

The potential legacy of the 2016 FIFA Futsal World Cup Colombia

“When you reach the rim of Medellín’s mountainous surroundings the power and presence of the City hits. Hits you both in your head and stomach. It’s an emotional feeling. You know there are bigger cities, but none provide such beauty, creativity and diversity in one snapshot. Looking across the City, from the high-rise buildings that group together, to the fevalas that chase outwards and upwards as far as the eye can see, makes it difficult to focus. The City, the landscape and the people, paisa – people of the region of Antioquia, are beautiful. The innovation visible and lived within Medellín provides further feelings of envy from the rest of Colombia, and from the mountains this is clearly visible. As the people navigate this tightly packed City, by metro system, cable car or elevators, reaching the higher ground – all – will be aware of the new additions rising from the landscape. They are unmissable. Whilst football has been the cornerstone of Medellín’s history and culture – the miracle of football pitches rising towards the heavens from the fevalas not only endorses this heritage, but makes clear that football is part of this City for the future.”

This purpose of this quote to give you an clear understanding of how much football is linked to the culture and every day life of Medellin and the people of Colombia. However, as I type this another footballing format that some argue is the fruit of Football and has provided the sport with most of its star players, is taking place in Colombia and that is the 2016 FIFA Futsal World Cup, a sport that is growing globally but was born in South America and is growing in popularity.



I (Dr Dan Parnell) (@parnell_daniel) and Dr Paul Widdop (@fire_and_skill) turn our lens on Medellín, Colombia to explore the potential legacy impacts of the 2016 FIFA Futsal World Cup.

The FIFA Futsal World Cup Colombia 2016 is upon us and is providing excitement, Futsal of great quality and passion, and is attracting cosmopolitan crowds for this international competition and event. Away from the excitement of this small sided frenetic game and perhaps more importantly in a country where [24.8 per cent of the population lives in poverty](#), issues around legacy are an important backdrop to this FIFA competition.

Legacy initiatives are a key part of the narrative when attracting and hosting major sport events. Much has been written about [London Olympics 2012](#), [FIFA World Cup 2010 South Africa](#); and [Socci 2014](#), in relation to legacy. The narrative about legacy usual surrounds the events, especially in relation to infrastructure, but rarely is legacy delivered. To help with this, it would help if organisers and hosts would be more open and honest about the benefits of events and their potential impact and benefits for wider society.

The legacy potential of the FIFA Futsal World Cup 2016 focuses predominantly on the School Programme. This programme is a joint initiative between FIFA and the Colombian Football Association (FCF) in order to promote and encourage the playing of futsal among children aged six to 12 at public schools in Bucaramanga, Medellín and Cali, the three host cities for the event.

As reported by [FIFA](#), the programme involves a group of 30 coaches from the country's futsal leagues and clubs who are tasked with leading the activities. The core focus of the training is to help prepare the coaches to become educators and facilitators to help increase participation in Futsal for boys and girls.

As we consider the potential legacy of the 2016 FIFA Futsal World Cup, we provide some closer scrutiny on a host city.

Medellin's – a unique host city

Medellín is a Colombian city and capital of the region of Antioquia. It lies in the north-western region of the country in the centre of Aburra Valley in the Andes mountain range. The valley is crossed by the heavily polluted Medellín River and is a densely populated urban area, the second most inhabited city in Colombia.

The city is also renowned for its cable car system – which helps communities interact in, round and through Santa Domingo; which links communities in the hillside to the metro and city centre.

This innovation in the city's transport is about developing the interconnectivity of residents of the comunas across the city. This infrastructure involves public spaces, libraries, and even escalators into the hillside of Commune 13, which also have outreach schools and police stations.

Alongside this urban and community innovation, sport is a key vehicle for innovation. Sport operations across the city is heavily immersed with a football flavour. The wider social role for sport is to support regeneration and social good in the city. For Medellin football defines the city's culture and identity, the very fabric of its soul.

Medellín – a place with football heritage

A feature in the New York Times, undertaken during the 2014 Brazil World Cup explored the perception of football fans in nineteen countries. In relation to Colombia the study found that [94 percent of Colombians were interested in football](#), the highest percentage of all countries surveyed.

Medellín has two football teams, however some local football fans would only profess to knowing of one team! But there are two, Deportivo Independiente 'Medellín' and Atlético 'Nacional'. The rivalry between the clubs is spirited and passionate – key characteristics of people of the region.

Throughout the week and on a match-day, the green and white of Nacional can be seen widespread across the city. Whilst, Medellín, or 'Los Rojos' (The Reds) are pretty easily spotted.

Both teams have a proud history, however Nacional are viewed as the stronger team. Both clubs share the Atanasio Girardot stadium. The stadium is part of a number of sport complexes across the city and is impressive. A sport complex managed by the local municipality INDER Medellín.

Furthermore, Futsal adds further to this sportscape, with [three teams](#) to have graced the Liga Argos Futsal since it was first launched in 2011.

Medellín – a place where football pitches rise from the favelas

The football pitches that somehow ascend from the environment are in fact a new urban intervention located in the heart of neighborhoods of the city for communities to engage in healthy physical activity and recreational sports practices; cultural events and promoting opportunities for community participation (civic engagement). These are called, life units and can emerge from the neighbourhoods as huge concrete football pitches, yet they are also colourful, clean, powerful structures, typically covered with an assortment of pitches.



The excitement really begins when you scratch below the surface of the football pitches. These football pitch spectaculars go beyond a playing space for football or Futsal, they provide high spec gym facilities, childcare and play settings, cinemas, computer labs, teaching areas, community shop spaces, dance rooms, dj recording labs, swimming pools, water zones, basketball courts and below the above football oriented life unit – a full size futsal pitch pictured earlier.



The life units allow for local communities to meet, socialise and engage in different types of social, physical and sporting activities. For many local communities this is 'their space' that the local communities own and take responsibility for the management and sustainability of the centre. The life units have high quality sanitary facilities and access to water fountains, for those that did not opt for the development of a swimming pool infrastructure, which was very expensive, this could be their major access to flowing water for play or to cool in the often intense heat.



Medellín - delivering legacy in Futsal

These community developed and led assets are an example of how Medellín ties in their communities sport and recreation to their city-wide sporting ambitions is the type of infrastructure they provide.

The School Programme delivered as part of the legacy programme will no-doubt compliment the ongoing locally delivered [Schools Popular Sport Programme](#), which is an ongoing programme to deliver sport and develop coexistence between the comunas of Medellín.

Indeed, it is a surprise to no-one that Medellín replaced an underachieving bid city to be a venue for the FIFA Futsal World Cup 2016. An event that fits the ongoing strategic sport and recreation strategy of Inder Medellín – the local municipality sport provider.

Many in England would be envious of the community Futsal courts like the one we visited below for their communities. This court is on a lower-level of the life unit pictured above (and has more seating than the Futsal facility in the national football centre in England – St Georges Park).

Medellín – more than an event

Putting the FIFA Futsal World Cup 2016 aside, it is clear that Medellín is a city with a clear sport for wider social good strategy and is backing up their intentions with coherent investment in facilities, programmes and events.

A sport strategy that supports other public policy. Indeed, not only do these facilities support sport participation, physical activity and social cohesion - the life units house medical support services such as general practitioners and limited accident and emergency alongside a range of health and social care services for local communities. All of which is free.

What this means is, that the 2016 FIFA Futsal World Cup is part of the mix in Medellín strategy to enhance its communities. Locals can play Futsal on the pitches, read about Futsal in the library, talk about Futsal in the social spaces, watch their friends play Futsal and follow the World Cup as a spectator or online in the computer labs.

Under the leadership of the local authority or municipal administration, who provide expertise, investment and knowledge for the consolidation of public spaces help create integrated multipurpose, inclusive and innovative environment. Indeed, one that appears conducive for some-kind of tangible legacy.

Our message for those involved in legacy and mega-events, is that rather than taking a larger open strategic perspective on legacy, the strength of Medellín and perhaps a lesson to other mega events is a targeted small localised approach to legacy – one which benefits the community and integrates seamlessly with current forward thinking economic development and public policy strategies.

Medellín is an incredible city, with some incredible football facilities. As the 2016 FIFA Futsal World Cup continues, it will be interesting to follow, explore and understand the legacy of the event ongoing role of football and futsal in the City.

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This article is based on fieldwork trips involving engagement with the public sector sport and recreation department, INDER Medellín and local academic institute, Universidad de Antioquia. The fieldwork was funded by the British Council and most recently by INDER Medellín. This involved twenty days working with government departments, academics and community groups building our understanding of the role football plays in social good on the ground in Colombia across 3 years of ongoing contact and engagement. The purpose of this article is to share some of the context and innovation observed.