

## 'Sports mega-events - what are they good for?'

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### ***1 Introduction***

In 1970, American soul singer Edwin Starr recorded the song 'War' in which he posed the question, 'What is it good for?' and answered 'Absolutely nothing'. This presentation asks the same question about sports mega-events and tends towards the same conclusion. This is not to suggest that it is impossible for host countries and cities to derive specific benefits from hosting such events – international recognition, infrastructural development, sporting success, even if only temporary, and so on. In more general terms, however, hosting mega events (and the term really only applies to the Summer Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup) is expensive and disruptive, particularly for democratic societies, and legacy promises are seldom fulfilled. The paper focuses primarily on the London 2012 Summer Olympics although reference is also made to other iterations of the event. I shall argue that whilst some Summer games have had positive results, London 2012 offers considerable support for those who would argue that sports mega-events, like war, are good for absolutely nothing.

### ***2 Changing trends in the social sciences of sport***

Sport for development and peace

Sports mega events

i.e. the Summer Olympics and the FIFA World Cup (with other multi-sport or world championship events being classified as Tier 2 or Tier 3)

### ***3 Main areas of focus re: sports mega-events***

(a) *Security* – how to make mega events safe for participants and the public

Emphasis tends to be on surveillance and policing

Less attention paid to the reasons why mega-events might be insecure

These include global issues e.g. the rise of Islamic fundamentalism which meg- event organisers and national/city authorities can do little to solve. However, they may also consist of local concerns about the impact of hosting mega-events in terms of the economic burden, impact on local communities, damage to the environment, and even concerns about the extent of surveillance deemed necessary to make the event relatively secure.

(b) *Legacy*

Enhancing the image of cities and nations states

Improving national sporting performance

Providing sustainable sports facilities

Increasing participation levels for health

Improving infrastructure more generally (especially transport)

Addressing environmental concerns

Regeneration of the urban landscape

### ***4 Enhancing the image of cities and national states***

As a global world city, London did not need to host a 3rd Summer Olympics. Indeed, it has been widely reported that fewer people visited the city during the summer of 2012 than in a normal summer. Perhaps Montreal needed the Olympics but any gains were achieved at a huge cost to the city's finances. Barcelona definitely benefitted and arguably so too did Seoul

and South Korea more generally. In sum, there is no guarantee that hosting a sports mega-event will definitely enhance the image of a city. Moreover some cities simply may not need such an event for the purposes of civic boosterism – London? Tokyo?

### ***5 Improving national sporting performance***

This also varies markedly from one place to another in terms of sustained excellence. One could argue that a legacy of the Seoul Olympics has been the consolidation of South Korea as a successful Olympic country. Success for Australian performers in Sydney, however, has not been matched in subsequent years. In the case of the UK, Rio will provide insights into the longevity of British Olympic success. However, it is tempting to suggest that the British Olympic team may have begun to reach its peak in Beijing, may have peaked in London, and may now be at the beginning of a period of decline. In addition, investment in elite sport in preparation for a home sports mega-event is likely to have a damaging effect on ‘sport for all’ strategies.

### ***6 Providing sustainable sports facilities***

Although some historic Olympic stadia, such as those in Stockholm, Berlin and Helsinki, are still in regular use, there has been a problem in recent years with maximising the use of both Olympic and FIFA World Cup facilities after the events have taken place. Some are simply dismantled; others are used only intermittently. In the case of the Olympic stadium in London, the new tenants will be West Ham United Football Club, highlighting the massively disproportionate economic power of the English Premier League in British sporting life. In general, there needs to be considerably more thought given to the subsequent use of venues at the planning and construction stages of sports engage events. In addition, one can ask whether there is any need to employ celebrity architects to design the stadia, often at huge

expense which could alternatively be used for the provision of grass-roots facilities throughout host cities/countries.

### ***7 Increasing participation levels for health***

Building grass-roots facilities before mega-events take place is absolutely essential if younger people who are inspired by the deeds of elite performers are to have places to which to go. This simply did not happen in the case of London 2012. As a consequence, after the Games took place, there were simply not enough qualified coaches or facilities to accommodate those young people who had acquired an interest in sports such as gymnastics and taekwondo, both of which had been unlikely sources of British Olympic medals. The promise had been that hosting the Games would deliver a fitter population in a country that takes sport seriously in terms of health and happiness – hence, a £9.3 billion investment. This has already been shown to be an idle boast. Child obesity rates continue to rise. PE in schools is still in decline. Sport participation figures suggest a growing gap between the rich and the poor.

### ***8 Improving infrastructure more generally (especially transport)***

The main emphasis here tends to be on getting people to and from the mega-event venues. The question is whether once the events have taken place these are in the parts of cities to which people want to go. In London, other transport developments were needed far more than a light railway to the Olympic Park but, as elsewhere, construction associated with sports mega-events often takes priority over other infrastructural needs e.g. at present for Tokyo 2020 rather than for Tōhoku. Furthermore, some of the best integrated transport systems in the world are in cities which have not hosted sport mega-events but where public funding has arguably been invested more wisely.

### ***5 Addressing environmental concerns***

Although environmental concerns are now considered to be essential elements of sports mega-event legacy strategies, what is given with hand is almost always taken away in much greater measure with the other. Mega-events by their very nature are not environmentally friendly. One only needs to mention Sochi and, for the future reference, Qatar. Not hosting mega events is the only sure way of making a contribution to sustainability.

### ***10 Regeneration of the urban landscape***

Although often intended to regenerate urban space, sports mega-events can often be extremely damaging to urban communities and ways of living. Think, for example, of the destruction of traditional *hutongs* in the lead-up to Beijing 2008. A major legacy promise for London 2012 was the regeneration of a neglected part of the city. When the success of London's Olympic bid was announced in 2005, those who lived and worked in the London borough of Newham were promised that they would benefit from the regeneration of East London. But almost a decade on, the promises of the Olympic legacy remain far out of reach from many. East London housing prices have increased dramatically and new housing developments contain a dwindling number of so-called 'affordable' units. Accompanying this, many social housing blocks and estates have been emptied to make way for new private developments and the expelled residents' 'right to return' is uncertain. In response to what some have called the 'social cleansing' of London, local campaigns have sprung up around the capital to resist the increasing unaffordability of city residency for those on an ordinary wage. Meanwhile, later this year, Loughborough University will open a new campus on the Olympic Park site, sharing premises with BT which, along with Sky, have made EPL football increasingly unaffordable for ordinary football fans.

*Conclusion*

So now I come to my conclusion based on the evidence in front of us. My question: 'Sports mega-events - what are they good for?' My answer: 'Absolutely nothing' or, at best, a limited number of positive outcomes, few of which, if any, are entirely predictable, universal, or irrefutably the direct consequence of the mega-events themselves.