

## Social Impacts of Major Sports Events on Host Communities: A Comparative Study of AFCON 2022 Host Cities in Cameroon

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### Abstract

The study of social impacts of major sports events has mostly focused on individual host cities. The purpose of this study was to explore data from all five host cities of AFCON 2022 in Cameroon on the perceived social impacts of the event, and examine the data for salient differences among the host communities. A quantitative research paradigm was employed, using a structured, closed-ended questionnaire to collect data from 1683 respondents across the host cities. The key finding from this study is that community perception of the social impacts of major sports events is influenced by their sociocultural realities as well as actual activities taking place during the event. Various practical and policy implications are discussed, particularly the need for broad-based consultations during the planning phase of major sports events, and the implementation of community-specific legacy projects at the end.

**Keywords:** Social impacts; major sports events; host communities; AFCON; Cameroon

### Introduction

Major sports events have received significant research attention in recent times, due to the diversity of impacts they generate on host communities (Tichaawa & Hemmonsbey, 2022; Musikavanhu et al., 2021; Preuss, 2019). While the marketing and bid documents of such events have generally focused on the short and long-term benefits of hosting sports events, studies have increasingly pointed to the unintended negative impacts often associated with events such as the Olympic Games, the African Cup of Nations (AFCON), the FIFA World Cup and the UEFA European Championship – commonly referred to as the European Nations Cup (Gursoy et al., 2017; Raoul & Zenabou, 2020; Yen & Kerstetter, 2009). Economic impacts such as employment opportunities, support for local businesses and infrastructure development feature prominently among the projected benefits of hosting mega sports events. Critics, however, posit that the publicised economic gains from mega sports events are usually either exaggerated, miscalculated or speculative (Mirzayeva et al., 2020; Raoul & Zenabou, 2020; Taks et al., 2011). Research on the social impacts of mega sports events, on the other hand, has not received sufficient attention (Gursoy et al., 2017), despite growing empirical evidence illustrating the long-term benefits and challenges that they could hold for communities (Karadakis & Kaplanidou, 2012).

Preuss (2019) argues that many studies examining the social impacts of major sports events have been limited in scope, as they have only focused on single communities, while Liu (2016) underscores the importance of adopting a multidimensional approach in studying such impacts, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the effects on various communities. This study explores residents' perceptions on the social impacts of AFCON 2022 on all five cities in which matches were played during the tournament. Analysing the perceptions of

residents of the host cities of Bafoussam, Douala, Garoua, Limbe and Yaoundé allowed the study to delve into the social issues that host communities are concerned about, and equally compare the views of residents of different communities. In achieving this goal, the study reviews relevant literature on the social impacts of major sports events, draws theoretical insight from the social representation theory, and, based on empirical evidence, makes practical and policy recommendations that could mitigate negative social impacts from major sports events while promoting opportunities for positive impacts.

### **Literature review**

The increasing appetite in countries and cities around the world to host mega sports events has largely been driven by literature supporting their effectiveness as instruments for destination branding and marketing (Wang & Jin, 2019), stimulation of economic growth (Li & Nauright, 2018) and social cohesion (Knott et al., 2017). The implications of hosting mega sports events differ, however, both in nature and intensity. Although financial costs often receive the widest publicity, there are also environmental and social costs that should be considered (Getz, 2017). It has been observed that in an effort to pacify the public and relieve the pressure of having to justify the extensive expenditure on infrastructure projects and other hosting requirements, government officials and organisers of mega sports events usually go to great lengths in elaborating on the various short-term and legacy projects that local communities stand to benefit from, when hosting the competition (Liu, 2016; Wang & Jin, 2019; Wilson, 2014). In this way, discussions on the social impacts of mega sports events are relegated to the periphery, while economic impact analysis takes centre stage.

It is important to note that alongside environmental and economic impacts, studies on the social impacts emanating from hosting mega sports events have increased significantly in recent years (Gursoy et al., 2017; Musikavanhu et al., 2021; Preuss, 2019). Li and Nauright (2018) argue that an increasing number of cities are participating in bids to host mega sports events because of their potential to reinvigorate growth and ignite interest in social activities in the city. Similarly, Knott et al. (2017) assert that mega sports events usually spark a celebratory atmosphere among local people, rally communities together, and attract tourists' interest in the local ambiance and culture. While some social impacts are short-lived, others last long into the distant future. Hence, social impact research has been multifaceted, delving into extant effects on society, but, equally, examining legacy or long-term social implications of hosting mega sports events (Mirzayeva et al., 2020; Musikavanhu et al., 2021; Raoul & Zenabou, 2020).

A prominent theme in the analysis of the social impacts of mega sports events has been on building a sense of community (Smith, 2014; Taks et al., 2015). Chalip (2006) posited that the experiences which community members share during mega sports events are important in enhancing behaviour and the way of life of residents. The sense of bonding and common humanity that develops out of togetherness is instrumental in community building (Heere et al., 2013). Musikavanhu et al. (2021) further highlight the fact that people tend to have lasting memories of events that positively impacted their lives. The concept of event leveraging therefore requires research exploration, because it enables communities to be foresighted on the long-term benefits and costs of hosting mega sports events such as the AFCON (Taks et al., 2015). On the other hand, some studies have investigated the potential in host communities to leverage or take advantage of the “seed” opportunities that mega sports events present, in order to build towards the future (Misener & Schulenkorf, 2016; O'Brien, 2006; Yürük-Kayapınar et al., 2017). Smith (2014) argues that the social impacts of mega sports events can only be leveraged into sustainable, long-term legacies if there was planning prior to the event.

Despite the plethora of literature propounding the positive social impacts of mega events on host communities, critics have highlighted the negative social impacts that need to be guarded against (Cornelissen & Maennig, 2010; Getz, 2012; Preuss, 2015; Zhemukhov & Orttung, 2014). Silvestre (2009) revealed that as a result of hosting the Olympic Games in 2000, Sydney experienced increased social disparities, disruptions to the community's way of life, gentrification, and the displacement of some community members. Findings from a similar study by Preuss (2015) on the 2012 Olympic Games in London revealed that most residents of East London expressed dissatisfaction with the Games, because of the demolition of creative spaces, increases in the value of accommodation, and the general commodification of the entire neighbourhood, among other issues. It suffices to mention here that the list of studies drawing attention to the negative social impacts of mega sports events is extensive. For instance, following the Rio 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, studies revealed that 275 families were evicted and their homes destroyed, to make way for construction in the Favela area of Barra de Tijuca, which led to violent community protests, increased social tensions and eroded community welfare (Phillips, 2016; Rocha et al., 2017).

Some commonly cited negative social impacts of mega sports events are systems overload, overcrowded public spaces such as restaurants, shopping malls and public transport, and also littering (Delamere et al., 2001). Derret (2011) also referred to the social tensions that easily flare up between locals and visitors, apathy, traffic congestion and insufficient parking spaces, that diminish the quality of the experience during mega sports events. There is also the potential for noise pollution, as well as other criminal activities such as theft, prostitution and vandalism that could further inconvenience locals (Tiyce & Dimmock, 2000). The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has further heightened the risk of diseases being spread during mega sports events such as AFCON 2022 (Madininos et al., 2021). Residents could therefore be even more apprehensive of environments where social distancing is not respected. Caiazza and Audretsch (2015) report that social pressure and unhappiness among residents would likely be heightened during mega sports events if price increases were observed, deterioration of cultural identity took place, displacement of locals occurred, or if there were perceived acts of prostitution.

### ***Social representation theory (SRT)***

Social Representation Theory (SRT) has frequently been used in research to explain the transactional perceptions that community members share (Johnston et al., 2021; Pearce et al., 1996). Moscovici (1981, p. 122) explained the SRT as “systems of pre-perceptions, images and values which have their own cultural meaning and persist independently of individual experience”. According to SRT, individual interpretations, and the understanding of situations around them, are assisted by social representations which are shared with members of the same community in a way that helps or supports a practical understanding between residents in the same group (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000).

Moscardo (2011) asserted that even though SRT has been widely used in community tourism research, the same cannot be said of studies on the impacts of major sports events. An early study by Fredline and Faulkner (2000) that employed SRT in events impact research on the Australian motor racing event, found five subgroups in the event perceptions, namely supporters with mixed perceptions, those who disliked the event, realists, people who liked the event, and respondents who had concerns regarding the event. Similarly, a study that used SRT in analysing residents' perceptions on the impacts of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, revealed that participants perceived mainly positive social impacts from hosting the mega sports event, while indicating their apprehension over the inflationary tendencies that they felt would result from the event (Al-Emadi et al., 2017).

This study therefore intends to draw from the theoretical grounding of SRT to analyse the perceptions of respondents from the AFCON 2022 host cities in Cameroon regarding the potential social impacts of the major sports event.

### **Study context**

The exceptional potential for tourism to contribute towards socio-economic development in Cameroon has been widely acknowledged in literature (Hele, 2002; Kimbu, 2011; Tichaawa, 2017). Hence, the Cameroon government has recognised tourism as one of the key drivers of socio-economic development in the country (Tata & Lambi, 2014). While the caption “Africa in miniature” (meaning ‘all of Africa in one destination’, which is usually used to describe tourism in Cameroon) is often associated with the exceptionally rich biodiversity in the country, it is worth noting that the cultural landscape in Cameroon is equally diverse and multidimensional (Kimbu, 2012).

The density and abundance of flora and fauna in Cameroon is ranked 13th out of 130 countries globally, and second only to Madagascar on the African continent (Kimbu & Tichaawa, 2018). The country boasts 13 national parks (3 of which are classified as UNESCO-MAB biosphere reserves and one UNESCO World Heritage Site), 18 wildlife reserves, 3 wildlife sanctuaries, 16 protected areas and nine (9) mountain forest sites, occupying a total surface area of 6,496,499 hectares (UNESCO, 2008). Cameroon also has a coastline of 402 kilometres, endowed with pristine beaches, close to the foot of the Cameroon mountain in Limbe, Southwest Region (Ministry of Tourism and Leisure, 2011).

The cultural prowess of Cameroon can be described as a missed opportunity for tourism development, considering that the country has more than 250 distinct ethnic groups speaking around 270 languages, and possessing a wide array of special clothing, song, dance, gastronomy, rituals and customs (Benneh, 2008; Paden & Soja, 1970). Hence, Cameroon has been described as one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse countries in the world (Harilal et al., 2018). Among the main ethnic groups in Cameroon are Highlanders, who make up 31% of the population, Equatorial Bantu (19%), Kirdi (11%), the Fulani (10%), North-Western Bantu (8%), the Nigritic (7%), other African (13%) and non-African (about 1%) (Kimbu & Tichaawa, 2018). However, French and English are the two official languages of Cameroon, despite the multitude of indigenous languages.

Regardless of the rich natural resource base in Cameroon, data from the World Bank indicates that 37.5% of the population live below the poverty line of \$1.25 a day (World Bank, 2020). The African Development Bank (AfDB) attributes Cameroon’s economic contraction of 6.1 percentage points between 2019 and 2021 to the triple malice of the COVID-19 pandemic and global measures taken to manage the pandemic, the protracted insecurity and socio-political crises, and the fall of world oil prices, particularly in 2020 (AfDB, 2021).

### **Methods**

#### ***Study sites***

The five sites of this study were purposively selected, due to the fact that they were hosts to at least one or more matches of AFCON 2022 in Cameroon. This explains why participants in the study were selected from the cities of Bafoussam, Douala, Garoua, Limbe and Yaoundé. The city of Yaoundé stands out from the others because of its status as the political capital of Cameroon and the hub of diplomatic activities hosting many foreign embassies and ministerial buildings. Douala, on the other hand, is the economic capital and the main access point to and from Cameroon by air, sea and land (Tichaawa, 2017). Garoua is best known for its tourism prowess with the well-entrenched Muslim culture and its proximity to the popular Waza National Park. The city of Bafoussam has deep entrepreneurial roots and a bustling business

centre, while Limbe houses the Cameroon oil refinery (SONARA), the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) and the dark sandy beaches along the Atlantic coastline (Harilal et al., 2018).

### *Design of the study*

The design of this study was cross-sectional, as data was collected simultaneously across all the AFCON 2022 host cities of Bafoussam, Douala, Garoua, Limbe and Yaoundé. Data collection started on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2022 and was concluded on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 2022. A questionnaire comprising two sections, labelled A and B, was prepared for data collection. The first ten (10) questions requiring demographic details of the respondents were presented in section A, while questions in section B requested the participants to express their views on potential social impacts of hosting sports events such as the AFCON 2022. The questions on the possible social impacts of sports events were adapted from previous studies (Gursoy & Kendall, 2006; Jago et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2021; Wang & Jin, 2019). All possible social impacts of hosting sports events were summarised and tailored to suit the Cameroon socio-economic context.

Before using the instrument to collect data, it was considered important to test it for consistency, reliability and relevance. The pilot study involved 50 postgraduate students involved in sports, from the University of Buea and Ahas University Institute of Tourism and Business Management. Following the results of the pilot study, a few questions were rephrased to avoid ambiguity and ensure consistency. For example, the question on the extent to which mega sports events contribute to building a sense of community had to be re-structured because “sense of community” was interpreted differently by some respondents. After editing the questionnaire, the final version was prepared and sent for ethical clearance.

An application for ethical clearance was submitted to the ethics committee in the Faculty of Commerce and Administration at Walter Sisulu University in South Africa. After studying the application, the faculty ethics committee forwarded it to the Walter Sisulu institutional ethics committee for final consideration. The ethics application was approved and ethical clearance received on the 6<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

Data collection was undertaken by fifteen postgraduate students with previous research experience. Prior to the start of data collection, the students were trained in the importance of respecting ethical conduct during data collection. The questionnaire was also explained to them, to enable them to clarify any misunderstandings on the part of the respondents. The students were then sent to each of the five AFCON 2022 host cities, in groups of three.

In collecting the data, potential respondents were approached while going about their normal daily activities such as shopping or relaxing in a restaurant. They were informed about the purpose of the study, and asked if they would be willing to take part in it. Those who consented were explained their rights to anonymity and withdrawal from the study at any point. Respondents were then handed the questionnaire to complete.

The five sites at which data collection took place in this study were purposively selected based on the fact that they were hosting at least one or more of the AFCON 2022 matches. Hence, data was collected in the cities of Bafoussam, Douala, Garoua, Limbe and Yaoundé. Within the host cities, the selection of participants followed a random sampling approach, as all residents who consented to take part in the study were handed a questionnaire to complete. Residents were randomly targeted across every part of the host cities, considering that social impacts are non-discriminatory. A total of 1683 completed questionnaires were returned following the data collection exercise. The returned questionnaires were screened for completeness and appropriateness. The data was captured on an Excel spreadsheet before being



exported to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 27 for descriptive and exploratory analysis.

### Descriptive statistics

Findings on the demographic profile of the respondents are presented in Table 1, below.

**Table 1: Results of the demographic data from the five AFCON 2022 host cities**

Variable	Description	Host city/%				
		Limbe	Douala	Yaoundé	Garoua	Bafoussam
Gender	Male	46	46.2	44.5	90.7	54.3
	Female	54	53.8	55.5	9.3	45.7
Age (years)	18 – 24	49.4	52.8	40.8	13.7	19.9
	25 – 35	22.3	24.2	23.9	49.7	30.5
	36 – 45	14.1	13.5	16.0	34.2	27.5
	46 – 55	8.6	5.1	14.7	1.9	9.9
	56 – 65	4.5	3.0	3.1	0.6	5.0
	66+	1.1	1.5	1.6	0	7.0
Monthly income (in CFA francs – XAF) \$1=XAF600	<50,000 (< \$83)	36.1	38.3	16.5	6.8	10.9
	50,000 – 150,000 (\$83-250)	17.1	21.3	25.3	26.7	5.3
	151,000 – 250,000 (\$250-416)	8.2	9.6	24.4	26.1	7.0
	251,000 – 350,000 (\$416-583)	10.8	5.8	12.2	37.3	9.6
	351,000 – 450,000 (\$583-750)	9.7	5.1	12.4	2.5	12.6
	451,000 – 550,000 (\$750-916)	5.9	6.6	4.3	0	21.9
	551,000+	12.3	13.2	4.8	0.6	32.8
Employment status	Unemployed	52.8	48.5	39.7	28.0	27.5
	Government employee	6.3	7.1	21.7	4.3	12.6
	Private sector employee	11.9	24.9	18.9	9.3	27.8
	Self-employed	29.0	19.5	19.7	58.4	32.1
Educational level	Below G.C.E Ordinary level certificate	31.2	26.4	4.7	11.8	9.6
	Completed Ordinary level certificate	10.0	26.1	12.0	16.2	11.4
	Advanced level (University entrance)	30.1	24.9	40.0	27.3	22.5
	Bachelor's degree	18.6	15.8	31.4	40.4	35.2
	Master's degree	8.2	5.3	9.9	4.3	11.6
	Doctoral degree	1.9	1.5	2.0	0	9.7

Source: Author

The following findings from Table 1 are worth highlighting. The data collection exercise yielded 302 valid responses from Bafoussam, 394 from Douala, 161 from Garoua, 269 from Limbe and 557 from Yaoundé. Quite prominent from the demographic data is the fact that 90.7% of the participants in Garoua were males. Noormohamed (2008) asserted that, following the Muslim faith and tradition, women are generally restricted to the home as custodians of the family, so their movement in public spaces is quite restricted. The demographic profile of respondents from the other four host cities was, however, fairly balanced in terms of gender parity. For instance, there were more female participants than males in Limbe (54%), Douala (52.8) and Yaoundé (55.5%). With regard to the age of the respondents, it is evident that most of the participants were young, generally within the 18-25-year age group (Limbe – 49.4%, Douala – 52.8%, Yaoundé – 40.8%). Nonetheless, Garoua and Bafoussam had more respondents within the 26-35-year age group with 49.7% and 30.5%, respectively. It is also

observed that the unemployment rate is quite high among all the cities, ranging from 27.5% to 52.8%.

### ***Measurement of variables and descriptive statistics***

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceived social impacts of AFCON 2022 from a community perspective and ascertain whether residents from the host cities had similar (or not) perceptions on the impact of hosting AFCON 2022. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) and multiple comparisons tests (MCTs) using the Bonferroni method were applied, in order to determine whether differences existed across host cities in Cameroon on the perceived impacts of hosting AFCON 2022 on the social well-being of communities. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to extract key factors that the respondents considered impactful on their social well-being. The results displayed in Table 2, below, revealed six factors, described as congestion, social distancing, prostitution, crime, COVID-19, price increases, diseases and happiness.

**Table 2: Results of exploratory factor analysis on social impact factors**

Variable	Measured items	Factor Loadings
Social well-being	Difficulties in moving around (congestion)	0.639
	Respect of social distancing regulations	0.654
	Encouraging prostitution	0.718
	Increased crime	0.740
	Increased COVID-19 infection	0.737
	Price increases in food items	0.513
	Increased spread of diseases	0.718
	More happiness among community members	0.736

Source: Author

Descriptive statistics (according to host cities) on the perceived impact of hosting AFCON 2022 on the social well-being of communities in Cameroon, are illustrated in Table 3, below. It can be observed from Table 3 that, in general, communities in Cameroon were in agreement that hosting AFCON 2022 had a significant impact on the social well-being of communities. This is evident from the fact that a bird’s-eye view of all social well-being elements revealed a high mean score of 3.9 out of a maximum of 5. Nonetheless, the Garoua communities expressed much stronger views on the social well-being impacts of AFCON 2022, with a higher mean score of 4.7, with communities in Yaoundé following with a distant 4.0 mean score.

Regarding the specific factors exerting an impact on community well-being, respondents from all the five host cities appeared to agree that price increases pose the greatest threat to their social well-being – as reflected in the high mean score of 4.4 out of a maximum score of 5, and equally evident in the fact that respondents from each host city attributed a score of more than 4 to the price increase factor. While Garoua communities attributed the highest score of 4.9, respondents from other host cities followed closely behind, with Yaounde (4.5), Bafoussam (4.4), Limbe (4.1) and Douala (4.0).

Respondents from the AFCON 2022 host cities also perceived congestion to be an impediment to their social well-being, with a high average mean score of 4.2 out of 5. Garoua communities appeared to dislike congestion more than all the other host cities, as seen in the high mean score of 4.8, followed by Yaoundé (4.2) and Bafoussam (4.2). In addition, the AFCON 2022 host cities expressed strong views about the neglect of social distancing rules at the AFCON games, with an average mean score of 4.1. Garoua communities, however, maintained the trend of leading the pack, with a mean score of 4.8, while Yaoundé followed at a distant second (4.2) and Bafoussam (4.1).



**Table 3: Perceived impacts of hosting AFCON 2022 on social well-being of communities in Cameroon**

Attribute	Host city	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social well-being (overall)	Limbe	269	3.6	0.872
	Douala	394	3.7	0.755
	Yaoundé	557	4.0	0.597
	Garoua	161	4.7	0.471
	Bafoussam	302	3.9	0.722
	Total	1683	3.9	0.761
Social distancing	Limbe	269	3.9	1.261
	Douala	394	3.9	1.187
	Yaoundé	557	4.2	0.956
	Garoua	161	4.9	0.418
	Bafoussam	302	4.1	0.968
	Total	1683	4.1	1.070
Congestion	Limbe	269	3.8	1.225
	Douala	394	4.0	1.130
	Yaoundé	557	4.2	0.920
	Garoua	161	4.8	0.607
	Bafoussam	302	4.2	0.914
	Total	1683	4.2	1.038
Prostitution	Limbe	269	3.2	1.489
	Douala	394	3.4	1.411
	Yaoundé	557	3.9	1.157
	Garoua	161	4.6	0.958
	Bafoussam	302	3.5	1.286
	Total	1683	3.7	1.342
Crime	Limbe	269	3.4	1.432
	Douala	394	3.6	1.294
	Yaoundé	557	3.9	1.115
	Garoua	161	4.6	0.908
	Bafoussam	302	3.4	1.200
	Total	1683	3.7	1.257
COVID-19	Limbe	269	3.6	1.451
	Douala	394	3.6	1.330
	Yaoundé	557	3.9	1.125
	Garoua	161	4.8	0.729
	Bafoussam	302	3.8	1.227
	Total	1683	3.8	1.260
Price increases	Limbe	269	4.1	1.205
	Douala	394	4.0	1.229
	Yaoundé	557	4.5	0.854
	Garoua	161	4.9	0.433
	Bafoussam	302	4.4	0.820
	Total	1683	4.4	1.020
Happiness	Limbe	269	3.6	1.079
	Douala	394	3.7	1.146
	Yaoundé	557	3.8	0.989
	Garoua	161	4.7	0.652
	Bafoussam	301	4.0	0.836
	Total	1682	3.9	1.037
Diseases	Limbe	269	3.4	1.426
	Douala	393	3.4	1.264
	Yaoundé	557	4.0	1.080
	Garoua	161	4.6	0.814
	Bafoussam	302	3.8	1.289
	Total	1682	3.8	1.255

Source: Author

It is surprising that social concerns such as prostitution, crime, the spread of COVID-19 and other communicable diseases did not feature prominently among the respondents' priority issues. The threat of catching COVID-19 and other diseases received scores of 3.8

each, while the practice of prostitution and crime both received scores of 3.7 each. It is nevertheless encouraging to see that the respondents perceived the spread of happiness among community members to be a good outcome from the AFCON 2022 tournament, with a moderate average score of 3.9.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived social impacts of mega sports events on host communities. Using AFCON 2022 as a case in point, the study searched for differences, across host cities in Cameroon, in the perceived impacts of hosting AFCON 2022 on the social well-being of communities. It was determined, through exploratory factor analysis, that eight social factors stood out among the respondents as impacting their social well-being. These factors were defined as social distancing, congestion, prostitution, crime, COVID-19, price increases, happiness and diseases.

The following conclusions are drawn from the findings obtained from the data analysis:

- Firstly, the findings of this study reveal a high level of awareness, among community members, of the AFCON matches taking place in their community. This is evident in the high level of participation in the study on the part of community members. As Liu (2016) points out, community perceptions of the social impacts of a mega sports event are premised on the community members' awareness of the event taking place.
- Secondly, it is evident from this study that all host communities of AFCON 2022 perceive that the mega sports event will have a significant impact on their social well-being, as seen in the high mean scores recorded across individual host cities, as well as the average of all the cities put together. This finding is in line with conclusions reached in previous studies by Balduck et al. (2011) regarding residents' perceptions during the Tour de France event in 2007, and by Karadakis and Kaplanidou (2012) during the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada, which found that communities were quite sensitive to the social impacts of the event.

Regarding specific social impacts of the AFCON 2022 event, the findings from this study reveal that participants from all host cities are most concerned about price increases as a result of hosting the event. This is quite surprising, as previous studies (Chalip, 2006; Heere et al., 2013; Musikavanhu et al., 2021; Taks et al., 2015) suggest that crime, prostitution and congestion are of greater concern to local communities during mega sports events.

A curious finding from the results of this study is the fact that participants from the host cities of Limbe and Garoua seem to be consistently expressing the lowest and highest perceptions on the social impacts, respectively. With the exception of price increases, where the Douala community expresses a lower perception score, the community of Limbe indicates the lowest social impact perceptions across all factors. These low perceptions of the Limbe community can be attributed to the social tensions caused by the armed conflict in the South-West Region where Limbe is located. This inference is supported by literature (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2011; Whelan, 2014). Both studies explore the subject of heightened security concerns at mega sports events, particularly during the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, when Israeli athletes were held hostage and 17 people were killed (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2011), and also when London organised the 2010 Olympic Games with one of the highest security alerts following a terrorist attack on the underground transport system (Whelan, 2014). Both studies reveal that anxiety about safety and security tends to depress the mood of community members – which could explain the low perceptions in Limbe.

The community of Garoua, on the other hand, finds itself on the high perception spectrum, expressing exceptionally strong views on all possible impacts. It is important to

recall that communities in Garoua are predominantly of the Muslim culture, hence the exceptionally high male respondent rate of over 90%. This could explain the strong views expressed regarding the social impacts of mega sports events. This conclusion is supported by Agergaard (2016), who examined the influence of culture in sports participation among young Muslim women, and Iheanacho et al. (2015), who argue that although the Muslim culture endorses the health benefits of sports, it remains apprehensive of the unintended negative social impacts from hosting mega sports events.

Finally, the findings of this study further uphold the relevance of the Social Representation Theory (SRT) by demonstrating that even though all the respondents are well informed about the AFCON 2022 matches being played in their city, their perceptions of the impact of the tournament on their social well-being are influenced by their different sociocultural circumstances. This is quite evident in the social tensions filtering through the perceptions of the Limbe community, while the cultural beliefs of the Muslims articulate themselves in their strong views on the social impacts of mega sports events.

### **Implications**

A number of practical and policy implications can be derived from the findings and conclusions of this study. The first practical implication relates to the role of stakeholders in the organisation of major sports events such as AFCON. It is evident from the findings of this study that none of the respondents had been consulted or involved in the planning process of the event; hence, the respondents are detached from the event, and speak as outsiders. While residents highlighting negative impacts arising from hosting a major sports event is not new (Liu, 2016), such sentiments could be managed through engagement, education and consultation.

Secondly, following the SRT, sensitivity on the part of the organisers to the social and cultural background of the host communities, is important. This is because evidence from this study suggests that host communities perceive and interpret the social impacts of the major sports event through the lens of their local community circumstances and culture.

A direct implication from using the theoretical lens of the SRT (Moscovici, 1981) when organising major sports events, is the need to design community-specific beneficence or legacy programmes. This intervention is mandated by the fact that while women's empowerment projects are required in the Garoua community to assist women to benefit from the mainstream economy, communities in the South-West Region, and Limbe in particular, where there is armed conflict, require a different form of support. Legacy projects from mega sports events should therefore not constitute a one size fits all attitude.

At policy level, this study has revealed that if mega sports events are to be effective as instruments of social cohesion, then policies need to be designed to make it a long-term process, not simply within the short period of a major sports event. While it is plausible that mega sports events can be helpful in getting communities to better understand each other, real engagement requires consistent and sustained engagement.

Finally, policies need to be put in place to deal with perceived negative social tendencies in communities as soon as they arise. It is clear from this study, that the respondents were quite aware of the negative social practices that were likely to be aggravated by the hosting of AFCON 2022. If clear policies existed on how to deal with perceived negative social impacts, communities might not be so concerned.

### **Conclusion**

The unique thrust of this study has been in its exploration of cross-sectional data from five culturally diverse cities that hosted matches at the 2022 AFCON. It has emerged that hosting a major sports event in a multicultural setting such as Cameroon requires broad-based

consultations in the planning phase of the event, and community-specific legacy programmes at the end. This study has, equally, looked beyond cultural differences to examine empirical evidence which suggests that communities in conflict areas such as the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon require special attention, in order to integrate them into the social ambiance that major sports events bring. Finally, this study concludes that community perceptions of the social impacts of mega sports events are both the result of their community-entrenched experiences, as theorised in the Social Representation Theory, and their assessment of activities taking place during the unfolding of the event.

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