Olympics, World Cup and Expos: What transport can do to make global mass events work

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Major events such as the World Football Cup or Olympic games easily fit the description of mega projects in terms of their planning and execution complexity. The event creates a temporary need for new infrastructure or service capacity for the venue in transport and other domains.

Planning for the event involves not only thinking about transport needs during the event but requires a vision of what transport and accessibility objective the event can help achieve in its aftermath over the long term. The business case for transport infrastructure to serve global events is temporary – peak demand from visitors and participants is limited in space and time – but the infrastructure legacy is permanent.

Delivery of new infrastructure is complicated, as the time scale for development of new transport infrastructure is usually well beyond the planning horizon for a typical major sports or cultural event. Operation of the transport system during the event is also complicated by existing background demand, this needs to be accommodated as a city cannot stop functioning because of a sports event. People need to get to their work places; goods need to be delivered to shops.

Both the 2012 London Olympics and the 2010 Johannesburg FIFA World Cup brought with them a number of contractual obligations upon the organizers. For example during the London Olympics 20 000 – 25 000 participants needed to be moved through the centre of the city at an average speed of 30 miles per hour (50 kilometres per hour) – a considerable challenge for the organisation of transport in the city centre.

In planning for this kind of demand there are substantial unknowns. It is not possible to forecast how many spectators will attend a specific event, it is not possible to predict which country will get into the finales and how many fans from that specific country will arrive, for example.

Beyond the immediate demand considerations, there are other aspects involving the management of the multitude of agencies involved in the execution of such an event. It is important to achieve a state where the media and the business community are working with the organizers and not against them. In terms of media for example in the case studies of World Cup in South Africa or the Olympics in the UK the pressure was immense. There was an ex-ante expectation in the media in both cases that the organizers would not
manage or that the transport system would collapse. Demonstrating to the media that the transport system would be up to the job was important to channelling the public to the most efficient services.

The experience from the London Olympics and Johannesburg World Cup case studies discussed in the Masterclass underlined that, to avoid creating white elephants, in an already saturated transport network, new infrastructure for spectators should only be provided by accelerating the business case for existing projects, projects that would have been delivered anyway to meet long-term demand growth. To meet one-off demand during the event, much more can be achieved by shifting existing background demand into time slots away from peak event demand, temporarily changing the travel behaviour of local people and businesses, rather than trying to cater for it with specific new infrastructure.

The role of transport and other leaders in major events is decisive. They can help facilitate a cultural change and communication between the stakeholders, involved in the planning and delivery of the event. Such leadership helps create a level playing field for interaction and communication between agencies. Both in the UK and South Africa a new body was created to facilitate communication between different organisations. Collective responsibility was pursued to avoid blame-shifting behaviour. Part of the strategy for building this collective spirit was organising social events where members of different public bodies connected.

Large one-off events can be managed to achieve transformative changes. For example in London one of the goals was the regeneration of the Eastern Part of London. In Johannesburg the World Cup was used to achieve a revolution in the public transport system, and in the spatial planning system inherited from the apartheid era. An informal, mainly unregulated, mini-bus taxi system with safety concerns was partially replaced with a BRT network, which employed many of the former drivers. Despite initial, violent resistance to the new system, it was successful in attracting passengers within a car captive city and in connecting areas formerly “apart”, isolated from each other. An example of how transport connects people not just place.

A common theme emerging from this masterclass is that a major event can be used to help bring about tighter connections between people through improved communication and shared responsibility to show to the world that a nation or a city “can do it”, and ultimately bring about lasting changes.

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Stuart Reid is responsible for developing Transport for London’s (TfL) Travel Demand Management programme. He has over 20 years’ experience in the field of travel choices, travel behaviour and travel behaviour change. From 2008 to 2012 he developed the strategy for, and strategic delivery of, TfL’s behaviour change campaign in response to the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Since 2012 he has been accountable for behaviour change around other major events in London such as the Tour de France, as well as the application of this approach to major engineering works and everyday congestion.

Anthony May is Emeritus Professor of Transport Engineering at the University of Leeds. He has been Director of the Institute for Transport Studies and Pro-Vice Chancellor. May was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to transport engineering in 2004 and was elected as a fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering in 1995. From 1985 to 2011, he combined research and teaching at Leeds with consulting as Director of Transport Policy for MVA Ltd. From 1967 to 1977 he was responsible, with the Greater London Council, for policy on highways, traffic management and land use planning.