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From Cape Town to Rio: the Human Rights Implications of Mega-Sporting Events

Thursday, July 11, 2013

1:30 - 3:00 pm

Facilitator:

- Minky Worden, Director of Global Initiatives, Human Rights Watch

Speakers:

- Patricia Lobaccaro, CEO, BrazilFoundation
 - Nikki Naylor, Acting Representative, South Africa, Ford Foundation
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Minky Worden, Director of Global Initiatives at Human Rights Watch (HRW) opened the panel by reviewing the human rights abuses associated with mega-sporting events, noting some particularly common abuses:

- Forced evictions without compensation
- Migrant labor abuses, including unsafe working conditions, exploitation and withheld pay
- Crackdowns on civil society groups
- Health concerns and environmental degradation as a result of major infrastructure projects
- Internet and press freedom restrictions

Nikki Naylor, Acting Representative of the Ford Foundation's South Africa office, shared experiences from the 2010 World Cup. Marketed as an opportunity to bring investment, infrastructure, and prestige to South Africa, the World Cup quickly fell into the pattern of rights abuses that Worden described. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) assumed control of preparations, suspending rights such as freedom of the press, and reaped profits while South Africa was left with steep debts.

Patricia Lobaccaro, CEO of BrazilFoundation, looked ahead to Brazil's preparations for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. Brazil's size will likely increase the magnitude of abuses, including evictions and sexual exploitation, which have received limited coverage in Brazilian and international media. The events' large price tag has diverted public resources away from housing, healthcare, and other government services, sparking widespread protests among the general public in June 2013.

After discussing the potential for abuses, the panelists shifted the focus to opportunities and strategies around mega-sporting events. Worden noted cases where advocacy has achieved impact:

- The Beijing Olympics led to permanent lifting of restrictions on foreign reporters in China

- Under pressure from HRW, Saudi Arabia allowed two female competitors in the London Olympics, though Worden noted that many are still banned from sports within Saudi Arabia
- Villagers successfully campaigned against a major gas plant scheduled to be built near Sochi
- Looking ahead to the 2014 Sochi Olympics, activists are challenging Russia's anti-LGBT propaganda law, which violates the Olympic Charter

Naylor explained that funders must be realistic: they won't stop mega-sporting events, so they should look for opportunities to leverage the events, raise awareness, and build capacity. She outlined two distinct strategies the Ford Foundation has used for the South Africa and Brazil World Cups.

In South Africa, Ford incorporated the World Cup into its existing priorities:

- Soccer centers served as forums to engage youth on gender-based violence and HIV testing
- Ford supported public interest litigation in response to evictions
- After sex work was decriminalized ahead of the World Cup, sex workers were better positioned to engage the government in broader conversations about violations and trafficking
- Similarly, women's groups have pushed for an effective criminal justice system. The system was on high alert during the increased scrutiny of the World Cup, and women successfully argued that officers should remain just as responsive to crimes and abuse after the tournament
- During the lead-up to and throughout the World Cup, Ford launched media campaigns pushing the South African government to hold FIFA accountable. Campaigns around the tournament forged connections across sectors, as diverse groups came to recognize the World Cup as an opportunity to achieve long-term gains.

In Brazil, Ford's grants have targeted the World Cup directly, focusing on government corruption and accountability. Ford has examined data on the World Cup's effects in South Africa, which grantees have shared with counterparts in Brazil. Naylor suggested that grantmakers can also effect change within FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), rather than just among vulnerable communities, noting that the IOC charter is more promising than FIFA's as it includes an article that guarantees the preservation of human dignity.

BrazilFoundation has focused its grants on building capacity at the grassroots level. As an example, Lobaccaro highlighted an arts competition that enabled Rio de Janeiro residents to share their perceptions of mega-sporting events' intrusions into their communities.

Question-and-Answer Session

A participant raised the issue of children's rights, noting that there is increased focus during mega-sporting events but that violations (in areas such as labor and trafficking) are likely to occur beforehand. The participant described a lack of shared knowledge among child protection actors and asked how grantmakers might coordinate and engage constructively in Brazil.

The panelists agreed that funders must improve communication and coordination, both by sharing data and supporting work that convenes people on the ground. Worden emphasized the importance of

coordinating a division of labor so actors can reach a consensus and target the same goals without duplicating efforts. One participant pointed to the People's Committee for the World Cup in Brazil as an effective model for assembling groups focused on a range of issues to lobby local and national government.

Worden also urged funders to look at the long-term timeline for mega-sporting events, monitoring and advocating for human rights before a host is even selected. The IOC will hold elections for a new chair in September, and the rights community can use that opportunity to get candidates on the record about how they will address abuses in host cities.

A participant returned to the point about the criminal justice system in South Africa, asking how funders might use that as a model for future host nations. While panelists agreed that there is an opportunity, Lobaccaro noted that, with 12 host cities, it is difficult to convene groups and expedite the judicial process across Brazil.

In response to a question about cases of migrant worker abuses, Worden pointed to [*Race to the Bottom*](#), a HRW report detailing migrant worker exploitation in Sochi, and noted that documentation of abuses should continue before and after the events.

Funders raised several ideas for local engagement, including connecting U.S. media to local journalists in World Cup cities in order to publicize solutions for human rights violations, and organizing cross-region exchanges among local activists to share strategies.

Unresolved questions also arose, including how local research might drive change in the international bodies that oversee mega-sporting events. Participants questioned whether funders could actually reach a consensus on key issues and priorities to enable the necessary coordination.