

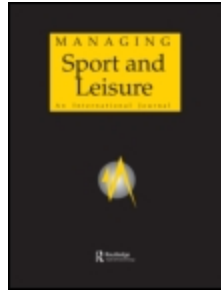
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**COVID-19 and its Impact on Sport Governance and Management: A Global, Critical Realist Perspective**

Journal:	<i>Managing Sport and Leisure</i>
Manuscript ID	RMLE-2020-0131.R2
Manuscript Type:	Commentary
Keywords:	COVID-19, sport governance, Critical Realism
Abstract:	<p>This commentary considers the impacts of COVID-19 on sport governance and management, given the global threat to sport services and organizations evident as a result of the disease since early 2020. To frame this analysis of the impacts and lessons to be learned, we use a Critical Realist (CR) perspective, which takes a multi-level view of reality and seeks to establish how and why something occurs in reality (Byers, 2013). While existing commentaries and emerging research on COVID-19 have focused on a superficial level of reality (i.e. what stakeholder responses have been), a CR view encourages a more holistic account of what and why something happens.</p> <p>Specifically, this commentary contributes to the discussion of COVID-19 impacts focusing on sport governance, using a philosophy that encourages examination of what is happening in sport organizations, how different stakeholder’s perspectives and assessment of the legitimacy of COVID-19 may reveal underlying social structures and biases that help explain sport administrator’s responses and value systems. We hope this novel perspective on sport governance encourages readers to think of new ways of organizing and governing that is more inclusive of diversity (e.g. race, gender, disability) in sport.</p>

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COVID-19 and its Impact on Sport Governance and Management: A Global, Critical Realist  
Perspective

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## Introduction

COVID-19 has presented much complexity and uncertainty for industries across the globe, including sport and leisure organizations. The disease has been classed as a global pandemic (WHO, 2020) with significant negative consequences for society, the economy and for the practice of sport and recreation. For example, the cancellation of large sport events such as UEFA EURO 2020, the Olympic/Paralympic Games and many small community recreation sports have had both economic and social implications (Parnell, Bond & Wilson, 2020). In fact, Parnell et al. (2020) suggest that impacts on sport in general, and on how sport and recreation are managed, needs consideration in light of this pandemic.

Other commentaries have highlighted the impacts of COVID-19 on specific countries such as Montenegro (Begović, 2020), women's football in England (Clarkson, Culvin, Pope, & Perry, 2020), the resumption of major sporting events (Lunvigsen & Hayton, 2020), disability sport (Fitzgerald, Stride & Drury, 2020), sport stadiums (Mastromartino, Ross, Wear & Naraine, 2020) and physical activity (Hammami, Harrabi, Mohr & Krusturp, 2020). There has been discipline specific analysis of impacts, such as the economic impact on professional soccer (Drewes, Daumann & Follert, 2020). Sociological analysis (e.g. Evans, Blackwell, Jolan, Fahlén, Hoekman, Lenneis & Wilcock, 2020) has highlighted the enormous volume of COVID related rhetoric related to sport, physical activity and leisure. Fitzgerald et al. (2020) noted particularly disturbing is the social, cultural and economic inequality highlighted in society and in sport, suggesting more critical thought on the role of sport and exercise in society, the structure and function of sport organizations in a post-pandemic world is needed.

These analysis of COVID-19 impacts on sport to date, have largely focused on the tangible or observable impacts in specific contexts and in relation to component parts of the sport industry. Understandably, as academics attempt to make sense of the implication of the pandemic, they have taken a practical and functional approach to provide guidance to sport organisations and society. This is an important function of Academia, to observe, analyze and bridge the gap between scholarship and practice. While this knowledge is valuable in dissecting and highlighting what is happening in different sports, countries and sub-sectors (voluntary versus professional sport), there is little insight into what and how sport organisations and their governance have been impacted. Our commentary builds on existing knowledge by offering a unique, comprehensive perspective to encourage both a deeper analysis and a synthesis of similar and contradictory responses and impacts of COVID-19 on one aspect of sport: governance and organisation. We suggest a Critical Realist (CR) perspective to provide a unique ontological position (multi-level view) of reality that seeks to establish how and why something occurs (Byers, 2013). To date, this frame of reference has not been used to consider the impacts of COVID-19 and so we illustrate its utility here to show how it can offer a deeper perspective on the impacts and long term implications of COVID-19 on sport organisations and governance, and highlight further research that is needed as the recovery from COVID-19 unfolds. This commentary should inspire academics and practitioners, students and industry bodies to consider how CR can help to consider new ways of organizing or being innovative in light of intense challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is beyond the scope of this commentary to provide a full CR analysis, but insight into the CR framework and its potential to provide in-depth understanding of the impacts of COVID19 on sport organisations and governance is provided.

Sport governance is the decision-making processes within sport organizations and across the sport system (Winand and Anagnosopoulos, 2019). COVID-19 has deeply impacted the governance of the sport system and of single sport organisation. Byers, Anagnostopoulos and Brooke-Holmes (2015) first suggested that a CR perspective of governance and organisational control were important to advancing governance research. They demonstrated that, Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of capital, habitus and field coupled with Hopwood's (1974) categorization of control as administrative, social and self-control mechanisms, can offer a lens to examine governance holistically. We draw on their use of multi-level

theory and method to offer a perspective that takes in account the complexity and diversity of COVID-19 impacts in sport governance.

### Critical Realism: A New Perspective on COVID-19 Impacts on Sport Governance

Critical Realism (CR) is a comprehensive philosophy of science (Brown, Fleetwood & Roberts, 2002) that embraces both constructivist and positivistic values in the generation of knowledge (Byers, Anagnostopoulos & Brooke-Holmes, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A CR perspective moves beyond simply being 'critical' (i.e. alternatives or negative critique) to consideration of four levels of reality to understand phenomenon: material, ideal, artefactual and social. Each level of reality gives deeper insight into the COVID-19 impact on sport organizations (see Figure 1) and corresponds to different levels of control mechanisms operating in sport governance.

Figure 1 Critical Realism view of sport governance response to COVID-19

Level of Reality	Definition	Hopwood (1974) Control Mechanism	Example
Material	Current and historical evidence of what sport organisation tangible responses to COVID-19 entailed.	Administrative (formal structures and policy)	Policy changes adopting public health recommendations.
Ideal	Differences and similarities between organization material reality.	Social (human interaction, development of cultural norms)	Rate at which sport organisations cancelled events varied; control mechanisms varied.
Artefactual	Assumptions and interpretations underpinning material and ideal reality.	Self-controls (individual motivations and interpretations)	Threat of COVID-19 legitimate or oppressive.
Social	Social structures, institutional norms and intangible factors underpinning all reality above.	Bourdieu's habitus and field (contextual features in which mechanisms operate).	Role/level of diversity (e.g. gender, race, etc...) in organization. Commercialisation of sport valued over human health and safety.

Using CR to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on sport governance is new, and so, this section illustrates how the framework can enhance our understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on sport organizations and governance.

#### Material Reality

COVID-19 and evidence of its existence is tangible with statistics of deaths, recoveries and infection constantly in the media. Despite experts warning of a pandemic such as this for many years, there was a lack of expectancy and preparedness from nations and economies regarding how to combat a mass-scale public health crisis of this nature. The response of sport organizations and their governance practices to this pandemic crisis is still in progress and includes tangible evidence such as programs and events cancelled, new policies (public health guidance and then return to sport plans) created and changes in personnel. Deloitte (2020) demonstrate a wide range of different impacts of and responses to COVID-19 by sport, country,

sector, and type of sport organization. Deloitte (2020) suggests the negative economic impact in Italy alone is estimated at EUR 80 billion, equal to approximately 4.6% of the country's 2020 GDP. A much worse scenario has been predicted by the International Monetary Fund, as a recent study foresees that the Italian economy will contract by approximately 9% this year.

Society has observed the widespread closure of sport and recreation facilities, services and programming, including gyms, community centers, playgrounds, and public parks. Mega sporting events, such as the Olympics, tournaments with long-standing histories, such as Wimbledon and the Masters, have been cancelled, and playoff schedules have been lost. One of the first responses to the virus was the IAAF cancellation of The World Indoor Athletics Championships in January 2020. Shortly after the World Health Organization had declared the coronavirus a pandemic (Taylor, 2020), most EU countries (except Belarus, who continued athlete training) cancelled sporting gatherings (Smith, 2020), events and competitions in grassroots and elite sport.

It is clear from the material level of reality that much of the sports industry was ill-prepared for a public health crisis of this magnitude, as were many industries and countries (Begovic, 2020). Sport organizations have largely focused on administrative mechanisms in response to COVID-19 but did little to address or use social control mechanisms (i.e. discuss alternative responses, actions with other sport organisations or stakeholders). A further examination of the realities of CR can reveal why, despite recent years of improving business practice in sport, commercialization and increases in use of strategic vision and policy development to manage sport organizations, that a more collaborative, coordinated approach was lacking. This will also identify weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the sport governance system and explore alternative mechanisms for governance.

### Ideal Reality

The ideal reality points to differences in stakeholder (e.g. sport administrators, athletes, general public) perceptions and actions. Indeed, across the globe, there was a wide range of reaction to COVID-19. Some suggestions indicated it was a hoax (despite the material reality that demonstrated thousands infected and dead from the disease) and other responses indicated it was very real. Although a global health pandemic is unprecedented for many, there should have been governance structures, actions and contingency plans already in place for a crisis. It was never "if" an outbreak of this scale would occur but was rather only a matter of "when" this would happen (Qiu, 2020; Obama, 2015).

As Evans et al. (2020) noted, and recent commentaries have highlighted (e.g. Lunvigen & Hayton, 2020; Parnell et al., 2020; Leng & Phua, 2020) there have also been divergent responses by athletes and sport organizations to the COVID-10 crisis and lockdown. Some sport organizations were slow to respond. For example, the IOC did not cancel the Tokyo Games until various sports organizations, such as The Canadian Paralympic Committee, decided not to send athletes to the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. At the time of writing, some businesses and activities were beginning to reopen but the second wave of the virus was expected, yet sport organisations responded differently. The French open Tennis tournament was scheduled to bring crowds into the stadium on Sept 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 as some athletes and spectators eagerly demand return to 'normal' despite concerns of infectious disease specialists (Robinson, 2020). In this



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2  
3 level of reality, focusing on how sport governance response differed, we can see that other  
4 control mechanisms, such as social controls (e.g. emotions, social capital) began to shape sport  
5 governance decision making as the pandemic unfolded. As communication through media and  
6 technology is rapid in the modern world, the complexity and diversity of sport governance  
7 response became apparent, while the context of the pandemic continued to change and vary  
8 across the globe.  
9

### 10 11 **Artifactual Reality** 12

13  
14 Artifactual reality encourages deeper examination of differences in material and ideal realities.,  
15 attributable to different stakeholder interpretations of reality as legitimate or oppressive. At this  
16 level of reality, control mechanisms become less tangible and require researcher interpretation of  
17 the meaning behind differences in sport governance and decisions to continue training and  
18 events, alter provision or cancel service completely. The swift withdrawal of athletes from the  
19 Tokyo Paralympic Games by the Canadian Paralympic Committee suggests they deemed the  
20 threat of COVID 19 to their athletes as significant and legitimate. The denial of the existence of a  
21 virus and lack of any restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus by Belarus government and  
22 sport organizations (Smith, 2020) indicates they did not think the virus was a legitimate threat.  
23 Some countries like Belarus and much of the United States of America, did not see COVID-19  
24 as a legitimate threat and therefore a lack of restrictions on large public gatherings and limited  
25 public health guidance (material reality) were the main response. We look to the final and  
26 deepest layer of CR to help understanding of why divergence in response exists. This level  
27 would require empirical examination of social networks and how COVID-19 was interpreted and  
28 negotiated as a result of social interaction. Understanding why there are differences and the  
29 control mechanisms which drive this and previous levels of reality can be found in the next and final layer  
30 of social reality.  
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### 34 35 **Social Reality** 36

37  
38 Social reality includes the intangible, taken for granted values, social structures and institutions  
39 that give rise to the more observable reality (Byers, 2014). Sport practitioners and researchers  
40 would benefit from considering how, for example, gender, race, disability and class provide  
41 explanation for why sport governance appears to lack a collaborative approach (Winand &  
42 Anagnostopoulos, 2019), why commercialization dominates sport organization development  
43 (Gammelsæter, 2020) and why sport organizations response to the global pandemic is so  
44 variable. Evans et al. (2020) illustrated the variability in positive and negative impacts of the  
45 pandemic on individuals, sport organizations and events and they also highlight that there is  
46 much contradictory evidence of impacts, acknowledging that we have yet to understand why  
47 sport has been affected in these ways. Using CR, and engaging with the social level of reality can  
48 help researchers and practitioners critically evaluate sport governance response to the crisis.  
49 Byers et al (2014) suggested this level of reality is a good opportunity to examine relationships  
50 between structures and agents, as opposed to traditional governance research which tends to  
51 focus on agents, or what agents do within the governance system. This level of understanding is  
52 often not consciously evident until a researcher analyzes the context, multiple stakeholder  
53 perceptions of reality, thematic trends in data as well as contradictions in perspectives. Most  
54 importantly, social reality brings focus to identifying how agent action is underpinned by  
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conscious and unconscious attitudes or biases and therefore provides a more critical perspective to sport governance research. For example, to what extent unconscious bias toward diverse and vulnerable groups has shaped our governance system and structures would enable a new direction in sport management research that begins to satisfy calls for equality and critical theory (Frisby, 2005; Knoppers, 2015; Hoeber & Shaw, 2017; Byers, Hayday & Pappous, 2020).

### **Discussion: Implications for sport governance research and practice**

A CR view of the way sport organisations are responding to COVID-19 reveals multiple layers of reality that taken together, point to both superficial and deep structural phenomenon related to sport governance that warrant further research. This multiple reality approach offers insight into what is happening, its variability and crucially, a critical examination of why sport managers responded as such. Examination of all layers of reality may allow sport governance practitioners and scholars to seriously consider the inequalities that exist in sport organizations (Evans et al., 2020) towards people of different nationalities, colour, disability, genders or other aspects of diversity. The implications of these inequities are manifest in the material, artefactual and ideal levels of reality but can only be meaningfully addressed by understanding the deep, intangible social structures (e.g. gender, race, institutional norms) that give rise to them.

Cohen, Robinson and Flint (2020) suggested that the global disruption of sport could be an opportunity to reconsider the organization and management of sport. We suggest this is also true for sport governance and examination of all layers of reality will allow sport governance practitioners and scholars to seriously consider the inequalities in our existing sport governance system that present unequal challenges to women (Pape and McLachlan, 2020), disabled persons (Fitzgerald, Stride & Drury, 2020; Kwok, 2020; Smith & Judd, 2020) and other minority groups. Taken together, the commentaries and special issues emerging to examine the impact of COVID-19 on sport indicate that the pandemic has, paradoxically, had wide ranging impacts on sport, yet little examination has addressed why variabilities exist, and how / why inequality sport governance response addresses a diversity of groups.

Collaborative governance (Batory & Svensson, 2019) is certainly a way forward identifying opportunities to develop solutions in consultation with stakeholders. Sport organisations rarely advocate the principles of collaborative governance in identifying solutions to crisis, when the need for advanced collaborative governance is greatest, engaging a wide diversity of stakeholders in “collective decision-making processes that are deliberative and consensus-oriented” (Boyle, Shilbury & Ferkins, 2019, 222). An example of collaborative governance can be seen in UEFA’s Executive Committee managing to virtually gather representatives of 55 national sport federations, the European Club Association, European Leagues and FIFPro Europe to lay the foundation for a coherent plan as a reaction to the change in the football schedules in 2020 (UEFA, 2020). Another key aspect that this crisis has certainly affected is the sport event governance which is the network of stakeholders involved in planning, implementing and closing events (Parent & Naraine, 2019). As noted by Parent and Naraine (2019), this sport event governance includes developing a social media presence, which in time of crisis opens up for criticism and scrutiny.



The EU Position paper (2020) on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the sport sector (including lost revenues, athletes in difficulties, organization cash flow issues, unemployment, unpaid freelancers) suggest this is a time to innovate. Sport organisations are certainly willing and able to think outside the box (Winand & Anagnostopoulos, 2017; Winand et al., 2016). Luxembourg Minister Dan Kersch raised the need to support small voluntary sporting organisations whose annual budget heavily relies on little revenue that are key in their survival and which they are deprived during the crisis. There is a real risk those organizations could disappear (Luxembourg Sport Ministry, 2020). Organizing events, meeting with agents, securing sponsorship deals and commercial activity has been the main driving force in sport of recent decades (Enjolras, 2002; Slack, 2004; Byers, 2018). During COVID-19, some sport governance practitioners and athletes, managers/officials have been redirecting their efforts to support each other, stay safe, help others stay safe, and donate money where needed, there has also been consideration of change to the organization of sport and its governance. Suggested mergers of men's and women's tennis organizations to market and promote equality between genders (Ganguly, 2020) may mean COVID-19 has a real benefit to athletes, sponsors and more importantly, the values that sport encourages in young people, society and future generations of sport administrators. However, countless examples of positive and negative impacts, inclusive and exclusionary practice exist and sport management/governance scholars should pursue answers to understand how and why our system continues to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

## Conclusion

This commentary begins to address the impact of COVID-19 on sport governance from a Critical Realist perspective. A number of opportunities for research and practice can be drawn from this CR view of sport governance, all of which would benefit from a multi-level approach to understanding reality. Within sport governance, future research and practice should seek to articulate critical perspectives of what, how and why something is happening, focus on structures and agents, inequality, oppression and vulnerabilities in sport governance, specifically focused on:

1. Understanding organization change, as sport governance evolves to meet new environmental challenges and uncertainty in the contexts of crisis management.
2. Collaborative governance and challenges in creating and maintaining collaborative governance.
3. Control mechanisms and the dynamics of control in sport governance.
4. How intangible mechanisms such as social structures, institutional norms and conscious and unconscious bias give rise to the reality experienced in sport governance and the reality experienced by those served by those governance practices.

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