
Assessing the impacts of sporting events – a realist evaluation of some legacies of the London 2012 Games

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Synopsis:

Abstract:

Evaluation of the impacts and outcomes of sporting events has been recognised as a complex process (Preuss, 2007), facing challenges in terms of how to identify legacies, determining who is affected by such legacies (Preuss, 2015), and estimating the extent to which, and ways in which, the emerging effects are brought about by the event (Chen and Henry, 2015). This paper outlines the use of an evaluation framework, i.e. Realist Evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), for evaluation of the impacts and outcomes of sporting events at the regional level. Specifically, it examines the application of the framework in the case of the London 2012 Games in Leicestershire, a non-hosting region. Although there has been a number of sources that have (directly and indirectly) discussed the London 2012 Games' impacts and legacy (both ex ante and ex post, see for example, Communities and Local Government, 2009, Cragg Ross Dawson, 2007, Blake, 2005, East of England Development Agency, 2006, Grant Thornton et al., 2011a, Grant Thornton et al., 2013a, Grant Thornton et al., 2011b, Grant Thornton et al., 2012b, Grant Thornton et al., 2012a, Grant Thornton et al., 2013b), many of these have provided a review of the existing evidence for claims of impact (see for example, Weed et al., 2009, Mahtani et al., 2013), or have focused on policy and strategic analysis of the London 2012 predicted legacy (mainly published before the Games, see for example, Shipway, 2007, Coalter, 2004, Woodhouse and Fielden, 2010, Bloyce and Lovett, 2012), and thus lack empirical evidence for or against the existence and additionality of effects. There are some exceptions where researchers have adopted a case study method to examine the impacts of the Games (see for example, Gilmore, 2014, Ritchie et al., 2009), but face criticism over paying little systematic focus on identifying the actual or additional impact of the Games. Accordingly, the use of

the Realist Evaluation framework which has been promoted as an effective method for identifying what works, for whom, under what circumstances and how in a wide range of contexts offers considerable gains for post hoc analysis of legacy policy outcomes at a local level.

With an emphasis on programme theories, Realist Evaluation as advocated by Pawson et al. (Pawson, 2006, 2013; Pawson & Tilley, 1997) addresses the importance of understanding the causal relationship between context, mechanisms and outcomes. This paper, drawing from a PhD study which examines Leicestershire legacy/impacts of the London 2012 Games (Chen, 2013), presents two case studies of initiatives operating within the Leicestershire sub-region (i.e. the CompeteFor programme and Get Set programme) in which the Realist Evaluation framework and analytic logic models are employed. Qualitative data from a range of internal and external stakeholders and analysis of key policy documents were used to develop the Context-Mechanisms-Outcomes matrices to provide evidence of 'generative mechanisms', to recognise and explain the nature of, and reasons for, success/shortfall in the two programmes, and implications for policy. In particular, in the evaluation of the Get Set programme as implemented locally, when examining why some schools/areas were more engaged with the Get Set programme thus producing more significant outcomes, firstly, the Realist Evaluation approach is used to inform the development of the underlying theories of the programme; and thus to articulate what causal mechanisms have worked to generate such changes. As for the case of CompeteFor, it was a typical case that different stakeholders had different perspectives and what counted as a 'successfully' leveraging strategy, which therefore resulted in different stakeholders invoking different 'mechanisms' to achieve different targets. In addition to the substantive discussion of the two projects the Leicestershire 2012 legacy experience the approach adopted provides lessons learned for legacy outcome evaluation, with the potential for useful insight into policy analysis of the outcomes of mega events.

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