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Olympic Games: linking sports mega events to population physical activity

Hosts, organisers, and sports' governing bodies should ensure that everyone reaps health benefits

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In May the World Health Assembly endorsed a resolution proposed by over 40 countries to strengthening health and wellbeing through sports mega events.^{1,2} This included a call to integrate the promotion of regular physical activity to people of all ages and abilities into the objectives of events such as the Olympics.

The financial, human, and environmental costs of hosting such events are enormous; the 2022 World Cup in Qatar was estimated to cost over \$200bn (£160bn; €190bn).⁸ Organisers, governments, and sports' governing bodies often justify this by arguing that the event will have long term benefits for the host, such as urban regeneration, economic growth, social impact, or improved population health.³ Unfortunately, systematic evidence indicates that sports mega events don't leave lasting increases in population physical activity.⁴⁻⁷

Legacy is a long distance event

A legacy that improves population health must be planned and delivered as thoroughly as the event itself.⁹ But this has been rare. Legacy planning and funding mechanisms are commonly detailed just months, or a year or two at best, before an event.

However, experience shows that it takes time to form the collaborations needed to integrate legacy activities with local resources and plans.^{9,10} Funding beyond the time frame of the event is needed to sustain legacy activities—and their evaluation. Lasting health effects, such as increased participation in sports and other physical activity, come from clearly defined plans for legacy ambitions, beginning during the bidding process and extending years, even decades, after the event itself.^{9,10}

Examples of good practice exist. For example, the Paris 2024 Olympics has a vision and strategy for legacy aimed at promoting physical activity across schools, workplaces, and urban centres.¹¹ Wide ranging objectives include promoting design principles that encourage physical activity in school, work, and public spaces that are being built or renovated, and a scheme to promote 30 minutes of daily physical activity for children aged 6 to 11 in schools, which has already been rolled out nationally.¹² An interim evaluation of the legacy and sustainability strategy highlighted that 91% of teachers in the schools where the scheme was initially trialled believe their pupils are less sedentary. Although this is encouraging, physical activity was not measured directly, and the size of the survey is unclear.¹² Other initiatives have also been implemented ahead of the games beginning, and further evaluation is needed.

For sports mega events to show a return on investment for health we need a common set of indicators to assess legacy for health. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has published impact indicators for culture, sports, and business events, which could be built on.¹³

The social impact indicators include the percentage of target groups reporting increased frequency of participation in sport or physical activity and the percentage of target groups reporting change in health and wellbeing.¹³ Both indicators will require baseline data. Care is needed to ensure that assessments are as objective and robust as possible, and that the extent of any change can be measured.¹³

We need also to be systematically better at measuring impact and learning from both failure and success.^{8,10-12} This means testing and refining evaluation methods and building capacity and support for knowledge transfer between sports events.⁹

Who is responsible?

A large ecosystem of stakeholders is responsible for elite sport and its prestigious events. Systemic problems can't be resolved by a single event, host city, or host country. Responsibilities lie among sport event owners, local and national event hosts and organisers, and wider stakeholders, including the international and regional sport federations.

They should review and revise their processes (such as host bidding requirements) to ensure long term resourcing and a return on investment for population health. Bid policies and processes for major sports event should require and incentivise stronger planning, delivery, and reporting of event legacy outcomes and the effect on public health priorities such as physical inactivity.

Some sport entities are already making progress. The International Olympic Committee's legacy objectives 2021-24 embed legacy within the entire games' lifecycle, including legacy in the process for electing future Olympic hosts.¹⁴ Union Cycliste Internationale, the world governing body of cycling, has made increasing mass participation in cycling a pillar of its strategy through its "bike cities" award for cities that host elite cycling and invest in cycling for all.¹⁵ Other sports should follow, and all sports entities should share practical experiences and hard-won lessons.

The World Health Assembly resolution cannot be ignored, and promises that events make about population health should be kept. The sports industry

can ensure that every future event leaves a positive sport and physical activity legacy for host citizens and sports fans.

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