

# SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES IN EUROPEAN FOOTBALL: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TOP CLUBS AND SLOVENIAN COUNTERPARTS

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Sport is a powerful societal force influencing behavior, values, and attitudes. Professional football clubs, as prominent sports organizations, have a responsibility to operate sustainably and contribute to global goals of environmental protection, social justice, and economic development. This article examines the sustainability practices of three European football giants: Manchester United from England, Real Madrid from Spain, and Bayern Munich from Germany. These clubs represent successful and influential leagues with a long tradition of excellence. The analysis covers the three dimensions of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. The environmental dimension focuses on efforts to reduce ecological footprints, including energy efficiency, waste management, and resource conservation. The social dimension involves community engagement, such as education, social inclusion, and health promotion. The economic dimension addresses financial performance, governance, and transparency. The article compares and contrasts the sustainability strategies of the three clubs, highlighting their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges. Additionally, it discusses the implications of these sustainability actions for stakeholders, including fans, sponsors, partners, staff, and players. The aim is to provide insights and recommendations for improving the sustainability performance of professional football clubs and enhancing the role of sport in creating a better world.

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## **1 Introduction**

In the contemporary global sports landscape, football holds an unrivaled position at the heart of cultural, economic, and social life. The sport's universal influence extends beyond the boundaries of play, touching upon aspects critical to sustainable development. As the urgency for addressing sustainability challenges increases, football clubs are increasingly recognized not just as entertainment entities but as significant actors in the global sustainability agenda.

This paper suggests that football clubs, by their extensive reach and profound influence, are uniquely positioned to contribute to environmental conservation, social inclusion, economic stability, and ethical governance. The analysis of sustainability practices among professional football clubs, therefore, offers valuable insights into the mechanisms of integrating sustainable development goals (SDGs) within the sports industry.

The objective of this comparative analysis is twofold: firstly, to evaluate the extent and efficacy of sustainability initiatives undertaken by prominent European football clubs, including Manchester United, Manchester City, Real Madrid, FC Barcelona, Bayern Munich, and Borussia Dortmund; and secondly, to contrast these efforts with those of Slovenian clubs, NK Olimpija and NK Maribor, thereby revealing the multicolored landscape of sustainability in football. Through this comparison, the paper aims to uncover the span and depth of sustainability practices within the football industry, highlighting the challenges, opportunities, and requirements that shape these efforts.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Environmental sustainability**

Environmental sustainability has received growing attention in sports management literature. Studies such as those by Karamichas (2013) and Trendafilova (2013) have highlighted how major sporting events and football clubs contribute to environmental degradation but also how they have begun to implement strategies to moderate these impacts. For instance, the use of renewable energy, waste management programs, and sustainable infrastructure in stadiums has been

documented across European clubs. However, there is a noticeable gap in research focusing on the environmental initiatives of smaller clubs, particularly those in less economically rich regions.

## **2.2 Social sustainability**

Social sustainability comprehends diversity, inclusion, and community engagement. Football clubs have been shown to play a significant role in promoting social inclusion and engagement through various programs (Walsh and Giulianotti, 2007; Babiak and Wolfe, 2009). These programs often target underprivileged communities, aiming to use football as a tool for social change. While extensive research exists on large European clubs' community engagement initiatives, there is less understanding of how smaller clubs integrate social sustainability into their operations and the unique challenges they face.

## **2.3 Economic sustainability**

Economic sustainability within football clubs focuses on financial stability, revenue diversification, and responsible management. Research by Morrow (2003) and Dobson and Goddard (2011) has explored the financial management practices of football clubs, highlighting the importance of sustainable economic strategies for long-term success. Yet, there remains a shortage of literature examining the economic sustainability practices of smaller clubs, particularly in how they navigate financial challenges and opportunities for revenue generation in smaller markets.

## **2.4 Ethical governance**

Ethical governance in football incorporates fair play, transparency, and compliance with regulations. Studies by Geeraert (2013) and Gorse and Chadwick (2010) have delved into governance issues within the football environment, including corruption, ethical breaches, and the implementation of governance reforms. While these studies have shed light on the governance practices of professional football clubs and governing bodies, there remains a gap in understanding how ethical governance is practiced and enforced among smaller clubs, especially those outside the major European leagues.

The review of the existing literature reveals significant openings that the current study aims to fill. Specifically, there is a necessity for more research on:

1. Environmental sustainability initiatives of smaller football clubs and the specific challenges they face in implementing such strategies.
2. Social sustainability practices among smaller clubs, including how they promote diversity, inclusion, and community engagement within their local contexts.
3. Economic sustainability strategies for clubs in smaller markets, focusing on innovative revenue generation and financial management practices.
4. Ethical governance in the context of smaller clubs, exploring how they navigate the complexities of ethical governance and maintain integrity and credibility.

By addressing these openings, the current study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of sustainability in football, encompassing clubs of varying sizes and resources. It aims to contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable development in sports, offering insights into the practices and challenges of clubs beyond the elite levels of European football.

### **3 Methodology**

To investigate the sustainability initiatives of European professional football clubs and their Slovenian counterparts, NK Olimpija and NK Maribor, this study employs a multi-method research design. This approach allows an in-depth exploration of the practices and impacts of these initiatives, combining qualitative and quantitative data to offer a comprehensive analysis. The research methods outlined below are designed to capture the scope of sustainability efforts within the mentioned football clubs, addressing environmental, social, economic, and ethical dimensions.

#### **3.1 Content analysis of club reports and publicly available documents**

The study aims to precisely gather detailed information on the formally reported sustainability initiatives undertaken by European professional football clubs. The data for this research will be extracted from a variety of publicly accessible sources provided by the clubs themselves, including annual reports, sustainability reports,

press releases, and other relevant documents. To systematically analyze the gathered data, a content analysis methodology will be employed. This will involve the categorization of the data into predefined themes, namely environmental sustainability, social inclusion efforts, economic strategies, and governance practices, to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the clubs' sustainability initiatives.

### **3.2 Media coverage analysis**

The objective of this study is to explore the illustration of European professional football clubs' sustainability efforts within media narratives and public discourse. The examination will draw upon a diverse selection of data sources, including news articles, online forums, and social media posts that discuss the sustainability practices of these clubs. Employing qualitative content analysis as the primary methodological approach, the study will examine the tone, focus, and depth of media coverage surrounding these sustainability efforts. This analytical process aims to uncover public perceptions regarding the clubs' sustainability initiatives and to identify any differences between the initiatives as reported and their representation in public discourse.

### **3.3 Academic literature review**

This research intends to situate the sustainability initiatives of football clubs within the wider scholarly conversation on sustainability in the realm of sports. To achieve this, the study will draw on academic journal articles, conference papers, and book chapters that discuss sustainability practices within football and the broader field of sports. A thematic analysis will be employed to sift through the existing academic literature, aiming to discern predominant themes, identify existing gaps, and determine how the findings of the current study correspond with or deviate from the body of established research on this topic.

### **3.4 Comparative analysis**

The study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the sustainability practices employed by top European football clubs and those implemented by NK Olimpija and NK Maribor, to identify the unique challenges and opportunities encountered by clubs of varying sizes and resources. The methodological approach demands

synthesizing data collected through previously mentioned methods to clarify the similarities and differences in the sustainability initiatives undertaken by these clubs. This analysis will take into account various factors, including the scale of initiatives, financial investments, community involvement, and the overall impact of these sustainability efforts.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

In gathering data, ethical guidelines will be strictly followed. Any sensitive information will be handled with the utmost discretion, and data will be presented in a manner that respects contributors' privacy and the clubs' reputations.

Through this comprehensive research methodology, the study aims to provide a detailed understanding of the sustainability initiatives within professional European football clubs, with a specific focus on the comparison between top clubs and Slovenian counterparts. This approach will allow a detailed examination of the practices, challenges, and impacts of these initiatives, contributing valuable insights to the field of sports sustainability.

## **4 Environmental sustainability**

Environmental sustainability in football exceeds simple operational efficiency, it reflects a club's commitment to playing a pivotal role in addressing global ecological challenges. European football giants have recognized this responsibility, guiding substantial resources into sustainability projects that not only minimize their environmental footprint but also set an example within the sporting world.

### **4.1 Case studies of European clubs**

Manchester United from England has emerged as a frontrunner in environmental stewardship, with Old Trafford Stadium integrating energy-efficient lighting, water conservation systems, and comprehensive recycling programs. Similarly, Manchester City's Etihad Stadium in England stands as a model of sustainable design, utilizing rainwater harvesting and solar panels to reduce dependency on non-renewable energy sources.

Real Madrid and FC Barcelona from Spain have taken significant steps towards green energy, with initiatives to power their facilities using renewable energy sources. These efforts are complemented by comprehensive waste reduction and recycling campaigns, aimed at fans and the communities, surrounding their iconic stadium. In Germany, Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund have invested in carbon offset projects and green stadium operations, notably Dortmund's Signal Iduna Park, which boasts an advanced waste management system and energy-efficient infrastructure.

#### **4.2 Challenges and opportunities for NK Olimpija and NK Maribor**

On the contrary, Slovenian clubs such as NK Olimpija and NK Maribor, while keen on embracing environmental sustainability, confront tangible barriers primarily related to financial and infrastructural limitations. However, these restraints also present unique opportunities for innovation. Small-scale, community-focused projects, such as local clean-up initiatives or promoting public transportation to games, can serve as a foundation for broader environmental strategies. Partnerships with local businesses and environmental organizations could further strengthen their impact, creating a model of sustainability that leverages community engagement and support.

### **5 Social sustainability**

The fabric of social sustainability in football is laced with the threads of diversity, inclusion, and community engagement. Clubs that excel in this domain recognize their role as community anchors, leveraging football's universal appeal to foster social cohesion and support.

#### **5.1 European clubs' community initiatives**

Manchester United and Manchester City have established robust community outreach and youth development programs, such as Manchester City's "City in the Community" scheme, which offers educational and health-related initiatives alongside football training to underprivileged youth.

Real Madrid and FC Barcelona extend their social impact through their foundations, running projects that tackle education, health, and inclusion, thereby reinforcing their commitment to the communities that form their fanbases.

Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund exemplify how engagement and diversity initiatives can enhance a club's social fabric, with Dortmund's "BVB Learning Centre" providing educational programs that use football as a medium to address social issues.

## **5.2 NK Olimpija and NK Maribor: building social ties**

For NK Olimpija and NK Maribor, the focus on social sustainability often manifests in initiatives tailored to their local contexts. Community engagement and youth development programs are essential, not only for fostering local talent but also for strengthening societal bonds and promoting inclusivity. These efforts, though smaller in scale, are crucial in sustaining the social pillars upon which these clubs stand.

## **6 Economic sustainability**

Economic sustainability within football clubs is a delicate balance of financial stability, revenue diversification, and responsible management. It supports the ability of clubs to pursue their long-term goals, including sustainability initiatives.

### **6.1 Revenue strategies of top European clubs**

Clubs like Manchester United and Real Madrid have harnessed their global brand appeal to maximize revenue through sponsorships, merchandise sales, and broadcasting rights. FC Barcelona and Bayern Munich underline the importance of revenue diversification, with Barcelona's "Barça Innovation Hub" serving as a testament to the club's investment in future-oriented projects.

Borussia Dortmund demonstrates a model of balancing competitiveness with financial carefulness, significantly investing in youth development to ensure a sustainable talent pipeline.



## **6.2 Challenges for NK Olimpija and NK Maribor**

NK Olimpija and NK Maribor face distinct challenges in achieving economic sustainability, mainly due to their operation within a smaller market context. Nevertheless, these clubs can explore innovative revenue generation strategies, such as developing niche marketing campaigns, enhancing fan engagement through digital platforms, or fostering local business partnerships, to build a sustainable economic foundation.

## **7 Ethical governance**

Ethical governance is at the heart of sustainability, encompassing transparency, compliance, and ethical conduct. For football clubs, this means obeying fair play, both on and off the pitch, and maintaining integrity in all operations.

### **7.1 Ethical practices in European football**

European clubs are increasingly held to high standards of governance, with regulatory bodies like UEFA imposing strict compliance requirements. Clubs such as Manchester United, Real Madrid, and Bayern Munich have implemented governance structures that ensure accountability and ethical decision-making, reflecting their commitment to upholding the sport's integrity.

### **7.2 Slovenian football's ethical framework**

For NK Olimpija and NK Maribor, navigating the landscape of ethical governance involves following both national and international regulations. While challenges continue, particularly in smaller markets where oversight may be less rigorous, these clubs recognize the importance of ethical governance in sustaining their credibility and nurturing trust among fans, stakeholders, and the wider football community.

## **8 Conclusion**

The journey towards sustainability in football is both complex and multi-layered, surrounding environmental, social, economic, and ethical dimensions. Through this comparative analysis, it is evident that while top European clubs lead with innovative

practices and extensive investments in sustainability, Slovenian counterparts like NK Olimpija and NK Maribor face unique challenges but also possess the potential to make significant contributions within their contexts. This examination highlights the critical need for collaborative efforts across the football ecosystem to advance sustainability, ensuring the sport not only prospers but also positively impacts the planet and its people.

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