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Comparing apples with oranges in international comparative elite sport studies: Is it possible?

V. De Bosscher¹, M. van Bottenburg², S. Shibli³, J. Truyens⁴

¹*Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Sport Policy and Management (SBMA), 1050 BRUSSELS, Belgium*

²*Utrecht University, Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht, Netherlands*

³*Sheffield Hallam University, Sport Industry Research Centre, Sheffield, United Kingdom*

⁴*Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Sport Policy and Management (SBMA), Brussels, Belgium*

vdebossc@vub.ac.be

Problem definition

Competition in international sport is increasing and more nations are adopting strategic approaches to gain a sustained competitive advantage. While there are a range of studies that try to explain sport success, mainly with reference to the Olympic Games, there is a gap in the literature on the determining factors that make nations excel in elite sport and how these factors relate to success (De Bosscher et al., 2006). In economic literature, this is referred to as 'competitiveness', or the determinants of productivity of nations (e.g. Porter, 1990; Garelli, 2008). Although past studies often questioned whether nations are suitable units for comparison, competitiveness inherently refers to the relative position of an organization vis-?-vis its competitors (Önsel, et al., 2008), which are -for the context of competitiveness in elite sport- by definition other nations. However, international comparative studies are one of the most complicated areas of research (Porter, 1990) and there appears to be a lack of standardisation of research methods and of available and quantifiable data on sport, especially with regard to policies (Henry, Amara, & Al-Tauqi, 2005). Consequently, while comparative literature on elite sport development has grown rapidly over the past decade (e.g. Bergsgard et al., 2007; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan & Green, 2008), most comparative elite sports studies exist mainly on a descriptive basis.

Objective

Reflecting recognised principles of economic competitiveness measurement, this study details a method for comparing nations' elite sport systems less descriptively by measuring and comparing the critical success factors of elite sport systems –or the determinants of national competitiveness- quantitatively. We endeavour to stimulate debate in the field of international comparative sports research by quantification of data and the introduction of 'measurement' to a subject (comparing elite sport policies and systems) that is essentially qualitative in nature.

Methods

A mixed methods exploratory sequential design was used (Creswell & Clark, 2007) consisting of two distinct stages:

(1) The development of a conceptual model of Sport Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS-model) builds on previous research (De Bosscher et al., 2006). The model consists of nine pillars and 144 critical success factors.

(2) This model was tested in an empirical environment and compared in six nations (2004-2008): Belgium, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and United Kingdom.

Data from each nation were collected through an overall sport policy questionnaire completed in each country with 84 open and closed questions on elite sport systems for each of the nine pillars, and through an elite sport climate survey (van Bottenburg, 2000) with the main stakeholders in elite sport, namely athletes (n=1090), coaches (n=253) and performance directors (n=71).

Following the principles of economic competitiveness studies we will demonstrate in one pillar (pillar 5, athletic and post athletic career support) how critical success factors containing quantitative and qualitative data have been transformed into measurable units that are individually scored (using a 5 point scale) and aggregated into a final score for each pillar for the sample nations. This scoring system is used to measure the competitive position of nations in elite sport and thus facilitates less descriptive comparisons.

Discussion / application to practice

The key point of this study is that research methods are mixed and nations are compared on the basis of qualitative analysis and guided with an objective measurement tool. In this respect it is of major importance that the scoring system is a supportive and tangible way of understanding elite sport policies more broadly in relation to sporting success, rather than an isolated competitiveness measurement or ranking system on its own. The scoring system can be regarded as a potentially useful means of helping policy makers and institutions to assess the performance of their elite sport system in comparable terms and to undertake appropriate remedial strategies. To date however, in economic studies as well as our study, there has been limited critical interrogation of how valid and useful these measurements are with respect to their ability to provide insights into what drives competitiveness and to generate robust predictions of future performance (Ochel and Röhn, 2006). Analysis of data from more nations is necessary in order to develop standardized methods.

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