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Mega-events and Public Economics in Japan: Tokyo 2020, Osaka 2025, and Sapporo 2030

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Abstract

The article examines the public economics of mega-events in the Japanese host cities of Tokyo (2020 summer Olympics), Osaka (Expo 2025), and Sapporo (2030 winter Olympics). The hosting of a mega-event requires multi-billions of publicly funded expenditures in permanent and temporary infrastructure, urban regeneration/gentrification, cultural events and amenities, tourism campaigns, and deployment of additional security measures, among others. However, matters relating to the comprehensive protection of taxpayers in Japanese host cities have remained understudied in the specialized literature of mega-events.

The article argues that local taxpayers not only have a claim to the financial/economic and environmental sustainability of these mega-events but they are, in fact, their largest stakeholder(s). This aspect is ever more pressing as the hosting of both the 2020 Olympics and the Expo 2025 is directly and/or immediately impacted by the (long-term) socio-economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to secure the long-term fiscal sustainability of host cities/nations, higher and clearer levels of accountability and transparency towards local taxpayers (and the general public, at large) are required.

Keywords: Japan, Public Economics, Expos, Summer Olympics, Winter Olympics.

Introduction

Mega-events (Ritchie, 1984; Ritchie and Yangzhou, 1987) are large-scale staged fairs, festivals, expositions, and cultural and sporting events held on either a regular or a one-time basis (Hall, 1989). Such events rely on a well-defined, short-term period and extraordinary status to create international interest and attract mass appeal (Hall, 1989). For instance, the Olympic and Paralympic Games (henceforth, Olympics) and World Expositions (henceforth, Expos) are increasingly employed by governments both in the global North and South to build internationally reputable city/nation brands that *potentially* foster economic revitalization and socio-cultural innovation. Likewise, mega-events serve as a conduit of

public diplomacy in order to update external perceptions whilst galvanizing a cohesive national/local identity. Moreover, these mega-events operate as international markers of history, modernity, and progress (Roche, 2000; 2003; 2017).

As a corollary, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and the Expo 2025 Osaka are meant to represent Japan's recovery after the March 2011 (triple) disaster. That is, the making of a new Japanese society. Compactness, sustainability, and cutting-edge technological prowess were promoted (by the Tokyo/Osaka and national Japanese governments) as key bidding and delivery aspects for these mega-events. This approach was especially welcomed, as the hosting of these events represents a colossal economic undertaking.

Host cities/nations undergo urban development or redevelopment requiring vast infrastructure and logistics-related expenditures (through legally binding guarantee letters and contracts with the International Olympic Committee). As such, cost overruns have become an intrinsic element in the planning and delivery of mega-events, with a consistent gross discrepancy between the projected (bidding phase) and the final costs (Boykoff, 2014; Cohen and Watt, 2017; Flyvbjerg and Stewart, 2012; Flyvbjerg et al., 2021). For example, as of late 2019, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics already had a 200 per cent cost overrun (Flyvbjerg, 2021). Now in the midst of a pandemic, a public debt-to-GDP ratio of 264 per cent (IMF, 2022), and a super-aged society, Japan faces dire socio-economic circumstances. Still, matters relating to the comprehensive protection of taxpayers in Japanese host cities have remained understudied in the specialized literature of mega-events.

The article argues that the public not only has a claim to the financial/economic and environmental sustainability of these mega-events but they are, in fact, their largest stakeholder(s). This aspect is ever more pressing as the hosting of both the 2020 Olympics and the Expo 2025 is directly and/or immediately impacted by the (long-term) socio-economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, in a rather worrisome fashion, government officials like Seiko Hashimoto continue fomenting the 'festivalization' of Japanese local and national economies by seeking to host the 2030 winter Olympics in Sapporo. In order to secure the long-term fiscal sustainability of host cities/nations, higher and clearer levels of accountability and transparency towards local taxpayers (and the general public, at large) are required.

More concretely, the key research questions this article addresses are as follows:

- a) What are the main impacts on public finances of the hosting of mega-events in Japan (Tokyo, Osaka, Sapporo)?
- b) What are the levels of accountability and transparency exercised by Japanese local/

prefectural/national governments regarding the bidding, preparation, and hosting of mega-events (summer/winter Olympics and Expos)?

c) What are the levels of public trust in the Japanese government (pandemic context)?

The article further argues that protection of taxpayers vis-à-vis risky megaprojects (particularly in times of compounding crises) is a fundamental tenet of the social contract in contemporary societies. Otherwise, policies/governance approaches not only endanger long-term fiscal sustainability of local/national economies, but also erode the public's trust in institutions¹⁾ on which societies depend.

The organization of the article is as follows: The second section reviews the canonical and state-of-the-art literature in the field of mega-events. The third section problematizes the instrumentalization of mega-events (by governments) as an *all-in-one* economic growth policy. The fourth section provides empirical evidence on the public economics of mega-events in the Japanese host cities of Tokyo (2020 summer Olympics), Osaka (Expo 2025), and Sapporo (2030 winter Olympics). Likewise, this section tackles public trust in the Japanese government (OECD data) in the current pandemic context. Lastly, the article sketches the road ahead for comprehensive protection of taxpayers in host cities/countries.

A Snapshot of the literature on Mega-events

The specialized literature on mega-events (interdisciplinary in nature) is robust and ever expanding. However, international academic trends on mega-events have commonly focused on modernity (Roche, 2000; 2003), intended and unintended legacies (Roche, 2017; Travers & Shearman, 2016; Mooney et al., 2015; Boykoff, 2014; Grix et al., 2017, Cohen & Watt (eds.), 2017), cost overruns (Flyvbjerg et al., 2021; Kromidha et al., 2019; Kassens-Noor & Lauermaann, 2018; Baade & Matheson, 2016; Jennings, 2013; Flyvbjerg and Stewart, 2012; Zimbalist, 2020) or impact assessment on the construction, tourism, and labor-market sectors (Moss et al., 2019, Gaudette et al., 2017; Teigland, 1999; Oxford Economics, 2012; Scherer, 2011; Singh and Zhou, 2015), and architecture and urban transformation (Burbank et al., 2002; Gotham, 2011, Smith, 2012, Wolfe et al., 2021) in host cities. Studies on public opinion and the Olympics have largely focused on the bidding or candidature phases to shed light on opposition groups (Horne, 2017) or spectacle/leisure aspects (Streicher et al., 2019; Leal de Oliveira et al., 2020; Coates & Wicker, 2015; Hiller & Wanner, 2017; Giulianotti et al., 2015). Likewise, the above-referenced have often tackled case studies in North America and Western Europe (more recently in

China, Brazil, and Russia).

Academic trends in Japan have mainly focused on the legacies of the Tokyo 1964 and the Nagano 1998 Olympics (Yoshimi, 2019; Nakamura & Suzuki, 2017), potential legacies of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics (Yoshifusa, 2019; Tamari, 2019), and economic impacts associated with the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics (Imahashi & Regalado, 2020; Harada, 2020; Kiuchi, 2021). As for Expos, trends have concentrated mainly on local and national planning of the mega-event: Japanese urban visions and masterplans (Urushima, 2011; 2007), collective memory (Anderson & Shimizu, 2007; 2012), art (Yoshimoto, 2011), multimedia, security, and urban governance (Furuhata, 2014), and information technologies and consumer behavior (Toyama, 2021).

Even though Japan has hosted four summer/winter Olympics and four world/specialized Expos in total, state-of-the-art (comparative) studies on the public economics of Japanese host cities are virtually inexistent in the specialized literature (in English). Against this backdrop, the article focuses on the Japanese cities of Tokyo, Osaka, and Sapporo to advance state-of-the-art empirical and analytical underpinnings in the fields of the political economy of mega-events and public economics, particularly vis-à-vis institutional accountability. Likewise, it potentially offers new policy pathways where the general public is acknowledged as the main stakeholder in the hosting of mega-events.

On Mega-Events and the State

The hosting of mega-events (the Olympics, most visibly) represents the crystallization of a 'competitive city' strategy (Evans, 2009) or urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989; Jessop, 1997, Jessop and Sum, 2000) (see below). These governance approaches have appealed, in particular, to post-growth (or stagnant) economies (e.g., United Kingdom, Japan, and France) that seek to promote mega-events as a catalyst of socio-economic growth (Gonzalez Basurto, 2017; 2018; 2020).

As argued elsewhere (Gonzalez Basurto, 2020), the contemporary state (and its institutions) generally represents the economic interests of the owners of capital. Following Harvey (2017:15-16), the state often serves as an 'active agent and element in securing the circulation of capital' through effective demand mechanisms (e.g., investment in science and technology, the military, and collective physical infrastructures). However, strands of urban governance, like entrepreneurialism, reflect a *meta-liberal* stance that alters (and

positions itself beyond) the neoliberal condition (Brenner, 2004; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; 2005) of capitalist markets. That is, urban governance is channeled through a public-private partnership in which the public sector assumes the risk (at the taxpayers' expense) and the private sector takes the benefits (Harvey, 1989:7). Even so, from the point of view of standard economics, the Olympics are 'one of the most financially risky type of megaproject that exists' (Flyvbjerg and Stewart, 2012: 3; Flyvbjerg et al., 2021). For instance, the average Olympics' cost overrun from 1960 to 2012 for both summer and winter is, in real terms, 179 per cent; with summer Olympics having an average cost overrun of 252 per cent (Flyvbjerg and Stewart, 2012). Rationally, there is little or no incentive for national and municipal governments (worldwide) to bid for and host mega-events like the Olympics and Expos. However, this practice continues to, on the one hand, garner enthusiasm among government officials and the private sector and, on the other, indebt taxpayers for decades (both in the global North and South).

As previously discussed, the hosting of a mega-event requires multi-billions of publicly funded expenditures (as demonstrated in the specialized literature) in permanent and temporary infrastructure, urban regeneration/gentrification, cultural events and amenities, tourism campaigns, and deployment of additional security measures, among others (Gonzalez Basurto, 2017; 2018; 2020). As a corollary, official estimates conservatively placed the hosting of the (postponed) Tokyo 2020 Olympics at USD\$13.6 billion (The Associated Press, 21 June 2022). Approximately 60 per cent of said expenditures were covered by taxpayer funds. In addition, expenditures relating to the postponement and counter-Covid-19 infection measures during the Olympics have been inaccurately disclosed to the public. For example, officials of the Tokyo organizing committee have publicly argued that Olympic Committees can make costs appear 'large or small' (usually smaller, at the behest of the International Olympic Committee) (The Asahi Shimbun, 22 December 2022). As such, the Tokyo organizing committee omitted at least 280 billion yen in expenses (Kyodo News, 21 December, 2022; The Asahi Shimbun, 22 December 2022).

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government (henceforth, TMG) and national government's Olympics deficit (as of 8/2021) was approximately 1.41 trillion yen and 874 billion yen, respectively (Kyodo News, 26 August 2021). The Japanese national government indicated that it would not assist the TMG in covering said deficit (The Asahi Shimbun, 11 August 2021). Therefore, this financial burden is most likely to be absorbed by Tokyo's taxpayers.

Osaka 2025 and Sapporo 2030: Wash, Rinse, Repeat?

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics were not only the first-ever postponed (due to a pandemic) and held amidst a state of emergency (and without international visitors), but also the most expensive ever on record (see above). Notwithstanding this bleak (long-term) fiscal outcome, the *hope value* placed on mega-events continues to thrive in Japan. In essence, the Expo 2025 has been touted by politicians (at central and prefectural/city levels) as the symbol of a new era in Japan. Under the theme of “Designing Future Society for Our Lives”, the Expo is linked to cutting-edge technologies to ‘solve’ (contemporary) societies’ challenges (Abe, 2022). Echoing the 2020 Olympics, The Expo 2025 Masterplan (2020) convolutedly states:

The Expo will also provide an opportunity to rediscover the cultural, historical, and other charms of Japan and serve as a catalyst for achieving tourism with higher added value through the national commitment to tourism.

Likewise, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has suggested that the success of the Expo 2025 will also lead to the success of his ‘new capitalism’: a “sustainable society and economy based on decarbonization, digitization, health and hygiene” (Abe, 2022). These grand statements by Japanese government officials mirror those proclaimed in the lead up to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics (Gonzalez Basurto, 2018). Whilst mega-events are markers of modernity (Roche, 1989; 1998; 2003; 2017; Tagsold, 2010), there is no evidence to suggest a causal link between mega-events and the foundation of a new (national) economy. Furthermore, it is risky at best, irrational at worst, to solely depend on a single mega-event to deliver a comprehensive socio-economic change (needed) for Japan.

To date, the most visible aspects of the Expo 2025 have been the rising costs a) associated with the development of the Expo site, Yumeshima (man-made) Island, due to soil liquefaction and contamination; and b) associated with the construction of the Expo pavilion. With regard to the former, the construction costs (as of January 2022) were already 1.6 times the initial estimate of 116.2 billion yen (Soeda, 2022). The Osaka City Government has insisted that bond-issued debt will be repaid through annual land lease payments of 2.5 billion yen (from operators of the integrated resort) and 20.3 billion yen in funds related to the infrastructure development project (The Asahi Shimbun, 26 October 2022; Soeda, 2022). In a similar rhetoric to that of the Prime Minister’s, the Osaka Mayor (Ichiro Matsui) ‘believes’ this development will be a success, even though the ‘initial estimates were too optimistic’ (Soeda, 2022).

As for the Pavilion, the original (construction) estimate was 7.3 billion yen (about USD\$50 million). However, it later increased to 10 billion yen (about USD\$68.6 million) and again to 11.5 billion yen (roughly USD\$80 million) (Ishikawa, 2022), partially due to higher costs of materials and a depreciated yen. The prefectural and city governments will cover 50 per cent of the 11.1 billion yen each (Matsuoka et al., 2022), whilst the private sector will cover the remaining 400 million yen. Here, it is worth highlighting the prefectural and municipal governments, as well as the Expo Promotion Bureau have simply apologized for further increasing the financial burden on prefectural/municipal taxpayers.

Lastly, Sapporo (considered by the international/national press as a leading candidate) had initially promoted a cost-cutting bidding to garner wider public appeal (placing the hosting costs between 280 and 300 billion yen) for the hosting of the 2030 winter Olympics. However, the Sapporo city government has recently announced an additional 17 billion yen (USD\$116 million) to its estimates. The figure is now between 297 and 317 billion yen (Hiura, 2022). Once again, local/prefectural taxpayers are expected to cover more than 50 per cent of the hosting costs. What is more, the above-referenced do not include the bidding costs (2.3 billion yen since 2014) (Hiura, 2022). Controversially, the City Assembly rejected holding a referendum over the bidding for the 2030 Olympics (in June 2022) citing their (initial) polling had shown 52 per cent of respondents to be in favor of it (Kageyama and Wade, 2022).

In sharp contrast to Sapporo, the Government of British Columbia has withdrawn its support over Vancouver's 2030 Olympic bid (led by four First Nations) after conducting an analysis of costs, (guarantee and liability) risks, and potential benefits of the winter Olympics vis-à-vis government priorities like health care, public safety, and tackling the current cost of living (Grant, 2022; NBC Sports, 27 October 2022). However, it is worth noting that the Sapporo city government has paused its bid promotion efforts while planning another survey (nationwide) to 'dispel the public's unease' regarding the hosting of another Olympics (Kyodo News, 20 December 2022). Here, the declining public support refers to multiple corruption scandals (and current government investigation) regarding bribes in the selection of the Tokyo 2020 sponsors, as well as the rigging of the bidding process for companies to take part in test events for the Olympics (Kyodo News, 15 December 2022).

All in all, the evidence presented here suggests that the cases of the 2020 Olympics, Expo 2025, and 2030 winter Olympics entail highly risky/speculative projects, as there is no indication of any short, mid, or long-term economic benefits for local taxpayers. In addition, it could be argued that Japanese taxpayers are deliberately exposed and/or denied

comprehensive protection vis-à-vis the hosting of mega-events. From a political economy/public policy perspective, this phenomenon engenders a fundamental erosion of institutional trust. To put this into perspective, an OECD survey (2021) suggests that only 24 per cent of respondents in Japan trust the national government (39.8 per cent distrust it) and only 25.85 per cent think that a public service would be improved if many people complained about it (36.13 per cent did not). Similarly, only 28.56 per cent are confident they have a say or participate in policy making. The perceived level of governmental integrity among respondents is one of the most revealing figures. That is, 47.27 per cent indicated high-level government officials would grant a political favor in exchange for the offer of a well-paid private sector job (only 15.09 per cent indicated the opposite). In terms of age cohorts, younger segments of the population have lower levels of trust in the Japanese government; 16.62 per cent among people age 30-49 (the lowest), followed by 22.08 per cent among people age 18-29, and 28.89 per cent among people age 50 and older. It is worth pointing out that these figures would likely be even lower in the current political ‘trust crisis’ stemming from the Liberal Democratic Party’s links to a controversial religious group (the Unification Church), the state funeral held for the former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (with 53 per cent opposition by the general public) (Kawamoto, 2022; The Mainichi, 23 August 2022), and the bribery scandal involving an influential former member of the Tokyo Olympic Organizing Committee (The Asahi Shimbun, 19 October 2022).

Concluding Remarks

By design, scope, and scale, mega-events are the riskiest megaproject there is. Moreover, the risk is mainly absorbed (long-term) by taxpayers in host cities/nations. As the largest stakeholder(s) in these endeavors, they ought to demand higher and clearer levels of accountability and transparency in the bidding, preparation, and hosting of mega-events. In this sense, Japan has become a prime example of event-led governance. As demonstrated by the empirical evidence in this article, the national and local governments in Japan deliberately endanger the country’s fiscal sustainability by opting to host mega-events like the Olympics (summer and winter) and Expos. Additionally, they limit or deny mechanisms of protection for local taxpayers (e.g., referenda) whilst misleading them with grand statements/projections. Nonetheless, it is also evident that the public in Japan distrusts the government (and its integrity) and perceives there are very few ways to participate in

policymaking or elicit positive change, even if a majority ‘complained’. This distrust not only erodes long-term institutional capacity, but also erodes the fundamentals of the social contract for the ‘99 per cent’ of the population. In the context of the ongoing pandemic and fragile economic recovery, there is simply no wiggle room for government malfeasance. Perhaps, as a measure of last resort, taxpayers ought to sue their national/local governments on the basis of systematic violations to their social contract. A Sisyphean task ahead, indeed.

Endnotes

- 1) According to Perry et al., (2021), higher levels of trust in public institutions improve compliance in regulations (including those designed to combat climate crisis) and tax collections, respect for property rights, confidence in the overall functioning of the (national) economy, and response to epidemics/pandemics, among others. Conversely, lack of trust or ‘trust deficit’ in institutions contributes to the support of extreme political and nonscientific views, increases public discontent, protests and, in some cases, violent conflict.

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