

# Surviving and Thriving from the Volunteer Involvement in Mega-Sport Events

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Towards a  
**National Strategy  
for Volunteering**



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# Surviving and Thriving from the Volunteer Involvement in Mega-Sport Events

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## Key Insights

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- Mega-sport events (MSE) like the summer Olympic and Paralympic Games can require up to 70,000 volunteers.
- Based on surveys of volunteers at 6 different MSE (n=23,630), 60 per cent of volunteers were female, 61 per cent were over the age 25 years, and 75 per cent had previously volunteered. The most common previous volunteering contexts were schools or education (20 per cent), sports (19 per cent), non-profits (17 per cent), and festivals and cultural events (16 per cent). Volunteers mostly came from the host country (81 per cent), and 63 per cent were employed full-time, part-time, or casually.
- MSE volunteers are not a very diverse group in Western countries and most marginalised groups are not front-of-mind in planning. First Nations groups and people with disability may be seen more as recipients of volunteer services, rather than providers of volunteer services, in the context of MSE.
- Motivations to volunteer in MSE vary, with some wanting to use their work-based skills in their roles, and others seeking to move away from their work-based skills and do unfamiliar tasks. Younger volunteers (<25 years) were more likely to volunteer to develop skills and/or job contacts that may help their careers into the future.
- While MSE often claim to upskill their volunteers for future roles, the limited training offered is often focused upon event-specific activities, which are less likely to be applicable to future volunteer roles.
- For volunteer legacies to be achieved,
  - Before the event - organisers need to work with volunteer involving organisations to plan for legacy; plans need to be put in place for the ownership and management of the volunteer database after the event; plans and resources need to be in place for enough time after the event to ensure a legacy occurs; recognition and credentialing of volunteer training should be planned to assist transfer,
  - During the event - information should be available about future volunteering opportunities,
  - After the event - a post-event legacy organisation may need to exist, to operationalise and transition legacies managements well after the Games-circus has left town.

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## Introduction

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In the decade to 2032 Australia will host at least 10 mega-sport events (MSE) including 2022 FIBA Women's basketball World Cup, 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, the 2026 Commonwealth Games, the 2027 Men's and 2029 Women's Rugby World Cups, and the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. While these sports often have professional leagues, their MSE depend upon many local volunteers for effective and efficient event delivery. Collectively over 100,000 volunteers may be needed by the Organising Committees (OCOG) of these events, along with additional community, host, and corporate volunteers. The OCOG volunteers work alongside a relatively small core of full-time staff and subcontractors. It is frequently suggested that MSE will leave a legacy of skilled volunteers who will add value to host communities beyond the event through increased volunteering. However, it has been questioned whether this volunteer legacy promise is "fake news",<sup>3</sup> and, if so, would better planning make it true? This paper highlights the gaps in theory, policy and practice and provides practical steps for future MSE organisers and volunteer managers to survive the impact of the events as well as thrive as a legacy beyond the event.

## Research Findings

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Some note that MSE, rather than encouraging more volunteering, are often a volunteer's swan song, or that MSE raises expectations of future volunteering with extrinsic rewards and public acknowledgement.<sup>4</sup> Thus, actual MSE legacies may be negative with less volunteers or less volunteering. This may be due to lack of planning by OCOG, host communities, and/or volunteer organisations.<sup>5</sup> The following draws upon insights from over 23,000 volunteers across 6 MSE in 4 countries to guide positive legacies from volunteering at future MSE.

### How is a mega sport event different from other events?

MSE are variously defined by the scale of the event, the media/public interest, and even the cost. However, distinct from most community volunteering such as, sports, recreation, the arts, festivals, and the environment, MSE are rare and episodic.<sup>6</sup> Well known examples are Olympic and Paralympic Games, Special Olympics and Masters World Games, and World Cups like FIFA, Rugby, and Cricket.<sup>7</sup> The former are multi-sport

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3 Dickson, Darcy, & Pentifallo Gadd, 2020

4 Darcy, 2003; Dickson, Benson, & Blackman, 2011a

5 Blackman, Benson, & Dickson, 2017

6 Dunn, Chambers, & Hyde, 2016

7 Dickson, Darcy, Edwards, & Terwiel, 2015

and multi-venue events, and the latter are single sport events. An easy way to distinguish between the two is to consider the number of national (NSO) or international sporting organisations (ISO) involved. World Cups general only involve one NSO and ISO, while multisport events will involve many NSOs and ISOs. Examples of different summer sports include, swimming, athletics, and boxing, while winter sports include skiing, ice skating and ice hockey.

MSE like the summer Olympic and Paralympic Games can require up to 70,000 OCOG volunteers. They may provide a series of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to attract volunteers that are well above volunteering norms.<sup>8</sup> An important issue for this paper is how the MSE volunteering experience impacts the future desire to volunteer elsewhere. With such a demand, other organisations dependent upon volunteers need to have a strategy in place both to survive the games-time impacts upon their volunteers, but also to thrive beyond the games from the increased public awareness of, and enthusiasm about, volunteering.

### Event legacies vs impacts

An impact occurs at the time of the event or soon after.<sup>9</sup> They may be either positive or negative. Examples from a triple bottom line perspective include: i) negative social impacts like noise near venues and live sites; or travel congestion, or positive social impacts like a sense of national pride; ii) positive economic impacts resulting from additional visitors/tourists, iii) negative environmental impacts may arise from increased visitation, transport, and wastage at venues.

A MSE legacy may be considered as *what remains*, not just at the end of the event, but well into the future.<sup>10</sup> Obvious tangible legacies are infrastructure like new stadiums, transport/roads, and housing. Less obvious are social legacies including increased sport participation and a volunteer legacy, seen in increased numbers of volunteers and/or increased hours among volunteers after the event.<sup>11</sup> A positive environmental legacy like enhanced environmental management knowledge and skills may remain from implementing best practice environmental strategies. Understandably, not all legacies are the same, and they vary across a range of dimensions. The different legacy dimensions include the cost to achieve, the time it takes to plan and deliver on the legacy, the time the legacy remains, as well as how far the legacy spreads across the host country.<sup>12</sup>

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8 Darcy, 2001

9 Dickson et al., 2011a; Dickson et al., 2020

10 Dickson et al., 2020

11 Cashman & Horne, 2013

12 Dickson et al., 2011a

Legacies don't just appear - they require strategic planning and resourcing.<sup>13</sup> A challenge for most MSE is that the OCOG is tasked with delivering the event, then soon after, the OCOG is dissolved. So, who remains to deliver and manage the legacy?<sup>14</sup>

Of focus here is the impact of the MSE on community-wide volunteering, before, during, and after the event. Thus, what needs to be planned and resourced to ensure a positive volunteer legacy from the MSE remains? To provide some insights into the strategic planning, resourcing, and practical implications, the remainder of this paper provides learnings from a research program that took place between 2008 and 2020. It specifically looks at: the background rationale; who volunteers at MSE?; How diverse are the volunteers who are attracted?; What motivates people to volunteer for MSE?: What skills do volunteers develop?; Surviving the event; and Thriving after the event.

### **Researching MSE volunteers: 6 event and 4 countries**

A research program began in 2008 after one of the authors heard a presentation about the Whistler mountain venue for the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. The comment was made that they expected there to be a legacy of volunteers as a result of Vancouver 2010. The author wondered, will that be true? So began over a decade of research on 4 Olympic and Paralympic Games (Vancouver 2010, London 2012, Sochi 2014, Rio 2016), 1 World Masters Games (Sydney 2009) and 1 FIFA Women's World Cup (Canada, 2015). The following are results from the 23,630 volunteers who responded to the online survey.

### **Who volunteers for MSE?**

Knowing who volunteers for events will help in the planning for training, event delivery, and event legacy. Over the 6 events (n=23,630), 60 per cent of volunteers were female, 61 per cent were over the age 25 years, and 75 per cent had previously volunteered. The most common previous volunteering contexts were schools or education (20 per cent), sports (19 per cent), non-profits (17 per cent), and festivals and cultural events (16 per cent). Volunteers mostly came from the host country (81 per cent), and 63 per cent were employed full-time, part-time, or casually.

With many MSE volunteers being older, experienced workers, as well as experienced volunteers, there can be challenges for those who supervise or lead them. The full-time, paid supervisors for MSE are often young and less experienced, thus they can be supervising people with much more extensive skills and experience. Given the dynamics of recruitment for people to work on MSE, these managers also tend to be recruited later

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13 Lockstone-Binney, Holmes, Shipway, & Smith, 2016

14 Lockstone-Binney et al., 2016

in the assembly of full-time staff, have less time to acculturate, and not have the same experience in training for diverse workforces.<sup>15</sup> This has implications for MSE volunteer and employee recruitment, and supervisor and team leadership training.<sup>16</sup>

## What about volunteers from marginalised groups?

Many recent MSE have been in BRICS countries, i.e., Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.<sup>17</sup> However, our research highlights that MSE volunteers are not a very diverse group in Western countries and most marginalised groups are not front-of-mind in planning. Two groups we want to briefly address are Indigenous, or First Nations, people<sup>18</sup> and volunteers with disability.<sup>19</sup> Other groups to consider who may benefit from being involved would include migrants, lower socio-economic groups, unemployed people, and homeless people.

The typical way of including Indigenous and First Nations groups in MSE is to have them perform in opening and closing ceremonies. This was certainly the case in Sydney 2000 albeit with Sydney OCOG also recruiting First Nations managers for the cultural and entertainment program.<sup>20</sup> However, the risk is they are seen as objects to gaze at, not as people and communities with agency and invaluable insights, knowledge, and skills to share. There is little consideration of them as co-creators, co-owners, and co-deliverers of MSE.<sup>21</sup>

The same may be said of people with disability. While London 2012 aimed to make their games the most inclusive, our research demonstrated that they did not operationalise their vision to cover the day-to-day volunteer experiences.<sup>22</sup> This included accessible transport within the event precinct, scheduling, accessible toilets, break rooms, place design, and most importantly, the training of supervisors and team leaders to work with volunteers with disability. As with First Nations groups, people with disability may be seen more as recipients of volunteer services, rather than providers of volunteer services. MSE like the Paralympics, seen as the pinnacle disability sport event, and the Commonwealth Games, where disability sport events are integrated within the program, are obvious places to change those societal perceptions.

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15 Darcy, Dickson, & Benson, 2013, 2014

16 Dickson, Terwiel, & Benson, 2011b

17 Dickson et al., 2020

18 Dickson, Sharpe, & Darcy, 2022 in review; Dickson, Terwiel, & Vetitnev, 2022, in press

19 Darcy et al., 2014

20 Dickson et al., 2022 in review

21 Dickson et al., 2022 in review

22 Darcy et al., 2014

## What motivates people to volunteer for MSE?

Understanding the motivations of volunteers will assist in all phases of an event's strategic human resource management including recruitment, training, job allocation, supervision, and legacy potential. The respondents to our research were asked to think about why they volunteered and to rate 36 different motivational items. To make it easier to understand the results, this data was simplified by conducting what is called exploratory factor analysis, which reduced the 63 items to less than 10 components representing how the items aggregate into explanatory factors. The two main components that explain why people volunteer for MSE are 1) to be involved in the event itself and 2) a more altruistic motivation, to give back to their community. Further, many people may like to use their work-based skills, while others are seeking to move away from their work-based skills and do unfamiliar tasks. This means that, for some volunteers, just being involved in the event is enough, and they may be willing to do any job required, while others have very clear expectations.

For example, among younger volunteers (<25 years), there was often a significant difference in what may be termed 'transactional motivations'.<sup>23</sup> For them, there was an increased interest in gaining skills and/or job contacts that may help their careers into the future. This can have implications for the types of jobs they would prefer to do, and the skills they would like to develop. From the OCOG perspective, the way that the volunteer program is marketed to different groups needs to be cognisant of these different motivations.

## What skills do volunteers develop?

One of the promises often made to host communities about what they would get from the MSE is a pool of volunteers with enhanced skills. In reality, the limited OCOG training offered is often focused upon event-specific activities, such as why the event exists, venue skills, and job-specific skills.<sup>24</sup> These skills are often enterprise-specific, and less likely to be applicable to future volunteer roles. Customer service and diversity training may have the potential to challenge attitudes and behaviours towards marginalized groups including First Nations people, those with disability, and migrants, yet, this is often left to the training of non-OCOG volunteers where more specific customer service training is provided.<sup>25</sup>

Should a MSE and host community be interested in upskilling, they could take the lessons learned from COVID-19 and offer more online training that could be provided more cheaply (for volunteers and organisers alike) and be assessed to ensure completion

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23 Dickson et al., 2020

24 Benson, Dickson, Terwiel, & Blackman, 2014

25 Terwiel, 2009



and compliance. A further value-add would be to link this training to a recognised vocational qualification. This would mean that those who want to build upon their MSE experience will have some documentation of what they have achieved which could be beneficial for human capital development and employability. For the OCOG, there will be a record of training completed, which may be important in areas like work, health and safety and food safety.

## **Surviving the event: managing the impact upon your volunteers before and during the MSE**

With so many MSE volunteers already volunteering, the potential impact of MSE on organisations dependent upon volunteers can be substantial. In the lead up, volunteers may be spending more time with MSE training and test events that will take them away from the organisation they routinely volunteer with. At the event time it is unlikely that they will be available at all. Then, after the event, at least three things may occur.

Firstly, they may need more time off to recover from the MSE. Secondly, there may be a shift in their expectations of the rewards and recognition they will get from your organisation, having received adulation for being the real heroes of the Games. Thirdly, the MSE may be a volunteer's swan song. That is, they keep on volunteering up to and including the event, and then retire from all their volunteer involvement, going out with a bang.

Hence, plans need to be in place to,

- leverage the training provided by the MSE in the lead up to the event, e.g., how can you transfer some of your volunteers' new skills or lessons learnt to your organisation?
- manage the drop in supply of volunteers, before, during and may be after the event which may mean decreasing the size of your operations around the event,
- support succession planning of your volunteers,
- manage expectations about the reward and recognition in your 'real' volunteering world.

## **Thriving after the event: What is the legacy potential from MSE volunteering?**

If a volunteer legacy after the MSE was actually important for event organisers and the key stakeholders like politicians and host communities, then resources would be in place to support the legacy realisation, before, during and after the event, and after the OCOG is wound up. With most MSE volunteers already actively involved in community volunteering, as well as doing their paid work, there may be little capacity for them to do more. Thus, those who were most likely to want to volunteer more were those

who weren't already volunteering before the MSE and younger and less experienced volunteers. This has implications for the time and cost for MSE for their pre-event training and in-event supervision. If MSE are recruiting for legacy, and not just event delivery, then MSE will be recruiting less experienced and younger volunteers who may require more training and supervision during the event.

Another aspect of legacy is for community organisations to have plans in place as to how you are going to benefit after the MSE. Our research demonstrated that most volunteer organisations did not have a plan in place to benefit from the MSE.<sup>26</sup> Yet if they did have a plan for before, during, and after the event, legacies could be achieved.<sup>27</sup>

For volunteer legacies to be achieved,

- Before the event,
  - organisers need to work with volunteer involving organisations to plan for legacy,
  - plans need to be put in place for the ownership and management of the volunteer database after the event,
  - plans and resources need to be in place for enough time after the event to ensure a legacy occurs,
  - recognition and credentialing of volunteer training should be planned to assist transfer.
- During the event,
  - Information should be available about future volunteering opportunities,
- After the event,
  - A post-event legacy organisation may need to exist, to operationalise and transition legacies managements well after the Games-circus has left town.

## Policy/Practice Implications

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Some suggest that adopting a more strategic approach, including strategic human resource management, that aligns with organisational and community needs, will facilitate beneficial legacies remaining.<sup>28</sup> This would include the organisational/event and community needs before, during, and after the event for effective event delivery and for a positive volunteering legacy beyond the event. Yet, a multitude of studies point out the inter-organisational problems associated with MSE where a separation between OCOGs

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26 Blackman et al., 2017

27 Dickson, Darcy, & Walker, 2021

28 Dickson, 2019

and the International, National and State sporting associations create a disjuncture that can only be sustainably addressed through properly resourcing these organisations to undertake the activities that are above and beyond their standard charter and operating budgets. In the case of Olympic and Paralympic games, this requires a more direct integration between these separate bodies if they are to be actively involved in delivering the sport programs.

Similarly, the host city and volunteering communities should be invited in by the OCOG to work with, co-create, and co-design the volunteer and legacy programs so that they will fit those communities. Planning with and, hence, together with, the community establishes trust and accountability. However, we have seen, with Sochi for example,<sup>29</sup> that this did not occur for either FIFA or the International Olympic Committee/International Paralympic Committee. How do you get collaboration between groups who may normally be competing for not only resources but participants, volunteers, media attention, and sponsorship?

The MSE needs to foster this collaboration on a volunteer legacy so there is a very clear understanding that the OCOG wants to assist in increasing the number of volunteers for the local community once the games are a memory. However, many OCOG often fall into a belief that the event is the most important outcome, rather than the benefit that remains for the communities who have invited them in. From an organisational perspective, those with vested interests are detrimental to the overall vision and host outcomes that MSE suggest that they are working towards.

## Knowledge Gap

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There have been some small ad hoc studies of MSE volunteer legacies,<sup>30</sup> and some efforts to use the same instrument across different countries and scale of events.<sup>31</sup> However, few actually tracked the same volunteers and host communities before and after the event to demonstrate positive volunteer legacies.<sup>32</sup> Tracking volunteers over this timeframe is logistically difficult. Also, there may be some ethical considerations that make it difficult to achieve from a research perspective. To help future MSE organisers, host communities, and volunteer involving organisations, well-designed research is needed that begins before the event and follows the host community, event organisers, and volunteers beyond the life of the event to ensure positive social and volunteer legacies remain.

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29 Dickson et al., 2022, in press

30 Fairley, Gardiner, & Filo, 2016; Lockstone-Binney et al., 2016

31 Okada, Ishida, Yamauchi, Grönlund, Zhang, & Krasnopolskaya, 2022

32 Dickson et al., 2015; Dickson et al., 2022, in press

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