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Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference 2016

The volunteering legacy of London 2012 Olympic Games: a pilot study

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Abstract

The hosting of the London 2012 Olympic Games was seen as an opportunity to harness the enthusiasm of the 70000 volunteers involved and to provide a volunteer legacy post event. A total of 77 London 2012 volunteers completed a web-based open-ended survey. The participants were asked to indicate their level of current volunteering engagement and whether volunteering at the Games had an impact on their current volunteering levels. The study found that the London Olympics were the first volunteer experience for most of the volunteers who completed the survey, with the main motivation to volunteer being anything related to the Olympic Games. Just over half of the respondents are currently volunteering. Lack of time is shown to be the main barrier towards further volunteering commitment. Only half of respondents had been contacted by a volunteering scheme post London 2012. The implications of the findings for a potential volunteering legacy are then explored.

Introduction

The Olympic Games are one of many proceedings that are deemed 'mega-events', due to the large scale they are held upon (Getz, 2008). Roche (2008) defines mega-events as specially constructed and staged large scale international, cultural or sport events, where the majority of world states participate in. These short term events are often utilised with the aspiration to create long-term post event impacts for the hosting nation. The hosting of the London 2012 Olympic Games not only intended to deliver a great level of sport to the host city, but also promised to provide a legacy for the years to come (DCMS, 2012). The term legacy refers to all 'planned and unplanned, positive and negative, intangible or tangible structures created through a sports event that remain after the event' (Preuss, 2007, p.211). A mega-sport event can create different types of legacies such as sporting, environmental and economic. With 70000 volunteers acting as 'Games Makers', as they were known throughout the sixteen day event in 2012, it was of vital importance to ensure that their enthusiasm could be harnessed to provide a social legacy of sports volunteering in the local communities. Indeed, the Conservative-majority coalition government in the UK was actively engaged prior to the event in the rhetoric that the Games would inspire an increase in sport participation and an enhanced volunteering culture after the event (DCMS, 2012). This paper reflects upon the reality of this rhetoric by exploring the opinions of a small pool of volunteers at the London 2012 Olympic Games. As such, an analysis of recently collected data around the current volunteering engagement of this small-scale sample of 'Games Makers' and the legacy of the event is discussed.

Literature Review

When London won the opportunity to host the 2012 Olympic Games, five promises were made towards the creation of a legacy following the event, for example to 'inspire a generation to take part in sport', to capitalise upon the increased interest around the Games to develop the economic activity of the country and to transform previously deprived areas such as the hosting region, East London (DCMS, 2010). A further aspect of these promises focused on bringing communities together through the increased number of those volunteering, in particular the youngsters, with the creation of schemes to get volunteers involved in sport and community activities (DCMS, 2010).

The focus of this study is the social legacy of the London 2012 Games and in particular the volunteering legacy of the event. Although social legacies are often intangible, they are deemed

the more important legacies associated with a visible effect of progress towards the general public and all of those involved (Gratton & Preuss, 2008). Considering that a main legacy priority of the London 2012 Olympic Game was to increase the levels of sports participation by ‘inspiring a generation’ (GovUk, 2012), and the majority of sport clubs rely heavily on volunteers (Taylor et al., 2012), it is surprising that there is a lack of precise objectives to realise such a social legacy preceding the Games (Benson et al., 2014). In addition, past research has been mainly linked to motivation and job satisfaction of event volunteers (e.g. Costa et al. 2006), rather than the transfer of volunteer efforts and skills across activities that may account for legacy (Benson et al., 2014). However, it is imperative to consider the long-term perspective of a legacy in order to maximise and capitalise upon the benefits, event related skills and training, in the post Games period (Owe, 2012).

An Olympic volunteer can be defined as ‘a person who makes an individual, altruistic commitment to collaborate to the best of his or her abilities in the organisation of the Olympic Games, carrying out the tasks assigned to him or her without receiving payments or rewards of any other nature’ (Moreno, Moragas and Paniagua, 1999). Volunteers are vital to the success of the event and have been present for many years, slowly expanding in number each year. For instance, 160000 people applied to be one of the original 45000 volunteers in Athens 2004 Olympic Games (Karkatsoulis, Michalopoulos & Moustakatou, 2005), similarly in London 2012, 240000 applications were received by LOCOG, the organising committee of the event, to be one of the selected 70000 Games Makers of the event (Martin, 2014). With this high amount of volunteers involved at the event, it was of vital importance that London and the rest of the UK, would continuously strive for and capitalise on a volunteering legacy, an aspect that many previous host cities have failed to ascertain (Owe, 2012).

There is a very little research to date to attain whether a volunteering legacy has been formed. Prior to the start of the Games, a survey found that 67% of potential volunteers stated that their main motive to volunteer at the Games would be because it was ‘the chance of a lifetime’, followed by 59% wanting to provide a friendly welcome to visitors of London and 58% wanting to share their love of London. Interestingly only 29% potentially wanted to gain new skills and experience (Martin, 2014). However, as reported by Costa, Chalip, Green & Simes (2014), the quality of training provided at an event influences commitment to and satisfaction with the event. Farrell, Johnston, and Twynam (1998) also concluded that training that is informative and develops volunteers’ skills to appropriately fulfil their responsibilities is integral in linking motivations to volunteer and satisfaction with the actual volunteering

experience. However, a volunteering legacy outcome depends on a number of factors including not only training to support the event, but also training that aims to develop volunteers in the long-term as well as other the existence of other development strategies in place to support the commitment of individuals to the volunteering act in the future (Dickson, Terwiel & Benson, 2011).

In relation to future volunteer engagement, a study of 11541 Games Makers found that 45% expected to increase their volunteering levels post Games, with 5% reporting that they were intending to volunteer less (Benson and Dickson, 2013). Post Games research on 28 of the volunteer centres located in London highlighted that there has been an increase by 31% of volunteering numbers within six months following the Games, increasing to 44% towards the end of 2013 (Martin, 2014). Furthermore, the total number of volunteers registered at volunteering centres in London increased by 5% in the years 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 (Martin, 2014). Further noticeable increases have been made amongst full time students and young people, those aged between 16-19 years (Cabinet Office, 2014), fulfilling the legacy aim to inspire a volunteering spirit beyond the Games, especially amongst young people (Olympic Games Impact Study, 2010). However, time was found to be a significant barrier to further volunteering in 2012-13. Moreover, 58% of individuals identified work commitments as a barrier, followed by 31% looking after their children at home and 24% having other commitments occupying their free time (Cabinet Office, 2014).

London has made a commitment to a volunteering legacy having set up the Join In Trust, one of the London 2012 Olympic legacy programmes. Join In is a project partly funded by the Cabinet Office and the Big Lottery Fund and aims to put more volunteers into community sport, supporting clubs and groups who are in the most need, and to promote opportunities for people to volunteer (Join In, 2014). However, the awareness of this scheme among volunteers is unreported.

It must be noted, however, that the choice to volunteer depends on a range of microeconomic and macroeconomic factors and the multitude of existing social networks that an individual has formed rather than on their place of residence (Taylor et al., 2012; Koutrou & Downward, 2015). In this regard, decisions to volunteer or participate in sport depend on an individuals' interest towards the relative activities compared to alternatives, their socio-economic background as well as on the relative influence from their peers and mutual acquaintances (Taylor et al., 2012; Koutrou & Downward, 2015). In addition, individuals or organisations

with an already highly established relational network are more likely to engage in social capital activities; that is to form social bonds and develop trust by engaging in different pursuits provided that other mediating factors such as time, effort placed, costs and other required resources are controlled (Morgan 2013). It also seems that sport organisations and individual members of organisations with strong ties, the so called ‘bonding’ of social capital are reluctant to move across contexts and further mobilise social capital through ‘bridging’ social capital processes (Putnam, 2000). For example, volunteering in sport-clubs reflects the interests of like-minded people, which stem from the love of the sport and the volunteers’ desire to help the club to function (Koutrou & Downward, 2015). In this regard, membership is restricted to outsiders since VSCs often do not call out to new volunteers, but wait for the latter to approach them (Morgan 2013). Thus, even if there is the desire to continue volunteering after a mega-event experience, this does not necessarily mean that it can be converted into long-term volunteering in sports, if the necessary support structures and promotion opportunities are not in place (Nichols et al., 2016). This is also relevant with regards to the motivations associated with volunteering at mega-events. For the London 2012 Olympic Games and other similar mega-events, the most important motivation is related to it being ‘a chance of a lifetime’. This motivation cannot be replicated in general or sports-club volunteering. Thus, volunteering ‘broker’ organisations or Sport England, in the case of sport clubs, are faced with the challenge to capitalise on other less unique motivations for volunteering, if the aim for a volunteering legacy is to be realised (Nichols et al., 2016).

Methodology

The research follows an exploratory research design, so no specific theories are prioritised, as it is to the authors’ knowledge one of the few studies that seeks to examine the volunteering legacy of a mega-event four years on from the London 2012 Games. This study includes a convenience sample of 77 volunteers who offered their services at the London 2012 Olympic Games in London and were known to the researchers. These individuals were Olympic Family Assistants during Games-time and acted as personal assistants and drivers for the IOC working groups, NOCs and the Olympic family. The volunteers were based at the Park-Lane fleet depot. The total population of volunteers who served the Olympic family clients during the London Olympics comprised 200 volunteers. This equates to 38.5% response rate for the current study. The research instrument was an online survey incorporating a series of open-ended and closed

type of questions and thus obtained both qualitative and quantitative feedback. Quantitative responses were analysed using descriptive statistics and qualitative results were analysed using Open and Axial coding (Bryman, 2008). The survey was designed to elicit the participants' socio-demographic information, their current volunteering engagement in sport or general contexts, the barriers they may face in engaging with volunteering activities and how volunteering could become more appealing to them. Data collection took place in April 2016.

Results and Discussion

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

An analysis of the gender of the participants suggested that 60.8% were male and 39.2% female. Of the total respondents, 62.4% were highly educated, holding a university bachelor degree or higher qualification. The employment status revealed that, 58.5% of the respondents were in employment (either full or part-time), followed by retired volunteers (40.3%). The participants were more likely to be white British (89.6%). From the 77 volunteers who completed the questionnaires, 35% were 60 years of age or older, followed by 30% in the 55-64 age range and 16% in the 45-54 age range. The survey participants indicated that volunteering for the London 2012 Games was their first volunteering experience at a mega-event (93.4%), whilst 57.1% of the sample had no other volunteering experience prior to the London 2012 Games. From the 42.9% of the sample who had volunteering experiences prior to the London 2012 Games, these were in charities (29.5%), sport clubs (27.3%) and school or universities (11.4%). When the participants were asked about the frequency of volunteering engagement in the past 12 months, 41.5% indicated they volunteered one day a week or more followed by 29.3% who volunteered very occasionally in the past 12 months. Finally, 56.4% of the sample indicated that they currently volunteer for other organisations reflecting a high engagement to volunteering. This is important as it shows a large degree of overlap between volunteer activities and motivations and hints at the potential for transferring volunteer efforts across activities; thus helping to create a volunteer legacy from London 2012 Olympics (Koutrou & Downward, 2015; Nichols et al., 2016).

Current Volunteering Engagement and Barriers

The study identified that time availability was the main barrier in further volunteering (40%), among those who do not currently volunteer, followed by location (13.3%) and ‘nothing being as inspiring as the Olympic Games’ (13.3%), which reflects the uniqueness of the event in attracting volunteers who wanted to be part of it rather as part of a general volunteering interest.

The 43.6% of the sample, who do not currently volunteer, were also asked what would make the prospect of volunteering more appealing to them. Alongside this, three practical issues were identified by the respondents. Firstly, the opportunity to ‘having more time to do so’ (29.2%), as ‘lack of time leads to inability to make regular commitments’ (Respondent, 1). Secondly, it was also suggested that a better use of the volunteers’ skill-set could have been made to ensure they feel that they have made a difference (32.3%). As suggested by some individuals, ‘feeling that my specific skills are useful, (Respondent, 10) and ‘a belief that my skills would be used rather than simply being ‘another pair of hands’’ (Respondent, 50) is associated to satisfaction with the experience and the volunteer role and can promote future volunteering (Costa et al., 2006). Another volunteer summarises this point well by noting that if you ‘know that the organisation was using your skills to help in its objectives’ (Respondent, 15) could lead to long-term volunteering becoming more appealing. Two individuals have also suggested that ‘Finding an organisation (like MOLA) with a properly resourced programme for recruiting, training and developing volunteers’ (Respondent, 25) can help to make volunteering more appealing. This further exemplifies the point made in the literature review, that if appropriate support networks are in place the process of creating a volunteer legacy can be realised (Benson et al., 2014; Nichols et al., 2016). Lastly, locality and close proximity to the volunteer activity (13.8%) could also make volunteering more appealing to those who do not currently volunteer, suggesting the relevance of the social exchange theory of volunteering. The social exchange theory suggests that when the costs outweigh the rewards associated with volunteering, individuals may choose not to engage in volunteering further (Doherty, 2009).

Impact of Olympic experience on future volunteering

The respondents of the survey were asked to indicate whether the experience at the London 2012 Olympic Games had influenced them to consider volunteering at other events or organisations. Some volunteers reported negative views in relation to the lack of challenge in their role during their involvement with the London 2012 Games. For example, as stated by respondent, 9: ‘There were too many volunteers and not enough for them to do. I spent hours,

days and possibly a whole week without doing a thing. My brother in law gave up after a week as there was nothing for him to do at all'. In addition, another respondent reflected on his experience and noted that 'The activities at the Games was rather generic, and the work I was asked to do made little use of my skills' (Respondent, 50). This potentially is one of the reasons behind some of the volunteers having not considered any future volunteering. These findings are in support of previous research by Wilks (2014) who demonstrated that London 2012 Games Makers were left disappointed by the low levels of knowledge and the lack of challenge that was included in their role. However, 66.2% of the sample suggested that volunteering at the Games influenced them to consider future volunteering in other sport event and general activities. For example, a respondent reported extensively the benefits of volunteering at the Games.

'I re-joined Girlguiding and am now a Brownie Leader of a unit in East London. I am also chair of governors at a school in north London' (Respondent, 5).

In the same token, another volunteer stated: 'Yes, since London 2012. I volunteered at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow 2014, I also volunteered at the Rugby World Cup in 2015. In between these events I have also been able to have some casual employment (Respondent, 6).

Moreover, another volunteer suggested: 'It has definitely made me WANT to volunteer as it was fun, rewarding and gave me a sense of purpose, but in reality it hasn't made me volunteer (I have a new job with very unpredictable, long hours, but I hope to volunteer more in the future!)' (Respondent, 1). This further supports the finding from past research that the lack of time due to work or family commitments impacts upon future volunteering decisions (Cabinet Office, 2014; Nichols et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2012).

Opportunities to Volunteer

Following the London 2012 Olympic Games, only 51.9% of volunteers were approached or being aware of any volunteering schemes. The main schemes that approached volunteers were the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games (29.6%), some National Governing Bodies (22.2%) including UK athletics and British Swimming, Join In Trust, the Olympic Volunteering Legacy scheme (14.8%), the 2015 Rugby World Cup (11.1%), Be Inspired (11.1%). However, it is interesting to note that the remaining 48.1% of participants suggested they haven't been

approached by any volunteer schemes post Games. Surprisingly, 75.3% of the volunteers in this study were unaware of the Olympic Legacy volunteering scheme, Join In., with a further 39% of respondents indicating that they were unaware of any local volunteering scheme in their area. Although, 58.4% were aware of schemes in close proximity to their place of residence, they haven't necessarily contributed with their skills to any of the available volunteering activities post Games. The most prevalent factor that prevented further involvement was lack of time (70.6%), illness (11.8%), location (11.8%) and other reasons (11.8%), including the difficulty of the application process and the dissolution from being unsuccessful in the selection process for volunteering at other sport mega-events. It must also be noted that satisfaction with the experience at an event may lead to future volunteering and the transfer of volunteer efforts across activities (Koutrou & Downward, 2015). An important determinant of event satisfaction is the volunteer role and the contribution made (Farrell et al., 1998; Costa et al., 2006). In this regard, it is clear that some volunteers had negative experiences with their skills being underused and their role not matching their previous knowledge and experiences. For example, a participant indicated 'I am more aware than before just how poor some organisations are at cherishing their volunteers. This includes large charities (National Trust) who appear to treat volunteers as cheap labour' (Respondent, 36). This is a negative impact upon legacy.

Discussion

This research study is one of the few that sought to determine the extent of a volunteering legacy post London 2012 Games. It has sought to address some of the limitations of previous volunteer legacies studies, which were conducted in the immediate aftermath of the event (e.g. Dickson et al., 2015). Thus, the study took place four years after the event. From the responses in this study, it is demonstrated that the amount of people who are currently volunteering is of respectable level following the Games and has increased by 14.2% when compared to pre-event figures for the current sample. However, these results should be interpreted with caution, since recent figures from the Community Life Survey (2013-14) indicate a decline in formal volunteering, with once a year volunteering levels dropping by 3% and once a month volunteering decreasing by 2% (Cabinet Office, 2014). This study further exemplified the little reported impact that post Olympics volunteering schemes have had on the engagement of the

Games Makers. Future studies could evaluate the effectiveness of such schemes in encouraging people to get involved in volunteering and the methods which they use in realising a volunteer legacy after a sport mega-event.

DCMS (2012) suggested that 40% of all Games Makers were volunteering for the first time at the London 2012 Games. However, 57.1% of the participants of the current study indicated that they did not have volunteering experience prior to the 2012 Games. This contradicts the findings of Dickson and Benson (2013) who noted that 80% of Games Makers had volunteered elsewhere prior to the London 2012 Games. However, it appears that previous volunteering experience has little influence over future volunteering decisions. In fact, Doherty (2009) highlighted that volunteers without any previous volunteering experience, were more likely to increase their levels of community volunteering in comparison to those with experience following a large-scale sports event. Similarly, Wilks (2014) indicated that the majority of the London 2012 Games Makers, including those who had not volunteered before, would like to continue volunteering after the Games, either for a mega-event or in other general settings.

However, the results from this sample of London 2012 volunteers and from other relevant studies (e.g. Benson et al., 2014; Wilks, 2014) suggest that the overall experience with the Games did little to inspire a wider volunteering legacy. For example, as stated by the chief executive of Volunteering England, ‘without investment the dream of a lasting legacy from the Games will remain just that’ (Davis-Smith, 2012: np). Thus, in order to sustain current volunteering levels in the UK and encourage new volunteers to become involved as well as develop a higher level of social capital, volunteering opportunities must be clearly advertised and communicated. Volunteer ‘broker’ organisations and schemes must make a greater effort in reaching volunteers with previous volunteering experiences at events and advertise new opportunities on a regular base. The findings of this study suggest that in general volunteers were unaware of the Join In charity, which was developed under the purpose of encouraging local volunteering after the Games (Join In, 2015). A further, 39% reported lack of awareness of any other local volunteering schemes that they could get involved in and find more information about volunteering. This was also evident in the qualitative element of the study. For example, one participant stated ‘If I had gone into a local or national volunteer list, maybe I would do more volunteering’ (Respondent, 62). In a similar vein, another respondent suggested having considered other volunteering opportunities after the Games, but ‘not sure how to get involved’ (Respondent, 28).

Although this study offers new insights upon the creation of a volunteer legacy four years on from the Games, the generalisability of the findings to the 70000 volunteer population that assisted with the London 2012 Games cannot be ensured. The researchers had limited access to a higher number of London 2012 volunteers. Future research could address this limitation. In addition, response rate could have been affected by the lack of authoritative standing of the researchers. Research conducted on behalf of large organisations, such as Sport England may have obtained a higher response rate, as respondents are more aware of whom the researcher is and thus are more confident that anonymity will be ensured.

In addition, an interesting area that has surfaced during this research includes the volunteer commitments of the 170000 unsuccessful applicants that applied to volunteer for the 2012 Games. An investigation into whether their unsuccessful application led them feeling disempowered and disillusioned towards volunteering in general; thus creating a barrier to the aim of volunteering legacy, would be an interesting avenue for future research.

This case study provides responses from a sample of Games Makers four years on from the London 2012 Games, eliminating any post-event euphoria and satisfaction; thus accounting for the behaviour of volunteers and not their intentions as with previous studies (e.g. Doherty, 2009; Alexander et al., 2015; Dickson et al., 2015; Koutrou & Downward, 2015). Although a time frame of 4 years preceding the Games is a suitable time to determine a legacy, a true volunteer legacy cannot be determined until a considerable number of years after an event. This study has highlighted the need for future research to explore the extent of a volunteer legacy further and to account for other factors mediating the legacy process; for example the planning phase, design and implementation for a legacy prior to the event (Benson et al., 2014), as well as the existing policy environment and the support or training available to volunteers and voluntary 'broker' organisations after the event.

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