This year’s World Cup was supposed to be the “greenest ever”, with FIFA taking measures to account for the event’s greenhouse gas emissions, including an estimated 2.7 million tonnes of carbon dioxide.

As the biggest sporting event on the planet, FIFA is under pressure to take its sustainability measures seriously. It provides a unique opportunity to raise awareness among hundreds of millions of people around the world and the potential to leave a lasting low carbon legacy in the cities that host it.

Accounting for greenhouse gas emissions helps identify where carbon emissions can be reduced. But like any form of accounting it is not an exact science and it is important to be mindful of what matters, what’s the purpose and what can and should be changed.

What’s in…

The key to calculating the size of the carbon footprint of the World Cup is deciding what’s in and what’s not. FIFA applies the Greenhouse Gas Protocol Corporate Standard, which aims to guide organisations in preparing a greenhouse gas emissions inventory that represents a true and fair account of emissions in a standardised way. This allows comparisons, for example, with other sporting events.

FIFA states that its carbon accounting includes the preparation phase and staging both the Confederation Cup and World Cup. That is, FIFA does not just include the World Cup event itself, but all the events leading up to it such as the draws and associated banquets.

FIFA has committed to reporting more than the minimum expected in a greenhouse gas inventory by including what are known as “Scope 3” emissions – indirect emissions that are beyond FIFA’s control. Reporting of Scope 3 emissions is optional. FIFA’s strategy and work on this can be found here.

Scope 3 emissions, of which spectator travel makes up by far the most, were estimated to make up of 98% of the World Cup Staging phase, so when included they make emissions actually under FIFA’s control look relatively small.

…and what’s out

Despite “going beyond the minimum” with its Scope 3 measures, FIFA does not account for emissions associated with infrastructure (known as embodied carbon) arguing that they are not under FIFA’s or the Local Organising Committee’s control or direct influence.

Yet major events could have significant influence through their assessment of bidders for infrastructure projects, including on social and environmental responsibility criteria.

For example, two strategies were used to reduce embodied emissions in London’s Olympic Park. Firstly, the use of low carbon concrete mixes. And second, designing structures that used less materials.

Although not considering these matters within its purview, FIFA has included the construction and demobilisation of temporary facilities.

Without greater effort to reduce and avoid emissions, FIFA’s commitment to buying carbon offsets could be seen as a smoke screen. But FIFA is demanding that bidders now have to provide information against a number of criteria including the management and governance processes in place to ensure the integration of environmental issues in planning.

There are other options for reducing event emissions that are not revealed by FIFA’s accounting: using existing
infrastructure wherever possible, minimising embodied carbon in new infrastructure (and making sure it’s used afterwards), as well as filling venues and using good public transport.

Abandoned Olympic venues from around the world.

**The power of sport to change the world**

With increasing pressure to account for greenhouse emissions, cities like Melbourne whose economies rely on hosting events will need to invest increasingly in public transport, renewable energy sources, energy efficient accommodation and reducing emissions from waste.

As non-government organisations and others step up calls for transparency of the environmental impacts of events, cities that invest in measures to reduce those impacts are increasingly likely to be favourably viewed as venues. ClimateWorks Australia worked with the City of Melbourne on research to inform its approach to developing a road map towards a zero net emissions goal.

This identified a range of energy efficiency and other mitigation opportunities, including for large sporting facilities, which could reduce the city’s emissions by 30% by 2020. In the future such measures may make the difference between a successful and unsuccessful bid for a major event.

An independent United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) report on the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa found that, while the event produced lower carbon emissions than expected, most of this was due to fewer people attending the event. The goal of the 2010 World Cup was “carbon neutral”, but funding constraints meant many planned strategies to reduce or offset emissions weren’t enacted. However, the strategies that were used did appear to work – particularly new, more energy efficient stadiums.

A key innovation of that event was an Environmental Forum comprising of representatives from government departments, host cities and international agencies, such as UNEP, as well as members of the World Cup Local Organising Committee. It’s an approach that will have a lasting influence - a legacy for hosting cities.

Sport is central to our lives and has an incredible power to change how we feel and how we behave. Indeed, under Nelson Mandela’s leadership, rugby went a long way to bringing black and white South Africans together at a critical time and in a way that nothing else could.

By using its influence as the world’s largest sporting event, FIFA could leave a lasting environmental legacy by looking beyond that which it currently measures. In this way it can become a model for sustainable planning of large international events in the future.

More information will perhaps become available in the coming months, but based on available information, it seems that FIFA is hiding behind data and carbon offsets and lacks a strategy to make a real impact.