

# An Olympic Mosaic

Multidisciplinary Research and Dissemination of Olympic Studies  
**CEO-UAB: 20 Years**

## Editors

Emilio Fernández Peña  
Berta Cerezuela  
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Ajuntament de Barcelona

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# **Volunteers as a Variable in the Success of the Olympic Games in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Anna Belén Moreno Vílchez**

**Communications Manager, Economic Development, Barcelona City Council**

The modern Olympic Games are an event that has often been disregarded by the academic world as an object of study, but the Games have become a unique setting for observing modern society from a wide variety of perspectives. An analysis of how the political, economic, social and cultural dynamics are reflected in each edition of the Olympic Games, and of the evolution of the Olympic Movement, provide a unique opportunity to understand the complexity of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Furthermore, on many occasions, the Olympic Games have become a test bed for new technologies, new models for training, education and social connectivity, among others. For this reason, since its foundation 20 years ago, CEO-UAB has been characterised by cross and multi-disciplinary approaches to the subject, as reflected in its vast range of research, reports, conferences, symposiums and courses.

In 1999, CEO-UAB, in collaboration with the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, organised the International Symposium on Volunteers, Global Society and the Olympic Movement, as part of the activities of the International Chair in Olympism (IOC-UAB). The event was attended by over 100 experts in various academic disciplines, who debated the phenomenon of sports volunteering, and more specifically volunteering in the Olympics. Although the figure of the volunteer has been observed since the first modern Olympic Games in Athens (1896), it had never been an object of analysis for researchers in the Olympic Movement, who tend to focus more on sporting feats and achievements, Olympic symbolism or the relationship between politics and sport.

The aim of this article is to consider some of the conclusions from that symposium. The presentation (Moragas, Moreno and Paniagua 1999) provided a historical overview<sup>28</sup> of the concept of volunteering, giving the example of the potential of the Olympic Movement to bring together the hopes of individuals and groups in a world where solidarity, equality and taking part are key.

## **Volunteers as a variable in the success of the Olympic Games**

Historically, the Los Angeles 1984 Olympic Games have been considered the start of the Olympic volunteering phenomenon as we know it today. Almost 30,000 people helped in a wide variety of ways: assisting with events, medical services, press, accompanying delegations and individuals, public relations, accreditation, technological and telecommunication services,

28. In 1999, a systematic analysis was performed on the official reports of each Olympic Games, both Summer and Winter, up to Atlanta 1996, and on a wide variety of literature on Olympism. An effort was also made to interview Olympic volunteers, but this was only possible for Games after Berlin 1936. For this review, the official reports of the Games from 1996 onwards were consulted, as were the websites of the future Games in 2010, 2012 and 2014, and of the candidate cities for the 2016 Olympic Games. The main research for the paper presented at the Symposium was carried out with support from the Spanish Directorate General for Scientific and Technical Research and the Spanish National Sports Council of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport.

transport, controlling access, food, finance, administration, etc. Furthermore, a specific department was set up to manage the volunteers, which played a significant role on the 25 subcommittees of the Organising Committee. This was a reflection of the increasingly fundamental role of volunteers.

However, four years earlier, at the Olympic Winter Games in Lake Placid (1980), the phenomenon of Olympic volunteering had already reached a key point in its development. The Organising Committee involved 'civilian' and individual volunteers in the programme and planning of the Games, in addition to the sports associations, national and international federations and social organisations, such as the Boy Scouts, (Moragas, Moreno and Paniagua 1999) that had traditionally been represented in this kind of event.

The indisputable importance of the work done by volunteers in Lake Placid can be summed up in one sentence of the official report: "Without this army of volunteers, 6,700 strong, the XIII Olympic Winter Games could not have become reality" (Organizing Committee of the XIII Olympic Winter Games Lake Placid 1980 1981, 164). The body of volunteers was made up of people from all walks of life: "An army of people was in Lake Placid during the XIII Olympic Winter Games about whom little was known. It was comprised of businessmen, students, teachers, homemakers, doctors, lawyers, professors, senior citizens and teenagers, skiers, hockey enthusiasts, bobsled fans, and skating lovers, in short, men, women and young people from all walks of life, and from all over the United States and the world" (Organizing Committee of the XIII Olympic Winter Games Lake Placid 1980 1981, 164). They all received specific training in each of the sports in the Olympic programme and worked in different areas: "The volunteers served as sport officials and organizers, as messengers and marshalls and mailers, as clerks, collators and crowd-controllers, as typists and timing officials, as judges and juries. They were unknown to the world because they worked behind the scenes, helping to ensure that the dozen days of skiing, skating, shooting, and sledding went smoothly" (Organizing Committee of the XIII Olympic Winter Games Lake Placid 1980 1981).

The advent of 'civilian' volunteering, which is understood to mean the individual engagement of citizens, was consolidated definitively at the Barcelona Olympic Games (1992). Even before Barcelona was named host Olympic city, as many as 102,000 volunteers had already signed up.

At Barcelona'92, there is no doubt that volunteers were visible in the media – for the first time ever – as a variable in the success of the Olympic Games. The growing importance of volunteers should be attributed to how the Olympic Games themselves have evolved throughout history, in a social, political and economic context that has witnessed significant periods of change such as the two World Wars, the Cold War, the 1970s oil crisis, the conflict in the Middle East, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Communist Bloc, the emergence of new countries, social protest movements, mass media (especially television), etc. According to Nigel Gann, voluntary organisations adapt to the circumstances of the times and reflect the structures and concerns of the times (Gann 1996).

The Games had expanded into a 'mega-event', especially from the 1980s; there was no doubt that they had become the most important event in the sporting calendar. The number of participants, both athletes and media, had escalated and, in this new phase, the role of the volunteer had grown; volunteers were incorporated into the structure and general planning of the Games. A volunteer participates personally, without being paid, in a group project and becomes a symbol of engagement of the society organising the Games in the values of the Olympic Movement.

Within this framework, the figure of the volunteer is made visible and takes its place in Olympic rhetoric and symbolism. For this reason, in the International Symposium on Volunteers, Global Society and the Olympic Movement, it was claimed that volunteers were seen as major stakeholders in the Games and as a group that represented the host community.

There are notable examples of such public tributes. In the Plaça dels Voluntaris, Barcelona, the sculpture, *David and Goliath*, by Antoni Llena, was erected in recognition of the volunteers' work at the Barcelona Games.

Sydney went one step further in their tribute to the volunteers, by recognising their individual efforts. On 5 October 2000, the volunteers that had taken part in the Olympic Games congregated in Sydney's main streets. This was how, for the first time in the history of the modern Olympics, the host city and country paid tribute to its volunteers. They became known as the 'silent heroes' of a great Games, as described by some broadcasters at the time. According to the official report, the volunteers were the image of the Sydney Olympics, (SOCOG 2001, 169). In addition to the volunteers' 'lap of honour' around the streets of the city, the day after the Australian Olympic athletes had done the same, the national press published the names of all the volunteers,<sup>29</sup> which also appear on a monument that can be visited today in the Olympic Park.<sup>30</sup>

As was reported in the conclusions of the symposium, without the contribution of volunteers it is not possible to account for the day-to-day operation, the success or the vastness of modern Olympic Games. This contribution, which has existed since the early years, has now become a more central issue, as the Olympic Games have become more complex and have grown in size.

**Table 1. Evolution of volunteer participation in Olympic Games**

<b>Olympic Summer Games</b>	
Seoul 1988	27,221
Barcelona 1992	34,548
Atlanta 1996	60,422
Sydney 2000	46,967
Athens 2004	39,494
Beijing 2008	70,000*

  

<b>Olympic Winter Games</b>	
Lake Placid 1980	6,703
Sarajevo 1984	10,450
Calgary 1988	9,498
Albertville 1992	8,647
Lillehammer 1994	9,054
Nagano 1998	32,579
Salt Lake City 2002	20,000
Torino 2006	18,000

(\*) The Beijing 2008 official report has yet to be published, therefore the figure has been taken from news reports during the Games.

29. Under the headline "Our 2000 Olympics volunteers" or "Roll of honour for the 2000 Olympics volunteers".

30. "A forest of 400 poles in front of the Olympic Stadium, entitled *Games Memories*, was unveiled in 2002, to honour the Games' volunteers". [www.metropolis-server.com/metropolis/sites/default/files/reuniones/sydney\\_2008/publicaciones/MEGAEVENT\\_1.pdf](http://www.metropolis-server.com/metropolis/sites/default/files/reuniones/sydney_2008/publicaciones/MEGAEVENT_1.pdf)

## Volunteers within the economic structure of the Olympic Games

As well as volunteers being included as a variable in the success of an Olympic Games, allowing the media and public opinion to judge and appreciate the organisation of the Games, volunteers have become a determining factor in the economic sustainability of the event.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the amount of research (Baum and Lockstone 2007, 29) on the impact of volunteers in the organisation of large sporting events, especially with regard to the large savings that can be made by accessing the huge potential of unpaid staff carrying out basic tasks that enable complex and large organisations to run smoothly.

However, the economic impact of sports volunteers is equally as crucial in sport in general. In 1999, Laurence Chalip (Chalip 2000) explained how a study on the economic impact in Australia, in 1998, demonstrated that the sports system all over the country would not function without the contribution of volunteers. According to his study, sport was one of the 25 largest industries in the country, since it accounted for 1% of the Australian Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Of this figure, 20%, some AUS\$1.6 billion, was accounted for by the volunteers' economic contribution.

At the beginning of the modern Olympic Movement, volunteers also carried out professional roles. In a large number of national federations, especially those with few members, volunteers habitually carry out professional roles, and many sports clubs were set up as a result of the efforts of volunteers that were amateur athletes.<sup>31</sup> In fact, without the unpaid, efficient acts of solidarity that are contributed by sports volunteers, modern sport would not be what it is today.

Therefore, sports volunteers, and more particularly Olympic volunteers, carry out functions that would be difficult for the Organising Committee to cover financially if they were carried out by paid staff, which constitutes a saving in salaries.

**Table 2: Some of the tasks performed by volunteers**

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- Services for spectators, the media and sponsors
- Services for athletes and technical teams
- Preparation and maintenance of sports facilities
- Assisting the accreditation service
- Assisting with transport
- Tourist information centres
- Welcome desks
- Assisting in medical and anti-doping services
- Assisting in media centres
- Assisting with security
- Translators and interpreters
- Guides for the Olympic Family
- Medal ceremonies
- Olympic torch relay
- Opening and closing ceremonies

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31. Pierre de Coubertin, himself, with the support of friends and directors of sports associations of the time, worked on a voluntary basis to found the International Olympic Committee, creating the modern Olympic Games.

However, the cost of organising and training the volunteers should not be overlooked, nor should their potential for adversely affecting the image and operations of the Games, in the case of bad management of volunteers. For this reason, it is necessary to allocate a large proportion of the budget to the effective training and management of volunteers to ensure that the Games run smoothly and are successful.

In the Torino 2006 Games, the cost of training and managing the volunteers was higher than for the rest of human resources. In total, between 2000 and 2006, the Organising Committee allocated €20.9m to human resources, of which €11.2 million was allocated to volunteers (TOROC 2007, 21). In Athens 2004, the cost of the volunteer programme was €33.8 million (ATHOC 2005, 131).

A further third economic effect is closely related to the legacy of holding the Olympic Games. The fact that thousands of people in a city or around the country receive training means that the population becomes more highly qualified in a very short period of time. In recent years, there has been a trend for grant holders and students to join volunteer programmes as an opportunity to receive training. The complex organisation of the Olympic Games means that volunteers are required to carry out a wide variety of functions and become specialised in certain areas, thus providing training opportunities that would be difficult to find in the normal job market.

In this respect, sociologists have speculated that, in the future, volunteering will be seen as a training option for the unemployed, offering work experience for young people and a new career direction for retired people. Undoubtedly, these employment opportunities are now also a motivating factor and constitute a non-remunerated compensation<sup>32</sup> for the volunteers. Participating in the organisation of the Olympic Games offers an opportunity to gain work experience, which could be useful when looking for a job later on, and could also provide a useful source of professional contacts.

However, despite all this, volunteer work should never be considered as a substitute for paid work. Part of the success of the organisation of the Olympic Games consists in achieving the right balance between paid and voluntary staff. Baum and Lockstone specifically refer to the volunteers' code of practice, developed by Volunteering Australia, which sets out some principles such as the following: "Volunteering is not a substitute for paid work and volunteers do not replace paid workers and do not constitute a threat to the job security of paid workers" (Baum and Lockstone 2007, 32).

## **Volunteers as part of 'official' Olympic symbolism**

Another noteworthy aspect of this 'new' phase in Olympic volunteering is how it has unquestionably been incorporated into Olympic symbolism. In the media, volunteers now symbolise the spirit of the Games: participation, sacrifice, overcoming personal challenges, solidarity, etc. The relationship between the Olympic Games and its volunteers has become an essential factor in terms of its added value for a sporting event that is considered to be 'unique' for its 'moral' and 'global' contribution to society.

The conclusions of the symposium in 1999 called for a strengthening of the institutional recognition of Olympic volunteers, given their incorporation into the 'official' symbolism of the Olympic Movement. It was proposed that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) create a specific programme or commission for Olympic volunteers, and also consider the technical and human aspects for volunteers in the application process and in the legacy of the Games.

In 2001, the IOC joined in the activities for the International Year of Volunteers, as declared by the General Assembly of the

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32. In the first Olympic Games, as is the case today, personal satisfaction is the main reward for volunteers; to achieve personal goals by carrying out the work and functions allocated in the context of a large organisation. In addition to these 'moral' rewards, there are other more material ones, such as the right to attend certain events or other advantages for being a member of an organisation, or a commemorative distinction or certificate.

United Nations. In recent years, the IOC has also paid special attention to volunteers at the Games by means of tributes and by featuring them in promotional material for the institution. However, the relationship with volunteers is still considered to be the responsibility of the Organising Committee, as a temporary relationship, and limited to the duration of each edition of the Games. Consequently, neither a commission nor a specific programme for a global and coordinated Olympic volunteers' movement has been created<sup>33</sup>.

In the organisation of the current Games, it has been impossible for the IOC to overlook the importance of volunteers. While the candidature questionnaire (IOC 2008) that cities are required complete as part of the procedure to become an Olympic host city does not include a specific section about the planning and management of volunteers, it does indeed include specific questions about human resource costs for paid staff and volunteers alike. There are also questions about planning and the role of volunteers in medical and anti-doping services and in transport and security, and about the training that will be provided to volunteers in Olympic sports that are lesser known in the host country, or for the Paralympics.

However, the inclusion of these questions in the candidature process does not accurately reflect the extent of the contribution that volunteers make to the organisation and beyond, whether it be as transmitters and representatives of global or local values, as a link between the Games host community and the Olympic Family or as promoters of an education based on solidarity, participation and altruism.

Organising Committees, for the time being, have sole responsibility for carving out the future of Olympic volunteering, and they have the possibility of structuring future relationships between citizens and the Olympic Games. For the post-Games period, London 2012 has, for example, set an objective of creating a 'family' of volunteers (LOCOG 2009) who wish to stay in touch, in order to boost volunteering in the United Kingdom and to create a new volunteering spirit, an improved network to exchange information and better preparation.<sup>34</sup>

In the recent candidature procedure for the 2016 Olympic Games, the four candidate cities (Chicago, Madrid, Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo) set up a programme for signing up as an Olympic volunteer, in parallel to the candidature procedure. Furthermore, the four cities included references to the volunteers in their candidature report and referred to their legacy for the city.

Thus, the Chicago candidature referred to a corps of volunteers who would be redeployed after the Games to support causes and programmes related to the Olympic Movement (USOC 2009, 15). Tokyo also made reference to a legacy,<sup>35</sup> but stressed the tradition of volunteer work that exists in Japanese society and outlined the training and organisation for the 50,000 volunteers that they claimed would be recruited. According to the Japanese Olympic Committee, with an anticipated 50,000 volunteers, Tokyo 2016 would also be able to disseminate volunteering culture in Japan. For an event of the magnitude of Tokyo 2016, the involvement of a large number of volunteers would be required (JOC 2009, 29).

In the case of Madrid and Rio de Janeiro, the two cities that reached the final round, mention was also made of volunteers in their reports and, in the presentation of their candidatures before the IOC on 2 October 2009 in particular, they became symbolic and emotional components, as examples of public support. According to the survey carried out by the IOC, 84.9% of Madrid citizens supported holding the Games, while in Rio de Janeiro, 84.5% of the citizens supported the bid (IOC 2009, 89).

The phenomenon of citizen volunteers has been definitively consolidated. Whereas in the past volunteers' motives were religious or humanitarian, or driven by a desire to bridge the gap between different classes, the Olympic Games have helped to create a new kind of volunteering that is also global, based on values of solidarity, peace, tolerance and participation, and

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33. The United Nations has an international network of volunteers with its own specific programme: <http://www.unv.org/>

34. "Voluntarios 2000" is a volunteers association that was set up following the Barcelona '92 Games and is still running.

35. The Tokyo candidature presented some innovative ideas for organising volunteers before, during, and after the Games, such as, for example, the Tokyo Volunteer Bank, a volunteer database created with the aim of sharing information on availability of volunteers and voluntary positions.

independent from the specific characteristics of the host society.

## **Volunteers in the Games in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: new technologies**

By 1999, the Internet had already made its presence known in various aspects of life and society, and the number of users and the development of applications had soared. The Internet was also incorporated into the Olympic Games, although, according to Moragas (2001, 5), in the early stages (1995-2000), the institutional use of the Internet was limited to promotional information, without causing any changes to its communication strategies, let alone to the way they were organised. In fact, it is considered that the Internet era did not start until Atlanta'96, with the launch of the first official website for an Organising Committee (ACOG) (<http://www.atlanta.olympic.org>), which received a total of 185 million visits in the first 16 days of the Games (Moragas 2001, 9).

However, the IOC was quick to integrate new technologies and new virtual media into its traditional structures, with significant economic and media repercussions, such as the negotiation of television broadcast rights and the management of accreditations for digital media in the Olympic Games.

The main challenge for the Olympic Games on the Internet is, without doubt, “webcasting: live sports broadcasts or recordings on the Internet. If this technology enables sports broadcasting on a computer or on a mobile phone, the convergence of digital television and the Internet also means that events can be broadcast directly via television sets. If exclusivity cannot be guaranteed, as is the case with television broadcast rights today, broadcasting the Olympic Games on the Internet, aside from losing any kind of exclusivity, will mean that the media will not be able to delay broadcasts until prime time. This could have serious consequences on attracting high-paying advertisers and, as a result, this would affect the capacity of the media to recoup the millions spent on purchasing television broadcast rights” (Moragas and Kennett 2005, 15).

In the case of Olympic volunteering, the question is whether, as well as providing information in a new format, new technologies can bring changes in terms of the management, planning and the concept of volunteering, given the creative applications of Web 2.0 for setting up social networks. For example, during Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008, new technologies and the capacity to manage a network of virtual volunteers were the most crucial factors in the Democrat candidate's success at mobilising supporters.

The Olympic Games have yet to face up to the challenge of embracing new technologies as an alternative communication channel, offering an unlimited range of possibilities, reduced costs and a significant legacy in terms of training and associative action. Likewise, an intensive use of the Internet should improve the integration of people with disabilities and make the best use of available knowledge and training in the Olympics and Paralympics.

Vancouver 2010, for example, was quick to set up a volunteer group on Facebook.<sup>36</sup> The Organising Committee for Rio de Janeiro 2016 seems to have seen these opportunities and has already set up a Twitter account and an online support campaign, originally for the candidature, and now for the Games. Brazil is one of the countries with the most dramatic rise in Internet use over the last 10 years (Barbosa 2009). Perhaps it is the advent of virtual Olympic volunteering, where essential tasks concerning communication and volunteer management will be carried out online rather than in person.

Without doubt, the world will eagerly attend future events in the Olympic calendar and also see the evolution of volunteering. However, we can be certain that, regardless of the inevitable changes ahead in the mechanisms for participation and social cohesion resulting from virtual communication, volunteers will maintain the characteristics that clearly identify them with the Olympic Movement: personal engagement, contribution to society and altruism.

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36. <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=40138368009>

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