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Chapter 9

Do the Olympic Games Lead to a Sustainable Increase in Grassroots Sport Participation?

A Secondary Analysis of Athens 2004

Athanasios Pappous

Introduction

Hosting the Olympic Games is a notoriously expensive operation, and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and host national governments have to justify the huge cost and investments. The Athens 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games (2004 Games) had an overall cost to the Organising Committee of US \$11 billion, almost double the initial stated budget. Six years later, Greece has just requested a €45bn bailout package from the EU and International Monetary Fund to avoid bankruptcy. Currently, criticism of the Greek fiscal policy has sharpened and voices are raised arguing that the 2004 Games spending played an important part in helping Greece fall into debt crisis (Gatopoulos, 2010). Other Olympic and Paralympic Games (Games) host cities' concerns centre around the huge investments governments put into Olympic and Paralympic sport. This is highlighted by the organisers of the forthcoming London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (2012 Games), who have recently announced that US \$39 million is to be cut from the 2012 Games budget (Associated Press, 2010). Under the uncertain

economic climate and the growing criticism against the economic sustainability of the Games, an important question needs to be answered: Does hosting of sport mega events, such as the Games contribute to sustainable economic and social development, making them worthwhile governmental investments?

This question is particularly pertinent today, as most countries are facing severe economic constraints (e.g., recession, inflation, currency de-valuation). The most commonly stated argument for hosting the Games involves the notion of *sustainability* and the social benefits and legacies of the Games.

Sustainable development is the policy agenda of our time and it is becoming a hot topic in the interdisciplinary research agenda. However, sustainability is a complex term that is difficult for the general public to understand. The editors of this book suggest that sustainability refers to “a holistic perspective that harmonises social, economic and environmental dimensions and systems and balance opportunities and constraints”. Indeed, sustainability is an ambiguous umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of definitions. Most of the discussion and information around sustainability that we read, listen to and watch in the media use anecdotal rather than empirical evidence (Murphy and Bauman, 2007). Despite the wealth of information about the Games, empirical research around the social legacy of the Games is surprisingly scarce.

Given the plethora of sustainability indices and dimensions available, the present study will focus on whether the 2004 Games inspired people to lead a more active lifestyle. According to the typology developed by Laura Keogh (2009), the sport participation dimension constitutes a *soft* legacy:

“A hard legacy may comprise the construction of sporting venues and associated infrastructure and soft legacies may relate to increased sporting participation”. (p.8)

In this chapter, secondary sources from Eurobarometer surveys are used to examine whether grassroots sport participation of the Greek population was boosted as a result of hosting the 2004 Games.

Grassroots participation after the Games: From Athens to London

“We want the Games, are eager for the Games. We love our country and we love the Games. For us, the Olympics is a way of life.”

(Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki)

These were the words of the president of the Greek 2004 Games bid committee, Gianna Angelopoulos, in August 1997 (Longman, 1997), just one month before the IOC awarded the city of Athens with the right to host the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad. This kind of rhetoric regarding the Olympic tradition provided the members of the IOC the sentimental choice to return them to their birthplace.

However, at the time when Athens was bidding for the Games, several studies were indicating that instead of an *Olympic way of life*, contemporary Greeks were adopting a rather sedentary lifestyle which was becoming a serious epidemic. In 1999 a Pan-European study (De Almeida et al. 1999) concluded that, together with Portugal, Greece shared the highest inactive population in Europe. This finding was confirmed a couple of years later by a random, multi-stage sample survey which took place in the Greek province of Attica, which highlighted that half of the interviewees reported being physically inactive (Pitsavos et al. 2005). So the question remains: Did the staging of the 2004 Games in Athens lead to any sustainable change in the lifestyle of Greeks by increasing participation in sport and physical activity?

The above question is particularly salient at present, two years prior the celebration of the 2012 Games, and form part of a timely research agenda regarding the Social Sustainability of the Games. Media attention and research scholars are currently questioning the possible effects that mega sport events might have in increasing the sport participation of the host population. Indeed, one of the most prominent key pledges from the organizers of the 2012 Games is to “make the UK a world-leading sporting nation” and “to increase sport participation”¹. The goal set by the UK Government is to increase the physical activity level by at least two million in England by 2012 (NHS, 2009); a target that is regarded as being extremely ambitious (Coalter, 2004). In fact there are several voices alleging that the 2012 Games may fail to deliver on its promise to promote the nationwide popularity of physical activity, as it has been claimed. The 2012 Games organizers and Government are frequently being criticized by those critical of the 2012 Games for supposedly constructing an elitist project, instead of providing a detailed plan for improving participation in grassroots sport. Lord Sebastian Coe, Chairman of the London 2012 Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games (LOCOG), contested these allegations by stating that:

“I will fight the nostrum that this is just about elite sport. The challenge is not whether we finish fourth or 20th in the medals table but what we do to convert big British moments into 10,000 more kids picking up sport.” (Beard, 2008)

However, evidence for the impact of the 2012 Games on sustained participation in sport is open to doubt. Research does not offer clear results to argue that mega sport events increase long-term sport participation.

This issue is addressed herein by evaluating whether there has been any long-term increase in sport participation following the 2004 Games. In order to carry out this task, a three period analysis based on Eurobarometer surveys from one year prior to the 2004 Games (EORG 58.2), just after the

1. *London 2012 Legacy Vision Presented to IOC* (12 June 2007). London 2012. See: <http://www.london2012.com/press/media-releases/2007/06/london-2012-legacy-vision--presented-to-ioc.php> (accessed November 2010).

2004 Games (EORG 62.0) and five years following the culmination of the 2004 Games (EORG 72.3) are utilized.

Eurobarometers

Eurobarometers are surveys across European Union member states where all participants are aged 15 years and over, and are interviewed face-to-face in the respondent’s home and in their corresponding national language. The sample design which is applied in all member states is a multi-stage, representative sample of each country.

According to Abel (2004, as cited in Tzormpatzakis, 2007), the Eurobarometer 58.2 was the first survey at a European level to investigate health-enhancing physical activity. Following the pioneer survey 58.2 which took place in 2002, the Sport Unit of the European Union renewed the census in 2004 and in 2009 and commissioned polls 62.0 and 72.3 respectively. Despite the slight modifications in the questionnaires which took place in the three waves of the survey, the majority of the questions are comparable and set the ground for long term assessment. In the following sections there will be an examination of the responses to the survey questions which are related to sport participation.

Results

Figure 1 shows the percentage of the Greek respondents who stated that they exercise regularly. The results are broken down for three periods corresponding to the three waves of the above mentioned Eurobarometers: before the 2004 Games (2003), just after the 2004 Games (2004) and five years after the 2004 Games (2009).

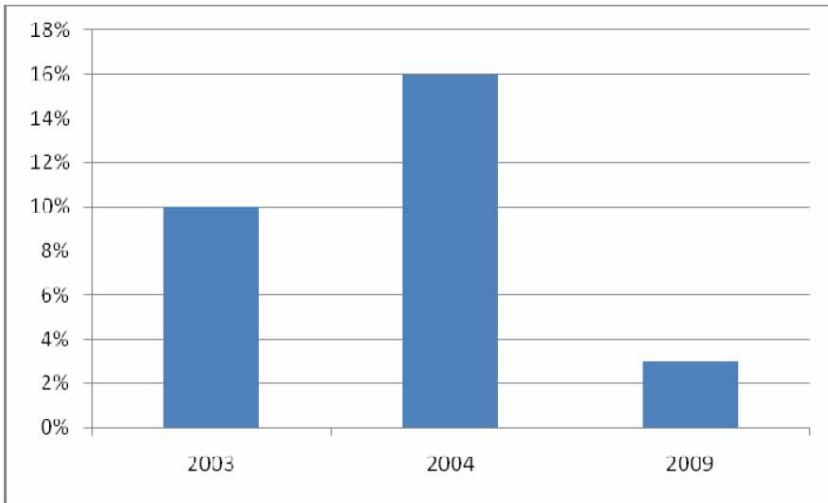


Figure 1. Greek respondents who declared they exercise regularly

The bar graphs corresponding to the 2003 and 2004 surveys highlight a significant upward trend (+6%) in levels of physical activity following the 2004 Games in 2004. However, the number of interviewees affirming that they do sport three times or more per week decreased significantly in 2009, five years after the celebration of the 2004 Games. Indeed, the data from the 2009 survey reports that Greece, together with Italy and Bulgaria, had the lowest number of citizens who play sport regularly (3%) in the European Union.

Important findings on the impact that hosting the 2004 Games might have had on the grassroots sport participation can be also drawn from comparing the percentage of those respondents who in 2003, 2004 and 2009 said that they never exercise (Figure 2). Did the celebration of the 2004 Games inspire the most sedentary part of the Greek society to become more physically active?

Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of Greek citizens who reported being completely sedentary. The first element that immediately draws attention is the significant decrease, from an average of 75% of the population in 2003 to 57% in 2004. As noted in the Eurobarometer report:

“The evolution compared to last year [2003] turns out to be especially positive in the country organising the most important sports event of the year, the Olympic Games. In fact, the proportion of interviewees who claim to never play a sport has decreased by 18 points in Greece compared to the results of 2003 (from 75% to 57%)”. (EORG, 72.3).

However, as can be seen on the third bar corresponding to the 2009 data, the decrease in the percentage of the inactive people did not last. Five years after the closing ceremony of the 2004 Games, the percentage of Greeks reporting they were completely sedentary increased to 67% (+10).

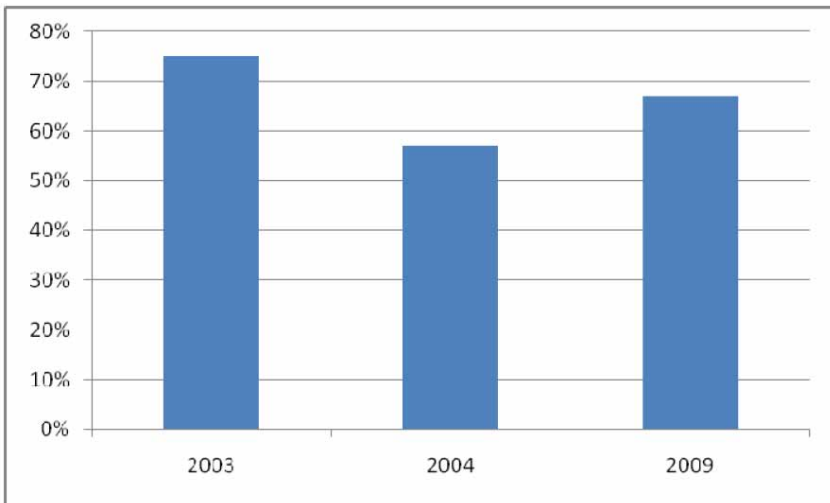


Figure 2. Greek respondents who declare that they never exercise (census 2003, 2004 and 2009)

Discussion and Conclusion

Data from the 2003 and 2004 Eurobarometer questionnaires referring to sport participation indicate a significant increased number of Greeks reporting exercising regularly (from 10% in 2003 to 16% in 2009), while at the same time the representative sample of people responding that they never exercise decreased significantly (from 75% in 2003 to 57% in 2004).

Before assuming a direct correlation between hosting the 2004 Games and the overall more positive attitude of Greeks towards sport participation in 2004, some important national and international contextual parameters which might have influenced this upward trend need to be considered. During the summer of 2004, Greece was the protagonist of one of the biggest surprises in sport history. Against the odds they won the Euro 2004 Football Championship, which generated an overwhelming sense of excitement and sporting euphoria amongst the Greek population that might have sparked enthusiasm for being active – as recorded in the 2004 Eurobarometer results. Another element that might have influenced the results is the fact that the European Parliament had established 2004 as the European Year of Education through Sport. This resulted in an abundance of initiatives in Greece designed specifically to raise awareness about the importance of physical activity and involved active sport promotion. Thus, precautions have to be taken when comparing data on sport participation chronologically, since several other extraneous factors may have positively or negatively influenced sport/physical activity participation statistics.

Moreover, a closer examination of the 2009 data indicates that the sport participation increase between 2003 and 2004 was only temporary, with no long-lasting effect on the overall sport participation of the host country. As can be observed in the 2009 Eurobarometer survey, five years after the Games, the percentage of people affirming that they exercise regularly had plummeted to a level that was significantly lower than the period before the 2004 Games (from 10% in 2003 to 3% in 2009); this result classified Greece as one of the most sedentary countries in the European Union. The lack of literature in this area makes it a difficult task to compare the findings of this secondary data analysis. However, the transient increase in sport participation recorded in the Greek population during the 2004 Games period corroborates an earlier study commissioned by the London Assembly, which examined the long-term impact on sports participation that the hosting of the Games had in Barcelona (1992 Games), Atlanta (1996 Games), Sydney (2000 Games) and Athens (2004 Games). In agreement with the findings expressed above, the 2007 London East Research Institute's report on previous Games indicated that there is evidence only of short-term increases in sports participation following the Games:

“Sports participation increases are often assumed very readily by host cities. Both Barcelona and Sydney provide evidence for some positive short term impacts. However there is doubt about the sustainability of Olympic effects and Sydney evidence is ambiguous. There is a tendency prior to hosting the Games to presume a large positive impact on participation rates. However,

Olympic impact on sports participation, within the host city and more generally is reported to be positive only anecdotally. More detailed research has been largely inconclusive, for example in Sydney” (London Assembly, London East Research Institute, 2007, p.47)

The findings of this study are also consistent with the EdComs literature review (2007). This review observed that the benefits in terms of encouraging participation in physical activity were short-term in nature.

In summary, this simple tripartite comparison of the Greek respondents to the Eurobarometer surveys prior (2003), immediately after (October 2004) and five years after (2009) hosting the 2004 Games reveals that instead of producing a lasting impact on a generation of people who are excited about sport, the 2004 Games had a temporary impact on sport/physical activity participation.

Interviews conducted with Greek respondents in the Special Eurobarometer 213 “Citizens of the European Union and Sport” survey, conducted between October 11 and October 31 of 2004, when respondents still had vivid memories of the European football competition and the 2004 Games, translated in 2004 to a significant upward trend (+6%) in sport participation. However, the 2009 data for this population suggests that if a broader strategy towards an active lifestyle is not implemented, the sporting excitement will apparently not sustain participation, leading to a reduction and possibly a ‘rebound effect’, where participation drops to levels lower than during the pre-Games period (from 10% in 2003 to 3% in 2009).

Despite these discouraging long-terms trends, there appears to be a critical difference with the culture in the UK as it prepares to host the 2012 Games that may make a difference in avoiding the same fate as that seen in Greece. The organisers of the 2004 Games did not prioritise an increase in sport participation of the general population. Their main concern was to ensure the security of the 2004 Games (Samatas, 2007). The 2004 Games were the first to take place since the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, and it was the risk of a terrorist attack which monopolised the interest of the organizers. As a result the security expenses of the 2004 Games were colossal – three times the amount of money and security personnel than was used for the 2000 Games in Sydney. LOCOG and the UK Government have established that the grassroots sporting legacy should be a top priority and increasing participation in sport is a key legacy promise for the 2012 Games. In this sense, this will be a pioneer effort. As Weed et al. (2008) noted, “no previous Games has employed strategies towards raising physical activity or sport participation. As such, the use of an Olympic Games to raise physical activity and sport participation has not been attempted in any real sense.” (p.8).

In that respect, it will be interesting to see if LOCOG and the UK Government achieve their ambitious plans and manage to turn the UK into a more active nation, or whether the results will have the same “firework effect” reported in previous host cities, most notably in Athens in 2004, where participation increased dramatically in the short-term, but was not sustained.

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