Agenda 2020 – sustainability of the Olympic Games

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Recently, elections for the host city for the Olympic Winter Games 2022 took place. Almost immediately, another bid process for the Olympic Games 2024 was launched with five participating cities – Budapest, Hamburg, Los Angeles, Paris and Rome. Compared to previous bid races, those cities encounter a different situation. Agenda 2020, approved by the IOC at the end of 2014, has brought with it some changes that relate to a range of issues including, crucially, the candidature process.

The major change resides in the IOC’s attitude to the whole process. In the past, the IOC stipulated strict requirements on bid cities and controlled their ability to meet them without any specific discussion about their scope. Cities, in an effort to convince the IOC, often agreed with solutions that were not in favour of city’s post-Olympic life. The examples of Athens 2004, Beijing 2008 or Sochi 2014 prove the fact, that the IOC requirements and demands could be hardly satisfied in the long-term. A warning sign evidenced by some of the OWG 2022 candidates reminded the IOC that mature democracies are not willing to accept certain conditions that might threaten either the financial and national stability, or everyday life of communities, cities and regions. These are the countries where responsible use of public money prevails over satisfaction of private ambitions at the expense of the whole. Their inhabitants as well as their representatives are aware that organization of a two-week fun for thousands of quests could never reasonably exist in priority over the satisfaction of their own real living needs (the financing of healthcare and education for example).

The IOC can still rely on countries like China, Russia, Kazakhstan or Azerbaijan, where the level of social responsibility of their representatives and maybe even of a major portion of their residents is not so evolved, so they do not have such problem to support anything and are, further, willing to pay any price in an exchange for that ephemeral feeling of pride or satisfaction that comes from worldwide attention. However, the IOC often appears in conflict with its own ideals and values in such cases. The COHRE organization (Centre of Housing Rights and Eviction) in Geneve in its study from 2007 referred to the fact that organization of the Olympic Games between 1988 and 2008 resulted in relocation of 2 million people. The most severe cases were violent evictions of 720 000 residents of Seoul due to construction works directly related the 1988 Olympics, 25 000 residents of Atlanta or the 1.5 million residents of Beijing, the host of 2008 Olympic Games (COHRE, 2007: 11). We can only add that similar practices could be also witnessed in Russian Sochi, or even in Brazilian Rio de Janeiro. The issue of human rights violations in China, or corruption and bad working conditions for workers building Olympic infrastructure, accompanying the
preparation of the OWG 2014 in Sochi are another examples of practices that the IOC should not identify with and that it should not support with its decisions at all.

The ambitions and convictions of the IOC about the benefits of the games that are presented to the world encountered resistance in recent times, due to the experiences and practices of some of the organizers. The Olympic Games overcame, in some cases, the limits of a healthy mind and threatened the existence of the event itself. Obviously, this is a phenomenon that representatives of the Movement should not ignore.

Stockholm and Oslo represent countries that had withdrawn their 2022 Winter Games bids due to the lack of governmental and public support to accept the exaggerated IOC requirements. Their reaction caused the eventual creation of Agenda 2020.

Agenda 2020 approval should represent a positive step towards improvement. One of the first examples of its implementation is improved transparency of IOC’s financing and accountancy, now exceeding international standards. The same standards should be required also from the future organizing committees.

The public awareness as well as the awareness of candidates about the financing of the games appeared to be an issue for the IOC. Sums, being spent by some organizers in the context of recent Games appeared almost terrifying. In this respect, the IOC tries to declare that each edition of the games is financed through two different budgets. The first one is focused on financing the construction of necessary infrastructure via the use of public and
private funding sources. The second one pertains directly to the organization of the event and involves expenditures on e. g. work of the organization committee, games services (accommodation, board, security, energy supplies etc.), ceremonies and other accompanying programs, venuisation etc. The financial contribution of the IOC represents significant portion of this budget and in case of the 2024 Olympic Games it reaches 1,7 billion US dollars. The public used to be often misinformed that the contribution could be used also for the construction of sport venues or other infrastructure. However, the money could not be spent for that purpose. Nowadays, the IOC stresses the fact that the investment budget for infrastructure often overlaps several times the operational budget. The overall costs thus can reach astronomic sums, depending on how the representatives of a host city and country as well as local private sector approach the preparation of the event. Through the Agenda 2020, however, the IOC makes clear its intention toward lowering the financial demands associated with hosting the games.

Costs reductions and transparency affected also the selection of host cities. The candidature process underwent structural changes. The IOC introduced the Invitation phase in order to give cities a possibility for improved communication and an understanding of its needs and requirements. The IOC has attempted, through an intensive dialogue and provision of detailed information, to help cities to prepare a project that reflects best the requirements of the IOC and at the same time the development needs of candidate cities. An immense amount of information is now available through the IOC web site. Detailed requirements that were kept secret within the Host City Contract are now available from the very beginning in the Invitation phase. Cities bidding for the first time thus can rely on information sources and receive a greater level of help from the IOC than they would have enjoyed before.

Contrary to previous years, the Invitation phase is not binding for cities. They can decide at any time whether to proceed with the bid as an official candidature or not, if they assume that the Olympic project is too demanding at that moment. The IOC does not evaluate the bids as it did during the application phase and it does not determine which city is capable to proceed into the candidature phase. The new Candidature phase is now a binding two year process. Cities must submit in three steps candidature files that are evaluated by the IOC Evaluation Commission and subsequently present the bid project to the IOC members, a process which is then followed traditionally by the election of the host city.

This approach is a positive change. Moreover, it is supported by further steps, such as an effort to decrease the number of accredited participants or an increased geographical flexibility in venue locations. The 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo is the first example of these changes. Several venue relocations have been made to existing but more remote venues as a direct consequence of the Agenda 2020 implementation, resulting into 1 billion US dollars costs savings. The Korean city of Pyeongchang, host of the 2018 OWG received an offer from the IOC to relocate bobsleigh, luge and skeleton events to an existing venue in Nagano,
Japan. Although the Korean organizers refused this solution, it is still a positive change in the IOC’s attitude. All these steps should contribute to an increased sustainability of the event into the future and its availability for an increased number of potential host cities.

Saitama Super Arena: the basketball venue for the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo and an example of the Agenda 2020 implementation; it replaces the original plan to build a new venue in Tokyo.

The election, however, is not only a matter of responsible financing or sustainable venues. It has been revealed right at the beginning of the candidature process for the 2024 Olympic Games that the requirements on human rights protection as well as labor protection are not included within the Host City Contract. The IOC has the ambition to present the games as a tool for promotion of Olympic values. These are often presented as the highest moral and ethical values. If the IOC is serious about these intentions, it is inevitable and it is a matter of their own integrity that the IOC members as well as the members of the whole movement live according to those values and express them as examples. This also includes their ability not to award the games to a country, where those values are not respected, or even take the games to such country, if there is an evidence of such behavior and conduct. The aforementioned experiences from the past show, that it is not so obvious for the IOC. The size of the event, its demands and time required for its preparation simply does not give too many possibilities for such initiatives. Relocation of the event to another city and country is therefore not so probable in current circumstances.

In case the IOC is serious about its reforms, the possibility of choosing permanent Olympic host cities could be a solution, contributing to implementation of the Agenda 2020 even more than it does now. The IOC is definitely able to make agreements with cities and countries, providing the best conditions for the games and at the same time exhibiting exemplary practice of its values. There is a possibility to choose one city on each continent that already possesses the requisite number of existing venues and for the IOC to secure
their maintenance via financial support from the IOC. From a financial perspective, it is cheaper than pursuing the current new host city process, and from the marketing and media point of view it should also not create a problem. With a permanent Olympic host at each continent, the media - the most important contributors to the IOC budget – will also crucially have secured acceptable and predictable broadcast times.

History shows that former host cities tend to repeat their Olympic experience in 20 – 30 years time and at least consider another bid for the games. Often, there are former host cities submitting a real bid. Paris, Rome and Los Angeles – candidates for the 2024 Olympic Games – prove that. From this perspective, the choice of permanent Olympic hosts is quite logical. These cities are definitely able to organize the event within a period of 20 – 24 years. It is a long enough time, so the games do not create excessive burden to them. In case of the winter games, there are only three continents usually hosting the event – North America, Europe and Asia. It is therefore suitable to choose two permanent hosts geographically located in these environs. The current form of host city rotation remains arguably far more an unreasonable arrangement.

Permanent Olympic host cities give the IOC more space for positive changes. Host cities will have more time for preparation, as the construction will not be such a priority as it is now. Organizers will have even more time to focus on the quality of the event. Each continental NOC taking part at the games could have a possibility to participate in the preparation of the
games. Though the national dimension of the games would be decreased, the games will receive more opportunities to be presented as a global celebration of mankind and Olympic values in the spirit of cooperation. This could diminish or eliminate the negative effects of nationalism and demonstrations of power.

The IOC still declares that the games are organized especially for the athletes. However, history exemplifies a different experience. Distances between the venues use to be sometimes unbearable and their quality is not always in consent of sports federations. Athletes usually do not care about the host city, where the event takes place. Their priority is the performance at the games and quality of the conditions they will experience at the event itself. The IOC member Richard Pound noticed in his book “Inside the Olympics” that the choice of the host city is often not a matter of quality conditions, but rather a matter of where the wives of the IOC members want to go shopping. He confirmed with this statement that there are enough of those within the movement and among the games participants, for which travelling and sightseeing for their own amusement is still more a priority than the price being paid for such a hobby.

Sustainability of the event would be increased with permanent host cities even more than it is today. The world simply does not need more ski jumps, toboggans, downhill courses, velodromes, stadia etc. Taking long-term perspective, it is simply not acceptable. Environmental ambitions and responsibility the IOC declares could be simply achieved through its own modesty and self-control, so it will not support further construction and environmental impacts. The IOC’s argument that it helps promotion and development of sport in a country is not necessarily a sound one. This goal can be achieved through the creation of projects much smaller and less costly than the Olympic Games and with more effectiveness.

The potential of the games in terms of urban transformation of host cities is obvious. However, the scope of urban projects related to the games always exceeds the needs of local communities. The last example of the Boston 2024 bid declares that the needs of city residents have little common with 80 thousand seat stadia even in a demountable mode. People in Boston simply refused to support a single financially demanding project, because they expect from their city representatives the development of more, smaller and cheaper projects directly focused on the improvement of their living conditions. History and the Bostonian example show that the specifics of certain sport venues still represent a burden to host cities and remain “an inevitable evil” that they do not need to build, nor for which they could seek solutions for post-Olympic use.

Olympic Games simply do not need more sport venues and the IOC, through the adoption of the Agenda 2020, is aware of that. Through the selection of permanent Olympic host cities it would just bring its intentions even more precisely into reality.
Literature sources:


