

Prioritization of elite sport: the consequence of a global sporting arms race.

Results of an international comparative study

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Introduction

The power struggle between nations to win medals in major international sport competitions has resulted in an intensified competition with increasing investments in elite sport from public sources in many countries. The global sporting arms race, described by Oakley and Green (2001) as the production of success by investing strategically in elite sport, is escalating because the return on investment has decreased over the past decade (De Bosscher et al., 2008). As a result, governing organizations in elite sport are searching for increasing efficiency of their investments, for example by prioritizing policies. The notion of "targeting the resources on only relatively small number of sports through identifying those that have a real chance of success at world level" (Oakley and Green, 2001, p. 91), as used in the early 1990s for example in Australia or in former communist countries, is now applied in many countries.

Aim

This study aims to identify if and how nations are adopting a prioritization policy of elite sports funding.

Methods

Data were collected by researchers in 16 countries who took part in a large-scale "SPLISS-II" project. An overall sport policy inventory - developed by a consortium group of SPLISS researchers - was used as a pre-defined framework to gather data from secondary sources via document review and primary sources such as interviews with national policy makers. Topics included the number of sports, sports clubs and national governing bodies funded; the amount of funding for each sport in 2010; whether there was a prioritization policy; how long this policy had been in place and what the drivers for this policy were.

Note: Data collection was only completed by 7 countries (BRA, EST, FIN, JAP, POR, ESP, SUI, NED) by the time of writing this abstract and will be finished by the time of the EASM conference.

Results

Interestingly, five countries do not fund non-Olympic sports as a priority sport (JAP, FRA, POR, BRA, EST). While only four countries indicated that there is a policy that sets out to prioritize particular sports for elite sport funding, closer analysis of the exact amounts of funding on a sport by sport

basis shows that all (7) countries prioritize: within the Olympic sports, all countries have spent 50% of elite sports funding on 6 or fewer sports out of a total of 20 or more. For example in Japan and Finland, 21 elite sport disciplines receive 25% of the funding and 9 and 8 sports respectively receive the remaining 75% of the funding. Some countries have taken a prioritization approach for a long time, however the policy was been implemented more vigorously since 2006. The Netherlands is a striking example in this regard. Policy makers in the Netherlands decided to refine their approach to elite sport funding: funding of ten sports (8 where the Netherlands was traditionally successful + 2 prestigious sports, athletics and gymnastics), will move from 25% of the overall elite sport funding (7,5 million euros) to 75% (22,5 million euros) by 2013; the other 7,5 million euros will then be distributed among the remaining 65 (smaller) sports.

The top ten of most funded sports in all the countries, receive 57% of the funding, with athletics the principal beneficiary, followed by aquatics (all four Olympic disciplines). This approach is logical as these two sports account for a significant proportion of the medal winning opportunities in the Olympic Games (97 events or 32% of the entire programme of London 2012).

Discussion

Increasingly, countries are trying to invest 'smarter' in elite sport by implementing a prioritization policy of elite sport funding. National policies have taken this decision but not much is known about the possible unintended side-effects of this policy, for example in the sports that lost their funding, or for less welldeveloped sports; as well as the impacts on other sport policy goals, such as raising sport participation.

Targeting strategies are performance-based, often using the number Olympic medals as a criterion for evaluation. This is a typical input-output evaluation. The question remains: (why) are medals important? Why would nations continue to take part in this global sporting arms race? The measurement of outcomes, or the long-term effects of success remain an unexplored area of research.

References

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