International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics

ISSN: 1940-6940 (Print) 1940-6959 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/risp20

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To cite this article: Ross Walker, Bradley Sharples, Chun-Chieh Lin & Matthew Holmes (05 Oct 2026): Sportwashing: a growing international concern in sport-for-development, International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, DOI: 10.1080/19406940.2026.2738555

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2026.2738555

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Published online: 05 Oct 2026.

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPORT POLICY AND POLITICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2026.2738555

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Sportwashing: a growing international concern in sport-for-development

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ABSTRACT

With organisations today required to operate in more ethically and socially responsible ways, different types of 'washing' in sport are emerging, while instances of illiberal practices, such as human rights issues, are becoming a growing concern worldwide. Thus, to situate sportwashing as a global issue, the research draws on four international case studies from England (Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games), Taiwan (2022 Workers' World Cup), Zambia (Response Network) and Scotland (Scottish basketball). Through this global lens, the research offers insights into structural incentives for sportwashing amongst efforts to leverage sport for social development. Collectively, the cases highlight how organisations operate under banners of social impact; albeit underpinned by broader economic, political, and performance-based objectives. Within the individual cases, nine themes: commercialisation, participation and talent development; institutional legitimacy and reputation building; funding and power beneath democratic prestige; and social exclusion and legacy framing. Furthermore, it is argued that sportwashing manifests by over-exaggerating social impact through and from sport. While the extent of sportwashing varies across ecosystems, such altruistic public-facing notions of social impact actively obfuscate lived realities and go unnoticed, subsequently constraining people's development. A key issue entails that sportwashing is largely unchallenged until it is too late to proactively address, with the main ramifications experienced by the people and communities that programmes were meant to support. The research thus advances SFD for understanding the negative impact of washing in social impact-driven environments. It also highlights the need to document sportwashing cases individually, as considering sportwashing broadly conceals individual contextual nuances.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 9 June 2026
Accepted 11 September 2026

KEYWORDS
Legacy; power; social impact; sport-for-development; sportwashing

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Introduction

Today, growing concern surrounds non-democratic regimes becoming embedded and normalised within sport (Grix *et al*. 2025) with the intersection of power, politics, money, and state, alongside media interests, exploiting and shaping sport worldwide (Chadwick *et al*. 2023, English and Ramon 2026). Such practices range from investment in sport, clubs, and events for reputation and geopolitical resilience, to diplomacy, nation branding, and soft power gains (Jarvie *et al*. 2026). Arguably, one main problem is how organisations and institutions, ranging from international sport organisations, such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), to various illiberal countries, detach themselves from sport's realpolitik (Chadwick *et al*. 2023). Thus, they ignore abuses of entire systems and human rights, among other environmental, ethical, and social issues (Ilevbare and McPherson 2025).

Detaching sport from political realities before manipulating, mobilising, and repurposing it for strategic, economic, and political benefits, such as commercialisation and trade, often emanates from illiberal practices through sports chain effects (Grix *et al*. 2025). Sport therefore becomes a problematised negotiation between policymakers, states, and non-state actors that negatively shapes sociocultural values, domestic politics, and foreign policies (Santos 2021). With these growing concerns, where sport conceals corporate externalities, counteractive pleas across global society rebuke unethical practices (Millington *et al*. 2019) while seeking innovative ways to analyse entities embedding and reflecting illiberal practices (Ilevbare and McPherson 2025). This stems from restructuring western-centred unipolar agendas of political economy and socioculturalism within the multipolar world order's dynamic power relations (Lee and Krieger 2024). One urgent call necessitates more socially conscious research, holding those committing immoral practices responsible by critically pinpointing illiberalism that constrains sport's potential to produce social change (Millington *et al*. 2019, Jarvie *et al*. 2026).

Given the increasing demands for socially conscious sport-based research, links to sportwashing entail processes whereby organisations misrepresent or overstate their commitment to ethical and social responsibilities. Within sport-for-development (SFD) and this research, this is positioned through entities draping themselves in legitimacy by advocating and publicly proliferating social impact from their practices, yet obfuscating their true intentions. Research into forms of 'washing' has risen, due to increased pressures for entities to act in socially responsible ways (Millington *et al*. 2019, English and Ramon 2026). However, organisations adopting neoliberal tenets place minimalist focus on human rights issues, inequality and structural economic change despite leveraging symbolic or reputational gestures (Jarvie *et al*. 2026). This constrains sport entities' capacity to make development decisions (Kidd 2008, Levermore 2011), creating competing priorities between nation building and human rights (Chadwick *et al*. 2023) in liberal and illiberal countries. Overall, there remains limited knowledge around issues of governance and policy in global SFD, particularly regarding problems within development programmes internationally (Lindsey 2017).

Existing studies of 'washing' draw on frameworks ranging from corporate social responsibility, stakeholder theory, ecological modernisation, social identity theory and, most pervasively, soft power (Rocha and McCullough 2026). However, each perspective evaluates the projecting actors' standpoint or the structure-agency

dynamic rather than those whose substantive development the underlying deprivation directly concerns. This limitation is acute in sportwashing, whose legitimating vocabulary draws from notions of, and outcomes associated with, development, yet it is seldom assessed against SFD literature. Furthermore, limited research exists which situates SFD within sportwashing (Al Thani 2021). The research therefore positions SFD as the analytical basis of information appropriate for understanding sportwashing's own normative account and the issues circulating social impact in development-based sporting contexts. Thus, this study adopts Açıkgöz *et al*.'s (2022) argument that while SFD environments embody some values and can create new developmental opportunities, the problem remains the way sport is used, which resultantly has a neutralising impact on participants' development. Subsequently, the research answers Giulianotti et al.'s (2019) call to challenge drifts by SFD towards sportwashing through politicised sentimentalism and CSR-based simulacrum of development.

Recent scholarship warns against confining 'washing' to non-Western or non-democratic states (Boykoff 2022). Current research (Jarvie *et al*. 2026) argues that SFD reinforces this caution, as sportwashing substantially impacts on development by unevenly distributing social impact regardless of regime type. To evidence this, the investigation embeds four international case studies, situating sportwashing as a global issue through empirical evidence from England (Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games), Taiwan (2022 Workers' World Cup), Zambia (Response Network) and Scotland (Scottish basketball). Doing so offers insights into structural incentives for sportwashing amongst efforts to leverage sport for social development. Because SFD helps recognise the varying challenges marginalised groups face in diverse global contexts alongside their structural and lived constraints (Jarvie *et al*. 2026), it helps explore sport-based programmes across the four countries. Through assessing different organisations' social impact worldwide, similarly to explorations by Ilevbare and McPherson (2025), the research contributes to shifts within sportwashing around how diverse sport institutions in different contexts are analysed.

To investigate these cases embedded within distinct political, regulatory, and developmental contexts, the investigation is guided by three research questions: How are sport-based organisations today reflecting signs of sportwashing?; What overarching themes reflect the underlying motivations of organisations' social impact endeavours worldwide?; and Why is sportwashing starting to emerge more prominently across the sport industry globally?

With sportwashing's definition suffering from imprecision (Boykoff 2022), this article assesses sportwashing within SFD ecosystems, showing that it manifests through exaggerating the social impact of sport, often in instances where entities overstate their contributions towards fulfilling government policies, institutional and organisational objectives, alongside funding stipulations. Collectively, these entities operate under banners of social development, albeit underpinned by broader economic and political objectives. While sportwashing varies across ecosystems, such altruistic public-facing notions of social development actively obfuscate lived realities and go unnoticed. Furthermore, they remain largely unchallenged until sportwashing can no longer be addressed, with the ramifications experienced by people and communities that programmes were meant to support, creating more problems than social

benefits. Thus, through the SFD lens, this helps conceptualise sportwashing in relation to social impact whereby individual cases reveal contextual nuances relating to SFD and reflect sportwashing mechanisms. By focusing on the public realm, mainly the community-ground-level where SFD is commonly located, this study contributes to conceptualisations of new forms of sportwashing and offers insights explaining their emergence.

Literature review

Sport-for-development

SFD was established in the nineteenth century (Kidd 2008). Gruneau (2015) and Collison *et al*. (2018) attribute its creation to working- and middle-class movements for rational recreation and muscular Christianity, initially conceptualised as a sporting ideology for cultural, individual, and social advancement. During the early-mid twentieth-century inter-war period, sport as a comprehendible tool for social improvement held major precedence (Giulianotti and Darnell 2016). From the 1980s onwards, organisations like the Mathare Youth Sport Association transformed sport from a popular pastime into an internationally renowned humanitarian tool (Giulianotti and Darnell 2016). SFD grew significantly in the 1990s, sparked by jubilant neoliberalism, spawning new entrepreneurial opportunities including commercially driven sports (Kidd 2008). When Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), including the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations (UN), alongside international sports federations, started leading development approaches during this period, this added greater legitimacy and financial support (Gruneau 2015). The twenty-first century saw SFD rapidly grow, becoming institutionalised and one of sport's most researched fields, with over 1000 organisations worldwide (Collison *et al*. 2018, Darnell *et al*. 2019). These entities originally worked towards achieving the UN's 2015 Millennium Development Goals, but currently focus on delivering the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (Jarvie *et al*. 2026).

Nowadays, SFD features in sport policies, receiving private and public investments for domestic and international initiatives seeking social impact (Darnell *et al*. 2019). Subsequently, SFD involves using sport to exert positive influences upon people's lives and achieve non-sporting outcomes (Walker 2026a). For example, sport is said to improve public health (Kidd 2008); promote social cohesion (Jarvie *et al*. 2026); enhance educational opportunities (Burnett 2010); and may specifically address members of disadvantaged communities (Spaaij *et al*. 2019). Additionally, sport enhances capacity at a community level, spanning multiple themes such as access to resources; social capital; inter-organisational networks; leadership; civic participation; shared community values and a culture of learning (Edwards 2015). Alongside this, Levermore (2008) groups the developmental power of sport into six clusters: conflict resolution and intercultural understanding; building physical, social, sport, and community infrastructure; raising awareness; empowerment; physical and psychological health; and economic development and poverty alleviation. Overall, the aim(s) of SFD projects are to connect with change agents or role models; embed participatory approaches in programme foundations and evaluations; extend intervention engagement; integrate sporting activities into

development proceedings; establish safe spaces and empower local communities to continue programmes after initial completion (Schulenkorf *et al*. 2016).

Sportwashing

Considerable research on 'washing' in sport exists (Boykoff 2022, Brannagan *et al*. 2025, Crossley 2026, English and Ramon 2026). Despite lacking a clear definition, sportwashing is frequently used to critique non-democratic states or large corporations that leverage sports to detract from exploitative or unfavourable practices (Jarvie *et al*. 2026) and is particularly understood within certain geopolitical structures (Grix *et al*. 2025). Regarding the social impact of sport, sportwashing involves the process by which observers and researchers accuse states and organisations of using their influence, such as through major events and sponsorship, to distract from poor human rights and generate positive coverage of themselves (English and Ramon 2026). Notably, sportwashing is prevalent with entities that are resource-rich but lack cultural capital, so they trade one for the other (Grix *et al*. 2025). Rather than a reductive critique of non-democratic regimes, it bi-directionally serves various partners involved in the process (Grix *et al*. 2025). Thus, inauthentic sustainable development may stem from agential deception but also from structural pressures that constrain the capabilities organisations and communities can exercise (Jarvie *et al*. 2026). Subsequently, 'washing' can be considered across two analytical perspectives. The first contends that washing is driven by (non-)state actors pursuing self-interest or mutual advantage (Brannagan *et al*. 2025). The second foregrounds stakeholders' moral obligation to resist practices that corrupt sport's intrinsic values (Fruh *et al*. 2022). However, in this study, sportwashing is neither freely chosen nor structurally determined but entangled within institutional practices, stakeholders' interests and influential agents' choices.

Today, international sports organisations are increasingly resembling political institutions. Subsequently, the political-sporting issue leading to 'washing' often emanates from forced conformity to political regimes, agendas, and policies, with political institutions and personnel influencing how sports organisations and practitioners operate (Ilevbare and McPherson 2025). Within this new geopolitical economy of sport, this influence reflects how countries use natural resource revenues, the use of sport for soft power purposes and how sport has become central to nations' industrial development (Chadwick *et al*. 2023). To help understand and interpret sportwashing, Boykoff (2022) offers four advances for conceptualising sportwashing: (a) the action is not just found in autocratic domains but also exists in democracies; (b) domestic audiences help understand sportwashing's political complexities; (c) sportwashing can lead to military intervention and (d) new forms of sportwashing are emerging, with authoritarian regimes funding teams and events in democratic states. Overall, if found to commit sportwashing, strategies can backfire and negatively impact organisations and people's reputations instead of washing them (English and Ramon 2026). Thus, washing of any kind, intended or unintended, carries significant risks.

Sport-for-development and sportwashing

While SFD's foundations and ethos reflect altruistic intent, underpinned by a clear social and developmental focus, SFD and its individual contexts suffer critiques that challenge

the altruism in which it was founded and is currently proliferated (Walker 2025). For example, wherein challenges and opportunities are intertwined, they do not always lead to clear, identifiable outcomes (Açıkgöz *et al*. 2022). One overarching issue remains neoliberalism's looming dominance and one-size-fits-all applicability to legitimisation and quantification measures (Jarvie *et al*. 2026) but also the neo-institutionalisation of organisations and social impact legacies (Leopkey and Parent 2012). Linked to neoliberalism are sporting organisations' requirements to meet predetermined participation targets, encouraging entities to use the most efficient means possible to maximise initiative numbers (Morgan and Costas Battle 2019). This detracts from programmes' developmental intent, alongside susceptibilities, to prove operational successes via high numbers. Such problems spark scepticism over sport's transformative social potential, alongside notions of self-interest and hidden motivations (Walker 2025). Often, various pressures, such as insecure and reduced funding, necessitate a shift of focus from the individual to the programme's survivability and productivity. However, the actions that ensue link to and embody acts of sportwashing.

Despite extensive SFD research, sportwashing within SFD ecosystems has received little attention, with a conspicuous absence of holistic analysis intersecting institutional arrangements and SFD programmes, leaving contributors to underwhelming social development under-researched. While existing scholarship has yielded productive typologies and institutional readings (Detchenique and Grolleau 2025, Ilevbare and McPherson 2025, Rocha and McCullough 2026), these have largely centred on mega-events and the reputational stratagems of state and corporate actors, deploying soft power as an analytic shorthand whose illiberal logics are rarely interrogated (Postlethwaite *et al*. 2022). Addressing this lacuna, the research explores structural conditions that ultimately encouraged sportwashing through inauthentic representations of social impact. As evidenced through four case studies, competing priorities constrained social impact. With SFD's continued existence tied to social impact (Walker 2026b), there appeared various incentives to disconnect perceptions from reality. The consequence of sportwashing is that particular voices, often those of marginalised communities framed as passive recipients of SFD programming, become silenced by inauthentic claims of positive social impact from those undertaking the SFD efforts. This decentring of social impact is antithetical to SFD and thus Costa and Moriconi (2024) warn that the politicisation of sport is not always positive, showing that some political practices jeopardise the core values of sport and delegitimize its positive aspect.

Methodology

Sportwashing is conceptualised in this study as a discursive-relational phenomenon, an interplay between publicly stated social-impact intent and contradictory organisational practice. This cannot be adequately diagnosed within any single setting because its mechanism depends on the transnational circulation of SFD discourse. Similar to research conducted by Giulianotti *et al*. (2021) drawing on data from Kosovo, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka, a *multi-sited* approach (Hayhurst 2015) is therefore necessary, as diverging cases provide different yet distinct insights about how misleading claims about sport are mobilised politically. Employing purposive sampling (Neuman 2013), the *multi-sited, multiple-case embedded design* (Yin 2014)

Table 1. Embedded design overview: cases, sub-units and primary evidentiary modes.

Case	Country	Sub-units	Primary evidentiary mode
2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games	England	Mega-event organisers; event programmes; host-community responses.	Document analysis (34 official documents, 9 academic articles, 201 news reports); supplemented by 6 semi-structured interviews with event stakeholders.
2022 Workers' World Cup	Taiwan	Global Workers' Organisation (GWO); 12 clubs/200+ footballers; coaches, organisers, government officials.	Participant observation; 10 semi-structured interviews; field notes.
Response Network	Zambia	Non-governmental organisation, sport for development programme staff, programme managers and delivery staff.	4 semi-structured interviews.
Basketball	Scotland	National governing body (basketballscotland); professional sport (Glasgow Rocks); 27 community clubs.	Audio-visuals (142); document analysis (292 mission statements, organisational reviews, government reports, media releases, newspapers); 6 semi-structured interviews with basketball stakeholders.

identified four cases in similar and dissimilar geographical and political contexts (Scotland/England/Taiwan/Zambia). The decision to work across four cases rather than one responds to long-standing criticisms that SFD research insufficiently engages the sector's transnational complexity (Hayhurst 2015), with few sustained comparative studies spanning the diverse geopolitical conditions SFD investigates (Collison *et al*. 2016, Jarvie *et al*. 2026). The four cases were selected following *replication logic* (Yin 2014). England and Scotland enable literal replication within close geographical, cultural and institutional proximity, while Taiwan and Zambia were selected for theoretical replication, providing contrasting cultural, governance and developmental contexts in which the same discursive pattern can be tested. The four contexts encompass contrasting sports (basketball/football/multi-sport events) and organisational forms (national governing bodies/professional franchises/mega-event organisers/community sport clubs/NGOs). Consistent with the embedded design, different cases based on their context required different evidentiary strategies (Yin 2014). Furthermore, cases were faceted into sub-units corresponding to their salient organisational tiers, permitting a multiplicity of evidence to be integrated within and across cases (See Table 1).

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021). Coding was guided by analytical concerns prominent in the sportwashing literature, including the recurring gap between symbolic, image-managing actions and substantive systemic change (Rocha and McCullough 2026); the strategic management of multi-stakeholder perceptions across fans, communities, sponsors and governments (Detchenique and Grolleau 2025); and the three reputational mechanisms—*distraction*, *minimisation* and *normalisation*—by which moral or developmental shortfalls are obscured (Fruh *et al*. 2022, Detchenique and Grolleau 2025). These functioned as sensitising lenses rather than a fixed codebook. Themes such as monetisation and participation were developed in dialogue with this literature including Walker's (2025) finding that self-interest is central to organisational involvement in development-oriented programmes. To ensure consistency, credibility and rigour, triangulation was applied throughout data analysis to

compare information across all sources, with the four researchers discussing inclusion and exclusion criteria and reviewing analytical themes across all cases.

Findings

Case study 1 (The 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games, England): social legacy framing

The West Midlands is the UK's poorest NUTS2 region (Office for National Statistics, 2016), while Birmingham is the sixth most deprived district in England (Anjum 2023), evidencing the argument for increased public investment. As a 'superdiverse' majority-minority city, Birmingham contains substantial minority ethnic communities, many of which have connections to Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, the Caribbean, and other Commonwealth contexts (Chen *et al*. 2023, KPMG et al. 2024). Given this, and the historical connection of the Commonwealth Games to the former British Empire (Quinn and Misener 2023), the Games were promised as a catalyst for social development, subverting previous negative perceptions of the UK as a colonial power, alongside criticisms of ethnocentrism and anti-immigration sentiments post-Brexit (De Ruyter *et al*. 2021). For example, the Games are colloquially known as the 'Friendly Games'. Aiming to support urban renewal and the social inclusion of marginalised communities (Chen *et al*. 2023), the Birmingham bid was awarded based on strong social legacy promises (Pavitt 2017).

Hosted from 28th July to 8th August, the Birmingham Games operated under the mission pillars of Bring People Together; Improve Health and Well-Being; Help the Region to Grow and Succeed; Be a Catalyst for Change; and Put Us on the Global Stage (2021). Dubbed a 'Games for Everyone' (2022a) and promoted as 'grounded in communities' (2022b), the event was lauded for being the first with social value requirements, including a 10% weighting in contract bids (KPMG et al. 2024). However, the temporary character of this commitment was acknowledged by one researcher involved in the event in an interview: 'The Games made all the contractors adopt a social value framework, which I think is really good . . . after you finish your event contract you don't have to do it anymore'. As a result, narratives surrounding the Games' social impact were presented favourably.

Social promises were challenged in 2021, when 51 prominent community leaders accused the Games of excluding local Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani communities (BRIG 2022, Murray 2022a). Underrepresentation of marginalised groups was also highlighted, only encompassing 18% of workers; 7% of managers, and only 1 of 20 Organising Committee members (Palmer 2021). A subsequent Race Equality Report concluded that the Games failed to effectively engage with local communities, instead focusing on the delivery of programmes that showcased racial equality but were 'for show, without serious meaningful intent' (BRIG 2022, p. 37). Indeed, the ethnically diverse Arena Academy was used as a backdrop for press events discussing event diversity, despite the school receiving limited actual event engagement (BRIG 2022). A volunteer manager asserted in an interview that: 'I think they maybe just wanted to get Birmingham back on the map, get people visiting Birmingham . . . I guess it definitely put Birmingham on the map'. However, they followed by stating that:

> I wish that we'd done more in the community leading up to it . . . I felt like maybe we could have like gone to local schools and got them excited beforehand . . . maybe just in the lead up doing like more things to get local communities involved.

In response to these criticisms, the Games funded the expanded 2022 Birmingham Festival, an effort criticised as a 'last-ditch' attempt to salvage social inclusion amidst increasing public criticism (BRIG 2022). While including valuable social programming, it was accused of excluding creative groups led by people of colour (Murray 2022b) and delivering limited Punjabi content (BBC 2022).

Instead, social inclusion appeared centred on perception and image. Amidst mounting tensions between the UK and EU trade, the Games aligned with UK government efforts to reignite connections with Commonwealth nations post-Brexit (De Ruyter *et al*. 2021). These efforts crystallised post-event through the 2025 Commonwealth Secretariat strategic plan, which makes clear the intent to strengthen relationships and resilience with Commonwealth nations (The Commonwealth 2025). Within this context, claims of 'superficial' social engagement become substantiated, wherein visible inclusion was prioritised because it generated reputational and geopolitical value, with less visible forms of community engagement under-resourced. Indeed, Birmingham's selection as event host, over other UK cities, could be argued to stem from strong links to the Commonwealth through its diverse population. Highlighting this outward-facing inclusive 'image' of the city and event, a venue manager mentioned in an interview that 'You see how diverse from the moment you get off the flight, it's quite refreshing . . . there's an appreciation for all different cultures in Birmingham'.

Alongside geopolitical and image factors, economic issues also inhibited social achievement. The Perry Barr Athletes' Village was planned as post-event social housing for a deprived ethnically diverse local community (Birmingham City Council 2022). Various issues, attributed to COVID-19, resulted in it being cancelled, instead constructed directly as a residential site. Original plans suggested 1414 homes built in phase 1, with additional phases of 500 homes, up to a maximum of 5000 (2021). However, only 968 were initially constructed (DCMS 2022). Despite warnings pre-event, Birmingham Council declared effective bankruptcy in September 2023, in debt by £1.25 bn; facing a budget gap of £300 m over 2 years; and had an £87 m in-year financial budget gap (Forrest 2023, Sandiford 2024). This resulted in reducing non-essential spending (Merrick 2023); cuts of £300 m to public services; suggestions to sell £750 m worth of public assets (Shackle 2024); and a 10% council tax increase in 2024 in surrounding low-income areas (Gilbert 2024). As such, no additional Perry Barr construction phases have occurred, while 755 of the 968 completed homes were planned to be sold to private developers at a public loss of approximately £320 m (Gilbert 2024).

This is particularly salient considering the Games cost £929.7 million (KPMG et al. 2024). In this sense, some tangible social legacies were underwhelming, demonstrating more image-related 'benefits', as one event organiser said in an interview about some host venues: 'Yes, they can say they hosted the 2022 Games but there wasn't a lick of paint, there wasn't equipment left behind, there wasn't anything'. Within this context, a volunteer manager stated in an interview the potential alternatives that event funds may have contributed to: 'Why have we built a new swimming pool in

Sandwell when we could have built new primary schools and made the local area better'.

Consequently, the findings highlight how, despite ambitious social legacy promises, political ambitions redirected investment away from less visible forms of inclusion, while economic issues both created logistical issues and provided impetus for exaggerating social impact amidst criticism. As event promises centred on social inclusion and development, these political and financial pressures created strong incentives to foreground visible inclusion and successful legacy narratives. These narratives helped legitimise the event's expenditure and sustain support for Birmingham's wider ambition to remain a host city for major sporting events, such as the Birmingham 2022–2032 Major Sporting Events Strategy (Birmingham City Council 2021).

Case study 2 (2022 Workers' World Cup, Taiwan): funding and power beneath democratic prestige

On 29–30 October 2022, 12 teams representing more than 200 footballers from over ten nationalities gathered at the Chaoma Football Ground in Taichung, Taiwan, for the inaugural Workers' World Cup (WWC) to showcase Taiwan's soft power as a democratic polity. WWC was organised by the Global Workers' Organisation Taiwan (GWO) and funded through the Asian Football Confederation's (AFC) Dream Asia social responsibility initiative and the Sport Administration's Sport-i-Taiwan programme administered locally through the Taichung City Government (TCG). This football event was deliberately staged weeks before the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. On the WWC's pitch, banners reading"Fair Play", "Workers' Rights", "Human Rights" and "Anti-Exploitation" signalled solidarity with the migrant labourers exploited in Qatar's stadium construction, while drawing attention to the constrained football participation and disempowerment of migrant workers within Taiwan.

Beyond its competitive format, the 2022 WWC served several functions for the migrant community in Taiwan. First, it advocated for migrant workers' rights, with one organiser affirming that "our event aims to show solidarity with the migrant worker issues surrounding the 2022 Qatar World Cup". Second, it strengthened partnerships between civil society and sports governing bodies as one football administrator noted that "collaborating with GWO has become standard, whether for referee training, AFC liaison, or foreign footballers in top-tier women's leagues". Third, it enhanced public recognition, with the organiser describing it as "changing Taiwan's attitude towards blue-collar workers, showcasing their passion for pursuing dreams and self-realisation". Fourth, it built support networks between migrant and Taiwanese communities when one participant reflecting that "sport [football] is a kind of universal way of sharing time together and learning about other cultures".

These aspirations, however, collide with Taiwan's migration regime, which is structurally rooted in racialised classism (Tseng 2006). As of 2026 May, Taiwan hosts over 1 million migrants (Ministry of Labor 2026; Ministry of Interior 2026), while Taiwan's Employment Service Act of 1992 established a dual system to them (Tseng 2006). The first scheme is open to foreign spouses, international students and white-collar workers worldwide; the second is reserved for blue-collar guest

workers from Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines Thailand, etc. This distinction alienates blue-collar workers by constraining their employment freedom, naturalisation prospects, and depriving their right to healthcare, occupational protections and leisure participation. Such deprivations are compounded by an exclusionary legal framework in which Taiwan's National Sports Act guarantees equal access to sport facilities yet only limited to ROC citizens (National Sports Act 2026), excluding migrants from statutory rights to sports. Although Taiwan has incorporated the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to showcase its commitment to the human rights protection since 2009, migrants' right to sport still falls into a jurisdictional vacuum in which no policy domain takes responsibility for safeguarding it.

The WWC further exemplifies this jurisdictional conundrum in securing of funding in both national and international levels. . In Taiwan, the collaborative framework for migrant football initiatives draws partnerships among public agencies, educational institutions and grassroots communities (Sport Administration 2017). However, their relationships largely depend upon a nepotistic nework in which organisational factions and stakeholder interests converge into the distribution of funding and power (Lee & Jiang 2013). In organising the WWC, GWO firstly navigated funding support from with Chinese Taipei Football Association (CTFA)and TCG. Each, however, imposed distinct demands. CTFA, whose elite-focused faction, offered no funding but verbal support on their commitment in migrant football development. The TCG, as the event's funder, insisted on transforming the WWC into an exotic cuisine-focused event attached with a football tournament for sidelining its human rights values. Beyond these local tensions, the GWO also confronted the sensitivity of Taiwan's naming disputes when seeking funding support from the AFC. The AFC required GWO to remove all references of Taiwan from the 2022 WWC and suggested use social responsibility rather than human rights. Otherwise, AFC would have no choice but withdarw GWO's application. These confrontations are the distractions and superficial measurements —as one interviewee stressed the "negligence of those justice-seeking participants"— through which donors and authorities commodify and dilute human rights within a neutral football programme.

This study thus argues that the 2022 WWC opens a human development pathway, a form of freedom for migrant communities but exposing the mechanics of sportwashing beneath Taiwan's pursuit of democratic prestige. Taiwan ranks 14th on the 2025 Human Rights Index (Our World in Data 2026), yet its migration regime treats migrants less as rights-bearing individuals than as soft-power assets projected outward to bolster international reputation. The WWC drew minimal media attention locally, despite its banners proclaiming workers' and human rights, but being selected as one of the AFC's benchmark case. However, the structural conditions of racialised classism, exclusionary sport legislation and nepotistic governance remain largely unchallenged, not to mention Taiwan's naming disputes. The WWC demonstrates Taiwan's charitable intent and progressive action towards migrants while overshadowing the everyday dirtying of their beings and doings within its own governing system as the organiser responded by stating "due to cultural differences, language barriers, and class distinctions, we're unaware of their communities and choose to ignore them". The gap between symbolic solidarity and substantive structural change is precisely where sportwashing resides.

Case study 3 (Response Network , Zambia): institutional legitimacy and reputation building

Response Network (RN) is a non-governmental organisation in Livingstone, Zambia's second largest city, where the latest census data indicate a population of 178,000, with 2.3 million residing in the wider southern province (Zambia Statistics Agency 2025). The province spans 85,000 km2 (Zambia Statistics Agency 2025), with settlements far apart and isolated from more urban regions. For two decades, RN has worked with hard-to-reach community groups from rural villages across the southern province, teaching them to find solutions that help them mitigate their poverty in the deliberate absence and exclusion of sustained external support.

Founded in 2005, RN initially did not deliver a SFD programme; however, this changed when rural villagers requested support to establish and develop sports clubs. Resultantly, for the last decade, RN has delivered a SFD programme with support from Zambia's wider SFD sector. Expanding their programme offering like this with SFD exposes the village sports clubs to risks that are characteristic of sportwashing. RN's mission is to foster sustainable community development without sustained external support. This mission risks being compromised as villages increasingly work with external parties from Zambia's national sports ecosystem. Crucially, these parties are more vulnerable than RN to structural pressures and constraints that stem from their affiliation with quasi-state institutional bodies that risk the agential deception that frequently characterises sportwashing.

An interview with a senior manager confirmed that RN underpins programme delivery with what they describe as a self-help facilitation model. This model is designed to help rural villages to exercise agency to initiate and sustain community development activity through the SFD programme without sustained support from external groups:

> The role of Response Network is simply to give motivation and encouragement and make people come to their self-actualisation, and realise that they can actually solve their challenges, they can mitigate on their poverty using locally available resources.

However, establishing and growing community sport clubs, integrating them with the existing national sports ecosystem, and organising sporting competitions and training courses, risks the perceived agency of rural villagers within the delivery model becoming symbolic. Arguably, these SFD practices resemble prevailing neoliberal logics which constrain programmes with prerequisite elements that maximise quantitative outputs over developmental intentions and captured examples of agency. Such practices risk subjecting rural villages to a type of sportwashing which is likelyknowingly or unknowingly initiated by sport-focused entities within Zambia's sports ecosystem.

Such competing purposes for sport are further evidenced by an interview with a programme manager. This interview highlights the priority of space for community agency to thrive for a developmental purpose that is explicitly altruistic, unlike the sports development often prioritised by established sport-focused entities institutionalised within the sport ecosystem:

> The communities themselves, they will know the challenges they are facing in terms of sporting activities. You will find that there are few women whom engage themselves in sporting activities. You will find that there are a lot of parents, or some men . . . refuse to allow

> the women to go to sporting activities . . . they beat them . . . you'll find the children have been raped.

Without sport being the social platform a community needs to reduce such gender-related injustice and promote gender equality, addressing gender-based violence and the sexual abuse of children thorugh increasing female participation in sport, RN's SFD programme risks sportwashing, with the community excluding females from sport and wider community participation. Sport-focused entities risk leveraging sport's symbolic value for reputational gain and the growth of sport itself, neglecting substantive action against gender inequality as a social injustice.

RN's SFD model also risks sportwashing through the integration of sports clubs into the national sports ecosystem with sport-focused entities reputation benefiting from the social impact of clubs. Moreover, these entities focus upon sports club registration and raising sport participation rates exposesclubs to potential resource dependency that compromises RN's SFD programme ethos of nurturing self-reliance, particularly through community engagment in income generating activity. An interview with a programme facilitator confirms such a focus on community self-reliance:

> What we tell the community is to find solutions within themselves . . . if you don't have a ball, does it mean that if you are a football team you can only play with a ball that can be bought in town? . . . We encourage them to engage in other productive activities: rearing chickens, gardening, moulding bricks and sell to others – any entrepreneurship activity to raise money – then they can buy themselves a ball.

Beyond income generation, the same interviewee explained how they work to encourage the community to engage in civic activity. Of note here is how the community builds relations with tribal leaders who are often the custodians of land which sports clubs wish to secure access to:

> If they want to have a football pitch they have to seek consent from the traditional leader, the headmen, they ask for a piece of land for this village, we want to be spending our time playing football instead of engaging in other illicit behaviours.

Response Network's case spotlights how sportwashing can manifest at the micro level in remote global settings, potentially compromising a SFD model that protects the rights of rural villages to pursue development through their own agency, which should enable them to identify, challenge, and potentially champion social change through sport, without relying upon external support. To prevent sportwashing, Response Network needs to caution against sports clubs relying upon sport-focused entities for resources, and asking them to instead focus their efforts upon how to exercise agency through leading income generating and civic engagement activities which should lead to them realising social impact through sport without the prolonged support of any external parties.

Case study 4 (Basketball, Scotland): commercialisation, participation and talent development

Roughly 330,000 people play basketball in Scotland annually (All-Party Parliamentary Group 2014). Despite sustained engagement, basketball operates insecurely, dependent

on public funding for grassroots/community sport and private funding professionally. Notwithstanding the differences, both avenues are constrained by reduced income, a lack of resources, substandard facilities and management issues (basketballscotland 2025). Despite these constraints, funding stipulations require Scottish basketball to generate social impact. Resultantly, organisations, programmes and teams are redefining themselves as person-centred and focused on improving people's quality of life, rather than the former focus on competition, increasing members and talent development. As one community club trustee and former governing body employee stated in a public webinar for practitioners: 'The future of our sport, sporting organisations, is based on meeting the needs of people in our communities'. (Actify 2020).

Despite organisational shifts throughout the twenty-first century, problems persist regarding authenticity, and thus the contemporary altruistic extent remains questionable. For instance, one grassroots basketball programme launched in 2017 by the NGB in partnership with a subsidiary of the NBA, supported by community organisations nationwide alongside the professional franchise, was deemed valuable 'not just in developing people's skills on the court but also life skills as well', 'To see people growing independently and with confidence, having fun through basketball at a younger age'. (The Church of Hoops 2019). However, following these statements, the same representative from the NGB also commented how the initiative 'will definitely have an impact on our national squads in the future'. (The Church of Hoops 2019). Such comments contradict the altruistic public image put forth and suggest that underlying agendas or duplicity of purpose exist, specifically working towards former ambitions for increased participation and talent development.

Similarly, these potential hidden objectives have been found at the elite and professional level within community engagement initiatives. For example, when discussing the impact of a school-based educational programme, a player from the former professional franchise discussed on a podcast how 'I'm not sure how well we do at retaining players and retaining interest' (Turley 2020). However, through basketball initiatives, engaging with youth, promoting the sport alongside the team and encouraging children to play basketball, this is when they receive their return on investment (time/effort) and 'payback in terms of sponsorships and money and a general kind of interest in basketball' (Turley 2020). Despite being invited to partake due to the athlete's potential to have a positive impact, such statements reflect how motivations underpinning professional teams' community programming link to self-interests ranging from growing the sport to increasing revenue through improving the club's public presence and notoriety as entities of good.

In Scotland, participation in basketball is most widely enabled through community clubs that operate teams and lead programming, providing competitive, recreational and social opportunities across diverse levels and age-groups. Despite the relative diversity of opportunity, one former member with community, professional and governance experience summarised the overarching problem facing Scottish basketball whereby an 'elitist mindset' represents the notion of the 'club' (Walker 2021). Despite this, examples taken from different clubs' websites and mission statements outline diverging ethos': 'We use sport to develop skills that transcend the court into people's lives'; 'To Provide Basketball Pathways and High-Quality Opportunities for Grassroots to High Performance Participants' (Falkirk Fury Basketball Club 2026, Dunfermline Reign Basketball Club 2026). Thus, despite ongoing shifts towards social impact, some clubs' first and foremost

priority is competition, coaching for technical/tactical development over non-sporting outcomes that the social impact philosophies they employ, or allude to using, entail. However, the issue regarding sportwashing remains: practices are either minimally adapted or not changing at all from sport-for-sport-sake to development. Rather, while change has occurred in theory, it has yet to fully occur in practice, with Scottish basketball's person-centred mission statements coexisting with the former competition-first approach.

These aforementioned examples have chain effects on how social impact, in relation to generating non-sporting outcomes, is viewed, accredited and publicised by organisations. In one instance, a club founder expressed how proud he was when former players went on to do well in broader life after leaving the team such as within 'careers or education' (Woods 2021). However, given the team objective is performance-based (Falkirk Fury Basketball Club 2026), and this is how the players are subsequently nurtured, the outcome is not necessarily a direct byproduct of the support provided by the team. Rather, it reflects how the individual navigated the club environment to generate their own development. Such assertions are reinforced by one community club coach who stated on a podcast that 'what I've observed over the years is that we tend to treat the impact on communities as a byproduct of what we do'. (Wright 2021). Thus, organisations cannot claim credit for social impact they did not purposefully seek to cultivate and left as a byproduct of participation. Through embellishing their role in a person or group's development-based outcomes, this is committing sportwashing through falsely attributing and overstating their contribution and role in the people's social mobility.

Discussion

Theoretical contributions

The four cases reveal that aspirations for social development through sport were deprioritised and leveraged towards competing economic, political and sporting priorities commonly associated with sportwashing and notions of self-interest (Boykoff 2022, Detchenique and Grolleau 2025, Grix *et al*. 2025, Ilevbare and McPherson 2025, Walker 2025, Crossley 2026, English and Ramon 2026, Rocha and McCullough 2026,). Birmingham's Commonwealth-inclusion discourse aligned with post-Brexit foreign-policy signalling (De Ruyter *et al*. 2021); Taiwan's hosting of the Workers' World Cup framed migrant football as evidence of democratic prestige while exclusionary statutes remained intact; Zambia's national association integration converted village-led designs into participation-and-leadership pathways; Scotland's person-centred mission statements coexisted with competition-first and commercialised practices. The structural pressures evidenced here privileged top-down articulations of development over bottom-up realities of development experienced by beneficiaries of the sport programming. Across the four cases, the findings show sportwashing is not a single phenomenon but a recurring over-exaggeration of social impact through and from sport, surfacing as a distinct thematic emphasis in each case. These suggest sportwashing operates less by fabricating social impact than by inflating it, foregrounding what sport is claimed to deliver while leaving the delivery itself unexamined. This pattern is the diagnostic obverse of SFD-informed sport practice that intentionally enables social impact through social

choice (Walker 2026a), yet often manifests as an unintentional byproduct of participation (Walker 2025) because social impact is a secondary motivation behind more prioritised politicised hidden objectives across diverse systems, organisations and events (Sharples and Lee 2026).

Across the cases, sport functioned not to develop the targeted disadvantaged groups but rather legitimise the pursuit of investment, prestige or institutional standing for actors outside the programme's intended scope. This reflects the façade–substance gap (Rocha and McCullough 2026), a slippage between visible social-impact rhetoric and substantive claims of development through transformative social outcomes. The mechanisms differ by case. Birmingham's 'Games for Everyone' branding operated through distraction (Fruh *et al*. 2022), refocusing social impact objectives as event-related narratives supporting political aims. Taiwan's Workers' World Cup is staged through multi-stakeholder perception management (Detchenique and Grolleau 2025), whereby AFC, CTFA and TCG framings dilute human-rights discourse into social responsibility and normalise exclusionary statutory regimes. Zambia's institutional displacement minimised focus on gender inequity alongside sexual and gender-based violence by transforming rural villagers' self-help designs into participation-and-representation rhetoric (Lindsey 2017). Scotland's clubs falsely attribute individuals' self-authored social mobility to programme architecture that never intentionally cultivated it (Walker 2025). In each case, the demonstration of development becomes the legitimising mechanism for objectives lying outside programme scope (Kidd 2008, Levermore 2011, Millington *et al*. 2019).

Consistent across these diverse contexts remains those with the power to articulate social impact outcomes. Ironically, power rarely rests with the targeted subjects, and thus development is often structurally produced rather than altruistically cultivated. Commonwealth diaspora communities, migrant footballers, rural villagers and programme participants are *chosen* rather than *choosing* within structural conditions, denied the freedom to articulate their own beings and doings, becoming non-agential actors and passive recipients of their development. Institutional bodies with power over sport's organisation assert articulation rights that supplant the self-sustaining developmental designs of intended benefactors, in stratagems analogous to those that the broader SFD and sportwashing literature locates in state and corporate actors (Brannagan *et al*. 2025, Walker 2025). The theoretical implication thus formulates more sharply than existing SFD and sportwashing literature has articulated to date. Sportwashing is what social impact becomes when development is structurally suppressed, with the discursive surface remaining pristine while non-sporting outcomes are displaced, denied or misattributed across individual, collective and public dimensions (Jarvie *et al*. 2026). Thus, programming success depends on prioritising people and communities' needs (Walker 2026b), not the ambitions and strategic goals of the organisations and individuals delivering it. Yet, the cases highlight how social impact is strategically used as a front to navigate systems and people while ultimately leveraging growth and maximising outcomes for those already in positions of power.

Practical implications

While diverse reasons for sportwashing exist, the cases identify common challenges and complexities. As sport moves towards increased social development (Kidd 2008, Jarvie

et al. 2026), sportwashing issues are arising, mainly organisations overstating social development from sport while failing to adapt practices to align with organisational missions and policies. For example, in Zambia, institutions attempt to legitimise SFD by asserting power to influence how SFD is understood and practised by stakeholder groups. However, exercising authority and enforcing compliance with standards established by national sport entities contradicts community expectations that SFD must and does automatically generate social development. In such instances, this reflects the study's broader collective issue with entities operating under banners of social development (Walker 2025) despite opportunities for social development being constrained by conformity measures, misaligned priorities and a lack of understanding about countries' and institutions' policies and practices. Such insights return the discussion to Açıkgöz et al.'s (2022) point about the way SFD is used: here, sportwashing influences programming before, during and after delivery, and predominantly dictates it.

The instances mentioned do not necessarily indicate maliciousness or lack of caring from sport organisers. Rather, they demonstrate the repercussions of allowing external objectives to overrule social development's importance, with sportwashing manifesting to maintain sport's perception as an effective tool for social development. Despite this, the decision to shift priorities is not necessarily reflective of authoritative figures' choices, but of broader institutional pressures and systematic challenges constraining the ability to generate social impact (Jarvie *et al*. 2026) alongside the non-sporting outcomes that local sport entities value (Walker 2026a). However, given SFD's emphasis on social impact, it should be the main focal point of and for the programme's specific targeted groups to pursue development. Thus, sportwashing is not necessarily a conscious decision by organisations, but a product of increasing neoliberal pressures within sport development efforts (Darnell and Millington 2019) as they focus on, for example, evidencing social impact within grant applications. Whereas within sport events, such as Birmingham and Taiwan, reporting is often highly politicised, presenting biased accounts of social development to justify exorbitant costs (Leopkey and Parent 2012).

Across the cases, sportwashing reflects constrained environments, ones operating with lower budgets and limited resources in conjunction with increased demands and short-term requirements to produce social impact to maintain funding (Kidd 2008). Scottish basketball's funding, for instance, fluctuates annually based on broader socio-political-economic discourses beyond their control. However, under these circumstances, the development process can subsequently become superficial and lose meaning (Levermore 2011), becoming a tick-box exercise that shifts priorities from development to alternative objectives that help evidence social impact (Jarvie *et al*. 2026). This stems from overarching systemic complexities pressurising people and groups to commit sportwashing or else risk operational security. Thus, amidst current constraints facing the contemporary global sporting landscape (Chadwick *et al*. 2023), sports organisers in cases such as those examined can hardly survive without sportwashing. Yet, the findings highlight how sportwashing nullifies real, substantive efforts to achieve social development. Subsequently, SFD offers a new dynamic to policy, practice and sportwashing where sports organisers are almost damned if they do and damned if they do not when communicating social impact.

These individual organisations' shortcomings are byproducts of policy-makers' and sport systems' failures, with influential actors providing minimal support

provisions and guidance around social development. Problems also emanate from reduced funding, competitive grant environments, new policies, substandard governance, broader geopolitical shifts and an evolving society that forces entities to adapt and conform to the changing sport landscape and new policies imposed upon them to remain active (Levermore 2011, Lindsey 2017, Chadwick *et al*. 2023, Walker 2026b). Yet, ground-level operatives operate in isolation, adapting, responding and struggling individually while the ongoing issue of capacity and capability such as lacking knowledge, resources and time which limit organisations' ability to manifest social development (Kidd 2008, Jarvie *et al*. 2026). Thus, these systemic failures represent chain effects of substandard practices at the highest level (respective to each organisation, programme and system), whereby failures at each level catalyse ramifications for each subsequent stage. Resultantly, increasing sportwashing is not necessarily an individual organisational problem; the issues are broad-ranging, evident across different sporting ecosystems worldwide. While developmental efforts through sport manifest differently, owing to diverse national contexts and capacities (Sharples 2024), the issues within these policies and systems have the same outcome: they can and do negatively impact the people they were implemented to help (Açıkgöz *et al*. 2022).

Limitations and future research

This research has provided a broad, but shallow, overview of sportwashing, operationalising SFD to understand how various pressures constrain development from and through sport, resulting in incentives to exaggerate social impact. Its main limitation is that the findings rest on only four case studies which do not reflect all sport organisations' and participants' experiences globally. The research also contributes only qualitatively, meaning quantitative gaps remain and require exploration (Rocha and McCullough 2026).

Future studies must delve deeper into sport programme stakeholders' perceptions, exploring structural pressures that enable or constrain organisations' success. Research should also focus on those who consider themselves entities for social good but follow historic sport-for-sport-sake practices and thus can become organisations for social bad. This stems from findings which epitomise how people lack knowledge of social impact. Increased research educating practitioners around new policies, alongside creating development programmes is required to guide ground-level organisations. Finally, increased studies documenting monitoring and evaluation approaches are crucial to help verify the extent of development from sport (Walker 2025).

Overall, the research calls for a shift away from overly positive and superficial accounts of sport organisations' social impact towards investigations documenting people's and entities' failures or their obfuscation of lived realities (Millington *et al*. 2019). Practically, it reiterates Fruh et al.'s (2022) need for greater resistance, whereby depending on a person's role, they either exit the condition of complicity by removing themselves or change their relationship via reconsidering the goal of social change. Ultimately, the future of SFD requires greater accountability and commitment towards international human rights and development (Al Thani 2021).

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this study, sportwashing is prevalent across diverse global contexts from developed, developing and underdeveloped nations to mega-events, alongside community and professional sport programming. From analysing the cases, sportwashing is theorised as not a conscious choice of agency, nor is it determined by structural power as it resides in-between as a complex, non-linear assemblage of institutional practice, stakeholder interests and agential choice. Within the theorising of sportwashing is a competition between actors to reassert power and influence over society through sport, with SFD a nuanced and emergent interpretation of sport for actors with power to influence: (a) the politics of state-migrant diaspora relations in Britain and Taiwan; and (b) how people in Scotland and Zambia view sport as instrumental within SFD when it is in fact relational to people's improved livelihoods. Furthermore, sportwashing emanates from ongoing shifts in and relating to sport such as new policy trends alongside increasing pressures for sport to generate development-based outcomes albeit with reduced funds, knowledge and resources. Through this interaction, some sporting ecosystems worldwide are consequently creating problematic, superficial environments where development is not a lived reality or aspiration, but a front to achieve organisational and institutional goals.

Until research begins documenting the nuances of sportwashing in isolation such as social impact within different institutions and organisations, the ability to understand its complexities is limited. As highlighted in the individual cases in this study, without doing so, issues of commercialisation, participation and talent development, institutional legitimacy and reputation building, funding and power beneath democratic prestige, and social exclusion and legacy framing go unchallenged and are perpetuated. This stems from sportwashing's current positionality; a broad field comprising diverse, active factors that can overshadow its importance but also its presence across international sporting communities. Failure to focus on prominent individual issues will likely escalate concerns of sportwashing, meaning sport systems must respond reactively. Recognising prevailing trends, by contrast, can proactively mitigate ramifications before sportwashing becomes a widespread and more systemic issue, pinpointing emerging influences while recognising their layers. Thus, through SFD's prioritisation of development, it exists as a basis for helping sport conceptualise the altruistic future it desires. Overall, this research's key message entails that sport systems alongside approaches to and the process of generating development must change. Without operating as altruistically intended, sustainable transformational social change is unlikely, and if it occurs, minimal.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The authors did not receive funding for the research or submission of the manuscript for publication.

Ethical approval

Prior to commencing the research, the study was approved by the ethics committee within the University of Edinburgh's Moray House, School of Education and Sport.

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