

## **Anti-Doping Policy Legitimacy and Support among Clean Athletes: A Cross-National Study (LEGIT Project)**

### **Protecting Clean Athletes through Anti-Doping Policies**

Since the conception of anti-doping in the early 1920s, its implementation policies have emerged that serve a dual purpose: (1) to detect doping incidents and impose legal and social sanctions to doping users, and (2) to protect clean athletes from doping use by bolstering a stronger anti-doping culture and social norms against doping in competitive sports. With the conception of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) in 1999, anti-doping has risen to a global level and the increasingly comprehensive anti-doping policies harmonised worldwide. While the first goal of anti-doping policies is directly relevant to coercion and fear of punishment, the second goal appreciates athletes' self-determination and aims to create the conditions under which doping use will be evaluated negatively and, consequently, be systematically avoided. The first goal (detection and punishment) is more explicit and publicized, and dominates most of the debates over the existing anti-doping paradigm<sup>1,2</sup>, but the second goal of anti-doping policies (protecting clean athletes) is rather implicit, understated, and largely neglected by the international scholarly community involved in the study of doping use in sports.

However, protecting clean athletes is an important aspect of anti-doping policies because, authority alone - although necessary - is not sufficient for policy implementation sustainability. Rather, anti-doping policies will be more likely to be enacted successfully and have a sustainable effect as long as the target groups (i.e., athletes) feel the moral obligation to endorse them, believing that the policies are appropriate and just<sup>3,4</sup>. Besides, regulatory authorities are more likely to be effective when they are perceived as adequate and entitled to regulate by the public. As Zelditch and Walker (2003) noted: "Every authority system tries to cultivate a belief in its legitimacy" (p217). Accordingly, the influence that is motivated by legitimacy leads to the voluntary, and intrinsically-motivated deference of rules and regulations<sup>5,6</sup>. Further extending this argument, it is sensible to argue that, to abide by, and be committed to supporting and justifying anti-doping policies, clean athletes should believe that these policies are legitimate and appropriate and the respective regulatory authorities are trustworthy and just<sup>3</sup>.

### **Legitimacy of Anti-Doping Policies**

The legitimacy of anti-doping policies has been questioned on several grounds by scholars almost since the conception of the WADA and the IOC anti-doping conference in 1999. Some of the most notable criticisms against the existing anti-doping paradigm involve the high financial costs incurred by administering anti-doping controls; the violation of athletes' personal freedom, civil rights, and self-determination; and an overemphasis on anti-doping coercion vs. evidence-based anti-doping education<sup>2,7,8</sup>. Accordingly, when inquired, elite athletes also displayed similar concerns about the legitimacy of anti-doping policies, believing that the policies are not equally and equitably enforced (e.g., believing that in the UK anti-doping policies are unjustifiably more stringent than in other European countries<sup>9</sup>).

Recently publicized scandals involving anti-doping authorities and international sport organizations pose another challenge to the legitimacy of the existing anti-doping paradigm. More specifically, in December 2014 and early August 2015 a German documentary made explicit allegations about corrupted practices and doping scandal cover-ups involving Russian athletes and their entourage, the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA), and the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF). The documentary elicited immediate reactions from the world of athletics as well as from anti-doping organizations. In a recently released newsletter (2<sup>nd</sup> August 2015), WADA President Sir Craig Reedie proclaimed that the allegations made by the documentary require further scrutiny and careful investigation by anti-doping authorities, and that

such allegations “will, once again, shake the foundation of clean athletes worldwide”. Indeed, research has shown that clean athletes feel pressured and uncomfortable believing that their competitors may potentially engage in doping practices, and, thus, have an unfair competitive advantage<sup>9</sup>

Overall, the aforementioned evidence suggests that the existing anti-doping paradigm undergoes stern criticism, and multiple stakeholders (athletes, scientists, and the general public) already question very seriously the legitimacy of anti-doping policies<sup>1</sup>. It appears that the current anti-doping paradigm faces a turning point and immediate action is required that will enable a more comprehensive understanding of clean athletes’ perceptions and attitudes towards the legitimacy of anti-doping policies, and how such attitudes influence their decisions to endorse and commit to anti-doping policies. After all, in times of crisis, if regulatory authorities are seen as legitimate, their policies are more likely to be supported by the public<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, better understanding of how policy legitimacy is constructed and interpreted among clean athletes will enable anti-doping authorities to develop focused interventions and communication campaigns to restore the legitimacy of their policies, and accordingly reclaim clean athletes’ support.

### **Project LEGIT**

Despite the scholarly arguments that challenge the legitimacy of existing anti-doping policies, there is no extensive behavioural science research into clean athletes’ attitudes towards the legitimacy of anti-doping policies, nor on the relationship between such attitudes and the actual endorsement of anti-doping policies by this population. This leaves an important gap in our understanding of perceived legitimacy and concomitant anti-doping policy support among clean athletes. Project LEGIT is predicated on the idea that research on these issues will provide important input for evidence-based interventions and campaigns to restore the legitimacy of anti-doping among clean athletes, and reclaim policy support. To this end, LEGIT aims to:

- a. Assess the perceptions and attitudes of clean athletes towards the legitimacy of anti-doping policies.
- b. Develop and empirically test a behavioural model of perceived legitimacy and anti-doping policy support.
- c. Address cross-cultural differences in the process of anti-doping policy legitimization and support among clean athletes.

In order to fulfil these aims, Project LEGIT will employ state-of-art research methodology and an international perspective on clean athletes’ perceptions of anti-doping policy legitimacy and support. Using an international perspective is highly important because there is evidenced variation in athletes’ perceptions of anti-doping policy enforcement across countries<sup>9</sup>, and because culture-specific values may influence policy support at a more profound level. Culture, captured through a collection of culture-related constructs such as languages, traditions, religious practices and individual mental representations (i.e., internalised values, attitudes and norms), has impact on general human cognitive processes, motivation and behaviour<sup>10,11</sup>, but is largely absent from studies of doping (and anti-doping) behaviour. Importantly, both the IOC and WADA put effort to globalize and harmonize anti-doping policies across countries and nations, but this requires a better understanding of the local cultures and values of the institutions and/or social groups that will be endorsing and implementing those policies<sup>12</sup>.

Project LEGIT contributes to **IOC’s Anti-Doping Research Fund** in the following respects. **First** and foremost, LEGIT is expected to provide novel findings and important input serving both scientific interest and policy-making with respect to clean athletes’ attitudes towards anti-doping policy legitimacy and concomitant policy support. This is highly relevant to an important, but, to date, largely unappreciated aspect of the life of clean athletes in relation to doping. More specifically, while most research on the life of clean athletes has focused largely on the predictors of doping intentions and motivations<sup>13</sup> or on the drivers of doping abstinence<sup>14</sup>, there is a considerable dearth of empirical studies about clean athletes’ attitudes towards, and support of, anti-doping policies. Although it is important to address behavioural processes with respect to doping use or abstinence, it is equally (if not more) important to understand how clean athletes make sense of,

and are willing to endorse anti-doping policies. Such a change in focus will advance the existing anti-doping research by tapping into a rather neglected aspect of anti-doping behaviour, and provide input to policy-makers with respect to restoring anti-doping policy legitimacy and support among clean athletes. **Secondly**, Project LEGIT is relevant to the efficacy of current anti-doping programs and approaches (e.g., how clean athletes make sense of, and legitimize existing anti-doping programs and policies), and directly addresses the issue of developing alternative approaches to anti-doping. In fact, focusing on clean athletes' perceptions of legitimacy and anti-doping policy support provides a new avenue for improving anti-doping communication and fostering policy support among referent target groups. **Third**, LEGIT is a multi-center, international, collaborative project involving elite athletes, anti-doping officers and leading expert scientists in the study of doping (and anti-doping) behaviour. The intended synergy between policy-makers and expert scientists aims to provide added value to the expected outcomes of the project by enabling a 'translational science' approach that will facilitate the transference and integration of empirical findings into policy-making initiatives and interventions to restore anti-doping policy legitimacy and support among clean athletes. This is anticipated to have a direct impact on improving anti-doping governance in competitive sports. **Finally**, Project LEGIT will contribute to the successful global harmonisation of anti-doping by developing a better understanding of how national culture affects the perception of the legitimacy of anti-doping rules and procedures.