

BETWEEN EXHILARATION AND PAIN HOSTING THE ALL AFRICA GAMES IN MAPUTO

The stakes and expectations were high when Mozambique hosted the All Africa Games in September 2011. However, the major multi-sports event forced many vendors to relocate and lose their livelihoods. Why did the games fail to be a moment of joy and celebration for everyone as anticipated?

Text by Ilda Lindell

The hosting of international events has become a common strategy for marketing cities and making them internationally competitive. In Africa, such events are also seen as an opportunity for countering negative perceptions of the African city as poor, chaotic and doomed. Eager to project a modern image of their cities, governments embark on major efforts to create the impression of an orderly, prosperous and “world class” city.

The urban poor and their activities are seldom seen as part of this revamped image of the city. Image-making strategies often necessitate their displacement and the policing of prime areas to ensure their invisibility. In the context of widespread urban deprivation, contrasts are further exacerbated and urban exclusion becomes more entrenched.

IN 2009, the Mozambican government vigorously embarked on its largest ever sports infrastructure project by building a national stadium, an athletes’ village of 800 modern flats and Olympic-size

swimming pools on the periphery of Maputo. The mega-infrastructures and the hosting of the games were seen as a means to assert the nation’s capacity to the world and to strengthen national pride among its citizens.

Built by a Chinese firm, and despite worker strikes and violence, the stadium was completed on time for the All Africa Games in September 2011. The modern sports facilities stand in stark contrast to the nearby residential areas, which are lacking in basic infrastructure.

A large number of vendors and marketers operate in the surrounding areas. At the unplanned “Drive In” market, located across the national road from the stadium, traders could not wait for the games to start. They anticipated higher sales, thanks to their strategic location. In the longer term, however, they had been warned they will be relocated to make way for “urban development.”

Meanwhile, hundreds of other traders in the area had already experienced the bitter taste of relocation. They used to sell at a very profitable location close to the national road and the stadium. About half a year before the games, they

Street vendors outside Mozambique's national stadium in Maputo, built by a Chinese firm for the All Africa Games held in September 2011.



PHOTO: ILDA LINDELL

were told they had to leave, as the area was to be turned into a parking lot for the stadium.

Fearing drastic consequences for the vendors, their spokesperson proposed that they would move to an empty area nearby. The authorities eventually agreed and the vendors built stalls and moved in. However, the new location is removed from the flow of customers and sales plummeted. "They dumped us here and don't care about whether we have something to eat or if we suffer," a trader remarked. In tears, another trader said, "I know about business. But when the games begin, I will be out of capital and won't be able to make a profit!"

Thus the vendors left their stalls to sell by the national road. This is a very risky venture. The police chased the vendors away and fatal accidents were frequent because of the heavy traffic. But the vendors had little choice. As one explained, "I have to go sell there to make at least enough money to pay for the bus to get home." Finding themselves between a rock and a hard place, for these vendors the stadium and games brought a heightened sense of fear and danger to their lives. In

spite of the hardships, many were proud of the stadium and expressed hopes that "development" of the area will improve their lives in the longer run. Only the future will tell whether their hopes will bear fruit.

MEGA-EVENTS ARE IMPACTING cities and their citizens in many other countries and parts of the world. Their effects on the lives of urban dwellers in the Global South are still under-studied. However, existing research suggests that such events often set in motion processes and interventions that deepen exclusion among certain groups of the urban poor. Events like the World Cup 2010 in South Africa, the Commonwealth Games 2010 in India, the Africa Cup of Nations 2008 in Ghana illustrate these developments, even if each of them also has unique features. Capacity among affected groups to organise themselves collectively and contest their exclusion is critical to avert the worst consequences, albeit with no guarantee of success. It remains to be seen how their needs will be addressed in future events on the continent and beyond.



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