Olympic Legacy and Its Governance: An Institutional Perspective

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The concept of legacy has become an important part of the sport event bidding and hosting field in recent years. It is generally associated with the potential spin-offs associated with the hosting of an event such as economic, tourism, and social benefits. Preuss (2007) broadly defined it as “all planned and unplanned, positive and negative, intangible and tangible structures created by and for a sport event that remains for a longer time than the event itself” (p.87). More recently, further examination of the concept shows that legacy has progressed from early perceptions of acquiring general benefits from hosting to the current trend of strategically developing sustainable long-term legacy plans. This movement towards a proactive approach to sustaining legacy benefits over the long-term can be associated with the need for legacy governance (i.e., the need for long-term structures and controls responsible for monitoring and managing Olympic legacies created as a result of hosting the Games). Several emerging trends in the evolution of modern Olympic Games legacy are evident including the expanding types of legacy (e.g., political, environmental) and their change in emphasis over time, legacy’s complexity and interconnectedness, as well as legacy’s overall governance. The norms and standards that have emerged over time in relation to the concept and governance of legacy are related to the notion of institutionalization. Institutionalization is the process by which events and structures become established habits of social behaviour within organizations over time (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

Girginov (2011) suggested that the current state of the event legacy related literature should be further deliberated. In response to this call, the purpose of this paper is to further explore the emergence of legacy and the process through which it has become a taken-for-granted institutional rule that has impacted how organizations plan and implement the Games. This paper’s specific objective is to review why and how legacy was adopted and the subsequent implications on bid and organizing committees and other actors within the Olympic Movement.

Institutional theory is applied as a theoretical framework to investigate the emergence and evolution of legacy and its governance. The organizational field under investigation consists of the committees involved in the bidding for and hosting of the Olympic Games, the IOC as the main rights holder, and other actors within the Olympics movement which impact or can be impacted by the event’s legacy (e.g., national and international sport organizations, and sponsors).

Archival material was used as the primary source of data. This source included multiple types of documentation such as bid documents, candidate files, final reports, and related websites. Data analysis occurred in the form of a content analysis using the qualitative data assessment software ATLAS.ti 6.0 that facilitated the coding and retrieval of the data by allowing the researcher to highlight themes that appeared in the archival material. Emerging patterns are discussed below.

Institutionalization is an ongoing process (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). As such, in order to further understand the adoption of legacy into the Olympic Movement, the evolution of the concept is broken down into the pre-institutionalization, semi-institutionalization, and full institutionalization phases as described by Tolbert and Zucker (1996). During the late 70’s and early 80’s several issues (e.g., financial, political) threatened the long-term existence of the IOC. The Los Angeles (LA) 84 organizing committee focussed on more private financing and less public support for the organization of the Games. The resultant financial structure and monetary legacy attributed to the city following the Games was a turning point as it renewed interest and competition among cities to host the event. The Calgary 1988 Games show the emergence of legacy as one of the reasons for pursuing the right to host and a reaction to the financial outcome of the 1976 Games. The conception for hosting stemmed from wanting to develop amateur sport in the city, the Calgary Olympic Development Association was sensitive to the financial mismanagement of the Montreal Games that continued to burden many within the country at the time. Calgary and LA can be seen as innovators in the field of legacy with their successful legacy practices and led to the uptake by early adopters in the field.
Following the success of the LA ’84 and Calgary ’88 Games, the concept of legacy began to diffuse throughout the Olympic Movement as cities bidding for the Olympic Games objectified the need to include legacy as an integral element in their bid in order to be considered legitimate contenders for the Games. The inclusion of legacy into the Olympic Charter and the bidding process supports the historical continuity and exteriority of the structure in the movement. Once mandated, dependent organizations generally respond by rapidly incorporating the element into their formal structure (cf. Tolbert & Zucker, 1983).

Consequentially, legacy has become embedded within the Olympic Movement. As a result of the concept of legacy becoming institutionalized within the Olympic Movement, a new organizational problem has emerged. The delivery of legacy, especially post-Games (once the organizing committee (OCOG) is dissolved), requires a system of governance in order to control, monitor, and manage the new assets, as well as to guide collective actions towards consensus regarding the direction of the legacies of the Games. The governance of legacy has also become objectified in a sense that the structures are diffused to other interested candidate and future host cities as a legitimate way of dealing with legacy issues pre, during, and post-Games. Following the analysis of the data, it is possible to conclude that while legacy governance practices have been adopted by bid cities and host OCOGs, these ideas have not reached the breadth and depth of acceptance in these organizations where they have become standardized norms to the same degree as the concept of legacy. The institutionalization of legacy within the Olympic Event field does not come without ramifications on the stakeholders within the Movement. This presentation will conclude with a discussion of these effects and impacts.