

The IOC, Transnational Relations, and South Africa

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We have argued elsewhere that the IOC can best be understood in the new world of interdependence as a transnational organization. One key characteristic of transnational organizations is that they are capable of influencing sovereign nations; conversely, they are themselves subject to pressures from sovereign states and other transnational organizations. We contend in this paper that the IOC's actions in respect to apartheid in South Africa demonstrate this key characteristic clearly. The IOC moved only very reluctantly to expel South Africa from the Olympic Games in the 1960s. It took this action only after pressure from transnational anti-apartheid organizations, such as the Organization for African Unity, and its sport arm, the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa, and from a number of sovereign states. In this instance, the IOC's decisions clearly demonstrated a commitment to a well-articulated organizational philosophy—i.e., Olympic idealism. In delaying expulsion action against South Africa, the conservative nature of the IOC membership and its Victorian notion of separation between sport and politics were at play. Conversely, the IOC moved very quickly to reinstate South Africa in 1991, at least in part because of a more egalitarian membership and a President who understood the realities of transnational politics. The IOC's decision put considerable pressure on Canada and the Commonwealth Heads of Government to follow the IOC move in normalizing relations with South Africa, and in particular, to revoke the measures the Commonwealth had taken in the 1970s and 1980s to prevent sporting contacts with South Africa.