

Sustainable mega-events: A look at some of the solutions related to organisation of the Olympic Games

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Some of you probably know that the bobsleigh track in Pyeongchang, host of the Olympic Winter Games in 2018, is a venue that was not necessary to build, because the organisers were offered by the IOC the opportunity to use the existing one in Nagano, Japan. But the Korean organisers refused this offer and instead decided to build this new facility, in spite of its quite doubtful post-event legacy.

However, this case illustrates the situation around the Olympic Games these days. Because construction of Olympic-related infrastructure has become the major source of issues related to organisation of this mega-event. We all have probably heard and read a lot about manifold impacts on host cities and countries and issues such as overbudgeting, corruption, unfair business model of the Games subsidised by taxpayers' money, or doubtful legacies and gentrification. And all of them are somehow related to construction of competition and non-competition venues and other infrastructure.

You probably also know that the IOC is aware of this problem and that it is making cost-saving measures these days. But it also seems to be the proof that the history is giving us an important lesson in this respect that instead of following the government funded and legacy oriented model of Barcelona 1992, the Games should rather start to follow more simplicity oriented and privately funded approach of Los Angeles 1984.

You may agree or not, but I think it is becoming obvious that what makes this event sustainable and even acceptable in the future is to simply avoid Olympic construction and the idea of tangible legacy. Something that has been so heavily promoted during the last several decades, but the taxpayers seem to not support anymore, also due to its economic, social and environmental costs.

Efficient use of existing facilities

The IOC has made one important step in this respect, because it has made an agreement with the International Bobsleigh and Skeleton Federation and International Luge Federation to use existing facilities only in the next editions of the Winter Games. I find the adoption of such a rule very positive, but I also find crucial to make it applicable also to other venues.

The downhill course on Mt. Gariwang in Pyeongchang, which is for many an example of a totally unnecessary intrusion into the ecosystem of a 500-years old forest, is also an example of how beneficial it would be to have such a rule in force even today.

In summer edition of the Olympic Games, the main Olympic stadium is probably the main adept for this new rule. The stadium in London for example is known for its quite complicated post-Olympic transformation into a legacy mode and it is sometimes referred to as „burning hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money in front of Londoners eyes“.

Particularly, in case of this stadium, it is something that could be possibly avoided, if e.g. the existing stadium in Wembley was used for the same purpose. It seems quite inefficient to use such a great venue for few football matches, when the city has in place so many existing high class football arenas, totally capable to serve this purpose. Instead in Wembley

a temporary solution of an athletic track on an elevated platform could be used, as it was realised e.g. at the Hampden Park stadium in Glasgow during the 2014 Commonwealth Games or as it is planned at the Coliseum stadium in Los Angeles for 2028 Olympics.

Another case of the stadium in Tokyo exemplifies the potential of existing football arenas to accommodate different kind of sports from the Olympic program and how they can help to avoid construction of new permanent facilities and consequently contribute to more efficient and sustainable Olympics in the future. This stadium is proposed to host not one, but three sports – rugby tournament, part of the football tournament and modern pentathlon events.

But as a contrast to this case, there are two stadiums in Paris – the Stade Jean Bouin stadium to serve solely for rugby tournament and the Parc de Princes stadium as a venue for few football matches during the 2024 Olympics. And I am quite curious, whether the organisers in Paris will be given by the IOC any advice to move both sports into single venue only as in Tokyo, so the other venue could be used for other purposes. One option appears to be quite interesting, especially in terms of cost-saving measures. Because, the Paris organisers are planning to build a new state-of-the-art aquatic centre. But I think it is definitely worth of some analysis to find out how feasible and efficient it would be to use e.g. the Parc de Princes stadium for those events and adapt it with temporary swimming pools and a roofing system, as it was realised e.g. at the stadium in Kazan during the 2015 Aquatics World Championships, or as it was proposed or it is planned at several other football arenas around the world.

We would probably agree that no community needs a 15000-seat swimming pool. Moreover, the Paris case reminds me on the situation around the aquatic centre in London – also a state-of-the-art venue that on the one hand is known for its good public use, but on the other hand it is also known for its complicated construction, problematic post-event transformation and for being overpaid three times the original budget. But there are still less than seven years until the Games in 2024, so Paris organisers can take the lesson from London 2012.

Geographical flexibility

I did a research several years ago on how the competition and non-competition venues and other Olympic related services were distributed over the territories of host cities and host countries. And I found out that not a single edition of the Summer Games has ever been hosted solely within the official host city itself. So it seems that the event has been from the very beginning either too big or its requirements so specific that the official host city simply had to cooperate with certain number of other municipalities in the host country.

Sustainability of the Olympic Games depends to a large extent on this intercity cooperation, of course unless some dramatic changes in its demands and dimensions are made. And of course the IOC's geographical flexibility is a very decisive factor in this respect, because this cooperation facilitates.

The German proposal for 2032 Olympic Games illustrates, where this flexibility may lead in the future. It proposes to stage the Games within the Rhein-Ruhr conurbation – a network of 13 well connected medium-sized cities, sharing all of the competition and non-competition venues, with 80% of them either existing or temporary one.

Similar proposal was submitted by the conurbation of Lille in north-eastern France for the 2004 Olympics. But I have also encountered other interesting proposals of polycentric urban regions, such as the Öresund region between Denmark and Sweden. But you may have also heard about some Olympic intentions of the Randstad region in Netherlands, but also about cross-border cooperation of cities within the Pacific Cascadia region like Vancouver and Seattle, or even about the Olympic attempts of cities on US-Mexican border such as San Diego and Tijuana.

Olympic village

The UCLA campus in Los Angeles is probably the best known example, how student campuses can be used for athletes' accommodation during the Games. Right now it really appears to be the best available option in this respect, but with the exception of Los Angeles, Atlanta, Calgary and Salt Lake City, it also seems to be quite hard to find anywhere else in the world, especially in combination with suitable existing sport facilities. Otherwise, I think, it would have been used more frequently in other Olympic host cities.

The IOC has historically relied mostly on real-estate development projects in this respect, but those have been recently related to several issues, such as overbudgeting, problems with public-private partnerships, resulting in an increased burden on public finances, problems with selling the apartments after the event, or the issues related to gentrification.

In Tokyo, the IOC is exploring with organisers the idea of building a smaller village with fewer beds as another cost-cutting measure. Instead, it is intended that the NOCs will agree with some transferable accreditations, so some Olympic team members could be replaced by athletes competing later in the Games.

And although it might be a solution to avoid some of the risks related to real-estate development projects, I have been asking myself „whether the IOC has ever considered to use the cruise-ships for this purpose?“

We know that this solution is frequently used as an additional hotel accommodation during the Games. But I have also found an interesting article mentioning utilisation of cruise ships as a cost-saving strategy for Boston 2024 Olympic bid for example. The biggest ships have around 5000-6000 plus capacity, they are adapted for disabled and can be berthed in almost any city with suitable docking facilities. But this option would probably require also redefinition of the Olympic village concept. The residential zone would be obviously placed on cruise-ships, but the international zone along with some temporary training facilities would have to be arranged on the coast somewhere in their vicinity. There are probably also other challenges that I am not aware of, but I think this option has a potential to be another sustainable solution.

Permanent host city of the Olympic Games

Permanent host city of the Olympic Games is frequently discussed and proposed as the best solution for current problems with organisation of the Games. The most frequent arguments in its favour are that it helps to avoid the issues related to construction projects and that it can bring long-term economic benefits to a potential permanent host city, which are more probable than in case of organising the event once in several decades.

Athens is frequently mentioned in this respect due to the obvious historical reasons and Christine Lagarde, a head of the International Monetary Fund supported this idea as a solution to help the Greek economy.

Andrew Zimbalist, on the other hand, is in favour of Los Angeles. Right now it seems to be the best available option in this respect, because the city has already in place all the facilities. Moreover, it also makes sense from a commercial point of view. Considering that major portion of IOC's income comes from American sponsors and TV companies, it probably makes sense for them to have the Games organised on their home soil and have secured the ideal broadcast times. Although, as A. Zimbalist says, the US west coast is not as valuable in this respect as the US east coast.

I did a small survey before this conference and asked people whether they would agree with the establishment of a permanent host city for both summer and winter editions of the Olympic Games. The respondents seem to be slightly in favour of a permanent host for the Summer Games and slightly in favour of current host city rotation in case of the Winter Games.

I work for an elite sport centre, so I have a chance to meet athletes, coaches or sport officials, who also participated at the Olympics. So they have a direct experience with this event. And some of them are surprised and wondering, why so many cities do not want to host the Games. But there are also others, who are probably better informed and feel disappointed about the manifold side-effects surrounding the Games and simply do not like it and support the idea of a permanent host city. But I have also encountered reactions that the Olympic Games should not be organised anymore.

I like the Olympic Games, since I had noticed it for the very first time on TV back in 1988 and I have always promoted it in a very positive way. But I think, it is good that the true picture of the Games is being revealed and that we start to understand that this event is not as indisputably beneficial as it is usually presented to the public as being. It is simply not only about its participants and those who consume it as a TV product, but also about those, who somehow suffered as a consequence of its organisation.

Olympism is definitely a very positive human achievement. But unfortunately, it is also infected with weaknesses such as greed, craving for prestige or intentions to make false impressions sometimes at almost any cost, as it happened e.g. in Sochi or Rio. These are the weaknesses in which also the problems surrounding the Games are rooted and that often hide behind the scenes of its legacy. So if we are looking for any solution or a change in this

respect, then we first need to stop supporting those weaknesses through our behaviour and decisions that we make.

The IOC still pursues the host city rotation model and strives to make the Games so efficient, so it becomes more attractive, potentially even for smaller cities. And although all the cost-saving measures and geographical flexibility should be viewed as beneficial steps from the IOC. I find equally important to make the Games so efficient, so it can be financed solely from private sources without using taxpayers' money. This is probably possible with the exception of security measures, as it was proposed by H. Verbruggen, a former IOC member, who passed away this year.

So what I would like to stress here as a conclusion is that for sustainable future of the Games it is vital that the IOC strictly avoids candidates with challenging construction programmes and focuses on projects based on existing infrastructure and temporary solutions, which has not always been the case, if we look at the winning bids from the past.

But the big question nowadays is, whether the IOC will still have any potential candidates for the next editions of the Olympic Games, especially those able to replicate the model of Los Angeles 2028, which profiles itself as a role model in this respect? The options are probably very few. Therefore, I think the future of this event is in a permanent host city, or even permanent host cities, as it is sometimes proposed. It is not an ideal option, but it appears to be the most suitable way, how to avoid many of the unwelcomed impacts on host cities and consequently how to host the Games more in line with the Agenda 2020 and even more in the spirit of values, it represents.

About the author: Igor Kováč received his masters' degree in Human Geography from the Comenius University in Bratislava in 2000. In his diploma thesis „Centres of the Olympic Winter Games and Poprad-Tatry Candidacy“, he analysed the impacts of the Winter Games on host cities, including an analysis of possible effects of the event on Poprad-Tatry region, bidding for the 2002 and 2006 editions. Since then he has been working in the field of Olympic studies, focusing mainly on spatial and urban aspects in organisation of the Olympic Games.

He is a contributor to the International Symposium on the Legacy of the Olympic Games of the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the Olympic Museum in Lausanne (November 2002), a Research Grant holder of the Olympic Museum in Lausanne (March 2003) and a participant at the IOA Postgraduate Seminar on Olympic Studies in Olympia, Greece (May 2 – June 6, 2003).

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