

THE OLYMPIC GAMES: SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL INNOVATION

Olivier Gilbert

Employment developer for the Paris 2024 Olympics and Paralympics



Olivier Gilbert has dedicated a large part of his career to promoting environmental and social innovations. At the Setude engineering consultancy, during a period in France when Brice Lalonde, the newly appointed minister for the environment, chose to highlight the importance of nature preservation, he helped local authorities set up their own environmental charters. After moving to Veolia, the world leader in environmental services, he took on a variety of roles, each with a major focus on environmental and social innovation: head of the sanitation division in Hauts de Seine; head of sanitation in Tangier and Tétouan, including running programs to ensure access to water for disadvantaged people; head of sustainable development for Veolia Water in Africa, Middle East and India; and, finally head of social innovation at Veolia. In 2014, he set up his own consultancy, *Réponse Sociétale*, specializing in societal innovation and inclusiveness. From 2018 to 2020, he was executive director of the Euro-African Sustainable Campus. In 2020, he joined the Labor Ministry as Employment Developer for the Paris 2024 Olympics and Paralympics, working across the Ile-de-France region from a base at the Seine-Saint-Denis prefecture.

In 2020, his track record as a social innovator led to Olivier Gilbert's appointment as Employment Developer for the Olympics and Paralympics, to be held in Paris from July to September 2024. Working mainly in the Seine-Saint-Denis department, near Paris, he identifies, coordinates and drives the rollout of various actions designed to deliver on commitments made by the French government to create and support local jobs during preparations for the Games. The government is determined that the Games will be green, inclusive and socially positive. A great many of the events will take place in Seine-Saint-Denis, a part of France scarred by poverty and high unemployment rates. This is an area where job creation is a priority, but it cannot happen in traditional ways: innovation is needed. The scale of the mobilization required to prepare for the Olympic Games, and the very tight deadlines they impose, make it possible to overcome some of the barriers that often hamper or block social and environmental innovation.

Can you tell us about your mission?

Olivier Gilbert: My mission involves tracking and coordinating commitments made in terms of job creation, integration into the workforce and training for people in areas affected by construction and events for the 2024 Paris Olympics and Paralympic Games, especially in disadvantaged neighborhoods. These commitments formed part of the bid the Paris 2024 organizers presented to the International Olympic Committee.

Most of the sports competitions will be held in Seine-Saint-Denis. Although only a few new facilities have to be built from scratch, such as the Olympic Aquatic Centre in the Plaine Saulnier development zone, many other training facilities that athletes will use during the games – that will then be handed over to local council ownership – require overhaul or modernization. Seine-Saint-Denis is also where the athletes' village and media village are currently under construction. Spread across three separate municipalities – Saint-Denis, Saint-Ouen-Sur-Seine and Île-Saint-Denis – the athletes' village will host 14,500 athletes and trainers during the Olympics, and 9,000 athletes and their assistants during the Paralympics. The media village, in the municipality of Dugny and next to the Paris-Le Bourget exhibition center, will be home to around 1,300 journalists and technicians communicating with the entire world.

The French government hopes that these games will generate major positive social benefits, particularly in terms of employment, and particularly for this part of France, which faces so many challenges. Creating employment, especially for people excluded from the labor market, is a major goal for authorities in Seine-Saint-Denis, for nonprofits working on integration into the workforce, and for local businesses, all of them faced with difficult social realities that nonetheless offer great potential. In 2019, the Seine-Saint-Denis prefect, in consultation with Jean Castex, then the interministerial delegate for the Paris 2024 Olympics and Paralympic Games, and with the agreement of then prime minister Edouard Philippe, decided they needed somebody experienced to work on this full-time. The individual in this role would help generate new ideas and approaches and coordinate initiatives proposed by a vast cohort of organizations to make sure that these initiatives were mutually beneficial and would generate as many jobs as possible. The bodies involved include central and local government, the state employment service (Pôle Emploi), regional government agencies (four in Seine-Saint-Denis), municipalities, nonprofits, local businesses and employers, all working closely with other departments in the Île-de-France region and with the region itself. The COVID pandemic and national lockdown meant my work effectively only started in September 2020.

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In what way did your career prepare you for this unusual mission?

O.G.: The authorities felt that innovation was the primary challenge if the French government's commitment was to be met. This is why my mission is as much about innovation as it is about coordination. At the time, I think that the pragmatic and original approaches Veolia developed in Seine-Saint-Denis to maintain access to essential services for the most vulnerable, as well as in Morocco in the outer suburbs of Rabat, in Tanger and Tétouan all played a part in the decision to appoint me rather than another candidate.

Among the qualities sought for this position were knowledge of local government, businesses and nonprofits, as well as agility and the ability to create and lead partnerships between public and private actors to create social added value, something that requires collective innovation. My experience gained in public-private-nonprofit partnerships to promote access to essential services in suburban France, Morocco, India and Niger, during my 12 years at Veolia, a group with a reputation for innovation, was very useful.

What innovations were adopted when preparing for the Olympic Games?

O.G.: This global event is a powerful catalyst for creativity. This means that all public services, national and local, as well as private actors have the opportunity, indeed the duty, to use the games to innovate. The most important innovation centers

on partnership. "Partnership, first, last and always," is how I describe it. It may sound simple, but it is anything but. Creating effective partnerships within very tight timeframes is far from simple, especially for something as important as the Olympic Games. The various actors each have their own agendas, and they may know each other but have possibly never worked together on a project. Innovation is needed to make sure that you have the right mix of actors each time. It is needed in working methods, in leadership, in experimentation, in support.

A Committee for Employment and Integration into the Workforce was set up, thanks to the prefect for Seine-Saint-Denis and the prefect for equal opportunities, now director of the National Urban Renewal Agency. The committee meets every three months and brings together all the public, private and nonprofit actors involved. It has created a strong dynamic that is extremely constructive. Everybody has ideas, but having a committee co-chaired by the prefecture and the departmental council allows everybody to talk to each other, to share ideas and create convergences between the different projects, picking the best solutions and designing action plans.

The second innovation focused on the concept of doing things together, jointly setting up and managing an action plan called the "emploi JOP de Seine-Saint-Denis" and processes for accessing training and employment through integration into the workforce and traditional channels.

These processes are faster and simpler, making them more efficient. They bring together people from different institutions, each also working in all topics and processes, no matter their specific job title or department. This organizational innovation has already been adopted in other locations and will certainly be part of the games' local legacy.

Let me give you a concrete example. We reached out to civil engineering companies to tell them about an organization we set up to help them recruit workers for Olympic preparations. This organization, "Emploi JOP 93", includes the prefecture, Pôle Emploi, the regional and interdepartmental office for the economy, employment, work and solidarity, local authorities, local integration taskforces, and neighborhood associations. The companies quickly understood that the state had set up a targeted structure specifically to meet their massive labor needs. In practical terms, for every work site we have a two-person team: a manager from Pôle Emploi, and a facilitator from the local authority who specializes in integration into the workforce, and whose role is to help companies integrate people in ways that make sense in terms of where they are based. Pôle Emploi agreed that cases would always be handled by the office nearest to the work site: an innovation that has proven highly efficient. When the Pôle Emploi manager has a suitable candidate, they collaborate with the work site facilitator for integration into the workforce. This two-person team is the sole point of contact for every company working on a site until 2024, the lead contractor and all sub-contractors, including all security and catering contractors. They will monitor work sites during preparations for the games, up to 2024 and in some cases into 2025, when some of the installations will have to be re-adapted.

Jobs created by Paris 2024 initially concern the preparations: mostly work to rehabilitate or construct installations, a task managed by Solideo, a company set up by the state to deliver Olympic facilities. Next are jobs involving management of the Olympic Games for which the Olympic and Paralympic Organizing Committee (COJOP) is responsible: these are service sector jobs in security, catering, hotels, cleaning and waste management, logistics and transportation. Figures are a very instructive way to describe the scale of services needed: the Olympic Games will be attended by 15,000 athletes from 200 countries and 20,000 accredited journalists, creating 150,000 jobs supported by 45,000 volunteers. During the games, a total of 13 million meals will be needed by athletes, helpers, spectators, etc., including 60,000 meals daily in the Olympic village. Over 13 million tickets will be sold. 100,000 hours of TV coverage will be produced, and the games will be watched by 3 to 4 billion people worldwide.

Since 2020 in Seine-Saint-Denis, thanks to Emploi JOP 93, every time a company with a Solideo or COJOP contract wants to recruit, they generally start by hiring locally in priority districts. But in the aftermath of the COVID lockdowns, certain skills are in such high demand that the search for candidates has widened to adjacent departments, the entire Ile-de-France region and, ultimately, the entire country. Security jobs are in high demand, as the games require 22,000 hires in Ile-de-France; catering, hotels, logistics and most other service industry roles are also in very high demand.

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used where possible in Olympic village buildings, lowering overall greenhouse gas emissions. The environmental quality of everything built is outstanding in every respect: energy management, waste recycling, carbon neutrality, economizing scarce resources, etc. In terms of catering, the goal is to halve the carbon footprint of a meal compared to the French average. Finally, there is a proposal to use certified offset projects, in France and internationally, to compensate for the million and a half metric tons of carbon that will be emitted.

There are further innovations that help make these the greenest games ever. The media village will be a hyper-modern garden city linking directly to Parc Georges Valbon, the third-largest park in the Île-de-France region. The athletes' village will become an eco-district once the games are over. Another innovation is that swimming once again possible in the Seine River after a 100-year ban! The prefecture first banned swimming in the river all the way back in 1923. The state, the Seine-Normandie water agency and various local authorities have invested €1.5 billion to restore water quality in the Seine to a level compatible with swimming.

This project involved analyzing wastewater and storm water connections at thousands of private houses, apartment blocks and industrial sites, then carrying out remedial work. It also entailed upgrading treatment systems at sewage plants to make them able to absorb and decontaminate rainwater runoff during storms and periods of heavy rain. This also meant hiring and training staff to carry out diagnoses and remedial works: just one illustration of how social and environmental concerns converge.

Pôle Emploi's facilitators for workforce integration, and other staff involved in Emploi JOP 93, needed to come up with responses to the very stringent environmental quality demands of Olympic work sites. They quickly gained considerable new expertise in environmental topics, arranging training sessions and working with nonprofits specializing in integration into the workforce through environmental services. Many specialist environmental consultancies were also involved. Thanks to the games, environmental considerations now play a larger role in job seeking and workplace integration.

What about environmental innovations?

O.G.: The Paris 2024 Games will be environmentally responsible games. This means that, in addition to social innovation, environmental innovation is also very important and is something the two Olympic leads, Solideo and the COJOP, are both determined to deliver. These aspects are also monitored very closely by the interministerial delegate for the Paris 2024 Olympics and Paralympic Games, who reports on them to the very highest levels of government. These games will be the first ever to respect the Paris Climate Agreement, signed here in Seine-Saint-Denis in 2015 during COP 21. The organizers' goal is to ensure that the Paris Olympics and Paralympics emit half the average greenhouse gas emissions of the 2012 Games in London and the 2016 Games in Rio. This equates to a carbon footprint of 1.6 million metric tons of CO2 equivalent. Around a third of emissions will be generated by transporting athletes and spectators, construction accounts for another third, with the final third coming from energy production, catering, accommodation, digital services, etc.

Meeting this ambitious goal requires innovation. Construction phase emissions are limited because 95% of infrastructure needed for these games is temporary or already exists. High environmental quality is a feature of every new building and facility: choices of construction methods and materials deliver a 30% cut in carbon emissions. Wood is

What are your main takeaways for ramping up development of social and environmental innovation?

O.G.: First, and by far the most important, is leveraging major events to overcome barriers to innovation. One of the standout features of the Paris 2024 Games is the incredible spotlight it shines on the region where the games will be held. This is what made it possible to create a dynamic capable of experimenting, inventing and creating. Innovation generally needs lots of time, but the Olympic effect allowed us to try things that had never been done before, at least by many of the local actors, and to do them at speed. In terms of employment and integration into the workforce, every actor involved in Seine-Saint-Denis



Emmanuel Macron, President, and Elisabeth Borne, Prime Minister, visiting work sites for the 2024 Olympic Games - Seine St Denis (oct 2021).

recognizes the state's contribution in its role as coordinator for preparations for the Olympic Games. The Olympic effect raises the bar for actions taken by local authorities, public services, nonprofits and businesses, encouraging them to explore new avenues and invent new ways to deliver high social and environmental quality. In other words, the games gave us an actionable and genuinely effective right to innovate and experiment. This was decisive when it came to promoting the question of employment and the games, allowing us to operate collegially and to meet tight deadlines that became even tighter after COVID and lockdowns.

The second major takeaway is not to be frightened of cross-cutting working methods, of bringing together as many actors as possible and combining expertise from different areas: technical, legal, economic, communications, etc. To innovate is, first and foremost, to design and nurture partnerships, working with each other in third places that act as incubators, endlessly listening, talking and communicating. If preparations for these Olympics seem to have succeeded, it is because they were piloted collaboratively between different services, institutions and sectors (public, private and nonprofit). The innovations delivered are simultaneously social, technological, contractual, organizational, etc. In places like Seine-Saint-Denis, where large sections of the community are disadvantaged, you should not hesitate to look for help from sociologists to make it easier to reach out to local people, to understand them and improve how you work with them. It is also important to work closely with local politicians and grassroots actors, whether they are sports people, nonprofits, educators, etc., because concrete results can only be confirmed at the grassroots level.

Another takeaway is to design your project from a circular economy standpoint from the outset. These games were designed to be frugal, maximizing the use of existing installations, which had to be extensively renovated instead of built from scratch.

Lastly, and this is no surprise, it is vital to have powerful political backing, capable of organizing the collegial approach and making sure government administrations are on board and offering active support to the project, changing working methods, and shaking up actors so they step out of their comfort zones, silos and routines, and possessing the authority to settle any differences. You need a vision that is ambitious, attractive, and collective, and the rigor needed to make working in partnerships efficient.

What does ecological transformation mean to you?

O.G.: Ecological transformation is also social transformation. It restores prestige to specialties that are sometimes undervalued, such as collecting and sorting waste, and which are essential to decarbonization, saving scarce resources, protecting the natural world, etc.

Whilst preparing for the Olympic Games, workers employed on tasks associated with rehabilitating certain existing facilities in Seine-Saint-Denis received training in how to dismantle door and window units, glazing, plumbing, etc., so that these could be reused or recycled. This environmentally-led approach changed their working methods, but it also changed how they viewed their work and the dignity it offers. They took ownership of these new working procedures, improving their sense of the value of their work. This was particularly true at a work site where a former Ibis hotel was dismantled with assistance from a nonprofit called *Réavie*, which works on integration into the workforce and trains people in specialties relating to reusing, repurposing and recycling. These are all noble specialties whose ecological and societal benefits should be celebrated. The Paris Olympics and Paralympics are helping to demonstrate the benefits and added value that these jobs deliver.