

# Planning a FIFA World Cup amidst a Pandemic – The Case of Qatar 2022

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## Abstract

The Coronavirus outbreak has had wide reaching impacts on society globally. Nowhere is it more apparent than in sport, and sporting events in particular. In an effort to limit the spread of the virus and to conform with social distancing regulations, major and mega- sport events across the globe have been cancelled, postponed or rescheduled including the biggest sporting event to have been hosted in 2020, the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games. While the other sport mega-event of a similar magnitude as that of the Olympics, the FIFA World Cup is only scheduled for 2022 in Qatar, it has also been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Qatar Airways International Tournament featuring four European countries which was due to take place before Euro 2020 was cancelled. There have also been positive cases amongst construction workers across three stadium projects which has resulted in mitigation measures being implemented. This book chapter explores some of the challenges of planning a sport mega-event amidst the pandemic. It draws on both primary and secondary data. Primary data included an online interview schedule with key informants regarding how they are adapting to planning the 2022 World Cup within the current context. Challenges and opportunities are also explored.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 2022 FIFA World Cup, Qatar, planning, sport mega-event

## **1 Introduction**

The Coronavirus outbreak has had wide reaching impacts on society globally, with a complete stoppage of competitive sports worldwide (Evans *et al.* 2020). In an attempt to limit the spread of the virus and to conform with social distancing regulations, major and mega- sport events across the globe have been cancelled, postponed or rescheduled. Two of the biggest sport events in the world, commonly referred to as mega-events; the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup were scheduled to take place in 2020 and 2022, respectively. The International Olympic Committee took a decision on the 24 March 2020 to postpone the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games (Parnell, Widdop, Bond & Wilson 2020) which was due to occur in August 2020. While the FIFA World Cup is only scheduled for the end of 2022 in Qatar, it has also been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both mega-events are highly networked in their nature given the multiple stakeholders (Parnell *et al.* 2020) including players, teams, fans, media, international sport federations and sponsors. Both mega-events also involve a significant amount of travel from different countries, with travel being identified as one of the major mechanisms for disease transmission (Tian *et al.* 2020). This book chapter will explore some of the challenges of planning a mega-event amidst the pandemic by focusing on the 2022 FIFA World Cup as a case study. In order to provide a context to Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the country's use of sport and sport mega-events in particular, as part of its economic diversification strategy is presented, followed by a brief overview of the bidding and planning of this mega-event. The impact of COVID-19 is then explored by drawing on both primary and secondary data. Primary data included online interview schedules with key informants regarding major challenges and opportunities, and how they are adapting to planning the 2022 FIFA World Cup within the current context. Finally, some concluding remarks are offered in relation to the likely impact of COVID-19 on the hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

## **2 Background to the Hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar**

The popularity of sport worldwide has led to its emergence as a global business and an important component of national economies (Zhang, Mastromartino, Qian & Nauright 2018). Furthermore, technological advancements have fuelled the growth of the sport spectatorship market as sport consumers can

watch their favourite teams compete on the global stage. This enhanced level of spectatorship has increased the value of organising and hosting mega sport events such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympics Games. The significant exposure stemming from the globalisation of sport has led to many countries looking to host these events to leverage the popularity of sport and use it as a platform to achieve a range of political and socio-economic objectives. It is therefore necessary to view Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup within the broader context of sport as a tool for economic diversification.

### ***2.1 Sport as an Economic Diversification Strategy in Qatar***

Qatar is a small country in the Gulf region with a population of nearly 3 million (2 807 805 estimated by the Planning and Statistics Authority at the end of May 2020), of which only 10% are Qataris (Snoj 2019). Qatar's immense reserve of natural gas underpins its economy (Wazir 2013). Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa who was the ruler of Qatar until June 2013 encouraged transition towards a diversified post-oil economy (Wazir 2013). Sport has been recognised as a significant driver towards economic diversification.

The 2006 Asian Games in Doha is regarded as a turning point in Qatar's strategy for hosting major international sport events (Amara 2013), with the Qatar Olympic Committee (2011:10) underscoring its role in changing 'Qatar's image in the world'. Foley, McGillivray, and McPherson (2012) analysed how Qatar was able to use this event to not only enhance its global reputation as well as set it apart from its neighbours. Over the years, Qatar made significant investments in sport as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Major investments in sport in Qatar**

| Year | Investment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2004 | The development of sport and related facilities such as the Aspire Sport Academy launched in 2004 to provide high performance training and high school education to athletes with sporting potential and serves as the catalyst to the development of Aspire Zone (a sport precinct) |
| 2006 | Hosting of the 2006 Asian Games provides platform for the hosting of numerous major and mega- sport events in Doha                                                                                                                                                                   |

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|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2009      | Development of Aspetar, the first specialised sports medicine hospital in the Gulf region and accredited as the FIFA Centre for Medical Excellence in the Aspire Zone                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 2010      | Successful bid to host 2022 FIFA World Cup, which was announced by FIFA on 2 December 2010                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 2011      | Hosting of the 2011 AFC Asian Cup, which is often considered as a launchpad for Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 2011      | Acquisition of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) football club by Qatar Sports Investment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 2012      | Launch of beIN Sports, which has dominated the broadcasting rights in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region since its inception                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 2017-2018 | Ongoing international sport sponsorship investments by Qatar Airways including becoming an official airline partner for the FIA Formula E Championship in 2017, primary shirt sponsor for A.S. Roma and Boca Juniors in 2018 and premium partner for PSG in 2020                                                                                                                 |
| 2018      | Launch of Qatar SportsTech, a sports technology accelerator to attract the best sports tech startups in the world to Qatar, which was initiated by the Qatar Development Bank, powered by Startupbootcamp and supported by the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, Qatar Financial Center, Aspire Zone Foundation, BeIN Sports, and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry |
| 2019      | Hosting of the International Amateur Athletics Federation (now known as World Athletics) World Championships                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

Reiche (2014) adds that Qatar's investment in sport sets out to achieve both domestic and foreign policy goals including nation-building, promoting and developing a healthy society, developing infrastructure and diversifying the economy. This is evident in the Sports Sector Strategy (SSS) (2011-2016) developed by the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) (2011). SSS is one of the 14 sector strategies integrated into the National Development Strategy (NDS), and highlights many of the potential roles of sport and the 2022 FIFA World Cup in particular, can play in diversifying Qatar's economy.

Additionally, the SSS is also aligned with Qatar's National Vision 2030 which highlighted the role of sport within the pillars of human development (healthy and active lifestyles), social development (community cohesion and international solidarity), economic development (diversify economy through sport events and sport-related services) and environmental development (utilising sport to create environmental awareness and utilising environmentally-friendly sport facilities and goods) (QOC 2011). Reiche's (2014) analysis of why Qatar is investing so heavily in the sport sector underscores Qatar's efforts to promote domestic elite sporting success, international sport investments and the hosting of mega sporting events; the latter which is discussed further next.

## ***2.2 Qatar's Pursuit of Sport Mega-events***

While there has been increasing criticism of sport mega-events in the developing world in particular, they have become an object of policy for many emerging nations (Cornelissen 2007; Reiche 2014) as is the case with Qatar. Holt and Ruta (2015) contend that emerging countries' desire to bid for and host sport mega-events arises from geo-political considerations. Sport mega-events are pursued by these countries to enhance their global visibility and as a catalyst for socio-economic development (Cornelissen, Swart & Bob 2011; Bek, Merendino, Swart & Timms 2019). Sport mega-events have received increasing attention as platforms for public diplomacy or 'soft power' (Black 2007; Horne 2015; Swart, Moyo & Hattingh 2019), nation-building (Cornelissen *et al.* 2011; Al Emadi, Kaplanidou, Diop, Sagas, Le & Al-Ali Mustafa 2016) and nation branding or place branding (Knott, Fyall & Jones 2015; Knott & Swart 2018). Heslop, Nadeau, O'Reilly and Armenakyan (2013) emphasise that while a sport mega-event strategy as a tool to fast-track re-imaging and reputation enhancement can be a high-risk strategy for emerging nations; there seem to be positive spin-offs for these nations as tourism destinations.

Doha has made two unsuccessful attempts to host the Olympic Games. In 2007, the country announced its bid for the 2016 Games but was not shortlisted as the Candidate City in 2008 (Kelso 2008). In an attempt to learn from its failed bid, Doha announced its bid for the 2020 Games. However, it failed once again to become a Candidate City when the International Olympic Committee selected Istanbul, Tokyo and Madrid as Candidate Cities in 2012 (LaMonica 2012). Nevertheless, it had succeeded in its attempt to bring the

FIFA World Cup to a Middle Eastern, Arab and Muslim country for the first time when, in December 2010, it was awarded the right to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. A brief overview of the 2022 FIFA World Cup is presented next.

### **3 Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup**

The 2022 FIFA World Cup is to be hosted in Qatar from the 21 November to 18 December. The Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy (SC) (n.d.b.) was instituted in 2011 and is responsible for 2022 FIFA World Cup host country planning and operations. SC's mission is 'to share Qatar's unique identity with the world through amazing FIFA World Cup experiences that will connect people like never before' (SC, n.d.a.). The 2022 FIFA World Cup is viewed as an opportunity to fast-track 'progress towards achieving national development goals and create a lasting legacy for Qatar, the Middle East, Asia and the world' (SC, n.d.b.). The 2022 FIFA World Cup will be the most compact World Cup ever staged, with three host cities (Al Khor, Doha and Al Wakrah) and eight stadiums (Al Bayt, Al Janoub, Al Rayyan, Al Thumama, Education City, Khalifa International, Lusail and Ras Abu Aboud stadiums) (FIFA, n.d.). In order to achieve the national development goals and ensure a lasting legacy of the event, several programmes have been initiated, including Generation Amazing (social legacy), Challenge 22 (human legacy), Workers' Welfare (social legacy), and the establishment of the Josoor Institute (economic legacy and the development of human capital) (SC, n.d.c.).

As mentioned above, bidding for and hosting of mega-events can be viewed as a high-risk strategy for emerging nations. In the case of Qatar, while there has been some positive media coverage of its successful bid (Scharfenort 2012), there has also been a widespread criticism of the decision, especially in western media (Reiche 2014). Negative international media coverage has generally focused on the 'kafala' or sponsorship system for migrant workers. This system emerged in West Asia in the 1950s to regulate employer relations with migrant workers and is common practice in the Gulf countries (Migrant Forum in Asia, n.d.). Under this system, a migrant worker's immigration status is legally bound to the employer or sponsor for the duration of the contract. This system has been criticized as it generally fails to protect the rights and welfare of migrant workers and favours the rights of employers (Migrant Forum in Asia, n.d.). In order to address the criticism in relation to workers, the SC developed a Workers' Charter in 2013 and Workers' Welfare Standards

in 2014 to ensure the health, well-being, and safety and security of workers involved in the 2022 FIFA World Cup (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, n.d.).

The 25 February 2020 marked the 1,000 days until kick-off of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Milestones achieved included the completion of Khalifa International and Al Janoub stadiums, with two more stadiums (Education City, –Al Rayyan and Al Bayt) due to be inaugurated later during 2020 (SC 2020). In addition, a new metro system is already in operation and was used successfully during the FIFA Club World Cup which was hosted in December 2019. The second edition of this event is also due to be hosted in December 2020. These events are regarded as important occasions to test stadium, event management and operations in new stadiums, with a view to further enhancement for the main event (SC 2020).

However, on the 1 March 2020, it was announced that season's opening of MotoGP in Qatar will be cancelled due to concerns regarding the outbreak of COVID-19, an increase in infections in neighbouring Iran as well as in Japan and northern Italy where many teams are based (Duncan 2020). With this in mind, attention is turned specifically to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

#### **4 The Impact of COVID-19 on the 2022 FIFA World Cup**

Due to the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and its highly contagious nature, sport organisations around the world have postponed or cancelled major and mega- sport events (Parnell *et al.* 2020). While the sporting world has witnessed the disruption of events due to previous health crises such as the Ebola virus (2015 Africa Cup of Nations) and the Zika virus (Rio 2016 Olympics) (Parnell *et al.* 2020), never have we witnessed such devastating impact as is the case with COVID-19. Miles and Shipway (2020: 538) contend that 'the escalating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic .... effectively decimated the global calendar of sport events from March 2020 onwards'. As highlighted above, it was in fact on the 1 March 2020 that Qatar announced the cancellation of the MotoGP season opener which was scheduled to take place on the 8 March 2020. Qatar was, therefore, one of the first countries where major international sport events were impacted. As such, various measures were implemented to curb the spread of COVID-19, which have also impacted the planning of the 2022 FIFA World Cup as highlighted next.

## ***4.1 Impact of COVID-19 on the planning of the 2022 FIFA World Cup***

Sport mega-events being large-scale events have numerous stakeholders, all of whom are likely to be affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by the global crisis. This drives us to make an attempt in understanding the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak in Qatar's planning of the 2022 FIFA World Cup by drawing on primary and secondary data. With two years of event planning time ahead, Qatar has the opportunity to plan appropriately to minimise the impact of COVID-19. This section reflects on the current impact of COVID-19 on the planning of the 2022 FIFA World Cup to date, utilising secondary data sources, primarily newspaper articles as well as primary data collected via an online interview schedule of key informants targeted at employees of the SC and related stakeholders, with some being associated with the planning for the 2022 FIFA World Cup since its establishment in 2011.

### ***4.1.1 Cancellation of Test Events***

Shortly after the cancellation of the MotoGP season, on the 11 March 2020, it was revealed that the Qatar Airways International Tournament featuring four European countries (Croatia, Portugal, Belgium and Switzerland) which was due to take place in preparation for Euro 2020 would also be cancelled (Reuters 2020a). The event was due to take place in Qatar during 26-30 March. Events such as these form a crucial component of test events which serve to trial tournament operations and facilities, including transport and accommodation. It remains to be seen how other planned events will unfold with the second edition of the FIFA Club World Cup due to take place in December 2020.

### ***4.1.2 Positive Cases amongst Construction Workers***

On the 17 April 2020, Goal (2020a) reported that the SC confirmed that two staff of one of their contractors and six workers from three World Cup stadium construction sites (Al Thumama, Al Rayyan & Al Bayt stadia) were diagnosed with COVID-19. The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre announced (2020) that in early March there were already reports of sudden increases in confirmed cases of workers quarantined in a labour camp due to conditions being conducive to the spread of COVID-19. They further report that at the

end of March, the Qatari Government had published an advisory notice which addressed a range of concerns including ‘the prevention of infection, provision of medical services to workers and payment of wages in full during the outbreak’.

Middle East Eye (MEE) and Agencies (2020) stated that Qatar has recorded one of the world’s highest per capita COVID-19 infection rates with 3.3 percent of its 2.75 million population having tested positive for the disease. It is, therefore, not surprising that this has spilled over to workers involved in construction of the World Cup-related projects with AFP news agency reporting 1,102 COVID-19 cases, with 121 infections still active as of 25 June (MEE and Agencies 2020). They further reported that the first death of an engineer involved in the construction of tournament-related venues, took place on the 11 June. While construction work continues, ‘Qatar said it removed high-risk workers from projects on full pay and imposed distancing rules in work facilities’ (MEE and Agencies 2020). The secretary-general of the SC also indicated that many employees have been working from home since the middle of March (Goal 2020b). While the secretary-general of the SC has acknowledged that they are working at a slower pace he highlighted that with two and a half years prior to kick-off, 80% of the venues have already been completed (Aljazeera 2020). The 15 June saw the third venue, Education City Stadium, being launched virtually and, given the circumstances, dedicated to COVID-19 frontline workers (Reuters 2020b). The next section highlights key challenges and opportunities that emerged from the key informants.

### **4.1.3 Key Challenges**

All respondents of our online interview schedule agreed that the pandemic would have negligible or moderate impact on the planning of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Most anticipate that the key challenges in planning of the event would be related to the reduction in the available workforce; maintenance of social distancing and safe sanitization practices among workers, fans, volunteers, and spectators; restricted international travel and mobility; extended lockdown, accommodation, ticketing, security, testing and operational experience in the rapidly evolving scenario. Interestingly, one of the respondents believes that the event being scheduled in 2022 is unlikely to be impacted, while another believes that with advancement in technology it is possible to surmount the anticipated challenges. Interestingly, according to one of the

respondents, the event will only be impacted if a vaccine is not successfully developed before the event, and under such a scenario, the event organisers can learn from the Tokyo Olympics scheduled to begin on 23 July 2021. The latter view echoes the Secretary General's sentiments who indicated, 'We are maybe in a better position than most in the sense that we have two years where we can learn from other people's experiences' (Associated Press 2020).

This quickly developing situation has brought about a paradigm shift in how organisations operate and function to deal with the crisis the world is grappling with (McKinsey & Company 2020), and is reflective of the responses to the planning of the 2022 FIFA World Cup too. All respondents are adhering to the rules and safety regulations proposed by the government and the World Health Organisation while performing their event-related planning. Although some respondents have delayed certain activities such as recruiting workforces and face-to-face meetings, others have opted for online meetings and trainings while working remotely from their home, using technology and IT tools, and developing plans to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

#### **4.1.4 Opportunities**

Most of the respondents believe that any crisis is a flip side of opportunity. According to them, the on-going global crisis would lead to better event planning and operational activities; ensure improved safety and healthcare facilities; secure supply chains; development of software related to virtual and augmented reality; create scope of engaging with fans through virtual interactions and social media; lead to digitisation in terms of e-tickets and virtual conferences without the need to travel internationally, thus making work more convenient than before.

Despite uncertainties and apparent challenges, the respondents unanimously believe that the situation, being dynamic, needs to be patiently followed through, and with appropriate strategic planning Qatar can successfully host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. In fact, the sentiment that the nation is already way ahead in its event planning stage, as highlighted previously, was also mentioned and thus it is viewed that the 2022 FIFA World Cup is unlikely to get affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, with two years of planning time still ahead, and an opportunity to learn from the Tokyo Olympics, Qatar will likely be able to adapt itself to accommodate changes that might be needed to host the event in 2022, if the global crisis is under control

through the successful development of vaccination and medication.

## **5 Conclusion**

This book chapter explores the initial impact of COVID-19 on the 2022 FIFA World Cup in relation to the planning of this mega-event, in particular.

While COVID-19 has impacted the planning of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, especially in relation to the cancellation of test events, the slowing down of construction and related planning activities due to positive cases amongst workers and mitigation measures adopted to reduce the spread of the virus, most key informants believed that the impact was negligible to moderate due to Qatar being ahead of its planning schedule. COVID-19 has also led to changes in the planning and operations of mega-events with greater adoption of technological solutions for both planning the event and opportunities for enhancing event-related services via digitisation.

The findings reflect Miles and Shipway's (2020) concept of sport event and venue resilience to enhance the understanding of crisis and disaster management at international sport events and related venues, with a view to improving practice so that international sport events are more resilient in the future. With some countries returning to sport amidst fears of a second-wave, it is prudent to understand the likely impact of COVID-19 on the hosting on the World Cup, especially within the context of a global economic recession. This also extends to being better prepared to handle future crises and disasters that may impact the sporting world.

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