

The Evolution and Future of Sport Event Bidding: Challenges and Opportunities in a Changing Landscape

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Introduction

Event bidding is a critical yet complex process that plays a central role in the global sports and cultural events industry. From the 1990s through to the mid-2010s, we witnessed an intensification of competition among cities and nations vying for the rights to host and deliver ever bigger mega sport events, including the Olympic and Paralympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. Demand was fuelled by the desire of prospective hosts to put themselves on the global map, or to signal a shift in their economic base from commodities to consumption and culture. However, as **Muller et al (2023)** have suggested, interest in bidding for mega sport events reached its peak in the mid-2010s, partly because of their unsustainable size and scale, and subsequent burden on the public finances of the 'lucky' winner. In response to declining interest in hosting and the increased prevalence of referendum to oppose bids (see **McGillivray, Lauermann & Turner, 2019**), the IOC and FIFA initiated reforms to address concerns among potential event bidders, including making the bid

process more about ongoing dialogue than blind competition. In the period since, the rising influence of non-Western countries in the global sporting arena has also challenged awarding bodies to think carefully about the relative merits of revenue generation and social justice goals.

Accompanying reforms to the bid process to reignite city and nation interest in bidding is a series of additional requirements, including more focus on human rights, sustainability, and governmental legacy guarantees that also respond to criticism of mega sport events for prioritising commitments to revenue generation over social benefits. In this thought piece, we explore the key factors that have shaped the current mega sport event form and the emerging trends that will influence its future. By examining these aspects, we aim to provide insights into the complexities of event bidding and its broader implications for host cities, nations, and global event organisers.

10 Key Points

1 Financial Commitment of Event Bidding

Event bidding requires significant financial outlays by prospective hosts, often with long-term implications. Host cities and nations must be prepared to commit substantial resources not only to the bidding process itself but also to the eventual hosting of the event. The financial burden can extend far beyond the initial bid, influencing public spending and economic policies for years to come.

2 Strategic Role of Event Bidding in Urban and National Development

Event bidding is often seen as a strategic tool for urban and national development. Governments and city leaders view bidding for mega sport events as opportunities to catalyse infrastructure development, boost tourism, and enhance the global image of their cities or countries. However, these ambitions must be balanced with the realities of the costs and potential disruptions associated with hosting, and the importance of aligning the interests of those residing in the host environment with the 'projected image' for external consumption.

3 Evolution from Competitive Bidding to Collaborative Agreements

Traditionally, event bidding was characterised by fierce competition among multiple cities and nations, each trying to outbid the other. Recently, however, there has been a shift towards more collaborative approaches, where awarding bodies engage in early dialogue with potential hosts to form agreements without the need for costly bidding wars. This trend reflects a move towards more sustainable and transparent bidding processes, though there are some concerns expressed about a lack of transparency and accountability in discussions taking place behind the scenes.

4 Role of Political and Social Factors in Event Bidding

Political and social factors play a significant role in event bidding. Governments often back bids to showcase their nation's capabilities on a global stage. However, the politicisation of event bidding can lead to controversies, especially when bids are perceived to prioritise political agendas over the interests of local communities, or there is a disconnect between what bid promoters set out in the vision and the priorities of other stakeholders particularly in liberal democracies.

5 Growing Significance of Human Rights and Sustainability on Bidding Processes

Increasingly, human rights and environmental sustainability have moved from the periphery to the centre of event bidding processes. Awarding bodies like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and FIFA now incorporate detailed requirements for both into their bidding criteria, reflecting broader societal demands for more ethical and responsible event hosting. For example, human rights risk assessments are required for prospective hosts bidding for the FIFA World Cup, albeit the influence of these assessments on the criteria for awarding has been open to criticism with the award of the 2034 FIFA World Cup to Saudi Arabia in December 2024, despite significant concerns expressed by human rights defenders about the nation's commitment to addressing its rights record.



6 Shift Towards Multi-Nation Bids

A growing trend in mega sport event bidding is the increase in multi-nation, or multi-city, bids, where several entities collaborate to host a single event (e.g. EURO2020). This approach can distribute the financial and logistical burden of hosting more evenly, while also promoting regional cooperation. However, it also introduces new challenges in terms of coordination, branding and governance that can impact on the identity of the event(s).

7 New Formats and Preferred Hosts

Aligned with the growth in multi-city bids is a related trend towards host cities and nations proposing new formats and models to sport federations as a means of revitalising their existing events, or to bring several previously separate events together into a 'mega' event in one city to garner more media coverage and to utilise existing venues and facilities. Unlike the traditional model where the prospective host bids for an event laid out in detail in a technical document, new formats bring host and awarding body together in dialogue to create a template that suits both parties, sharing power and decision making more equitably.



8 Influence of Emerging Markets and Non-Western Countries

The increasing involvement of non-Western countries, particularly from the Middle East, in the event bidding process marks a significant shift in the global sporting landscape. Nations like Qatar and Saudi Arabia are leveraging their financial power and strategic commitment to transitioning from fossil fuel dependence to service economies to secure major events, raising questions about the role of soft power and the ethical implications of hosting in countries with controversial human rights records.

9 Role of Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability are crucial in the event bidding process, particularly considering past controversies involving corruption and unethical practices around both the Olympic and Paralympic Games (e.g. Salt Lake City) and the FIFA World Cup (e.g. Russia 2028 & Qatar 2022). There is a growing demand for more open and accountable bidding processes, where the public and independent organisations can scrutinise the decisions being made. However, these calls are also accompanied by calls to reduce the costs of bidding and the removal of competitive candidate city contests (see point 3).

10 Future of Event Bidding in a Changing Global Context

As the global context continues to evolve, so too will the event bidding process. Factors such as digital transformation, the increasing importance of global media coverage, and the need for post-pandemic recovery strategies will all play a role in shaping the future of event bidding. This will require a more flexible and adaptive approach from both awarding bodies and potential hosts.



Key Opportunities to Strengthen Bid Processes

For Event Owners

Develop a Transparent Bidding Framework

Create a clear and transparent bidding framework that outlines the criteria and decision-making processes. This framework should be accessible to the public and include mechanisms for independent oversight, including how different criteria will be weighted in the final decision-making process.

Incorporated Human Rights and Sustainability into Bidding Criteria

Ensure that human rights and environmental sustainability are core components of the bidding criteria. This can help prevent future controversies and align the event with global standards for ethical and responsible hosting.

Enable Multi-Nation Bids

Explore the potential for multi-nation bids to share the financial and logistical burden of hosting. This approach can also foster regional cooperation and create new opportunities for collaboration.

Strengthen Anti-Corruption Measures

Implement robust anti-corruption measures to ensure that the bidding process is fair and transparent. This includes regular audits, whistleblower protections, and strict penalties for unethical behaviour.

For Event Bidders

Engage Stakeholders Early in the Bidding Process

From the bidders' perspective, it is crucial to involve local communities, NGOs, and other stakeholders early in the bidding process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are reflected in the bid. This can help build public support and prevent backlash further down the line. While it is important to facilitate deliberative processes in person, there also exists an opportunity to make use of digital platforms to engage a wider audience and build support for the bid. This can include social media campaigns, virtual tours of proposed venues, and interactive content that highlights the benefits of the bid.

View the Bid as the Start of Long-Term Legacy Planning

Prioritise legacy planning from the outset (what is commonly referred to as 'leveraging') to strengthen the bid and ensure that if awarded the event delivers lasting benefits. At this stage legacy planning includes governments and other key stakeholders committing to investments in infrastructure, community programmes, and sustainable practices that will continue to serve the host city or nation long after the event has concluded.

Align the Bid with National Development Goals

Ensure that the bid aligns with the broader national development goals, such as economic diversification, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. This can help secure government support and increase the likelihood of leveraging the event for long-term success.

Operate Transparently in the Use of Public Funds

Clearly communicate how funds will be used throughout the bidding and hosting process. This includes providing detailed budgets and regular financial updates to stakeholders and the public.

Prepare for Post-Event Evaluation

Plan for a comprehensive post-event evaluation to assess the impact of the event and the effectiveness of the bidding process. This should include feedback from stakeholders, financial analysis, and an assessment of the event's legacy.

Key Challenges to Event Bidding Processes

For Event Owners

The Scale of Revenue Generating Activity

Mega sport events represent a significant part of event owners' revenue generating activities, dictating that commercial considerations often win out over social and cultural issues when making decision about which candidate to support.

Commercially Sensitive Information

Commercially sensitive information might be shared during initial dialogue with prospective host cities and nations, reducing the likelihood of open and transparent processes.

Seeking to be Politically Neutral

Event owners, in seeking to avoid becoming too involved in geo-political debates shy away from making difficult decisions to not award their events to nations with poor human rights records or authoritarian regimes.

Declining Interest from Liberal Democracies

Because mega sport events have been criticised for overpromising benefits and underestimating costs, fewer democratic nations have been able to secure support to bid in recent years. This puts additional pressure on event owners to accept bid proposals from nations that fail to meet their bid requirements in full.

For Event Bidders

Lack of Time, Resource or Interest

Bid organisations are set up to bid without having put in place time and resource to undertake meaningful engagement and/or consultative approaches with the population to secure support or buy in for a bid.

Increasing Levels of Public Discontent

A more informed public, especially in the liberal democracies, have information to hand on the costs associated with hosting major sport events and this contributes to the expressions of doubt and opposition, played out in referenda and/or new media activism.

Fiscal Pressures and Alternative Political Priorities

In many nations, economic pressures lead to political and economics leaders prioritising investments in policy platforms other than bidding for mega sport events.

Unequal Competition

As nations with democratic political systems find it more difficult to make the case to bid for mega sport events, non-Western countries with alternative regimes can invest more heavily in bid without the need to account to a wider public.

Conclusion

Event bidding is a dynamic and evolving process that reflects broader changes in the global landscape of sports and cultural events. As new players enter the arena and the criteria for hosting become more stringent, the need for transparency, accountability, and strategic planning has never been greater. The future of event bidding will likely see continued pressure on awarding bodies to uphold higher ethical standards and manage increased competition from emerging markets.

For host cities and nations, the challenge will be to balance the immediate benefits of winning a bid with the long-term implications of hosting. This requires a careful consideration of financial, social, and environmental factors, as well as a commitment to delivering on the promises made during the bidding process. By embracing a more transparent and collaborative approach, the event bidding process can become a powerful tool for positive change, helping to create events that are not only successful but also sustainable and inclusive.

Biographies



David is Deputy Director of the Centre for Culture, Sport & Events at University of the West of Scotland. He is the co-author of *Event Bidding: Politics, Persuasion and Resistance* and has written extensively on the event bidding process, alongside other dimensions of mega sport events including their relationship with urban public space and their effect on the human rights of affected groups.



Mike is Professeur, University of Paris 1 (Pantheon-Sorbonne), France. Over the past 10+ years he has been researching, analysing, commentating, writing, publishing, and teaching on the economics and social impacts of staging major events, with the view to improve delivery and leave a sustainable legacy for the communities, people and places that play host.



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