

THE ELITE SPORT REFORMS IN NEW ZEALAND: THE COMPARATIVE VIEW

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Aim

The aim of this conference paper is to understand why and how the government has taken the leadership in the sport after mid 1980s in New Zealand. The paper will focus on changes in the elite sport structure and policy in the three different reforms in 1985, 2001 and 2011. The study is part of the comparative research concerning the elite sport systems in Norway, Finland and New Zealand.

Theoretical background

The main focus of the study is on the interplay between elite sport system and the wider institutional context of the elite sport reforms in New Zealand, Finland and Norway. In many countries, elite sport reforms have changed since the 1990s towards more and more intentional strategic process, in which the reformers follow international currents and evaluate different approaches in other countries. This awareness has led the countries to seek and adopt best available methods to improve or even to sustain their elite sport success. This policy learning process has probably been one component in making elite sport systems more homogenous in different countries (Oakley, B & Green, M., 2001). At the same time the view about the effective elite sport system or "critical factors contributing to elite sport success" has become more specified and a field of research in itself (De Bosscher et al 2006). Due to these research and policy learning processes, an instrumentally rationalized *ideal model* of elite sport system has been developed (e.g. SPLISS-model in De Bosscher et al 2006).

This paper recognizes the value of ideal model but sees it necessary to complement it with the view in which the elite sport system and its goals are seen in broader cultural and political contexts in which they are embedded. The knowledge of the ideal model is easily available and recognizable but elite sport cannot reform itself if this model is conflictual with other sport policy lines or interest of other sport organizations. This helps to understand e. g. why some countries like Finland has been incapable to adopt ideal model and to reform elite sport system in spite of many attempts (Mäkinen 2011, 209).

Methodology, framework and material

New Zealand and Norway have ended relatively similar elite sport structures but in politically different routes and in culturally different contexts (see Houlihan & Green 2008, 278). They both ended up in a more nationally centralized model. In Norway the sport movement led the reformation, and the government interest and involvement was very modest. The new elite sport organization Olympiatoppen was created in order to function under a larger voluntary umbrella organization of the sports (NIFs). In New Zealand, governmental workforces led the reformation, and the present HPSNZ was established as a crown entity in 2011. In Finland both paths are relevant since it is not clear whether the fragmented sport movement is capable to achieve the reform by itself after many attempts or whether the government should take a more active role to make the change finally happen.

This paper will focus on the analysis of data that was gathered in New Zealand between October 2012 and March 2013. It consists of eight elite sport leader interviews, the reports of the governmental workforces, strategic papers and economic data. I use the interviews and reports in order to trace how the change was strategically planned, politically achieved and practically implemented. The purpose of the analysis of NZ elite sport strategy papers is to see how the international ideal models were reflected in creating new content for elite sport policy. Economic data was gathered to understand the level of National Sport Organizations' dependency on governmental funding.

Results

The interviews reveals strong willingness at the political level to reform elite sport system as a way to improve NZ international elite sport success. Some informants argued that reforms had clear blueprint and the acceptance from the highest governmental level. It was argued that there was an agreement by the two leading parties (National Party and Labour Party) to avoid making political debates about elite sport policy. This has created more permanent elite sport policy line in spite of the changing governments and ministers. The governmental leadership was needed since the weak sport federations were unable to produce centralized national level policy content. The successful elite sport strategy (2006-2012) was created based on benchmarking elite sport systems in seven different countries. Both interviews and economic data imply that the targeted sports approach raised debates among NSOs but the new strategy was implemented relatively easily since NSOs were highly dependent on governmental funding.

References

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