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# FOOTBALL AND SUSTAINABILITY: LOVE OR DISCORD? A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

**Abstract:** Sustainability in football is gaining increasing attention due to the global influence of the sport and its capacity to promote positive environmental and social change. Despite this potential, the academic literature on the adoption of sustainability practices within football remains limited. This study addresses the gap by analysing a single case: the football club Forest Green Rovers (FGR). The objective is to investigate the determinants and effects linked to the implementation of sustainable practices. The analysis reveals that the adoption of sustainable behaviours is influenced by the values of top management and by competitive motivations, such as the ambition to improve sporting performance and attract skilled players. The study also identifies several positive effects, including enhanced reputation, improved stakeholder engagement, financial benefits, and contributions to environmental and social well-being.

**Key words:** SUSTAINABILITY, CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, FOOTBALL SECTOR, CASE STUDY

## Introduction

Since the 1970s, growing awareness of ecological limits has driven the international community to promote sustainable development as a response to the long-term risks of conventional growth models (Raimo et al., 2021). Defined in the Brundtland Report (1987) as development that meets present needs without compromising those of future generations, sustainability has evolved into a multidimensional concept involving environmental, social, and economic priorities. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015 by the United Nations, operationalized these principles through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, calling for the involvement of all sectors, including business and civil society.

In this context, sport has been increasingly recognized as a platform for promoting sustainability. The 2017 Kazan Action Plan by UNESCO explicitly linked sport to the SDGs (UNESCO, 2017), highlighting its potential to contribute to health, education, gender equality, social inclusion, and environmental awareness. Major international organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), and Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) have thus begun to adopt strategies focused on environmental and social sustainability. Football, as a global industry, presents a paradox. On one side, it generates substantial revenues and operates according to commercial logics that often overlook sustainability (Raimo et al., 2021). On the other, it produces considerable environmental impacts through stadium operations, travel, and events (Raimo et al., 2021). Although some initiatives – such as UEFA's plan to plant 600,000 trees for EURO 2020 – reflect growing awareness (UEFA, 2019), the sector remains largely reactive and fragmented in addressing sustainability challenges (Daddi et al., 2021).

Despite the emergence of studies examining sustainability in sport (e.g., Walters & Chadwick, 2009; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2014), the literature on football clubs is still limited. In particular, there is a lack of research on the determinants and effects of sustainability within football organizations. In response to this gap, the present study seeks to enhance the current understanding of how sustainability is implemented in the football sector. To this end, the study addresses the following research questions:

**RQ1:** *What are the determinants of sustainability in football?*

**RQ2:** *What are the effects of sustainability in football?*

A single case study approach (Yin, 2008) is adopted, focusing on Forest Green Rovers (FGR), a club internationally recognized for its environmental and social commitment. As Eisenhardt (1989) notes, studying an exemplary case offers valuable theoretical insights, particularly in under-researched fields.

## Background

Academic literature has primarily addressed sustainability in football through the lens of support for charitable foundations (e.g., Walters, 2009; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2017), often overlooking environmental commitments (e.g., Zeimers et al., 2018). In this regard, Kolyperas et al. (2016) noted that many clubs have established foundations to create sustainable and shared value, although this has also introduced challenges in managing relationships with these entities (Zeimers et al., 2018).

A separate strand of research has explored how football clubs adopt and implement sustainability strategies. Kolyperas et al. (2015) examined the cultural and strategic transformations required for such integration, while Breitbarth and Rieth (2012) identified key factors enabling successful implementation and proposed a model for embedding CSR policies. Similarly, Walters and Anagnostopoulos (2012) developed a conceptual framework for the creation of social partnerships.

Further contributions have adopted individual and organizational perspectives. Anagnostopoulos et al. (2014), through an individual-level analysis, examined the decision-making processes behind CSR activities within football foundations. Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury (2013) highlighted the growing complexity of CSR, stressing the need to consider both inter-organizational and individual dimensions. Zeimers et al. (2018) reinforced this view by proposing a multilevel framework that captures the interplay between individual, group, organizational, and inter-organizational factors.

Sustainability in football has also drawn the attention of policymakers. In Italy, the Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio (FIGC) has been proactive, promoting the Charter on Environmental Sustainability in Football, developed from the FIGC's experience in the LifeTackle project. The Charter provides operational guidelines for applying sustainability principles in governance, infrastructure, event management, partnerships, and stakeholder engagement (FIGC, 2022). Participation is voluntary and open to all Italian clubs, both professional and amateur, which can express their interest by submitting a form through their respective leagues.

The growing institutional and scholarly interest in sustainability within football underscores the importance of investigating the determinants and effects of clubs' sustainable engagement.

## Methodology

This study adopts a single case study methodology, appropriate given the complexity and limited prior investigation of the phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989). The selected case is unique and exemplary, justifying the use of this approach despite

potential limitations in generalizability (Eisenhardt, 1989; Vitolla et al., 2020). Moreover, the absence of comparable cases in this context makes it a necessary methodological choice (Vitolla et al., 2020).

### *Selecting case-study*

The case study presented in this analysis focuses on the FGR football club, based in Nailsworth, a town of 7,746 inhabitants in the Stroud district of England. Since 2023, FGR has competed in Football League Two (the fourth tier of English football) and plays home matches at The New Lawn stadium. The facility, owned by the club and renovated between 2005 and 2006, now accommodates up to 5,032 spectators. Founded in 1889 by Reverend E. J. H. Peach, pastor of the local parish, the club takes its name from the nearby wooded area known as “Forest Green”, located on a hill in Nailsworth. In 2010, Dale Vince became president and chief executive officer of the club. Alongside the long-term ambition of reaching the Championship, FGR has embraced a strong sustainability mission, earning international recognition and awards for its environmental and ethical commitments.

### *Data collection*

In line with observations by Yin (2006) and McLeod (2008), this study adopts a mixed-method approach, based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through interviews and direct observation. Specifically, interviews available online and addressed to the president and staff of FGR were used, together with video materials published by the team on YouTube and other platforms. Secondary data derive from official documents and information made available on the website of FGR or through the official social media of the team. The use of multiple sources enhances the validity and reliability of the case study through methodological triangulation. Cross-verifying data from different sources strengthens the credibility and depth of the findings.

### *Validity and reliability of data*

The data collected in this study are qualitative in nature. Initially aggregated, they were subsequently subjected to triangulation, a technique that enhances the credibility, accuracy and validity of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Analysing multiple sources allows the same phenomenon to be explored from different angles, increasing the robustness of the results. In qualitative research, triangulation serves a role similar to reliability testing in quantitative approaches (Creswell, 2007).

Patton (1987) identifies four types of triangulation, which include the use of multiple data sources, different methods, diverse perspectives on the same data set, and comparisons among different evaluators. In this study, triangulation was car-

ried out with respect to data sources and methods. First, data were cross-checked using interviews, direct observation, and official documents and information published on the website and social media of the team. This comparison enabled a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and improved the reliability of the findings. Second, methodological triangulation – based on different data collection techniques – helped to reduce the limitations associated with each individual method.

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis enables the researcher to capture and interpret the underlying meaning of the information collected (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Given the qualitative nature of the data, the approach adopted draws on Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 1983), which allows for the identification of key points that are then transformed into codes (Katamba et al., 2016). These codes are subsequently organised into concepts, making the data interpretable. From these concepts, broader categories are developed, forming the basis for the formulation and discussion of results. This analytical framework is consistent with previous studies in the field (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data analysis was structured in three phases: cross-analysis of raw data, identification of emerging themes, and interpretation. The first phase focused on understanding and evaluating the phenomenon through initial examination of the raw data, allowing for the elimination of elements not relevant to the research questions. The second phase involved coding through identification, naming, and classification of the data, which were organised according to their source. The third phase entailed interpreting the data in relation to the objectives of the study, with the aim of identifying the determinants and effects of sustainability practices in the football sector.

## **Results**

### *Sustainability level of the club*

The results highlight the sustainability level of FGR, recognised as one of the most advanced football clubs in this field and the first carbon-neutral sports team officially acknowledged by FIFA. The club's commitment focuses on three areas: infrastructure, lifestyle, and resource management. In terms of infrastructure, FGR built the eco-stadium The New Lawn in 2006, with 10% of its electricity from rooftop solar panels. Energy is supplied by Ecocity, a company linked to the club president. The pitch uses natural fertilisers and wildflower seeds to support pollinators, and a beehive is maintained on site. Irrigation is based on rainwater collection and wastewater reuse. A solar-powered robot cuts the grass, and charging stations are available for electric vehicles. Training facilities run entirely on renewable energy and are managed without chemicals. Regarding lifestyle, the club promotes a vegan diet

to reduce environmental impact, improve health, and raise awareness among fans, as stated on its official website. As for resource management, the club has reduced energy, water, and material consumption. The First Team travels by electric bus, the Academy by electric minibus, and fan travel is offset through carbon compensation. For home matches, cycling and electric mobility are encouraged. FGR has also cut textile waste by producing kits from coffee grounds and bamboo, eliminated single-use packaging, adopted refillable cleaning products, and introduced a reusable chip container system to minimise waste.

## Determinants

To answer RQ1, this study explored the factors influencing FGR's adoption of sustainable practices. The results highlight several key drivers behind the integration of sustainability into the club's business model.

The first is the sustainability-oriented and innovative mindset of President Dale Vince. Before joining FGR, he founded the renewable energy company Ecotricity in nearby Stroud, demonstrating a long-standing commitment to environmental issues, later extended to the football context. His values also influenced the club's vegan commitment. As he stated:

*"I chose to live a vegan lifestyle to respect animals and protect the environment."*

Although Vince promotes a vegan diet within the club, he does not impose it on players outside training, encouraging it as a recommended choice rather than a strict obligation. His innovative drive is also reflected in the goal of making FGR the world's first football club with minimal environmental impact, reinforcing the club's image as progressive.

Another factor is the pursuit of international visibility. Despite being based in a small village, FGR aims to reach a broader fan base and gain global recognition. Additionally, sustainability is seen as a way to attract talented players and enhance on-field performance. According to Vince:

*"It's hard to say to what degree the off-field affects the on-field [...], but the positivity around the club and our message in the media adds up to us looking like a progressive club. Players want to come to progressive, ambitious clubs."*

The commitment to sustainability is also linked to the club's sporting ambitions. Vince clearly states:

*"Our target on the field is to reach the Championship, currently."*

He further suggests that a vegan diet contributes to performance, noting:

*"I think the vegan diet is a performance boost. I'm convinced of it. When we won the National League playoff final, we played 50 games and we had zero soft tissue injuries throughout the entire season. [...] Our opponents that day had roughly eight, which would have been a factor for them, certainly."*

## Effects

To answer RQ2, the effects of FGR's sustainable practices were analysed across sporting, environmental, social, and economic dimensions.

A first benefit concerns improved athletic performance. The adoption of a vegan diet appears to have contributed to players' well-being. As stated by team manager Mark Cooper:

*"We've seen an improvement in our injury record and lowering total injuries sustained. [...] You have to look at the vegan diet and say it could be that. There's no cast iron information either way, but we look at it in terms of players' recovery from games and the soft tissue injury and we've had very few ultimately."*

From an environmental perspective, several positive outcomes have emerged. Emissions have been reduced through sustainable transport initiatives for players and fans. The eco-stadium has lowered energy consumption, while systems for rain-water harvesting and toilet water purification have reduced freshwater use. Additional benefits include reduced plastic and textile consumption through reusable containers and alternative play kits, as well as lower overall waste production.

From a social perspective, sustainability initiatives have increased the club's visibility and community engagement. FGR has attracted international supporters, including from countries such as Russia—an unusual occurrence for a lower-league team. These strategies have also drawn attention from universities and researchers interested in sustainable football practices, while strengthening ties with football institutions and securing awards from FIFA. The club has also partnered with non-profit organisations, enhancing its public image.

From a financial perspective, sustainability has influenced both costs and revenues. Although initial investments were required for eco-friendly infrastructure, savings were achieved in energy, water and material consumption. On the revenue side, the launch of sustainable kits generated significant returns, with online orders from sixteen countries within the first 24 hours. International fan interest also led to the creation of a paid streaming service, expanding the club's global reach and providing new income streams. Lastly, the sustainability commitment has attracted new sponsors and partners aligned with environmental and social values, further increasing financial resources.

## Conclusions

This study explored sustainability performance in football, focusing on the determinants and effects of clubs' sustainable engagement. The case of FGR highlighted that such strategies are driven primarily by the culture and values of top management, along with competitive aims such as attracting talent and enhancing performance. Findings show that sustainability is often adopted through top-down initiatives led by leadership commitment. The effects include environmental, social, competitive and economic benefits, confirming that sustainability can support not only ecological goals but also sporting success.

This work contributes to a still limited academic debate on sustainability in football. It enhances understanding of sustainability performance in this sector, clarifies the main drivers behind clubs that adopt sustainable practices, and identifies a range of positive outcomes. The qualitative and exploratory approach allowed for an in-depth examination of complex dynamics not fully addressed in previous research.

From a practical perspective, football clubs should increase their engagement with sustainability, recognising their role in environmental protection and in shaping social behaviours due to their broad international following. This includes reducing the consumption of resources and improving relationships with fans and stakeholders. The findings on the determinants highlight the importance of promoting environmental and social awareness among all personnel. The achievement of sustainability goals requires widespread awareness and a willingness to adopt responsible behaviours. The benefits identified in the analysis should serve as a concrete motivation for clubs to adopt sustainability strategies. These actions can activate a virtuous cycle of environmental, social, sporting and financial advantages. In this regard, sustainability may represent a strategic tool to enhance performance and ensure long-term competitiveness. There are also implications for football institutions. At the national level, the results support recent interventions by FIGC and call for further initiatives from international bodies to promote sustainable development in football.

However, some limitations must be considered. The analysis is based on a single case, which may restrict the possibility of generalising the results. Nonetheless, the use of a strategic case allows for the extension of some insights to similar contexts. A further limitation concerns the quantity and nature of the sources, which were limited in number and collected exclusively online. Despite these constraints, the research provides a solid foundation for future investigations. Further studies could analyse multiple cases and diversify sources to offer a broader and deeper understanding of sustainability in football.





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# ФУДБАЛ И ОДРЖИВОСТ: ЉУБАВ ИЛИ НЕСЛАГАЊЕ? АНАЛИЗА СТУДИЈЕ СЛУЧАЈА

**Сажетак:** Одрживост у фудбалу добија све већу пажњу захваљујући глобалном утицају овог спорта и његовој способности да подстакне позитивне еколошке и друштвене промене. Упркос овом потенцијалу, академска литература о примени пракси одрживости у фудбалу и даље је ограничена. Ова студија попуњава ту празнину анализом једног случаја – фудбалског клуба *Forest Green Rovers (FGR)*. Циљ је испитати факторе и ефекте повезане са применом одрживих пракси. Анализа показује да је усвајање одрживог понашања под утицајем вредности највишег менаџмента и конкурентских мотива, као што су амбиције за побољшање спортских резултата и привлачење талентованих играча. Студија такође идентификује бројне позитивне ефекте, укључујући унапређену репутацију, бољу сарадњу са заинтересованим странама, финансијске користи и допринос еколошком и друштвеном благостању.

**Кључне речи:** ОДРЖИВОСТ, ДРУШТВЕНА ОДГОВОРНОСТ КОМПАНИЈА, ФУДБАЛСКИ СЕКТОР, СТУДИЈА СЛУЧАЈА