

WHAT LEVEL PLAYING FIELD? THE DEVELOPMENT OF ELITE ATHLETES IN DEVELOPING SPORT SYSTEMS

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Synopsis:

The purpose of this research, carried out in Papua New Guinea (PNG), was to investigate the system used to develop elite athletes in order to inform elite sport development going forward.

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AIM

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Research investigating elite sport development systems has identified macro-, meso-, and micro-level foci to the factors impacting on the development of elite athletes (de Bosscher et al. 2006, Oakley & Green 2001, Houlihan & Green 2008). This research has identified the 'trend towards a homogeneous model of elite sport systems', highlighted by Oakley and Green (2001, p. 9). This desire for a level playing field, demonstrates a belief in the need for such a system in order to be successful. However, most, if not all of this research has been with developed, western or 'rich' sport systems. Given the increasing costs of participation in sport at the global level and the increasingly competitive nature of this environment (Shibli et al. 2012) the applicability of this 'homogenous' approach to less developed sport systems needs to be considered as these nations also have high performance objectives requiring them to compete within this environment. As the IOC principle of universality requires all sporting nations to compete at the Olympic Games, it is important to understand if the 'playing field' is, or can be level.

METHOD

The research approach was a single case, embedded design and comprised three phases to create a case study of the elite sport system of PNG. Case

study research was appropriate for this research as it makes use of multiple sources of evidence in order to create a picture of the phenomenon under investigation. The first component of the research was a 'state of play' audit that evaluated current PNG elite sport provision using the Macro/meso/micro structure apparent within the elite sport policy literature. The second was an on-line questionnaire of a small number of key stakeholders that further investigated the key areas that emerged from the 'state of play' audit. The final aspect of the research was semi-structured interviews in order to explore a number of issues that arose in the first two parts of the research. The questionnaire data were analysed manually, with qualitative comments being coded using terms associated with the factors perceived necessary for elite sport success. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and subject to content analysis which allowed coding of responses in relation to a number of aspects, such as the PNG context, the role of NFs and the existing system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The sporting culture in PNG can be described as healthy in the sense that most adults are very active on a daily basis and sport is a social activity for many people. The notion that sport can bring positive benefits to a country has been adopted by the government of PNG and sporting excellence as an area of government focus. However, the government has yet to become actively involved in the development of an elite sport policy. There is an absence of a coordinated and focused elite sports system in PNG, in part due to the lack of a current national sports policy. Without a policy to guide the efforts of the various sporting stakeholders, the establishment of a coordinated elite sports system is difficult. In addition, the production of athletes that have the potential to be elite has been largely left to the volunteer-led, under-resourced National Sports Federations, meaning athletes do not receive the comprehensive support needed to produce results at an elite level.

It is clear from this research that PNG's elite sport system is missing many of the factors required for sporting success and those factors that are present are at a basic level. Consequently, there is no elite sports system with genuine high level quality development pathways for athletes. The substantial weaknesses in some areas such as sport science support and facilities require significant investment, suggesting that the elite sport system in PNG is far from reflecting the homogenous model to be found in more developed sport systems. Thus, for PNG, as with many other nations, the elite sport playing field is not level, nor is it ever likely to be. This research calls into question the appropriateness of a range of issues to do with elite sport in PNG, such as the government's stated commitment to sporting excellence and the participation of PNG at the Olympic Games.

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