

OUTLOOK

MEGA AND GIGA EVENTS AND HOST TERRITORIES: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This Outlook explores the future of mega-events through the case of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, arguing that they should be understood not only as global spectacles but also as large-scale urban projects that reshape cities, mobilise significant resources, and generate lasting territorial effects.

The analysis identifies three major challenges. First, environmental sustainability: despite efforts to reduce carbon emissions through innovative construction and mobility strategies, the Olympics' global scale continues to generate substantial environmental costs. Second, uncertainty: organisers must increasingly respond to climate change, health crises, geopolitical instability, and security threats, which require more adaptive forms of planning and governance. Third, social and political contestation: criticisms related to costs, displacement, surveillance, and uneven benefits challenge the legitimacy of mega-events and raise questions about their long-term legacy.

The Outlook concludes that the future of mega-events will depend on their capacity to balance urban development, environmental responsibility, social acceptance, and resilience in an increasingly uncertain world.

Keywords:

Mega-events, urban transformation, sustainability, uncertainty, legacy.

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Now over, the Paris 2024 Olympic Games were widely considered a success, but the question of how to organise future mega-events such as the Olympic Games remains. Such events require not only private funding but also public funding, but other investments seem more urgent, particularly in the context of climate change. After clarifying what these mega-events are, this paper shows that, in an increasingly uncertain and complex context, which may lead to significant and sometimes irreconcilable conflicts, and at a time when the issue of sustainable development is becoming increasingly pressing, the urban action they require faces many challenges.

1. Main events, mega-events and giga-events: what are we talking about?

There is no consensus in the existing literature on the definition and size of mega-events (Müller, 2015): some authors consider only the largest sporting events, foremost among which are the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. Others include world exhibitions, major political meetings (such as the G7, G20 and UN summits) and festivals. Paris 2024 can be defined as a mega or giga-event.

A definition of events that needs to be explored further

Müller (2015) proposes a matrix for rating event size based on four criteria; the first is size, measured by the number of visitors and/or tickets sold. While Müller uses the number of tickets sold, we consider it insufficient from an urban action perspective. This is for two reasons. First, because people can take part in the (given) mega-event without necessarily having bought tickets. Second, the current population is more important for managing transport and waste, as well as for considering other urban networks (electricity, water, sewage, telecommunications, etc.). Given this, we consider the population that is present (tourists, day trippers, residents and so forth) (Terrier, 2009) in the host territory at the time of the (given) event. This population may be much larger than the resident population of the location if the latter wishes to remain in the territory at the time of the event, or is forced to do so. This population, that is present, however, is harder to assess.

Mega-events also receive extensive media coverage and can be watched on television and other visual media. Media coverage is Müller's second criterion. For example, Tokyo 2020 took place in 2021 without spectators due to the COVID pandemic. It was watched by more than 3 billion television viewers and thus qualifies as a mega-event. Though this criterion is certainly important when it comes to defining a mega-event, it has little impact on urban action, except that the area must be equipped with efficient electricity and communication networks to enable television (or other) broadcasting.

Mega-events also entail costs associated with the organisation of the event itself and the construction of the infrastructure required to stage it. The cost of organising the event itself is Müller's third criterion. Beyond the overall financial aspect, we believe it is interesting, from an urban development perspective, to identify the funding sources for such organisations. In theory, the organisation is mainly funded by private sources. However, the host region must ensure security, accommodate attendees, and provide transportation services during the event. Public funding can therefore be very significant (as discussed below).

Costs associated with the infrastructure required for the event are capital expenditures. This is the fourth criterion. These costs vary depending on the scale of the construction work. Costs are also associated with urban transformations (construction of facilities, transport infrastructure, etc. or demolition of others). Once again, it is important to emphasise that the majority of such costs are borne by local authorities and are therefore ultimately financed by the host country and/or local residents (inhabitants, businesses) through existing taxes, or by the country and/or local residents when funding is provided through a public loan.

The overall organisation of the mega-event changes local residents' living conditions before the event (construction work); during the event (due to factors such as traffic and security constraints it entails, as well as due to the festive atmosphere that such events may bring); and permanently after the event (buildings and image of the area).

Müller then classified events according to the number of points obtained for each criterion (Table 1).

Table 1 Müller's scoring matrix (2015)

Size	Attractiveness to visitors	Media coverage	Cost	Urban transformation
	Number of tickets sold	Value (US \$ 2025) of broadcasting rights	Total cost (US \$, 2025)	Capital investment (US \$, 2025)
XXL (3 points)	> 3 million	> 2.74 billion	> 13.7 billion	> 13.7 billion
XL (2 points)	> 1 million	> 1.37 billion	> 6.87 billion	> 6.87 billion
L (1 point)	> 0.5 million	> 0.137 billion	> 1.37 billion	> 1.37 billion

Source: Reconstructed from Müller, 2015, updated to 2025 dollars

Giga-events total between 11 and 12 points, mega-events between 7 and 10 points, and major events between 1 and 6 points. If we look at this scale, mega-events mainly concern sporting mega-events such as the Winter Olympics, the Asian Games, the Euro (football), the Football World Cup, or events such as the Kazan Universiade organised by the International University Sports Federation (FISU). The only non-sporting event is the Shanghai World Expo. In this analysis, London 2012, with a total of 11 points, was a giga-event; so too was Paris 2024.

Paris 2024: a giga-event significantly supported by public funding

12.1 million tickets were sold for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, including 3.5 million to people outside France and 4.2 million outside the Ile-de-France region (giving Paris 3 points for this criterion). As we mentioned in a report submitted to the Paris Organising Committee for the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games (COJOP2024) (Delaplace et al., 2020), with an average of 4 tickets per spectator at the Olympic Games, approximately 3 million people attended the events. However, visitors without tickets to attend may have been present in the city. According to data from Orange/Paris je t'aime, 11.2 million people were present between 23 July and 11 August 2024 during the Olympic Games: 3.1 million tourists (including 1.7 million international and 1.4 million domestic), as well as 3.1 million day trippers and 5 million inhabitants of the Paris region. The Paris 2024 events and ceremonies were watched by 5 billion television viewers (IOC, 2024) and generated US\$3.3 billion in broadcasting rights, or €2.94 billion at the average exchange rate for 2025 (3 point).

The total cost of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games is difficult to determine, to distinguish between the budget for organising the sporting event, which in theory was covered by the COJOP2024, and the budget for the infrastructure that remains after the Games, which was covered by public and private funding.

The first, which rose to €4.49 billion at the end of 2025 instead of the €3.6 billion planned in 2018, was covered by €4.2 billion from private funding (IOC, sponsors, ticket sales, etc.), plus €224.1 million in public funding for the Paralympic Games. However, the organisation of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games also required public funding for security measures in the city. These were estimated at €1.44 billion in 2025: transport services for spectators and accredited persons (€570 million), public mobilisation efforts (€459.8 million) and other public expenditure (interministerial coordination, health, subsidies and funding for high performance, etc.) (325.1 million; bringing the total public expenditure for the organisation of the Games to 3.019 billion (CRC, 2025). The budget for organising the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, therefore, amounted to €7.219 billion; not simply the €4.49 billion calculated by the COJOP2024: 42% of which was public funding.

Furthermore, though public funding for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games in terms of infrastructure directly related to the Games was *ultimately* estimated in October 2025 at €3.63 billion, there is a need to add the private funding for the Olympic Village and Media Village of approximately €2.13 billion to this figure, bringing the total infrastructure cost to 5.76 billion.

The total cost of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, therefore, amounts to €12.979 billion (including net public expenditure of €6.7 billion (CRC, 2025)), or €14.6 billion at the average 2025 US dollar exchange rate. In terms of cost, Paris 2024 would also be an XXL event (3 points). Paris 2024 would then be classified as a giga-event as a consequence of its accumulation of 12 points.

The definition of these mega-events highlights the importance of visitors and private and public costs for host regions. A comparison with the Seine-Saint-Denis (SSD) department's budget, where most of the infrastructure (Olympic Village, Media Village, Olympic Aquatic Centre) was built, illustrates the scale of this event in terms of funding. The SSD department's investment budget for 2024 amounted to €398 million out of a total budget of €2.1 billion. It financed €85 million of the €3.8 billion spent by SOLIDEO (which is responsible for building the infrastructure for the Olympic Games), while receiving 80% of SOLIDEO's investments.

2. The challenges of urban action associated with mega-events

Three main stakes must be taken into consideration in the organisation of mega-events and urban action in the current context of climate change, whose consequences are already being felt in cities. The first concerns the sustainability of such mega-events; the second concerns the management of the uncertainties that characterise our societies; and the third, which is partly linked to the other two, concerns the opposition faced by organisers.

Sustainable mega-events: an oxymoron?

Sustainability issues are now at the heart of the organisation of mega-events, even though these issues are not new. For example, concerns about the sustainability of the Olympic Games date back to the early 1990s (Lopes dos Santos & Delaplace, 2024). In terms of environmental aspects, the Olympic Village in Sydney was designed as a model of eco-sensitive construction, which incorporated solar energy, water and electricity, water recycling, and passive heating and cooling. In London, sustainable development was also a priority. 98% of the Olympic Stadium was built with recycled materials, and water recycling was also implemented. London's intention was to use the Olympic Games as a tool for urban regeneration and to leverage the "showcase" the event offered to project the image of a dynamic economic capital: a pleasant, sustainable, and innovative city (Amion, 2012). Environmental aspects were also evident at Tokyo 2020, as these Games were intended to showcase the circular economy in the construction sector (for example, a temporary exhibition hall near Tokyo Big Sight, built from 100% recycled, easily dismantled materials). Similarly, as part of the BATON (Building Athletes' Village with Timber of the Nation) programme, 63 Japanese municipalities participated in the construction of the Olympic Village square using Japanese timber from legal and sustainable sources; the timber used for construction was then returned to the communities from which it had come to be reused in public buildings and schools.

As part of the implementation of the Olympic Agenda 2020 promoted by the International Olympic Committee (Lopes dos Santos & Delaplace, 2023), Paris 2024 committed to organising more sustainable Games. In April 2021, the Paris 2024 Olympic Games Organising Committee announced its commitment to staging an event that would make a "positive contribution to the climate", i.e. one that captured more greenhouse gases than it emitted by offsetting all CO₂ emissions linked to the event, and by also supporting additional projects. The aim was therefore to go beyond "carbon neutrality". The reference to "carbon neutrality" was subsequently abandoned due to the difficulties posed by the concept. However, Paris 2024 committed to reducing emissions from the Games by at least 55% compared to the London Games in 2012, representing a saving of 1.9 tonnes of carbon and a threshold of 1.6 million tonnes of CO₂ not to be exceeded.

Construction was at the heart of this plan. Only 5% of the facilities were new buildings, whilst the Olympic Village was designed, under the responsibility of SOLIDEO (Olympic Delivery Authority), as an experiment in what a sustainable city would be in terms of its living environment in 2050. In other words, it had to be adapted to be resilient to what is assumed to be the climate of 2050 (including extreme weather events such as heat waves and possible flooding). The apartments, therefore, needed to withstand the 2003 heatwave without air conditioning (comfort being defined as a temperature not exceeding 26°C). This issue was criticised by the athletes, and fans had to be purchased. The event organisers also replaced conventional generators with grid electricity.

The circular economy was also promoted: 96% of the volume of materials dismantled at the Olympic Village site has been reused across various industries.

To reduce transport use and its environmental footprint, Paris 2024 also emphasised the compact nature of the Olympic Games (with most venues located within a 10 km radius of the Olympic Village in Seine-Saint-Denis). It has also promoted sustainable modes of transport, with nearly 30 kilometres of additional infrastructure built for the Games, creating a 60-kilometre-long cycle network connecting all the Olympic venues.

However, like any mega-event, the Olympic Games inevitably emitted greenhouse gases. According to Paris 2024, 34% of emissions were linked to the travel of spectators, officials and athletes, 33% to construction, and 33% to the running of the Games (catering, accommodation, logistics, etc.). Transport to the host city for the mega-event remains a black spot for greenhouse gas emissions, as it is in tourism.

Mega-events attract millions of people to the host city. While some of these visitors are local, a large proportion come from abroad: the carbon footprint of these mega-events is therefore all the higher as they attract international tourists travelling by aeroplane. Tourism accounts for around 8% of greenhouse gas emissions from human activity, including not only emissions directly linked to transport but also those associated with tourist consumption (e.g., catering, hotels; Lenzen et al., 2018). According to the UNWTO and the International Transport Forum (2019), 75% of CO₂ emissions from the tourism sector are attributable to transport (40% from air travel and 32% from cars). In France, tourism-related emissions account for 11% of the national GHG emissions inventory, which corresponds to the GHG emissions of 11 million French people over an entire year (Ademe, 2021), with 77% of those emissions being attributable to transport. Foreign visitors were therefore responsible for around 80% of GHG emissions linked to transport between origin and destination, despite accounting for only 32% of arrivals at holiday destinations in 2018, due to the long distances that they travelled. While the pandemic period demonstrated the feasibility of staging certain mega-events - such as the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 - without spectators in attendance, remote mega-events seem difficult to envisage.

Finally, consideration of environmental issues leads to a narrow definition of sustainability. It does not consider the social (e.g., inclusion, the fight against inequality) or economic (e.g., financing issues) dimensions of sustainability (Lopes dos Santos & Delaplace, 2024).

Managing uncertainty: key to the feasibility of future mega and giga-events

Societies today face many uncertainties that are partly interrelated: geopolitical uncertainties regarding current and future conflicts and their consequences in terms of terrorist acts; uncertainties regarding the political functioning of our societies (authoritarian drift, polarisation or even multipolarisation with increasingly incompatible positions); uncertainties concerning the scale of technological changes associated in particular with artificial intelligence, economic and financial uncertainties (in terms of public debt, pension systems, the functioning of the world of work); and social uncertainties (growing inequalities, discriminations, etc.) partly linked to the above uncertainties. These uncertainties are amplified by climate change, which itself generates high costs (health, insurance, security, etc.).

Each of these uncertainties makes it difficult for both individuals and organisations to predict the future. For example, the use of artificial intelligence is subject to major uncertainties regarding its impact on jobs and the risks it poses. Its use requires adapting existing legal and regulatory frameworks, limiting the risks it entails, and ensuring its social acceptability. Economic uncertainties are hampering local authorities' capacity for future investment, and political uncertainties make it difficult to define joint projects. Social uncertainties reinforce societal polarisation and call into question the relevance of actions undertaken in the name of the public interest (see below).

Faced with such mutually reinforcing uncertainties in the sense of Knight (1921), rationality of action is necessarily limited (March, 1988, March & Simon, 1969). Moreover, this rationality is not merely a weakened one because it is difficult to anticipate and process all options and information (March, 1988: 139) (an impoverished form of substantial rationality), whilst the set of options is also unknown.

This is the context in which public action in general, and the preparation and organisation of mega-events in particular, must now take place. To paraphrase Amin (2011: 631), the question is how organisers and host cities should “act in an urban environment that is daily shaped by distant forces and hidden interdependencies that generate unpredictable and unexpected outcomes?”

These uncertainties are significant throughout the event preparation phase, but some persist during the event itself. During the preparation phase, urban project management must therefore be adaptive and flexible to limit irreversibility whilst keeping as many options open as possible for adaptation along the way. The complexity of the action is all the greater as it is difficult to know all the variables that will affect urban development. Long-term planning is therefore difficult, and the overall costs associated with unforeseen events are not only unpredictable but also rapidly changing.

Public action must take into account the possibility of unforeseen events (such as the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme weather events such as heat waves and floods, and cyberattacks and terrorist acts) at the time of the events. Event organisers must ensure the safety of millions of participants in the event of such occurrences. They must guarantee water supplies, even though the availability and quality of this water may be affected by the phenomena noted. They must also consider how to manage the volume of waste generated by the population present, which may be much higher than usual. This poses significant logistical challenges, as supply management, drinking water and sanitation networks are primarily designed for resident populations. In addition, taking into account the likelihood of these extreme weather events is likely to generate additional costs related to potential material damage, insurance, and so on.

The smooth running of events also requires limiting uncertainties about process security, particularly regarding the internet. Ticketing problems during the Champions League final at the Stade de France in May 2022 illustrate the risks involved. While Tokyo recorded 450 million cyberattacks in 2021, the organisers of Paris 2024 anticipated 4 billion cyberattacks during the 15 days of competition. Although Paris 2024 did not ultimately experience any major incidents, 548 events affected entities linked to the organisation of the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games between 8 May and 8 September 2024.

The smooth running of events also requires limiting uncertainties associated with personal safety, particularly in the face of terrorist threats. While the location and precise timing of possible terrorist acts are difficult to predict, it is clear that mega-events are prime locations for such acts. By definition, a mega-event brings together several million people in a host territory and provides a certain form of camouflage for terrorists while offering numerous targets. “Terrorists can move among travellers and carry out financial transactions in foreign currencies without arousing suspicion” (Richter and Waugh 1986; Sonmez et al. 1999, 14). Furthermore, because they affect people of different nationalities, attacks benefit from widespread publicity (Weimann and Winn 1994: 143, cited by Sonmez et al., 1999). Security in the host territories of mega-events and, more broadly, in tourist destinations has thus become a central issue.

To ensure security during mega-events, increasingly sophisticated video surveillance systems incorporating artificial intelligence are being implemented, as was the case during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games (Zatsepina & Ludvigsen, 2025). Authorised by the Olympic Law of 19 May 2023 and valid until 31 March 2025, these experimental video surveillance systems, known as “augmented cameras”, were deployed from spring 2024 onwards. Artificial Intelligence makes it possible to analyse thousands of hours of recordings in a matter of minutes and anticipate potential risks by predicting behaviour based on the automatic identification of unusual situations.

The difficult management of oppositions

In such a context of uncertainty, opposition to the event is inevitably stronger. The growing opposition to mega-events stems from the current characteristics of our societies in a context of climate change and the essential integration of sustainability issues: increasing polarisation or even multipolarisation, fewer and fewer shared truths and the emergence of post-truths, which are pluralistic in nature, have led to an inability to define common objectives and to the breakdown of the very notion of ‘the general interest’. Any project may therefore face strong opposition and be exacerbated by the need to deliver the event on the scheduled date, which may limit the consultation process.

Opposition to mega and giga events is sometimes extremely strong right from the bidding stage. As a result, many bids to host the Olympic Games have been abandoned due to such opposition, and have sometimes been organised by anti-games movements (NOlympics), either following negative referenda or as a result of local political resistance (Kassens-Noor and Lauermann, 2017; Zeghni & Fabry, 2021; Bourbillères et al., 2021; Wolfe, 2023). Similarly, opposition to World Expos is significant. For example, Osaka 2025 has been heavily criticised, particularly because of the costs (€6.7 billion), which far exceeded the initial estimates (€1.5 billion), in the context of post-earthquake reconstruction. It was also criticised for the environmental problems associated with the construction of the artificial island of Yumeshima. Similarly, Universal Exhibition Riyadh 2030 is the subject of political opposition due to human rights violations and/or environmental concerns. Part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 - a plan which aims to diversify the economy away from oil - Riyadh 2030 is presented as the first carbon-negative exhibition but is considered by opponents to be a greenwashing event. Indeed, such a global mega-event cannot be carbon-negative except through climate-offsetting actions, which are subject to significant criticism.

Opposition to mega or giga-events focuses on the costs, which are sometimes considered exorbitant when other priorities exist; on the sustainability of these mega-events; and on the urban transformations they generate. Population displacement and the destruction of natural and cultural resources in host cities are also subject to criticism. According to the mayor of Beijing, around 18,000 people were relocated to make way for the construction of Olympic facilities, while COHRE (2007) estimated that 1.5 million people were displaced within Beijing. In Rio, as part of the federal Minha Casa, Minha Vida programme, more than 20,000 families were evicted from the favelas where they lived and given apartments further away from the city or financial assistance in return (Magalhaes, 2016). For the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, nearly 18,000 families were forcibly displaced to make way for construction work (COHRE, 2007). More recently, video surveillance systems that use artificial intelligence to ensure security have been highly controversial: while their promoters argue that they are temporary, as was the case for Paris 2024, some opponents believe that they could become permanent. *"History shows that the Olympic state of exception often becomes the new normal, handing more power to the already powerful at the expense of movements from below pressing for justice"* (Boykoff, 2023). These surveillance mechanisms are seen as symbolic of an authoritarian drift (Zirin and Boykoff, 2023).

The concept of legacy is then mobilised by the promoters of these mega-events who maintain that, while they are costly and lead to urban transformations, they leave a counterpart to residents. Thus, the notion of Olympic legacy, which first appeared with the Melbourne Games (Leopkey & Parent, 2012), is a tool designed to limit opposition from residents. Taken up again for Atlanta 1996, the Olympic Games must *"leave a positive physical and spiritual legacy and an indelible mark on Olympic history by staging the most memorable Olympic Games ever"* (Atlanta 1996: 20). Subsequently used by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2003, the concept was highlighted in 2014 in the new Agenda 2020 (Rule 2, Article 15 of the Olympic Charter): *"Olympic legacy (...) encompasses all the tangible and intangible long-term benefits initiated or accelerated by the hosting of the Olympic Games/sport events for people, cities/territories and the Olympic Movement."* (IOC 2017).

However, what is considered a legacy by some is not necessarily considered as such by others. *"Who is in a position to consider that a particular consequence of a mega event is a legacy? Here, it would seem essential to distinguish at least three points of view on the part of three stakeholders: that of the local population, that of the urban regime, i.e. the political and economic leaders of the host region (including the organising committee), and, that of the owner of the event (who attributed it to the city)"* (Chappelet, 2012: 80). Furthermore, there are also negative legacies (Preuss, 2019) and the very notion of legacy can be debated. So, *"what is a legacy for Paris 2024 and the Polynesian government is not necessarily the same for the local population, as the absence of changes to the natural heritage may be considered preferable to any form of legacy. It therefore seems important to question this notion from a territorial and cultural perspective"* (Delaplace et al., 2024).

It should be noted that opposition sometimes concerns only a very small minority of the population. Opposition to Paris 2024 among residents (in mainland France) was relatively weak and fragmented (Martinache & Le Noé, 2023; Delalandre & Schut, 2024). But, even if this opposition is limited, the organisation of future mega-events requires that it be curtailed, unless they are to be held in authoritarian political systems. It is therefore necessary to prepare for them collectively, particularly by involving residents at a very early stage of consultation.

Conclusion

In a fundamentally uncertain context, the challenges posed by mega and giga-events are significant. Even L.A. 2028, which is characterised by private funding, is the subject of fierce controversy, again in the context of climate change (mega-fires) and complex politics (Trump's election). However, these challenges should not obscure the fact that these events have an important festive dimension. Surveys we conducted among people present during the Olympic Games in Seine-Saint-Denis, Seine-et-Marne, and Paris showed that, beyond the sporting aspects, the festive aspects were particularly important, especially in Seine-Saint-Denis and among residents of the Île-de-France region and domestic tourists (Delaplace, 2025). The festival has thus become a strategic urban planning tool for cities and enabled the creation of a new festive urbanity (Gravari-Barbas, 2009).

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