



## UNIVERSALITY AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

### SAM RAMSAMY

Stakeholder representative • International Olympic Committee



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In sport, universality incorporates inclusiveness, an ideal illustrated in the mission of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which is “to promote Olympism throughout the world” and “the five interlaced rings, which represents the union of the five continents and the meeting of the athletes from throughout the world at the Olympic Games”.

David Maraniss, Associate Editor of the Washington Post and Pulitzer Prize winner aptly sums up the realities of the Olympic Games:

“The singular essence of the Olympic Games is that the world takes the same stage at the same time, performing a passion play of nations, races, ideologies, talents, styles, and aspirations that no other venue, not even the United Nations, can match.”<sup>1</sup>

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, was greatly embarrassed by “the ‘Anthropology Games’ whose events were reserved for Negroes, Indians, Filipinos, and Ainus...”<sup>2</sup> He warned then that it would not be long before these people would compete as equals. How right he was.

However, inclusiveness must ensure that all competitors, not only at the Olympic Games, but during preparations leading up to the Olympic Games, are provided with equal opportunities. I refer to opportunities rather than facilities. The quality and types of facilities differ from place to place and from country to country. The basic football facilities in developing countries are so different, and considered by many to be somewhat inferior to those in Europe and elsewhere. But footballers from developing countries have produced some of the world’s greatest stars like Pelé (Brazil) and Eusébio (Mozambique). All of the world’s major leagues (presently based in Europe) continue to feature footballers from developing countries in their line-ups.

But basic facilities are, however, necessary for the practice of sport. Many of these facilities either do not exist or are few in number in most developing countries.

It is a regular feature to witness athletes from developing countries on the victory podium at the Olympic Games in sports such as athletics, boxing, football and weightlifting, but very seldom or hardly ever in equestrian sports, rowing and sailing.

There is, no doubt, a huge disparity in the socio-economic background of countries in the industrialised world and developing countries. The affluence in the industrialised countries facilitates the provision of sports facilities for a wide range of sports on the Olympic Programme – sports which are traditionally European in nature.

How do we address these disparities so that universality is achieved across the board?

Olympic Solidarity, the successor to the IOC’s International Olympic Aid, initially created in 1961 to assist countries, which had just gained independence from colonisation, has greatly contributed to bridging the disparity – but not to the extent of equating the level of participation of the developed countries in all the sports. Support from Olympic Solidarity has resulted in numerous athletes achieving Olympic medals in athletics, boxing, weightlifting and many other sports.

What about support from the International Federations (IFs)? Are they fulfilling their mandate? Are they meeting their obligations? The world needs the support of the IFs to effect total parity.

The IOC policy now makes it mandatory that all IFs in the Olympiad Programme (Summer Games) have continental representation in the Games. This, in turn, compels all IFs to comply with the principle of universality. However, while some IFs have used this opportunity to develop the sport worldwide and have provided a commendable amount of support to many countries, others are doing very little in this respect, merely ensuring that there is continental representation at the Games.

The threat that some IFs might lose Olympic participation because their sport is not broad-based enough is forcing them to recruit more members, but they do little to develop their respective sports on a worldwide basis.

The first modern Olympic Games were not open to women. Since then, there have been dramatic changes and women’s participation at the Olympic Games soon reached 50 percents despite several hurdles. Sadly, progress at administrative level is still regrettably slow.

The Olympic Movement is, in many ways, the greatest social force in the world. It has overcome innumerable barriers – be it political, socio-economic, religious, cultural or racial – because of its principle of universality. It will pursue this principle until universality in all its manifestations is accomplished.

1. David Maraniss, “Rome 1960”, Simon and Shuster, New York, 2008
2. Pierre de Coubertin, “Olympic Memoirs”, IOC, Lausanne, 1979