

Taking part: Participating in the London Games through sport, arts and education, By: Beatriz Garcia

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On the 6th of July the International Olympic Committee announced that London will host the 2012 Olympic Games. The decision took many by surprise, as Paris had been the clear favourite from the outset. But, anyone following the final bid presentations could see that London had managed to distinguish itself from its competitors: instead of playing a purely corporate card, its main premise was the commitment to use the Games as a platform to inspire young people and promote the cultural and educational values of sport.

Such a promise to the IOC should also be seen as a promise – and a possibility for inclusion – to the wider UK cultural community. The prospect of an Olympic Games in 2012 will influence sport, cultural and educational policies for the next seven years, with the promotion of sport participation topping the agenda. However, policy makers should be reminded that the arts also have something to offer in this race: they can make us think more creatively about the possibilities – and responsibilities - brought by the prospect of hosting the largest global event in the world. And they can increase the numbers and diversity of community participation.

Sport is often defined as a universal language, but its message needs to be established. What is going to be London's message? Is it all about winning gold medals, creating business opportunities and state-of-the-art competition venues? Or is it also about promoting intercultural understanding, making everyone – throughout the UK, not just London – feel part of the process, and establishing meaningful international links with the 200+ nations that are to gather on our doorstep? The proposal of an ambitious

Olympic culture and education programme, spanning four years, with a national and international remit, is aimed at the latter. The challenge is ensuring that this programme is not marginalised nor seen as a token gesture towards the cultural and education sector. To avoid it, Olympic organisers and the wider sector must engage in an open dialogue, recognise the mutual benefits of acting in partnership, and establish some common goals.

The Games can create synergies across sectors by offering a common purpose and timeframe to arts, sporting, tourism, education and social work agencies, among many others. The thinking must start now and those involved have the responsibility to remind the London 2012 organisers that, in their close race against Paris, they did not get the Games just on the basis of an excellent technical plan, but rather for their promise to increase opportunities for young people to be inspired and participate in the process. Sport will certainly benefit from being integrated with arts, culture and education to maximise this premise.

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