



INTERNATIONAL
OLYMPIC
COMMITTEE

Thomas Bach
President

Seoul Peace Prize
Acceptance speech
Seoul, 26 October 2020

It is a great privilege to receive the prestigious Seoul Peace Prize, today.

The fact that I can only address you virtually and not in person is itself a reflection of the unprecedented situation the entire world is facing because of the global coronavirus crisis.

As you can imagine, it is a huge personal disappointment that I could not be there with you today to receive it in Seoul, which is a great Olympic City that holds such a strong place in my heart.

It is with much gratefulness and appreciation that I humbly accept this distinction, and I would like to thank the Seoul Peace Prize Cultural Foundation for this honour. This prize belongs to the entire IOC and the whole of the Olympic Movement, because without the support of so many around the globe, the achievements for peace through sport could never have been accomplished.

It is very humbling to join the illustrious ranks of previous recipients, who include extraordinary personalities like my predecessor Juan Antonio Samaranch, Professor Muhammad Yunus, with whom we are working closely together to empower athletes around the world, or former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who is now the Chair of the IOC Ethics Commission.

Although I could not attend the ceremony in person, I am comforted by the fact that His Excellency Mr Ban Ki-moon is present to collect the award trophy on my behalf today.

The close Olympic connection of the prize, in commemoration of the unforgettable Olympic Games Seoul 1988, gives this ceremony today even more significance. My personal connection to Seoul also began during the Olympic Games Seoul 1988. At the time, I was the first-ever athletes' representative on the Games' steering committee. This was the beginning of a precious bond that I share with Seoul and the Korean people. After becoming an honorary citizen of Seoul in 2018, today's distinction adds another chapter to this special relationship for which I will always be grateful.



The country I come from, Germany, shares a history with Korea of being a divided country. Because of this shared history, we have another common bond, and that is the wish for peace.

This wish for peace in the world is also a driving force behind the mission of the International Olympic Committee and the Olympic Games.

The peace mission of the IOC

Already over 3,000 years ago, the foundation for the ancient Olympic Games to take place in peace was a sacred truce – the *ekecheiria*, or the Olympic Truce. The *ekecheiria* ensured a halt to hostilities, allowing athletes and spectators to travel safely to Olympia and home again. In this way, there was already in Ancient times an inseparable link between the Olympic Games and peace.

When the founder of the International Olympic Committee, Pierre de Coubertin, revived the Olympic Games, he saw it as a way to promote peace among nations and people. Always the visionary, he said: “Should the institution of the Olympic Games prosper, it can become a potent factor in securing universal peace.”

The purpose of the IOC was always to promote peace through sport. When Coubertin founded the IOC in 1894 at the University of Sorbonne in Paris, he did so in the presence and with the full support of leading figures of the international peace movement of the time. At this founding moment, six of the first thirteen future winners of the Nobel Peace Prize were present to support Coubertin’s vision. This demonstrates that, for the IOC, sport and peace were intricately intertwined from its first moment of existence.

In our increasingly confrontational and fragile world, we see how relevant our mission of building a more peaceful world through sport is in our times.

Ideals are by definition impossible to fully achieve. Like other peace movements, the Olympic Movement has sometimes fallen short of achieving our ideals. In our efforts to build a more peaceful world through sport, sometimes we have failed, and have been failed.



But being in sport, this only encourages me to strive even harder. As every athlete knows, if you do not make it at first, try again. And again. Because it is only by striving that we make progress; that we go beyond and finally achieve the impossible. This is what motivates and drives me day after day.

While we are determined to strive for our ideals, we have to be realistic about our limitations. We know very well that sport alone cannot create peace. We cannot take decisions on war and peace – this is the realm of politics, and not of sport.

And yet, knowing that we operate within these limitations, navigating between what sport can and cannot do, opens up a unique pathway for us. This pathway is about finding those areas where the power of sport as a force for good can unfold. In order to adapt our mission to our modern age, we need to look beyond the Olympic Games as a singular event and take a holistic view of how sport as a whole can best contribute to make the world a better place.

To contribute to peace through sport, we have to look at why human conflict happens in the first place. Conflicts occur for many different reasons: aggression, discrimination, prejudice, inequality, social disparity, competition for limited resources, just to name a few.

The Olympic Movement cannot address all these political and social challenges. But the Olympic Games can set an example for a world where everyone respects the same rules and one another. They can inspire us to solve problems in friendship and solidarity. They can build bridges, leading to better understanding among people. In this way, they can open the door to peace.

The pathway of sport to best unfold its peace-building power is by addressing roots of conflict in a holistic way. This holistic approach to the role of sport in society forms the thinking behind Olympic Agenda 2020, the reform programme that we initiated in 2014, shortly after my election as IOC President.

The overarching goal of Olympic Agenda 2020 is to strengthen the role of sport in society so that we can pursue our mission in our rapidly changing times.

We are living in an age of global crises, division and discrimination. We are seeing many societies driven by egoism and nationalism. The zeitgeist in many parts of the world is one of narrow self-interest gaining ground over solidarity, shared values and common rules. This leads to more confrontation and to the politicisation of all aspects of life.



Olympic Agenda 2020 is our answer to the challenges of our times, giving a renewed sense of purpose to the Olympic Movement. Our mission requires us to stand against this zeitgeist of division, of nationalism and of discrimination. More than ever, in our troubled times, we need to stand up for the ideals that define us. Olympic Agenda 2020 defines the pathway for sport to be a force of good in the world. This is why Olympic Agenda 2020 is focused on promoting universality, solidarity, inclusivity, sustainability and credibility in and through sport.

Universality and political neutrality

The power of the Olympic Games is their universality – uniting the entire world in peaceful competition. To ensure that this unifying power of the Olympic Games can unfold, our relationship with politics must be based on solid principles. Navigating a values-based organisation like ours through a highly political and commercialised world requires the IOC to be strictly committed to political neutrality. Only this principle of political neutrality ensures that the Olympic Games can stand above and beyond the political differences that exist in our world.

Therefore, the Olympic Games are governed by the IOC, not by governments. The IOC issues the invitation to National Olympic Committees to participate in the Olympic Games, the invitations do not come from the government of the host country. It is the NOCs which then invite their political authorities to accompany their athletes to the Games.

At the same time, the IOC needs to be in constant dialogue with politics in order to advance its mission. In this dialogue, we always need to build understanding and to gain respect for the role of the Olympic Games and for our principle of political neutrality. Only in this way can we be truly inclusive.

The Olympic Games are the only event that brings the entire world together in peaceful competition. They are a celebration of the unity of humanity in all our diversity, uniting the best athletes of all 206 National Olympic Committees and the IOC Refugee Olympic Team. The Olympic athletes personify the values of excellence, friendship, respect and solidarity. They are competitors in sport, but at the same time, they live peacefully together under one roof in the Olympic Village. At the Olympic Games, there is no discrimination, everyone respects the



same rules, regardless of social background, gender, religion or political belief. At the Olympic Games, we are all equal.

In this way, the Olympic Games show us that despite all our differences it is possible for humankind to live together in peace and harmony.

Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018

The Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018 are an illustration of these principles in action. We all remember the incredible moment at the Opening Ceremony, when the athletes from the NOCs of the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea marched as one team behind one flag, the Korean Unification Flag. This moment sent a powerful message of peace from Korea to the world.

This moment did not happen by chance. It was the result of a long process of negotiations and high-level government engagement by the IOC that began back in 2014 and lasted until four hours before the Opening Ceremony.

When we started the talks with North Korea and support for its athletes in 2014, we were facing many political obstacles. Even the South Korean government at the time showed little interest in the participation of the North Korean athletes, to put it diplomatically.

This changed after President Moon Jae-in was elected. When I met with President Moon, shortly after he took office in May 2017, we agreed that the participation of athletes from North Korea in PyeongChang would be a priority and task for the IOC, while President Moon and his government would support the IOC initiative on the political side. This cooperation was a good example of how politics and sport can work together if the political neutrality of sport is respected.

But the political tensions on the Korean Peninsula escalated significantly during the second half of 2017. There was aggressive rhetoric from all sides. The thought of North Korean participation or of both Korean teams marching peacefully at the Olympic Games together seemed illusionary: we were facing missile launches, nuclear tests and threats of war on the



Korean Peninsula. We were indeed confronted with the fundamental question of whether the Olympic Games could take place at all under such circumstances.

Throughout even these most difficult times of political tensions, the IOC always kept the door open for the participation of North Korean athletes in PyeongChang. We continued to engage both sides in dialogue, without taking a political side.

We did so out of our firm belief in the universality of the Olympic Games. We did so out of our unshakeable conviction that athletes from all NOCs in the world should be able to participate in the Olympic Games without any discrimination, regardless of their background. We did so based on our strict commitment to political neutrality.

When the commitment of North Korea for its participation was expressed in the 2018 New Year's message by the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, I immediately called for a meeting on 20 January 2018 in Lausanne, chaired by the IOC, with the two NOCs, the two Korean governments and the Organising Committee of the Games.

The meeting resulted in all parties signing the "Olympic Korean Peninsula Declaration". This declaration contained exceptional decisions of the IOC to make the participation and joint activities of the two teams possible.

If somebody thought that with this agreement everything was sorted, they were wrong. The delicate political discussions came up again two days before the Opening Ceremony. On the evening before the Opening Ceremony, North Korea indicated that they may not participate in the Olympic Games at all. This is why I had to resume the talks with them again. Just four hours before the Opening Ceremony, we finally had an agreement again to respect the conditions contained in the "Olympic Korean Peninsula Declaration".

The road was finally clear. When then the athletes from the NOCs of both North and South Korea entered the Olympic stadium as one team, under the name Korea and behind the Korean Unification flag, it sent a powerful message of peace from the Korean Peninsula to the world. When the unified women's ice hockey team played in a crowded arena with incredible support from the spectators, it showed the world the unifying power of sport. For the first time in their Olympic history, the two NOCs united to compete as one team in a sport. And all this



on Korean soil. There was an extremely positive response to these actions from almost every corner of the world.

With these powerful symbols and gestures, we have seen how the Olympic Games can open the way to dialogue, how the Olympic values can open the way to a more peaceful future.

We were happy and proud to see all our efforts become reality. But we also knew that sport alone cannot create peace. The political tensions would not disappear overnight. But, as we saw in PyeongChang, the Olympic Games can open the door to a more peaceful future.

This power of the Olympic Games to open doors is obviously also on the minds of the political actors. For example, within the past few days, the US administration expressed its hope for a resumption of peace talks with North Korea on the occasion of the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 next year.

There are many other examples of our peace efforts. Over the years, the IOC has mediated between governments, building bridges through sport and opening the door to peace and reconciliation. This has been the case in the last couple of years for our negotiations, for example, with the governments of India, Pakistan, Serbia, Kosovo, Spain, Tunisia, Israel, Palestine, Iran, Ukraine, Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and others. Our negotiations were always restricted to sport and always took place with strict political neutrality. Only in this way, could we be successful.

If the Olympic Games can bring together athletes from bitter political rivals and enemies today, this shows that our ideal of promoting a peaceful world through sport continues to have much compelling power.

In our fragile world that is drifting apart, the enduring relevance of our mission could not be clearer.



Solidarity and inclusivity

Uniting the world in peace requires more than political neutrality. The Olympic Games can only unite the entire world through sport if everyone can participate. For us, universality also means solidarity and inclusivity. This is why we not only respect but wholeheartedly embrace diversity.

Guided by Olympic Agenda 2020, we contribute to peace by actively promoting solidarity, inclusivity and diversity.

We do this through our Olympic solidarity model which benefits all athletes in the world. The IOC distributes 90 per cent of all its revenues for the benefit of the athletes and the development of sport and Paralympic sport around the globe. With this solidarity model, the equivalent of 5 billion US dollars during the past Olympiad went to support athletes and sports organisations worldwide. Because of the long-term commercial stability of the Olympic Movement, which is thanks to the great confidence and loyalty our commercial partners are demonstrating, we can expect this figure to increase significantly during the current Olympiad. This financial support benefits not just a few countries, or a few sports. It benefits all the athletes from all 206 NOCs, from the IOC Refugee Olympic Team and from all Olympic sports, whether popular or less popular, thereby ensuring true universality and diversity.

We also demonstrate solidarity through the IOC Refugee Olympic Team, which we created for the Olympic Games Rio 2016. For the first time in Olympic history, refugee athletes competed side by side with the teams from all 206 NOCs, sending a message of hope and inclusion to all refugees in the world. With half the world's population watching coverage of these Olympic Games, the refugee athletes demonstrated to a global audience that we are all part of the same humanity. Their participation was a clear signal that refugees are our fellow human beings – that they are an enrichment to society just as they are an enrichment to our Olympic community. Unfortunately, the reasons why we created this team continue to persist. This is why we will have once again an IOC Refugee Olympic Team for the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 next year. In this way, we want to continue to raise awareness about the magnitude of the ongoing global refugee crisis.



Furthermore, we launched the Olympic Refugee Foundation in 2017, which brings together all our many refugee activities, from grassroots support to the IOC Refugee Olympic Team. The goal of the Olympic Refugee Foundation is to support the protection and empowerment of vulnerable displaced people through sport and through the creation of safe sports facilities. In the relatively short time of its existence, the Olympic Refugee Foundation has already reached over 200,000 displaced young people and their host communities. This is another example of how we contribute to peace through the power of sport.

We promote inclusivity through our cooperation with the International Paralympic Committee, having taken it to a new level with a long-term partnership. This cooperation ensures the organisation of the Paralympic Games and gives financial stability to the IPC as the governing body of Paralympic sport. With our partnership, we are increasing the visibility of the Paralympic Games and the IPC, with which we share so many of the same values and objectives. Enhancing the cooperation between the Olympic and Paralympic Movements was in fact one of the key recommendations of Olympic Agenda 2020.

Guided by Olympic Agenda 2020, we are also advancing gender equality on and off the field of play. We will achieve gender-balance at the Olympic Games for the first time at the postponed Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 next year, with about 49 per cent of the athletes being female. We achieved this by establishing the necessary qualification and athletes' quota systems and by including more mixed sports events in the programme. We also modified the Olympic competition schedule to better balance the visibility of men and women's events. Furthermore, we have changed the rules to allow NOCs to nominate a female and a male athlete to jointly bear their flag during the Opening Ceremony. We are also aiming to have, for the first time ever at the Olympic Games, at least one female and one male athlete in each and every one of the 206 Olympic teams.

Off the field of play, we are also putting our commitment into action. We have elected more female IOC members, increasing female membership to 37.5 per cent, up from 21 per cent at the start of my presidency. On the IOC Executive Board, female representation has grown from 20 per cent to 33.3 per cent. We have appointed many more female IOC commission members, increasing female membership to currently 47.7 per cent – more than double from only 20 per cent.



Sustainability and good governance

In a world where conflicts arise far too often over struggles for limited resources, we want sport to contribute to positive change in the area of sustainability as well. This is why sustainability is a key pillar of Olympic Agenda 2020 and we have made sustainability an integral part of all IOC activities. In this regard, climate change is a challenge of unprecedented proportions for all humankind – and it requires an unprecedented response. This is why we want to ensure that sport contributes to the global efforts to address climate change. The IOC as an organisation is already carbon neutral, as the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 should also be. Our aim is to make both the IOC and the Olympic Games climate positive even before 2030, which is the year targeted by the international community to achieve their climate goals.

Another concrete example of how we make sustainability a central element in all our activities is our Olympic House, the new IOC headquarters. Inaugurated in 2019, Olympic House is one of the most sustainable buildings in the world.

We know that our ability to make a difference in the world rests on our credibility and integrity. For this reason, good governance is a central feature of Olympic Agenda 2020. As a values-based organisation, we have the double-duty to uphold good governance and integrity in everything we do. This is why, through the Olympic Agenda 2020 reforms, we have put in place a robust system of governance and transparency. We have established advanced control and risk management processes. Our accounts are audited at a much higher standard than legally required. We publish an annual report where we make all our flows of money transparent. We have an organisational excellence programme in place to ensure best-in-class operations. We have strong rules in place to prevent misconduct as well as to swiftly sanction such behaviour. We are monitored by a well-respected and independent Ethics Commission. We are honoured that this IOC Ethics Commission is chaired by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who has made integrity a hallmark of his illustrious career in public service. He summarised this IOC approach in an excellent way when he said: “Sport is a unique vehicle for peace, but it can only be efficient if it has credibility.”



Opportunities

The universal Olympic Games show us what the world could look like, if we were all guided by the ideals and values of sport. We know that our ideals are not shared by everyone in this world, they are contrary to the zeitgeist. But a disregard of our Olympic ideals does not negate their inherent value. On the contrary: it demonstrates the importance of our mission, to strive to uphold these values and ideals in a world where peace and solidarity are under threat.

Building peace is an ongoing effort. This is why I accept this Seoul Peace Prize, not as a reward, but as an encouragement to continue to work towards our Olympic ideals. Our journey to achieve our mission of uniting all of humanity in peace at the Olympic Games goes on. This is why we will carry forward Olympic Agenda 2020 in light of the new challenges that the world and sport are facing today. This updated agenda will address the deteriorating political environment as well as the far-reaching political, social and economic consequences of the global coronavirus crisis. But this crisis also offers an opportunity. An opportunity for us to emphasise one important lesson that I hope we have all learned from this crisis – and this lesson is: we need more solidarity. Solidarity within societies and solidarity between societies. The post-coronavirus world will need sport and its values. We are ready to contribute to shaping it with our Olympic ideals.

Just as this prestigious distinction will strengthen the peace efforts of the IOC, it is my sincere hope that it will encourage all Koreans to continue your journey of building peace through sport. With the Winter Youth Olympic Games Gangwon 2024, you have every opportunity to again build peace through the power of sport. Inspired by this prize, I can assure you that the IOC will continue to be on your side for every step of this journey. We will continue to build bridges through sport and in this way open the door to peace.

Once again, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the recognition of this award. I hope to see you all soon, in person, in Seoul, to renew the special bond I have with this great city and with your great Olympic nation.