

South Africa: The myths and realities of the FIFA soccer World Cup

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June 15, 2010 — Offering an unapologetic public critique of the FIFA Soccer World Cup at the height of the collective frenzy of positive expectation, feel-good nationalism and general public excitement that now exists in our country is a risky thing to do. But it is a risk that needs to be taken precisely because, no matter what the context, myths always need to be separated from realities. In the case of the “greatest show on Earth”, leaving aside the very real beauty and enjoyment of the game of soccer, the myth-making has created a situation akin to inhaling tik -- a short-lived high/euphoria that obscures all reality, followed by a rapid, depressing “come down” back to that reality.

The starting point for the mythology that has been built up around the World Cup is the misplaced assumption that mega-events (in this case a sporting one) are vehicles for economic, social and political development that will benefit everyone. Most of the things that our government and FIFA (not to mention the bevy of commentators and journalists) have been telling/selling us about the benefits of the World Cup, since the time when South Africa first bid for hosting rights, are grounded within that assumption.

Amongst such benefits are: the promotion of economic growth; the stimulation of urban re-development; the intensification of job creation and infrastructural development; the spreading of confidence and prosperity; the engendering of “nation-building”; and, yes, enhanced peace and security for both country and continent. If only, like children lapping up a fairy tale, we believe all of this then the ultimate promise will be fulfilled — a permanent “developmental legacy”.

So let's take a quick look at the realities that would (hopefully) bring us back to earth and remind us what has really been going on when it comes to the 2010 FIFA soccer World Cup.

- The overwhelming majority of the economic benefits that have accrued from this sporting mega-event have gone to an elite grouping of private entities, while most spending has come from the public purse. Private South African construction companies have made billions and are laughing all the way to the bank. WHBO has increased its profit before tax by 142%, Murray and Roberts by 99% and Group Five by 79%. Meanwhile, the thousands of casually employed construction workers on the various stadia (now mostly out of jobs) never received more than R3000 per month. As for FIFA and its local organising committee sidekick, they stand to make massive profits that are now, according to FIFA itself, estimated to be in the region of R20-R25 billion, the most ever for any World Cup. No prizes then for guessing who's pocketing the booty and who's paying the bill.

- The costs of the 2010 World cup stadia and related infrastructure, borne by the South African taxpayer, have increased from an initial amount of R2.3 billion in 2004 to a whopping R17.4 billion presently, representing a 757% increase. It is no secret that most of the newly built stadia will struggle to remain commercially viable after the World Cup is over -- a “white elephant” legacy in this regard seems all but guaranteed. Add to this the fact that much of the transport infrastructure linked to the World Cup, such as the Gautrain and various urban highways (mostly in Gauteng), will either be beyond the means of ordinary South Africans or partially privatised through the looming introduction of toll fees and it is also not difficult to see who is, and is not, going to benefit on this front.

- While the initial bid document estimated that more than 500,000 annual jobs would be created through, and as a result of, the World Cup, South Africa has actually lost more than 1 million jobs in the past two years. In turn, this has helped produce a vastly increased current account deficit for South Africa, not because (as claimed) billions have been spent on basic services and infrastructure for the poor (and don't forget the massive hikes in various service charges for ordinary citizens), but mainly because of massive imports for construction of World Cup stadia, the Gautrain and the continued outflow of domestically generated profit/capital. Add a "debt legacy" to the outcome equation.

- The much touted, "trickle down benefits" to both ordinary South Africans (as well as the region/continent) have simply not materialised. Besides the massive let-down for small businesses in the accommodation/tourism sector as a result of hugely inflated predictions of foreign visitors, informal traders will largely lose out due to FIFA declared restricted/controlled zones around all the key World Cup sites. Additionally, the enforced "cleaning up" of urban areas has mainly targeted the homeless and poor, something which is in direct contradiction to the promise of more inclusive urban planning, housing provision and living space. This criminalising and crowding out of the urban poor has only served to reinforce and exacerbate the divided racial and spatial landscape of South Africa.

- Meanwhile, FIFA alongside its hand-picked local and foreign corporate World Cup "sponsors" are poised to make a killing, protected as they are from any meaningful competition through government guarantees, monopoly concessions and manipulated "intellectual property rights".

Those who would blow the whistle and/or publicly demonstrate their dissatisfaction are threatened with law suits, effective bans on gatherings and being labelled as "unpatriotic" spoilers or anti-social troublemakers. So much for celebrating "diversity" and democratic accountability.

The bottom line, regardless of the wonderful soccer that will no doubt be seen on the field and enjoyed by most, is that the 2010 FIFA World Cup represents the conquest of South Africa by an elite-led, capitalist branding/image making exercise. In the World Cup business model, elite and corporate interests are conveniently conflated with the "common" and "national" interest.

As Chris Webb has so cogently pointed out: "In South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy to global capitalism, image is key in pursuing the now dominant economic rationalisations of neoliberalism ... (it) perfectly serves the ruling African National Congress's redistribution through growth policy (and) effectively opens the economic and political spaces necessary to (further) pursue neoliberal policies and development." "The grand spectacle that we are witnessing is not a metaphor of the historical triumph over adversity, of South Africa's (or Africa's) "renaissance" or of a positive "developmental legacy". It is rather a hugely costly and ultimately ephemeral exercise in myth-making. Reality is a different story.

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P.S.

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