

HOW TO IMPROVE HUMAN RIGHTS POLICIES IN INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL

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Legal Briefings

More than six years ago, amidst several corruption allegations, the Executive Committee (ExCo) of the Fédération Internationale de Football Associations ("FIFA") awarded the FIFA World Cup 2022 to Qatar. Even today the discussion on this largely criticized decision has not yet stopped. While no evidence of corruption was found and the extreme summer heat threatening the health of players and spectators will be avoided by a change of date with the final to take place literally under the Christmas tree, it is the situation of migrant workers that still alarms supporters and the wider public alike.

Never before FIFA – or any other sport organization – has been confronted with such an intense and long-lasting protest. But this did not come as a surprise: The FIFA decision gave international trade unions and human rights organizations a perfect opportunity to cast a spotlight onto the poor situation of migrant construction workers in Qatar and beyond. With the [UN Guiding Principles on Human Rights and Business](#) (UNGPs) approved in 2011 the expectation towards companies' responsibilities regarding human rights in a globalized economy had changed and sport organizations like FIFA with a budget of more than US\$ 1 billion per year have to adhere to these standards, too. Even more so, as sport organizations are seen as a force for good, serving the public and especially FIFA claims to take over social responsibility with its slogan "For the Game. For the World."

For some time, struggling with severe governance problems and losing several members of the ExCo due to corruption cases, including in 2015 its president Joseph Blatter, FIFA seemed not to care. So the public criticism continued and forced FIFA to act.

As part of its governance reform in February 2016 FIFA added a new clause with a human rights commitment to the statutes. In April 2016 Harvard Professor John Ruggie, the author of the UNGP, published a [report](#) "on what it means for FIFA to embed respect for human rights across its global operations".

In the meantime, independent inspections of construction sites together with international trade unions have been accepted by the organizers of the FIFA World Cup 2018 in Russia and 2022 in Qatar. To further elaborate the recommendations contained in the Ruggie report, FIFA has created an independent Human Rights Advisory Board with human rights and anti-corruption experts as well as representatives of trade unions, players and sponsors (link to be added). This demonstrates that FIFA has accepted its global responsibility and aims to implement the UNGP as recommended by John Ruggie. The work to be done by the new advisory board will not be limited to the FIFA World Cup and migrant workers in Russia and Qatar. Discrimination of all kind, gender issues as well as homophobia and threats to LGBTIQ-people are challenges all over the (football) world. While a step by step approach with clear priorities is needed to really "embed respect for human rights across FIFA's global operations" the chances of this new approach are going far beyond football: The global outreach of this sport and especially the longing of quite many political leaders to polish their (country's) image by major sport events give a unique leverage to FIFA and its members to set the respect for human rights at the centre of public attention thus supporting real change - for the game and for the world.

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