



A major sports supporter: The Sports Authority of Thailand

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Abstract

The National and Youth National Games have been organized for several decades in Thailand, but they have never been evaluated in terms of their success or whether they meet objectives set forth by various stakeholders. In this case study, the social and economic impact of National and Youth Games towards the host city are analyzed. The major issues including technical problems, marketing and public relations problems are described. The stakeholders involved in organizing the previous Games, SAT executives and also sport associations were interviewed for possible alternative solutions to a range of challenges. The main objectives for organizing the National Games and National Youth Games consist of technical objectives and also social and economic objectives. The major issues are the disparity between the larger cities who traditionally dominate the games, and the qualification of athlete registration which allows the athlete to register to a province in three different ways either by birth place, place of education or place of work. The other challenges are little interest from foreign spectators and local citizens. It is also a concern for SAT that the value of National and Youth Games seems to be diminishing among Thai people in general. The reason may be ascribed to the rapid growth of easily accessible Satellite TV and Cable TV across the country. The solutions are not easy to implement because each alternative also has advantages and disadvantages. Some rules might benefit the smaller provinces while others might benefit the larger provinces. SAT should close the gap by providing more opportunities such as training and reinforcement for the cities that lack of resources, plans and great effort should be made all round.

Keywords: Organization, management, sport event, Sports Authority of Thailand.

Introduction

Thailand recognizes the results of the Olympic Movement as the cooperation of internal and international sport development for better quality human lives (International Olympic Committee, 2013). Utilization of sport as a means of personal efficiency development is important because sport and exercising are the means to develop physical, mental principles which reflect positively on individuals and society and also enhance national reputation. The quotation from our Great Sport King Rama IX applies: "Sport is the most significant to individual and nation lives with correct conducting, with efficiency and capability, of which will gain reputation to oneself and the country, if conducted with politeness will also gain the same reputation and national unity". Sport in Thailand has been promoted and developed by the public and private sector for a long time. The Department of Physical Education was established in 1933 for the promotion of sport and physical education to pupils and youth in school, while the Sport Authority of Thailand (SAT) was established in 1967 for coordination and promotion of sport among people and youth all over the country.

Government also has a policy for local and central government agencies to promote sport and exercise for their own personal ideas. The National Sport Development Plan is the master plan to indicate policy, direction and sets the boundary of sport development and promotion for sport organization including organizations e.g. Sport Authority of Thailand, Physical Education Department and National Olympic Committee of Thailand, etc. This Master Plan consists of six developmental aspects: the development for fundamental exercise and sport, the development for mass sport, the development for elite sport, the development for



professional sport, and the development for technology and sport science and development for sport management (National Sport Development Plan, 2017-2021). The improvement of Thailand sports development is indicated by the number of medals gained in SEA Games, Asian Games and Olympic Games. At the regional level in the Asian area the country hosted the Asian Games four times in 1966, 1970, 1978 and 1998 and on six occasions it hosted the SEA Games - 1959, 1967, 1985, 1995 and 2007 and it also bid to host the Summer Olympic Games in 2008.

The Sport Authority of Thailand (SAT) is the main supporter of elite sport development in Thailand. The major events for measuring the progress of athletes are National Games and Youth National Games. Both Games are multi-sporting events which last for almost 10 days. The National Games have a longer history. In the past the National Games were known as the Regional Games, in which every province in the country were separated into 10 regions, and each regional team sent the athletes representing their regions to participate in the Games annually. However, the name was changed to the National Games. So the structure also changed. Each province sent their athletes to the National Games and Youth National Games. The event had been organized every two years. Since there were large numbers of athletes from 76 provinces, only the large provinces were capable of hosting such a big event. However, SAT started to introduce sponsorship programs and that can bear some value for the host cities. Within a few National Games, there were more provinces which had interests in bidding for the Games, then SAT changed the Games to both National Games and Youth National Games to be hosted annually.

Currently, the large cities are lining up to bid for the National Games, while smaller cities mainly considered bidding for the Youth National Games. Therefore, SAT started the bidding process and evaluated the host cities in more detail. Currently, the results of host cities selection are decided three years in advance in order to give the host cities sufficient time for preparation and construction of the required infrastructure. Annually, the Youth National Games is organized in March, while the National Games is organized in December. Four months before the Games, there are qualifications for numbers of sports in 5 regions. The qualifiers are entitled to participate in the final round at the National Games. In terms of participants, the National Games are open to Thai citizen without any age restrictions while the National Youth Games are restricted for youth under 20 years old. However, it varies by sport and depends on law of the game set forth by each sport association.

The Olympic Movement in Thailand along with Sport Master Plan 2017-2021 intend to promote a better quality of life for citizens through the public and private sector concerning sport. The target groups are:

1. Children and youths, gaining sport knowledge through the development plan for fundamental sport. They will recognize the basic skills of playing and watching sport, within the educational system. The Ministry of Education and the Physical Education Department and Institute of Physical Education will handle this while the outside educational system is run by SAT.
2. General citizens: the development of sport passes through the development plan for mass sport is desired as better health for all is the target. The Ministry of Tourism and Sport and Ministry of Health and also SAT handle this plan.
3. Elite Sport developed for the top athletes is through the development plan for elite sport at all levels. SAT, NOCT, NFs and PFs handle this target group.
4. Professional athletes, the top calibre of elite sportsmen and women will be a greater group than the professional athletes group and operate through the development plan for professional athletes via the development plan for professional sport by SAT and NFs.



5. Sport technical aspects: the development of sport science and technology will be done according to the plan directions by the Bureau of Universities and SAT. Sport personnel, sport administrators, coaches, and all referees will be developed and promoted under the development plan for sport administration by NOCT, NFs, PFs and SAT. The sports organizations include aspects in their agendas relating to: 1) fairness 2) accountability 3) responsibility 4) transparency 5) social responsibility 6) independence and 7) discipline

Problem identification and analysis

Having been organized for several decades, the National Games and Youth Games have never been evaluated in terms of their success or whether they meet the objectives set forth by various stakeholders. In this case study, social and economic impacts of National and Youth Games towards the host city were analyzed. The major issues including technical problems, marketing and public relations problem were described. The stakeholders involved in organizing the previous Games, SAT executives and also sport associations who set the rules and organize the competition, were interviewed for possible alternative solutions. It is critical that all those involved should be considered and be supportive of SAT initiatives as they are stakeholders (Nicolaidis 2015a, 2015b) and have the requisite skills to add great value.

Statement of the major problem(s)

The main objectives for organizing the National Games and National Youth Games consist of technical objectives and also social and economic objectives. First and foremost, the event was primarily viewed as the key platform for identifying the talents for high performance sportsmen and women. Successful athletes can use this platform as a springboard to the higher level such as the national team and for competing at the international level. Second, the sports are getting higher funding from either SAT or other stakeholder sponsorship. Moreover, increasing media channels are available for public to access, and they need sport content. These two reasons immediately increase the interest for provinces to use the Games for public relations purposes. Hopefully, there would be more new money from the athletes, parents, and tourist influx to the community. Moreover, the Games also bring an opportunity for the host city to have new and not only renovated sport facilities. In addition, the improvement of infrastructure such as new roads also comes to fruition.

Besides the economic impact (Cole, 2003), the Games would elevate the profile of the province and can bring more pride in the local community. In some specific areas, sport can be used as a tool for creating harmony between different social groups such as race, religions and social class, for instance, and it may thus relieve the political and social tensions in three border provinces in Southern Thailand.

When we look into the detail of the problems in organizing the National and Youth Games, the above objectives in terms of technique, economic and social have to be evaluated (Charouck., 2011). First, the technical factor can be evaluated in terms of the sporting success, and it often comes to the standard of competitions. If we just glance at the medal table of the National Games and Youth Games, it is not surprising that Bangkok, the capital of the countries, dominates both games since the provincial system was introduced. The larger cities such as Chonburi, Suphanburi, Nakhon Ratchasim and Chiangmai, are also in the top five in every one of the games. This means the provinces with larger pools of athletes have more success. It is not only the larger pool of talent, but also the higher budget in funding sport programs and higher opportunity to access better sport facilities that leads to this situation.

One of the frequent criticisms is the qualification of athlete registration (Supitr, 2011). The qualification of athletes is set by SAT which allows the athlete to register to the province in three different ways either by birth place, place of education and place of work. However,



several experts criticized that this rule created wider disparity between the larger and smaller cities because the province with big money can lure the athletes to represent their provinces by offering them work in the provinces. Although employment contracts are legitimate and the rules have not been breached, in reality, these athletes still study and practice somewhere else, especially in Bangkok. They even worked in Bangkok or other cities. For the small cities, the athletes were normally transferred to other big cities where they find more money to reward them. In addition, the athletes also move to larger cities for better educational opportunities.

The other issues are the competition standard. Normally, the National Games and Youth Games have no limited number of Thailand national athletes, and there it is quite often the case that the national players are pooled in large provinces. As a result, they often dominate the games and crush the opponents from smaller cities. Therefore, the standard of the games and also the athlete registration are issues needed to be remedied.

In terms of economic impact to the provinces, sponsorship plays an important role for coping with issues of expenditure (Burger, 2005). The cost for holding the Games was too high and limited the interest of medium sized cities to host the Games. However, since SAT gets higher sponsorship income from SAT national sponsorship program, SAT can provide more subsidies to the host city. However, the city itself also needs to do fundraising from local governments and private sponsors either local or national. The games definitely create an economic impact by getting needed money to the local vendors, hotels, and restaurants and from the spending of participant athletes, officials, and parents. The expenditure in organizing the games then also goes to local suppliers and benefits the community.

However, there was little interest from spectators (Wiener, 1948). In the recent Games, the TV cameras often showed the stadium with a lot of empty seats. This was despite famous athletes and sufficient advertising and public relations in the cities, but it seems little interest from local citizens is increasing. It is another concern for SAT that the value of National and Youth Games seems to be diminishing among Thai people in general. The reason may come from the rapid spreading of accessible Satellite TV and Cable TV across the country.

The social impact (Nipat, 2012) is intertwined with the interest of the Games. SAT hopes the Games will bring pride and harmony to the local communities. It is quite satisfied with some points. However, little interest from local people and the youth are SATs concern that the Games would not leave any legacy or create the social impact required for the communities as the key objective set forth by SAT.

Generation and evaluation of alternative solutions

In order to close the gap between the provinces, SAT need to consider either changing the rules which can be a combinations of player's province registration and the quota of the national teams, or they can raise the standard of small provinces. When three options for registering players were considered, there are both positive and negative effects of changing to any of the options. Most stakeholders support the option that the athletes should only represent their place of birth as in international games. This would increase the opportunities for increasing the numbers of medals for small provinces. However, there is a disadvantage. The small provinces might not be able to support the athletes or provide quality training facilities. So this alternative needs to be evaluated in supplementary detail.

In practice, the host city often wants to increase their medals for only the year they host the Games, and the athletes also want to transfer and play for the host city because of the incentive reward and amenities from playing for the host city being higher than the others. However, once the Games are over, these athletes do not gain the same reward and amenities for the following years, and some of them are struggling to transfer to other cities. This also creates inappropriate practices and people in the city also do not view them favourably



because they are not their local hometown boys and girls. Therefore, the proposal for birthplace consideration would be more appropriate. (Foreman, 2003).

SAT can also work with national sport associations to set the quota for the national players in each sport. The quota can be varied from sport to sport. This approach would immediately close the gap to an extent. However, the provinces that have several homegrown players representing Thailand would feel that this is quite unfair for their provinces in higher support of the nation. The other option which is the most appropriate is to provide more training opportunities for small provinces. By teaching them to work with their limited resources this can lead to greater efficiency, and this would be more legitimate. For example, there may be special training courses for provinces with poor performance in competition, and also management upskilling opportunities (Pongpeng, 2018).

The host city needs to put more effort in terms of public relations. Currently, very little budget goes to public relations and especially the activities to engage with the local community to involve them more in the games. The volunteers are normally recruited as students in schools or universities because it is easy to do this, and the students also want daily wages in return for their services rather than for offering free services in volunteerism. Therefore, the organizing committee needs to work closely with the local administration, local media as well as national media partners of SAT such as T Sport channel and others (Somphong et al., 2019).

Recommendations

After study in detail, the solutions are not easy to implement because each alternative also has both advantages and disadvantages. Some rules might benefit the smaller provinces some might benefits the larger provinces. Moreover, they might argue that the proposed rule might benefit the provinces which do not put enough effort, but SAT attempts to close the gap by compromising the quality of the top performers. Therefore, more possible approach should not rely on changing rules or limited the registration of the athletes, but try to provide more opportunities such as training and reinforcement for the cities that lack of resources, plans and efforts. Furthermore, greater support is required from all stakeholders as they embark on meaningful and supportive CSR initiatives (Nicolaidis, 2017). In addition, SAT should close the gap by providing more prospects such as training and support for the cities that lack of resources, plans and great effort should be made all round.

Conclusion

The National Games and Youth Games are the major multisport event in Thailand which gains interest in hosting the games from several provinces. However, the standard of the competitions and issues such as athlete movement and player registration were an unfavorable image for the games. SAT who is the owner of the games should come up with new fresh ideas for solving the problems especially in developing the interest among Thai people and the local community.

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