

Headline 2.1 Autonomy

1. Definition

Autonomy in sport organisations, especially within the Olympic Movement, signifies their right and obligation to independently establish and control the rules of sport, determine their structure and governance, and conduct elections free from external influence. This concept is enshrined in the Olympic Charter of the IOC ([2023](#)), which emphasises that sports organisations within the Olympic Movement must apply principles of good governance while enjoying their autonomy. Rule 25 of the Charter highlights the “independence and autonomy [of each international federation] in the governance of its sport,” and Rule 27.6 mandates National Olympic Committees to “preserve their autonomy and resist all pressures of any kind, including political, legal, religious, or economic pressures” that could hinder their compliance with the Olympic Charter.

However, the claim of autonomy is not an unrestricted right. The European Court of Justice cases in 2023 clarified that autonomy must result from good governance, increased transparency, effective accountability mechanisms, and enhanced stakeholder consideration, rather than complete independence or absence of external controls. Sport organisations and the sport movement are not above the law. Autonomy is a result of an ongoing dialogue between sports and their legal and social environments at both national and supranational levels. The Council Resolution ([2021](#)), states that “Good governance in sport is a prerequisite for the autonomy and self-regulation of sport organizations and federations, in compliance with the principles of democracy, transparency, integrity, solidarity, gender equality, openness, accountability, and social responsibility.”

The essence of autonomy for sports associations lies in balancing self-regulation with necessary, transparent, proportionate, and non-discriminatory rules aligned with their goals, alongside adherence to legal principles. Constructive partnerships between sports organizations and other entities are crucial for advancing sports interests and aiding in their missions. These collaborations should focus on developing sports, supporting and safeguarding athletes, combating doping, manipulation, and corruption, and addressing harassment, abuse, or violence in sports, while protecting youth from criminal activities.

Sport organisations must consider the consequences when exercising their autonomy and cannot justify deviations from the law solely by citing the “specificity” of sport. They must prove that any restrictions they impose are necessary for the proper conduct of sports competitions, ensuring fair play, maintaining competitive balance, and upholding the integrity of sport. Legal compliance is essential, and sports organisations should ensure that their rules and regulations align with broader legal frameworks to avoid legal challenges and maintain public trust.

Financial autonomy is also vital for the long-term sustainability of sport organisations. Diversifying income sources is crucial to avoid reliance on a single or limited number of public and private actors, which can lead to vulnerabilities such as undue influence or financial instability if one source withdraws support. This can be achieved through securing multiple sponsorships, developing revenue streams from merchandise sales, ticket sales, broadcasting rights, and forming partnerships with various stakeholders. A broad

financial base allows sport organisations to better withstand economic fluctuations and maintain decision-making autonomy. Financial autonomy empowers organizations to invest in infrastructure, development programmes, and community initiatives, fostering growth and innovation within the sport. Furthermore, it promotes greater transparency and accountability in financial management, building trust with stakeholders, including athletes, fans, and sponsors.

In summary, the autonomy of sport organisations is a complex balance of self-regulation, legal compliance, financial independence, and collaborative partnerships. By adhering to principles of good governance and transparency, sport organisations can maintain their autonomy while ensuring integrity, trust, and sustainable development in the sports sector.

2. Ideal scenario

For NOCs

Sport organisations exercise their autonomy in sport-related operations and governance as outlined in the Olympic Charter. This autonomy enables them to independently establish and control their rules, structure, and governance without external interference. This self-governance is complemented by formal agreements, such as cooperation pacts, which foster a respectful and collaborative relationship with government entities. These agreements facilitate a balanced partnership, characterized by open dialogue and mutual respect for each party's distinct roles and authority.

Effective cooperation and coordination between sports organisations and governments are crucial for ensuring that their actions are mutually beneficial and that the autonomy of sports is preserved. The shared objectives of governments, the Olympic Movement, and other sports stakeholders drive collaborative efforts towards common goals. Maintaining a balanced relationship involves ongoing dialogue and cooperation, respecting each party's contributions and roles. This collaborative approach supports the advancement of sports, aids athletes, and upholds the integrity of sports competitions.

To ensure financial sustainability and guard against dependency on a limited number of public or private sponsors, sport organisations implement a tiered sponsorship and marketing programme that involves multiple sponsors. This approach diversifies income sources, mitigating the risk of financial instability and undue influence. The organisation adheres to specific policies, such as a conflict-of-interest policy, which guide its engagements with commercial partners while upholding its core integrity principles and values. By maintaining financial independence through this diversified sponsorship model, sport organisations enhance their stability and protect their autonomy.

For NFs

The National Federation should maintain autonomy in sport-related matters, aligned with the Olympic Charter. The NF upholds high standards of governance, not only as a requirement from government ministries for handling public funds but as a fundamental principle. They must resist undue external pressures—political, religious, or economic—that could compromise their compliance with the Olympic Charter. Securing financing compatible with Olympic principles and diversifying revenue sources is essential for their independence.

Promoting collaboration between sports organisations and governmental or non-governmental entities is vital, ensuring respect for the expertise of sports organisations and alignment with Olympic values. Close coordination between sports organisations and government authorities is crucial to advancing sports development, protecting athletes, combating doping and corruption, and safeguarding youth involvement in sports. This collaboration should be conducted with mutual respect for each entity's jurisdiction and responsibilities, without undue interference.

3. Risks

- Difficult relationship with public authorities up to instrumentalisation of sport.
- Conflict of interest problems.
- Dependence on public funding making cuts an existential threat for the organisation.
- Decisions by the government undermining the sport policy of the sport organisation
- Undermining the integrity of the sport and the people involved.
- Financial dependency on a limited number of actors, leading to a relationship of subordination and activities not aligned with the sport organisation's vision and mission.
- Lack of creativity and initiative.
- Danger for development and sustainability of the sport organisation
- Low performance of staff, volunteers and the organisation as a whole

4. Instruments and key elements

<i>Instruments</i>	<i>Key elements</i>
Strategic agreement with public authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearness and mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities. • Formalised cooperation based on partnership and a formal agreement - identification of areas of cooperation. • Legal compliance of sporting rules with national / European law. • Distribution of subsidies and funding for sport organisations. • Recognition and respect for the autonomy of sport.
Sponsorship programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of the sponsors and income sources. • Diversity of sponsorship programmes (licensing, hospitality, social responsibility) aligned with marketing strategy. • Clear rules when dealing with sponsors (can be part of the Code of Conduct). • Conflict of interest provisions and other integrity issues (e.g. sport betting companies as sponsors). • Responsible advertising (consider the impact of advertising alcohol, and tobacco).
Public funds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributing to the diversification of income sources. • Enables work on specific policy field/ project topic. • Maintaining autonomy by being mindful of any conditions being attached to the funds that could compromise their independence or mission.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that activities funded by public money contribute to the organisation’s overall objectives and benefit its stakeholders. • Maintain clear records of how the funds are used.
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5. Good practice examples

Example “Strategic Agreement with public authorities”

Organisation: European Olympic Committees (EOC)

Description: The renewed Arrangement for Cooperation between the EOC and the EU Commission is a signpost for their mission to promote sport and healthy lifestyles throughout Europe, demonstrating the dedication to collaborating with key EU institutional partners on EU policy. Spanning until the end of 2027, this Agreement of Cooperation encompasses pivotal events such as the 4th European Games in Istanbul, which will reinforce Europe's central role in global sports, along with four editions of the European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF). With the Arrangement for Cooperation, the EOC and the EU Commission commit themselves to regular exchanges on topics of concern to European sport and formalise their partnership on mutually beneficial topics.

Further information: [EOC and EU Commission sign Arrangement for Cooperation - EOC EU Office \(eurolympic.org\)](https://eurolympic.org)

Example “Sponsorship Programme”

Organisation: International Olympic Committee (IOC)

Description: The autonomy of sport organisations belonging to the Olympic Movement is one of the core principles of the IOC as indicated in the Olympic Charter. With the 15 recommendations of the Olympic Agenda 2020+5, the IOC further strengthened this commitment. Recommendation 15 refers directly to “Innovate revenue generation models”. This recommendation emphasises the need to explore, reinforce, and validate key fundamental principles that have underpinned the IOC's commercial programmes, to continue their evolution in the future. In response to a rapidly changing media and commercial landscape, the IOC acknowledges the necessity to adapt its commercial strategies to ensure mutual benefits for the Olympic Movement and its Partners. Historically, the IOC centralised the operation and management of certain revenue programmes, such as the Worldwide TOP Programme and broadcast rights, to create efficiencies and added value. Building on this approach, the Olympic Agenda 2020 led to the creation of a global licensing programme and a marketing alliance with the IPC, effective from 1 January 2021. To further optimize benefits for all Olympic stakeholders, the IOC plans to extend this centralised model to the Hospitality sector's business operations. Additionally, the IOC will continue to diversify revenue streams beyond traditional avenues like broadcast, sponsorship, and licensing, including the creation of new properties.

Further information: [Olympic-Agenda-2020-5-15-recommendations.pdf \(olympics.com\)](https://olympics.com)

Example “Sponsorship programme”

Organisation: International Olympic Committee (IOC)

Description: The IOC adopted a specific sponsorship programme allowing the organisation to have different sources of incomes and therefore avoiding any dependency on a single financial partner. Sponsorship accounts for about 30% of the IOC’s revenue sources, which are distributed throughout the Olympic Movement.

This strategy is set-up at different levels. At the worldwide level, the Olympic Partner (TOP) programme is the highest level of Olympic sponsorship and provides sponsors with exclusive worldwide marketing rights to the Summer, Winter and Youth Olympic Games. The IOC negotiated these contracts with multinational corporations which are able to provide direct financial support, sponsor services or expertise for the staging of the Games. These TOP Partners receive exclusive global marketing rights and opportunities within their designated product categories. The TOP Programme operates on a four-year-term and supports the Organising Committees of the Olympic Games and Olympic Winter Games, the NOCs and the IOC

At the same time, the IOC has clearly defined specific rules for allowing the Organising Committees of the Olympic Games (OCOGs) and the NOCs to manage their own commercial programmes to support the staging of the Games or their national activities. However, these programmes have to be non-competing with the TOP sponsors programme.

Further information:

<http://www.olympic.org/sponsors>

<http://www.olympic.org/ioc-financing-revenue-sources-distribution>

[IOC-Marketing-Fact-File.pdf \(olympics.com\)](#)

[IOC - Funding \(olympics.com\)](#)

Example “Public Funds”

Organisation: European Athletics

Description: The Agency for the Development of Athletics in Europe (ADAE) was established to facilitate project proposals for European Union funding and lead projects on behalf of European Athletics—based outside the EU in Switzerland—and its Member Federations. The ADAE, an international non-governmental and non-profit association, assists European Athletics Federations in promoting and developing athletics across Europe. Its mission includes promoting voluntary activities in sports, social inclusion, equality of opportunity, and awareness of the health benefits of physical activity. The agency also advocates for fair play and ethical values in sports, combating cross-border threats such as doping, violence, intolerance, and discrimination. Additionally, the ADAE supports European Athletics and its member federations in their interactions and projects with European institutions like the Council of Europe, the European Union, and the European Commission. Despite the complexities often associated with accessing European funding, particularly for sports clubs or federations, the ADAE aims to bridge these opportunities with European athletic development projects. For more information on how the ADAE can assist, a leaflet is available for download.

Further information: [EU Funding Programme | European Athletics \(european-athletics.com\)](#)

Example “Sponsorship programme”

Organisation: Sport New Zealand – public body

Description: This guide offers a framework for sports organizations to secure, develop, and retain valuable commercial partnerships, emphasizing a flexible approach that can be tailored to fit specific needs and experiences. It is designed to complement other sources of sponsorship expertise, including consultants, board members, and insights from other sports. The guide applies broadly to all commercial partners, whether sponsors or funders, defining a "sponsor" as any entity providing funds in exchange for the right to associate with a sports body or its assets. These assets, termed "properties," include competitions, events, teams, athletes, venues, and websites. In the context of New Zealand, where businesses have significant marketing budgets and increasingly use sponsorship as a marketing tool, sports organizations possess numerous properties with sponsorship potential. However, while some organizations generate substantial revenue from sponsorships, many lack a strategic approach, often relying on personal contacts. As major sponsors become more sophisticated, they demand clear value for money, unique opportunities, and a strong alignment between their brand and the sport property. Effective sponsorship is not merely about financial support; a good sponsor can enhance brand exposure and long-term value beyond the initial investment. Successful sponsorship relationships necessitate a significant investment and commitment from both parties, with sponsors providing financial resources and management support, while sports organizations must ensure they offer robust services and systems to deliver value to the sponsor.

Further information: [Commercial sponsorship and partnership | Sport New Zealand - Ihi Aotearoa \(sportnz.org.nz\)](#)

6. Steps to the next level

To level 2 ★★ “Emerging”	To level 3 ★★★ “Developing”	To level 4 ★★★★ “Established”	To level 5 ★★★★★ “Embedded”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand autonomy as a product of sporting, financial, legal, political and technological independence. Assess the organisation's autonomy, in light of applicable laws and legislation and discuss at the next 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt provisions specifying decision-making processes, delineating boundaries between the organisation and external stakeholders, and outlining mechanisms to protect against undue influence in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt provisions specifying decision-making processes, delineating boundaries between the organisation and external stakeholders, and outlining mechanisms to protect against undue influence in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt provisions specifying decision-making processes, delineating boundaries between the organisation and external stakeholders, and outlining mechanisms to protect against undue influence in

<p>meeting of the Board.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify relevant public officials/representatives and establish informal meetings. Analyse the various revenue streams within your organization, exploring options to diversify income sources and potentially secure sponsorships or access public funding. Ensure the Constitution has no barriers to autonomy and if so have this updated. 	<p>the strategic documents of your organisation indicating and safeguarding that your organisation is autonomous and can function independently.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiate a legal assessment of the sporting rules of your organisation to determine if these rules are compliant with national law. List sport-related policy areas in which your organisation and the government have a common interest. List public officials or Members of Parliament that are dealing directly with sport. Establish informal contacts with these representatives. Discuss, during a meeting of the Board, the different types of sponsorship agreements (besides subsidies from higher-level sport bodies) that your organisation would like to set up. Ensure that all sponsorship deals 	<p>the strategic documents of your organisation indicating and safeguarding that your organisation is autonomous and can function independently. Monitor and assess if these provisions are adhered to.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that all staff members and Board members are informed and trained about the extent of autonomy and its implications for their daily tasks. Adopt a formal cooperation agreement with relevant public bodies to formalise cooperation between both entities, including a reference to the areas of autonomy of your organisation (i.e. rules of the game, election of officials), and identification of areas of common interest and a clear repartition of competences and tasks. Establish regular contacts with public 	<p>the strategic documents of your organisation indicating and safeguarding that your organisation is autonomous and can function independently. Monitor and assess if these provisions are adhered to.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that all staff members are informed and trained about the extent of autonomy and its implications for their daily tasks. Adopt a formal agreement or refine the existing strategic agreement with the government in order to clearly define roles, duties and responsibilities. This agreement should include references to the role of your organisation within the national strategy for sport as well as the support that the government is committed to provide to your organisation. Adopt adequate provisions to ensure that your
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	<p>are formalised by written and signed contracts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore public funds and grants dedicated to sport or where sport can be a means to achieving public interest. • Develop policies to clearly outline the organisations commitment to autonomy and provisions against interference, corruption, bribery and policy around the acceptance of gifts. • Create a Code of Conduct and Conflicts of Interest Register for all members of the Board. 	<p>officials that are dealing directly with sport or have a clear interest in sport.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign a staff member or representative of your organisation as responsible person for dealing with the contact with public authorities (e.g. Public Affairs Manager, Government Relations manager). • Refine your sponsorship program with the objective of diversifying sponsors and consolidating the financial sources. This program should include a range of potential agreements for a variety of activities (licensing, hospitality, social responsibility...). • Regularly assess for potential conflicts of interest with current or prospective sponsors. • During a Board meeting, prioritize areas for accessing public funds or 	<p>rules are compliant with national and/or European law.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refine your sponsorship programme to a formal tiered programme offering various possibilities of sponsorship deals for a variety of activities (licensing, hospitality, social responsibility ...). Ensure that your sponsorship programme links directly or is in line with other strategic documents such as the marketing strategy, code of conduct or conflict of interest policy. • Include handling commercial partners in the organisations Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Policy. • Have a strategic approach to public funds from which sport organisations can benefit or in which sport can be used as a means to achieve public interest. Specific projects on
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