Statement by Mario Pescante, Permanent Observer for the International Olympic Committee to the United Nations

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Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,

On behalf of the International Olympic Committee, the supreme authority of the Olympic Movement, and in our capacity as Permanent Observer, I welcome the opportunity to address you today to provide our perspective on the role of sport as a tool for development and peace.

Allow me to congratulate and thank the Secretary-General for his comprehensive biennial report outlining the many ways that sport is contributing to a better world and what approaches need to be strengthened.

With the Olympic Games, the IOC is able to set an example of global peaceful interaction. The Olympic Games, the Olympic athletes and in particular the Olympic Village are powerful symbols of this. They break down the barriers of cultural differences. They serve as an example of mutual respect and non-discrimination. They bring Olympic values to life and demonstrate their unifying power to a global audience.

The Olympic Movement cannot be truly successful unless we leverage that positive power year-round and with the support of other partners. The past two years have seen many important developments in this area, and especially in the strong partnership between the IOC and the United Nations and several joint initiatives with its agencies and programmes.

The IOC’s collaboration with the UN demonstrates the positive impact that results from effective engagement between sport, business, politics, culture and other aspects of society. Sport can change the world, but it cannot change the world alone. That is why the IOC, under the leadership of President Thomas Bach, is engaging more than ever before with political and business leaders at the highest levels.

Since taking office a little more than a year ago, President Bach has met with 85 heads of government and state, and confers regularly with the Secretary-General of the UN. As President Bach has said: “It is time that sport is no longer isolated from politics. We will always be neutral, but we will talk with governments and work with organisations like the UN. Talking to politicians will avoid creating fractures and possibly solve problems more quickly.”

These relationships must be built on a foundation of mutual respect that protects the autonomy of sport. Sport is unique. It is guided by truly universal principles. These universal principles of
sport are based on globally recognized ethics, fair play, respect and friendship. Government interference dismantles this global framework and renders sport ineffective as a tool for positive change.

In keeping with this emphasis on expanded engagement, and in another sign of the strong relationship between the IOC and the UN, President Bach and the Secretary-General signed a historic agreement in April to strengthen cooperation between the two organisations at the highest level. Among other things, the agreement calls for using sport to promote a number of social dimensions, including girls’ and women’s empowerment; inclusion, healthy lifestyles promotion and peacebuilding.

These goals are embedded in the Olympic Agenda 2020, our strategic roadmap that will shape the future of the Olympic Movement. The IOC is exploring ways to use sport even more effectively as a tool for positive change. We know we have a role to play and we are ready for greater collaboration.

In this time of increased sedentary behaviours, persistent inequalities for girls and women, a growing burden of non-communicable diseases, rampant social exclusion, devastating civil strife, the world needs sport more than ever. We strongly encourage governments and other stakeholders to increase access to safe and protected sport for all and, in particular, for girls and women, people with disabilities, and marginalized communities.

Sport and physical activity are major contributors to a healthy life and can play an important role in preventing non-communicable diseases. Sport offers multiple channels to promote healthy lifestyle and healthy diets. The IOC is actively supporting the World Health Organisation’s Commission to End Childhood Obesity through the direct involvement of IOC Honorary President Jacques Rogge.

We strongly encourage others to join the IOC in promoting sport and physical activity for health and wellbeing.

Sport and physical activity can help ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and promote life-long learning. Sport and physical activity encourage school attendance and can help teach social skills. Evidence-based research demonstrates that physical activity improves learning performance. We strongly encourage the inclusion of quality and age-appropriate physical education in school curricula, along with values education.

Sport and physical activity can help make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe and sustainable. Sport helps steer young people away from delinquency and dangerous behaviour; encourages social cohesion and helps lower societal health care costs. We strongly encourage investments in sport facilities, infrastructure and safe play spaces which can help build active and healthy cities.

Sport and physical activity need to be seriously considered in the post 2015 development agenda. They provide a meaningful, cost effective way to advancing any future Sustainable Development Goals especially on issues related to health, education and community life.

Sport can also contribute to advancing environmental sustainability. The IOC is committed to working with the United Nations Environmental Programme and other stakeholders to ensure that sport plays a significant role in achieving a sustainable approach to development. The IOC’s active participation in the first UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi in June is just one manifestation of that collaboration.
Environmental considerations have been included in planning and organising the Olympic Games for 20 years and we have called on other sport organisations to follow that example. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the partnership between the IOC and UNEP; a partnership that has most recently provided support and guidance during preparations for the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi last February, as well as for the upcoming Games in Rio in 2016.

Let me not forget to mention the importance of sport to peacebuilding. I want to thank the General Assembly for the work and approval last November of Resolution A/RES/68/9, commonly known as the Olympic Truce Resolution, in view of the Sochi Games. The UN’s steadfast and consistent support of the Olympic Truce is an excellent example of how the sport movement and governments can work together to advance common goals. The Truce will not bring about world peace but it sends a strong message to the entire world.

A new consultation process for an Olympic Truce resolution urging an end to conflict in the context of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro is to start in the coming months and we hope that the General Assembly and all its Member states will once again unanimously support it.

In all of these initiatives, the IOC is grateful for the support and assistance provided by the UN Group of Friends of Sport for Development and Peace and their co-chairs; Wilfried Lemke, the Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace; and the entire team at the UN Office of Sport for Development and Peace.

We were pleased to jointly celebrate the first International Day of Sport for Development and Peace and look forward to continuously highlighting the important role that sport has to play for social change.

We are of course extremely grateful to the UN Secretary-General, a true friend of sport and the Olympic Movement. His participation at the IOC Session in Sochi and his run with President Bach in the Olympic Torch Relay is a great sign of the depth of his personal commitment.

Together, the IOC and the UN are using sport to improve lives and build better communities around the world. As outlined in the Secretary-General’s report, we have seen much progress over the past two years. The Secretary-General has also reminded us that there is still much more to do. Let me reiterate the strong commitment and determination of the International Olympic Committee to ensure, through all possible means, increased synergies among all stakeholders involved, and ultimately further recognition and support for sport at the service of social change.

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