



The Case of the Soccer World Cup 2022 in Qatar and Sustainability: Comparison of FIFA's Plan (Target) and Public Perception (Actual)

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ABSTRACT

No other mega sporting event has ever been as controversial as the 2022 soccer World Cup in Qatar. This paper does not look at how the World Cup was awarded to Qatar and the role played by corruption and the power of money. Instead, this case study will take a closer look at the sustainability of the event. Was it possible to keep the promises made by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the state of Qatar in the run-up to the event? To what extent do FIFA's self-image and the public's perception of it match? In the analysis (target/actual comparison), the dialectical three-step method (with thesis, antithesis, and synthesis) is used.

KEYWORDS: sports management, sports marketing, sustainability, sportswashing, Soccer World Cup, case study, target/actual comparison, dialectical three-step approach

1. Introduction

The dialectical three-step approach goes back to the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). It is a method of thought and cognition that is based on the idea that a new thought is usually produced based on a previously expressed thought. This creates a contradiction between the two opposing ways of thinking. This in turn is resolved by a third thought, which brings together the two previous points of view by preserving the best of both ideas (Stangl, 2022; Fritz, 2021).

The juxtaposition of two statements on an issue creates a thesis (the basic idea) and an antithesis (the negation of the position asserted in the thesis). It takes the cognitive process to a new level and results in a synthesis.

The following example is intended to illustrate the dialectical three-step (Fritz, 2021):

- Thesis: The earth is a disk.
- Antithesis: The earth is round.
- Synthesis: The earth is the round center of the universe. This synthesis became the new thesis for centuries until Copernicus contradicted it and declared the sun to be the center of the universe.

2. Thesis: The sustainability of the 2022 soccer World Cup in Qatar from FIFA's perspective (target, self-image)

In the run-up to the tournament, FIFA President Gianni Infantino promised that the 2022 soccer World Cup in Qatar would be the best and most sustainable World Cup ever (cited in Sichtermann, 2022). FIFA's vision was to use the power of

soccer to open doors. This included showcasing Qatar's identity through the World Cup, connecting people through a shared celebration of soccer, intercultural understanding, and new opportunities for growth and development. New benchmarks should be set in terms of long-term community use of infrastructure, smooth operations, and game-less services, which should have a positive impact on the organization of future World Cups and other major sporting events. In particular, the 2022 soccer World Cup should create a sustainable and lasting legacy that contributes to both FIFA's vision and Qatar's national development goals. In other words, according to FIFA, sustainability was at the heart of the 2022 World Cup from the outset, with its planning and delivery based on the idea that future generations should find our planet a greener, fairer place, free from discrimination and full of opportunities for all (FIFA, 2020).

To realize this vision, maximize the positive legacy of the FIFA World Cup 2022, and set a new benchmark for the sustainability of mega sporting events, FIFA has developed a sustainability framework as the basis for its sustainability strategy for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. This sustainability framework comprised objectives, commitments, priority material topics, and strategic objectives, which were divided into five pillars (see Figure 1): Human, social, economic, environmental, and governance. The framework pillars corresponded to the three dimensions of sustainability and the human, social, economic, and environmental pillars of Qatar's National Vision 2030, with an additional pillar for governance (FIFA, 2020; FIFA, 2022).



Figure 1: The five pillars of FIFA's sustainability strategy for the 2022 soccer World Cup in Qatar

(Source: FIFA, 2020)

The five pillars of FIFA's sustainability strategy are presented below-divided into FIFA's overarching objectives and its commitments to achieving them (FIFA, 2020).

2.1. Human

Objective:

Developing human capital and safeguarding workers' rights.

Commitment:

FIFA commits to protect the rights and welfare of workers employed at the 2022 World Cup sites and to promote their rights in projects and supply chains directly related to the World Cup. The aim is to achieve world-class standards and practices for workers. FIFA also aims to use the unique platform of the 2022 World Cup to develop a skilled and motivated workforce and encourage young people across the region.

2.2. Social

Objective:

Providing an inclusive tournament experience.

Commitment:

FIFA aims to make the 2022 World Cup an inclusive tournament experience that is welcoming, safe, and accessible for all participants, visitors, and communities in Qatar and around

the world. In this way, cultural understanding, infrastructure, services, and expertise will be left in the local communities.

2.3. Economic

Objective:

Catalyzing economic development.

Commitment:

FIFA's ambition is to promote economic growth and diversification in Qatar and the region by linking local businesses to the value chains and innovation opportunities of the 2022 World Cup. It also aims to enable the tournament venues, along with the associated services and infrastructure, to host future events, attract new businesses, and meet the needs of society.

2.4. Environmental

Objective:

Delivering world-class environmental solutions.

Commitment:

FIFA is committed to hosting the 2022 World Cup in a fully climate-neutral way and aims to set a benchmark for environmental responsibility by implementing leading standards for sustainable construction, waste and water management, and low-emission solutions. This work will leave behind world-class environmental management expertise, technologies, companies, and standards in Qatar and the region.



2.5. Governance

Objective:

Setting an example of good governance and ethical business practices.

Commitment:

FIFA takes responsibility for managing the impact of the 2022 World Cup through its activities and those of its business relationships and value chains. FIFA creates a culture of compliance based on legal requirements and organizational guidelines and demonstrates transparency and accountability to its stakeholders about its sustainability decisions and performance.

In its sustainability strategy, FIFA set out in detail how it intended to address 20 material sustainability topics that it had prioritized and achieve its 22 defined strategic objectives through a broad range of sustainability initiatives (FIFA, 2020).

3. Antithesis: Public perception of the sustainability of the 2022 soccer World Cup in Qatar (actual, external image)

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar was by far the most expensive tournament of all time. Qatar spent around 220 billion US dollars on the World Cup. That is more than fourteen times the cost of the previous most expensive World Cup in Brazil in 2014 (Beuthner, 2022).

Few words have been used more often by the Qataris in their World Cup bid than sustainability. And since the award, FIFA has also played along with this promise (Rieger, 2022). In the following, selected aspects will be used to critically examine whether these announcements could ultimately be kept.

3.1. Climate neutrality

According to FIFA and the State of Qatar, the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar was the first climate-neutral soccer World Cup in history. Climate neutrality means that all emissions are fully offset by compensation projects. This means that there is no increase in the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere during climate-neutral processes (Beuthner, 2022).

According to FIFA, the event caused around 3.6 million tons of CO₂ emissions. 68 countries in the world emit less CO₂ per year than FIFA and Qatar with this World Cup. Most of the emissions were caused by travel (to and from the event) at just under 52%, 24% by new infrastructure, and 20% by accommodation. FIFA calculated the figures for itself: For example, it assumed that the stadiums would be in operation for around 60 years. However, FIFA only considers itself responsible for 70 days of this. This corresponds to just 0.3% of the actual emissions caused (Walsh, 2022; Schneider, Laubender & Tolks, 2022; Rieger, 2022).

As Qatar is a very small country, domestic flights were not necessary to move between venues (the greatest distance between two venues was 75 kilometers). However, as there were not enough accommodation options in the host country, fans from neighboring countries were flown into Doha for the matches – usually on match day and back again immediately after the end of the match. Most of these shuttle flights were organized by Qatar Airways, an official sponsor of the 2022

World Cup, with up to 160 short-haul flights from neighboring countries every day during the World Cup (Ertl, 2022).

The fact that the stadiums were artificially cooled due to the high temperatures in Qatar also calls into question the climate neutrality of this World Cup (Beyer, 2022). According to FIFA and the state of Qatar, the emissions caused by the air conditioning systems were supposedly offset. According to Carbon Market Watch, the offsetting certificates are of comparatively low quality: The certificates were issued by an organization that was virtually founded by Qatar itself. According to German Environmental Aid, such climate offsetting has the character of greenwashing (Behrens, 2022). Part of the compensation was achieved by planting trees and shrubs. However, this is extremely questionable due to the climatic conditions in Qatar: Young trees need a lot of water, which in a desert country has to be treated in energy-intensive desalination plants. German Environmental Aid therefore describes the compensation measures as nothing more than an ecological indulgence trade (Fischer, 2022).

Most of the fresh water in Qatar comes from desalination plants, which require a lot of energy. An additional problem is that the plants pump the resulting brine residues with a very high salt content back into the sea. However, the brine is toxic to marine animals and plants (Walsh, 2022).

The organizers stated that 60% of the waste generated during the Games was recycled and 40% was incinerated for energy production. However, waste incineration releases further greenhouse gases (Sichtermann, 2022; Schneider, Laubender & Tolks, 2022).

In summary, it can be said that FIFA's sustainability strategy is based on incorrect CO₂ calculations and questionable offsetting practices. The Federation of German Consumer Organizations describes statements about the supposedly climate-neutral World Cup in Qatar as consumer deception and greenwashing (Lorenzen, 2022).

3.2. Human rights

The human rights situation in Qatar is completely different from that in the Western world: Women's rights are severely restricted in Qatar due to male guardianship. At the same time, there is discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people. Quote from Qatari World Cup ambassador Khalid Salman: "Women are candy [...] and homosexuality is a mental damage" (cited in Schneider, Laubender & Tolks, 2022).

In the run-up to the World Cup, it became known that over 6,500 migrant workers have died since the start of the construction projects for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Amnesty International even assumes that over 15,000 people of non-Qatari nationality died in connection with the World Cup between 2010 and 2022. Many of them came to Qatar from countries such as India, Nepal, or Bangladesh to find a way out of poverty and work for better pay. However, inhumane working conditions awaited them there. Many workers were not paid or were paid too late and lived in overcrowded quarters with inadequate sanitary facilities.



In addition, the ruling regime severely restricts freedom of expression and freedom of the press in the country. According to Reporters Without Borders, Qatar only ranks 119th out of 180 countries in terms of press freedom (Schneider, Laubender & Tolks, 2022).

3.3. Stadiums

The 2022 World Cup matches were held in eight stadiums. Eight stadiums with a capacity of up to 80,000 spectators each in a very small country. Six of the eight stadiums were built especially for the World Cup. These new buildings are particularly harmful to the climate because they use highly

specialized materials that have to be transported over long distances. The stadiums are undoubtedly very modern and efficient. But this is disproportionate to the effort involved in building these stadiums and their sustainable benefits (Walsh, 2022; Fischer, 2022).

The prestige stadium 974 in the Ras Abu Aboud district of the capital Doha (see Figure 2), which owes its name to the 974 shipping containers used and Qatar's international telephone code (W.A., 2022), was dismantled after the World Cup in Qatar. The energy required for its construction and dismantling cannot be considered sustainable.



Figure 2: The World Cup stadium 974 in Doha

(Source: Stadionwelt, 2022)

Four of the eight stadiums alone are located directly in Doha and some are not even 10 kilometers apart. The question arises as to what the inhabitants of Doha will use the four (or three remaining) huge stadiums for after the World Cup. Soccer did not play a major role in Qatar before, there is no fan culture as we know it from other World Cup host countries. The stadiums are in danger of becoming "white elephants" (Sichtermann, 2022). This term stands for expensive buildings with little use, such as those left behind by the World Cup in South Africa.

3.4. Energy sources

Qatar has the best conditions for producing sustainable solar energy using solar panels. On average, the sun shines for around nine hours a day in Qatar (in comparison: in middle Europe, the average is only around 4.6 hours of sunshine) (Sichtermann, 2022).

Nevertheless, Qatar largely relies on climate-damaging fossil fuels because oil and gas are available locally in abundance. Qatar is one of the largest suppliers of crude oil and is therefore self-sufficient as long as the oil does not run out and nothing else is prescribed (Fischer, 2022; Kleinschmidt, 2022).

3.5. Sportswashing

Since the hosting of the soccer World Cup was awarded to Qatar in 2010, Qatar has done a lot to make a name for itself in sport: The 2015 handball World Championships were held in Qatar, and in 2019 the athletics World Championships were held

in Doha (Muschong, 2022). The calculation behind this is "sportswashing": Qatar is trying to polish up the country's image through sportswashing. The appeal of sport is used to present the country in a positive light and to cover up undesirable developments in the country (Mittag, 2022).

The phenomenon of sports washing is not new, but has existed for decades: The instrumentalization of the stage of sport for interests beyond sport has been around for a long time. The staging of the 1936 Olympic Games already exhibited characteristics of sportswashing only nobody had used the term back then.

In Qatar, this development was planned over several decades. The emirate began to realign its entire economic activities as early as the mid-1990s. From a focus on resources such as oil and gas deposits to increased tourism, conferences, and sporting events. All that was missing was a particularly attention-grabbing global mega-sporting event. This missing icing on the cake was the 2022 soccer World Cup.

Qatari athletes and teams play a minor role at best on the pitch. Against this backdrop, the wealthy country has already made purchases in Europe, particularly in soccer. For example, Qatar bought the Belgian soccer club KAS Eupen. More well-known is Qatar's involvement with top French club Paris St. Germain, where world stars such as Neymar, Kylian Mbappé, and Lionel Messi were signed thanks to Qatari money. Qatar has



been shaping international soccer for years but often plays a very controversial role. FC Bayern Munich also had close ties with Qatar until recently too close for many fans of the German record champions (Muschong, 2022). Qatar is thus contributing to the commercialization of sport and changing its values (Mittag, 2022).

4. Synthesis: Implications and new questions

The contradiction between the two perspectives presented (thesis and antithesis or self-image and external image) should lead the cognitive process to a new level (synthesis) in the dialectical three-step. Three selected findings from the 2022 FIFA World Cup are presented below the headings are deliberately provided with question marks, as the critical reader should ultimately draw their lessons and conclusions.

4.1. Are sustainable mega sporting events even realistic?

Given the enormous size of mega sporting events, the question arises as to whether such events can be made sustainable at all. A study by the University of Lausanne on the sustainability of the Olympic Games between 1992 and 2020 concluded that the overall sustainability of the Games can be rated as mediocre and has continued to decline over time. A similar trend applies to tournaments such as soccer World Cups. The focus on profit creates incentives to make these competitions bigger and bigger. The bigger these events become, the more destructive they are for the environment, the economy, and society (Beuthner, 2022).

Making such mega sporting events sustainable in the future therefore seems unrealistic. For such events to become sustainable, they would have to become smaller, and this contradicts the event organizers' objective of making a profit (Faix, 2022). If organizers want to take the issue of sustainability seriously, there is no way around downsizing events in the future (Beuthner, 2022). However, FIFA is taking the exact opposite approach: While the 2022 World Cup was held with 32 participants (and 64 matches), the next World Cup in 2026 in the USA, Canada, and Mexico will feature 48 nations (with presumably 104 matches). This further expansion of the World Cup is counterproductive from a climate protection perspective.

A step in the right direction would be to give sustainability a greater role in the awarding of mega sporting events in the future. Sustainability standards must become central award criteria (Faix, 2022).

4.2. Is Europe a continent of know-it-alls?

In a commentary immediately after the end of the tournament, journalist Thomas Wheeler notes the often biased reporting on the 2022 World Cup before and during the tournament, which has shaped a largely negative image of Qatar in Europe, especially in Germany (Wheeler, 2022):

Qatar is a state that does not respect human rights. It even criminalizes them and prosecutes people for doing so. This is not compatible with Western norms and ideas. You can criticize, condemn, and even reject this. But is it possible to change it? Wheeler uses the image of the guest who spoils the

party: How should the host react to this? Shouldn't you at least try to put yourself in the shoes of other people's ways of living and thinking? Shouldn't we at least try to question and reflect on our positions?

For example, in Germany, there is often an attitude of wanting to be a role model. In principle, Germany is not exclusive to this in the Western world. However, it becomes difficult when Germany is perceived as a know-it-all and do-gooder that claims to know the only true way. Outrage in Germany is like a Pavlovian reflex.

According to Wheeler, Europeans are not better people, but they are world attitude champions and practice "moral colonialism". Perhaps it would have been a better idea for the outraged World Cup boycotters to travel to Qatar and see for themselves what it is really like there to form their own opinion (Wheeler, 2022).

4.3. What is the view of the younger generation?

Gen Z (also known as millennials, refers to young people born between 1996 and 2010) is the generation that will bear the consequences of climate change and experience them first-hand (Absolventa, 2022; Unicum 2022). As a result, concern about the future is ever-present among young people. Gen Z longs for security and sustainability. This is also the reason why Gen Z actively campaigns for a better future, for example in the form of the "Fridays for Future" demonstrations. It is therefore a determined generation willing to make a contribution and fight for its goals. At the same time, however, Gen Z is also the generation that lost two years of its youth to the coronavirus pandemic due to lockdowns and the associated restrictions.

Evaluation from the perspective of a 15-year-old member of Gen Z by Isabel Nufer.

There are two main reasons for the soccer World Cup 2022 in Qatar being so controversial:

The first one is the alleged but not actual sustainability. I do not even get how it is a serious question to have an opinion about whether the World Cup 2022 was a sustainable event, considering the facts that have been elucidated in the previous explanations. Everyone is supposed to protect the environment by reducing trash, using public transport instead of going by car, and eating less meat which is good and can surely make a difference. But is this what we get as a reward? The FIFA is a huge and influential association and could therefore act like a role model for people, but what they do is the exact opposite. In my opinion, their so-called sustainability framework is nothing more than a lie which makes it even more obvious that FIFA does not care about anything but money, especially not about the destruction of our planet in which they play a big part.

The second reason is the violation of human rights that took place in Qatar regarding the migrant workers who built the stadiums. These people had to work and live under inhumane conditions and thousands of them died working in Qatar. But neither FIFA nor Qatar's government seems to care about these horrendous deaths. They just seem to try to cover them up by not



even trying to explain themselves. The money they gained due to the World Cup was worth thousands of human lives to them.

The migrant workers' situation is, however, not even the only clear violation of human rights that has been and still exists in Qatar. Women's rights do not exist there and homosexuality is a crime that can be punished with the death penalty. Thinking about this, I can only ask myself if this is the world we want to live in. And my answer to that is a very, very clear no. LGBTQIA+ rights are human rights after all and killing people for loving someone is the worst thing I can think of. So, as a feminist and ally, I cannot even put in words how shocking and terrible I find that the FIFA as the huge and influential association it is cooperates with the government of such a country. They could have taken a stand against this worst kind of discrimination by not executing the World Cup in one of the world's most misogynistic and homophobic countries, but again, they decided to just not care.

It is up to us now if we act indifferently or if we show that we do care.

5. Conclusions

This article compares FIFA's ex-ante plan (target, self-image) and the public perception ex-post (actual, external image) regarding the sustainability of the 2022 soccer World Cup in Qatar. This comparison leads to a major discrepancy. However, it helps to take the knowledge process to a new level. To this

end, implications were derived in the form of new questions that need to be answered.

Environmentalists emphasize that the 2022 World Cup was a missed opportunity to rethink the structure of soccer World Cups and initiate fundamental change. One example of change would have been to use the event to build a rail network between the Gulf states and host the games throughout the region (Walsh, 2022). In the future, the topic of sustainability must play a central role in the awarding of a World Cup to create acceptance among the population and do justice to the overall social responsibility (Krämer, 2022).

Unfortunately, one of the first opportunities for this was missed miserably: The 2034 FIFA World Cup will in all likelihood be held in Saudi Arabia. In the bidding process, FIFA had only admitted interested parties from Asia and Oceania due to its proclaimed rotation principle. After Australia, the last potential competitor of the desert state decided not to officially submit its previously announced interest by the deadline at the end of October 2023, Saudi Arabia was the only remaining candidate to host the tournament. The final bid must be submitted to FIFA by July 2024. There is currently little doubt that Saudi Arabia, which has been criticized for human rights violations among other things, will win the bid. It is also clear that sustainability was not a criterion in FIFA's selection process for the 2034 soccer World Cup.

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