MEGA-EVENTS AND URBAN POVERTY: LEGACY PROJECTS IN RIO DE JANEIRO[1]

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Introduction

Sporting mega-events are regarded as vehicles for urban and economic development, leaving host cities and nations with lasting 'legacies'. But what kind of development do the events facilitate, and which legacies do they produce? This Brief considers the case of Rio de Janeiro. It argues that in order for mega-events to play a constructive role in the reduction of poverty and urban inequality, this must become a genuine priority of the events' organising bodies in Rio as well as in future host cities and nations.

The Olympic Poverty Torch has arrived in Vila Autódromo. It was created in Vancouver in 2010, and has since been passed down by community organisers in Olympic host cities to draw attention to evictions due to real estate speculation and other ways in which the Olympics exacerbate the situation for poor.

Main points:

- Sporting mega-events are considered vehicles for urban and economic development; providing impetus to the local economy while creating 'legacies' in the form of infrastructure and other upgrades.

- In Rio de Janeiro, legacy projects intended to improve living conditions in self-built neighbourhoods have been mostly abandoned. Instead several such neighbourhoods have been targeted for removal to make valuable land available for other purposes.

- In their current form, sporting mega-events exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and economic marginality. In order for this to change, the priorities of the events' organising bodies and host cities must be radically reconfigured.

Mega-events as vehicles for urban development and poverty reduction

Sporting mega-events are far more than mere sports competitions. Indeed, Lenskyj writes about the Olympics that "sport is only a minor component of these multinational operations", which are most appropriately described as an industry (2008: 2). Furthermore, the discourse of development is closely associated with mega-events, both by organising bodies and in public debate and expectations of such events. FIFA states "that the FIFA World Cup™ is […] closely linked to the United Nations' development work" (Koch 2010: 32, see also FIFA and LOC 2014). In order to explain this relationship, Willi Lemke, Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General on Sport for Peace and Development, stated prior to the FIFA World Cup in South Africa in 2010 that he expected a successful event to bring the necessary confidence and impetus needed for development, and to create the necessary optimism to attract investments and tourism (Koch 2010: 33). The identification with urban development is even stronger, as for host cities and nations, sporting mega-events necessarily implicate change (Kassens-Noor 2012: 1). This is reflected in Rio's Olympic bid, where "transformation of the city" is cited as one of four key legacies (Comité de Candidatura Rio 2016 2009: 22). The stated purpose of this transformation is that "Rio enhances its profile as a global city, and that it becomes an even better place to live, and to do business and tourism" (Comité de Candidatura Rio 2016 2009: 22). However, specifically addressing poverty or inequality is not mentioned as part of this process.

Mega-events constitute some of the most expensive, complex and transformative processes that cities and

nations undertake (Gaffney 2010: 7–8). There are specific ways in which these changes usually happen: low-income neighbourhoods are cleared out to make space for event infrastructure and upgrades, either through forced removals or rent inflation; public funds are channelled into construction projects, democratic processes are suspended and public space is militarised for security reasons (Gaffney 2010: 9). Through these transformations, the city is reconfigured and adapted for investment, tourism and property development. Legacy projects are intended to benefit the host population, yet often do not work according to plan (Kassens-Noor 2012). The situation for poor residents in host cites is therefore more often exacerbated than alleviated by the events.

This model for mega-event development is controversial, and has led to resistance in a number of host cities and nations, for example in Brazil/Rio, Beijing, South Africa and Canada (Barbassa 2015; Broudehoux 2007; Cornelissen 2012; Gaffney 2010, 2014; Lenskyj 2008).

Urban development in Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro has recently hosted the Pan-American Games (2007), the Confederations Cup (2013), the FIFA World Cup (2014), and is preparing to host the Olympics in August 2016. Here, the transformations described above take place in an urban landscape marked by deep-seated social and economic inequalities. In the course of Rio's history, the city's poor have established self-built neighbourhoods, or *favelas,* throughout the city. This has provided residents with affordable housing, often near upper middle class neighbourhoods where employment has been available. Rio´s urban landscape is therefore a patchwork of self-built and formal neighbourhoods.

Urban development projects in Rio have often centred on "taking over" self-built neighbourhoods in attractive areas to make them available for more affluent citizens. This has happened through forced removals, demolition of *favela* homes and at times entire *favelas,* combined with housing projects for the poor in peripheral areas (see e.g. Pearlman 2010). This approach to urban development has been contested by *favela* residents. Many have lost their belongings as their homes were demolished, and/ or ended up in housing projects far from their place of employment, without sufficient access to public transport. Being moved to a housing project could therefore imply loss of employment. Furthermore, the violent bereavement of home and community can be traumatic experiences that harm residents' psychological wellbeing (Fullilove 2004). Consequently, housing projects for the poor in Rio de Janeiro have frequently resulted in increased spatial segregation, loss of community, and the exacerbation of poverty and inequality. As such, these approaches are in line with how efforts to address poverty, historically as well as today, tend to be geared towards preserving rather than challenging hierarchical social orders (Broch-Due 1995; Milton 2007; O'Connor 2002; Ystanes 2014).

Deferred legacy: affordable housing for the poor

Sporting mega-events are associated with the discourse of development through their projected 'legacies' – or their potential societal contribution. The idea that the Olympics should leave host cities and countries with a positive legacy is not new. However, since it made its way into the Olympic Charter in 2004, an envisioned positive legacy is now an obligatory part of Olympic bids (Kassens-Noor 2012). 'Legacy projects' may include parks and areas of recreation, upgrades in public transport, infrastructure, and affordable housing. Nevertheless, as Rio exemplifies, Olympic legacy projects are not necessarily carried out. Here, the abandonment of the commitment to clean up the polluted Guanabara Bay has received much attention because of its possible health consequences for athletes (Ford 2016). In contrast, the projected social housing legacy has been allowed to silently fizzle out.

The athletes' village in Rio, *Ilha Pura* (the Pure Island), will be sold as luxury apartments after the games, and as such, will not contribute to a social housing legacy. However, an ambitious legacy programme, *Morar Carioca,* was announced in 2010. It aimed to urbanise self-built communities by providing public services such as drainage systems, sewage treatment and water. Activists and academics described the programme as a "dream *favela* upgrade programme" (Steiker-Ginzberg 2014). Yet, after mayor Eduardo Paes' second-term inauguration in January 2013, *Morar Carioca* quietly unravelled as funding failed to materialise (Barbassa 2015: 215). By mid-2014, construction had started in only two of forty projects, while at the same time, *favela* removals were accelerated (Barbassa 2015: 216).

The remaining residents in Vila Autódromo live among the rubble of demolished houses while the Olympic Park rises in the background. The graffiti calls for the on-site upgrading of Vila Autódromo, and refers to the involvement of Olympic construction projects in the unfolding corruption scandal "Lava Jato".

An example of the latter is the removal of residents from Vila Autódromo, a self-built community adjacent to the Olympic Park in Jacarepaguá. Originally, around 600 families lived here, now fewer than 10% remain. While

appropriation of land for the creation of public good is legal in Brazil, no projects to justify the removal of Vila Autódromo have been presented. On the contrary, the Olympic bid project mentions the transfer of "illegal accommodations on the shore of the Jacarepaguá Lagoon to a new place" (Comité de Candidatura Rio 2016 2009: 100). This should have left Vila Autódromo intact, as the community is a legal settlement (for details, see AMPAVA and Moradores e comunidades da Vila Autódromo 2016: 12). Indeed, the winning bid to construct the Olympic Park, developed by the British design firm Aecom, preserved most of Vila Autódromo (see Rio 2016.com 2011). The municipality's near-eradication of this community is therefore without legal foundation and unnecessary for hosting the Olympics. Rather, it represents a continuation of historical approaches to urban development in Rio based on forced removals, which have for some time been difficult to implement because of their association with authoritarian regimes (de Magalhães 2013). Now, with the Olympics as a novel discursive tool, removals of self-built communities are back in full force. It is likely that the authors of Rio's Olympic bid had this possibility in mind, as they included an illustration of what the Olympic Park might look like. Here, Vila Autódromo has been replaced by an access road along the lagoon shore, and a clump of trees (Comité de Candidatura Rio 2016 2009). Moreover, the Private-Public Partnership model for financing Olympic construction projects implies the transfer of public land to the private contractors for the erection of high-end condominiums after the Games (Barbassa 2015; Kaiser 2015). This further emphasises the authorities' intention of using the Olympics to create a housing legacy for Rio's wealthy, while removing poor communities from attractive areas that can be appropriated for this purpose.

The attempts to dislodge Vila Autódromo date back to 1993, when the municipality of Rio opened a lawsuit, accusing the community of causing "aesthetic and environmental damage" to the Jacarepaguá Lagoon and surroundings (AMPAVA and Moradores e comunidades da Vila Autódromo 2016: 13). While unsuccessful, the existence of this lawsuit reveals a persistent interest in removing Vila Autódromo, which coincides with the rapid development of condominiums and shopping centres in the region. Just like previous waves of *favela* removals, the current one is aimed at making new areas available for high-end homes and enhancing the value of already existing properties by removing "undesired" neighbours. As residents in Vila Autódromo put it during a recent fieldwork[2]; "rich people want poor people to be their employees, not their neighbours". The Olympics are thus not the main reason why Vila Autódromo is being targeted for demolition. The Games do, nevertheless, provide the municipality of Rio with a discursive tool for re-implementing historical strategies for urban upgrades that exacerbate socio-economic segregation and inequality in the city.

The fate of Rio's social housing legacy is not unusual. Lenskyj points out that promises of affordable housing have been a constant feature of recent Olympic bids, yet conditions for homeless and inadequately housed people are often worsened by the events (2008: 16). Hence, Rio's deferred social housing legacy represents a common outcome of contemporary mega-events.

Residents protested against the demolition of the community organisation's building in Vila Autódromo in February 2016 by gagging their mouths. This symbolises how the residents experience the municipality's use of force to carry out demolitions as denying them influence over the community's future.

Possible solutions: making positive legacies a genuine priority

If sporting mega-events are to play a constructive role in poverty and inequality reduction, the priorities of organising bodies and host cities must be radically reconfigured. Rather than accepting that legacy projects are abandoned, the IOC and FIFA should insist that they are followed through. They have considerable power to do this (Kassens-Noor 2012). Furthermore, the design of legacy projects should be grounded in critical research on urban development and sustainability. Finally, mega-events should not be used to pave the way for interventions and violations towards host populations that would be legally and politically impossible under normal circumstances. The case of Rio de Janeiro illustrates the importance of these points. In short; the organising bodies and host cities should guarantee that mega-events are planned and carried out in ways that are genuinely helpful for reducing urban segregation, poverty and inequality. This implicates on-site upgrades of self-built neighbourhoods such as Vila Autódromo, instead of their removal. While these suggested solutions may appear unrealistic or naive, fieldwork in Vila Autódromo demonstrated that affected poor citizens can now share their experiences and concerns via social and alternative media and reach an ever-wider, global audience. After a massive social media campaign, *#urbanizaja* (urbanise now), Rio mayor Eduardo Paes announced on 8 March that what remains of Vila Autódromo will be upgraded. There are numerous problems with his urbanisation plan (see e.g. Robertson and Reist 2016), and it remains to be seen whether it will actually be implemented.

Nevertheless, its announcement indicates that resident activism is beginning to influence the unfolding of events. Furthermore, local and international journalists, filmmakers and researchers are now a constant presence in Vila Autódromo, and as their work is published, the Olympics have become increasingly associated with human rights violations and event legacies that only benefit the wealthiest segments of society, not the poor. The outcome of this process is of course impossible to predict, yet the impetus provided to protest movements by these new forms of media makes a continuation of the status quo less certain.

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Notes

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2   Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted by the author and José Alejandro Huidobro Goya in Vila Autódromo in November - December 2015 and February – March 2016. This fieldwork forms part of the production of a documentary on the issues considered in this Brief.

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