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Wise, N and Ludvigsen, J (2023) New notions of soft power: Impact rhetoric in mega-event bid documents. *Local Economy*, 38 (4). pp. 306-311. ISSN 0269-0942

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New Notions of Soft Power: Impact Rhetoric in Mega-Event Bid Documents

Nicholas Wise & Jan Andre Lee Ludvigsen

Abstract: This viewpoint addresses notions of impact and soft power. Two bidding documents submitted in 2018 by Morocco and a joint bid by Canada, Mexico, and the United States are explored, focusing specifically on language used when discuss the term “impact.” Soft power is important to consider and use as a framework for interpretation because bidding for events involves the ability to persuade and use power as a medium to showcase the ability to host. Both bid proposals place less attention on economic impact, and emphasize the social and environmental impact that these events will have. Each bid document had a defined statement on legacy, but legacy did not dominate either bid as both put focus on how they would create impact in the present time. This approach is something that brings people into the directions of the bid, in terms of how social, economic, or environmental impact would be achieved, and directives positioned how they would make people aware of impact.

Keywords: event impacts, mega-events, FIFA world cup, nation, event bidding

This viewpoint article is concerned with the notion of impact and sport power, as explored through language used in bidding document to host mega-events. As nations bid to host events, the word impact is at the center of discussion (Wise and Maguire, 2022). Rhetoric is referred to as the art of persuasion, putting emphasis on what the outcomes will be, or at least could be. Thus, nations that prepare bidding documents to host mega-events speak to the impact that the event will have. In this article we argue that persuasive language of impact is a diplomatic approach to convey soft power by looking at the proposed impact that an international mega-event will have. In line with the purpose of this special issue, this paper takes a look at the legacy impact of sporting events, and breaks down interpretations of how the notion of impact is conveyed through the lens of soft power.

In 2019 the first author of this viewpoint co-edited a special issue for *Local Economy* dedicated to soft power (see Wise and Maguire, 2019). The purpose of that special issue was to address the confluence of political and cultural ideals by looking at this term in relation to urban regeneration and leisure. Soft power plays an important role in shaping attitudes, perceptions and preferences, as argued in seminal work by Nye (1990, 2004). To this regard, bidding for events involves the ability to persuade and use power as a medium to showcase the ability to host (see McGillivray and Turner, 2018). Bidding to host mega-events are in line with approaches to use soft power as a communicative medium, because these documents are attempts to showcase what an event will offer, and the language of impact is often used to present appeal, or to “create attractive (and affirmative) value” (Wise and Maguire, 2019, 627).

The 2026 FIFA Men’s World Cup will be the first mega-event of this scale hosted by three nations. Canada, Mexico and the United States will co-host under the emblem of United 2026. The United 2026 bid was selected over a bid put forward by Morocco in June of 2018. Following the selection of the 2026 host, some early scholarship offered social and political insights on the significance of this hosting between three nations (see Beissel and Kohe, 2022; Ludvigsen, 2019; Wise and Ludvigsen, 2022). Both papers offered an in-depth look at policy and situated the context of the bid alongside

pressing international relations between the countries at the time it was announced the three country bid was successful.

This paper looks into how impact is incorporated into the United 2026 and Morocco 2026 bid documents. We look at each occurrence of the word impact and offer some interpretative commentary around its use, persuasion, and how it offers scope into ways to thinking about how soft power is a part of bidding to host mega-events. From an events and destination development standpoint, scholars address social, economic, and environmental impacts (see Wise, 2016; Wise, 2020), as these have been integral to assessment of planning, development, and sustainability for decades as addressed in event management texts (e.g. Bladen et al., 2022). When reviewing the content from the bid document, little has changed from how impact is addressed as mentions of impacts were all categorized directly into each of these categories. The triple bottom line framework is clearly present in this regard as core pillars of sustainability. The focus on impact from a bidding and soft power standpoint are used to position destination competitiveness and place image, so to create an impression of change amid pressing global awareness of the climate and human rights. The focus on residents and social impacts has come into more perspective in destination development around events, as there is a need to focus more on outcomes for people opposed to solely on economic incentives (Wise, 2019). We outline the focus on impact that had a substantial narrative around what impact means in each bid in Table 1. ‘Impact’ is discussed with some depth and supportive narrative 46 times in the Morocco bid and 60 times in the United bid. Impact was mentioned much more often in the United bid but in many occurrences social or environmental impacts was repeated over-and-over to reinforce the significance of the impact in the narrative.

Table 1. Observed “impact focus” considerations in each bid

	UNITED Bid (n=60)	Morocco Bid (n=46)
Economic	4	4
Social	24	12
Environmental	15	15
Legacy	1	8
Other	16	7
Other directives (Listed)	Sport/Soccer/Football as Change, Technology, Image, Political, Transport, Triple Bottom Line	Research, Prevention, Awareness, Participation, Operations, Image

Both bids attempt to put impact in the broadest sense possible, United 2026 bid focuses on impact “across every metric – ticket sales, television audiences and rights fees, digital engagement, partner involvement, community support, environmental, social and economic impact, and more”. Whereas the Moroccan bid announces a timeframe for a “long-term impact for football - and the world Overall, a 2026 FIFA World Cup™ in Morocco will be a feel-good, authentic and meaningful celebration, for the benefit of five core groups”. The five groups being: Players, Fans, FIFA, Morocco and Africa, and the World. The focus on feel-good as a factor and celebration offers an engaging approach to discuss impact early on in the bid, as it showcases an attempt to build a narrative of how people will actively be involved. The United bid stuck to a more traditional approach to lay out impact across the main areas and they elaborate through the document.

Economic impact was addressed, but with public opinion critical of economic priorities and profits, to garner support a focus on social and environmental impacts is a way of connecting with a wider audience to showcase diverse legacies. Thus, economic impacts did not overwhelm the presentations, as there was more attention on how the population would gain in relation to the economic directives and gains aimed at making places more competitive. The challenging with stating economic impact is costs are estimated based on current prices and these can change greatly in coming years due to inflation. Much of the early focus on economic impact is related to construction of venues and attractions, and potential income generation. Recent mega-events had positive outlooks for revenue generation, but say the impact of Covid-19 limiting this greatly.

Social impact was clear and a core focus of each bid. Arguably, scholars note that social impacts are a challenge to outline and address because they are an intangible impact. This is where soft power and commitment is necessary, because there is a need to be very persuasive here, in a manner that convinces how the general public will gain from an investment in a mega-event. Morocco put emphasis on positive aspects of the event would impact on the daily lives of Moroccans. The new infrastructures are related to promoting participation and benefitting local communities socially and economically, offering a balance of tangible and intangible benefits. A focus on human rights and community development were at the forefront of discussions of social impacts. Both bids placed much attention on human rights as this has been addressed in numerous media outlets and in academic literature following previous editions of the World Cup (see Ashraf, 2016). The Morocco bid states: “building on Morocco’s desire to consolidate its culture of human rights, and thanks to its own strategic commitment that draws on the expertise of certain relevant stakeholders, will adopt and comply with the internationally relevant standards and best practices applicable to the management of direct and indirect social impacts throughout the period of the 2026 FIFA World Cup”. A similar statement is echoed in the United bid: “Where we identify potentially adverse impacts on the human rights of people belonging to specific groups or populations, or in specific circumstances, we have considered other international standards and principles that elaborate on the rights of such individuals, including standards concerning indigenous peoples, migrant workers and their families, national, ethnic and religious minorities, people with disabilities, women, race, LGBTQI+, journalists, and human rights defenders”. Both bids dedicated depth to how they would protect human rights. Community focus was more apparent in the United bid because it was an attempt to showcase cultural connections between the three nations: “Canada, Mexico, and the United States will each contribute to an extraordinary FIFA World Cup™ experience in a spectacular setting that benefits from the friendliness, cultural richness and sense of community that defines North America”. Morocco put more emphasis on their place in the global community and the positive connectiveness of football in a global society.

What is important to note is the overwhelming discussion of environmental impacts, given increased public attention on climate and scrutiny around travel carbon footprints to both larger and smaller scale events (see Grofelnik et al., 2023; Talavera et al., 2019). The repetitive focus on environmental impacts and reducing these consequences can be seen as a persuasive approach to showcase the need for awareness, but also to enhance the bid showing this consciousness. For Morocco, there is much attention placed on how they will reduce the environmental impact of the 2026 FIFA World Cup. They outline a commitment to sustainable development, and benchmark their approach to showcase how they have less of an environmental impact than Brazil’s 2014 FIFA World Cup (this even with an expanded 48 team tournament). Geography and area is a factor here since the

geographical spread of travel is much less than past host cities. Initiatives put forward to reduce the environmental impact included the use of renewable energy and low-emission transportation. The United bid is situated on a collaborative effort across host cities as a way of addressing concerns and best practices for environmental management. The United 2026 events is spread across a much wider geographical area so more environmental impact attention was put on the efficient use of resources and minimizing waste. Energy efficient transport was noted, but this seems to be in relation to travel within host cities opposed to between cities.

Each bid document had defined statement on legacy, but legacy did not dominate either bid as both put focus on how they would create impact in the present time. This approach is something that brings people into the directions of the bid, in terms of how social, economic, or environmental impact would be achieved, and directives positioned how they would make people aware of impact. Legacy, on the other hand, puts too much on what might happen and does not put in motion how impact will be created or achieved. Image legacy and awareness were themes that were incorporated, and these would be discussions that often led into considerations of the environment and society.

Something unique outlined in the United bid is plans to develop a smart system for collecting and analyzing real-time data during the tournament. This is an attempt to aid transparency and use data to make informed decisions around energy usage, waste, water, and transport. Seen as research impact, many of points noted address how we measure the environmental impact of the event. This is also outlined for social impacts as well in the United bid: “Using science-based approaches and applied research to maximize impact of football programming on key social issues such as health, education, and other sustainable development goals”.

Some might argue the use of the word impact is overused in bid documents today, to the point that its semblance in the text becomes repetitive. How impact is proposed has been criticized by scholars because some argue the notion is used too vaguely and can result in unfilled promises (see Cowan, 2016; Hall and Wise 2019; Maharaj, 2015; Stell, 2014). Lee (2019) focused on the impact post-event, because this is a time when scholars can reflect on what is proposed and how something is then realized. It must also be noted that studies focusing on impact consider legacies over a longer period of time, and some mention that impact cannot be truly realized until five or even ten years following an event (Garcia, 2005). Impact is used repetitively because it is meant to draw one’s attention to what is presented as an important appeal and directive. The use of impact is meant to enlighten the reader and draw attention to what an event will do, sometimes in a rather vague manner but we often find that impact leaves an impression of a lot needs to be fulfilled. In bidding documents, soft power is a constructive medium for setting an agenda, and rhetoric that is persuasive and details a cause into how impact is expanded is necessary and learnt from the hosting of past mega-events.

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