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Is the booming sustainability of Olympic and Paralympic Games here to stay?

: environment-based procedures versus dubious legacy

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Abstract

The 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Vancouver, Canada (Vancouver 2010) made history for being the first 'sustainable' Olympic and Paralympic Games, from planning to execution. In contrast, previous Summer and Winter games in the last two decades were presented as 'Green', with an emphasis on eco-efficiency rather than a more complex approach to sustainability, a concept which goes beyond structure-oriented environmental care. In this concern, the difference between the so-called Green Games and the Sustainable Games would rely on the rationale that 'sustainability' involves more than just environment friendly procedures, but would incorporate also social and economic well-being into its framework. The Green Games utilised technologies and practices that were aimed at reducing the environmental impacts of the mega event on the host cities/towns, within a discourse aligned with the protection of the local natural environment. The Vancouver 2010 'Sustainable Games', on the other hand, proposed to expand the 'green'

programme and go "beyond the environmental impacts of the Games to include the social and economic dimensions of sustainability". A similar proposal is in place for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Taking into account this context, the present chapter will briefly analyse the paradigm shift in mega event bidding processes, particularly in the case of the Games, where environmentalist discourse increasingly in being used to legitimize successful proposals. This review is justified by the complexity involved in the implementation of sport projects that aggregate several distinct purposes (social development, tourism, an increase in job opportunities, etc.), particularly projects of the size and scope of mega-events such as the Games, but that at the same time claim to be sustainable. Additionally, this chapter will succinctly examine the sustainability proposal presented by the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Games Organising Committee, with the aim of assessing the validity and continuity o

Is the Booming Sustainability of Olympic and Paralympic Games Here to Stay? Environment-based Procedures versus Dubious Legacy

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Introduction

The 2010 Vancouver Olympic and Paralympic Games in Canada made history for being the first 'sustainable' Games, from planning to execution. In contrast, previous Summer and Winter Games in the last two decades were presented as 'Green', with an emphasis on eco-efficiency rather than a more complex approach to sustainability, a concept which goes beyond structure-oriented environmental care. In this concern, the difference between the so-called Green Games and the Sustainable Games would rely on the rationale that 'sustainability' involves more than just environment-friendly procedures, but would incorporate also social and economic well-being into its framework. The Green Games utilised technologies and practices that were aimed at reducing the environmental impacts of the mega-event on the host cities/towns, within a discourse aligned with the protection of the local natural environment. The Vancouver 2010 'Sustainable Games', on the other hand, proposed to expand the 'green' programme and go "beyond the environmental impacts of the Games to include the social and economic dimensions of sustainability" (Vancouver2010, 2010, n.p.).

A similar proposal is in place for the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games. The organising committee (LOCOG) claims that positive global impacts will accrue from the London Games:

Sustainability underpins the entire London 2012 programme. By showing how changes in the way we build, live, play, work, do business and travel could help us to live happy and healthy lives, within the resources available to us, the 2012 Games will set an example for how sustainable events and urban

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planning take place around the world in future. […] As the most high-profile

event in the world, the 2012 Games will provide an opportunity to show off the

best that the host city and nation have to offer. This will be achieved in several

ways: by pioneering new approaches to sustainability; changing people's

behaviour through the power of sponsorship, media and communications;

inspiring new standards of sustainability in the construction, events and

hospitality sectors; influencing our supply chain to adopt more sustainable

practices; and transferring our learning and knowledge (London2012, 2009, p.

5).

Taking into account this context, the present chapter will briefly analyse the

paradigm shift in mega-events bidding processes, particularly in the case of the

Olympic Games, where environmentalist discourse increasingly is being used to

legitimize successful proposals. This review is justified by the complexity involved in

the implementation of sport projects that aggregate several distinct purposes (social

development, tourism, an increase in job opportunities, etc.), particularly projects of

the size and scope of mega-events such as the Olympic Games, but that at the

same time claim to be sustainable. Additionally, this chapter will succinctly examine

the sustainability proposal presented by the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Organising

Committee (Rio-2016), with the aim of assessing the validity and continuity of what is

now called the 'Sustainable Games'.

Environment, Sustainability and the Olympic Games

The environmental impacts of mega-events are one of the newest concerns of

event organizers, sponsors, environmentalists and citizens. The first impact study on

Olympic Games related to environmental issues dates from 1980 when the Games

were staged in Lake Placid; but it was only after the Games in Albertville and Lillehammer that this concept was included as a topic in the Olympic Movement (Chappelet, 2003). In 1994 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) elected to make the environment one of its pillars, demonstrating that attention was increasingly being paid to environmental issues.

In order to fulfil the emerging demands not only of the IOC, but also of the society and consequently of the institutions which hold the rights of some mega-events, bidding committees have increasingly recognised environmental issues and created projects for urban development and facilities construction that are aligned with principles of environmental care and protection. The 1994 Lillehammer Winter Games were successful in this matter by making consultative alliances with environmentalists' organizations and putting into practice a recycling project which recycled 70% of the total waste produced during the 1994 Olympic Games (TED, n.d.). The Sydney Olympics is also known for its environment care and alliances with conservationists, being the first Games to have Greenpeace analyze and contribute to its 'green' proposal (Chappelet, 2008).

However, by associating its 'sustainability' language solely with environmental protection, the IOC for some years limited the contribution of the Olympic Games to the promotion of a more holistic approach to sustainable development. This narrow association can be seen in the Olympic Charter, where the only mention of sustainable development is found in Rule 2, Paragraph 13: "The IOC's role is: […] to encourage and support a responsible concern for environmental issues, to promote

sustainable development in sport and to require that the Olympic Games are held accordingly" (IOC, 2007, p. 15).[1]

There, sustainable development is clearly associated with environmental issues, a position that reinforces the restricted vision of sustainability that dominated the discourse of Organizing Committees for the Games (OCOGs) that followed the inclusion of the third pillar of the Olympic Movement. In following the Olympic Charter, OCOGs attended to IOC requests for environmental protection, but other important issues for the development of sustainable societies and lives often were overlooked, with communities being displaced, big stadia underused and subsequently dismantled, social projects discontinued and the uneven distribution of benefits within host societies (Lenskyj, 2007).

The problem is, however, of greater complexity. As Holden, MacKenzie and VanWynsberghe (2008) argued recently, the sustainability jargon has been loosely used ever since the United Nations' Brundtland report coined the term 'sustainable development' (Bruntland, 1987), and what an Organizing Committee might consider sustainable practice might not necessarily reflect the IOC's expectations of sustainability. This problem derives from the "frustratingly ambiguous, perilously

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[1] It is important to mention here that the use of the uni-dimensional concept of sustainability emerged during the 1992 UN Conference on the Environment, held in Rio de Janeiro, which focused mainly on the environmental aspect of sustainable development. This approach, according to DaCosta (2010), began gradually to embrace social and economic demands during the 2000s, creating the three-fold conception now more accepted for its mutual reinforcement of the different aspects of sustainability.

contradictory, and/or eminently co-optable concept [that is sustainability] that damages more than it provides" (Holden, MacKenzie & VanWynsberghe, 2008, p. 884). Therefore, sustainable development targets frequently have not been achieved, when the emphasis has lain only on certain practices that reduce the impact of Olympic Games on the host's natural environment.

It is for these reasons that the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games have been considered a turning point in Olympic history. For the first time an OCOG has promised to deliver a Sustainable Olympic Games, without focusing only on environmental protection. As the Impact of the Olympics on Community Coalition report, from May 2007, states:

> For the first time in history, these Commitments[2] include a pledge to ensure the benefits of the Olympics are available to all people, regardless of income or social position, and further, to ensure those most marginalized in society are not displaced or otherwise harmed by the Olympics (IOCC, 2007, p. 4).

Although the report graded the performance of VANOC as 'D'[3], it is important to highlight the effort made by Vancouver and all its partners to build a participatory environment for the assessment of the impacts of the Olympic Games, in light of comprehensive sustainable development targets having been set. Environmental protection is only one among several social, cultural and economic targets. Although

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[2] "Commitments contained in the Inner-City Inclusive Agreement, the Olympic Bid Book, and the Multi-Party Agreement ("Commitments"), which the organizers of the 2010 Winter and Paralympic Games undertook to ensure that Vancouver's inner-city residents, the environment, and all British Columbians benefit from the Games in Vancouver and Whistler." (IOCC, 2007, p. 4).

[3] Referring to the grading system of 'A' to 'F', being 'A' excellent and 'F' fail.

still subject to intense criticism, as were the ones presented by the Coalition, VANOC has the merit of putting into practice, or at least attempting to through its written commitments to the people of Vancouver, Whistler and Canada, for the first time a wide-encompassing sustainability framework for the organization of the Games.

LOCOG has followed this same pattern of focusing on a broader definition of sustainability, but included also new, pertinent points to its vision. Whilst Vancouver Sustainability Performance Objectives were centred around six themes, described as accountability; environmental stewardship and impact reduction; social inclusion and responsibility; aboriginal participation and collaboration; economic benefits; and sport for sustainable living (Vancouver2010, 2009), the LOCOG focuses on five distinct themes: 1) climate change, 2) waste, 3) biodiversity, 4) inclusion and 5) healthy living (London2012, 2009). This shift in focus reflects current discussions about sustainability, which recognize a fourth pillar, or "a 'quadruple bottom line' of environmental, social, economic and climate responsiveness" (UNWTO-UNEP-WMO, 2007, p. 2).

What seems clear from the recent experience of the Vancouver Games and the current preparations for the London Games is that the Olympic Movement, through the OCOGs, has moved to a new level of responsiveness to social, cultural, economic and environmental demands, as a consequence of the hosting of such mega-events. The level of success in attaining the goal of hosting truly Sustainable Games is still to be assessed, but the Olympic Games have now reached the point where sustainability, even with all the ambiguities carried by this term, is paramount for the development of a successful bid. The question we pose now is; whether Brazil, and Rio de Janeiro more specifically, are prepared to take on, beyond rhetoric, what should be the newest legacy from the Olympic and Paralympic

Games, the increased awareness that sustainable development must necessarily include social justice, heritage/culture preservation, environment protection and economic redistribution.

The 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games and Sustainable Development

Although the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' are cited frequently throughout the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Bid Book, there are a few indications that suggest that these terms are being used loosely, allowing multiple interpretations (Rio2016, 2009). The major problem may be due to the constant use of the experience of the 2007 Pan-American Games as the starting point for the proposed 2016 Games. Although those Games technically were a success, they were far from being exemplars of sustainable practices, at any level.

The Pan-American Games is one of the major multi-sporting competitions in the Americas. In 2007, 42 countries were represented, with over 5,500 athletes competing in more than 300 events. The Games were used to test Rio de Janeiro's ability to host a sport mega-event that was similar in format to the Olympic Games, in order to present a stronger case to the IOC. The event was hosted with no major incidents[4] and did indeed pave the way for Rio de Janeiro to be selected as the host of the 2016 Olympic Games.

However, several problems were encountered during the 2007 Games with promises undelivered, particularly the ones related to the natural and social well-

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[4] Barros (2008, p. 578) lists a few examples of 'minor incidents' concerning the delivery of the Games, such as faults in some big screens, damage to some facilities due to strong winds, double booking/sale of seats in some events and change in competition schedules without prior announcement to the public.

being of the city. According to Gaffney (2010), Rio de Janeiro's proposal for the Pan-American Games was based around 'Olympic constellations', or the complexes produced for the delivery of the Games. These 'constellations' "are the tangible, physical elements of the Olympic city including new and upgraded communications and transportation infrastructure, stadia, tourist amenities, cultural installations, environmental remediation projects, housing developments, and security apparatuses" (Gaffney, 2010, p. 8).

According to the Pan-American Games Organising Committee, these 'constellations' would be the actual legacy of the Games, ones that would be enjoyed by the rich and by the poor. However, what resulted from the Pan-American Games was "an ambiguous social and urban legacy" (Gaffney, 2010, p. 18).

Rio did not deliver the promised transportation infrastructure, did not improve the housing situation for Rio's poor, did not open new sporting venues in order to develop a generation of Olympic athletes, and neglected promises of environmental remediation while contributing to the generalized opacity of mega-events. Tens of thousands of police prevented public violence in the city for a short period of time before conditions returned to "normal" (Gaffney, 2010, p. 18).

Some examples that prevented the Pan-American Games being able to be labelled as truly sustainable, and that need to be addressed if the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games is to follow on the 'sustainable trend' initiated by the Vancouver Olympics, are: the exponential increase in the original budget used for the Games, due to successive delays in constructions (684% in five years according to the Brazilian newspaper Folha de São Paulo, 7th March 2007); the displacement of low-income families (mostly *favelas* in and around construction sites for competition

venues) (Benedicto, 2009); construction sites that were embargoed by popular lawsuits and were then abandoned without removal (Behnken & Godoy, 2009; Mascarenhas & Borges, 2009); construction of the athletes' village over marshland (Gaffney, 2010); and privatization of publicly-funded venues (Benedicto, 2009; Gaffney, 2010).

Overall, the operational success of the 2007 Pan-American Games, which had strong support from the local population, contrasted with shadow costs and social impacts that were not visible to the direct observation of the general public. The issue of the legacy of the Games, as depicted by DaCosta (2008), became more a classification exercise developed by government and sport leaders than a responsible managerial process.

Although the proposal for the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games is much larger and more complex in nature than the Pan-American Games, the latter was 'sold' to the public as an 'experiment' and as a draw card for securing the Olympic Games and, therefore, that facilities and projects would be re-utilised and improvements to facilities and infra-structure would make the city ready to host the Games. Hence, it is worrying for social researchers to envision a similar approach to the 2016 Olympic Games, as the Pan-American Games were clearly not driven by sustainability concepts. In fact, this requirement was not included in the original commitment of the city of Rio de Janeiro to host the 2007 event.

Conversely, for the 2016 Games, Rio's proposal had a clear involvement with environmental issues, particularly through the selection of the location of venues, all of which are surrounded by spectacular nature. Rio de Janeiro has the largest urban forest in the world (Tijuca National Park), and is surrounded by rocky and bush-clad mountains rising from the coast line with world-renowned beaches. It is therefore the

perfect landscape to sell and use to build an awareness of sustainability concepts. It is clear from the bid proposal that these features were indeed used as an important selling point:

> In Rio, nature is not just part of the city; it is the city itself. With Games venues strategically located to embrace nature, the beauty of Rio's physical environment will be clearly evident to all members of the Games Family (Rio2016, 2009, p. 87).

Using the management method of contrasting risks with opportunities, it is appropriate to raise the question: will this phenomenal tool for building sustainable development awareness, and most particularly environmental conservation/ preservation, be used wisely and to the advantage of the city's population? Being so close to such a fragile environment, one of the last remnants of Atlantic Forest in the country and in the world, the 'spell can turn against the caster' and further pressure can be placed on this already stressed environment. With development proposals planned in areas such as Barra da Tijuca, a suburban area where wetlands are predominant, there is a high risk the 2016 Games will have a significant negative impact on the natural environment and, as a consequence, on the people of the city also.

Conclusions

The 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games present a unique opportunity for Rio de Janeiro and Brazil to develop an increased awareness of more sustainable practices that contribute to a better quality of life for all segments of the population. However, the 2007 Pan-American Games' dubious legacies highlight the risks

lurking behind the 2016 project. This tension demands a close follow up of the next steps of Rio2016 preparation.

The ingenious decision made by Rio2016 to place the Games in very close contact with the extraordinary natural environment of the city, as well as in some areas of low-income populations, presents possibilities for the propagation of not only the third pillar of the Olympic Movement, the environment, but also the new 'ideal' embraced by Vancouver and London in organising the Olympic Games: to deliver Games that are sustainable in every aspect. In doing so, the 'legacy' discourse that legitimised the Pan-American and the Olympic bids can move toward a 'sustainability' discourse (DaCosta, 2008), where fair distribution of benefits and losses can be achieved and where the population as a whole gains from the experience of hosting the Games that were created to promote peace between all people.

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