

Sport Participation, International Sports Events and the ‘Trickle-down Effect’

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In our 2012 article on the ‘Sport participation legacy of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games and other international sporting events hosted in Australia’ (Veal, Toohey and Frawley, 2012), we summarised the long history of claims, by governments and sports organisations, that hosting international sports events provides a range of sport-related and other benefits to the host community. In particular we focussed on claims made in relation to grassroots sport participation, sometimes referred to as recreational sport, mass sport or sport for all. Our research raised doubts about such claims in the case of Australia. Since that time, systematic reviews of the research literature, notably by Weed et al. (2015), have indicated a consensus among researchers that there is no evidence to support the ‘trickle-down effect’ in sport.

This conclusion has been reflected in official publications. For example, the ‘Crawford Report’, by a federal government-appointed panel established in 2009 to enquire into sport in Australia, stated: ‘the Panel can find no evidence that high profile sporting events like the Olympics ... have a material influence on sports participation’ (Independent Sport Panel, 2009: 7). The purpose of the Crawford Report was to lay the groundwork for a national plan and its influence was apparent the following year, when the resultant plan, *Australian Sport: The pathway to success* (Australian Government, 2010), made no claims about the impact of hosting major events. Such claims were also absent from subsequent strategic plans of the main government sports agency, the Australian Sports Commission (ASC, 2011, 2015a, b, 2017), now known as Sport Australia.

However, this does not necessarily indicate that the trickle-down idea has died among frequenters of the corridors of power in sport. Those who believe that something *must* be true may not be dissuaded from their belief by ‘inconvenient truths’. The notion of trickle-down continues to permeate sports policy and rhetoric. In a recent address, the Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC), Matt Carroll, declared: ‘Athletes are at the heart of the Olympic Movement, at the heart of the Games. They are the role models who inspire millions of people around the world to participate in sport and reflect the Olympic ideals’ (Carroll, 2018). The most recent Australian national sport plan states that ‘Governments have an obligation to seek tangible returns from investing in both attracting and staging major international sporting events’ (Australian Government, 2018: 57), the ‘returns’ for such support including: tourism; trade; employment; infrastructure; gender equality; strengthened communities; diplomacy; and *participation*. The last of these is achieved, it is claimed, through the creation of ‘role models who motivate and inspire children and adults to be active and play sport’ (p. 57). However, hosting major events is not included among the formal participation policy measures outlined in the plan.

Continued belief in the trickle-down effect is not confined to Australian policymakers. In the

foreword to the most recent Sport England strategic plan, the Minister for Sport refers to the policy of ‘strengthening of our support for major sporting events – helping to inspire a nation to take part in sport’ (Sport England, 2016: 4). Furthermore, the plan declares: ‘Hosting major events not only provides home advantage to our athletes and wide ranging economic impacts, but our Major Events Engagement Fund has shown that – with careful planning – they can also inspire people to engage in sport through taking part, coaching, volunteering and spectating’ (p. 42). However, Sport England’s own Active People Survey indicates that, while the adult sport participation level in England rose by one per cent around the time of hosting of the London 2012 Olympic Games, thereafter it fell back to pre-game levels¹.

If sport administrators are immune to the correlational evidence between major event involvement and participation levels, then perhaps, in order to reinforce the message, it would be wise to explore the causal relationships – or their absence – in more detail. In our earlier paper, we noted that any possible impact of a major sports event might be direct or indirect. The direct effect involves individuals being inspired to participate as a result of live or mediated viewing of the event. The indirect effect arises from the activities of sports or governmental organisations stirred to action by the hosting of the event. Their activities might be developmental or facility/infrastructure-related. Two comments might be made on this possibility.

First, while our paper did not support the trickle-down effect in relation to multi-sport events (Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games), the results were more supportive in the case of a single-sport event: the 2003 Rugby World Cup. A linked project (Frawley and Cush, 2011), indicated that a national sports organisation which has an effective, on-going, system for recruitment of grassroots players, is in a position to effectively capitalise on the exposure offered by a major event, by deploying complementary promotional activity and resources at the community level. This appears to have been the case with the Australian Rugby Union in 2003. The principle is supported by the work of Misener et al. (2015). There is a parallel here with another group of organisations seeking to ‘leverage’ sporting events: the sponsors. It is well-known that, to gain maximum impact, sponsors must match their direct sponsorship expenditure with at least a similar amount of expenditure on complementary advertising and ‘in-store’ promotion (Cornwell, 2004: 62-3; Masterman, 2009: 305-8). A number of questions arise from this finding. First, if all the sports involved with a multi-sport event could establish and deploy an effective recruitment system, would their combined efforts be effective, or would the potential recipients of the mass of recruitment messages be overloaded? Second, do sports which already have well-developed recruitment systems even need the added boost of a major international multi-sport event to be effective? Third, if such measures are found to be effective, could other relevant organisations, notably governments, play a similar role in relation to physical activity not covered by national sports bodies, namely the non-organised and non-competitive activity which makes up the bulk of participation in physical recreation (e.g., in cycling, swimming, running/jogging, walking)?

The second observation concerns the indirect mechanism implied in the AOC chief executive’s statement. This is that young people will be inspired through the role-model effect of elite athletes. In his address, Matt Carroll announced the ‘Olympics Unleashed’ programme, which is to take ‘Olympians and Paralympians into classrooms so kids hear first-hand from champions about what they’ve learned during the twists and turns of their personal

¹ Authors’ calculations from absolute figures in DCMS (2015: 34): adult participation rate: 2010: 36.0%; 2011: 35.5%; 2012: 36.9%; 2013: 36.4%; 2014: 35.9%.

and sporting journey’ (Carroll, 2018). Its aims are broader than sport: ‘While Olympics Unleashed may inspire future Olympians, it will also inspire future scientists, artists, nurses, tradies, parents, people – to be the best they can. That’s the Olympic spirit; that’s at the core of our new direction’. It can be seen that the terminology used by the Australian Government in its current national plan, quoted above, reflects this personalised inspirational model. However, while the aim of Olympics Unleashed is to ‘reach and influence nearly 4 million Australian students across 9,400 schools’, no indication is given that the outcomes of the exercise will be formally monitored and evaluated. In our earlier article we referred to Sebastian Coe’s claim, in his speech to the IOC as part of the London 2012 Olympics bid, to have been inspired by British Olympians of the 1960s to take up athletics. However, the evidence regarding the inspirational effect of elite sporting role models on youth in general is sparse and ambivalent (Payne et al., 2003). This can therefore be seen as another example of an article of faith, rather than research evidence, forming the basis of sport policy.

It is by now widely accepted in the public sector that policy should be evidence-based (Pawson, 2006; HM Treasury, 2011). However, as Hemingway and Wood (2001) point out, in many fields, knowledge which arises from experience and practice often has at least as much standing among practitioners as science-based knowledge which relies on formal relationships between evidence and theory. A number of commentators have noted the tension between these two sorts of knowledge in the sport sector. For example, Long and Hylton (2014) have raised doubts as to the suitability of the formal controlled experiment format of scientific/ medical research for the sport policy sector. Piggin et al. (2009) go so far as to call evidence-based policymaking in sport a sham, at least in relation to the marketing and public relations activities of one national sports agency. The agency they studied formally espoused reliance on positivistic ‘evidence’ but frequently rejected, ignored or manipulated such evidence or gave precedence to other forms of knowledge, such as stakeholders’ personal past experience in elite sport. They concluded that, in practice, sport policy ‘is not solely based on “sound evidence”’ (Piggin et al., 2009: 99).

It would seem then, that the role of the evidence-wielding researcher in the sport policy environment will not always be a comfortable or straight forward one. If it’s any compensation, evidence-based practice also had a difficult evolutionary path in medicine, as the experience of Archibald Cochrane testifies (Shah and Chung, 2009).

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