

## Article

# Corporate Social Responsibility and Football Clubs: The Value of Environmental Sustainability as a Basis for the Rebranding of Real Betis Balompié in Spain

Gema Lobillo Mora <sup>1</sup>, Xavier Ginesta <sup>2</sup>  and Jordi de San Eugenio Vela <sup>2,\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising, University of Malaga, 29071 Málaga, Spain; gmlobillo@uma.es

<sup>2</sup> Department of Communication, University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia, 08500 Barcelona, Spain; xavier.ginesta@uvic.cat

\* Correspondence: jordi.saneugenio@uvic.cat

**Abstract:** On October 2020, Real Betis Balompié, a football club located in Seville (Andalucia), presented the Forever Green programme, a global programme of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) that, through the club's foundation, enables the entity to position itself in areas of sustainable development and environment at a global level. This project was preceded by a sponsorship initiative with the Green Earth project, as well as having been the first football club to sign the United Nations' Climate Change Now initiative. This article aims to explain the rebranding process of a sports brand based on values linked to sustainability and to assess the impact this rebranding process has had on the fans' perception of the brand. The methodology used was a combination of in-depth interviews with the executives charged with leading the rebranding process and a convenience survey given to 100 fans to assess the impact of the initiative. The results show that both the entity and the fans agree on a holistic vision of what the CSR is, altruistic in nature, and that its initiatives should be applicable across the entire organisation. However, although the club's link with values of the environment and sustainability is highly valued by the fans, they still do not feel directly called upon to take part in actions that the club organises.

**Keywords:** Real Betis Balompié; corporate social responsibility; sustainability; LaLiga; environment



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## 1. Introduction

Within the framework of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, promoting sustainability is offered as an opportunity to develop Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in organisations. Specifically, in football, clubs can implement such actions, be it directly by the entity or through their foundations [1–4]. Along with the social and economic spheres of CSR, the environmental sphere is currently postulated as the most profitable within the marketing policies of organisations, due to the greater awareness of the younger generations [5].

The original understanding of CSR as a business concept, back in the 1940s [6,7], is very different from that of today, at least in a generalised way, due to the influence of marketing and organisational communication. From its inception, where the objective of CSR actions was to give back to society what society had given to the company, CSR today is conceived either as a communication strategy to improve the company's image with regard to the stakeholders [8], or as the design of "brands with a purpose". Specifically, in football, Chadwick et al. [9] warn about the hypocrisy that underlies many of the actions of the clubs' actions of social responsibility: "One action does not represent the general responsibility of a football club, particularly when that action is not core to that club's operational functions" (p. 603). However, we can observe how various football clubs have strengthened their environmental awareness through various actions [10]. This is the case of Real Betis Balompié, an elite football club of the Spanish LaLiga, which has

structured its entire project of social responsibility around the Forever Green initiative. The rebranding process of Real Betis Balompié, based on the adoption of new corporate values of environmental sustainability, is this article's object of study.

Hence, this article has two specific objectives (SOs). First (SO1), to explain the rebranding process of a sports brand, specifically Real Betis Balompié, based on values linked to sustainability. Second (SO2), to assess the impact this rebranding process has had on the fans' perception of the brand. This research is significant because it will analyse the first case of an elite Spanish football club that structures its rebranding strategy using a conjunction of new corporate values based on environmental sustainability. This strategy can be a benchmark for other professional sport organizations that aim to start a rebranding process to improve their social positioning in a moment where the fight against climate change and the promotion of sustainable consumption habits have become mainstream topics of the social, economic and political agenda.

This article has the following structure: Section 2 focuses on the theoretical framework, with Sections 2.1 and 2.2 considering CSR research, Section 2.3 highlighting the value of environmental sustainability as the bases of brand value creation, and Section 2.4 introducing Real Betis Balompié as a study object; Section 3 explains the methodology (research design, sample and procedure); Section 4 outlines the results; Section 5 presents the discussion; and Section 6 highlights the main conclusions of the research, its limitations and future research gaps.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Current Situation

### 2.1. Social Responsibility and Sponsorship: A Conceptual Delimitation

Research on CSR is not a new field of study. For instance, Bowen [6], Campos [11], Bigné et al. [12], Villagra et al. [13], Sen, Bhattacharya and Korschun [14] and Arimany-Serrat and Sabata [7] have made some interesting contributions in this regard. They state that CSR actions must be strategically planned in companies, integrated into management systems and their stakeholder relationships [15,16], and chosen in such a way that they are related to the organisation so that the benefits and identification are as close as possible. Further, Villagra et al. [13] consider that "the basic problem that CSR communication faces is, in short, a problem of source credibility. If the organisation is perceived as sincere (sincerity) and is capable of doing what it says and with experience in doing it (competence), the message will be accepted by the receiver" (p. 45).

Complementarily, from the perspective of the communication sciences, what interests researchers is the perception that consumers have of the CSR actions [17]. It should be noted that there are seminal studies, like that of Bigné et al. [12], which stated that "in the purchasing decisions between two product categories, CSR is not a very relevant criterion". This study was done with young university students from Argentina, Chile, Spain and Portugal. But five years later the concept of CSR had evolved and the position of consumers as well—towards favouring the consumption of products and services that have sustainability and care for the environment among their values.

For this reason, at present, in the choice of brand by consumers it is decisive that "the actions of social responsibility offer visible benefits for the company, and it is important to communicate the implementation of these actions to consumers and the general public" (p. 160) [18]. In the third decade of the 21st century, a communication in values linked to sustainability and concern for the environment due to the dire impact of human beings on nature are decisive in purchase choice; and in the legitimation of brands and great sporting events [19]. CSR actions, therefore, in their different aspects, are a good choice to vindicate the values of the organisation and recover them for the image they give to their current and potential consumers.

Apart from CSR, we need to bear in mind that there are other very useful marketing instruments for communicating values: for example, sponsorship [20–23]. For Capriotti [22], sponsorship represents a new way of thinking of the organisation, a style of conduct of the sponsoring entity, and a different way of approaching business activity; and not just

as one more investment in publicity. That is why through sponsorship the brand acquires a deep bond with the one that is sponsored, be it an event or a football club, such as the one we present in this research (the Real Betis Balompié). A sponsorship is much more than a simple advertisement, and a sponsor too: it is a communication weapon where the advertising organisation and the recipient of the sponsorship create synergies around a common goal through different actions. To conclude, Palencia-Lefler [21] states that “sponsors and sponsored must share the successes that good communication brings to the image and reputation of the patron or sponsor” (p. 169).

## 2.2. Sport, Environmental Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility: The Current Situation

The concept of sustainability, in relation to sport, has been approached in various ways. There is no doubt that what has generated most research is the analysis of financial and economic sustainability. The work of, for example, Andreff [24] on French football, Dantas et al. [25] on football in Portugal, Safakly et al. [26] on football in Turkey, and Solntsev [27] on Russian football stand out. Furthermore, there is extensive literature on the economic sustainability of the FIFA and UEFA football model, and the implementation of regulations to ensure the economic soundness of the clubs [28,29].

Sustainability in sports research has also been linked to architecture and infrastructure design [30,31], physical education and the study of sports performance [32] and the management and planning of major sporting events [19,33]. In fact, according to González-Serrano, Añó-Sanz and González-García [34], sport mega-events and sustainability is the most developed sub-area of research, based on their bibliometric analysis of the articles about sustainable sports entrepreneurship and innovation published between 2000 and 2009 in the Web of Sciences Core Collection. Paché [19], after analysing the main environmental controversies linked to the celebration of the Qatar 2022 World Cup, considers that the “the 2022 FIFA World Cup is simply an almost idealised representation of the society of the spectacle, it underlines the destructive madness that professional football carries in its irrational use of the planet’s resource” (p. 93) [19]. However, he does feel that there are reasons to be optimistic: “Sustainable initiatives are moving in the right direction, even if they remain anecdotal. For example, in April 2019, a football field designed from 50,000 recycled cups was inaugurated in Sochi (Russia). The sports facility, known as the ReCup Arena, was built by one of FIFA’s official sponsors, Budweiser, who recycled cups used during the 2018 FIFA World Cup” (p. 93) [19].

In this field of study, a specific review of the studies that have focused on the intersection between social responsibility and football clubs needs to be carried out [1–4,35–42]. Olabe [2] associates the clubs’ CSR strategies with reputation and the generation of business assets, shifting from being sports entities to international brands. Meanwhile, Ordeix and Ginesta [41], using a stakeholders’ approach, analyse the sports foundations of FC Barcelona and RCD Espanyol as the source of their CSR actions, being an added value of the organisation and product, “creating a circle of dependent communication between the commercial and social areas through the corporate path” (p. 191). As Ginesta [42] explains, the foundations of FC Barcelona, and also of Real Madrid and Manchester United, were key to the international expansion of the brands and their consequent transformation into “entertainment multinationals”.

The research of Kolyperas et al. [40] considers the development of CSR based specifically on examples of Scottish football. Breitbarth and Harris [38] propose a conceptual model that describes a greater awareness and integration of CSR in the football business where competitiveness of the game is promoted and additional political, cultural and humanitarian value for the stakeholders is generated. It is based on case studies from four key countries that currently dominate the shaping of the debate on CSR and that are vital to the game itself: England, Germany, Japan and the United States. With respect to English football, Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury [3] analyse the particular routines of the managers of the foundations of 21 clubs in the country’s two main leagues (Premier League and the Championship) and the way in which their own strategic vision connects with

the complexity inherent in the implementation processes of social responsibility policies in sports organisations. Finally, Moyo et al. [4] analyse the impact of CSR actions on the deployment of marketing strategies of six sports organisations in South Africa, including football clubs, concluding with some recommendations to improve their integration.

López-Martínez and Fernández-Fernández [39] defend a proactive attitude of ethical and socially responsible management. They also claim that CSR actions have started to be considered for competitive advantage in terms of reputation. In this regard, analysing the Forever Green project, we could mention Real Betis Balompié as a pioneer in establishing a global strategy with respect to sustainability.

Over time, corporate social responsibility has evolved into the need for purposeful branding. Reinforcing this idea, we also have to consider the implementation of a different type of sponsorship from the one that is becoming common in other businesses: so-called solidarity sponsorship. Lobillo, Ginesta and Badia [23], after studying the cases of FC Barcelona and UNICEF and Málaga Club de Fútbol and UNESCO, define it as a contract for which the sponsor (visible, for example, on the shirt) becomes sponsored by receiving income thanks to a reverse sponsorship contract, where the clubs benefit from the image of non-governmental organisations to try to improve their brand positioning and obtain other future income [23].

Beyond solidarity sponsorship, and in line with what are considered “brands with a purpose”, LaLiga also carries out CSR actions essentially related to recycling and the attainment of good practices oriented towards sustainability. In addition to Real Betis Balompié, other Spanish football clubs carry out specific actions [10].

This is the case of Club Deportivo Leganés in collaboration with the recycling company Ecoembes in 2018, with the initiative “We are special, WE RECYCLE” to promote the selective collection of containers at the Butarque stadium. This recycling was linked to a social action through an economic donation to the Spanish Prader-Willi Syndrome Association.

Real Zaragoza collaborates with the Ecodes Foundation to offset the carbon footprint produced during their trips through reforestation projects. This carbon footprint amounts to the equivalent of “33.85 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>” (p. 58) [10]. Club Deportivo Numancia is also carrying out a project that aims to evaluate the possibilities of using rainwater to meet the non-potable water requirements of its sports facilities in Soria, specifically for the irrigation of the football pitch.

Real Club Deportivo de La Coruña has signed a contract with the company Ecoalf as sponsor of non-sports clothing that will be worn by the players on their trips, with a sustainable collection with fabric generated from trash from the bottom of the oceans. Finally, Valencia Club de Fútbol offers, through its foundation and training centre, a course to manage the resources of any sports entity in an economically and environmentally sustainable way.

### *2.3. The Environmental Sustainability as the Basis of the Brand Value*

The disciplines of marketing and branding have also included environmental sustainability in their research. In fact, Menon and Menon [43], Ellen et al. [44], Henderson and Arora [45], Chabowski et al. [46], Hunt [47], Achrol and Kotler [48] and Kumar and Christodouloupolou [49] provide interesting contributions where a transdisciplinary perspective on these concepts is key to understanding the importance of environmental sustainability for any marketing or branding strategy of an organisation, including sports.

In fact, the growing importance of sustainability in the creation of brand value is justified because “it is important for companies to recognize that their actions or inactions impact the future prospects and that sustainability is a passport to a secure future” [49] (p. 6). Kumar and Christodouloupolou argue that companies should contribute value to society and thus need to “shift from shareholder capitalism to responsible capitalism. Embracing this responsibility to society and the environment, in addition to the shareholders, is at the core of sustainability” (p. 6) [49].

Kotler [50], Kumar and Christodouloupoulou [49], as well as Grubor and Milovanov [51], explain that integrating the values of environmental sustainability in the design of the brand does not only mean communicating them through advertisements, product packaging and other promotional materials, but also requires a change in company processes and attitudes. The implementation of sustainable attitudes and practices is, therefore, a strategic decision of the company that radiates across all its dimensions, where the results need to be communicated and the brand must be able to value and allow the creation of associations with public objectives [49].

In addition, as Grubor and Milovanov [51] point out, brands are powerful instruments of change that allow us to modify the behaviour of consumers. Further, the introduction of “sustainable brand management has the potential to bring together multiple requests between consumers, companies and society, creating win-win situations for all the actors involved” (p. 84) [51].

Corporate values linked to environmental sustainability are not only a powerful asset for commercial brands, but the discipline of place branding has also placed them at the centre of the new narratives of cities, regions and countries that embrace a perspective linked to sustainable development [52–54]. However, Rinaldi et al. [52] warn us that, under the current neoliberal economic system, the principles of environmental sustainability have been dissociated from its practices, leading to what Higgins-Desbiolles [8] called “greenwashing”. In this way, in the field of city marketing it could occur that the values of sustainability were simply a communicative façade that are not applied in the practices and actions of the local administration. And the same can happen in the corporate sphere.

This is where Rinaldi et al. [52] advocate finding “boundary spanners, that is, agents that carry out boundary work” (p. 2), managing the boundary between two groups and capable of seeking a common space between the interests of different stakeholders. In fact, Rinaldi et al. [52], and also Lundberg [55] and Van Meerkerk and Edelendos [56], have highlighted the need to find these change agents to reinforce multi-stakeholder cooperation, as well as when referring to projects of sustainable development. They identify these agents as “skilful networkers that are able to bridge different interests, connect different stakeholders in collaborative environments, and promote dialogue to create shared interests towards common action” [52] (p. 3).

#### *2.4. Real Betis Balompié: A Model of Andalusian Football*

Real Betis Balompié is a club based in Seville and founded in 1914 as a result of the merger of two old clubs in the Andalusian capital: Sevilla Balompié and Betis Football Club. The former was founded in 1907 by students of the Polytechnic School who were pursuing a military career or medicine; and the latter was founded in 1909 as a split from the Sevilla Football Club. However, the club adopted 12 September 1907 as its founding date [57].

Its highest awards are a league championship, obtained in the 1934–35 season, and two King’s Cups (1977 and 2005). The current stadium of Real Betis is the Benito Villamarín Stadium, with a 60,271-seat capacity, and next to it is the Ciudad Deportiva Luis Del Sol. It is the fourth Spanish football team with the most fan clubs (it currently has more than 450) and has more than 50,000 members. Currently, Real Betis can also be considered a sports club, because apart from football (men and women’s) it has a professional basketball team (Coosur Real Betis) and futsal team (Real Betis Futsal) [57].

In sports research, there has been little scientific study on Real Betis Balompié, which can basically be divided into three areas. Aguilar [58,59] has studied the club from its historical perspective, while González [60], Maya and Bohórquez [61] and Aguado-Méndez et al. [62] has provided contributions from the point of view of sports performance and sports psychology, using the club as a case study. Finally, within a field that is closer to that of this article, Ginesta [63], Toledano et al. [64] and Lobillo-Mora and Smolak-Lozano [65] analyzed the way in which the club communicates with its target audiences, based on stakeholder theory or the structural analysis of its corporate media.



### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research Design

This research is based on a qualitative case study, which involves assessment of “the multiple perspectives of stakeholders, observation in circumstances that occur naturally, and interpretation in context” (p. 21) [66]. Specifically, and following these parameters, our study focuses on analysing Real Betis Balompié as a club that has centred its brand positioning on environmental sustainability. We conducted three in-depth interviews with members of the Real Betis Balompié management team [67]. The interviews were conducted as follows: first with the director of communications of Real Betis Balompié, Julio Jiménez; second with the club’s general business director, Ramón Alarcón; and, finally, with Rafael Muela, manager of the Real Betis Balompié Foundation. All the interviews were held between the 2019–20 and 2020–21 seasons. The first two were used to learn about the background of Forever Green (the sponsorship with Green Earth and the agreement with Climate Change Now), while the third was to learn about the development of the Forever Green programme and its areas of application. In addition, to monitor the Betis fans’ perception of the brand, an opinion survey with qualitative and quantitative questions was designed [68].

#### 3.2. Sample

This questionnaire was given to a convenience sample of Betis fans, a non-probabilistic sampling that is justified because, as researchers, “we do not have access to a complete list of the individuals that make up the population (sampling frame), and we therefore do not know the probability that each individual is selected for the sample” [64] (p. 1). Neither Vinuesa [63] nor Ochoa [64] rule this sampling technique out for the simple fact of not being probabilistic and, therefore, being unable to “to make general statements about the population with statistical rigour” [64] (p. 2). Vinuesa [68] and Ochoa [69] assume that the professionalism and experience of the interviewer is the key to avoiding a seriously biased sample.

#### 3.3. Procedure

In our case, in order to directly impact our target population, we chose to distribute the survey, using google forms platform, through representatives of the Real Betis Balompié supporters’ clubs. The questionnaire was not published on social networks to prevent fans from other clubs, especially local and regional rivals of Real Betis Balompié, from distorting the results. A hundred fans of Real Betis Balompié answered the questionnaire.

The following items were used to design the questionnaire: personal data and residence; level of involvement in the club (subscriber, supporter, shareholder); attendance (or not) at Benito Villamarín matches; how fans got information about the Forever Green programme; fans’ understanding of CSR concepts; fans’ acceptance of CSR areas; why fans consider that Real Betis Balompié should take actions of CSR?; level of involvement of fans in the actions of the Forever Green programme; and, finally, fan ratings of the Forever Green programme. Each section, a part from except those related to personal information, gave respondents the possibility to add extra information if they did not find an adequate answer among the response options provided by the researchers.

Of these 100 fans, 80% are men and 20% women. With regard to age, the majority of respondents are between 41–50 years old (34%), and the rest are distributed as follows: between 50–60 years, 21%; between 31–40, 22%; between 18–30, 12%; over 60, 10%; and under 18, 1%. As to residence, the majority live in the capital Seville (35%), although there are also respondents who live in the province of Seville (31%), in the rest of the autonomous community of Andalusia (22%), in the rest of Spain (10%) and outside Spain (2%). Of all the fans surveyed, 53% have a membership card to attend the matches, although the majority are neither shareholders of the club (69%) nor belong to a supporters’ club (53%). Finally, regardless of their degree of commitment to the club (subscriber, shareholder or supporter), the majority say that they frequently attend the matches played at the Benito Villamarín (57%).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Green Earth Sponsorship, the Climate Change Now Initiative and the Forever Green Programme: The Club's Perspective

In this section, we present the CSR initiatives that reflect Real Betis Balompié's commitment to the environment. First, we will present the different initiatives diachronically (with a summary in Table 1) and, second, we will outline the club's and its executives' theoretical vision of what CSR is.

**Table 1.** Comparison of the programmes of Real Betis Balompié.

Programme	Green Earth	Climate Change Now	Forever Green
When started	2017–18 pre-season in Germany. Continued in 2017–18 season	21 April 2019: hand in hand with Green Earth (sponsor), together with the UNFCCC	29 October 2020: as a continuation of the Climate Change Now. Project
Type of action	Sponsorship	Sponsorship and CSR	CSR
Level	Local and International	Local and International	Local, National and International
Temporality of the action	Continues: signing of sponsorship contract for the 2017–18 season	Continues, with an action that brings it visibility in a specific match	Continues: presentation of the project and starting the project as a star programme of the club's Foundation
Objective	Brand awareness	Brand awareness	Brand awareness, social awareness and social mobilisation against climate change
Resulting actions	Support for the United Nations' Climate Change Now	Creation of the Forever Green programme Second sponsorship activation on the back of the team shirt, 9 February 2020 in a Betis- FC Barcelona match	Internal: creation of the club's sustainability committee and of the Forever Green's volunteer group Local: cleaning in the Guadalquivir river, creation of an urban garden in 3000 homes (Seville). National: creation of a sustainable farm in Toledo and partnership with Ecoterrae. International: signing of collaboration agreements with Amazon, Climate Pledge, the Sports for Climate Action programme of the United Nations
Communication tools	Social networks, own media, press releases and sponsorship activations on television	Social networks, own media and press releases	Social networks, club's own media, press releases and conferences
Implementation of the programme	Sponsorship of the first team shirt	Implementation in 3 steps: measure the club's carbon footprint; carry out corrective measures; buy credits	Implementation in 5 parts: recycling, sustainable mobility, climate change (especially alliances), environment and nature, and the club

Source: the authors based on the in-depth interviews.

#### 4.1.1. Real Betis Balompié and Its Commitment to Climate Neutrality

In the 2017–18 preseason, Real Betis Balompié signed a sponsorship agreement with Avalon Life, a company dedicated to cryptocurrency mining that wanted to spread its social responsibility project, Green Earth, for the preservation of the environment in Costa Rica through the commercialisation of lands that they promised to maintain and preserve. The club showed it during their preseason games in Germany and, due to the success of this action, a sponsorship agreement was signed for the 2017–18 season, making Green Earth the club's main sponsor.

Thanks to the sponsorship link with Green Earth, Real Betis Balompié carried out CSR actions in collaboration with the Climate Change Now, dependent on the United Nations. Green Earth gave its space on the shirt to the United Nations, through the Climate Change Agency, in a match between Real Betis Balompié and Valencia CF (21 April 2019). The Betis players wore a checked shirt made with recycled material provided by Betis fans, with the Climate Change Now initiative as the main shirt sponsor.

Furthermore, taking advantage of the game against Valencia CF, an action that gave visibility to the club's environmental commitment was carried out, with the presence of the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Patricia Espinosa. An agreement was signed with her with "the idea of giving continuity to the project and, as a result, the club will host the convention of signatory companies of climate change in the Betis Stadium. The club would cover the costs of the event at an amount of between 50,000 and 100,000 euros" (Alarcón, personal interview, 2019). Julio Jiménez added that "this has positioned Betis in areas such as sport and ecology as an example. Furthermore, the club has a lot of presence in social networks, and that makes it attractive to its audiences" (Jiménez, personal interview, 2019).

From this link between the club and a CSR initiative, the organisation saw an opportunity to become the first football club to sign the United Nations' Climate Change Now. This agreement with the United Nations' Climate Change Agency includes three phrases: measure the club's carbon footprint; carry out corrective measures to reduce this footprint; buy credits that offset the carbon footprint. The objective of this agreement was to promote the association of the club's corporate colours, green, with values linked to the preservation of the environment that, at the same time, could be attractive and increase the pool of sponsors. Ramon Alarcón believes that this agreement could encourage other companies to become associated with the "green team".

Reinforcing the first two initiatives (the sponsorship of Green Earth and the association with Climate Change Now), on 29 October 2020, the club presented the Forever Green programme at LaLiga headquarters, which was already a global CSR programme led by the club's Foundation, and which enables the club to position itself in areas of sustainable development and the environment at a global level.

Rafael Muela defines Forever Green as "a programme that emerged in the club due to the success and connection with the sponsorship of GreenEarth and Climate Change Now, and it is a platform that seeks to join the efforts of organisations and companies in order to raise awareness and mobilise society in the fight against climate change" (Muela, personal interview, 2021). This project has five branches: recycling, sustainable mobility, climate change, environment and nature, and the club. The first two are related to raising awareness, fomenting and promoting both recycling and sustainable mobility, both internally within the club and externally. The other three try to forge alliances with external partners of the club and target audiences that contribute to developing initiatives of environmental sustainability. Of these five branches, as can be seen in Table 1, concrete actions have been taken at the internal, local, national and international levels.

However, and although in recent years the club has reinforced its commitment to environmental responsibility by institutionalising the Forever Green programme, the economic crisis that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic forced the club to seek new income. The club had to reconcile the narrative of sustainability with the presence of new



sponsors from economic sectors of dubious social responsibility, such as cryptocurrencies and bookmakers.

The sponsorship of Green Earth has been present on the team shirt for two seasons. In the 2017–18 season it was the only sponsor for all the matches, while in the 2018–19 season it shared with the German company OTC Desks, dedicated to financial services of exchange of cryptocurrencies to facilitate bitcoin transactions, among other cryptocurrencies, without using traditional currency. During the 2019–20 season, Betis was sponsored by the company Easy Market, a European broker founded in 2001, and in the 2020–21 and 2021–22 seasons by the sports bookmakers Betway and the communications telemarketer Finetwork (an agreement signed in principle for three seasons).

With regard to the information used to publicise the different actions of the CSR programmes, these are the social networks, the club's own media (television and radio) and press releases. In the case of Climate Change Now, a specific promotion was carried out to collect plastic to make the team shirt for the sponsored match; while in Forever Green these instruments are enhanced with the presence and/or organisation of conferences to publicise the programme.

#### 4.1.2. The Club and Its Vision of Corporate Social Responsibility

Although there are certain shared premises, there are nuances in how the executives interviewed understand corporate social responsibility. For Julio Jiménez, the club's Director of Communications, corporate social responsibility is focused on the reputation that links the "Betis" brand with the environment, while for the General Business Manager, Ramón Alarcón, corporate social responsibility means protecting the environment, providing resources and helping to spread the word about the project.

However, for the Managing Director of the Real Betis Balompié Foundation, Rafael Muela, corporate social responsibility is the unavoidable line of work of football clubs because they are organisations that connect many people, and their activity has a significant impact on the social environment. It is a moral and ethical duty that the organisations have to take joint responsibility for what happens, because of both their activity and the fact that they exist. For the Foundation's managing director, football clubs must carry out CSR actions, since they align two fundamental elements: visibility and responsibility towards their contextual environment. On the one hand, football is the most popular sport on the planet and, as a result, and because it is a social activity with so much visibility and so much exposure, there is a very high level of responsibility due to the potential influence it has on society.

But with Betis two factors are added, one quantitative and one qualitative. The quantitative factor is the large number of members (48,112) [70], and the qualitative factor is the sense that Betis "is associated with values like empathy, solidarity, being a close-knit club that everybody feels is theirs and this is part of what drives us to represent these values, not just environmental but also the social part!" (Muela, personal interview, 2021).

Furthermore, although the Foundation plays a central role in the development of the Forever Green programme, CSR is part of the whole club, since it permeates all the departments. A Sustainability Committee—understood in a broad sense, including human resources, facilities and the social area—has been formed in the club, since it plays an important role because it has the Betis support office that attends to subscribers, shareholders and so forth. In this regard, the Forever Green programme will add versatility to the brand, since there are brands that do not wish to associate with a football club but do want to associate with a project like this. In the commercial sphere, Alarcón adds that "now the sponsors not only want to have a media presence in the matches, they also want experience. The experience is part of commercialisation, without changing the encounter" (Alarcón, personal interview, 2019).

With regard to the brand, in 2019 and 2020 Betis was one of the fifty most recognised football brands worldwide, according to the annual reports on the most valuable brands in

football, the Brand Finance Football 50 [71,72]. In 2021, it failed to make the top 50 due, among other factors, to it being a special year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 4.2. The Forever Green Programme: The Perspective of the Fans

In this section we present the main results of the survey designed for the Betis fans, the sample of which was described in the methods section. Regarding the way in which the fans first learnt about the Forever Green programme, we can see that most of them found out about it through the club's own media (40%), followed closely by those who first learnt about it through the social networks (36%), then by those who did so through personal relationships with other Betis fans (14%), and finally by those who learnt about it through other media (10%). In fact, these figures complement what was stated by the club's directors in the previous section, who agreed that the social networks played a central role in communicating the initiatives and sponsorship actions.

Betis fans are aware that sports organisations have a social responsibility to their public and the environment in which they operate. Above all, that this social responsibility involves the protection of the environment and the raising of environmental awareness, as well as promoting culture, education and their city. This can be seen in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 reflects the percentage of acceptance by Betis fans of three basic approaches to what CSR is according to the consulted literature and the in-depth interviews we conducted. From this we can conclude that the fans are aware that the club's CSR policies are not just sports-washing [9], as they have been perceived on other occasions. Table 3 shows, in a more categorised way, the different areas of CSR action in accordance with the theoretical framework of this research and the degree to which they are accepted by the fans. The protection of the environment is one of the most accepted areas of CSR action.

**Table 2.** What is your understanding of corporate social responsibility?

Possible Answer	Acceptance (%)
An organisation's business policy to implement measures designed to improve the environment	39
The club's responsibility towards its social context due to the simple fact of existing	36
A communication and/or marketing strategy to compensate for possible negative actions of the organisation	16
Others	9

Source: the authors, based on the results of the research.

**Table 3.** Areas of corporate social responsibility. Percentage of acceptance among the sample.

Area	Agree (%)	Indifferent (%)	Disagree (%)
Protection of the environment	95	4	1
Community development	90	9	1
Economic sustainability	89	8	3
Promotion of the city and province	92	5	3
Promotion of programmes of social inclusion	91	8	1
Prevention of violence	88	11	1
Cultural and educational promotion	96	4	0

Source: the authors, based on the results of the research.

The second part of the survey has a more evaluative focus on the concrete actions of Real Betis Balompié. Table 4 confirms that Betis fans do not see either the CSR actions or the Forever Green programme as sports-washing, but rather a way of strengthening their relationship with the community (55%). The club can thus be warranted in feeling that their CSR actions are not perceived by the fans as simply an act of sports-washing their corporate image, which is particularly important when it comes to generating public commitment with these actions. The public's commitment with CSR programmes of an organisation can

only be gained if there is a narrative shared by both the producer and receiver. However, the perception that the club still has work to do when it comes to involving the fans can be seen in Table 5. Although most fans feel that the Forever Green programme has improved the club's image (75%), and that the supporters' clubs feel challenged (48%), there are very few respondents that have taken part in any of its actions (5%).

**Table 4.** Why do you think that Real Betis Balompié should take actions of corporate social responsibility?

Possible Answer	Acceptance (%)
Due to altruism and relation with the community	55
To improve their image and get more income	25
To improve their relationship with other football governance bodies (LaLiga, UEFA, FIFA)	15
Because football governance bodies impose it (LaLiga, UEFA, FIFA)	5

Source: the authors, based on the results of the research.

**Table 5.** The Forever Green programme. Level of involvement in percentage.

Question	Yes (%)	No (%)
Have you participated in any action of the Forever Green programme?	5	95
Do you think the supporters' clubs feel involved in the Forever Green programme?	48	52
Do you think that the Forever Green programme has improved the image of the Real Betis Balompié?	75	25

Source: the authors, based on the results of the research.

The specific evaluation of the Forever Green programme is detailed in Table 6. What stands out is the Betis fans' clear perception that the club has managed to give prominence to its environmental commitment (62%), and that it has increased the fans' pride in belonging to Betis (51%). In this regard, community building seems a more than likely result of the Forever Green programme. The fans also believe that it enables the club to position itself as an innovator (55%). However, only a minority of fans (29%) consider that a programme such as this will lead to new sponsorships in the long term to increase the club's income. This contrasts with the perception of those interviewed, who considered that the club's association with the climate neutrality policies promoted by the United Nations could be a way to attract new sponsors.

**Table 6.** Fan ratings of the Forever Green programme (in percentage).

Statements	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)
It has allowed the club to give prominence to its environmental commitment	62	3	35
It has allowed the club to give prominence to its commitment to sustainable development goals (SDGs)	50	4	46
It has increased my pride in Betis	51	24	25
It has positioned the club alongside the great LaLiga teams	35	33	32
It will enable the club to have more income in the long term	29	18	53
It will enable the club to position itself as innovator at the national level	55	4	41

Source: the authors, based on the results of the research.

In summary, the quantitative results of this research reveal a high degree of acceptance of the Forever Green programme by Betis fans, with a corresponding improvement of the club's image and their feeling of belonging. However, the fans do not see this action as a means to improve long-term financial results, but instead feel that the club is acting for altruistic reasons towards the community.

## 5. Discussion

Kumar and Christodoulopoulou [49] explain that, in the current social conditions, it is important that organisations accept that they have to shift from a strictly profit-based capitalism to a responsible capitalism. The football industry has evolved in recent decades following a capitalist dynamic, close to what the previous authors call profit-based capitalism. However, initiatives such as those of Real Betis Balompié, partnering with a United Nations programme in favour of climate neutrality and creating the Forever Green programme, allow us to see how elite football clubs can combine their legitimate interest to increase income with the need to foster a beneficial relationship with their local environment.

With regard to this research's SO1, the rebranding process of Real Betis Balompié shows how a specific sponsorship action (Green Earth) can lead to a global CSR programme (Forever Green) that links the entire organisation, modifies its corporate culture and brand attributes (Betis has linked its corporate green colour with the attributes of the environment). However, it shows that the rebranding process has not only become a simple communicative action or a process of greenwashing [9], but rather the club has taken the opportunity to change its corporate culture and improve its relationship with its stakeholders [16].

Kotler [50] and Grubor and Milovanov [51] also consider that the integration of values linked to sustainability in the redefinition of brands cannot just remain in the sphere of communication. The opportunity must be used to change processes and attitudes of the organisations, turn it into a strategic action that radiates throughout all the departments of the organization [49]. In the case of Betis (as shown in Table 1), the creation of a sustainability committee is a good sign that its commitment to the environment will not remain purely an act of greenwashing.

However, the club is aware that its interest in carrying out CSR actions contrasts with the imperative need, especially after the COVID-19 crisis, to generate income in the short term. For this reason, the club has not renounced signing sponsorship agreements for the team shirt with online betting companies, cryptocurrencies or online brokers. The club executives interviewed for this research accept these sponsorships as a forced economic necessity, even though it may weaken their social commitment.

With regard to SO2—the perception the fans have of this rebranding process—we can point out that although they consider that the programme increases their pride in Betis and improves the image of the club (innovator, modern and so forth), they do not feel involved in the actions of the Forever Green programme. In this regard, the potential that Grubor and Milovanov [51] see in introducing sustainability as the basis of brand management to create complicity among the organisation's stakeholders (internal and external) is less in the analysed initiative, possibly due to its short implementation period.

However, the quantitative study shows that the Betis fans do not only attribute environmental protection actions to the area of CSR; they also understand that CSR has more areas of complementary actions, such as the promotion of the city and province, and cultural, social and educational promotion.

Comparing the evolution of the Real Betis Balompié rebranding process (Table 1) with the results of the survey with the fans (Tables 2–6), and exploring the long-term results of this rebranding policy, we can see that Betis has the potential to become an “agent of change” [52] to make its city and province (Seville) a place with greater environmental commitment and, at the same time, incorporate the values of environmental sustainability in the city and/or regional brand [30]. In fact, Betis fans consider CSR to be a holistic concept, in contrast to the commercial and marketing vision [8], where the club interiorises altruistic actions and improves its image, but without having a priori economic returns. To a lesser extent, respondents also agreed with the reason why Betis carries out CSR with the aim of improving its relations with other football governance bodies (LaLiga, UEFA, FIFA, etc.).

In any case, this rebranding process of Real Betis Balompié is not perceived in some of the most important reports on the positioning of professional football brands in Europe, such as the *Brand Finance Football 50* [73]. This report includes Real Betis Balompié in 2019 (position 48) and 2020 (position 50), but the club is not present in the report of 2021, despite its rebranding and greater social commitment. The fact that these reports are based on a methodology such as royalty relief [73,74], which calculates brand value based on the economic performance of organisations, could be one explanation. In fact, Real Betis obtained its best position in the ranking in 2019, the season after having classified for the UEFA Europa. Thus, we could consider it necessary to search for other indicators apart from those linked to the clubs' accounts, which would allow the inclusion of CSR actions as assets of the brand's value.

## 6. Conclusions

This research has approached the rebranding process of Real Betis Balompié based on the club's association with three sponsorship actions and/or CSR focused on environmental protection and the fight against climate change. We have verified how a sponsorship action (Green Earth) can give continuity to a more global CSR programme, which the Betis Foundation finally took over under the name Forever Green. In this way, the club has structured actions in five areas and at an internal, local, national and international level.

These CSR actions have allowed Betis to make a change in its corporate culture, since it has not only turned out to be an element of communication, but has also helped to generate integrated dynamics in all the club's departments, which are committed to climate neutrality. The rebranding process is considered to be a success internally, although its economic benefits are much more complex. As can be seen from the interviews with the club's executives, the rebranding has not automatically increased the pool of sponsors. What's more, the rebranding process had to be made compatible with sponsorship contracts with companies from sectors that have not always been socially responsible (betting houses and cryptocurrencies).

In addition, it has been found that the club still has work to do to involve its fans in the CSR projects that result from the Forever Green programme. While the fans accept the principles of the programme and take pride in it, they do not feel involved and participate very little in its actions. The club needs to make an effort in order to find ways to generate a greater commitment of the fans in the programme, so as not to disconnect their actions from what the fans expect in the future.

Finally, the authors would like to highlight some limitations of the research, as well as future research perspectives. Regarding the limitations, the authors had problems accessing the full list of club members to provide a probabilistic sample for the survey. Due to ethical reasons, the club could not provide researchers with this list. For this reason, the authors decided to use a non-probabilistic sample of 100 fans (members and non-members of the club) to provide an initial overview of Real Betis Balompié fans' perception of the Forever Green programme that could be compared with the in-depth interviews with the club's executives.

With regards to future research in this field, this article can provide a starting point for other researchers that would like to examine more deeply the social impact of the Forever Green programme in Seville or Andalusia using other qualitative methods, such as focus groups or questionnaires [75]. In addition, more research on the incorporation of environmental values into the corporate culture of Spanish football clubs' is needed, as well as measurement of their social value [76], above all in a moment when several elite football clubs (for instance, FC Barcelona or Real Madrid) are in the process of rebuilding their stadiums.

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