Looking Back at London 2012: Recruitment and Training of Games Makers

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The history of volunteers’ services for the Olympic Games is not new and dates back to 1896 when 900 volunteers for the first time provided their support for the Olympic Games in Athens (Wei Na, 2009). The growing social demands and the needs of the Olympic Games continually pressure Organizing Committees to recruit and mobilize volunteers in increasingly large numbers. For example, during Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles (1984) 28,742 volunteers helped to host the Games; Barcelona (1992) attracted 34,548 volunteers; Sydney (2000) had 46,967 volunteers; and Athens (2004) had 65,000 volunteers (Sydney Report, 2001; Solberg, 2003; Girginov, 2012). Recent Olympic Games in London (2012) recruited 70,000 volunteers (Games Makers) for over 3,000 different roles. London 2012 Games were referred to as the largest single mobilization of a workforce in Britain since World War II. Volunteers were an indispensable part of this workforce helping to run the Games smoothly. They brought their skills, commitment and enthusiasm to deliver an unforgettable experience for athletes, officials and spectators alike (Volunteering Strategy Group, 2006). However, large numbers of people involved in the Games also meant an unprecedented scale of human resource operations and greater managerial challenges which needed to be addressed.

One area that requires close attention is recruitment of volunteers and their subsequent training and management, a big issue faced by every Organizing Committee. Each Olympic host city adopts its own volunteer recruitment strategy and methods which range from central or government models (London 1948, Moscow 1980, Seoul 1988) to open recruitment (Barcelona 1992) and mobilization of social organizations (Atlanta 1996) (Wei Na, 2009). These methods reflect political choices, socio-economic conditions of the host city as well as operational demands and overall Games and volunteering strategy. Recently some host cities have attempted to use Games volunteering to achieve better event related social impacts, and London is the prime example. However, the empirical evidence of these kinds of impacts on a host population is scarce due to difficulty in gaining access, recording, quantifying, monitoring and evaluating these impacts. Among limitations is the nature of intangible impacts, the lack of details on the process, vague definitions, limited findings, short-term nature of projects and their funding (Hall, 1998; Brown and Massey, 2001; Coalter, 2007; Smith and Fox, 2007; Clark, 2008; Wilson, 2000; Wilson, 2012). This study is dedicated to fill some of these gaps by highlighting managerial and social implications of the London 2012 volunteering program from a holistic perspective. This unique contribution was possible due to the ability of the author to gain an access and gather primary data from London 2012 Games Makers and members of London 2012 Organizing Committee (LOCOG), usage of mixed methods and the longitudinal nature of the research.

Being integral to the Games, London 2012 volunteering program consisted of three major phases: pre-, during and after-Games. This paper is mainly devoted to the first vital phase of the program, which is recruitment and training of volunteers. On one hand, it aims to illuminate the rules and procedures that were in place with regard to roles planning, engagement activities, application process, assessment, selection and training of volunteers and what impact these had on the profile of Games Makers, roles offered and their performance. On the other hand, it aims to show how this part of the program was received by volunteers themselves, their attitudes and satisfaction with the roles, training and overall volunteering journey. The research argues that this understanding is equally important in analyzing the impacts of these processes on the quality of volunteers who helped to run the Games and also on the kinds of benefits the program delivered to volunteers and the city.

Both quantitative and qualitative data was gathered for this research from multiple sources. An on-line survey (30% response rate) was distributed among London 2012 Games Makers before, during and after the Games. In-depth semi-structured interviews with 16 volunteers were conducted before and after the Games (12 months apart) as well as interviews with five LOCOG managers and volunteer coordinators were conducted after the Games. In addition, being a Games Maker herself the researcher had an opportunity to carry out a participant observation before and during the Games.
The results of this part of the study revealed who eventually volunteered for London 2012 and why: socio-economic profile of volunteers, their expectations, motivations and barriers to participation, existing and new skills, qualifications and experiences with LOCOG during this first phase of the volunteering program. On the other hand, the results uncovered how the program was set up by LOCOG and how it helped to mobilize, train and utilize volunteers to operate the Games. The conclusions were made with regard to whether volunteers were mainly used as the means to the successful Games or whether they were also empowered to make better life choices beyond the Games. This may include future involvement in volunteering, employability, further education or training which may influence personal well-being and satisfaction.

The evidence suggests that since the early stages of the volunteering program the major focus was on delivering the Games with everything else being residual and subordinate to this grand target. The acknowledged success of the program and Games Makers themselves in staging the Games should not be underestimated. Yet, it is claimed that more emphasis should be given to the quality of volunteers’ experiences and the social legacy the program ought to leave after the Games, which needs to be planned and managed from the very early stages.

Overall, this study extends the body of scientific knowledge in sport management studies in general and mega sport event volunteering in particular. Detailed implications of the findings, limitations, and directions for future research will be discussed in the presentation.