

Olympic Rhetoric Exposed

In a letter dated 21 January, 2008, the Organising Committee for the Poverty Olympics in Vancouver wrote to Jacques Rogge and Members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). In the letter, the committee highlighted the 'world-class' levels of poverty and homelessness in Vancouver and British Columbia (e.g., 10-15,000 people homeless in the province, the highest rates of child poverty in the country, etc).

The purpose of the letter was to ask the IOC to press the federal and provincial governments to implement the recommendations of the Inner City Inclusive Housing Table – a group convened by VANOC as a means of honoring its Inner City Inclusive commitments under the Olympic Bid promises of community sustainability. In particular, the letter cited the recommendations to increase income assistance, end the barriers to getting on assistance, and build 3200 units of new housing for low-income residents.

Such a request of the IOC was most reasonable. After all, Vancouver's Olympic Bid was accepted on the basis of an agreement by the four partners of the 2010 Winter Games that included a pledge to build social housing, protect the city's rental housing stock, and ensure that no one would be displaced or left homeless because of the Games.

The letter ends with this plea: "The Olympic creed states, 'the most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part.' That is all we want – the poorest people in BC want the opportunity to 'take part,' to participate in the economic and cultural life of our province."

The IOC responded in a letter dated 4 March 2008, signed by the Executive Director of the Olympic Games, Gilbert Felli. He stated that any expectation that the IOC put pressure on governments of future host cities is misplaced since this concerns "sovereign matters outside the IOC's mandate." In the letter he also strongly affirmed that "the IOC is using sport as a tool to bring hope to the world," and if there were concerns about matters of poverty and housing within the region hosting the 2010 Games, they should be taken up with the relevant Canadian authorities. The IOC's role is specifically "to ensure the successful staging of the 2010 Games" by working in close collaboration with VANOC.

On 9 December 2008, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), a not-for-profit, non-governmental, international human rights organisation based in Geneva that campaigns for the protection of housing rights and the prevention of forced evictions, announced its Housing Rights Awards for 2008. In addition to a Housing Rights Protector Award and a Housing Rights Defender Award, they also presented a Housing Rights Violator Award to the government or institution that demonstrated significant failure to protect and implement housing rights. This year, the IOC was one of three to receive the Housing Rights Violator Award (along with the governments of Israel and Italy). COHRE's research on evictions and displacement that have attended mega-events around the world over the past few decades, including the Olympic Games, reveals a history of substantial and persistent housing rights violations, with the recently completed 2008 Beijing Games being a particularly spectacular example (estimated 1.2 million people displaced).

When Mr. Felli stated that the IOC wants to bring hope to the world through the Olympic Games, he apparently did not include among the beneficiaries of this "hope" the people tossed aside as collateral damage through displacement and eviction. That an organisation espousing a mandate of spreading hope and peace around the globe could at the same time be a leading housing rights violator constitutes a startling incongruity that reveals the truth about the Olympics: it is a showcase event for elite power that strengthens its grip on dominant systems of control and exploitation, cloaked in a rhetoric of humanitarian goodwill.

Such remarkable incongruities help us to see that the emperor has no clothes. They expose the naked truth that in this spectacle of power, the poor and the marginalized are swept aside so as not to efface its image and disclose the reality of oppression, inequality and injustice behind the façade. If we care about justice and stand in solidarity with the poor, we cannot at the same time support the Olympic Games or remain silent about the dark reality behind the glossy image. We are currently being held hostage by the inevitability of the 2010 Games, but we can still raise a cry for truth and justice as we stand alongside those who disproportionately endure the devastating fallout of its arrival.