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## **The 2012 Olympic Games at Stratford: the latest East London regeneration initiative considered**

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### **Introduction**

The venue for the 2012 Olympic Games is situated at Stratford in the borough of Newham, East London. At the time of writing, the physical and infrastructure projects are almost complete and organisational plans to ensure the smooth running of the event well underway, a year before the opening ceremony. New housing, hotels and conference centres surrounding the site are also in their final stages of construction, giving Stratford a new and unfamiliar skyline. With modern street lighting and pavements that are no longer cracked and broken, it feels as if Stratford has finally 'arrived'. Once the Games are over, further housing will be constructed to reach an

expected total of 50,000 new homes, with 12,000 as affordable housing, and new business and retail developments will further add to these new impressions.

Back in 2005 Jack Straw explained in the House of Commons that the Olympic bid was successful because the Games would be '*a force for regeneration*' and that they would transform one of the poorest and most deprived areas of London, create thousands of jobs and homes and offer new opportunities for private sector organisations (Hansard 2005, quoted in Poynter 2009:141). But what outcomes and impacts can we reasonably expect from the Olympic regeneration experiment for the most economically and socially disadvantaged? Can the 2012 Games live up to the expectations outlined by Jack Straw six years ago? Can we expect this latest regeneration initiative to be more or less successful than its predecessors?

This paper considers these questions by discussing the plausibility of the assumptions which underpin the Olympic project and the governance structures that are intended to secure benefits for East Londoners. This approach enables us to strip away some of the hype that is typical of mega sporting events which use powerful and persuasive narratives and images to portray their 'legacy' (see for example MacRury 2011). The 2012 Games are no exception and slogans such as '*the power of the Games to inspire lasting change*' and '*transformative momentum*' exemplify this idealism. But what practical arrangements are in place to make this rhetoric a reality for those living in East London?

This paper traces the reality of regeneration initiatives that have populated Stratford since the 1980s and questions how much learning from previous regeneration initiatives has been incorporated into the theoretical propositions that underpin the Olympic regeneration experiment. A problems perspective is used to inform the discussion, the characteristics of successive regeneration initiatives implemented at Stratford reviewed, and the Olympic regeneration approach described to suggest that the outcomes for the most disadvantaged are likely to fall well-short of what could be achieved.

## **Our approach**

At the Centre for Institutional Studies (CIS) we use a problems approach for policy analysis and treat policies and institutions as trial solutions to social problems (Popper 1968, 1969; Majone 1980; Burgess 2002). We find out how problems are formulated and how well policies and agencies implementing policies are solving them. How regeneration initiatives identify, understand and give meaning to critical factors affecting poverty and disadvantage explains why particular actions are chosen rather than others and why particular institutional arrangements and governance structures are put in place to deliver policies (see for example Sabatier 1986, 1999; Hoppe 2010). Emphasis is therefore placed on finding out if the identified social and economic problems have been alleviated, rather than if the aims, objectives, targets and outcomes of an initiative have been met (Sampson 2007).

The Olympic Games initiative is the latest regeneration project in East London and contains a particular formulation of critical factors that explain the persistence of economic and social problems and offers a tentative set of actions to alleviate these difficulties. Based on past experiences it can be anticipated which causal links embedded in the Olympic model are likely to be active, produce harm, or will to be unable to generate expected improvements (Sayer 1992; Weiss 1995; Pawson and Tilley 1997). Using this approach the plausibility of how benefits will accrue for the most disadvantaged and those experiencing inequalities can be assessed.

## **Our research**

The analysis for this paper draws on information from several sources; from our knowledge and experiences of evaluating social policies and researching in East London including Stratford City Challenge, East London Single Regeneration programmes, Safer Cities, Youth Inclusion programmes, New Deal for Communities, Sure Starts and Children's Fund ([www.uel.ac.uk/cis](http://www.uel.ac.uk/cis)), a study that outlined how a healthy Athletes' Village may be created and maintained (Sampson et al 2010), and an analysis of Olympic-related policy documentation and academic papers.

These data sources centre the discussion on the original intention of bringing the Games to East London to affect poverty, disadvantage and inequalities. The Olympic

project has many other anticipated sporting, business and cultural outcomes throughout the UK and whilst important to the UK as a whole, the main beneficiaries are expected to live and work in East London.

### **Regeneration at Stratford**

In the 1980s primarily property led initiatives were exemplified by the Urban Development Corporations (UDC) and in particular the London Dockland Development Corporation (LDDC) which incorporated south Newham. The LDDC was an unelected quango, with responsibilities to regenerate derelict land that is now Canary Wharf and an internationally renowned financial district. Public subsidies were used to attract private enterprise and the LDDC was given responsibilities for local planning thereby marginalising local authorities and local people. Even though the LDDC invested more of its funds in social and community development by the early 1990s, new jobs were not taken by local people and they remained socially marginalised (Deakin and Edwards 1993; Rhodes and Tyler 1998; Fearnley 1999). By the end of the 1980s the property market had collapsed and this approach was criticised for its lack of local involvement and failure of local communities to benefit (Lawless 1988; Audit Commission 1989; National Audit Office 1990; Turok 1992; Imrie and Thomas 1993; Sampson 1998). In 1991 when City Challenge was announced it sought to address shortcomings in previous policies and aimed to integrate cultural, economic, physical and social regeneration to address a range of problems facing disadvantaged areas and brought local authorities back to take the lead, although City Challenge was based on a notion of partnership between three key sectors – public, private and community (Pratt and Fearnley 1996; Fearnley 1999). Each City Challenge area was allocated £37.5 million over five years and there was an expectation that this initial funding would attract further investment from private and public sectors. A key problem identified by Michael Heseltine, then Secretary of State for the Environment, was that inner city areas lacked the ability to attract investment and compete and City Challenge was intended to give them a competitive advantage (Heseltine 1991).

In 1993 the London Borough of Newham successfully secured funding for Stratford City Challenge (SCC) because the bid demonstrated high levels of disadvantage and considerable development opportunities on the old disused rail lands. Stratford was

considered uniquely placed as a gateway to East London and there was a strong belief locally that a vibrant and thriving Stratford would 'kick start' the economy in the rest of East London. The local authority had been lobbying for an International Passenger Station (IPS) for several years and it was hoped that City Challenge would attract sufficient private investment to start this project. In the event SCC did not lever in as much additional funds as hoped for and the rail lands remained largely vacant and the IPS project remained on the drawing board, although agreement for a new regional passenger station was secured and was completed after SCC had come to an end.

As the City Challenge initiative progressed it was adapted and a new Single Regeneration Budget programme was launched. This programme gave higher priority to consulting the community and responding to their feelings of insecurity and social isolation, enhancing the role of voluntary organisations, and addressing issues which limited local people's access to new employment and business opportunities due to lack of formal education qualifications, insufficient work-related skills and ill-health. Single Regeneration Budget programmes (SRBs) spawned in areas close to the Olympic Park site including; SRB Temple Mills, SRB Leabridge, SRB South Leytonstone, SRB Hackney Wick, SRB Fit for Work, Towards Employability SRB. Ambitions to bring larger infrastructure projects to the area remained. During this time plans for a new Stratford City were developed by the London Borough of Newham and a model was put on public display in the Old Town Hall at Stratford for inspection and comment. The proposed city was situated on the rail lands, the current Olympic site, and was conceptually remarkably similar to the Athletes' Village and Olympic site. But attracting the interest of private investors to construct this new city remained a dream, the model city was put in a cupboard and the initiative placed 'on hold'.

SRBs were followed by other national programmes and each was an attempt to remedy the errors identified in previous initiatives. Several were located in the London Borough of Newham including Safer Cities, Youth Inclusion Programme, Children's Fund, New Deal for Communities, to name but a few. These programmes aimed to assist families, children and young people living in particularly disadvantaged areas and those with complex needs. Further emphasis was placed on involving local people in the planning and delivery to improve the responsiveness

of services to their needs, on improving the co-ordination of delivery agencies strategically and in practice, supporting voluntary organisations, as well as mainstreaming best practices. Evaluations of these programmes found that the most vulnerable and those with complex needs benefited from additional and targeted resources but that better ways of spreading good practice could be developed to engage with the most disadvantaged (see for example Law 2000; Edwards et al 2006; MHB 2003; CRESR 2005; Belsky et al 2007; Sampson 2007; Themelis and Sampson 2009).

Thus, any assessment of the Olympic legacy will take into account that for many years core funding from central government and additional resources from regeneration programmes have been invested in the area to achieve better life chances for its residents. Infrastructure projects such as housing developments, at Barking Reach for example, improving transport links between west and east London with the Crossrail development and a host of initiatives to improve educational attainment, work skills and making East London a safer and more attractive place to live, work and invest in were all ongoing prior to the announcement of the Olympic Games. Indeed some local politicians argue that it was only possible to win the bid to host the Olympics in East London due to substantial prior investment and that these activities are integral to assessing legacy.

### **Regenerating Stratford Olympic style**

#### *How can East London regeneration be assessed?*

Much has been written about how the return on the £9.3 billion public expenditure allocated to the Games can be assessed (for example, EdComs 2007; LERI 2007; DCMS 2009; Brimicombe et al 2010; Grant Thornton et al 2011, 2011a). These reports have elaborate methodologies and list many outputs, outcomes and impacts to be measured in order to capture as many benefits as possible. A complex methods-driven 'meta-evaluation' for the whole project has been commissioned that includes a value-for-money component (Grant Thornton et al 2011, 2011a).<sup>i</sup> However, from the perspective of East London and in the context of the discussion on the succession of regenerative initiatives in Stratford assessing an 'Olympic legacy effect' can be simplified to just one issue. This is 'additionality' – extra benefit or harm – that the Olympic project contributes to bring about an improved

understanding of the 'regeneration problem' to produce more effective solutions than previously. Past experiences at Stratford demonstrate that the continuing persistence of economic and social disadvantage means that the 'regeneration problem' in East London is a 'wicked problem' (Rittel and Webber 1997).<sup>ii</sup> Wicked problems are ill-defined, difficult to characterise, evoke many meanings and lack consensus about effective solutions, and for these reasons typically recur (Rittel and Webber 1997). A key aspect of 'additionality' is therefore to identify any changes in the way the regeneration problem Olympic style has been characterised and to assess if it is more likely to lead to improvements for those living in poverty and experiencing inequality in the immediate and longer term, than previous interventions.

### *Bringing the Games to Stratford*

In 1997 the British Olympic Association commissioned a feasibility study to host the 2012 Games in London and when the bid was submitted in 2005 the then Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone and the Labour government insisted that it was located in East London (Poynter 2009). In fact, just winning the bid to host the Games was sufficient to bring to fruition projects which had stalled for many years. The 'power of the Games' was a commitment from central government, that had previously not been forthcoming, to use public funds to invest heavily in Stratford. The IPS came into being, over 20 years after it was initially lobbied for, and the original Stratford City, that includes the Athletes' Village that comprises of 4,500 residential units with 30% affordable housing, has finally come to fruition too. Westfield have built a large shopping centre with offices, hotels, and a conference centre adjoining the IPS and the Athletes' Village, with the promise of 5,000 new jobs and 8,000 in total. Most importantly for local people who, throughout the Stratford City Challenge years lobbied hard for a Marks and Spencer and who got a Wilkinsons and Poundland instead, now have a Marks and Spencer, and a John Lewis and Prada as well.

The contaminated rail lands which lie just beyond the old Stratford City Challenge boundaries have also been remediated and reclaimed, businesses in Carpenters Lane compulsorily moved, travelling families evicted from the site, and 450 homes at Clays Lane demolished. This space now has numerous 'state-of-the-art' sporting venues and images of the Olympic Park show that smart inter-connecting walkways,

clean canals, and attractive gardens are all on their way. From this perspective the promise of the department of Culture, Media and Sport to '*transform the heart of East London*' (DCMS 2008: 3) has been achieved. Physically Stratford has indeed been spectacularly transformed.

*Governance structure: who is responsible for ensuring that local people are lasting beneficiaries?*

The governance structure of the Olympic project has been described as complex, with a lack of clarity about which agency is responsible for delivering particular legacy goals and where accountability lies (GLA 2010). Nevertheless, identifying where responsibilities lie for the East London legacy gives an insight into the practical application of hypotheses that predict how the Olympic infrastructure and living in poverty are connected.

An action plan arose from the Legacy Masterplan Framework, and projects are delivered by the London Development Authority (LDA) who are responsible for commissioning projects and which are overseen by the East London Legacy Board, a seemingly large and unwieldy body consisting of 31 local, regional and national agencies. Originally the only project to remain beyond 2013 was the Olympic Park Legacy Company (OPLC) which will be reconstituted as a Development Corporation. The OPLC is responsible for the management of the sporting venues, setting up new businesses, and overseeing the construction and management of mixed tenure housing, the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, for which 7,000 new homes are planned. Its 'success indicator' is to ensure that '*the Olympic Park can be developed after the Games as one of the principal drivers of regeneration in East London*'. The OPLC has many similarities with the LDDC, although with a narrower remit; it is centrally controlled and managed, local planning regulations have been 'relaxed', and the active participation of local people in planning and delivering is largely absent. Concerns have already been expressed that the repeat of this state-led approach is likely to have similar detrimental social consequences for local residents (Poynter 2009:147). There is a clear presumption that when the infrastructure projects are completed and the management of the Olympic Park put in place, then economic, social and health benefits will naturally follow, just as night follows day.

The original legacy plans for East London assumed that benefits will automatically flow to local people.

However, it is 40 years since the inception of the LDDC and the indices of deprivation 2010 ranked Tower Hamlets, the borough within which the Canary Wharf development is located, as the 3<sup>rd</sup> most deprived area with 60% of its wards amongst the worst 10% in England, and with the highest proportion of children living in poverty (ONS 2011; see also HBU 2009; Brimicombe et al 2010). Without this development poverty in Tower Hamlets may be even worse, but the continuing high levels of disadvantage challenges the presumption that strong links naturally occur between large scale infrastructure investment and economic and social marginality even in the longer term.

The Olympic legacy presumption of 'trickle down' was contested and in January 2010 leaders from five East London host boroughs, Newham, Hackney, Waltham Forest, Tower Hamlets, and Greenwich, publically criticised the government for failing to produce a credible legacy plan for East London and produced their own Strategic Regeneration Framework (SRF).<sup>iii</sup> Following political pressure the SRF was adopted and the delivery of the SRF is now included in the legacy plans. Central government pledged its support for its organising principle, convergence, that states '*within 20 years the communities who host the 2012 Games will have the same social and economic chances as their neighbours across London*' (HBU 2009). But this commitment occurred after the majority of the Olympic Delivery Authority's budget had been spent and how its action plan can be effectively put in place is therefore uncertain (GLA 2010). The SRF is supported by a Host Boroughs Unit (HBU), located in Hackney Town Hall, and by the end of 2010 the Unit became embedded in the Olympic Games governance structure. Once a year the HBU reports to the Chief Executives Board and to the East London Legacy Group which was established by the Greater London Authority (GLA) and which in turn reports to the Olympic Regeneration Steering Group. The HBU remains the only agency with a remit across all East London boroughs and one which is wholly informed by democratically elected representatives.

The SRF initiative is also different because it will exist beyond 2013 and its remit includes addressing familiar social and economic issues that account for poverty and

inequality; poor educational attainment levels and low aspirations, low pay and unemployment, insufficient access to affordable housing, high rates of violent crime and poor health (HBU 2009). It assumes that direct investment is necessary to create and maintain causal links between constructing large infrastructure projects and accruing social and economic benefits for local people. But there has been little financial backing from central government to support this approach. For three years the Host Boroughs Unit received a grant from Department of Communities and Local Government of £150,000 but this was terminated in the financial year 2011/12. This financial cutback occurred at a time when public expenditure has also been cut and local authorities reduced their contributions to cover salaries and running costs. Currently only three part time staff are responsible for implementing the SRF convergence agenda, and two full time and one part time staff have responsibilities for employment issues. The HBU is, in essence, a 'shoe string' operation.<sup>iv</sup>

#### *Investing in effective practices: outside the Olympic regeneration model*

The lack of co-ordinated working across East London boroughs has been identified in the SRF as a critical issue and part of the regeneration problem (SRF 2009) and the 2011 SRF progress report signals that the main effort of the HBU has been co-ordinating strategic cross- borough working (HBU 2011). It may be anticipated that the more efficient use of resources across the boroughs arising from this strategy, with its potential benefits for local people, can be attributed directly to an 'Olympic effect'. That is because the boroughs came together to challenge the proposed Legacy plan, to draw up an alternative and persuade central government to adopt their convergence agenda. Arguably without the Olympics the HBU would not exist.

However, a finding from our Stratford City (Athletes' Village) study was that practitioners considered '*strategy was too high*'. They wanted practical guidance, and reflected that decisions made at a strategic level about what happens '*on the ground*' can be misinformed and unhelpful (Sampson et al 2010). Having responsibilities for delivering services on an Olympic site creates particular anxieties and challenges. Practitioners were keenly aware that their actions would be heavily scrutinised by the media and they frequently mentioned that the '*stakes are high*' and that what happens will '*make or break reputations*'. In public settings these practitioners created an aura of confidence and spoke with authority, making

statements such as *'we have a track record of success'*, *'we know how to do this from our experiences of working in x[name of place]'* and *'well, of course, we use best practice'*. But research studies signify a gap in our knowledge about how best to reach out to, and engage with residents to create lasting tolerance and understanding in new planned mixed communities and integrate existing and new communities (Sampson et al 2010). Knowing how best to implement effective participatory decision-making to address the social determinants of ill-health and to reduce health inequalities is another challenge (Marmot 2009). In essence, practitioners wanted to know more about what to do and how to do it. There was also a concern that additional resources are required to address new problems that have arisen as a result of the Olympic project. But neither the government-led approach nor the convergence perspective are directly investing in improving effective practices nor ensuring that these practices are embedded throughout East London.

**Looking forward: there is still time to achieve better outcomes with greater certainty**

Stakeholders in the Olympic project will undoubtedly be able to claim legacy achievements. Many of the East London 'success indicators' will be achieved by 2013 as the infrastructure projects will have been completed and the expected gentrification will be sufficient to achieve targets such as improved educational attainment levels, higher skills and income levels, and increased participation in sport and exercise.

However, the presumption that 'trickle down' and 'ripple out' effects from the Olympic site will bring economic and social benefits to the most disadvantaged does not have a good track record in East London and it appears that there has been a collective memory loss or denial about the lessons learnt from previous initiatives. Unless the Olympic regeneration model is underpinned by better propositions that make strong links happen between activities in one small area to those living in poverty in East London as a whole, and resources are allocated to activate these connections, claims that a 'convergence' agenda has been achieved due to the Olympic regeneration initiative will lack credibility. To date there is scant evidence that much attention has been given to an improved understanding of critical factors affecting the wicked problems to produce better longer term solutions for the most

disadvantaged and, as a consequence, it is uncertain that it will produce better and more sustained solutions. It is highly likely that any 'additionality' from the Olympic experiment will fall well below its potential.

There is still time to draw on lessons from the past and to adapt the Olympic project in order to increase confidence that benefits will accrue to the most disadvantaged within a reasonable time frame. A re-assessment of the role, funding and support for the Host Boroughs Unit would be an obvious starting point. But time is running out and the matter is urgent. However, without a willingness to accept current shortcomings and the political will to make changes the promise of the Olympics inspiring lasting change will be a false promise.

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<sup>i</sup> The evaluation frameworks are typically focussed on rationale and calculating value rather than inquiring if the Olympic Games have shifted or alleviated the problems the initiative intended to address.

<sup>ii</sup> The Multiple Deprivation Index 2007 showed that the six host boroughs were within the top ten most deprived London boroughs and within the top 10% most deprived boroughs in England, that they were below the London average for educational attainment at Key Stage 2 and GCSEs, and have a greater proportion of people with no qualifications than the London average, as well more ill-health and levels of household overcrowding between 18% and 38% which is significantly higher than the London average of 7% (Thornton Grant et al 2011a:58; see also Brimicombe et al 2010).

<sup>iii</sup> Barking and Dagenham joined in 2010 to become the sixth host borough.

<sup>iv</sup> A comparison between the Strategic Regeneration Framework launched in 2009 and the 2011 up-date reveals that planned work on key poverty indicators has not been actioned and that many of the convergence activities are reliant on the activities of the Host Boroughs without additional input from the HBU including youth crime and initiatives in areas with concentrations of worklessness (HBU 2009). Unsurprisingly activities to support the intentions set out in 2009 'to reduce the inequality gap in outcomes between disadvantaged groups and social classes with the average for London' have been significantly curtailed (HBU 2009).