



## LEVERAGING MEGA-EVENTS

Abstract - This short essay, through a literary review, aims to verify whether the strategic choice of organizing a mega-event can be effective in acting as a lever responsible for significant local and global desirable effects (legacy). The mega events aim to meet the local needs of the host community and address global challenges. There is no consensus on the fact that the legacies of events, intended as a direct consequence of their staging, are positive, especially in the social sphere. For this reason, the use of mega events as a social, economic and environmental lever offers a proactive perspective with respect to waiting for results that may not be a direct consequence of the events. The concept of leverage provides a theoretical framework for reflecting on the broader theme of sustainability, organizer accountability and the appropriate mobilization of stakeholders to jointly determine a desirable future. It will be concluded that there is still a lack of operational indications and practical evidence that make the organization of mega events a preferable and reliable option for obtaining positive effects in the medium and long term, including those in the social sphere, compared to other alternatives.

Keywords: Legacy; mega-events; sustainability.

## APROVEITANDO OS MEGAEVENTOS

Resumo - Este pequeno ensaio, por meio de uma revisão literária, visa verificar se a escolha estratégica de organizar um megaevento pode ser eficaz em atuar como uma alavanca responsável por significativos efeitos desejáveis locais e globais (legado). Os megaeventos visam atender às necessidades locais da comunidade anfitriã e enfrentar desafios globais<sup>1</sup>. Não há consenso de que os legados dos eventos, pensados como consequência direta de sua realização, sejam positivos, especialmente no social. Para isso, a utilização dos megaeventos como alavanca social, econômica e ambiental oferece uma perspectiva proativa no que diz respeito à expectativa de resultados que podem não ser consequência direta dos eventos. O conceito de alavancagem fornece uma estrutura teórica para pensar sobre a questão mais ampla de sustentabilidade, responsabilidade do organizador e a mobilização adequada das partes interessadas para determinar em conjunto um futuro desejável. Concluir-se-á que ainda faltam indicações operacionais e evidências práticas que tornem a organização de megaeventos uma opção preferível e confiável para a obtenção de efeitos positivos a médio e longo prazo, inclusive no âmbito social, em relação a outras alternativas.

Palavras-chave: Legado; megaeventos; sustentabilidade.

## APROVECHAR LOS MEGA EVENTOS

Resumen - Este breve ensayo, a través de una revisión literaria, tiene como objetivo verificar si la elección estratégica de organizar un mega evento puede ser efectiva para actuar como una palanca responsable de efectos deseables (legado) locales y globales significativos. Los mega eventos pretenden satisfacer las necesidades locales de la comunidad anfitriona y abordar los desafíos globales<sup>1</sup>. No existe un consenso general sobre el hecho de que los legados de los eventos, pensados como consecuencia directa de su puesta en escena, sean positivos, especialmente en el ámbito social. Por ello, el uso de los mega eventos como palanca social, económica y ambiental ofrece una perspectiva proactiva respecto a la espera de resultados que pueden no ser consecuencia directa de los eventos. El concepto de apalancamiento proporciona un marco teórico para reflexionar sobre el tema más amplio de la sostenibilidad, la responsabilidad del organizador y la movilización adecuada de las partes interesadas para determinar conjuntamente un futuro deseable. Se concluirá que aún faltan indicios operativos y evidencias prácticas que hagan de la organización de mega eventos una opción preferible y confiable para la obtención de efectos positivos a mediano y largo plazo, incluso en el ámbito social, frente a otras alternativas.

Palabras-clave: Legado; mega eventos; sustentabilidad.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of mega-events in promoting local development, considering the importance of balancing global goals with specific community needs and resources. This perspective provides a way to leverage the event delivery to achieve other outcomes.

Events are one of the ways in which the community can find an opportunity to meet, share, be proud, develop cohesion and experience different cultures<sup>1,2</sup> bypassing the boredom of everyday life, celebrating religion, natural events, anniversaries, work products, entertainment and sports<sup>3</sup>. Events involve participants who wish to meet specific needs<sup>4</sup>. They are an economic opportunity for tourism, advertising and marketing and can cover all aspects of community life. Since they are a means and not an end, the resources used to stage events should be invested and not consumed according to their size indicates that mega events are such due to their ambition to support local development by promoting universal values and principles in global challenges<sup>1</sup>. So that it is not a mere declaration of intent, local development should be safeguarded and not sacrificed for the global purpose or for the objective of the owner of the event.

## Literature review and discussion

The literature search was conducted on the keyword 'leverage' in documents relating to mega events such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup.

Political elites, in order to maintain and consolidate their position, may have used mega events in the past as a means of propaganda and celebration, overstating economic opportunities, promoting the city as a tourist destination, increasing employment, redeveloping depressed areas and improvement of transport<sup>5</sup>, without then implementing effective actions to achieve lasting positive effects in favor of the entire population.

It is therefore not surprising that third-party studies have not found sufficient evidence of the promised results and that there is no general consensus. Although no negative data has been collected<sup>6,7</sup>, they are generally inconclusive. For example, with reference to the London 2012 Olympic Games, despite the improved access to green spaces and the expectation of relieving stressors to improve physical and mental health, the benefits seem to have been temporary. This, combined with what has occurred in previous events, leads to a decreased attractiveness in hosting other events<sup>6</sup>.

The link with the event should go beyond that with what will remain after the event, that is the legacy of the event, integrating it into the process of changing the community in the direction that best meets its real needs.

Today, in order to still have access to the public resources necessary for their city to host mega-events, policy makers must have convincing arguments<sup>7</sup>: citizen support depends on awareness and perception of actual opportunities coming from these events for one's own well-being<sup>8</sup>.

Lack of results could be the consequence of inadequate policy actions to seize opportunities<sup>8</sup> scholars generally agree that benefits cannot come automatically<sup>6</sup>, as a spontaneous consequence of hosting the event, but that lasting, planned and intentional actions are needed, which act as levers<sup>9</sup>.

Leveraging mega-events could act as confounders with respect to legacy planning as they determine additional effects that cannot be considered a direct consequence of the event. This can make it difficult to justify the event or facilitate its support by including results external to the event among those that contribute to generating benefits. Opponents of the event can reinforce their position on the basis that the external benefits of the event could be obtained without it, while avoiding undesirable effects, including enormous expenses. The opponents demand to direct the efforts directly on the expected results and to contain the dimensions of the events, especially since the expected benefits are not clearly attributable to them or that they are even able to produce damages, disappointing expectations.

With regard to the economic purpose of an event, the levers necessary to organize it and those useful for maximizing revenues can be distinguished<sup>10</sup>. The latter are actions that can aim to incentivize investments, tourism, construction, marketing, sponsors, the media with the use of long and short term pre-event and post-event strategies<sup>11</sup>. For example, the provision of basic information and support to enable the city hosting the event to be identified as an attractive destination must begin earlier and must continue long after the event through adequate investments, before becoming lasting effects. It is possible to distinguish the actions to identify events that, due to their characteristics, can contribute to building the destination brand or be an extension of it, and the necessary coordination actions to synergize the efforts of those organizing them<sup>12</sup>.

Overcoming the logic of the impact and legacy of an event, that is the consequences of its staging, there is a leverage approach, i.e. the use of the event as an opportunity for resources and initiatives aimed at other purposes<sup>9</sup>. The concept of leverage does not differ from that of activation typical of sponsorship and seeks to create a positive association of events with certain desirable effects, even if they are not directly related.

For this reason, it becomes urgent for those who intend to continue organizing mega-events to demonstrate that they are the ones who provide the further and more effective opportunity for positive results that go beyond their own staging<sup>9</sup>.

The owner of the event or anyone who directly benefits from his organization could be disinterested in other purposes, especially in the absence of lasting links with the place where it takes place. In the case of events such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup, the owners are respectively the IOC and FIFA, while the organizers are empowered to deliver the event and coincide with the local committee and its organizational structure separate from the event owners. In fact, leverage actions can increase the overall financial outlay and therefore constitute an additional risk. It is also a question of evaluating which initiatives have the best chance of achieving pre-established objectives and giving up some leverage options<sup>9</sup>. This is why Smith proposes to involve stakeholders who have interests in the place and who are already willing to use the concept of leverage *ante-litteram*, that is, to enhance the opportunities of the event. For example, local companies can become suppliers of products and services closely related to the event and use the favorable context to demonstrate their potential and attract other potential customers.

Planning remains a dynamic process for changing leverage options in relation to the performance of the outcomes. Generally, the funds available to the event organizer are such that most of them are absorbed by the event with modest margins for carrying out leverage activities<sup>9</sup>. For this reason, those who intend to host an event should verify that the lever is an integral part of the project from its earliest stages and that it is balanced in order to allow actions guided by the needs of the city and not exclusively by the event.

Mega events, in fact, can be an opportunity to put on the agenda activities useful for the needs of the city, which small events would not solicit: urban redevelopment, transport, culture, tourism. The possibility of success does not depend on the strength of

the link between the event and the objective, but on the concrete opportunity to finance the project and the ability to conduct it correctly, as happens, for example, for initiatives to promote art and culture<sup>9</sup> on issues beyond the main event. The association with other activities can also take place in terms of social groups involved and extension of the geographical area concerned by activating projects dedicated to specific groups of the local population or of other cities: an example is given by the initiatives to inspire young people all over the world through the London 2012 Olympic Games<sup>13</sup>.

Planning should also consider the best time to link initiatives and reduce unwanted effects, such as overdevelopment of hospitality and the subsequent post-event crisis<sup>9</sup>. These effects can be counteracted by partnerships with government organizations<sup>14</sup> have moderate links to the event and that have institutional missions that they will take care of even after its conclusion. All ancillary activities should be authorized by the event owner and harmonized, with shared forms, including the use of second level logos and partnerships<sup>9</sup>. Even when these conditions are in place since mega-events owners generally require the commitment of national government forces as in the case of the organization of the Olympics, this aspect is sometimes only real in the first phase of the process. In fact, initially the interest of the local committee may correspond to the involvement of the government to obtain local benefits. In a second phase, once the national institutions are involved, the latter, if during the process growing difficulties emerge, in order not to lose credibility on the world stage, can be induced to sacrifice the initial local objectives in order to adequately deliver the event which becomes the end and ceases to be the means.

In the aforementioned case of London 2012, the objectives of economic development and increase in employment, as well as the urban redevelopment of the suburbs, should have moved into a better perception of the quality of life of citizens, of safety, an increase in social relations and effects on the state of well-being and health. However, there is limited evidence that urban regeneration has had a positive effect on young people in the affected neighborhoods and their parents and the assessment is affected by the numerous confounders that are constituted by health, economic and inequality problems, which go beyond the urban but which significantly affect the perception of well-being. Although the residents experienced a period of pride and felt included during the Games, the effect was short-lived with a quick return to the previous

situation. Furthermore, the housing problem, perceived as the main one, has not been solved by the redevelopment of the suburbs. Even the school educational programs, due to the lack of funding, have been rapidly reduced, giving rise overall to irrelevant effects of improving health and well-being<sup>7</sup>.

Intervening through the organization of an event on aspects related to the quality of life and the human heritage of a place means acting with a social lever. It is an extension of economic leverage, i.e., a profitable use of public resources to address community problems and build a lasting positive legacy<sup>15</sup>. Social leverage should be constitutive in mega-events. In fact, from an anthropocentric perspective, the characteristic of the events of being celebratory determines a limonoid experience, capable of nourishing a sense of community that can be further stimulated with other informal social events linked to themes of interest to the participants.

Liminality differs from leverage in that it precedes it<sup>16</sup>. By receiving the attention of the media and sponsors, the connected events strengthen the economic and social leverage, contribute to the possible extension of the visitor's stay, involve the local community, attract other people to relevant topics, while offering the opportunity to advertise the main event for its connection to social purposes<sup>17</sup>.

This approach is consistent with sustainability, understood as harmonious development in the three economic, social and environmental spheres<sup>18</sup>. Its implementation requires *ex ante* planning strategies, that is, capable of using events, even short ones<sup>16</sup>, to obtain long-term outcomes. It is no longer a question of focusing on what can happen during the event or immediately after, but of acting to maintain / strengthen relationships, investments, employment and best practices, with an approach that rather than waiting for the presumed effects of the event, intends to provoke them proactively. An orientation to learning and a constant predisposition to act on the levers with contingency plans means moving from liminality to an effective opportunity. An example is the use of messages that do not focus on the competitive aspects of sporting events, but on the context and which are celebratory of local attractions enhanced with dedicated actions collateral to the event.

According to O'Brien and Chalip, leverage actions can achieve the following main strategic objectives: focus the attention of stakeholders on social problems, orient the agenda of the local community, support environmental causes<sup>17</sup>.

Implementation programs should respect the city's agenda, local identity, potential and natural and human resources, historical and landscape riches, cultural and ethical heritage. For example, to promote an active lifestyle, it is not enough to organize sporting events or increase intact green structures or spaces, but other interventions are needed to reduce economic disparities, enhance and integrate subcultures, increase safety, improve the quality of air, transport, restore urban planning in the suburbs, coordinate the operators of the fitness and sports sector, carry out educational campaigns, promote technological development<sup>19</sup>. Consequently, in a city where the practice of sport is widespread, the conditions that make it a potential tourist destination are already present<sup>20</sup>. Appropriate communication and investment strategies and the organization of events can enhance, enrich or co-build the destination brand while, on the contrary, neglecting the image of the city can correspond to its decline and act in a spiral that discourages entrepreneurship and employment<sup>21</sup>.

The example just presented shows briefly how the development of a city is the result of the interaction of the economic, social and environmental levers on all the main objectives, apparently very different from each other.

The joint use of social, economic and environmental leverage can be defined as a “triple bottom line” approach<sup>16</sup> (p. 334). Its transversal nature, with broader and more integrated actions, should increase the effectiveness in achieving the objectives of a greater number of stakeholders, compared to the use of the three levers in a distinct and uncoordinated way. At the same time, it requires greater collaborative efforts and greater responsibility of each to take specific actions that have an indirect or third-party effect. Companies that profess Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and are motivated to balance Profit, People and Planet (3P) should be in tune with these principles<sup>22,23</sup>.

From a theoretical perspective, the joint and coordinated action of the levers on the social, economic and environmental system should lead to a development aimed at satisfying the needs of the community. However, the social system is not fully understood and uncertainty suggests focusing on priority issues with sustainable efforts. The use of the term lever could lead back to the concept of an instrument capable of amplifying the effects of efforts also thanks to their positive coordination. However, it may be useful to remember that physics distinguishes between advantageous, indifferent and disadvantageous levers and that moving a very heavy boulder requires great forces and

energies. This implies considering the actual need, the possibility of carrying out a project and in what time, as well as evaluating the options, including the null alternative.

### **Conclusions and perspectives**

The use of mega events as social, economic and environmental levers, consistent with the criteria of sustainability, does not have solid elements in the literature referable to concrete results. The opposition to mega events therefore has fertile ground for two reasons: it is the task of those who intend to organize mega events to demonstrate that they can achieve the promised results; the organizers should not leave to others the responsibility and the burden of using events as leverage when it is not demonstrated that this can be implemented in a sustainable and convenient way compared to other options.

The failure of mega events could result from not achieving the external objectives claimed by the organizers or simply from the fact that they could not be presented as a consequence of the event. The paradox is made more intricate by the fact that the organizers would be left with the only possibility to organize events for their own sake, which is contrary to their intentions and the human needs of the participants.

In the social sphere in particular, scholars continue to have little evidence of how mega events can achieve measurable results. This is due to the fact that, for example, the reasons why disadvantaged communities exist are multifactorial and there are many confounders that make it difficult to distinguish whether the specific initiatives undertaken in conjunction with the event are effective in inducing positive and lasting changes.

On the other hand, it was illustrated how social development is linked to actions coordinated by political decision makers, aimed at implementing an integrated plan of interventions that should achieve objectives that cannot derive from the use of levers in a separate and specific way.

From the paradigm of the legacy of events, scholars have moved on to that of leverage, whose characteristic action is to direct and multiply efforts to guide the results on what would not happen just by organizing an event. From here the passage towards integrated objectives took place, that is, interdependent and to be balanced. If the literature at the turn of the two millennia has concentrated on the definition of economic, social and environmental levers and on their coordinated use, today this theoretical concept is now consolidated and merged into the paradigm of sustainability.

Therefore, the success of hosting a mega event should be part of a strategy in which policy makers are already doing everything in their power to ensure the sustainable development of the city, both in terms of objectives and timing. The staging of the event could be an attractive option if, in addition to complementing and constituting an additional activity with a sustainable increase in commitments, it can also provide any positive impulses to the ongoing process. For this reason, the organizers and owners of mega events will have to continue to develop forecasting models and operational suggestions in order to be able to give guarantees on suitable results to justify their staging in the future.

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