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REWARD POLICIES FOR SEA GAMES MEDALLISTS: STRUCTURE, INCENTIVE LOGIC, AND SYMBOLIC FUNCTION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

Reward schemes for medal-winning athletes represent a prominent yet underexamined dimension of sport governance in Southeast Asia, particularly within the context of the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games). These schemes encompass financial bonuses, education opportunities, employment pathways, and public recognition, functioning not only as performance incentives but also as politically and symbolically embedded policy practices. Despite their visibility, limited comparative research has examined how reward systems are structured and justified. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative comparative analysis of SEA Games reward schemes across Southeast Asian countries. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with senior officials from National Olympic Committees and national sport governance bodies, supplemented by documentary analysis. The findings identify three interrelated dynamics: fragmented and nationally determined reward structures; a dominant short-term performance orientation shaped by event-cycle funding and political time horizons; and the symbolic deployment of reward schemes to signal national commitment and regional prestige.

By systematically comparing reward practices across Southeast Asia, the study contributes to regional sport policy scholarship and provides an empirical foundation for policy reflection and governance dialogue.

Keywords: Athlete reward schemes, Southeast Asian Games, Sport governance, Elite sport policy

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Introduction

Elite athletes competing in the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) invest substantial time and resources to reach high performance levels. As a regional multi-sport event, the SEA Games serves as a key platform for competitive development and national representation, and for many athletes functions as a stepping stone to the Asian Games and Olympic Games.

Across Southeast Asia, governments recognise medal-winning athletes through various reward schemes, including financial bonuses, education benefits, employment pathways, and public honours. In some countries, military or police induction serves both material and symbolic purposes. However, the scale and structure of these incentives vary considerably, with gold medal bonuses ranging from under USD 3,000 to over USD 50,000. Differences in eligibility criteria, inclusion of coaches, and treatment of team versus individual sports further contribute to variation. Despite this diversity, no consolidated comparative analysis currently exists.

Public information on reward schemes remains fragmented, typically emerging through government announcements or National Olympic Committee briefings during competition periods. Academic research has largely focused on single-country cases or global mega-events, leaving the SEA Games comparatively understudied and limiting regional understanding of how reward policies shape athlete welfare and governance.

Globally, athlete reward systems are often embedded within structured high-performance frameworks aligned with talent development pathways (Botwina, 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). Beyond motivational functions, they operate as governance instruments through which states shape expectations and signal institutional priorities. In Southeast Asia, where elite sport is closely linked to state legitimacy and national representation (Creak, 2020a), reward schemes may serve both material and symbolic functions, reflecting the political embedding of sport governance in the region.

This study aims to examine and compare reward schemes for medal-winning athletes in the Southeast Asian Games across participating Southeast Asian countries. Specifically, the research seeks to:

1. Identify and map the structure and variation of SEA Games reward schemes across national contexts;

2. Analyse the policy rationales and administrative logics underpinning these reward systems;

3. Examine how senior sport administrators perceive the effectiveness, sustainability, and governance implications of these schemes.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the structure, policy rationale, and implementation of reward schemes for medal-winning athletes in the Southeast Asian Games. The qualitative approach was selected to obtain in-depth perspectives from senior sport administrators across multiple national contexts and to enable comparative analysis of governance

arrangements. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, supplemented by document analysis of publicly available policy documents and official announcements related to SEA Games reward schemes.

Participants

The study involved ten senior representatives from National Olympic Committees and national sport governance bodies across Southeast Asia, representing Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Timor-Leste did not participate in the interview process due to availability constraints at the time of data collection. Participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in policy decisions concerning athlete reward schemes for the SEA Games. Participants were identified through the Southeast Asian Games Federation (SEAGF), and each participating country nominated a representative holding a senior administrative or leadership role with responsibility for athlete incentive policies.

Data Collection

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in person during the 33rd Southeast Asian Games in Thailand and online via videoconferencing platforms. Interviews focused on the structure and monetary design of reward schemes, policy rationales, administrative processes, perceived effectiveness, sustainability, and alignment with long-term athlete development. Questions were shared in advance, and all interviews were conducted in English, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (COE 60-594-2-1), and all participants provided informed consent.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following a six-phase approach (familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting). Transcripts were first read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Open coding was then conducted to identify meaningful units related to reward structure, policy rationale, and governance implications. Codes were iteratively grouped into higher-order categories, which were subsequently refined into overarching themes through constant comparison across national cases.

To enhance analytical rigour, coding was conducted independently and reviewed through discussion to resolve discrepancies and ensure consistency in interpretation. Documentary sources were used for triangulation, enabling cross-verification of reported reward structures and policy practices. This process strengthened the credibility and reliability of the thematic findings.

Results

The thematic analysis identified three interrelated themes reflecting how National Olympic Committee representatives and senior sport administrators conceptualise reward schemes for SEA Games medallists. These themes concern structural variation in reward design, short-term performance

orientation, and the symbolic and political dimensions of reward policies. A comparative overview of SEA Games reward schemes across Southeast Asian countries is presented in Table 1 to contextualise the interview findings.

Table 1: Variation in National Reward Schemes for SEA Games Medallists in Southeast Asia (Data as of 2023–2025 SEA Games cycle)

NOC	Gold *Individual*	Silver *Individual*	Bronze *Individual*	Gold *Team (Sport)*	Silver *Team (Sport)*	Bronze *Team (Sport)*
Brunei	**US$7,700** BND 10,000	**US$3,850** BND 5,000	**US$2,310** BND 3,000	**US$7,700** BND 10,000	**US$3,850** BND 5,000	**US$2,310** BND 3,000
Cambodia	**US$10,000** KHR 40m	**US$7,500** KHR 30m	**US$4,000** KHR 16m	**US$10,000** KHR 40m	**US$7,500** KHR 30m	**US$4,000** KHR 16m
Indonesia	**US$59,000** IDR 1bn	unannounced	unannounced	**US$59,000** IDR 1bn	unannounced	unannounced
Lao PDR	**US$2,310** LAK 50m	**US$1,385** LAK 30m	**US$925** LAK 20m	**US$1,540** LAK 33.3m	**US$925** LAK 20m	**US$615** LAK 13.3m
Malaysia	**US$4,900** MYR 20,000	NO PRIZE	NO PRIZE	**US$4,900** MYR 20,000	NO PRIZE	NO PRIZE
Myanmar	**US$14,300** MMK 30m	**US$9,500** MMK 20m	**US$4,760** MMK 10m	**US$4,760** MMK 10m	**US$3,330** MMK 7m	**US$1,665** MMK 3.5m
Philippines	**US$5,100** PHP 300k	**US$2,550** PHP 150k	**US$1,020** PHP 60k	**US$1,280** PHP 75k	**US$640** PHP 37.5k	**US$255** PHP 15k
Singapore	**US$7,700** SGD 10,000	NO PRIZE	NO PRIZE	**US$23,200*** SGD 30,000	NO PRIZE	NO PRIZE
Thailand	**US$9,600** THB 300k	**US$4,800** THB 150k	**US$2,400** THB 75k	**US$9,600** THB 300k	**US$4,800** THB 150k	**US$2,400** THB 75k
Timor-Leste	unannounced	**US$7,500**	**US$4,500**	unannounced	**US$7,500**	**US$4,500**
Vietnam	**US$1,700** VND 45m	**US$950** VND 25m	**US$760** VND 20m	**US$1,700** VND 45m	**US$950** VND 25m	**US$760** VND 20m

Notes: Notes: All amounts indicate cash incentives per athlete (USD equivalent and local currency) based on the most recent publicly available data during the 2023–2025 SEA Games cycle.

Structural Variation and Fragmentation

Comparative data demonstrate substantial cross-national variation in monetary reward levels, medal differentiation, eligibility criteria, inclusion of non-monetary benefits, and administrative responsibility, reflecting nationally determined governance arrangements across Southeast Asia. While all participating countries provide some form of recognition for medal-winning athletes, the scale

and structure of rewards differ considerably. Some systems operate under formalised and documented frameworks that specify fixed monetary tiers and eligibility rules, whereas others adjust reward levels on a cycle-by-cycle basis in response to political leadership, fiscal conditions, or shifting national priorities. As one administrator noted, reward amounts "can change depending on the government and the budget… so athletes do not always know what to expect from one Games to the next" (Senior sport administrator, National Olympic Committee). Such variability introduces uncertainty into athlete planning cycles and weakens the signalling function of performance incentives.

Fragmentation is also evident across sports and event types. Several participants reported that team sport athletes frequently receive lower per capita recognition than individual medallists, despite comparable training demands and preparation intensity. This differentiation embeds an implicit hierarchy within reward structures, privileging individual medal attainment over collective performance outcomes.

Additionally, variation further extends to the inclusion of coaches and technical staff. In certain systems, structured formulas allocate proportional rewards to head coaches and support personnel, institutionalising collective responsibility for performance success. Although administrators commonly attributed these differences to historical precedent and budgetary constraint, the pattern suggests deeper normative distinctions regarding whether elite sport success is conceptualised primarily as an individual accomplishment or as the product of a broader performance system.

Taken together, these findings indicate not only differences in financial magnitude, but divergence in institutional philosophy, distributive logic, and the role of the state in underwriting elite performance.

Short-Term Performance Orientation

A second theme concerned the predominantly medal-contingent structure of reward schemes. Monetary bonuses represent the most consistent component across countries, typically triggered by medal outcomes and distributed shortly after competition.

Administrators described these incentives as effective in motivating performance leading up to the SEA Games, but emphasised that their impact is concentrated around the event cycle. As one senior administrator noted:

"These rewards are very effective at the moment of competition, but they are not designed to carry athletes through the period after the Games. Motivation becomes much harder to sustain once the event cycle ends" (Senior sport administrator, National Olympic Committee of Thailand).

Interviewees also highlighted the economic importance of bonuses, which frequently provide short-term financial relief for household or family expenses but rarely translate into long-term security or structured career pathways. Some administrators further observed that strong medal-

linked incentives may influence federation priorities, with sports associated with higher reward potential receiving greater attention.

Symbolic and Political Dimensions

Participants described the SEA Games as a regional platform for comparison and status-making, where the scale and visibility of reward schemes carry meaning beyond domestic recognition (Creak, 2020b). Although not formally coordinated, awareness of neighbouring practices may influence national adjustments. At the same time, some administrators cautioned that highly visible ceremonies may overshadow longer-term investment needs in infrastructure, athlete welfare, and development pathways.

Discussion

The findings provide insight into how SEA Games reward schemes operate across diverse governance and political contexts in Southeast Asia. While all participating countries implement reward schemes, the scale, administrative authority, and underlying policy logics vary substantially, reflecting nationally determined governance priorities.

Governance Fragmentation and Policy Diversity

The observed structural variation in reward schemes aligns with broader scholarship highlighting diversity in elite sport governance arrangements across national systems (Masismadi et al., 2025). Fragmentation reflects differing political priorities, fiscal capacities, and institutional histories across Southeast Asia rather than simple administrative inconsistency. SEA Games reward schemes operate primarily through nationally determined policy logics, reinforcing a governance model that prioritises sovereignty and domestic flexibility over regional standardisation, consistent with research suggesting that Southeast Asian regionalism accommodates policy diversity rather than convergence (Creak, 2020a; Trotier, 2021).

Short-Termism and Event-Cycle Incentives

The predominance of medal-contingent financial bonuses reflects a policy orientation strongly aligned with immediate performance outcomes. This pattern corresponds with Zhao et al., (2022) argument that elite sport funding is frequently organised around major event cycles, concentrating resources during high-visibility competitions.

In the Southeast Asian context, reward schemes appear embedded within SEA Games cycles. While effective in motivating performance during preparation and competition phases, these incentives provide limited structural support beyond the event period. The findings also resonate with scholarship on the precarity of elite sport labour (Seltmann, 2026). Where reward payments function primarily as short-term financial relief rather than integrated components of career pathways, athletes remain vulnerable to income instability and limited transition support.

Symbolic Politics and National Prestige

Participants described the SEA Games as a regional platform for comparison and status-making, where the scale and public visibility of reward schemes carry meaning beyond domestic athlete recognition (Creak, 2020b). Reward announcements, ceremonial presentations, and headline monetary figures function not only as incentives, but as signals of national ambition and governmental commitment to elite sport. In this context, reward levels become part of a broader narrative of competitiveness, prosperity, and state capacity within the Southeast Asian regional arena.

Although reward policies are not formally harmonised across countries, administrators acknowledged an implicit awareness of neighbouring practices. Public disclosure of medal bonuses and ceremonial practices creates conditions for informal benchmarking, where governments may feel pressure to adjust reward levels to avoid perceptions of lagging behind regional peers. Such adjustments are rarely framed as direct policy imitation; rather, they occur through subtle recalibration in response to perceived regional norms and political optics.

At the same time, several administrators cautioned that highly visible reward ceremonies may generate short-term symbolic capital while diverting attention from longer-term structural investment needs. The emphasis on immediate, headline-grabbing bonuses can overshadow less visible but more consequential expenditures in infrastructure, athlete welfare, and development pathways. This tension reflects a broader political dilemma: whether elite sport success is leveraged primarily as a performative instrument of national prestige or sustained through institutionalised developmental planning.

Policy Implications for Regional Sport Governance

The findings carry implications for sport policymakers, National Olympic Committees, and the Southeast Asian Games Federation. First, fragmented and nationally determined reward structures highlight the need for improved transparency and predictability. Establishing clearer eligibility criteria, consistent communication, and more standardised delivery mechanisms may enhance administrative coherence and strengthen the signalling function of reward schemes for athletes.

Second, the predominance of short-term, medal-contingent incentives indicates the need to better integrate reward systems with long-term athlete development. Complementing financial bonuses with structured support mechanisms such as education pathways, employment opportunities, and post-career transition programmes may contribute to more holistic athlete welfare and reduce reliance on competition-cycle incentives.

Third, addressing disparities between team and individual sports may support more equitable recognition of performance. Revisiting allocation models or introducing team-based recognition frameworks could better reflect the collective nature of elite sport performance systems.

A central consideration concerns the sustainability of reward schemes within existing governance arrangements. Current models, which rely heavily on medal-contingent financial bonuses, may be difficult to sustain over time due to fiscal constraints, political turnover, and shifting national priorities. The variability observed across countries suggests that reward systems are often reactive rather than institutionally embedded. Moving towards more sustainable approaches may involve aligning reward policies with longer-term athlete development frameworks, ensuring continuity beyond individual SEA Games cycles, and balancing immediate performance incentives with sustained investment in athlete welfare, career security, and post-sport transitions. In this context, sustainability is not only a question of financial capacity, but also of policy coherence and institutional stability.

While symbolic recognition remains important for national visibility and prestige, balancing ceremonial display with sustained investment in training environments and athlete support systems remains essential. Although full regional standardisation is neither feasible nor desirable, structured dialogue within the Southeast Asian Games Federation may facilitate knowledge exchange and informed policy learning across countries.

Conclusion

This study examined reward schemes for Southeast Asian Games medallists as an underexplored dimension of sport policy in Southeast Asia. The findings demonstrate that reward schemes extend beyond financial incentives and play central roles in athlete motivation, public recognition, and regional positioning. Three interrelated dynamics were identified: fragmented and unevenly documented reward structures; a predominance of short-term, medal-contingent incentives linked to competition cycles; and the symbolic use of rewards as expressions of state commitment and national ambition. Although they do not consistently support sustained athlete development, they generate public visibility and reinforce the political salience of elite sport. For some athletes, SEA Games bonuses provide temporary financial support within otherwise uncertain career trajectories.

This study is subject to limitations, as it draws primarily on perspectives from senior sport administrators and publicly available documentation. Future research incorporating athlete perspectives and longitudinal policy analysis would further clarify the long-term impact of reward schemes.

Overall, the study contributes to regional sport policy scholarship by offering a systematic comparative overview of SEA Games reward practices and underscoring the importance of contextualised governance analysis. The findings reveal not only variation in policy design, but distinct national interpretations of what constitutes athlete “reward” across diverse sport systems.

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