

WHAT ROLE CAN FOOTBALL PLAY IN ADVANCING CLIMATE JUSTICE?

Climate action on all fronts

“Our world needs climate action on all fronts everything, everywhere, all at once.” Those were the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres as he launched the 2023 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Synthesis Report in March of last year. In recent years, one such front has become the world of sport. A focus on the fans suggests its potential for transformational change should not be overlooked. Sport is an integral part of our culture and is often described as a “[unifying force](#)” in recognition of its unique ability to bring millions of people together, cross boundaries, and reach deep into communities and across geographies both at a grassroots and professional level.

In recent years, this connection and potential for action have been evidenced by initiatives such as the [UNFCCC Sports for Climate Action Framework](#) and [Football for the \(Sustainable Development\) Goals](#). In light of these and other well-embedded global frameworks, perhaps it is time for the conversation to move from ‘Is there a role for sport in advancing climate action?’ to examine what exactly that role should be, or rather, could be. This is the question guiding the Football for Climate Justice Erasmus + project, of which TASC is the research partner. The project, which began in 2022 and will run until 2025, is led by the European Football for Development Network and brings together football clubs from across Europe, including Bohemian F.C. in Ireland, Club Brugge in Belgium, Ferencvárosi T.C. in Hungary, F.C. Twente in the Netherlands, FC St. Pauli in Germany, Real Betis Balompié in Spain, SV Werder Bremen in Germany, and Spanish football league Fundación LALIGA, to explore the role that football clubs can play in securing a safer, fairer and greener future.

Moving away from traditional sustainability approaches

This Football for Climate Justice framework is explored in the [first of two research reports](#) published by the Football for Climate Justice project team late last year. Drawing on an extensive mapping exercise of the activities being undertaken within the coalition, as well as an analysis of the current best practice sustainability guidelines emerging across Europe, the report proposes a move away from more traditional sustainability-focused activities. It outlines that clubs have a mandate from fans to take a leadership role in the fight for climate justice through the development of fairer and more equal local economies. Further, it describes this new approach as one that foregrounds the needs of both people and the planet while utilising football’s potential as an anchor institution for local community wealth building. In practice, this could involve leveraging football’s unique position in the community to take an active role in supporting the development of community-owned renewable energy, drive forward the development of fair local employment in the low-carbon economy, or advocate for policies which would ensure that all communities, but especially the most marginalised, are supported to participate in and benefit from climate mitigation and adaptation policies.

Listening to and learning from the fans

[The second research report](#) published by the project team in November last year explores a methodology for what the first step of this work might look like in practice and, in doing so, presents the results of a community and fan engagement survey of more than 1,400 people across Europe. The survey, conducted during the spring of 2023, set out to listen to and learn from fans and their fellow community members. Across the themes of energy, mobility, green space, access to decision-making, and food, several areas emerged where communities may need support transitioning to a zero-carbon future. For instance, under the theme of the energy transition, survey results highlighted the relationship between climate action and the cost of living. 70% felt that their home was in need of a retrofit, but continued fossil fuel reliance at home was evident, with a majority of participants (68%) using gas to heat their homes. Further, survey questions related to the rising cost of living revealed that more than one in four participants were struggling to pay their energy bills some or most of the time. Fans at Bohemian F.C. (Ireland), FC Twente (Netherlands), and Real Betis (Spain) were among the most affected by rising living costs, with more than 40% at each club citing difficulties paying their energy bills. These findings tally with those of a [recent Eurobarometer study](#) examining Just Transition perceptions across the European Union, which found that compared to those who do not have difficulties making ends meet, people experiencing financial difficulties were less likely to have undertaken a home retrofit even though they are more likely to need one. A climate justice approach would see football clubs use these findings to address inequalities within their communities, collaborate with local institutions and groups to tackle shared challenges, create space to ensure that people’s voices are heard, and leverage their club’s position within the local economy for the benefit of the community.

Enabling conditions and next steps

In addition to uncovering climate-related challenges that fans face, the survey revealed several important enabling conditions that could serve as a foundation for this work. For example, a majority of participants felt that football clubs are important institutions, alongside more traditional actors such as local and national governments in developing solutions to climate change. In addition, 80% of respondents expressed feeling connected to their local community and their local football club, highlighting strong positive relationships and social approval from which to begin a foray into inclusive and equitable community-led climate action.

A full analysis of the survey comparing each participating club and theme can be found on the [Football for Climate Justice website](#). Guided by this research and shifting from theory to practice, over the coming 18 months, each participating Football for Climate Justice partner will experiment with bringing the Football for Climate Justice Framework to life at their club by undertaking projects that combine climate action with inclusive community development. It is our hope that this novel approach to fair and equitable climate action within the world of football will demonstrate how climate action can improve the standards of living of the communities and fans that sustain the sport.

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