



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Identification of Sustainable Sports Development Components in Semnan Province

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KEY WORDS

Public sports;
Semnan Province;
Sports infrastructure;
Sports tourism sustainable
sports development

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify the components of sustainable sports development in Semnan Province. This research is exploratory-applied in terms of objectives and qualitative in terms of data collection method, conducted using conventional qualitative content analysis. The statistical population included sports managers and executive experts as well as academic specialists in sports development, from which 13 individuals were selected as samples through purposive sampling using the snowball method until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data analysis involved conventional content analysis including two stages of open and selective coding. The results of interview analysis led to the extraction of 58 primary codes from 13 interviews and the identification of 6 components including infrastructure development, capital attraction, organizational coordination, planning and research, tourism development, and public sports development as components of sustainable sports development in Semnan. Based on the research findings, recommendations for sustainable sports development in the province include: expanding scientific approaches to sports through improving the education system, collaborating with academic centers, and implementing knowledge management systems; forming an economic and marketing committee with a focus on developing sustainable sports revenues; emphasizing grassroots sports with a focus on school sports and athlete talent management approaches; and paying attention to other identified opportunities

Introduction

Organized sports have been an important part of countries' cultures for generations. Today, given the belief that sports foster positive characteristics such as physical fitness, self-confidence, social skills, and cooperation while reducing costs in healthcare, treatment, and social corruption prevention sectors, more parents encourage their children to participate in sports (Basil *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, the role of sports in all economic, social, and environmental dimensions at national and international levels is not hidden from governments, and they seek to invest in developing their country's sports to utilize its potential

for achieving many sports and non-sports goals (Mandalizadeh *et al.*, 2021).

Today, sports are not viewed merely as recreation and entertainment but are recognized as having vast potential to create significant economic, educational, ethical, social, biological, and cultural impacts. Consequently, there is widespread enthusiasm for comprehensive sports development in society, and sports have found their place in household budgets, with people showing great interest in investing in them (Javadipour & Rasekh, 2019). Sustainable sports development in today's world is one of the fruitful

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strategies for achieving superior development goals in various dimensions for policymakers in developed countries (Jenkinson & Benson, 2010). In developed countries' programs, sustainable sports are used as a tool for community development. The foundation of sustainable sports stems from the definition provided by the Brundtland Commission, which defines sustainability as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Lawson, 2005). Accordingly, sustainability in development means balancing economic health, social justice, and flexibility, creating a long-term vision. In countries' sports development programs, sustainability has been emphasized as "long-term individual change" and elsewhere as "stability and continuity of planning" (Mandalizadeh, 2014). According to Houlihan and Green (2011), sustainable sports development refers to the ability to sustain and continue sports development programs in a way that considers the sustainability of participatory, economic, environmental, and social dimensions (Lindsey, 2008).

Based on various definitions of sustainable sports development, Mandalizadeh (2014) describes it as emphasizing the institutionalization of sports in society and the durability of sports development programs while considering economic, social, and environmental dimensions. In another definition, Mandalizadeh *et al.* (2018) define sustainable sports development as a concept where sustainability is a common and central theme in sports development, encompassing long-term changes in individual, community, and organizational attitudes through sports participation. Generally, what characterizes a sustainable sports system in societies is a systematic approach coupled with planning that directs sports toward specific visions and goals. This may highlight the difference in sports sustainability between developed and developing countries, where developing countries face fluctuations due to traditional approaches and lack of belief in planning

and implementation in a rapidly changing global environment (Welty & Cohen, 2016). Welty and Cohen (2016) identified critical elements for successful sustainable sports development in Western countries as strategic planning, communication between national and regional sports organizations, clarifying roles and responsibilities of national and regional sports organizations, stakeholder teamwork, and continuous evaluation of sports development processes. Meanwhile, researchers believe that despite numerous organizational and structural changes in Iran's sports industry, it has not achieved a desirable level of development or played an appropriate role in achieving sports and non-sports goals (Rezaei & Salehipour, 2018). According to Rezaei (2017), Iran faces many weaknesses in sports industry legislation, particularly in development policies and sports structures.

Hosseini Nasab *et al.* (2019) showed in their research that sports tourism development positively impacts sustainable economic development, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability of cities. Ghorbani *et al.* (2020), in examining sustainable development through sports, identified cognitive-knowledge, structural, and legal-managerial factors as barriers and perceptual-communicative, economic-structural, and functional factors as strategies. Hejri *et al.* (2020), in a study examining obstacles to achieving sustainable development goals through sports, identified factors such as lack of integrated programs and policies, absence of reliable statistical-information systems, cognitive-perceptual barriers, short-sightedness, negative effects of sports professionalism, lack of human, financial, and equipment resources, and inappropriate policies for leveraging sports' economic benefits as barriers to sustainable development through sports.

Based on researchers' findings, Iran has an unfavorable status in sustainable sports development (Askarkhadeh & Heidarinejad, 2011). However, most sports and non-sports sectors seek to utilize sports to achieve sustainable development in various

dimensions such as economic, social, and urban development. Thus, another research question is whether achieving sustainable development in other areas through sports is reasonable and feasible before achieving sustainable sports development as a prerequisite. Especially in conditions where sports development in provinces like Semnan has been severely neglected. While many researchers and experts believe that Semnan Province's sports, due to its natural and local attractions, unique characteristics, and conditions of athletes, has always been one of Iran's most important sports hubs. The presence of national athletes, renowned wrestlers, and famous footballers attests to this, indicating that sports in Semnan Province have deep roots and, given proper facilities, services, social, cultural, and political infrastructure, and centralized and efficient management in macro decision-making and long-term policies for attracting appropriate investments in public and private sectors, can become Iran's sports hub. Therefore, to properly manage resources, time, and make more efficient decisions regarding sustainable sports development in Semnan Province, this study addresses the following question: What are the components of sustainable sports development in Semnan Province.

Materials and Methods

This research is exploratory-applied in terms of objectives and qualitative in terms of data collection method, conducted using conventional qualitative content analysis. The statistical population included sports managers and executive experts as well as academic specialists in sustainable sports development in Semnan Province. Sampling was purposive using the snowball method until theoretical saturation was achieved. In this study, 13 semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with experts to identify sustainable sports

development components in Semnan Province. From the 11th interview onward, data repetition was observed, but interviews continued until the 13th for greater certainty. Data collection tools included documentary methods (reviewing and using articles, existing theoretical foundations, and policy documents) and semi-structured interviews, which began with describing interviewees' demographic characteristics and continued with the research's main questions, concluding with open-ended questions such as "Do you think there are any unaddressed aspects in this area?" Data were analyzed using conventional content analysis, including open and selective coding.

Results

In the first coding stage, collected interview data were transcribed, then analyzed line by line to generate open codes and concepts. These concepts were derived from written materials and, in some cases, verbatim quotes. After analyzing interviews using qualitative content analysis and summarizing majority opinions along with reviewing documents related to identifying sustainable sports development components in Semnan Province, 58 primary codes were extracted from 13 interviews as components of sustainable sports development in Semnan Province, reported in Table 1.

Due to the large number of extracted codes and concepts, similar codes were categorized based on conceptual and semantic similarity into specific groups, reduced to 6 components. Each category was assigned an appropriate concept based on its conceptual weight. From interview analysis results, 6 components were identified: infrastructure development, capital attraction, organizational coordination, planning and research, tourism development, and public sports development, reported in Table 2 .

Table 1. List of Primary Code Sets for Sustainable Sports Development Components in Semnan Province.

No.	Meaningful Code (English)	No.	Meaningful Code (English)	No.	Meaningful Code (English)
1	Construction of multi-purpose halls	2	Renovation of old stadiums	3	Construction of artificial turf fields
4	Development of traditional zurkhanehs	5	Development of desert motorcycle tracks	6	Building sports halls in villages
7	Upgrading lighting systems	8	Establishment of neighborhood sports parks	9	Construction of cycling tracks
10	Equipping halls with green energy systems	11	Marked hiking trails	12	Cycling tours in plains
13	Desert safari tracks	14	Paragliding over Shahroud mountains	15	Water sports in Semnan dams
16	Horse riding tours in pastures	17	Nature-based sports training camps	18	Winter sports development (skiing in cold regions)
19	Rock climbing competitions in Alborz	20	Sports lodges in nature	21	Attracting private sector investors
22	Job creation through sports	23	Export of sports services (e.g., coaching)	24	Establishing sports support unions
25	Sports advertising in media	26	Launching sports startups	27	Sports insurance for champions
28	Specialty sports stores	29	Hosting international tournaments	30	Production of local sportswear
31	Daily walking in parks	32	Morning exercises in offices	33	Family sports conferences
34	Low-cost sports (e.g., jump rope)	35	Development of local parks with sports equipment	36	Government employee sports competitions
37	Outdoor yoga classes	38	"Active Semnan City" campaign	39	Health screening through sports
40	"Bike to Work" program	41	Football academies in major cities	42	Provincial competitions in various sports
43	Sports scholarships for elite athletes	44	Student olympiads	45	Construction of specialized academies (e.g., taekwondo)
46	Attracting sponsors for local athletes	47	Youth talent ranking system	48	Collaboration with national federations
49	National team camps in Semnan	50	Wrestling clubs with expert coaches	51	Semnan Women's Volleyball League
53	Sports for people with disabilities	54	Sports therapy for special needs patients	55	Construction of sports halls in girls' schools
56	Health parks for seniors	57	Development of indigenous women's sports (e.g., tug-of-war)	58	Organizing sports competitions for female students

Table 2. Extracted Categories from Open Coding.

Primary Open Codes (Concepts)	Secondary Open Codes
Construction and renovation of sports facilities (multi-purpose stadiums, indoor halls, standard swimming pools). Upgrading existing facilities (lighting systems, ventilation, flooring). Development of neighborhood sports spaces (sports parks, local volleyball and basketball courts). Focus on Semnan's special sports (traditional zurkhanehs, desert motorcycle tracks).	Infrastructure Development
Attracting local sponsors (Semnan industries, major companies). Developing sports tourism (international desert competitions). Establishing specialized sports stores and related equipment production.	Capital Attraction
Collaboration between municipalities and sports departments for building sports parks. Coordination with environmental organizations for eco-friendly sports development in nature. Partnership with universities (sports research, organizing student competitions).	Organizational Coordination
Sports needs assessment in cities and villages of the province. Studying successful models (experiences of similar provinces). Developing strategic document for Semnan sports development with expert participation.	Planning and Research
Development of desert sports (motorcycling, camel riding). Mountain climbing and sports ecotourism (marked trails in Eastern Alborz). Sports ecotourism (cycling in plains, sports camping).	Tourism Development
Public walking and cycling (safe routes in Semnan, Damghan, Shahroud cities). Collaboration with medical centers for "free sports prescription" programs. Workplace sports programs (companies and government offices). Construction of women-only sports halls complying with cultural standards. Organizing women's leagues in popular sports (volleyball, basketball, tennis). Sports for disabled and elderly (rehabilitation halls, health parks).	Public Sports Development

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to identify key components of sustainable sports development in Semnan Province through qualitative content analysis of interviews and review of related documents. Findings revealed six components: infrastructure development, capital attraction, organizational coordination, planning and research, tourism development, and public sports development as fundamental to sports development in the province. These findings are analyzed and compared within existing literature .

Interviewees unanimously emphasized the necessity of sports infrastructure development in Semnan Province. This aligns with studies like Sadeghi *et al.* (2021) and Hall (2018) that consider infrastructure as the main foundation for sports development. However, some research like Gibson *et al.* (2019) shows that infrastructure development without precise needs assessment may lead to resource wastage. For Semnan Province, given its geographical dispersion and climatic diversity, infrastructure planning should prioritize deprived areas and optimal use of existing facilities .

One of Semnan's main challenges is financial resource shortages for sports development. This aligns with Smith *et al.* (2021) who identify capital attraction as key to sports development. Conversely, Roberts (2020) warns that over-reliance on government funding threatens project sustainability. For Semnan, leveraging private sector capacities and public participation is recommended for capital attraction .

Lack of coordination between sports, tourism, and executive organizations was another challenge identified. This aligns with Weed and Bull (2004) emphasizing inter-organizational collaboration. However, Chalip (2015) notes that parallel structures and inter-organizational competition sometimes hinder effective collaboration. For Semnan, establishing a joint task force with representatives

from relevant organizations could improve coordination .

Weaknesses in long-term planning and lack of applied research were other identified challenges. This aligns with Gratton and Higham (1999) emphasizing evidence-based planning. However, Misener and Mason (2006) show many sports projects are implemented without research backing. For Semnan, strengthening sports research centers in local universities is recommended to provide decision-making data .

With its natural and cultural attractions, Semnan has high potential for sports tourism development. This aligns with Getz (2008) emphasizing sports-tourism links. However, Hinch and Higham (2011) warn that unbalanced tourism development can cause environmental damage. Thus, Semnan's sports tourism development must follow sustainability principles and environmental preservation .

Public sports development as a community health pillar was emphasized in interviews. This aligns with Coalter (2007) considering public sports as social development foundation. However, Houlihan and Green (2009) note that elite sports sometimes take priority. For Semnan, incentive programs for public sports participation are recommended . This study showed that sustainable sports development in Semnan requires simultaneous attention to all six identified components. Sun and Hambrick (2015) recommended tax exemptions for organizations participating in sports development programs due to philanthropic work. In Iran, particularly Semnan, many industrial and production organizations manage sports teams in various leagues. Providing incentives like tax reductions could encourage their participation in development programs, leading to more sustainable sports development in Semnan .

Other recommendations based on findings include: expanding scientific approaches through education

system improvement, academic collaboration, and knowledge management implementation; forming economic and marketing committees for sustainable sports revenues; focusing on grassroots and school sports; and talent management systems. These findings are generalizable to similar regions. Future studies could examine these components' impacts on objective sports development indicators (e.g., public participation rates or sports tourism economic growth). Developing assessment models for evaluating sports project sustainability in Semnan is also recommended.

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