Paper Title: Sustainability, the Athens Marathon and Greece's sport event sector: Lessons of resilience, social innovation and the urban commons

Abstract:

Increasingly, a confluence of challenging global forces have precipitated sport sector change. While responses vary, a discernible trend has been the growing extents to which sport organisations and events have transcended typical participatory, performance and/or spectator focused logistics and embraced social responsibility acts that that embed sport more deeply into communities. These manoeuvres have also become fundamental to organisation and sector capacity building and sustainability. Accordingly, this paper examines the example set by the Athens Marathon, Greece's leading sport sector entity, towards sustainable event development through its strengthened volunteer and civil society practices and stakeholder relationships. Drawing data from key Athens Marathon informants and building upon conceptual models of sustainability that emphasise the interplay of resilience, social innovation and an urban commons, we demonstrate how the Athens Marathon affords a useful exemplar of how key organisational events may inform sustainability and sector strengthening.

Key words: Athens Marathon, organisational sustainability, volunteering, sport events, civil society

Introduction

Over the course of the last 16 years, Greece has experienced a confluence of substantive economic, geopolitical, environmental and socio-cultural forces that have simultaneously challenged State resources and contributed to civil society growth (Clarke et al., 2016; Lazoudi, 2019; Polyzoidis, 2015). Part of this development has entailed the strengthened capacity and power of existing civil society organisations, the proliferation of new entities, and increased prominence of the civil society sector. The landscape is now characterised by a rise in organisational stakeholders, wider activities to address, and enhanced volunteer activity (Huliaras, 2016; Graikioti et al., 2020; Polyzoidis, 2015; Vathakou, 2015). Sector proliferation has also catalysed capacity building with regards to producing new and increased sources of funding to support initiatives and collaboration and enhancing training and professional development (Shutes & Ishkanian, 2022; Triantafillidou & Tsiaras, 2018). Notably during the recent Covid-19 pandemic, the civil society sector also witnessed a flurry of innovative practices and cross-sector partnerships to develop resilience, adaptability, and creative enterprise (Hazakis, 2022; Tzagkarakis et al., 2020). In this task, many organisations have set about creating more effective and resourceful stakeholder networks and collaborations, extending sector and organisational remits, and empowering local communities, groups, and individuals therein to be social change agents. Herein, too, the sport sector and organisations within have been noted contributors to reconfiguring the country's civil society landscape.

As a space comprising large swathes of organisations, stakeholders and activities, and with its popular appeal and entrenched links to health and wellbeing, community, identity and belonging, sport has become a valued site to prioritise and enact civil society agendas. Concomitantly, Greece's sport sector has also not been immune to the changes, challenges and opportunities presented in recent years, and faces many of the same concerns with regards to its capacity building and sustainability (Giannoulakis et al., 2017; Maditinos et al., 2021). Where in the past, Greece's sport sector adopted an ad hoc approach to civil society and social responsibility endeavours (Koutrou & Kohe, 2023), focusing instead on participatory or performance agendas, the sector now confronts new realities. This includes, for example: The need to maintain the nation's diverse and vibrant sport cultures; developing resilience to address prevailing political, economic and socio-cultural shifts; resourcing

individuals, groups and communities with services and infrastructure; and, providing opportunities for education and training, skill enhancement and employment that attract, retain and develop sector constituents. At the vanguard stand key organisations and events, such the Athens Marathon (the focus of this paper), who have become increasingly responsive to Greece's contextual shifts in manoeuvring organisation priorities towards socially responsible and civil society focused actions. While this may be read as highly laudable altruism, such pivots also comprise part of fundamental efforts for the organisation to assure, foremost, their thrivability and survivability. As scholars note (Jones et al., 2016; Le Roux & Prestorious, 2016), sustainability processes are, however complex and necessitate a range of strategies and investments to be effective.

While sport organisations and events have been noted as examples of sustainability (Lindsey, 2008; Tjønndal, 2021), how various organisation's within the sector engage with sustainability ideas and processes warrant continued scrutiny. Specifically, amid growing examination of the processes and practices of sustainable sport in Greece (e.g., Giannoulakis et al., 2017; Maditinos et al., 2021; Pangiotopolos et al., 2022; Schulenkorf et al., 2019), there exist rationale to critique how specific sport organisations understand and implement sustainability ideas to fortify their operations, build capacity, and contribute to the national and regional sport sector's continuity more broadly. Additionally, although sustainability rhetoric forms part of the contemporary language of (sport) organisational operations, the processes also take place within specific national, sector, sociocultural, political, and economic settings that contribute to the effectiveness and perpetuity of sustainability-related goals and ambitions. As noted in the above research on Greece's sport landscape, sustainability discourse is also entrenched within, and exists in tandem, to an array of organisational processes. These include, for example, resource protection, risk management, developing and future proofing, relationship building and collaboration, forms of situational awareness and attentiveness to forces of change, strategic diversification in operations and strategy, and creativity and entrepreneurialism of enterprise. How each sport organisation, and individuals therein, understand these issues and demands may be distinct, and provide useful insights to commonalities and differences of sustainability work.

Subsequently, to better understand the intersection of sport, civil society and sustainability, in this paper we examine the Athens Marathon; a flagship event in Greece's sport and national calendar, and prominent sector organisation. Accordingly, drawing upon semi-structured interviews with Athens Marathon management and volunteers, the aim of the paper is to understand how sport and mega-events may align with, and contribute to, local, national and global solidarity enterprises *and* bring about meaningful and enduring civic change. Focusing on the Athens Marathon leadership and development of its core volunteer programme, and exploring insights of key organisational professionals and volunteers, we examine how the organisation has continued to ensure sector relevance and value by strengthening and diversifying its remits, contributed to civil society solidarity, and positioned itself as a socially progressive actor. Our work is guided by sustainability scholars

(Moldavanova & Goerdal, 2018; Moulaert et al., 2013; Moulaert et al., 2013), and in particular by Vaiou and Kalandides' (2016; 2017) tripartite conceptual model synergising resilience, social innovation and the urban commons.

Specifically, we are drawn to Vaiou and Kalandides (2016, p.464) notion that "the operation of solidarity initiatives seems to create new spaces of congregation and contact among participants - an emerging type of public space, local but also city-wide, and at the same a "laboratory" for a different public sphere'. From such a point it may, we contend, be possible to appreciate not only the Athens Marathon's effectiveness in becoming a conduit for the sector's sustainability ethos, but also illustrate the organisation's (and sport sector more generally) sensitivity to forces that may antagonise continuity and growth.

In taking this focus, our work recognises inherent tensions exist within and across organisations as they individually and collectively seek to pursue sustainability ambitions. Notable in this regard, and as other scholars acknowledge (e.g., Dellenbaugh et al., 2015; Maniates, 2019; Schulenkorf et al., 2019), is the relationship between ensuring economic viability and continuity (particularly in increasingly competitive environments and/or times of resource precarity and uncertainty) *and* the organisation's wider image, reputation and ethical position and practices among the contexts and communities in which it operates. The complexity of the commercial and community dynamics of organisations has historically and extensively been explored as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) debates (in sport, for example, see Millington et al., 2022; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). While research is wide-ranging, there is acknowledgement that CSR is not divorced from, and is often central to, an organisation's priorities; particularly in relation to sustainability and capacity building (Schulenkorf et al., 2019; Strand et al., 2015). Sustainability in general, and according to the United Nations is defined as the ability to balance and meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UN.org, 2023). While much of the focus of sustainability has been placed on the environment and the conservation of natural resources, this forms just one part of the three-part approach to sustainability, which also includes economic and social well-being. The term triple-bottom line has been frequently used to describe the interrelationship between the three facets of sustainability and posits that organisations should seek to make responsible choices and practices that balance environmental, social, and financial considerations to ensure a more equitable and stable future for all living beings on Earth (Holmes et al., 2016). Invariably, sustainability in

this regard entails developing practices, processes *and* values that not only make best use of organisational resources to ensure prosperity and growth into the future but are also commensurate with the prevailing social and moral *zeitgeist*. Here, for an organisation to both survive and thrive effectively it must adopt qualities and traits (and with that relationships, priorities, and work) that enable its routine and longer-term continuity, while at the same time respond to, be proactive towards, and ultimately appease its stakeholders (which may include a wide range of consumers, investors, partners, and participants).

Notwithstanding critiques of the authenticity of CSR and sustainability practices, it stands that organisations have continued to recognise the value of social responsibility as a means toward sustainable futures. Part of which entails investing considerable resource in engaging in multifarious pursuits towards these agendas (in the case of this paper, commitments to community/globally mindful volunteer development and socially conscientious partnerships). While this paper focuses on Athens Marathon as one player in the Greek landscape, this intertwining of CSR and sustainability can also be seen in the substantial and innovative examples of other national peers (e.g., initiatives such as the Bodassaki Foundation's *Social Dynamo* project and the Athens metropolitan government supported *Synathina* venture; *Ethelon's* corporate volunteer programme and platform, *The Hellenic Initiative* (covering crises relief, entrepreneurship and economic development), and *Irida* (who support females at risk)).

Subsequently, this paper aims to: 1) illustrate ways in which the development and practices of the Athens Marathon has contributed to sustainability agendas within Greece's sport sector; 2) examine ways organisational protagonists within the Athens Marathon understand, prioritise and respond to sustainability challenges; and 3) explore how the interplay between resilience, social innovation and an urban commons may provide insight into sport sector strategies toward precarity, change and continuity. We contend that while the Athens Marathon sits as a central organisation within the nation's sport sector, and exists within an environment of opportunity and potential, there remains need to continually appraise its work (and that of its stakeholders) and the wider landscape to ensure individual and collective momentum may be meaningful and maintained. The value of the paper lays in demonstrating how key sport sector organisations not only operate within distinct national and contemporary context, but foregrounding experiences of strategically located professionals who are well-placed to speak to the localized and global sector's needs,

ambitions and futures. We commence with an overview of the conceptual framework and methodology, then offer analysis of the interplays between resilience, social innovation and urban commons within Athens Marathon's sustainability.

Theoretical framework

In examining the Athens Marathon, we draw on conceptualisations of civil society and how they may explain third sector work, development and continuity. Guided by Moulaert et al (2013a), Vaiou and Kalandides (2016; 2017), and Moldavanova and Goerdel (2018) who, variously, have identified how contemporary civil society organisations have strived to adapt to challenges and thrive within the evolving environments. Their examinations highlight the value of sustainability and capacity building for individual organisations and the wider sector, and the interconnectedness of resilience, solidarity, network fortification, and social entrepreneurship. Interrogating the Greek civil society landscape since 2011, Vaiou and Kalandides (2016) noted a proliferation of activities and initiatives emerging to tackle the combined variety of national issues. Building upon this initial conceptualisation, Vaiou and Kalandides (2017) proposed a tri-faceted approach that synergises the concept of social innovation with resilience and urban commons (described below). We recognise the synergy here between sustainability discourse and recent parallel work on social innovation in sport (eg., Tjønndal, 2021) underscoring the value of the space as site for civil society action, collaboration and creativity. We draw upon this conceptual trinity as a way of understanding the intertwined forces and processes that have influenced the Athens Marathon as a space of not only sport sustainability, but of social innovation and civil society action.

Resilience

Within sustainable organisational literature, the concept of resilience has been recognised as a prominent characteristic of management practices and structures; particularly in terms of dealing with day-to-day realities, addressing business needs and objectives, and maintaining longer term momentum towards organisational goals (Hayman 2016; Moldavanova & Goerdel, 2018; Walter & Molgaray, 2021). As Vaiou and Kalandides (2017) propose resilience comprises how organisations and systems can rebalance, or achieve homeostasis/equilibrium, after major external shocks. And, in addition, learn from these

experiences to develop and entrench proactive contingencies strategies, procedures and policies. Notwithstanding limitations the concept has in capturing organisational nuances, and the need to distinguish between 'every-day resilience' (involving resilience beyond emergency situations) and 'persistent resilience' (building up collective effort and enduring strength to withstand future organisational perturbations) (Hayman, 2016; Le Roux & Prestorius, 2016; Pratt & Hayman, 2018), the notion is apparent in organisational vernacular. Additionally, the concept provides means to interpret the relationship between organisations and their external environment (for example, the Athens Marathon flexing in response to the country's civil society needs and the Covid-19 pandemic). Toward sustainability-ends, the presence and enactment of resilience has also been identified as instrumental to organisation risk and crises assessment and mitigation.

We acknowledge here the close overlap to 'crisis management' literature (e.g., Brown-Devlin, 2018; Shipway et al., 2020; Sato; 2015;), and we appreciate that there are elements of crisis mitigation evident within the Greek sport context. Nonetheless, crisis management scholarship has tended to emphasise reactionary elements and focus on maintaining (or restoring) organisational reputation, damage mitigation, and fortifying stakeholder relations to retain credibility, legitimacy, and power. However, such a focus only partially helps explain approaches organisations adopt to sustain practices and construct future plans. Here we recognise resilience within a broader framework of management actions that contribute to individual and collective organisational sustainability. Such conceptualisation is of value in considering how and why entities in Greece, such as the Athens Marathon, have enacted growth and development measures that are advantageous for positioning themselves as a key social actor that contribute to a 'greater good'.

Social innovation

Within national and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and citizen initiatives, Vaiou and Kalandides (2016) noted how groups worked together to devise alternatives to (the decline and absence of) public resources and state services and support (e.g., natural disasters or socio-cultural or economic barriers). To achieve these goals, civil society actors created community-centric coalitions to generate programmes, initiatives and projects that then were mobilised within individual sites and city spaces across the country. Examples include

the philanthropic Bodossaki Foundation's *SocialDynamo* programme, the Athens Municipality's SynAthena programme, and Ethelon (a civil society and volunteer platform). Such practices have been conceptualised by Moulaert et al (2013) as social innovation, which includes "...innovation in social relations [... and] refers not just to particular actions, but also to the mobilisation-participation processes and to the outcome of actions which lead to improvements in social relations" (Moulaert et al., 2013. p.2). We follow Moulaert et al.'s emphasis that the concept can be utilised analytically to inform ways of addressing and resourcing fundamental humanitarian issues and fortifying the social fabric of communities. Furthering the concept in the Greek context, Vaiou and Kalandides (2017) adds that the idea comprises, foremost, organisations working in concert to transform operations to satisfy unmet 'basic' and/or 'alienated' needs within communities and cities, widening engagement of actors in decision-making, empowering individuals, and groups towards citizen action, and improving sector governance.

Recent sport scholarship has also underscored how instrumental forms of innovation have been to the sport sector and, in particular, pursuits of organisational and environmental sustainability (Jones, Wegner, Nols & Tjønndal; 2022; McSweeney et al., 2022; Shipway, Mosey & Symons, 2023; Tjønndal, 2017; Triantafyllidis & Mallen, 2022). Here, Tjønndal (2017) and colleagues' work has provided a framework for understanding how sport and innovation may overlap and, notably, how sport innovation might comprise a dynamic space of partnership, performance, and possibility towards shared sustainability agendas. Sport innovation types, Tjønndal (2017) notes, may entail social, technological, commercial, community-based and organizational aspects (as can be seen in the examples of Athens Marathon discussed shortly). Furthermore, while not always sustainability orientated, sport innovation bears many of the hallmarks evidenced in sustainability discourse; particularly, vis-à-vis institutional change, entrepreneurship, attentiveness to social issues, market influenced change, and unethical practices. Such conceptualisation of social innovation - which also emphasises the value of human interactions, connections and communications centred on empowerment, equality, and social justice –, are taken up in this paper. Ergo, we specifically conceive social innovation as practices within sport that not only bring about needed, desired and meaningful change, but that are orientated around a sense of common/universal ethics.

Urban Commons

The idea of organisations uniting around collective causes is a well-established feature of civil society and sport sector practice. Notably, the notion of a 'commons' has remained prescient as a creative catalytic space for revolutionary, often counter-hegemonic, challenges vis-a-vis ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality, inequality and social justice. However, a 'commons', as various scholars have stressed (Federici, 2018; Harvey, 2011; Theobold, 2018), transcends the functionality of stakeholder networks and constitutes sites of political and social resistance, transformation, justice, action, and creation. Drawing on the work of Harvey (2012) and others, Vaiou and Kalandides (2016) identify a commons as a space that brings together heterogenous multitudes that may challenge and resist the status quo (e.g., established State power and hierarchies), and create more inclusive and alternative models to civil society organisation, democracy and action. While a commons may be forged across large-scale, international/regional, spaces (e.g., *juille-jaunes*, environmental climate change groups, migrant refugee responses, and anti-capitalist initiatives), the urban commons, specifically, focuses on collectives and activities operating at a relatively local level.

In the context of Greek civil society, Vaiou and Kalandides (2016; 2017), and other scholars (Bastian, 2021; Clarke et al., 2016), recognise that the various solidarity initiatives that have emerged in recent years have generated new forms of connection between individuals and organisations. Moreover, that while aided by large philanthropic civil society organisation and pan-European services (e.g., Stavros Niarchos Foundation, Bodossaki Foundation, European Union, Red Cross among others), many national congregations have emerged first from, and been developed at, the micro community level. For example, initiatives driven by local sport clubs, charity groups, churches, social service stakeholders, citizen action groups. In this sense, the urban commons within Athens, and wider Greece, has become a laboratory of sorts in which participants feel relative freedom to explore progressive solutions to their own collective needs (while acting in solidarity with wider issues and causes). An urban commons, thus, is an intersectional dynamic space of the public sphere in which members are not merely participants but actors to greater means and ends. The long-term sustainability of a commons is contingent upon the congruence with the meaningfulness of the relationships, and trust and rapport established, across the organisational network, and processes of negotiation and compromise (Koutrou & Kohe, 2023).

While not always conceptualised using the vernacular of innovation, resilience or commons, there is recognition of the interplay of these dimensions within the intertwined fields of sport and sustainability (Toscano & Molgaray, 2021; Triantafyllidis & Mallen, 2022), sport mega event, and sport (for) development debates (Shipway et al., 2020), and sport management and organisational stakeholder literature (Houlihan and Lindsey, 2009). We also note alignment of scholarship in this area to the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the implementation of these at the local level (UN, 2022). The SDGs are not sport specific, but sport and physical activity has been identified as a key space and mechanism through which the goals may be fulfilled (UN, 2015; 2022). Currently, while not all sport organisations and networks attend to the SDGs in their strategies and/or daily practices, in light of continued local and global issues there is an increasing attention being paid to the themes and groups utilising the goals to align local action to larger causes. The presence and persistence of the SDGs within sector discourse has helped unite and empower sport organisations to collaborate with other sector entities on meaningful and continued humanitarian social actions (including within urban areas such as Athens). Notwithstanding the Athens Marathon is at the start of its alignment to the SDG goals and other socially progressive aspirations, the growing ethos of sustainability is an important feature of context in which it operates, and it warrants examination how such organisation may act as agents and stakeholders within this space.

Research context: The Athens Marathon as space of/for sport sustainability

Although with a genesis dating from Ancient Greece c. 490 BC (Athens Marathon, 2022a), the contemporary Athens Marathon bears the hallmarks of a conventional, modern, and annual mass sporting event. In 1896, Athens hosted the first Olympic Games, and the marathon became a flagship event, and has maintained a place within subsequent Olympic programmes. These origins have provided a rationale to legitimise the establishment and marketing of the Athens Marathon as the 'authentic' long-distance event. During 20th Century, the Athens Marathon remained a small-scale event outside officially sanctioned and recognised events by the IAAF (International Amateur Athletics Federation) (Karadimitriou et al., 2022; Papanikos, 2015). Capitalising on the growing success, and as part of a strategic collaboration by the Hellenic Tourism board, the event transformed in 1972 to the Athens

Classic Marathon. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the event's size, status and historical uniqueness had garnered wider international interest by semi-professional and professional athletes. Increased popularity and capacity led to the event being awarded Gold Label Road Race status in 1983 by the IAAF, and jurisdiction for the event transferred to the Hellenic Athletics Association (SEGAS). While the event expanded over the subsequent two decades, the Athens 2004 Olympics provided a further catalyst for its development, modernisation, and promotion (Karadimitriou et al., 2022; Koutrou & Kohe, 2021; 2022).

To briefly rehearse, the Athens 2004 Olympic Games precipitated a need for the concomitant development of the nation's sport organisations, and the wider civil society sector whose collaboration was needed to fulfil the Games' operational and volunteer objectives and resourcing. Sport organisations, in particular larger entities such as SEGAS - who had consistent experience in large-scale event management and personnel acquisition and deployment –, and civil society organisations (such as NGOs, philanthropic entities) and public services (who could draw upon large cohorts of the local and national population), formed key resources and partnerships that aided Games' delivery. Notwithstanding these ambitions to use the Olympic Games for the country's longer-term sport development, it has been noted there were substantial legacy failings; in particular, lack of investment and plan in sustaining expensive physical infrastructure (e.g., stadia, venues and auxiliary facilities) (Georgiadis, & Theodorikakos, 2016). Beyond this, the Games afforded a further rationale (alongside economic austerity, natural disasters, pan-European refugee and migrant crises, and wider environmental causes) to prioritise and invigorate greater public participation in social, civil, and humanitarian issues (Kaplanidou et al., 2021; Panagiotopoulou, 2010; Scheu et al., 2021). Part of this response entailed efforts to not only better financially and practically resource, and politically support, an increasing cohort of organisations in Greece, but also ensure organisations have the necessary pools of educated and trained, knowledgeable and proficient personnel suitably equipped to support, grow and sustain sector work. Although each organisation may seek to fulfil their own agendas and remit, organisations in Greece have also not been immune to the need to work collectively to respond to prevailing and contemporary global discourses; particularly those related to ecological and humanitarian crises, political and economic stability, social citizenship (Graikioti et al., 2022; Hazakis, 2022; Tzagkarakis et al., 2020).

To these ends, in recent decades there has been evident organisational acknowledgement with Greece of the value of forging alliances to ensure effective resource management. As explored in part of this paper, extending partnerships and collaborations (particularly around common goals and missions), may assist in the organisation diversifying operations and developing entreprenuerial approaches that insure against risk and future adversity, but also that consequently might extend the life of the organisation *and* enable it to have more profound influences upon a collective greater good (at present, vis-a-vis sustainable development, environmentalism, global health and prosperity). In this case, Athens Marathon has annual event delivery at its core, yet the organisation has also been a driver of volunteerism and sport employment. Specifically, it has established a human resource pool of talent and professional skill development opportunities that have extended across sports events, and to activities and collaborations with other sector entities to help address shared global sustainable development priorities. Ultimately, the Athens Marathon is positioned within a context of organisational, national and international activity directed towards wider universal changes (whether, invariably, feasible, realised or idealistic). Moreover, the organisation's management comprise a collective of expertise (whose perspectives are drawn upon within this paper) that has provided strategic vision and guidance within Greece's sport sector as it looks to meet its current and future challenges.

Presently, the Athens Marathon stands as a prestigious fixture within Greece's sport sector and the international athletic landscape that not only focuses on sport but has wider aims, remits and externalities (Athens Marathon, 2022a). In the first instance the organisation provides the governance and strategic direction to facilitate the successful running of the annual Athens Marathon event. The growth of the event (specifically in the post-2004 period) has led to the city being recognised as a successful host site and now provides residence for the world Association of International and Distance Races (AIMS). To resource its operations the organisation receives finances from variety of tiered sponsorship, aid, and grant agreements. This, along with National Federation partners, includes individual grant sponsors, official sponsors (e.g., Adidas, Coca-Cola), and regional/smaller-scale partners. Recent analysis identified that the Athens Marathon social contribution amounted to approximately 3.5million Euro in support of good causes; particularly directed towards socially vulnerable groups. Whereas these partnerships have secured resource for the event,

they have also extended its activities and initiatives in the wider civil society and sport sector by providing a platform for corporate social responsibility and volunteering agendas (Karadimitriou et al., 2022; Papanikos, 2015; Zouni et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the organisation's impact and contribution, its continuity and growth are not assured, and require strategic resource management, careful mediation of external forces, and establishment of productive sport and civil society relationships (Karadimitriou et al., 2022; Papanikos, 2015). As examined in this paper, the sustainability and capacity building potential of Athens Marathon can be understood and explored via the three-faceted interplay between resilience, social innovation, and the urban commons. Such an investigation provides a valuable understanding of the roles that sport mega events and organisations can play in facilitating wider social contributions and outcomes, and evidence examples of creative practices that might aid sector continuity and connectivity. Additionally, a focus on the Marathon builds a deeper theoretical understanding of the entrenched place that human resource investment (and, related volunteerism) has in organisational, sport and civil society sustainability frameworks.

Methodology

Adopting an interpretivist research design, this study adopted a specific organisational and management focus on the Athens Marathon. Mindful of variances in case study conceptualisation (e.g., Cresswell & Clark, 2004; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2003), we were guided by a bounded case study design (Merriam, 1998; Gaya & Smith, 2016). Accordingly, the case study approach is specifically utilised to provide a descriptive, particularistic and heuristic explanation of the sustainable development of the Athens Marathon. The case is first descriptive in its initial detailing of accounts from strategically positioned individuals within the setting who have expressed a breadth of views on the organisation and event development, wider civil society issues and priorities, and the subsequent historical and contemporary connections drawn between the Athens Marathon and wider national and regional sport development. Second, the work is particularistic in its focus on a specific entity within a defined geospatial, political and temporal setting. In this case, the national and metropolitan sport management and civil society culture (e.g., SEGAS and stakeholders within

Athens and Greece) and international sport federation (e.g., AIMS) setting. In addition, the work primarily takes interest in the development of the Athens Marathon in the post-Olympic Games period (2004-2023). Third, fulfilling heuristic criteria the case contributes to current knowledge and critique of how sport organisations and their constituents understand their wider socio-cultural, political and economic roles and remits (in this case, within the discourses and practice of civil society and sustainability rhetoric). The work also offers means to understand connections (or disconnect) between theoretical conceptualisations of sustainability in sport management and practices *in situ*. The case study comprised an investigation of organisation, management and event development experiences of the Athens Marathon as recalled by a cohort of key individuals most closely associated with the phenomenon. Further to professional insider insights, the case was enriched through our long-running work with these and other key sport and civil society stakeholders in the Greek setting, and wider European sport organisation networks. Such a position has, invariably, enabled us to offer a deeper and nuanced interpretation of both context and text.

The case study encapsulated perspectives of 8 professionals internal to the organisation who were best placed to provide insights on Athens Marathon practices and processes, as well as issues related to sustainability, volunteerism, and social responsibility enterprise. These key informants comprised individuals with decision making responsibilities, and operational know-how in the annual organisation of the event including Senior Executives, Senior Volunteer Managers, and established long-term volunteer leaders entrenched within the administrative culture and practices of the organisation *and* strategically connected to wider volunteerism. Moreover, these participants were integral parts of a distinct and closely integrated sport organisational system within the country. As such, they possessed varied perspectives and interpretations of the Athens Marathon contoured by, and unique to, their specific roles, expertise, sector experience and knowledge, career trajectories, personal recollections and current work. A focus on targeted and relevant knowledgeable professionals ('elites') from within the sector is considered appropriate in aiding access to insightful, insider, perspectives that may reveal more nuanced understandings of the organisation than may be revealed by those on the periphery (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Harvey, 2011; Solarino & Aquinis, 2021). We appreciate the need to also consider and examine the roles wider stakeholders within the sector play, and

further examination of these perspective may shed further light on the effectiveness, reception and authenticity of Athens Marathon's position and work in the area. For this research, a primary gatekeeper also provided referral sampling that yielded future key organisational participants who held important strategic positions during the Athens 2004 Games and the subsequent development of the country's sport volunteer landscape. Subsequently, these individuals were well-placed to discuss the continuities/discontinuities and transition of competencies and managerial expertise over the last two decades.

Participants were invited to share their perspectives in semi-structured interviews that were held online due to Covid-19 related public health and safety guidelines and restrictions at the time using virtual technologies such Microsoft Teams and Skype between May to July 2021. The interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The authors' institution provided ethical approval to conduct the study and participants provided informed consent for their participation in the study. Most participants were interviewed in English (which both researchers and participants spoke fluently), with a few exceptions performed in Greek (the primary language of one of the study team members). One member of the research team and an independent translator cross-translate the Greek interviews. Both Greek and English versions of the transcripts were cross-checked for minor differences in translation and meaning and verified to ensure inter-coder reliability. We acknowledge participants' reflections are shaped by the passage of time, affective personal and professional interpretations, information filtering and censoring. All of which, may, distort the accurate depiction of the narrative. Nonetheless, this is countered by a degree of rapport and trust that had been built up with participants over the course of the research, and the assurances to ensure anonymity and confidentiality was protected. Accordingly, organisational positions have been generalised. We acknowledge here, and are sensitive in our analysis, also to our own preferences to emphasise particular phenomenon features within the framing. Notwithstanding these limitations in data and analysis, there is value in this interpretivist approach in enabling participants' experiences to be articulated in ways and words meaningful to them and to how they understand their previous and current position within the phenomena.

The interview schedule included questions about the emergence of the contemporary Athens Marathon, its strategic position and establishment within the sport event sector in Greece, challenges and opportunities faced, organisational capacity, alignment to wider civil society agendas, sustainability plans and future developments. Interviews were also contextualised against an examination of academic research, website data, national sport reports and other publicly available reports and materials (e.g. Chatziefsthatiou, 2014), which were consulted to inform discussions and provide a holistic account of the Athens Marathon ecosystem (as acknowledged in the contextual section above). Useful sources here include the SEGAS (Social responsibility SEGAS - SEGAS) Athens Marathon organisation website (https://www.athensauthenticmarathon.gr/), national sport-focused resources (e.g., SEGAS, https://www.segas.gr/; Runners' World magazine, https://runnermagazine.gr), National media sources (e.g., https://www.businessnews.gr, https://www.tanea.gr/), tourism and civil society related publications (e.g., https://money-tourism.gr/).

Each researcher individually analysed the transcripts and identified key units of information pertinent to the study objectives. In organising the data we recognise that our readings and interpretations have limitations, are informed by our work as interdisciplinary researchers drawing upon sociology, management, development and sustainability studies, and that other narratives and elucidations from the data are possible. The generated themes around organisational sustainability and civil society partnerships and networks, drew us towards Vaiou and Kalandides (2017) intertwined framework of resilience, social innovation and urban commons to organise, illustrate and interpret Athens Marathon stakeholders' perceptions, actions and interactions (Moldvanova & Goerdel, 2018; Purdy et al., 2021).

Discussion

Reflecting the Athens Marathon's reliance on a substantive volunteer human resource pool, one specific focal area has been the establishment of the organisation's volunteer programme. The aims of which are to enhance social sustainability (aligning the organisation and the programme in fulfilling a variety of civic needs and missions) by raising and strengthening community awareness, engagement, and collaboration. The event currently

recruits approximately 2000 individuals to its volunteer programme (Athens Marathon, 2023). Through the programme the organisation provides educational opportunities, social networks and a community, and industry connections. As noted in civil society, urban development and sport volunteering work, the existence of this infrastructure not only benefits the immediate event or social need, but also may afford a space to catalyse other activities beyond (Giannoulakis et al., 2017; Hayman, 2016). To this end, Vaiou and Kalandides' (2016; 2017) threefold model focusing on resilience, social innovation and the urban commons provides a useful means of understanding the sustainability of sport organisations; particularly those that seek to engage in remits beyond just delivering the logistics of a sport event just for sport's sake.

Resilience

Experience hosting the 2004 Olympic Games and other sport events afforded some sport professionals new insights into sector management and organisation. Games delivery forced not only close collaborations, but also enabled the building of individual and organisational capacities and strategies to cope with inadvertent pressures and adversities. In the post-Olympic Games period, when professionals moved on to other sport or civil sector agencies, and economic austerity prevailed, such resilience remained of value. While conceptualisation of resilience may have differed among individuals, as evident below, the notion appeared to entail enacting learning(s) from the past, degrees of reaction and pro-action, adaptability, flexibility, challenging the status quo (e.g., shifting entrenched Greek cultural attitudes to management and volunteering), and resource management. Regarding trying to learn from the past, and avoiding regression to 'the old ways', participants noted the Games afforded opportunities to counter the country's lagging volunteerism, and sport and third sector scepticism (Bastian, 2021; Bustad, 2021; Chatziefstathiou, 2014; Koutrou & Kohe, 2022; Rozakou, 2016), and that volunteerism could be utilised as an effective resource to make other sport events more robust. As sector professionals noted,

> 'We had the Games. Some things changed, but over time people went back to what is known and what they were familiar with…those that believed in change had to be resilient in terms of promoting and doing things in a different way…' (Senior Executive B, Athens Marathon)

> ‘For the first years, we went and tried to use all this knowledge, and we had experience to develop projects. Then Greece, after 2010, went into the economic crisis, and for 7, 8 years was a step away from bankruptcy. So, the good thing, not everywhere, but for this team and me, despite the crisis and everything that was happening in Greece, we excelled. We did very well, we developed. The economy was going down, we were going up and that was one of the good things….’ (Senior Executive A, Athens Marathon)

One key area within Athens Marathon’s resilience related to fortification of the volunteer programme through enhancing and professionalising volunteer management structures (e.g., establishment of volunteer databases, creation of job descriptions and roles, and formulation of policies and procedures to better recognise and protect volunteers).

> ‘I don't think there was such a thing, like organised volunteering then [before the Games] …it did not exist. After the Games, there started to be real volunteering and most of the volunteers that I met in the original marathon started with the training that they did in 2004. Trust me most of the races since then have been with a lot of people who were in 2004 Olympics, and with all the training most of them had received since 2004’ (Athens Marathon, Volunteer Manager)

For those involved, efforts went beyond a laissez-faire legacy rhetoric that assumed organisational effects would trickle-down and be automatic. Rather, forging more robust volunteer management structures enmeshed with the wider agency of professionals within the organisation to generate more robust practices. Here, energies were directed to not only using prior learning to help navigate change, but also foster a positive organisational culture and collaboration to build strength and capacity around specific goals and priorities. “The Athens Marathon was a good example how an organisation (and network) could work”, one participant noted,

> “…we could use this kind of legacy, knowledge, international relations, and mentality…and combine it in order to take the Athens Marathon legacy forward. However, the challenge in developing and sustaining the Athens Marathon legacy (and

the volunteer culture it supported) was in dealing with the challenging relationships with the parent athletic federation, and the need for the event to establish its own governance, autonomy, and legitimacy" (Senior Executive A, Athens Marathon)

The organisation was able to lay some effective foundations for resilience that helped them endure Greece's subsequent crises, and efforts contributed to organisational momentum as the event grew and the remits extended into civil society and socially progressive agendas. As expressed in the excerpts below, enacting resilience, nonetheless, was hard work.

"In trying to do so [develop more professional volunteer infrastructure], I came across a lot of objections, and many times I refused to make announcements or take actions that would go against my values and would burn the volunteers out…I went on to propose a show register, and half of the Team Leaders were like 'leave us alone now, we have other things to do'. There are generally a lot of uneducated people (in Greece), who do not understand the value of this. Only one colleague believed in the value of this proposition, and you will see in this Marathon edition in November how the programme will proceed and what will happen" (Athens Marathon, Volunteer Manager)

Adverse cultural attitudes towards, and misunderstanding about, sport, conjoined with the emerging Covid-19 public health crises, presented Athens Marathon leaders with additional challenges (Bustad, 2021; Karadimitriou et al., 2022; Zouni et al., 2021). Paradoxically, the challenges also fostered a tenacity among some individuals to work harder to fortify the organisation and ensure its (immediate) continuity and sustainability. As participants noted, while sport may have been still important, amid the crises sector spaces posed issues for mass viral transmission, *and* hosting sport events was not deemed to be a national priority.

"I don't think there is a problem mentality out there for people to talk to them about organising major events. It's more like the mentality right now of survival and stability. I mean, people are willing to get stability to survive. And then they will start thinking

about, um, especially sports, which is not the primary section of the economy for development.' (Senior Executive B, Athens Marathon)

While individual interpretations of the period may vary, the reflections indicate notions of resilience as a central thread of a collective organisational narrative. Whereas resilience may generate as an intangible part of organisation culture overtime, as participants indicate, here its enactment and practice was not necessarily a given, or developed without tension (Brown-Devlin, 2018; Moldavanova & Goerdel, 2018; Shipway et al., 2020).

'Greek people had very bad and hard times after 2010 until even today, and when we said, okay, we're okay now, we overcame, somehow, the economic crisis, and are back on the right road. And then the pandemic came, and here you go again. We're now try again to survive…. To see that there is light at the end of the tunnel, that if you work well, even the crisis cannot stop you to see if we reset our minds, we can all together overcome the hard times.' (Senior Executive B, Athens Marathon)

Conceptualisations of resilience here are invariably borne from an intertwining of Greece's predominant crisis response mode, entrenched cultural assumptions about the civil sector, and a strong belief in sports humanitarian and social capacities. Whether real or imagined, this ideological trinity provides a foundation upon which Athens Marathon stakeholders rationalise their work and direct energies and resources to ensure growth and sustainability. Notably, there appears to be acknowledgement that the Athens Marathon has been a leader in the post-Olympic landscape and, moreover, that the challenges, conflicts, and tensions it encounters are the precipitators of organisational adaptability, change and innovation (Karadimitriou et al., 2022; Zouni et al.,2021). In this sense, the Athens Marathon is reflective of sector peers who, amid contextual crises and perennial uncertainties, possess the capacities to appropriately, and proactively, position and/or transform themselves to remain viable and relevant (Brown-Devlin, 2018; Lindsey, 2008; Pratt & Hayman, 2016). Yet, such requires, as the next section explores, an appreciation, commitment, and attenuation to innovation.

Social Innovation

As part of its sustainability efforts, the Athens Marathon teams have acknowledged the necessity of the organisation transcending its remits beyond sport event delivery towards socially progressive aspirations. To do so has required a proactive approach to understand local attitudes and enact strategic policy development, implementation and resource allocation that is specifically directed towards innovations that meet wider agendas, engage more people, and reach and reflect wider community needs.

> 'In order to develop and change, you need to have a vision, long-term goals, to have the right strategies, be very disciplined, to have a plan and follow it. And be very disciplined in following the plan. You need time to produce results…we had the vision; we had long-term goals. We had proper strategies, we had good projects, and a nice plan for each one of them.' (Senior Executive, Athens Marathon)

Pivotal to this process was an ideological and practical step-change adapting event marketing to emphasise physical activity and health promotion and cultivating in citizens ways of seeing the space as a site of civil society involvement and investment.

> 'In 2019, the 4300 runners became 60,500 participants culminating the work of 15 years of a team and legacy of the Olympics with a proper strategy, attitude, and leadership. We got in an event with just one sponsor and 200,000 euros and now the sponsorship programme is close to 2 million euros. We had an event that the spectators and the community participating was just a few people except the runners. And nowadays, they are more than 50,000 people that they are part of this event as spectators and volunteers…We had an event where we shared only a few thousand euros, now we managed in 2019 to contribute to the charities around Athens in Greece with more than 2 million euros.' (Senior Executive B, Athens Marathon)

The organisation's growth provided it a larger participant base from which it was then able to leverage more financially lucrative stakeholder investment, and these new revenue streams afforded opportunities for broader social responsibility initiatives. To note, the positive urban, social and financial aspects of the event development and its legacy have also become

important in the contemporary marketing and public relations. As both the Athens Marathon and SEGAS websites evidence:

> "From the year 2011 onwards, OPAP S.A., the leading gaming operator in Greece and one of the major corporations in Greece and Europe, has been nominated Grand Sponsor of the event and its valuable support led to the significant upgrade of the race in all aspects. Thousands of runners from all over the world are expected to participate in every year's race. Apart from the sporting experience, they will have the chance to enjoy the traditional Greek hospitality, discover the fascinating landscape of our country and explore a city which is constantly improving its standards."
>
> (athensauthenticmarathon.gr, Accessed 17 November 2022)

> "After the successful return to racing action in 2021, SEGAS moves forward and draws up a new strategy with the broader purpose of "embracing" society and acting as a strong vehicle of solidarity! In the last 5 years, SEGAS, driven by the dynamics of the two largest running events in the country (Athens Half Marathon & Marathon), has collaborated directly with about 35 different Non-Governmental Organizations covering a wide range of social and not only actions in Greece and abroad."
>
> (Social responsibility SEGAS - SEGAS, Accessed 24 November 2022)

The effects have also been noted more widely too. As national media outlet *Tanea* illustrated:

> "Based on this participation, the direct economic impact of foreign and Greek visitors to Attica is enormous. From 2010 onwards, the foreign exchange that the Marathon brings in every year exceeds 10,000,000 euros. More generally, SEGAS research in recent years shows that for every euro spent/invested by the Greek state (2009: 140,000 euros, 2010: 190,000 euros, 2013: 180,000 euros, 2016: 250,000 euros) of Athens, the institution returns to the country's economy from 20 to 30 euros, without counting the indirect economic impact of the organization…The social contribution of the Athens Marathon through the Social Responsibility Program of SEGAS is also impressive, which is addressed to Non-Governmental Organizations,

giving them the opportunity to use the race itself, both as a means of raising awareness among the general public regarding the purposes and their work as well as a platform to raise money and resources to realize their goals. In 2016 alone, the social footprint of the organization reached 3,500,000 euros!"

(How the 4,000 entries became 50,000 - TA NEA, 23 June 2017, Accessed 1 February, 2022)

Economic innovation aside, Athens Marathon leaders believed that the organisation's social investments could be progressed by generating a more intangible shift in peoples' mindset towards exercise, community, and social bonding.

'We did not invest money ourselves. What we did is we thought that there was a market out there, which was dormant. So, people actually were looking for someone to motivate them to do that. So, the market, we developed it, but we had prospective clients, prospective customers. So, we had people that we knew that with a proper vision and plan, these people will become clients, meaning runners, because we developed an increase of runners, but we knew that out there, there was not a running community and running mentality in Greece. And people were saying, Greeks will never run. We did not believe that.' (Senior Executive B, Athens Marathon)

'We did not develop only the Athens Marathon and the related events. We knew that if we're going to develop only the Athens Marathon, that will not be enough for us to survive in the long term. We [needed to] use the development of the Athens market as a vehicle to develop a running community and running market in Greece. And so far, it seems like we did very well.' (Senior Executive B, Athens Marathon)

Central to this development was connecting to international and regional priorities (e.g., social responsibility and sustainability goals). Such positioning formed part of the organisation's vision to simultaneously grow sponsorship and building volunteer recruitment.

As one participant noted, highlighting the synergy between these two organisational objectives,

> 'The vision for us is to become one of the top 10 marathons by 2026, either business, size, income, sponsorship or impact-wise to society. So having this plan, we thought about how to develop the infrastructure to allow more registration and make international projects. So, we raise money not only from the local market, [but also] from the international market'. (Senior Executive B, Athens Marathon)

As one volunteer manager noted, this openness to new ideas has included learning from other international settings (e.g., drawing on innovations from the USA and wider Europe to establish a digital volunteer recruitment and management database/platform). Most substantially this development has led to a social responsibility programme with approximately 35 charities and corporate sponsors (Athens Marathon, 2022b). As noted in the *Businessnews.gr* (Asimakopoulos, 2016)*:*

> Η ηγεσία του ΣΕΓΑΣ έκανε το αυτονόητο, που δυστυχώς η υπόλοιπη χώρα και ιδίως οι κυβερνήσεις της δεν το έκαναν. **Σκέφτηκε καταρχήν να αξιοποιήσει τη διεθνή προβολή της χώρας από την επιτυχία των Ολυμπιακών Αγώνων και συγχρόνως να αξιοποιήσει την κληρονομιά του 2004 σε στελέχη και τεχνογνωσία**. Αυτό από μόνο του βεβαίως δεν θα έφθανε, εάν ή ίδια η ηγεσία του ΣΕΓΑΣ δεν **ήταν αρκετή σοφή και συνειδητοποιημένη για να σκεφθεί ότι κάθε πετυχημένο project χρειάζεται πρώτα από όλα αυτοπειθαρχία και σωστή διοικητική πρακτική από την ίδια**

The programme offers varied levels of charity partnership (depending on charities' priorities, resources, and intentions), and has a predominant emphasis on donor-recipient organ and transplant support, severe life-threatening/intensive care conditions, or vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals. Partners include: ActionAid Hellas; Amnesty International; Greek Society for the Protection of Autistic People (EPPA); Steps Forward for the Child with Disability; Exelixi Zois (a children's rights organisation); Shedia Street Paper (charity that support disadvantaged and homeless people) among others.

Ultimately, the Athens Marathon provides a physical and digital public platform through the event promotion to charities to draw attention to their respective causes, fundraise, attract their own volunteers, *and* offer opportunities for athletes to connect to specific charities and run on their behalf. Whereas the organisation rehearses those popularised by other Marathon organisations (e.g., London and Boston), in Greece such efforts are innovative as they challenge pre-existing connections and ideas about the role of sport events, and sport more generally, as a legitimate space through which to advance civil society causes. Moreover, the programme builds upon continued social and cultural shifts in the country to build wider appreciations of charity work and volunteer, and challenge negative perceptions of civil society organisations (Bastian, 2021; Bustad, 2021; Grakioti, et al., 2020). This social responsibility programme also harmonises with the organisation's volunteer programme that allows external organisations (for example, Schools and University department's staff and students, and existing citizen groups, such as the Red Cross and Scouts) to formulate their own volunteer groups for charity and join the Marathon event. As a key civil society sector leader outlines below, the work of the Athens Marathon has been well-positioned within, and contributes effectively to, the aider zeitgeist of collective partnership to advance urban and community change within the city:

> 'In many cases there was no other solution other than use the capacity and the presence of community groups to respond to city challenges…this led to different types of solutions for the city, different types of governmental innovation. Experiments you know to share decision making.' (Senior Metropolitan Politician & Civil Society Organization Leader)

Reflecting wider sport organisational shifts towards environmental sustainability, the Athens Marathon volunteering programme includes engagement of volunteers with environmental actions and initiatives. One initiative comprises organisational volunteers forming their own 'green teams' in the lead up and during the event to collect and recycle all items during and after the race (specifically, collecting used apparel, recycling and reducing single-use plastics, and promoting zero waste). In principle, the green teams, working as agents of social change, contribute to the organisation's aim of carbon neutrality, and in so doing, assist its part within the country's and region collective sustainable development goals

(Athens Marathon, 2023). Further ventures also include partnerships forged with the United Nations Environment branch to raise awareness about the shared commitments to the Mediterranean Action Plan that aims to enhance the physical environment and more broadly promote regional sustainable development (Athens Marathon, 2023). While longer term outcomes and continuity of these initiatives needs monitoring, at present they appear advantageous in framing the event in a way in which people may see benefits of collaboration, would want to unify around a common ideal, and shared vision about the power of sport's wider values.

Urban commons

Building from resilience and social innovation, Athens Marathon organisers realised early on the value of working together in ways characteristic to an urban commons (Moulaert et al., 2013; Vaiou & Kalandides, 2016; 2017). As reflections below highlight, there was a strong moral conviction among participants towards the social, civil, and global significance of their collective goals. While not necessarily aware of the tenets of an urban commons, stakeholders evidently recognised the value of unity and endeavoured to build understanding, trust, and mutual respect in and through Athens Marathon's social initiatives.

> 'We had to develop ways of working together, to find common ground for the successful delivery of the event and supporting the city and country's wider need and consolidate resources to strengthen each other individually and in pursuit of common goals'. (Senior Executive, Athens Marathon)

To this end, it became clear to Athens Marathon organisers that the external facing visibility of the volunteer programme, and its capacity to draw in diverse cohorts, represented a key socially ambitious space in which to foster meaningful collective action. With its emphasis on using event and sport engagement to generate awareness of local-to-global issues, the programme also represented an opportunity to develop acceptance and recognition of volunteer cultures within civil society remits.

> 'The success of the Games gave us a lot of bonds…so the first years were all trying to see how we can use the legacy of the Games, how to use all these volunteers that were hungry to offer more and do more…' (Senior Executive, Athens Marathon).

Reflecting the diversity and inclusion of the commons, in which non-conventional, informal, and cross-sectional partnerships can emerge in times of need and flourish (Kallman & Clark, 2016; Pratt & Hayman, 2016; Vaiou & Kalandides, 2016; 2017), the programme also constituted a space of interaction, knowledge transfer and dissemination, and sector dialogue. Echoing the organic nature of post-Olympic volunteer development in Greece (Chatziefstathiou, 2014; Koutrou & Kohe, 2022), ad-hoc and serendipitous connections to the Games also helped fertilise initial points of commons contact.

> 'Most of the volunteers I had met in the authentic marathon started with the training they had from Athens 2004, and the Games had influenced a lot of aspects, which some we continued, others not, others were good to keep and continue'. (Volunteer Programme Manager).

Initial bonds and connections were useful, but insufficient in providing solid foundations for continued action. Strengthening the commons environment, subsequently, required creating appropriate structures and effective resourcing to accommodate members' interactions and participation. This, for example, entailed Athens 2004 volunteers creating an officially registered group [Continuator Volunteers of Athens 2004] to catalyse the volunteer ethos, propel further social actions, and, additionally, partner with Athens Marathon organisers, sport federations and civil society groups. Signalling their trajectories on and through the commons, participants reflected,

> 'I randomly met one of the Marathon Volunteer Managers. I think I mentioned to her at some point that I was a volunteer in 2004 and she asked me, 'why don't you start it again?'...it has become a big event and since then we have bonded very well with the partners there'. (Repeat Olympic, Athens Marathon and Sport Sector Volunteer).

> 'I don't know whose initiative it was. Basically, to put it another way, in the Athens Marathon there is a very specific core of ongoing volunteers who help every year. I don't know how that happened. If they met again in the Athens Marathon or in another sporting event and then they thought, 'it would be very nice to build a club [Continuator Volunteers of Athens 2004]' or when the Olympics finished, they

> thought, ‘so as not to lose each other, let's do the club and then see how it goes’. (Repeat Olympic, Athens Marathon and Sport Sector Volunteer).

As Vaiou and Kalandides (2016; 2017), and others (eg., Agustín, & Jørgensen, 2018; Theobold, 2018) note, the commons can be a complex site of action involving multiple stakeholders, purposes, and projects. Nonetheless, although a chaotic space, there are still forms of leadership and direction that emerge as particular agents (who may possess political status, power, or resource) guide commons activity. Herein, and aided by its annual regularity, size and institutional competency, the Athens Marathon positions itself as a commons protagonist. As evidenced below, there is a strong belief among the organisation’s leaders regarding its central role in the space, and its effectiveness in forging networks, deploying and unify well-equipped people around a shared vision and goals. In doing so, the Athens Marathon embodies a similar commons position and organisational network leadership nous to its Greek civil society (e.g., *Social Dynamo*, Bodossaki Foundation, Stavros Niarchos Foundation, Levindas) and international sport body peers (e.g., International Olympic Committee, European Non-Governmental Sport Organisation [ENGSO], FIFA). As one Athens Marathon Senior Executive (A) articulated:

> ‘We had a good vision and plan, and the background experience of organising properly, and successfully, the Olympics, we convinced by that time people outside sports, like sponsors to invest in our vision and in our team’.

Echoing this assertion, a fellow Senior Executive (B) team member noted, “Then [we had] very disciplined professionals, with good leadership skills to carry on with that and to allow us to work…So it's all about working together. But, you know, uh, if I had to choose one of all of them, I will say we were very disciplined.”

Recalling the need for resilience within the space, and reflecting Mouleart et al. (2013) and Vaiou and Kalandides’ (2016; 2017) arguments that the commons may not be a space of linear progressive, planned development, and positive ‘end-points’, Athens Marathon leaders were also confronted by, and mindful about, the need for agility and adaptability. In the most immediate sense, surviving and thriving in a ‘post’-Covid19 pandemic era.

> ‘We feel like we have a vision, we have a new plan to go further, but we don't right now, stand on the same ground that we were at the end of 2019. We feel like we have moved a little bit backwards. Should we just plan to get back to where we were, and then to keep moving. It's kind of this period that someone pushed us back. So, thinking instead of even going forward, our goal is to be now whatever we were at the end of 2019’. (Senior Executive B, Athens Marathon).

Rehearsing aspects of Bustad’s (2021) critique of sport, crises and popularism in Greece, there was notable tension within the commons whereby some individuals were critical of Athens Marathon organisation in sustaining volunteering, and believed, invariably, other entities were perhaps better equipped to propel the nation’s volunteer culture. As a cohort of key volunteer participants’ sentiments below demonstrate:

> ‘Lack of funding has led to erosion of the ability to sustain the volunteer base’.

> ‘The athletic system deters participation of volunteers. Athletic dinosaurs [senior staunchly conservative administrators] have had a negative impact’.

> ‘Some people sometimes believe that volunteers are their ‘SLAVES’ and this is due to lack of training, the volunteer offers their time for a good cause, and I would say sport organisations should respect and applaud these people’.

Nonetheless, participants appeared to recognise the Athens Marathon’s central role, and saw an ongoing need to ensure the continuity, and diversification, of resources directed towards sustaining volunteer activities. As indicated below, there was a sense among participants that investment on technologies could aid volunteer network development, education and promotion activities.

> ‘From the state, I do not think volunteering culture could be enhanced because there is no such thing in the Greek mentality...The only one who could really create a volunteer program right now is some type like [Stavros] Niarchos Foundation who would be smart enough to get a platform that starts crowdfunding and loans volunteers to any other programs. If SEGAS, with its large numbers of athletes and

volunteers, was smart, it would have made the best program and loan [volunteers] to the rest of the world'. (Volunteer Participant and Programme Manager).

'In 2018, I attended a university workshop organised by [a digital technology specialist]. I talked to him and then I presented it [a digital volunteer platform] to SEGAS and they ignored me because it was too costly. 3000 euros was too much money to invest in a platform, despite this being an innovative tool that would've made volunteer management easier'. (Volunteer Participant and Programme Manager).

Notwithstanding critiques, and arguably reflecting their senior leadership positions and organisational investments, there remains a strong sense in the altruistic and synergistic value of commons membership and growth and capacity of the volunteer network.

'Some, we stayed with the Athens Marathon team…[others] went back to their businesses to develop new [volunteer and civil society] projects. Some went back to their Federations to use this knowledge to develop their own sports. In our case, we joined the Athletics Federation, and we took responsibility for this historic project [the authentic Athens Marathon]'. (Senior Executive A, Athens Marathon).

'The Marathon helped Greek society to believe in itself, to see that there is light at the end of the tunnel, to see that if you work well, even the crisis cannot stop you…We can altogether overcome the hard times because of the economic crisis, the social crisis, and now this new international health-related crisis'. (Senior Executive B, Athens Marathon).

Ultimately, the perspectives here illustrate recognition for an interplay between aspects of resilience, social innovation and urban commons within the context of Greek sport, event and wider volunteer development. In doing so, participants' experiences point to ways in which this conceptual trinity may also contribute to organisational longevity, survivability and thrivability.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the Athens Marathon, there is merit in not only widening organisations' social responsibility remits, but in also adopting a sector leadership position within the landscape. In this, Athens Marathon management have simultaneously begun to address their sustainability needs and those of the sport sector more generally by providing continuity of its presence, and strategically exercised its organisational power, political resources and stakeholder gravitas to orchestrate a productive and progressive commons space. With entities like the Athens Marathon at the core, the commons comprises potentially a more inclusive site that maintains its sport features and foci yet has forged new contours by enveloping a greater emphasis on social causes. Contiguous with the conceptualisations offered by sustainability and commons scholars (Dellenbaugh et al., 2015; Ferguson, 2015; Huron, 2015; Moulaert et al., 2013; Theobold, 2018), Athens Marathon's work upon Greece's sport and civil society landscape has been precipitated by crises that have necessitated resilience, ideological and practical alignment of stakeholders, and innovative resource sharing and creative enterprise. It is within this interstitial space – between State and market – that a distinct commons, as both metaphysical and physical, has taken shape.

Whereas Athens Marathon still operates under Greek State laws, and remains beholden to sponsorship arrangements, this balance does not appear to have inhibited its leaders' social vision and reach. Athens Marathon's connections with an increasingly diverse cohort of partners also aligns it with other civil society peers in Greece who have exerted considerable vigour in forging cross-sector stakeholder networks, democratising resources, and their distribution, and diversifying conventional remits (Bastian, 2021; Clarke et al., 2016; Shutes & Ishkanian, 2022). Athens Marathon leaders have also been tenacious and possessed foresight and acumen transforming the event beyond the performative spectacle. Rehearsing Vaiou and Kalandides (2016; 2017), such resilience may be considered fundamental to how the organisation ensures sustainability, and as part of this, makes it possible to engage in innovative social projects. In developing a social programme, particularly one orientated around securing a substantive, well-trained and socially conscious volunteer workforce, the Athens Marathon constitutes a significant contributor to the country's urban commons (Rozakou, 2016).

Theoretically, conceptual schemas such as those offered by Vaiou and Kalandides (2016) provide valuable foundational points upon which to interrogate civil society spaces,

actors and actions. In this regard, our work points to the Athens Marathon as an archetypal (if albeit evolving and imperfect) transformative sector stakeholder that has utilized its popularity in the nation's cultural psyche to inhabit a strategic position at the confluence of sport, civil society and global social responsibility debate and practice. Whereby the Athens Marathon's position echoes that of other sport organisations, its role in Greece and Athens metropolis takes on gravitas amid the country's continued 'crises-and-response' narratives (Hazakis, 2022). Here, importantly, it is possible to move beyond seeing the Athens Marathon as an event *in* the city/a specific city *per se*, but rather commons theorizing enables a deeper understanding and appreciation of the event *of and for* 'the city'; a transcendental space that goes beyond geopolitical confines and entertains new forms of stakeholder connectivity, creativity and critical action (Karadimitriou et al., 2022). In intangible respects, empowering young people and others to become community change makers, advocating greater public participation in sport and wider political projects and democracy, and connecting local citizens to wider global responsibilities. Accordingly, the Athens Marathon is in synergy with the dearth of sport organisations around the world that have continued to demonstrate the roles sport can play in shared sustainability and development goals (Schulenkorf, 2016; 2017; Giulianotti et al., 2019).

We acknowledge that framing the Athens Marathon and the Greek sport sector as socially progressive and transformative may be somewhat idealistic (and vary from daily realities). In addition, we accept a commons orientated around sustainability ideals, is not always a harmonious space in which forces, ideas, organisations and priorities connect in amiable or productive ways. Moreover, and as noted elsewhere (Augustin & Jørgensen, 2018; Frantzeskaki, et al., 2016; Kallman & Clark, 2016), the commons is a dynamic and crowded space in which multiple actors vie for power, resource, attention, audiences and priorities. Accordingly, while Athens Marathon may be a current paragon of sustainable virtue, its existence is not *au fait accompli*, uncontested by, or without deleterious effects upon, other commons constituents. For example, in this case, how it decides which stakeholders to partner with, what priorities and aims volunteer and civic initiatives have, ways resources are distributed, and how recognition (and, at times blame and fault) may be apportioned and attributed. The organisation may have clearly outlined its commitment to social responsibility, and can evidence its 'successful' actions, yet there may be unknowable and/or

hidden aspects to the commons that are irretrievable and may yet reveal additional nuances or counterpoints to the sustainability narrative Athens Marathon leaders offer in this paper. Questions, too, remain regarding how fellow commons stakeholders perceive this work, and how its characteristics might change over time. Critical reading of the commons and caveats notwithstanding, as far as the Athens Marathon ventures are concerned, the notion of a commons appears to work on practical and conceptual levels in unifying stakeholders around ideas, values and priorities that are deemed to be important and meaningful to those inhabiting the space.

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