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Viewpoint: Using sports infrastructure to deliver economic and social change: Lessons for London beyond 2012

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Over the last two decades, there has been a new trend emerging within sport, which has seen a shift, from investment for the sake of sport, to investment in sport for good (Sport England, 2008). In the context of the latter approach, there has been an emergence of the use of sport to address regeneration objectives, largely stemming from the belief of government and other sporting and non-sporting organisations, that it can confer a wide range of economic and social benefits to individuals and communities beyond those of a purely physical sporting nature, and can contribute positively to the revitalisation of declining urban areas (BURA, 2003). This commentary will examine regeneration legacy in the context of the London Olympic Games. In particular, it will focus on the use of sports stadia as a tool for delivering economic and social change, and by drawing upon previous examples, suggest lessons London can learn to enhance regeneration legacies beyond 2012.

Defining Legacy

Legacy is a term that has become synonymous with major sports events. Host cities and nations are now widely assumed to deliver economic, physical, social and sporting 'legacies' beyond the duration of the event itself. Yet the concept of legacy is widely contested and arguably little understood. It has multiple definitions, meanings and interpretations and despite its widespread usage in the literature, policy documentation and the wider media, its definition is somewhat elusive (Cashman, 2005). In its simplest form, legacy can be taken to be 'a tangible or intangible thing handed down by a predecessor; a long lasting effect of an event or process; the act of bequeathing (Mangan, 2008: 1869). However, this definition does not capture the wide range of outcomes commonly associated and expected with major events, ranging from physical elements including sporting infrastructure and urban and environmental development, through to wider socio-economic improvements to an area such as enhancing skills and workforce development, community relations and social capital. Gratton and Preuss (2008) suggest that legacy can be conceptualised as a cube with three dimensions: positive and negative; planned and unplanned; tangible and intangible. Nevertheless, they note that in reality, feasibility and impact studies only take account of the positive, tangible and planned. Also, a feature often overemphasised is the economic, largely due to the ease with which these outcomes can be quantitatively measured.

Legacy and London

Legacy has been central to the London 2012 Olympics from the outset. Since the bid was won on 6th July 2005, numerous statements and plans have since been published aimed at identifying the various components of legacy and how it could be achieved (EDCST, 2010). Nevertheless, proposals currently reflect aspirations rather than reality, with implementation and funding of legacy plans still unclear, particularly in light of ongoing spending reviews by the UK Coalition Government. Even though the Olympic budget of £9.3 billion has been largely protected (BBC, 2010), funding for the legacy proposals and the Olympic Park Legacy Company (OPLC), which is tasked with leading the long term physical transformation and regeneration of the park after the Games, are less clear.

While post-Olympic legacy planning for London remains aspiratory and ongoing, it is apparent from the various policy documents and statements, that even from the early stages, urban regeneration was a particularly important component:

The most enduring legacy of the Olympics will be the regeneration of an entire community for the direct benefit of everyone that lives there (Candidate File: 2007: 19)

The significance of urban regeneration to East London is largely due to the high levels of deprivation within the Olympic Boroughs, which according the Strategic Regeneration Framework for the Olympic Legacy (Five Boroughs, 2009), account for and represent the greatest cluster of deprivation in England and Wales. The regeneration challenge in East London is clearly considerable, and dates back well over a century, as reported in the first surveys of poverty carried out in the late 19th Century by Charles Booth (LSE, 2010). Whether it is realistic to expect a sporting event and its ensuing legacy to address the scale of the regeneration challenge is thus highly debatable.

Lessons for London: Maximising regeneration opportunities beyond 2012.

While research suggests that major sporting infrastructure such as stadia do have the potential to confer economic and social regeneration benefits (Davies, 2010), there are various factors that will influence the scale of the impact. The following section will now attempt to draw upon the lessons learned from other sport-related regeneration initiatives to enhance the opportunities for East London beyond 2012.

Lesson 1: Footfall

The first lesson that London can learn from previous sport-related regeneration initiatives is that economic and social legacies in the surrounding area will be maximised if the Olympic Park is used regularly. Long term usage of the Olympic venues and particularly the stadium are absolutely critical to the broader regeneration of the area, therefore in the case of London priority needs to be given to stadium legacy use which attracts regular events with high numbers of people. This will not only maximise employment opportunities within the venues themselves and return on public investment, but create a vibrancy to the place, which will encourage other investment and usage. There are many examples of Olympic stadia that have found it difficult to find a longer term use, including Beijing, Sydney and Athens. In the case of the latter, many venues have fallen into a state of disrepair and whole areas have been fenced off to prevent vandalism (Mangan, 2008). There has been considerable debate about the long term legacy usage of the Olympic stadium in London, in part because the original Candidate File contained a pledge to retain an athletics legacy. While the Olympic stadium has been designed and constructed with this in mind, it is now more likely that a professional football club will become the anchor tenant (Hickey, 2010). Although this is considered to be unacceptable by many (BBC, 2010a), a key lesson from previous stadia is that a venue with high regular footfall will have the greatest regeneration outcomes for the surrounding area.

Lesson 2: Revenue

Previous examples of stadia built for major events suggest that finding a suitable long term usage is not only important for generating footfall, but also for generating a source of revenue to contribute to ongoing maintenance and other costs of operating the venues. The Olympic Stadium in London, and indeed other venues within the Olympic Park need to have self generated revenue streams to be economically viable. This is fundamental for the broader regeneration of the area. Not only will it reduce public subsidy and therefore enable funds to be channelled into other regeneration activities, but recruiting an anchor tenant could provide the public sector with an ongoing source of revenue in the future. Lessons for London can be drawn from The City of Manchester Stadium, where various partnership arrangements exist, based on lease of the venue by Manchester City Council (MCC) to Manchester City Football Club. In return, MCC receives a proportion of the proceeds from tickets above a specified threshold. This revenue is then used to improve further the surrounding area (Brownhill, 2010). Similar agreements are in place with other major venues in the UK, and the Olympic Stadium and the surrounding Olympic Park would benefit greatly from replicating a similar model.

Lesson 3: Community involvement

Tallon (2010: 140) argues that 'an increasingly important component of recent urban regeneration has been the involvement of communities in driving forward the regeneration of their area'. Community participation and involvement is a crucial consideration in terms of maximising the economic and social legacies of the Olympic Park and the Olympic venues. Community involvement in regeneration can take many forms, most obviously in the case of London, it would be through participation and access to services at the Olympic venues. However, examples from other stadia in the UK such as Stadium MK, in Milton Keynes, Coventry Ricoh Stadium and the KC Stadium in Hull demonstrate that community involvement can take other forms including employment and training opportunities, SME and local business involvements and venue management. It would be naive to suggest that community involvement has to be equal across all venues at the Olympic Park. Varying models of community involvement need to be investigated and balanced with economic priorities. However, on a cautious note, regeneration can be perceived as threatening to existing communities. Exclusion of the local population from the planning process such as in Atlanta (ELRI, 2007), together with fear of increasing property prices and gentrification can create negative legacies for regeneration and thus need to be carefully managed and considered in the case of London.

Lesson 4: Holistic regeneration

Consideration of regeneration holistically, rather than on a venue by venue basis is another lesson that can be learnt from previous Olympic Stadia. Social and economic legacies in London will only be maximised if major venues such as the Stadium are considered as part of the broad Masterplan for the area, rather than in isolation. Lessons from Sydney in particular can be learnt here, whereby despite delivering a successful Games, organisers paid little attention to legacy planning (Searle, 2002). Post-Games, with competition from other venues in the city, together with a lack of major events and professional clubs coming forward to take the stadium over, left the viability and future of the Olympic stadium looking questionable. However, the situation was transformed by drawing up a Masterplan for the area, led by a public sector organisation, the Olympic Coordination Agency (Brownhill, 2010). In the case of London, there is a crucial role for the OPLC in terms of using public assets to lever in and secure private investment for the Park and leading the strategic and holistic regeneration of the site from an early Pre-Games stage.

Lesson 5: Evaluation

Despite drawing upon the lessons learnt from previous stadia, and emerging evidence of good practice, the current evidence base in relation to stadia, regeneration and legacy is highly variable. It remains the case that scientific evidence needed to evaluate the regeneration legacy of hosting major events, particularly in the longer term does not exist (Gratton and Preuss, 2008; Davies 2010). There is a considerable need, given the extensive public resources invested in stadia, both within the UK and elsewhere, for more robust evaluation and monitoring over a longer period, although as Gratton and Preuss (2008) suggest, host governments may not actually welcome a truly scientific evaluation of legacy benefits. While attempts are currently being made to evaluate the impact of 2012 by various stakeholders, including the Department of Culture Media and Sport, the London Assembly, the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games and others, whether these will be brought together into a coordinated and holistic evidence base, and continued much beyond 2012 remains to be seen. One of the most significant lessons that London can learn from previous hosts of major events, it is that the evidence base for making judgements on investments of millions of pounds of public and private money, is wholly inadequate. It is therefore crucial for learning lessons in the future, that London evaluates its social and economic legacies comprehensively and in the longer term, for the benefit of future sport-related regeneration schemes.

Concluding comments

The Strategic Regeneration Framework for the London Olympic host boroughs (Five Boroughs, 2009) states in its vision that

...within 20 years, the communities who host the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games will enjoy the same social and economic chances as their neighbours across London.

This is an ambitious target, as it means halting a century of social and economic decline. The regeneration legacy for London will not be judged when the Games end in 2012 but ultimately in 15-20 years time, and is likely to be judged on the socio-economic indicators that measure inequality, rather than more controversially on whether original legacy promises made to the International Olympic Committee in 2005, such as retaining an athletics track at the Olympic Stadium were honoured. Sporting infrastructure which is utilised and embedded within local area planning has tremendous potential to create economic and social change. However, unless it is strategically planned and evidenced, sports infrastructure and services will only ever have a limited impact on the revitalisation of declining areas.

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