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CONTEMPORARY POLICY DEBATES

A missed opportunity waiting to happen? The social legacy potential of the London 2012 Paralympic Games

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Since the Games of the XXXth Olympiad in 2012 were awarded to the city of London on 6th July 2005, there has been extensive policy discussion about the potential to develop 'legacy' from the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The potential for such legacy has been discussed across a range of sectors and is perceived, by the actors in the 2012 planning process at least, to have the potential to benefit the whole of the UK, not just the city of London.

Of course, a project as large (and as expensive for taxpayers) as hosting and planning to benefit from the Olympic and Paralympic Games stimulates discussion beyond the immediate policy actors involved. The written and print media, national and local government, commercial and not-for-profit interest groups, and the public at large have all shown a considerable interest in what has inevitably come to be a significant national project. As part of a recent Economic and Social Research Council supported investigation into potential regional legacies of the Games, Smith and Weed (2009) suggested that there are a wide range of official and oppositional 'Olympic Narratives' in circulation, each developed to serve the interests of particular interest groups and actors.

However, notwithstanding the range of actors commenting on the 2012 Games, the dominant public discourse has been about the potential to develop economic legacies (New Economics Foundation, 2008; PWC/DCMS, 2005). In this climate, opportunities relating to the Paralympic Games, perhaps because they are perceived to have less economic potential, have only rarely been discussed. Yet, just as the Olympic Games can offer opportunities to promote culture, health, sport and community and social wellbeing in the four years up to 2012 (Weed et al., 2009), so there are likely to be specific opportunities offered by the Paralympic Games to advance the social wellbeing of disabled people in all aspects of their lives, and to underpin this by enhancing positive attitudes towards disability among the population as a whole.

The London 2012 Candidate File (LOCOG, 2004, p. 189) suggests that the Paralympic Games can 'build respect ... for disabled people by changing society's perceptions'; however, this initial statement is followed by aspirations to motivate disabled young people 'to become involved with sport and to aspire to elite performance' and to 'train UK Paralympians, coaches, Technical Officials and volunteers who will dramatically advance Paralympic sport' (p. 193). This trend of stating

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general aspirations about enhancing the lives of disabled people but then following up with specific plans focusing on developing elite Paralympic sport is typical of those policy documents that explicitly mention the Paralympics (e.g. DCMS, 2008; NWDA, 2007). Much legacy planning, however, makes no explicit mention of specific opportunities relating to the Paralympic Games, although this could be implied from statements about leaving legacies for 'disadvantaged' or 'socially excluded' groups from 'the 2012 Games' (e.g. DCMS, 2007).

The nomenclature used here derives from LOCOG's attempt to adopt an inclusive approach by referring to either 'the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games' or simply 'the 2012 Games'. Yet this latter shorthand can lead to the Paralympic Games becoming invisible, or to a tendency to claim that legacy planning refers to both the Olympic and Paralympic Games when, in fact, it has been planned with only the Olympic Games in mind. Not only is this approach disingenuous, but it implies that there are no specific opportunities for the advancement of social wellbeing offered by the Paralympic Games other than those related to the development of disability sport. That opportunities offered by the Paralympic Games are perceived by policymakers and politicians to relate largely to sport development has also been implied in previous practice, with research from the Sydney 2000 Paralympic Games (Darcy, 2003) suggesting that the disabled community were not best served by the diversion of funds from social provision to Games-focused initiatives in the approach to Sydney 2000.

In the UK, the broader policy context is one in which a Labour administration was elected in 1997 with a commitment to 'full and enforceable civil rights for disabled people' (Disability Rights Task Force, 1999), which it sought to achieve by, *inter alia*, the establishment of an enforcement capacity in the Disability Rights Commission in 2000 (Hurst, 2004) and extended disability rights provision, a widening of the definition of a disabled person and an emphasis on social understandings of disability in the Disability Discrimination Act (2005). However, there are tensions in an approach that simultaneously emphasises social understandings of disability and promises 'enforcement' of disability rights. The increasingly pervasive social model of disability (Barton, 2004; Hahn, 2001; Oliver, 2004; Shakespeare, 2006a; C. Thomas, 2004) views disability as a fluid condition produced by the attitudinal, economic, social, political and environmental barriers to full participation in society (Barton, 2004; Oliver, 1986; Shakespeare, 2006b; Shogan, 1998). Yet, the breaking down of such barriers is rarely enforceable, particularly attitudinal and social barriers (from which many economic, political and environmental barriers flow). As such, a legislative approach to enforcement may be less successful in advancing the social wellbeing of disabled people than a softer social policy approach that focuses on attitudinal change (Miller, Parker, & Gillinson, 2004). Against this background the Paralympic Games, as a significant national project in the global spotlight, provides an important social vehicle to promote such change.

As with the Olympic Games, opportunities exist for the Paralympic Games to take advantage of social, media and political attention to drive changes in attitudes and provision. Broader research in sport suggests that sport has been a site for transformation to support attitudinal change, empower disabled people and portray disabled bodies in an enabling context (DePauw, 1997; Steadward, 1996; N. Thomas, 2003). However, there is little specific empirical research on the Paralympic Games that reinforces these points. Many opinion pieces and discussion papers (e.g. Blauwet, 2005; Landry, 1995) assert or suggest that the Paralympic Games improves attitudes,

but the evidence base for such assertions is unclear (London East Research Institute, 2007). There are contrary views that the Paralympic Games may reinforce stereotypes, particularly through the use of tragedy narratives (Gold & Gold, 2007), something that was prominent in media coverage of the Sydney 2000 Paralympic Games (Darcy, 2003). There can also be a tendency to downplay impairment and difference, with media (and often policy) portrayals of disabilities being of those that are least 'unpalatable' (focusing, e.g. on wheelchair-bound athletes and those with partial missing limbs rather than on athletes with, e.g. cerebral palsy) (Thomas & Smith, 2003). Tragedy narratives may also contribute to the perception that disabled athletes have extraordinary and heroic qualities that have enabled them to overcome their disability (Hardin & Hardin, 2008), something that may disconnect them from the lives (and the perceived lives) of many disabled people (Darcy, 2003; Howe, 2008), and also suggest that disability is a 'problem' to be overcome (Gilbert & Schantz, 2008).

The essential problem with the various perspectives outlined in the previous paragraph is that, while they each (both positive and negative) intuitively seem sensible and coherent, they are rarely evidenced, and as such the potential to adopt what is increasingly being referred to as a 'leveraging and mitigation' (L&M) approach (Weed, 2009) to the development of legacies from the 2012 Paralympic Games is inhibited. L&M identifies potential outcomes of an event or initiative, and develops strategies to leverage positive outcomes and mitigate negative ones. It has been applied to the economic outcomes of sporting events (Chalip, 2004) and more recently, to social outcomes (Chalip, 2006). However, L&M is reliant on a clear understanding of both the processes that lead to potential outcomes, and of the outcomes themselves. The absence of an evidenced understanding of these processes and outcomes currently compromises the effectiveness of L&M approaches for the 2012 Paralympic Games.

It appears, therefore, that there are three major obstacles to the potential development of a social legacy from the London 2012 Paralympic Games:

- (1) The Paralympic Games are largely, both intentionally and unintentionally, overlooked in legacy planning which appears to assume that they offer few specific opportunities beyond those served by generic legacy strategies catering for 'the 2012 Games' (i.e. at once for both the Olympic and Paralympic Games).
- (2) Where Paralympic legacies are specifically considered, although there may be a general rhetoric about social goals, specific plans relate almost entirely to sport development goals, with a considerable emphasis on elite sport.
- (3) The research base relating to potential social legacies offered by the Paralympic Games is illusory, in that published works are largely opinion pieces or discussion papers that assert rather than provide empirical evidence for social outcomes and, more importantly, the processes that may lead to social outcomes that might be developed from the Paralympic Games.

In conclusion, therefore, there is a need for national policy makers to consider whether their 'inclusive' terminological shorthand ('the 2012 Games') actually contributes to the invisibility of the Paralympic Games in legacy planning; a need for legacy planners to overtly consider potential Paralympic legacies in their own right; a need to extend Paralympic legacy thinking beyond sport development; and a need for

the research community to contribute empirical evidence rather than opinion to the Paralympic legacy debate. However, time is swiftly advancing and many of the opportunities to develop social legacies from the Paralympic Games are in what Weed (2008) has called the ‘pregnancy’ (pre-Games) period. As there is no indication that there is any direction of travel towards the developments outlined above, the development of social legacy from the London 2012 Paralympic Games appears to be a missed opportunity waiting to happen.

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