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2012 and the 'Legacy' Games: assessing the Olympic Legacy one year on

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For many years sport has been viewed by political elites as a panacea of all ills. In particular sports mega-events, such as the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup, are looked upon as opportunities to transform, increase, improve and grow anything from mass participation in physical activity, to urban regeneration, economic growth and a nation's international image. The benefits derived from such events are termed 'legacies,' and the promise of them materialising is often used as the chief justificatory discourse for the investment of large sums of public finance into hosting a sports mega-event at the outset.

Precisely one year ago Danny Boyle's spectacular opening ceremony marked the start of the London 2012 Olympics, which has been dubbed the 'legacy' Games on account of the key promises made in the UK's bid. While many commentators point out – rightly – that the IOC (International Olympic Committee) and FIFA (International Federation of Association Football) have left a trail of white elephants in the form of under-utilised sports facilities in previous hosting states, London 2012 is the first Olympics to expressively set out to produce a lasting legacy. Although a year is a relatively short time after an event to attempt to take stock, a whole raft of (government) reports published around the anniversary of the Games claim that results on 'legacies' are already promising. This includes the headline-grabbing news that the UK has already clawed back the £10 billion of public funds spent on the Games through 'Olympic-related business'. The latter is open to broad interpretation, as it includes a £1 billion revamp of a shopping centre in Croydon that Vince Cable conceded would have taken place anyway. A wider debate on the spending of public monies for the Games and facilities (including the £500 million Olympic Stadium) and the opportunities and subsidies for private sector firms post-Games is still to be had.

Perhaps the most important legacy promised by the London 2012 bid team is that of increased physical activity among the masses as a result of the Games. Given that no other Games in history have recorded such a rise, this was a bold prediction. There is no doubt that physical activity plays a substantial role in optimising human health and enriching social connections. Not only does inactivity contribute to as many deaths worldwide as tobacco, but prolonged and uninterrupted sitting (such as watching television or working on the computer) is now recognised as an independent risk factor for various chronic diseases. Participation in sport is one of myriad ways to increase one's daily activity levels. But is there any evidence that the Olympics have led to an increase in physical activity levels among the masses? To our knowledge, the direct impact of the Olympics on increasing mass participation in sport and physical activities has not been measured. Sport England data on general participation in sports records a decline in major sports post-Olympics, apart from the initial surge in interest in some sports (for example, women's boxing). Those committed to increasing physical activity in communities have not seen a delivery on this promise; rather cuts to budgets – especially Local Authorities – that support public health initiatives, physical activity programmes and access to leisure facilities have become the norm. Changing human behaviour is challenging, and requires long-term commitment and vision. It is doubtful that the millions who watched the Olympics (sitting in front of their televisions) have been sufficiently inspired one year on to increase their daily activity levels through sport or other activities. And without local, regional and national strategies to implement the delivery and ensure the sustainability of sport and physical activity programmes that are accessible to the masses, the potential to deliver on this legacy is in question.

When assessing legacy, we need to bear in mind the clear distinction that can be made between politicians' rhetoric and evidence-based practice. While the former advocate the latter, politicians tend to overlook previous evidence when it comes to sports mega-events. There is a need for sustained research into the various perceived legacy effects of major sports events and into strategies that take us from a land of sport viewers to active participants: so that future event hosts can make sound judgements based on previous evidence of what does and what does not work.

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