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# A NATIONAL RESOURCE CONFIGURATION LEADING TO A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN ATHLETICS: A FOUR COUNTRY BENCHMARK STUDY

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## **Abstract**

### AIM OF THE PAPER

A strategic approach in elite sport goes hand in hand with the increasing investment of countries. At a sport overall level, this has led to the homogenization of elite sport development (Houlihan, 2009). At a sport specific level, Andersen and Ronglan (2011) and Newland and Kellett (2012) highlighted a growing divergence among the organization of elite sport policies. Therefore, this article seeks to explain how countries develop a competitive strategy and which policy programs exactly these countries develop to achieve such a competitive position in one specific sport, athletics. The aim of this paper is to evaluate and compare four countries' national resource-configuration to obtain a competitive advantage in athletics (Belgium [Flanders & Wallonia], Canada, Finland & the Netherlands). Such a configurational analysis starts by the development of thematic composite indicators in order to make an evaluation of countries' competitive position.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The Resource-Based View (RBV) conceptualizes strategy as a function of the resources of an organization and the efficiency with which these resources are structured and utilized (Wernerfelt, 1984; Gerrard, 2005). Organizations with more effective resources and capabilities are likely to have a competitive advantage over firms with less effective capabilities. A national resource configuration represents the combination of organizational resources and capabilities in the elite athletics policies of countries. Organizational resources are defined as 'all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, etc. controlled by a firm that enables the firm to conceive and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness'

(Barney, 1991, p.101). A capability refers to the capacity of organizations to combine and organize resources, usually in combination with tacit elements (such as knowledge and expertise) embedded in the processes (Amit & Schoemaker 1993).

On the crossroads of organizational theory and sport management, different authors tried to identify specific internal characteristics contributing to the competitive position of countries and consequently the success in elite sport (i.e. Bar-Eli, Galily & Israeli, 2008; Böhlke, 2007; Wicker & Breurer, 2011). However, these authors did not make a sport specific analysis even though success of countries tends to be concentrated on specific sports or events (SIRC, 2002).

#### METHOD

The framework used in this paper builds on the SPLISS model (De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg & Shibli, 2006), applied to a sport specific context of athletics. It encompasses ten organizational dimensions and 98 resources and capabilities that need to be in place to develop a resource-based competitive advantage in athletics. An integrated mixed methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Srna & Koeszegi, 2007) was found to be best suited for the collection of a comprehensive amount of data on the ten organizational dimensions in these countries. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected through a sport policy inventory, completed by a researcher in each country. Open-ended questions primarily sought to gain insights into the presence of organizational resources (i.e., full time coaches, talent programs, high performance centers), while closed questions were added to specify key characteristics or organizational resources. Thematic composite indicators were developed by the computation of scores of specific indicators (level 1) of the resources in the framework. In a second stage, specific weights were attributed to the different resources in the framework. All scores for each resource or capability were aggregated in order to calculate the total percentage score for each dimension.

#### RESULTS

The international comparison reveals that Finland has a competitive advantage in athletics in 5 dimensions of the framework. Finland has the best scores for financial support (70%), youth participation (88%), training and competition facilities (46%), (inter)national competition opportunities (71%) and scientific support (59%). The Netherlands has the highest score for athletic career support (58%) and coach provisions and development (72%). Flanders has a competitive advantage for talent identification and development with an index score of 75%. Athletics Canada takes the lead regarding the governance and organization of athletics policies (66%). On average, all these countries have a weak index score for dimension 6 training and competition facilities.

#### AIM OF THE PAPER: A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN ATHLETICS

A strategic approach in elite sport goes hand in hand with the increasing investment of countries. At a sport overall level, this has led to the homogenization of elite sport development (Houlihan, 2009). At a sport

specific level, Andersen and Ronglan (2011) and Newland and Kellett (2012) highlighted a growing divergence among the organization of elite sport policies. Therefore, this article seeks to explain how countries develop a competitive strategy and which policy programs organizational resources exactly these countries develop to achieve such a competitive position in one specific sport, athletics. The aim of this paper is to evaluate and compare four countries' national resource-configuration to obtain a competitive advantage in athletics (Belgium [Flanders & Wallonia], Canada, Finland & the Netherlands). Such a configurational analysis starts by the development of thematic composite indicators in order to make an evaluation of countries' competitive position.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW COUNTRIES' ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

The Resource-Based View (RBV) conceptualizes strategy as a function of the resources of an organization and the efficiency with which these resources are structured and utilized (Wernerfelt, 1984; Gerrard, 2005). Organizations with more effective resources and capabilities are likely to have a competitive advantage over firms with less effective capabilities. A national resource configuration represents the combination of organizational resources and capabilities in the elite athletics policies of countries. Organizational resources are defined as 'all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, etc. controlled by a firm that enables the firm to conceive and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness' (Barney, 1991, p.101). A capability refers to the capacity of organizations to combine and organize resources, usually in combination with tacit elements (such as knowledge and expertise) embedded in the processes (Amit & Schoemaker 1993).

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#### METHOD BENCHMARKING ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES

The framework used in this paper builds on the SPLISS model (De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg & Shibli, 2006), applied to a sport specific context of athletics. It encompasses ten organizational dimensions and 98 resources and capabilities that need to be in place to develop a resource-based competitive advantage in athletics. An integrated mixed methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Srna & Koeszegi, 2007) was found to be best suited for the collection of a comprehensive amount of data on the ten organizational dimensions in these countries. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected through a sport policy inventory, completed by a researcher in each country. Open-ended questions primarily sought to gain insights into the presence of organizational resources (i.e., full time coaches, talent

programs, high performance centers), while closed questions were added to specify key characteristics or organizational resources. Thematic composite indicators were developed by the computation of scores of specific indicators (level 1) of the resources in the framework. In a second stage, specific weights were attributed to the different resources (level 2) in the framework. All scores for each resource or capability were aggregated in order to calculate the total percentage score for each dimension.

#### RESULTSDIVERSE RESOURCE CONFIGURATION IN ATHLETICS

The international comparison reveals that Finland has a competitive advantage in athletics in 5 dimensions of the framework. Finland has the best scores for financial support (70%), youth participation (88%), training and competition facilities (46%), (inter)national competition opportunities (71%) and scientific support (59%). The Netherlands has the highest score for athletic career support (58%) and coach provisions and development (72%). Flanders has a competitive advantage for talent identification and development with an index score of 75%. Athletics Canada takes the lead regarding the governance and organization of athletics policies (66%). On average, all these countries have a weak index score for dimension 6 training and competition facilities.

An evaluation of the national resource configuration (i.e. the combination of resources among multiple dimensions of the framework), reveals that resources and capabilities both in Flanders and the Netherlands are strongly tailored to national funding streams, sport programs and training facilities, which facilitates the organizational capacity of the NGB for athletics. Both policy structures in Finland and Canada are characterized by different organizations or structures. The fragmented organization of talent development at a regional and national level create a high dependency on other organizations, their resources and their strategic goals.

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