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## A method to evaluate countries' organisational capacity: A four country comparison in athletics



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### ABSTRACT

An examination of high-performance development studies reveals that a growing amount of research points to a divergence of elite sport policies among different sports or nations. At a sport-specific level, previous studies have identified crucial organisational resources within clubs, leagues or sports, but there is no method to evaluate countries' organisational capacity. Inspired by economic methods to evaluate the competitive advantage of countries, this article provides a method to measure and evaluate the organisational capacity of countries in athletics. The method presents the development of *composite indicators* that can be used to evaluate the key organisational resources in athletics. In addition, the method shows how a *configuration analysis* can be used to review the alignment of resources into specific configurations. Qualitative and quantitative data on organisational resources were collected using a standardised research instrument, a resource *inventory*. This inventory included measures on all the organisational resources identified by [Truyens et al. \(2014\)](#). Illustrated by a four country comparison of the dimension 'governance and organisation in athletics', the results are twofold. While composite indicators represent the development of key organisational resources in athletics, the configuration analysis explains how countries strategically combine organisational resources into specific resource configurations. Therefore, this method can clarify which organisational resources countries develop and how these resources are strategically configured to obtain a competitive advantage.

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## 1. Introduction

International sporting competition represents a continuous battle between countries. The idea that success is 'developable' induces governments to strategically invest in elite sports ([De Bosscher, Bingham, Shibli, van Bottenburg, & De Knop, 2008](#)). Parallel to the increasing investment of governments in their high performance systems ([De Bosscher, Bingham, et al., 2008](#)),

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countries adopt and improve their policies in accordance with the dominant practices of their major competitors (Böhlke & Robinson, 2009).

Researchers have developed multiple frameworks that refer to the common approaches or general policy characteristics of elite sport development (e.g., Bergsgard, Houlihan, Mangset, Nødland, & Rommetveldt, 2007; De Bosscher, Bingham, et al., 2008; Digel, 2005; Digel, Burk, & Fahrner, 2006; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Oakley & Green, 2001). The aforementioned studies refer to appropriate funding, comprehensive policy planning, effective systems of talent development and coach education, training facilities and competition programs as the common elite sport development characteristics. Although researchers agree on the increasing government investment and the homogenisation of elite sport policies, some scientific and methodological challenges remain unanswered.

First, only a small amount of research has focused on the organisation of elite sport policies or the combination of these sport policy factors at a sport-specific level (Böhlke & Robinson, 2009; De Bosscher, 2007; Oakley & Green, 2001; Sport Industry Research Centre [SIRC], 2002; Winand, Rihoux, Robinson, & Zintz, 2012). Additionally, Andersen and Rongland (2012) and Newland and Kellett (2012) highlighted a growing divergence in the organisation of elite sports among different sports and countries. Their research reports that there are multiple ways to develop elite athletes in specific sports. Although many studies agree on the common characteristics of elite sport policy, De Bosscher, van Bottenburg, Shibli, and De Knop (2013) noted that “the optimum strategy for delivering international sporting success is still unclear” (p. 47).

Second, as most research on elite sports has a descriptive nature, there are only a few comparative studies that focus on the specific determinants, or critical resources, of international sporting success, and the measurement of these determinants (e.g., Bayle & Madella, 2002; De Bosscher, Shibli, van Bottenburg, De Knop, & Truyens, 2010; Madella, Bayle, & Tome, 2005). Nonetheless, such strategic assessments and monitoring of how well organisations are able to develop relevant critical success factors (CSFs), in comparison to their major competitors, are crucial to understand their competitive advantages (Rangone, 1997). At a sport-specific level, some authors have identified organisational resources, or categories of resources, within clubs and leagues, that can lead to the development of a competitive advantage (e.g., Bar-Eli, Galily, & Israeli, 2008; Böhlke, 2007; Smart & Wolfe, 2000). Despite these efforts, current research does not provide a method to evaluate the organisational capacity of countries against one another in one specific sport. The current article addresses this issue.

Organisational capacity refers to the ability of an organisation to harness its internal and external resources to achieve its goals (Misener & Doherty, 2009). In this respect, internal resources relate to “all assets, capabilities, organisational 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). On the other hand, external resources, or industry effects, are represented by the competitive rivalry between competitors in an industry, the intensity of competition, and specific barriers to enter a particular industry (Porter, 1990). These external factors determine the position and performance of organisations within the industry (Porter, 1990; Spanos & Lioukas, 2001). This perspective of competitiveness and competitive position represents the Market-Based View (MBV). As the competitive environment is in a state of flux, internal resources are perceived as a more stable basis for strategy development than the external focus of the MBV (Grant, 1996; Makhija, 2003). For that reason, this study focuses on internal resources.

Competitiveness, or competitive advantage, has different levels of aggregation: the level of the firm, the industry, or the country. These levels are strongly interrelated as a country's competitiveness is determined by the international competitive position of its firms (Depperu & Cerrato, 2008). The same can be said for elite sport development; the competitiveness of nations depends on the organisational capacity of its sports or national sport organisations (NSOs) (Robinson & Minikin, 2012). Previously, the SPLISS study (De Bosscher et al., 2010) evaluated the determinants of national competitiveness at a sport policy level, by measuring the CSFs of elite sport systems. The method presented in this article complements the analysis of countries' competitiveness in elite sport as it focuses on the organisational level of elite sport and the resources and capabilities in a specific sport.

The organisational approach used to examine internal resources is a Resource-Based View (RBV) (Spanos & Lioukas, 2001). The RBV has previously been applied to sports-related organisation studies. Such studies have identified which resources sports organisations were lacking or the resources that are significant in order to gain a competitive advantage (e.g., Bar-Eli et al., 2008; Böhlke, 2007; Smart & Wolfe, 2000; Wicker & Breuer, 2014). The RBV provides an explanation why organisations are able, or unable, to develop a competitive advantage as it identifies resources and the role of management in converting these resources into a competitive position, leading to superior performance in the marketplace (Fahy, 2000). From a RBV, strategy represents the process of matching a firm's resources and capabilities to the opportunities that arise in the external environment. Organisational capability represents the end of this process, the ability to manage and organise resources and capabilities to achieve goals (Grant, 2010).

Bearing in mind the arguments outlined above, the purpose of this article is to present a method to measure and evaluate the development of organisational resources and, ultimately, organisational capacity. The focal point of attention is the national level structure of one specific sport: athletics. The method presented in this article attempts to address the need for an organisational approach to compare and understand strategy, rather than to describe policy-level factors or developments. Hence, this method enables a better understanding of the allocation and configuration of resources that lie at the foundation of the competitiveness of nations (Fahy, 2000). Useful methodological insights can be observed in an examination of research beyond the sport sector. For example, in the economic sector the concept of competitiveness has been extensively developed, notably in the fields of international trade, industrial organisation and business economics

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