

THE CONVERSATION

Why banning Kenya from Rio presents an Olympian dilemma

May 29, 2016 5.42pm BST

Paul Dimeo

Senior Lecturer in Sport, University of Stirling

The Conversation's partners

The Conversation UK receives funding from Hefce, Hefcw, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as sixty five university members.

[View the full list](#)



From left, Kenya's Florence Kiplagat, Emily Chebet and Joyce Chepkirui celebrate victory at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. Reuters/Suzanne Plunkett

The World Anti-Doping Agency, the International Olympic Committee and the International Association of Athletics Federations are facing a real dilemma. Having pushed Kenya towards improving its anti-doping environment, the question remains whether to follow through and deliver the ultimate sanction – disqualification from the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

Such a move would potentially prove disastrous for Kenyan sport. Athletes would lose the opportunity of participating in the most prestigious event. Months, even years, of planning would feel wasted. The economic rewards would be lost. The reputational damage would be enormous and a huge shadow would be cast over the country's involvement in other international events.

The arguments for such a move are clear. Media investigations claim to show **widespread doping**. More than 40 athletes have failed drugs tests since 2011 and 18 are currently serving bans. Some highly successful male and female athletes are now associated with **doping and cheating**. Only six months ago, former World Anti-Doping Agency President Dick Pound **said** it was “pretty clear there are a lot of performance-enhancing drugs being used” in Kenya. Some of these allegations **go back four years**.

Kenya’s non-compliance would mean it had not fulfilled all the requirements of the World Anti-Doping Code. These include having an effective independent national anti-doping organisation to oversee testing, education, sanctions and appeals. Subsequent legal amendments made by Kenya on specific recommendations would, it appears, result in the country being declared compliant and thus able to compete in the Olympics. But this remains to be seen.

It is not unique for a country to have doping cases – in some situations a high number of positives is seen as evidence of an effective anti-doping system. But the problem facing Kenya is its long-running non-compliance with the World Anti-Doping Code.

Despite warnings and support from the World Anti-Doping Agency over the **past two years**, Kenya’s sports and political leaders have left it to the proverbial last minute. In an effort to resolve this in time for the Olympics, the parliament is **pushing through legislation**.

However, we should look beyond the policies to take stock of the wider situation and potential implications of a ban.

Kenya is not an isolated case

In the broader international context, Kenya is arguably unlucky to be singled out. This might be because it is home to so many successful athletes. Its various successes include finishing top of the table at the last World Athletics Championships with **seven gold medals**. The London marathon is also an example of their dominance: since 2004, the men’s race has been won by a Kenyan athlete on all but two occasions. This year Eliud Kipchoge won it for the second year in a row with a course record. Another example is Florence Kiplagat’s world record last year for the **women’s half marathon**.

It is hardly surprising that sports scientists have been searching for the **secret to their success** for over a decade. It is a high-profile target, similar to American champion cyclist Lance Armstrong.

But other countries have also recently faced issues with their **anti-doping systems**. In March 2016, Spain and Mexico were non-compliant, and Olympic hosts Brazil still had final steps to take even after being declared compliant. Six countries were added to the list and four had only just been **declared compliant**.

In April, the Chinese anti-doping laboratory had its **accreditation suspended** for four months. And, of course, Russia is the other country that could face disqualification after a damning report in November 2015 by a commission led by **Dick Pound**.

Given the apparent range of anti-doping system weaknesses, the Kenyan sports community might think itself hard done by if the county is the only one to be severely punished through removal from the Olympics.

What a ban would mean

The potential implications of a ban are far from clear. Presumably the sports and specific athletes not implicated in any doping investigation would feel highly aggrieved. Most of the focus has been on track and field, despite the fact that Kenya’s 2012 Olympic squad included boxers, swimmers and a weightlifter. Athletes who do not have a positive test as

evidence of their individual doping might have a legal case for compensation if a country-level ban prevented their participation.

Moreover, disqualification would open up challenging questions around where to draw the line in other contexts. As doping mainly occurs during training periods, any country that is not sufficiently testing its athletes during the full four years between Olympic events has arguably opened the door to cheating. So becoming compliant in the months before the Games hardly suggests a long-term commitment to anti-doping.

And would the Rio Games be of the same quality without the best athletes from all countries competing? Any disqualification would be a regression to the early 1980s, when political boycotts meant gold medal winners could not claim to be the best in their sport.

It was recently reported that even fans **would not be too concerned** if they were watching “doped” athletes in Rio. Once you take the best athletes out of a competition, there is potential to lose viewers and sponsors. This also harms the clean athletes, whose career opportunities are dependent on the economic viability of their sport.

Unfortunately the spate of recent scandals means that the World Anti-Doping Agency and international sports agencies are under pressure to prove that they are cracking down on doping.

The question of equality

Perhaps an even wider political lens needs to be taken on this subject. It is difficult for developing countries to meet the expectations of globalised anti-doping when economic resources are much scarcer and geographical locations make testing even more challenging. With each test costing US\$500-\$800, many African, Asian and South American countries might reasonably identify other priorities for public finances.

In addition athletes in developing countries see sport as a route out of poverty, not as a pastime for wealthy people. For example, some Kenyans describe athletes as a way to create **new wealth** for their family and community. By comparison, 20% of the British squad at the 2012 Olympics attended **private fee-paying schools**.

If Kenya were to be banned from Rio 2016, the overall inclusiveness of the Olympics and the global equality of sporting opportunities would be seriously questioned.



Olympics

Doping

Rio Olympics

International Olympic Committee

Anti doping

Kenya

World Anti-Doping Agency



Tweet66



Share18



Get newsletter