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Social leveraging of the 2010 Olympic Games: ‘sustainability’ in a City of Vancouver initiative

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Heightened inter-city competition for hosting sport mega-events has increased the involvement of levels of government. Governments are seeking to achieve public policy objectives using the sport mega-event as a vehicle to do so. The emergence of the concept of social leveraging is important to understand the involvement of host governments in attempts to amend, fast-track, or generate new public policy, curriculum, community programmes, and demonstration projects. This article presents a case study of the City of Vancouver’s newly emerging post-Olympic Greenest City initiative. The purpose of this case study of social leveraging is to better understand this concept in the context of hosting the 2010 Olympic Games and the City of Vancouver’s development of a sustainability business brand. This case study is explored according to Chalip [Chalip, L. (2006). Towards social leverage of sport events, Journal of Sport & Tourism, 11, 109–127. doi:10.1080/14775080601155126] and O’Brien and Chalip’s [O’Brien, D., & Chalip, L. (2007a). Executive training exercise in sport event leverage. International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research, 1, 296–304. doi:10.1108/17506180710824181; O’Brien, D., & Chalip, L. (2007b). Sport events and strategic leveraging: Pushing towards the triple bottom line. In A.G. Woodside & D. Martin (Eds.), Tourism management: Analysis, behavior, and strategy (pp. 318–338). Cambridge: CABI] framework of social leveraging. Case study analysis offers evidence that suggests that social leveraging does conceptualize the efforts by government hosts to maximize benefits from their intensive investments in sport mega-events. Findings also extend the exploratory framework of social leveraging by considering additional leverageable resources that government officials utilize, especially as these resources might fast-track policy objectives. Our research also suggests amending the sequence of and the parts of this framework in order to elaborate on social leveraging as an iterative rather than linear process.

Keywords: branding; government; Greenest City; public policy; social sustainability; sport mega-event

Resumen

La intensa competencia entre ciudades por acoger grandes eventos deportivos ha aumentado la implicación de los estamentos gubernamentales. Los gobiernos buscan lograr objetivos de políticas públicas utilizando como vehículo para lograrlo el gran evento deportivo. La emergencia del concepto de influencia

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Palabras claves: marca; gobierno; La ciudad más verde (Greenest City); políticas públicas; sostenibilidad social; grandes eventos deportivos

Résumé

prometteuses utilisées par les officiels du gouvernement, particulièrement lorsque ces ressources peuvent accélérer les objectifs politiques. Notre recherche suggère également de corriger des séquences et des parties de ce cadre dans le but de développer l’idée selon laquelle le levier social serait un processus itératif plutôt que linéaire.

**Mots clés:** image; gouvernement; Cité la Plus Verte; politique publique; durabilité sociale; Mega Événements Sportifs

[摘要]


[关键词]: 品牌; 政府; 绿色城市; 公共政策; 社会可持续性; 大型体育事件

**Introduction**

Staging the Olympic Games and other mega-events have acquired the reputation of being important instruments of urban development and regeneration since Rome hosted the Games in 1960 (Gold & Gold, 2008). Cities seek these events because an informal ruling coalition wants to advance a growth agenda in the host region (Burbank, Andranovich, & Heying, 2001; Surborg, VanWynderghem, & Wyly, 2008). City officials, developers, real-estate lawyers, and the media – the already influential and wealthy – are commonly depicted as working collectively as a *growth machine* (Molotch, 1976), pursuing specific objectives through an inter-city competition to gain the right to host (Andranovich, Burbank, & Heying, 2001; Hall, 2006; Harvey, 1989). The growth agenda involves branding the host city as world-class using a consumption-oriented, image-based, economic development strategy (Burbank et al., 2001; Surborg et al., 2008). According to regime theory, winning bids to host mega-events enables cities to differentiate themselves visually and experientially from other cities and to harness economic flows by drawing in corporate investment and leveraging scarce resources from governments (Hiller, 2000). Following the economic success of the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1984, there has been a frenzy where cities and countries engage in inter-city competitions in an attempt to win bids and get on to what has been referred to as the *mega-event circuit* (Cornelissen & Swart, 2006) – a circuit that is supposed to generate investments within the host city.
Investments are forthcoming due to the prospect of garnering international media attention. New monies fund the rapid construction and repair of infrastructure necessary to host the event (e.g. sports facilities and transportation routes) that in turn are anticipated to enhance the experience of tourists and encourage additional investments (Burbank et al., 2001; Hall, 2006). More importantly for this article, this infrastructure is leverageable by organizers to gain access to ordinarily scarce public monies from levels of government (Surborg et al., 2008).

The Olympic Games are a well-utilized cause that proponents use to incorporate mega-events into a growth agenda. The Games provide the ruling coalition access to the popular symbolism of the Olympic movement, an international, elite amateur sporting event that, for some, reflects the epitome of human aspirations for peace and international goodwill. Elite cities of New York, Paris, and London have competed to host the 2012 Games, signalling that the Games are prized acquisitions (Shoval, 2002). The Olympic Games, however, might be unique among mega-events because they also represent a catalyst for positive social change in the host region and around the world, supplying additional symbols and images with which to attract capital. The Games’ five interlocking-ring symbol, for example, connotes universality, brother/sisterhood, peace, and friendly competition (VanWynsbergh & Ritchie, 1994), and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has added both culture and environment, while considering sustainability, as key pillars of the Games (Holden, MacKenzie, & VanWynsbergh, 2008). It should be mentioned that these meanings can backfire, as perceived inequities among the host region’s community members (e.g. gentrification and displacement) can counter and even resist the growth agenda (Owen, 2001).

This article is theoretically grounded in the understanding that mega-events, such as the Olympic Games, are a powerful opportunity for government funding, corporate investment, and international attention. The local growth regime and its opposition extract their own meanings from the heavy symbolism of the Games in order to push for specific impacts in and benefits for the host region. What we demonstrate and elaborate on in this article is a process called social leveraging. That is, convinced that hosting the mega-event will generate international recognition (Burbank et al., 2001; Surborg et al., 2008) and unique opportunities for place promotion (Hall, 2006; Hiller, 2000), which in turn will entice corporate investment (Curi, Knijnik, & Mascar-enhas, 2011; Gold & Gold, 2008; Shoval, 2002), various levels of government are leveraging the city’s moment on the global stage to achieve their own public policy objectives. We argue that this process is called social leveraging, an existing term in the sport management and other literature, but one never before applied to levels of government.

**Methods**

The authors of the current study explore social leveraging by conducting a case study of the City of Vancouver’s *Greenest City* initiative, which is the post-Games branding of Vancouver as a sustainable city to local and international audiences. We chose to study this case as the result of conducting the pre-Games segment of the Olympic Games Impact (OGI) study, which two of the authors of this article helped to conduct. OGI is an IOC-mandated initiative designed to gather economic, environmental, and social impact data to evaluate the overall changes in the host region (e.g. venues, tourists, media, housing, protest, etc.) produced by the Games. In total, 126 prescribed indicators at multiple scales (e.g. municipal, regional, provincial, and national) are used to...
determine what changes, if any, may be attributed to the Games. OGI has a 12-year reporting period, starting 2 years before the awarding of the bid (2001 in Vancouver) and ending 3 years after the event (2013 in Vancouver) to conduct four reports. These reports (i.e. a baseline, pre-Games, Game-time, and post-Games) enable the comparison of individual indicators over time to determine changes and trends in the indicators.

While assembling indicator data for the pre-Games report, the researchers also sought to provide evidence of Games attribution by studying other potential factors. In doing so they documented the existence of 50 initiatives from different levels of government formulating a long-term, planned, and coordinated approach to connect broad-based social objectives to the 2010 Games. Indeed, some of these initiatives were important factors in changes in indicator data across the timeline examined, which was roughly 4–7 years. For example, two OGI indicators (So16: top-level sportsmen and women; So19: results at the Olympic/Paralympic Games and World Championships) were bundled, measuring national changes in the athletic performance of host athletes, ostensibly as a result of the then impending 2010 Games. In Turin in 2006, Canadian athletes won a record of 24 medals, which were seven medals more than at the Salt Lake City Games in 2002. Importantly, the Turin record was set 3 years after the selection of Vancouver as a host city and, more importantly, 2 years after the launching of a federal government initiative entitled Own the Podium. At the time of study (2009), Own the Podium was a 5-year, $110 million initiative designed to help Canadian athletes win the most medals at the 2010 Games. As it turns out, the 2010 Canadian team placed third in overall medal rankings and first in the gold medal rankings. The point is arguably that this increase in medals is in part a result of the Own the Podium initiative, which is a federal policy that can be labelled as social leveraging. For those questioning this increase in federal support for elite athletes, polls suggest that the general Canadian population supports these efforts. After the Olympic Games in 2004 and 2006, about 61% of Canadians were in favour of increasing funding to Canadian athletes. This percentage increased to 72% in 2008 and remained the same in 2010 (Jedwab, 2010).

The Greenest City initiative was one of the 50 policies, programmes, projects, curriculum, or laws/bylaws undertaken among the City of Vancouver, Metro Vancouver, Resort Municipality of Whistler, Government of British Columbia (BC), and Government of Canada that was for, the result of, or prompted by, the 2010 Games. In the post-Games period it is an exceptional initiative because the City of Vancouver has been aggressive in its continued effort to engage in and document what we are calling social leveraging. This post-Games pursuit means relevant data for extending Chalip (2006) and O’Brien and Chalip’s (2007a, 2007b) exploratory framework of social leveraging by considering how government officials might use sport mega-events to achieve policy objectives. Our research will also test the sequence and the parts of this framework as we seek to elaborate on leveraging. Qualitative data presented in the case study are official and public government documents and media sources retrieved online.

**Sustainability and the Olympic Games**

In the late 1980s, the United Nations General Assembly initiated discussions around sustainable development and defined it in the Brundtland Report as ‘development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of
future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). While working towards sustainability, one attempts to reconcile constituents’ needs of three broad types – economic, environmental, and social needs. These three types are not fully separate but interrelated and overlapping, visualized as a Venn diagram (McKenzie, 2004). Sustainable development is generally interpreted to be an admonition of the developed world, an effort to develop a global norm that seeks the active limiting of the daily and resource-depleting activities that compromise future human members of the planet.

The body of literature examining the relationships between sustainability and sport mega-events has been growing. However, most research focuses on the economic (e.g. Baade & Matheson, 2004; Kasimati, 2003; Lee & Taylor, 2005; Matheson & Baade, 2006; Preuss, 2004) and social impacts (e.g. Deccio & Baloglu, 2002; Hall & Hodges, 1996; Kim & Petrick, 2005; Lenskyj, 2002; Waitt, 2003), and to a lesser extent on environmental impacts (e.g. Collins, Jones, & Munday, 2009; Friedman, Powell, Hutwagner, Graham, & Teague, 2001; Lesjø, 2000; May, 1995). Most researchers agree that financial benefits as well as the anticipated social benefits are overestimated. Nonetheless, Collins et al. (2009) note that sport mega-event organizers now view environmental consciousness as essential.

The Olympic Games’ first link to the environment dates from 1964 when citizens of Tokyo voiced concerns about pollution and water quality (Holden et al., 2008). The Olympic Charter now refers to the environment as the IOC announced ‘to encourage and support a responsible concern for environmental issues, to promote sustainable development in sport and to require that the Olympic Games are held accordingly’ (IOC, 2007, p. 15), increasing its expectations for sustainable planning and hosting of the Games. Increasingly, Olympic bid committees are framing their bids according to sustainability (Chalkley & Essex, 1999; Essex & Chalkley, 2004; Pentifallo & VanWynsberghe, 2011). Sustainability is a practical consideration for programme planners, policy makers, and political leaders, who need to both work towards sustainability and be perceived by the public as doing so. As Frey, Iraldo, and Melis (2008) note, it refers to ‘a path of socio-economic development that would be financially balanced, socially equitable, ethically responsible and adequately integrated in the long-term ecological balance of the natural environment’ (p. 4). Practitioners implement on-the-ground legislative, regulatory, structural, and educational manoeuvres to meet the perceived economic, environmental, and social needs. The improvement of socio-economic conditions in host cities is a key objective of Agenda 21, the IOC’s action plan for sustainable development. As a result, sport mega-event organizers typically gather community support and foster engagement by arguing that the event will benefit social inclusion (Burbank et al., 2001) and accommodate other social and economic issues. The shift to sustainability has also provided the logic for levels of government to increasingly comprise bid committees and add ambitious social objectives to help frame the bid in winning terms. The consequence of government involvement is the desire to leverage the Games to achieve public policy objectives.

The City of Vancouver began to guide policy through a sustainability lens in 2002 with the establishment of its Sustainability Principles – 10 encompassing value statements and goals for equity, renewable resource use, collaboration, diversity, leadership, and fossil fuel reduction (City of Vancouver, 2002). Furthermore, the Olympic Strategic Plan stated that ‘the City must educate the public clearly as to what the City is committed to and capable of delivering as one of many organizations responsible for planning and staging the Games, and for implementing various inclusivity, accessibility
and sustainability commitments’ (City of Vancouver, 2006, p. 24). Although City officials failed in encouraging the IOC to add sustainability as an Olympic pillar (City of Vancouver, 2006), the 2010 Games did contain a number of references to sustainability. The vision of the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (VANOC) was ‘a stronger Canada whose spirit is raised by its passion for sport, culture and sustainability’ (Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, 2010, p. 2). In addition, one of VANOC’s five values was sustainability. VANOC also embarked on specific sustainability initiatives, such as the Inner-City Inclusive Commitment Statement, annual Sustainability Reports, and the OGI study.

By implementing the Greenest City initiative, the City of Vancouver attempted to leverage the 2010 Sustainability Games (Holden et al., 2008) for its sustainability brand, using the sport mega-event as an opportunity to push forward the kinds of actions they believe are needed along economic, environmental, and social lines. The Greenest City initiative can be visualized by the intersection between the economic, environmental, and social areas in the sustainability Venn, which is clarified by Mayor Robertson in his speech launching the initiative to the Vancouver Economic Development Council:

Green is about far more than the environment. Green is social sustainability and the local economy as well. It’s the many Vancouver enterprises from the small café to the auto repair shop to the insurance agency, the real estate sales firm, the dentist office. (Robertson, 2009, p. 10)

Being the greenest city does not only reflect Vancouver’s environmental aspirations, but also its economic and social targets. Social sustainability as defined by the City ‘reflects three primary outcomes: residents’ basic needs – including housing, health care, food, jobs, income, and safety – are met; residents develop their personal capacity and fully participate in, contribute to, and benefit from all aspects of community; and communities have the capacity to foster and support social inclusion on all dimensions and the positive development of all residents’ (Cooper, 2006, p. iii).

From event impact to event leveraging
It is important to elaborate on the difference between event impact and event leveraging. Impact studies are descriptive in nature as they focus on evaluating an event based on its outcomes. Chalip (2006) argues that ‘although this provides useful post hoc information about an event’s outcomes, it does not tell us much about why those outcomes occurred’ (p. 112). Leveraging studies, therefore, are analytic in nature and part of organizational learning as they focus on identifying strategies and tactics that can be implemented prior and during an event in order to generate particular outcomes (Chalip, 2006). From an event leverage perspective, host cities need to implement strategies and tactics ex ante based on their assets to leverage the Olympic Games in order to generate community benefits and legacies.

The term leveraging is derived from business literature, in which it refers to the long-term process through which corporations seek the highest return on their marketing investments. In order to be successful and stay ahead of competitors, corporations learn to strategically maximize their marketing expenditures by targeting customers contributing to long-term growth, by timing the investment in the growth stage of the product life cycle, and by adding what Slywotzky and Shapiro (1993) call an
unmatchable advertising message. These practices for maximizing marketing expenditures are incorporated within a corporation’s business model and the important strategic process they form is leveraging. Leveraging involves identifying existing assets and addressing the ways in which these assets can be enhanced to create value and to benefit the business (Boulton, Libert, & Samek, 2000).

Hosting sport mega-events requires substantial financial resources. Similar to other businesses, host cities increasingly seek to maximize the economic benefits of their investments. As a result, event organizers encourage governments and other actors to invest in part because of the strategic leveraging possibilities that the event offers. Introducing the concept of event leveraging to the field of mega-event studies, Chalip (2004) defines it as the strategic activities created around the event to maximize immediate and long-term benefits resulting from the event. Leveraging and event leveraging strategies are similar, but the latter is not limited to the practices of maximizing marketing expenditures described above. For instance, immediate benefits such as the optimization of trade and revenue can be created by enhancing business relationships (Chalip, 2004). O’Brien (2006) documents how the Australian government launched a new programme labelled Business Club Australia (BCA), an initiative which facilitated the development of networks and relationships among visiting international business leaders and their Australian counterparts during the 2000 Olympic Games. One month after the Games, the initiative had already generated $260 million in investments (O’Brien, 2006). Until today, BCA is the government’s official networking programme around major international sporting events across the world. More than $1.7 billion in international business outcomes were facilitated in the first 7 years of the programme (Australian Trade Commission, 2011).

Furthermore, long-term benefits such as the enhancement of the host community’s image can be created by strategically showcasing the host city in event advertising and reporting (Chalip, 2004). The Olympic brand gives cities the possibility to improve their image and status (Heying, Burbank, & Andranovich, 2007). During the 2000 Olympic Games, for instance, manufactured images of Sydney and Australia employed for place promotion in the event media involved themes of multiculturalism and a high quality environment (Waitt, 1999). With regard to the 2010 Olympic Games, the government of BC launched the media campaign You Gotta Be Here. This initiative offers a more local example of enhancing the host’s image via media. The survey company Competitive Edge ran a study following the 2010 Games reporting that Americans had a markedly better impression of the city after the Games than before. They attributed a large part of this success to the campaign, which featured BC celebrities popular in the United States in scenic locations in the province (Macpherson, 2010).

Social leveraging

Chalip’s (2004) notion of event leveraging for economic benefits has been extended by Chalip (2006) and O’Brien and Chalip (2007a, 2007b) to include event leveraging for social benefits through the strategic alignment of the sport mega-event with a specific social issue in the host community. The birth of the concept of social leveraging along with the growth of knowledge and scope of sustainable sport mega-events has led to researchers using the term social sustainability as a desired outcome of social leveraging efforts (O’Brien & Chalip, 2007b; Smith 2009). O’Brien and Chalip (2007b), for example, argue that event leveraging and sustainability should intertwine: ‘the
purpose of event leveraging’, they assert, ‘is to be proactive in planning for the creation of specific event benefits for the host community, and taking strategic measures to make those events sustainable’ (p. 320). O’Brien (2006) reinforces this idea in stating that ‘mega events and the opportunities they present are merely the seed capital; what hosts do with that capital is the key to realizing sustainable longer-term legacies’ (p. 258). We would add that social leveraging or strategic planning for social sustainability outcomes can come through levels of government’s use of public policy. In this way the audiences of leveraging efforts are expanded to include not only potential investors and tourists, but also host citizens who receive sophisticated messages concerning mega-event related positive outcomes that are attributed to host governments. Seeking such outcomes also entails the wise use of taxpayers’ funds because it provides something for those who balk at the almost exclusive post-event use of sporting venues and other physical infrastructure as post-Games legacies (Furrer, 2002; Kissoudi, 2008; Whitford, 2009). As such, social leveraging may strengthen the existing political system. Newman (2007), for one, argues ‘that bidding for and winning the 2012 Games has helped define the new system of London government and that through such moments different representations of city politics are (if only temporarily) clarified’ (p. 256), with the Olympics enhancing mayoral power.

An exploratory framework for social leveraging is published by O’Brien and Chalip (2007a, 2007b) (Figure 1). Social leveraging asserts that there are powerful resources present in the host community before the sport mega-event, for which novel strategies can be designed to make use of (leverage) these resources to achieve social objectives (Chalip, 2006; O’Brien & Chalip, 2007a, 2007b). The theoretical framework begins with the leverageable resources that are part of the hosts’ existing urban development, history, and reputation (step 1), which can be uniquely reconfigured to align with the opportunities present in hosting a sport mega-event (step 2). From this, the sport mega-event provides opportunities for government policy makers and other officials to achieve key strategic policy objectives (step 3). The final step or the means to achieve the objective (step 4) is particular to the host and its targeted social issue(s).

To choose a different example from the Greenest City, the Government of BC introduced Daily Physical Activity (DPA) in every public elementary and high school in the province. The DPA policy was implemented by ActNow BC, a new organization tasked with developing resources and protocols for DPA as part of realizing a provincial vision of being the healthiest jurisdiction to ever host an Olympic Games.

The social leveraging framework is preliminary and as O’Brien (2007) explains, ‘strategically leveraging sport events to shift a host community’s social change agenda remains empirically unexplored’ (p. 162). However, it is encouraging to find out that it has been applied elsewhere (O’Brien & Chalip, 2007b), including a non-

Figure 1. Social leveraging framework (adapted from O’Brien & Chalip, 2007a, 2007b).
Western context (Tian & Johnston, 2008). The following case study describes the Greenest City initiative in terms of the social leveraging framework.

**Case study: social leveraging of the 2010 Games**

**Step 1: leverageable resource in the host community**

The social leveraging framework illuminates how pre-existing resources in the host community may lead to desiring certain social objectives and consequently drive public policy development. In terms of pre-existing resources, Vancouver has a reputation of being a sustainable city, providing the source of an attractive international image and a home-grown framework for city policy (Holden et al., 2008). Part of the backdrop for this reputation is the physical geography of the city. It has a remarkable natural landscape, nestled among a mountain range, an ocean, and remnants of old growth forests. Not surprisingly, it is the home of organizations such as Greenpeace and the David Suzuki Foundation. Its location provides the appearance of a large urban population having delicately and appealingly placed itself. Indeed, it is the placement of numerous condominiums in the downtown core that is most important to what planners call Vancouverism. As a model for urban planning, Vancouverism calls for interspersing numerous tall, skinny condominiums in the downtown core with plenty of amenities and green spaces. It is a model whose birth is connected to hosting the World Exposition in 1986, which showcased Vancouver and created marketing opportunities for selling downtown real-estate to offshore developers—land that provincial authorities had accumulated and re-zoned for real-estate purposes (Mitchell, 2004). The resulting development produced hundreds of condominiums whose inhabitation increased the core population significantly and transformed the city. Tens of thousands now work and live in the core. As a result, Vancouver has been consistently considered to be one of the world’s most livable cities. In 2011, the city ranked fifth on the global quality of living ranking, a reputable survey of living conditions measured with criteria such as safety, education, hygiene, health care, culture, environment, recreation, political–economic stability, and public transportation. Vienna had the highest quality of living, followed by Zurich, Auckland, and Munich. Furthermore, Vancouver ranked first in the Americas (Mercer, 2011).

Internally, there are numerous policies that strengthen this reputation and improve livability. For instance, in 2007, during the Games planning period, the City coined the term EcoDensity, a policy to promote zoning, which allowed, among others, homeowners and developers to build laneway housing. The City advertised EcoDensity as a way of making Vancouver more sustainable, affordable, and livable 'by demonstrating how well-designed and strategic density can be a catalyst for the development of complete communities, improved transportation choices, greater housing affordability, economic vitality, and energy efficiency' (City of Vancouver, n.d., p. 3). The City’s sustainable urban policies have been exported elsewhere, leading to international leadership status (Berelowitz, 2005; McCann, 2008).

In addition to Vancouver’s international reputation and internal policies on sustainability, other leverageable resources include physical infrastructure and much of this infrastructure is recent and built in connection with the 2010 Games. Opportunities for building and upgrading infrastructure related to hosting an Olympic Games help to improve the quality of life for local residents (Karadakis, Kaplanidou, & Karlis,
Southeast False Creek (SEFC) was the site of the Olympic Village during the 2010 Games. Each building is designed according to a minimum LEED™ Silver certification. In addition, the community is a leading model of sustainability in North America, based on its green environmental features and its social and economic principles as people will live, work, play, and learn within walking distance from their home. By 2020, SEFC will be home to 12,000–16,000 people (City of Vancouver, 2011). Bricks and mortar may be important because they are palpable benefits of sustainability that may encourage Vancouverites to attempt riskier efforts, such as those addressing social sustainability issues. Relatedly, the 2010 Games may have produced citizen capacity that may also be considered part of the leveragable resources (VanWynsberghe, Kwan, & van Luijk, 2011). For example, Games planning introduced many challenging social issues (e.g. small business development and adequate social housing) that citizens learned about and engaged with. One overarching issue was change itself. Games preparation and staging meant Vancouverites gained resilience in relation to change and this may prove to be a valuable skill in the future.

Despite its international reputation as a sustainable city, internal policies on sustainability, and physical sustainable infrastructure, Vancouver is not sustainable (City of Vancouver, 2009a). However, by implementing the Greenest City initiative, the City of Vancouver attempts to leverage its aforementioned resources to hopefully become the greenest city in the world – to become more livable and sustainable.

**Step 2: opportunity for social leverage**

Being the host of an Olympic Games comes with many opportunities for place promotion. Vancouver decided to promote the hosting of the 2010 Games alongside its efforts to become the greenest city in the world. Thus, the Olympic competition resembled the greenest city competition, better known as the Green Capital Global Challenge. Similar to inter-city competitions to host the Olympic Games, this challenge has a global roster of competitors aspiring to win the title of the world’s green capital (e.g. Chicago, San Francisco, Toronto, Copenhagen, London, etc.). Ostensibly, the challenge was established by industrialist and philanthropist Richard Branson of the Carbon War Room, an organization devoted to understanding and preparing for a world without oil (Carbon War Room, 2012). The Green Capital Global Challenge replicates the European Green Capital, a competition which was officially launched on 22 May 2008 and encouraged European cities to compete for the status of greenest European city. Stockholm was chosen the first winner of the competition for 2010 and Hamburg was the title winner for 2011. More recently, Vitoria-Gasteiz and Nantes were the winners of 2012 and 2013 respectively (European Commission, 2012). Critically, the 2-year Green Capital Global Challenge deliberately mirrors the Olympic cycle: (1) it was launched in the Olympic host city of Vancouver on 17 February 2010 (5 days after the start of the 2010 Games), and (2) a gold medal will be announced to the winning city at the London 2012 Olympic Games. Furthermore, Mayor Robertson reinforced that Vancouver’s greenest city efforts are tied to the 2010 Games. An excerpt of the press release reads as follows:

The Olympics are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and we need to do everything we can to help our local economy capitalize on it. That means being aggressive in terms of how we market ourselves to the world. The ‘Vancouver Green Capital’ branding strategy allows us to define Vancouver on our terms. (City of Vancouver, 2009b, p. 1)
It establishes the imperative of leveraging the Olympics around a Green Capital business brand wherein the individual social entrepreneur gains cache in the new sustainable and green urban regime.

Vancouver’s status as the host of the 2010 Games also gives it an opportunity to capitalize on the metaphor of competition to promote its participation in the Green Capital Global Challenge. This can be seen in the language of *Vancouver 2020: A bright green future* (hereafter referred to as *Vancouver 2020*) which uses the metaphor of victory to sell the proposed green actions to constituents (such as charging for water use). This report outlines 10 long-term goals and a set of measurable and attainable targets, described as ‘a pathway to victory’ (Greenest City Action Team, 2009, p. 6) – a pathway to achieving the status of the greenest city on earth by 2020. The metaphor of the pathway to victory is echoed in descriptions of the plan as ‘once again, a path to prosperity. It is a roadmap to health and long life, for Vancouver’s residents today and for all the world’s children tomorrow’ (Greenest City Action Team, 2009, p. 6). The City, that is, has leveraged the image of international Games competition that was filling public attention to suggest that international competition for sustainability provides a single path to green, prosperity, and health and long life.

In addition to promoting its participation in the Green Capital Global Challenge, hosting the 2010 Games also provided the City with the opportunity of promoting an understanding of sustainability including social issues and having a socioeconomic rationale, in addition to its environmental segment. Contentious social issues are targeted and included in what is a decidedly Florida-esque inspired image of the gravitational pull of Vancouver:

> Our reputation as one of the best places on earth to live, work and play is attracting leaders and thinkers who want to invest and work in a city that offers a promising and green future. The continued growth of Vancouver as a Green Capital also requires that social issues like *homelessness and housing* [italics added] continue to be handled with the same level of compassion that has made us a leader in social sustainability and accessible services. (City of Vancouver, 2009c, p. 1)

Robertson asserts an international reputation for social sustainability. He also offers a strong socioeconomic rationale for overcoming seemingly intractable social problems. Not only will future Vancouver be a better world for our proverbial children and grandchildren, but Robertson promises that Vancouver’s green reputation will attract desirable leaders and thinkers, asserting that taking care of social issues comes with economic benefits. This last point is reinforced in the *Vancouver 2020* document, which again makes the point that Vancouver’s green practices will attract the right kind of people to further the city’s prosperity (and be more cost-effective):

> Why green? Because in the highly competitive, highly mobile modern world, the elements that make a community healthy also make it wealthy. Functionally, a compact, efficient city with a well-organized transportation system and a light environmental footprint is cheaper to run and easier to maintain. The bright, creative people who are the key to conceiving and expanding a globally competitive economy also gravitate to the most desirable – most livable – cities. (Greenest City Action Team, 2009, p. 6)

The image of sustainability as both including social issues and having a strong economic rationale is useful to the City in garnering a range of benefits: economic investment, citizen goodwill, and a greater buy-in of the idea that sustainability comes from individual and collective transformation. What validity exists for proposing this
transformation? For one thing, it is claimed that Vancouverites are already leaders in social sustainability. More provocatively, and as Harvey (2008), for one, has explained, individuals in the mega-event host region are actually able to exert enough control in the process to have it reflect their ideal lifestyle. The leveraging dynamic creates a unique role for citizens in determining its economic and social successes.

**Step 3: strategic objective**

Throughout all the public documents, the City of Vancouver clearly articulates its strategic objective: becoming a cleaner, greener, healthier, and wealthier Vancouver (City of Vancouver, 2009a). The Vancouver 2020 report states that the specific goal is to win the Green Capital Global Challenge and become the world’s greenest city by 2020 (Greenest City Action Team, 2009), assisting the City in the development of a post-Games sustainability brand. Two reasons for its focus on sustainability are discussed: (1) it is our responsibility to future generations, and (2) if we can transition to a truly sustainable economy, Vancouver will be the home of the social, economic, and environmental leaders of the world. In the end, it is the synergy between the three areas of the sustainability Venn that is important. The focus on sustainability will lead to change: Vancouver will be cleaner, greener, and healthier and in the end also wealthier. For instance, green jobs requiring energy efficient building retrofits, will save energy and money. Furthermore, initiatives that reduce pollution, also improve the environment and positively impact health and wellness (e.g. creating a public bike sharing programme and implementing city-wide composting). Economic, social, and environmental sustainability are interrelated. Green – as in the greenest city – is not only the colour of the environment but also the colour of money and job creation (City of Vancouver, 2009a).

**Step 4: means to achieve objective**

In February 2009, 1 year before the 2010 Games, the City of Vancouver announced its ambition to become the world’s greenest city by 2020. Officially labelled the Greenest City, this initiative began with the announcement of a Greenest City Action Team (GCAT) who are ‘14 experts on environment and economy, with a mission to gather best ideas and practices and make recommendations to City Council’ (City of Vancouver, 2009a, p. 1). The Greenest City promised to implement actions recommended by GCAT and generally embraced an attitude of openness to and enthusiasm towards future social, structural, and institutional changes. As the team’s first report tells Vancouver citizens,

> Because their involvement is crucial, Vancouverites will need to engage to a degree never before seen. After all, it will be our actions that make the difference. We will be the ones riding our bikes, taking the bus, doing energy efficiency retrofits to our homes, and buying fresh local foods. (City of Vancouver, 2009a, p. 4)

The GCAT fulfilled its mission to gather ideas and make recommendations by publishing the Greenest City Quick Start Recommendations (hereafter referred to as Recommendations) on 27 April 2009. The document recommended 44 potential actions to assist the City in becoming more sustainable and promised a 10-year plan, which would outline more extensively what citizens would need to do for Vancouver to become the world’s greenest city. It has an important local component as it informed...
Vancouverites of impending investments that would require them to change practices, such as dedicated lanes for bike commuting. By 22 September 2009, just 9 months after the inception of the Greenest City policy, two-thirds of the 44 actions outlined in the Recommendations were already underway, with more to follow. A few months later, the following completed actions were announced in a strategically chosen news release on 21 April 2010 – Earth Day. Among other, the City highlighted: the implementation of a curb side compost programme, the improvement of cyclist and pedestrian safety with separated bike lanes on the Burrard Bridge and Dunsmuir Viaduct, the setting of the greenest building code in North America by requiring all new buildings to be LEED™ Gold, and the requirement of 20% of parking stalls in new multi-unit residential buildings to have electric vehicle charging capacity (City of Vancouver, 2010b). These actions heavily emphasize local physical infrastructure like bike lanes and parking spots.

The Greenest City also contains an important outward-facing international component. Following the publishing of the Recommendations, came the release of the Green Capital brand for Vancouver. Launched by Mayor Robertson on 30 September 2009, at a speech to the Vancouver Board of Trade, the brand emphasized Vancouver’s status as a highly livable, green location in order to attract entrepreneurs and head offices. This green credibility was to give Vancouver an edge in international circles.

A month later, the City’s 10-year plan for Vancouver to become the world’s greenest city (the kind of city that the Green Capital brand was promising the world) was released: Vancouver 2020. This plan was promised to Vancouverites in the Recommendations and was announced at the Resilient Cities Gaining Ground conference on 20 October 2009. Finally, prior to and following the Games, the City engaged in the ongoing promotion of its green ambitions through a series of websites and social media, including a Facebook page and news releases.

Several key elements of the Greenest City initiative link explicitly and implicitly to the Games, showing that the initiative is not a mere coincidence in its timing around the Games but rather an effort to capitalize on the Olympic moment. For instance, the first page of the Recommendations describes that the document is ‘setting out a host of actions, all of which can be initiated and most of which can be completed in time for Vancouver’s Olympic moment in February 2010’ (City of Vancouver, 2009a, p. 1).

The desire and competition for global city status are also apparent in the pre-Games Recommendations. The Recommendations draw upon the Olympic momentum to assert that the scale and stakes of the sustainability game ought to excite the same fervour and commitment as the Games themselves. The document introduces its 44 recommendations with a comparison between gold medal Olympic decathlon athletes and the greenest city.

In the Olympic decathlon, competitors earn scores in 10 different events, from sprints and hurdles to javelin and high jump. To win gold, athletes must excel in a range of events, while ensuring that they do not have an Achilles heel in any of the sports involved.

The greenest city needs to have: a small carbon footprint; clean air; clean water; an abundance of parks and greenspaces; locally produced food; an absence of toxic hotspots; a transport system dominated by walking, cycling, and transit; and compact, mixed-use neighbourhoods. (City of Vancouver, 2009a, p. 4)

Vancouver, in participating in the sustainability decathlon, is clearly an elite player – a city operating at a high level of excellence. As such, this comparison suggests that the
Greenest City deserves to be supported through citizen support for policies and adoption of new behaviours.

Furthermore, the Vancouver House was built for the Games to showcase the City of Vancouver’s cadre of sustainability experts. This is continued to be used to promote Vancouver’s international sustainability image. In writing about the City of Vancouver’s presence at the World Exposition in Shanghai in the summer of 2010:

Visitors to the City of Vancouver component of the pavilion will learn about the city’s ambitious green agenda through the history of the Southeast False Creek neighbourhood in Vancouver, the transformative experience of the 1986 Expo in Vancouver through to the Olympic Village, which was recently certified as a LEED™ Platinum neighbourhood development, making it the greenest neighbourhood in the world. (City of Vancouver, 2010a, p. 1)

The press release goes on to describe Vancouver as one of the world’s most livable cities and a world-class city, further cementing the suggestion that focusing on a balance between economic, social, and environmental sustainability is its forte.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to advance research into the emerging phenomena of social leveraging through a case study of the City of Vancouver’s use of the 2010 Games as a catalyst for the Greenest City. The Greenest City is a municipal policy that simultaneously seeks to enhance local sustainability and enable the City of Vancouver to develop its sustainability brand to attract international audiences. Using Chalip (2006) and O’Brien and Chalip’s (2007a, 2007b) framework for social leveraging, it is argued that social leveraging or event leveraging for social benefits can be applied to levels of government. This framework provides an organizing device to examine the City of Vancouver post-Olympic place branding efforts entitled the Greenest City.

So is Vancouver the greenest city in the world? No – not yet – but it is inching steps closer to achieving its goal. At the 2011 Aspen Ideas Festival, Vancouver was named the second greenest city in North America, being the runner up to San Francisco (Siemens, 2010; Walsh, 2011). On 9 February 2011, Corporate Knights publicized its sustainable cities rankings and Vancouver tied Victoria for first place among all cities in Canada, having successfully planned and implemented projects in all five judged categories of sustainability: ecological integrity, economic security, governance and empowerment, infrastructure and built environment, and social well-being (Elston, 2011). Parallel to Vancouver’s focus on sustainability, other Canadian cities are becoming involved and all major cities and universities for that matter have (some in rhetoric) signed the sustainability pledge (Makwana, 2011). Lastly, Vancouver was named the most livable city in the world in 2011 (The Economist, 2011), securing international recognition of its sustainability brand.

However, it remains difficult to assess Vancouver’s process of leveraging the 2010 Games to build its sustainability brand. Researchers agree that events branding is a practical technique used by urban planners (Kavaratzis, 2004; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Anholt (2006) described how cities can build their brand based on hosting an Olympic Games, which is the case for Sydney, Australia, and how slowly this brand association decays. Furthermore, it has been suggested that corporate branding can be applied to cities (Balmer & Gray, 2003) by branding the whole organization to more universal values such as ‘social responsibility, environmental care, sustainability,
progressiveness, innovation, trust, quality, etc.’ (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005, p. 512).

It remains to be seen how the City of Vancouver will employ its sustainability brand in its future actions, policies, projects, and so forth.

The social leveraging framework suggests that determining whether leverageable resources exist is the first step and determining the means to leverage them is the last. It is evident from the case study analysis that the City of Vancouver appears to build on its international reputation of being green that was based on pre-Games internal policies and physical infrastructure. This reputation was determined by City officials to have been solidified by the hosting of the Games (see step 2) and a decision was made to further these leverageable resources to achieve the status of world’s greenest city.

The opportunity for leveraging is the second step of the framework and elaborates on the fact that City officials are actively seeking to augment an international endorsement of Olympic Games host. The press releases and other official documents consistently return to this experience and this is one of the reasons for the Green Capital Global Challenge winner to be awarded in London during the 2012 Games. One can imagine this event will help to remind Olympic fans of Vancouver’s reputation as host and as an international force in the sustainability sector. We will have to see if Vancouver is successful in the actual Green Capital Global Challenge, but authoring the event you want to win should provide some advantage for Vancouver.

The Greenest City includes an economic, environmental, and social approach to sustainability, which is evident in the third step of the framework: the strategic objective. The objective is to build a greener, cleaner, healthier, and wealthier Vancouver. Social sustainability is important because it is feasible in the context of Vancouver. However daunting the prospect is of employing the expertise that is said to exist in the City to address social issues like homelessness, it is way more feasible than, for example, aspiring to be fossil fuel free or affordable in 10 years. Moreover, in the wake of the 2010 Games and the prominence of social issues like homelessness and civil liberties, it is actually conceivable for the City to implement socially sustainable municipal policies that really take Vancouver to the international forefront of social sustainability, while being lauded at home. Our guess is that, should this choice be made, then the Greenest City may be replaced with a title that is less environmental and more progressive socially. The target date of 2020 for achieving the status of world’s greenest city is salient here because it provides some nice connotations regarding the kind of forward thinking that can be easily tied to the creation of an Olympic legacy.

The social leveraging framework reminds us that perhaps the City of Vancouver must figure out how to mine or build leverageable resources for achieving social sustainability. An example would be generating evaluation criteria for the Greenest City initiative that predispose actions over time to meet the challenges of residents’ basic needs, community capacity, and social inclusion. Speaking of planning-based criteria, it is hard to reconcile some of the completed actions by the City with an evaluation process, as it is more likely that these were the kinds of early successes that would suggest to Vancouverites that the initiative is a timely response to citizens and businesses that wish to make more sustainable choices. The problem is that they do not offer an image of sustainability as something to be achieved via individual and collective transformation and this is a critical piece of operationalizing a sustainability brand. The City has to invest in new projects that support citizens and businesses who have been motivated to change their behaviour to drive electric cars, cycle to work, build green buildings, and so on. Whether the City’s social leveraging attempts will be ultimately successful, is predicated on changing public behaviour.
In sum, the *Greenest City* attempts to socially leverage policy development as a legacy of the 2010 Games because the 2010 Games drew heavily upon the increasingly popular and successful idea of sustainability. The *Greenest City* policy directs citizens’ post-Olympic momentum to individual actions that enhance the collective well-being and prosperity of the City. Leveraging the Games to develop the *Greenest City* business brand enables the City to make changes that enhance its ability to compete internationally in the growing market of economic, environmental, and social sustainability.

**Notes**

1. The pre-Games report is available at the OGI website (www.ogi-ubc.ca).
2. Laneway houses are detached dwellings located in the typical garage area of a single-family lot, facing the laneway and maintaining backyard open space.
3. Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) is an internationally recognized, third-party certification system for the design, operation, and construction of green buildings. The program includes four levels of certification, ranging from Certified and Silver to Gold and Platinum.
4. In a recent magazine interview Mayor Robertson cited a 47% drop in the street homelessness population in the last 2 years and expressed his believe that the City could end street homelessness by 2015 (Barrett, 2010).
5. Following work on adding these bike lanes, the City announced in May 2010 that it had approved $25 million for bike paths, as reported in the Vancouver Sun ‘as part of the city’s ambitious goal to become the world’s greenest city by 2020’ (Sinoski, 2010).

**References**


