

Article

Strategic Sustainable Development in International Sport Organisations: A Delphi Study

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Abstract: The study aims to explore the consensus-level strategic priorities for sustainable development from the perspective of decision makers in organisations responsible for governing international sport and how they cluster within the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development. We employed the three-round Delphi study with decision makers from international sport organisations. Based on the 29 semi-structured interviews in the first round, we inductively generated items for questionnaires for the subsequent two rounds. The process yielded 20 items representing strategic priorities determined by 20 experts in the last round. The highest ranked item was normative change, in which sustainability is prioritised throughout all organisational strategies and actions. Moreover, planned efforts that are part of a long-term strategy and embedding sustainability requirements at the bidding phase of sport events were considered with high priority. The 20 items clustered into four out of five levels of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development, namely system, success, strategic guidelines and actions. No items could be assigned to the framework's tool level, potentially indicating gaps of strategic consideration. The findings from the Delphi study add a forecasting element to the research and practice of strategic sustainability in the management of sport by revealing consensus-level strategic priorities for the future.

Keywords: sustainability; sport management; Delphi technique; Sustainable Development Goals

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1. Introduction

To date, sport management scholarship that is focused on international sport organisations has not fully explored the managerial perspectives on the future of sustainable development from a holistic standpoint. Although previous empirical studies are valuable in depicting the current state of affairs in international sport governing bodies, they are either limited to past or current strategic considerations (neglecting perspectives on the necessary strategic actions to take in the future) or limited in scope to environmental sustainability (neglecting social and economic aspects). In particular, Morgan et al. [1] examined the perception of Commonwealth Games Association's members regarding their organisation's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and a study by Moon et al. [2] assessed international sport federations' sustainability practices. Environmental sustainability policies and actions in international sport federations were a focus in Santini and Henderson's [3] and Vrontdou et al.'s [4] studies.

There is a paucity of empirical studies addressing the strategic organisational management of international sport organisations holistically to understand what strategic actions are needed for sustainable development in the future. To fill this gap, this study employed the Delphi technique. We used expert knowledge to build consensus around a complex topic to outline possible future strategic directions [5] in international sport organisations. The findings were aligned with the Framework for Strategic Sustainable De-

velopment (FSSD), a theoretical grounding used to explore organisational strategic management from a holistic perspective [6]. The theoretical lens allows us to put high- and low-priority perceptions of managers into context and identify the potential need for action.

The guiding research questions (RQs) for our contribution were as follows. RQ 1: What strategic responses of international sport organisations are most relevant in increasing international sport organisations' contribution to sustainable development in the near future? RQ 2: How do the strategic responses align with the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development? Instead of formulating specific hypotheses, the present research is exploratory in nature, in the sense that it aims to uncover near-future relevant sustainable development manoeuvres (of different priorities), as perceived by managers of international sport organisations.

In what follows, we first outline the conceptual framework by defining sustainable development inside and outside sport. After drawing on the literature on organisational strategic sustainability and corporate sustainability management, we reflect on the available literature in the realm of sustainable development and international sport organisations. Next, we describe the methods and present the findings by placing them in the proposed contextual background. We discuss the findings as well as the limitations of the present study and conclude by suggesting future research directions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainable development was offered to solve many pressing social, economic and environmental challenges, such as preserving biodiversity, mitigating climate change and improving the situation in terms of poverty and inequality, human rights violations, illiterate and ill populations [7–10]. Amid the plethora of accounts of sustainable development, the most prominent definition is the one coined by the World Commission on Environment and Development in the so-called Brundtland Report, which outlined sustainable development as the development that enables the present generation to fulfil their needs without jeopardising the ability of the future generations to do the same [11]. Sustainable development is envisioned as a process, a way towards sustainability, which represents the goal of sustainable development [7,12]. In this article, the terms sustainable development and sustainability will be treated synonymously.

The Brundtland definition provided an ethical view of sustainable development through simultaneous attention given to three pillars: the economic, social and environmental [12,13]. Described as a necessary step at a normative level, the definition has been criticised for not enabling the clear operationalisation element needed for guiding the implementation [6,14]. In response to that shortcoming, the United Nations (UN) issued a global plan that aims to guide actions until 2030 using the SDGs [15]. The SDG Agenda offered organisations a frame of reference for their actions directed towards sustainability with “political tail wind” [16] (p. 21) and the alignment of private, public and civil sectors [16].

Sustainable development came into prominence in the international sport arena in 2015, when sport stakeholders were urged to share the responsibility for the planet's health, people and prosperity in the Agenda 2030 through SDGs [15]. The Agenda 2030 highlighted sport's potential as an enabler of development and peace [15] and has been highly influential in guiding international sport policies and actions [17]. The UN emphasised that achieving SDGs implies a transformation of policies and practices [18], where organisational efforts play a pivotal role. However, the main challenge remains to guide organisational changes towards an effective commitment to SD [19,20]. This challenge applies to international sport organisations.

Sport-related scholarship addressed the social and environmental role of various sport organisations through the prism of corporate social responsibility (CSR) [21–23].

Although CSR and sustainable development have interconnections and the concepts are often blurred [24], they address distinctive aspects of the same issue [25]. CSR emphasises the organisational ethical obligation towards its stakeholders, whereas sustainable development takes a systems perspective by placing the organisation in the wider social and environmental contexts and examining their interdependencies [24–26]. Sport organisations and other organisations using sport for development have made use of the SDG Agenda [1,27,28]. However, the engagement with the SDGs in managerial practice remains limited, as demonstrated in a recent survey of 41 professional sport organisations where only 24% of the surveyed organisations addressed the SDGs in their activities [29].

2.2. Strategic Sustainable Development from the Perspective of the FSSD

Even though the SDGs provide a point of reference for organisational engagement with sustainable development, organisations need to develop their ways of implementation. To date, the most prominent scholarly model outlining how to do this is the FSSD [6,30]. The FSSD has been developed as a guiding framework for strategic sustainable development and comprises four main features: (1) a funnel metaphor that aims to facilitate an understanding of sustainability; (2) a five-level model for differentiating and defining various levels of entities that have a role in sustainability; (3) a sustainability definition expressed via principles; and (4) a procedure aimed at guiding sustainability transitions [6].

The FSSD uses a set of guiding principles more specific than the Brundtland definition but still allows for individual, context-dependent organisational differences. According to the sustainability principles, in a sustainable society, organisations do not subject the nature to increasing (1) the concentrations of substances extracted from the earth's crust; (2) the concentrations of substances produced by society; (3) the degradation of physical means (...), and people are not subject to structural obstacles to (4) health; (5) influence (people are not hindered from participating and shaping social systems); (6) competence (people are not hindered from learning and developing competencies); (7) impartiality (people are not exposed to partial treatment, e.g., discrimination); and (8) meaning making (people are not hindered from creating individual or co-creating common meaning) [6].

The FSSD model delineates five levels, starting with the systems level that considers broader fundamental environmental and social contexts and interconnections with actors on various levels, from local to global relevance for the organisation. The success level implies a vision, core values and core purpose aligned with the basic sustainability principles. There are numerous ways organisations can approach sustainability by defining their vision and mission; the FSSD allows for the organisation-specific approach and only requires the alignment with sustainability principles. The strategic guidelines level includes a strategic approach to the vision and mission, whereas the action level comprises the concrete actions needed to carry out the strategies. Lastly, the tools level includes tools needed for making decisions, such as indicators, monitoring and reporting tools.

Drawing on the FSSD, Baumgartner [31] proposed a conceptual framework encompassing three levels of strategic sustainability management: normative, tasked to provide legitimacy to stakeholders and society; strategic, tasked with determining the goals and providing efficiency; and operational, tasked with the successful implementation. The normative sustainability management includes vision and mission statements, policies emerging from the organisations' position towards sustainable development and the organisational culture that aligns with vision and mission [31]. All sustainability activities are based on the normative management level that can take the form of introverted strategy, primarily based on the risk mitigation and imposed legislation; extroverted strategy, seeking to gain approval of external stakeholders; conservative strategy, focused on the clean production and eco-efficiency; and visionary strategy, focusing on sustainability within all organisational aspects [32]. These generic types of strategy express the extent of

an organisation's involvement with sustainable development. Only the introverted strategy has no ambition towards contributing to sustainability; all others pursue sustainability in an active rather than reactive manner [31]. Sustainability management also includes determining the contextual factors unique to every organisation before setting the long-term sustainability objectives and planning activities using forecasting and backcasting [6,31]. Further down the process, the long-term goals are detailed as well as linked to measurements and concrete action points. It is then down to the operational level directly to execute the strategy.

2.3. International Sport Organisations and Strategic Sustainable Development

In sport, international sport governing bodies provide “a framework for developing sustainability policies for elite sports” [33] (p. 7). Gammelsæter and Loland [33] contended that there is a need for policy change that emphasises constraints of the activities, particularly regarding long-distance travel, misuse of facilities and the use of fast fashion and sporting equipment. Moon et al. [2] analysed how the international sport governing bodies strategically approach sustainable development. They outlined five approaches: implementing sustainability pilot events, partnering with non-governmental organisations and consultancies, creating a sustainability committee and launching a comprehensive sustainability strategy with at least one full-time sustainability manager.

Further research has focused on the environmental aspect of sustainable development. Vrontdou et al. [4] analysed the environmental aspect of sustainability policies of international sport federations that govern sports directly dependent on the environmental conditions (e.g., sailing, rowing). The authors concluded that the federations kept limited environmental focus, and although the International Olympic Committee emphasised sustainability in its policies, this did not translate to the policy making of the federations. Moreover, the environmental regulation of the events under their jurisdiction hinged mostly on local legislation, implying the reactive rather than proactive sustainability strategy [31]. Similarly, Santini and Henderson [3] examined scholarly literature and online and social media accounts across 32 Summer Olympic sports federations concerning their environmental sustainability. They found that research on environmental sustainability was available for only 5 out of 32 federations, and only 4 had an environmental sustainability strategy. The authors determined the drivers of environmental sustainability to be a strategic choice, partnerships and governance, and strained resources were found to be a barrier. Moreover, most federations did not engage with environmental sustainability on their websites, with nine federations addressing environmental sustainability but, again, without a clear strategy in place, indicating ad hoc and incidental engagement. The non-strategic and piecemeal approach was also found in an exploration of the Commonwealth Games Association's sustainable development efforts [1] with a conundrum: most of the surveyed organisations regarded themselves as important players in achieving the SDGs. Morgan et al. [1] explored sustainability in all aspects and found that the organisations perceived to contribute to the SDG Agenda primarily through gender equality, health and education.

The scholarly literature on sport and sustainable development not directly related to the international sport organisations has addressed policy options through which sport can contribute to prioritised SDGs [28] as well as governance aspects in general and policy coherence in particular (e.g., Refs [34–36]). The sustainability of mega-sport events received attention (e.g., Refs [37–40]), indicating their relevance to sustainability in sport. In their recent work, Müller et al. [41] developed sustainability indicators to analyse 16 editions of the Olympic Games. The results reveal that none of the Olympic Games scored in the highest category of sustainability. Although much attention has been given to the mega-sport events, other small sport events should also be considered to be relevant [42].

Considering the global urgency towards reaching the SDGs and the potential of international sport organisations to contribute to the SDG Agenda and the void in research

assessing future-directed strategic priority setting in these organisations, exploring strategic organisational priorities that would contribute to sustainable development in international sport seems timely and necessary. To partly fill this research gap, the present study aims to uncover the consensus-level strategic priorities for sustainable development from the perspective of decision makers in organisations responsible for governing international sport and explore how they cluster within the FSSD model.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design and Procedure

To answer the research questions, we employed the Delphi method, a structured “group communication process (...) allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem” [43] (p. 3). We deemed the Delphi method appropriate, as we wanted to explore, identify and prioritise the information that may generate a consensus [44] in the management of sport organisations pertaining to sustainable development. Further, the Delphi approach seemed suitable, as it is often used in strategic management as a tool to outline possible future directions [5]. In contrast to surveys that provide information about what is, Delphi focuses on forecasting and includes information on what could or should be [45]. In addition, unlike other decision-making techniques, such as nominal group technique or interacting group method, the experts participating in the Delphi study do not have to physically be at the same place at the same time and do not have to deal with group pressure and communication issues [5].

The Delphi process is characterised by iterative questionnaires based on the provided input from earlier responses [46] generated through systematised communication with panellists presumed to possess the appropriate expertise in the field of study [47]. The method provides the statistical group response and guarantees the respondents’ anonymity, as the experts do not communicate directly [48]. For the current study, the procedure was as follows: we first outlined the criteria for the panel recruitment, contacted the selected experts and established the panel. Simultaneously, we developed the interview schedule to be used in the first round of the Delphi study. The first round included semi-structured expert interviews, embedded in a larger data collection project [49]. We analysed the interview data and constructed a questionnaire based on the analysis.

Next, we piloted the second-round questionnaire with two experts from the group and amended it according to the feedback received. In the second round, we sent the questionnaire to all experts. After analysing the results, we developed a third questionnaire, which was sent to all experts to obtain the data for the third round.

3.2. Characteristics of the Panel and Recruitment

Panel selection is a crucial consideration in the Delphi method, as the quality of results rests on the opinions of the group of “informed individuals” [50] (p. 1221). We used the purposive sampling technique to identify panellists with “appropriate domain knowledge” [47] (p. 127). We considered the experts’ established “social representativity” [51] (p. 50) as the initial inclusion criteria, which assumed their involvement in international organisations dealing with sport. Further inclusion criteria specified that the experts occupied higher management paid or voluntary decision-making positions within their respective organisations and were familiar with sustainable development, in the sense that they deal with it in their daily work for their organisation. With these minimum requirements, experts provided technical knowledge regarding the management of their respective organisations and the process knowledge on the decision making regarding various facets of sustainable development within their organisations [51].

Due to the multifaceted and broad scope of sustainable development, we paid particular attention to the organisational and geographical heterogeneity of the panel. Heterogeneity is suggested to provide increased reliability and accuracy of judgements because it is presumed that a heterogeneous panel may reduce the risk of error or bias inherent in

individual judgements [47]. To address the full scope of the complexity of sustainable development in the management of sport organisations, we recruited experts dealing with sport in either international non-governmental sport organisations (i.e., sport governing bodies, sport event governing bodies, special task bodies or representative bodies; the categorisation was based on Geeraert et al. [52]) or other international intergovernmental or non-governmental organisations with a mandate for sport. Details of the expert panel can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Background information on the experts.

Characteristic	Number of Experts
Type of Organisation	
INGSO Sport Governing Bodies	7
INGSO Sport Event Governing Bodies	5
INGSO Special Task Bodies	10
INGSO Representative bodies	3
Intergovernmental organisations	3
National NGO with an international mandate	1
Scope	
Global	22
Continental/regional	6
National level with an international mandate	1
Gender	
Male	20
Female	9
Engagement	
Voluntary	6
Paid	23

Notes. INGSO = International non-governmental sport organisation; NGO = Non-governmental organisation.

We started the recruitment process by listing the international sport organisations of interest, followed by the extensive internet search of persons within the organisations relevant to the study. As one of the main difficulties inherent to the studies with experts is their interest and availability, we overcame this barrier by personalised initial contact in which we explained the purpose of the study, why we think the research question is worth answering and why they, in particular, were chosen to participate [53]. In some cases, we also requested to pass on the message to a colleague if they perceived them to be a better fit for the study. Where possible, we requested the endorsement from our professional networks, which facilitated the commitment from some experts.

There is no universally accepted guidance regarding the panel size [54]. Rowe and Wright [47] suggested using between 5 and 20 panellists to strike a balance between the quality and representativeness of data on the one hand, and information overload and data handling issues on the other hand. Considering the latter points and the potential bias resulting from the usual drop-out rate at consecutive rounds [54], we aimed to recruit 30 panellists for the initial round, assuming an attrition rate of 33% during the three rounds of data collection. The recruitment process resulted in a commitment from 29 experts in the first round. Indicative job titles included Secretary-General, Head of Sustainability, President, Vice-Chair, Chair of Education Board, Chief Marketing and Communications Officer and Vice President for Strategy and External Affairs.

3.3. Data Collection

While there is no shared consensus about the optimal number of iterations of rounds, the prevalent opinion is that three rounds are usually enough [47,54]. Accordingly, we organised the data collection in three rounds. Conforming to good practice guidance [55,56], we determined the number of rounds and defined consensus at the onset of the study.

3.4. First Round

To collect the data in the first round, we conducted 29 systematising semi-structured expert interviews. We opted to use semi-structured interviews to gather as much information from the experts as possible and mitigate the attrition risk in consecutive rounds by establishing a rapport with experts. The interviews were undertaken between May and December 2020 using an online video communication platform. All the interviews were recorded with previous explicit approval from the experts and transcribed verbatim. In one case, due to the repeatedly weak internet connection, the expert delivered his answers in writing. The interview schedule included a set of questions on the experts' background information, the perception of familiarity with sustainable development and the SDG Agenda and an outline of their organisations' efforts towards achieving sustainability. We also inquired about the experts' recommendations regarding what actions are needed to increase sport's contribution to sustainable development.

3.5. Second Round

All statements collected in the first round were presented to experts in a second round of the Delphi study via a web-based survey. The second round took place throughout February and March 2021. All experts from the initial pool were invited to participate in the second round, except two who asked to be excluded from further iterations. Twenty-one experts (72.4%) participated in the second round. Due to the high number of statements, we organised them into eight thematic categories to ease the presentation online: strategy, environment, sponsorship, organisational efforts, targeting, partnering, promotion and awareness. The experts were asked to rate the items according to the perceived importance of sport's potential to maximise positive and/or minimise negative contribution to sustainable development on a five-point rating scale (see Supplementary Material; anchors: 1 = not at all important, 5 = extremely important). The experts were also given an opportunity to provide feedback on the statements. In one case, an expert stated that he did not understand the context of some statements, so we excluded his answers to those statements.

The level of consensus for the second-round data analysis was pre-defined as more than 80% agreement on the five-point rating scale in the top two categories (i.e. 4, very important, and 5, extremely important). Forty-one items reached the defined level of consensus. Against the background of the experienced decrease in participation of experts from round one to two due to time constraints and the tendency of decrease in the quality of the answers towards the end of relatively long questionnaires in Delphi studies [57], we reduced the number of items in the third round further and focused on the 20 items that were rated most important.

3.6. Third Round

We presented the experts with a list of 20 statements with the highest mean in the second round. In particular, we asked them to rank the statements according to how important they perceived them to maximise their positive and/or minimise their negative contribution of sport organisations to sustainable development. Twenty experts (response rate of 95.2% compared to round two; 68.9% compared to round one) participated in the final round in May and June 2021.

3.7. Data Analysis

For the qualitative data analysis of the first round, we used the software MAXQDA to apply Creswell's data analysis spiral [58] as guidance; we repeatedly read the data, memoed and then inductively coded the data. Similar statements were brought together while keeping the meaning where the semantic clarity allowed. Where possible, we used in vivo coding to keep the original wording of the experts. This process resulted in 72 statements.

For the second- and third-round data analyses, we used the Qualtrics software with its built-in descriptive statistics options. With regard to the analysis of the second-round data, we calculated the level of agreement across all the experts by summing up the item-level percentages of ratings of four (very important) and five (extremely important) on a five-point rating scale (see Supplementary Material). The sum of these percentages describes the proportion of experts who believed that the particular item was very or extremely important. Furthermore, we calculated the means and standard deviations for each item. In the third round, we calculated the mean ranks and standard deviations for each of the remaining 20 items.

4. Results

The items generated in the first round and the level of consensus reached in the second round can be seen in the Supplementary Material (Tables S1 and S2).

All of the items that were subjected to the final-round survey were above the consensus level of 80% agreement on the five-point rating scale, indicating a high level of expert agreement in the second round. The results of the final Delphi round are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Ranking of items in the third round of the Delphi study.

Item	M	SD
1. Strategically prioritise sustainability	2.70	3.30
2. Make lasting and planned rather than one-off and ad hoc effort	3.30	1.45
3. Embed sustainability requirements in the bidding processes for the sport events	4.85	3.97
4. Take actions to implement sustainable policies	5.00	3.22
5. Initiate more sustainability specific and focused actions	5.75	2.23
6. Initiate and support organisational behaviour change	7.15	2.37
7. Take into consideration the legacy and sustainability of sport facilities	7.20	2.06
8. Base sustainability policies on operationalisable and measurable objectives	8.30	3.69
9. Change business operations to more environmentally sustainable	8.75	3.18
10. Follow the principle: "Do what you preach"	9.15	3.64
11. Implement projects in support of gender equality	9.20	2.38
12. Establish a comprehensive, coherent and concerted commitment from all stakeholders	11.60	3.20
13. Introduce safeguarding policies	13.05	3.25
14. Support sport event organisers in sustainable efforts	13.95	2.13
15. Appreciate that sport can influence sustainable development directly and indirectly	15.05	2.31
16. Emphasise sustainability across policies	15.20	2.91
17. Embed sport events in a wider scheme of sustainable development of the host city	16.75	3.05
18. Use competitive sport to advocate for being physically active	17.40	3.20
19. Raise awareness about the potential and achievements of sport in sustainable development in the general population	17.65	2.01
20. Use sport events to raise awareness about sustainable development	18.00	4.28

Notes. SD = Standard deviation; M = Mean rank; see Figure 1 for the assignment to the structure of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development.

Next, we clustered the top rated 20 items following the FSSD structure, namely system, success, strategic guidelines, actions and tools [6]. Figure 1 provides an overview of the results.

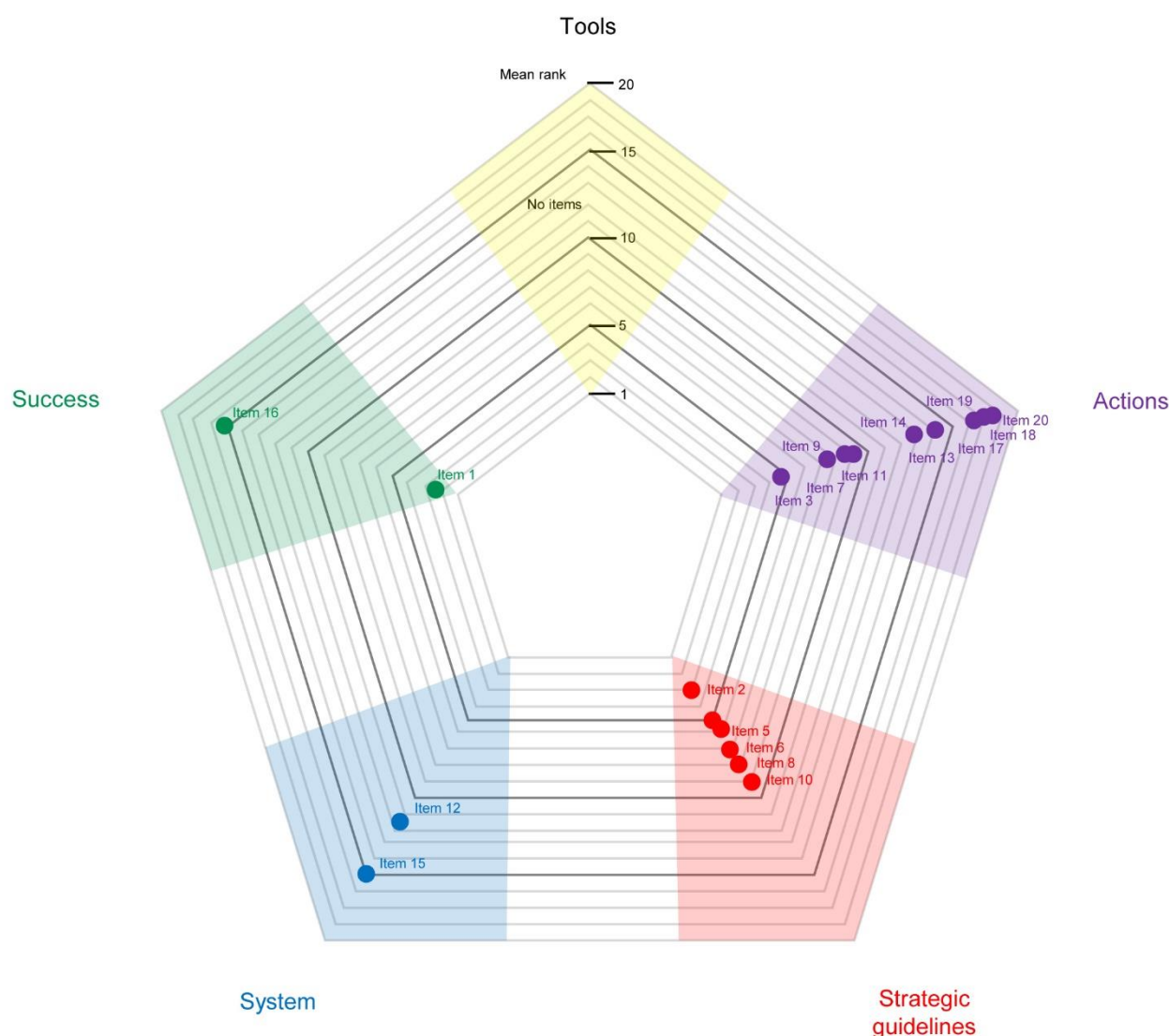


Figure 1. Assignment of the third-round Delphi study items to the structure of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development. See Table 2 for the specifications of the items; 1 indicates highest priority (rank), 20 indicates lowest priority (rank) among the 20 items of the final Delphi study round. Mean ranks are based on evaluations of 20 experts from international sport organisations.

Two out of the twenty items can be clustered within the system level of the FSSD (see Figure 1; items in blue). The items were the following: (12) *Establish a comprehensive, coherent and concerted commitment from all stakeholders* (mean rank $[M] = 11.60$, $SD = 3.2$) and (15) *Appreciate that sport can influence sustainable development directly and indirectly* ($M = 15.95$, $SD = 2.31$).

The highest ranked item (1), *Strategically prioritise sustainability* ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 3.30$) and item (16), *Emphasise sustainability across policies* ($M = 15.20$, $SD = 2.91$) can be clustered under the success level of FSSD. Figure 1 displays these items in the colour green.

The items that we clustered in the strategic guidelines level include (2) *Make lasting and planned rather than one-off and ad hoc efforts* ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.45$), (4) *Take actions to implement sustainability policies* ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 3.22$), (5) *Initiate more sustainability specific and focused actions* ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 2.23$), (6) *Initiate and support organisational behaviour*

change ($M = 7.15$, $SD = 2.37$), (8) *Base sustainability policies on operationalisable and measurable objectives* ($M = 8.30$; $SD = 3.69$) and (10) *Follow the principle: “Do what you preach”* ($M = 9.15$, $SD = 3.64$). Figure 1 displays these items in the colour red.

The actions level items include items (3) *Embed sustainability requirements in the bidding processes for the sport events* ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 3.97$), (7) *Take into consideration legacy and sustainability of sport facilities* ($M = 7.20$, $SD = 2.06$), (9) *Change business operations to more environmentally sustainable* ($M = 8.75$, $SD = 3.18$), (11) *Implement projects in support of gender equality* ($M = 9.20$, $SD = 2.38$), (13) *Introduce safeguarding policies* ($M = 13.05$, $SD = 3.25$), (14) *Support sport event organisers in sustainable efforts* ($M = 13.95$, $SD = 2.13$), (17) *Embed sport events in a wider scheme of sustainable development of the host city* ($M = 16.75$, $SD = 3.05$), (18) *Use competitive sport to advocate for being physically active* ($M = 17.40$, $SD = 3.20$), (19) *Raise awareness about the potential and achievements of sport in sustainable development in general population* ($M = 17.65$, $SD = 2.01$) and (20) *Use sport events to raise awareness about sustainable development* ($M = 18.00$, $SD = 4.28$). Figure 1 displays these items in the colour purple. Notably, the experts did not propose any items that can be clustered under the tools level of FSSD.

5. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the strategic responses of international sport organisations in order to increase the contribution to sustainable development from the perspective of managers (i.e., experts within the organisations). We aligned the proposed responses with the FSSD levels, indicating different elements of consideration when planning and acting towards sustainable development. The study expands the empirical literature that focused on the status quo in sport organisations regarding their sustainability efforts [1–4] by adding a forecasting element and a holistic perspective. The findings reveal what items managers perceive to be top priority (versus lower priority) to contribute to sustainable development in the near future. In what follows, we discuss the findings according to the structure of the FSSD levels.

5.1. System

The emphasis is on the systems perspective and sport’s position with the broader societal and environmental contexts. Item 12 (*Establish a comprehensive, coherent and concerted commitment from all stakeholders*) considers every organisation’s specific internal and external stakeholder network management. International sport organisations operate in a multi- and cross-sectoral environment where, because of the diversity of stakeholders and their interests, it can be challenging to establish coherent and concerted efforts towards sustainable development. To avoid a silo approach, Broman and Robert [6] proposed to ground sustainability strategies in the principled definition of sustainability to facilitate shared understanding among stakeholders and enable them to redefine and align the success level considerations. Furthermore, stakeholder management hinges on the transparency and participatory approach to decision making. That approach is needed for increased quality of stakeholder relationships essential for their acceptance of sustainability strategies [14,32].

Through item 15 (*Appreciate that sport can influence sustainable development directly and indirectly*), experts acknowledged the need for complete spectrum analysis of the organisational influence when shaping their sustainability responses. If the aim is to develop a holistic and visionary sustainability approach, it is necessary to integrate sustainable development considerations into all organisational spheres of influence [32], including the less obvious, indirect and unintended effects of organisational actions. Van Zanten and van Tulder [59] highlighted, albeit in a corporate setting, that the organisational direct influence on the SDGs results from organisations’ processes and offered goods or services. Those direct interactions can cause indirect and unintended interactions because of the interconnections between the SDGs, and hence, sustainability pillars in general. For example, if a sport organisation’s main objective would be to organise an international youth

camp with the aim to increase the intercultural understanding through sport, the setting they provide would have to be international. This means that all participants would probably have to travel, causing increased travel-related carbon footprint. Intercultural understanding would be a direct outcome, but that outcome negatively correlates with the indirect environmental impact. For facilitating the systems approach that would consider the full complexity of influence on sustainability in a given organisational context, the usage of systems thinking in research and practice is warranted [60].

5.2. Success

The success level implies the definition of success through vision and mission statements aligned with the sustainability principles. Items (1) *Strategically prioritise sustainability* and (16) *Emphasise sustainability across policies* reflect experts' view of the need for adopting visionary, high-relevance levels of sustainable development [31] in international sport organisations. According to Baumgartner [31], normative management of the visionary sustainability strategy entails the full integration of sustainability in all activities, including the vision, mission and organisational policies, instead of ignoring it or having it as an add-on to existing policies. High placement of Item 1 can mean that the experts perceived an increased need for a normative change towards a visionary sustainability strategy with sustainability included in the vision statement and across all organisational policies. For sport organisations this would imply a normative shift away from the underlying anthropocentric beliefs [61] where "human interests and happiness are primary values that usually trump contentious environmental and sustainable needs" [62] (p. 62). The success level considerations are particularly decisive for organisational sustainability efforts, as they dictate the appropriate actions and tools that would support the implementation [6,30]. A similar finding emerged from an analysis of environmental policies across international sport federations [3] where the strategic choice was found to be a driver of the environmental sustainability progress.

5.3. Strategic Guidelines

The strategic guidelines level considers how to address the vision strategically [6]. The available literature on the responses of the international sport organisations to SD highlighted that even if the organisations are considering SD, their actions are often unplanned, piecemeal and ad hoc [1,35]. The issue of random actions has already arisen in the sustainability literature that highlighted that sustainable development should have no end; it is a long-term, never-ending process with constant adaptations to emerging challenges [20] that is impossible to achieve through isolated actions [63]. Along those lines, sustaining efforts is of paramount consideration for future sustainability endeavours, as the experts in this study called for lasting and planned engagement, contrasted with current one-off and ad hoc practices. Additionally, through Item 5 (*Initiate more sustainability specific and focused actions*), the experts called for introducing focused and specific actions that should be based on the long-term strategy and shaped as clear, short-term, departmental goals at an operational level [25].

By placing Item 4 (*Take actions to implement sustainability policies*) high on the findings list, experts in this study seem to have recognised the policy implementation gap as a current problem to be addressed. The discrepancy between the commitment and the delivery has already been highlighted in screenings of good governance policies across the international sport organisations [52]. A number of international organisations struggled to implement their policies or, at first glance, seemed to be implementing them, but below the surface, they did not adhere to sufficiently high standards. This is closely aligned with Item 10, that is, a call to "walk the talk" or follow the "do what you preach" principle. Our findings indicate a shared concern about sport organisations' credibility in the light of, for instance, greenwashing [37] or, more specifically, sponsorships arrangements with companies known for disregarding sustainability [64], to name just a few. Moreover, Swatuk

[65] warned about discrepancies between what sport organisations claim regarding sustainability and the actions that they take to be sustainable. However, to address the policy implementation gap in the context of sustainable development, the international sport organisations must first issue sustainability policies, which at this point, only a few did [3]. Consequently, this concern seems relevant for the future but perhaps somewhat premature at present.

Item 6 regarded the need for organisational behaviour change in the light of sustainability. The nexus of organisational behaviour change and sustainability has been primarily addressed at the macro level [66], including the present study. However, as Cooper et al. [66] underscored, sustainability management calls for explorations at the behavioural micro level due to its potential to drive sustainable decision making and actions. By including the micro perspectives in scholarly discussions on sport organisations and sustainability, academics can gain insights into antecedents of sustainability actions in international sport organisations. This is particularly relevant because the change is not necessarily initiated at the very top management structures but can also come from lower-level leadership [14]. In an applied setting, our findings show that individuals active within the international sport organisations may have a relevant role in driving the change towards more sustainable international sport.

Through Item 8, the experts in the current study raised the issue of operationalisation, that is, allocating meaning to sustainable development by translating it to a set of objectives in a given context [67]. The SDG Agenda is one example of an operationalised view of sustainable development; however, as it is intended for the national level, it can be used as a reference but still needs to be translated to an organisational level. As international sport organisations make up a group of heterogeneous organisations with their unique contexts, they should operationalise sustainable development within their organisational setting and make it testable [14]. The experts in our study underlined that the assessment is a relevant consideration for the decision-making strategy, that is, setting the objectives. The argument is in line with the literature that regards assessment as a critical consideration for generating information needed to direct the decision making; it is a mechanism for operationalisation, learning and structuring the complexity inherent in SD [67].

5.4. Actions

The actions level consists of concrete prioritised actions in line with all previous levels. The items in this level include more specific actions perceived by the experts as needed to advance sustainable development in international sport organisations.

The first group of recommendations (Items 3, 14 and 17) refers to actions that deal with how international sport organisations manage the sport events. According to the experts in this study, the primary consideration should be the inclusion of sustainability requirements in the bidding process. This very same measure was proposed in the Agenda 2020 as means to improve the Olympic Games' environmental sustainability and presents one of the critical determinants of what Samuel and Stubbs [68] label green legacies. However, research has shown that requirements for the bid do not suffice to ameliorate the environmental sustainability of the sport events [39]. The reason for this lies in the event owners' lack of control over event organisers to prevent shirking [39,69].

The experts in this study proposed that both the legacy of the sport facilities and the sustainability should be considered when discussing the sustainability of sport events. Although the terms legacy and sustainability overlap and tend to be confused, as per the experts in this study, sport event organisers should consider both. To distinguish them, Preuss [70] argued that legacy is expected to give impetus to new opportunities from the initial activity, whereas sustainability does not imply this. Further, legacy can create negative value and include individual-level impact, while sustainability is discussed positively and in local and global remits. Sustainability suggests the balance between three pillars, whereas this is not a requirement for legacy [70]. The recommendation from the

Delphi panel to broaden the scope of considerations is consequently connected to a plethora of challenges, such as issuing strategies and tools to reduce the consumption of resources, capacity building, sourcing sustainable products and services, as well as measurement and evaluation [71] while making sure positive value is produced in the long term after the event [72,73].

The relevance of Item 17 (*Embed sport events in a wider scheme of sustainable development of the host city*) can be explained by highlighting that the “pursuit of sustainability hinges on integration” [20] (p. 14). The integration here refers not only to the three pillars of sustainable development but also to scales, from global to local, and time, from intermediate to long-term integration [20]. Hence, the recommendation to integrate sport events into the sustainable development of the host is grounded in the sustainability debates. In particular, organising events that do not consider the long-term strategy of the local environment in which they take place is a “risky endeavour” [74] (p. 16) for the sustainability and legacy of the event in question.

Item 9 refers to the operational management considerations, including but not limited to logistics, production, maintenance and marketing [31]. Whatever the organisational remit is, operational management is developed to support the strategic goals and should be developed in terms of its efficiency but also in terms of capacity to support innovation as a standard practice for sustainability [14]. An integrated approach to sustainability considers sustainability in every aspect of an organisation’s activities, processes and routines [14]. Additionally, as Baumgartner and Rauter [14] pointed out, the operational level must include the non-economic issues of sustainability, usually not considered standard business administration issues. This includes enhancing employees’ capabilities in sustainable development and experience exchange between the operational, strategic and normative levels.

Implementing the projects directed at gender equality (11) highlights two issues. First, gender inequality, including sport participation, coaching, leadership, media coverage and gender-based violence, is still a concern in sport [75]. This indicates that the principles of the FSSD, namely influence and impartiality, are not entirely included as the norm at the success level of international sport organisations. This is despite gender inequality having its own SDG 5, reflecting discussions about diversity as a “source of learning and a resource base for adaptation and reorganisation” [20] (p. 15) needed for sustainable development. Secondly, the emphasis on the implementation is indicative of the policy implementation gap [75,76]. Experts did not provide further information on how this should be achieved; yet, the findings indicate that achieving gender equality requires action, rather than more policies.

Item 13 is grounded in the sustainability principle of health; namely, sustainable development requires people not to be subjected to structural obstacles to health [6]. Hence, through safeguarding measures, international sport organisations can support sustainable development by preventing harm to all participants, especially children (one of the most vulnerable groups). Global initiatives in that direction have preliminarily shown effectiveness [77]. Still, our findings suggest the need for further issue and implementation of the safeguarding policies to account for one of the basic sustainability principles.

Finally, the last three items refer to sport’s potential to reach many people, making it reasonable to claim that sport is a relevant player in sustainability [62]. The idea behind Items 18 and 20 is to use the allure and unique position athletes and teams have with their fans [78] to act as social activists to change the norms and behaviours of people [79]. The research on the effects of sport events (and players competing at these events) on physical activity and sport participation, however, paints a more complex picture of the potential of sport for the trickle-down effect. Namely, the mere exposure to competitive sport may not produce the desired effects, so an additional strategic nuance is needed to leverage this potential (e.g., Refs [80–82]). The same holds for the awareness-raising potential of sport events and consequent behaviour change for sustainable development [83,84].

With Item 19, the experts in the panel expressed the necessity for the general population acknowledging sport's contribution to sustainable development. Implicitly, this may be a result of experts' concern that, so far, sport stakeholders have not always proven to lead the way as role models for sustainability (e.g., Refs [64,69,85–88]). In the context of Items 18 and 20, it seems that there is a worry about sport's perceived legitimacy when the aim is to raise awareness about sustainable development; a similar concern was already expressed through Item 10.

5.5. Tools

Interestingly, the experts' recommendations did not include any tools level considerations. This is in contrast to what Moon et al. [2] discovered; the international sport federations in their study reported that they used standardised management tools. However, their research design included explicit questions about the standardised management tools and purposeful sampling of federations with sustainability initiatives in place. Our findings can perhaps be attributed to the larger organisational heterogeneity of our sample, where the organisations that are at the initial state of organisational sustainable development are included, focusing on the other levels of the FSSD, as well as to potential differences in priority setting between the organisations. Tools, such as indicators, International Organization for Standardization (ISO) certifications or reporting standards (e.g., Global Reporting Initiative), are usually used for mapping and reporting [89] despite their potential to be used for the strategy formulation and implementation, as well as external communication [90,91]. Future research could explore to what extent various international sport organisations use these tools and what role they hold for internal and external sustainability management elements, especially for perceived legitimacy of sustainability actions.

5.6. Limitations and Outlook

This study used the FSSD framework to cluster items that represent strategic responses to contribute to sustainable development. Owing to the exploratory nature of our research, an inductive approach generated the items, which were then clustered with the help of the FSSD. One alternative approach would have been to use the FSSD as a theoretical background and develop questionnaires based on the content of the FSSD. This procedure, however, has one important disadvantage: it would have been likely to result in socially desired responses because the researcher (not the informant) introduces a particular topic. This is why we did not follow such deductive approach. Still, based on our findings, the FSSD showed promise for future studies that could consider the FSSD in its entirety to study the strategic sustainability management of sport organisations.

Second, we considered international sport organisations as one homogenous entity, although they are heterogeneous with different purposes [92], governmental versus non-governmental characters, and cultural and normative contexts. This is particularly relevant, as the sustainability considerations are context dependent, and there is no one-fits-all solution [20]. A more nuanced sampling could be beneficial for guiding sustainability strategies in line with individual organisational purposes.

Finally, one methodological limitation is the drop-out of experts, which is typical when multiple feedback requests are made [53]. Although the attrition rate calculated for the present study exceeded the recommended 70% [93] and can thus be evaluated favourably, one cannot know whether the results would have been replicated if all initially participating experts had taken part in the final round.

5.7. Managerial Implications

The implications for managers of international sport organisations are manifold. To steer their organisation towards sustainable development, managers, regardless of their level, can act as agents of change. The organisations should prioritise sustainability in their

vision, mission and values. Likewise, the introduced changes should be planned in the long run and not just as an add-on incidental activity. Sport events should include requirements for sustainability from the earliest stages. Support should be provided to event organisers when it comes to expertise in sustainability. In particular, critical considerations when organising sport events are the sustainability and legacy of sporting facilities.

The implementation issue came across as a very relevant finding with a decisive managerial implication. Our experts viewed taking action based on the policies as crucial; hence, managers should act on the policies and, in that way, actually “do good” and show the legitimacy of their promises to external stakeholders. Furthermore, with the measurement and evaluation mechanisms in place, they can substantiate their claims and establish the trust needed to clarify the commitment from all organisational stakeholders. Moreover, when making decisions, systems thinking is necessary as a base for all actions in which the environmental, social and economic interaction is analysed and taken into account.

It is difficult to recommend what should be the highest priority strategic consideration items within system, success, strategic guidelines, actions and tools as optimal for contributing to relevant sustainable development goals. Rather, our work suggests that a mix of items of all five categories serves the purpose best and thus meets the sustainable development agenda. Addressing all categories indicates that organisations holistically embrace sustainability with high priority and consider promoting sustainable development as an essential managerial task, with consequences at all levels. Based on the results of our study, there is also clearly room for improvement on the tools, system and success levels.

6. Conclusions

This study provided an empirical examination of the relevance of strategic directions for international sport organisations’ transformation towards being more sustainable. The findings revealed what the high-priority items are, and that the proposed items can be, allocated to four levels of the FSSD, namely system, success, strategic guidelines and actions. This indicates that the transformation towards sustainability from the perspective of our respondents should be addressed at the normative, strategic and operational levels. The most urgent seems to be a normative change in which sustainability is prioritised throughout all organisational strategies and actions. While the present study extends the current knowledge on strategic sustainable management in international sport organisations, the study of actual implementation and performance of these actions in the near future is warranted to explore how international sport organisations contribute to achieving the SDGs.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su14169874/s1>, Table S1: Statements rated in the second round above the consensus level of 80%; Table S2: Statements rated in the second round below the consensus level of 80%.

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