

Winter Olympics must tackle environmental impact before the snow runs out, adapted from George Timms, *The Guardian*, February 24th, 2026

By the end of the 21st century, only eight of the 21 cities that have hosted the Winter Olympics are projected to be cold enough to reliably host the Games due to climate change. Challenges faced by Milano Cortina 2026 organisers such as producing artificial snow, establishing transport links between remote locations and building new infrastructure are likely to become more omnipresent at future editions.

In response to a petition asking the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to prevent fossil fuel companies from sponsoring winter sports, the IOC president, Kirsty Coventry, said the governing body is “having conversations in order to be better” in its approach to climate change. A New Weather Institute report estimated that the fossil fuel giant Eni, carmaker Stellantis and ITA Airways sponsoring Milano Cortina 2026 will induce an additional 40% to the Games’ carbon footprint, enough to melt 3.2 square km of snow cover and 20 million tonnes of glacier ice.

Although it is still early in Coventry’s presidency, she encouraged having these conversations “instead of waiting for the climate to push us into a corner where we have to make rushed decisions”.

But what does it mean to host the Winter Olympics “sustainably”? Martin Müller, professor in the department of geography and sustainability at the University of Lausanne, says that “just constructing the baseline was difficult” for his research evaluating Olympics sustainability between 1992-2020. “Even for newer events, some very basic data is hard to find, which tells us about the need to improve transparency for these multi-billion-dollar undertakings.”

In 2000, the IOC launched the Olympic Games Impact (OGI) initiative to create sustainability standards for future host cities. Featuring 126 economic, environmental and sociocultural indicators, and requiring host cities to collaborate with an independent research partner, OGI was abandoned in 2017 after host cities complained about its rigour.

This means that organisers can make whatever sustainability claims they like. Müller and his colleagues concluded that every Olympic Games now claims to be sustainable, but rhetoric does not match reality. To establish a baseline for future events, Müller’s team are developing a database to measure the sustainability of mega sports events between 1990-2024. They have also defined a sustainable sports event as one that “minimises its ecological impact and promotes social wellbeing by ensuring its economic viability and implementing accountable governance in a long-term perspective”.

Some 410,000 of the estimated 930,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent produced from Milano Cortina 2026 will be from spectator travel, but Müller believes that the IOC can prioritise the environment “more easily than other sectors” because the governing body wouldn’t have to change its business model to do so. “The tourism part is high carbon, so the question is, how do you reduce the high carbon tourism part while keeping the media part? It doesn’t create many carbon emissions to actually create these images.”

Müller suggests a geographical contingency scale of ticket allocation, making it more expensive to travel round the world to attend the Winter Olympics. He points out that most people watch the action on a screen rather than in-person anyway, and that ticket demand is high whether tickets are sold locally or not.

Müller and his colleagues also propose that each edition of the Winter Olympics could be spread among several locations to reduce the number of people travelling long distances to one destination. This would also mean choosing suitable hosts that can use or adapt existing venues to host each event, rather than building new infrastructure.

Prospective hosts have also “declared a desire to reduce the size” of the Olympics to make them more feasible to host. If the IOC continues with business as usual, Müller and his fellow researchers argue that the Games will “enter a period of rapid decline,” leading to scenarios such as potential hosts no longer bidding due to excessive costs, as well as host city residents and communities challenging their governments because of overtourism.

“In the end, this leads us back to rethinking what these events are about,” says Müller, “the sports and athletes at their centre.” As favourable conditions for elite winter sport become more elusive, it will be harder than ever to avoid this long-overdue reckoning of whose interests come first.