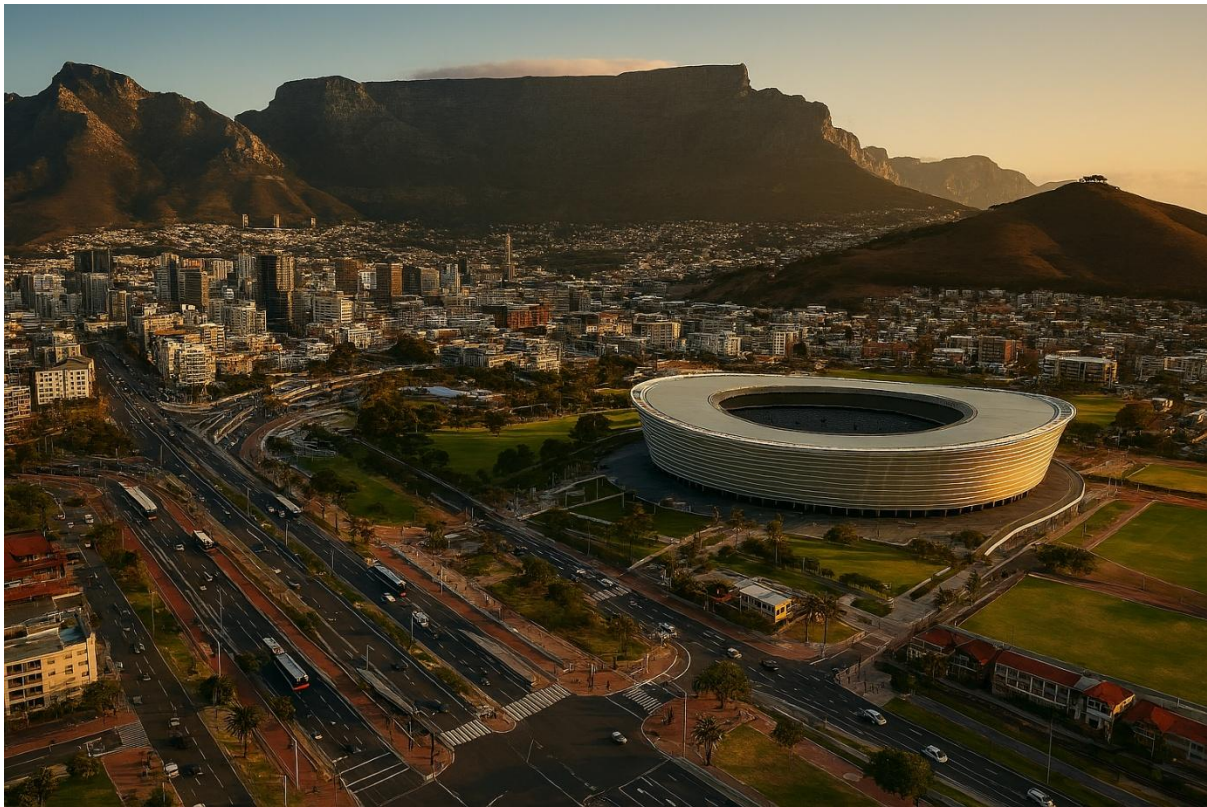


Mega-Events as Development Policy?

Cape Town's Legacy 16 Years After the World Cup

Daniel Ghassemi, 29.07.2026



Introduction

On Thursday, 11 June, the moment had finally arrived: in the opening match of the 2026 FIFA World Cup in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, host nation Mexico faced South Africa at Mexico City's Azteca Stadium.

For true football fans, this scenario may have felt like a *déjà vu*. While this year's encounter marked the opening match of the World Cup with the largest number of participating nations in history, the same fixture 16 years earlier also kicked off the first World Cup ever held on African soil: the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa.

Although considerable time has passed since then, many still remember this historic event, not least because of Siphiwe Tshabalala's iconic opening goal. Before the eyes of the world, he scored the first World Cup goal ever on African soil for the "Bafana Bafana"

("The Boys," the nickname of South Africa's men's national football team), setting the tone for a vibrant World Cup summer accompanied by the distinctive sound of the vuvuzela.

Unlike South Africa's defeat in this year's opening match, expectations in 2010 extended far beyond the sporting dimension. They reflected South Africa's hope that the country would continue to benefit from investments made for the mega-event long after the final whistle. In preparation for the tournament, the host cities invested not only in newly constructed stadiums such as Green Point Stadium in Cape Town, but also in public infrastructure, including roads and rail transport. According to the City of Cape Town's 2009/10 Annual Report, investment associated with World Cup preparations amounted to approximately €650 million. Of this, around €230 million was allocated to Green Point Stadium and roughly €30 million to the redevelopment of Green Point Urban Park. Another €16 million was spent on bridges and roads in the city centre to improve circulation around both the stadium and the downtown area. The Integrated Rapid Transit system and MyCiTi bus services also received substantial support, with approximately €68 million invested.¹

But what remains today, 16 years later, of this new infrastructure? Did the World Cup, as a mega-event of global significance, provide Cape Town with a lasting opportunity to advance urban development through infrastructure investment, or did the momentum fade? To what extent can successes, or their limitations, be attributed to political governance and decision-making?

The World Cup as a Political Development Project

Beyond its sporting dimension, hosting a World Cup also carries a significant political component. Political authorities play a decisive role in creating the framework necessary for an event of such magnitude. While the tournament was undoubtedly a global sporting spectacle, it also became a historic symbol intended to demonstrate that Africa was capable of successfully organizing major international events.²

The project's objectives can be divided into two overarching goals: **domestic development** and **international image-building**. South Africa sought not only to benefit from investment and tourism in order to foster sustainable economic development, but also to transform global perceptions of Africa.

¹ City of Cape Town (2010): *Annual Report 2009/10*. Cape Town. Available online at: <https://resource.capetown.gov.za/documentcentre/Documents/City%20research%20reports%20and%20review/AnnualReport0910.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2026).

² DIE ZEIT (2010): *Development Policy: Why South Africa Should Receive an Award*. Available online at: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2010-06/suedafrika-risiko-wm> (accessed 29 June 2026).

The country approached the World Cup with highly ambitious political objectives. By 2010, South Africa intended to provide ten world-class stadiums³, while the country's aging transportation system was likewise expected to achieve "world-class" status in time for the tournament.⁴

According to various estimates, public and private investments associated with the event and its intended long-term development reached between 33 and 50 billion rand, equivalent today to approximately €1.6-2.6 billion.⁵ Other estimates suggest that the escalating costs of constructing and modernizing transport infrastructure and stadiums ultimately approached €4 billion.

Former Justice Minister Jeff Radebe later described the improved transportation infrastructure as the "greatest legacy of the World Cup." Yet the tournament was also expected to strengthen a shared national identity and create approximately 129,000 new jobs, thereby generating positive effects on GDP and tax revenues.⁴

Given the billions invested in domestic development and the effort to reshape international perceptions of Africa, the 2010 World Cup was arguably less a sporting event than a state-led infrastructure and modernization project.

Cape Town as a Case Study

Particular attention is given to Cape Town as the case study for this analysis. As one of the nine host cities of the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the metropolitan city of Cape Town in the Western Cape Province constructed the iconic Green Point Stadium specifically for the tournament. To this day, the stadium remains a defining feature of the city's skyline and can accommodate up to 68,000 spectators. The price tag amounted to approximately €220 million.⁶ Yet beyond the stadium itself, the record of successful and sustainable infrastructure investments, as well as their limitations in generating long-term benefits, presents a mixed picture.

Among the more successful investments with enduring value were the modernization of the airport, roads, and rail infrastructure, which improved transport connections to and within the city even after the World Cup had ended.⁷ Transportation challenges were

³ **STERN.de** (2010): *2010 World Cup: Stadium Construction "Made in Germany"*. Available online at: <https://www.stern.de> (accessed 29 June 2026).

⁴ "2010 World Cup: Roads of Hope." Available online at: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/sport/strassen-der-hoffnung-1509220.html> (accessed 29 June 2026).

⁵ **fairunterwegs** (2010): *The 2010 World Cup in South Africa: Expectations and Realities*. Available online at: <https://fairunterwegs.org/wm-2010-in-suedafrika-erwartungen-und-realitaeten/> (accessed 29 June 2026).

⁶ **Kapstadt.de** (n.d.): *Green Point Stadium*. Available at: <https://www.kapstadt.de/lifestyle/sport/fussball/green-point-stadion> (accessed 29 June 2026).

⁷ **Embassy of South Africa in the Federal Republic of Germany** (2010): *FIFA World Cup 2010*. Available at: <https://www.suedafrika.org/archiv/fifa-wm-2010/fifa-wm-2010> (accessed 29 June 2026).

already complex before the tournament. The spatial and social segregation created during the apartheid era continues to affect South African residents today. For example, lower-income populations living on the urban periphery often must travel long distances through an inadequately developed public transport system to reach the city centre.

Road safety also represented a major challenge. According to the World Health Organization, around 45 people died every day on South Africa's approximately 75,000 kilometres of roads in 2010. While wealthier residents primarily relied on private vehicles according to the official *Road Condition Report*, many others remained dependent on deteriorating public transport services or overburdened minibus taxi operators. Consequently, substantial investments in public transportation infrastructure became indispensable in the run-up to the World Cup.

The primary objective was to reduce accidents, particularly those involving pedestrians and cyclists, by improving overall road safety. Policymakers also aimed to reduce the number of vehicles on the roads and promote more regulated driving behaviour. Improved lighting and upgraded transport stations were expected to lower crime rates along public transport corridors. In addition, expanding public transportation and reducing private vehicle usage were intended to improve environmental sustainability. In the long term, these measures aimed to decrease transport-related CO₂ emissions.

In Cape Town, this led to the creation of the integrated regional bus system **MyCiTi**, which initially comprised 43 Volvo buses and enabled rapid travel across the city using dedicated bus lanes. A direct bus connection to the airport was also introduced. Stations were equipped with surveillance cameras, security personnel, and electronic information systems to ensure safe and efficient operations.⁸

Although the system met international standards, planners anticipated a substantial annual operating deficit of approximately €68 million. This was largely due to initially low passenger numbers, high operating costs associated with long travel distances in and around the city, and a socially oriented fare structure designed to ensure affordability for all income groups.

Cape Town also benefited significantly in terms of visibility and international reputation. The city emerged as an attractive destination for international visitors, presenting itself as a dynamic African metropolis rather than a place defined solely by poverty. During the tournament, expectations ranged from 350,000 to 450,000 football tourists, generating an estimated additional 10 billion rand for the South African economy, with Cape Town regarded as a premier destination.

⁸ **Zukunft Mobilität** (2014): *How the World Cup Improved South Africa's Public Transport Networks*. Available at: <https://www.zukunft-mobilitaet.net/1471/analyse/wie-die-weltmeisterschaft-suedafrikas-oepnv-netze-verbesserte/> (accessed 29 June 2026).

According to the Department of Tourism, actual visitor numbers were somewhat lower, with approximately 309,000 tourists arriving in Cape Town and spending around 3.64 billion rand. Nevertheless, this still represented a significant gain. As Liz Krüger, General Manager of the Sanlam Cape Town Marathon and an expert in organizing major events, emphasized during an expert interview conducted in July 2026, such impacts are difficult to quantify. However, Cape Town's improved international image as a tourism destination can clearly be identified as a long-term legacy of such events.

More limited benefits, however, became evident in the construction and maintenance of the stadium infrastructure. The construction of Green Point Stadium alone ultimately consumed approximately €550 million. To this day, annual maintenance costs amount to roughly €437,000, while revenues reach only around €580,000.⁹ Post-tournament utilization has also remained problematic. Despite a capacity of nearly 70,000 spectators, average attendance figures regularly hovered between only 8,000 and 9,000 visitors.¹⁰ Although efforts were made to use the arena as a venue for concerts and other events, high maintenance costs persisted. In summary, the stadium has remained, and continues to remain, a financial burden on taxpayers.¹¹

Liz Krüger distinguishes between permanent and temporary event infrastructure. The stadium, now known as **DHL Stadium** and half-owned by the city, serves as an example of an unsustainable "**white elephant**". Today, the term is commonly used to describe large-scale structures that entail substantial costs while providing only limited practical value. After years of mixed use by rugby and football clubs, the stadium has primarily hosted matches of the local rugby team, the Stormers, international rugby fixtures, and the Cape Town Marathon Expo since 2020.

Nevertheless, the long-term consequences of underutilization and continued maintenance generate considerable opportunity costs.

The promise of newly created jobs also failed to materialize to the extent anticipated. The expected economic growth occurred primarily during the stadium construction phase. Beyond the major construction firms involved, FIFA remained the principal beneficiary of the tournament.¹²

⁹ **SRF** (2010): *Football Stadiums – South Africa's Money Pits*. Available at: <https://www.srf.ch/news/wirtschaft/wirtschaft-fussballstadien-die-geldschlucker-suedafrikas> (accessed 29 June 2026).

¹⁰ "**Empty World Cup Stadiums**". Available at: <https://www.dw.com/de/leere-wm-stadien-in-s%C3%BCdafrika/a-16410721> (accessed 29 June 2026).

¹¹ Dixon, Robyn. "Taxpayers had to fork out more for renamed Cape Town Stadium." *IOL / Cape Times*, 29 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/2021-09-30-taxpayers-had-to-fork-out-more-for-renamed-cape-town-stadium/> (accessed 20 July 2026).

¹² **stickerpoint.de** (n.d.): *2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa*. Available at: <https://www.stickerpoint.de/fussball/wm-2010.php> (accessed 29 June 2026).

What remains is a tension between viewing these investments as instruments of development and regarding them as prestige projects. While investments in infrastructure aligned with broader urban development goals, such as airport upgrades, transportation networks, public transit, and surrounding parks, have provided lasting benefits for the city, infrastructure built primarily for the event itself has delivered relatively limited long-term value.

World Cup-induced investments therefore failed to address many of the underlying challenges facing South African cities, and longstanding problems in Cape Town remained unresolved. Although the city benefited from improved infrastructure, enhanced international visibility, and increased tourism, criticism persisted regarding the expensive and often underutilized stadium, ongoing fiscal burdens, and the continued spatial segregation of the city, as well as attempts to conceal these realities from international visitors.¹³

Consequently, both assessments hold true for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. It was simultaneously a long-term development instrument and an expensive prestige project.

Political Lessons

As the first FIFA World Cup ever held on African soil, the 2010 tournament was an ambitious mega-project that produced both winners and losers. What political lessons, then, can be drawn from the development of infrastructure in Cape Town?

The first key lesson is the recognition that **mega-events cannot substitute for long-term urban development**. While certain processes were accelerated in preparation for the World Cup, reality in other areas fell far short of expectations. The anticipated solutions to housing shortages and fragmented urban landscapes never materialized. Instead, the tournament often served to conceal the existing informal settlements located within tourist zones.¹⁴ Poor communities and townships such as Khayelitsha and Langa remained spatially segregated, and lasting improvements were limited. Despite successes in tourism, comprehensive social development failed to occur. Even housing programs tended to result in cosmetic renovations rather than sustainable solutions.

A mega-event such as hosting a FIFA World Cup can accelerate certain projects, but it does not resolve structural problems such as housing shortages, inequality, and segregation.

¹³ “Cape Town as a Machine of Exclusion.” Available at: <https://archiv.labournet.de/internationales/suedafrika/khan.pdf> (accessed 29 June 2026).

¹⁴ *Urban Development in South Africa in the Context of the 2010 FIFA World Cup*. In: *Geographische Rundschau*, 62 (2010) 6, pp. 36-43 (accessed 29 June 2026).

A second lesson concerns the effectiveness of investment spending. While Cape Town achieved notable successes through government-funded projects such as the implementation of the MyCiTi Bus Rapid Transit system and the modernization of roads and the airport, costly mistakes also occurred. Most notable was the expensive construction of the stadium, which lacked a viable long-term utilization strategy and generated substantial operating costs.

Although the economic and infrastructural benefits were limited both spatially and temporally, Cape Town was nevertheless among the first cities in South Africa to implement measures based on a Good Governance framework, complementing the country's broader corporate governance initiatives embodied in the *King Reports*.¹⁵ Cape Town was also the only World Cup host city to develop a dedicated sustainability strategy, the **Green Goal Action Plan**.¹⁶ However, while successful as an environmental initiative, it ultimately did little to address broader social development challenges.

Even in projects worth billions, therefore, **a well-designed governance approach is more important than the sheer volume of investment**. The MyCiTi bus system succeeded because it was supported by a coherent strategy; the stadiums failed largely because there was no comprehensive plan for their post-event use. As Haferburg and Steinbrink concluded in their assessment of the World Cup, *"Mega-events in the Global South reveal specific governance challenges that extend beyond questions of investment volume."*¹⁷

More generally, stakeholders continue to call for closer cooperation with public authorities, simpler communication channels, and greater regulatory consistency. Stronger institutional support and a more solution-oriented approach, for example through a dedicated committee for major events, could benefit city administrations, event organizers, and local communities alike.

The third lesson follows directly from these observations: **successful infrastructure emerges where existing development strategies are reinforced**. In Cape Town, lasting improvements such as the continued operation of the MyCiTi bus network and the Metrorail commuter rail system can largely be attributed to broader state-led urban development programs. Conversely, the limitations of the city's World Cup legacy can be

¹⁵ **Invest Cape Town** (n.d.): *Good Governance | Investment Growth*. Available at: <https://www.investcapetown.com/why-cape-town/business-essentials/good-governance/> (accessed 29 June 2026).

¹⁶ **Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung** (2010): *2010 FIFA World Cup – "Green Goal Action Plan" for Cape Town*. Available at: <https://www.kas.de/de/statische-inhalte-detail/-/content/wm-2010-green-goal-action-plan-fuer-kapstadt> (accessed 29 June 2026).

¹⁷ **Haferburg, Christoph & Steinbrink, Malte (eds.)** (2011): *Mega-Events and Urban Development in the Global South: The 2010 FIFA World Cup and Its Impacts on South Africa*. Frankfurt am Main: Brandes & Apsel. Available at: <https://www.gbv.de/dms/zbw/616412770.pdf> (accessed 29 June 2026).

linked to the absence of long-term development strategies for stadiums, townships, and housing.

Although the global football community in 2026 is focused on Mexico, the United States, and Canada, the 2010 FIFA World Cup continues to carry long-term significance for South Africa and for Cape Town as one of the tournament's host cities. Perhaps former Minister Jeff Radebe was correct in arguing that the improved transportation infrastructure represents the tournament's greatest legacy. Others point instead to the prominent "white elephant" that still dominates Cape Town's waterfront skyline in the form of DHL Stadium.

More important than either, however, are the lessons that emerged from the tournament. While another World Cup organized under similar circumstances may be unlikely, Cape Town now benefits from more functional infrastructure and valuable insights regarding the role of planning, governance, and political accountability.

Sixteen years later, the **Bafana Bafana** continue to inspire enthusiasm through their historic qualification for the knockout stages of the 2026 World Cup. In this sense, they have become a symbol of South Africa's progress. Only those who are willing to pursue progress boldly and learn from past mistakes can hope for future improvement. The foundations for another World Cup on African soil have been laid.

About the Author

Daniel Ghassemi worked as a Research Assistant for the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's South Africa Country Project in Cape Town from June to July 2026. He holds a dual Bachelor's degree in Political Science and Communication Studies from Otto-Friedrich University Bamberg and is currently completing his Master's degree in Political Science: Governance and Participation.

Alongside his academic studies, he has gained practical experience in the fields of civic and political education, journalism, as well as marketing and public relations.