

## **Christiana Figueres**

### **Keynote address to 134<sup>th</sup> IOC Session**

### **25 June 2019, Lausanne**

Dear President of the IOC, Thomas Bach, thank you very much for that rousing speech that you gave us this morning. I would call it a “call to peaceful and value-driven arms” – nonetheless, a call to arms. So thank you very much for that.

Dear Honorary President; Your Serene Highness, under whom I serve in your Sustainability and Legacy Commission; dear IOC Members and ladies and gentlemen.

What an absolute pleasure and delight it is for me to be joining you this time, here on the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the IOC, when you have just opened a most impressive Olympic House with all the highest certifications for both construction and operation, truly setting a standard and gold example for all sports infrastructure around the world. Congratulations.

It is also quite an exciting moment when you have just decided on Milan-Cortina to host the Winter Games in 2026. I would also, since my topic here is climate change and sustainability, like to truly congratulate the trajectory that you already have on these topics, which started way back in 2015 – the year that the Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs, were adopted – where you were very clear in acknowledging sport as an enabler of sustainable development, followed then in 2016 by your ground-breaking sustainability strategy.

And then in 2018 two major events – the Sports for Climate Action initiative was launched, as His Serene Highness has just explained, and your first IOC Sustainability Report. It covers five focus areas and makes very clear that there’s a close alignment with the SDGs and that in fact sport contributes to almost all the SDGs. Sport is undoubtedly in a privileged position with respect to the development of humanity over the next few years.

It is very clear that you’ve actually not just issued the report, but that there is already decisive action where you have already embedded sustainability into venues and food & beverage. Paris and Tokyo are already signatories to the UN Sports for Climate Action initiative, and of course we would expect Paris, as a host city, to be prepared to align itself with the Paris Agreement of 2015.

And, of course, I would also like to thank the IOC for educating the public through your commercial partners, through so many other stakeholders; you continue to educate the public in your unequalled way on sustainability issues.

Now, my friends, it is my job to challenge everyone every time I speak in public or in private, and if you don’t believe that, ask my family. So may I say that, while the IOC has done an excellent job in incorporating sustainability into your thinking, to your actions, to your planning and to your execution, it is, I’m afraid, sadly no longer enough, because we no longer live in normal times.

As of just a few months ago, it has been made clear to everyone, through the new reports on science and climate change, that we are now living not with the challenge of climate change, but that we are living in a climate emergency. Sustainability is therefore no longer a “nice to have”; sustainability, or the lack thereof – whether we plan and incorporate sustainability into everything that we do – that decision will

actually define the quality of life of everyone on this planet, not for one or two years, but for the next 125 years.

That is a major responsibility that rests on the shoulders of all of us. What that actually means is that sustainability can no longer be a project here and there; it actually has to be holistic, it has to be long-term and it has to be strategic.

Let me put it in the words of Mark Carney, the Governor of the Bank of England, who looking at commercial enterprises, said just a few days ago: “Those enterprises that fail to adapt to the challenges of climate change will fail to exist”. Those who fail to adapt will fail to exist. It is quite a sobering warning from someone whose job it is to be rather conservative in his economic assessments of the stability of the world.

So it seems to me that our collective task here is to ensure that that warning does not apply to the Olympic Games. We must make sure, through our planning and through our anticipatory actions today, that the Olympic Games continue to exist, certainly in the present but more so in the future. That is not an easy task, because the threats are already on our doorstep.

Glaciers are melting around the world. To put it very clearly to you, most central and eastern Himalayan glaciers will be gone by the year 2035. European glaciers and South American glaciers will follow soon after that, but it is the Himalayan glaciers that we will lose first.

The snow cover that is the basis of the Winter Olympics is decreasing, and has been decreasing for the past 10 to 20 years, particularly in the spring, which is the time period most important for the Winter Olympics. What that actually means is that, increasingly, precipitation in the winter will come down as rain instead of snow. Please think what the effect of that is going to be on all Winter Olympics.

Conversely, for summer events, think of the increase in heat. We are already, today, at one degree of global warming on average around the world, which equals 10 to 15 degrees on any given day in any given city. Think what that actually means for the Summer Olympics.

The fact is, my friends, that changes in the conditions of nature upon which the Olympic Games, Summer and Winter, so fundamentally depend, used to happen in geological times – that is no longer the case. The changes in natural conditions are now happening within short decades, certainly within our lifetime.

This is actually going to affect, number one, host cities. Can you imagine what the decrease of snow is going to mean for the performance conditions of snow events in winter? For one, it might mean having to extend even further the distances that have already been extended between events. It will certainly increase the costs, because no one can produce snow cheaper than Mother Nature. If we have to produce the snow, it is much more expensive for any host city.

Think about the rise of ambient temperatures for summer events. Think about what that does to the performance and the competition of athletes at the Games; pretty impossible to put air conditioning over the marathon, over rowing, over mountain biking – not doable. So athletes would have to compete in the increasing heat conditions. And think about the spectators and the conditions of heat waves that they would have to endure. Think also, please, about the training conditions under which current athletes and aspiring young athletes would have to train, in particular in the hottest areas of the world, which translates into a very real danger of losing the

universality of the Olympic Games. As we have heard from President Bach, at the core of the values of the Olympic Games is to protect universal participation.

So, what can the IOC do? Well, let me say, just like President Bach, I am actually an optimist. I think it is important to see the reality that we face, but it is also equally important to understand that we have many tools at hand to actually address climate change and do so in a timely way.

So what can the IOC do? I would say that the IOC is one of the institutions in the world that can have the most beneficial impact on how the world addresses climate change, and let me put it pretty clearly.

Number one – both practise and preach.. Both be aware of the global effects as well as the local. And thirdly – it has to be top down. It has to start in the C-suite of the IOC and then trickle down to the entire rest of the Olympic family.

Now luckily, I would say, to pick up my point about the global and the local, luckily there is a very helpful overlap between the health of the planet – global health – and the health of human beings – local health. That overlap between global and local is actually the sweet spot that we can actually address, because it so happens that the burning of fossil fuels is both responsible for most of climate change, and is also responsible for most of air pollution – which is local health. That is something that the IOC can clearly help decrease.

Think about the fact that every single athlete needs and deserves clean air for both training and competing. Think about the fact that 9 out of 10 people alive today – that means 9 out of 10 of us as well – are already breathing unsafe air, and that we have 7 million people dying from air pollution annually.

Now consider that athletes are disproportionately affected on top of that, because they take in 10 to 20 times as much air as sedentary people, which doesn't mean that we should become sedentary! –It means, actually, we need to provide clean air. Have you ever read in air pollution warnings when they say “Warning: do not exercise outside today”? How is that going to affect training and performance for the Olympics?

So, dear friends, here is my proposal. First, as an organisation, you have the responsibility of care, both for the conditions of nature that are fundamental to the Games as well as the conditions of health that are fundamental to your athletes. You can become very vocal stewards of both climate change and clean air; you can protect your athletes and those aspiring; and you can influence your host cities on both global and local issues.

As the owners of the Games, on the global side, you can very much build on the experience that Beijing already had for its Olympics of producing the Olympic blue sky, because they stopped burning fossil fuels for the time period before the Olympics, as you know, proving that stopping burning fossil fuels can actually clean up the air. So, building on that, you can influence host cities by requesting that host cities be carbon neutral by 2050, which we all have to do. You can also request them to have a plan of resilience in case they do not have the snow conditions, or in case they have too much heat, depending on whether the cities are hosting Winter or Summer Games. But all of your cities should be required to anticipate changing natural conditions for the hosting of the Olympic Games, and the question should always be, as those natural conditions are changing: what is the resilience plan for this host city?

Building on the Beijing experience with air quality, starting with the Tokyo Olympics, the IOC could work in Tokyo to install air-quality monitors in each and every venue in order to raise awareness about the importance of air quality for the athletes, for the spectators and for the world as a whole, and you could make air-quality data visible via the scoreboard for everyone to see.

Thirdly, as leaders of the Olympic Movement, IOC Members can encourage athletes, as well as you yourselves, Members of the IOC, to be messengers of both local health and global health, which fortunately coincide. It is important, as you do that, as you step up, that you do your own homework within the house first, because otherwise you don't establish your credibility. And, fortunately, you are very much on your way to that in both infrastructure and mobility. You can lead the world by example, because the Olympics punch way above their own weight.

Yes, the Olympics are not the highest emitters in the world – fully understood – but didn't we just hear about the millions of people that watch the Olympics? You punch way above your weight, and you can lead by example in both infrastructure and mobility. You can also use your microphone for advocacy on both global issues of greenhouse gases and local issues of air pollution, thereby bringing both together – practising and preaching.

The age-old saying of “Do not as I preach but do as I practise”, in this case, is wrong. Do as I practise and as I preach – because we need both. We need the IOC to both practise and preach. We need the IOC to be champions of both global and local health, and start from the C-suite level.

Now, my friends, we have just heard a rousing speech from President Bach, and he reminded us that the Olympics were re-launched 125 years ago by the visionary Pierre de Coubertin. Let us remember that those Olympics that were launched 125 years ago were launched in optimal training and competition physical conditions. They were not threatened at that time. If the IOC's purpose is to build a better world and not a worse one, and you have all agreed to that, then let us not let performance conditions diminish the Olympic ethos now and for years to come.

The restoration of the Olympic Games 125 years ago is a legacy. We must protect it, and we must enhance it. The IOC can therefore not afford to let the Olympic Games come under any form of existential threat. On the contrary, the IOC has the responsibility and the great opportunity to use its unequalled platform of the Games to exhibit, beyond all doubt, our human capacity to rise to a historic challenge – this time, the greatest challenge humanity has ever faced.

We in the climate community stand ready, willing and able to work with the IOC to ensure that the Olympics remain the unequalled emblematic international sports event for the next 125 years at least.

Thank you.