

Legacy: what is the long-term impact of mega-sporting events?

Definition

- ***A multi-dimensional concept***

The definition of the legacy of a major sporting event consists in answering the question: what long-term footprint will this event leave on the host territory? There is no simple answer to this question as many dimensions of society are involved: economic impact through the investments made in sports and non-sports infrastructures; social impact with, in particular, the improvement of conviviality, health, education, citizenship; political impact with soft power strategies for better positioning of the host country on the international scene; cultural impact due to the sporting values that can positively influence the behaviour of the actors; sporting impact with the improvement of accessibility to sport for all the public; environmental impact with the internalisation of the external effects linked to the hosting of the event. It will therefore not be easy to evaluate the legacy of an event in all these dimensions, especially as a certain number of them belong to the category of externalities. This is why economists propose to analyse two categories: the tangible and intangible legacies of major sporting events.

- ***Tangible legacy***

This term essentially refers to the long-term economic impact of all the investments made to host the event and which may have resulted in positive or negative effects on the population.

- In the case of the Olympic Games, the main positive effects concern sports infrastructures (stadiums, arenas, swimming pools, Olympic village, etc.); transport infrastructures (motorways, metros, trains, airports, etc.); urban renewal operations (rehabilitation of depressed areas, new districts). All these operations improve the efficiency and attractiveness of the host territory by fundamentally transforming its economic base. Barcelona, with the 1992 Games, is a good example of a stalled city that, thanks to the Games, was able to achieve international metropolitan status in record time.
- The main negative effects concern first and foremost the issue of white elephants, i.e., oversized sports facilities that are subsequently no longer of any use because of the lack of a resident club, sufficient spectator demand or funding for maintenance costs. This is the case for four stadiums from the 2014 football World Cup in Brazil (Manaus, Brasilia, Cuiaba, Natal) and most of the sports facilities of the 2016 Olympic

Games in Rio de Janeiro. Then there is the whole issue of social segregation and gentrification in the vicinity of Olympic facilities due to land speculation. The resident and underprivileged social classes cannot afford the increases in rents or the sale prices of apartments and have to leave. Finally, there is the issue of forced population displacement, with the destruction of entire neighbourhoods to build Olympic infrastructures and the questionable conditions for the rehousing of the population.

- ***Intangible legacy***

It concerns the evolution of the brand image of the host country, which can evolve positively or negatively in the eyes of international public opinion, depending on the success or failure of the event. Indeed, major sporting events are increasingly criticised for their social or environmental aspects, which can damage the reputation of the host country: Qatar with the 2022 football world cup at a time of global warming; Russia and the Sochi Winter Olympics, which resulted in massive destruction of natural resources and Saudi Arabia with the hosting of the Dakar Rally at a time of energy transition. This soft power strategy is increasingly being criticised and international sporting organisations would do well to ask themselves whether we are not reaching a threshold of social acceptability of sports events accused of wasting resources. This also applies to public opinion within each host country, which also denounces the waste of scarce resources when the basic needs of the population are not being met (education, housing, health, transport, etc.).

In light of these findings, the question arises as to what the net legacy of such events is: do the positive effects outweigh the negative aspects? Would it not have been more appropriate to invest in other sectors of activity? How do we decide?

Key Learnings

- ***The need for a global impact assessment***

The impact studies of the programme plans initiated by the European Commission (Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs) can be taken as a model. (Directive of June 2001). Such a procedure could be applied to the hosting of a major sporting event, on the understanding that for the environmental impact studies the same methodological problems are encountered. Complex relationships between different types of impact inevitably arise; feedback, synergies, amplification, irreversibility and latency. Territorial forecasting exercises would be necessary, for example, with the construction of scenarios. It is well known that the organisers of major sporting events have taken too many long-term decisions too lightly.

This is the case, for example, for the major sports infrastructures that have become white elephants.

- **The need for an opportunity cost calculation**

Social utility is at the heart of public decision-making. It should be possible to determine the social utility for a city or a country hosting a major sporting event, but also the social utility of the projects that have to be abandoned. This raises the problem of calculating the opportunity cost of such events: would the investments made here not have been more profitable for society if they had been destined for other sectors such as education, health or transport? It is not certain that the legacy of major sporting events will live up to expectations. There are winners and losers in the legacy, and it is always the poorer social classes that bear the brunt of the negative effects of major sporting events, while the wealthier classes benefit from their positive effects.

- **The need for new participatory decision-making tools**

It is now recognised that the participatory instruments used in France to improve decision-making are not effective. This is the case for public inquiries or the mobilisation of the National Commission for Public Debate. These procedures have in no way prevented the acceptance of projects of doubtful social utility. In the field of sport, the referendum on the opportunity to host the Olympic Games was also used, but it does not seem to be an appropriate response. This is why new participatory tools to help decision-making were established in the 1970s, including the citizens' conference, which seems to be very effective. According to all the evaluations carried out, these citizens' conferences are a real success in terms of the realism and impact of their recommendations. They represent a major contribution to decision-making and one wonders why they are ignored in the field of sport. One could imagine, for example, a citizens' conference on the opportunity to organise such mega-sporting events, notably the Olympic Games or the football World Cup, which are becoming increasingly polemic.

Further information:

Pierre CHAIX (Dir.), *Les Jeux Olympiques de 1924 à 2024. Impacts, retombées et héritage*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2017.

Center on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), *Fair Play for Housing Rights. Mega Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights*, www.cohre.org/mega-events.

Ingrid NAPPI-CHOULET et Emmanuel de la MASSELIÈRE (Dir.), « L'héritage urbain et immobilier des méga-événements », *Les Cahiers de la Chaire Immobilier et développement durable*, n°6, ESSEC Business School, 2018.

Jean-Jacques GOUGUET et Jean-François BROCARD, « Grands événements sportifs : la nécessité d'une réévaluation », *FUTURIBLES*, n°401, Juillet-Août 2014.

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