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The 2012 Paralympics: The Opportunities & the Risk

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The Context

The opportunities presented by the 2012 Olympic Games & Paralympic Games are predominantly perceived as economic or sports related.

But!

Whilst there is reference to the “Olympic Games and Paralympic Games” or indeed the “2012 Games” the reality is that the focus is much narrower...

The Olympic Games

At the risk of stating the obvious

- The Paralympics have the potential to advance specific social outcomes for disabled people & wider society
- The origins of the Games' – the Stoke Mandeville Wheelchair Games was founded in the belief that a disabled equivalent of the Olympics would support physical rehabilitation & aid social integration

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A recognised opportunity...?

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London's Dream...

“a legacy marathon of disability awareness & inclusion rather than just a short term ‘sprint’”

which will

- *...create exciting opportunities to build respect for the achievements of Paralympians as athletes & further develop the opportunities for disabled people by changing society's perceptions*
- *...set new standards for inclusive & sustainable design [from sporting facilities right through to service delivery]*

Theme 9: Paralympic Games Official bid documents

<http://www.london2012.com/news/publications/candidate-file.php>

Rhetoric Vs. Reality

- *Are there competing priorities?*
- *What activity is planned or underway?*
- *Is this activity sufficient to realise the legacy ambitions?*

Competing Priorities...

Other Paralympics legacy goals, to:

- *...motivate greater numbers of young people – & in particular those with disabilities – to become involved with sport, & to aspire to elite performance.*
- *... be a force and focus, unlike any other, to train UK Paralympians, coaches, Technical Officials & volunteers who will dramatically advance Paralympic sport.*

Competing priorities...

The Five Promises of the London 2012 Olympic Legacy Action Plan

- To make the UK a world leading sporting nation
- To transform the heart of East London
- To inspire a generation of young people
- To make the Olympic park a blueprint for sustainable living
- To demonstrate the UK is a creative, inclusive & welcoming place to live in, visit and for business

DCMS, 2008. *Before, during and after: making the most of the London 2012*

Activity Planned or Underway...

- The policy environment & action planning nationally & in the regions and nations, predominantly reflect sport based legacies and/or the five promises
- The specific social opportunities presented by the Paralympics are only reflected in a limited range of planning documents
- Limited attention appears to be focused on what processes need to be in place to realise the specific social opportunities presented by the Paralympics and London's legacy "dream"

Activity Planned or Underway...

A Missed Opportunity Waiting to Happen?

- The absence of a clear steer is evident in the variable inclusion of planning for the social legacy of the Paralympics in regional & national planning documents.
- ESRC funded research shows that in the absence of a clear steer policy makers & the general public *'do not know how or what to do to generate benefits'* & this may lead to a *'decrease in support for the Games & an increased risk of failure to maximise outcomes.'*

Realising Legacy Ambitions: Disability Research?

- Physical, environmental, attitudinal, political & economic barriers combine to prevent full social inclusion
- These barriers reflect & affect social perceptions & self-perceptions of the physical, social & intellectual capacity of disabled people
- Society is 'ableist' & impairment has as been internalised as a deficit
- Challenging the disability as deficit understanding is compromised by the relative lack of oppositional codes (e.g. positive role models & the promotion of the abilities of disabled people)

Realising Legacy Ambitions: The History of Disability Rights

- The development of a social understanding of disability catalysed the development of a disability rights based movement
- The politicisation of disability by disabled people & the political action that drew attention to the *socially created* disadvantage was significant in driving legal & policy changes in the UK and internationally
- Research & statistics show that disadvantage & discrimination continues & that alone a legal and policy framework will not lead to social inclusion

Realising Legacy Ambitions: Moving forward

- Effective anti-discrimination strategies are sustained, built on an evidential basis & challenge the individual social, economic and political elements of discrimination through:
 - the provision of empowering self concepts and alternative role models which promote the ABILITY of disabled people
 - highlighting the interplay between the social, medical & individual factors of disability, drawing attention to indirect discrimination & the physical reality of impairment

The Paralympic Potential

Conventional wisdom suggests the Paralympic Games will generate positive social outcomes for disabled people because:

1. Positive role models (athletes & officials) are promoted
2. Elite sports promotes ABILITY
3. The media attention presents disability in a positive context & highlights the socially created barriers to social inclusion
4. The requirements of hosting the Games promotes a discourse of inclusion in community & environmental planning

Paralympic Research: What we KNOW from previous Games

Coverage of the Paralympics in the body of research available is limited – what information exists suggests that the Paralympics are marginalised, ignored or have assumptions made about them that are neither quantified nor evidentially substantiated

Paralympic Research What we KNOW from previous Games

The research available raises a number of issues regarding

1. discrimination against disabled people
2. media coverage more likely to reinforce existing stereotypes
3. the sustainability of the legacy impact
4. a redirection of resources away from the local community
5. a disjoint in the aims of the various stakeholders
6. failure to review and learn from previous games

Conclusion

- The social potential for the Paralympic Games has been recognised
- Research indicates that the Paralympics may generate unintended and negative outcomes
- The social impact of the Games is indeterminable in the absence of measurement, & currently this data is not available
- Strategic leveraging at international, national & local levels involving the identification, implementation and evaluation of the action is required to ensure that optimal outcomes are not undermined by conflicting action – or possibly worse – inaction.