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# Identifying the Contexts and Causal Factors Affecting the Sustainable Development of Professional Sports in Iraq

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## Abstract

This study aimed to identify the contextual and causal factors influencing the sustainable development of professional sports in Iraq. The research employed a qualitative methodology based on the Grounded Theory approach, specifically following Strauss and Corbin's systematic coding method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 purposefully selected experts in the field of sports development, including policymakers, managers, and academics. Snowball sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives until theoretical saturation was reached. The interviews, ranging from 30 minutes to 2 hours, were transcribed and analyzed in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This process enabled the identification of categories and subcategories contributing to the development of a conceptual model for sustainable sports advancement in Iraq. The analysis revealed two primary dimensions shaping sports sustainability: contextual and causal conditions. Contextual factors included economic resources (oil wealth, corporate investment), geographic advantages (climate and location), human capital (skilled professionals and athletes), public and international policies, and available infrastructure (universities, venues, tourism capacity). Causal factors encompassed public health concerns (inactivity, youth issues), athletic potential (youth fitness, international success), social dynamics (youth interest, inclusion of women and disabled populations), and sports diplomacy (international prestige and cooperation). These interrelated dimensions highlight the importance of strategic planning, institutional alignment, and international engagement. Sustainable development of professional sports in Iraq requires a multidimensional strategy integrating economic planning, human resource investment, infrastructural development, and diplomatic positioning. Iraq's latent potential can be realized through coordinated efforts that embed sports within national development agendas and foster cross-sectoral collaboration. Emphasis on youth engagement, health promotion, and global visibility is essential to drive long-term success.

**Keywords:** Professional Sports, Sustainable Development, Grounded Theory, Iraq, Contextual Factors, Causal Conditions, Sports Diplomacy, Human Capital, Policy Integration.

## 1. Introduction

The sustainable development of professional sports has emerged as a strategic priority for many nations seeking to integrate health, economic growth, social cohesion, and international prestige through sport. Iraq, as a country with a youthful population,



natural wealth, and increasing socio-political engagement, finds itself in a unique position to leverage professional sports for broader national development objectives. However, realizing this potential requires a deeper understanding of the structural, political, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to—or hinder—the advancement of sustainable sports infrastructure and systems. In Iraq, the interconnection between policy, resource allocation, organizational capacity, and social context forms the foundation for evaluating how sustainable professional sports development can be achieved and institutionalized.

Sustainable development in sports, particularly at the professional level, is deeply influenced by global trends that stress environmental stewardship, economic viability, and social inclusion. The concept of sustainability in sports is no longer limited to ecological concerns; it encompasses the development of long-term frameworks for athlete training, sports tourism, equitable access, and governance transparency (Changqing et al., 2023; Dastbarhagh et al., 2023). Iraq's progress in aligning with this multifaceted vision has been gradual but promising. As Pavlović (2023) argues in the context of Serbia, sports tourism and event hosting can function as levers of sustainable development, provided that national strategies support such ventures (Pavlović, 2023). In Iraq, the evolution of sports policies, particularly those targeting the institutional promotion of talent development and regional competition, reflects a growing recognition of this potential (Najmaldeen, 2021).

Moreover, strategic investment in professional sports is viewed as a critical dimension of national development in both emerging and developed economies. The case of Saudi Arabia's sports sector reform, which emphasizes improving quality of life through public and private investment, is particularly instructive (Elshaer, 2023). For Iraq, oil revenue and emerging private-sector interest in sport sponsorship could provide the economic base for a similar trajectory (Rahmani et al., 2024; Rezaei et al., 2019). However, as Rezaei et al. (2019) note in the Iranian context, the absence of coherent planning and a strong professional sports culture often limits the ability of such initiatives to scale effectively (Rezaei et al., 2019).

Parallel to financial considerations, human capital plays a critical role in the sports development ecosystem. Iraq possesses a growing population of educated and motivated athletes and sports administrators. Research by Haidar Eissa et al. (2023) shows how time management and quality talent systems significantly influence stakeholder satisfaction in Iraq's volleyball sector, emphasizing the importance of systemic performance management (Haidar Eissa et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies in other Middle Eastern contexts underscore the role of management capacity, values-based leadership, and talent pipelines in delivering sustainable sporting success (Najmaldeen, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the lack of a unified framework for coaching education, performance monitoring, and scientific training continues to hinder Iraq's full participation in international competitions.

Digital transformation is another central pillar in shaping the sustainable development of professional sports. The integration of electronic marketing and digital engagement strategies is now viewed as essential to growing fan bases, securing sponsorship, and enhancing brand equity for sports teams and events (Tarighi et al., 2017; Torki et al., 2017). In Iraq, the application of these technologies remains underdeveloped, although research by Obaid and Kishore (2022) and Bapir (2018) reveals a growing awareness of social media's role in sports marketing and communication strategies among football clubs in the northern regions (Bapir, 2018; Obaid & Kishore, 2022). As Giroux et al. (2017) have shown, the perceived brand personality of sports organizations directly impacts their promotional effectiveness, a lesson that can be adapted for the Iraqi context as clubs seek to cultivate professional identities and attract commercial support (Giroux et al., 2017).

Cultural and geopolitical variables are also deeply intertwined with Iraq's ability to establish a thriving professional sports ecosystem. Historically, sports have served as both a tool of national unity and international diplomacy. In this regard, sports diplomacy offers Iraq a mechanism to improve its global image and foster transnational cooperation, particularly through regional competitions and bilateral exchanges. According to Taghvaei et al. (2023), aligning sports policy with broader sustainable development goals—including those in public health and education—can amplify its developmental impact (Taghvaei et al., 2023). Similarly, Chatziioannou et al. (2023) emphasize the role of sustainable mobility and transport planning in facilitating liveable sports cities, a dimension worth exploring in Iraq's urban centers (Chatziioannou et al., 2023).

Additionally, Iraq's geographical location and cultural disposition provide unique advantages in expanding sports tourism, particularly in Kurdistan and southern provinces with distinct climates and natural attractions. Hussien and Himam (2022) suggest that with targeted strategy and investment, regions such as Kurdistan can become sports tourism hubs, thereby linking



local development with global sporting circuits (Hussen & Himam, 2022). Moreover, Zhang et al. (2022) highlight how Performance-Status-Response (PSR) frameworks and Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) models can be employed to evaluate competitive sports sustainability—methods that can guide Iraq in benchmarking and refining its own systems (Zhang et al., 2022).

At the strategic planning level, the integration of championship and grassroots sports is critical to ensure long-term sustainability. Pourkiani et al. (2017) stress the importance of balancing elite-level sports with broader participation in order to strengthen the national sports base and generate public support (Pourkiani et al., 2017). This dual emphasis is echoed in the work of Bastami et al. (2023), who argue that lifelong learning and community-based sports education can serve as mechanisms for sustainable sports development (Bastami et al., 2023). In Iraq, where youth form a large percentage of the population, such educational frameworks are vital for instilling values of discipline, inclusion, and resilience through sport.

However, sustainable sports development is not without challenges. According to Zareian et al. (2019), shadow economic activities and informal transactions often distort funding and governance processes in professional sports, especially in fragile economies (Zareian et al., 2019). Iraq is not immune to these risks, which must be addressed through greater transparency, legal reform, and institutional accountability. Additionally, Rowe et al. (2019) underscore the necessity of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs in ensuring that sports organizations contribute to community well-being and are not solely profit-driven (Rowe et al., 2019). These considerations are crucial for fostering a participatory and ethical sports culture in Iraq.

Finally, global models offer valuable insights into how Iraq can build its own framework. Xiang et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of how mega-sporting events contribute to urban sustainability, highlighting the need for long-term legacy planning and integration with city development agendas (Xiang et al., 2023). Similarly, Changqing et al. (2023) emphasize the strategic role of sports events in enhancing infrastructure, tourism, and civic engagement—all of which are relevant for cities like Baghdad, Basra, and Erbil (Changqing et al., 2023). Elshaer (2023) further illustrates that stakeholder satisfaction—particularly among fans—must be considered when designing policies that affect the professional sports experience (Elshaer, 2023).

In sum, the sustainable development of professional sports in Iraq requires a multi-dimensional strategy that integrates economic planning, institutional reform, cultural empowerment, and technological adoption. With abundant natural and human resources, and an emerging policy framework, Iraq holds significant potential to transform professional sports into a catalyst for national progress. Drawing on international experiences, local capacity, and a growing awareness of sport's socio-economic impact, this study seeks to explore the foundational contexts and causal factors that can inform an effective model for sustainable professional sports development in Iraq.

## 2. Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative design based on the Grounded Theory methodology, specifically following the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin. Grounded Theory was chosen due to the lack of pre-established theoretical frameworks concerning the sustainable development of professional sports in Iraq. The approach is suitable for generating theory inductively from systematically collected and analyzed data, particularly in contexts with complex sociocultural variables and limited prior empirical research. The target population consisted of experts in the field of professional sports development in Iraq. This included executive managers and professionals working in sports institutions, as well as academic and scientific specialists engaged in research on sports development. A total of 14 participants were selected through purposive sampling. To identify suitable informants, the snowball sampling technique was applied, wherein interviewees were asked to suggest other knowledgeable individuals who could contribute meaningfully to the study. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Notably, signs of information repetition began to appear after the eleventh interview, but to ensure comprehensive data coverage and validation, interviews were extended until the fourteenth participant. Consideration was also given to ensuring diversity in participant selection, aiming to represent the views of various stakeholders involved in professional sports, including governmental organizations, sports federations, and academic institutions. Interviews were



conducted in a semi-structured format, with durations ranging from 30 minutes to two hours depending on the participant's depth of knowledge, level of engagement, and willingness to share.

The primary data collection tool was semi-structured interviews, designed to elicit in-depth responses regarding the enabling environments and causal mechanisms influencing sustainable professional sports development in Iraq. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions tailored to explore participants' professional experiences, perceived institutional barriers, cultural factors, and governance-related dynamics affecting sports sustainability. The design of the questions was guided by a review of relevant literature and refined through expert consultation to maximize contextual relevance. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and traceability of the analytical process. Field notes and reflective memos were also utilized to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details that emerged during the interviews, contributing to a richer understanding of the data.

Data analysis followed the three-stage coding process outlined by Strauss and Corbin within the Grounded Theory framework. The first stage, open coding, involved line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts to identify initial codes and conceptual labels. This step sought to determine what key ideas or phenomena were embedded in each sentence or paragraph. The open codes were then grouped into categories based on thematic similarities and conceptual relevance. In the second stage, axial coding was conducted. At this point, the researcher identified one central category — the core phenomenon — and systematically related other subcategories to it using a coding paradigm that considers conditions, context, strategies, and consequences. This allowed for the construction of logical connections between categories, thereby revealing the underlying structure of the observed phenomenon. Finally, selective coding was employed as the third stage, integrating and refining the emerging theoretical model. During this phase, the researcher returned to the data to verify the consistency of the narrative and fill any conceptual gaps. The ultimate objective of this stage was to articulate a coherent and comprehensive grounded theory that explains the causal and contextual factors shaping sustainable professional sports development in Iraq. To ensure methodological rigor, constant comparison was applied throughout all stages, and analytic memos were used to document theoretical insights and guide iterative refinement of the emerging framework.

### 3. Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the identified contextual factors that shape the sustainability of professional sports in Iraq. Economic conditions play a foundational role, driven by oil wealth, the presence of powerful industrial corporations, and active private sector investment in sports. Geographic factors such as favorable winter weather and ecological variety support year-round training and diverse sport disciplines. Human resources are highlighted by the availability of talented athletes, a well-educated workforce, and philanthropic individuals supporting the sector. Policy conditions—both domestic and international—are critical, as government strategies and diplomatic engagements align to foster development. Lastly, infrastructure is well-positioned to enable growth, including academic institutions, tourism-related amenities, and natural resources for water-based and outdoor sports.

**Table 1. Contextual Factors Influencing the Sustainable Development of Professional Sports in Iraq**

| Category                      | Key Indicators                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Economic Conditions           | Oil wealth; large oil and petrochemical companies; high investment potential in sports; strong private sector sponsors; trade zones; proximity to rich neighbors                     |
| Geographic Conditions         | Winter-suitable climate; ecological diversity; proximity to countries like Iran and Arab Gulf states                                                                                 |
| Human Resources               | Large population of athletes; educated sports professionals; potential in women's sports; engaged researchers; skilled and patriotic managers; philanthropic donors                  |
| Domestic and Foreign Policies | National sports development strategies; inter-sectoral policy integration (urban planning, economy, education); collaboration with foreign countries; knowledge and capital transfer |
| Facilities and Infrastructure | Universities for sports science; potential for sports tourism; rivers for aquatic sports; numerous hotels and accommodations; natural and open-air sports spaces                     |

Table 2 compiles the causal conditions that either necessitate or facilitate professional sports development in Iraq. Public health dynamics, including rising chronic conditions and sedentary lifestyles, increase the need for active engagement through sports, with additional benefits for the elderly population and national healthcare systems. Athletic potential is another strong causal force, evidenced by existing success stories, youth readiness, and the presence of professional coaches. Social dynamics contribute meaningfully, as Iraq's youthful population exhibits high enthusiasm for sports, and there's increasing inclusivity



for women and people with disabilities. Furthermore, sports diplomacy offers Iraq a unique avenue to gain international prestige, promote national culture, and build cross-border alliances, all of which strategically position professional sports as both a domestic and global development tool.

**Table 2. Causal Conditions Influencing the Sustainable Development of Professional Sports in Iraq**

| Page | Category              | Key Indicators                                                                                                                                                           |
|------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 143  | Health and Well-being | Rise in sedentary lifestyles; increasing youth addiction; computer gaming and mental health risks; elderly health improvement needs; cost-saving health impact of sports |
|      | Athletic Potential    | Youth physical readiness; achievements in international sports; presence of qualified national coaches; broad talent pool of adolescents; national sports heroes         |
|      | Social Factors        | Widespread youth interest in sports (especially football); young demographic; support for women's and disabled persons' participation; civic engagement through sports   |
|      | Sports Diplomacy      | Enhancing international reputation through sports; cultural identity projection; strengthening bilateral relations; using sports as a soft power tool                    |

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to identify the contextual and causal conditions that influence the sustainable development of professional sports in Iraq. The findings revealed a multidimensional set of factors encompassing economic, geographic, human, policy, infrastructural, health, athletic, social, and diplomatic domains. These results collectively underscore that Iraq possesses significant latent potential for the advancement of its professional sports sector, though its full realization is contingent upon systemic reforms, strategic investment, and alignment with global trends in sports development.

Among the contextual factors, the economic dimension emerged as a dominant enabler of sports development. Iraq's vast oil reserves, presence of major oil and petrochemical companies, and potential for investment in sports through private sponsorship and trade infrastructure represent considerable economic capital. These findings align with research emphasizing the role of economic backing in sports sustainability. For example, Elshaer (2023) highlighted the transformative role of investment in the sports industry in Saudi Arabia, illustrating how financial inputs can directly improve quality of life and stakeholder satisfaction in the sporting domain (Elshaer, 2023). Likewise, Rahmani et al. (2024) projected the future of the sports industry through an economic lens, emphasizing the centrality of financial planning and industry structuring in achieving long-term sports sector goals (Rahmani et al., 2024). The current findings mirror these insights and reaffirm that sustainable development in Iraq's sports sector must begin with fiscal strategy.

Geographical and infrastructural factors were also found to be essential contextual enablers. Iraq's diverse climate, proximity to affluent neighboring countries, presence of rivers, natural sports venues, and existing hospitality infrastructure together constitute a foundation upon which sports tourism and event-hosting capabilities can be expanded. These results resonate with Hussen and Himam's (2022) study on the Kurdistan region, which emphasized the potential of regional tourism and sports events in supporting sustainable development (Hussen & Himam, 2022). Similarly, Pavlović (2023) identified tourism-based sports development as a viable path to economic and cultural enrichment in the Balkans, underscoring the global relevance of leveraging geography and infrastructure for sports development (Pavlović, 2023).

Human capital was another prominent theme in the findings, particularly the availability of educated professionals, enthusiastic youth, and committed sports managers in Iraq. This finding is consistent with Haidar Eissa et al. (2023), who demonstrated how talent management and organizational quality affect stakeholder satisfaction in volleyball programs in Iraq (Haidar Eissa et al., 2023). Moreover, Rezaei et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of cultivating human resources and leadership structures in professional sports, particularly in Middle Eastern contexts where institutional systems are still developing (Rezaei et al., 2019). The current study supports the assertion that Iraq's future in sports lies significantly in the strategic training and deployment of its human assets, particularly in coaching, talent scouting, and administration.

Policy-related factors emerged as a critical bridge between contextual and causal domains. The integration of national sports strategies, intersectoral collaboration (e.g., with education, city planning, and economics), and proactive diplomacy were all identified as catalysts for sports development. These results parallel the observations of Taghvaei et al. (2023), who posited that aligning sports policy with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can enhance societal well-being and institutional efficiency (Taghvaei et al., 2023). Additionally, Rowe et al. (2019) demonstrated that the institutionalization of Corporate





Social Responsibility (CSR) programs within sports organizations fosters community engagement and ethical governance (Rowe et al., 2019). Iraq's potential to operationalize such frameworks remains largely untapped but can be significantly enhanced through cross-sectoral planning and international cooperation.

The causal factors identified in the study, including health-related motivations, athletic potential, social dynamics, and the role of sports diplomacy, further clarify the urgent developmental relevance of sports in Iraq. Health was underscored as both a challenge and opportunity, with the rise in sedentary lifestyles, addiction, and mental health concerns prompting a need for preventive intervention through physical activity. Dastbarhagh et al. (2023) emphasized the environmental and health benefits of sport, framing it as a vehicle for sustainable public health development (Dastbarhagh et al., 2023). The dual role of sports as a public good and therapeutic mechanism makes it a key strategy in Iraq's broader health agenda.

Athletic potential—reflected in the presence of successful athletes, competent coaches, and physical readiness among youth—was affirmed as an existing but under-leveraged asset. The study findings support the conclusions of Zhang et al. (2022), who advocated for structured performance evaluation and national talent cultivation to sustain competitive sports ecosystems (Zhang et al., 2022). Moreover, Bastami et al. (2023) proposed the use of lifelong learning approaches to reinforce student sports development, suggesting that educational policy and sports development are deeply intertwined (Bastami et al., 2023). In Iraq's case, a combined emphasis on academic sports training and practical field development would facilitate this synergy.

Social factors, including Iraq's young population, interest in football, and increasing participation of women and people with disabilities, were identified as facilitators of inclusive development. These align with Giroux et al. (2017), who demonstrated that fan engagement and emotional connection with sports brands can drive sustainable community support (Giroux et al., 2017). Obaid and Kishore (2022), along with Bapir (2018), also highlighted the importance of social media and digital platforms in mobilizing fans and promoting engagement, suggesting that Iraq's youth-centered sports development can be digitally amplified (Bapir, 2018; Obaid & Kishore, 2022). These insights support the proposition that the emotional and social appeal of sports should be strategically integrated into development programs.

Finally, the findings regarding sports diplomacy underscore the transformative potential of international engagement. Iraq's ambition to enhance its global image through sports aligns with international evidence on the role of mega-events and bilateral sports exchanges in promoting diplomacy and national prestige (Changqing et al., 2023; Xiang et al., 2023). Chatzioannou et al. (2023) further proposed that infrastructure for sports mobility—such as transport and urban design—contributes to the international appeal of a nation's sports landscape (Chatzioannou et al., 2023). Iraq's participation in regional tournaments, cross-border training programs, and international hosting opportunities could serve not only as developmental milestones but also as soft power strategies.

Although this study provides valuable insights into the contextual and causal factors influencing sustainable professional sports development in Iraq, it is not without limitations. The qualitative nature of the research, while rich in contextual depth, restricts generalizability across all sports disciplines and regions of Iraq. The purposive and snowball sampling approach may have introduced selection bias, as participants were drawn primarily from known academic and professional networks. Moreover, the study focused on perceived opportunities and challenges without quantitatively measuring the impact or performance outcomes of existing sports initiatives. Future studies may benefit from combining qualitative exploration with longitudinal or experimental designs to validate and extend the present findings.

Building upon the findings of this study, future research should aim to develop empirical models that quantify the relationships among identified factors using structural equation modeling or multilevel analysis. Further investigations could also examine sector-specific differences—for example, comparing the development of team sports like football versus individual sports such as wrestling or martial arts. It would also be valuable to study the impact of decentralized sports policies in Iraq's federal regions, particularly the distinct trajectories of Kurdistan and central Iraq. Additionally, integrating athlete and community perspectives could broaden the analytical lens and enrich understanding of grassroots dynamics.

To translate these findings into actionable policies, sports policymakers and planners in Iraq should prioritize the establishment of a national strategic plan that integrates economic investment, human capital development, digital marketing, and international cooperation. Building formal partnerships with global sports organizations and regional federations can help



Iraq acquire technical expertise and infrastructural support. Emphasis should also be placed on developing comprehensive athlete pathways, expanding access to training for women and youth, and leveraging Iraq's geographic and climatic advantages for hosting tournaments. Finally, embedding sports within broader development agendas—such as health, education, and urban planning—will ensure long-term sustainability and national relevance.

### Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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