IOC and Rio Tinto, a global mining company that is making the gold medals to be distributed at the games. AFL-CIO and others claim that Rio Tinto has a poor track record with labor and environmental abuses and should not be given the contract to forge Olympic medals.\textsuperscript{13} The London Organizing Committee has environmental approvals for Rio Tinto’s mining operations and the medal supply chain, though a third party certified evaluation to cover other sustainability issues has not been carried out.\textsuperscript{14}

A second campaign is being launched against Dow Chemical. Vietnam and India are campaigning against Dow’s corporate sponsorship of the Olympics. Vietnam holds Dow responsible for the American use of Agent Orange that caused great harm to the people of Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Dow manufactured the compound and has refused to pay compensation to Vietnamese victims. More than half a million children were born with birth defects due to Agent Orange.\textsuperscript{15}

India holds Dow responsible for the Bhopal gas leak disaster, in which poisonous gas leaked from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, killing 3,787 people officially (unofficial tallies reach 15,000) and injuring half a million people. Dow Industrial bought Union Carbide and inherited this burden and thus far has not paid out any compensation either.\textsuperscript{16} Independent observers who vetted Dow’s Olympic sponsorship does not hold Dow responsible for Bhopal and feels that they should be allowed to sponsor the games.\textsuperscript{17}

**Conclusion**
Human rights campaigns at the Olympics are hardly new. Racial inequality in the U.S. was highlighted in the 1968 Olympics. The condemnation of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was brought up at the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Protests against China’s human rights policies were front and center at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. While the controversies were highlighted in these games, no action was taken against the hosting or participating countries.

One of the few times, in which a strong statement of displeasure was made by the IOC was against South Africa, when it was banned from participating in the Olympics from 1962 to 1992 because it did not have a non-racial sports system in place. A similar ban was placed on Rhodesia until white rule was ended. This rare success has been the ultimate goal of many of the human rights campaigns since then.

While these campaigns did not really lead to much change in the South Africa’s policies, the statement was loud and clear that its policies have repercussions beyond the country’s borders. It seems that this year a similar statement could be made for Saudi Arabia’s (and Qatar and Brunei’s) participation this year, even if no female athletes actually attend. Hopefully, in the future, countries will create the social, political, and financial structures to allow equal participation by all interested athletes.

8 Ibid.
16 Ibid.