

# A review of the level of good governance in international sport federations

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## ABSTRACT

The importance of increasing regulation in this field in all socio-economic areas, including the sport sector, and major pressure on the traditional autonomous hierarchical networks of the sport world done by governments, mainly due to the commercialisation of sport, have forced all major sports bodies and associations representing the sports industry to join this initiative of improving their good governance. A qualitative and quantitative study of the 35 Olympic ISFs has been carried out following the OGD - SGO index tool in 4 areas of improvement. The results allow to conclude that there is still a weakness in the control structures with a need to focus on the dimensions of democracy and checks and balances which are the weakest. There is also a lack of agreement on a standardised way to assess the good governance of sport entities that must be addressed and improved urgently.

**Keywords:** Sport; Good governance; International federations; Olympic sports; Management.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is clearly accepted that sport is a public good that fulfils important social, educational, cultural and health-related functions in modern societies. In addition to improving public health through physical activity, sport has the potential to transmit values, contribute to economic and social integration and cohesion, and provide recreation (European Commission, 2007). Sport thus enables millions of Europeans to learn the value of fair play and the importance of rules, and to develop respect for others. Sport entities, which still rely heavily on public funding, must set a positive example by taking measures for the integrity of their activity (Schenk, 2011).

Nowadays, the European Union does not have a strong sports competence, there is a joint effort between European Council, Commission and Parliament to act along the same lines regarding interventions in the sports sector, especially the professional field. Since the 1990s the EU has understood the importance of increasing regulation in this field in all socio-economic areas, including the sport sector. All major sports bodies and associations representing the sports industry have joined this initiative, from the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF) and all associated International Sport Federations (ISFs), as well as at a more national level with the National Sports Federations (NSFs).

### ***Governance and its conceptualisation in sport***

Definitions of governance depend to a large extent on the research perspectives of academics or the phenomenon under study. A part of state authorities, governance also includes non-governmental and informal mechanisms, allowing non-institutional actors to participate in the analysis of social direction (Rosenau, 1992; Lemos and Agrawal, 2006). In that sense, the notion of governance through so-called governance networks, used to describe the formulation and implementation of public policies through a network of relationships between state, market and civil society actors, has gained prominence in the governance literature in the last years (Klijn 2008).

The term governance has been presented as an attractive alternative for the migration from traditional vertical models to ones that involve more and better participation of all sectors or so-called horizontal models. This is the trend in pioneering countries in the implementation of these new policies, especially in Europe, which for years has been trying to decentralise sport administration and give more autonomy to the communities themselves (Cucaita, 2019).

In the last decades, international institutions have developed good governance indicators checklists at national and international levels (UNDP 1997; EU 2001; OECD 2004; WB 2005; IMF 2007). They have factors with key principles as accountability, efficiency, effectiveness, predictability, sound financial management, anti-corruption and transparency. Besides, when referring to the political area, they may also include participation and democratisation, as a democratic environment (Santiso, 2001).

International Non-Governmental Sport Organisations (INGSO) are the governing organisations or bodies of sport, as they are at the top of a pyramid of vertical hierarchy of commands, ranging from continental, national and local organisations. This hierarchical structure has sometimes been labelled undemocratic, as those at the bottom of the chain (clubs and athletes) who wish to participate in network competitions are subject to the rules and regulations of the governing bodies, often without being able to influence them (Geeraert et al, 2012). In fact, for almost a century, the sport network has been able to exercise its self-governance without

any significant interference from states or other actors with full political autonomy, trying to avoid state interference in its activities (Forster and Pope, 2004; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011).

Today, the autonomous hierarchical networks of the traditional sport world are increasingly facing attempts by governments, mainly due to the huge commercialisation of sport, to interfere in their political processes (Bruyninckx, 2012; Geeraert et al, 2012). Although we have already indicated that good governance is a complex concept, when looking at the corporate, public, non-profit and sport sector, we can state that the principles of good governance are very similar in all these sectors. However, it seems that the process of governance reform in sport is particularly challenging due to a few factors inherent to the sector (Von Eberhardt and Van Kleef, 2016).

However, recently, the quality of INGSO self-governance has increasingly come into question due to that level of commercialisation of sport, with fragrant cases of corruption and bribery, which have subjected sport to the most greedy and predatory forms of global capitalism (Andreff, 2008; Sugden, 2002; Henry & Lee, 2004). This development, which reflects the growing influence of INGSOs in what had once been almost exclusively matters of state policy (Weiss, 2000) and has the potential of a substantial impact with negative repercussions on society at large.

The IOC Sport Governance Observatory provides a useful tool composed of 4 important dimensions related to good governance (transparency and public communication, democratic process, checks and balances, and solidarity). Sports organisations face increased demands for social, ethical and environmentally responsible behaviour and are also offered significant opportunities to establish themselves in this respect (Babiak, 2010). Public coffers pay for the construction of sports stadiums, public transport infrastructure, public television contracts to acquire the rights to major sporting events, investments in high performance and technification centres (Bruyninckx, 2012).

There is also a debate about which organisations are accountable, with strategic and operational target setting. While some organisations may operate within a culture where the accountability relationship is accepted as normal and a duty, others, probably the majority, may see the relationship as an imposition to be resisted or avoided (O'Loughlin, 1990).

The control system or monitoring process is a special analytical procedure used to collect information on the results of the work of organisations or policies they implement, whether in the private or public sector. Four main functions are described in this process (Dunn, 2004):

- Explanation: which provides information about the results of implementation and can help explain why the results differ or not.
- Accounting: important for providing information that can help account for changes following the implementation of a process or policy.
- Audit: helps to determine whether resources and services that have been intended for beneficiaries or certain target groups have reached them.
- Compliance: helps to determine whether the processes, activities and resources, staff and other people involved comply with the organisation's own or external standards and procedures.

The specific objectives and expectations for monitoring the implementation of the work of organisations and their policies can differ, and are summarized into 3 objectives in relation to monitoring (Parent & Hoye, 2018):

- Monitoring as the operational and managerial procedure that through information and evidence provides feedback on performance.

- Monitoring as a prerequisite that enables further assessment of the impacts of implementation for past and future situation, and further on platforms for policy learning and possible introduction of policy changes.
- Monitoring as the procedure that provides information on the impacts that an organisation's implementation and its creation have on the broader governance practices, norms and values of the system, such as democracy, transparency, human rights and welfare.

### **General framework for good sports governance**

Over the last decade, confirmed and alleged cases of corruption and mismanagement have been uncovered in major sporting bodies (Football, Athletics, Boxing, etc.), which have been widely exposed in the media, leading to widespread public concern about how funds are structured and managed in sport organisations and particularly in ISFs. That has tarnished the image of sport and ASOIF took a leadership role in maintaining and building trust and legitimacy in ISFs (ASOIF Governance Task Force - ASOIF GTF, 2016).

All ISFs require funding and commercial revenue to fulfil their mission to promote and develop sport globally, and while the sport movement and ISFs, welcome any initiative aimed at promoting better governance in sport, they are mindful of its idiosyncrasies. The existing standards and applicable measures can address the current issues. Thus, the credibility of a system chosen to assess ISFs depends on the relevance of the indicators, the identity and the background of the parties conducting the assessment.

Consistency in the reporting approach, allowing for a meaningful assessment of progress. Leaving aside the negative perception of the general public, the 5 most sensitive areas for ISFs are:

- Democracy and stakeholder representation.
- Transparency.
- Composition of executive bodies, terms and age limits, and conflicts of interest.
- Decision-making on major competitions and events.
- The fight against doping and match-fixing.

ISFs are one of the 3 pillars of the Olympic Movement, therefore the main rules promulgated by the IOC in the context of good governance should be recognised and applied (Alm, 2013):

- The IOC Olympic Charter.
- The World Anti-Doping Code
- The IOC recommendations contained in Agenda 2020.
- The IOC Code of Ethics.

Transparency should be conceived as an intrinsic value of democratic and accountable organisations, or it can be seen a way to achieve other important goals, such as less corruption (Grimmelikhuisen, 2012). Most definitions refer to the degree to which an organisation or institution discloses relevant information about its own decision-making processes, procedures, functioning and performance. Good governance practices are a prerequisite for the recognition of any sport association project by society. These practices should be focused on the effective implementation of better transparency and ethics in the governance of sports organisations, which obviously benefits sport and enables the challenge of achieving organisational excellence to be met by reconciling sporting, economic, ethical and social benefits. (García-Caba, 2021).

It is a priority that sport organisations understand that democratic procedures can only be implemented considering the interests of all groups, especially national member organisations. Public communication must

be done respecting the fairness' principles, addressing the needs of each of the parties involved, where any information that may be of interest to stakeholders must be disclosed and accessible, understanding that it is not only about self-promotion (Alm, 2013).

Taking in consideration the changing face of the media environment and the growing importance of social media, already seen as the future communication tool, sport organisations should pay special attention to them, in particular supporters and the general public (Parent & Hoye, 2018).

### ***Sport organisations, autonomy and good governance***

By recognising the economic and social function of sport the EU gained a certain degree of legitimacy in the political direction of sport governance (Garcia, 2009; European Commission, 2012). Chappelet (2010) addressed that, considering the complexity of the sport system, the autonomy of sport organisations can be understood in 4 main dimensions (political, psychological, financial and conceptual). The discourse on good governance emphasises the diversity of the sport system and must consider a multifaceted approach to the autonomy of sport organisations. In addition, athletes have rights and obligations derived from ordinary law and also SFS (national and international and) in which they are registered (Parrish, 2004). Many of these rules derive from the EU's internal market competences, and thus from the so-called fundamental freedoms of the union.

As a general principle, democracies are based on autonomous and equal individuals. Therefore, the question of a right and representative electoral system is a permanent debate (Boix, 1999; Lijphart, 1985; Taagapera and Shugart, 1989; Farrell, 2001; Colomer, 2004; Gallagher and Mitchell, 2005; Klingemann, 2009).

Democratic decision-making in most international sport governing bodies is based on the principle of one vote per nation (association-federation). Although this model has a strong appeal, allegations of vote buying in international sport governing bodies in the last two decades, starting with the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympic Games concession scandal, have led to discussions about a reform of voting procedures in international sport organisations, which could lead to a less coherent and efficient system, but which will act in a fairer and more democratic way and which could also contribute to a better form of representation. In any democratic organisation where the membership is of different sizes and compositions, it makes sense to weigh the votes of the representatives with the level of development its sport has compared to the rest of the world, contributing most to the development and expansion of the sport it represents (Parent & Hoye, 2018).

The main objective of this research is to understand and analyse the reality of sport and sports entities regarding good governance initiatives as a strategic element of sustainable development based on the credibility demanded by today's society, using international sports federations as a specific reference.

## **METHODOLOGY**

One of the biggest challenges to achieve a better governance in IFs is the lack of accepted, comprehensive and practical set of indicators (Geeraert, 2015). The IOC Sport Governance Observatory (SGO) aims to fill this gap, through a user-friendly benchmarking tool based on composite indicators representing the most relevant dimensions of good governance in ISFs. The tool is based on a checklist of indicators using a scoring system that functions as a tool for self-assessment.

Thus, this study has used a mixed methodology of qualitative (through the analysis of institutional documents, scientific articles and books) and quantitative (through the analysis of the survey carried out by ASOIF on 35 ISFs following the OGD - SGO index tool).

Regarding the content analysis, a distinction was made between formal institutional documents originating from official bodies and organisations (COI, ASOIF and OGD) and secondary documentary sources (books, book chapters, journals and other documents) described in the bibliographical references section.

### **Analysis and data collection**

As already indicated in the introduction section, the Sports Governance Observer survey (SGO index) is composed of 4 dimensions:

- Transparency.
- Democracy.
- Checks and balances.
- Solidarity.

Each dimension is a combination of individual indicators (36 in total) that is quantified using a scoring system (Likert scale) from 0 for "not met at all" to 4 for "fully met".

The indicators were then applied to the 35 Olympic ISFs (fed), using the following formula (Kaufmann and Kraay, 2007):

$$SGO\ index_{fed\ x} = \frac{\left( \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{12} Trans_i}{12} + \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{10} Dem_j}{10} + \frac{\sum_{k=1}^7 Check_k}{7} + \frac{\sum_{l=1}^7 Sol_l}{7} \right) - 1}{4} \times 100$$

This formula results in a percentage score that represents the average score of the four governance dimensions described above and their 36 indicators. Similarly, the SGO index of the 35 ISFs (feds) combined to obtain the percentage average of all of them is calculated with the formula:

$$SGO\ index_{35\ feds} = \frac{\sum_{x=1}^{35} SGO\ index_{fed\ x}}{35}$$

To simplify the process, the SGO index is based on an equal weighting of all indicators, although a differentiation of the weight of each indicator according to the importance to be defined could also be used (Cherchy et al., 2006). This could be considered a limitation of the present study.

### **Study dimensions**

According to the 4 dimensions described above, these can be described as follows:

A.- **Transparency**, referring to the degree of availability of information that allows internal and external stakeholders to monitor the functioning of an organisation and thus decrease the likelihood of inappropriate behaviour (Ball, 2009).

B.- **Democracy** or democratic processes refer to the rules and norms inherent in democratic conduct, in relation to the participation in election processes of all those who will be affected by the policies developed by those elected. Sound democratic processes increase the accountability and effectiveness of organisations (Mouffe, 1993; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2004).

C.- **Checks and balances** or mutual control procedures are essential to avoid concentration of power and ensure that decision-making is sound, independent and free from undue influence, ensuring that no one has absolute control over decisions and actions are monitored by different actors (Aucoin & Heintzman, 2000).

D.- **Solidarity** refers to practices related to contributing to a better society by integrating social and environmental concerns into operations and interactions with stakeholders, enabling sport to expand globally in a sustainable manner.

These 4 dimensions were studied in the following 35 Olympic ISFs according to the SGO index:

AIBA - International Boxing Association  
BWF - Badminton World Federation  
FEI - Fédération Equestre Internationale  
FIBA - International Basketball Federation  
FIBT - International Bobsleigh and Skeleton Federation  
FIE - International Fencing Federation  
FIFA - Fédération Internationale de Football Association  
FIG - International Gymnastics Federation  
FIH - International Hockey Federation  
FIL - International Luge Federation  
FINA - Fédération Internationale de Natation  
FIS - International Ski Federation  
FISA - International Rowing Federation  
FIVB - Fédération Internationale de Volleyball  
IAAF - International Association of Athletics Federations  
IBU - International Biathlon Union  
ICF - International Canoe Federation  
IGF - International Golf Federation  
IHF - International Handball Federation  
IIHF - International Ice Hockey Federation  
IJF - International Judo Federation  
ISAF - International Sailing Federation  
ISSF - International Shooting Sport Federation  
ISU - International Skating Union  
ITF - International Tennis Federation  
ITTF - International Table Tennis Federation  
ITU - International Triathlon Union  
IWF - International Weightlifting Federation  
UCI - Union Cycliste Internationale  
UIPM - Union Internationale de Pentathlon Moderne  
UWW - United World Wrestling  
WA - World Archery Federation  
WCF - World Curling Federation

WR - World Rugby  
WTF - World Taekwondo Federation

## RESULTS

This section presents the results of the analysis of the SGO survey set out in the methodology of the study, with special attention to the 4 dimensions of the research and the 35 indicators developed in the ASOIF study (2018).

Table 1 shows the details of all the data from the 35 IFs, divided by dimensions and in turn each of them broken down by each of the indicators that compose it.

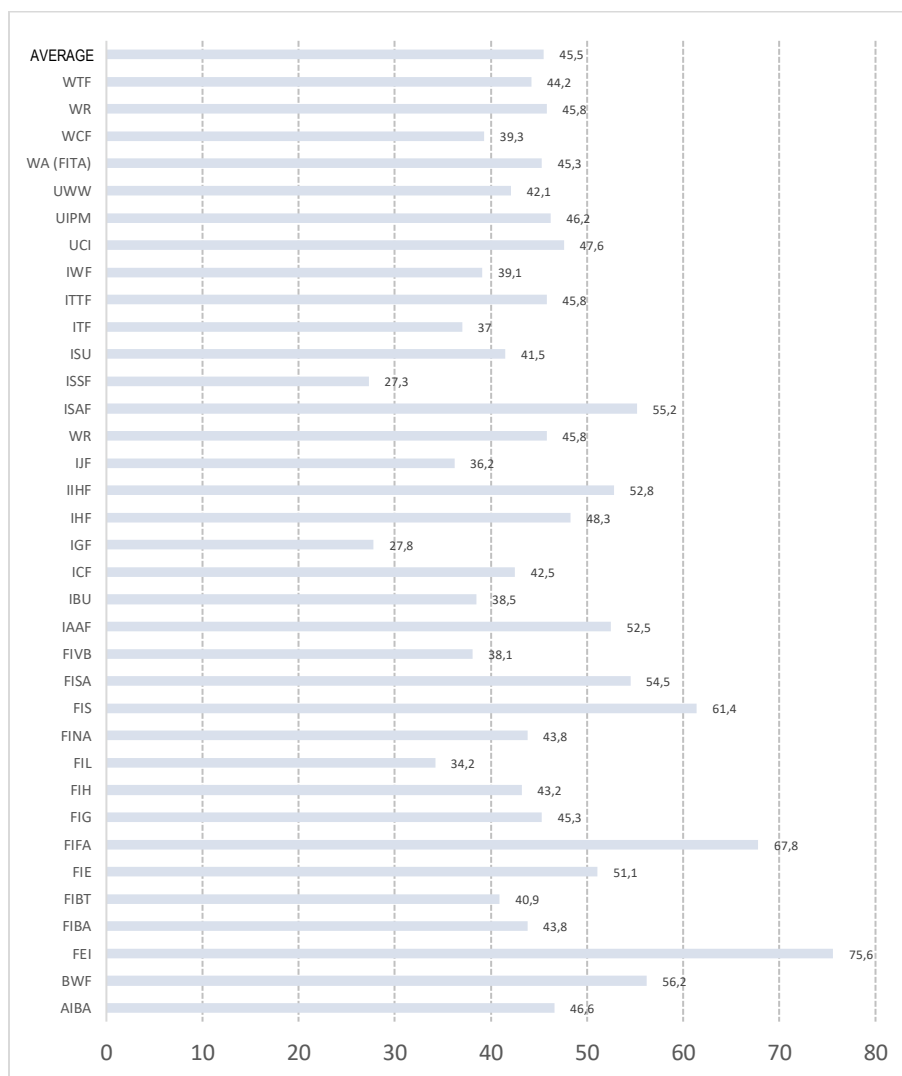


Figure 1. SGO index of each of the 35 Olympic FIs and total average (%).

When we analyse the 4 dimensions, it should be noted that the highest indicators are given for Transparency with 5 ISFs above 70%, the equestrian, fencing, skiing, football and rowing federations, but 2 of them with data below 35%, the golf and tennis federations.





However, regarding the democracy dimension, only the equestrian federation reaches 70%, while only the golf federation is below 35%, with 25%.

Concerning with the dimension of checks and balances, once again only the equestrian federation is above 70%, namely 87.5%, while at the bottom with less than 35% there are 9 ISFs, with the Olympic shooting federation with 16.5%. Meanwhile the solidarity dimension, there are only data from 16 ISFs, which are the ones that have collaborated to provide information on this dimension. Of the participating federations, there are again large differences between those at the top with more than 70%, with football and skiing, while at the bottom there are 5 below 35%.

Figure 1 shows a comparison of the total SGO index of each international federation. As can be seen in the data, there are large differences between the total number of ISFs, and it is surprising that only one of them (equestrian) is above 70% in the SGO index. Only 16 of the FIs are above the overall average of 45.5%, i.e. only 45% of all ISFs are above the average.

Figure 2 shows that all dimensions are below 50%, which means that in the totality of the total number of all the FFs, they fail in good governance. The most developed and reinforced dimension of all the FIs is that of transparency with 49.6%, still below 50%, and together with the dimension of solidarity, it is the only two that are above the average of the SGO index (45.5%). The dimensions of democracy, with 45.3%, and checks and balances, with 41.5%, are the most deficient.

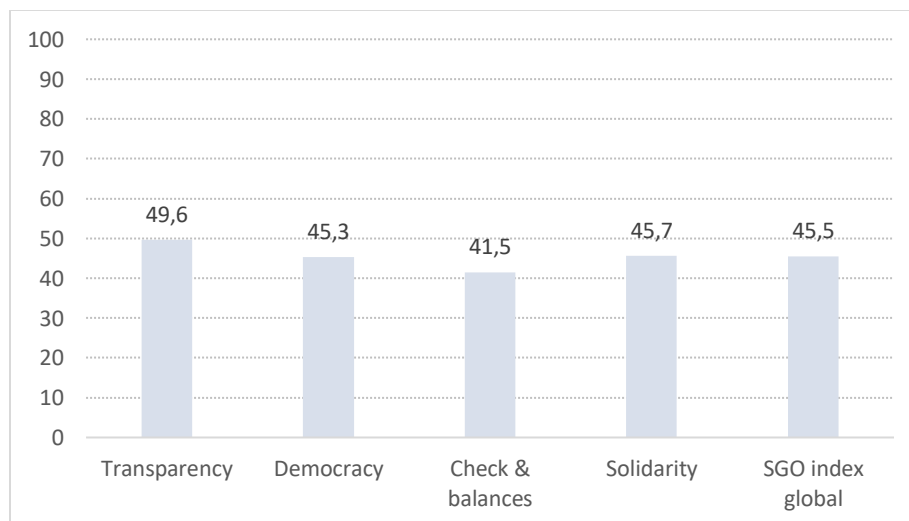


Figure 2. Dimensions and SGO index average (%) of the total number of ISFs

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this section, we can globally indicate that sport governance is characterised by self-regulation, which is also the most effective means if it is truly believed in. Therefore, sport entities and ISFs determine their own internal functioning based on the different recommendations that public institutions have defined on good governance (OECD, WB or EU), as well as those described by the highest sport entities (IOC and ASOIF).

It is true that there is still much room for improvement, as all the dimensions analysed are below 50%, but it is no less true that in the last decade there has been a comprehensive reform of the processes of good

governance in the world of sport, due to its conversion into an industry with an enormous economic and social impact on a national and international level in many developed countries. We cannot forget that the effective implementation of good governance mechanisms in sport constitutes a fundamental element in the strategic roadmap of any entity and one of the objectives to be developed in its daily work, however, this matter, despite its special relevance, has not had an adequate legislative or doctrinal treatment to date. (García-Caba, 2021).

The dimensions of democracy (45.3%) and checks and balances (41.5%) require special attention, given their deficient figures, and in line with what Klijn & Koppenjan (2004) have already stated.

A certain geographical imbalance in the exercise of power in sport entities have been found, especially when it comes to ISFs, which could be justified by the greater sporting development of the European continent, although it would be advisable to ensure a more inclusive and balanced geographical and gender representation, as this is currently not the case, with an under-representation of women in positions of responsibility, as it was also described by González et al. (2020).

With this research, we wanted to review the state of the art and carry out a more transversal analysis that contributes to a better understanding of the reality of ISFs. In this way, we can conclude that:

- There is a lack of agreement on a standardised way to assess the good governance of sport entities, although in recent years the use of the SGO index has become more widespread, especially in ISFs, on the recommendation of ASOIF.
- There is still a weakness in the control structures, through independent ethics committees, which can develop a global management audit of the actions of sport entities, which improves the accountability system and their control systems.
- The democratic participation of the main stakeholders has improved, particularly athletes' representation, although it is still a very low percentage weight in decisions.
- Special emphasis and specific work need to be done on the dimensions of democracy and checks and balances, through targeted measures to strengthen both areas, which are the weakest.

As a result of the above, we put forward some implications and recommendations for improvement measures for good governance in sport:

- A voting weighting system for decision making could improve transparency, democracy and efficiency.
- Transparency, democracy and efficiency, through a double majority system at the level of both Assemblies and Executive Committees, as while a large majority of decisions can be taken by simple majority, others, particularly those with financial or statutory reform implications, should require qualified majority (super-majorities) or weighted votes.
- These changes in voting systems should be accompanied by other modifications, notably a review and improvement of the powers of Assemblies and other collegial bodies, defining more precisely their decision-making capacity and the controls to be followed in such decisions.

Much more academic research is needed to help sport entities to equip themselves with more effective tools to improve good governance from a qualitative and quantitative point of view.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, D.C.-M.; Methodology, E.P.-G. and D.C.-M; formal analysis, E.P.-G. and D.C.-M; Results and data curation, E.P.-G. and D.C.-M; Conclusions, D.C.-M; writing—original draft preparation, E.P.-G. and D.C.-M, translation E.P.-G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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