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The politics of sporting mega events

Do the benefits justify the budgets?

Dr Jonathan Grix

“The London Olympics will undoubtedly be a spectacular success and bring with it a number of memorable sporting moments. Beyond the two weeks of action, however, it is worth reflecting on the increasingly political use of sport by a wide variety of states throughout the world. In recent years, there has been a shift from advanced capitalist states to developing, small or ‘emerging’ states who have queued up to stage a sporting mega-event.

It is surprising how few commentators have considered the whys and wherefores behind the rush to stage what are very expensive and elaborate events (London 2012’s budget, for example, is £9.3 billion). It is generally accepted that sporting mega-events are good for us. This rests on a number of conjectures, of which the following five – drawn from the academic literature and the reasoning of governments staging or hoping to stage such events – are the most prominent:

1. National elite sport success – can inspire the masses to take up sport thereby improving their health

2. Such events are economically lucrative, bringing revenue from, among others, increased tourism

3. Mega sporting events engender a ‘feel-good’ factor among citizens, which has knock-on effects for well-being

4. Much needed urban regeneration is accelerated

5. States benefit by showcasing themselves internationally – this leads to an increase in so-called ‘soft power’

Interestingly, the evidence base upon which the conjectures above are based is relatively shaky. There is little evidence – beyond the anecdotal – to back up Conjecture 1. The essence of this relationship can be traced back to the spectacular successes of the former Soviet Satellite countries, most notably, East Germany, that had the most medal-intensive sport system of all. From the outside, the general impression was that of a system that thrived on the mutually supportive relationship between elite and mass sports. In reality the East German model was elite-driven and focused on a carefully selected number of sports disciplines largely at the expense of mass sport provision.

Conjecture 2. is another controversial discussion. The economic benefits that accrue from sporting mega-events are notoriously difficult to measure. The FIFA World Cup in Germany appears to have had a positive net impact on Germany’s economy through attracting more year-on-year tourism. The history of staging the Olympics, however, is littered with examples of over-inflated budgets, under-utilised sporting infrastructure and little sporting legacy.

There is no doubt that a ‘feel-good’ factor among certain sections of the population (Conjecture 3.) exists during sporting events. There is, however, scant evidence to suggest that this continues much beyond the event itself.

Evidence of past sporting mega events reveals that decisions around previously stalled or rejected regeneration (Conjecture 4.) have been positively fast-tracked due to the hosting of the event. Whether the resulting change in infrastructure, housing, roads and so on are better for society than, say, the equivalent investment in non-sport specific development is difficult to judge.

Despite the ‘fuzzy’ and practically unquantifiable notions invoked in Conjecture 5., my research suggests that states believe they will gain in terms of their international prestige due to holding a sporting mega event; further, they believe that this will increase their ‘soft power’ or the ability to persuade others to want what they themselves want on the international stage. India’s – and Delhi’s – recent staging of the Commonwealth Games in 2010 could certainly be read as an attempt by a developing country to announce to the world that it had finally arrived on the international stage.

What does all this mean for the up-coming Olympics in London? The UK is likely to witness a ‘Wimbledon effect’ spike in participation – that is, a rise in recreational sport, during and just after the Olympic Games, with a return to pre-Games levels a few months after the event. Nonetheless, the UK is likely to put on an excellent show, everyone will be happy for a few weeks and the UK’s image abroad may well be more positive in the medium term.

There remains, however, an urgent need for sustained research into the areas touched on above, for with a stronger evidence-base on the effects of sport and sporting mega events on society, governments can channel resources into targeted sport policy interventions of hard-to-reach cohorts to attempt to bring about positive behavior change. Mapping the areas for research is the first step; contributing to the evidence-base through the academic study of sport is what this author and colleagues at Birmingham are currently undertaking."

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