

Football in Iraq is one of the national sports with deep social and cultural influence; however, in recent decades its development trajectory has faced serious challenges. The official history of Iraqi national football dates back to 1951, when the national team played its first international match against Lebanon. This event marked a turning point in consolidating football's status as a national symbol. During the 1970s and 1980s, with the establishment of a national league, the emergence of more professional coaches, and participation in Asian competitions, Iraqi football achieved a strong regional position. Nevertheless, political instability, wars, and a lack of infrastructure—especially during periods of crisis—negatively affected the quality of football. Despite these obstacles, Iraq won the AFC Asian Cup in 2007, which was not only a major sporting achievement but also played a unifying role among different ethnic groups (Herbi et al., 2022: 21).

Today, Iraqi football is on a path of revival. The national league and domestic competitions are striving to become more professional; youth talent development programs at both club and national levels have been strengthened; and women's participation in football—through the establishment of a women's league and the inclusion of the women's national team in the FIFA rankings—has once again become a focal point. However, significant weaknesses remain, including inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, and the absence of long-term and sustainable planning in both men's and women's football. Under these circumstances, designing a football development model that draws on successful international experiences while responding to Iraq's specific needs is essential (Al-Dirawi et al., 2024: 347).

Football in Iraq is not only the most popular national sport but also a reflection of the country's social, cultural, and even political dynamics. Despite challenges arising from wars, sanctions, and weak infrastructure, Iraqi football has consistently maintained its place among the people and is currently pursuing a path of reconstruction and development (Obaid, 2022: 58).

According to the latest FIFA rankings (July 2025), the Iraqi men's national team is ranked 55th in the world and sixth in Asia, indicating gradual growth after periods of stagnation. The Iraqi women's national team is ranked 172nd globally; although still in the early stages of development, its inclusion in the official FIFA rankings represents the beginning of a positive movement in women's sports. These developments reflect increasing attention to expanding football in both the men's and women's sectors (FIFA, 2025).

At the club level, the Iraqi Premier League—founded in 1974 and currently known as the Iraq Stars League—features 20 teams in the 2025–2026 season. The season runs from 13 September 2025 to 28 May 2026, with Al-Shorta winning the previous season. In the latest AFC ranking of Asian leagues, the Iraq Stars League is ranked twelfth in Asia, showing notable improvement compared to previous years (AFC, 2025).

Despite these advances, Iraqi football continues to face challenges such as a lack of standard sports infrastructure, limited financial resources, insufficiently structured talent identification programs, and weaknesses in league professionalization. At the same time, strong public enthusiasm, social capital derived from football's widespread popularity, and support from international bodies such as FIFA and the AFC provide significant opportunities for sustainable development (Khalaf & Diachenko, 2015: 62).

The necessity of conducting research on designing a football development model in Iraq stems from the fact that football, beyond entertainment and competition, is an important factor in strengthening social cohesion, promoting public health, and improving the country's international image. Drawing on the successful experiences of countries with well-developed football structures such as Japan, South Korea, and Spain can contribute to formulating a localized and sustainable framework for the growth of Iraqi football. Accordingly, this research aims to design a comprehensive model for football development in Iraq by integrating theoretical knowledge, international experiences, and the country's socio-cultural conditions.

Football, as one of the most popular sports worldwide, holds a special position in Iraq as well. However, Iraqi football faces numerous challenges that hinder its sustainable development, including inadequate infrastructure, limited financial resources, weak planning and management, and cultural and social issues. These problems have prevented Iraqi football from fully realizing its potential and achieving significant success at the international level (Farzan, 2025: 127).

In the FIFA rankings (July 2025), Iraq's men's national team is ranked 55th globally and sixth in Asia, while leading countries such as Japan (18th), Iran (22nd), South Korea (25th), and Saudi Arabia (57th) demonstrate more stable performance. Meanwhile, despite having 20 active teams, the Iraq Stars League ranks twelfth in Asia in the AFC competitiveness index but still lags behind leagues such as those of Japan or Qatar in terms of infrastructure, club management standards, and professionalization.

Football in Iraq is not merely a recreational activity but a social and cultural force capable of exerting profound influence on society. Addressing football development in Iraq is important from multiple perspectives. First, football can serve as a tool for social cohesion. Given Iraq's cultural and ethnic diversity, football can act as a common language that brings people from different backgrounds together, thereby strengthening national unity and reducing social tensions (Zaid Kazem et al., 2023: 85).

Another key aspect of football development is improving the quality of the sport. Despite the abundance of talent among Iraqi youth, the lack of systematic educational and development programs has resulted in many talents going unrecognized or inadequately nurtured. Designing a comprehensive development model can help identify and cultivate these talents, enhancing both national and club teams and increasing international competitiveness. Furthermore, football development requires attention to sports infrastructure, as many stadiums and training facilities in Iraq require renovation to meet international standards. Improving infrastructure can attract domestic and foreign investment, stimulate economic development, and enhance the spectator experience, thereby increasing fan attendance (Mohammadi & Hassan, 2023: 39).

Effective management is another critical dimension of football development in Iraq. The lack of transparency and proper planning within the Iraqi Football Association has led to inefficiency and unmet objectives. Designing a comprehensive management model with transparent and efficient structures can improve organizational performance and enable the achievement of long-term goals. Better management of human and financial resources can foster a healthy competitive environment. Football development can also generate employment opportunities, as increased sports activities and investment raise demand for specialists in coaching, sports management, sports medicine, and sports media, helping reduce youth unemployment (Hassan & Abbasi, 2024: 45).

Moreover, football development can have significant economic impacts. Hosting major competitions and attracting sports tourism can increase national revenues. Given football's status as a global industry, investment in this sector can contribute to economic growth, benefiting not only the football federation but also related industries such as tourism, hospitality, and services. Additionally, football development can promote sporting culture and values such as respect, cooperation, and perseverance, guiding young people toward positive activities and helping reduce social problems like addiction and delinquency (Al-Dirawi et al., 2024: 347).

In conclusion, addressing football development in Iraq is not only a social and cultural necessity but also a major opportunity for economic and social growth. By designing a comprehensive model that includes educational programs, effective management, infrastructure improvement, and the promotion of sporting culture, a bright future for Iraqi football can be envisioned. Implementing such a model may enable Iraqi football to achieve its rightful international position and play a positive role in society. Conversely, neglecting

football development can lead to numerous negative consequences, including the loss of young talent, declining quality of play, reduced international competitiveness, increased social tensions, diminished investment, missed economic opportunities, declining fan engagement, and the inability to host international events (Moradi & Hussein, 2024: 35).

Ultimately, failure to invest in football development in Iraq can result in a range of social, economic, and cultural problems that affect not only the sport but society as a whole. Therefore, addressing this issue and adopting appropriate measures for football development in Iraq is essential. Accordingly, the present research seeks to propose a comprehensive and integrated model for the development of football in Iraq.

English Translation (Methodology):

Research Method

The present study is applied in terms of purpose, employs a mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) in terms of methodology, and falls within the category of cross-sectional research. Initially, a library-based approach and systematic literature review were used to identify the factors influencing the development of football in Iraq. Subsequently, the perspectives of practitioners and experts in this field were utilized to achieve a deeper understanding and to complete the identification of these factors. These factors were then refined and screened using the **Fuzzy Delphi technique**.

After this stage, the identified general factors were categorized and placed into their respective main groups. Next, a researcher-developed questionnaire was designed to assess the importance of the studied factors. The level of importance was determined based on a **five-point Likert scale**, with scores assigned by experts and sample participants to each factor.

Following this process, descriptive statistics related to the identified factors were first analyzed using **SPSS** software. Then, the relationships among these factors were examined using **PLS** software, and the data were analyzed through **structural equation modeling (SEM)** using the aforementioned software. In the final stage, the findings of the research are discussed and conclusions are drawn.

The **Research Onion** is a six-layer framework that specifies the research philosophy, approach, strategy, methodological choice, time horizon, and data collection methods. This multilayered model illustrates the research process. According to this framework, a study is composed of several layers, with each layer being influenced by the layer above it.

Based on this model, the first fundamental issue in any research is the **research philosophy** or the governing paradigm. This is followed by determining the **research approach** (deductive or inductive). The third layer involves the **research strategy**, which can vary widely depending on quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approaches. The **methodological choice** may be mono-method, multi-method, or mixed-method. The **time horizon** can be cross-sectional or longitudinal. Finally, the **methods of data collection and data analysis** must be specified.

Findings

Key Factors Identified in the Development of Football in Iraq

In the first section, which was presented at the end of Chapter Two, the factors were extracted from the literature review. Table 1 presents the complete list of these factors.

Table 1. Final List of Main and Sub-Factors

Identification Source	Sub-Factors	Main Factors	No.
Ji Liang (2024) Cooper (2021)	1. Professional management 2. Strategic planning 3. Corporate governance	Managerial and governance factors	1
Njororai (2019)	4. Sports facilities 5. Talent identification centers 6. Sports equipment and facilities	Infrastructure and technical factors	2

Hao et al. (2021) Hamzah et al. (2025)	7. Strategic investment 8. Revenue generation models 9. Professional financial management	Economic and financial factors	3
Askarnia et al. (2021)	10. Coach development 11. Talent retention 12. Referee education	Human and educational factors	4
Jia et al. (2025) Bognar et al. (2024)	13. Sports culture 14. Role of media 15. Social cohesion	Socio-cultural factors	5
Hao et al. (2021) Wagan et al. (2022)	16. Regional cooperation 17. Sports exchanges 18. Impact of sanctions	International factors	6
Wang et al. (2022)	19. Application of technology 20. Virtual space 21. Performance analysis systems	Technological factors	7

Table 2. Sample of Expert Opinion Frequency Counts

No.	Sub-Criterion Name	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
1	Managerial and governance factors	0	1	3	12	4
2	Infrastructure and technical factors	0	3	4	10	3
3	Economic and financial factors	1	1	6	8	4
4	Human and educational factors	0	2	11	7	0
5	Socio-cultural factors	1	2	6	9	3
6	International factors	1	1	10	5	3
7	Technological factors	1	1	4	6	8

Table 3. Final Factors

Sub-Factors	Main Factors	No.
1. Professional management 2. Strategic planning 3. Corporate governance	Managerial and governance factors	1
4. Sports facilities 5. Talent identification centers 6. Sports equipment and facilities	Infrastructure and technical factors	2
7. Strategic investment 8. Revenue generation models 9. Professional financial management	Economic and financial factors	3
10. Coach development 11. Talent retention 12. Referee education	Human and educational factors	4
13. Sports culture 14. Role of media 15. Social cohesion	Socio-cultural factors	5
16. Regional cooperation 17. Sports exchanges 18. Impact of sanctions	International factors	6
19. Application of technology 20. Virtual space 21. Performance analysis systems	Technological factors	7

Table 4. Examination of Factor Loadings and t-Statistics

Main Component Path	Path Coefficient	t-Statistic	Results
Hypothesis 1: Managerial and governance → Football development	0.806	4.237	Effect confirmed; positive and significant ($t > 1.96$)

Hypothesis 2: Infrastructure and technical → Football development	0.791	4.156	Effect confirmed; positive and significant
Hypothesis 3: Economic and financial → Football development	0.735	3.581	Effect confirmed; positive and significant
Hypothesis 4: Human and educational → Football development	0.772	4.143	Effect confirmed; positive and significant
Hypothesis 5: Technological → Football development	0.616	3.522	Effect confirmed; positive and significant
Hypothesis 6: International → Football development	0.594	3.449	Effect confirmed; positive and significant
Hypothesis 7: Socio-cultural → Football development	0.741	3.792	Effect confirmed; positive and significant

Discussion

Management and governance are recognized as two key elements in the development of football. These factors not only influence the organizational structure of football federations but also contribute to shaping sporting culture and creating the necessary infrastructure for the growth and advancement of football. Effective management can lead to transparency, accountability, and efficiency in decision-making, which in turn positively affect the overall performance of football within a country.

Several sub-factors influence management and governance in football, including financial transparency, stakeholder participation, strategic planning, human resource training and development, and the establishment of effective monitoring systems. Financial transparency helps reduce corruption and financial misconduct while increasing public trust. Likewise, stakeholder participation—including players, coaches, fans, and the media—can foster a supportive environment for managerial decision-making.

Strategic planning is one of the most important managerial tools that can contribute to football development. It involves setting long-term goals, identifying available resources, and assessing risks. Through effective strategic planning, football federations can define clear directions for progress in areas such as infrastructure development, player and coach education, and attracting financial investment.

Human resource training and development is another critical factor in governance and management. Without skilled and well-trained personnel, no program can succeed. Therefore, investment in the education of coaches, referees, and young players should be a priority. Regular training courses and specialized workshops can enhance the technical and tactical level of football.

Establishing effective monitoring and oversight systems is also of great importance. Such systems can improve transparency and accountability in managerial processes. The presence of independent bodies to supervise federation performance and review financial activities can reduce corruption and increase public trust. This not only improves football's image in society but also attracts new investors.

It should be noted that these factors do not operate independently; rather, they interact with one another. Success in one area can strengthen others. For example, effective strategic planning requires financial transparency and stakeholder participation. Therefore, adopting a coordinated and integrated approach to football governance and management is essential.

Overall, governance, management, and their related sub-factors play a significant role in football development. Given the complexity of this domain, a comprehensive and

multidimensional approach is required to address all managerial aspects. Only through such an approach can a bright future for football in any country be envisioned.

Sports Infrastructure

Sports infrastructure is recognized as one of the key factors in football development. This includes stadiums, training grounds, educational centers, and medical and health facilities. Adequate infrastructure can attract talented players, improve training quality, and ultimately enhance team performance. For instance, modern and high-quality stadiums provide better experiences for fans, which can increase financial and social support for football.

Training grounds are another vital component of sports infrastructure. Their quality directly affects players' ability to train and develop technically. High-quality pitches help improve players' techniques and tactics. Moreover, the availability of multiple training facilities allows teams to train continuously without interruption, fostering both individual and collective skill development.

Educational centers also play a crucial role in football development. These centers should focus on educating coaches, referees, and young players. Standardized and professional training programs can elevate the technical level of football nationwide. Well-trained coaches can apply modern training methods, which contributes to the development of young talents.

Medical and health facilities are another important infrastructural factor. Injuries are a major challenge in football, and advanced medical facilities can enable faster diagnosis and more effective treatment. Preventive programs to reduce injury risks can extend players' professional careers, benefiting both players and teams.

Other sub-factors influencing infrastructure and football development include government policies, private investment, and sporting culture. Supportive government policies can help attract the investments required for building and improving infrastructure. A strong sporting culture can also increase youth participation in football, creating a solid foundation for future development.

Infrastructure and its related factors function as an interconnected system. For example, insufficient government investment can weaken educational centers, negatively affecting player quality. Therefore, a coordinated and integrated approach to infrastructure development and related factors is essential.

In conclusion, sports infrastructure and its sub-factors play a crucial role in football development. Investment in infrastructure not only improves game quality but also attracts new fans and increases financial revenues. Hence, these factors must be prioritized in strategic planning by football federations and sports authorities.

Economic and Financial Factors

Economic and financial factors are key drivers of football development. They influence sports infrastructure, shape sporting culture, and attract the investments needed for football progress. Understanding how these factors affect football development is therefore essential.

One major economic aspect of football is infrastructure investment. Building quality stadiums and training grounds requires substantial funding, typically sourced from government investment, private capital, and sponsorships. Successful football teams often have modern stadiums and advanced training facilities, enabling better performance and higher revenues.

Broadcasting rights represent one of the primary revenue sources for football leagues and clubs. As football's popularity increases, television networks are more willing to purchase broadcasting rights, generating higher revenues. These funds can then be reinvested in player recruitment, infrastructure improvement, and educational programs, creating a positive cycle that enhances competition quality and attractiveness.

Sponsorship support is another critical economic factor. Brands and companies seek partnerships with football teams to increase visibility. Such collaborations provide teams with

financial resources for infrastructure development and player salaries, while also creating commercial opportunities for sponsors.

However, economic crises can negatively affect football. Declines in public and private revenues during economic downturns may reduce sports budgets, impacting league and team quality and potentially leading to club bankruptcies. Thus, sound financial management and sustainable planning are essential.

Cultural factors also influence football's economic development. A strong sporting culture increases youth participation and attracts investors. Higher social engagement leads to more fans, boosting ticket sales and merchandise revenues.

In sum, economic and financial considerations—such as infrastructure investment, broadcasting rights, sponsorship, and financial management—are essential for football development. Attention to sporting culture and social participation further contributes to building a sustainable football ecosystem. Adopting comprehensive and coordinated strategies in this area is therefore necessary

Human and Educational Factors

Football development depends not only on economic and financial factors but also on human and educational elements. These include coach education, youth development, sporting culture, and attention to athletes' physical and mental health.

Coach education is one of the most important determinants of team performance. Knowledgeable and experienced coaches can effectively teach appropriate techniques and tactics. Training courses and specialized workshops for coaches can significantly enhance football quality.

Youth player development is equally crucial. Football academies must systematically identify and train young talents, focusing not only on technical skills but also on psychological and social development. Supportive learning environments help attract and retain talent, improving overall football standards.

Sporting culture plays a vital role in football development. A positive culture encourages participation and fosters fan loyalty. Promoting values such as respect, cooperation, and effort contributes to a healthy sporting society.

Attention to players' mental and physical health is also essential. Psychological pressures from intense competition can negatively affect performance. Providing counseling and psychological support services, along with appropriate training programs, can extend players' careers and improve performance.

Families also play a significant role. Family support encourages children to pursue sports and join local teams or academies. Positive interaction between families and sports institutions creates a supportive environment for young athletes.

Overall, human and educational factors are fundamental to football development. By adopting comprehensive approaches that involve all stakeholders—players, coaches, families, and fans—a sustainable football ecosystem can be established.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Socio-cultural factors profoundly influence football development by shaping participation, support, and engagement. These include beliefs, values, behaviors, and social norms that affect how individuals interact with football.

Social values such as respect, cooperation, and fair competition help build a strong sporting culture. When societies value sport, more young people are drawn to football, fostering talent development and improving game quality.

Families, as primary social institutions, play a critical role in shaping children's interest in sports. Community initiatives and local facilities further promote football culture and participation.

Media also plays a key socio-cultural role. Media coverage and promotion raise public awareness and provide role models, increasing fan engagement and support for teams.

Educational systems contribute by integrating sports programs into schools, encouraging early interest in football and developing teamwork and discipline.

Cultural diversity influences playing styles and fan engagement, enriching the football experience and attracting broader audiences. International cultural interaction through football promotes mutual understanding and global connections.

Social challenges such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination can hinder football development by limiting access to facilities and opportunities. Supportive policies ensuring equal access are therefore essential.

Overall, socio-cultural factors are vital to football development. Addressing these factors helps create a supportive ecosystem where all stakeholders can benefit.

Technological Factors

Technology has become a key driver of football development in recent decades, improving player performance, team management, and fan experience.

Data analytics is one of the most important technological applications in football. Advanced software enables coaches to analyze player performance in detail, improving strategies and identifying strengths and weaknesses.

Video Assistant Referee (VAR) technology has enhanced decision-making accuracy and fairness in matches, increasing trust in officiating.

Advancements in sports equipment—from smart balls to high-tech apparel—have improved player comfort and performance.

Social media and digital platforms have transformed communication between clubs, players, and fans, expanding access to football globally and strengthening fan communities.

Technology has also revolutionized education through online courses and virtual training, making learning more accessible.

Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies are increasingly used for simulated training, improving players' mental and physical readiness.

Overall, technological factors play a crucial supporting role in football development. Proper utilization of these technologies enhances game quality, fan experience, and youth participation.

Conclusion

This study aimed to design a football development model for Iraq. Based on data analysis, global best practices, and an assessment of Iraq's current football landscape, the following conclusions were reached:

Comparison of Findings with Theoretical Foundations

- **Management and Governance:** Weak managerial structures, policy instability, and insufficient transparency are major barriers to sustainable development. This aligns with sport development theories emphasizing transparent governance and strategic planning (Sanchez et al., 2025).
- **Infrastructure and Technical Factors:** In line with theoretical frameworks, standard infrastructure and professional equipment are crucial for competitiveness. Iraqi stadiums and training centers require modernization and standardization (Ribeiro et al., 2019).
- **Human and Educational Factors:** Coach education, youth development, and academy expansion are prerequisites for improving league and national team quality, consistent with global studies in Japan and Germany (LaLiga & JFA, 2021).

- **Socio-Cultural Factors:** Football in Iraq serves as a social cohesion tool, helping reduce ethnic tensions and strengthen national identity, aligning with socio-cultural sport theories (Coulter & Thibault, 2025).
- **Economic and International Factors:** Financial constraints and limited international interaction hinder development, consistent with studies on emerging football nations.
- **Technological Factors:** Insufficient use of modern technologies in performance analysis and league management is a key weakness, as highlighted in modern sport management theories (Capasa et al., 2022).

Research Innovation

- Designing a comprehensive conceptual model for football development in Iraq encompassing managerial, infrastructural, human, economic, cultural, international, and technological components.
- Integrating successful global experiences with Iraq's local context and offering practical, context-specific recommendations.
- Applying SWOT analysis and key factor modeling to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—an approach rarely used in prior Iraqi studies.
- Proposing interactive strategies between internal and external organizational factors to establish a sustainable and professional football system.

The findings indicate that Iraqi football has significant development potential. However, sustainable success requires comprehensive planning, coordination among components, utilization of global best practices, and targeted investment in infrastructure, human resources, and technology. The proposed model can serve as a practical guide for the Iraqi Football Association, clubs, and other stakeholders to achieve sustainable development and enhance Iraq's regional and global football standing.

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