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Toward COVID-19 secure events: Considerations for organizing the safe resumption of major sporting events

Abstract: The current COVID-19 pandemic has already impacted both elite and grassroots sports in a series of ways. Whilst accepting that many answers to emerging and relevant questions cannot be provided at this stage, this commentary discusses some of the organizational prospects of “post-pandemic” sports mega-events by focusing predominantly on the topics of volunteering and security management. Importantly, these are two central facets of mega-event organization that are likely to be impacted by the current crisis in some way as the world of sports aims to resume. By considering a number of emerging questions, this commentary calls for an engagement with some of the individual and social implications related to future mega-event organizations. It sheds light on some of the potential organizational challenges and management issues related to “restarting” sports and provides some directions for future interdisciplinary work.

Key words: sporting events, crisis, Covid-19, organization, volunteering

Introduction

This short commentary seeks to reflect and encourage discussion on some of the social impacts related to the *coronavirus disease 2019* (COVID-19) in the context of sports, major sporting events organization and governance. In this sense, it ties into existing commentaries on the COVID-19 crisis in the context of sports and society (Parnell et al., 2020; Clarkson et al., 2020; Leng & Phua, 2020). In agreement with others (Parnell et al., 2020; Stott et al., 2020), we argue that the pandemic has the potential to be a watershed moment. In the context of this commentary, we focus primarily on how this may be the case in terms of the organizational activities related to security and volunteering at mega-events, as sports aim to restart.

As it proceeds, the commentary offers some tentative ideas and touches upon some of the social implications of COVID-19 in the realm of sport mega-events (SME). However, it is an important caveat, as Evans et al. (2020) rightfully submit, that there still are a number of unknowns in relation to what the future holds. As such, full answers cannot necessarily be provided at this stage. Notwithstanding, that is not our intention. We merely seek to shed a light on some important areas in the domain of sports that are likely to be impacted by the current crisis in some way. As maintained throughout, we fully agree that social researchers can play an important role with their contributions to the understanding of some of the social impacts of COVID-19 in sports (Parnell et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, this

commentary contributes by advancing some points for consideration to the emerging discussions.

Context

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 emerged in late December 2019 and spread worldwide in early 2020. The disease is caused by the virus named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and a main source of spread is human-to-human transmission between individuals in close proximity (WHO, n.d.). On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed that COVID-19 had been given pandemic status (WHO, 2020a). It has been suggested that COVID-19 is one of the most serious threats to public health from a respiratory virus since the 1918 H1N1 influenza pandemic, also known as Spanish flu (Lodise & Rybak, 2020). At the time of writing (13 May 2020), there had been more than 4 million cases worldwide of COVID-19 and 285 328 confirmed deaths (WHO, 2020b). The effects of the pandemic on human life have been devastating and it remains unclear when societies will reopen after lockdowns and social distancing measures.

As the academics who opened the scholarly discussion on the pandemic–sports *nexus* have pointed towards already, COVID-19 has quickly impacted sport at elite, community and grassroots levels (Parnell et al., 2020). With no available vaccine that can offer immunity - at the time of writing - social distancing has provided one of the main strategies enforced to contain the spread of the virus. Importantly, sports have not been exempt from these strategies on local, global, elite or grassroots levels. As Duarte Muñoz and Meyer (2020, p. 85) highlight in the context of (association) football:

Given that social distancing has been identified as a key factor in the prevention of COVID-19 spread [...] matches were initially carried out without fans. However, the increasing number of COVID-19 cases forced sporting associations to postpone and even cancel competitions. The 2020 UEFA European Football Championship, UEFA Champions League, and major national leagues, to name only a few, have now been deferred [...] Rescheduling events without clear dates foreshadows a period of financial uncertainty for football.

As Tovar (2020, p. 2) argues, “never in recent history has the world faced a disastrous event of such proportions. Not even the terrible events of the Second World War were enough to close soccer as the COVID-19 pandemic has”. It is therefore *clear* that COVID-19 has generated a new set of unknowns and uncertainties in sports, as it has in a number of other domains of global societies, too. Notwithstanding, it still remains *unclear* exactly how these uncertainties will impact the complex activities and processes associated with the organization of SMEs. In themselves, mega-events are risky and uncertain projects (Boyle & Haggerty, 2012; Jennings,

2012) and it seems evident that COVID-19 will merely enhance these conditions of uncertainty (Parnell et al., 2020). In the next section, we provide some reflections on two vital areas of mega-event organization in the context of COVID-19: security and volunteering.

Organizing sport mega-events in a “post-pandemic” future: Some notes on security and volunteering

The organization of mega-events is a highly complex task which involves a number of individuals and diverse stakeholder groups (Frawley, 2015). As Taylor and Toohey (2015, p. 373) write, “[t]he organisation and delivery of sport events now requires an increasingly systematic approach to governance, including planning and managing for every kind of possible risk”. In the case of an “out of the ordinary” event occurring, Parent and Smith-Swan (2013) cite that, in the case of a health pandemic, event organizers must be prepared to identify and mitigate the tangible risks presented by such “out of the ordinary” circumstances. As this commentary proceeds into some of the impacts of COVID-19 on SME organizations and resumptions, it predominantly focuses on some of the prospects of security management and the roles of volunteers within this area.

COVID-19 represents a novel threat in sports. However, this does not mean that mega-events have not been impacted by large scale security and safety measures or responses previously. In recent years, interdisciplinary research into SME security governance has grown substantially (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010; Boyle & Haggerty, 2009; 2012; Klauser, 2011; Cleland, 2019). Particularly in light of 9/11, one may observe increased security budgets and security efforts at mega-events. For example, Giulianotti (2013, p. 96) notes that the security expenditures for the 2012 Olympic Games in London were estimated around \$1.9 billion. Notwithstanding, in the existing literature, it is predominantly the security threats posed by “hooliganism”, “terrorism” and “crime” that has been most widely covered, given the historical relations between sports and these security threats. Meanwhile, the threat to mega-events posed by epidemics or pandemics have been given less attention (for an exception, see for example Dickman, 2013). This, despite the fact that infectious disease outbreaks before mega-events have happened previously, although not necessarily diseases with pandemic status. Further, these have not necessarily led to event postponements or cancellations (Parnell et al., 2020; Duarte Muñoz & Meyer, 2020). One example of this is the Zika virus outbreak which occurred prior to the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro (Parnell et al., 2020).

Ultimately, in the organization of SMEs, there are a number of important links between security and volunteering. First, volunteers typically comprise the largest proportion of sport major event personnel, thus security management and the work of volunteers are both considered completely essential to the smooth running and potential success of an SME (Cuskelly et al. 2006; Boyle & Haggerty, 2012; Parent & Smith-Swan, 2013). Indeed, event organizers at all levels rely on large numbers of volunteers to deliver core services, and without whom such operations would not be feasible (Hoye et al., 2020). Second, and crucial to our commentary, the two overlap: volunteers do occasionally contribute with security-related tasks and duties (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010; Bladen, 2010). Thereby, volunteers can comprise a part of an event's "security assemblage". For example, prior to the postponed Euro 2020, host cities were required to detail the roles and tasks of volunteers in their integrated safety and security concepts (see UEFA, n.d., Sector 6). As a key facet of their deployment on the ground, in the case of the London 2012 Olympics, Giulianotti et al. (2015, p.128) explain that private security and volunteers combined to enjoin "spectators and visitors to 'keep moving', while forming human or physical barriers to minimize the spillage of people outside these routes and pathways". Such methods of crowd control function to confine event visitors within the sanitized physical spaces that are sectioned off from the surrounding land as part of a venue's "security landscaping" (Parent & Smith-Swan, 2013). Indeed, Samatas (2011) notes also that volunteers can provide additional "eyes and ears" to the event security network. Third, there are important social dimensions related to both mega-event security management and volunteering. Ultimately, both are attached to a range of social meanings, individual affects and micro-experiences and they can leave a set of post-event legacies (Boyle & Haggerty, 2009; Koutrou et al., 2016; Bladen, 2010). As such, volunteering and security management must be approached as two crucial and interconnected organizational activities in an SME's organization and execution phases.

Upon proceeding, it is necessary to consider how the links between the COVID-19 crisis, "health", "safety" and "security" may be pinpointed in the realm of elite sports. More broadly, it can be seen that developments throughout the 1980s and 1990s (including new and re-emerging infectious diseases) meant that such diseases were "discussed as *both* public health hazards *and* security risks" (Kamradt-Scott & McInnes, 2012, p. 99, original emphasis). Hence, health issues can occupy a position on security agendas. In the context of sports, we have seen - following COVID-19 - that a number of health, safety and security responses have been made. These include cancellations, postponements, tournament suspensions, games in front of empty

stands and the closure of training grounds and/or stadiums. The threat to health, safety and security in sport - posed by COVID-19 - is, for example, captured in the below statement from football's governing body, *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) (2020):

In light of the current situation concerning the Coronavirus, the Bureau of the FIFA Council has decided that the general football rules which normally oblige clubs to release players for national team matches will not apply for the up-coming international windows in March/April [...] To avoid any unnecessary health risks and also situations of potential sporting unfairness, we therefore recommend that all international matches previously scheduled to take place in March and April should now be postponed until such time that they can take place in a safe and secure environment, both for players and for the general public. The final decision on this issue rests with the respective competition organisers or relevant member association in case of friendlies.

As Dickmann (2013, p. 81) writes, crowded “major sporting events pose a unique opportunity for diseases to spread among a broad variety of people: pathogens can travel from or to remote areas of the world” and infect new groups of people. Thereby, one risk is that events can spread and/or intensify an infectious disease. Aware of this, sport bodies have, following the COVID-19 outbreak, cooperated with and acted on guidelines from organizations like the WHO (Parnell et al., 2020). Yet, over time it will still be interesting to follow how COVID-19 is responded to by event organizers, sporting bodies, authorities and health organizations. As the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (2020a) declared in a statement:

WHO was instrumental in providing real-time information to the IOC during the discussions that led to the postponement of the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, and continues to give advice as it gathers additional knowledge and understanding on COVID-19

COVID-19 resulted in the postponements of two of the largest mega-events in the world that were scheduled for the summer of 2020: the Olympic Games and the *Union of European Football Associations* (UEFA) Euro 2020 (Parnell et al., 2020). From an organizational perspective, volunteers were, reportedly, already recruited and expected to be crucial for the smooth running of the aforementioned events (UEFA, 2020; IOC, 2020b). Moreover, both these events typically require large-scale security operations that take years to prepare, rely on transnational collaboration practices (Klauser, 2011) and are embedded into the wider “spectacle” of the relevant mega-event (Boyle & Haggerty, 2009; Manley & Silk, 2014).

Although a number of unknowns remain, it is possible to ask questions around how exactly COVID-19 will impact the organization of these SMEs and other forthcoming sporting events. However, it is important to emphasize that the sizes, types, geographies and organizational demands of the sporting events we mention differ, as will visitor attractiveness to them. Whereas certain events are centered on one sport (i.e. the Rugby World Cup or football mega-

events), others, such as the Olympics or the Commonwealth Games are multi-sport events and feature a variety of sports. Hence, the number of volunteers and conditions for volunteering also vary between events, as according to scale and style.

Furthermore, because it is unclear exactly *when* fans and event visitors will be allowed to return to stadiums and fan zones (The Guardian, 2020), the spatial conditions or parameters of the relevant mega-events' organizational activities are also characterized by a blurriness. We may see examples of this in light of the politicized efforts to restart the English Premier League (dubbed "Project Restart"), where there have been recent debates around the possibility of fans gathering *outside* the stadiums where games possibly will take place behind "closed doors". Whilst such concerns were based on limited evidence (The Independent, 2020), this could mean that if mega-events are largely staged behind closed doors, without their usual meeting points (stadiums, fan zones, public squares), then this is likely to substantially reshape and possibly relocate the securing efforts.

The return of sport is likely to be subject to debate among stakeholders, in the public and the media. It is also likely to be a gradual process, as articulated by the International Hockey Federation (FIH, 2020) and World Rugby (2020). Closely following advice and recommendations from the WHO (2020d, 2020e), both the IHF (2020) and World Rugby (2020) outline in their recently published guidelines for a safe return of their respective sports the process for a phased reintroduction of domestic and international competition. This process entails five stages for a graded return to sport activity that have been matched against the gradual relaxation of governmental PST restrictions (on public gathering, travel and social distancing), with "normal competition" conditions only resuming "post-vaccine" (stage 5) (IHF, 2020; World Rugby, 2020). Elaborating further, stage 1 marks a return to training for players; stage two reintroduces regional competition permitting gatherings of no more than 200 persons; stage 3 would permit local travel between countries for cross border competition, and stage 4 would allow the reinstatement of trans-continent competition (IHF, 2020; World Rugby, 2020).

World Rugby, for example, have estimated the minimum number of stakeholders required to deliver a match, indicating further that, as in the Bundesliga (Germany), early stage resumptions of professional competitive sport will take place behind closed doors. Moves beyond this may see reduced numbers of spectators admitted to mitigate risk of transmission, but this may be for registered participants who have disclosed their demographic and health information in advance (FIH, 2020; WHO, 2020e). Under this scenario, the required number of event staff and

volunteers are likely to remain low as access can be facilitated by the use of automated turnstiles and admission gates.

Furthermore, there are a host of questions that emerge around the willingness, attitudes and motivations of volunteers and visitors at “post-pandemic” sporting events, not to mention how local residents feel about the influx of visitors descending upon the venues, spaces and transport links neighbouring their homes. A key question thus becomes: how does the “invisible” nature of COVID-19 is likely to impact the way volunteers, spectators and residents consider their own (and others’) health and safety at the prospect of encountering large crowds at mega-events? As Bajc (2015) remarks, the socialization effects of security and surveillance apparatus already nurtures fear of strangers and open public spaces, whilst Evans et al. (2020) raise the question of what happens when proximity to others becomes a threat. In light of COVID-19, the crowded nature of mega-events, where people normally find themselves in confined spaces such as stadiums and fan parks, opens up a series of new questions. For instance, how may volunteers contribute to others’ experiences of safety or general event satisfaction? Lockstone and Baum (2008) describe volunteers as the “public face” of the event, and as Getz, O’Neill and Carlsen (2001) explain, volunteers, or their absence, can shape visitor satisfaction and enjoyment. As Parent and Smith-Swan (2013) state, volunteers can establish a positive relationship with the public and provide empathy with visitors, and in the current context, their presence may offer welcome reassurance to the public. However, event staff and volunteers are likely to have to wear personal protective equipment in the form of gloves, face coverings and masks to protect the nose and mouth as per recommendation (FIH, 2020; WHO, 2020d; WHO, 2020e), and this may serve to detract from the experience for spectators and volunteers alike. This is unlikely to be helped by volunteer and event personnel instructively moving spectators along as they seek to maintain physical distancing and prevent crowding (in this case, to reduce close contact amongst visitors) (WHO 2020d; WHO 2020e). Saliently, Parent and Smith-Swan (2013) highlight that venue-based safety and security measures have the potential to engender feelings of oppression and constraint amongst visitors, and therefore suggest that event organizers should pay consideration to how they can implement such methods in a way that builds rather than breaks trust with spectators. Such explicit and public-targeted security discourses offer an interesting avenue for future analysis.

Cleland and Cashmore (2018, p. 466) rightfully argued that supporters are likely to “face even greater security and surveillance measures as new threats emerge”. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 represents a “new threat” in the context of sports events, which again impacts an event’s

organizational activities. But in addition to questions around what exact measures and policies are to be implemented at future events, questions also remain as to the meanings of “security” in such a context. In the mega-event context, for example, it could refer to the objective levels of security (e.g. the absence of “undesirables”). Though, it can also relate to policies implemented in the name of “security” that ultimately assist so-called “clean sites” for event owners and official sponsors (Klauser, 2012). Concerning the “new” threat sports are faced with; this therefore generates a set of new meanings of and conditions for “security” but also “safety” and “health”.

To create a sterile zone of safety, Bajc (2015) explains that purification processes entail individuals as much as they do objects and physical and social spaces. To this effect, such purification processes may mean that preselected individuals such as volunteers are subjected to health and medical screens as well as identity checks (Bajc, 2015). As Evans et al. (2020) suggest, specific groups adjudged to be at a heightened risk of mortality if they contract the virus - such as older adults or those with underlying health conditions - may be blocked from volunteering as a protective measure to reduce their chance of infection. Taking the UK as an example, those aged 65-74 years old exhibit the highest rates of formal volunteering according to the UK Civil Society Almanac 2019 (NCVO, 2019). Indications from the literature are that the 65-74 age category may figure prominently at events too. For example, Lockstone and Baum (2007) report that more than half of the 75,000 people that applied to be volunteers for the Sydney Olympic and Paralympic Games were over 60 years old. Kim et al. (2018) studied volunteers from three separate sport events held in Australia and from a sample of 337 participants, 40.9 percent and 39.8 percent belonged to the 45-64 and 65+ event categories, respectively. Research by Alexander et al. (2015) to segment volunteers by motivation drew on 11,421 of the 70,000 volunteers involved at the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games: of these volunteers 51.43 per cent were aged 45-66, whilst 10.6 per cent were aged 65 and over. The demographic make-up of participants from the studies outlined above may simply demonstrate that older volunteers are more willing to take part in surveys, but if, as research by Fairley et al. (2014) reported, event volunteering does beget event volunteering, then we can expect a good proportion of volunteers approaching the 60 and over age bracket to form part of an event-volunteer selection pool. Indeed, the WHO (2020d) endorse the mandatory exclusion of anyone who is at additional risk from attending events in any capacity, whilst the FIH (2020) specifically place males over 60 years of age as a high-risk category. Therefore, the safety

precautions aforementioned may preclude those deemed more susceptible to the severest effects of the virus from accessing event volunteering on health grounds.

What is more, sport volunteers in general typically present a homogenous demographic profile and are more likely to be highly educated and employed in more “professional” occupations, and Kim et al’s (2018) research on volunteers of sport events in Queensland, Australia, is indicative that this may bear out within these more episodic forms of volunteering, also. This is important as the literature demonstrates that volunteer selection for events tends to favour those candidates whose applications signal the possession of “desirable” skills and experience, with such individuals tending to hail from managerial and service occupations (Fairley et al., 2016; Kim & Bang, 2012). At a time of heightened risk to public health, event organizers may come to place an even sharper emphasis on prospective volunteers who are perceived as disciplined, professional and “role ready”. However, the WHO (2020e) suggest that the occupation of participants should also be considered in relation to admittance on the basis of possible previous exposure to the virus, and this would likely entail “essential” workers including those in health and medical professions. Practices of preventative exclusion of prospective personnel creates interesting research questions around “who” volunteers to volunteer, the shaping of the volunteer demographic profile, and how event organizers approach and manage this potential staffing issue.

When referring to the FIH’s (2020) guidelines, the governing body make clear that the responsibility for a safe and successful reintroduction of sporting activity, including at “top level, spectated events”, extends to every member of the “hockey family” - encompassing players, coaches, officials, staff, administrators, and volunteers at all levels of the game:

We are all part of society and most of the measures needed to combat COVID-19 start in the community and at home... Strict observance of measures at work and at team facilities may be undone at home or in social situations. We will look at some of the specifics we all need to take care of in our daily life. (FIH, 2020, p. 2).

This statement is in line with the WHO’s (2020d) advice on risk communication and represents the responsabilization of members of the hockey community, whilst also emphasising that the safeguarding of public and player health must begin prior to and external from the event. Where international and national governing bodies of single sports - such as field hockey - have a track record of hosting events, as well as a large and dedicated membership-base to tap into, then it is conceivable that they will focus on their own volunteer pool, or those registered on counterpart organization databases, to staff events because such individuals are “a known group

so easier to advise, support and follow up” and who may be more trusted to self-monitor and report on their own health statuses as opposed to unknown applicants (WHO, 2020d, p.2). Such an approach to risk reduction is inextricably entwined with the event planning process, and whereby proper staffing and recruitment are of priority concern (Parent & Smith-Swan, 2013). To this end, event organizers will likely favour prospective volunteers who have had relevant training or prior event experience, who may have been involved in previous “test” events, and those who are perhaps familiar with the venue (Leopkey & Parent, 2009; Parent and Smith-Swan, 2013). Indeed, those organizations and sport governing bodies who already have a track record of event hosting may be more event ready than those who have less experience of doing so - and there may be opportunities to ‘port’ volunteers in support of other organizations.

However, as the prospect of attendance at and participation in events in the current climate has the very same potential to arouse anguish in volunteers as it does spectators, event staff, and the athletes themselves, a key question becomes: will volunteers - those who are deemed physically and medically eligible - be deterred from stepping into the breach? Of course, only time will tell. Indeed, it is common for a sense of camaraderie to develop amongst volunteers during events, and such social bonds often play an important role in beckoning them to volunteer again at future events so to reunite with their friends (Doherty, 2009; Fairley et al., 2014; & Fairley et al., 2016). It is also worth noting that event volunteering is not necessarily restricted to those with an affinity to a particular sport, with other motivational pulls including: the desire to sample the unique “behind the scenes” event experience, to uphold the spirit of an event and make it a success, as a means of contributing to society, or out of sheer excitement (Farrell, Johnston and Twynam, 1998; Green & Chalip, 2004; Giannoulakis, Wang and Gray, 2008; Güntert et al., 2015; Ralston, Downward and Lumsdon, 2004). Thus, whilst the volunteer selection pool may modify in light of COVID-19 imposed precautions, based on what the literature does tell us about event volunteer motivation however, a willingness of volunteers to support such efforts is conceivable.

As a final consideration, Parent and Smith-Swan (2013, p. 229) stated that the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) required 500 Olympic workers - principally doctors, nurses, paramedics and health researchers - to be inoculated against smallpox in the event they would need “to respond to a biological terror attack” at the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Parent and Smith-Swan (2013) posed the question whether such an imposition infringed upon the liberties of those personnel. Of course, to vaccinate is to (self)protect, however, if post-vaccine it is stipulated by event organising

committees that all personnel inclusive of volunteers must be inoculated, then this may raise questions as to the rights and freedom of choice of any individuals whose personal preference may not to forego vaccination.

Concluding remarks

To conclude, history shows that tragic events located both externally and internally to sports have altered the ways in which major sporting events are organized, managed and secured. To mention a few, this includes the attack in the Olympic Village in Munich in 1972, the Hillsborough tragedy in 1989, 9/11 and the 2015 *Stade de France* attack. In the context of COVID-19, it still remains unclear *exactly* how the pandemic will impact the organization, delivery and contingency planning of future SMEs, some of which have been postponed recently.

In contemporary societies, the social impacts of SMEs are highly important (Horne, 2007). Given the significance of volunteering and security to sports event organization, this commentary has focused predominantly on these two aspects. Moving forward, this commentary calls for engagement with some of the social and individual impacts related to mega-event organizations in the context of “post-pandemic” SMEs. Here, insights from sociology, leisure studies, sports and events management can prove particularly useful when considering the implications that emerge as organizers and stakeholders bid to “restart” or “resume” sport events following the sporting “shut down” (Tovar, 2020). Given the ability of mega-events’ to express wider trends and arrangements in the social world, such analyses may also have the capacity to speak to broader debates beyond the world of sports. Accepting - and emphasizing again - that there are a number of questions that simply cannot be tangibly answered at this stage, our commentary ties into some of the recent discussions on COVID-19, sport and society (Parnell et al., 2020; Clarkson et al., 2020; Leng & Phua, 2020) and contributes **with** a set of ideas and critical discussion points that can be considered by researchers and practitioners.

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