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Developing a Paradigmatic Model for Track and Field Development in Iraq: A Grounded Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study developed a paradigmatic model for track and field development in Iraq. Track and field is a foundational Olympic discipline with potential to strengthen public health, youth development, sport culture, international representation, and sport diplomacy. However, its development in Iraq has been constrained by managerial instability, financial limitations, weak infrastructure, insufficient human resources, limited school-based talent identification, socio-cultural barriers, and political-security disruptions. Using the grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 experts, including national and age-group coaches, Iraqi Athletics Federation officials, university faculty members, and international referees. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling until theoretical saturation was reached. Data were analyzed in MAXQDA through open, axial, and selective coding. The analysis produced 177 open codes, 34 axial codes, and five selective categories. The final model included causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. Causal conditions consisted of managerial and financial challenges, infrastructure and human-resource limitations, and education and talent-development challenges. Contextual conditions comprised cultural-social, structural-demographic, and economic-organizational factors. Intervening conditions included political-security and temporary managerial-institutional influences. The proposed strategies included governance reform, human-resource development, talent identification, international engagement, media promotion, technology use, and infrastructure expansion. Expected outcomes included health and sport development, cultural and social development, economic and infrastructural development, and political-international development. The model indicates that sustainable track and field development in Iraq requires integrated intervention across governance, finance, education, culture, infrastructure, and international cooperation.

Keywords: track and field; Iraq; grounded theory; sport development; sport governance; sport policy; sport diplomacy

Introduction

Track and field is widely recognized as one of the foundational disciplines of organized sport because it encompasses basic human movement patterns, including running, jumping, and throwing. As a central Olympic sport, it has historically functioned as a benchmark for national sport development and elite performance systems. Its significance extends beyond competition because athletics can support public health, youth development, social integration, and national representation.

Sport development scholarship has repeatedly shown that sustainable sport systems depend on coherent governance, long-term policy design, coordinated talent pathways, qualified human resources, and sufficient facility provision (De Bosscher et al., 2015; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan & Green, 2011).

The developmental value of athletics is not restricted to medal production. Participation in running, jumping, and throwing events contributes to cardiovascular fitness, motor competence, psychological well-being, and lifelong physical activity. At the policy level, athletics is also important because it is relatively accessible, can be integrated into schools, and provides a basis for identifying sport talent across diverse regions. The World Health Organization (2022) emphasizes that physical activity produces major health benefits and reduces risks associated with noncommunicable diseases (World Health, 2022). In countries affected by social disruption, organized sport can additionally provide structured opportunities for youth engagement, social trust, and community rebuilding (Coalter, 2013; Schlenker et al., 2016).

International sport success also has diplomatic and symbolic functions. Sport mega-events, Olympic participation, and international sporting visibility may contribute to national image, soft power, and external relations when embedded in wider policy strategies (Giulianotti, 2011; Grix & Lee, 2013). For developing and post-conflict states, however, such benefits cannot be achieved through symbolic participation alone. They require institutional capacity, athlete support, coaching expertise, transparent resource allocation, and stable competition structures. The literature on elite sport policy suggests that countries succeed when they align macro-level policy environments with meso-level organizational systems and micro-level athlete development processes (De Bosscher et al., 2006; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009).

Iraq provides an important context for examining these issues. Track and field has historical roots in the country, and the Iraqi Athletics Federation has long been part of the international sport system. The original study indicates that athletics in Iraq was formally institutionalized in the mid-twentieth century and that Iraq previously hosted regional and Asian competitions. Nevertheless, prolonged war, political instability, economic sanctions, institutional disruption, and infrastructure damage have weakened the national sport system. The source manuscript reports that the country has a limited number of standard athletics tracks and that international participation has declined markedly in recent decades. These problems illustrate not merely technical weakness but a broader failure of coordinated sport development planning.

The barriers facing Iraqi athletics are multidimensional. At the organizational level, weak federation performance, limited strategic planning, poor financial transparency, and fragmented institutional coordination restrict long-term development. At the infrastructural level, shortages of standard tracks, training halls, equipment, and technological systems reduce the quality and continuity of athlete preparation. At the human-resource level, the limited availability of specialized coaches, experienced referees, sport scientists, and trained administrators weakens program delivery. At the educational level, the absence of systematic school-based talent identification and weak links between schools, universities, clubs, and the federation reduce the ability to identify and retain young athletes.

The socio-cultural and political context further complicates these barriers. Athletics competes with more popular team sports for media attention, sponsorship, and family support. Traditional attitudes may limit the participation of women in some regions. Uneven facility distribution across provinces reproduces geographic inequality, while bureaucratic constraints and dependence on state funding reduce organizational flexibility. Political and security instability may disrupt competitions, training camps, international travel, and continuity of policy programs. Such barriers are consistent with sport governance

research showing that sport systems are shaped by formal institutions, informal norms, stakeholder relationships, accountability systems, and resource dependencies (Dowling et al., 2018; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Thompson et al., 2023).

Previous research on sport development in Iraq and comparable contexts has often focused on isolated factors such as facilities, finance, talent identification, or coaching. While these factors are important, isolated analyses cannot explain why development initiatives repeatedly fail when the wider system remains fragmented. Sport development is best understood as an interconnected policy and governance process that requires alignment among institutional design, human resources, finance, infrastructure, culture, and evaluation (Houlihan & Green, 2008; Ouyang et al., 2023). Therefore, a systemic model is required to clarify the interaction among causal, contextual, intervening, strategic, and outcome-related factors in Iraqi athletics.

Grounded theory is appropriate for this purpose because it enables theory generation from the experiences of actors directly involved in a complex social and organizational process (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Rather than imposing an external model on Iraq, grounded theory permits the development of an indigenous explanatory framework derived from coaches, federation officials, academics, and referees. Accordingly, this study aimed to develop a paradigmatic model for track and field development in Iraq. The model is intended to support policymakers, federation managers, educational institutions, and sport stakeholders by identifying the systemic constraints and strategic pathways required for sustainable development.

Methodology

This study was qualitative and applied in purpose. It employed the grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin to generate a data-based explanatory model for track and field development in Iraq. Grounded theory was selected because the research sought to identify categories, relationships, and processes from field data rather than test a pre-existing hypothesis. This approach is particularly suitable for complex sport development problems in which institutional, cultural, economic, political, and educational factors interact dynamically (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research population consisted of individuals with direct knowledge of athletics development in Iraq, including track and field coaches, officials and experts from the Iraqi Athletics Federation, university faculty members in sport-related disciplines, and international athletics referees. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and then through snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were at least five years of relevant professional experience, an academic or coaching credential related to sport, sufficient familiarity with Iraqi athletics, and willingness to participate voluntarily. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

The final sample included 20 participants: eight track and field coaches, five Iraqi Athletics Federation officials and experts, four university faculty members, and three international referees. The sample included 14 men and six women aged between 32 and 55 years. This composition allowed the study to capture perspectives from training, federation management, academic analysis, and competition regulation. Table 1 presents the participant characteristics.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions about the main barriers to track and field development, the role of governance and finance, facility limitations, school and university participation, talent identification, media visibility, women's participation, international cooperation, and the expected

outcomes of development strategies. Interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA. The coding process followed three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In open coding, interview transcripts were divided into meaningful units and assigned conceptual labels. In axial coding, related codes were grouped into broader categories and relationships among them were examined. In selective coding, the major categories were integrated into a paradigmatic model consisting of causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. The analysis generated 177 open codes, 34 axial codes, and five selective categories.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through procedures consistent with qualitative research quality criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was supported through member checking, repeated transcript review, and peer examination. Transferability was supported by detailed description of the participants and research context. Confirmability was strengthened through documentation of coding decisions and analytic memos. Inter-coder reliability was assessed by having two coders independently code three interviews selected from different participant groups. Agreement was calculated at the open-code level and reached 90.38%, exceeding the commonly accepted 70% threshold. Remaining disagreements were discussed and resolved before final axial and selective coding.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

No.	Gender	Age	Description
1	Male	45	National team track and field coach
2	Male	42	National team track and field coach
3	Female	38	National team track and field coach
4	Male	40	National team track and field coach
5	Male	35	Age-group track and field coach
6	Female	32	Age-group track and field coach
7	Male	36	Age-group track and field coach
8	Male	34	Age-group track and field coach
9	Male	50	Director of Education and Athlete Development, Federation
10	Female	48	Director of Competitions and Planning, Federation
11	Male	46	Secretary of the Talent Identification Committee, Federation
12	Male	44	Development and Infrastructure Expert, Federation
13	Female	42	Coordinator of Leagues and Age-Group Competitions, Federation
14	Male	55	University faculty member
15	Female	50	University faculty member
16	Male	48	University faculty member
17	Male	52	University faculty member
18	Male	40	International athletics referee
19	Female	38	International athletics referee
20	Male	41	International athletics referee

Research Findings

The grounded theory analysis produced five integrated components of the paradigmatic model: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. As shown in Table 1, the expert panel represented the principal stakeholder groups involved in Iraqi athletics. The coding process generated 177 open codes, 34 axial codes, and five selective categories. The results were condensed into two analytical tables to maintain manuscript readability while preserving the conceptual pathway from codes to categories.

Causal conditions refer to the factors that directly generated or intensified the underdevelopment of track and field in Iraq. The analysis identified 28 open codes in this component. These codes were grouped into managerial and financial challenges, infrastructure and human-resource limitations, and educational and talent-development challenges. The first

group included weak federation performance, limited strategic planning, poor financial transparency, weak institutional unity, and insufficient investment. The second group included shortage of standard facilities, lack of specialized tracks, insufficient specialized human resources, weak coach education, and limited use of expert knowledge. The third group included weak school-based talent identification, limited competitions, insufficient training camps, and poor technical exchange with other countries.

Contextual conditions describe the cultural, social, demographic, economic, and organizational environment in which development strategies must be implemented. The study identified 29 open codes in this component. Cultural-social factors included the low cultural status of athletics, limited public awareness, weak media support, preference for team sports, traditional constraints affecting women's participation, and the influence of family socioeconomic status on sport choice. Structural-demographic factors included uneven facility distribution, concentration of resources in major cities, climatic diversity, geographic dispersion, and the potential of Iraq's young population. Economic-organizational factors included dependence on public funding, legal and bureaucratic constraints, limited foreign investment, and weak private-sector engagement.

Intervening conditions were structural and temporary factors that could facilitate or restrict the effectiveness of development strategies. The analysis identified 21 open codes in this component. Political-security factors included changes in government sport policy, political pressure on the federation, unstable security conditions, regional tensions, disruptions to competitions, and restrictions on training camps. Temporary managerial-institutional factors included frequent leadership changes, changing budget priorities, short-term decisions by senior managers, organizational resistance to change, discontinuity of programs, visa restrictions, equipment sanctions, and limited contact with international federations. These factors indicate that development strategies in Iraq must be resilient to political and institutional volatility.

Strategies represented the proposed actions for managing the central phenomenon of track and field development. The analysis identified 59 open codes grouped into four strategic domains: management and policymaking, education and human-resource development, promotion and international engagement, and infrastructure and technology. These strategies included restructuring the federation, strengthening technical committees, improving financial supervision, creating a development fund, establishing partnerships with schools and universities, developing coaches, using foreign expertise, integrating athletics into schools, organizing continuous competitions, promoting athletics through media, supporting young athletes, using digital management systems, and constructing and maintaining athletics facilities. Table 2 summarizes the central phenomenon and the main categories affecting athletics development.

Table 2. Components of the Paradigmatic Model for Track and Field Development in Iraq

Component	Axial categories	Condensed open-code content
Central phenomenon	Track and field development in Iraq	The core process around which the model was constructed; it reflects the need to transform fragmented athletics activities into an integrated national development system.
Causal conditions	Managerial and financial challenges; infrastructure and human-resource limitations; educational and talent-development challenges	Twenty-eight open codes, including weak federation performance, lack of strategic planning, poor budget transparency, insufficient investment, shortage of standard tracks, weak coach education, absence of continuous training, insufficient competitions, weak school-based talent identification, and limited technical exchange.
Contextual conditions	Cultural-social factors; structural-demographic factors; economic-organizational factors	Twenty-nine open codes, including low cultural status of athletics, weak media support, preference for team sports, traditional constraints, family socioeconomic influence, uneven facility distribution, geographic diversity, young population potential, dependence on public funding, bureaucratic constraints, and limited private-sector engagement.
Intervening conditions	Political-security influences; temporary managerial-institutional influences	Twenty-one open codes, including policy volatility, political pressure, regional instability, security disruptions, competition interruptions, frequent leadership changes, shifting budget priorities, lack of program continuity, visa restrictions, sanctions on equipment, and weak relations with international federations.
Strategies	Management and policymaking; education and human-resource development; promotion and international engagement; infrastructure and technology	Fifty-nine open codes, including federation restructuring, strategic planning, financial supervision, development funds, coach education, school integration, talent centers, continuous competitions, media campaigns, international cooperation, athlete support, digital management, technology use, track construction, and facility maintenance.

Consequences	Health and sport development; cultural and social development; economic and infrastructural development; political-international development	Forty open codes, including improved fitness, public health, mental health, social cohesion, national pride, women's participation, life skills, employment creation, sport industry growth, tourism, infrastructure expansion, diplomatic visibility, international cooperation, and participation in international competitions.
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Table 2 shows that the development of track and field in Iraq is not constrained by one isolated problem. Instead, it is shaped by an interaction among governance weakness, financial limitations, infrastructure deficits, insufficient human resources, cultural barriers, and political-security instability. The causal conditions generate the basic constraints of the system, whereas contextual and intervening conditions determine whether strategies can be implemented effectively.

Consequences were defined as the expected outcomes of implementing the proposed strategies. The analysis identified 40 open codes grouped into health and sport development, cultural and social development, economic and infrastructural development, and political-international development. Health and sport outcomes included improved fitness, public health, reduced physical inactivity, and better mental health. Cultural and social outcomes included stronger social relations, national pride, women's participation, discipline, responsibility, confidence, and life skills. Economic and infrastructural outcomes included job creation, development of sport equipment industries, reduced healthcare costs, non-oil revenue, sport tourism, local facility development, and improved public access to sport facilities. Political-international outcomes included sport diplomacy, improved international image, stronger regional cooperation, and increased participation in international competitions.

Table 3 presents the strategic actions and expected outcomes. The table demonstrates that the strategies are multidimensional and mutually reinforcing. Management reform is necessary but insufficient without school-based talent pathways, human-resource development, media promotion, technology adoption, and infrastructure investment. Similarly, facility construction alone cannot generate sustainable development if governance, financing, coaching, competition pathways, and social legitimacy remain weak.

Table 3. Strategic Actions and Expected Outcomes for Track and Field Development in Iraq

Strategic domain	Main actions	Expected outcomes
Management and policymaking	Granting stronger authority to technical committees; restructuring the federation; strengthening provincial boards; creating a national strategic plan; improving financial supervision; revising legal frameworks; increasing institutional authority; designing domestic and foreign investment strategies; creating an athletics development fund; and strengthening coordination with schools and public institutions.	Improved governance coherence; greater transparency; stronger accountability; increased funding diversity; more stable long-term development planning.
Education and human-resource development	Developing coaches; cooperating with World Athletics and foreign federations; sending young coaches and referees to international courses; visiting advanced facilities; using foreign experts; integrating athletics into schools; assigning athletics specialists to schools; establishing talent centers; and using standardized tests to identify youth talent.	Stronger coaching quality; improved technical expertise; systematic school-to-club talent pathways; higher retention of young athletes; increased technical learning.
Promotion and international engagement	Organizing regular training programs and competitions; holding long-term camps; using national champions as role models; funding events through advertising; promoting athletics through media and social networks; covering competitions; attracting spectators; networking with specialized centers; supporting young athletes; providing transport and financial support; and organizing local festivals and seminars.	Improved social visibility; increased youth participation; stronger family and community support; wider sponsorship appeal; better competitive readiness; stronger regional and international links.
Infrastructure and technology	Using modern teaching methods; modernizing digital management systems; applying smart technologies in training; conducting scientific studies; building athletics tracks and halls; distributing facilities across provinces; maintaining infrastructure; appointing technical staff in each province; and using parks, green spaces, and school facilities for athletics training.	Improved training environments; expanded access; better data management; stronger facility equity; reduced geographic exclusion; more sustainable athlete preparation.
Integrated consequences	Implementation across all strategic domains.	Improved public health and sport participation; social cohesion; national identity; women's participation; employment and sport industry growth; infrastructure development; sport tourism; sport diplomacy; improved international image; and increased international competition participation.

Based on the grounded theory findings, the final paradigmatic model was designed to explain the dynamic relationships among the five components. As shown in Figure 1, causal conditions produce the need for change, while contextual and intervening conditions shape the implementation environment. Strategic actions are expected to transform the central phenomenon by generating health, social, economic, infrastructural, and political-international outcomes. The feedback loop in the model indicates that successful outcomes can gradually modify the causal conditions by increasing legitimacy, investment, participation, and institutional learning.

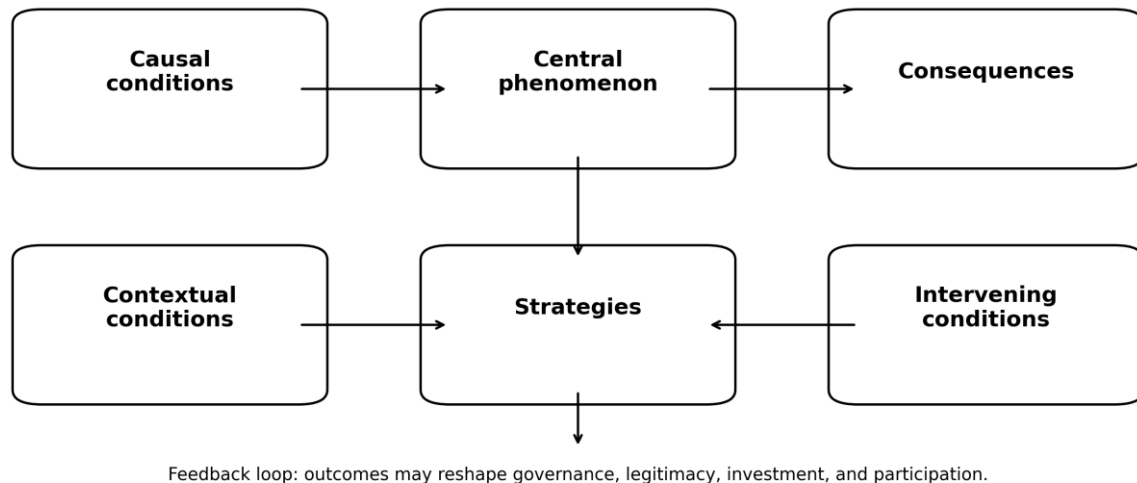


Figure 1. Paradigmatic model of track and field development in Iraq

Figure 1 shows that track and field development in Iraq is affected by a reinforcing cycle in which weak governance, scarce resources, limited talent pathways, low performance, weak social legitimacy, and insufficient investment reproduce one another. Breaking this cycle requires simultaneous interventions across the strategic domains summarized in Table 3. This systemic interpretation is consistent with research indicating that sport development and sport-for-development initiatives require coherent governance, evaluation, community legitimacy, and sustained institutional support (Giulianotti, 2011; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Spaaij, 2009; Svensson & Woods, 2017).

Discussion

This study developed a paradigmatic model for track and field development in Iraq using grounded theory. The findings show that athletics development is constrained by a complex interaction of managerial, financial, infrastructural, human-resource, educational, cultural, political, and institutional factors. This result supports the broader sport governance literature, which argues that sport development is not only a technical training issue but also a matter of institutional coordination, accountability, strategic policy design, and resource mobilization (Dowling et al., 2018; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Thompson et al., 2023).

The causal conditions reveal that the main barriers to Iraqi athletics are structural. Weak federation performance, insufficient strategic planning, limited financial transparency, shortage of standard facilities, and weak talent-development systems create a reinforcing pattern of underdevelopment. This finding is consistent with elite sport policy research showing that international performance depends on coherent policy systems, adequate facilities, coaching capacity, talent

identification, and athlete support (De Bosscher et al., 2015; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009). However, the Iraqi case shows that these factors are more difficult to coordinate in a post-conflict and resource-constrained environment.

The contextual conditions indicate that athletics development in Iraq is shaped by cultural and social legitimacy. The low public status of athletics, weak media coverage, preference for team sports, and traditional constraints on women's participation reduce the ability of the sport to attract participants, families, sponsors, and public support. This finding is aligned with sport-for-development scholarship emphasizing that sport programs cannot be separated from cultural meaning, community acceptance, and local ownership (Coalter, 2013; Schulenkorf et al., 2016). In Iraq, cultural promotion should therefore be treated as a development strategy, not as a secondary communication activity.

The intervening conditions are particularly important because they explain why technically appropriate strategies may still fail. Political volatility, security disruptions, leadership changes, shifting budget priorities, visa restrictions, and weak international connections can interrupt long-term programs. This finding contributes to the literature by showing that sport development in post-conflict contexts requires adaptive governance. A conventional strategic plan may not be sufficient if it does not include mechanisms for continuity, risk management, decentralized implementation, and institutional memory.

The strategy component demonstrates that no single intervention can solve the development problem. Building tracks without coach education will not generate elite athletes. Training coaches without school-based talent identification will not expand the athlete pipeline. Media campaigns without competitions and facilities will not sustain participation. International cooperation without governance reform will not be institutionalized. Therefore, the proposed model argues for synchronized action across management, education, promotion, international engagement, infrastructure, and technology. This integrated approach is consistent with policy studies that emphasize systems thinking and coordination across sport development stakeholders (Houlihan & Green, 2008; Ouyang et al., 2023).

The expected consequences show that athletics development may produce benefits beyond sport performance. Improved public health, social cohesion, national pride, women's participation, employment, infrastructure development, sport tourism, and diplomatic visibility were all identified as potential outcomes. These outcomes are consistent with the sport-for-development literature, which frames sport as a possible vehicle for social inclusion, community engagement, and broader developmental goals when programs are governed coherently and evaluated carefully (Coalter, 2007; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Whitley et al., 2019).

The study has several practical implications. First, the Iraqi Athletics Federation should develop a national athletics strategy with measurable objectives, funding mechanisms, and evaluation indicators. Second, talent identification should be integrated into schools through cooperation between the federation, Ministry of Education, universities, and provincial sport boards. Third, a coach and referee development system should be established with certification, continuing education, and international exchange. Fourth, facility development should follow a geographic equity plan rather than being concentrated in major cities. Fifth, media and cultural promotion should be used to increase public recognition, women's participation, and sponsorship attractiveness. Sixth, digital systems should be used to record athletes, facilities, competitions, rankings, injuries, and development indicators.

The study also has limitations. The findings are based on expert interviews rather than direct observation of federation meetings, school sport programs, training centers, and competitions. The model is context-specific and should be tested in

future research using wider stakeholder samples, including athletes, parents, sponsors, school administrators, and local authorities. Future studies should also examine the feasibility of each strategic domain quantitatively and compare the Iraqi model with athletics development systems in other developing or post-conflict countries.

Conclusion

This study developed a paradigmatic model for track and field development in Iraq based on grounded theory. The findings indicate that athletics development is shaped by causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. The major constraints include managerial and financial weaknesses, infrastructure and human-resource limitations, insufficient education and talent development, weak cultural legitimacy, economic-organizational dependence, political-security instability, and temporary managerial disruption. The proposed strategies include governance reform, financial diversification, coach and referee development, school-based talent identification, media promotion, international engagement, technology use, and infrastructure expansion. The model suggests that sustainable development cannot be achieved through fragmented projects. Instead, Iraq requires an integrated national framework linking federation reform, education, facilities, finance, culture, and performance development. If implemented coherently, the model can help track and field contribute to public health, youth development, social cohesion, women's participation, employment, sport diplomacy, and improved international representation.

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Authors' Contributions

Murtadha Abdulabbas Deiri Alasadi contributed to conceptualization, data collection, formal analysis, and writing the original draft. Abbas Naghizadeh-Baghi contributed to conceptualization, methodology, supervision, validation, and review and editing. Nasrin Azizian Kohan contributed to methodology, validation, supervision, and review and editing. Mehrdad Moharramzadeh contributed to methodology, validation, supervision, and review and editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

AI use statement

None.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted according to accepted ethical principles for qualitative research. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study before interviews were conducted. Informed consent was obtained for audio-recording and use of interview data. Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved during transcription, coding, analysis, and reporting.

Transparency of Data

Reasonable requests for research materials should be directed to the corresponding author, subject to university policies and participant confidentiality.

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