



MEGA-EVENT SYNDROME - POLICY BRIEF

Why So Much Goes Wrong in Mega-Event Planning and What to Do About It

Martin Müller



This brief identifies a mega-event syndrome, a group of symptoms that afflict the planning and hosting of large events such as the Olympic Games, the Football World Cups and many others. It provides key recommendations for cities and countries on how to minimize damage and maximize benefits.

Mega-event syndrome

In the past two decades, mega-events have become major liabilities for host cities. Staging an Olympic Games is one of the costliest and riskiest projects a city can undertake. And it is almost certain to go wrong.

Mega-events such as the Olympic Games now routinely command more than USD \$10 billion in, usually public, capital investment, take up several hundred acres of often prime inner-city land, and require the infrastructure to accommodate, move and keep secure hundreds of thousands of visitors. Their size and public profile makes

mega-events exceptional undertakings for even the largest cities in the world.

But the benefits received from hosting a mega-event rarely justify the costs. This is not just because host cities and countries do not plan them well. What is more, the cards are systematically stacked against hosts, who need to fulfill excessive requirements when hosting mega-events.

A group of seven common but dangerous symptoms afflicts hosts of mega-events. Together they constitute 'mega-event syndrome'.

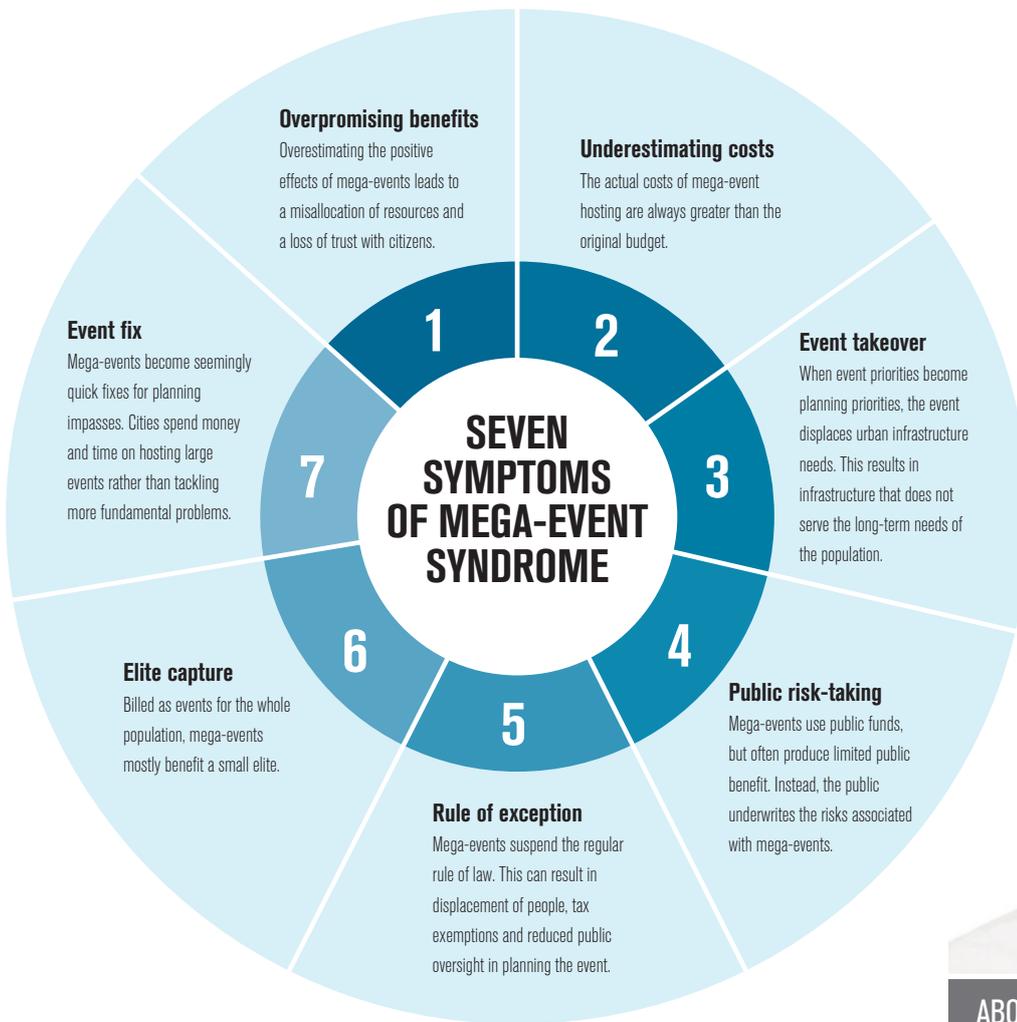
KEY MESSAGES

- Mega-events such as the Olympics and the Football World Cup are expensive and risky, often producing adverse effects: overpromising benefits, underestimating costs, rewriting urban planning priorities to fit the event, using public resources for private interest, and suspending the regular rule of law.
- Cities and countries can reduce adverse effects by bargaining with event-governing bodies, seeking public participation, capping and earmarking public expenditure, and not tying mega-events to large-scale urban development.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CITIES

- Avoid tying mega-events to large-scale urban development
- Bargain with event governing bodies
- Cap and earmark public expenditure
- Seek public participation from the start
- Enroll independent experts

'BID CITIES HAVE THE GREATEST POWER TO CHANGE THINGS – AND THEY RECEIVE THE GREATEST BENEFIT.'



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Time for a change

Addressing mega-event syndrome requires radical changes from cities to the status quo of planning mega-events.

These five actions will have the greatest impacts:

- 1) Avoid tying mega-events to large-scale urban development:** Cities often link large urban development schemes to hosting a mega-event. But organizing a mega-event is complex enough. Adding a multi-billion dollar redevelopment project to it just exacerbates the challenges – and the syndrome.
- 2) Bargain with event governing bodies:** The IOC, FIFA, UEFA, and others are monopolies. This means they can dictate their terms, as long as there is enough demand for their events. This is why host cities should bargain – on their own or, even better, collectively –for concessions from event governing bodies. These should include lower infrastructure requirements, full taxation of revenues, waiving government guarantees, or additional contributions to cover the cost of hosting.
- 3) Cap and earmark public expenditure:** Event hosts should cap expenditures and earmark the funds. This avoids having the public sector compensate mega-event cost

overruns or fund projects with limited public benefit.

- 4) Seek public participation from the start:** Citizen involvement reduces the risk that event priorities will take precedence over urban development priorities. It ensures that citizens can have a say in mega-event planning.
- 5) Enroll independent experts:** Much of the assessment of costs and benefits of mega-events is done by organizations that profit from the event and are thus biased. But for decision-makers and the public, independent expert advice is crucial.

Bid cities have the greatest power to change things, because their bids are essential for events to happen in the first place. Bid cities can change the rules of the game – but they must act before signing hosting contracts.

Now is the time for a change. The IOC is facing difficulties convincing cities of the benefits of the Olympic Games. The recent shake-up of FIFA has opened a window for reform. We need to move on this chance – not just in the interest of bid cities, but to secure a sustainable future for the events many of us love so much.

LEARN MORE



"The Mega-Event Syndrome: Why So Much Goes Wrong in Mega-Event Planning and What to Do About It." Journal of the American Planning Association 81 (1): 6–17. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01944363.2015.1038292> (open access).

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