

Opportunity

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Social impacts and legacies of major sporting events

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The argument that major sporting events create legacies such as city regeneration and economic growth has repeatedly been used politically to justify event bids¹, and these types of legacies have been researched extensively². By contrast, social legacies and impacts remain relatively understudied³.

However, this does not mean that social legacies are unimportant.

Let's first look at what social legacies entail. According to the systematic review of Mair et al. (2021), event legacy research has included social elements specifically concerning 'inclusion and diversity', 'volunteering', 'social cohesion, civic pride, and social capital', 'business and government partnership', 'disaster preparedness', 'sport participation, infrastructure, and health', 'destination branding', and 'accessibility'.

Unlike economic and environmental legacies, which some might argue benefit only certain business sectors (e.g., tourism and trade) or certain locations within a host city (areas close to stadiums where major infrastructure tends to be focused), social legacies can, in theory, benefit all individuals and communities in a host region.

Social legacies are transboundary (in terms of ethnicity, gender, and other socio-demographic categories) and perhaps more important than ever in the aftermath of the COVID outbreak, when people are actively seeking reasons and opportunities to celebrate and to socialise with family and friends.

So, what kinds of social legacies have the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games offered to Birmingham citizens and communities?

The Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games has five legacy missions⁴: (1) bring people together, (2) improve health and well-being, (3) help the region to grow and succeed, (4) be a catalyst for change, and (5) put us on the global stage.

Translating those legacy missions into actual legacy programmes and activities, the pre-games legacy evaluation report produced by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport⁵ outlined that two out of the five legacy missions (1 & 2) appear to have been strongly focused on social legacies anticipating outcomes for '*physical activity and wellbeing*', '*community cohesion, inclusion, and pride*', '*youth and learning*', and '*creative and cultural*

¹ McGillivray, D., & Turner, D. (2017). *Event Bidding: Politics, Persuasion and Resistance*. Routledge: London.

² Thomson, A., Cuskelly, G., Toohey, K., Kennelly, M., Burton, P., & Fredline, L. (2019). Sport event legacy: A systematic quantitative review of literature. *Sport Management Review*, 22(3), 295-321. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2018.06.011>

³ Mair, J., Chien, P. M., Kelly, S. J., & Derrington, S. (2021). Social impacts of mega-events: a systematic narrative review and research agenda. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1870989>

⁴ Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games (2021). *Legacy Plan*. Available at: <https://resources.cwg-qbr.pulselive.com/qbr-commonwealth-games/document/2022/02/11/9592fb24-e996-498a-87e5-34e55ada0676/Legacy-Plan.pdf> (Accessed: 18 May 2022).

⁵ DCMS. (2021). *Birmingham 2022 pre-Games evaluation framework and baseline report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/birmingham-2022-pre-games-evaluation-framework-and-baseline-report>

participation'. And another three legacy missions (3, 4 & 5) encompassed social legacies (specifically '*accessibility and equality*', '*social value*', '*skills*', '*volunteering*', and '*creative and cultural participation*'), in addition to other different types of legacies (e.g., economic and environment legacies) that were targeted.

While the abovementioned various social-legacy-anticipations appear to be consistent with the promises of previous major sporting events and are evidence-based (to various degrees), one type in particular – sport participation legacies – deserves discussion here. This is because, although research⁶ has suggested time and time again that the hosting of major sporting events does not create sustainable positive sport and physical activity legacies, the expectation persists that the Games will generate a legacy for physical activity and wellbeing to '*inspire and offer targeted opportunities for the people of the West Midlands to improve and sustain levels of physical activity*' (p. 26).

Watching the Games and the performance of elite athletes might inspire individuals and change their attitudes towards sport and physical activity, but it does not necessarily change behaviours – as established in our study⁷ of long-term sport participation legacies from the Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Olympics Games. When we examined the effects of other intrinsic and extrinsic factors (e.g., time, money, and sport confidence) on participation behaviour, we found the 'Olympic impact' to be one of the least influential factors affecting sport participation.

Our findings offer two key messages concerning policy learning: First, the findings serve as a warning that the legacy promises for major sporting events such as the Commonwealth Games must be realistic. Second, there is a need for proactive planning and concrete, sustainable mechanisms – beyond the hosting of events and the building of stadiums – that support sport and physical activity participation.



⁶ Annear, M., Sato, S., Kidokoro, T., & Shimizu, Y. (2022). Can international sports mega events be considered physical activity interventions? A systematic review and quality assessment of large-scale population studies. *Sport in Society*, 25(4), 712-729. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2021.1957834>

⁷ Chen, S., Liang, x., Hu, R. X., & Xing, X. (2022). *Long-term sport participation impact of mega sporting events: Evidence from the Beijing 2008 Games and the London 2012 Games* (a report for the British Academy). University of Birmingham. <https://sites.google.com/view/sport-participation-legacy/home>