



Analysis of the Elite Sports Policy Framework in Iran

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to analyze the policy framework for elite sports in Iran. The research method is qualitative with a systematic analysis approach. The statistical population included all faculty members of physical education, managers, and experts from executive organizations, professional sports organizations, as well as scientific documents and resources. A sufficient sample was selected based on theoretical saturation through purposive and available sampling (16 individuals and 28 documents). Research tools included systematic library study and semi-structured interviews, and the validity of the tools was evaluated using qualitative validity assessment methods (content validity). Data were analyzed using coding and conceptual framework methods. The conceptual framework of elite sports policy in Iran was identified in 10 perspectives and is categorized into 5 conceptual levels: elite sports policy framework, the groundwork for implementing elite sports policies, the policy process for elite sports development, strategic maturity of the elite sports system, and the level of development and functions of elite sports. The framework presented in this research provides an understanding of the dimensions of policy development for elite sports based on its relationship with a set of different activities. Based on this framework, an objective evaluation of management activities in elite sports can be conducted, and scientific information regarding appropriate actions that sports organizations need to take for the development of elite sports policy can be provided.

Keywords: Sports development, elite sports, policy-making.

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, elite sports policy has attracted significant attention from researchers concerning the prediction of macroeconomic factors' decline, such as population and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Among these studies, there are similarities and key features that support the international elite sports system, which has been designed by various systems (1-3). Houlihan

(2009) introduces three categories of these factors: contextual factors (e.g., financial support), procedural factors (e.g., talent identification and system development), and specific factors (e.g., training facilities). Recently, research has focused on the analysis of specific sports levels to examine the potential diversity in elite sports policies. This branch of research helps to better understand the factors

influencing the increased chances of success for elite athletes, who are considered the output of the system (4-7).

The primary objective of sports development policy is to engage all people and popularize sports. Two approaches exist in the theoretical foundations of sports development: 1) a bottom-up approach and 2) a top-down approach. In the bottom-up approach, it is assumed that sports development should begin at the lowest levels of the sports development pyramid, and the main objective is to engage all people and promote sports and physical activity. In the top-down approach, the goal is international sports success, where investment is made in the growth and promotion of one or several sports disciplines (8-10). The predominant assumption in the second approach is that elite sports, due to the attraction of medals, ranks, fame, popularity, and financial rewards for athletes, as well as the allure of elite sports, advertising, and marketing, position elite athletes as role models for the public, leading to new individuals joining sports clubs, which fosters participation and competition in grassroots and general sports (4, 11, 12).

It seems that governance and policy-making in elite sports are factors that weigh more heavily in comparison to other sports development factors, and without substantial success and changes in this area, other factors will not experience significant growth. Policy-making and planning for development and welfare in society are among the most important responsibilities of governments. Any type of policy and program stems from theoretical foundations and concepts that are offered concerning the problem-solving aspects of society and the government's agenda. The government, as the agent of national interests, is responsible for the service, welfare, and development of the country and uses policy-making and planning as tools to mobilize resources and direct them. The agenda of the modern state, as the agent of national interests, involves policy-making and decision-making concerning human and material interests to improve the current and future status of society, a process known as development. Any form of policy-making requires adherence to theoretical foundations and concepts that define its main direction and purpose. Elite sports development policy-making is no exception to this rule (13). Policy-making is a term intertwined with governance, government, society, and its public affairs, evoking government action in the proper administration of

public matters. If we associate policy-making with the concepts of governance and management, we will undoubtedly affirm the need for its careful and scientific analysis. For this reason, in recent years, policy-making has attracted attention as a scientific field among scholars, policy-makers, and organizational managers. Policy-making, as an organized scientific discipline, does not have a long history, but it has gained attention in academic circles over the past four decades. Along with conducting various studies and holding conferences, organizations and institutions have focused on research in this area and made efforts to make policies more scientific. Universities and research centers in our country have also initiated activities in this field and have taken practical steps to make policies more scientific, with the establishment of the Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly as one of the scientific-applied centers being an example of such efforts (14).

To elucidate the research problem, previous studies were reviewed. Ehsani et al. (2013), in a study, stated that professional sports are in a critical condition in most components of soft and hard support systems and face many weaknesses and threats (15). Shariati and Goudarzi (2015), in their research, identified ten factors, including international branding and prestige, cultural development, political development, economic development, combatting isolation and sanctions, moving out of the dark side, peace and friendship, national unity, media interactions, and the development of intelligent power, that have been coded. They concluded that the Islamic Republic of Iran, due to its lack of a unified strategy in the field of sports diplomacy and viewing sports as a "backyard," has missed many opportunities to develop its international relations through sports (16). Shabani Bahar et al. (2016), in their study, stated that two external factors, financial support and competitive environments, have a significant impact on sports success (17). Rahimi Pardenjani et al. (2017) also found a significant relationship between achievement goals and sports success. However, no significant relationship was observed between economic capital and the sports success of wrestlers in the conceptual model (18). Moreover, De Bosscher et al. (2006) proposed a conceptual framework for international elite sports success, which includes financial support as a core input recognized as the foundation of sports achievements.

Additionally, eight other factors were identified: an integrated view of policy development, grassroots level, talent identification and development systems, athlete support and post-career assistance, training facilities, coach support and development, national and international competitions, and scientific research (19). De Bosscher et al. (2008) also examined the nine-tier pyramid of factors contributing to international sports success for comparing elite sports policies in these two countries. The results showed significant differences in the organization and long-term planning, financial support, comprehensive development perspectives for athletes, opportunities for coach development, and scientific research in elite sports policies between the two countries. These differences could explain the Netherlands' greater success in international sports arenas (20). Furthermore, De Bosscher et al. (2013) demonstrated a positive and significant relationship between the number of athletes and international success. They also found significant differences in the medal achievements of Belgian athletes compared to Dutch athletes in four of the eight compared sports (athletics, gymnastics, judo, and tennis), with Belgian athletes outperforming the Dutch in these disciplines (6). De Bosscher et al. (2013) also presented three levels (macro, meso, and micro) of factors influencing sports success. The researchers stated that 50% of success factors at the macro level are within the control of policymakers, while this level of sports policies is not influenced by sports policies. Meso-level factors include sports policies, which are easily influenced by sports policies. The results of this level showed that elite sports policies have not yet been fully developed. Micro-level factors include coaches, athletes, and environments (6). Additionally, in this study, nine regions or pillars of the most important factors for international sports success were identified. Funahashi et al. (2015) emphasized that to increase public acceptance of elite sports policies, policymakers should consider the social benefits and values emerging from the community (21). Yuon Gao and Robinson (2017), comparing talent identification and development in China and England by examining the results of athletes from these two countries in world and Olympic competitions, and focusing on the superiority of Chinese athletes over their English counterparts, concluded that factors such as full-time participation of Chinese athletes

compared to part-time athletes, the double volume of training of Chinese athletes compared to their rivals, especially during the early stages of training and talent identification, long-term planning and investment in athletes with potential (those capable of achieving results in the next eight years) compared to podium athletes (elite athletes capable of achieving results in the next two to three years), and providing standard training facilities, with the organization and participation in diverse, numerous, and purposeful competitions, could explain the superiority of the Chinese talent identification and development system over England's (22).

Based on the review of previous studies and theoretical foundations, it can be concluded that the first essential step in designing sports policies for any country is to define and interpret the concept of sports development. Various definitions and interpretations have been proposed for the concept of sports development, and countries also plan and policy for different levels of sports based on their social and economic conditions. Bramham et al. (2001) have defined this concept as sports policies (23). Sotiriadou and Shilbury (2008) consider this concept to include structures, systems, opportunities, and processes that enable all individuals in society to participate in specific groups and categories in sports and recreation and improve their performance to the desired and target level (9). In exploring the concept of sports development, defining three concepts—mass sports, sports participation, and elite sports—is essential. Mass sports refer to the voluntary and free participation of individuals in society in various games, leisure activities, informal sports, either individually or in groups, organized by government and non-governmental organizations. These activities are not organized systematically and are pursued with different objectives. Sports participation, on the other hand, refers to the continuous and systematic engagement of individuals in a specific sports discipline, with the goal of improving sports performance and achieving competitive and other social and economic benefits. In this form of participation, various specialized organizations are active in training athletes and organizing sports events. Elite sports are only a part of professional and competitive sports, with the goal of achieving national and international records and successes at the highest level of sports competitions. Some researchers define elite athletes as professionals who have

won a medal in one of the world championships or the Olympics. Therefore, an individual can be considered a professional and competitive athlete but may not be classified as an elite athlete based on this definition. Of course, this definition can be revised according to the conditions of each country (13). Therefore, the present study seeks to answer the question of what the policy-making model for elite sports development in Iran looks like.

2. Methods and Materials

Given that the subject of the research is the design of a policy-making model for elite sports development in Iran, this study is qualitative, with a systematic analytical structure and an applied purpose. The methodological framework of this research is based on the exploration and framework formulation of determining components from scientific resources and experts. The statistical population included all faculty members in physical education, managers, and experts from executive, professional, and commercial sports organizations. The sample consisted of 16 individuals and 28 documents. The sampling was purposive and accessible, and the sample was consulted accordingly.

The sample for the interviews was selected based on criteria such as having at least two roles from several roles (management, university professor, and experts active in the field of professional and elite sports in the Ministry of Sports and Youth), evident and appropriate role experience, and expertise. Sixteen individuals were selected as the research sample, as this number was deemed sufficient due to reaching theoretical saturation. The research tools included

library study and semi-structured exploratory interviews. The validity of the tools was controlled and evaluated as desirable using the mentioned validation methods. To determine the reliability of the research tools, the internal agreement method was used, which resulted in a reliability of 0.73, confirming the tools' reliability. The research tools comprised two parts: a library study (transcripts and checklists) and semi-structured interviews. Three stages of coding were used: open coding (coding the concepts in the interviews and documents based on their relation to similar topics), axial coding (establishing relationships between the produced categories), and selective coding (the process of selecting the main category, systematically relating it to other categories, confirming the validity of these relationships, and completing categories that require further refinement and development). The coding was conducted using previous studies and expert opinions. Moreover, the analysis of findings was conducted through framework formulation and conceptual coding methods based on systematic analysis.

3. Findings and Results

Based on the analysis of the research findings, the conceptual framework of the research was identified in 10 perspectives and categorized into 5 conceptual levels, which included the elite sports policy framework, the groundwork for implementing elite sports policies, the policy process for elite sports development, the strategic maturity of the elite sports system, and the level of development and functions of elite sports. The details of these perspectives, dimensions, and components are provided in the following:

Table 1

Coding of Identified Components

Dimensions (resulting from axial coding of components)	Components (resulting from open coding of categories)	Frequency of Key Themes
Hard capabilities	Elite sports organizations and centers	5
	Elite sports spaces and facilities	6
	Elite sports financial and commercial resources	11
	Elite sports products and services	6
	Elite sports activities and events	5
Soft capabilities	Elite sports roles and stakeholders	7
	Elite sports knowledge and technology	11
	Cultural and behavioral aspects of elite sports	10
	Elite sports communications and partnerships	12
Principles and assumptions of elite sports	Scientific principles of elite sports	6
	Technical principles of elite sports	4
	Operational principles and framework of elite sports	2

Strategic information of competitive sports in the country	Challenges and issues of elite sports	8
	Needs and goals of elite sports	9
	Capabilities and capacities of elite sports	8
	Elite sports background and achievements	6
National development and policy principles	Legal and regulatory framework of development policy	5
	National policy and institutional framework	6
	Organizational and executive structures for policies	8
	Scientific and technical requirements of development policy	5
	Socio-cultural assumptions of national development	6
International elite sports experiences	Elite sports investment levels in different countries	10
	Competitiveness of elite sports globally	4

Table 2

Components of Policy Development for Elite Sports

Category	Details
Formulation and referral of policies	Determining the current and desired status, policy formulation, program referrals
Implementation and support of policies	Allocation of resources, inter-organizational task division, policy execution
Policy monitoring and evaluation	Policy control, progress assessment, policy improvements

The research identified 110 components through the first phase of coding and reduced them to 27 dimensions in the second phase. The third phase of coding resulted in the identification of 10 key perspectives:

1. **Strategic Capabilities of the Elite Sports System:** This includes the dimensions of hard capabilities and soft capabilities.
2. **Provision of Knowledge for Elite Sports Policy-making:** This perspective encompasses the dimensions of the principles and assumptions of elite sports, strategic information of competitive sports in the country, national policy and development principles, and international elite sports experiences.
3. **Policy Process Efficiency in Elite Sports:** This perspective includes the dimensions of policy formulation and referral, policy implementation and support, and policy monitoring and evaluation.
4. **Policy-making Structures for Sports Development:** This includes the dimensions of policy levels and policy tools.
5. **Participation in Elite Sports Policy Processes:** This perspective covers the dimensions of role participation and institutional participation.
6. **Systemic Capabilities for Policy Implementation:** This includes dimensions such as talent management systematization, scientific and technological advancement, and human capital.

7. **Ecosystem Capacity Building for Policy Implementation:** This covers commercial capacity building, institutional capacity building, and social capacity building.
8. **Development Drivers for Elite Sports:** This includes dimensions such as alignment of elite sports training pathways, internationalization of the elite sports system, and competitiveness enhancement of elite sports.
9. **Sustainable Development of Elite Sports:** This includes strategic sustainability, resource sustainability, and operational sustainability.
10. **Systemic and External Outcomes of Elite Sports Development:** This includes internal system functions and external system outcomes.

The identified perspectives were organized into 5 conceptual levels, which are:

1. **Elite Sports Policy Framework:** Includes the perspectives of "Provision of Knowledge for Elite Sports Policy-making" and "Policy-making Structures for Sports Development."
2. **Groundwork for Elite Sports Policy Implementation:** Includes the perspectives of "Ecosystem Capacity Building for Policy Implementation" and "Systemic Capabilities for Policy Implementation."
3. **Elite Sports Development Policy Process:** Includes the perspectives of "Policy Process

Efficiency in Elite Sports" and "Participation in Elite Sports Policy Processes."

4. **Strategic Maturity of the Elite Sports System:** Includes the perspectives of "Strategic Capabilities of the Elite Sports System" and "Development Drivers for Elite Sports."
5. **Level of Development and Functions of Elite Sports:** Includes the perspectives of "Sustainable Development of Elite Sports" and "Systemic and External Outcomes of Elite Sports Development."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify and present a conceptual framework for the policy-making of elite sports development in Iran. One of the significant innovations of this research is the relatively comprehensive examination of all dimensions and processes involved in the field of elite sports in Iran. In this study, a scientific framework based on qualitative data was identified and explained. The components derived from the qualitative survey were categorized into 10 perspectives and structured into 5 conceptual levels: the elite sports policy framework, the groundwork for implementing elite sports policies, the policy process for elite sports development, the strategic maturity of the elite sports system, and the level of development and functions of elite sports.

At the elite sports policy framework level, the discussions raised by the interviewees were classified into two perspectives: the provision of knowledge for elite sports policy-making and the structures of sports development policy-making. In this study, elite sports policy-making was regarded as an environment and antecedent, whereby, according to experts, the application of principles and assumptions of elite sports, strategic information on competitive sports in the country, national policy and development principles, international elite sports experiences, policy formulation and referral, and policy monitoring and evaluation can provide the necessary groundwork for the development of elite sports. Therefore, by enhancing policy-making knowledge and creating policy structures, it is possible to advance elite sports in the country. In this context, De Bosscher et al. (2006) demonstrated in their research that scientific studies serve as the foundation of sports success (19). In another study, De Bosscher et al.

(2008) emphasized the importance of conducting scientific research on the elite sports policies of Belgium and the Netherlands (20). Hence, it is recommended that managers and officials in elite sports work towards enhancing policy-making by improving the scientific knowledge of their staff and coaches through various educational programs.

At the level of groundwork for implementing elite sports policies, the interviewees believed that two perspectives, ecosystem capacity-building for policy implementation and system capabilities for policy implementation, were effective in advancing elite sports. The codes extracted from the interviews were categorized into two major categories: ecosystem capacity-building for policy implementation and system capabilities for policy implementation. According to the research participants, elite sports can be improved by enhancing commercial capacity, institutional capacity, social capacity, systematic talent management, scientific and technological advancement, and human capital. In this regard, Sabbaghian (2015), in his study on sports diplomacy, showed that sports in countries go beyond physical activity or leisure and have various health, social, cultural, economic, and environmental functions, particularly political standing in international arenas. The international functions of sports have led to increased attention to the role of sports and athletes in conveying a nation's message to other nations within public diplomacy. Moreover, Shabani Bahar et al. (2016) stated that two external factors, financial support and competitive environments, significantly impact sports success (17). De Bosscher et al. (2013) also presented three levels (macro, meso, and micro) of factors influencing sports success in their study (6). The researchers indicated that 50% of the success factors at the macro level are under the control of policymakers, while this level is not influenced by sports policies. The meso-level factors include sports policies, which are easily influenced by policy interventions. Based on these findings, it can be stated that the development of elite sports policy can be achieved by enhancing the elite sports environment and its system capabilities.

The policy process for elite sports development includes two perspectives: the efficiency of elite sports policy processes and participation in elite sports policy processes. The participants in the study emphasized the growth and development of talent in elite sports. In this section, they answered the question of what methods could be used to

improve and develop elite sports. The policy process for sports development consists of two parts: the efficiency of elite sports policy processes and participation in elite sports policy processes. The interviewees believed that if elite sports officials could formulate and refer to various policies related to elite sports, implement and support these policies, and monitor and evaluate them, they could take steps towards the development and improvement of elite sports at the international level. In this regard, Yuon Gao and Robinson (2017), by comparing the development of talent identification and development systems in China and England, concluded that factors such as the full-time participation of Chinese athletes compared to part-time athletes, the double training volume of Chinese athletes compared to their competitors, especially during foundational training and talent identification stages, and the provision of standard training facilities through diverse, numerous, and purposeful competitions can lead to the superiority of Chinese athletes and their talent identification and development systems over England (22).

The interviewees believed that the strategic maturity of the elite sports system includes two perspectives: the strategic capabilities of the elite sports system and the development drivers of elite sports. The codes extracted in these two perspectives include hard capabilities, soft capabilities, alignment of elite sports training pathways, internationalization of the elite sports system, and competitiveness enhancement of elite sports. In this context, Green (2005) considers the development of competitive sports to be the result of three processes: 1) selecting athletes into the elite sports system, 2) retention, and 3) the growth and advancement of athletes (24). De Bosscher et al. (2006) also demonstrated in their research that policy development, grassroots development, talent identification, and system development can contribute to elite sports development (19). Therefore, based on these findings, it can be said that to achieve strategic maturity in the elite sports system, integrated systems of competitiveness and aligned talent training pathways should be pursued.

Finally, the interviewees believed that the outcomes and functions of elite sports development include two perspectives: the sustainable development of elite sports and the outcomes of elite sports development. The extracted codes in these two perspectives were categorized into

strategic sustainability, resource sustainability, operational sustainability, and two levels of internal system development and external system outcomes. De Bosscher et al. (2006) argued that over 50% of the factors determining success at the international level (e.g., global competitions and the Olympics) are macro-level variables beyond the control of sports organizations and managers. In this context, Therefore, to achieve sustainable development in elite sports, resource development and sustainability, as well as performance enhancement, can be utilized.

In conclusion, this model can be described as a structured set of elements that explain the development of elite sports policy. The framework presented in this study provides an understanding of the dimensions of elite sports policy development based on its relationship with various sports activities. Based on this model, an objective assessment of management activities at the elite sports level can be conducted, and scientific information can be provided on the appropriate actions that sports organizations should take to develop elite sports policy.

Based on the findings of the research, the following suggestions are made for the development of elite sports policy in Iran:

Since the primary sources of elite sports policy development were identified in this study, it is recommended that future research examine methods of maintaining and supporting each of these sources. Furthermore, the impact of supportive factors on the creation and sustainability of elite sports policy development should be explored. Since the current and ideal state of Iran's elite sports brand was not addressed in this study, it is suggested that future research identify and analyze the gap between the current and ideal states of Iran's elite sports. The framework presented may have weaknesses and shortcomings; therefore, further research to refine the framework and address any potential weaknesses is necessary.

Authors' Contributions

M. P., M. N. N., and S. A. B. contributed equally to this study on the elite sports policy framework in Iran. M. P. led the research design and coordinated data collection through interviews and document analysis. M. N. N. contributed to the systematic analysis approach, assisting with coding and conceptual framework development. S. A. B. provided

expertise in sports policy and facilitated access to relevant participants and documents. All authors participated in the interpretation of results, discussion, and drafting of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study placed a high emphasis on ethical considerations. Informed consent obtained from all participants, ensuring they are fully aware of the nature of the study and their role in it. Confidentiality strictly maintained, with data anonymized to protect individual privacy. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for research with human subjects as outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

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