

## **Interview to Pere Miró, Director of Olympic Solidarity and Director of the Relations between the International Olympic Committee and the National Olympic Committees**

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**Abstract:** At the beginning of the interview Pere Miró is asked to introduce himself so as to allow readers to know him. All in all, the purpose is to analyze his professional work within a worldwide sports organization (The International Olympic Committee) which interacts with 205 National Olympic Committees of very diverse characteristics and, sometimes, even opposed. The professional task of Pere Miró consists of a constant interaction between the local and the global. The interview has three parts: Cultural diversity and the Olympic Movement, Diversity of the organizational structures, and the values of Olympic Solidarity.

**Keywords:** International Olympic Committee, sports organizations, national Olympic committees, values, cultural diversity.

*Before beginning the interview we asked Pere Miró to introduce himself to provide readers with a little background knowledge of his life and career:*

I invariably begin by saying I'm a Manresà.<sup>1</sup> I was born 53 years ago, I'm married and have a son who was born in Switzerland eleven and a half years ago and who loves playing football. Then I say I graduated in Physical Activities and Sports Sciences, taught at the Barcelona centre of the Institut Nacional d'Educació Física de Catalunya (INEFC), was appointed head of studies and director of this centre and subsequently director of the INEFC as a whole until 1988. Next I worked for the Barcelona '92 Olympics, first as sub-director for sports and later as sub-director general for operations. In 1992 I came with my family to live in Lausanne, where I've been for the last 17 years working for the International Olympic Committee (IOC). In 1997 the chairman, Samaranch, decided to appoint me head of relations with the national Olympic committees and chairman of Olympic Solidarity.

### **Cultural diversity and the Olympic movement**

**Question (Q):** *You hold a position of authority in a worldwide organization that works with Olympic committees that differ greatly from each other in terms of sports culture, management, political culture and so on. How do you manage to ensure that you move ahead jointly?*

**Answer (A):** This issue is probably one of the most important aspects of what we might term the IOC's strategy. We've established relations with 205 Olympic committees that belong to 205 different territories or countries. Above all else, this contact

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<sup>1</sup> From Manresa, an inland city of Catalonia, near Barcelona.

means building bridges that strengthen the Olympic movement through everything held in common, while respecting everything that's different. The most crucial point here is deciding what we should keep that's really the same for everyone. And we have plenty of examples of this. One of the clearest, which is of especial interest to me, is that belonging to the Olympic movement is the result of each of our organizations' being governed by statutes approved by the International Olympic Committee that respect the values of the Olympic Charter. The 205 national committees must respect the values of the Olympic Charter even when their natures are very different, in some cases even at odds with the values of the Charter.

Some time ago, and as part of our endeavour to attain maximum unity, we decided not to tell the committees 'in order to draw up your statutes, take the Olympic Charter and comply with everything it says'. No. We saw very clearly that the Olympic Charter couldn't be applied point by point and article by article to 205 countries characterized by very different cultures and situations. In the year 2000 what we decided to do, headed by the IOC legal commission during judge Kéba M'Baye's term of office, was to extract from the Charter ten points we regarded as so fundamental that they must be shared throughout the world. And on this basis we set out to bring all the Olympic committees' statutes up to date. So we asked everyone to revise them in terms of their own cultural backgrounds, but stressing at the same time that they must include these ten points.

We advised, for instance, that the principles of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) had to be respected in full and a document signed to this effect. There's no room for interpretation here. The anti-doping code applies equally to India, Puerto Rico and Bahrain. Regarding other points, though, we said that they had to agree with the spirit if not with the articles, the wording and so on. They could introduce nuances in accordance with their own cultural contexts. Then we ourselves reviewed the statutes drafted by each of the countries to make sure that what they said was compatible with the spirit of the Olympic Charter. Although the wording may not be the same, what matters is that the principles are similar.

Another example is the presence of women on executive committees. We've never said that there must be a specific number of women, but we *do* stipulate that there should at least be a presence.

*Q: Of course, that way you ensure that the presence of women increases without imposing obligations.*

A: Exactly. What we can't do is make certain demands that unfortunately we know couldn't possibly be met in certain countries today. We have to take things step by step.

*Q: Knowing that confrontation probably leads nowhere, while moving ahead by stages does.*

A: That's precisely what we think. Indeed, at the Peking Olympics a major quantitative step forward was made in terms of countries with women's presence and women's participation in general. The proportion of women's participation now stands at around 44%, which is a major advance compared to previous editions of the Olympic Games.

What's more, it's encouraging to see that this 44%, which globally speaking is already very good, includes three or four Gulf countries from which women took part for the first time ever. So major qualitative progress has been made. We propose quotas of participation by women and give financial support to those countries that meet these quotas, but we never impose obligations. And we see that the number of countries acquiring sensitivity to this issue is gradually on the increase.

The role of women in sport reflects the role of women in society, and the way we approach the subject is to see how sport may contribute towards women's integration and improving their social role. Sport isn't just an isolated phenomenon, obviously; it forms part of society as a whole. And it's quite clear that when we set programmes in motion and establish quotas, around 80 to 85 percent of Olympic committees are in a position to apply them and quickly take advantage of the opportunities they afford, while the rest are far more reluctant to do so, which means that we have to keep nudging them gently.

The same applies, for example, to the use of sport as an instrument of tolerance or an instrument of peace. There are committees that have worked very hard on this, while others find it very hard to understand what we mean by using sport as an instrument of tolerance or an instrument of peace. Not so much because they're against the idea but because the circumstances in their countries may not encourage its use as such, or perhaps they've simply never seen how it's done. As the outcome of this, we devise programmes to provide guidance supplemented by technical and economic support, or programmes that focus on aid, which may be technical or economic.

### **The diversity of organizational structures**

*Q: Cultural diversity also includes organizational structure diversity. You often say that some committees are truly spectacular – almost as big as the IOC itself –, while others are so small that their office might be the chairman's own home. So how do you manage to communicate with them all when each organization must move at its own individual pace or have its own individual relations with sponsors (assuming they have any such relations at all)?*

*A:* As I see it, this is a fundamental part of our own organization. Our motto is 'find the minimal common ground to keep up the strength that diversity gives us'. Our departure point here is the fact that we have committees that are very different from each other. The North American Olympic Committee, for example, is very big; it has more staff and a bigger budget than the IOC and manages sports facilities. In the USA there's no sports ministry since the government has always regarded sport as something for society to organize. So the Olympic Committee is responsible for structuring sport there.

On the other hand, there are countries with an Olympic committee – which is called thus and also has the right to vote at the assembly of Olympic committees – that consists of a chairman and a secretary general and sometimes, as a major luxury, a person who acts as secretary, who runs the office that normally doesn't even exist (it's the chairman's own home) and handles the computer. I believe, however, that this ex-

ample we give of the committee headquarters in the chairman's house practically no longer exists; I liked very much to put this forward as an example in the past, as an extreme case, but now I'd almost dare assert that it no longer exists.

Because over the last three quadrennials, and as part of the criterion of minimums attainable by everyone that I mentioned before, at Olympic Solidarity we've made a great effort to reinforce this minimal structure. What are the minimum requirements an Olympic committee must fulfil to ensure that it acts as our ambassador in a specific country, that it's really capable of grasping our messages, guidelines and programmes and use them minimally to develop those values we hold in common? For this to be possible, there must be a minimal structure, otherwise we can't do anything. Over the past twelve years we've really stressed this need for a minimal structure, that all Olympic committees must at least have an office, however small it may be. We've helped the vast majority purchase a small locale or a small headquarters, to have a permanent staff of two or three people and to acquire the essential equipment and technology (computers, Internet and so on) they need to be in touch with modern society. In short: material, an office, human resources, a budget ... Only this way, in the local context, can they develop actions that are generated globally.

What's more, they can maintain beneficial relations with the media, with government bodies, with civil society and with athletes, clubs and federations only when they have a minimal structure. In the past there were many cases of committees that just went their own way, which served no purpose at all. National Olympic committees must have at least a network around them that enables them to come into contact with society in one way or another. Although we talk a lot about the autonomy of the Olympic movement – and it's true that we want it and defend it – it's also clear to us that the principles and the values we defend through sport are hard to develop if no harmonious relations exist with governments. How far you can get and how to get there is something you have to work out for yourself in your own country, in your own circumstances, which include relations with the media, with sponsors and so on. These circumstances vary a lot.

*Q: In the courses we run for you, sometimes we find students who say that there are no sponsors in their country.*

A: That's absolutely true, although it may simply be that the Olympic committee has no idea about how to attract sponsors. That's why training programmes like MEMOS ("Master Executif pour le Management des Organizations Sportives") and MOSO (Management of Olympic Sports Organizations)<sup>2</sup> are so important.

*Q: Let's look now at the different perceptions of time that affect organization management so much. How do you manage to move along together and mark specific paces?*

A: It's true that each part of the world has a different perception of time, completely different. But that causes serious problems only when major common projects are in-

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2 For information on these programmes see [www.olympic.org/uk/organisation/commissions/solidarity/index\\_uk.asp](http://www.olympic.org/uk/organisation/commissions/solidarity/index_uk.asp).

volved. In such cases, everyone *does* have to move along together, and a clear example of this is the organization of the Olympic Games. These 205 committees have to meet the same deadlines when it comes to registering athletes, heats, booking rooms, paying ..., administrative aspects that the Olympic committees have to settle directly with the organizing committees. The organization committees have a different culture and the IOC is in the middle.

Fortunately, extreme cases when everyone has to move along at the same pace are few. In the face of local circumstances and attitudes, *it's up to us to adapt a little and be patient or flexible*. I'd say we have to be patient in some cases and flexible in others in an endeavour to understand that things really work differently: time, pace, cadence, everything. The important thing, though, is that we get there, sooner or later, but we get there. Here it takes us half the time, there it takes longer, but we get there.

Let me give you an entertaining example of what I'm saying: the difference between a general assembly on continent A and continent B. On continent A, the assembly begins at the appointed time, the agenda contains ten points, which were sent out two months earlier, and after discussion the assembly comes to an end, also at the appointed time. On continent B, on the other hand, the assembly may or may not begin at the appointed time and there may or may not be a break for lunch; but the people attending accept this and are willing to carry on discussing for as long as necessary, and the assembly ends when all points have been debated. People are willing to spend all the time in the conference room, even skipping lunch, and that's it. Though they may leave the room for a while and then come back in. At the assembly on continent A all this would be regarded as an intolerable lack of respect, while at the assembly on continent B you can walk in and out of the room, it starts late because the person who has to open it hasn't arrived yet, but when he *does* arrive, we'll begin, etc.

Q: *But in the end, the result is the same in both cases; the only difference is the procedure.*

A: I've seen that things can work in both ways. Personally, with my European, deeply Catalan mentality, and with a wife who's half German, I considered myself flexible; but I discovered that I was much less flexible than I thought and it's taken me a long time to learn. But now I feel much more comfortable with it; I feel that I've managed not only to rationalize things but to accept them with conviction. What I mean is that I no longer have to rationalize every time I'm faced with one of these situations, I don't have to tell myself "no, look, it's a different culture, you have to be patient, you have to do this or that ...". Now I've learnt to take it as something natural; it's an enriching experience and that makes me happy. I've become much less impatient over time.

### **The values of Olympic solidarity**

Q: *Many of the documents issued by Olympic Solidarity contain words you invariably define as the values that govern your way of doing things and developing your programmes: attention and respect, quality, integrity and flexibility. How did these values emerge and what do they mean to you?*

A: Values are everything. They're what guide our conduct. We at Olympic Solidarity and at the department of relations with national Olympic committees are responsible for working very directly with these 205 committees. As a team, we felt that within the IOC as a whole we had to find our own specific identity when it came to carrying out our mission, so we decided that of all the IOC values contained in the Olympic Charter we had to select those that are fundamental to enable us to work every day with these 205 committees.

We were very lucky to secure the collaboration of an expert, someone very familiar with this problem, who had worked on several occasions with us. And the whole team (there were fifteen or sixteen of us then) locked ourselves up for two days. First we chose the values we identified with most, and someone said "Look, we should visualize these values on an object so that we keep them permanently in mind". And this is how the cube emerged, which everyone approved of straight away. What's more, we decided that what was important about the cube wasn't its material value but its rarity, so we made just one for each Solidarity office, six in total.

So, legally at least (I don't know whether anyone has made any illicit copies), there's only one cube for each of our offices: one in Kuwait, one in Fiji, one in Mexico, one in Rome, one in Nigeria and one in my office. There's also one in the IOC chairman's office, and I'm very glad it's there.

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