And if Cape Town Loses?
Mega-Events And The Olympic Candidature

By Harry H Hiller
Department of Sociology
University of Calgary

The mega event is a little understood phenomenon. Benefits and costs are difficult to quantify, but important lessons can be drawn from the candidacy experience.

No idea has seemed more incongruous to the post-apartheid national agenda than the proposition to host the 2004 Summer Olympics. Even before the first democratic elections in 1994 were completed, the proposal had already been advanced to participate in the next round of Olympic bidding. With so many issues percolating on the reconstruction agenda, surely hosting the world must be near the bottom of the list!

Such thoughts represented the feelings of many South Africans who were both startled and bewildered by the bid proposal. The bid itself evolved from an initiative driven by Pic-n-Pay’s Raymond Ackerman, to a Cape Town city bid supported by the private sector, to ultimately a key policy initiative led by the ANC National Government with a significant coalition of endorsement from other political parties, labour organisations, and business.

This evolution represented the growing level of importance given to the Olympic bid among many elites. Some South Africans warmed up to the idea, being convinced that “If Cape Town Wins, We All Win”. Others were much more sceptical, though curious. Strangely enough, in a society where the mobilisation of discontent had once been a way of life, overt opposition to the bid was scattered and muted.

It is accurate to say that the Cape Town bid began with a low probability of success but that through the bid process, and to the surprise of many, the Cape Town Bid Company clearly provided both the technical expertise and an Olympic vision to capture the attention of the International Olympic Committee and to manage selection to the short-list of five cities from the original eleven cities.

By the time of the final decision, the local media had indeed led many to believe that a successful bid was imminent. Surely, the combination of a continent that had never been given the opportunity to host the Olympics as well as Madiba magic would be irresistible. But on September 5, 1997 in Lausanne, Switzerland, the bid failed as Athens was selected.

The nature of mega-events
The priority given to the Olympic Bid makes little sense, given the South African
context, unless we understand the concept of mega-events, how they work, and what they mean. A mega-event (formerly called "hallmark event") is a one-time event of relatively short duration but of global significance. It necessarily has a long preparatory period given the magnitude and scale of the event and the substantial mobilisation of resources required.

The "mother" of all mega-events has become the Olympics, with its strict infrastructural requirements, the large "Olympic family" entourage from athletes to officials to media to sponsors, as well as the Olympics’ media appeal, global television audience, and its in the world language of competitive sport.

Other mega-events include World Expositions or World’s Fairs, world-scale conventions and trade shows that attract thousands, and other sporting events such as the Commonwealth Games or World Police And Fire Games which contribute greatly to the tourism industry and the local economy.

The key characteristic of mega-events is that their size, scale, and significance require a level of planning and preparation that elevates the event among other priorities because of its high profile nature. While the event itself may pay its own way, it is the infrastructural requirements (which may be considered the event’s legacy) that require government participation, whether for event facilities or for housing or transport enhancements via grants, subsidies, land use changes, or other policy issues.

**Justification**

Since the mega-event is of only limited duration, a rationale must be developed to justify the long-term benefit of the cost and effort involved. Therefore, the mega-event can never only be understood in terms of the event itself but must always be understood in terms of some broader objectives.

One of these broader objectives might be urban in scope so as to engage in some form of renewal of decaying but valuable urban space (e.g. the waterfront in Barcelona), or to provide an urgency for general urban upgrading from public transportation to signage to telecommunications.

Another objective might be to develop a tourism infrastructure (e.g. hotels, tourist attractions or landmark structures) and stimulate tourism growth through the resultant global media exposure. In all of these instances, land values are enhanced as the result of the mega-event and the city becomes a more attractive place for business of various kinds.

Additional objective of the mega-event is to use the hosting of such an event as a way of making a political statement. No one can think of the Olympics in Moscow, or Seoul, or Los Angeles, or Tokyo without thinking of dominant ideological messages that governments or elites wanted to make both to their own constituencies and to the rest of the world – especially since television broadens influence beyond those who attend in person.

In large measure, these messages have to do with the desire to establish or affirm business linkages with the rest of the world and to reaffirm the legitimacy of polities and their elites as leaders in the world community. In other words, the event is not just what it appears to be and becomes a symbol for other goals.

The prestige of the mega-event is mobilised to accomplish additional objectives from showcasing the city (its tourism potential, its expert labour force, its investment opportunities) to affirming internal national political leadership (its vision, its need for unity) to the promotion of economic interests (the need for inward investment, new markets, and internal business stimulants). Supporting the Olympics as a mega-event may indeed have little to do with love of sport.

The criticism of the recent commercialisation of the Olympics makes the point clearly that mega-events are not just what they appear to be and have a purpose that goes far beyond the event itself. The significance of the Cape Town bid must clearly be understood in terms of this much more complex reality.

With this background, we are now able to begin to understand why mega-events are controversial. The event is championed as a highly desired good, as an end in itself, but behind the event is lurking all kinds of other objectives, no: all of which are known to the general public or considered desirable by them or discussed openly, except perhaps by opponents.

Furthermore, the fast-track and task-oriented preparations required often mean the
displacement of other desired public goals and initiatives so that the mega-event becomes the pre- eminent and all- encompassing objective, and negative impacts (e.g. appreciating property values displacing low income residents) are minimised.

Questions of public support

Given the fact that the value of hosting the mega-event is not necessarily self-evident, the influence of public opinion becomes very important. Therefore, the mega-event organisation not only has the task of planning for the event but doing the public relations work that will stress its positive impact.

As an interstitial organisation between government, capital, and the general public, and charged with organising the event, the mega-event organisation is continually squeezed by multiple pressures because it lacks unequivocal power. This places organising committees in a tenuous position in which the interests of capital and business development vie with the agendas of politicians and political strategies, and the grass-roots are unclear about their own interests.

The mobilisation of support is in large measure dependent on the high profile and sense of prestige related to the mega-event. There is no guarantee that all people will buy the “honour and glory argument” (for example, there are numerous critics of the Olympic movement itself), but as we will see, the bid process as well as the media attention helps elevate the mega-event to a significant international achievement.

It should be noted that the prestige ideology is particularly effective in ascendant communities where international recognition is highly desired—not only by capital and politicians, but by the public at large. One measure of this is the large pool of volunteers that are needed to host most mega-events. These volunteers are increasingly the cornerstone of event operation who are attracted by the prestige factor of the event in hosting international guests.

The meaning of bidding

One of the unique characteristics of rotating mega-events is that selection to host the event is competitive through an international bid process in which cities (and the countries which they represent) are pitted against one another.

In a real sense, the prestige and the competence of the city and country are at stake, and the competitive nature of bidding helps propel public support as almost blind statements of patriotism, so that opposition to the mega-event takes on the character of unpatriotic behaviour.

The competitive nature of the bidding also creates game-like conditions in which strategy and secrecy go hand-in-hand, so as not to give the opposition any advantages in the game. What creates difficulties is that the public is frequently not consulted on either the commitment to play the game or the strategy to be used to attain the goal.

Thus the game calls for many cheerleaders from the public-at-large while elites huddle to develop the strategy to achieve the taken-for- granted objective. But since bidding is truly a game in itself, in which the outcome is dependent on external and considerably unpredictable forces, the need to show the world a united internal front demands that the bid utilise nationalist feeling as a supportive ideology.

In view of the fact that the public is rarely directly consulted about the hosting of the mega-event, the decision to back the event is largely an action by political or interest groups, but operating under the assumption that the event is indeed in the common good, and as though such action was politically neutral.

Opponents, on the other hand, are usually quick to seize on the political agenda or interests championed behind the event. Yet much of this is masked by the competitive nature of the bid which requires both unity and mobilisation of support in the face of “foreign” competition.

Thus winning has a status of its own on the world stage, in addition to feelings of collective euphoria over such recognition. Conversely, losing conveys real feelings of disappointment and even rejection.

The Cape Town bid

The purpose of the foregoing discussion was to place South Africa’s recent
The NP was caught between supporting the Western Province and opposing the ANC.

Olympic bid into a global context in which mega-events are an expanding phenomenon. The competition between an unprecedented eleven cities for 2004 attests to that fact, as well as the notation that once on the mega-event circuit, there is a desire for more of them (e.g. Calgary hosted the 1988 Winter Olympics, the World Rotary Convention in 1996, and the World Police And Fire Games in 1997).

As South Africa is now moving out of its more isolationist pariah position, such opportunities will undoubtedly rise again. Therefore, it is important to understand their significance.

The experience of South Africa with the Cape Town bid demonstrates most of the mega-event characteristics described above. Neither Capetonians or South Africans were ever directly consulted about support for the bid in a decision-making format.

Scientific polls showed that there did appear to be support but listener and reader polls by radio stations and newspapers revealed opposition. The public interest was deemed accounted for by endorsements from elected political representatives first in the Cape Town City Council, and later by the ANC Party and the Cabinet.

The Nationalist Government of the Western Cape was caught between supporting an initiative that could clearly benefit and impact its own province, and supporting action that ultimately became an instrument of ANC policy and economic strategy.

The fragility of this united national support for the bid was revealed a number of times when the National Party in particular reacted negatively to the non-consultation or non-inclusion by the ANC government at particular moments, especially in the latter stages when in many ways the National Government took over the bid.

Contrary to other countries where the economic rationale for hosting mega-events are often less explicit, the Cape Town Bid established strong expectations. In a country slow to experience the economic growth it needed for reconstruction and development, the Olympics provided the government with a sense of "doing something" through an initiative that synchronised with the neo-liberal agenda (GEAR).

Consequences

The Olympics was to stimulate local economic growth and serve as a magnet for foreign capital investment thereby creating more jobs (90,000 permanent jobs were estimated) which would support better housing and provide a stronger tax base for other government services. It is clear that business bought into this logic as evidenced by the high degree of corporate support.

It is true that the Olympics would have been a good launch for an expanding tourism infrastructure, and tourism is known to provide a high number of entry level jobs. Whether this would have translated into adequate wages to support more adequate housing might be open for debate.

It is also true that the Olympics would have led to significant upgrading of the urban infrastructure in general though it was not likely to provide significant housing for shack dwellers.

In spite of affirmative action principles that should have benefited some small businesses and previously disadvantaged communities, there is also the possibility that much of the economic expansion that might have taken place as the result of the Olympics would have worsened the condition of the very poor who were not able to benefit in any way.

The evidence from the scientific polls was that blacks were the most strongly supportive of the bid because, it might be assumed, they bought the economic catalyst-reconstruction argument. Whites on the other hand were more likely to be cynical about both the fiscal costs of the bid as ratepayers and the financial interests that stood behind the bid, and were much less supportive.

Critics could assert that whatever the argument, the Olympics at best warranted the faint hope that reconstructionist objectives would be achieved through the mega-event, and at worst represented only a distraction away from government policies that had been unable to deliver results.

The Olympic bid also supported other political messages. The nonracialist policy of the ANC was supported by the nonracialist ideology of the Olympic movement, and fit nicely with the role that the Olympics had played in the anti-apartheid movement.

It is possible the Olympics would have worsened the lot of the very poor.

At worst, the bid was a distraction.
The need for national unity in the face of external competition served as a useful mechanism to legitimate togetherness in a common cause in a country still very fragile. Social psychologically, it was also hoped that the Olympic bid would play an important role in helping to remove the nagging South African sense of inferiority and the remnants of shame from the apartheid past that stalked the country’s international image.

In sum, then, the Olympics was to be the perfect occasion to showcase the acclaimed “new” South Africa. Yet, in losing, the thin veneer of unity for the sake of solidarity in the face of external competition became clear.

The appeal to the IOC was that this was not just a Cape Town bid but a bid for South Africa on its threshold of a new democratic era. Indeed, it was claimed that this was a bid for all of Africa for what was labelled the beginning of the “African renaissance”. This line came apart quickly as ideology soon after the bid failed.

Soon it became known that assumed African IOC votes had fallen away, political parties jockeyed to shift the blame, white vs. black issues rose between the Bid Company leadership and the National Government, and the differences between the racial and political composition of the Western Cape from the rest of South Africa reminded us that the sense of solidarity for bid appearances purposes was indeed not real.

Ironically, not even that world icon, Prime Minister Mandela, the architect of the Government of National Unity, was able to produce the anticipated triumph.

**Accomplishments?**

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the bid from a global perspective is that for the first time, the Olympics was linked to human development rather than just urban or economic development objectives.

The key notion here from the point of view of a mega-event was not just the usual appeal to job creation (in this case with affirmative action principles) or economic/tourist impact, but the distinction that was made between competition venues and training venues.

While competition venues were to be more centralised at Wingfield, training venues were to be located in disadvantaged areas and used as a basis to kick-start new housing/retail/service facilities in shantytowns. Given the preference of the IOC for all centralised facilities, this was an innovative idea adapted to the South African context.

Even a failed bid produced a small legacy in that regard with seven priority projects in disadvantaged areas under construction as demonstration projects to the IOC prior to the final vote. The fact that mega-events could be attached to human development goals remains an intriguing idea.

There is a tendency to exaggerate the international publicity gained from the bid (“all this free advertising about South Africa”) - though some of it is not to be denied. For a country that had been on the margins of the world community, it can be acknowledged that the bid provided a different signal of a new era for South Africa in international relations.

Olympic related visitors to South Africa easily misled their hosts about the bid outcome because they were often unexpectedly pleasantly surprised with the existing expertise and infrastructure in the country.

Third, in spite of the arguable wastefulness of time and resources represented by the bid, and the distraction from the “real” problems of South Africa, conversely the bid helped to focus on them all the more.

For example, the issue of crime arose repeatedly through the evaluation process, and the bid even led to some creative yet floundering initiatives to deal with the crime problem. Or, the issue of shantytowns in a partially developed country provoked new international awareness of the socio-economic problems in South Africa and sub-saharan Africa in general.

In that sense, the bid reminded South Africans once again of their own unsolved problems in this regard, perhaps reflected in the collective sigh of relief (in spite of some disappointment) when the bid failed. For the ANC, the goal must now be to find a new instrument for reconstruction delivery.

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**REFERENCES**


