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Public organizations' evaluation: an investigation of municipal sports services in the region of Attica, Greece

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore in-depth aspects of the substantial upgrading of municipal sports services. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted to three Mayors of the Attica region and the Directors of the Municipal Sports Organizations. For interview questions, the Balanced Scorecard Model was used. Financial, customer, internal processes, tangible, and learning and growth perspective were investigated. Results were analysed by "thematic analysis" and showed that there is an urgent need to raise funds through sponsorship. Organizations show great awareness to vulnerable groups, but in terms of technology and innovative administrative applications, limited use is registered. Tangible seem to need upgrading, and staff is not sufficient, and no measures are taken to train them further. Overall, the study shows that there is a lot of room for modernization, and also that the Balanced Scorecard Model is a useful tool for evaluating Municipal Sports Organizations.

Keywords: Municipal Sports Services, Evaluation

1. Introduction

The role of local government can play a particularly decisive role in promoting sport. According to this aspect, in every modern country the central government cooperates with regional, municipal and local authorities in order to promote sport among citizens. Thus, through local government, citizens can benefit from the positive effects of sport ^[26]. Under these conditions, in Greece, as in most European countries, for the past 30 years, "Sport for all" has been promoted by municipal sports organizations with beneficial effects on the physical and mental health of citizens.

The development of sport through local government, although important, albeit there is a lack of studies on this topic. A study published in the United Kingdom highlighted the need to enhance sport at the local level with long-term prospects and by people who have a thorough knowledge of the subject ^[10].

It is true that high-level sport produces significant funds through sponsorships, TV rights and other sources. However, this form of sport is only a small part of the overall sport activities, and the fundamental goal should be the increase of the number of people participating in sports at the local level ^[13].

In addition, the availability of budget funds for the development of sport at local level is an important step in this direction as it will be carried out with a balanced, fair and rational distribution of funding, and through these processes local government structures will be strengthened ^[26].

Organized sport by local government with significant citizenship participation is widespread in many European countries such as France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Spain ^[1, 7, 21]. Over the last few years it has shown an upward trend internationally ^[6].

In Greece, all municipalities provide sports programs for citizens without or with an extremely low price. For this purpose, municipalities have establish organizations and have employed a significant number of Physical Education Instructors. These organizations make use of municipal and public sports facilities for recreation and sport for all.

The main actions of these organizations, according to their websites, are related to the whole spectrum of sport management: They support the "Sport for all" program, sports within schools or clubs, as well as entertaining, cultural, scientific and conferential events.

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They also support disabled people and promote the cultivation of lifelong learning and fair play, away from extreme competition, fanaticism and profit-making goals. Finally, those organizations try to develop sport centers, gyms and fitness programs in order to meet the increased needs of citizens of all ages, as well as sport programs to connect citizens with the nature (mountaineering, trekking tourism, skiing etc.).

1.1 The Balanced Scorecard (BSC)

Any modern organization should be evaluated. The term "evaluation" is referred to as a process that contributes to improving performance and achieving results. Improvement is important for both current and future management ^[12]. A modern, very widespread and multi-level tool for organizational assessment is the Balanced Scorecard (BSC). This tool was developed by Kaplan and Norton in 1990 and was first published in 1992 at Harvard Business Review ^[19]. The Balanced Scorecard method has the potential (ability) not only to provide data on financial measures, but to explore important and critical elements in relation to the organization's performance in the future and in the development and implementation of strategies ^[16].

The BSC indicators are basically related to economic data, but they do not just focus on them. It complements information through three other indicators: customers, internal processes and education and development ^[16].

However, the literature supports the use of this four-dimensional evaluation model after it has been redefined and adapted in order to fit the specific public sector ^[17, 18, 22, 27].

In the case of the Municipal Sports Organizations, it was considered appropriate to adjust the above dimensions and thus to investigate the following factors:

The financial dimension of the economic resources and in particular: (a) the financial contribution of the citizens, (b) the existing state resources and (c) other external resources. The customer dimension that investigates: (a) the financial contribution, (b) the information actions (for health, nutrition, etc.), and (c) the accessibility of disabled people, of the elderly and of pre-school children. The dimension of internal procedures concerning: a) technology and innovative administrative applications, (b) leadership, (c) coordination of sports activities with other activities, (d) coordination of different sports activities, and e) the development of public relations. The education and development dimension of the personnel concerned (a) the way staff are recruitment, (b) staffing, (c) personnel training, (d) personnel evaluation procedures, and (e) further personnel training. The dimensions of the tangible have been added to the above dimensions as a necessary condition for the operation of the Municipal Sports Organizations, concerning: (a) the utilization of facilities, (b) the evaluation of the facilities, (c) the adequacy of the facilities, and (d) the design of new facilities.

1.2. Purpose of the Research

The aim of this paper is to investigate in depth the parameters of substantial upgrading of municipal sports services through innovative programs, administrative reforms, further education, and strategic decisions with a long-term horizon, so that these organizations meet and satisfy the wishes of the customers / citizens in a social environment that changes almost every day. The ultimate goal of the survey is to take into account all the elements that will be collected in order to formulate proposals for further development of the municipal

sports organizations.

2. Materials and Method

2.1 Sample

The sample of the study consisted of 3 mayors of the Attica region and the directors of the sports organizations of the respective municipalities. Initially, the two largest municipalities of Attica, the Athenian municipality and the municipality of Piraeus have been selected, because of their larger resources, more staffing and greater potential for reforms and long-term strategic planning. In addition, the Hellenic-Argyroupoli Municipality was chosen because of its involvement in the management of the big project at the old Athens Airport, as it is foreseen to construct sports facilities in an area that will belong to the municipality.

Sampling politically important cases is best suited to qualitative surveys ^[25]. With regard to the size of the sample, the relevant bibliography states that in qualitative research there are no restrictions on the size and constant rules regarding the sample size ^[14, 25].

2.2. Procedure

After examining extensively the actions and structures of these three sports organizations, mainly via their websites, semi-structured interviews were held with mayors and sports managers in order to collect informations based on the Balanced Scorecard (BSC).

According to Grunig ^[11] there are many cases in which is better to evaluate through quality methods. A lot of information cannot always be gathered with data from questionnaires, because in many cases it is useful to collect more detailed information.

Qualitative methods are also considered to be the most appropriate in cases where opinion and evaluation of governmental and municipal officials are investigated, who can provide in-depth information through the interview. In addition, the researcher can develop a better relationship with the participant through the interviews, which usually means that the participant will provide more honest answers. The interview is the most appropriate procedure in these cases ^[11].

2.3. Interview tool

The interview was based on the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) four-dimensional evaluation model, with the addition of one more dimension. In particular the present study investigated: the economic dimension, the customer dimension, the dimension of internal processes, the dimension of the tangibles, and the dimension of education and development.

2.4. Analysis

The analysis of the data was based on the qualitative analysis and was carried out with "thematic analysis", which is widely used in qualitative research. It is a method of data analysis that identifies, describes and effectively re-encompasses recursive motifs, which in this case are called "themes", which arise from the research data ^[5].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Financial perspective

These research results highlighted that the economic situation prevailing in the Municipal Sports Organizations is not particularly satisfactory, as in most Public Organizations in recent years. The economic crisis in Greece has led to a decrease in income, a decline in wages and pensions, a rise in unemployment, a rise in commodity prices, and a decline in

public spending ^[15]. Under these difficult situations an effort should be made in order to preserve and develop sport through subscription, sponsorship, or even state resources, if there is such a possibility, in order to be financial independent. Municipal Athletic Organizations, due to difficulties in collecting a significant amount of subscriptions and the relative lack of state resources, should make an effort to decrease costs and be more actively involved in sponsorship, especially in the so-called "Cultural Sponsorship". The Culture Sponsorship refers to a two-way cultural transaction and business practice that leads to financial support and has a communicative impact ^[8, 9]. According to the existing donation legislation in Greece, cultural sponsorship referred to as a financial or other form of provision, immaterial goods or services, for the purpose of strengthening specific cultural / sport activities, in return for promotion of the sponsor's social profile and beneficence. Municipal Sports Organizations should turn to this direction, as it seems to be the only way that could actually boost the financial perspective.

3.2. Customer perspective

It seems that a lot of effort is being made by the Municipal Sports Organizations to deal with citizens in order to offer high quality sports services. Social sensitivity towards the economically weaker is demonstrated by the extremely low (sometimes zero) subscription fee they are asked to pay. In order to enhance the profile of the programs, and make them more attractive to citizens and to develop the relationships between the people involved, i.e. the sportsmen, the physical education instructors, the managers, the president and the members of the Board of Directors of the Municipal Sports Organization, it is a good idea during the year to organize some supportive special events.

Such supportive special side events could be: (a) educational events with thematic issues such as: first aid, development of voluntary consciousness, healthy diet, information for disabled people, information on acceptance of diversity, parents of young athletes (b) recreational events such as Christmas celebrations for adults (c) competitive sport events for children, and (d) charity events.

The variety, the organization, the degree of participation, and the frequency of these events can increase the validity of the programs and enhance the role of sports ^[23].

Moreover, all Municipalities show great sensitivity towards disabled people. Particularly, great emphasis has been placed to swimming lessons. It is well known that aquatic therapy is a method of treatment used to address the complexity of patients with kinetic, sensory, learning, psychological, and neurological disorders in order to achieve optimal functional independence and general improvement in quality of life. Physical properties of hydrodynamics, such as buoyancy, viscosity, and thermodynamics, seem to benefit the mobility of people with disabilities ^[2, 28]. Additionally, more actions can also be organized for disabled people, such as Bocce races for mentally deprived people, dancing and ball games with bells for visually impaired people, experiential games that help in perceiving diversity and acceptance, and many other actions which serve the same purposes.

3.3. Internal process perspective

Although in terms of leadership, public relations, internal

coordination of sports programs and coordination of sports programs with other actions such as cultural events, the Municipal Sports Organizations are making significant progress. However, in the field of technology and innovation, they seem to be lagging behind. It is said that innovation is the most important part of the progress of public and private organizations, which contributes significantly to the development of the economy ^[4].

Technology and Innovative can be reached by the use of technological platforms and social media, applications for sports control, information on program changes, cancellations, creation of new pioneering programs, cost reduction, promoting the specificities of the municipality etc. Modern Municipal Sports Organizations should make use of technology and innovation for another reason: to be competitive with the private sector.

3.4. Tangible

As the funds are limited, creation of modern new facilities are not realistic under present financial circumstances. The public sector's bureaucracy creates delays in decision-making regarding issues of material renewal, consumables, repairs and maintenance. The funds are limited and very specific. Significant interventions for the creation of modern new facilities are not realistic, given the economic circumstances. What needs to be strengthened is essentially the function of internal administration, fast decision-making for maintenance and repairs. If these factors work well, it will substantially change the image of the facilities. In addition, instrument safety and cleanliness are considered as important factors in several service quality models, such as SERVQUAL by Parasuraman, ^[3]. QUESC by Kim & Kim ^[20] and Service Quality Scale by Brady and Cronin ^[24]. If, therefore, a particular emphasis is placed on these dimensions, the lack of new and modern tangibles will be largely balanced.

3.5. Learning and growth perspective

According to most service quality models ^[3, 20, 24], personnel plays an important role in organizations' development. Education, willingness and courtesy are considered as very important issues, and although courtesy and willingness cannot be easily ascertained before the employee is recruited, education should be carefully evaluated.

In addition, the field of sports science, as most scientific disciplines, are constantly evolving. This can be easily understood by government policies for dealing with chronic illness and obesity, the development of sports sciences such as biomechanics, exercise biology, sport psychology, motor behavior etc. Additionally, many companies provide new scientific knowledge by improving exercise equipment, producing nutritional supplements and personalized sports programs. Therefore, the issue arises that all sport scientists must be informed about all new information and acquire knowledge on these topics. For this reason, Organizations should invest in further training of the personnel and encourage them to participate in scientific conferences and seminars and/or in postgraduate studies. Incentives such as special permits, work schedules and financial assistance should be provided to cover expenses such as travel, accommodation and conferencing costs.

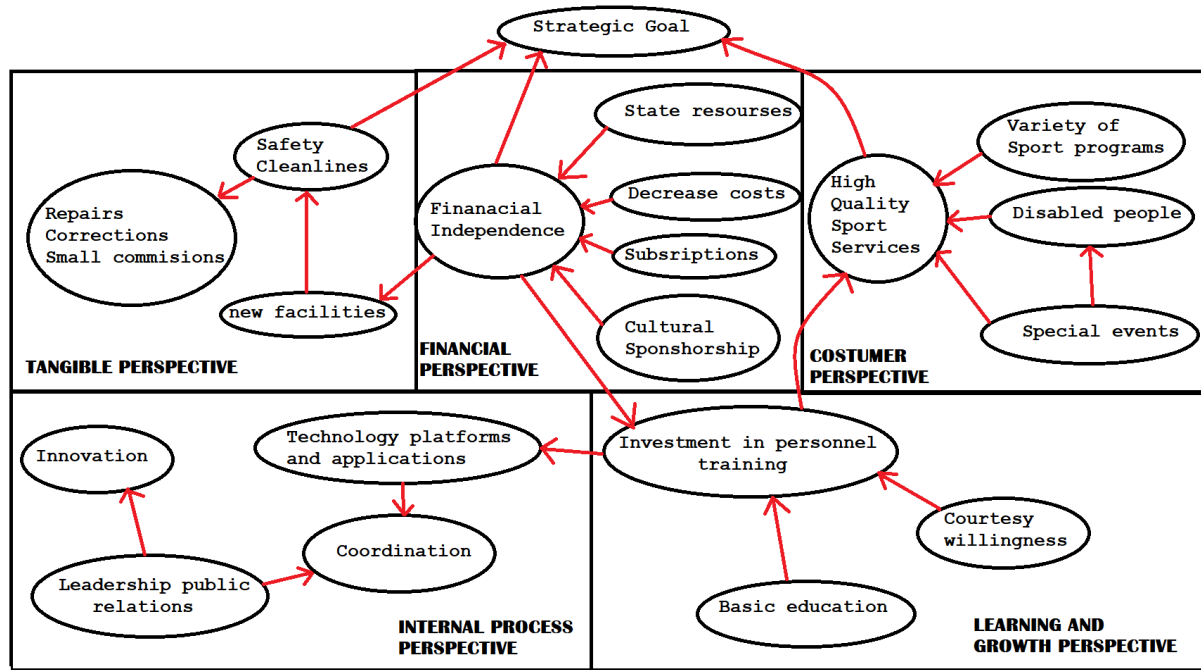


Fig 1: Strategic Goal

4. Conclusions

The necessity of physical activity is well known. Everyone knows the value and benefits of sport participation in physical and mental health. Municipal Sports Organizations have a great advantage in reaching the strategic goal (Figure 1) that is to become the pioneers in the field of sport for all, by providing high quality sports services in a safe environment. This goal can be reached if Sports Organizations are financially independent. They have the advantage to reach the strategic goal because they have scientific personnel, and offer a great variety of sports programs with competitive financial contributions. They should give emphasis on sponsorship and high quality sports programs and tangible in order to attract more participants. Furthermore, investment in personnel training, innovative ideas, technological applications, and giving respect to the vulnerable social groups, can promote Municipal Sports Organizations' services.

Finally, it should be noted that the customized use of the Balanced Scorecard model has given an excellent orientation to this research as the factors of the model seem to cover the most important issues of Municipal Sports Organization.

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