An Olympic legacy for all? The non-infrastructural outcomes of the Olympic Games for socially excluded groups (Atlanta 1996–Beijing 2008)

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 22 January 2011
Accepted 19 April 2011

Keywords:
Olympic Games
Social exclusion
Legacy
Social sustainability
Volunteering

A B S T R A C T

The use of mega sporting events to achieve social goals for socially excluded groups is heavily contested. Comparative evidence regarding the effects of the Olympic Games for these groups is scarce, and there is an even greater dearth of studies focusing on non-infrastructural programmes (such as sport participation initiatives, volunteering opportunities, training and employment schemes). This study identifies planning principles that allow for the development of such non-infrastructural benefits for socially excluded groups in host cities, and reviews their application in recent Olympic Games.

This study examines data from 7 Olympic cities (Atlanta, Nagano, Sydney, Salt Lake City, Athens, Turin and Beijing). It shows that the Olympic Games generally bring few benefits for socially excluded groups, although these benefits are often important justifications in the bidding stage. The study highlights the growing importance placed by the International Olympic Committee on environmental sustainability, and proposes a similar emphasis on social sustainability.

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1. Introduction

Mega sporting events like the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup and the Commonwealth Games can be important components of a city’s tourism product. The impacts of these events are frequent topics of tourism research. Hall and Hodges (1996) highlight however that research often focuses on the economic dimension of events at the expense of social, environmental, and political analyses.

This study examines the non-infrastructural outcomes of the Olympic Games on socially excluded groups in the host community. Academic discussion of the socio-economic impacts of the Olympic Games on socially excluded groups has exposed a divide between supporters and critics of the use of mega-events to achieve social goals. On the one hand there are those that emphasise that “the presence of the Olympic spirit in the host city, and in the national imaginary, does offer a real and rare opportunity to develop and mobilise cultural, communal and social action – opportunities to catalyse large-scale transformation” (LERI, 2007, p. 16). On the other hand, there are those that liken the Olympic Games to “a self-serving commercial circus of property developers, construction companies, equipment suppliers and commercial sponsors whose benefits do not necessarily extend to the local communities” (Keating in Essex & Chalkley, 1998, p. 191). In this view the Olympic Games are a mere form of urban boosterism, invoked by elites and the media (Tufts, 2004). In this article, planning and management principles that increase the potential for non-infrastructural benefits for socially excluded groups will be identified. Seven recent Olympic Games will be examined to evaluate to which extent these have been applied in the organisation process.

2. The social impacts of events

A mega-event may be of short duration but it may have an impact and meaning far beyond the event itself for the host city (Hiller, 2000). In terms of social impacts of mega-events, one can make a distinction between infrastructural and non-infrastructure, or tangible and intangible, or “hard” and “soft” impacts (Preuss, 2007).

The tangible, and most visible impacts of mega-events like the Olympics on host cities are usually related to the built environment. “Hosting the Olympics almost always involves significant capital costs through the construction of specialised buildings and other infrastructural improvements” (Hiller, 2006, p. 318). All host cities pursue these tangible, “hard legacy gains”, examples of which are new amenities, a clean-up and reorientation of city spaces, new types of land use, and improved transport infrastructure (LERI, 2007, p. 9). These impacts may be presented as social, as well as economic, impacts: although the regeneration of urban areas often serves the economic goals of attracting new investment and
stimulating the local economy, there are associated social benefits. New sporting infrastructure may improve access to sport; Olympic housing developments may later be used as affordable housing units; and the redevelopment of run-down areas may increase feelings of safety and local pride.

Less visible, and less often discussed in the academic literature, are the non-infrastructural, intangible, “soft” impacts of mega sporting events. These impacts are more difficult to record and quantify, which may be one of the reasons why research evidence for them is scarcer than for the infrastructural impacts. These impacts can be divided into different categories:

- **Impacts relating to individuals**: These can be divided into different subcategories:
  - Health benefits: Sporting events have been linked to health improvements via increased sport participation, promoting healthy living, improved physical health and interest in Olympic sport (Atkinson et al., 2008; Bull & Lovell, 2007; DCMS, 2005; Smith, 2009).
  - Mental health: A number of authors also linked mega sporting events to mental health benefits for the host community members. These benefits tend to be placed within the realm of self-esteem, confidence and well-being (DCMS, 2005; LERI, 2007; Smith, 2009). One source linked this impact to inspiring children (Smith, 2009).
  - Skills: Mega-events can be seen as opportunities for gathering and developing skills, increasing employability. These impacts are referred to as skills, employment opportunities, experience of work, employment prospects and encouraging volunteering (DCMS, 2005; Smith, 2009).
  - Social capital: This refers to relationships and networks between individuals. Events can provide opportunities to extend personal networks and strengthen communication links, which may help the individual (LERI, 2007). An increase in social capital can also strengthen communities (see below).

- **Impacts relating to the community**: These tend to refer to improved links and cooperation. Terms used to describe this impact are community cohesion (an outcome of increased social capital), community buy-in, co-operative entrepreneurship, social inclusion, social integration, reinforcing collective identities, uniting people, social interaction, increased social capital, community buy-in, co-operative entrepreneurship (DCMS, 2005; LERI, 2007; Smith, 2009). One source mentions more engaged government structures (LERI, 2007).

- **Impacts on the image, status and sense of place**: This is classed as a social impact because of the positive impact this is claimed to have on the local residents: Gu and Ryan (2007) highlight the role of place attachment for self-esteem and personal growth. Terms to describe this impacts are often buzz, pride of place, civic pride, sense of spectacle, atmosphere, nationalism, patriotism, feel-good factor, reputation, showcase, image and status (Atkinson et al., 2008; Bull & Lovell, 2007; DCMS, 2005; LERI, 2007; Smith, 2009). One source mentions more engaged government structures (LERI, 2007).

- **Impacts on the environment, well-being, and mental health**: Sporting events have been linked to health improvements via increased sport participation, promoting healthy living, improved physical health, and interest in Olympic sport. The theory is that economic benefits will filter down to all groups in due course. But evidence of such filtering of benefits to the poorest groups is difficult to find. The distance between the new, buoyant activities within a city, and the lives of the poorest citizens has instead tended to increase” (Healey, Davoudi, Tavangoglou, O’Toole, & Usher, 1992, p. 7). The Olympics, often heavily focused on property-led regeneration, are often viewed as reinforcing the increasing polarisation of urban populations (Hiller, 2006). Indeed, the costs involved of staging the Games are now so high that host cities can often only justify the expenditure when it is seen as leading to a major programme of regeneration and improvement (Essex & Chalkley, 1998, p. 187).

The globalisation of the economy has given rise to what is referred to in the academic literature as “the entrepreneurial city”, wherein coalitions of urban elites unite to promote the economic development of their city to obtain a significant place within the global urban hierarchy. The Olympics can be an opportunity to enhance and broaden the profile of the city, and to showcase the city as an attractive place for investment (Hiller, 2006). Flagship developments and prestigious projects are often the key to achieve this aim. On a social level however, flagship projects enhance socioeconomic inequalities between communities by increasing cost of living and doing little to increase employment opportunities or material outcomes for the most deprived (Hall & Hubbard, 1998).

The principle of “trickle down” economics assumes that the public and private financial investment flowing into deprived areas will naturally distribute. “In practice, it leaks out through consultants, developers and large companies which are best able to exploit new commercial opportunities. Those who benefit are the existing asset holders and the affluent middle classes” (Ryan-Collins & Jackson, 2008, p. 4). For socially excluded groups, the impacts may be negative, via diluted community structures or an inflation of the housing market, which may force people who do not own their homes to move (Ryan-Collins & Jackson, 2008, p. 4).

Examples are the development of new sporting facilities and new housing. It has been shown in academic research that sports events and infrastructure have the greatest impact on those already involved in sports (Vigor, Mean, & Tims, 2004, p. 97). It also suggests that the new facilities do not have great impacts on local employment or economic activity levels: the subsidies paid by governments do little to benefit the host populations economically (Ryan-Collins & Jackson, 2008, p. 14). Another issue concerns Olympic-related housing, built to high standards to accommodate athletes and the media, which are built under pressure to be sold at high market value to pay for the construction costs and/or make a profit. “After-use then might shift to persons of higher income rather than the provision of housing for low-income persons” (Hiller, 2006).

4. **Non-infrastructural impacts on socially excluded groups**

Hiller (2000) discusses how the two traditional pillars of the Olympic Movement are sport and culture. More recently environmental aims have been added. Lenskyj (2008) argues social...
responsibility needs to be the “fourth pillar” of the Olympic Movement. Whereas the social impacts of major sport events have been consigned to a transient “feel-good” factor in the past (Smith, 2009), the event is now increasingly seen as an opportunity for long-term social legacies, inclusive of all economic strata in the host populations. A body of evidence regarding three legacies for socially excluded groups is growing within the academic literature. These are skills (volunteering), employment, and sports participation.

4.1. Skills/volunteering

Olympic volunteering programmes have been hailed as opportunities to improve skills and employability. Olympic volunteering is often motivated by a pride for the own country and its culture, social contact and friendship, and a desire to feel needed and valued by society: all of which can be seen as positive intangible impacts of mega-events. Kemp (2002) shows that volunteering can generate positive feelings and skills in the following areas: expanding of social networks, learning to work together with people from different places, heightened self-esteem, a renewed sense of contribution to society and increased competence in function-specific skills. Whilst this confirms the potential value of the volunteering experience, there are limitations for socially excluded groups: they are generally hard to engage and include in the volunteer experience. Hiller (2006) highlights that service workers (primarily white-collar employees) fit the model of the Olympic volunteer the best, seeing that they are more likely to be interested, and that they are usually conscientious, disciplined and image-conscious. Persons from socially excluded backgrounds may require more training and support to become and stay involved in volunteering – even though they may be most in need of skills and experience. Another limitation is that Olympic volunteering may have a negative impact on unionised labour, and its displacement of volunteers from work of greater social value (Lenskyj, 2000, p. 115).

4.2. Employment

Increased employment opportunities are often used prominently to justify investment in the Olympic Games. However, these new employment opportunities are not always evenly distributed: “Many Olympic contractors wanted people who were already employed, skilled, and having “the right attitude” to work, while a lot of the long-term unemployed and those from areas of high unemployment were not getting Olympic jobs” (Lenskyj, 2000, p. 115). Like volunteering opportunities, employment opportunities usually benefit people on the easier end of the citizen participation ladder: this shows that employment and training programmes need to be more focused if they want to reach the long-term unemployed. Vigor et al. (2004) therefore emphasise that if Games-related development is to provide new employment opportunities are not always evenly distributed: “The practice of sport is a human right” (Olympic Charter, 2007, p. 11). This principle is repeated in the ‘Mission and role of the IOC’: mission 12 is “to encourage and support the development of sport for all” (Olympic Charter, 2007, p. 15).

Participation in sport has been associated with a range of benefits, such as improvements in physical health, contributions to neighbourhood renewal and communities, reducing truancy and youth crime, improved attitudes to learning amongst young people, opportunities for active citizenship and development of social capital (Bailey, 2005). Gratton and Henry (2001) add a potential reduction in vandalism, the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, greater pride in the community, improving employment prospects and enhancing self-esteem. Henry (2005) links sports to intercultural understanding and multiculturalism. Although many of these benefits are claimed, these claims are not always substantiated with robust academic evidence (Gratton & Henry, 2001, p. 189).

If this is the case, non-participation in sporting activities can be seen as exclusion from its positive impacts. It has been shown that persons who are socially excluded are less likely to participate in sports. Collins and Kay (2003, p. 728) list the three types of constraints on playing sports: the first type are structural constraints (such as poor facilities, poor transport, poor environment), the second type are mediating constraints (manager’s attitudes, labeling by society), and the third type are personal constraints (lack of time, income, skills, confidence; fear over safety). Poverty adds an extra dimension to each of these factors. Engaging in sports often costs money – sport and physical activity have to a large extent become commodified (Collins, 2004, p. 728). But money, or economic capital, is not the only inhibiting factor: sport involvement is also linked to cultural capital. Research shows that both people who are more affluent, and people who are better educated, engage more in sports: importantly, these two tendencies operate independently from each other (Wilson, 2002). This may be an indication that lowering prices for sporting facilities and/or sporting events will not necessarily increase participation: a change in attitudes may also be necessary.

Jarvie (2008, p. 104) suggests that cities, rather than using sport as a basis for attracting national and international exposure, should resurrect the notion of sport as a social right. He adds that “sport as a social right for children and all vulnerable groups cannot be left to chance” (Jarvie, 2008, p. 115). Sporting events tend to have the greatest impact in terms of increased participation on those already involved in sports (Vigor et al., 2004, p. 97). There is little evidence that shows sustained changes in interest and participation post-Olympics. Haynes reports that “the only areas of change that could be attributed to the Olympics are in the area of television viewing” (Haynes, 2001). It is also the more affluent groups in society who are most likely to attend sport events (Hiller, 2006; Wilson, 2002).

5. Planning and management principles for greater inclusion

The examples above have confirmed that “there is no guaranteed beneficial legacy from hosting an Olympic Games […] and there is little evidence that past Games have delivered benefits for those people and places most in need” (Vigor et al., 2004, p. xi). Nevertheless, there may be practical planning tools to leverage the social leverage opportunities the Games present. These are fourfold.

5.1. Building links with existing policies and networks

The literature recommends that local governments and community organisations should co-operate and represent the needs of socially excluded residents. Vigor et al. (2004, p. xi) assert
that “what is clear is that cities that have benefited most have embedded the Olympics in a wider urban strategy and social policy agenda”. Community networks such as sports bodies may also play a role. Many already possess good working relationships and networks within deprived communities, and represent an existing resource that can be developed and promoted (Vigor et al., 2004, p. 45). Local charities and community organisations provide useful channels to engage with socially excluded groups who may lack the confidence to engage in formal decision making directly.

5.2. Focused vs. universal programmes

Universal regeneration objectives are those that make reference to issues such as poverty, social exclusion, low skills, unemployment or poor health within the regeneration plans (Brownill & Darke, 1998, p. 9). The objectives are expressed in general terms and the whole community is targeted through them. In the previous sections, it has been made apparent that universal programmes, such as employment or volunteering schemes, do not always reach the groups in the community that are most in need of them. It seems that where no efforts are made to direct effects, they may gravitate to those who least need them (Smith, 2009). This has led claims that “Olympic legacy benefits will accrue to the already privileged sectors of the population, while the disadvantaged disproportionately bear the burden” (Lenskyj, 2000, p. 131). More focused programmes, that take into account the characteristics of socially excluded groups, may be more suitable and successful in engaging these groups.

5.3. Participation and involvement

Balsas (2004) states that swift planning processes without due public participation can undermine the expected effects of regeneration and skew civic agendas. Misener and Mason (2006, p. 46) agree that “in order to ensure that community values are respected, the local community needs the opportunity to continue to be involved in the overall event hosting process. Critics of the bidding process though have argued that in many cases no real consultation of the local community is held, and refer to the process as “manufactured consent”” (Cashman, 2002, p. 6).

5.4. Delivering the legacy during the “pregnancy” period

A significant proportion of the legacy of the Olympic Games is delivered before they are held (Vigor et al., 2004, p. 22), because funding and interest in Olympic programmes often wanes after the Games (Smith, 2009). After the event, the funding sources and focus of the project may have to change: there may be a feeling of loss experienced by many members of the host community, even a post-Games depression (Cashman, 2002, p. 12).

This article examines if, how and to which extent these principles have been applied, and how far benefits for socially excluded groups have been achieved in the context of the Olympic Games. Essex and Chalkley (1998, p. 204) highlight the need for comparative historical research about the socio-economic impacts of the Olympic Games, and draw attention to the methodological difficulty that “the further back in time the researcher wishes to stretch, the more fragmentary the evidence is likely to be. There may therefore be a case for concentrating enquiries on the more recent Games”. This study has therefore focused seven Olympic Games, encompassing four Summer (Beijing 2008 Athens 2004, Sydney 2000, Atlanta 1996) and three Winter (Turin 2006, Salt Lake City 2002, Nagano 1998) Games.

6. Method

This study offers a semi-longitudinal and comparative perspective, and is based on a combination of primary and secondary data. The research was guided by the following research questions: Have host cities leveraged the benefits of the Olympic Games for socially excluded groups via non-infrastructural initiatives? How does the approach of the host cities differ? Are there noticeable differences between the Summer and the Winter Games? Are there best practice examples that can be identified?

The secondary data were mainly sourced from academic research, but also from reports from social and charitable organisations, the press, IOC (International Olympic Committee) and NOC (National Olympic Committee) documentation. These sources were supplemented by primary data collected via email interviews. The respondents to the email interviews were selected to cover a wide range of stakeholders and commentators: the academic perspective was represented by researchers who have published academically about the Olympic Games in host cities, the social perspective was represented by respondents from charities and social organisations who work with socially excluded groups in the host cities, and the policy perspective was represented by respondents from political organisations (such as members of the city council). Each quotation in the findings is followed by a letter that highlights the viewpoint of the respondent — A (academic institution), S (social organisation), P (political organisation). An initial selection of respondents was made on the basis of the secondary sources described above and on a search in the online broadsheet press. The International Olympic Committee, sponsors of this study, also provided initial contacts in each case study country. In many cases further respondents were identified via a snowballing technique. The respondents were all asked the same questions in the initial email interview to make a uniform data collection process possible, and thus improve comparability between the findings. The questions addressed the different potential non-infrastructural schemes discussed in the literature review (including sports participation, volunteering, local pride, skills development, social ticketing and advocacy). Respondents were requested to evaluate the implementation and outcomes of each of these for the Olympic Games in their city. Where appropriate, a follow-up email was sent with further questions. The data were thematically analysed.

The number of combined data sources for each city varied between 12 and 26. For each city, a minimum of 5 primary data sources were used. The recruiting emails were translated in Italian, Greek, Mandarin and Japanese. In total, 46 respondents participated in the email interviews. An overview of the responses is provided below.

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Atlanta</th>
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<th>Athens</th>
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<td>Social/charity</td>
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Generating data in 7 different locations posed a range of challenges. If the Olympic Games were organised a long time ago, this made it harder to find respondents, but there are also problems with the validity of the responses. “Legacy assessments of Olympic Games are fraught with dangers of incorrect assessments and influenced by
those who make them. There is the likelihood of insufficient or too much time having passed when the pronouncements are made to make any meaningful judgement. Secondly, there is the matter of objectivity depending on the stakeholder relationship” (Toohey, 2008). The researcher has aimed to gather responses from a variety of stakeholders to ensure fair representation. Although the number of respondents per host city (between 5 and 9) may be fairly small, and it may not be possible to draw firm generalisations for each city individually, the striking consensus between the different interviewees and sources has resulted in a convincing body of evidence that has the capacity to transcend temporal and geographical boundaries.

7. Findings

The findings of this study highlight that great differences between the Olympic Games researched for this study, not only in terms of the non-infrastructural benefits that were achieved for socially excluded groups, but also in the attention this aspect received during the bidding stage, as part of their justification and conceptualisation. The graph below illustrates the differing levels of interest and commitment that were reported by the secondary data and the respondents.

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<td>Explicit objective in bidding stage</td>
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<td>Direct social sustainability legacy</td>
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The graph shows that the Olympic Games discussed in this study can be divided into four groups with regards to their non-infrastructural benefits to socially excluded groups in the host community:

(i) those where these benefits were not identified as goals for the event during the bidding and hosting stage, and no specific outcomes were noted (Nagano, Salt Lake City);
(ii) those where these benefits were identified as goals for the event during the bidding stage, but where a social sustainability legacy for socially excluded groups in the host community was not achieved (Atlanta);
(iii) those where some of these benefits are argued to be achieved indirectly, via a lasting infrastructural or non-infrastructural legacy that affects the whole host community (Athens, Turin, Beijing);
(iv) those where some of these benefits were achieved directly, and where a lasting legacy is notable (Sydney).

Where several editions of the Olympic Games are grouped under the same category, there may be considerable differences in their approach to social sustainability and non-infrastructural legacy. The following sections provide a more nuanced overview of each event.


In the Candidature Files and the Official Report of Nagano 1998, sustainability is mentioned: the focus is on natural sustainability, the participation of children, and peace and friendship. Social sustainability values were thus noted, but these did not specifically extend to socially excluded groups in the host community. Several primary respondents highlighted this explicitly, in commenting that ‘there were no projects that were aimed at poverty reduction or socially excluded people linked to the Games’ (S), and ‘my friends who have studied the history of the Olympics do not know any’ (A). One respondent links this to the structure of Japanese society:

“I personally think this (reduction of social exclusion) was not an intention. As you know, Japan is generally a homogenous society, where one cannot easily find disadvantaged people. […]’ (A)

Some social initiatives are mentioned by the respondents, but none are specifically targeted towards the reduction of social exclusion. One comment refers to the construction programmes and the effects on the local economy: ‘Much money was invested to boost the economy of the region, particularly through construction. However, it was a one-shot ‘dosage’. So after the Games were over, many local constructors, who over-invested in plant and equipment, bankrupted’ (A). Two respondents also refer to the efforts of the organisers to include athletes from countries where winter sports are often non-existent. ‘An example is the bobsled team from Jamaica, and a cross-country skier from Kenya, but both of those were commercially driven to product sponsorship’ (A).

The economic conditions during at the time may have played a role: GDP was very high in 1998, so that resources may have been deemed more constructive in areas of the world with more severe levels of poverty. The Nagano Organising Committee for the Games established the ‘Nagano Olympic International Cooperation Fund’. One respondent explained that this fund aimed to ‘improve the deteriorating educational environment for children due to poverty and conflicts’ (P). Initiatives included (amongst others) a campaign to ban personal land mines, and a Patchwork Blanket campaign for Sarajevo.

The Candidature Files and Official Report of the Salt Lake City Olympics are heavily focused on the principle that the Games will be privately funded, but do not mention social sustainability aims in great depth. All primary respondents agreed that there was no coordinated response in this direction. One respondent elaborates:

“For the Salt Lake Olympics, there was no effort or intent to use the Games to reduce social exclusion or disadvantage. While the bid committee hinted that hosting the Games could be a way to promote social causes, once the 2002 Games were awarded in 1995 the organising committee made it very clear that they were only interested in hosting an athletic event and had no interest in addressing social issues. Unlike Atlanta, there was never any sense in SLC that the Games could or would be used to try to address social disadvantages.” (S)
There is sporadic evidence of a number of small initiatives that addressed the needs of two groups, youth and the homeless. In the youth category, only a small proportion of the initiatives found are specifically targeted towards socially excluded young people. Although Nagano 1998 and Salt Lake City 2002 can thus both be seen as examples of Olympic Games where socially excluded groups in the host community were not specifically on the agenda, there are considerable differences between the two: where Nagano 1998 included a number of social initiatives for other communities, this was not the case in Salt Lake City. An increased concern for safety and security after the attacks of 9/11 in 2001 could have played a role here, but from the candidature files (compiled long before the 9/11 attacks) it becomes clear that social sustainability was never a priority for the organising committee.

7.2. High hopes: Atlanta 1996

The Candidature Files and the Official Report of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta show markedly more interest in social sustainability aims than those of Nagano and Salt Lake City. The words ‘equality’ and ‘equitable’ are mentioned on several occasions.

“As the birth place of the modern human rights movement, Atlanta has the moral vision to express the ideals of justice and equality inherent in fair play exceedingly well” (Candidature files, p. 10).

“Atlanta understands that the Games provide, as no other event could, a chance for a city to demonstrate to the world the true power of the Olympic Ideals. Atlanta is by no means perfect, but in many ways it embodies the values of human liberty and equality as well as any city on earth. As the birth place of the Civil Rights Movement and for many the capital of human rights, Atlanta reflects the high ideals of Olympism” (Candidature files, p. 19).

“Through the preparation for and staging of the Centennial Olympic Games, Atlanta must live up to the measure of its historical rhetoric. We must prepare and implement this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity with the certainty that the rewards are fairly and equitably apportioned among all the citizens of our community, Atlanta is uniquely positioned among the cities of the world to make this dramatic and lasting statement of care and compassion” (Official Report, p. 2).

Although social sustainability and inclusiveness feature highly in these aims, many commentators agree that in practice, the Games mainly achieved the objective to be no fiscal burden on the city, to the point where some would allege the Olympic Games in Atlanta were overly commercialised. Yarbrough (2000, p. 109) calls the Olympic Games “a blown opportunity”: “Mayor Jackson Young’s view was that ‘what good is it to have the Olympic Games if we can’t make a buck of them’” (Yarbrough, 2000, p. 109). He adds “To know all you need to know about Atlanta, walk around the city today (but not after dark) and look. It is almost as if the centennial Olympic Games were never here. […]” (Yarbrough, 2000, pp. 109–110). Rutheiser (1996, p. 238) agrees with this evaluation: “Mayor Young asserted that the Olympics were not a welfare programme, they are a business venture”.

Primary respondents commented indeed that ‘ACOG (Atlanta Organising Committee) viewed their task as taking care of what happens inside the fence’ of the Games and not the city as a whole. They report also that CODA (Committee for Olympic Development in Atlanta), had the task to use the Games as a catalyst to improve the lives of the city’s poor residents. This organisation though failed to ‘get any substantial funds except from federal sources. These funds were tied to the rather vague ideas of transportation improvements’ so most went to sidewalk improvements, planting street trees, and signs to direct pedestrians’ (S). Local charities were rarely included or consulted, even though the integration with existing networks was highlighted as an inclusive planning principle in Section 5 of this text.

The Official Report refers to a job training programme in the construction industry (300 beneficiaries) and internships for young people (more than 200 beneficiaries, plus several hundreds volunteers at ACOG head quarters (Official Report, 200–202)). Rutheiser (1996, p. 253) comments that there was indeed ‘a minority contracting programme and modest job training programme for residents of the neighbourhoods near the stadium’. He rates this effort though as more symbolic than substantive. He also adds that some of the construction programmes, such as the Centennial Park construction, destroyed more than 10% of shelter space for the homeless (Rutheiser, 1996, p. 263). A primary respondent adds that residents in disadvantaged areas ‘were promised job training to help with the construction of the stadium, but few ended up qualifying for the programme, as most neighbourhood residents were both poor and old’ (P). One primary respondent does show appreciation for the employment programme, even if it did not reach the most disadvantaged: ‘I will say that the preparation for the Games did provide jobs for most who wanted them. There were so many projects like the sidewalk reconstruction, road paving, landscaping and the like that did not require extensive skills, and which were filled by locals and by people who came from all over in the hope of finding employment’ (A).

In terms of employment, a report by COHRE (Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions) refers to racial inequalities in commercial opportunities that were offered. Many vendors were lured into huge investments and leased spots on city property, with promises of hundreds of thousands of customers. The report then quotes Professor Robert Bullard, who stated that ‘Atlanta went out of its way to block Olympian visitors from local vendors and small entrepreneurs in Atlanta’s African American communities, causing many to lose their entire investment’ (COHRE, 2007, p. 31).

Smaller initiatives included the Children’s Olympic Ticket Fund – all honoraria received from ACOG Speakers Bureau presentations were used to purchase tickets for children in Georgia who might not otherwise have had the chance to attend the Games. 17,000 young people benefited from this scheme (Official Report, 21), although it is unclear which criteria were used for allocating the tickets.

It can be concluded from this evidence that Atlanta rated social sustainability very highly in its objectives, but that few of these objectives were achieved. The set objectives were highly ambitious, and only through intensive and targeted programmes could they have been achieved. In this study, little evidence of such projects was found.


The Candidature Files and the Official Report of Athens 2004 concentrate heavily on the aim to achieve infrastructural improvements for the city. Social sustainability aims are but fleetingly mentioned:

“For a country to take part in the Games or to express a wish to host them, is for it to state its desire for a better world, without poverty, without conflict – a free world in which physical vigour is the other half of mental creativity”. (Candidature Files, Introduction)
The dearth of social sustainability objectives is echoed by the primary respondents and by the literature. Kissoudi (2008) highlights that the main aims of the Olympics were infrastructural: there were meant to be a catalyst for the transformation of the city of Athens. In practice this means the objectives were to improve the quality of life for residents, to attract tourists and investors, and to improve the image of Athens. With regards to social sustainability, the primary respondents commented:

“There was no policy for tackling poverty or social exclusion during the Athens Olympics. There was the occasional piece of rhetoric (about the need to ensure that the Olympics not only give a boost to development and ‘improvement’ but that they do so in a manner that is sensitive to the poor and excluded, blah, blah, blah). But in practice the whole thing was conspicuous by its absence.” (A)

“Unfortunately the perspective of your research never preoccupied Greece in the form you try to examine. The whole Olympic Games preparation project was seen as a boost to the Greek economy, which increased considerably in those years. Mainly they were building projects, which changed the country’s infrastructure to the benefit of all.” (P)

Athens thus adopted a strongly infrastructural approach to social benefits. Because infrastructural improvements such as those to the transport system can be argued to positively affect every citizen (and as such be a ‘community’ social impact), it could be argued that these benefits will ‘trickle down’ to socially excluded groups. Earlier in this article it was highlighted that this theory has been challenged by many critics, and that socially excluded groups can be affectively reached only through targeted programmes. No evidence of these programmes, or of participation of socially excluded groups in the planning process, was found.

In the Candidature Files and the Official Report for Torino 2006, environmental sustainability was central. In some sections, the link with social sustainability is made, for example:

Environmental protection is one of the main objectives of Torino 2006[...]. The plans being drawn up for environmental improvement looking to Torino 2006 will be available for the city and will contribute to the welfare of all its citizens (Candidature Files, 64).

In the same document, TOROC (Torino Organising Committee) highlights it intended to make the Torino 2006 Olympic Games an event not only “good for a few” but “good for all”. Socially excluded groups though are not specifically mentioned in suggested actions: instead the aims focus on actions such as green procurement, ethical sponsors and volunteering.

In the Sustainability Report 2004/05, solidarity initiatives across the region are mentioned that are supported by TOROC. Although the document refers to ‘projects for social co-operation, whose primary goal is the integration of residents via the development of initiatives aimed at integrating persons from disadvantaged backgrounds into the work force’ (Sustainability Report, 159), there is only one project that focuses on socially excluded groups. The Transistor Project, managed by Arcobaleno (Italian for ‘Rainbow’), is a recycling service for PCs, printers and videos. Arcobaleno is a social co-operative that provides socially excluded persons with learning and employment opportunities in the sorting and recycling industry. The company recruits in cooperation with local social services, substance abuse units, and rehabilitation officers in prisons (www.gruppoaobele.org). This project seems to have been selected as much for its environmental credentials (as a recycling initiative) as for its social aims. For a small number of socially excluded persons however, the event led to positive individual social impacts in the area of skills development (see Section 2).

The consensus between the primary respondents is that social sustainability or a reduction of social exclusion was not a priority for the Turin 2006 Games:

“When planning everything for the Games, the problems you are studying were rather far from their (the organisers’) main interests.” (P)

“I am not aware of any project connected to the Olympic Games which was specifically aimed at people with social difficulties.” (S)

“The Olympic Games in Turin did not modify the organisation of social services for the homeless.” (S)

“For me, the Games have not had any impacts at all on socially excluded people or groups (nor on any other social service). The only impacts have been on the construction level.” (A)

This consensus clearly indicates that the social aspect of sustainability was relatively neglected, particularly compared to the environmental aspect.

From the Candidature Files and the Official Report it can be seen that the one of the main aims of the Olympic Games in Beijing (2008) was to improve the image of China in the eyes of the international community. It is stated that “the whole world will get to know Beijing and China better, and it will further integrate Beijing and China globally” (Candidature Files Questionnaire, p. 2).

In the academic literature, the function of the Olympic Games as an image-building event with a political meaning is regularly emphasised. Mangan and Dong (2009, p.195) for example state that “the Beijing Olympics is first and foremost a political act and assertion. It is also a statement of national intent, the culmination of ideological effort going back to 1999 and the outcome of political, social, cultural and economic changes. [...] In short sport has been the chosen ‘stage’ on which the Chinese perform in pursuit of world recognition, respect and esteem”.

The strong growth in the Chinese economy, and the desire to showcase this new economic status to the world, are often seen as motivations to host the Games. Although this economic growth has been positive for many, some authors highlight that it has not benefited all layers of the population equally. They also suggest that for lower-income citizens, most markedly those outside of Beijing, hosting the Olympic Games may seem like a vanity project: “Wanting everyone to have the chance to be elevated before the wealthy get even wealthier seems to be a sense of justice that is very popular in the lower echelons of Chinese society, where the notion that Beijing is often trying to run before it can really walk due to issues of face is popular” (Mangan & Dong, 2009, p. 195). Also in Beijing, the effects of the Games were not financially positive for all citizens: the price of land, homes and home rentals for example rocketed around the time of the Games (Dong & Mangan, 2008).

According to Dong and Mangan (2008), hosting the Games had a range of benefits for Beijing, such as the encouragement of grassroots sports, the shaping of a national identity, the growth in environmental awareness, and increased sports participation among the young. It is hard to derive to which extent these initiatives reached socially excluded groups: as a number of the respondents aptly put it, the term may just be entirely irrelevant to Chinese culture and society:

“I have been collaborating with Chinese colleagues on various matters and I can tell you that the socially excluded point of view never occupied the Chinese Organising Committee

1 There was indeed the Marginal Neighborhoods Plan which aimed to increase social inclusion and urban renewal through the regeneration of 17 city areas affected by urban and social decay (Bondono & Guala, 2006, p. 4).
because in a communist government there are no socially excluded citizens by default’ (A).

“I am not aware of poverty-reduction-oriented programmes in Beijing. Urban poverty itself is a new subject in China.” (A)

Caffrey (2009, p. 65) refers to censorship as a way to hide social exclusion and inequality — specifically as Beijing wanted to present itself as a strong, wealthy and leading city: “While money is made and lives develop, not all lives. The image of poor people being sacrificed for the privileged, when it appears in Olympic coverage broadcast to the world, can have strong backwash potential”.

Several of the primary respondents indicated that the Olympic Games increased social inequalities, rather than reduce them:

“I would say the Olympics widened the gap.” (A)

“I have seen no evidence that the state tried to reduce social exclusion in a meaningful way. Much to the contrary, the massive capital spent on the Olympics actually entrenched established privilege in many ways.” (A)

“China is full of these types of projects — or at least full of projects that claim to be directed at this type of thing, and for a while everything there was tied to the Olympics at least rhetorically. But nothing strikes me as substantially connected, and I can think of none that are even particularly good examples of real inequality remediation efforts.” (A)

According to the evidence gathered in this study, the aim of these Olympic Games was to present Beijing as a prosperous and attractive city. From this perspective, it may be unsurprising that initiatives highlighting groups that do not conform to this image, were hard to come by. It is possible that in Beijing, the social impact of the Olympic Games focused primarily on the image aspects of the city, rather than on individual or community social impacts (see Section 3): for socially excluded persons in Beijing, the Games may have contributed to a sense of local pride, but no clear evidence in this direction was found. An added difficulty is that just as in Japan, social exclusion is not an often-used concept in China — it may not be culturally relevant.

7.4. Limited though lasting legacy: Sydney 2000

Sydney’s social sustainability aims are specifically mentioned in its Candidature Files and Official Report. The key aims focused on the integration of indigenous peoples, the engagement of different cultural communities, and employment and training programmes for the construction industry.

The choice of the site for the Olympic Games can be seen as significant. Waitt (2003, p. 198) explains that ‘Sydney’s population was polarised between the Northern suburbs (mostly highly skilled service economy employees), and the Western suburbs (higher levels of youth unemployment, higher numbers of unskilled migrants, lower levels of household income, education and English proficiency).’ The Olympic site was located in the disadvantaged West. Through large-scale infrastructural changes to the area, it was intended to increase equality. It has been argued earlier that it is doubtful that benefits through infrastructural developments ‘trickle down’ to socially excluded groups naturally. This could be one of the reasons why in 2008, Toohey (2008, p. 1953) argued that ‘any social impacts that were claimed as a result of the Games appear to have dissipated’. This is echoed by one of the primary respondents: ‘The Olympic propaganda made it seem that this (social sustainability) was an aim, but the reality was that the situation of low-income tenants, street homeless people, and Aboriginal people in Sydney and regional areas was significantly worsened’ (A). One of the primary respondents, who was a representative on the Social Impacts Committee, negates this view and states that ‘I would not say that we were using the Olympics to reduce disadvantage, but we were trying to ensure that there were no negative side effects’ (P).

A number of specific programmes were introduced before and during Sydney 2000 that targeted socially excluded groups in the host community. These programmes focused on event participation via social ticketing, employment initiatives and a strategy for the homeless.

Although an ambitious ticketing policy for Sydney 2002 was proposed in the run-up to the Games, providing affordable tickets to low-income groups, this strategy failed to satisfy many social organisations and commentators. Haynes (2001) refers to this as the “Tickets for the Rich” scandal. Lenskyj (2000, p. 123) summarises that “social service leaders tried for many years to persuade SOCOG (Sydney Organising Committee) to offer discounted tickets to disadvantaged groups. With Olympic venues and associated infrastructure funded with public money, equality of access to Olympic tickets for low-income people was an important social equity issue”.

In 2000, the number of tickets available in this scheme was reduced from 1.5 million to 735,000. The initial offer was only made to schools, sales to welfare groups were postponed until later in the year (Lenskyj, 2000, p. 124). SOCOG’s eventual ‘Olympic Opportunity’ ticket plan for community and welfare groups did not offer discounted tickets. It offered mainly packages of low-priced tickets ($10—19) to less popular events that would probably not have sold otherwise. One cynical view was that SOCOG wanted to swell the television audience at events in which Australian spectators had little interest (e.g. hand ball, fencing and badminton), while appearing magnanimous by giving poor people cheap tickets (Magnay in Lenskyj, 2000).

A second area of activity was employment and training opportunities for the long-term unemployed. Although the Olympic Games provided opportunities for many, it seems these programmes were not sufficiently targeted to have a great effect on the long-term unemployed. Lenskyj (2000, p. 115) states that “many Olympic contractors wanted people who were already employed, skilled, and having “the right attitude” to work, while a lot of the long term unemployed and those from areas of high unemployment were not getting Olympic jobs. […] The widespread use of volunteer labour in the hosting of the Olympics has been justly criticised in the past for its negative impact on unionised labour and its displacement of volunteers from work of greater social value”. Although the initiatives thus may have brought opportunities for some, they were mainly situated at the “easier end” of the citizen participation ladder. This is supported by the primary respondents:

“The reduction of social exclusion was not an explicit objective of either the New South Wales Government or the bodies established to manage the processes. There was a recognition that increased economic activity during the construction phase (1995—2000) and during the year of the Games should provide significant employment opportunities, some of which might be targeted at disadvantaged groups in the labour market. There were some attempts, generally at the margins, to provide employment and training opportunities in both the construction and the hospitality/security industries for indigenous people, but these were later in the process and could have been implemented with much greater impact had the political/governance will been there.” (P)

The third action undertaken was the establishment of the Homelessness Protocol: a code of practice for how police, security, council rangers and other officers should address street homeless people; and an assistance and referral service to be operated by homeless persons’ workers. One primary respondent explains that ‘The Protocol was aimed at protecting street homeless people from being inappropriately moved on or treated during the
Games period, and has survived to now. Allied with this was the short term expansion of the number of emergency shelters and some supported accommodation places available in the inner city parts of Sydney. This was time specific, largely ending by the end of 2000. ’(S)

Even though the provision of additional accommodation places was temporary, the Homelessness Protocol is a lasting legacy of the Sydney 2000 Olympics for socially excluded persons in the host community and the wider region. It is a social impact on the ‘community’ level — strengthening the identity and rights awareness of a group of socially excluded people. On the ‘individual’ level (skills development and participation) the positive outcomes were less noticeable.

It can be concluded that the Sydney Olympic Games not only included social sustainability initiatives in their aims, but also attempted to implement these in three areas: social ticketing, job and training opportunities, and a homelessness strategy. The levels of success varied by area: where the cheaper ticket promises were not kept, there were some improvements for the street homeless, even though some of these were short-term. The case of the employment programme for the Sydney Olympics in particular clearly demonstrates that to achieve real change for socially excluded groups, a targeted strategy is needed, as general programmes do not tend to reach those with multiple disadvantage.

8. Discussion of findings

The study has shown that for many Olympic cities, social sustainability was not part of their aims, nor of the organisation of the Games: as this was the case, it is only natural that the planning and management principles identified in Section 5 were not applied, and that the non-infrastructural impacts for socially excluded groups are marginal in the event’s outcomes. This was the case for Nagano, Salt Lake City, Athens and Beijing. For Turin, there is evidence of small, isolated targeted initiatives, in the context of environmental sustainability. Atlanta and Sydney are the cities in the sample that made social aims the most explicit in their candidatures, but only Sydney seems to have made substantial efforts to turn these aims into practical programmes and initiatives. Even in Sydney there are aims that were not achieved: ‘individual’ social impacts, to be achieved via the ticketing policy and the employment strategy can be said to not have been sufficiently targeted. The Homelessness Protocol though is an example of a lasting social legacy. It has become clear though that overall, leveraging the non-infrastructural benefits of the Olympic Games for low-income groups has been ‘conspicuous by its absence’.

Based on the findings of this study, the difference in attitudes and approaches cannot be linked to the geographical situation of the city alone. In North-America for example, Atlanta 1996 did include social sustainability aims in the candidature, whereas Salt Lake City did not. Neither city seems to have placed great importance on the inclusion of socially excluded groups in the organisation of the Games, but this was not the case for Nagano, Athens or Beijing either. On the basis of this study, there was also no clear difference in approach and goal-setting between Winter and Summer Olympics — even though the Summer Olympics tend to take place in bigger urban centres, where social exclusion may be more visible than in smaller cities.

One cultural difference that was noted was the interpretation of the terminology around social sustainability. Social exclusion is not a term that is used in all parts of the world (in Japan and China for example the concept is still relatively unknown), and poverty is often seen as a relative concept. Terms like ‘community participation’, ‘social cohesion’ and ‘social mix’ may be appropriate. Further research is needed to develop a terminology that can be more universally acceptable.

Although the values of the Games have differed widely in the last decades, the emphasis on environmental sustainability appears to be consistently growing over time — London 2012 for example is striving to become the ‘greenest Games ever’. This can potentially be linked to the increasingly strong environmental demands of the IOC for host cities. In its “Manual for candidate cities” (IOC, 2008, p. 39), the IOC highlights its commitment to sustainable development:

“The Olympic Movement is fully committed to sustainable development and endeavours to contribute to the protection of the natural environment. The IOC is concerned that the Olympic games should be an exemplary event in this respect and that environmentally sound policies, programmes and practices be adopted. […] Environmental protection is an area where candidate cities often experience tough public scrutiny and opposition and it is essential that, from the earliest stages of planning, a dialogue of cooperation is established with the governmental and non-governmental organisations in this respect.”

Lenskyj (2008) argues the IOC fears to be perceived as intrusive — the Olympic Games are a sports competition, and social issues may not appear to be part of the IOC’s jurisdiction. Nevertheless, highlighting the importance of environmental sustainability has encouraged candidate cities today to pay specific attention to this area. This can be expected as the great importance of social sustainability would have a similar effect. The idea that the IOC has an explicit role to play in the achievement of social sustainability goals via its regulations is by no means new: Kidd (1992) in his discussion of the 1996 Toronto Olympic bid, already called for a ‘Social Contract for the Olympic Games’. Hiller (1998) also raises the question if the bidding and hosting requirements of Olympic cities, which are prescribed in a lot of detail, are not neglecting the requirement to be truly socially responsible.

A trend towards a greater emphasis on social sustainability is noticeable since the candidacies of cities in developing and recently developed countries to host the Olympic Games. The Candidate Files of Cape Town 2004 (not awarded) and Rio 2016 (awarded) highlight the social sustainability aims much more explicitly than most of the Olympic cities in this sample have done:

“To award Cape Town an Olympic Games offering opportunity to those historically deprived of it, would demonstrate unequivocally the IOC’s own commitment to the promotion of the Olympic ideal as an instrument not merely of commercial benefit but of wider and more equitable human and social progress.” (Candidate Files 4)

“Brazil enjoys one of the youngest demographic profiles of any nation in the world. Recent initiatives by the Brazilian Olympic Committee, the government and non-governmental organisations to develop youth-oriented programmes based on Olympic values have had a dramatic impact, demonstrating the tangible power of sport as a transformation tool for social inclusion and education.” (Rio Candidature Acceptance Application, 11)

9. Conclusion

The findings of this exploratory study have shown that, as opposed to the rhetoric sometimes used in the bidding stages, the Olympic Games do not automatically bring non-infrastructural benefits for all: socially excluded groups in the host community are very rarely specifically targeted to be beneficiaries of the event. The planning principles identified in this article are rarely applied in the organisation of the Olympic Games: although a number of targeted programmes are highlighted, there is little evidence of fruitful co-operations with existing networks, participation by socially excluded persons in planning, and delivery of targets
during the pregnancy period of the Games. In this respect, there is little differentiation between Games under research on a geographical basis, nor between Summer and Winter Games. In many cases, where (limited) benefits are noted, these benefits tend to be indirect, and on the basis of the much-disputed ‘trickle-down’ effect. The only Olympic Games where a lasting legacy of the Olympic Games for socially excluded groups is argued is Sydney 2000, where the Homelessness Protocol has provided a long-term form of legal protection for the homeless. Although the success of many other social objectives is disputed, this Protocol is an example of a focused measure, that was achieved via the communication and participation of existing networks, during the pregnancy period. From the results of this research it seems these principles have very rarely been followed elsewhere.

The social impacts of mega-events, and particularly the impacts on socially excluded groups, are still an under-researched area of study. Further research evidence is needed to evaluate the potential of mega-events to increase the social sustainability of cities. An in-depth evaluation of the sustainability goals and outcomes of past Olympic Games is generally still lacking. In the spirit of Olympic competition, this evaluation is necessary to evaluate how the performance of different cities compares in this respect.

This study has adopted a semi-longitudinal and comparative research design. This research design comes with a range of challenges and limitations, which may go some way in explaining why these types of studies are relatively rare in the literature. Further research of this type is needed to map out the impacts of the Olympic Games as a social phenomenon. The social impacts of mega-events on socially excluded groups are equally a comparatively under-researched area of study. Further research into good practices and successful examples can provide valuable policy support for the hosting cities of the future.

There are critics who claim that the Olympics are at heart a sporting event, and not a social welfare programme. Whilst the Olympic Games may have started out as a mere sporting competition, it is hard to deny that its symbolic importance has changed dramatically over the last century. Organising the Olympic Games involves great commitments of host cities, in terms of financial, political and human resources. There is a growing sense that these investments are only justified, if the positive power of the Olympics is harnessed effectively for all. Particularly in the current economic climate where many aspects of public spending are under increased scrutiny, the investment of great sums into sports events like the Olympics can perhaps only be justified if wider economic, social and environmental goals are reached. Moreover, even if one disagrees with the social responsibility of the Olympics, it is undeniable that providing sports participation for all (so also socially excluded groups) is a key element of the Olympic charter. This study has shown that for many Olympic cities in the past, even this aspect has been largely rhetorical. Cities are now often competing to organise the ‘greenest’ Games — with IOC support, they could also be competing to organise the most inclusive Games.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the International Olympic Committee, funders of this study.

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