



# Footprints and Goals

***Sport and particularly football (soccer) has a unique capacity to bring people together, build bridges between cultures and accelerate positive social transformation. This unique World Cup represents the most geographically compact footprint in the history of the tournament, accentuating the shared experiences and intercultural exchanges, but also bringing with it interesting implications for per capita intensities.***

Regardless of where a tournament of this scale is hosted it will always have a significant environmental impact, particularly with regards to the emission of greenhouse gases.

Hosting large scale tournaments against the backdrop of the current climate change discourse is bound to carry a significant burden of responsibility, but also opportunity. The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar undoubtedly represents a landmark for all international sporting events and the multiplicity of aspects around this mega-event provides an excellent case study for all ESG practitioners.

As a frequent visitor to Qatar since 2006, I have huge admiration for the country's development trajectory which has led it to become a country with one of the highest levels of per capita income in the world. Although the economics of Qatar are more robust than your average hosts, the country has still absorbed an expensive infrastructural legacy, in hosting the World Cup, which traditionally remains in host nations as "White Elephants" signifying the inefficient use of resources. The economics around hosting such a large event would on the surface seem like a high price to pay to be in the global spotlight for a month, however a key objective for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, besides serving as a historical milestone and achievement for the region, was to serve as a catalyst for the achievement of Qatar's SDG's, as is conveyed in the Qatar National Vision 2030. Hosting the greatest footballing event has enabled significant progress to be made on various tough national material issues, such as labour law and supply chain reform, necessary for the country to achieve their goals and which otherwise would've taken longer to address.

## From the kick-off

From the moment that the World Cup was awarded to Qatar, right up to the first kick of a ball, there have been no shortages of conflict and controversies ranging from the rescheduling of the tournament which collided with the schedules of the major European leagues, allegations of poor governance within FIFA, concerns regarding Qatar's migrant labour laws, freedom of expression and even the serving of alcohol at stadiums. The intense scrutiny received by Qatar during their preparations of this World Cup highlights the emergence of a global ESG and stakeholder capitalism. The acute ESG criticisms levelled at Qatar and FIFA underline the importance of good quality supporting data, use of correct terminology, understanding of produced emissions and applicable materialities.

Large scale organizational activities are being subjected to increasingly sophisticated interrogation by means of fact-checking and qualitative assessments requiring organizations to operate transparently with regards to conduct, methodologies, measurements, baselines as well as the selection of the most fit for purpose metrics. This is very difficult considering that ESG data is characterized by self-disclosure and self-selection and is near impossible to achieve without engaging a multidisciplinary team of knowledgeable practitioners.



## Ambitious Goals

The organizing committee laid out noble and ambitious goals of setting a sporting benchmark for sustainable tournaments and contributing to the consolidation of ESG in sport. The strategy for achieving these goals is described in FIFA's first ever Sustainability Report and can be summarised as follows;

- The reporting period commences from 2011 and divides activities into 3 phases; preparation, staging and post event
- Strategy would focus on measuring and mitigating emissions and then offsetting the remainder
- Adequate materiality assessments were conducted and key risks identified
- All processes were carried out in accordance to relevant international standards, principles and certification systems
- All 3 scopes of emissions were measured, arriving at an estimated 3.6 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e in total
- Innovative solutions include; solar powered lighting, sustainable landscaping, public transport solutions and a first fully demountable stadium.

## Can Major Sporting Events Be Truly Sustainable?

Despite theoretically following all the rules and guidelines, the published Sustainability Report has had much criticism levelled against it ranging from general scepticism on whether a major tournament could truly be sustainable to extreme views such as carbon market sceptics, or those who believe the tournament should've been a crowd-less event, the latter are from a partisan and biased perspective to say the least and indicate a poor understanding of **holistic** ESG. However, the more credible criticisms were focused around the claims of carbon neutrality based on factual assessments of some of the chosen process methodologies and metrics. These criticisms raise valid points and provide important learning outcomes.

## Right Tools for the Job

Although the Organizing Committee followed the GHG protocols for accounting and reporting procedures, the selected carbon accounting methodology for constructed stadiums only attributed emissions equivalent to the ratio of the period of the tournament against the total lifespan of the stadium, thereby grossly underestimating a major source of emissions. This methodology is not suitable as it discounts the fact that the main purpose of stadium construction was the FIFA World Cup and that any legacy use thereafter is a secondary and subordinate outcome.

*Furthermore, quantifying carbon footprints for large organizations or events inherently contain large margins for error. Therefore, I agree unreservedly with another issue brought up by the more knowledgeable detractors in that more offsets should be purchased than the amount arrived from the carbon accounting in order to ensure a contingency and therefore that the project is truly offset.*

## Goalkeeping the Carbon Markets

FIFA's carbon market partner, the Doha based Global Carbon Council (GCC) have also received a lot of flak and have been dubbed as an upstart outfit which approves sub-par projects and was established solely to offset World Cup emissions. This is not the case, as the GCC was established in light of the missed opportunity after the Kyoto protocol and in anticipation of the mechanisms of the Paris Agreement to allow the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to be represented in carbon markets and climate change mitigation finance. Detractors of the GCC criticize the quality of their credits issued, while on the other hand criticising the small number of projects registered and credits generated which actually conversely signify the GCC's selectivity in accreditation. Although the interlinked ownership of the various organizing parties and their partners does raise questions of independence, it is an inevitable function of the small pool of local industry, energy and climate change proponents in Qatar.

The GCC has received full approval and is a member of the International Emissions Trading Association, is listed under the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSA) and their methodologies follow the rules and principles of UN CDM methodologies all of which underline their credibility. Another criticism levelled at the GCC is around their inclusion of renewable energy projects, on the basis that such projects are non-additional. However, the additionality of renewable projects is highly geographically dependent and to make a blanket statement on their non-additionality betrays a Eurocentric world view. This is corroborated by the fact that most of the standards' bodies allow such projects from Least Developed Countries. Additionally, I personally believe it is flawed to solely utilize a financial basis for demonstrating additionality in such projects.

## At the Final Whistle...

When all is said and done qualified industry watchdogs play a pivotal role in the consolidation of the nascent ESG space. However, FIFA and their partners deserve some credit for their foresight and bravery in recognizing the opportunity and attempting to make an impact. Due to the scale of the event the magnifying glass was always going to critically focus on this project, however, it is imperative that the event be regarded with the same lenience granted to other companies that embark on their first ESG quantification and reporting journey. Criticism of the event should be used by FIFA and partners in a constructive manner, but also delivered as such by other stakeholders and spectators in order for it to form a basis on which to build upon in future tournaments.

**WRITTEN BY:** [Joshua Kilani](#), Managing Director of [Xpotential Mining Services](#), who is currently in Qatar.

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