

**Special
Olympics**



Co-funded by
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Special Olympics Environmental Sustainability Impact

Sport Sustainability Framework- Final Project Report

2024 REPORT

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"Sustainability is important to me and Special Olympics because we rely on many natural resources like water and land that help protect our planet. If we all make small changes in our daily lives, it can collectively create a much larger positive impact on the environment."

Inge Maiberg,
Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Leadership Council Athlete Representative and Global Athlete Leadership Council member,
Special Olympics Estonia Athlete Leader

Project Background and Context

In November 2022, the SO Europe Eurasia Foundation (SOEEF), the sister organization to Special Olympics Europe Eurasia, committed to taking action to embed sustainability across the wider Special Olympics network and its events. Supported by funding from the European Union through the Erasmus+ programme, SOEEF began with a focus on driving sustainable performance at events through this project which was titled - Special Olympics Environmental Sustainability Impact – Sport Sustainability Framework (SSF). The SSF project built upon the work carried out by the Local Organizing Committee (LOC) for the Special Olympics World Summer Games 2023 (SOWSG 2023) in Berlin – where the LOC developed a draft sport sustainability framework to integrate into its operations for the Games.





Recognizing that whilst the draft sustainability framework presented a robust start, SOEEF recognized the limits of its own knowledge in this area. As a result, SOEEF, through the EU's grant funding, appointed Think Beyond – a social impact and sustainability consultancy – to take the framework to the next level through calibrating and pilot testing with the two Special Olympics National Programmes who were a part of the project consortium. Special Olympics National Programmes Special Olympics Belgium and Special Olympics Italy tested the initiatives contained in the draft version of the SSF document and further tested these initiatives throughout the project. This helped the consortium to understand what sustainability initiatives are appropriate for the Special Olympics network.

The main objective of this project was for SOEEF to lead the creation of a pioneering environmental sustainability framework to evaluate and outline what can be done to reduce the environmental impact of Special Olympics events. The framework, which was tested by the consortium throughout the project, seeks to provide best-practice support and recommendations for the wider Special Olympics network. This network covers over 190 countries across the globe and involves over 3.6 million athletes with an intellectual disability and across the world, with 53,000 Special Olympics competitions of all shapes and sizes taking place in 2023. Therefore, the potential impact of this project is truly significant and will help to drive positive environmental impacts at a local, national and international level. We hope that the outcomes of the project will transcend the sphere of Special Olympics and support wider sporting events to take environmental action. We also hope that the results/best practices from the project can be used not only by the Special Olympics network but by the wider sports industry who run sporting competitions and tournaments.

Introduction

Since its inception in 1968, Special Olympics (SO) has been dedicated to enhancing the social inclusion of athletes with intellectual disabilities, fostering their skills and opportunities for success through sports, and inspiring communities to embrace human potential. In the past 50 years, not only has the sporting landscape changed both culturally and economically, but environmentally too. It is now clear that sporting events not only have an environmental impact (e.g., potential impacts on environmental quality on land, water, and air), but are also impacted by a rapidly changing environment (e.g. vulnerable to the effects of climate change).



"Sustainability is crucial to both me and Special Olympics because climate change is already affecting our local programs. For instance, we face difficulties in retaining coaches who have moved away from their communities. Additionally, we need to address the cost-of-living crisis, which impacts athletes and their families when we consider events, manage travel needs, etc. By embracing sustainability, we can better support our community and ensure our programs remain accessible and impactful."

Kiera Byland,
Special Olympics GB athlete leader and Special Olympics
International Board Member



For Special Olympics, we want to futureproof our games, competitions and operations to continue to enhance social inclusion whilst remaining resilient and, where possible, leaving a positive environmental impact. The Special Olympics Global Strategic Plan - <https://resources.specialolympics.org/strategic-plan> - which will run to 2030, is based around the UN Sustainability Goals. Therefore, sustainability is crucial to the Special Olympics movement. We recognize, with our ever-widening stakeholder audience – sponsors, suppliers, spectators, governments, NGO’s and our athletes – our events provide a substantial opportunity to help drive environmental sustainability through sport. With this in mind, we recognize the significance of our events, and we are committed to embedding environmental sustainability to safeguard the future of our events.

Although this report presents an environmental sustainability framework for Special Olympics, it is important to note that the framework has been developed / refined with the support of the LOC from the SOWSG 2023, Special Olympics Italy and Special Olympics Belgium. Each of these partners were chosen strategically because they were starting from different points on their sustainability journey, and to inform and test the framework at upcoming events scheduled for 2024 and 2025. The literature informing the framework’s development (see section 3) is both global and regional (European) in nature. For implementation with Special Olympics National programmes, it is important to take account of the local context in the implementation of sustainability initiatives. Feedback should be shared with SOEEF to ensure refinement and best practice going forwards.



“As an inclusive organization conducting sports and related social programming in over 190 nations worldwide, the theme of sustainability is a critical one for the movement of Special Olympics. We are most grateful for the support of the European Union in affording organizations like Special Olympics the opportunity to implement the Erasmus+ project, empowering all levels of the organization the chance to develop the tools necessary to ensure our development through sport platform is both sustainable and aligned with global best practices. We are fully committed to making the world a more inclusive place for individuals with intellectual disabilities, indeed for us all - for in the end, it is sustained inclusion that will serve as the strongest legacy of this project. That is something we all can celebrate - on and off the field of play.”

David Evangelista
- President and Managing Director,
Special Olympics Europe Eurasia

Project Overview

The Environmental Sustainability Framework project breaks new ground as it focuses on how to make Special Olympics events and operations more environmentally sustainable.



Funded through the EU Erasmus+ programme, the project lasted for 24 months in total, finishing on the 30th of November 2024. Special Olympics, up until this project, had no specific guidelines for Special Olympics National Programmes to guide them on how to make their events and operations sustainable. It is within this context that this project should be viewed. As the various best practices from this project are rolled out, it is inevitable that the Framework will be adapted and changed based on implementation at Special Olympics competitions. The project programme was broadly categorized into three phases, outlined below.

PHASE ONE:

Review & Recommendations

- Research if current best practices and understanding the planning around sustainability for the SOWSG 2023
- Think Beyond joined the project in October 2023 – kicking off a workshop with SOEEF and the two National programmes, Special Olympics Belgium and Special Olympics Italy.
- Concurrently, Think Beyond and SOEEF engaged with the LOC from Berlin to build upon the sustainability framework developed as part of SOWSG 2023 and the recommendations from their framework.
- Think Beyond built upon the lessons learned and identified areas for refinement and gaps within the framework – following interviews with the local organizing committee from Berlin and additional research (see section 3).
- After the initial research phase, a draft environmental sustainability framework was developed.

PHASE TWO:

Pilot Testing with Markets

- Working collaboratively as the consortium, Think Beyond worked with SOEEF and the 2 National Programmes (Italy and Belgium) to test the framework for proof of concept through interviews and a collaborative workshop.
- Following the workshop, the framework was updated for further implementation and pilot testing from Special Olympics Belgium and Special Olympics Italy.
- Then, over a period of 3 months, Think Beyond with SOEEF provided 1-2-1 support with the 2 National Programmes – capturing relevant feedback and providing guidance.
- This culminated in a collaborative workshop with the consortium to present the final framework and reflect on lessons learned from the project.

PHASE THREE:

Finalization & Dissemination

Following the workshop, the framework was reviewed and finalized with best practices and recommendations for the Special Olympics – including the identification of areas for additional guidance.

The project culminated in the development of this report and a supporting webinar on the project's successes, challenges and lessons learned.



Developing the Environmental Sustainability Framework

At the outset of the project, it was important to understand the need for the environmental sustainability framework and its intended outcomes. Think Beyond engaged with SOEEF to better understand the role of the framework, its aim, and its intended audience. This led to a clear action path for the rest of the project. One of the key components of the initial part of the project was understanding the outcome of the sustainability initiatives carried out by the LOC at the SOWSG 2023.

Key findings were as follows:



Sustainability to be included within roles and responsibilities

Prioritized in day-to-day operations with a clear plan in place.



Setting standards

Requesting evidence of sustainability certifications from venues, suppliers and products.



Staff to be appropriately educated on sustainability

With a clear training and capability plan in place.



Negative environmental impacts to be reduced, leaving no trace

For instance reducing carbon emissions from travel, building of infrastructure; reducing resource consumption; and avoiding impacts to the local environment.



Clear communication with partners

Demanding sustainability practices from venues, sponsors, and suppliers to accelerate momentum for environmental action.



Awareness-raising with Special Olympics athletes and spectators

Communicating sustainable travel and accommodation opportunities, digital and on-event communications.



Delivering healthy events

Considering environmentally and socially responsible healthy, good quality food and beverages.



Building upon this, Think Beyond and SOEEF further sought to understand the environmental landscape of sporting events in the context of the region. A literature review was conducted with key criteria and guidance incorporated into the draft environmental sustainability framework. This included, but was not limited to:

- Active Environmental Sustainability in Colleges
- Bucs: Our Strategy
- Council for Responsible Sport
- Environment Agency: Plastic Pollution Guidance
- IUCN: Mitigating Biodiversity Impacts of Sports Events (2020)
- Sports Contribution to a European Green Deal
- Sport England: Environmental Sustainability Checklist
- UN Sports for Climate Action Framework
- UN Sustainable Development Goals

Once topics and key themes were identified (see section 3), Think Beyond and SOEEF then sought to create a practical and usable framework for Special Olympics National Programmes. A robust framework should be tailored, flexible and easy to use. Recognizing this, the framework was refined not only to provide key recommendations per environmental sustainability topic, but also to consider the practicality of each. Each recommendation was then equipped with the guidance on the following:



Ease of Implementation

(time or complexity) How simply can the event deliver the requirement? This, however, can depend on capacity and resources within the Special Olympics National Programme.

- Easy**
No to low effort required
- Medium**
Moderate effort required
- Hard**
Major effort required



Financial Materiality

How much additional spending will it require (beyond the baseline event budget)?

- Low Cost**
Relatively inexpensive
- Affordable**
Reasonably priced, some costs incurred
- Expensive**
Requires moderate to significant investment



Sustainability Level

To what extent should we be implementing this?

- Recommended**
Core sustainability actions typically implemented at events
- Best-Practice**
Sustainability requirements typically regarded as the best to use in the events industry
- Leading**
Ambitious and innovative sustainability measures at events, very few are delivering this on the ground



Event Type

Which scale(s) of event does this requirement apply to?

- All Events**
All events including Special Olympics local, regional and major events
- National and Major Events**
National Games and World Games excluding local and regional events

Sustainable Event Framework

The final Environmental Sustainability Sport Framework covers 11 thematic pillars:

Sustainability Policy & Governance

Venue Management

Sustainable Procurement

Waste Management

Sustainable Food

Climate Action

Environmental Protection & Biodiversity

Clean Energy

Awareness & Communications

Sustainable Mobility

Innovation & Partnerships

The framework has been simplified below to showcase key areas of focus within each pillar.





Sustainability Policy & Governance

- Appoint a sustainability manager / lead for the event
- Gain Board and Senior Management buy-in
- Engage with local communities and key stakeholders throughout the event lifecycle
- Develop, implement and monitor progress against an environmental sustainability plan or policy

Venue Management

- Consider environmental sustainability at venue selection
- Conduct virtual site visits where possible
- Work with venues to ensure a commitment to environmental sustainability
- Work with venues to embed climate resilience measures

Waste Management

- Produce and implement a waste management plan
- Set clear recycling targets
- Divert waste from landfill where possible
- Promote re-use and renting for equipment and materials
- Avoid single-use plastics and materials
- Produce and implement a water management plan
- Promote drinking fountains and the use of tap water

Sustainable Food

- Produce and implement a sustainable food plan
- Develop sustainable food communications
- Limit food waste and donate leftover food
- Reduce catering packaging waste



Climate Action

- Measure the event carbon footprint (scope 1, 2 and 3)
- Produce and implement a carbon management and reduction plan
- Offset remaining carbon emissions

Clean Energy

- Produce and implement an energy management plan, including the use of smart technologies and alternative fuels
- Work with the venue to install renewable energy sources such as solar panels or green electricity

Sustainable Mobility

- Produce and implement a sustainable travel plan, including spectators
- Produce and implement a sustainable accommodation plan
- Communicate sustainable travel and accommodation through digital media and on-site signage
- Use sustainable modes of transport for freight and logistics

Environmental Protection & Biodiversity

- Develop environmental protection and biodiversity communications
- Co-create an event sustainability legacy project with the local community

Education & Awareness

- Produce and implement a sustainability communications plan
- Communicate sustainability knowledge post-event to relevant organizations
- Include an optional donation to a sustainable initiative for merchandise and tickets

Partnerships and Innovation

- Demonstrate sustainability leadership through innovative solutions
- Engage on sustainability with current and prospective commercial sponsors



Challenges & Key Learnings

Challenges

Through pilot testing and engagement with the consortium, several challenges and barriers to delivery were identified. SOEEF, Special Olympics Italy and Special Olympics Belgium identified a number of similar challenges as well as differences based on geographical context. The challenges presented are not insurmountable and present key learnings and areas for exploration to be taken forwards. A sample of key challenges are highlighted below:

Capability and skills building

Sustainability topics can often be complex and require technical expertise. The National Programmes identified the need for robust guidance and templates to ensure effective implementation of recommended criteria. Having a dedicated staff person to oversee sustainability is the ideal situation. If this is not possible, a specific person should oversee sustainability initiatives for each event. Areas which require upskilling / expertise include, but are not limited to, carbon accounting and energy management

Affordability

Constrained budgets may limit the ease of implementation of sustainability initiatives. High-cost initiatives included selecting venues with sustainability criteria (which can result in a significant rental uplift) and the co-creation of sustainability measures with sponsors (which are sometimes outside of the remit of the partnership)

Senior buy-in

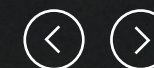
It was noted that leadership commitment to sustainability is essential for the effective implementation of environmental actions at events. Without this, it becomes difficult to embed sustainability into the heart of event delivery

Availability of local infrastructure

Certain criteria may be difficult to achieve due to limitations on local infrastructure. This may include, for instance, availability of clean energy supply in the host city / country, waste management facilities in the local area to facilitate diversion from landfill and recycling, and availability of local public transport / electric charging infrastructure

Lack of low carbon goods and services

Across the supply chain, Special Olympics National Programmes may be constrained by the availability and cost of environmentally sustainable goods and services based on the range of services provided by local suppliers.



Key Learnings:

The challenges, whilst requiring time and effort to unlock solutions, presented a series of key recommendations for sustainable event delivery. This includes, but is not limited to the need for:

Ongoing training, learning and capability building for Special Olympics event organizers – embedding sustainability across all roles and responsibilities

Effective resources and toolkits should be provided to support sustainable event delivery e.g. planning templates and measurement frameworks

Budget planning with sustainability in mind to ensure financial considerations are given to environmental action across all project stages

Ongoing sustainability communication across event delivery to internal staff and external stakeholders (e.g. athletes and spectators) – including from senior leaders to ensure buy-in

Engagement with local authorities, sponsors, and suppliers to unlock solutions for sustainable event delivery and effectively communicating barriers for future implementation.



Key Achievements

Whilst challenges persist in event delivery, we are proud to celebrate the successes achieved across our events.

Special Olympics Belgium

Partnering with sustainable cities to drive environmental action

Sustainable approach to merchandise, kits and equipment

Special Olympics Belgium has been promoting re-use and reduction across its goods and products. The team has requested that key volunteers keep their uniforms for three years rather than producing new kits which will only be worn for a few days each year. They are also improving their digital visibility offer for sponsors, which enables them to reduce the amount of new branding material being produced year after year.



Working with Kortrijk

(Host town for 2025 Special Olympics Belgium National Games)

“If we can convince the town to be sustainable then we can move forward. Fortunately, this is the direction that most towns are moving in. They want to prove that they are sustainable, and, in that case, it can really facilitate the partnership if we can say from the first moment that we also have sustainability objectives.”

Frank De Vos,
Project Coordinator with
Special Olympics Belgium



Special Olympics Italy

Working with corporate partners and sponsors to foster sustainability and reduce negative environmental impacts

Toyota Partnership

Since 2022, we have partnered with Toyota to use hybrid vehicles to transfer staff at our games. This aimed to reduce carbon emissions and air pollutants.



Coca Cola Partnership

Since 2010, we have partnered with Coca Cola to reduce single-use plastics associated with our games. Coca Cola provided paper cups for our event to distribute beverages for our athletes and spectators. In order to promote separate waste collection during the games, Coca Cola also provided recycling bins at our venues to help reduce the amount of waste going to landfill.



“It’s important to set common standards for everyone and find best practices that can be adopted by everyone at every event. It’s crucial to get stakeholders and sponsors involved and finally to create a legacy.”

Giorgio Scarnecchia,
Project Manager with Special Olympics Italy

Promoting healthy, sustainable food for all

Sustainable Food

Across Special Olympic Italy’s Play the Games event, the team focused on the use of sustainably sourced local food. Supplier selection prioritized sourcing from within the city’s hinterland to the regional limits to reduce the travel distance of food and to support local economies. This approach ensures that the food is fresh, seasonal, and minimizes its environmental footprint. As for the snacks, they were both environmentally sustainable and healthy, reflecting traditional eating habits. For instance, bread with olive oil and salt was provided - a simple yet nutritious snack that eliminates the need for plastic packaging and avoids the high levels of sugar found in many processed foods.

“We are Italian, and we care a lot about food! We always choose local suppliers for food.”

Sara Capone,
Project Manager with Special Olympics Italy

Recommendations / Next Steps

The collective efforts of all participants within the project consortium demonstrate a commitment to working towards environmental best practices across our events. However, to ensure continued best practice, it is important that we review the framework in line with the latest legislation, international guidance, and accounting for feedback from the use by the wider Special Olympics network. In the future, the use of expert consultation will help confirm that environmental recommendations are not only robust but remain pioneering in the context of our organization.



The meaningful participation of Special Olympics athletes or people with intellectual disabilities is essential in the development and delivery of the environmental sustainability framework within Special Olympics and athletes should be engaged on the framework across all events. Efforts should be made to solicit and facilitate their input according to their specific needs. Environmental sustainability guidance must also be accessible and co-created with athletes to ensure continual relevance and effectiveness.

In summary, the journey of developing this environmental sustainability framework has highlighted the commitment of all participating national programmes to prioritize environmental sustainability across our events. Despite varying capacities, capabilities, and local contexts, the National Programmes engagement and feedback has been shaped by the recognition of the continued importance of making their operations more sustainable. This engagement has not only resulted in the tangible achievement of finalizing our pioneering framework but has also fostered a collaborative mindset for environmental action and enhanced awareness and technical capabilities among project participants. The collaborative nature of this project and facilitation of critical discussions serves as a catalyst for a step change for sustainable practices not only within national programmes but within the Special Olympics movement.

Looking ahead, recommendations from this project emphasize the importance of seeking expert consultation as necessary, prioritizing athletes' participation, establishing robust reporting and feedback mechanisms, and training and upskilling key staff involved in the delivery of events. Ongoing communication and engagement are essential for environmental action, and we will continue to collaborate and foster best-practice across our network. By implementing these recommendations, the Special Olympics movement can continue to uphold its commitment to protecting our environment whilst fostering a safe and inclusive environment for all participants. Processes and guidance will also need to be updated to reflect learnings, feedback and emerging legislation/best practice.



Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the Special Olympics National Programmes for all their hard work during this project. Also, a big thank you to the team at Think Beyond for all their guidance and support throughout the project. With thanks to the European Union's Erasmus+ program for the generous funding which made this project possible.

The SSF Framework Document can be accessed and downloaded on this page:

<https://www.specialolympics.org/region/europe-eurasia/european-union-funded-projects/special-olympics-environmental-sustainability-impact>

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