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Spatial scale, time and process in mega-events: The complexity of host community perspectives on neighbourhood change

Julie Clark [a,*], Ade Kearns [a], Claire Cleland [b]

[a] Urban Studies, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom
[b] MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

A focus on the 'mega' aspect of hallmark events can divert attention from the micro – those local communities who are most impacted by the event. Similarly, attention to the 'event' aspect underplays the long process of bidding and preparation before any putative legacy of urban transformation for local people. This paper uses qualitative data to unpack the complex and multi-layered views of local residents, living in a deprived neighbourhood beside the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games site in Scotland. They reflect on five years of intensive urban regeneration, evaluate the experience of 'lockdown' at Games time, and consider their hopes and fears for the future of the community. Interviewing a mixture of lifelong, established, new and returning residents, we found considerable common ground across the different groups in terms of hopes for a new, mixed community in the area. However, findings also highlight concerns around urban governance practices and the limitations of a market-led approach to regeneration.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Mega-events and the micro-geography of impacts

Mega-events can be considered an integral component of much 20th century urban development (Muñoz, 2006), with urban transformation and 'legacy benefits' used to justify the expenditure (Essex and Chalkley, 1998; Leopkey and Parent, 2011; Pound, 2003; Smith, 2012). In many ways, the essence of a mega-event is scale. Müller (2015) argues that there are four integral dimensions, along which scale should be considered: visitor attractiveness; mediated reach; cost; and transformative impact. Hosting a mega-event has been described as 'one of the most fundamentally political acts of the modern age' (Horne and Whannel, 2012: 204) which, necessarily, advantages some and disadvantages others. Indeed, securing and delivering a mega-event speaks to the power of the host city's elite (Liao and Pitts, 2006).

As Müller's framework demonstrates, the criteria that define a mega-event predominantly involve macro-scale interests. Reflecting this, evaluation data and impact assessments generally use aggregate monitoring data at city, regional or national levels eliding uneven development and differential community-level experiences (Kasimati, 2003; Preuss, 2004; Owen 2005). Furthermore, well-intentioned, elite attitudes towards the preferences of relatively disadvantaged groups may be based on assumptions rather than knowledge (Ahlfeldt et al., 2012).

However, this paper prioritises a neighbourhood 'host community' perspective on the impacts of a mega-event, using the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games as a case study. The 'transformative impact' for the built environment and population (Müller, 2015) draws attention to specific geographies, with stadium-building, new 'village' accommodation and adapted transport systems having differentiated effects across the city. It is in the host neighbourhood of a mega-event that the most dramatic impacts can be seen and where, despite a promised legacy, the interests of those promoting and managing the event do not necessarily align with those of those most affected by it. Although urban regeneration and (positive) legacy have increasingly been used as a rationale for undertaking large sporting or cultural events, the question of 'who benefits?' is still germane (Coaffee, 2012; Essex and Chalkley, 1998; Hall, 1992).

This paper argues that neighbourhood-level geography and time are as salient as 'mega' scale in understanding the nature and impacts of a mega-event. We begin by examining the grounds on which the validity of event-led regeneration has been challenged from the host community perspective. Following this, the Glasgow 2014 Games (GCWG), the study area and research sample are introduced. An exploration of local residents' perceptions of the nature and drivers of change in their neighbourhood, their attitudes towards GCWG regeneration, and their fears and ambitions for the future is used to illuminate the case. The paper closes with reflections on the limitations of mega-events as a catalyst for regeneration and the scope for sustainable,

* Corresponding author at: Urban Studies, University of Glasgow, 25 Bute Gardens, Glasgow G12 8RS, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: Julie.clark@glasgow.ac.uk (J. Clark).

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mixed community development around the regeneration site in the post-event era.

2. Host community impacts: the mega-event as process

It is tempting to think of the mega-event as a point in time. However, for the host community, from bid, to event, to aftermath, it is more appropriately considered as a process. Physical space is reshaped in order to accommodate the event and social relations are reconfigured, influencing how local people and place are understood, by themselves and by others (Gaffney 2010). From this perspective, time, as well as geography, is a crucial factor in considering the community impacts of a mega-event. We consider the existing literature around three phases, with the host community seen as disadvantaged in each case.

2.1. Pre-event: physical displacement and development

The pre-event phase comprises decision-making about the event and associated regeneration, with displacement and demolitions preceding the construction of new infrastructure. Here, the host community often finds itself in opposition to planned developments, being seen as an entity to be managed or maligned in order to facilitate the delivery process.

Despite the high profile of legacy, the language of policy planning can serve to obscure both agency and who benefits (Marcuse, 2015). Although 'the city' is identified as bidding for and hosting a mega-event, in the triumvirate of the state, community and capital, it is the community that has the weakest voice. High economic stakes and fixed deadlines systematically militate against successful democratic participation, and elite actors rather than local communities drive the urban development agenda (Garcia, 2004; Hayes and Horne, 2011; Surborg et al., 2008).

From the organisers' perspective, community involvement constitutes a 'risk factor', which can interfere with project delivery, while resistance to demolitions or development is construed as not 'business-friendly', and often suppressed or downplayed (Raco 2014: 183; 194; Lenskyj, 2002). Fussey and colleagues note a pattern of public engagements taking place in a limited form and 'only after key decisions have been taken' (2011: 238). Community actors hoping to influence events require the capacity to identify and engage assertively with layers of complex and changing bureaucratic structures at multiple levels (Olds, 1998; Armstrong et al., 2011). In rare cases, pre-event host communities have strong legal support (Sadd, 2010). More commonly, they are heterogeneous and relatively disadvantaged – by virtue of economic resources, youth, minority or migrant status – when it comes to forming coalitions and lobbying to defend their position (Hall, 2005; Shin and Li, 2013; Smith and Himmelfarb, 2007). Some marginalised groups have made effective use of media coverage to advocate for their interests, lobbying on compulsory purchase, housing, employment and pay (Fussey et al., 2011; Sant et al., 2013; Vigor et al. 2004). Nevertheless, such resistance faces a massive challenge.

The interests of the urban growth machine are enforced through exceptional planning powers, authorising demolitions and the displacement of people (Andranovich et al., 2001; Boykoff, 2014; Gray and Porter, 2014; Hillar, 2003; Lenskyj, 2000). Property developers and owners, including the relatively affluent middle classes, tend to be prioritised by local politicians and media over those of generally poorer, local communities (Gruneau, 2002). Although protecting vulnerable communities or ultimately offering improved social or affordable housing may be the stated aim, some commentators have analysed exceptional planning powers as a manifestation of neoliberal urbanism, with class- or ethnically-based 'cleansing' enforced as a prelude to the marketisation of urban space (Harvey, 1989; Kallin and Slater, 2014; Nam and Seok, 2008; Souliotis, Sayas and Maloutas, 2014; VanWynsberghe et al., 2013). Within this framework, the mega-event is an 'alibi' (Boykoff, 2014), facilitating a gentrification process: less desirable urban residents can be moved out; more affluent residents moved in; increases in land and property value are captured (Lauermann, 2015; Watt 2013). Policy and media narratives can be complicit in this process, systematically stigmatising already vulnerable people and places and framing the regeneration intervention as the solution to a problem which they have defined (Gray and Mooney, 2011; Thompson, Lewis, Greenhalgh, Taylor and Cummins, 2013).

Pre-event activity around venues and the Athletes' Village typically includes displacement of resident populations and housing demolition, to the extent that forced evictions are an expected part of the process (Olds 1998), and have been identified in relation to 32 different mega-events since 1980 (COHRE, 2007). Environmental improvement projects prior to the Beijing 2008 Olympics were described as 'a euphemism for demolition and displacement', with an estimated 1.5 million people displaced (COHRE, 2007; Shin and Li 2013: 559). In other instances, environmentally protected land has been reclassified, and smaller businesses are particularly vulnerable to clearance (Follman, 2015; Raco and Tunney, 2010). The 'host community' at the time of the event may, therefore, be markedly different from the community in existence at the time of the bid.

2.2. Event time: experiencing securitisation

At the event time, a growing list of behaviours or processes have been defined as security concerns, requiring surveillance or control, with this 'securitisation' meaning that living around a mega-event is increasingly likely to involve constraints (Bennett and Haggerty 2011:4; Fussey et al. 2011; Samatas, 2011). Presenting a carefully sanitised image of the city for television audiences, international visitors and corporate interests is an established phenomenon in mega-events, leading to concerns about infringement of civil rights and the impact of the security agenda upon local communities (Graham, 2012; Hall, 2005; Houlihan and Giulianotti, 2012; Newham Monitoring Project, NMP, 2013). Additional to pre-event evictions, 'cleaning operations', harassing or detention of minority groups including the homeless, migrants, street children and gay people, have been recorded in numerous host cities (COHRE, 2007).

A military presence within the host community may also be required (Fussey et al. 2011). Security for the London Olympics was boosted to include 18,200 military personnel (more than were deployed in Afghanistan at the time), additional to police and private security services, with the armed forces comprising up to half of security staff in and around the Games venues (Corera and Heald, 2012; Houlihan and Giulianotti, 2012). The Newham Monitoring Project (NMP), a community based civil rights organisation in one of the London 2012 host boroughs, documented a 'climate of fear' associated with the intensive security around the Games, which included missile launchers, fighter jets and helicopters overhead, an 11-mile long electrified fence and additional electronic surveillance (Newham Monitoring Project, NMP, 2013: 2).

2.3. After the event: economic displacement

In the post-event period, the host community can find that the promised legacy is targeted towards more affluent incomers and non-residents. The main economic benefits from the event may be felt in other parts of the city. Where there are jobs for local people, these might be temporary or of poor quality, leading to frustration and disappointment within the host community (Boyle et al. 2008; Gray and Mooney, 2011; Newman, 1999). Mega-events are said to function as a means of gentrification that 'permanently place housing beyond the financial means of a significant segment of society' (COHRE, 2007: 11). The mega-event village is an embodiment of the 'new' urban image, the housing generally being for new, more affluent people (Muñoz, 1997; Sadd, 2010). Furthermore, there can also be a 'ripple' effect in

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