

Economic Progress of Iranian Cycling Clubs: Role of Sports Sponsorship and Competitive Advantage

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Abstract

Purpose: Sports serve as a vital tool for social engineering, contributing to crime and delinquency reduction, enhancing youth health, and increasing societal capacity. Given the significance of public sports policymaking in achieving these outcomes, this study aims to investigate public sports policymaking in northwest Iran using a qualitative approach grounded in data from experts and practitioners. **Method:** This research employed a qualitative design based on grounded theory. The statistical population included faculty members specializing in sports management (public sports), public sports experts in the municipal physical education organization, and staff of physical education departments in northwest provinces. Sampling was conducted purposively using the snowball technique, and the sample size was determined by theoretical saturation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the three-stage coding method (open, axial, and selective coding). Causal factors (individual, managerial, and economic), along with intervening factors (environmental factors, facilities and equipment, human resources), were identified as having the most significant influence on strategies and the future success of public sports policymaking in northwest Iran. **Results:** Contextual factors included two key social and cultural dimensions. The main strategies derived from the analysis encompassed developing participatory infrastructures, strengthening the role of governance and decision-making institutions, promoting culturalization and societal motivation, and ensuring justice and sustainability in policymaking. **Conclusion:** The outcomes of advancing public sports policymaking in northwest Iran include job creation in sports, improved quality of life, reduced medical and healthcare costs, the promotion of a health-oriented culture and active lifestyle, mitigation of traffic and pollution issues, enhanced policy coherence, strengthened organizational interactions, and overall improvement in urban life quality.

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Introduction

Today, many researchers believe that sports can be beneficial not only for adolescents and young adults but also for the elderly and other segments of society (Wang & Wei, 2022). Studies indicate that more than half of the world's population does not engage in sufficient physical activity to maintain health; reducing this inactive population by just one percent could save millions of lives and result in billions of dollars in savings (Guthold et al., 2023; World Health Organization, 2022). The fact that less than 10 percent of various segments of the country participate in public and recreational sports, even under the best conditions, confirms the need for a fundamental review in this area (Shahbazi et al., 2013). In recent years, numerous factors have contributed to the lack of attention to sports, including the COVID-19 pandemic (Martinez, 2022). Various governments have sought to use sports as a tool for social engineering to reduce crime and delinquency, decrease youth obesity, and achieve higher social capacity in subgroups (Hallihan, 2005), to the extent that recreational sports have become a standard method for promoting individual health and quality of life (Chen, 2011). Each government provides different responses to the challenges of public sports, depending on its political, economic, and cultural conditions. Given the low rate of physical activity in the country, public sports can be considered a public issue, a need, a deficiency, a limitation, or a palpable dissatisfaction in society, which is recognizable and for which a solution is felt. The lack of codified programs to encourage and motivate people to engage in public sports, as well as the absence of unified management and consistent policy, are recognized as the most significant weaknesses and internal challenges of public

sports in the country (Javadipour et al., 2019). Public sports policymaking has garnered significant attention as a tool for promoting health, social cohesion, and sustainable development in recent years. Piggan (2025) conducted a comprehensive review of meso-level policy frameworks, emphasizing the need for consensus-driven approaches to enhance the sustainability of grassroots sports programs. While highlighting the importance of stakeholder collaboration, the study notes a lack of practical implementation guidelines, particularly in regional contexts such as northwest Iran. Similarly, Moustakas et al. (2025) explored policy advocacy strategies in sport-for-development programs across Europe, advocating for inclusive governance and multilingual outreach to ensure equitable access to public sports. Their findings underscore the role of cultural and social factors in shaping effective policies, aligning with the cultural and social considerations of the present study. Additionally, Zhang and Mou (2023) investigated the integration of low-carbon economic principles into sports industry development, proposing strategies to align public sports policies with health and environmental goals. However, their focus on urban settings leaves a gap in understanding region-specific policymaking, such as in less urbanized areas like northwest Iran. Collectively, these studies highlight the importance of participatory and sustainable policymaking but indicate a need for context-specific frameworks, which the current study addresses by examining public sports policymaking in northwest Iran using a grounded theory approach. In Iran, despite the presence of multiple institutions such as the Federation of Public Sports, the Public Sports Department of the Ministry of Sport and Youth,

municipalities, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology—each of which claims responsibility for

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public sports—there remains insufficient participation and inadequate policymaking in this field. This issue is particularly evident in the northwestern provinces of Iran (East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and Zanjan), where rates of obesity and physical inactivity are significantly higher than the national average. According to the Ministry of Health (2023), the average obesity rate in this region stands at 32%, which is 8% higher than the national average of 24%. Limited access to sports infrastructure, urban and rural lifestyle patterns influenced by local culture, and a lack of targeted promotional programs have made this region a focal point for research into public sports policymaking. These regional characteristics, combined with cultural and social diversity, underscore the urgent need to investigate barriers and propose policy solutions to increase participation in public sports. Policy-making, by nature, involves the intentions, goals, and objectives of decision-makers to ensure equitable distribution of services, opportunities, and achievements among individuals and groups in society (Almond et al., 2018). In simpler terms, policy-making is a deliberate and purposeful method of shaping actions, rather than a random or fragmented process (Forouzandeh & Vejdani, 2009). Understanding policy and the policy-making process helps optimize future initiatives by identifying existing strengths, weaknesses, and gaps. Research Gap: Despite extensive research on public sports policies in developed contexts, limited attention has been given to regional and socio-culturally diverse areas such as northwest Iran. Existing studies have primarily focused on urban environments, neglecting the influence of local cultural, social, and managerial factors on the policy process. Furthermore, there is a lack of an integrated

framework explaining how individual, managerial, economic, and environmental factors interact to shape public sports policymaking in Iran.

Materials and Methods

Research Design This study employed a qualitative approach based on the Grounded Theory methodology. This method was selected to explore and conceptualize the processes underlying public sports policymaking in northwest Iran. Grounded Theory allows for the systematic generation of theory grounded in empirical data, facilitating the identification of causal relationships and strategic frameworks specific to the study context. **Participants** The statistical population comprised individuals directly involved in public sports policymaking, including sports management professors, experts from municipal sports organizations, and specialists from the physical education departments of public sports across four northwestern provinces of Iran (East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and Zanjan). A total of 18 participants (13 men and 5 women) were interviewed. Participants ranged in age from 35 to 62 years and possessed 10 to over 25 years of professional experience in sports policy or administration. Their educational backgrounds spanned master's and PhD degrees in sports sciences, public administration, and related fields. **Sampling Procedure** Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals with substantial knowledge and experience in public sports policy. Initial participants were identified through academic publications, administrative roles, and professional networks. Subsequently, the snowball sampling technique was applied, whereby each interviewee recommended additional experts meeting the study criteria. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—defined as the point at which no new concepts or categories emerged from further interviews. By the 16th interview, only minor repetitions appeared, and by the 18th, data

saturation was confirmed. Accordingly, the sample size of 18 was considered sufficient for grounded theory research. Data Collection The primary data collection tool was the semi-structured, in-depth interview, conducted either in person or virtually, depending on participants' availability. The interview guide was developed based on a comprehensive review of existing literature on public sports policymaking, focusing on extracting key patterns, challenges, and strategies. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Data Analysis Data were analyzed using the three stages of grounded theory coding as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998): 1. Open Coding: Identification and categorization of key concepts emerging from raw data. 2. Axial Coding: Establishing relationships between categories to identify causal and contextual linkages. 3. Selective Coding: Integration of core categories into a cohesive theoretical model of public sports policymaking. This multi-stage analysis facilitated the development of a context-specific conceptual framework to enhance public sports

policymaking in northwest Iran.**Results**

After open coding to identify which condition each category is part of (contextual, intervening, and causal), considering that if a category is the cause of the formation of the main phenomenon, the causal conditions are considered, each of which is a general ground-breaking condition effective in strategies is considered intervening conditions, and each of which has the greatest role in the main phenomenon is considered contextual conditions.

The causal factors of these conditions cause the creation and development of the phenomenon or central category. The most important factors were identified in three categories: individual factors, managerial factors, and economic factors. These factors can be fully controlled by the organization.

Table (1): Selective coding (causal factors)

Question (1) what are the causal factors effective in the development of public sports policymaking in the northwest of the country?

The main category	Subcategory	Concepts
Causal conditions	Individual factors	* Individual Education Level
		Individual Physical Characteristics
		Interest in Sports Activities
		Individual Opinions and Beliefs about Sports
		Income and Financial Capability
		Psychological and Motivational Factors
		Past Sports Experiences
		Physical Limitations or Physical Health
		Influence of Family and Friends
		Knowledge of Local Sports Opportunities
		Culture and Social Norms
		Social and Cultural Support and Influences
		Individual Education Level
	managerial factors	Quality of Planning and Policy Design
		continuous Monitoring and Evaluation of

		Programs
		Abilities and Skills of Sports Managers
		Optimal Allocation of Financial and Human Resources
		Coordination and Cooperation between Public and Private Institutions
	Economic factors	General income level of society
		Government financial capabilities and public resources
		Spending on sports infrastructure
		Economic growth and social welfare
		Investment in the sports sector

Contextual Conditions: This includes two major categories: social and cultural. The term "context" refers to specific conditions that influence strategies and must be considered when selecting them. These conditions consist of a set of concepts, categories, or contextual variables. Two factors have been identified as contextual conditions, indicating that these two factors play the most significant role in the development of public sports policy in the

northwest of the country. This means that cultural and social factors are among the most crucial elements in the development of public sports policy in the northwest of the country and have a greater impact.

Table (2): Selective Coding (Contextual Conditions)

Question (2): What are the contextual factors influencing public sports policy in the northwest of the country?

The main category	Subcategory	Concepts
Contextual conditions	Social conditions	The role of local culture and customs in sports acceptance
		Social support for sports programs
		The influence of family and social networks on encouraging sports
		Social beliefs and attitudes towards public sports

		Attention to social and health issues in society
		The role of family and social relationships in sports participation
		Access to sports facilities in different regions
		The effects of media and advertising in promoting public sports
		The role of media and cyberspace in promoting public sports
		Social norms and their effects on individuals' sports behavior
		Social support for sports projects at the local and regional levels
		Social structure and social classes
		Public culture of society towards sports
	Cultural conditions	Public culture of society towards sports
		Social beliefs and attitudes towards public sports
		Social structure and social classes
		Social support for sports programs

		The role of family and social relationships in sports participation
		The effects of media and advertising in promoting public sports
		Social norms and their effects on individuals' sports behavior

Intervening factors are general conditions that impede the implementation of strategies and influence them. Three factors were identified as intervening conditions, indicating that these three factors provide a general foundation for effective public sports policymaking in the northwest of the country. Specifically, environmental factors, facilities and equipment, and human resources play the most significant role in determining strategies and the future

success of public sports policymaking in the northwest of the country.

Table (2): Selective Coding (Intervening Factors)

| Question (2): What are the intervening factors affecting public sports policymaking in the northwest of the country?

	Category	Indicators
Intervening Conditions	Environmental Factors	Access to open spaces and sports facilities Condition of transportation infrastructure Economic stability and its impact on funding sports resources Air pollution levels and their effects on sports activities in open spaces Influence of social and political crises on sports policies Presence or absence of financial and private sector support in sports
	Facilities and Equipment	Quality and variety of sports equipment Maintenance status and lifespan of

		sports facilities Availability of roofed and outdoor sports spaces Health and welfare facilities in sports spaces Distribution of tools and equipment for different age and gender groups Provision of equipment for sports activities dedicated to people with disabilities and individuals with special needs
	Human Resources	Weakness in training programs and skill courses leading to a reduction in workforce efficiency in sports management and execution Challenges in recruiting and retaining expert professionals due to lack of financial incentives Absence of a structured career path for specialists Weak coordination and communication among sports organizations, municipalities, the education sector, and other related institutions, causing confusion in human resources and reducing their efficiency

Category: Intervening Conditions

Environmental Factors: Access to open spaces and sports facilities. Status of public transportation infrastructure. Economic fluctuations and their impact on providing sports resources. Air pollution levels and their impact on outdoor sports activities. The impact of social or political crises on sports policies. Presence or absence of financial and private sponsors in the field of sports

Facilities and Equipment: Quality and variety of sports equipment. Status of maintenance and repairs of sports facilities. Availability of indoor and outdoor sports spaces, Health and welfare facilities in sports spaces, Accessibility of equipment and facilities for different age and gender groups, Coverage and equipment for specific sports activities for people with disabilities and special needs

Human Resources: Weakness in training programs and skill courses reduces the effectiveness of human resources in managing

and implementing public sports, Lack of financial and non-financial incentives, low job security, and unclear career paths reduce the motivation of human resources active in public sports, Lack of specialization and weakness in attracting specialized personnel.

Mismatch between academic education and the

real needs of the public sports field leads to inappropriate use of non-specialized personnel, Weakness in inter-organizational coordination and communication, Lack of cooperation between sports institutions, municipalities, education, and other related organizations causes confusion for human resources and reduces their efficiency.

Category	Strategies	Implications
Development of Infrastructure	Beautification and expansion of public spaces Provision of standard equipment Investment in sports spaces Use of modern technologies	Creating job opportunities in sports Improving quality of life Strengthening the culture of active living Reducing traffic and pollution
Governance and Decision-Making Outcomes	Formulation of macro policies Inter-organizational coordination Continuous monitoring	Enhancing political interactions Improving urban management quality
Cultural Integration and Community Engagement	Utilizing international experiences Public awareness campaigns Implementing sports programs in education Designing economic incentives Creating social interactions Promoting family-oriented programs	Alignment with global standards Enhancing social cohesion Encouraging economic participation Boosting social services
Equity and Sustainability in Policy-Making	Expanding access to deprived areas Supporting disadvantaged groups Creating effective supervisory structures Resource conservation	Reducing gaps in access to facilities Fair distribution of resources Improving mental health through sports

Discussion

Policy-making in public sports plays a fundamental role in developing public health and improving the quality of life for citizens. However, the formulation and implementation of effective policies in this area, particularly in the northwest of the country, face numerous

challenges. In this research, utilizing grounded theory and through the analysis of qualitative interviews with sports management professors, experts from the municipality's sports organization, and physical education departments, an attempt has been made to identify effective policy-making patterns. In this

section, the research findings are compared with the theoretical background and suggestions are presented for improving public sports policies.

The results of this study show that the development of public sports in the northwest of the country requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach among relevant institutions. The findings indicate that infrastructure deficiencies, weaknesses in financial resource provision, and lack of coordination between responsible organizations are among the main obstacles to effective policy-making in this area. Accordingly, it is suggested that public sports policies be revised with an emphasis on developing public participation, improving sports infrastructure, and establishing sustainable financial mechanisms.

One of the effective factors in public sports policy-making in the northwest of the country relates to the obstacles and deterrents that are influential in decision-making for public sports. Deterrents to the development of public sports in northwest Iran include economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers. Economically, the lack of government budgets and the high cost of sports equipment hinder public participation. In the cultural dimension, traditional attitudes towards sports, especially among women and specific age groups, reduce participation. Furthermore, the lack of suitable infrastructure such as sports parks, bicycle paths, and recreational facilities reduces motivation among citizens (Hosseini et al., 2011; Hosseini et al., 2014).

Considering the existing economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers, the development of public sports in northwest Iran faces numerous challenges. Without reforming social attitudes, increasing investment in sports infrastructure, and implementing supportive policies, widespread public participation cannot be expected. Therefore, accurately identifying these barriers and developing comprehensive programs to address them is an essential step towards the development of public sports in this

region.

Conclusion

Advancing public sports policymaking in northwest Iran can yield tangible societal benefits. These policies can create sports-related job opportunities, enhance citizens' quality of life, reduce healthcare costs, promote a culture of health and active lifestyles, and mitigate traffic and pollution. Furthermore, they foster greater policy coherence, strengthen inter-organizational collaboration, and improve

urban living standards. These outcomes highlight the significant potential of public sports to enhance social, economic, and environmental indicators in northwest Iran. To maximize these benefits, policymakers should prioritize multi-stakeholder partnerships, integrating local communities, educational institutions, and private sectors in the design and implementation phases. Future research could explore quantitative metrics to measure the long-term impacts of these policies, such as through longitudinal studies tracking health outcomes and economic growth in the region. Ultimately, by embedding sustainability and equity at the core of public sports initiatives, northwest Iran can serve as a model for other regions seeking to leverage sports for holistic societal advancement.

This study comprehensively examined the multifaceted dimensions influencing the development of mass sports in Northwest Iran. Through the analysis of support policies, promotional strategies, indigenous sport practices, health-related outcomes, and participatory policy-making models, several key findings emerged that offer critical insights for both researchers and policymakers.

First, economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers remain major challenges to widespread public participation in mass sports. However, targeted support policies, including sports subsidies, incentive programs, and equitable resource distribution, demonstrate significant

potential in mitigating these obstacles and promoting inclusivity.

Second, the findings emphasize the effectiveness of social advertising and public awareness campaigns in shaping positive attitudes toward physical activity. Media outreach, community-based campaigns, and digital engagement can play a pivotal role in encouraging behavioral change and fostering a culture of active living.

Third, the study underscores the untapped potential of indigenous and local sports as tools for increasing public participation and stimulating sports tourism. By reviving traditional games and aligning them with regional tourism strategies, it is possible to preserve cultural heritage while enhancing community engagement and economic development.

Fourth, the role of mass sports in reducing healthcare costs is particularly noteworthy. The positive impact of regular physical activity on physical and mental health translates into lower demand for healthcare services, decreased medical expenses, and improved overall quality of life—making it a cost-effective public health strategy.

Lastly, the research advocates for a participatory policy-making model that involves diverse stakeholders—including local communities, governmental bodies, and private sector actors. Such inclusive frameworks ensure that policy decisions are grounded in real needs, promote cross-sectoral collaboration, and result in sustainable outcomes.

In conclusion, the integrated approach outlined in this study presents a strategic roadmap for the sustainable development of mass sports. By combining supportive governance, cultural revitalization, health advocacy, and participatory planning, regional and national stakeholders can unlock the full potential of mass sports as a driver of public well-being, cultural identity, and socio-economic growth.

This research is consistent with the studies of Vafaei Moghaddam et al. (2022) and Farahani et al. (2017).

Driving factors indicate that with government support, targeted advertising, and public awareness, public participation in public sports can be increased. Strengthening incentive policies and providing necessary facilities can have a significant impact on changing people's lifestyles. Therefore, systematic planning to leverage these factors will pave the way for the development of public sports.

Research Proposals

1. Investigating the Impact of Government Support Policies on Reducing Barriers to Mass Sports Participation in Underdeveloped Areas

Explanation: Given the economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers that hinder widespread public participation in mass sports, this study can analyze the role of support policies, sports subsidies, and incentive programs in reducing these obstacles and increasing public engagement.

2. Assessing the Impact of Social Advertising on Increasing Participation in Mass Sports: A Case Study of Northwest Iran

Explanation: Since advertising and awareness campaigns are key factors in promoting mass sports, this research can examine the effectiveness of media advertisements, social campaigns, and awareness-raising activities in increasing participation rates.

Sports Attractions

3. The Role of Indigenous and Local Sports in Developing Mass Sports: A Study on the Potential of Sports Tourism in Northwest Iran

Explanation: Considering the region's natural and cultural sports attractions, this study can explore how reviving traditional and local sports can increase public participation in mass sports and contribute to attracting tourists.

Consequences

4. The Impact of Mass Sports on Reducing Healthcare Costs in Iran

Explanation: Taking into account the positive effects of mass sports on individuals' physical and mental health, this research can examine the influence of sports participation on lowering medical expenses and improving quality of life.

Strategies

5. Designing a Policy-Making Model for Mass Sports Development Using a Participatory Approach

Explanation: This study can focus on designing a comprehensive policy-making model that, by considering citizens' needs, available facilities, and intersectional cooperation, provides effective strategies for mass sports development.

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