

SUSTAINABILITY AND GREEN TRANSITION IN THE FITNESS SECTOR

Latest update: July 2021

Policy context: the European Green Deal

EU citizens put the environment as the number one policy priority for the EU Institutions as reported in the 2020 Eurobarometer: *“94% of citizens in all EU Member States say that protecting the environment is important to them. In addition, 91% of citizens stated that climate change is a serious problem in the EU. European legislation is necessary to protect the environment, according to 83% of those surveyed.”*¹

The European Green Deal has been placed at the heart of EU policymaking and represents not just a series of policies, but a complete overhaul of the way we do things. Its ambitions to make Europe “a climate neutral continent by 2050”, “restore biodiversity and support industry innovation to reduce pollution” and “boost the efficient use of resources by moving to a clean circular economy”.²

The European sustainable transition had already taken off when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe, but instead of acting as a barrier, it is serving as a strong motivation that the post-COVID economy recovery will be a “green” one, giving policy makers some unexpected leverage to act: *“implementation of the European Green Deal and the coronavirus recovery are two sides of the same coin.”*³

¹ New Eurobarometer Survey: Protecting the environment and climate is important for over 90% of European citizens, European Commission. 3 March 2020. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3CldvLp>

² A European Deal: Striving to be the first climate neutral Continent, European Commission. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3AR1MJS>

Sustainability in the sport industry

The green transition is pushing industries to welcome more environmentally friendly governance and regulations, leading most of them to adopt Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) instead of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). While CSR simply refers to the responsibility of enterprises for their impact on society⁴, ESG describes a more ambitious set of standards measuring how businesses need to respond to climate change, how to treat their workers, to build trust and to foster innovation whilst also managing their supply chains.

Such trends are eventually affecting the **sport industry** which perhaps has felt for a long time to be considered immune to environmental or sustainability issues: *sport’s status as a beloved entertainment form has shielded it from the scrutiny felt by other factors such as sustainability.*⁵ Nowadays, for policy makers and civil society organisations it is no longer acceptable to reduce the role of sport to the promotion of physical activity and well-being and major events alone. Sport, being one of the most effective enablers for social change in modern societies, must both collaborate to raise awareness on environmental issues and set example to other industries.

The UN Climate Change⁶ initiative furthered the case for the sector to take responsibility by inviting sport organisations and their stakeholders to join a new climate action for the sport movement that will set the trajectory and provide the support for sport to play a

³ A System Change Compass – Implementing the European Green Deal in a time of recovery, Club of Rome. 2020. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3u8V13K>.

⁴ Corporate social responsibility & Responsible business conduct, European Commission. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/2WdySVw>

⁵ UEFA/ WWF report ‘Playing for our Planet’, UEFA. 2 May 2018. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3io8dgh>

⁶ Sports for Climate Action, UNFCCC. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3EOWGAs>

winning role in achieving global climate change goals. It calls upon sport organisations to show leadership and “by engaging actively and collectively in the climate neutrality journey. This can be achieved by taking responsibility for their climate footprint, helping global ambition step-up, and incentivising action beyond sports to take meaningful and transformative climate action.”

Sustainability in the fitness sector

Although there are some apparent success stories of fitness chains and clubs who have already initiated a green transformation, this trend is often more around re-branding than direct action itself. The need for the fitness sector to take responsibility in green and environmental issues is already considerable and will clearly further increase in time.

Some forward-thinking fitness chains and suppliers are nonetheless already embracing high-level environmental and social standards, notably committing to contribute to the implementation of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs)⁷. For example, Ingesport has revealed that in 2019 it cut its carbon footprint by 61%, water use by 72%, usage of chemical products by 99%, and moved its energy usage to 100% renewables, as part of its long term 2030 Sustainability agenda to align with the UNSDGs.⁸

Suppliers have recently invested in R&D to reduce the environmental impact for producing equipment (e.g., renewable materials, clean energy). **Terra Hale**, London’s first eco-friendly, human-powered gym which harnesses its members’ energy to power its facilities⁹, relies for instance on the well-known **SportsArt’s ECO-POWR** technology, which captures 74% of energy per workout, which is then fed back to the electrical grid.¹⁰

Both fitness operators and suppliers are introducing new KPIs to reduce Co2 emissions, including green energy sources and improved energy efficiency. Moreover, some fitness-based organisations organise charity and green initiatives to support local communities (e.g., wellness valley¹¹, train for trees¹²).

These initiatives are made possible by fitness consumers, who are increasingly demanding products and services environmentally and socially viable as if well-being throughout physical activity could not prescind from the care of the environment. Clubs and facilities which show they are developing and improving their environmental sustainability credentials will undoubtedly be the beneficiaries.

In conclusion, two current fitness trends may further condition the relationship between fitness and sustainability, but also challenge the more typical way of providing services and products across the sector:

- The race toward digitalisation was accelerated by the COVID-19 which pushed operators to find creative ways to retain clients and keep them physically active. Beyond the challenge that it represents, there is no doubt that digitalisation is turning fitness into a more sustainable industry.
- Outdoor fitness (also powered by COVID-19) has recently grown thanks to the positive effects on the psychological, physical well-being and health of people. Moreover, so-called “green exercising” is usually combined physical activity with social and environmental activities (e.g., plogging: a combination of jogging and picking up litter).

⁷ Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3zCijjK>

⁸ PricewaterhouseCoopers audit finds GO fit owner generated €300m in social value and reduced carbon footprint, before pandemic, HCM. 8 February 2021. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3o4R92L>

⁹ London’s first eco-friendly, human-powered gym is open,

Evening Standard. 19 March 2018. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3EZc7Gv>

¹⁰ Sports Art. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/2W8fMijp>

¹¹ Technogym. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3kFr3kA>

¹² Motosumo announces ‘Train for Trees’, Motosumo. 14 November 2019. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3lQaths>