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Diversification or prioritization? The Dutch struggle with the why, where and how to prioritize in elite sport policy

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Introduction

In elite sport policy, individual nations vary along a continuum of diversity to priority. Some nations invest in a broad portfolio of sports; others focus more narrowly on specific sports. The Netherlands is typically a nation which has thus far explicitly taken a diversity rather than a priority approach to performance. This diversity approach, however, is under great pressure. The international competition for success in elite sport has increased. All around the world, governments and national sports agencies have committed themselves to enhancing and supporting their elite sport systems, resulting in a considerable growth in funding and a policy of targeting these funds to specific sports. This also goes for the Netherlands, where the government has expressed its support to the Netherlands' Olympic Committee / Netherlands' Sports Federation (NOC*NSF) and its affiliated national governing sport bodies "to ensure the Netherlands ranks among the top ten nations in the international sports world"; an ambition which has not only been accompanied with a fourfold increase of the government's elite sport spending in the last three Olympic cycles, but also with a perceived necessity by NOC*NSF to focus these funds on a smaller number of sports.

Research question

This tendency towards prioritization raises several questions that are relevant for countries where this issue is under discussion. These questions can be summarized as why, where and how to prioritize. Why to prioritize: what arguments are used to legitimize this policy of prioritization and how valid are these arguments? Where to prioritize: which sports are given priority, what criteria are used for prioritization of elite sports, and what kind of dilemmas are experienced in this respect? And how to prioritize: what governance approach is used to redistribute money for elite sport and to give priority to a targeted minority of sport organizations, particularly in the Dutch context with its democratically-governed network of national sport associations?

Methods

The paper draws upon empirical data gathered from one year participatory observations in a panel group 'Forum Study Top 10', set up by NOC*NSF to discuss its top ten ambition and the way(s) to realize this; interviews with key persons in elite sport policy; and a documentation study to cast light on the structural roots of this prioritization process. In addition, the paper

makes use of statistical data on the popularity of sports, elite sport success, public elite sport preferences and the costs of elite sports in the Netherlands.

Results

Compared with Belgium, Canada, Italy and the UK, the Netherlands appeared in 2003 to have the most athletes per million inhabitants ranked in the World top eight and top three. This was achieved with a diversity-based elite sport policy, funding federations and athletes if they had reached the top eight of the world, regardless of whether their sport was football, swimming, athletics, draughts, petanque or aero-modelling. Although NOC*NSF has tightened up this policy by reducing the number of targeted sport disciplines which are eligible for subsidies and stipends, even today elite sport funding is spread over 150 elite sport disciplines of 57 sport associations. This diversity approach led to a twelfth place ranking on the medal table of Beijing 2008 and a tenth place ranking in Vancouver 2010. In the discussion about the 'top 10 ambition', however, opposite arguments have been used to legitimize a policy of prioritization; like the fact that 91 per cent of all 259 Dutch Summer and Winter Olympic medals between 1948 and 2010 were won in only nine sports. Moreover, it has been argued that the increasing international competition put pressure on the sport organizations to deliver greater efficiency and effectiveness. Findings from other countries suggest that this can be achieved by investing in focus sports in which there is a track record and a reasonable probability of future success, rather than spreading resources thinly across more than 150 disciplines. The paper discusses the criteria which are put forward in this discussion for prioritization and the dilemmas involved in this approach, like the differential value of Olympic medals and the costs/benefits of team sports against individual sports, and gives an overview of the course of the debate and the positions of the national governing sport bodies and involved interest groups.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that NOC*NSF faces more difficulties than countries with a more dominant state presence to implement its perceived necessity to prioritize. Operating in a democratically-governed network of national sport organizations, it needs to mobilize a majority to give priority to minority interests in a redistribution of money to its affiliated sport organizations. NOC*NSF tries to do so by stressing a series of arguments in favour for prioritization, ignoring the results of its diversity approach. In this pursuit, NOC*NSF meets fierce opposition from the affiliated national sport organizations who contest the desirability and effectiveness of prioritization mainly because it will lead to a further centralization of elite sport policy and a decline in their autonomy.