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# Olympic Planning, Profit, and Participation: Towards a Children's rights-based Approach to Sport mega-event Research?

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## Abstract

It is well-established that sport mega-events remain highly relevant sites of enquiry for sociologists of leisure. Whereas sport mega-events are associated with a range of diverse and (un-)intended socio-spatial impacts, they can also have transformative impacts on children and young people. Against this backdrop, this article discusses the inter-relationship between sport mega-events and young people. By focusing predominantly on Olympic planning, participation and profits – which we call the ‘3Ps’ – we argue that researchers may turn towards research methodologies that are underpinned by children's rights principles and which increasingly voice the perceptions of children and young people on the social impacts of sport mega-events. At the same time, we also reflect on exactly how children's rights-based methodologies in this context can push the boundaries of the sociology of leisure, events and sport. In this sense, we contend that this article makes an important contribution to the academic work on the nexus between sport mega-events and young people and to our understanding of mega-events' social costs.

**Keywords** Sport mega-events · Olympics · leisure · young people · children's rights · research methods

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## 1 Introduction

This article explores the inter-relationships between children and young people and sport mega-events. More specifically, we set out to discuss how, in this context, researchers may turn towards research methodologies that not only increasingly voice the perceptions of children and young people on the social costs of contemporary sporting spectacles, but also the extent to which those methodological approaches are themselves, or indeed should be, underpinned by children's rights principles. In the twenty-first century, sport mega-events undoubtedly exert a transformative impact on children and young people's lives (van Blerk et al., 2019; 2021; Kennelly 2016). Yet, while sport mega-events, such as the Olympics (as the event we primarily focus on within this article), as well as local organizers, seek to positively impact mega-event cities, it is well-established in the literature that optimistic aspirations and social legacies do not always materialize (Tomlinson, 2016). Mega-events, essentially, are associated with diverse unintended consequences such as the loss of social housing and marginalization (Spracklen, 2012). Notwithstanding, as commonly situated right across mega-events' social legacy promises, children and young people are often referred to in Olympic discourses and the surrounding political rhetoric. Here, they are often framed as a specific population group that can either *benefit from*, or be *inspired by*, the staging of events, as perhaps best illustrated by the 2012 London Olympics' legacy aim of "inspiring a new generation of young people" (DCMS, 2008, cited in Postlethwaite et al., 2018, p. 391).

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this article is to examine the potential of a children's rights-based approach to sport mega-event research on contemporary mega-event-related social costs, emerging issues and promises. As such, this article also reflects on the methodological implications of this. Consequently, this paper is set up to address and engage with the following research questions: (1) How can children's rights-based methods in mega-event contexts advance the sociologies of leisure and sport? (2) What are the key prevailing or emerging issues or topics relevant to the inter-relationship between sport mega-events and children and young people?

Consequently, this paper remains important not merely because it revisits the complex relationship between Olympics, children and young people, but it provides an extension to the available scholarship on sport mega-events, and especially the body of this research that is concerned with the link between events' social impacts and costs, youth and the creation of alternative narratives across the mega-event domains (Kennelly, 2015, 2017; Kennelly & Watt 2011; van Blerk et al., 2019). Moreover, the importance of this paper, both sociologically and with regards to practice, relates to how the research – which we call for – may give a voice to the young people who have their lives impacted by the Olympics as a spectacle that may appear transient, but in fact has long-lasting tangible and intangible impacts on communities and their citizens. As scholars of leisure and events studies seek to continue to be methodologically innovative and transformative, we provide an example of *one* potential pathway – a children's rights-based approach – and we reflect upon some of the advantages, challenges, and implications of this approach to research on the Olympics, which is by extension, transferrable to other sport mega-events. More specifically, we examine three key areas around the Olympics, which we contend would benefit enormously

from a more robust adherence to a children's rights-based approach to research. Whilst we acknowledge that the three areas do not encompass an exhaustive list of *all* Olympic-related issues that deserve academic attention, we argue that the three areas nonetheless comprise of some of the most demanding issues which arise before, during and after Olympic events. By building upon existing insights from the academic literature, we conceptualize these three areas as falling within what we call a "3P framework" consisting of *planning*, *profit* and *participation*.

## 2 The Olympics and Young People: A Literature Review

Before assessing the implications of the "3P framework" it is firstly necessary to examine the key issues emanating from the burgeoning literature on the overlay of the Olympics and children and young people. For international sport federations and organizers of sport mega-events, the connection between young people and sport has long represented both a focus of interest and a focus of concern (Skirstad et al., 2017). In that respect, it is also worth noting that the key literature on the relationship between the Olympics and young people serves to powerfully remind us that sport mega-events are never solely about *sport*.

As Kennelly (2016, p. 17) writes, contemporary versions and visions of the Olympics are tightly linked to Olympic promoters' claims that the Games will: "boost employment, provide housing, and help young people at both a local and global scale". Contemporary mega-events are also frequently packed with promises of positive social and economic impacts or legacies and end-goals that go far beyond sport *per se*. For example, reflecting the normative assumption that sport represents, or can be a force of social good (Coakley, 2011), the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) *Olympic Charter* (2021, p. 12) states that the goal of the Olympic Movement "is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised in accordance with Olympism and its values".

Whilst a full-scale Olympian political history is beyond the scope of this literature review (for this, consult Boykoff, 2016), it is still established that modern cities' staging of the Olympics have become increasingly tied up to a maximization of social, economic and cultural impacts. Following this, Kennelly (2015) observes how the Olympic interventions, throughout the twenty-first century, have come to increasingly revolve around children and young people, whereas the concept of "youth legacy" emerged in the build-up towards London 2012, emphasizing how sport engagement constitutes a "good" for children and young people (Griffiths & Armour, 2013). As Kennelly (2015) writes, following the displacement of marginalized communities ahead of the Seoul (1988) and Atlanta Games (1996), the IOC – facing a public image problem – pledged to counter social exclusion, combat poverty, and increasingly integrate disadvantaged groups in the run-up to the staging of Olympics' Games. However, while social legacy goals relating to children and young people have taken on a new socio-political significance across Olympic charters, discourses and rhetoric, several scholars – as will be demonstrated throughout this paper – simultaneously challenge the notion that the Olympics benefit all children and young people (Watt, 2013; Kennelly & Watt, 2011). Indeed, as discussed later, in

the preparation for the hosting of the Olympics, internationally protected children's rights have often been routinely violated, which itself raises wider state-based compliance and accountability concerns, which brings into sharp focus the oft-outwardly pledged socially virtuous impacts of the Olympics themselves.

As celebrated and broadcasted worldwide, the contemporary Olympics have become "strongly associated with youthfulness", first, due to the relatively young age of competing athletes and, second, due to the perceived benefits which attach to young people buying into the Olympic ideals (Kennelly & Watt, 2011, p. 765). Accordingly, it is contended that:

Young people are meant to be a pillar of Olympic efforts within cities; they are thus targeted by local organizing committees for special events and through selected activities on their websites. While such efforts are undoubtedly well intentioned, they do not provide much assurance that the effects of the Olympics will in fact be positive for *all* youth.  
(ibid., original emphasis)

This serves as an important reminder for this article. Crucially, however, our contention is not that the Olympics (or other sport mega-events) *never* bring about (or intend to bring about) positive outcomes speaking to community cohesion, cosmopolitanism, sport participation, inspiration or motivation for children and young people (see, for example, Veal et al., 2012; van Blerk et al., 2019; Scholz, 2012). Rather, we recognize that the Olympics and concepts of "youth" or "young people" are multifaceted and diverse and that the extent to which the Olympics can "be of holistic benefit" to a nation's youth (Armstrong et al., 2017, p. 4) can and should be further engaged with by scholars, given the acceptance that legacies and promises surrounding sport mega-events are invariably felt differently by diverse social groups, including children and young people. Further to this, we also contend that the wider preparatory, economic, social, political, infrastructural, and cultural impacts, amongst others, which directly and indirectly stem from the hosting of an Olympic event, serve to remind us that their effect on children and young people are equally varied in nature.

This paper is principally concerned with the relationship between young people and the social effects of the Olympics (which includes the Olympic bidding and planning process) which transcend the urban spaces the Games are allocated to and eventually hosted in. Although it remains important to highlight the various political and geographical contexts that specific Olympic editions are hosted within, which naturally impact their organization and social realities. In recent years, this relationship has received increased attention from researchers (Armstrong et al., 2017; Cotton 2012; Kennelly & Watt, 2011; Watt, 2013; Kennelly, 2017; Such, 2013). For example, in the cases of Vancouver's 2010 Winter Olympics and London's 2012 Summer Olympics, Kennelly (2015) draws upon extensive fieldwork and finds that the neoliberal Olympic spectacle exacerbated the pre-existing impoverished conditions faced by marginalized youth, in those cities and impacted their housing, employment and the targeted policing efforts in the host cities (see also Kennelly & Watt 2011).

Watt (2013) finds that the 2012 London Olympics was perceived to accelerate wider processes of gentrification in specific areas of the host city which subsequently

contributed towards the displacement of populations, including young people into temporary housing. Ultimately, these studies, drawing upon the voices from young (and marginalized) people, give a powerful insight into the alternative realities of mega-events spectacles. Under the umbrella of the same Olympics, Armstrong et al.'s (2017) ethnographic account of the Olympic policing also demonstrates how potentially "violent youth" emerged as one Olympic *threat* that required policing in the Games' build-up. Meanwhile, in his examination of the claim that the London 2012 Olympic Game would exert a positive impact on children and young people's lives, Cotton (2012) found that students in the UK (aged 11–15 years) felt that the Olympics could inspire young people to participate in sport, but that the choice of major food and drinks industry sponsors worked to send out mixed messages concerning healthy eating and health promotion.

More recently, Aina et al., (2021) explore children's rights in the context of the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo and note that, despite an espousal of international children's rights and child participation strategies, a gap remained between the pre-event rhetoric and the actual implementation of policies regarding the promotion of children's rights. Dowse et al., (2018, p. 105), meanwhile, emphasize the importance of recognizing children within the planning process as distinctive stakeholders. This, they argue, depends on a "child-aware" approach which depends on a "golden thread" that starts with clear leadership by event owners" such as the IOC.

In sum, existing research demonstrates a clear link between Olympic events, their social and economic costs and children and young people. Concurrently, the wider Olympic context must also be understood. We critically approach the Olympics as a mega-event which promotes the economic rationalities of neoliberalism and relatedly involves, for example, the reconfiguration of urban space for event-related, commercial and celebratory purposes (see Boyle & Haggerty 2012; Boykoff & Mascarenhas, 2016). To justify this, and the event's large costs, within the bidding, build-up and staging of an Olympic event, young people are firmly positioned at the core of the Olympic celebrations (Davidson & McDonald, 2018; Scholz, 2012) and framed as a population group that will ultimately benefit from the Olympics. The reality is, however, far more nuanced. Situated inside and around the Olympic "theatre", some young people experience the associated giant projects differently and they are also occasionally considered as threats to public or social order (Armstrong et al., 2017) or feel socially and spatially excluded (Kennelly, 2015). Ultimately, mega-events and their associated socio-urban transformations and non-sporting and leisure legacies both directly and indirectly impact children and young people as a heterogeneous group. Therefore, caution must always be exercised, especially within the context of research with, by or on children and young people, that they present as a uniquely homogenous population group, defined exclusively by their age, which as Christensen & Prout (2002, p. 483) remind us is "one of the most dominant factors used to discriminate against children being heard and listened to". Rather, the diverse familial, cultural, societal, economic, and political spaces, amongst others, that children and young people inhabit, necessitates a deeper, more rigorous understanding of how particular events and experiences, including sport mega-events, impact children in their everyday lives and contexts. For instance, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2015), the international treaty-monitoring body which oversees the imple-

mentation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) ('CRC') noted that in the run-up to the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, children were subject to increased levels of physical violence as part of the forced evictions which underpinned the wider infrastructural initiatives which accompanied the Olympic preparations, were subject to heightened levels of sexual exploitation, and many children were compulsorily confined without sufficient legal safeguards as part of the street 'clean-ups' which also accompanied the hosting of the Olympics in Brazil.

Thus, as this article contends, researchers face an important methodological task in continuing to include and capture the voices of children and young people in their research on the Olympics and their associated consequences. Accordingly, this speaks to the research gap this article seeks to fill by not only enhancing our understanding of how children may be positioned within mega-events' organization not solely as recognized stakeholders (Dowse et al., 2018), but also by better understanding how social researchers, increasingly, can contribute to this, or shed a light on this, by adopting theoretical and methodological perspectives that allow for an outlook that gives effect to children's rights.

### 3 Understanding a Children's Rights-Based Approach to Research

Before examining the primary areas which we contend could benefit from a more robust adoption of a children's rights-based approach to Olympic research, it is firstly necessary to understand what exactly is meant by a children's rights-based approach to research and the fundamental characteristics which should govern it. This also necessitates an understanding of what is meant by children and young people in the first instance and the legal, practical, and methodological implications this has for research. In defining a child as anyone under 18 years of age,<sup>1</sup> the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ('CRC') (1989) situates children within wide definitional parameters. Whilst this may appear to have the legal effect of grouping all children and young people together, the CRC, as discussed below, also gives effect to the evolving capacities of the child in Article 5 CRC, which recognizes that children and young people develop and attain disparate levels of maturity as they grow up (Varadan, 2019). The result of this is two-fold in nature. The practical effect is that research involving children and young people is a much more nuanced exercise in practice, whilst the methodological consequence demands that research designs and approaches give effect to this principle and the differing capacities that children possess at any given time. In quoting Holzscheiter (2011), Quennerstedt et al., (2018, p. 43) reiterate that the principle of the evolving capacities of the child "defied historical images of the vulnerable child", while in her analysis of the gradations which are inherently subsumed within the broad numerical parameters in which children are situated, Skelton (2008, p. 24) succinctly states:

While we have a collective term of "children" for those under 18 there is of course a considerable difference between a child of seven and one of 17...

<sup>1</sup> Article 1, UNCRC (1989).



Issues of consent and participation for children under the age of, say, 10 are different; indeed we might say for those under 13 or under eight, so much depends upon the nature of the research and the perceived competence of the children.

On closer analysis, the net effect of such observations is that they present a vast array of methodological options for researchers wishing to pursue research with, by or on children and young people. These also reflect the need for researchers to effectuate the varying degrees of maturity that children and young people exhibit within their methodological designs, which consequently highlights the responsibility which falls on researchers to devise and develop their methodological approaches to adapt to children and young people's divergent levels of maturity. Writing over 25 years ago, Morrow & Richards (1996, p. 100) stated that this essentially "involves respecting children's competencies" and being "wary of assuming that children are a homogeneous group" (ibid.).

Such realities further bring into sharp focus the question of what methodological approaches should in fact be used when researching with, by, or on children, including in the context of Olympic research. In response to such a question, we contend that caution should be exercised against prescribing fixed or static methodological parameters within which such research should occur. Put another way, we contend that no-one-size-fits-all approach exists in relation to Olympic research, but rather the choice of methods depends on the research objectives, the target research audience and the willingness of the researcher to build their methodological approach around the CRC and its provisions. With the rise of progressive and participatory research methods (Horgan & Kennan, 2021; Cairns et al., 2018), including the use of online methods (Fox et al., 2007), increased discussions around the adoption of child-led research (Kellet, 2012), the use of children's rights advisory groups to inform and frame research agendas (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Horgan & Martin, 2021) and the widespread use of children as co-researchers (Lundy et al., 2011; Cutter-Mackenzie & Roussel, 2019), the methodological possibilities for researching with, by, or on children are inexorably growing. Central to such approaches has been the *centralization* of children's voices, perceptions and experiences as fundamental constituent elements which should underpin the methodological decisions adopted. As Bradbury-Jones & Taylor (2015, p. 161) note, participatory methodological approaches which seek to give effect to children's voices "have become de rigueur in social research involving children". However, drilling down deeper into such approaches, the permeating thread running through these methodological decisions is not just an objective appreciation for children's rights law, but the desire to give effect to such rights as part of a wider children's rights-based approach to research.

Firstly, and fundamentally, a children's rights-based approach to research involves the deployment of key provisions of the CRC (as discussed below), an international human rights treaty which has been described as "a landmark in the history of childhood" (Freeman, 1996: 1) and the construction of a methodological framework around them. And while the CRC contains the right of children and young people to participate in all matters which affect them pursuant to Article 12 thereof (Lundy, 2007), a right which has been characterized as one which "broke new ground" (Freeman, 2020, p. 117), a children's rights-based approach to research involves much



more than the external adherence to children's participatory rights alone. Indeed, to fully grasp the legal (and methodological) implications of what a children's rights-based approach to research entails, it is necessary to understand the legal and sociological evolution which children and young people themselves have experienced since the enactment of the CRC in 1989 and its near universal endorsement since.<sup>2</sup>

Undoubtedly, the position of children and young people within society and within the academy has irreversibly shifted. The ascendancy of both the sociology of childhood on the one hand (James & Prout, 1997; James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2015) and children's rights scholarship on the other, as two distinct, yet often intersecting fields of inquiry have rendered children not only more visible within the research academy but has also accelerated their recognition as "rights-holding social actors" (Larkins et al., 2015; 333). This has also arguably hastened the paradigmatic shift within research, which historically regarded children and young people as objects of research, towards the recognition that they are active agents in their own right, with much to say and tell regarding their own individual and subjective experiences (Freeman, 1998; Oswell 2013; Punch, 2016). The corollary of this recognition, in practical terms has also resulted in the allotment of increased attention to the design and development of methodological approaches to research which reflect and symbolize not only children's agency, but also their fundamental right to participate in all matters which affect them (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011; Lundy et al., 2011). In this regard, Lundy and McEvoy's (2012) espousal of a "*Children's Rights-Based Approach*" to research is highly influential in view of its transferrable reach. They argue that in its most elemental manifestation, such an approach to research must not only remain faithful to the CRC, but also that all stages of the research process, including the framing, conducting and dissemination of the research must comply with CRC principles. They state that:

the research aims should be informed by the CRC standards, the research process should comply with the CRC standards; and the research outcomes should build the capacity of children, as rights-holders, to claim their rights, and build the capacity of duty-bearers to fulfil their obligations. Cutting across all of this is a requirement to ensure that the process furthers the realization of children's rights (ibid., p. 78).

Drilling down deeper into this conceptualization is the appreciation that central to this methodological framework is the direct and ascertainable involvement of children and young people in all stages of the research. And central to that involvement is the operationalization of key CRC rights within the context of academic research. Such sentiments have been further captured by Tobin (2011, p. 66) who articulated that a core principle of a rights-based approach to research involves "the requirement to integrate rights into the resolution of the issue that is the subject of analysis and consideration", while Beazley et al. (2009, p. 369) argue that:

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of completeness, the United States of America is the only country in the world to not have ratified the CRC.

Rights-based research with children acknowledges their agency, not as the outcome of academic theory but rather as recognition that they are subjects of rights. The difference may be subtle, but it is vital.

Such approaches have unequivocally gained considerable traction within academic research involving children, and further tend to revolve around what is commonly referred to as child participatory methodologies (Tisdall et al., 2009; Powell & Smith, 2009; Horgan, 2017; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010) whereby the right to children to participate in matters which affect them becomes the prescriptive axis around which the methodology itself is constructed. However, the construction of such methods is well-supported by the legal scaffolding which comprises several children's rights principles which provide the supporting framework which is common to all children's rights-based methodological approaches. What follows is a non-exhaustive outline of the principal rights within the CRC which are essential for the adoption of a children's rights-based approach to research, including Olympic-related research.

### 3.1 The Right to Participate (Article 12 CRC)

The primary principle permeating all strands of a children's rights-based approach to research is the right to participate, the contemporary genesis of which can be traced to Article 12 of the CRC which states at 12(1) that:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

In its most elementary form, Article 12 accords a right to children and young people to express their opinions on matters relevant and pertinent to their individual circumstances and has been broadly conceptualized as the right to participate. In her analysis of participation rights, Kjørholt (2017, p. 158) argues that they denote a change in our understanding of children "as competent and autonomous, more so than seeing them as vulnerable, dependent and in need of being protected by adults only". With no prescribed biological or numerical limitation on the exercise of the right (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p. 21) Article 12 directly envisages its elective exercise by children and young people. In one of the earliest theorizations on the right to participate, known as the "*Ladder of Participation*", Hart (1992) outlined a continuum of participation ranging in terms of substance and meaning, from the inconsequential, manipulative, decorative or tokenistic participation of children to their material and measurable involvement<sup>3</sup> in matters affecting them. Hart subsequently defined participation as:

The process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is the means by which a democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured. Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship (ibid., p. 5).

Hart's ladder has been subsequently built upon by Shier (2001) who, rather than seeking to replace Hart's conceptualizations, complements his analysis by articulating five levels of participation which include: listening to children; supporting them in expressing their views; taking such views into account; involving children in decision-making and ensuring that children share power and responsibility for decision-making. Indeed, in their treatment of participation rights, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) have stated that affording due weight to the wishes and views of the child is not an age-dependant exercise, conditional upon the attainment of a specific numerical standard. Rather, the Committee state:

Children's levels of understanding are not uniformly linked to their biological age. Research has shown that information, experience, environment, social and cultural expectations, and level of support all contribute to the development of a child's capacities to form a view (ibid., p. 29).

Moreover, the scope of Article 12 commands a right to participate "*in all matters affecting the child*" which, by extension, traverses broad personal, familial, and social landscapes and contexts which involve children and young people. Woodhead (2005, p. 89) states that: "Article 12 demands that children's views be respected, not as evidence of their relative competence, but as evidence of their unique experiences of the world they inhabit". Indeed, in her seminal conceptualization of children's participation pursuant to Article 12 CRC, Lundy (2007) advocated a four-fold framework, instituted on the mutually reinforcing pillars encompassing space, voice, audience and influence. Lundy's conceptualization affords the young person concerned the space to form a view with that view expressed freely, with such views listened to and subsequently acted on. However, the translation of Article 12 into an operable reality is both practically and conceptually dependent on the realization of multiple other children's rights.

However, caution should also be exercised in relation to avoiding participatory approaches to research with, by or on children on the basis that it may ultimately be tokenistic in practice, or indeed, perceived as such. In highlighting the efforts and resources required to ensure participation takes place in the first instance, Lundy (2018, p. 343) argues that: "It is difficult to think of another situation where it would be presented as honourable to deny an individual the enjoyment of their rights on the basis that full compliance is impossible". By further reiterating that participation should "not be rarefied to the point that it is considered unattainable" (ibid., 352), Lundy starkly reminds us that not listening to children and young people in the first instance is itself a breach of their human rights. Thus, within Olympic sport mega-event research, child participatory approaches as part of wider children's rights-based approach to research should always occupy a central methodological position within the research.

### 3.2 The Evolving Capacities of the Child (Article 5)

Respect for the evolving capacities of the child is enshrined in Article 5 of the CRC which states that:

States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the present Convention.

Article 5 represents the practical accommodation of the interface between children's autonomy rights on the one hand and their need for protection on the other. It exposes the legal equilibrium sought to be achieved in the CRC between promoting the exercise of children's agency and participation in matters which affect them, while simultaneously according them the requisite protection in light of their age and maturity (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). It accords neither parent nor child legal superiority nor does it endorse a child-liberationist nor parent-centric ethos. Rather, it recognizes the necessity for parental guidance and direction in the context of children's lives within an over-arching framework wherein the autonomy and agency of the child is both valued and promoted (Varadan, 2019).

In the context of academic research Article 5 CRC is of immense significance as it directly challenges the notion that children's age, in and of itself, is a barrier to inclusion. Given that children do not occupy a homogeneous unit within society, Article 5 recognizes that age-based biological developmental equivalence does not materialize (Lansdown, 2005). Rather, child development is comprised of, and influenced by, a range of issues including cultural, social, biological, familial, and environmental elements amongst others (Lansdown, 2005; Kamchedzera 2012) and so therefore the capacities of children evolve within different contexts at different stages and with different levels of intensity. The corollary of this reality is that researchers must be alert to, and give effect, to the principle of the evolving capacities of the child within their methodological design, noting that the experiences and developmental capacities of children vary enormously and are not exclusively age-dependant in their nature. As Lansdown (2005, p. 23) notes, children's "expressions of competence will vary according to the nature of the tasks involved, their personal experiences, expectations placed on them, social context and individual abilities". Additionally, recognition of children's evolving capacities is an integral component for compliance with Article 12 CRC because for researchers, to give due weight to children's views in accordance with their age and maturity, this will very often depend on the individual development of the child herself, and central to that is the appreciation that children do not develop within preordained linear nor numerical parameters (Daly 2018).

### 3.3 The Rights to Information and Freedom of Expression

Collectively, Articles 13 CRC and 17 CRC encase the rights to information and freedom of expression for children, respectively. Article 13 CRC states:

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regard-

less of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

Similarly, Article 17 CRC states:

States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.

Both rights are essential building blocks in the context of adopting a children's rights-based approach to research. Both are fundamental to the substantive operation of other CRC rights, namely Article 12 CRC, as information "is essential for the child's development and represents an essential precondition for participating in social life" (UN, 2014; 18). Indeed, Stalford et al., (2017, p. 210) argue that the right to information is "an essential starting point for stimulating meaningful participation". In its most elementary construction, participation is ultimately futile in the absence of access to information which consequently enables the formation and articulation of views thereafter. Articles 13 and 17 CRC, part of a wider gamut of rights within the CRC, and their direct connection with Article 12 highlight the interdependent and indivisible nature of all human rights (Thorgeirsdóttir, 2005). Indeed, the relationship between these rights exemplifies the cyclical context within which they exist as children and young people require appropriate information to both form and convey their views pursuant to Article 12 CRC. Moreover, such rights play a profound role in the development of an active citizenship. Thorgeirsdóttir (2005, p. 20) argues that "the instrumental value of these rights is to construe citizens rather than mere consumers. It is to involve individuals as active participants in society". Therefore, in the absence of appropriate and accessible information, the ability of children to meaningfully participate, including within research, is undermined. Such information plays a critical role in ensuring Article 12 CRC has real bite.

#### 4 Towards a Children's Rights-Based Approach to Olympic Research

In sum, the above section has outlined the primary rights which are fundamental to ensuring a children's rights-based approach to research. What follows now is an examination of three key areas around the Olympics, which we contend would benefit enormously from a more robust adherence to a children's rights-based approach to research. Whilst we acknowledge that the three areas do not comprise a full list of Olympic-related issues that deserve academic attention, we argue that the three areas comprise some of the *most* pressing issues which manifest themselves before, during and after Olympic events. By building upon existing insights from the academic literature, we conceptualize these three areas as falling within what we call a "3P framework" consisting of *planning*, *profit* and *participation*.

## 4.1 Planning

Olympic planning remains a long-lasting, expensive and often contentious process bound to several risks (Jennings, 2012). Olympic venues must be “readied for world-class competitions” (Kassens Noor, 2020, p. 4) whilst organizers and relevant actors must plan for “worst-case scenarios” and prepare for diverse security risks (Boyle & Haggerty, 2012). As touched upon, when a city secures the prestigious Olympic hosting rights, this commonly results in significant urban and infrastructural changes, and kick-starts the pursuit for legacies and public and social goods. Thus far, the planning stages of the Olympics have attracted attention from scholars (Smith, 2014; Kassens Noor, 2020; Boyle & Haggerty 2012; Kennelly, 2015). Importantly, however, within the hosting and planning processes children have often remained invisible and the impacts on children and young people have remained poorly understood (Dowse et al., 2018).

As Dowse et al., (2018, p. 100) submit, “[t]he absence of a child-aware focus in MSE [mega sport event] planning and delivery processes is, therefore, a significant omission that contributes to the social irresponsibility of many hosting projects”. However, despite the minimal focus on mega-event’s consequences for children, it is contended that sport mega-events’ hosting processes “present a range of risks *and* opportunities” for younger populations (ibid., p. 105, original emphasis). We concur with this and, as we argue, these risks and opportunities – also located within the Olympic planning processes – are important to capture in future research. Researchers, increasingly, need to explore how children and young people perceive the longitudinal planning processes of the Olympics, their role within such processes, as well as the impacts on various issues, which include, *inter alia*, housing, access to leisure and recreation spaces, in addition to children and young people’s overall participation within the bidding and planning stages. This also extends to *all* children and young people, including those that are routinely or unconsciously excluded from research such as disabled children (Priestley, 1998; Thompson et al., 2020) and those from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds (Curry & Dagkas, 2018). In this regard, methodological ease or subjective knowledge with familiar or preferential research approaches should never outweigh the need to engage with all children and young people. Indeed, in her analysis of qualitative research with disabled children, Kelly (2007, p. 23) states that such research allows “for creative and responsive methodological approaches for consulting children, including disabled children”. This, we contend, is equally applicable in the context of Olympic related research.

Moreover, in their recent examination of the extent to which children’s rights were embedded within the bidding and planning processes of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Aina et al., (2021, p. 6), as mentioned, found “little evidence that Tokyo 2020 organizers had developed or implemented robust policies, principles or practises to respect, protect and promote child rights in Games planning”. Rather, the evidence suggested that children and young people were encouraged “to participate in sport, rather than ensuring children have a voice or an audience in planning and decision making” (ibid.). These observations serve as an important reminder that Olympic planning and bidding procedures should not be viewed exclusively as documentary or technocratic processes designed to achieve lucrative hosting rights. Rather,

properly assessed through a children's rights-based approach, Olympic planning processes could potentially reveal a state's commitment to children's rights, with the extent of that commitment revealed through the bidding and planning processes, from their embryonic genesis right through to the formal submission of a hosting application. Indeed, we further contend that the planning aspect of the Olympics also covers the events and protocols that are initiated after the awarding of hosting rights, which invariably traverse a broad range of issues which include security, policing, urban and infrastructural issues, amongst others (Grix et al., 2018).

However, recent human rights developments within the IOC itself (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2019; MacAloon, 2016) shine a spotlight on the need to critically examine the extent of the traction which children's rights principles are having, or will likely exert, on the planning phases of the Olympics themselves. Recommendations in 2020 by Al Hussein and Davis (2020) in support of the development of an IOC Human Rights Strategy and the adoption of the Olympic 2020+5 Agenda, which pursuant to Recommendation 13 thereof contains a commitment to amend the Olympic Charter "to better articulate human rights responsibilities" (IOC, Recommendation 13) and to better equip the IOC's "internal capacity with regard to human rights" (ibid.), all signal a more robust commitment to human rights by the IOC. Indeed, as Chappellet (2022) reminds us, the IOC amended the host city contract (HCC) it signs with Olympic host cities in 2017 and accordingly, Article 13 HCC now places stricter conditions upon host cities *vis-a-vis* the prohibition of discrimination, the protection of human rights and ensuring that human rights violations are remedied in line with international law, agreements and regulations as well as internationally recognized human rights standards such as the UN's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Whilst welcome however, such documents are nonetheless silent on children's rights and the CRC, the result of which could either dilute or remove children's rights principles altogether from Olympic planning. While children's rights by their very nature undeniably fall under the wider canopy of international human rights law, their textual elision from the IOC's operational and human rights documentation runs the risk of denuding them of their important procedural and substantive reach. In view further of both the positive and negative impacts which the Olympics have on children's rights, such an omission further underscores the necessity for researchers to remain vigilant to the extent to which Olympic planning gives full effect to the rights of the child.

Methodologically, and still under the umbrella of a children's rights-based approach to research, scholars could for example look towards van Blerk et al.'s (2018) creative participatory approach to action research – involving participatory drawing, theatre and discussion – in the case of another sport mega-event: Brazil's 2014 FIFA World Cup. Here, the researchers sought to examine, from the perspectives of twenty young people, the positive and negative aspects of the World Cup and how the planning of this mega-event could be changed. The findings here suggest that some young people felt the World Cup failed to bring about positive transformations, resulted in dirty streets, a rise of food prices and that money from tourism was not invested back into communities. Other young people, meanwhile, referred to the happiness felt during the tournament, coming together to support the national team and an enhanced feeling of community and belonging (ibid.). As van Blerk et al. note,



this demonstrates how the inclusion of children and young people's voices can challenge the "top-down" security planning and facilitate positive social transformation.

Therefore, as this section argues, planning is a central pillar of any Olympic event and thus composes a key area through which we can better understand how children and young people, as a heterogeneous population group, can both *impact* and be *impacted* by Olympic planning across the event's cities, respond to and perceive the build-up phases to an event and its many social, urban and individual effects. By anchoring future academic investigations across these areas within a children's rights-based approach to research, new perspectives and insights can be collected to better ensure that Olympic planning, moving forward, across all its facets, can better adhere to children's rights law.

## 4.2 Profit

The second area that we contend would benefit from a more robust deployment of a children's rights-based approach to Olympic research is the vast area which encompasses the profit element of the Olympics. This also includes the related issues of marketing and sponsorship. Undoubtedly, processes of globalization and commercialization have had enormous ramifications for the world of sport, including the Olympics (Beech et al., 2007). Indeed, Yang (2008, p. 58) notes that: "Sports sponsorship has, in a relatively short period, developed into a major industry in the global marketplace". Consequently, events such as the Olympics are attractive for sponsors and commercial partners seeking to utilize the global reach and popularity of the Olympics for profitable purposes. As Smart (2018, p. 248) notes: "The Olympics have become a commercial consumer festival at which sponsoring brands compete for consumer impact and 'mentions'", while Kim (2013; 2202) reminds us that against the backdrop of the London 2012 Olympics, "11 sponsoring corporations were named official partners" which "were selected from 11 different areas of specialty". Among these were McDonald's and Coca-Cola, both of whom have come under intense scrutiny in relation to their promotional strategies from a public health perspective, in relation to the connection between their products and the ascendancy of childhood obesity (Garde & Rigby, 2012; Garde et al., 2018).

Indeed, it is arguably within the area of sponsorship, and the lucrative income-generating capacity that it engenders, which has been at much of the forefront of Olympic research (Boykoff & Mascarenhas, 2016; Farrell & Frame, 1997; Brown, 2000; Giannoulakis et al., 2008). Central to this has been the recognition of not just the gradual grip which commercial sponsorship, in all its semblances, has exerted over the development of the Olympics, but also the multi-layered nature of Olympic sponsorship itself. Yazdanparast & Bayar (2021) have recently recapped, Olympic sponsorship essentially exists along three tiers. Sitting at the pinnacle is The Olympic Partner Programme (TOP), created in 1985, which "provides each Worldwide Olympic Partner with exclusive global marketing rights and opportunities within a designated product or service category" (IOC, 2021; 12). The remaining two tiers include domestic Olympic partners, and domestic Olympic supporters, and as Yazdanparast & Bayar (2021; 143) state: "Each level of sponsorship carries specific terms and conditions dictating how the Olympic logos, names, and images can be used in adver-

tising, on uniforms, and in apps and tweets”. However, what is undeniable is that commercial sponsorship is now an inseparable, indeed a contiguous, aspect of the Olympics, and is likely to remain so moving forward. In their assessment of the interface of sponsorship and the Olympics, Garde and Rigby (2012, p. 42) argue:

From having a comparatively low level of sponsorship half a century ago, the Games have become highly commercialised, reflecting the marked trends in recent decades that have transformed sports sector deals which account for a significant proportion of the global sponsorship market.

This in turn raises several profound issues from a children’s rights perspective, including the impact which Olympic sponsorship has on children’s rights, their right to health and social development, amongst other rights. When viewed against the multi-layered canvas on which Olympic sponsorship is situated, the role of the state and the private sector becomes a significant source of inquiry from the standpoint of effective regulation and monitoring of related advertising and marketing strategies which is often connected to sponsorship deals. From a children’s rights perspective, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013, p. 16) have categorically stated that:

Advertising and marketing can also have a powerful influence over children’s self-esteem, for example when portraying unrealistic body images. States should ensure that marketing and advertising do not have adverse impacts on children’s rights by adopting appropriate regulation and encouraging business enterprises to adhere to codes of conduct and use clear and accurate product labelling and information that allow parents and children to make informed consumer decisions.

Hence, it is clear from the foregoing that the profit element of the modern Olympics, in all its facets, is a site of inquiry which warrants increased and ongoing attention from a children’s rights perspective. Whilst the above analysis has primarily centred on the overarching issue of sponsorship, the connected issues of marketing and advertising and the promotional strategies which multi-national corporations regularly deploy, including those utilized during the Olympics prompt further children’s rights concern (Garde et al., 2018). Indeed, in view of the advanced, immersive, and digitized nature of the current advertising and marketing ecosystem (Garde & Byrne, 2020), the need for heightened attention on the impact which such strategies can have on children becomes a heightened concern (Whalen et al., 2019; Tatlow-Golden et al., 2021). Given that these directly affect children and young people, the need for the increased adoption of a children’s rights-based approach to research becomes apparent.

Indeed, in view of the increasing evidence of the negative effect which the marketing of unhealthy food products to children presents (UNICEF, 2018; Garde & Byrne 2020) and which impacts on the child’s right to health and development, amongst others, the need for research into the overlap of Olympic profit and children’s rights becomes apparent. Against this backdrop, several questions abound. To what extent

do Olympic sponsorship and marketing arrangements comply with children's rights principles? How do children's rights principles either influence or underpin the awarding of such lucrative sponsorship contracts in the first instance? And what is the wider impact of such sponsorship contracts on children's consumptive patterns and their right to health? While such questions do not provide an exhaustive account of the manifold issues that arise when examining the profit element of the Olympics, they do provide a snapshot into several areas, many of which involve the relationship between the Olympics and multi-national companies, which increasingly warrants further examination. In view further of the global reach of the Olympics, such questions assume increased import considering the mounting evidence that "commercial marketing of products that are harmful to children represents one of the most underappreciated risks to their health and wellbeing" (Clark et al., 2020, p. 630). Examining such matters should be underpinned by methodological approaches which comprise of, and give effect to, the children's rights principles alluded to earlier.

### 4.3 Participation

The final area which we contend could benefit from a children's rights-based approach to research is the field of sport participation. In spite of the inconclusive evidence base, sport mega-events like the Olympics are often considered to have the potential to increase populations' physical activity, and to inspire sport participation (Annear et al., 2019; Weed et al., 2015). Not uncommonly, sport participation impacts are also "cited as justification for investing in hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games" (Weed et al., 2015, p. 221). As mentioned earlier, of the most prominent legacy promises for London's 2012 Olympics was to boost sport participation across British society, including hard-to-reach groups, as a legacy that could also have important public health effects (Widdop et al., 2018). However, this trend has continued. Most recently, in relation to Paris 2024's proposal for new sports (skateboarding, breaking and sport climbing) to be included in the Olympic programme, the Paris 2024 President, Tony Estanguet, commented that: "When considering new sports for our proposal, we were guided by three principles – sustainability, *sports that speak to youth* and those that reflect Paris 2024's identity" (quoted in IOC, 2019, emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

With regards to the existing evidence, some suggest that the Olympics may be effective in inspiring young people to participate in sport (Veal et al., 2012). However, whilst evaluative questions centred on "effectiveness" and "success" remain important, we contend here that researchers should also seek to engage with the perceptions of children and young people on what there is about the Olympics that may – or may not – inspire sporting participation; the nature of their participation and, finally, how forms of social inclusion or exclusion might emerge in and around participation legacy claims. Indeed, more widely from a children's rights perspective, the necessity to fully engage with children's participation in sport and their connected right to play, leisure and recreational facilities as contained in Article 31 of the CRC becomes an important consideration. As noted by the UN Committee on the Rights

<sup>3</sup> <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-executive-board-accepts-paris-2024-proposal-for-new-sports>.

of the Child (2013), the right to play is an integral human right for children and one which underpins the activation of many others. Specifically, they note that:

Play and recreation are essential to the health and well-being of children and promote the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, as well as physical, social, cognitive and emotional strength and skills ... Research evidence highlights that playing is also central to children's spontaneous drive for development, and that it performs a significant role in the development of the brain, particularly in the early years. Play and recreation facilitate children's capacities to negotiate, regain emotional balance, resolve conflicts and make decisions (ibid., p. 4).

As Davey & Lundy (2011) have previously argued, a rights-based approach to, and understanding of, the child's right to play not only recognizes the *ipso facto*, free-standing nature of the right itself, but also its inseparability from the activation of other rights. Thus, the importance of the right to play, and children's wider sporting participation, whether engendered or not by the Olympic, warrants further investigation. Indeed, such investigations should also account for the participation of children with disabilities, those from minority ethnic backgrounds and those who are typically excluded from research.

Additionally, it is important to emphasise the distinction between research which examines sport participation *per se*, and research that explores the wider social costs of the Olympics themselves. And while both strands of research may appear to objectively encase divergent goals, they can, nonetheless, be examined in a manner which is underpinned by children's rights principles. Be it the allure of sport participation, which is often engendered by the Olympics themselves, or the wider societal, infra-structural, economic, or urban impacts of the Olympics that is under scrutiny, what is clear is that both areas impact on children and young people, and their rights, to varying degrees. Thus, for researchers seeking to explore the impact which these areas have on children and young people, it is vital that their methodological approaches are governed by, and underpinned, by the CRC and children's rights principles. The practical outworking's of this is that whatever the methodological approach adopted, researchers in this field of study should familiarise themselves with the CRC and wider children's rights law.

Taken together, by exploring the "3Ps" above, we contend that researchers have simultaneously the opportunity to engage with the wider questions of who ultimately benefits from the bidding and hosting of Olympics, and the potential issues which may arise between pre-event discourses and the realities of the Olympics itself from a children's rights perspective. By advocating for a children's rights-based approach to Olympic research around the three areas of *planning*, *profit* and *participation*, it is contended that not only can new insights around sport mega-events be adduced, but significantly, new methodological boundaries in pursuit of those insights can be established and subsequently developed.

## 5 Conclusion

To conclude, this article has illustrated the contemporary sociological and leisure-related relevance of the compounded relationship between sport mega-events and children and young people. By connecting to the earlier literature (Kennelly, 2015; Kennelly & Watt 2011) and employing the Olympics as a contemporary and relevant exemplar, this article's purpose was to discuss the potential practical and methodological ramifications of a children's rights-based approach to sport mega-event research. In the modern world, sport mega-events like the Olympics are often synonymous with emerging sport, recreation and leisure facilities and impacts on cities' urban and social life (De Lisio et al., 2019; Kennelly, 2015). Yet how exactly children and young people are situated within these narratives remains comparatively under-explored as within discourses and rhetoric promoting the Olympics, children and young people are often featured centrally alongside talk of "youth legacies" (Griffiths & Armor, 2013). However, young people are also occasionally situated in the shadows of the relevant events' urbanism and planning processes (Lisio et al., 2019) and are often socially and spatially excluded from the celebrations (Kennelly, 2015). In this paradoxical context we have discussed what we conceptualize as the "3P framework" which consists of *planning*, *profit* and *participation* – representing three integral facets of contemporary sport mega-event hosting – and we have argued for a children's rights-based approach to sport mega-event research that is relevant and applicable to scholars of leisure studies, the sociology of sport, socio-legal studies and education studies, amongst other disciplines.

Sociologically, this remains important because it can further advance the leisure studies informed mega-event literature. Thus, whilst this article specifically provides a methodological and theoretical extension to the literature by providing a foundation for further research on mega-events, young people and the "3Ps", this article provides a foundation for further research seeking to capture the (un)intended social ramifications of contemporary urban projects which essentially mega-events represent. A children rights-based approach to mega-event research would not solely allow for increasingly capturing the voices and perceptions of young people within mega-event cities or places and deepen our understanding of mega-events' unintended consequences (cf. Spracklen, 2012). It would simultaneously allow the field of research to enhance its methodological versatility and dynamism. Therefore, with its argument, discussion and research agenda, this article makes an important addition to the extant body of research on sport mega-events and specifically the portion of this literature which deals with the Olympics, children and young people and the social costs and consequences of these events (Kennelly, 2015, 2017; Kennelly & Watt 2011; van Blerk et al., 2019).

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** On behalf of the authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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