**London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics Resource Guide**

# Sport mega-events and a legacy of increased mass participation in sport: reflecting on the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games

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*The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (London 2012 Games) was the first Games to be explicit about intent to deliver a legacy of increased mass sport participation (Veal et al 2012). Reflecting on London’s ‘promise’ for sport (DCMS 2008a), this guide reviews previous literature and asks ‘where next?’ in the on-going debate of the efficacy of claims for the association of an Olympics and a legacy of increased mass sport participation.*

## Introduction

A legacy for sport, and specifically one of increased mass participation, is frequently cited by sport mega-event organisers and supporters (Girginov & Hills 2008; Veal, Toohey & Frawley 2012). While there is some limited evidence that participation can increase in line with a single sport major event (Frawley & Cush 2011), there still remains little empirical evidence to suggest a causal relationship between sport mega-events and increased mass participation (McCartney et al 2010; Weed, Coren, & Fiore 2009).

By way of example, Sydney’s successful bid for the 2000 Olympic Games included a claim that the event would create increased sport participation (Sydney Olympic Games Review Committee 1990). However, there was no evidence that the event had any impact on sport participation in Australia (Armstrong, Bauman, Ford, & Davies 2002; Veal & Toohey 2005). A contrary result was found when the Olympic Games were held in the spiritual home of the Olympics, Athens; between 2004 and 2009, a decrease in sport participation was recorded among the Greek population (Collins 2013).

## Leveraging

Despite recognising the lack of research evidence (Hansard 2008), the UK Government made increasing sport participation a central tenet of its bid for the Games of the ? XXX Olympiad (British Olympic Association [BOA], 2004). Veal et al (2012) note that host countries of previous Games had taken a very passive approach to promoting a legacy of mass sport participation and that London was the first host city to be explicitin its intent. Although criticised for a lack of initial impetus (Simmonds 2007), the UK Government published ‘Our Promise for 2012’ with a supporting Action Plan (Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS] 2008a) which included the target of one million people to increase their physical activity levels and one million people to be participating in more sport .[[1]](#footnote-1) The promise was supported by a change in sport policy from *Game Plan* (DCMS 2002) to *Playing to Win* (DCMS 2008b). These steps might be considered to follow the concept of ‘leveraging’ legacy; with consensus being found in the literature that if an event is going to act as a ‘shop window’ for sport development, careful planning needs to occur to ensure that a sustainable legacy programme is created (Chalip 2006; Coalter & Taylor 2008; Hughes 2013; Masterman 2009; Weed et al 2009). A strategy of ‘legacy by osmosis’, relying on incidental effects which are unpredictable, difficult to direct and control, is unlikely to be successful (Hodgetts 2011; Smith 2009). In the words of Girginov and Hills (Girginov & Hills 2008, p.89): ‘legacies are created not given’.

## The Trickle Down and Role Model Effects

The concept that elite spots performance will positively impact on mass participation is often referred to as the ‘Trickle Down Effect’ ([TDE] Frawley, Veal, Cashman, & Toohey 2009) or the ‘Demonstration Effect’ (Weed et al 2009). The TDE has had a significant influence on sport policy over a number of decades in a number of countries, including the UK (Grix & Carmichael 2012). Green (2009) suggests the TDE has been used as the justification for the prioritisation of funding to elite sport. As revealed in the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report (2006, p.Ev2), the TDE is considered to have a ‘huge impact on people in this country in motivating them to participate in sport and compete in sport’.

In order to better understand the concept of a TDE, it has been suggested that the role model effect (RME) could be a contributing factor. Coalter (2008) proposes that the RME is implicit in the notion that mega-events lead to increased sport participation. Hughes (2013) illustrates that the RME was the ‘programme theory’ behind the London 2012 legacy ‘promise’. As stated by Lord Coe, Chair of the LOCOG, ‘it will be the performances of the stars in the Games that gets people involved [in sport]’ (White 2011, para 9).

Hindson et al (1994) concluded that there are two antithetical models of the relationship between elite sport’s role models and grassroots participation: that elite athletes become role models and attract new participants to sport; or, demonstrations of sporting excellence act as a deterrent to sport participation because of the perceived competence gap between the observer and the athlete.

There are several factors that impact on the relationship between role models and participants. One is age; adults are more likely to be dissuaded when seeing elite athletes perform as they perceive they can never reach such a standard (Lyle 2009). Weed (2009) has, however, provided evidence to show that role models can have a positive impact on some groups’ sport participation, such as primary aged children and adults that are already active in a particular sport.

In answering the question, ‘What makes an effective role model programme?’, MacCullum and Beltman (2002) conclude that the key elements for a successful programme focusing on observation and modelling (as in the case of sport mega-event) are:

* the role model must appear relevant and accessible;
* there is provision of on-going support for participants;
* there are on-going reminders of the role model.

The use of the word ‘on-going’ suggests the programme needs to be embedded in the wider sport development strategy in the event’s host country. As summarised by Coalter (2008, p.15), ‘Fleeting images of elite and specialised sporting achievement are clearly not enough to ensure that role models contribute to a substantial increase in sport participation’.

## Development of sport – development through sport

One area of sport mega-event legacy that potentially muddies the waters is whether the intent is for the ‘development of sport’ or ‘development through sport’. In relation to the Olympics, the former is evident; it is accepted practice for a host country to invest heavily in elite sport to maximise the home advantage and potential of a record medal haul. Investment in Team GB at the London 2012 Games was no exception to this rule; £8m for Team GB at Beijing 2008, £13m for London 2012, where the ‘scope of services would be unprecedented’ with ‘unparalleled levels of preparation’ (Rai 2011). In a further unprecedented move, UK Sport has announced increased funding for Rio 2016 with a record £347m to be invested over the next four years, an increase of £47m (Gibson 2012). Paralympic sport is undoubtedly the main beneficiary with its funding increased by 43% over the four year period 2008 – 2012 (BBC 2012). The development of sport in the UK as a legacy of 2012 has a healthy outlook, particularly elite and high performance sport.

‘Development through sport’, as a legacy, where one of the topical proposed outcomes is the increased health of the nation seems unable to attract similar interest and government investment. The London 2012 Games were billed as the catalyst for an increase in participation rates in sport and physical activity (Vigor, Mean, & Tims 2004) with the subject of tackling obesity, particularly among children, frequently wove in the rhetoric (Hughes 2013). Funding for this legacy initially amounted to £480m spread over 46 National Governing Bodies should NGBs be outside and precede the brackets? ([NGBs] Sport England 2008b). Later, in 2010, the Coalition Government announced ‘Places, People, Play’, a £135m 2012 legacy fund, and in 2012 a further £8m to promote sport among people with disabilities. However, when it is known that Team GB comprised only 550 athletes, that every medal cost just over £4.5m (Couvee 2012) and that in the build-up to the Games, National Lottery funding for ‘development through sport’ was raided to the tune of £1.1bn to help fund the London 2012 Games (Kelso 2008) the balance of investment might appear skewed to supporting a legacy of the ‘development of sport’. In the aftermath of the London 2012 Games, Catherine Bennett (Bennett 2012, posed the question, who were ‘The real Olympic winners?’ In her discussion, she observed, ‘while the government invests vast sums in yachting and rowing, countless children are left behind’.

## British Cycling Federation (BCF) – ‘Inspiration to Participation’

The BCF is one NGB that has had success with its London 2012 legacy programme – ‘Sky Ride’. Following success at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, the rise in prominence of the BCF’s Team GB and Team Sky through riders such as Sir Chris Hoy, Sir Bradley Wiggins and Victoria Pendleton was notable. Sponsored by Sky, the BCF has since 2009 run a growing series of Sky Ride events showcased by Sky Ride City where cycling Olympians and Paralympians take part alongside the public to ‘get the role models out there, mixing with people, making that visible link’ (Hughes 2013, p.170). Sky Ride City participants are then signposted through social media to more local intensity graded Sky Ride events (www.goskyride.com). In 2012, the BCF (2012) claimed that since 2008 they have put one million people back on their bikes.

## Planning for legacy

A contributory factor to the success of the Sky Ride programme that used the inspiration of the London 2012 Games was the planning. A development structure was put in place three years prior to the event. As noted earlier, the importance of ‘leveraging’, making the legacy part of a wider sport development strategy, with additional sustainable activity, is recognised as important to success.

Although seen earlier in this document to seemingly follow the concept of ‘leveraging’, the planning for the London 2012 Games bid participation promise was still criticised for lacking a clear strategic lead (Simmonds, 2007) and amounted to merely a ‘repackaging of existing plans and existing investment to increase sport participation’ (Hughes 2013, p.202). The DCMS gave Sport England the responsibility of delivering the sport legacy, who in turn gave responsibility to the NGBs as ‘experts in their field’ (DCMS 2008a). However, not everyone was convinced that this was a recipe for success. It was pointed out that to make the legacy happen it needed a ‘powerful mandate to make this whole area of increased sport participation a priority’ and that ‘Sport England lacked the political stature to influence cross-departmental agendas’ (Lamb 2007, Q97). The structure of UK sport development was seen to encourage competition for resources to take forward the objectives of individual organisations. NGBs were set to be put head to head ‘rather than getting behind the vision of a commonly held vision of legacy’ (Plowright 2009, p.5). By down-grading the original target, Sport England’s Active People survey has demonstrated an increase of 1.5 million people taking part in sport since the bid for the London 2012 Games was secured (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts [HCCPA] 2013). However, it is perhaps indicative of the lack of planning for legacy that at time of writing (nine months after the Games’ closing ceremonies), Lord Coe has been made the UK Government’s Olympic Legacy Ambassador, yet there has been no public indication of intent, only concerns that the opportunity to capitalise on the Games’ has passed (Collins 2013; HCCPA 2013).

## Conclusion

In the aftermath of the London 2012 Games and despite London’s brave rhetoric, questions remain as to whether leaving a legacy of increased mass sport participation is a realistic aim. The future currently seems set to follow a similar pattern. President of Rio 2016, Carlos Newman (Rio 2016, 2013) has spoken of a sporting legacy of ‘cutting edge facilities’ to support elite development. However, initial reports show that to date little consultation or planning has occurred to support a sport participation legacy (Reis, de Sousa-Mast, & Gurgel 2013).

Cashman (2006) reports on the observations of Professor Hai Ren of the Olympic Research Centre in Beijing that proposes elite and grassroots sport have become incompatible in nature, elite sport being part of a commercial entertainment business that bears little resemblance to community sport. Cashman (2006) suggests it is a growing divide, which may help explain the lack of a symbiotic relationship, although the validity of the link between the two has long been questioned (McKay 1991).

Parent (2008) suggests that host cities are ‘well-intentioned in the beginning’ but plans are shelved as time and effort is directed to the hosting of the event. Stuart and Scassa (2011) propose the need for some form of legislation to increase the status of legacy within the bid. They suggest the IOC might implement the same model of ‘coercive power’ it holds over host cities to protect the IOC’s intellectual property rights to create a single body to be accountable for legacy plans, their finance and management.

Indeed, as Veal et al (2012, p.176) concluded that to ‘leverage sporting events to achieve a sport participation legacy it is necessary to know what levers to pull’, it may be that the next step is to employ some supportive legal muscle to help maximise the effectiveness of the levers?

**Key Points**

* There is little empirical evidence yet to support the claim that an Olympic and Paralympic Games can leave a legacy of increased mass sport participation.
* It is important to differentiate between the ‘development of (elite) sport’ and the ‘development through sport’ (sport for good).
* If an event is to act as a ‘shop window’ for sport development it needs to be ‘leveraged’. Planning and investment need to be given priority in the ‘sunrise’ of the event.
* More attention needs to be given to efficacy of the ‘programme theory’. What is the *mechanism* by which it is anticipated that the event will leave the proposed *outcome* of increased mass sport participation and in what *context* does it work? (Pawson and Tiley 1997; Hughes 2013).
* If a host city’s legacy promises are to be more than ‘well intentioned’ (Parent 2008) will it require the introduction of legislation to ensure delivery?

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A practical guide applying the theoretical concepts of the trickle-down effect to leverage the London 2012 Olympic Games for the creation of physical activity legacy. The guide draws on Sport England’s market segment database to show a range of activities to target specific markets.

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1. Participation was defined as 3 x 30 minutes of exercise per week. It included recreational walking and cycling, but excluded walking and cycling exclusively for travel (Sport England 2008a). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)