A Tale of Two Cities: The Factors Affecting the Realisation of Volunteering Legacies at the Sydney 2000 & London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games

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Volunteers are an essential element of the modern Olympic and Paralympic movement, and make an integral contribution to the ultimate success of the Games. This paper examines how Olympic volunteer programmes can lead to post-Games volunteer legacies for host cities through engagement with the established volunteer infrastructure in host cities before, during and after the sports events. In doing so, this study will evaluate how the relationship between the volunteer programme and the host city’s volunteer infrastructure facilitates realisation of this desired legacy. For the purpose of this paper, the volunteering infrastructure is defined as being ‘the organisations and programmes in place to promote, support and manage volunteering; including volunteering peak bodies, volunteer resource centres, national governing bodies of sport, community organisations and local government’ (Lockstone-Binney, Holmes, Shipway & Smith, 2016:10).

Two Summer Olympic Games were used as case studies: the more recent case of London 2012 and the longer-term case of the Sydney 2000. Perspectives on the positive and negative impacts of both Games on volunteering post-event are examined, in addition to the roles of the various stakeholders in planning and delivering the Games volunteer legacy. The comparison of two cases, one in recent history, the other more distant, offers insights as to how the delivery of Olympic legacies has changed over time and in light of the pre- and post-legacy era.

In relation to the current body of knowledge, the literature on event volunteering has burgeoned in recent years, with most attention afforded to sport mega events, including the Olympic and Paralympic Games. However, the existing literature highlights the relative paucity of research on the management of Olympic volunteer programmes (Lockstone & Baum, 2009), on volunteer legacies generated by the Olympic Games (Nichols & Ralston, 2015), and there have been few long-term post-event legacy studies (Dickson, Benson & Blackman, 2011).

Data collection occurred in two research phases. Stage one involved a comprehensive review of secondary data on the Sydney and London Olympic and Paralympic Games, and Stage two involved twenty seven interviews with key informants in both host cities. In the case of London, interviews were conducted face-to-face, in Sydney there was a combination of both face-to-face and telephone interviews conducted. The interviews were all recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically using qualitative template analysis (King, 2004).

The discussion in this paper will focus on four emergent interpretive themes that are broadly categorised under the four headings of Resources, Structures and Delivery Mechanisms, Strategy and Knowledge Transfer. More generally, the findings will reveal limitations with legacy planning for each Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (OCOG). In Sydney, while SOCOG had no specific remit for legacy planning, the voluntary sector led legacy efforts in Australia; whilst in London there was Government-led legacy planning, but the failure to engage with the voluntary sector hampered implementation. The paper concludes with an overview of twenty six recommendations that aim to provide direction as to how both future OCOGs and host cities might best engage with any existing volunteering infrastructure in order to plan for and realise a sustainable and positive post-event volunteer legacy, and how the International Olympic Committee (IOC) can effectively support this.