

BUILDING A LEGACY? EURO 2005 AND THE IMPACT ON WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IN NORTH-WEST ENGLAND

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Context

This presentation will focus on the challenges associated with establishing the impacts of the Euro 2005 Women's Football Championships on football for women and girls in the North Western region of England. The event is one of the largest female-only events to be held in the UK, and has been marketed under the theme of '*football's coming home*'. With a long tradition of football for women, as well as large numbers of professional and amateur clubs in the region, great interest was expected to be generated for the women's game, and in other sport or activity. The sporting impacts were expected to be particularly strong in the areas selected for hosting the matches of the championships, not all of which were in or near locations of female 'centres of excellence' for football.

Though studies of legacy impacts have tended to focus on the physical legacy of facilities, or on economic impacts, in events such as the Olympic games (e.g. Preuss, 2004), this study is concerned with the sports development legacy; that of changes to the sport structures, the personnel involved in sports delivery systems and the level of participation, as measured by club membership and involvement in organised sporting activity, by participants and volunteers. It is strongly influenced by the theories of social and human capital, as discussed by Coalter (2004), assumed to underpin such programmes and individual changes in perceived competence in sport. Vigor *et al* (2004) have indicated that such sporting legacy will be a major feature of London's Olympic bid, for example.

A large legacy activity programme has been operating across the region, in and around the competition venues, and in other areas in the region with strong links to the game. One of the key objectives of this programme is to increase participation in women's football, which has the highest participation figures for female team sport in England (F.A., 2003). However, demonstrating successful achievement of this objective has been recognised as problematic, as arriving at suitable measures and indicators that could demonstrate causal links with the Euro 2005 event is contentious. As in assessing impacts of the 2002 Commonwealth Games, increases in sports club memberships were considered important (Brown and Massey, 2001), however, without more in-depth analysis, it would be difficult to demonstrate any change was due, even in part, to the events and activities around Euro 2005. Such problems had been highlighted by the research conducted by Collins *et al* (1999) in social inclusion programmes.

Blackburn in Lancashire, was one of the hosting areas approached to provide a geographical focus for the study. The local authority was also interested in developing its own development plan for football, particularly for women and girls. This area has significant areas of social deprivation, a large ethnic minority population, and a 'mixed -economy' of football for women - a professional club (Blackburn Rovers F.C.) with a centre of excellence for girls, local authority facilities, courses and programmes, and various voluntary sector clubs, some female only and some for participants of both genders.

Methods

The project is a multi-method approach to evaluation, based on the 'realist evaluation' approaches of Pawson and Tilley (1997). The first phase, reported here, conducted in the period leading up to and immediately following the event, focused on establishing a baseline for any subsequent gains and examining the mechanisms of the programme, and assessing *how* it had 'worked'. This involved significant stakeholder consultations and collating extensive secondary data from the county and regional football agencies, previous studies of participation in schools and clubs in the area, combined with extensive primary data collection, by both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The assumed impacts were established based on the 'theory' implied in legacy activity, and through consultation with the relevant agencies.

The second phase will be conducted twelve months after the event, and will gather data on longer-term outcome measures for comparison. This phase should lead to comparisons with groups in other locations without such extensive provision and infrastructure for the game (like the West Lancashire district). In the future, cross-cultural research in women's football structures could enhance the understanding in a context-mechanism-outcome approach to football development programmes for women and girls.

A questionnaire for event participants and game spectators in the target group of young women (under 16) was distributed to a sample of approximately 1,000 (work still in progress). The returns of this survey were to form the cohort for a follow-up study in 2006, with potential for longer term tracking, as well as providing exploratory and baseline data on the nature and extent of football activity, as well as gathering views on the experiences, barriers and constraints perceived by young women in the area.

Selected focus groups (4 planned) of participants and non-participants in football were also conducted to gather more detailed and finely-grained understanding of how young women had responded to Euro 2005 and their football experience. Focus groups (2) were also conducted with local clubs and volunteers to determine their views on the development of the game in the locality.

Results, discussion and implications

The results of this phase, presented here, provide essential background for the future development of the sport in the area, and help inform the plans of the local authority and the football agencies. The results also provide stakeholders in the development of women's football locally an important voice in the future of their sport. It is also important to help demonstrate whether any growth in club-based football, and human capital measures can be attributed to the Euro 2005 legacy. However, as made clear in the discussion, this depends on longitudinal tracking and careful monitoring of the progress achieved by particular groups. It is important to establish for example, if changes in sport participation represent growth – i.e. more young women taking part in sport, or if such change represents little net gain via a diversion to football from other activities. It may be that the level and quality of the football experience has increased for those already taking part, through more coaching or establishing more competitive activity, for example, leagues for more age groups. Through careful analysis of the results, it should be possible to determine what aspects of the programme have worked best, and for whom. However, it may not be possible, as Coalter (2004) has pointed out, to achieve evidence which convinces 'beyond doubt', of Euro 2005 impacts.

The longitudinal approach to the programme impacts is problematic, due to resource and practical implications as well as methodological concerns over measures and indicators. However, though this represents the greater challenge for evaluation, such effort is essential if we are to demonstrate that investment in major events and related 'legacy' activity can demonstrate the 'power' to change sporting landscapes and individual sporting trajectories for the better, over the longer term.

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