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THE USEFULNESS OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS A METHOD TO IDENTIFY MASS SPORTS PROGRAM SUCCESS

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Abstract

The importance of the relationship between good health and physical activity is well known. Despite the growth of public mass sports programs in many countries, few evaluate them to ensure they meet their targets. Measuring organizational effectiveness and program success in public sports organizations is difficult and cannot be done directly as it involves a number of complex dimensions involving both internal (organizational) and external (customer) factors. Recognizing this, the paper advances the Appreciative Inquiry approach as a culturally sensitive method to focus on the positives of human experience rather than finding faults or gaps and as a means of identifying the success factors of service delivery. The paper outlines the research strategy to investigate success in Malaysian mass sport programs.

1. Introduction

Physical inactivity, obesity and non-communicable disease rates are increasing globally. In 2006 the 11th World Sport for All Congress highlighted that 60% of the global population is not active enough to gain health benefits; at least 1 in 6 is overweight and physical activity and physical education are declining at school level. This is associated with increasing health problems (Cuban Olympic Committee, 2006; Sport England, 2004). Awareness of the problem is widespread and most nations offer a range of recreational and sporting activities. However, there is little evidence that public sports organizations achieve their goals. This is complicated by the fact there is a lack of appropriate indicators to monitor programs and measure their social and health impacts (WHO European Working Group, 1998). There is also a lack of research on the impact of sports programs on societal health. Indeed “most research has focused on exploring the links between physical activity and various health outcomes, however, this work has essentially been confined to the realm of targeted research and has not extended to routine monitoring and evaluation of service delivery” (Cunningham and Beneforti, 2005, p. 96). We postulate that the determinants of successful sports policy implementation should ideally be explored by examining the effectiveness of public sports organizations.

Measuring organizational effectiveness in public sports organizations involves complex dimensions, which relate to the ability of an organization to generate attractive programs which result in consistent participation from the community (Slack and Parent, 2006). The effectiveness of organizations and programs cannot be measured directly because such measurement involves multiple concepts such as goal attainment, organization structure, systems, processes, competencies, and capabilities (Chelladurai and Haggerty, 1991; Dressler, 2004; Papadimitriou, 2007). These make measuring organizational effectiveness in the domain of sports, especially at the program level, difficult. It is possibly the main contributing factor to the lack of analysis of organizational effectiveness in this field. For example, Weese (1997) explained that, because measuring organizational effectiveness in campus recreational programs across the United States is difficult, less attention has been given to it.

A review of the literature shows many studies on organizational effectiveness but only a few on non-profit sports organizations (Chelladurai and Haggerty, 1991; Daprano *et al.*, 2008; Madella *et al.*, 2005; Papadimitriou, 2007) and fewer have explored the program level (Cunningham and Beneforti, 2005; Weese, 1997; Wolfe *et al.*, 2002). There is thus a clear research gap in this area and a need to explore “what works” in promoting public participation in sports and physical activities. This paper proposes the use of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a means to assess sports program success by exploring the factors which act to enhance the capacity of public sport organizations to fulfill their programs broader aims. The paper focuses on the mass sports programs of Malaysia. We commence with a brief literature review covering the main factors associated with successful sports program delivery before examining organizational

effectiveness, service delivery and organizational capabilities and how these are related to success. The paper then introduces the Appreciative Inquiry methodology as a way forward to identify success in this complicated domain and outlines the proposed research agenda.

2. Sports development and mass sports programs: a Malaysian context

Sports development in Malaysia has been guided by the 1988 National Sport Policy which provides guidance for high performance sport and mass sports development. These activities are supported by the Sports Development Act (1997) which is administered and monitored by the Office of Commissioner of Sports. In 2006, the government introduced the chapter “Developing a Sports Culture” in the Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010 which aims at “creating a sports culture among Malaysians to promote a healthy lifestyle as well as achieve excellence and recognition in sports at the national and international levels; Sports For All (Mass Sports) programs will continue to be promoted to encourage mass participation of society in sports and recreation” (Malaysia Economic Planning Unit, 2006, p. 475). The document established three strategic thrusts for the sports development: first, strengthening the institutional capacity of sports’ associations to promote greater achievement in sports. Second, developing a sports culture among Malaysians through the implementation of various sports programs, and finally promoting active and healthy lifestyles through sports and recreation (Malaysia Economic Planning Unit, 2006, p. 478). This plan also specified a target stating that “50% of Malaysian will be directly involved in fitness and healthy lifestyle activities by year 2010” (Malaysia Economic Planning Unit, 2006, p. 479). To achieve this goal, the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS) of Malaysia promotes participation in sports and physical activities.

There are three agencies under MYS that govern sports: the Sports Development Division in the National Department of Youth and Sports (responsible to enhance participation in sports, recreation and physical activity through mass sports programs), the National Sports Council and the National Institute of Sports (both agencies are responsible to enhance high performance sports). The National Department of Youth and Sports administers and organizes mass sports programs and activities through the Sports Development Division or Sports Development Branch at national, state and district levels. It also organizes cross-sector collaboration with the Ministry of Health, the Department of National Unity and Integration, local governments and with private companies. Mass sports programs include community sports activities; activities for targeted groups such as veterans, women, children and the disabled; education through sports, recreation and physical activities; training programs for sports leaders; and training programs for physical activity instructors. These are conducted either by the department or granted sports associations.

In 2007, the Sports Development Division spent RM 46.7 million for organizing 1,575 mass sports programs which involved 541,159 people (Unpublished Paper, Sports Development Division, 2008). This data indicates that only 2% of Malaysian

communities participate in the programs implemented by this organization. Data from the Sport Development Division shows that the funding for Non Government Organizations (NGOs) for mass sport development purposes increased from RM 2.6 million in 2000 to RM 3.4 million in 2005. This was increased dramatically to RM 123.3 million in 2006 due to the Sport Development Trust Fund, approved by the Cabinet Committee for Sport in 2005 (Unpublished Document, Sport Development Division, 2007). Since 1988, the Malaysian government has promoted sports participation through the “Malaysia Cergas” (Active Malaysia) campaign. Unfortunately, there are no known studies on its success in cultivating active and healthy lifestyles. In fact the obesity rate among Malaysian communities is increasing due to lack of physical activity (Ismail *et al.*, 2002; Zalilah *et al.*, 2006). The Prime Minister insists that a more strategic approach should be taken to develop Malaysia as a “Sports Country” (<http://www.bharian.com.my/>). Concurrently, the Malaysian government is also encouraging all public organizations, including the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Malaysia, to improve service delivery effectiveness for citizen’s benefits (Malaysia Economic Planning Unit, 2006, p. 502).

3. Organizational effectiveness and success in the sports domain

An emerging area of research deals with organizational effectiveness of non-profit sports organizations, high performance sports programs and in campus recreation programs (Madelle *et al.*, 2005; Papadimitriou, 2007; Wolfe *et al.*, 2002). These studies have focused on specific effectiveness indicators but not on the broader factors which enable success in service delivery in line with program mission. Dressler’s (2004) framework of organizational effectiveness comprises: organizational context; corporate and business unit structure; organizational infrastructure; team and individual capabilities; performance measurement and target setting. Literature from organizational theory studies reveal four major approaches to measuring effectiveness: the goal attainment approach, systems approach, process approach and the multiple constituency approach. These approaches assume an organization is an open system comprising input, throughput and output. Briefly, the systems approach relates to organizational input; the process approach relates with organizational throughputs; the goal attainment approach relates to organizational output; and finally the multiple constituency approach is related to all three aspects (Slack and Parent, 2006). The principle of the multiple constituency approach is that the effectiveness measures are dependent upon who is making the judgment (Slack and Parent, 2006; Wolfe *et al.*, 2002).

The approaches have been used to explore the effectiveness of sports organizations (Chelladurai and Haggerty, 1991; Madella *et al.*, 2005; Papadimitriou, 2007) and sports programs (Cunningham and Beneforti, 2005; Weese, 1997; Wolfe *et al.*, 2002). Whilst there has been some debate about the use of the goal attainment approach, systems approach and process approach, most agree that the multiple constituencies approach is the best way to measure effectiveness because it integrates all aspects of

the organizational system, process and structure (Papadimitriou, 2007; Weese, 1997; Wolfe *et al.*, 2002). For example Wolfe *et al.* (2002) used the multiple constituencies approach to examine the effectiveness of Intercollegiate Athletics programs in the United States. They found that perception of organizational effectiveness varied among different constituencies depending on their priorities. The authors identified six themes which determine the perceptions of success of these programs (external profile, resource management, performance on the field, ethics, education and institutional enthusiasm). Daprano *et al.* (2008) supported the findings of Wolfe *et al.* (2002) and added that customers' perceptions of effectiveness are influenced by their judgment of how the stated goals correspond with their own.

Papadimitriou's (2007) multiple-constituency study of organizational effectiveness used interviews with the general managers of the 20 largest Hellenic National Sports Organizations, followed by extensive interviews with members of the Board, paid administrative staff, technical staff, international officials and elite athletes. The study found five dimensions of effectiveness for non-profit sports organizations which encompass the caliber of the board, its perception of effectiveness in terms of policy formulation, decision-making, staff management and external liaisons; interest in athletes; internal procedures and administration systems; long-term planning; and finally the organization's ability to ensure a sports science approach to the technical domain. Papadimitriou (2007) noted that these indicators reflect management and service delivery effectiveness.

There is no direct measure for mass sport program effectiveness (Slack and Parent, 2006) as it involves delivering a human service which focuses on changing people's behaviors and attitudes towards healthy life-styles which include physical activity (Chelladurai, 1992). Thus, exploring effectiveness measures of mass sports programs should be based on aspects of both the management as well as service delivery of the program as well as the capabilities of the organization (Dressler, 2004; Papadimitriou, 2007). Service delivery effectiveness is a factor identified in the literature which contributes to organizational effectiveness. It has been suggested that organizations should establish human resource development programs to enhance organizational outcomes through strategic thinking and effective service delivery (Agere, 2000). One South African study identified six main areas which contribute to the effectiveness of service delivery in health and education services: the international and national legal framework; information collection; publication and management; strategic planning; budgeting and expenditure management; human resource management; and external oversight mechanism (AfriMAP; Open Society Foundation for South Africa, 2007). Each indicator forms a measurement of service delivery which contributes to a better understanding of program effectiveness. The African study found that the gap between policy formulation at national level and implementation at local level influenced service delivery effectiveness. Finally, organizational capability is a factor which contributes to effectiveness. It represents mutual integration of organizational

systems, processes, structure and resources that enables organizations to achieve their strategic goals (Gill and Delahaye, 2004; O'Regon and Ghobadian, 2004). Research in this area is largely confined to private companies and profit-making organizations. Nevertheless, it provides a useful concept of organizational capabilities and their role in predicting successful program delivery.

The complexity of measuring effectiveness of mass sport programs lies in the fact that the outcomes of these programs cannot be measured directly and the judgment of success or “what works” needs a detailed analysis of the program’s development processes. Such an analysis should consider how the combination of organizational mission, strategy formulation, targeted goals, processes, systems, structure and capabilities which lead to successful service delivery of the program. Further, success is also reliant on factors which enhance community acceptance that can contribute to the achievement of the program outputs and outcomes. Since there is no direct measure of the effectiveness of mass sports programs (Slack and Parent, 2006), we propose the use of the Appreciative Inquiry approach, a multiple constituency approach, as an appropriate tool to explore this issue.

4. Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

AI was developed in the field of organizational development and change as an action research methodology to enhance the performance of an entity based on past successful experiences (Yaeger *et al.*, 2005). The methodology is predicated on identifying a success and then probing into what, when, why and how that success was achieved and how it may be used to develop a better plan for future performance. The basic principle of AI is that “an effective way to evaluate and develop organizations is to build on achievements, rather than focus on problems” (Reed, 2005, p. 167). By focusing on the positives of a particular program and assuming that every living system has the potential and strength to generate better future, AI points to a more positive way of evaluating and then repeating success (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). The AI approach can be used at organizational, departmental or individual levels (Yaeger *et al.*, 2005). According to Gilmore (2007, p. 100) AI involves:

“Choosing an affirmative topic for an inquiry; discovering what is working in a system; dreaming or envisioning a compelling image of the future by building on past successes; designing the relationships, systems and process with others that will deliver the future; and looking at how the organization will continue to learn, improvise and sustain its success-in other words, will reach its destiny”.

There are four stages in the AI method which comprise a “4-D cycle” representing the phases of Discovering, Dream, Design and Destiny (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005, p. 16). These are illustrated in Figure 1 and depict how people view a successful service and reveal what, when, why and how the success was achieved and discover new areas that will assist in strengthening future services. As Cooperrider and Whitney (2005, p. 15) explained: “It is a cycle of activity that starts by engaging all members of

an organization or community in a broad set of interviews and deep dialogue about strengths, resources and capabilities”.

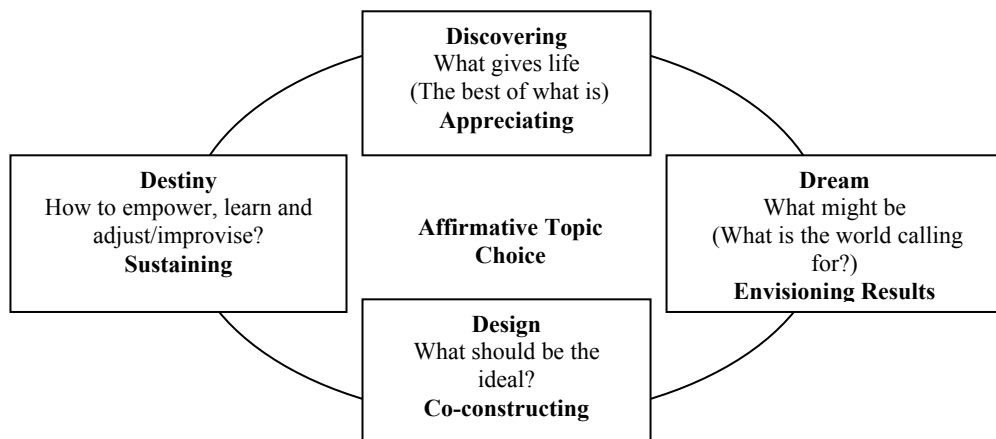


Figure 1: Appreciative Inquiry “4-D” Cycle
Source: Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005, p. 16.

The first phase, Discovering, is where the respondents tell stories about organizational or program successes and the factors that led to the success. This phase constitutes the appreciation of the successful case and the remaining stages represent the inquiry into the success. The second phase, Dream, focuses on respondents’ visions for “what might be” and the third phase, design, is the stage where respondents learn from their successful experiences and associate them with their dream to discover new ways to create “what should be”. In the Design stage, respondents are asked to develop provocative propositions (also called design or possibility statements) which might operate in the future and represent an ideal configuration. The last phase is Destiny where respondents are asked about how to implement the provocative proposition. This stage also focuses on how to sustain a proposition in the organization. All four phases of AI are about learning from past success and using this experience to generate new ideas for the future (Preskill and Catsambas, 2006).

5. The usefulness of AI in program evaluation

According to Yaeger *et al.* (2005) the AI approach has been used in a wide range of settings in both qualitative and quantitative studies. The approach has been used extensively as an evaluation tool in measuring program or project impact (Catsambas and Webb, 2003; Murphy *et al.*, 2004; Preskill and Catsambas, 2006; Reed, 2001). For example, Catsambas and Webb (2003) used AI to evaluate the International Women’s Media Foundation Africa Program and after two years found the use of the evaluation tool had generated a positive impact for the organization and its programs. Farrell, Douglas and Siltanen (2003) used AI to explore the services provided by a college

of nursing in United States. They conducted either a once off, one-on-one interview or a single, focus group event to answer the research question: “in what ways does a college of nursing contribute to the health and excellence of the community it serves as perceived by its internal and external community?” After content analysis, they successfully identified shared values among communities toward the college’s history and vision for the college’s future. They also found that major strength of the college related to the ability of the faculty to provide a successful educational program.

Murphy *et al.* (2004) used AI to measure the impact of a project on the well-being of an Indigenous community in Australia. They conducted a one day AI workshop involving project participants, family members and service providers. The workshop demonstrated “the impact of the project on individuals, service provider and the broader community and aspirations for a way forward” (p. 212). Forty-seven aspirations for a way forward were identified but only three were prioritized as most achievable (a “drop-in” centre, implementing cultural camps and expanding on the existing performances). Another example of study using AI was conducted by Reed (2005) who evaluated the processes of change during the Cancer Services Collaborative Improvement instituted by the Department of Health in the UK. Reed chose AI because it was suitable for exploring the factors that lead to program success and identifying them at performance level despite the complex nature of the issues studied. He explained this was a result of the challenge of “integrating national targets with local initiatives, and with a wide range of aims and goals” (Reed, 2005, p. 166). He used telephone interviews with respondents selected from various employment groups and locations and concluded that “AI has proved to be a successful approach to evaluating change in health care” (p. 174) and noted that this approach could also help in identifying related strategies for future performance.

Clearly the literature indicates that AI can be used as a framework to explore what, when, why and how success has been achieved in order to generate an understanding of how to improve “organization’s programs, processes, products, policies and systems” (Preskill and Catsambas, 2006; Reed, 2005). This tool can be adapted for various settings but its effectiveness depends on how the inquiry process is organized. Although it originated as an organizational development and change method, it has been used widely in various settings including evaluation and therefore it is strongly relevant to be used as a method of inquiry into mass sports programs success.

6. Approach and methodology of the study

AI has been identified as a methodology capable of determining the set of factors which constitute successful program delivery. We turn now to explain how AI will be used in a forthcoming study of success in Malaysian Mass Sports Programs. We have seen that from a review of the literature, organizational effectiveness and successful service delivery are associated with organizational systems, processes, structure and capabilities (Dressler, 2004). However, there is no absolute model for organizational effectiveness and its measures depend on individual intent and priorities (Wolfe *et*

al., 2002). The proposed framework for the study is adapted from Dressler (2004) which specifies five elements of organizational effectiveness (organizational context; organizational strategy, purpose, mission, goals and stakeholders perspective; corporate and business units structure; organizational infrastructures; team and individual capabilities; and performance measurement and target setting). The study will comprise AI interviews, questionnaire administration and documentation analysis to determine the factors which lead to successful service delivery of mass sports programs outcomes. The framework for this research is shown in Figure 2.

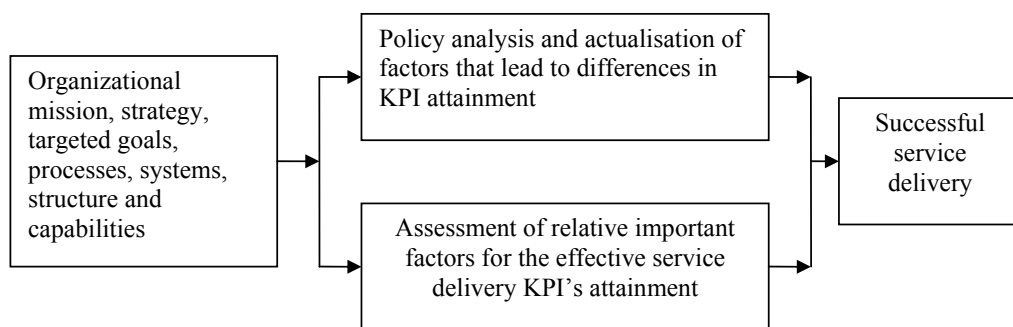


Figure 2: Research framework

This research will answer the following questions:

1. How do the key stakeholders of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Malaysia at national and state level define successful service delivery of mass sports programs?
2. What factors predict successful service delivery of mass sports programs in Malaysia?
3. What are the circumstances or conditions which enable these success factors?
4. What are the factors, circumstances or conditions which predict failure to achieve successful mass sports programs in Malaysia?
5. How can the capabilities of public sports organizations in Malaysia be enhanced to achieve successful mass sports program delivery?

AI was chosen because it is a culturally sensitive approach which focuses on the positives of human experience rather than finding faults or gaps. It is about discovering and revealing rather than analyzing and predicting and this approach is considered a community development tool (Preskill and Catsambas, 2006). Figure 3 shows there will be three distinct data sources. The first is the scholarly literature, government documents and policies in the area of mass sports programs. The second source is an empirical survey with selected sports leaders and senior sports development officers, followed by a set of elite interviews which will involve collection of data from key stakeholders involved in the mass sports programs.

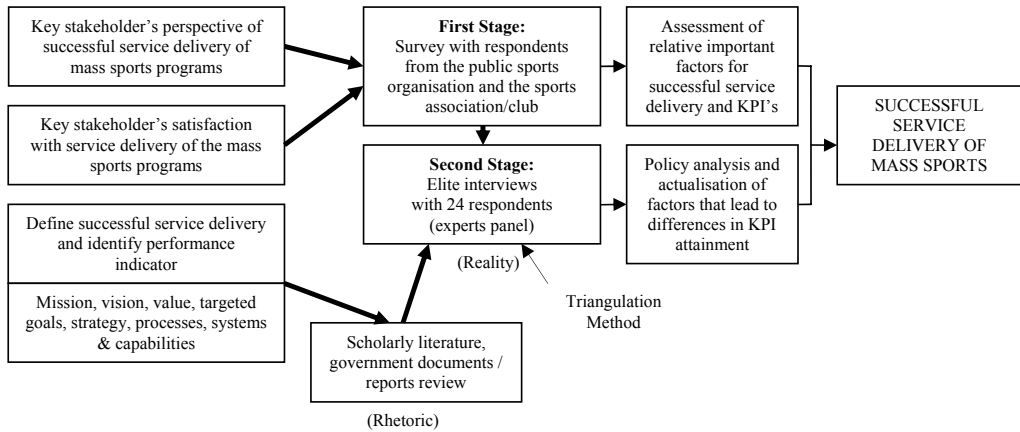


Figure 3: Process of data collection

The survey aims to identify the organization’s key employee and customer expectations of, experiences of and satisfaction with mass sports program service delivery. It focuses on determining the factors that respondents consider to have contributed to the success of the mass sports programs (Weese, 1997; Wolfe *et al.*, 2002). Respondents will be asked for their views on how well the programs are designed and operated; whether they meet their needs and the broader goals of government policy; and to identify successful programs and give examples. This stage is to explore the important factors for successful service delivery of the programs and analyze policy actualization towards successful outcomes. The next stage will involve elite interviews with the key management group of public sports organizations at federal and state level. Elite interviews refer to interviews with “sophisticated people who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon and attached in position of authority or power by virtue of their experience” (Gillham, 2005, p. 54). Elite interviewing provides positives impacts to the study because the respondents are ‘a rich source of information, can facilitate and give direction to the research, and provides access to unpublished information’ (Gillham, 2005, p. 59). Interviews will be guided by the 4-D cycle of AI which consists of Discovering, Dream, Design and Destiny. Examples of the interview questions for AI are shown in Table 1, based on Presskil and Catsambas (2006).

Table 1: Sample of AI questions

AI Questions	
1.	Think back on your experience with the mass sports programs service delivery, and remember a time when you felt most energized and most proud to be part of those programs. What happened? What were you doing? What were others doing? Name the programs and tell the story about those programs.
2.	Why has this program been successful in the past?
3.	What contributed to the success you experienced?
4.	Looking back over the life of the mass sports programs in Malaysia, how do you think they have developed?
5.	When did you know the program was working? How did you know it?

6. What are the greatest attributes and capabilities needed for an organization that is responsible for developing mass sports programs in this country?
 7. How can the capabilities of public sports organizations in Malaysia be enhanced to achieve successful mass sports program delivery?
 8. What does the community expect from your organization?
 9. Based on your best experiences with the mass sports programs service delivery, what are some wishes you have for how the programs might attract more public participation in the future?
 10. Where do you see mass sports programs service delivery in the next five years? Ten years?
 11. How do we sustain our success?
-

These interviews will explore the meaning of successful service delivery, best practice in achieving targeted mass sports programs outcomes, factors enabling successful service delivery of mass sports program and suggestions for the future performance. Their perspectives will be gathered with focus on strategy and policy formulation, goal attainment, decision-making, staff management and external liaisons of public sports organization in delivering mass sports programs (Papadimitriou, 2007; Weese, 1997; Wolfe *et al.*, 2002). Data gathered from the survey and interviews will be analyzed to assess how well the services have been delivered against targeted goals.

Two samples will be developed for this study. The first group comprises a set of 14 members of public sports' key management group (Ministers and Sports Directors) and up to 30 senior sports development officers. These individuals have been chosen because of their key contribution to the achievement of the organization's objectives and they are involved in policy making, program planning and overseeing quality of service delivery of mass sports programs in the country. The second group comprises the public sports organizations' customers who are the secretaries of sports associations and sports clubs from those organizations who received sports development grants in the years 2006, 2007 and 2008 from the National Department of Youth and Sport at federal and state level for the purpose of conducting mass sports programs. There are about 250 sports associations or sports clubs that are expected to be involved in this study. These respondents are important to the study because they are knowledgeable about mass sports programs and their success (and failure) in depth and they have wealth of information associated with questions under this study. Data of factors enabling success and satisfaction levels of service delivery will be collected from both the senior sports development officers and public sports organization's customers. Data for the meaning of successful service delivery and best practice of mass sports program will only be gathered from the public sports organization's key management group. This research will use a purposive sampling method which will involve selected managers in the public sports organizations in Malaysia and sports leaders from selected sports associations and sports clubs in Malaysia. The statistics and details of those respondents are obtained from the National Department of Youth and Sports in the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Malaysia.

7. Conclusions

Measuring organizational effectiveness and success in the domain of sports, especially at the program level, is difficult. Evaluation has been neglected by many sports service providers particularly because of the lack of understanding about the indicators of success and also because the evaluation process is time consuming and difficult to implement (Weese, 1997). The AI approach is proposed here as a suitable method for evaluating success in mass sports programs. Rather than being based on problem solving oriented, it looks into organizational strengths, resources and capabilities. Because it does not focus on finding faults or gaps it is also appropriate in a culturally sensitive study where ultimately the lessons learned from successful mass sports programs will be more readily implemented by other organizations than will a litany of program failures.

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