

The Paralympic Games fails to increase disabled people's participation in sports

January 29 2020, by Christopher Brown



Great Britain's Hannah Cockroft after winning a T34 sprinting heat at the 2012 London Paralympics. Credit: [Richard/Flickr](#)

Tokyo's 2020 Paralympics promises to be a sporting spectacle that thrills and excites, showcasing the very best in Paralympic sports. However, looking at the legacy of London 2012 it is unlikely to inspire more

people to take part in sports.

Mega sporting events do not automatically increase participation in sports. [A systematic review of the evidence](#) found mega sporting events unable to inspire [sports participation](#) on their own. Instead, the Paralympic Games and other mega sporting events must be "leveraged." In other words, organizers and organizations need to strategically supplement the event with planned initiatives encouraging sports participation.

[The problem is that hosts often assume](#) the event will bring about increased sports participation but [fail to capitalize on the event](#).

The problem with inspiration is its intangible quality. How to turn inspiration into habits and concrete change? Trading on inspiration also fails to appreciate [wider obstacles and barriers](#) preventing disabled people participating in sports and society.

The London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics represented the first Games to make a [concerted effort to achieve a positive sports participation legacy](#). This makes the London 2012 Games an ideal test case for exploring the viability of increasing disabled people's sports participation through mega sporting events.

London 2012 Paralympics

[One of the main aims of the 2012 Paralympics](#) was to increase the number of disabled people participating in sports. [Despite an initial rise](#) in once a week sports participation immediately after the Paralympics (19.1% in 2013), [participation subsequently fell back to pre-2012 levels](#) (16.8% in 2016).

My [Ph.D. research](#) found that the 2012 Paralympics made [minimal](#)

impact on the number of disabled people participating in sports club settings. Of the 538 voluntary sports clubs that completed a questionnaire about the impact of the London 2012 Paralympics, about six in 10 sports clubs saw no noticeable change in their disabled membership five years after the 2012 Paralympics. Furthermore, about six in 10 sports clubs agreed the 2012 Paralympic Games had no impact on the number of disabled adults participating at their club.

Interviews with 30 individuals from sports and non-sports organizations revealed a complex combination of factors explaining the limited impact. One of the main reasons for the decline in sports participation was the lack of strategic activities and initiatives by sports organizations to maximize the hosting of the Paralympics, as well as a failure to embed a culture of inclusion within sports organizations.



The London 2012 Games aimed to inspire a generation. Credit: British Rowing

Many sports organizations were unprepared for the level of interest from disabled people and were unable to respond accordingly. For some disabled people, Paralympians lacked relevance. Reduced disposable income caused by austerity was also found to have been an important barrier to participation. Due to negative media portrayals disability, some disabled people were [fearful of being active](#) in case they were accused of being a "benefit scrounger" and potentially lose some of their benefits.

While these examples expose the folly of investing faith in a two-week sporting event's ability to increase sports participation, it's important to highlight there have been positive developments in disability sports since London's 2012 Paralympics.

There is increased awareness in the sports sector of the need to provide sporting opportunities for disabled people: disability is an important focus in both the [government's sports strategy](#) and [sports England's strategy](#). [Funding and research into disability sports](#) has also [grown](#). In the [2013-17 funding round](#), sports England invested about £170 million pounds in disability sports, having previously invested significantly [less than that](#).

Most national disability sports organizations [gained funding](#) for the first time after the 2012 Paralympics, while 42 national governing bodies of sports received investment for disability, compared to 11 in 2009-13. In 2016, sports England released [its research into disability in England](#), providing sports organizations with facts about disability.

Despite the positive developments, there are still mountains to climb. Disabled people are still [twice as likely to be inactive](#) than non-disabled people.

When you next listen to politicians extolling the benefits of mega

sporting events when it comes to boosting participation in sports, [be skeptical](#). It's likely to be [political spin](#) to justify the [huge financial investment](#).

The evidence suggests mega [sporting events](#), on their own, fail to increase sports participation in the long term. Tokyo 2020 hopes to [inspire change](#) for disabled people [and to make Japan a more accessible society](#). However, [more work needs to be done to make Japan more accessible](#). If the London 2012 Paralympic Games failed to meaningfully increase sports participation, despite prioritizing sports as a legacy goal, what hope is there for Tokyo 2020?

What is the Paralympic Games good for?

The Paralympics is, first and foremost, an elite sports event. Elite sports, by its very nature, discriminates on the basis of ability—only the best is acceptable. It's questionable whether this is the best way to engage people in sports. There's no doubt the Paralympics can be inspirational for some people, but its appeal and potency is not for everyone.

The Paralympic Games do not represent the diversity of disability and is not a substitute for educating individuals on the lived experience of disabled people. In fact, the Paralympic Games may propagate stereotypical narratives on disability, [causing more harm than good](#). The Paralympics may shine a spotlight on accessibility and inclusion in the host country, but whether this can lead to lasting change is doubtful. For sports participation, the Paralympic Games is not the solution and should be one component of a wider [sports](#) participation strategy.

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