
THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF AN ELITE SPORT EVENT: THE CASE OF THE EUROPEAN YOUTH OLYMPIC FESTIVAL 2013

Abstract ID: EASM-2015-242 - (688)

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Date submitted: 2015-03-20

Date accepted: 2015-03-29

Type: Scientific

Keywords: social impact, elite sport, sport event, olympic, legacy

Category: 2: Global Sporting Events

Synopsis:

Abstract:

Aim of paper

Politicians often point at the importance of elite sport events for social cohesion, national pride and sports participation. Nonetheless, little is known on how, if at all, society benefits from elite sport events. In addition, in order to create social benefits “there is need to think more clearly, analytically and less emotionally about sport and its potential” (Coalter, 2007: 7). In this study, evidence for the social impact in terms of participation and celebration of an elite sport event is set out. The case concerns the summer European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF) 2013, a multi-sport event for young talented athletes from 49 countries which was organized in Utrecht, The Netherlands. The EYOF belongs to the European Olympic Committees (EOC), and is organised on behalf of the EOC. This paper focusses on the social impact of the event on three target groups: the local population, the local sport clubs and the event visitors. The study aims to make a contribution to the knowledge development regarding the social impact of elite sport events.

Theoretical background

With the organisation of sport events, like the EYOF, frequently a “fever of expectations” (Mean et al., 2004: 131) arises among policy makers and other proponents. This recurrently refers to the manifestation of a demonstration effect. The demonstration effect, also referred to as a trickle-down effect, is a process by which people are inspired by elite sports, athletes or sports events to participate themselves (Weed et al., 2009). Furthermore, sport events are frequently considered as a way to create a pleasurable atmosphere in a substantial part of the host city which works as a catalyst for positive host community outcomes (Misener & Mason, 2009). All in all, the empirical evidence to date suggests that the creation of both effects differs from event to

event and is at best mixed.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The project was commissioned to a team of researchers from the Mulier Institute, Utrecht University and the University of Applied Sciences Utrecht. The project consisted of nine subprojects of which three are central in this paper. Firstly, a representative sample of the local adult population was drawn pre-event (n=440) and post-event (n=410) by means of an online questionnaire. Secondly, representatives of local sport clubs were invited for an online questionnaire after the event (n=100). Thirdly, as the name and email address of ticket buyers were registered, there was the possibility to invite event visitors for an online questionnaire by e-mail (n=1,832). Visitors who visited one of the non-ticketed events were interviewed face-to-face (n=122). These answers were processed during the interview by the interviewer by means of an app on a tablet. SPSS software was used to analyse the data. Both bivariate and multivariate analyses were conducted.

Results, discussion and implications

As described by Breedveld & Hover (2015) the local population and the local sport clubs were most critical about the impact of the EYOF. 17% of the local population followed the EYOF and 16% of these locals stated after the EYOF that the event had 'lived' in their neighbourhood, indicating the extent to which they had witnessed people talking about the EYOF or the frequency they saw expressions of the event on the streets and in shops. Worth noting is that the communication budget of the organisation was relatively small. Additionally, 4% claimed afterwards that the event had stimulated them to take up (more) sports. Similarly, 3% of the sport clubs that had been involved in the organization of the EYOF felt that they benefitted from the event (e.g. increase in memberships), 15% felt that sport in the city had benefited from the event and 21% believed the city itself had benefited from the event, including attracting tourists. The absence of guidance and ideas of the EYOF management for sport clubs to become engaged did not stimulate their involvement. Visitors were more involved and more positive. The event was graded with a 8,0 (scale 1-10). Most visitors were already active in sports (94%). Of those who were not participating in sports, a small minority (7%) felt encouraged to become active in sports as a result of visiting the event. The EYOF learns that there should be more modest expectations among politicians regarding a positive social legacy as a mechanized result of solely an elite sport event, including the occurrence of a trickle down effect and the creation of a positive atmosphere among a substantial part of the host community.

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