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Reducing Mega-Event Syndrome: A Case Study of Expo 2020

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Abstract

The study was designed to explore how Expo 2020, as one of the first mega-events to be hosted in the Middle East, was undertaking steps to avoid many of the negatives of such events, termed mega-event syndrome (MES). A qualitative approach was adopted, where 5 elite face-to-face interviews were conducted with senior officials within Expo 2020 who could offer detailed insights into the planning of the event. Participants were purposefully selected based on their knowledge and experience within Expo 2020. Participants felt that Expo 2020 was not exposed to many of the symptoms of MES largely because of Dubai's pre-existing tourism reputation, the strategic plan of using the Expo as a catalyst for further tourism and infrastructure development, and the highly involved nature of local government. This is one of the first studies to investigate mega-events hosted within the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) and one of the few to consider the steps being taken by the organizing team pre-event. This offers new and valuable insights to future event organizers as they plan mega-events to help them avoid some of the many negatives associated with mega-events.

Keywords: mega-event syndrome, Expo 2020 Dubai, mega-events, Middle East, Dubai events

Introduction

Growth in the number and scale of events has piqued the interest of potential host destinations. Particularly in the Middle East, destinations like Qatar and Dubai have looked to events to increase revenues, develop a strong market presence, and catalyze the development of new infrastructure (Al Hallaq et al., 2020; Duignan et al., 2023; Meza Talavera et al., 2019). While there is a lack of consistency in definitions of mega-events, all researchers describe high-stakes events that overtake destination resources and leave lasting impacts (Jago & Shaw, 1998; Malfas et al., 2004; Roche, 1994). Of the few things that all research agrees on are cost and publicity as vital factors to define mega-events (Bowdin et al., 2006; Müller, 2015b; Ritchie & Yangzhou, 1987).

Mega-events, while being typically one-time, relatively short-duration occurrences, can significantly impact host destinations (Müller, 2015a) in both positive and negative manners, depending on a variety of factors (Clark et al., 2016; Malfas et al., 2004; Müller et al., 2021). Benefits included growth in revenue, national engagement, media visibility, hospitality development, and prospective tourists' perceptions (Clark et al., 2016; Malfas et al., 2004; Nikolaeva et al., 2017; Yates, 2010). Securing the bid to host an event often leads to rapid infrastructure development, equivalent to up to a decade's

worth of progress (Müller, 2015a) and can introduce the destination to new audiences at higher rates than may otherwise be possible (Vij et al., 2019), as seen with hosts of the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cups, and World Expos (Evans, 2019; Müller, 2015a; Weaver et al., 2021).

Events can provide catalysts for destination growth, especially considering their influence on future destination attractiveness (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). Given the reputational gains and visibility of these benefits, destinations' enthusiasm to bid for mega-events is understandable. However, most new hosts do not have the experience to reduce the occurrence of negative impacts. These impacts are also observed to last longer than the positive (Müller, 2015a). Such negatives can include the costs associated with exceeding budgets (Müller, 2015a, 2015b), the reallocation of resources for the event away from public needs (Müller, 2015a), and the development of white elephants single-purpose infrastructure (Clark et al., 2016; Nikolaeva et al., 2017; Vij et al., 2019), which can impact residents' perceptions of the event (Weaver et al., 2021).

These elements have been associated with mega-event syndrome (MES; Müller, 2015a), a condition of symptoms that catalyze negative impacts typically attributed to mega-events. The lack of communication between veteran and new mega-event hosts further deepens the gap between expectations and realities. While the impacts of mega-events on destinations have been studied, these often focus on events returning to a destination, limiting their applicability to non-recurring events (Vij et al., 2019) and are frequently conducted as a post-event review rather than identifying pre-event indicators (see Sadd & Nguyen, 2023). Addressing foot-loose events during the event planning stage is a notable knowledge gap that needs to be addressed.

With renowned mega-events, such as the FIFA World Cup and the World Expo, being hosted in the Gulf for the first time, the Middle East and North Africa Region, and the Gulf in particular, are becoming more established hosts of mega-events (Bridge, 2019). Given their unfamiliarity with hosting mega-events, there is a discernible lack of experience in the region, leaving these destinations vulnerable to MES. As a result, there is a risk that the negative effects of mega-events could surpass the benefits. (Bowdin et al., 2006; Malfas et al., 2004; Müller, 2015a, 2015b). The purpose of this study is to identify indicators of MES in a pre-event setting to address the symptoms and minimize its negative impacts on host destinations through the research question:

- What can planners do in preparation for hosting mega-events to mitigate the occurrence of MES?

Literature Review

The Events Industry

Mega-events have only been recognized as a distinct segment of the industry in the past fifty years (Evans, 2019) and have quickly evolved into a highly competitive cultural phenomenon (Nikolaeva et al., 2017). Early definitions introduce mega-events as one-time or recurring incidents, often extended over a limited period, with several long-term impacts, including increased awareness, appeal, and profitability to the host (Ritchie & Yangzhou, 1987; Roche, 1994; Sun & Ye, 2010). Other researchers specified mega-events as those which operate on an international scale, are of high status, and attract revenue to the host (Jago & Shaw, 1998), with a particular focus on creating *legacies*, in the form of new infrastructure or policies (Deng et al., 2016; Jago & Shaw, 1998; Malfas et al., 2004; Sun & Ye, 2010).

Most recent definitions list key characteristics of mega-events, including the attraction of tourists, global media coverage, high costs, and lasting post-event environmental and social impacts (Müller, 2015b). All definitions describe a high-stakes event that overtakes the destination's resources and leaves behind lasting impacts (Bowdin et al., 2006; Jago & Shaw, 1998; Malfas et al., 2004; Müller, 2015b; Ritchie & Yangzhou, 1987; Roche, 1994; Vij et al., 2019).

The following definition will be used for the purpose of this study (Bowdin et al., 2006; Evans, 2019; Jago & Shaw, 1998; Malfas et al., 2004; Müller, 2015a; Ritchie & Yangzhou, 1987; Roche, 1994):

Mega-events are non-annual occasions held for a limited period at a host destination that incurs significant costs for event planning and execution, generating revenue from a large number of attendees, garnering significant mediated viewership, and departing lasting impacts or legacies.

This would include events like the Olympics, FIFA World Cup, and World Expos.

Impacts of Mega-Events

The effects of mega-events on host destinations vary, with long-term impacts largely influenced by the hosts' pre-existing economic conditions (Clark et al., 2016; Nikolaeva et al., 2017). On the positive side, mega-events offer a unique opportunity to enhance the host destination's visibility, drive urban development, and expand hospitality-related infrastructure and services (Wilson, 2018). This expansion may include training programs in areas such as customer service, languages, event management (Wilson, 2018), tourism, and urban development (Mills & Rosentraub, 2013; Yates, 2010). Additionally, through the association with the mega-event, societal shifts may occur, including greater tolerance for diversity (Inoue et al., 2023).

Host destinations often experience increased spending by both residents and tourists during the mega-event, as well as job growth in sectors such as hospitality, destination marketing, construction, and urban planning (Clark et al., 2016). Companies connected to the event may ramp up production and storage to meet heightened demand (Clark et al., 2016). All these factors can contribute to notable improvements in a destination's GDP.

During the event period, the host destination typically receives unprecedented global media attention (Nikolaeva et al., 2017), which can increase destinations' intangible value (Mair et al., 2023; Yates, 2010) and promote future tourism. DMOs can later leverage created content for additional marketing initiatives (Malfas et al., 2004), benefitting the host destination's economy for many years (Wilson, 2018). Moreover, legacy-building efforts, such as the development of new infrastructure, transportation systems, and policies, can catalyze much-needed urban regeneration, significantly improving the quality of life for residents (Clark et al., 2016; Deng et al., 2016; Hall & Hodges, 1996).

Some studies have suggested that the negative impacts associated with hosting mega-events can be longer-lasting than the positive (Müller, 2015b). Host destinations of the Olympics, for example, experience "eleven days of sport, [and] five years of dirt and disruption" (Clark et al., 2016, p. 92). Residents' perceptions of these negatives may not, however, last long after the event, the value and significance of the negative impacts notwithstanding (Sadd & Nguyen, 2023). During the build-up to the mega-event, urban and infrastructure developments can displace poorer or homeless populations (Clark et al., 2016; Hall & Hodges, 1996; Mills & Rosentraub, 2013; Wilson, 2018). Hall and Hodges

(1996) refer to this as the social *hangover* of mega-events, whereby residents' social priorities are generally ignored in favor of the mega-event.

Many destinations invest heavily in infrastructure which, once the mega-event has concluded, cease to have sufficient usage to justify their existence (Wilson, 2018), termed *white elephants* (Clark et al., 2016; Davis, 2020). These are unfortunate yet common outcomes of mega-events; avoiding poor post-event usage requires extensive planning to consider stakeholder perceptions prior to construction (Davis, 2020). To control for this outcome, many planners consider the legacy of the event (Preuss, 2019), which can include economic, infrastructural, health, political, or participation impacts (Byers et al., 2020). Adding to the complexity of analyzing event legacies, however, is the potential for legacies to become evident months or even years after the mega-event (Mckenzie et al., 2024), making it difficult to fairly assess and associate impacts to the mega-event. Additionally, in their desire for timely development, organizing entities often forgo policies that ensure public safety (Müller, 2017), such as building regulations and sustainability policies. Müller (2017) calls this the *compliance paradox*, where mega-events cannot operate without strict rules but are the most likely party to violate them.

Pre-event, many residents express concern for future traffic, property prices, and overcrowding (Al Hallaq et al., 2020; Mills & Rosentraub, 2013; Vij et al., 2019). In some cases, residents can be openly critical or skeptical of the *promises* made by mega-event organizers (Müller et al., 2023). During the execution phase, these concerns frequently become a reality (Clark et al., 2016; Vij et al., 2019), with increased traffic, gentrified regions with locals priced out of the real estate market (Clark et al., 2016; Mills & Rosentraub, 2013), life disruptions, and resource over-use or misallocation (Müller, 2017; Wilson, 2018). Resident perceptions of the destination are also likely to decrease during the execution stages (Nikolaeva et al., 2017; Vij et al., 2019).

Following the execution phase, a multitude of issues can plague the host. Immediately after, economic displacement is typically evident across the national economy (Clark et al., 2016). It is also possible that white elephants can create resentment amongst residents and stall further infrastructure projects needed by the community (Wilson, 2018). Likewise, As organizing and operating staff disassemble, their shared knowledge, skills, and expertise often get lost, resulting in intangible asset degradation.

While most of the above impacts have often been discussed when analyzing mega sporting events, they are possible with any type of mega-event. These have sometimes been referred to as MES (Müller, 2015a). In De Groote's (2005) study of world expos, many of the aforementioned impacts were identified including infrastructure development, foreign investment, GDP and job creation (Clark et al., 2016), exposure to the latest innovations (Yates, 2010), elite capture (Müller, 2015a), and the creation of white elephants (Wilson, 2018). Contrary to sporting-based literature questioning the long-term impact of skill development and training because of the mega-event (Wilson, 2018), De Groote suggests that some past expos' training programs have had long-term benefits, possibly due to the extended event period, with most expos operating over months rather than days or weeks. The following Table 1 summarizes the key identifiers of MES, according to Müller (2015a).

Table 1. Mega-Event Syndrome Symptoms

Symptom	Description
Overpromising Benefits	During planning, event benefits are over-promised, raising expectations of the event's positive impacts (Müller, 2015a).
Overspending	Costs related to the event are underestimated, due to inexperience, changes, resource misallocations (Clark et al., 2016; Matheson, 2006; Mills & Rosentraub, 2013; Müller, 2015a), or last-minute cost overruns when trying to complete the event on time.
Elite Capture	The <i>participation paradox</i> (Müller, 2017) where the event is marketed globally but often leave residents unable to attend due to targeted elite attendance (Müller, 2015a, 2015b; Nikolaeva et al., 2017).
Event Takeover	New event infrastructure takes over urban spaces, limiting access to the general public (Müller, 2015a). Economic displacement can drive visitor spending towards the event over other businesses (Clark et al., 2016).
Public Risk-Taking	In order to secure a successful event, governments may allocate public funds to the event, and risk of misallocation (Müller, 2015a).
Extensive Shortcut-Taking	Planning authorities may look for shortcuts pre-event, such as bypassing sustainability policies or community opinions (Müller, 2015a).
Rule Bending or Breaking	In attempting to ensure success, certain regulations may be bypassed, modified, or changed solely for the event purpose (Malfas et al., 2004; Müller, 2015a).

Source. Müller, 2015a

Finding a Solution

While there has been much research into the impacts of mega-events., no implementable solutions have been proposed for MES. Some hosts have accepted the likelihood for MES to impact their destinations and have adopted preventative measures , such as legislation to protect the rights and safety of residents in public areas introduced for the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games (Institute for Human Rights and Business, 2014).

Some possible solutions suggest encouraging organizing committees, such as the IOC, to take more responsibility during the planning stage (Preuß et al., 2019). Awareness of the realities of hosting mega-events and early community involvement (Weaver et al., 2021, 2024) can help reduce Müller's (2017) *winner's paradox* and lead to a more successful event.

Müller (2015a) proposed measures such as capping attendance and managing expectations for mega-events as a way to stimulate urban development. However, given the prestige and large-scale viewership associated with these events, it is unlikely that host destinations or event organizers will adopt these recommendations. Another suggestion put forth is for host destinations to commence infrastructure development immediately after securing the bid to prevent delays as the event approaches (Preuß et al., 2019). These actions., however, may not always be applicable given the varied nature of mega-events.

The Context

World Expositions have been frequently analyzed as examples of mega-events (Deng et al., 2016; Magno & Dossena, 2020; Vij et al., 2019) , often due to their believed social-cultural and infrastructural impacts, inter-governmental dealings (De Groote, 2005; Vij et al., 2019), legacies (Deng et al., 2016), destination branding (Yu et al., 2012), motivation (Lee et al., 2013), volunteering (Lee et al., 2014), and resident attitudes (Lamberti et al., 2011; Magno & Dossena, 2020).

Most studies have been conducted post-event, and so offer insights into the post-event impacts. This study, however, looked into the planning processes of the event. While expos have occurred repeatedly since 1851, Dubai Expo 2020 offered some relatively unique challenges to the planning committee, making their considerations of MES more acute, namely, COVID-19. While Dubai was supposed to host Expo 2020 in 2020, the emergence of COVID-19 meant that the event had to be

postponed by one year to accommodate global travel restrictions. This delay had obvious impacts on budgets, infrastructure design and openings, staffing, and sales and marketing strategies. By the conclusion of the event, Expo 2020 had hosted 192 participating countries, catering to 24.1 million visitors, just shy of the 25 million target, with 30.3% coming from overseas (Expo 2020 Dubai, n.d.). This study was conducted during this 1-year *extension* when organizers were adjusting plans to account for this additional year. Some additional data has been provided after the event from publicly available sources to provide some updated consequences of the planners' decisions.

Methods

The study focused on understanding what aspects of the mega-events industry can be targeted to ease its lasting effects on host destinations and to interpret the planners' roles in reducing the negative impacts related to MES. A qualitative study offered detailed insights on methods to control for MES and provided insightful, practical applications (Cooper & Schindler, 2008; Jennings, 2010). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, following an elite interview approach (Boden & Shipway, 2023; Harvey, 2011), which allowed knowledgeable respondents to tackle the questions from numerous detailed angles (Jennings, 2010). Elite interviews offer researchers the opportunity to explore a topic in a conversational approach from the perspective of influential and knowledgeable individuals who often have access to information not available to the public (Boden & Shipway, 2023; Harvey, 2011; Mikecz, 2012).

Due to the high complexity of the Expo 2020, only respondents with a detailed understanding and engagement with the event's operations were chosen. The nature of these respondents limited the pool of potential interviews in terms of their reliability and applicability to the study. A non-probability purposive sampling approach was chosen for expert participants with the most valuable planning insight to be invited and those with the most influence over the potential occurrence of MES. For this, individuals who worked for Expo 2020 in the capacity of protocol managers/coordinators, logistics managers, or operations managers were selected due to access and knowledge regarding the operations and legacy of Expo 2020. A total of 5 experts were identified as fulfilling the relevant criteria and having the relevant knowledge. Given the seniority of these individuals and the focus on a single case study, the sample was deemed sufficient to reach saturation (Boddy, 2016; Boden & Shipway, 2023).

Data Collection

Elite face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted from the main offices of Expo 2020, although some online and offsite meetings were conducted to accommodate participant's requests. The researcher created an interview guide, listing important themes, concepts, and general questions to discuss with the interviewee (Harvey, 2011; Neuman & Robson, 2018).

Methods of Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim into a secure online document and then analyzed using content analysis (Neuman & Robson, 2018). In the first stage of open coding, the researchers thoroughly reviewed the interviews and used a color-coding system to identify prominent themes, highlighting similarities across the data. These themes were then organized into analytical segments for further exploration in the next stage. Axial coding enabled the researchers to categorize the themes

based on their frequency and significance (Neuman & Robson, 2018; Saldaña, 2016), facilitating the identification of connections and patterns within the text. e text. Finally, selective coding was applied to refine the understanding of the remaining themes (Neuman & Robson, 2018). Once the themes were fully developed, the researchers analyzed the patterns between codes, ultimately generating a grounded theory from the data (Neuman & Robson, 2018).

Findings

Participant Demographics

At the time of the interviews, all participants were directly employed by Expo 2020 in Dubai. Of the five interviewees, three were Emiratis. All individuals were within the age group of 25-45 years old, with one female. Of the participants, two had previous mega-events experience in a management capacity, as seen below in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

No	Nationality	Gender	Title	Year at Expo	Previous M-E Experience
1	UAE	Male	Manager, Protocol	5	No
2	UAE	Male	Manager, Protocol	3	No
3	Italy	Male	Lead Manager, Protocol, Hospitality, and Guest Services	7	Yes
4	Australia	Male	Manager, Protocol, Operations, and Logistics	2	Yes
5	UAE	Female	Coordinator, Protocol	2	No

Main Themes

A total of six themes were extracted from the interviews: Potential positive and negative impacts of hosting, resident satisfaction, financing, legal, destination planning, and legacy. Each theme consists of distinct subthemes, detailed below. A summary of the themes and sub-themes is available in the supplementary materials.

Potential Impacts of Hosting

Participants discussed the positive and negative impacts they anticipated from hosting Expo 2020. On the positive side, participants universally agreed that the Expo would have positive impacts on Dubai's sustainability: "All the infrastructure that was created are positive, we get rid of the unsustainable, so it's actually good for the environment. We're using environmentally friendly measures for construction and most other things as well" (P4).

The sustainability in terms of ... how we've been when constructing the site, in terms of all the different assets that we've been purchasing...If you look at gifts, and resources across all departments, what we've been asking for from different suppliers is to have reuse-ability... (P1)

Participants also felt that the Expo would allow for greater opportunities for all: "Expo is really driving home the point of empowerment, and that is Youth Empowerment as seen through the emphasis of the Youth Pavilion, [and] women's empowerment [with] the Women's Pavilion" (P5).

From an innovation perspective, the event was described as a "catalyst for change" (P1), where the trial-and-error learnings of the actual event can later be applicable to future city-wide projects. Additionally, there would be the chance for "joint ventures with all Expo participants that are showcasing their innovations and their events" (P2). The main concerns participants expressed in

terms of negative impacts were related to safety and security issues and overcrowding. “With the increase of the total number of visitors that we forecasted to come visit Dubai, for this international event, there’s a security risk as with a lot of things that are coming to our country...” (P1).

[Dubai’s], traffic is always a challenge. Until people understand how the traffic system is working, it normally takes a couple of days. There are always little teething problems, [like] whether the buses, or the trains, or the metro are overcrowded. (P4)

Resident Satisfaction

All participants rejected the idea that the Expo only caters to a certain type of demographic, especially of the elite kind, because of the wide variety of ticketing options available to travelers:

Expo is actually focusing on the people rather than the high-net-worth individuals, just because it’s an event at end of the day, and they want people to come [...] and enjoy. Yes, it is business centered but doesn’t mean it’s for high-net-worth individuals. (P2)

Extending participant’s thoughts on preventing resident dissatisfaction, participants believed that most publicly advertised goals of the Dubai variation of Expo would be met:

The biggest show in the world, we’ve been saying that for around seven years now. But not everyone’s really interested in the same thing.... We’ve absolutely tried to cater to everyone, every demographic and every sort of population that we’ve seen globally...We are bringing in so much [activities and events] that fits every profile of guest that we’re expecting to come, so definitely no, no over promising. I think people will be very happy when they see what we have to offer. (P5)

Throughout all these areas, participants felt that the organization was doing what it could to deliver on its promises. The only area where participants felt the expo may not deliver on its promise was around the international visitation numbers, largely related to COVID-19:

There’s one place that I think that could potentially not go quite right. It is accommodation in the hotels. Because if people can’t come here, because of travel restrictions around the world, then the hotels aren’t going to get the increased patronage...and that flows on throughout the whole hospitality industry...So that’s not a fault of the Expo. And it’s not a fault of the UAE. (P4)

As part of ensuring resident satisfaction, participants stressed the importance of involving all stakeholders, notably the destinations’ residents, government entities, and international parties, in the event planning to ensure its long-term success:

I would involve external entities and stakeholders when it comes to operations in the early stages of planning, another one is to involve different ministries, like foreign affairs of different countries earlier. So, I think...the planning [of] groundwork would be more impactful than administrative work when it comes to an event that’s usually just on the ground. (P2)

In relation to the involvement of leadership positions, particularly the leadership role played by the local government:

There are a lot of strong personalities involved with Expo. As you may know, we have the Higher Committee, which is spearheaded by Her Excellency, Reem al Hashimy. So, there is a lot of interaction with the government...to ensure that things like [rule-bending] don’t happen. (P5)

The RTA [Road and Transport Authority] is involved, so it's very government and law-centric... Government entities like PMO [Prime Minister Office], you have companies like Dubai Holding, ICD [Investment Corporation of Dubai], they basically own all these companies." (P2)

Through continuous engagement with stakeholders from the planning stage, participants believed that the planning and organization of the event were more efficient and targeted at promoting the positive impacts of the event over the negative.

Financing

When asked about the potential for the event to overrun its budgets, there was an understanding that Expo 2020 was at risk, if not already breaching the possibility.

...as we get closer to that time, we are seeing a fair amount of requests from external stakeholders to ensure that we're delivering the highest standard that goes along with their standard, which has resulted in changes of let's say, certain infrastructures, landscapes, or even assets on site, which has also resulted in us spending more than we had planned. (P1)

Participants noted that COVID-19 had a significant impact on this potential overrun:

Nobody had predicted a pandemic in 2020. The fact that the event got pushed forward for one whole year resulted in us as an organization spending extra costs, for example, when you're putting the pavilions in the hibernation phase. There are additional costs we have to spend... (P1)

Legal

Another typical observation within mega-events, rule-breaking or shortcuts, was felt to have little relevance to Expo 2020:

No, we here at Expo, we abide by a lot of certifications ... The Sustainability Pavilion, for example, follows the LEED Sustainability Certification requirements ..., and we would not be able to receive any of those certifications if we had taken any sort of shortcuts. We're very regulated by our ... Higher Committee. The reputation of Dubai is hanging on to us so strongly that I don't think we would take ... any sort of shortcut like that. (P5)

P1 revealed that some regulations were modified considering the event. In some cases, the organization of the event drew attention to outdated regulations; in others, special regulations were needed to support the functioning of the event.

That happens everywhere around the world. And every event that I've worked on, there are priorities for certain things. And if the law allows that to occur, then that's quite okay... It just got priority because it was given priority. But extra people were allocated to do that. I don't see anything wrong with that. As long as it's not been detrimental to other things that are happening. I think that's quite okay. As long as everything is done within the law. And if the laws change to account and allow that, then that's quite okay. (P4)

Destination Planning

All planning by Expo 2020 was done with future implications in mind. In addition to legacy planning, participants spoke about Dubai's focus on excellence. "The UAE does very good with their planning, construction and everything else, that people have been aware of what's been happening for over seven years, there are people [who have] put the right plans in place" (P4).

Participants also emphasized that Expo 2020 was designed as an integral part of Dubai's long-term tourism strategy. Despite the extensive preparations made to accommodate visitors, they noted that the event's attendance and overall success would primarily depend on the city's inherent appeal::

In the years of 2015 to 2020... we've got roughly 18 million visitors in Dubai [annually], which is pre-corona, their [Emirates Airlines] planes, were in every airport all around the world. The numbers are just they'd bring us the 25 million visits. (P1)

I think that's the main difference with us versus a lot of other destinations is that we don't focus all of our guarantees on the fact that we have infrastructure, we in fact, are building our infrastructure to accommodate that additional guaranteed tourism base. (P5)

Expo 2020 was planned as a stepping stone in Dubai's planned tourism development; Dubai had other plans to promote tourism without relying on the Expo. The fact that Dubai was already an established destination and independent plans were in place to further develop Dubai's tourism meant that unrealistic goals and expectations were not set. Expo 2020 was going to be *another* attraction, not *the* attraction. During the course of the event, however, most participants felt that Expo 2020 would temporarily become the main attraction . However, this was a strategic action taken by higher management parties of Expo 2020. The plan of Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid, the leader of Dubai, was to bring attention to the new site, with a goal to: "...make a new target audience for the new [area], as it's in the interest in Dubai [to] attract more people" (P1). However, this increased attention is thought to cause temporary overexertion of services in the area:

There could be an overflow of visitors. [...] There's going to be an impact on taxi services, the metro services, as well as the hotels that are here in the market. [...] It's going to be a fair amount of pressure on [...] all these different industries that haven't been having too many tourists or people over the past year because of COVID-19. (P1)

This temporary overexertion, however, can be seen positively in that it implies that there was not a planned oversupply of facilities to accommodate the event but then went unutilized after the event. The infrastructure developments planned for the event had a post-event plan; temporary excess demand during the event was seen as preferable to wasted capacity post-event.

Legacy

When discussing managing the potential negatives of Expo 2020, participants particularly focused on the event's legacy. Participants noted that forward-thinking plans were emphasized by top-level management, with a particular focus on infrastructure developments. Legacy planning was:

...part of our legacy plan, especially when building everything for the past almost decade. And I think that was very important to us...essentially winning the bid in the first place, making sure that there was a plan for everything...when we were done with Expo. (P5)

After Expo 2020, the project will be named District 2020. It will be a residential area with many facilities, like hotels...Within the district...you will have the DEC, Dubai Exhibition Center, you'll have weddings...a lot of activities such as sports, events such as musical events, graduations, hospitals will be also within the site...the mall will be ready as well. (P2)

Intangible legacies were also discussed by participants, as they explained the organization's attempts at improving information sharing between each Expo event:

We call it the corporate archive... We barely received any information from Expos that have taken place in the past. We know Expo Milano 2015 was... a little bit of a disaster. But we don't know why... So, what Her Excellency has actually taken the initiative to do is sort of compile all of the information that we're collecting or generating or creating, and all the suppliers that we're working with, especially internationally, to provide to Osaka 2025. (P5)

It was, therefore, evident that participants believed that Expo 2020 had plans to extend the usefulness of event facilities and knowledge gained from the event.

Discussion and Conclusion

MES at Expo 2020

Participants suggested that extensive planning minimized Expo 2020's exposure to MES. Despite this, some literary overlaps suggests that Expo 2020 has made similar mistakes to past mega-events. On the other hand, the evidence also exhibits key differences taken by Expo that may help to avoid MES. Overall, participants felt that Expo 2020 had a low vulnerability to MES because of the established nature of Dubai's tourism, the plan to use Expo 2020 as a catalyst to develop tourism further, and the heavy governmental involvement in the organization and operation of Expo 2020. Table 3 summarizes the connections between the symptoms and what was revealed by the participants during data collection. As seen in Table 3, Expo 2020 was considered not to be overly susceptible to MES, suggesting that some of the decisions could act as guidelines for future similar events, the nature of the host notwithstanding.

Table 3. Expo 2020 Vulnerability to MES

No	MES Symptom	Expo 2020 Vulnerability	Post-Event Impact
1	Overpromising Benefits to Residents (Müller, 2015a)	<i>Unclear</i>	Expo promised 25 million visitors, a permanent focus on Dubai's tourism, and improved infrastructure and hospitality services (Sadaqat, 2021). Expo delivered over 24 million visits (Expo 2020 Dubai, n.d.). First international in-person global congregation since the COVID-19 outbreak (Dubai Tourism, 2022). The department of tourism attributes some of Dubai's post-COVID-19 rebound success to Expo 2020 (Dubai Tourism, 2022). Participants described numerous longer-term infrastructure developments thanks to Expo, which would benefit Dubai in the long-term, such as the expansion of the metro, public transport systems, and the development of District 2020.
2	Overspending	Yes – Expected, due to the yearlong delay due to COVID-19 and last-minute cost overruns to ensure the event started on time and as expected (cf. Müller, 2015a).	Data unavailable
3	Elite Capture	No – Expo planned to offer a variety of ticket options to allow any visitor.	All promised tickets were offered to stakeholders. Some tickets were free with Emirates Airlines, others were as low as AED 10 (USD 2.72; Amlot, 2022).
4	Event Takeover	Yes	Participants described that event takeover was deliberate to give Dubai an additional boost and incentive to develop additional infrastructure and tourism attractions.
5	Public Risk-Taking	No	Participants described this as not possible due to the multiple levels of oversight, including senior government officials, ensuring that finances were spent appropriately.
6	Extensive Shortcut-Taking	No	As above, participants referred to the numerous layers of senior government oversight limiting the potential for short-cuts to occur.
7	Rule Bending or Breaking <i>Compliance Paradox</i> (Müller, 2017)	No	Participants described Expo 2020 as a catalyst to update laws regarding, for example, sustainability. This benefited Expo 2020, but also would have long-term benefits for Dubai as a whole.

Requirements for Rejecting MES

The following recommendations from participants offer possible methods of limiting MES without the need to compromise on event size and attendance (see Müller, 2015a): Maintaining external connectivity, stabilizing leadership, increasing involvement, ensuring planning excellence, and establishing destination independence from mega-events.

External connectivity refers to the organizing committee's efforts to maintain relationships with local residents, government bodies, and international partners. The inclusion of diverse perspectives, experiences, and input from these groups is crucial for effective event planning and can help mitigate the risks of MES. This approach addresses residents' concerns while also minimizing public risks. Additionally, it allows key stakeholders to offer valuable insights into the operational aspects of the event, reducing the likelihood of errors during the event itself. While it is likely at the beginning of the event planning that a small team will be responsible for the event, it is still important to gather input from multiple stakeholders (Gursoy et al., 2017; Gursoy & Kendall, 2006; Mair et al., 2023; Weaver et al., 2024). As well as increasing support for the event and helping to provide more realistic and achievable goals, it can also improve the perceived transparency of the event's organization and operation (Al Hallaq et al., 2020; Gursoy et al., 2017; Gursoy & Kendall, 2006). On a simple level, this could be done through constant engagement with the community listening to their input. It is, however, important that residents' feedback is addressed and not treated perfunctorily (Gursoy et al., 2017).

The important role of governing parties in Expo 2020's operations, means that stable leadership is needed. As with Expo 2020's own leadership, host destinations should involve residents and key government stakeholders in planning and executing the event (Al Hallaq et al., 2020; Gursoy et al., 2017; Gursoy & Kendall, 2006). This would offer additional networks for organizers to access resources that may otherwise be unavailable. In Dubai, the involvement of such stakeholders (such as the Road and Transport Authority, Prime Minister's Office, and Dubai Tourism) ensured that the priorities of the city aligned with the Expo 2020's goals. Involving residents in the planning and operating of the event, through acting as guides, ambassadors, or volunteers, can help to increase resident support for the event, promoting positive sentiments for the event (Vibber & Lovari, 2022). Furthermore, it is suggested that planning for the mega-event is conducted with future goals in mind. Long-term strategies are vital to event success, especially when legacies are involved (De Groot, 2005). Ensuring that all new infrastructure is developed with a future usage plan to help the host destination benefit from the overall cost spent on the event.

Finally, it is vital for the host to be independent of the mega-event. Prior to hosting Expo 2020, Dubai was already a popular tourism destination. Therefore, increased tourism numbers because of Expo 2020 was from a strong and established base rather than there being a sudden inflow of tourists to a new destination. Similarly, it is vital for destinations to understand that mega-events are not a permanent magic-pill to suddenly become a tourism destination, but rather are effective infrastructure-development catalysts (Duignan et al., 2023), which may help the destination target a new tourism market. However, this is still likely to be an *additional* target market, not a *new* key source market.

Dubai's nature cannot be ignored when considering Expo 2020's potential for success in avoiding MES. Dubai has taken the rare approach to build its event-related infrastructure on the outskirts of

the city, thus allowing for more development to form around the site as part of Dubai's broader growth strategy. It is, therefore, important to remember that solutions will require localization.

Theoretical Implications

The study has contributed to the advancement of our understanding and application of MES to different types of events and geographies around the world. The study also offered new insights on how MES can be avoided through better stakeholder involvement, clear leadership, honest and careful planning, and destination independence from the mega-event. Such clear recommendations will aid in our understanding of how MES can be explored and applied.

Practical Implications

Based on participants' recommendations, the study aims to reduce the tendency for MES to impact future first-time mega-event hosts. The suggestions have relevance to mega-events and host destinations; they are general and simple and are foreseen to be picked up by planning organizations for trial. At the event planning stage, it is vital that organizers look at ways to engage the local community as much as possible to help ensure greater long-term success (Weaver et al., 2024). This could take the form of community-level recruitment, information-sharing events or press releases, or competitions to encourage community members to offer advice on the features of the event. Another important aspect would be the role played by the mega-event in the destination's development. Clear and structured development plans with the mega-event as a stepping-stone are important to help encourage support. The running of a mega-event with the hope that the event will be *the* change destinations want is likely to disappoint.

Limitations and Future Research

While the sample size was suitable for the elite nature of the participants, the small and focused sample may limit the generalizability of the results. Nevertheless, the recommendations are general enough to be considered by international planning parties. As Müller (2017) describes with the *uniqueness paradox*, all mega-events boil down to the same operations. This means that the results of this study can have widespread applicability.

There are opportunities for the research to be carried further. This could ideally take the form of international replication of this study for other mega-events around the world. One key element of this research was the data collection during the planning phase. Future studies should consider such similar approaches and particularly look at a post-event comparison. Such comparison should take a qualitative and quantitative form to offer a combination of detailed insights with generalizable relationship testing.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Key Themes and Subthemes

No	Theme	Count	Subtheme	Count
1	Potential Positives and Negatives of Hosting	35	Sustainability Applications	7
			Increasing Access & Opportunity	8
			Innovation as a result of Expo	5
			The Overall COVID-19 Impact	6
			Safety & Security Concerns	6
2	Resident Satisfaction	50	Anti-Resident Dissatisfaction	22
			External Connectivity	18
			Leadership & Involvement	10
3	Financing	13	Financing Activities	13
4	Legal	9	Law-Abiding Obligations	9
5	Destination Planning	20	Event Takeover	6
			Planning Excellence	8
			Destination Independence from Event	6
6	Legacy of Expo	24	Legacy Planning	17
			Intangible Legacy	7