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# FIFA World Cups: An Own Goal Against Sustainability

Gilles Paché\*

**Abstract.** The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar sparked significant societal and ecological controversy, particularly concerning the exploitation and deaths associated with stadium construction and the tournament's overall environmental impact. Despite global criticisms and calls for boycotts, the event's ecological footprint was largely ignored as FIFA moved forward with plans for future tournaments. The 2026 World Cup, set to be hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, promises an even greater logistical and environmental challenge with 48 teams across 16 venues, spanning multiple time zones and involving substantial air travel. This paper examines FIFA's persistent disregard for ecological concerns despite mounting evidence and criticism, drawing parallels with past events and exploring the lack of a regulatory counterbalance to FIFA's practices. The analysis highlights a troubling trend where profit and logistics consistently overshadow environmental sustainability in elite football, suggesting that systemic change remains elusive.

**Keywords:** Controversy, Ecology, Environment, FIFA World Cup, Logistics.

## Introduction

Much has been written about the organization and staging of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar at the end of 2022. Although memory often plays tricks on us, especially when repeated geopolitical crises then take up all the attention, we must remember the societal and ecological controversies that the competition raised for several months (Paché, 2020). The thousands of deaths on the construction sites of air-conditioned stadiums, now almost entirely useless in the face of suffocating temperatures, are now just a kind of “froth on the ocean”, as if it were all ancient history. In short, the world seems to have moved on, even though the call for a boycott of the broadcasting of matches was a complete failure, particularly in Western countries (Gallo, 2023). It remains to be seen whether the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar will send out strong signals about the intolerable nature of sporting mega-events with disastrous environmental impacts, signals whose importance we understand to avoid repeating these mistakes. To this end, a closer look at the 2026 FIFA World Cup to be held in June and July 2026 in the United States, Canada and Mexico is particularly instructive in identifying whether there is an experience effect.

It is interesting to recall that in December 2010, FIFA justified the choice of Qatar by pointing to the limited distances that fans and teams would have to travel to get from one stadium to another, with players in their beds an hour after the end of each match. This argument falls flat for the 2026 competition. The tournament is organized in three

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countries, which have co-constructed a collective project for the occasion, called *United 2026* (Wise and Lee Ludvigsen, 2022). The tournament will involve 16 venues, spread over four time zones, and separated from each other by several thousand kilometers (see Figure 1). The “volume” itself has been greatly increased, as 48 teams will be competing, compared with 32 teams since 1998... an increase of 50%. From the point of view of sporting ethics, this is a positive development, since Africa and Asia will have more teams, and for the first time, a place is guaranteed for Oceania. On the other hand, from a more logistical perspective, the result risks producing a new ecological aberration with the 104 matches (over 33 days) of the tournament and massive use of air transport given the long distances to be covered, bearing in mind that a record attendance of 5.5 million spectators is envisaged by FIFA.

**Figure 1**  
Location of the 16 FIFA World Cup stadiums in 2026



Source : <https://flytrippers.com/list-world-cup-locations-2026/>

The aim of this research note is to highlight the persistence of what might be described as “deviant” behavior on the part of a regulatory body that has no countervailing power to limit its deployment. While the subject primarily concerns a singular entertainment industry, namely elite football, which generates colossal sums of money (between 2019 and 2022, FIFA’s sales totaled 7.6 billion US dollars, and are expected to reach 11 billion US dollars between 2023 and 2026), it brings us back to a question raised in the early 1950s by Galbraith (1952/1993) concerning the importance of a countervailing power in the capitalist system, i.e., the existence of a power that balances out an established entity imposing its norms and rules of the game without

being thwarted in their implementation. However, it is as if the absence of a political and/or economic counterweight favors FIFA's headlong rush into a succession of FIFA World Cups, ignoring the presence of increasingly dramatic environmental issues as climate change becomes a scientifically indisputable reality.

## **2026 FIFA World Cup**

FIFA's decision-makers, and particularly its President Gianni Infantino, are not so stupid as to be unaware of the criticism surrounding the 2026 FIFA World Cups. They sense that new controversies are likely to emerge and grow in importance as the 2026 competition draws nearer, in a context where the environmental damage of FIFA World Cups is now widely studied (Orr *et al.*, 2022). To counter this, the decision was taken in May 2023 to organize the preliminary phase (12 groups of four teams each) from "regional logistical hubs". In other words, the aim is to create a sort of mini championships, decoupled from each other, with the emphasis on optimizing flows, a point acknowledged by Gianni Infantino himself: "The challenges will be the whole logistics around it. For us, it is important to create the right environment for the teams and the fans to be put in the best possible conditions" (*The Daily Star*, May 18, 2023). It is true that staging the 2026 FIFA World Cup on one continent will mean air travel of up to six hours (over 4,000 km between Boston and San Francisco), with time zone changes, which could have an indirect impact on the competition.

But a FIFA World Cup does not stop at the preliminary phase, far from it. Trivially speaking, it is just an "appetizer" before the serious business begins: direct elimination from the Round of 32, which will pit the 32 best teams in the tournament against each other. The simplest solution is for the top two from each of the 12 groups, plus the eight best third-placed teams, to reach the last 32, and for eight matches, instead of seven, to be needed to finally win the tournament. Others, on the other hand, felt that the top eight winners of each group should automatically qualify for the Round of 16, with the other four group winners and eight runners-up playing to join them. In the end, the simplest solution prevailed, along the lines of previous FIFA World Cups. However, the logic of "regional logistical hubs" will naturally break down after the preliminary phase, in favor of a total spatial mix.

From the Round of 16 to the semi-finals, 30 matches (i.e., around a third of all matches) will take place without reference to the famous "regional logistical hubs". On the contrary, depending on the results of the national teams as the competition progresses, hundreds of thousands of fans will have to travel from the United States to Canada, and from Canada to Mexico. In a recent, hard-hitting article, Cannasant (2023) recalls that in 2021, at COP26 in Glasgow, FIFA announced a goal of zero net CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 2040 and did not hesitate to communicate that the FIFA World Cup in Qatar was a remarkable model of sustainability (see Figure 2, taken from Lundberg's [2023] panegyric). The dissonance between *green washing* rhetoric and practical implementation certainly reached new heights when it was announced in November 2023 by the *Sports Business Journal* of a sponsorship deal struck between FIFA and Saudi oil giant ARAMCO, with an estimated revenue for FIFA of around 11 billion US dollars by 2034. In so doing, FIFA is sending a strong signal of support for the fossil fuel industry by associating it with the world's most popular sport.

**Figure 2**  
Strategic pillars of sustainability  
linked to the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar



*Source : Lundberg (2023).*

### **2030 and 2034 FIFA World Cups**

It seems that the environmental denial of the FIFA World Cups will continue after the competition in Qatar. In 2030, the FIFA World Cup will be jointly organized by Spain, Morocco, and Portugal (Goff, 2023), and true fans are already delighted that Morocco, a land of footballing passion, is finally hosting the competition after four unsuccessful bids (1994, 1998, 2006 and 2010). Some ecologically minded fans, on the other hand, are more concerned to see matches relocated to Asuncion (Paraguay), Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Montevideo (Uruguay) to celebrate the centenary of the first ever World Cup –it took place from July 13 to 30, 1930, in Uruguay, with 13 teams, including only four from Europe. As for 2034, the organization of the FIFA World Cup by Saudi Arabia, in climatic conditions like those in Qatar (not to mention the human rights issue), confirms FIFA’s environmental denial. It is important to note, however, that FIFA’s decision-makers are not alone in refusing to consider the ecological issues that concern the world’s population. Indeed, Saudi Arabia has also secured the privilege of hosting the 2029 Asian Winter Games from the Kuwait-based Olympic Council of Asia, representing 45 national Olympic Committees.

A promotional film has already been produced by Saudi Arabia to present Trojena, the future mountain city that will be at the center of a pharaonic project for an ultra-connected megalopolis, located in the middle of the desert, in the image of the

indoor ski slope at Dubai's Mall of the Emirates (Alrifai, 2007). The promotional film features snow galore and hordes of snowboarders and skiers gliding down the immaculate slopes in the light of an artificial moon. Of course, the promotional film never mentions the environmental cost of this snowy oasis in the middle of the desert, nor that Saudi Arabia is the world's leading oil exporter and one of the biggest per capita emitters of greenhouse gases (672.38 million tons in 2022). To reduce its dependence on oil, Saudi Arabia has been focusing on tourism for several years as part of its Vision 2030 plan (Ettinger, 2023). Hosting major sporting events is a key component of the country's economic diversification strategy, coupled with a desire to assert its soft power (Bianco and Sons, 2023). The Asian Games in winter 2029 and the 2034 FIFA World Cup are the first manifestations of this, while the organization of the Olympic Games in 2036 is beginning to be mooted... in competition with Qatar.

Returning to the case of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, in an article published in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, Guyon (2021) stressed the importance of designing a tournament that was "more effective, more efficient and better paced". It must be said that he was heard, as FIFA finally modified the organization of the tournament in the direction suggested by Guyon (2021). FIFA's decision-makers are therefore capable of changing certain rules of the game in the interests of the players, for example in terms of the pace of matches. However, it would be clumsy to ignore the fact that there seems to be no experience effect when it comes to awarding FIFA World Cups based on ecological outcomes. Older readers will recall that the 1978 FIFA World Cup was held in Argentina to the cries of political opponents tortured by the military junta hundreds of meters from the stadiums (Scharpf *et al.*, 2023). Can we consider that a new awareness has taken place since 1978? It is unlikely. The conclusion is therefore a bitter one: elite football, or rather its highest regulatory body, FIFA, operates outside the societal and environmental issues that concern us all. FIFA is certainly not the only non-state organization in this situation, but it would have been possible to hope that the passion that football arouses would provide FIFA with the media exposure it needs to be at the forefront of effective environmental action.

## Conclusion

The tone of this research note is that often found in Anglo-Saxon academic journals, which open their columns to a societal position taken by a researcher who, for a moment, abandons the usual trappings of the scientific approach to provoke debate... even if it means being provocative. This is the case, for example, of most of the journals published by the British publisher Emerald, with their invigorating *viewpoints*. As we pointed out at the outset, the absence of a countervailing power allows FIFA to impose its economic and sporting order based on profitability objectives that are increasingly disconnected from ecological and, more broadly, CSR considerations. Latty (2011) goes even further when he speaks of a veritable *Lex FIFA* insofar as the body also deploys a transnational legal order that transcends national laws in a kind of "extra-territoriality" without any real legal control. The very name "FIFA World Cup" demonstrates that the competition belongs purely and simply to a non-state organization, which governs it down to the smallest detail. It is clearly a *broad unexplored area* in Farooq's (2017) words.

One of the most surprising paradoxes is the fact that, while FIFA does not appear to be under threat from a supra-authority that could influence its strategic orientations, it is itself traversed by power games that have a strong impact on decision-making



processes. The players with the greatest infrastructural capacity –to put it simply, the countries with a long footballing culture and the means of communication, hotel capacity and *ad hoc* stadiums– are in fact under pressure from “peripheral” countries whose voice prevails just as much when it comes to awarding the various FIFA World Cups (Bishop and Cooper, 2018). FIFA has 211 national associations in 2023, divided between six regional confederations, with the United Kingdom not represented as a sovereign state (which allows it to have four teams: England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales). The democratic voting system thus opens the way to all manner of vote-buying haggling for the award of a tournament, and there is no need to recall several scandals at this level, the most famous of which is undoubtedly the accusation of corruption of several national association presidents in 2015. Sadly, it is to be feared that if die-hard football fans close their eyes to such a reality, rushing to the stadiums and in front of their TV screens and smartphones, nothing will really change in the land of “football as business”.

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