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POLICY
BRIEF

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The Trajectory of Olympic Success: Entry, Sustainability and Efficiency

What do four related studies tell us
about the policy of Olympic
competitiveness?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Research indicates that Olympic success is **not a one-off event, but a developmental trajectory**. The policy challenge extends beyond a country's ability to win its first medal: it is equally important to make that success sustainable and resource-efficient.

The findings show that **winning a first Olympic medal** requires primarily economic and demographic capacity, alongside targeted strategic focus. Winning subsequent medals, however, places greater weight on infrastructure, sport selection and institutional support.

The research concludes that hosting the Olympics **does not substitute for a long-term sport policy system**: the home advantage may exist, but it is neither automatic nor consistent, and cannot on its own guarantee sustained performance growth.

The analysis indicates that Olympic success in a given sport **can be maintained for an average of only 2.1 Olympic cycles**, meaning the central policy question is not merely entry, but building the organisational and funding capacity required to sustain that success.

The efficiency analysis adds that countries' average technical efficiency stands at **0.68**, indicating that significant room remains to make better use of existing resources. Broader participation across sports not only increases expected Olympic output but also reduces efficiency gaps.

KEY POLICY MESSAGES

- Winning a first medal often requires focused resource allocation, but sustained success demands a broader institutional and sporting base.
- Hosting rights or one-off breakthroughs do not substitute for a long-term sport development system.
- The keys to sustainable success are talent development, coaching and sports science capacity, and funding stability.
- Diversification and efficiency monitoring can improve the effectiveness of public expenditure.

Why now? In an increasingly costly international elite sport environment, it is no longer sufficient to monitor whether a country wins medals. The policy question today is how well a country can enter the realm of Olympic success, how long it can sustain it, and how efficiently it converts resources into results.

Normative conclusion: Olympic competitiveness policy should not be organised around a single metric – such as total medal count – but rather around a trajectory logic that addresses entry, sustainability and efficiency simultaneously.

BACKGROUND

The economics literature on Olympic performance has long emphasised the role of GDP, population and other structural factors. From a policy perspective, however, what matters more than the absolute medal tally is the trajectory by which a country achieves its first success, how well it can maintain that success, and whether it can do so in a sustainable and cost-effective manner.

The four studies can be read together in this sequence as a coherent narrative.

- The first examines the conditions for entering the Olympic system.
- The second reveals the limitations of the host effect.
- The third analyses the duration of sustained success.
- And the fourth assesses how much performance can be extracted from available resources and how that distribution shifts across countries.

KEY FINDINGS**1. Entering the System**

- Economic development and population size play a decisive role in winning a first Olympic medal.
- For subsequent medals, raw resource capacity is no longer sufficient: sport infrastructure, targeted sport selection and the quality of athlete development systems gain in importance.
- The policy lesson is that specialisation and strategic focus may be rational in the early stages.

2. Hosting Does Not Replace the System

- Host countries' performance may improve, but this effect is highly variable and cannot be considered a stable source of growth in the long term.
- The visibility and one-off additional incentive that come from hosting cannot, by themselves, build a lasting talent pipeline and performance system.
- Hosting major events should therefore be regarded not as a standalone success strategy, but as an opportunity for institution-building.

3. Sustaining Success Is a Distinct Policy Problem

- Olympic success in a given sport can be sustained for an average of 2.1 Olympic cycles, meaning that breakthrough results can quickly fade without a stable system underpinning them.
- GDP and population remain important, but durability is made more likely by organisational capacity, talent development and funding predictability.
- Policy focus must therefore shift from rewarding one-off success to managing performance trajectories.

4. The Ultimate Question Is Efficiency

- Based on the Summer Olympics from 1996 to 2020, countries' average technical efficiency is 0.68, indicating that substantial room for improvement remains even with existing resources.
- Sport diversification simultaneously increases expected Olympic output and reduces inefficiency — a broader participation base is itself a performance-enhancing factor.
- Inequality declined only moderately between 1996 and 2020, but mobility is real: catching up is possible, though typically gradual, and the position of the leading group remains relatively stable.

The shared policy logic of the four studies

STAGE	CENTRAL QUESTION	KEY FINDING	POLICY IMPLICATION
ENTRY	How is the first medal won?	Initial success requires resources, population and targeted focus.	Specialisation may be justified in the early stages.
ACCELERATION	What does hosting provide?	The home advantage is limited and not lasting.	Event hosting is only beneficial when paired with institution-building.
SUSTAINABILITY	How long can success be maintained?	Success is typically short-lived without a stable talent pipeline and funding system.	Focus must shift to managing performance trajectories.
EFFICIENCY	How much does the country extract from its capacity?	Diversification improves output and reduces inefficiency.	Regular efficiency monitoring is needed alongside the medal table.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Olympic strategy must be planned according to a lifecycle logic

Distinct policy instruments are required for entry, sustaining success and improving efficiency.

2. Specialisation must be complemented with gradual diversification

It may be rational for a small or medium-sized country to focus on a limited number of sports, but a broader sport portfolio must be built in the interest of long-term systemic efficiency.

3 Organisational capacities must be strengthened rather than investing in one-off major projects

Hosting, infrastructure and campaign-style programmes yield returns only when linked to talent development, coaching and sports science systems.

4. Introduce efficiency and mobility indicators alongside the medal table

Public expenditure must be assessed not only by absolute medal counts, but also by performance relative to available resources.

5. Catch-up must be treated as a long-term programme

Mobility exists, but tends to be gradual. Policy evaluation should therefore reward progress across multiple cycles rather than short-term pressure for results.

CONCLUSION



Together, the four studies tell a single policy story. To achieve Olympic success, a country must first enter the system, then sustain its performance, and finally learn to operate its sport development system efficiently.

Those who focus solely on winning a first medal risk mistaking a one-off achievement for lasting competitiveness; those who look only at the medal table fail to see how much potential remains untapped within organisational and sporting structures.

The coherent policy conclusion is therefore that Olympic competitiveness cannot be made sustainable through short-term campaigns, but only through gradually built, data-driven and institutionally stable systems.

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