



How can FIFA be held accountable?

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ABSTRACT

The Fédération Internationale de Football Association, or FIFA, is a non-governmental organization located in Switzerland that is responsible for overseeing the quadrennial World Cup football (soccer) competition in addition to its jurisdiction over other various international competitions and aspects of international football. The organization, long accused of corruption, has in recent years been increasingly criticized by observers and stakeholders for its lack of transparency and accountability. In 2011 FIFA initiated a governance reform process which will come to a close in May 2013. This paper draws on literature in the field of international relations to ask and answer the question: how can FIFA be held accountable? The paper's review finds that the answer to this question is "not easily." The experience in reforming the International Olympic Committee (IOC) more than a decade ago provides one model for how reform might occur in FIFA. However, any effective reform will require the successful and simultaneous application of multiple mechanisms of accountability. The FIFA case study has broader implications for understanding mechanisms of accountability more generally, especially as related to international non-governmental organizations.

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1. Introduction: what is the problem?

In an inauspicious coincidence, May 31, 2011 was the 100th anniversary of the launch of the Titanic and it was also the date on which Joseph "Sepp" Blatter the much-criticized president of FIFA (the Fédération Internationale de Football Association, "association football" is generally known simply as "football" and in some places, as "soccer" and in this paper both terms are used), announced that he would see the organization through the latest charges of corruption that had been leveled against it, declaring, "I am the captain, we will weather the storm together" (Hughes, 2011a). Less than one year later, Blatter continued the metaphor, declaring that the storm had subsided, "we are back in the harbor. . . and are heading to calm, clearer waters" (Collett, 2012). In October 2012 Blatter announced that the reform process would come to a close at the May 2013 FIFA Congress (FIFA, 2012a).

Despite Blatter's reassurances a storm of controversies continued to surround FIFA, which since 1904 has been the international non-governmental, non-profit organization responsible for the governance of global football. The controversies included allegations of corruption such as bribery in the selection process for the 2018 and 2022 World Cup venues (chosen as Russia and Qatar), allegations of payoffs for votes in advance of the 2011 FIFA presidential election – complete with a sordid story of bribes delivered in brown paper bags (Kelso, 2011a,b). In addition, FIFA's reform process has received broad

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criticism, including from the chair of the committee FIFA established to oversee the process, Mark Pieth of the University of Basel (Alvad & Bang, 2012).

Accountability of FIFA matters for the governance of the sport, the business of football and to the larger issue of the accountability of international organizations. Sport generally, and football specifically, brings together people and nations in a manner arguably not seen in any other area of global society. While football itself is not inherently “big business” in economic terms, increasingly football has implications for big business, particularly in the consequences of the periodic decisions associated with hosting the World Cup, which is often tied to large programs of government investment in infrastructure, television rights and sponsorship deals. The governance of FIFA is also a case study in the governance of international organizations, which includes a large class of governmental and non-governmental organizations that justify their legitimacy in terms of serving broadly shared interests. Effective governance of such institutions is thus a matter of common interest (Pieth, 2011).

This paper asks and seeks to answer what seems to be a straightforward question, how can FIFA be held accountable? I answer this question by drawing on the broader academic literature on the governance of international organizations from the problem oriented perspective of the policy sciences. Specifically, I use “seven mechanisms of accountability in world politics” (Grant & Keohane, 2005; Jordan and van Tuijl, 2006) to structure an appraisal of alternative ways in which FIFA might be held accountable.

To be clear, this paper has no ambition of advancing academic theories of accountability or international organizations, it is a focused policy appraisal of FIFA which draws upon such scholarship. Data on FIFA used in the appraisal, a notoriously secretive organization, come from publicly available documents and media reports. The paper begins with short discussions of accountability and international organizations, FIFA and international football and the current crisis surrounding FIFA. The paper concludes its survey of mechanisms of accountability with a discussion of the prospects for holding FIFA accountable in practice, drawing on the precedent of the reform of the International Olympic Committee.

While there are numerous and powerful mechanisms through which FIFA might be held accountable, such mechanisms are indirect and difficult to implement. Direct accountability of FIFA appears unlikely. Holding FIFA to account will require a degree of leadership in international sports governance that has only been hinted at to date.

2. Accountability and international organizations

Accountability is a central feature of global governance and has increasingly come to be viewed as an issue much broader than nation states working together to include non-governmental organizations and multinational corporations (Keohane, 2006). Keohane (2006) explains:

Governance can be defined as the making and implementation of rules, and the exercise of power, within a given domain of activity. “Global governance” refers to rule-making and power-exercise at a global scale, but not necessarily by entities authorized by general agreement to act. Global governance can be exercised by states, religious organizations, and business corporations, as well as by intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations. Since there is no global government, global governance involves strategic interactions among entities that are not arranged in formal hierarchies.

According to Grant and Keohane (2005) accountability,

implies that some actors have the right to hold other actors to a set of standards, to judge whether they have fulfilled their responsibilities in light of those standards, and to impose sanctions if they determine that those responsibilities have not been met.

Stiglitz (2003) offers a similar definition:

Accountability requires that: (1) people are given certain objectives; (2) there is a reliable way of assessing whether they have met those objectives; and (3) consequences exist for both the case in which they have done what they were supposed to do and the case in which they have not done so.

Enforcing accountability is particularly challenging in the context of global politics exercised through international organizations because governmental and non-governmental organizations around the world practice a very wide range of incompatible systems of domestic governance, making it exceedingly difficult to reach agreement on formal and informal norms, standards, responsibilities and sanctions associated with decision making.

Challenges of accountability in international organizations are commonplace. For instance, in 2011 the International Monetary Fund found itself in a crisis situation when its president, Dominique Strauss-Kahn was arrested in New York after allegedly sexually assaulting a hotel maid. The criminal charges were eventually dropped (a civil suit was settled), but nonetheless event brought to light the different standards of behavior that IMF senior officials were held to as compared to staff at other international organizations. IMF officials had less stringent rules and requirements related to sexual harassment than other organizations (Bandel, 2011). The scandal and its consequences brought broader issues of accountability of the IMF to the fore.

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