A Sustainable Olympic Games: Examining the Concept-Practice Linkages

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This paper reconsiders the concept-reality linkages between the Olympic Games and sustainability from a stakeholder perspective. It is argued that the modern Olympic Games are inherently a developmental project, premised on a philosophy of social reform known as Olympism. This Olympic philosophy claims the status of a social, political and educational ideology and represents a normative concept. Recently we have witnessed the growth of the concept of Olympic legacy. Despite its 'past tense' connotations, as is inherent with the Olympic Games, it represents a developmental project concerned with building the future. The concept of sustainable Olympics has been increasingly codified in a comprehensive Technical Manual on Olympic Games Impact (IOC, 2009) and the Sustainable Sport and Event Tool Kit (AISTS, 2009). The IOC recognizes that the Games can be utilized as a tool to realize a vision, in which the universal values of Olympism are also promoted (IOC, 2009). However, the realization of any developmental vision requires the construction of systems of governance to guide collective actions. Closely linked to governance, the Stakeholder Theory (Freemen, 1984) attempts to address the principle of who or what really counts, identifying and defining the specific stakeholders via a normative theory, and examining the conditions under which these parties should be treated as stakeholders via a descriptive theory.

This paper critically interrogates the concept-practice linkages of a sustainable Olympic Games through an analysis of the conceptualization of sustainable Olympic legacy and its delivery by using the London 2012 Olympic Games to illustrate those linkages. Key policy documents on sustainability and the Olympic Games produced by the British government, the IOC and the London Organising Committee of the Games were analysed using a thematic approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This information was examined to identify the main stakeholders responsible for the delivery of sustainable Games and what modes of governance have been employed to ensure compliance with the prescribed norms. Utilizing the stakeholder theory as a theoretical framework, this exploratory paper introduces the concept of sustainable Olympic legacy as a prospective developmental project, interrogates the role of various stakeholders and makes an argument for a better understanding of its governance both as a political process and an essential element of the notion of sustainability. Such an improved understanding of the meaning of sustainable Olympic legacy will facilitate the drawing of more realistic development plans based on the principles of modern democratic governance.