



Kent Academic Repository

Beissel, Adam Scott and Kohe, Geoffery Z. (2020) *United as one: the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup hosting vision and the symbolic politics of legacy. Managing Sport and Leisure* . ISSN 2375-0472.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/84134/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/0.1080/23750472.2020.1846138>

This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal* , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

This is the accepted pre-print version and appears here in lieu of the publisher's version of record. Please use the official reference details below when citing this work:

Beissel, A.S. & Kohe, G.Z. (2020) United as one: the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup hosting vision and the symbolic politics of legacy, *Managing Sport and Leisure*, DOI: [10.1080/23750472.2020.1846138](https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2020.1846138)

United as One: The 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup hosting vision and the symbolic politics of legacy

Dr. Adam S. Beissel¹

Dr. Geoffery Z. Kohe²

¹ Corresponding author: Department of Sport Leadership & Management, Miami University (OH), USA. abeissel@miamioh.edu

² School of Sport & Exercise Sciences, University of Kent, UK. g.z.kohe@kent.ac.uk

Abstract

1. Rationale/Purpose

In June 2018 FIFA awarded the 2026 Men's Football World Cup tournament to a transnational bid comprising the United States, Canada and Mexico. We explore this moment of historical conjuncture to understand the interplay of football, SME processes, geopolitical symbolism, and legacy craft.

2. Design/methodology/approach

Drawing on a critical document analysis of bid material, media reports, economic analysis, and secondary evaluation, we analyse how the *United As One* bid's core legacy tenets of *certainty*, *opportunity* and *unity* produced a complex narrative of economic, sporting, and political harmony and prosperity.

3. Findings

We contend that while the bid employs common legacy tropes and axioms, *United As One* exposes the sustained fallacies implicit within bid constructions and paucity of legacy as a currency in the future of SME enterprise.

4. Practical implications

Stakeholder alliances are fundamental to sport mega-event bidding. Yet, collaborations are politically complex as each party balances benefits and risks. Accordingly, this paper forewarns all bid actors to be cogniscent of the roles they may play within the symbolism and rhetoric of bid construction.

5. Research Contribution

Beyond the context of football, this paper adds new insights to ways sport mega-event bid visions fuse economic, socio-cultural, and public health advancement rhetoric to consolidate and masque persuasive host and legacy agendas.

Proem

On June 13th 2018, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) awarded the 2026 FIFA Men’s World Cup (MWC) hosting rights to a joint bid of the United States (US), Mexico and Canada.³ The North American effort—known as the ‘United Bid’— will be the first time the tournament has a 48-team format, the first to completely use existing infrastructure, and the first time three countries have shared hosting rights. Bid documents offered FIFA members a seemingly ready-made MWC by emphasizing the 23 ready-built stadiums across three nations, substantial experience hosting large-scale sporting events, and all the pre-existing infrastructure necessary to accommodate thousands of consumers and participants. Although joint-hosted FIFA MWC bids promising transnational unity have occurred previously (e.g., in 2002), the United Bid marks the first MWC bid in recent history to use an integrated hosting vision and strategy promising to strengthen continental partnership between host nations and use FIFA’s signature event as a platform to unite the global [football] community. The strategic hosting vision of ‘United As One’ leverages three key event legacies—the power of *unity*, the promise for *certainty*, and the potential for extraordinary *opportunity* — to create a new and sustainable blueprint for the future of FIFA MWCs and a aspirational vision for sport mega-events (SMEs). In constructing the United Bid, however, organizers were confronted by a contradictory geopolitical context framed by the unexpected election of Donald Trump as US President, and hard-line stances on trade and immigration, that eroded transnational relations and complicated the Bid’s ethos of unity and cooperation.

In this paper, we examine the conjunctural politics of the United Bid’s hosting vision and the event legacies of the 2026 FIFA MWC. The politics of each sport mega-event is, to note, conjunctural in that it will be “affected by different political circumstances at local, national, regional and global scales at different times and places” (Horne, 2017, p. 331). According to Horne (2017), there is a

³ The United Bid routed its only challenger, Morocco, by a final vote of 134 to 65.

politics *in*, and a politics *of*, sport mega-events such as the Olympic Games and MWC. The former focuses on the *internal politics* of organizing bodies, such as the International Olympic Committee and FIFA. Congruent with Horne's assessments, Tomlinson's (2014b) investigation of the underlying political dynamics of FIFA reveals an organization used as a vehicle for the acquisition and expression of power and status, and whose political manoeuvrings have corrupted host selection processes. These dimensions have been discussed elsewhere (Author X, Author XX). This paper extends discussion by examining the *external politics of* the 2026 FIFA MWC as they relate to global forces and relations in combination with, or in confrontation of, local interests and national political agendas. Specifically, our interest lays in examining ways bid organizers leverage hosting visions and event legacies as a political strategy.

The purpose of this paper is to extend empirically broader debates on the political leveraging and narratives of hosting visions of SMEs as continent-wide sports spectacles (Ludvigsen, 2019; Byun, Ellis & Leopkey, 2020). As Ludvigsen points out, the 2020s signal a 'new model of SME staging' where for the first time historically, two events regularly considered among the largest SMEs globally – the FIFA MWC and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA European Championship – will be jointly hosted by nations across entire continents. Accordingly, this paper makes a timely and important contribution on the symbolic politics and political legacies of joint bids for international SMEs. We examine the symbolism of the United As One strategic hosting vision and the leveraging of event legacies as they are shaped by the current political conjuncture. We begin framing the bid within an examination of contemporary sport-mega event debates and the leveraging of event legacies. Following articulation of our methodological approach, we present an analysis of the United Bid focused on the strategic hosting vision and the bid's core tenets of *certainty, opportunity, and unity*. Although the bid lacks many specifics and evidence of its claims, we interrogate three event legacies: *economic legacies* of financial *certainty, opportunities* for inspirational *sporting legacies*, and *political legacies* of

continental partnership and global *unity*. We conclude by suggesting that the construction of the United As One hosting vision enabled bid organizers to leverage the political antagonisms of the Trump conjuncture to frame favorable dominant narratives about the host nation(s), alter the transnational partnership image to external audiences, and leverage the symbolic politics of public diplomacy as an event legacy for the host nation(s).

Political Leveraging of Hosting Visions and Legacies of Sport Mega-Events

Major international sporting events have become increasingly important in the contemporary global age. Although definitions of ‘mega-events’, and of ‘event studies’ more broadly, vary, much of the literature on mega-events builds on the foundational work by Roche (2000) and Hiller (1995, 1998, 2000b, 2000a). Roche has characterized cultural mega-events as “large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events, which have dramatic character, mass popular appeal, and international significance” (Roche, 2000, p. 1). Hiller (1995; 2000b), in concert, identifies the pronounced political roles mega-events play in engendering civic/urban boosterism and inter/intra-regional dialogue. Roche and Hiller’s respective work reminds us that although SMEs encompass a wide range of sports, nations, and political interests, they share characteristics with other ‘mega-events’, and a wide range of heritage or historical events. As Gruneau and Horne (2015) add, SMEs (such as the Olympics and football World Cups in particular) have become normalized within the seasonal and rhythmic patterns of everyday life. Because SMEs can attract high and growing levels of global media exposure and vast public interest, the events are attractive to nation-states seeking to catalyze national economies, gain international visibility, and project a particular global image (Gruneau & Horne, 2015; Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006; Horne & Whannel, 2016; Maennig & Zimbalist, 2012; Wenner & Billings, 2017). To these ends, SME productions involve a range of

different actors—such as international sport federations, media corporations, trans/multi-national (sport) corporations, and various governmental/state entities.

Within SME bids, the collaboration of actors toward legacy visions has become pronounced. International organizations, especially FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), require hosts to run extremely costly events according to exacting specifications. These requirements necessitate national governments, in partnership with corporate entities and non-governmental organizations, prioritize leaving something of ‘value’ behind. Often these event legacies promise to renew a city, revive an economy, grow sport participation, re-brand a nation, and/or contribute to global economic and social development (Burnett, 2017; Carey et al., 2011).⁴ Bid books of candidate host cities now frequently comprise a hosting vision that establishes a long-term event blueprint for the city or region spanning venues, marketing, sports, finances, and human and community resources.

Altruistic ambitions aside, ultimately SME’s have become expressions of ‘celebration capitalism’ (Boykoff, 2014) that use social euphoria to allow politicians and corporate cohorts to advance policies not possible during normal political times, and normalize an economics rooted in public-private partnerships (PPPs) in which the public pays and the private profits. This has led to growing resistance and anti-SME movements in some cities and countries as global citizens have become increasingly aware of both the harsh economic realities (e.g. exorbitant public costs, limited financial returns) and the social costs (e.g. human rights abuses, evictions, gentrification, and militarization) that come with the construction and delivery of speculative spaces of spectacular consumption ((Boykoff, 2020; Lenskyj, 2000, 2008; O’Bonsawin, 2010; Talbot, 2019). Failed bids to host the 2024 Summer Olympics by Boston and Hamburg – both which faced fierce opposition from the local community – have led some to ponder whether a tipping point of a ‘power shift’ between

⁴ Such goals have also been crystalized by the closer relationship both entities, and prospective host nations, have also forged with the United Nations in pursuit of the UN’s 17 Global Sustainable Development Goals.

cities and national governing bodies like the IOC and FIFA has now been reached (Kassen-Norr & Laurman, 2019).

Varied understandings and use of legacy notwithstanding, Gratton and Preuss (2008) offer a broad articulation of legacy as “planned and unplanned, positive and negative, intangible and tangible structures created through a sport event that remain after the event” (p. 1924). Here, our interest lies in the diverse scope of legacy ‘impact’. In general economic terms, impact is “the amount of money that will flow into or out of a region or city exclusively through the holding of a particular event, whether it be a sport event, a concert or a political convention or some other large, one-off gathering” (Holt & Ruta, 2015, p. 3). Whether hosting events deliver the kinds of economic benefits mega-event proponents claim remains strongly contested (Baade et al., 2006; Baade & Matheson, 2004, 2001, p. 200; Coates, 2006, 2014; Coates & Matheson, 2011; Crompton, 2006; Porter, 1999). Serious concerns have been noted, too, about the unequal distributional effects of SMEs that typically, and inordinately, favour ‘booster coalitions’ of particular private and public stakeholders while compromising marginalized communities (Gaffney, 2010; Preuss, 2011; Solberg, 2017).

Despite that benefit forecasts are nearly always wrongly overstated, and hosting costs are frequently understated, SMEs can engender positive outcomes that persist beyond bidding campaigns and event completion. According to Horne (2017), there are distinctions with respect to *tangible* and *intangible* legacies and, also, *selective* and *universal* legacies. Event legacies can be *tangible* because they may result in substantial enduring changes to urban infrastructure. They can also be *intangible* since they evoke emotional responses and popular memories (Preuss, 2007). With regards to *selective* and *universal*, the former refers to legacies that are individualist and elitist, privileging a relatively narrow group of powerful political and economic positions in society. The latter are concerned with “event outcomes that are communal, collectivist, and inherently democratic, available to all by virtue of being made freely accessible” (Horne, 2017, p. 334). Adding to these conceptual frameworks, Chappelet (2006)

categorizes legacy forms into five interrelated domains: (1) sporting legacy; (2) economic legacy; (3) infrastructural legacy; (4) urban legacy; and (5) social legacy. While realised by respective host cities and nations differently, each area constitutes a realm of action and focus for organizing committees.

In addition to focusing on SME legacies, scholars have noted the strategic ‘leveraging’ of sports mega-events for specific purposes representing a marked ‘shift’ from the dominant focus on measuring *post-hoc* impact assessments (Grix, 2012). Chalip’s work on the leveraging of SMEs (2014) has focused on economic leveraging of SMEs and the social leveraging of sports events (2004; 2006; O’Brien & Chalip, 2007). However, cities and states have increasingly leveraged SMEs to enhance socio-cultural legacies rather than material aspects to improve a nation’s image abroad (Grix, 2012). Indeed, *image leveraging* is concerned with how the bid processes and the events themselves have been used to communicate key messages to the national populace and improve perceptions among foreign publics. Rehearsing Cornelisse’s (2004) ‘ideas of the state’ and Redeker’s (2008) ‘imaginary power of the state’, Black (2007, p. 262) notes this as a pursuit of *symbolic politics* – “...a chance to signal important changes of direction, ‘reframe’ dominant narratives about the host, and/or reinforce key messages about what the host has become/is becoming”.

Black’s notion of symbolic politics is beneficial to understanding the use of the MWC by host organizers and affiliated political proponents to (re)frame the state and intra-state relations. As evidenced in our evaluation, not only are new and inspiring hosting visions essential to (re-)framing the host city and state as a site of *what is*, but also illustrating the symbolic possibilities of *what could be*. A successful branding of SMEs benefits the state apparatus and, when successful, “can be an increase in the self-belief of the political elite, a reinvigoration of patriotism (effectively cornerstones of a national identity) among the general public, an increase in tourist visits to the host nation, and a growth in inward investment and exports” (Grix & Houlihan, 2014, p. 578).

In what follows, we build on previous SME leveraging work and the narratives of hosting visions to consider the political leveraging of the 2026 FIFA MWC. Ultimately, the paper seeks to fill the gap in an emerging body of scholarship of what Giulianotti (2011) referred to as “SME Studies” (p. 3307). More specifically, it builds on the recent work of Ludvigsen (2019) and Byum, Ellis and Leopkey (2020) who have each examined the socioeconomic impact(s) and joint bid strategic alliances of the joint hosted SMEs in the 2020s. Although analyses of SMEs have seemingly reached a saturation point, Ludvigsen’s (2019) contends there remains demonstrable need for further research on the impact and legacies of “multiple host format” SMEs (p. 178). Byum, Ellis and Leopkey (2019) interrogate the practical and ideological realities and associated political and symbolic power of unity in joint SME bids, but refrained from examining specifics of the United 2026 Bid. Accordingly, we situate our analysis of the symbolic politics and political legacies of the 2026 MWC as an empirical extension of a small but growing body of SME’s research on multiple host format for which there is minimal analysis of United 2026. In so doing, we aim to advance Author X and Author XX’s (2020) formative examinations on the geopolitics of the 2026 MWC by articulating that the 2026 United Bid represented a coordinated attempt to produce a political legacy of enduring global/transnational unity.

Methodological approach

To interrogate symbolic legacy politics, we employ document analysis to examine various bid materials used by FIFA in the 2026 Men’s World Cup selection process. Bowen (2009) notes that while document analysis is more typically used in triangulating data, it has value as a stand-alone method for interpretivist and critical research of which this work is an example. Building on Olympic-related bid document critique (Chen et al., 2019; Leopkey et al., 2019), and related analysis of SME image leveraging (e.g. Grix, 2012), we undertook an inductive document analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Our documents consisted of three primary bid sources utilized during the selection process.

First, the “Bid Book” (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018), produced by the United As One campaign organizers outlining bid logistics and articulating potential social, economic, and political benefits. Second, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) report (*GRI Referenced Report*, 2018); a sustainability audit of the United Bid’s short-term operations during the bidding process created by international consulting firm Quantis for FIFA to demonstrate the bid organizer’s commitments to environmental and economic sustainability and transparency. Third, the Bid Evaluation Report (*Bid Evaluation Report*, 2018); FIFA’s executive summary document and contrasting evaluation of both the Moroccan and United Bids. We also consulted the Evaluations Report of the Human Rights Strategy Submitted by 2026 FIFA World Cup Bidders (*BSR Report*, 2018) prepared by global non-profit Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) as well as an independent report, *Human Rights in Canada, Mexico, and the USA in the Context of a Potential FIFA 2026 World Cup Competition*, prepared by Ergon Associates, Inc (*Ergon Report*, 2018). These documents were all made publicly available by FIFA on their website and were selected because each played a primary role in the 2026 Men’s World Cup selection process. In total, this analysis consisted of examining 955 pages of bid document materials and reports collected from a range of organizations and non-profits related to the 2026 MWC.

Drawing from previous research on the FIFA Men’s World Cup (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson, 2014a, 2014b), our analysis incorporated a critical investigative framework which situated the documents within their social, political, economic, and historical milieu. Context in this analysis was drawn through reading the documents alongside related media reports and mega-events critique to investigate the various forces acting on and through the bid process (Sugden & Tomlinson, 1998, 2013). While the process was iterative, key document aspects germane to the political context and symbolic politics (e.g. practical, strategic, political) were noted and referenced in relation to the extant literature and general mega-event-related discourse. Distinctive document features were discussed and

critiqued by both researchers, and we convey here a representation of the encoded politics within to demonstrate the construction of the bid as political product.

A limitation of this methodological approach involves the inherent politicized nature of official Bid Books and FIFA's bid evaluations. Bid Books are meticulously branded and highly calculated marketing efforts used by local organizing committees to manufacture consent for the hosting of a particular SME aimed at appealing primary to FIFA voters and global citizens. Such documents are produced years in advance and lack crucial specifics on the staging of the competition, which makes it difficult for scholars and activists alike to parse out myths from realities. FIFA's Bid's books are not to be considered politically neutral as they serve the interests of FIFA, its members, and commercial partners. The inclusion of independent reports in our analysis is important for identifying potentially false promises, political contradictions, and avoid taking the promises of SME's at face value.

Alongside documents, we are also mindful in the analysis of the roles played by individual and organisational proponents in document construction and bid rhetoric. As noted in the preceding literature, we recognise that sport mega-events processes require a complex array of actors (referred synonymously to as agents, parties, partners, stakeholders or organisations) who conceptualise, develop, drive and produce the bid, and also see it through to hosting and post-event phases. In a bid network, actor involvement also varies considerably from individuals and organisations who are central, public-facing and more actively engaged in fundamental aspects of bid formation (e.g., key members of the national sport governing bodies, local, state or national politicians, leading figures within business and industry, and celebrities), through to actors who may take semi-peripheral or peripheral roles or assume functions beyond the bid committee (e.g., State organisations and Ministries, financial investors and funding agencies, civil authorities, national/local sport bodies and international federations, philanthropists and charitable entities, and consultants). Moreover, actors'

roles can and do fluctuate over the bid process; particularly through individuals moving in and out of organisations and/or administrative or political positions, governments changing over election cycles, or due to political fallouts or controversies. As a result of actor movement, bid messaging and direction may change. With regards to the United Bid, and as interrogated below, several figures have been prominent in voicing bid messages in official documents and public sources. This includes key United Bid board members: Robert Kraft (Bid Committee Chair and New England Patriots owner), John Kristick (Executive Director , and former Managing Director the USA's 2022 World Cup Bid and former executive of FIFA marketing partner, Infront Sports and Media Inc.); Peter Montopoli (Canadian Bid Director and Co-Chair); Von De Luisa (Mexico Bid Director and Co-Chair); Victor Montagliani (CONCACAF President); Jim Brown (Director of Technical Operations); and Sunil Gulati (USSF President and FIFA Executive Council member, and United Bid Chair).⁵ To note, it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a prosopological examination of key actors behind bid texts. Indeed, in many cases it is not easy to discern or assign individual authorship and/or influence within documents. The Bid Book, for example, is published by the transnational bid team, yet was likely drafted, composed and edited via a process of frequent exchange, negotiation and discussion between committee members, their organisations and external parties. To note, the construction of bid documents is also passed to expensive Public Relations and Marketing consultancy teams who also play their roles in creating the appropriate tone in rhetoric and strategic messaging.

⁵ Further committee members include: Don Garber (Commissioner of Major League Soccer); Dan Flynn, (Republican member of the Texas House of Representatives); Carlos Cordeiro (who resigned in March 2020 over criticism of his administrative oversight of the US women's team; Donna Shalala (Democratic member of the US House of Representatives and Political Science Professor at the University of Miami); Decio De Maria (President of the Mexican Football Federation); Steven Reed (President of the Canadian Soccer Association); Guillermo Cantu (Gen. Sec, Mexican Football Federation); Carlos Bocanegra (Technical Director of Atlanta United F.C); Julie Foudy (Retired professional soccer player, twice FIFA Women's FWC winner, & Founder of the Julie Foudy Sports Leadership Academy); and Ed Foster-Simeon (President & CEO of US Soccer Foundation).

Accordingly, ascribing linear or clear relationships between specific agents (and their motives), what manifests in bid texts, and the realities of whatever political machinations have occurred ‘behind the scenes’ or in public forums is difficult. Moreover, while evidently some actors express strong opinions, and concomitantly carry a charisma and personae, that endear them as individual proponents and/or endorsers of bids, the roles actors play in bid work may vary considerably. Think here of the combined efforts of Sebastian Coe and David Beckham who helped fuel public motivation for the successful London 2012 Olympic Games bid; Wayne Rooney, David Beckham and Prince William as figure heads of England’s failed bid for the 2018 FIFA World Cup; or President Obama, Oprah Winfrey and Michael Phelps endorsing Chicago’s failed bid for the 2016 Olympic Games. Furthermore, depending the nature of the bid, and contemporary issues that arise over its development, some actors may take more prominent roles in expressing key bid messages (for example, regarding economic benefits, sport participation promotion, urban rejuvenation developments, community and social advancement, or defending bids against public criticism). As discussed later, in the United Bid this actor-ship extended to the interventionist voices of U.S President Donald Trump and key figures in his administration.

Nonetheless, we acknowledge that individual agents, and their entourages, play fundamental roles in providing ‘voice’ to bid politics and conveying the symbolic messages (in this case of positive and progressive transnational legacies) throughout the bid process. Furthermore, while bids are complex partnerships, we note there are hierarchical structures to bid management, and inequalities in agency may exist across actors (and their organisations). As evidenced below, for the United Bid there were several voices asserting the symbolic transnational unity message and the trifold emphasis on *unity*, *certainty* and *opportunity*. While there has been a continuity of actors involved in the United Bid, an overview of the bid trajectory is also useful to further understand how actor perspectives manifested within and across the course of the event life-cycle (Smith, 2014).

The Integrated Hosting Vision and Strategy of the 2026 United Bid

In April 2017, the three governing bodies of Canada, Mexico, and the US officially announced their intent to submit a joint bid for the 2026 FIFA MWC in an effort to bring the tournament back to the region for the first time since 1994, when the US last hosted (Goff, 2017).⁶ The Canadian Soccer Association first declared its interest in bidding for hosting rights in 2014 with Mexico Football Association announcing its pursuit to become the first nation to have hosted the MWC three times later that year. The US Soccer Federation (USSF) emerged as a potential suiter after losing out on independent hosting rights for 2022 to Qatar. The 2022 result immediately caused controversies after revelations bribes were paid to FIFA's executive committee to secure votes. In the aftermath of the scandal, FIFA instituted a series of governance reforms to mitigate the risk of misconduct and improve the fairness and transparency of the bidding process for awarding the FIFA Men's World Cup 2026 hosting rights. Under revised statutes, regulations for 2026 bidding process now allowed for joint bids between nations and their football federations. From the outset, the United Bid promised an unprecedented show of continental unity that would bring together the entire North American continent. As then-U.S. Soccer President Sunil Gulati remarked at the joint bid press conference, "When our nations come together as one, as we will for 2026, there is no question the United States, Mexico and Canada will deliver an experience that will celebrate the game and serve players, supporters and partners alike" (quoted in Dwyer, 2017, para. 3). With little more than a year to prepare before the official vote on June 13th, 2018, at the 66th FIFA Congress in Moscow, the respective football federations quickly assembled the United Bid Committee and solicited bids from 41 North American cities to serve as host cities by September 2017. The bid committee narrowed down the 41 potential host cities to 23 candidates by the release of the official United Bid Book on March 15, 2018.

⁶ To note, to ensure continental rotation of hosting duties, the FIFA Council announced in 2014 that football associations in Europe and Asia were not invited to submit bids, as these continental confederations had hosted one of previous two MWCs.

The decision for the North American partnership arose due to three interrelated contextual factors: *practical*, *strategic*, and *political*. First, there were *practical reasons* for each nation to join forces. The new 48-team, 80-game format required more state-of-the-art stadiums and modern infrastructure than any previous MWC. Not only did each federation offer experience and expertise in hosting world-class sporting events, but the increased number of teams and matches for the 2026 FIFA MWC necessitated more infrastructure to support larger fan engagement with in excess of 5.8 million fans expected to attend matches in person and millions more participating in city-hosted FIFA Fan Fests (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 8). Neither Mexico nor Canada had the current capacity to host the MWC independently or the market potential FIFA desired. To bring these nations up to FIFA's new standards for the expanded tournament required significant financial investment in stadium construction, expanding and modernizing public infrastructure, and guarantees of State-backed financial resource.

There were also *strategic reasons* that guided the joint North American effort. Following the Qatari scandal, USSF was hesitant to commit the time and money – estimated at US\$10 million of a US\$60 million annual budget in 2022 – to pursue hosting rights (Murray, 2015). A global partnership with Canada and Mexico could, however, negate the bidding costs and the public image of a previously failed bid. Second, there were concerns within USSF that FIFA members would seek retribution via MWC hosting rights after the U.S. Department of Justice investigation of FIFA's corruption resulted in numerous criminal indictments. Thus, a collaborative North American effort could, potentially, shift focus from the US as the main tournament benefactor. Although, to note, the United Bid will see the US host 16 of the 23 host cities, most of the 150 venue-specific training sites, and three quarters of all matches in the tournament (including every match from the quarterfinals onward).

Finally, there were *political reasons* for collaboration. As interrogated shortly, bid organizers hoped an integrated hosting strategy of 'United As One', and the implied symbolic politics of unity,

would outweigh any concerns about negative perceptions of President Donald Trump or American foreign policies that restrict visas being granted to visitors due to their religious or national origin. Notwithstanding commercial and diplomatic relations between the three countries reaching their lowest point in decades, the United Bid's vision enabled symbolic reimagining of a truly international partnership amidst growing diplomatic tensions and rising anti-American sentiment (Luce, 2018). This shared vision of unity was complicated by the increasing involvement of Trump and his administration in political leveraging other nations for the hosting rights. Amidst these contexts, the vision has become a metonym for shared cultures, economic trade relations, and transnational government alignment. As the deliberate use of selective messaging in the official United Bid Book illustrates:

In these challenging times, events such as the FIFA World Cup remind us what we have in common, rather than what might divide us (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. II). We have a long and successful history of partnership. Innovation is shared among our citizens. Culture and language transcend our borders. We support and enable each other, promoting growth and prosperity in ways that advance each country, and our continent as a whole (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 4).

Akin to other sport mega event bids, the United As One vision romanticised the potential for football to bring people together and transform lives and communities by invoking clichés about the sport as a global unifier.

three proud countries, connected through history, culture, geography, and partnership – celebrating the rich heritage of football and the game's unique ability to connect and inspire people around the world (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 1)

In challenging times, when forces too often pull us apart, the 20206 FIFA World Cup will remind us all of the common values and ideals – humanity, friendship, and mutual respect – that unite us as fellow human beings. (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 3)

Yet, notions of continental partnership and global fraternity sit largely as abstract promises and clichés for unity building. In harmony with the recognised ambiguity of sport mega event legacy constructions (Chen & Henry, 2016; Author X, Author XX & Author XXX), the hosting vision lacked measurable outcomes for its diplomatic ambitions. More critically, the vision ignored deeply entrenched cultural differences, problematic histories, and the growing contemporary geopolitical divides. Furthermore, the vision normalized football as inherently positive, while ignoring unequal power relations, sports' marginalizing effects, and prevailing socio-cultural hegemonies.

Contrary to organizer's aspiration, from the outset United As One was less euphemistic vision than carefully mediated marketing strategy. However, a hosting vision expressing global unity and inclusivity aligned harmoniously with FIFA's new unified/unifiable vision for football's future. Moreover, a bid pursuing transnational (and by proxy global) partnership provided FIFA an acceptable altruistic and public project for rehabilitating its public image. The bid also cohered perfectly with the launch of FIFA 2.0; a new strategic organisational vision promising transparency, accountability, and cooperation (*FIFA 2.0 - Vision for the Future*, 2016). Capitalising on opportunity, United As One organisers directly played to FIFA's reimagined identity by highlighting how host countries would best embrace the organization's 'good' governance aspirations and enactment of FIFA 2.0:

Together, with FIFA, we will work tirelessly to deliver a FIFA World Cup of the highest standards – one that is far-reaching, inclusive, innovative, and inspiring; one that embeds respect for human rights and respect for fundamental freedoms and values at its core; one that takes a crown jewel of sport to new levels, making it even more valuable to our partners, and in turn generating resources that will be invested back into the game through the member associations; one that fulfils FIFA's vision for the future (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. III).

The bid also promised to offer FIFA an archetypal hosting model for future tournaments:

The United Bid will support FIFA to provide a new template for executing the FIFA World Cup at this greater scale, with multiple hosts, working together to utilize the latest technology and combining our existing resources and experience (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 11).

In the *Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)* report, the United As One bid's Executive Director outlined how the vision dovetailed with FIFA's Sustainable Event Management principles. Congruent with contemporary conceptualizations (Bosselmann, 2016; Choudhury, 2018; Lindsey, 2008), sustainability was defined in two ways. First, sustainability represented a new level of financial security and economic certainty in hosting the MWC, stemming largely from the lack of new stadia and infrastructure construction:

...our focus is on building the game, staging a fantastic 2026 FIFA World Cup that embeds sustainability to its core, and in doing so, leaving significant legacies for generations to come (*GRI Referenced Report*, 2018, p. 3).

Secondly, sustainability referred to enhanced transparency and accountability for human rights, social inclusion, and the environment:

We have embedded sustainability, including respect for human rights and protection of the environment, into every aspect of our Bid vision and strategy. Our approach, which we call "Sustainability+" is designed to go beyond the requirements outlined by FIFA, creating a bid proposition that contributes measurably to sustainable development in our three countries and shares what we have learned with the rest of the world (*GRI Referenced Report*, 2018, p. 3).

From conception, the United As One vision was designed to reflect FIFA's 'transformed' identity and imperatives to establish more sustainable practices and robust organizational ethics. In this task, and

as we interrogate below, the construction of symbolic politics within a broader conceptualization of legacy became paramount.

Event Legacies of the 2026 United Bid

The United As One hosting vision was based on three core event legacy tenets: the promise of *certainty* (economic), the potential *opportunity* (sporting); the power of *unity* (political). Each of these legacies are examined now in turn.

Certainty as Economic Legacy

The United Bid offered FIFA the largest commercial market in MWC history. The three host nations combine for a population of 500 million people, 69 Metro areas >1 million inhabitants, and a GDP of US\$21.5 (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 31). Together, the three nations combine for an estimated US\$20 trillion in total economic output (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 103). Although the US comprises the majority economic weight (in terms of GDP), both Canada and Mexico rank among the 15 largest global economies (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 103).⁷ Accordingly, the bid emphasized specific innovative corporate sectors within the three nations including: biotechnology, transportation, and smart cities (Canada); agriculture, mathematics, and tech innovation (Mexico); and technology, pharmaceuticals, aerospace, media production (US).

Drawing upon these corporate modalities and couched in profit language FIFA members have long appreciated, United Bid's signature economic legacy privileged commercial opportunity and cost certainty. Bid organizers promised a staggering US\$11 billion profit for FIFA—more than twice that of its competitor Morocco—and more than double that of any previous MWC. The revenue projections include more than US\$5 billion in television rights fees; US\$3.6 billion for sponsorship

⁷ In terms of trade and commercial relations, The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) account for US\$1 trillion a year in trade between Canada, Mexico, and the US.

and licensing; and at least US\$2.1 billion in ticket revenue (Bradsher & Panja, 2018). Carlos Cordeiro, then-U.S. Soccer Federation President, proudly proclaimed, “a profit of this magnitude is unprecedented in any single-sport event in the world...In terms of value, it could mean US\$50 million more per association” (quoted in Bradsher & Panja, 2018, para. 10).

The official United Bid Book offered promises of economic impact for host cities that are all too common in SME proposals:

[T]he 2026 FIFA World Cup will provide jobs, increase economic activity, and raise levels of performance across a wide range of industries, further expanding those at which we excel and encouraging learning processes resulting from volunteer training and from working with world-leading experts in diverse areas such as broadcasting and media (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 16).

The economic impact study for 2026, commissioned by The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) suggested a cumulative US\$5 billion in short-term economic activity, including the creation of 40,000 jobs and more than US\$1 billion in incremental worker earnings from the candidate host cities, for an overall net benefit of US\$3-4 billion (*GRI Referenced Report*, 2018). The study further estimated that individual host cities could expect to see approximately US\$160-620 million in incremental activity, translating to a net benefit of approximately US\$90-480 million per city after accounting for estimated public costs (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, 2018). Much of this economic optimism was based on cost certainty hosting the tournament by using existing infrastructure.

The United Bid included candidate host cities with all the pre-existing necessary infrastructure – notably each candidate city featured stadia with capacities of 68,000 or greater – thus avoiding need for new constructions (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018: 21). With more than 125 FIFA compatible stadia in existence across the three nations, the bid guaranteed FIFA timely delivery of all venues and facilities and avoided any of the human rights issues that have plagued stadium and infrastructure construction.

In claiming that no major public expenditures would be required to stage the games, organizers drew upon public condemnation of previous MWCs in South Africa, Brazil, and Russia, and forthcoming 2022 Qatar tournament, for human rights violations, disused stadia and local community displacement.

As bid documents noted, infrastructure savings could enable enhanced social investments.

Instead of building new infrastructure that contributes to the development of football, we will invest our energy and resources towards improving and scaling existing and to-be-developed spaces and programming, and directly impacting the lives of millions of children, and thousands of communities, across the three countries (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 35).

Such assertions provided an assurance the tournament would be a commercial success, and the promise to use existing infrastructure, presented FIFA a sign of further certainty and sustainability. FIFA internal assessments subsequently marked the United Bid as the lowest risk of the two bids in all categories except political support (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018). The technical reports also scored the United Bid far higher than Morocco. The United Bid scored 4 out of 5 from FIFA, while Morocco scored 2.7 following FIFA inspections labelling it ‘high risk’. The superiority of, and certainty offered by, the United Bid was also echoed in FIFA’s official evaluation report (*Bid Evaluation Report*, 2018, p. 14). As one journalist echoed, the sheer scope of geography of infrastructure included in the United Bid made it “too big to fail” (Hall, 2018, p. 19).

Yet, stated tangible financial benefits, certainty and windfall economic benefits can easily be challenged. Even without the construction of new stadia there is scant evidence in impact case studies to support the assertion that the event would have any long-term economic benefit for the hosts (Coates, 2014). More critically, the bid ignores extant significant public investment in stadia—estimated to exceed US\$7 billion in the US alone—and the burden of externalized economic and

social costs associated with staging the games. Not unlike previous MWC bids, many *ex ante* economic impact studies, including the Boston Consulting Group's study on the 2026 MWC, are generated by consulting firms hired by interested parties and are marred by inappropriate methodology that project false economic impacts (see: Baade & Matheson, 2004; Szymanski, 2002). Baade and Matheson's (2004) *ex post* analysis of the 1994 MWC held in the US suggested that the economic impact of that event could not justify this magnitude of expenditures. Host cities for the 1994 MWC experienced a net economic loss of US\$5.5 to US\$9.3 billion, as opposed to the *ex ante* estimates of a US\$4 billion gain touted by event organizers, when tourism displacement, the substitution effect, crowding out, and the indirect economic multiplier were accounted for (Baade & Matheson, 2004). Despite bid organizers' claims, a US-based MWC, in fact, will "likely cost the United States billions of dollars in *lost economic impact*" (Coates, 2014, italics original).

Essentially, the economic analysis offered in United's official bid book reaffirms common presumptions of SME framing that hosting will, invariably, offer *economic legacy as market certainty*. In this case, that the tournament ensures FIFA and its corporate partners commercial success. Yet beyond an array of superlative projections, there is little need for guarantee and up-front accountability for the provision of assumed benefits.

Opportunity as Sporting Legacy

Akin to recent SME bids (Burgess et al., 2019; Frawley & Cush, 2011; Frawley & Hoven, 2015), the United Bid promises an event legacy based on unprecedented opportunities for health and physical activity promotion through sport. Specifically, the bid utilizes football to leave a *sporting legacy* of an inspired generation engaged in sport. In support, all three national governments outlined priorities and commitments to inspire youth, grow participation levels, and promote health and physical activity. In particular, the Canadian government promises that hosting the 2026 MWC:

serve as an inspiration for all Canadians to be active, through sport and recreation activity. The Government of Canada promotes health and physical activity for Canadians and will use the positive messages which the competition provides to encourage Canadians (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 15).

In Mexico, hosting the 2026 MWC is viewed as a way to combat declining physical activity and growing childhood obesity:

Sport in general is an important way to counteract this trend and football is the single most appealing motivation. The 2026 competition gives us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to energise the younger generation through inspirational programs linked to the 2026 FIFA World Cup. . . (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 16)

And in the US, promote healthy and active lifestyles:

Bringing the 2026 FIFA World Cup Competition and Competition-related events to North America will promote physical activity among people of all ages. It will especially encourage a new generation of our citizens to participate in activities that improve their health and wellness... (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 17).

Aside from general health promotion, each host nations offers a priority issue as a specific sporting legacy outcome. The Canadian focus is on social inclusion in sport, particularly for indigenous and minority groups; the Mexican focus is on expanding access to football for girls and women; and, the U.S. focus is providing football opportunities for underserved communities (Bid document, 2018, p. 464). The legacy centrepiece here is the creation of a new “Minutes from Soccer” program which is promised US\$20 million as part of the bid in order to build and improve safe soccer facilities for underserved populations in each country (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, pp. 463–464). In addition to developing 2,026 mini-pitches across North America, the bid also aims to align each country’s

respective football development programmes.⁸ Yet, despite promising a bid “based on facts today rather than promises in the future” (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 7), there is scant demonstration the 2026 MWC would lead to increased levels of healthy, physical activity, and discernible social change.

As seen elsewhere regarding fluid SME physical activity legacy targets (e.g., in relation the London 2012 ‘Inspire a Generation’ campaign) (Chen & Henry, 2016; Author X, Author XX & Author XXX), the ambiguity in language, policy evaluation and objective measurement is consistent with obfuscation practices within contemporary bid politics that deflect accountability and responsibility, and make it relatively easy for organizers (and post-event stakeholders) to shift and re-envision legacy achievements. Here, and comparable with other SME physical activity legacy plans, the United Bid outsources the development, implementation, and oversight of programming to regional organisations (and other sport development and/or corporate entities), and assumes simply creating more football opportunities will generate benefits that solve complicated issues of health disparities, physical inactivity, and social exclusion.

While the bid grants lip service to the notion of soccer as a catalyst for growing sports participation and social inclusion, it is largely focused on the commercial opportunities which can grow FIFA’s bottom line. As the United Bid Book attests, football has plenty of room to grow in popularity in the United States, and a second MWC hosted in the U.S. will be the “spark” and “catalyst to generating hundreds of millions of dollars that can be invested into making football in the United States more affordable...” (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, pp. 7–8).

North America is the most lucrative region in the world for football. Staging the Competition here will allow FIFA to expand into new commercial fronts and increase economic possibilities by deepening connections to existing football enthusiasts, while

⁸ Including, Canada’s *Soccer Pathway* and *Active Start Soccer Fests* programs; *Grassroots Mexico* and *Abrazos por el futbol* of the Mexican Football Federation, and the USSF’s *Soccer for Success* and *Safe Places to Play* programs.

also welcoming millions of new fans to the global football community – establishing new business and engagement models that support future organizers. (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. IV).

Citing facts, figures and metrics as evidence of market potential, the bid book purports seismic participation and fan growth in North America over the past three decades driven in large measure by a strong foundations in Mexico and the transformation of Canada and the US into mature football markets ripe for tapping.

Beyond capitalizing on consumption, the bid offers myriad options to access broadcasters and commercial partners. For FIFA, this translates as opportunity to access a powerful commercial market that will provide further global economic benefits for the football community:

We are confident that a successful 2026 FIFA World Cup in North America will provide FIFA with renewed opportunity to engage many of the largest, most influential brands in the world, in one of the largest and most influential media markets for rights fees. Moreover, FIFA will be able to enlist existing and new partners to share football with hundreds of millions of potential new players and fans, and establish new methods of engagement suited to meet the needs of 21st century audiences (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p.8).

The bid also emphasized the potential of strategic commercial and non-profit partnerships drawing from the continents “culture of innovation for the benefit of FIFA” (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 10). To these ends, and from the outset, the bid is positioned in ways that harmonize with FIFA’s desires to restore its relationships with its US global multinational partners and sponsors (specifically, Visa, McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Budweiser, and Johnson-Johnson), and aid in securing more lucrative media rights and commercial partnerships. Proposed new partners include advanced technology companies in Silicon Valley to the biotechnical universities in Canada, with possible goals of utilizing football as a “global language” for STEM education, using research and science to connect football

solutions to physical and mental health issues, spectator behaviour and public policy (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 10).

The ‘opportunity’ of the 2026 MWC is a *sporting legacy as market opportunity*. In synergy with the established sport, (physical) education and corporate nexus (Author X & Author XX), ultimately the United Bid’s general framing of sporting legacy leverages the mythologized beliefs and hegemonic values regarding sports’ health and physical activity benefits, yet masques the broader commercial imperatives and market-driven logics of a North American MWC. By creating more facilities, more people to play football, and more interest in the global game, it cultivates future consumers that can be monetized for the primary benefit of FIFA and its member associations.

Unity as Political Legacy

The United Bid presented the case for trans-continental unity as a political legacy of the 2026 MWC. It also provided a blueprint for strengthened political and economic relations between countries joint hosting MWC tournaments. As the bid outlined:

...North America has become one of the most integrated and interdependent regions in the world. Sharing 12,000 km of peaceful borders, Canada and Mexico now play vital roles in the United States’ stability, security, and prosperity. (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 103)

In addition to transnational partnership, the bid simultaneously offered transformative experiences for respective nations’ citizens.

If the three North American countries deepen their integration and cooperation, they have the potential to improve the standards of living of their citizens and those around the world for generations to come (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 104).

Echoing soft diplomacy rhetoric employed in many contemporary SME bids (see: Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Grix & Lee, 2013), organizers positioned the bid as capable of transcending political scruples to provide a common good. Bid documents cited full public support of national and local government leaders, pointing out the long and successful history of partnership, shared culture and language that transcends borders, and prosperous growth available to each country. All three federal governments committed unilateral support to the United Bid and, alongside candidate host cities, crafted statements highlighting the power of football to transform lives, promote global unity and transnational inclusivity. From Mexico City, “We will share our culture, traditions, and diversity in a sustainable, inclusive, and innovative way, inspiring our country, our region, and the world”; from Montreal “football will be the unifying thread linking all cultures and backgrounds”; and from Washington D.C., “our vision is: cultural diplomacy, uniting residents and visitors through sport” (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018: 20–21).

The Official Bid Book received further support from more than 300 high-ranking politicians, high-powered corporate executives, or well-connected members in the sport hospitality and tourism industry in local host cities. In terms of public support, the bid cited an IPSOS survey of 1,000 residents of the three nations which claimed large public support for hosting the tournament. 77% of North American residents were in favour of hosting the first ever 48-team MWC, whereas 81% believe it is good for their countries with most residents interested in the perceived economic benefits the tournament would bring. Only 7% thought hosting a bad idea. As IPSOS Spokesman Chris Jackson claimed, “There is no real opposition to speak of” (quoted in Reuters, 2017).

However, statements of political and public unity overlooked the noted criticisms by political officials over FIFA hosting requirements. Three potential host cities, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Vancouver, for example, bowed out prior to the bid’s submission because of the demands placed on host cities by FIFA. To participate in the bid, cities had to agree to non-negotiable hosting

requirements requiring cities to cover full costs of hosting the tournament. FIFA requires host cities to: grant the Swiss-based organization a full 10-year tax exemption for FIFA, the FIFA MWC entity, and the 2026 FIFA MWC Subsidiaries; establish limited tax exemptions for FIFA contractors and broadcast service providers; allow import and export of unlimited foreign currency; full copyright protection over rights and images of host cities; exemptions from labour laws and a visa-free work environment; and full taxpayer resourcing of safety and security costs (Mackin, 2018). These demands are consistent with other mega-events in which international non-government organizations like FIFA and the IOC necessitate an “event seizure” allowing them to take infrastructural, financial, and legal control of a city or nation (Müller, 2017). This often leads widespread population displacement, loss of affordable housing, weakening of civil liberties and human rights, and intensified militarization and securitization of public space (Boykoff, 2015; 2020; Horne, 2007).

Lack of unanimous support aside, the inclusion of unity as a political legacy of the 2026 MWC was striking given that commercial and diplomatic relations between the three countries have reached their lowest point in decades. The campaign and subsequent election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016 had, specifically, complicated the work of United Bid organizers and the nation’s three football federations. Moreover, continued political backlash between Trump’s policies, rhetoric, and international disputes with Mexico and Canada over trade and immigration, injected serious doubts into meanings of global unity as part of the bid’s strategic vision. Paradoxically, Trump emerged as a vocal public supporter of bid, seizing the project as opportunity to insult political opponents and advance his distinct brand of authoritarian populism (Author X & Author XX). Trump also became actively involved in securing hosting rights by directed lobbying efforts to FIFA and member associations (Author X & Author XX). In the lead-up to the official FIFA vote, for example, a bi-partisan letter drafted by 44 US Senators (26 Democrats, 17 Republicans, and 1 Independent) was sent to Trump urging him to support the United Bid (Bowden, 2018). Trump responded by: (1) writing

letters to FIFA President Gianni Infantino expressing his unwavering support for the United Bid and granting FIFA assurances of visa-free travel; (2) deploying members of his administration, son-in-law Jared Kushner and then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, to lobby foreign governments for their vote at the FIFA Congress and; (3) issued public threats via Twitter and statements promising retribution against nations that opposed the United Bid. Although violating FIFA's ethical code of conduct prohibiting direct political influence in bidding regulations, FIFA took no punitive action (Author and Author, XXXX). Amid this political landscape, bid organizers consequently hoped that the power of unity narrative would ameliorate negative perceptions about Trump, his administration and America's foreign policies.

Strategically, the United Bid acknowledged the polarized US political system and the historically low approval ratings of US Congress following Trump's contentious election. It also made explicit that Trump would not be US President during the 2026 MWC:

President Donald J. Trump's job approval currently registers at low levels in some surveys, but he enjoys significant support from his base. Due to term limits, he will not be eligible to be President in 2026 (*United 2026 Bid Book*, 2018, p. 98).

Notwithstanding these domestic political concerns, the bid reiterated axioms about the nation's favourable global reputation and citizens' historic optimism about their economic futures.

To note, over the past twenty years, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has fundamentally (re-)shaped North American economic relations, driving unprecedented integration between the developed economies of the three countries. Yet, this economic unity and strength has been threatened as Trump has recently renegotiated NAFTA provisions with his North American neighbours to increase trade barriers, impose tariffs on foreign goods, and currency and exchange rate restrictions. There is, nonetheless, little discussion in the bid of the political fallout from Trump's election and the political fracturing of North American trade and diplomatic relations. Nor is there a

discussion of how the United Bid would improve extant transnational relations. Accordingly, the shared *symbolic politics of unity* conceptualized in the bid remain (at least at this juncture) merely discursive; a symbolic re-imagining of a North American continental partnership absent of concrete diplomatic and geo-political realities.

While diplomatic and political aspirations have featured in other SME bids, the use of unity as a political legacy was a means for bid organizers to confront and break with Trump's discourse and administration and, concomitantly, offer FIFA a political legacy of diplomacy extending beyond competition cessation. Moreover, the United Bid organisers were able to leverage the contemporary political moment to assert *political legacy as market unity*. Ultimately, the joint MWC venture is a means to usher in a new era of market integration and cooperation between the three countries in pursuit of single market formation.

Political Leveraging of/beyond the 2026 United Bid

In evaluating the *politics* of the United Bid, at the outset little differentiates this bid from previous MWC bids and those of other SMEs. Despite emphasizing the uniqueness of this bid's legacies within FIFA's new integrated framework, the United Bid remains in harmony with market-driven logics of previous bids. The tournament and positioning of legacy ambitions are contextualized in the favoured economic rhetoric shared by FIFA, its members, and partners. In terms of an economic legacy, the bid offers FIFA financial opportunities, but relies on generous projections and assumptions while providing few protections for host countries to mitigate risk. Economic investment, instead, is balanced by promises of an inspirational sport participation legacy that, while socially palatable, rehearse regurgitated moral axioms that obfuscate corporate opportunism toward new generations of football consumers. Regarding political legacy, the United Bid promises aspirational global unity that

sits in uncomfortable contradistinction from the current geo-political moment and gradual evolution (real or conceptualized) of North America into a singular marketplace.

The United Bid distinguishes itself from previous MWC bids by the political leveraging of the United As One hosting vision as a strategy for advancing a *symbolic politics of global unity*. The approach intentionally attempted to gain public and political support within host nations and appeal to FIFA and its members by offering possibilities for a political legacy after the tournament, regardless of geo-political tensions of the current milieu. To United organizer's credit, their novelty was in presenting a new and robust economic and political model of tournament franchise, and a credible response to the long-enjoyed staid Euro-centric hegemonies and 'risky' offerings of Asian counterparts. Regardless of the viability and realities of legacy deliverables, the United approach reaffirmed the necessary symbiosis, and unperturbable consolidation, of legacy discourse, political leveraging and symbolic politics as SME currency. Nonetheless, as the tournament looms, and World Cup iterations continue investing in this political currency exchange, there remains much to be sceptical of.

Yet, there is already a discernible legacy that United have left in this bid process. It is not one of reinvigorated stadia, economic uplift, or enfranchised healthier football consumers. Instead, rather a more cynical contribution to legacy nomenclature. In this case, that in which legacy has been conceptualized by the audacity of symbolic political lies (including half-truths, parsimonious truths, mistruths, distractions, obfuscations and deceptions *ad nauseum*). Sustained by organisers whose success depends on regurgitation of symbolic rhetoric, stakeholders whose investments rely on public and political duping, and FIFA whose altruism it bolsters, *the legacy as lie* has become normalised and entrenched. As much a 'part of the game' as the game itself; perpetuated, accepted, and furthered in post-legacy phases and discourses as bid and host promises become poorly (if ever) monitored and evaluated, diluted, vacuous and meaningless. Even subsequent FIFA 2.0, and within other International Federations, bid processes remain largely unchanged vis-à-vis demonstrable

commitments to legacy fallacy. The question remains, thus, how might the *faux-audacity of hope* within legacy bid symbolics be resurrected, reconstituted, and revealed *anew* as we look to a context in which SMEs, their sustainability, and their ‘value-added’ ideals, remain under intense scrutiny? Such solutions will not, most likely, come from FIFA and its constituents, but rather have genesis in our continued (academic, public, media, political) scrutinies of SME’s and the global sport system.

The staging of the 2026 MWC is still a long way in the future and much can change as the tournament comes to fruition. This presents a significant limitation in terms of the relevance of this analysis as much of the bid’s proposals will continue to take shape and become realized in the forthcoming years. The authors also acknowledge a shortcoming of this study is that it is written from a decidedly American and Eurocentric perspective. Although the 2026 MWC is largely viewed as a US-centred bid, there is a greater need for interdisciplinary scholarship and research to examine the socio-political and political economic implications of the 2026 MWC inclusive of Mexican and Canadian perspectives and insights. Future research should also consider how joint hosted SMEs are experienced, negotiated, and contested by citizens of all three nations.

Funding

The authors received no external financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Baade, R., Baumann, R., & Matheson, V. (2006). Selling the big game: Estimating the economic impact of mega-events through taxable sales. *International Association of Sports Economists, Working Papers*.
- Baade, R., & Matheson, V. (2004). The quest for the Cup: Assessing the economic impact of the World Cup. *Regional Studies*, 38(4), 343–354.
- Baade, R., & Matheson, V. A. (2001). Home run or wild pitch?: Assessing the economic impact of Major League Baseball's All-Star Game. *Journal of Sports Economics*. 2(4), 307-327.
- Bid Evaluation Report*. (2018). Fédération Internationale de Football Association. <https://resources.fifa.com/image/upload/2026-fifa-world-cup-bid-evaluation-report.pdf?cloudid=yx76lnat3oingsmnlvzf>
- Black, D. (2007). The symbolic politics of sport mega-events: 2010 in comparative perspective. *Politikon*, 34(3), 261–276.
- Bosselmann, K. (2016). *The principle of sustainability: Transforming law and governance*. Routledge.
- Boykoff, J. (2013). *Celebration capitalism and the Olympic Games*. Routledge.
- Boykoff, J. (2015, October 5). *Sochi 2014: Politics, activism, and repression*. Mega-Events and Globalization.
- Boykoff, J. (2020). *Nolympians: Inside the fight against capitalist mega-sport Los Angeles, Tokyo and beyond*. Fernwood Press.
- Bowden, J (2018). Senators ask Trump to back bid to host World Cup. The Hill. Available at: <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/374943-senators-write-letter-to-trump-calling-for-bid-to-host-world-cup>
- Bradsher, K., & Panja, T. (2018, June 9). North American World Cup bid projects US\$11 billion profit for FIFA. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/sports/2026-world-cup.html>

- Brannagan, P. M., & Giulianotti, R. (2015). Soft power and soft disempowerment: Qatar, global sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals. *Leisure Studies*, 34(6), 703–719.
- BSR Report (2018). Evaluation Report of the Human Rights Strategy Submitted by 2026 FIFA World Cup Bidders. Business for Social Responsibility. New York, USA. pp. 1-31.
- Burgess, S., Bingley, S., & Urwin, G. (2019). Examining the grassroots participant legacy of major sporting 'supplemental' events. *Event Management*, 23(3), 363–378.
- Burnett, C. (2017). The Olympic movement as stakeholder in the UN–IOC partnership: Configurations in Southern Africa. *Diagoras: International Academic Journal on Olympic Studies*, 1, 35–54.
- Byun, J., Ellis, D., & Leopkey, B. (2020). The pursuit of legitimacy through strategic alliances: the examination of international joint sport event bidding. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 1-20.
- Carey, M., Mason, D. S., & Misener, L. (2011). Social responsibility and the competitive bid process for major sporting events. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 35(3), 246–263.
- Chalip, L. (2004). Beyond impact: A general model for sport event leverage". In R. by, B. W., & D. Adair (Eds.), *Sport tourism: Interrelationships, impacts and issues* (pp. 226–252). Channel View Publications.
- Chalip, L. (2006). Towards social leverage of sport events. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 11(2), 109–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14775080601155126>
- Chalip, L. (2014). From legacy to leverage. In J. Grix (Ed.), *Leveraging Legacies from Sports Mega-Events: Concepts and Cases* (pp. 2–12). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137371188_1
- Chappelet, J. (2006). The tale of three Olympic Cities—forecast for Torino on basis of Grenoble and Innsbruck. *Torino 2006 XX Winter Games Symposium, Turin, February*.

- Chen, S., & Henry, I. (2016). Evaluating the London 2012 Games' impact on sport participation in a non-hosting region: A practical application of realist evaluation'. *Leisure Studies*, 35(5), 685–707.
- Chen, S., Preuss, H., Hu, X., Kenyon, J., & Liang, X. (2019). Sport policy development in China: Legacies of Beijing's 2008 Summer Olympic Games and 2022 Winter Olympic Games. *Journal of Global Sport Management*, 1–30.
- Choudhury, P. (2018). Reviving 'public policy' and triggering 'good governance': A step towards sustainability. In A. Singh, M. Punia, H. N., & T. Singh (Eds.), *Development and Disaster Management* (pp. 123–134). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Coates, D. (2006). The tax benefits of hosting the Super Bowl and the MLB All-Star Game: The Houston experience. *International Journal of Sport Finance*, 1(4), 239–252.
- Coates, D. (2014). *What Americans Need to Know about a US World Cup Bid*. Working Paper. https://economics.umbc.edu/files/2014/09/wp_10_121.pdf
- Coates, D., & Matheson, V. (2011). Mega-events and housing costs: Raising the rent while raising the roof? *The Annals of Regional Science*, 46(1), 119–137. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00168-009-0340-5>
- Cornelissen, S. (2004). "It's Africa's turn!" The narratives and legitimations surrounding the Moroccan and South African bids for the 2006 and 2010 FIFA finals. *Third World Quarterly*, 25(7), 1293–1309.
- Crompton, J. L. (2006). Economic impact studies: Instruments for political shenanigans? *Journal of Travel Research*, 45(1), 67–82.
- Dwyer, C. (2017). U.S., Canada, and Mexico declare combined bid to host the World Cup. NPR. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/04/10/523303357/u-s-canada-and-mexico-declare-combined-bid-to-host-the-world-cup>

- Ergon Report (2018). Human Rights in Canada, Mexico, and the USA in the Context of a Potential FIFA 2026 World Cup Competition. Ergon Associates, Inc. London, UK. pp. 1-155.
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80–92.
- FIFA 2.0—*Vision for the Future*. (2016). Fédération Internationale de Football Association.
- Frawley, S., & Cush, A. (2011). Major sport events and participation legacy: The case of the 2003 Rugby World Cup. *Managing Leisure*, 16(1), 65–76.
- Frawley, S., & Hoven, P. (2015). Football participation legacy and Australia’s qualification for the 2006 Football World Cup. *Soccer & Society*, 16(4), 482–492.
- Gaffney, C. (2010). Mega-events and socio-spatial dynamics in Rio de Janeiro, 1919-2016. *Journal of Latin American Geography*, 9(1), 7–29. Giulianotti, R. (2011). Sport mega events, urban football carnivals and securitised com- modification: the case of the English premier league. *Urban Studies*, 48(15), 3293–3310.
- Giulianotti, R., Armstrong, G., Hales, G., & Hobbs, D. (2014). Sport Mega-Events and Public Opposition A Sociological Study of the London 2012 Olympics. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 66(1), 118-140.
- Goff, S. (2017). U.S., Mexico and Canada formall announce joint bid for 2026 World Cup. The Washington Post. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/soccer-insider/wp/2017/04/10/u-s-mexico-and-canada-formally-announce-joint-bid-for-2026-world-cup/>
- Goff, S. (2018). U.S., Mexico and Canada win joint bid for 2026 World Cup, topping Morocco in FIFA vote. *The Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/soccer->

- insider/wp/2018/06/13/u-s-mexico-and-canada-win-joint-bid-for-2026-world-cup-topping-morocco-in-fifa-vote/ (accessed 18 December 2019).
- Gratton, C., & Preuss, H. (2008). Maximizing Olympic impacts by building up legacies. *International Journal of The History of Sport*, 25, 1922–1938.
- GRI Referenced Report. (2018). Prepared in accordance with Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Guidelines by United Bid 2026 Committee. <https://resources.fifa.com/image/upload/gri-referenced-report-united-bid.pdf?cloudid=msbdtfolv8bozcenvxlda>
- Grix, J. (2012). ‘Image’ leveraging and sports mega-events: Germany and the 2006 FIFA World Cup. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 17(4), 289–312.
- Grix, J., & Brannagan, P. M. (2016). Of mechanisms and myths: Conceptualizing states’ “soft power” strategies through Sports Mega-Events. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 27(2), 251–272.
- Grix, J., & Houlihan, B. (2014). Sports mega-events as part of a nation’s soft power strategy: The cases of Germany (2006) and the UK (2012). *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 16(4), 572–596.
- Grix, J., & Lee, D. (2013). Soft Power, sports mega-events and emerging states: The lure of the politics of attraction. *Global Society*, 27(4), 521–536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2013.827632>
- Gruneau, R., & Horne, J. (2015). *Mega-Events and globalization: Capital and spectacle in a changing world order*. Routledge.
- Hall, M. (2018). Are cities starting to see World Cup hosting duties as a poisoned chalice? *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/mar/19/are-cities-starting-to-see-world-cup-hosting-duties-as-a-poisoned-chalice>
- Hayes, G., & Horne, J. (2011). Sustainable development, shock and awe? London 2012 and civil society. *Sociology*, 45(5), 749–764.

- Hayes, G., & Karamichas, J. (2011). *Olympic Games, mega-events and civil societies: Globalization, environment, resistance*. Springer.
- Hiller, H. H. (1995). Conventions as mega-events: A new model for convention-host city relationships. *Tourism Management, 16*(5), 375–379.
- Hiller, H. H. (1998). Assessing the impact of mega-events: A linkage model. *Current Issues in Tourism, 1*(1), 47–57.
- Hiller, H. H. (2000a). Mega-events, urban boosterism and growth Strategies: An analysis of the objectives and legitimations of the Cape Town 2004 Olympic Bid. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 24*(2), 449–458.
- Hiller, H. H. (2000b). Toward an urban sociology of mega-events. In *Research in Urban Sociology* (Vol. 5, pp. 181–205). Emerald (MCB UP).
- Holt, R., & Ruta, D. (2015). Introduction: Sport, Legacy, and Leadership. In R. Holt & D. Ruta (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Sport and Legacy: Meeting the Challenge of Major Sports Events* (pp. 1–15). Routledge.
- Horne, J. (2007). The Four ‘Knowns’ of Sports Mega-Events. *Leisure Studies, 26*(1), 81–96.
- Horne, J. (2017). Sports mega-events – three sites of contemporary political contestation. *Sport in Society, 20*(3), 328–340.
- Horne, J., & Manzenreiter, W. (2006). *Sports mega-events: Social scientific analyses of a global phenomenon*. Wiley.
- Horne, J., & Whannel, G. (2016). *Understanding the Olympics*. Routledge.
- Lenskyj, H. (2000). *Inside the Olympic industry: Power, politics, and activism*. SUNY Press.
- Lenskyj, H. (2008). *Olympic industry resistance: Challenging Olympic power and propaganda*. SUNY Press.
- Leopkey, B., Salisbury, P., & Tinaz, C. (2019). Examining legacies of unsuccessful Olympic bids: Evidence from a cross-case analysis. *Journal of Global Sport Management, 1*–28.

- Lindsey, I. (2008). Conceptualizing sustainability in sports development. *Leisure Studies*, 27(3), 279–294.
- Ludvigsen, J. A. (2019, March). “Continent-wide” sports spectacles: The “multiple host format” of Euro 2020 and United 2026 and its implications. In *Journal of Convention & Event Tourism* (Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 163-181). Routledge.
- Luce, E. (2018, June 21). The rise of a new generation of anti-Americans. *The Financial Times*.
<https://www.ft.com/content/ae6d2aca-7530-11e8-b6ad-3823e4384287>
- Mackin, B. (2018, March 15). Exclusive: FIFA demands 2026 World Cup bidders guarantee a tax holiday, copyright protection and exemption from labour laws. *TheBreaker*.
<https://thebreaker.news/news/exclusive-fifa-demands/>
- Maennig, W., & Zimbalist, A. S. (2012). *International Handbook on the Economics of Mega Sporting Events*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Müller, M. (2017). How mega-events capture their hosts: Event seizure and the World Cup 2018 in Russia. *Urban Geography*, 38(8), 1113–1132.
- Murray, C. (2015, August 11). Is the US ready – or even willing – to host the 2026 World Cup? *The Guardian*.
<http://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2015/aug/10/is-the-us-ready-or-even-willing-to-host-the-2026-world-cup>
- O’Bonsawin, C. M. (2010). No Olympics on stolen native land?: Contesting Olympic narratives and asserting indigenous rights within the discourse of the 2010 Vancouver Games. *Sport in Society*, 13(1), 143–156.
- O’Brien, D., & Chalip, L. (2007). Executive training exercise in sport event leverage. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 1(4), 296–304.
- Porter, P. (1999). Mega-Sports Events as Municipal Investments: A Critique of Impact Analysis. In J. Fizez, E. Gustafson, & L. Hadley (Eds.), *Sport Economics: Current Research*. Praeger Press.

- Preuss, H. (2007). The conceptualization and measurement of mega sport event legacies. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 12(3–4), 207–228.
- Preuss, H. (2011). A method for calculating the crowding-out effect in sport mega-event impact studies: The 2010 FIFA World Cup. *Development Southern Africa*, 28(3), 367–385.
- Redeker, . (2008). Sport as an opiate of international relations: The myth and illusion of sport as a tool of foreign diplomacy. *Sport in Society*, 11(4), 494–500.
- Reuters. (2017, October 24). Broad public support for North American World Cup bid. *Reuters*. <https://af.reuters.com/article/idAFL2N1MZ1FF>
- Roche, M. (2000). *Mega-Events and Modernity: Olympics and expos in the growth of global culture*. Routledge.
- Smith, A. (2014). Leveraging sport mega-events: new model or convenient justification?. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 6(1), 15-30.
- Solberg, H. A. (2017). Mega events: Why cities are willing to host them, despite the lack of economic benefits. In *Legacies and Mega Events* (pp. 43–59).
- Sugden, J., & Tomlinson, A. (1998). *FIFA and the contest for world football: Who rules the peoples' game?* Polity Press.
- Sugden, J., & Tomlinson, A. (2013). International power struggles in the governance of world football. In J. Horne & W. Manzenreiter (Eds.), *Japan, Korea and the 2002 World Cup*. Routledge.
- Sugden, J., & Tomlinson, A. (2017). *Football, Corruption and Lies: Revisiting "Badfellas", the book FIFA tried to ban*. Routledge.
- Szymanski, S. (2002). The Economic Impact of the World Cup. *World Economics*, 3(1), 169–177.
- Tomlinson, A. (2014a). *FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association): The Men, the Myths and the Money*. Routledge.
- Tomlinson, A. (2014b). The supreme leader sails on: Leadership, ethics and governance in FIFA. *Sport in Society*, 17(9), 1155–1169.

United 2026 Bid Book. (2018). Fédération Internationale de Football Association.

<https://img.fifa.com/image/upload/w3yjeu7dadt5erw26wmu.pdf>

Wenner, L. A., & Billings, A. C. (2017). *Sport, Media and Mega-Events*. Taylor & Francis.