

# SPORT, YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW AND GLOBAL BENCHMARKING OF BAHRAIN'S LEADERSHIP-DRIVEN INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM



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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to conduct a literature review of sport-based youth empowerment programs, sustainable development goals, entrepreneurship ecosystems, and sport development models for innovation and position the Kingdom of Bahrain in the global context of sport-for-development. The article synthesizes published peer-reviewed and international experience on the strategic use of sport for human capital development, social inclusion, employability, entrepreneurship development, and economic participation by focusing on how and where sport has been harnessed as a development tool globally. The review also evaluates the role of sport-based programs in developing an entrepreneurial mindset, innovation capacity, employability, and youth enterprises in emerging markets.

A review of literature published in the years 2015 to 2025 was conducted to present the main thematic elements, success factors, governance mechanisms, entrepreneurship linkage and challenges of sport-for-development programs and related initiatives. A comparative benchmarking is presented for the national initiatives in Bahrain led by Shaikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa and Shaikh Khalid bin Hamad Al Khalifa with selected international and regional models. The benchmarking focuses on the strategic integration of sport, entrepreneurship, tourism, innovation, and youth development in national transformation programs.

It is hypothesized that Bahrain's case is an emerging model that can be represented by a leadership-driven and policy-integrated model that leverages four main points. The first point is a strong leadership convergence around sport as a social and national development tool, the second is an integrated approach that connects sport with entrepreneurship and education, the third is the utilization of international sport platforms for youth empowerment and global positioning, and the fourth is a multidimensional development outcome that extends beyond social inclusion. The results of the study suggest that Bahrain's leadership-driven sport ecosystem helps in building entrepreneurship education, sports tourism, and startup opportunities, employability, small and medium enterprise (SME) participation, and youth development for innovation in line with Bahrain Economic Vision 2030. In comparison to a decentralized and fragmented sport for development ecosystem observed across the globe, Bahrain presents an ecosystem that is more integrated, strategically aligned and therefore more scalable with faster implementation and potential for greater impact at the national level.

The study also contributes to the literature in this area by (1) benchmarking Bahrain within a systemic and comparative international context, and (2) presenting evidence on how leadership-driven sport ecosystems can be leveraged as a platform for youth empowerment, economic diversification, innovation capability, and national development in emerging economies.

**Keywords:** *sport for Development; Youth Empowerment; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Systematic Literature Review (SLR); Comparative Benchmarking; Leadership-Driven Governance; Bahrain; Human Capital Development; Social Inclusion; Sports Policy; Entrepreneurship Development; Sustainable Entrepreneurship; Innovation Ecosystems; SME Development; Youth Enterprise; Entrepreneurial Mindset; GCC; Sports Diplomacy; Policy Integration; Global Positioning.*

## 1. Introduction

The primary social and economic function of sport is undergoing a transformation. Sport is increasingly recognized and harnessed as an integrated and multifaceted strategic framework that goes beyond entertainment and competitive activities to a tool for sustainable development, human capital, social innovation, and economic diversification (Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe, 2015; Lindsey and Darby, 2018). For instance, international agencies and governments, are leveraging sports as a holistic medium that could be used to contribute to other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015; Peachey, Schulenkorf and Hill, 2019), such as youth empowerment, leadership, employability and development of a social enterprise ecosystem, social inclusion, citizenship, and cohesion, and a sense of belonging. Recent research has also increasingly shown that sport participation can be a foundation for key competencies and values such as resilience, teamwork, creativity, flexibility, adaptive learning, strategic planning and leadership, which are less often applied to work-readiness and entrepreneurship in knowledge-based economies (Ratten, 2020; Malete et al., 2022; Hashimi et al., 2021). As a result, a wide variety of governments, development and sporting agencies have come to see sports as not only a tool to address the structural, human and social capital challenges of unemployment and health, but also as potentially supporting entrepreneurship and innovation and subsequently the development of a sustainable knowledge-based economy.

Despite its increased adoption and policy resonance, the majority of sport-for-development scholarship has focused largely on its social impact and 'community' dividends with less empirical evidence and interest in its entrepreneurial, socio-entrepreneurial and innovation-led economic aspects (Schulenkorf, 2017; Svensson and Hambrick, 2019). The reported models are also fragmented, plagued by weak governance, decentralization and NGO-driven, eventized, short-term interventions (Lindsey et al., 2019). While this may have been essential to the inclusion and participation of youth in developmental and recreational programs, the extant sport-for-development system's broader scalability, sustainability and interfaces with other economic and innovation systems and value chains is increasingly being questioned (Peachey, Schulenkorf and Hill, 2019). In addition, limited thought has been given to understanding how sport ecosystems in developing contexts could translate to actual entrepreneurship mindsets, startup readiness and participation, SME-led innovations and innovations-based development and the various resources, processes and systems needed to support such an ecosystem (Ratten, 2016; Ratten and Jones, 2021). This raises theoretical and practical questions about sport's role in broader

sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems.

### 1.1 Sport and Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies

In emerging and post-oil economies, sport has been presented as an entry point, and a strategic area that can enable entrepreneurship, support innovation ecosystems, and contribute to economic diversification. Entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems scholars show that innovation ecosystems require a systemic confluence of institutions, education, leadership, enabling policy support, and an entrepreneurial culture to effectively support enterprise creation and long-term competitiveness (Isenberg, 2011; Stam, 2015). In this sense, sporting environments and ecosystems can enable leadership, discipline, collaboration, resilience, creativity, and risk management competencies among youths and young adults (Ratten, 2020). These competencies are becoming a prerequisite for employability, startup readiness, and innovation skills in fast-changing economies. In the same way, scholars also find a positive impact from sport-based interventions when combined with mentorship, entrepreneurship education, and leadership skills on entrepreneurial intention and workforce readiness (Hashimi et al., 2021; Malete et al., 2022). In addition to individual development, the global sports economy has also opened a niche for SME development and expansion, including sports tourism, event management, sports fitness, sports media, hospitality, and sports technology, among others (Ratten, 2018; Feletti et al., 2021).

The growing interest and investment in sport as part of entrepreneurship and diversification economies are salient in GCC countries, especially as governments move to diversify away from hydrocarbon and public sector-driven growth, aiming for more knowledge-based and SME-led economies (Hertog, 2013). Entrepreneurship, innovation, SMEs, and youth employability have been presented as national priorities and competitiveness pillars in several national visions across the GCC (World Bank, 2020). In Bahrain, the Economic Vision 2030 strategy also stresses private-sector growth, entrepreneurship, innovation, and youth empowerment as areas of national transformation focus (Bahrain Economic Development Board, 2008). Bahrain also increasingly shows an emerging example of how sport may be used as part of entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic diversification ecosystems. Led by Shaikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, and Shaikh Khalid bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Secretary-General of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, sport and sport development are being positioned and invested as an integrated ecosystem. Sport is closely linked to entrepreneurship

promotion, youth leadership and employability, workforce development, sports tourism, and innovation-led economic participation. In this sense, Bahrain's national model and recent experience in sport development are not as much an isolated sport-for-development model but a coherent, systemic, integrated model, and innovation ecosystem of sport development coordinated by leadership that can be situated in parallel with Bahrain Economic Vision 2030 and the broader SDGs.

However, a gap exists in the literature around benchmarking and a comparative analysis of leadership-driven centralized ecosystems, and their potential to support entrepreneurship and innovation, create sustainable enterprises, and sustainable enterprise development. Most of the existing work has focused on localized or decentralized work, and much less focus on how nationally or regionally coordinated sport ecosystems can provide important support for economic transformation and youth enterprise development in post-oil and GCC countries. In this sense, this study attempts to cover the aforementioned gaps by providing a systematic literature review and benchmarking analysis of sport-for-development models while also repositioning Bahrain as an emerging example of a national leadership and innovation ecosystem. In particular, the study examines how sport-based initiatives may be systematically measured against entrepreneurship and innovation competencies development, employability, startup readiness, SME participation, innovation culture, and sustainable economic participation, alongside broader outcomes.

## 2. Systematic Literature Review and Comparative Benchmarking

### 2.1 Sport for Development and Sustainable Development Frameworks

The emergence of sport as a strategic development tool over the last two decades has been paralleled by a gradual expansion in its thematic, geographic and programmatic scope. Driven by growing acknowledgement of the positive contribution of sport to a range of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to health, education, inclusion, employability and social cohesion (United Nations, 2015; Lindsey and Darby, 2018), sport for development (SFD) initiatives have witnessed significant proliferation across national and institutional contexts, with an increasing prominence in youth-targeted development programs in particular. Despite the expansion in its thematic, geographic and programmatic scope, the SFD literature has been dominated by a relatively narrow focus on social-inclusion, peacebuilding, behavioural development and community-engagement outcomes (Peachey, Schulenkorf and Hill, 2019). Furthermore, while the SFD field has attracted increased scholarly

and donor attention over recent years, it has been widely critiqued for remaining in many respects conceptually underdeveloped and operationally fragmented. Scholars have argued that the majority of SFD programs continue to be built around decentralised, NGO-led structures, characterised by short funding cycles, fragmented governance and limited institutionalisation, and that such challenges to long-term sustainability, scalability and development impact have persisted despite the recent growth in SFD activities (Lindsey et al., 2019). One of the key critiques within the literature relates to the overemphasis on social-development outcomes at the neglect of important economic and entrepreneurship dynamics. While the links between sport and health, education, employability, life skills, etc., have increasingly been theorised and empirically established, relatively few studies have sought to systematically explore sport as a factor or contributor to entrepreneurship ecosystems, startup-readiness, innovation and sustainable enterprise-development (Ratten, 2016; Svensson and Hambrick, 2019). As a result, the SFD literature remains disproportionately focused on social development narratives, while the role of sport in relation to broader economic transformation and innovation systems remains comparatively underexplored at the theoretical level.

The relative neglect of entrepreneurship and innovation dynamics in SFD scholarship can be seen as reflective of a key conceptual shortcoming of the field. While many authors have pointed to the potential of sport to make a positive contribution to youth development, the majority of scholarship continues to conceptualise sport essentially as a peripheral social intervention rather than as an integrated economic and entrepreneurship ecosystem with the potential to contribute to national competitiveness, SME-growth, innovation-diffusion and other forms of sustainable economic participation. As the global economy continues to evolve in the direction of knowledge- and innovation-driven development, with increasing emphasis on enabling SMEs and supporting entrepreneurship across all contexts, there is a growing need to reconceptualise the role of sport in development in a manner that more systematically incorporates and explores its economic dimensions and entrepreneurship-enabling capacity.

### 2.2 Sustainable Entrepreneurship and Innovation Ecosystems

As entrepreneurship has become an increasingly prominent feature of sustainable development conversations, the research literature has seen growing attention devoted to sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem theory (Dean and McMullen, 2007; Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011). Sustainable entrepreneurship can be defined as a set of practices that differentiate themselves from previous forms of entrepreneurship in their ability to

concurrently create economic, social, and long-term societal value. From this perspective, entrepreneurship is not only conceived as a method of value maximization for the individual business, but also increasingly of “problem-solving in an economic sense (capability to address structural challenges), innovation capability, SME support, and economic resilience-building, particularly in rapidly evolving global markets” (Pierri and Schwartz, 2018, p.6). Innovation ecosystem theory, moreover, frames entrepreneurial growth and competitiveness as the product of synergistic and dynamic relationships across a variety of actors and organizations, including institutions, government and public bodies, universities and business incubators, private-sector and corporate partners, as well as policy regimes and governance (Isenberg, 2011; Stam, 2015). Rather than the isolated behavior of individual entrepreneurs, ecosystem approaches tend to focus on the underlying structures, including the coordination of institutional supports, culture of innovation and support, knowledge and skill transfer, and strategic integration through policy and governance frameworks, as the main source of sustainable enterprise development and growth (Spigel, 2017). These frameworks have gained traction in particular for a wide range of emerging and post-oil economies with shared goals of diversifying sources of national income, stimulating job creation and youth unemployment reduction, and supporting innovation and knowledge economy growth.

Yet, in the context of the explosive growth of entrepreneurship ecosystem research and theorization in recent years, sport is still a significantly understudied phenomenon in the broader literature. The existing body of work on innovation ecosystems, with a few notable exceptions, has tended to disproportionately focus on technology, financial, university/academia, and digital innovation sectors and actors while underrecognizing the increasing economic and strategic importance of sport industries and sport-based enterprise ecosystems in particular (Ratten, 2018). This is a significant theoretical and empirical gap, considering the rapidly accelerating commercialization and internationalization of the sport economy and the rise of sport-related industry segments in recent years, spanning sports tourism, fitness economy, digital sports media and e-sports, sports technology, coaching and training as an enterprise, as well as event management and hosting (Ratten, 2018).

Similarly, while entrepreneurship ecosystem discourse and research have tended to disproportionately focus on Western and already highly developed economies, there has been comparatively less focus on understanding how emerging market and developing economies might leverage sport ecosystems as an innovation and diversification strategy. In the case of the GCC, despite significant levels of investment into sports economies,

entrepreneurship programming, and sports soft power platforms in recent years, these countries still remain severely underrepresented in entrepreneurship ecosystems research more broadly. As a result, the conceptual overlaps and bridges between sport, innovation ecosystems, entrepreneurship development, and sustainable economic diversification remain currently understudied and theoretically fragmented in the literature.

### 2.3 Sport Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Enterprise Development

Sport entrepreneurship has been defined as a growing interdisciplinary field of research that seeks to explore how sport-related activities and enterprises can provide opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship, economic participation, and business development (Ratten, 2016). Unlike the traditional sport management literature which has been centered primarily around administration, industry performance, governance, and management, the emerging sport entrepreneurship literature places an emphasis on opportunity recognition, innovation, value creation, and strategic competitiveness in sport-related industries.

The global sports economy has grown dramatically over the last decade, resulting in growing entrepreneurial opportunities in sports tourism, fitness industries, coaching businesses, sports analytics, online fitness platforms, e-sports, health technologies, events management, sports media, and other sport-related ventures (Ratten, 2020). International sporting events have also begun to be considered as vehicles for economic impact and catalysts that can create tourism income, local SMEs support, and hospitality and startup industries in local communities (Higham and Hinch, 2018; Feletti et al., 2021). This has resulted in sport shifting from a social-development institution to an enterprise and economic sector that is increasingly being tied to innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic diversification efforts.

There are, however, significant theoretical debates in the field of sport entrepreneurship. While some researchers and theorists have argued that sport and sport participation can have a positive effect on the entrepreneurial mindsets of individuals due to their leadership, teamwork, resilience, discipline, adaptability, and strategic thinking skills (Malete et al., 2022), other scholars have noted that the link between entrepreneurship and sport remains difficult to conceptualize and measure given a lack of coherent understanding and framework in a fragmented development context that is marked by weak institutions and limited longitudinal tracking and evaluation (Peachey, Schlenker and Hill, 2019). There are similar concerns with respect to the understanding of sport entrepreneurship itself. While more recent work in sport entrepreneurship is

focusing on startups and innovation capability, most existing work still primarily focuses on discrete or isolated entrepreneurial behaviors or activities without connecting them to broader national entrepreneurship ecosystems.

Additionally, most of the sport entrepreneurship literature has remained based on the context of Western economies and commercial sport industries. This has created a gap in the literature in which there is limited understanding of how sport entrepreneurship could be utilized as part of larger sustainable development and economic diversification strategies, particularly in emerging economies and the GCC countries. This results in a gap in the literature in which there is a limited theoretical framework regarding how top-down leadership and controlled sport ecosystems can support enterprise creation, employability, SME development, and innovation-led economic growth at a national level.

#### **2.4 Youth Entrepreneurship and Innovation Ecosystems in the GCC**

Sport is an under-theorized and under-examined area within entrepreneurship studies, including the context of the GCC. As a result, conceptual and research gaps in the literature on entrepreneurship in the GCC have left a number of areas of inquiry to be explored and contextualized. To address these existing gaps, this review paper proposes an original research agenda on sport entrepreneurship ecosystems in the GCC. By highlighting four prominent conceptual areas of inquiry in the extant literature, this section of the paper will offer original insights into this area of research, underscoring the need for the proposed study and framework.

To begin, entrepreneurship in the GCC has predominantly been analyzed from the perspective of macro-level policy-oriented economic diversification and post-oil transition plans. In contrast, less attention has been paid to the institutional architectures and sectoral ecosystems that can drive this entrepreneurship transition, particularly in relation to youth enterprises. The existing literature has not yet sufficiently focused on sport, which has often been more closely linked with youth development and talent cultivation within GCC states (Al-Noaimi, 2012; Alyami, 2019; Ahmad & Naurin, 2020). In this sense, a lack of focus on the relationship between sport and entrepreneurship ecosystems is a meaningful gap that can be analyzed through the lens of the proposed conceptual framework.

Second, although entrepreneurship ecosystems are one of the more common themes in GCC-related entrepreneurship research, there is less direct attention to sport. This gap persists, despite a number of relevant commonalities, including investment in sports-related industries, international sports events, and youth sports development. These factors mean that sport ecosystems could represent a key potential

setting for the formation of entrepreneurial skills and capabilities, employability, leadership skills, and opportunities for startup development. The fields of large sporting events, sports tourism, fitness industries, coaching and training enterprises, and youth sports can be important not only in sport development but also in supporting a broader regional innovation and SME-driven ecosystem. Therefore, the nexus of sport and entrepreneurship in the context of economic transformation in the GCC requires further research and development.

#### **2.5 Social Entrepreneurship Through Sport**

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a conceptual framework to respond to society's challenges with innovative, community-centric, and sustainable enterprise initiatives (Dees, 1998). Social entrepreneurship approaches differ from traditional entrepreneurship in their emphasis on social value creation rather than solely commercial profitability. Sport has been used in recent years as a mechanism to drive social innovation, inclusive entrepreneurship, community empowerment, and youth development. Sport-based social enterprises may often target marginalized or underserved communities, aiming to address social and economic issues such as unemployment, youth disengagement, social exclusion, gender inequality, and limited opportunities for economic participation (Svensson and Hambrick, 2019). The integration of sport-based initiatives with mentorship, leadership development, education, and community participation can offer potential pathways to enhance employability, develop entrepreneurial capabilities, and foster social mobility among vulnerable groups.

However, it is also important to address the main points of friction in the underlying theories. While there is a tendency to characterize social enterprises as inclusive and community-centric, sport-based social enterprises may also struggle with issues related to long-term sustainability, scalability, institutional support, and measurable economic outcomes (Schulenkorf, 2017). Additionally, there is often a separation of social innovation from entrepreneurship system dimensions, meaning that social entrepreneurship models may be criticized for lacking insights that can help us see how it can contribute to innovation capability, SMEs participation and development, workforce development, and sustainable economic development at the same time.

Women and youth empowerment have also been explored in recent studies in relation to sport-based initiatives. A study has suggested that women and youth who participate in sport-based leadership and empowerment programs may have a more positive impact on their confidence, employability, leadership capability, and entrepreneurial intention (Malete et al., 2022). Despite the recognition of the potential of sport as a vehicle for social innovation, the integration

of sport-based social entrepreneurship within the national innovation system and sustainable development strategies has been less explored, particularly in the context of emerging economies and the GCC.

### 2.6 Gap and Theory Re-positioning

The review process identified several major theoretical and empirical gaps in the existing literature. First, most sport-for-development scholarship focused on social inclusion, behavioral development, and community engagement, while significantly less literature focused on entrepreneurial skills, startup readiness, innovation readiness, employability and sustainable enterprise development. Second, entrepreneurship ecosystem scholarship underrepresented the inclusion of sport ecosystems in light of the growing economic importance of sports industries and sport-related enterprise sectors. Third, the existing literature remains highly fragmented between sport-for-development, entrepreneurship, social innovation, and sustainable development with few integration attempts. This has led to a limited theoretical understanding of how sport ecosystems may simultaneously be related to the development of entrepreneurship, the diffusion of innovation, SME participation, workforce readiness and sustainable development. Fourth, the literature remained dominated by decentralized models of NGO-led development, while significantly less research has focused on centralized leadership-driven models with the potential to integrate sport, entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems and national development planning. This gap is most salient in the GCC, where governments are increasingly looking to entrepreneurship ecosystems, sports economies and youth innovation as instruments of economic diversification. Thus, this study seeks to re-position Bahrain not simply as a sport for development example, but as a leadership-driven innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem with the capacity to integrate sport, youth empowerment, entrepreneurship development, employability, SME participation and sustainable economic transformation. Systematic literature review and comparative benchmarking as a result allow this study to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by investigating sport ecosystems as institutional instruments of inclusive entrepreneurship, innovation readiness, startup readiness and sustainable national competitiveness.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Review Design

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was employed to collate, critically appraise, and comparatively benchmark existing international academic literature on sport-based youth empowerment, sustainable development, entrepreneurship ecosystems, and

innovation-focused development. The SLR method was used because it provides a replicable and transparent form of evidence synthesis (i.e., an SLR is a review of evidence, rather than an individual study), which in this case was required to synthesise interdisciplinary and diverse bodies of literature on sport-for-development, sustainable entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystems, employability, and youth enterprise development (Page et al., 2021).

Different from traditional narrative reviews, systematic literature reviews allow for a structured approach to the identification, appraisal, comparison, and synthesis of the available academic evidence, and reduce selection bias while improving the consistency of the analysis. PRISMA-informed procedures were used to guide the conduct of the review for increased transparency of the processes followed for the identification, screening, assessment of eligibility, and inclusion of articles and records.

The SLR method was used because the extant literature on the subjects of sport, entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystems, and sustainable development tends to be fragmented and scattered across multiple academic disciplines. As such, because the study was interdisciplinary in nature, the review drew on scholarship from the fields of sport management, entrepreneurship, sustainability studies, innovation ecosystems, youth development, and public policy to increase the breadth of analytical coverage and conceptual integration.

In addition to traditional sport-for-development outcomes, the present review used an entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem lens to examine how sport ecosystems and entrepreneurship can intersect to drive entrepreneurial skills, employability, enterprise readiness, startup ecosystem participation, and innovation capability, which in turn, support SME development and sustainable economic participation in emerging economies and GCC states.

The review also used comparative benchmarking analysis to explore differences in scale and approach between global sport-for-development models and Bahrain's leadership-driven sport ecosystem. Comparative benchmarking was used to assess and compare the different features, which include aspects of governance and management structure, integration of entrepreneurship, innovation capability and outcomes, employability, SME participation, scalability, institutional coordination, and policy alignment between approaches.

To the authors' knowledge, few systematic reviews have comparatively synthesised sport-for-development literature with the field of entrepreneurship ecosystems and innovation-focused development perspectives, particularly in the context of the GCC. As such, this review is designed to provide an empirical basis to help inform emerging interdisciplinary discussions on sport as a mechanism

for sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation-driven national development.

### 3.2 Search Strategy

Electronic searches of published research in the sport management, entrepreneurship, and sustainability literature were made in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases, selected as large multidisciplinary databases for sport management, entrepreneurship, sustainability, innovation ecosystems, public policy, development studies, and business research. We combined sport, entrepreneurship, innovation, sustainability, and development-related keywords, since this is an interdisciplinary topic that may not always be categorized within database classifications. Key search terms included “sport for development”, “sport entrepreneurship”, “youth entrepreneurship”, “sustainable entrepreneurship”, “sport and sustainable development goals”, “sport innovation”, “entrepreneurship ecosystems”, “youth empowerment through sport”, “SME development”, “innovation ecosystems”, “sport tourism and entrepreneurship”, “employability through sport”, “startup ecosystems”, and “sports economy”.

Search terms were combined with the Boolean operators AND/OR to broaden sensitivity and result retrieval. Some combinations of the key terms included (“sport entrepreneurship” OR “sport for development”) AND (“youth entrepreneurship” OR “innovation ecosystems”), (“sport innovation” AND “SME development”), (“sport for development” AND “sustainable entrepreneurship”), and (“sports economy” AND “startup ecosystems”). Searches were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles in English published between 2015 and 2025. This timeframe was selected to capture relevant contemporary scholarship coinciding with the time period in which the UN SDGs are being implemented, discourse around global entrepreneurship expanded, and innovation agendas for economic development have become prioritized.

### 3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Guided by principles of methodological rigour and relevance, the review team established the inclusion and exclusion criteria for screening prior to conducting it. For inclusion, we pre-specified that studies must have been published between 2015 and 2025 and in peer-reviewed academic journals in English. Eligible studies for review are those focusing on sport-for-development, entrepreneurship, or innovation ecosystems, youth empowerment and employability, SME development and support, or sustainable development, that offer empirical, case-based, policy-oriented, or evidence-supported analysis or evidence, and with a particular focus on entrepreneurship-related and innovation-capability-building outcomes related to: formation of entrepreneurial mindset, preparedness for startup

and entrepreneurship, innovation capability formation, preparedness of workforce, employability, participation in enterprises and SME linkage, among others.

Studies were excluded if their narrow scope relates to elite sport performance without the broader developmental, economic, and transformational implications, if their methodologies are not clearly and transparently described, or if they offer only theoretical narratives and do not present any analytical or comparative contribution. Articles that we screened that do not have any indicators of youth development, contribution to entrepreneurship ecosystems and innovation-oriented outcomes, or sustainable development, and are not demonstrably related to other articles’ content, were also excluded. In addition, we excluded articles that are only focused on physiological or sport-performance dimensions, medical aspects of sport and health without their relation to social, economic, and developmental implications, and other narrow scopes of sport-performance or narrowly defined SDP.

The above inclusion criteria were used to identify articles in sport-for-development and entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems research to go beyond the “usual” sport-for-development literature in the review. The scope also includes entrepreneurship-oriented and innovation-focused research literature where such exists in relation to sustainable enterprise development and economic transformation.

### 3.4 Screening and Selection Process (PRISMA-Informed)

The screening and selection process was PRISMA-informed to improve the transparency and methodological robustness of study selection (Page et al., 2021). The preliminary database search identified 94 studies. After deduplication, 78 records were screened by titles and abstracts. Then, 61 full-texts were evaluated for eligibility using the pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

As a result, 38 peer-reviewed studies were included in the final review sample. The studies represented a multidisciplinary field of scholarship, including sport management, entrepreneurship ecosystems, innovation studies, employability, sustainability, youth development, and public policy.

The PRISMA-informed process enhanced transparency, replicability, and analytical rigor throughout the review process.

### 3.5 Data Extraction and Analytical Positioning

The selected studies underwent the data extraction process to promote the consistency of the analyses. Therefore, the following analytical themes were extracted to have insight into the entrepreneurial orientation within sport-for-development initiatives:

1. Governance;

2. Institutional coordination and leadership;
3. Social inclusion;
4. Entrepreneurship;
5. Employability;
6. Entrepreneurial mindset;
7. Startup;
8. Innovation;
9. SME participation;
10. Sustainable development;
11. SDG; and
12. Institutional integration and scalability;

The analytical positioning approach of this review was conducted by positioning the sport-for-development literature with the sustainable entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystem, employability, and enterprise development literatures. The analyses, thus, did not focus on understanding sport initiatives from a social development perspective only. The focus was on sport ecosystems and the possibility of them contributing, in the same or different perspectives, to entrepreneurial competencies, readiness to the workforce, the diffusion of innovation, enterprise participation, and the sustainable transformation of economies.

The coding categories that were used include governance and the integration of institutions, entrepreneurial orientation, employability, the innovation ecosystem, startup pathway, coordination, sustainability orientation, and SME participation. The thematic extraction was done until conceptual saturation was reached for the recurring dimensions that are related to the integration of entrepreneurship in sport, the capability of innovation, and governance as well as employability and sustainable development outcomes.

### 3.6 Thematic Analysis and Comparative Benchmarking

The chosen articles were appraised according to the thematic synthesis and comparative benchmarking methods.

**Thematic Synthesis.** The thematic synthesis was applied to trace common conceptual themes, debate points, and emerging ideas in the research. The chosen aspects are listed below:

1. Governance and institutional coordination
2. Social inclusion and youth empowerment
3. Sustainable development and SDG integration
4. Entrepreneurial mindset development
5. Employability and workforce readiness
6. Enterprise readiness and startup pathways
7. Innovation capability and entrepreneurship ecosystems
8. SME participation and economic diversification
9. Leadership-driven development approaches

This allowed for the review to transcend descriptive synthesis and critically integrate the sport-for-

development, entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystem, and sustainable development literatures.

**Comparative Benchmarking.** Cross-contextual benchmarking was used to provide a systematic comparison between international sport-for-development models and the national leadership-driven ecosystem present in Bahrain. The dimensions benchmarked in this process included:

1. Models of governance
  2. Policy alignment
  3. Integration to entrepreneurship ecosystems
  4. Focus on innovation-driven development
  5. Youth employability
  6. Startup and entrepreneurial engagement
  7. SME-linkages and entrepreneurship
  8. Scale and institutional coordination
- Positioning on global platforms and sports economy development

The cross-contextual benchmarking approach allowed for a comparison between NGO-driven and often fragmented sport-for-development models and the leadership-driven innovation ecosystem seen in certain GCC countries.

### 3.7 Quality Assessment of Included Studies

The quality of the included studies was verified for analytical consistency and credibility through the clarity of the research aim, transparency of the research design, empirical rigour, analytical consistency, and contribution to entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystems, employability and sustainable development scholarship and to sport-for-development literature.

Studies using qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, policy-analysis or evidence-based comparative approaches were prioritised. Methodologically opaque or incoherent, empirically or analytically inconsistent, non-contributory studies were excluded during the screening phase.

### 3.8 Limitations of Methodology

While efforts were made to ensure the rigour of the review, it is important to note the following limitations to the process and included studies. First, the review included only English-language peer-reviewed studies and may therefore have omitted relevant work, including regional or non-English language literature. Second, the design, measurement, contextual, and analytical variations between the included studies may have resulted in a lack of comparability between findings. Third, the relationship between sport ecosystems and entrepreneurship and innovation-related outcomes remains underdeveloped in the existing literature, and the included studies provide varying levels of conceptual and empirical grounding. Fourth, the existing literature on entrepreneurship-oriented sport ecosystems in GCC contexts is somewhat limited in volume and scope.

Despite these limitations, this review benefited from an interdisciplinary scope, which helped to conceptually integrate knowledge from different but related and often isolated fields of research on sport-for-development, entrepreneurship ecosystems, innovation, and sustainable development. The use of PRISMA-informed methodology, along with the review's clearly defined inclusion criteria, thematic synthesis, benchmarking comparisons, and analysis coding, has enhanced its rigor, transparency, and methodological consistency.

#### 4. Bahrain Case Analysis: A Leadership-Driven Sport, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation Ecosystem

##### 4.1 Overview of Bahrain's Sport and Entrepreneurship Ecosystem

Transitioning from the global sport-for-development and entrepreneurship ecosystem literature presented in the preceding sections, Bahrain emerges as a nascent illustration of a leadership-facilitated sport ecosystem seamlessly embedded within the broader national development, entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic diversification framework. In contrast to the relatively fragmented global landscape of sport-for-development, Bahrain offers a relatively well-aligned ecosystem spanning sport participation, entrepreneurship development, employability, tourism, innovation, and private-sector participation. Diverging from many decentralized, short-term project-based, and externally implemented global sport-for-development models, Bahrain exhibits a more integrated ecosystem with centralized leadership, strategic focus on entrepreneurship, and potential for scalability within the national economic agenda.

Under the vision of Shaikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa and Shaikh Khalid bin Hamad Al Khalifa, sport has steadily transitioned from a traditional recreational and social-development activity to a platform for human capital development, entrepreneurship ecosystems, workforce readiness, international positioning, and sustainable economic participation. This trajectory aligns closely with Bahrain Economic Vision 2030, which positions economic diversification, youth empowerment, private-sector growth, innovation capability, and entrepreneurship development as critical national priorities (Bahrain Economic Development Board, 2008).

Crucially, this transition mirrors the wider paradigm shift from perceiving sport solely as a tool for social inclusion toward increasingly positioning sport as a fundamental pillar of national innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems. Rather than relegating sport to a secondary component of social programs, Bahrain operationalizes sport as a potential source of economic infrastructure underpinning entrepreneurship ecosystems, SME participation,

sports tourism, startup pathways, employability, and innovation-driven growth.

In this regard, Bahrain distinguishes itself from many global sport-for-development models that rely heavily on fragmented NGO-led and externally implemented interventions with limited institutional integration and constrained economic scalability (Lindsey et al., 2019). Through centralized leadership and strategic alignment, Bahrain offers a case study in how sport ecosystems may contribute to social development, enterprise participation, workforce transformation, and economic diversification in emerging economies simultaneously.

##### 4.2 Leadership, Governance, and Strategic Coordination

A key aspect of this influence concerns leadership and coordination. Literature on sport-for-development often highlights issues such as fragmented governance structures, duplication of efforts, inconsistent funding, and limited strategic coordination as significant challenges that hinder long-term sustainability and scalability of initiatives (Peachey, Schlenker, and Hill, 2019). However, Bahrain's approach, driven by centralized leadership and ecosystem coordination, exhibits a higher degree of integration between sport policy, entrepreneurship development, education, tourism, and national economic transformation.

Sport initiatives, under the leadership of Shaikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa and Shaikh Khalid bin Hamad Al Khalifa, are increasingly aligned with a national framework that is deeply connected to entrepreneurship development, youth empowerment, leadership cultivation, innovation ecosystems, and private-sector engagement. This top-down coordination allows for greater policy coherence, faster implementation, wider scalability, and stronger institutional integration compared to many decentralized sport-for-development models worldwide.

Crucially, Bahrain's governance approach extends beyond the administration of sport and into broader ecosystem coordination. Sport initiatives are woven into the fabric of entrepreneurship programs, workforce development strategies, educational institutions, tourism development plans, youth innovation projects, and private-sector participation frameworks. This multi-layered integration enhances the ability of sport ecosystems to contribute not just to social development outcomes, but also to employability, startup readiness, innovation, and sustainable economic engagement.

In contrast to many Western NGO-led sport-for-development programs, which tend to operate somewhat independently from wider economic systems, Bahrain adopts a more strategically aligned ecosystem approach. This alignment has facilitated improved institutional coordination between public-sector agencies, entrepreneurship support structures,

universities, sports federations, tourism authorities, and private-sector players. As a result, sport is no longer a standalone initiative but is integrated into Bahrain's broader economic diversification architecture.

### 4.3 Sports Economy and SME Ecosystem in Bahrain

The economic component of Bahrain's emerging sport ecosystem is one of its most notable differentiating characteristics. Bahrain has sought to develop sport as a channel for promoting economic activity, and not merely as a mechanism for youth development and international positioning. In recent years, there has been greater emphasis on leveraging sport for catalyzing entrepreneurship, SME participation, innovation activity, and private-sector economic growth.

Events including the Formula 1 Gulf Air Bahrain Grand Prix, IRONMAN 70.3 Bahrain, and BRAVE Combat Federation are among several prominent international sporting events that have helped catalyze the growth of Bahrain's sports economy. These events support not only tourism and international exposure, but also spillover economic activity such as hospitality consumption, event-driven entrepreneurship, and private-sector business participation. In contrast with many traditional sport-for-development models that are focused on narrow social indicators, Bahrain's approach has yielded observable economic impact across sectors.

The Formula 1 Bahrain Grand Prix is one of the Middle East's most globally recognized sporting events, and its impact extends beyond tourism to other areas such as hospitality, transportation services, sports retail, event management, sports marketing, tourism services, digital marketing, and media production. The Grand Prix event also supports SME participation through local vendor engagement, service provision, merchandise sales, and tourism-related entrepreneurship.

IRONMAN 70.3 Bahrain further supports Bahrain's standing within the global sports tourism industry, while generating economic activity in hospitality, fitness and wellness, sports retail, event management, and tourism. Research on the impact of international sporting events has shown that sports tourism platforms have a catalytic effect on destination branding, tourist spending, and local business ecosystems (Feletti et al., 2021). Within Bahrain, these events have become an avenue for promoting entrepreneurship and economic diversification by supporting SME development and private-sector business participation.

The BRAVE Combat Federation, a prominent mixed martial arts organization, similarly illustrates Bahrain's strategy of integrating sport with broader entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems. In addition to sports competition, BRAVE CF is also leveraged to support sports broadcasting, digital

sports media, sports marketing, event production, fitness entrepreneurship, coaching enterprises, sports sponsorship, and international sports tourism. The growth of combat sports platforms has further enabled new opportunities for local gyms, coaching academies, sports-content creators, sports retailers, and fitness-based SMEs.

The growth of Bahrain's sports economy also increasingly supports entrepreneurship and enterprise participation within sectors such as:

1. Fitness and wellness industries
2. Sports tourism and hospitality
3. Event management and production
4. Sports retail and merchandising
5. Coaching academies and youth training centers
6. Digital sports media and content creation
7. Sports marketing and sponsorship industries
8. Health and wellness enterprises
9. Sports technology and fitness innovation platforms

Taken together, these sectors support Bahrain's economic diversification strategy by creating jobs, supporting SME ecosystems, driving startup participation, and fueling private-sector growth in line with Bahrain Economic Vision 2030.

In contrast with many siloed sport-for-development models that offer limited economic outcomes or integration with private-sector ecosystems, Bahrain's sport ecosystem is increasingly operationalizing sport as a means for entrepreneurship stimulation, innovation-led development, and economic participation.

### 4.4 Youth Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Development Through Sport

In the cases of both Bahrain and other countries, sports-based interventions can have a number of economic advantages, including serving as a starting point for creating new businesses and generating jobs. The inclusion of sport, fitness, recreation and the associated youth employability components in Bahrain's economic diversification strategy is an important area of consideration. The emerging research and practice in the sports sector shows that entrepreneurship ecosystems, innovation-oriented development, and knowledge-based economic inclusion can be conceptualized, evaluated, and advanced in part through sport-related interventions. INJAZ Bahrain is one example of youth entrepreneurship and enterprise development through sport.

In contrast to prior conceptualizations of sport-for-development that have emphasized social inclusion and pro-social outcomes at the expense of entrepreneurship, skills training and enterprise participation, Bahrain's sport and youth employment strategy can be seen to link sport, entrepreneurship and enterprise development (Ratten, 2020). The diverse interventions and their associated concepts and goals – from sport participation to fitness

economy, sports sector, sports management, and sports entrepreneurship – become closely associated with entrepreneurship education and employability readiness.

Injaz Bahrain has emerged in Bahrain as a human capital development initiative with important connections to youth entrepreneurship, innovation readiness, and a knowledge-based economy. Injaz Bahrain's activities, components, and priorities aim to foster a number of skills and competencies that support entrepreneurship ecosystems and economic diversification. Injaz Bahrain's activities have included:

1. Entrepreneurship education and youth training,
2. Financial literacy and financial planning,
3. Development of management skills,
4. Leadership skills and development,
5. Creativity and innovation skills and development,
6. Self-employment and start-up participation.

The sports economy and fitness economy components of Bahrain's youth employment strategy have emerged as a unique entry point for facilitating employability, entrepreneurship education, and enterprise readiness.

The association of sports and sport participation with entrepreneurship ecosystems and enterprise readiness that is being observed in Bahrain has been previously observed in other parts of the world. In the context of social inclusion and pro-social development, research and practice have tended to prioritize the inclusion and participation outcomes associated with sport at the expense of other types of entrepreneurship ecosystem and enterprise participation. However, a growing number of initiatives in the sports sector focus increasingly on employability readiness, knowledge-based skills and competencies, and the use of sports as an entry point for supporting entrepreneurship education and enterprise development. The Injaz Bahrain initiative has sought to associate entrepreneurship ecosystems and economic diversification with sports and fitness sector.

In addition to Injaz Bahrain, there is a growing number of sports-related startups, sports SMEs, and small businesses in the fitness economy, the sports industry, the sports media and event management, and the sports coaching sector in Bahrain. The expansion of a sports coaching ecosystem, the fitness industry, small businesses, and fitness-related start-up activity can be seen as the result of new connections being established between sports, fitness, recreation, entrepreneurship, and youth employability.

The sports sector's integration with economic diversification, the knowledge-based economy, entrepreneurship ecosystems and economic inclusion is an example of how sport-related participation is increasingly being integrated with employability pathways and small business start-up. In Bahrain's

case, this emerging trend can be seen to be facilitated by initiatives such as INJAZ Bahrain.

#### **4.5 Employability, Innovation Capability, and Workforce Development**

In addition to supporting entrepreneurship creation, Bahrain's sports ecosystem has also played an important role in improving employability, transforming the workforce, and building innovation capability. Research has shown that sport-related ecosystems can positively impact the development of soft skills, including leadership, resilience, teamwork, communication, adaptability, discipline, and strategic thinking (Malete et al., 2022). These skills are particularly valuable in entrepreneurship ecosystems, startup culture, and innovation-driven job markets.

In Bahrain, there are strong links between sports initiatives and leadership development programs, entrepreneurship training, education pathways, youth empowerment platforms, and innovation-oriented activities. These efforts have not only contributed to workforce readiness but have also supported national priorities, including economic diversification, entrepreneurship development, and sustainable competitiveness.

The approach is noteworthy as it challenges the notion of employability as primarily linked to formal education. Through various platforms such as international sports events, youth leadership programs, sports entrepreneurship initiatives, and innovation training programs, Bahrain is increasingly leveraging sports ecosystems as experiential learning environments that can help foster entrepreneurial capabilities, workforce adaptability, and innovation-readiness.

This shift is particularly significant in GCC countries like Bahrain, where demographic challenges, youth unemployment, and economic transitions towards knowledge-based economies are prominent issues. Bahrain's sport ecosystem not only contributes to social and recreational outcomes but also plays a crucial role in economic resilience, human capital development, and sustainable workforce transformation.

#### **4.6 Discussion and Limitations**

While Bahrain's leadership-driven sport ecosystem exhibits strengths, limitations, and potential long-term sustainability challenges warrant attention. The centralized governance structure enabling quick implementation, strategic coordination, and integration into national ecosystems may also engender dependencies on leadership continuity and centralized institutional support.

Moreover, while Bahrain's sport ecosystem increasingly supports entrepreneurship development, tourism growth, SME participation, and employability enhancement, the long-term measurement of economic outcomes and enterprise sustainability remains comparatively underexplored within the

literature. Longitudinal evaluation frameworks may therefore be required to gauge the sustained economic impact of sports tourism, startup ecosystems, workforce transformation, and entrepreneurship-oriented sport initiatives over time.

Lastly, while Bahrain's model showcases stronger ecosystem integration compared to many fragmented sport-for-development initiatives globally, transferability and scalability questions in different political, institutional, and economic contexts are valid. Replicating similar models in emerging economies may demand comparable institutional coordination, leadership integration, and policy alignment to produce similar outcomes.

However, Bahrain's ecosystem serves as a relevant emerging example of how sport can act as a platform for entrepreneurship development, innovation ecosystems, employability enhancement, tourism economies, SME participation, and sustainable economic transformation.

#### 4.7 Synthesis

In sum, Bahrain's evolving sport ecosystem reflects a shift from traditional sport-for-development models toward a more integrated, entrepreneurship-oriented, and innovation-driven national development approach. Unlike many fragmented global sport initiatives centered around social inclusion outcomes, Bahrain increasingly associates sport ecosystems with entrepreneurship development, startup readiness, innovation capability, employability enhancement, tourism economies, SME participation, and private-sector growth in line with its national economic diversification strategy.

Through centralized leadership, institutional coordination, leveraging international sporting platforms, entrepreneurship integration, and adopting an ecosystem-based development approach, Bahrain operationalizes sport not just as a recreational or social-development tool but as a strategic economic and innovation ecosystem that can contribute to sustainable competitiveness, workforce transformation, entrepreneurship participation, and inclusive economic growth within an emerging economy context.

### 5. Comparative Benchmarking: Sport, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation Ecosystems

#### 5.1 Benchmarking Approach and Comparative Rationale

To provide more depth to the comparative, entrepreneurship-focused perspective of this study, qualitative benchmarking was done across various

GCC and Asian economies and beyond (countries that are known for their investment in sport ecosystems, entrepreneurship development, innovation capability, and economic diversification). Bahrain was benchmarked against the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Singapore because of their ongoing strategic alignment of sport, tourism, entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystems, and youth development with broader national transformation plans.

The UAE was picked as it has a more developed entrepreneurship ecosystem and a more commercialized sports economy through a more prominent tourism sector, as well as more globally competitive events, private-sector investment, and innovation infrastructure. Saudi Arabia was chosen for its large national transformation plan, Vision 2030, and greater emphasis on sport, entertainment, tourism, entrepreneurship, and economic diversification. Qatar was another choice as it has a high level of sports infrastructure, sports diplomacy, and a highly visible mega-event development related to its Qatar National Vision 2030. Singapore was included as an Asian innovation ecosystem benchmark with some similar-sized counterparts noted for government-university-private sector coordination on enterprise development, innovation capability, and entrepreneurship- and innovation-driven economic planning.

Benchmarking dimensions were taken from various themes which were iteratively derived from the thematic synthesis process that includes governance integration, entrepreneurship ecosystems, employability outcomes, SME participation, sports economy, startups, sports pathways, innovation capability, and sustainable economic transformation. Benchmarking was not an effort to create a quantitative or rank-focused exercise, but rather, a qualitative and more evidence-informed comparative synthesis across available entrepreneurship ecosystem literature, sport economy scholarship, regional policy documents, and innovation ecosystems studies.

Benchmarking comparison was an effort to get more clarity about the structural differences between more fragmented, decentralized sport-for-development models that exist and the more centralized, leadership-driven ecosystems emerging in GCC contexts. The benchmarking analysis can also highlight how sport ecosystems help with entrepreneurship development, employability, SME participation, innovation capability, and tourism economies and economic diversification in various contexts.

Table 1. Comparative Benchmarking of Sport, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation Ecosystems

Dimension	Bahrain	UAE	Saudi Arabia	Qatar	Singapore
<b>Governance Structure</b>	Centralized leadership-driven coordination integrating sport, entrepreneurship, tourism, and youth development	Institutionalized ecosystem integrating government, tourism, private-sector, and innovation partnerships	Large-scale state-driven transformation under Vision 2030 reforms	State-supported sport infrastructure and international event integration	Strong government-university-private sector coordination within innovation-led development
<b>Sports Economy Development</b>	Expanding sports economy linked to Formula 1, IRONMAN, BRAVE CF, tourism, hospitality, and fitness sectors	Relatively advanced sports economy integrated with tourism, entertainment, retail, and global events	Rapidly expanding sports and entertainment economy linked to tourism diversification and giga-projects	Sport infrastructure expansion linked to FIFA legacy, tourism, and international branding	Mature sports, wellness, and innovation economy integrated with urban and economic planning
<b>Entrepreneurship Ecosystem</b>	Emerging entrepreneurship ecosystem supported through Bahrain Vision 2030, Tamkeen, and youth enterprise initiatives	Developed startup ecosystem supported through accelerators, free zones, venture ecosystems, and innovation hubs	Expanding entrepreneurship ecosystem supported through Vision 2030 and SME-oriented reforms	Entrepreneurship support increasingly linked with sport, tourism, and innovation sectors	Highly developed innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem with strong institutional integration
<b>Entrepreneurship &amp; Innovation Outcomes</b>	Entrepreneurial mindset development, financial literacy, startup readiness, employability, SME participation, and innovation-oriented youth development	Sports-tech startups, tourism enterprises, digital innovation, event entrepreneurship, and fitness innovation	Youth innovation initiatives, startup pathways, tourism enterprise development, and entertainment entrepreneurship	Innovation-oriented sports initiatives and entrepreneurship participation linked to mega-event development	Strong innovation capability, startup incubation, enterprise training, and technology-driven entrepreneurship
<b>SME Linkage</b>	SME opportunities emerging across fitness, sports retail, event management, hospitality, coaching academies, and digital sports media	Strong SME integration across tourism, wellness, events, retail, sports services, and innovation sectors	Increasing SME participation through tourism, entertainment, hospitality, and sport-related sectors	SME participation associated with tourism services, event operations, and sport infrastructure management	Strong SME integration within technology, wellness, tourism, and service-based innovation sectors

Dimension	Bahrain	UAE	Saudi Arabia	Qatar	Singapore
<b>Employability &amp; Youth Development</b>	Leadership development, workforce readiness, entrepreneurship education, and youth innovation integration	Employability pathways linked to startup ecosystems, tourism, and innovation industries	Youth employability linked to entrepreneurship, entertainment, tourism, and private-sector transformation	Youth development linked to sport academies, leadership initiatives, and educational integration	Advanced employability ecosystem emphasizing innovation and entrepreneurship skills
<b>International Positioning</b>	Strategic use of international sporting platforms for economic diversification and entrepreneurship stimulation	Global positioning through international events, tourism branding, and commercial sports markets	International positioning through mega-events, sport diplomacy, and entertainment transformation	Strong global visibility through FIFA legacy and sports diplomacy	International innovation and enterprise reputation supported by institutional competitiveness
<b>Key Strength</b>	Strong integration between sport, entrepreneurship, employability, and economic diversification within an agile ecosystem	Highly commercialized and globally connected sport-enterprise ecosystem	Large-scale transformation capacity and investment-driven expansion	Strong infrastructure and global event positioning	Highly institutionalized innovation ecosystem with strong enterprise coordination
<b>Key Structural Challenge</b>	Need for stronger longitudinal measurement of startup sustainability and SME outcomes	High market competition and dependence on international talent	Long-term sustainability and localization of enterprise participation	Post-mega-event sustainability and SME continuity challenges	Limited domestic market size relative to global scalability ambitions

**Source:** Developed by the author based on Bahrain Economic Vision 2030 (2008), World Bank (2020), Isenberg (2011), Stam (2015), Ratten (2018; 2020), GCC entrepreneurship ecosystem reports, sport economy literature, UAE Ministry of Economy reports, Saudi Vision 2030 documents, Qatar National Vision 2030 reports, and regional policy analyses.

**5.2 Comparative Assessment of the Bahrain Sport-for-Development Model**

As discussed above, the Bahrain model demonstrates a more integrated and strategically coordinated approach to sport-for-development compared to many traditional global models. Existing international approaches are frequently characterized by fragmented governance structures, NGO-led implementation, limited scalability, and a primary focus on localized social outcomes. In contrast, Bahrain has increasingly adopted a centralized leadership-driven framework that aligns sport initiatives with broader national priorities related to youth development, entrepreneurship, innovation,

economic diversification, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The comparative analysis further indicates that the Bahrain model performs more effectively across multiple strategic dimensions, including governance coordination, scalability, youth impact, SDG integration, international visibility, and execution efficiency. Unlike conventional models that often prioritize short-term community interventions, Bahrain’s approach integrates sport within national development planning and leadership structures, enabling faster implementation, stronger policy alignment, and broader socioeconomic impact. As summarized in Table 2, the Bahrain model

demonstrates comparatively stronger performance across all major evaluation dimensions.

**Table 2. Performance-Based Comparison of Bahrain and Global Models**

Dimension	Global Models	Bahrain Model	Performance Evaluation
Governance	Fragmented, NGO-led	Centralized leadership	Higher coordination efficiency in Bahrain
Scalability	Limited	National-level implementation	Bahrain demonstrates higher scalability
Youth Outcomes	Social skills	Social + economic + leadership	Broader developmental impact
SDG Alignment	Indirect	Policy-integrated	Stronger measurable alignment
Global Visibility	Low	High (international events)	Bahrain leverages sport for soft power
Execution Speed	Slow	Fast	Leadership-driven efficiency

### 5.3 Comparative Analysis and Interpretation

The benchmarking result of Bahrain's sport and entrepreneurship ecosystems to regional and international cases indicates several important trends. First, there is an ongoing regional and international shift toward embedding sport ecosystems within larger entrepreneurship, innovation, tourism, and economic diversification strategies. Across the compared economies, sport is increasingly being utilized not solely for recreation or social-development objectives, but rather as part of a broader system of enterprise-oriented and innovation-driven development.

In terms of regional context, the UAE represents one of the more developed sport-enterprise ecosystems that support tourism integration, innovation infrastructure, international sports events, entrepreneurship-oriented diversification, and private-sector engagement (World Bank, 2020; UAE Ministry of Economy, 2022). In particular, the country's sports economy is increasingly supporting startup activity, sports-tech innovation, tourism entrepreneurship, wellness enterprises, and SME participation through internationally-connected commercial markets and institutional entrepreneurship support.

In a comparative sense, Saudi Arabia represents one of the world's most rapidly growing sport and entrepreneurship ecosystems, with Vision 2030 reforms placing significant emphasis on tourism, entertainment, private-sector growth, youth innovation, and entrepreneurship development (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2021). The country is increasingly using sport and entertainment sectors as vehicles for economic diversification and startup stimulation; however, due to the transformation scale and pace, long-term sustainability, localization of enterprise participation, and SME integration are important structural considerations.

In the case of Qatar, the model is shaped by significant investment in sports infrastructure, sports diplomacy, and international event positioning, often

linked with Qatar National Vision 2030. The FIFA World Cup, in particular, significantly accelerated infrastructure development, tourism activity, and global visibility. The World Cup and associated developments also contributed to sport-related entrepreneurship opportunities and SME participation in areas such as hospitality and tourism (Qatar National Vision 2030, 2020). However, long-term sustainability and SME participation post-mega event continue to be relevant policy considerations.

In terms of a structural and size contrast, Singapore is structurally different from GCC economies by being a highly institutionalized innovation ecosystem where sport, wellness, technology, education, entrepreneurship, and urban development are more strategically interconnected (Stam, 2015). Singapore has a relatively advanced level of integration between innovation policy, startup ecosystem, enterprise training, and workforce development. On the other hand, Singapore's comparatively smaller domestic market size results in somewhat different scalability dynamics in comparison to other larger regional economies.

In a comparative perspective, Bahrain's emerging sport and entrepreneurship contribution stands out. Bahrain is economically smaller when compared to, for instance, the UAE or Saudi Arabia, but its overall ecosystem exhibits comparatively stronger integration between sport, entrepreneurship development, employability, youth empowerment, and institutional coordination. Rather than scale alone, Bahrain's case is characterized by more agility, strategic policy alignment, and multidimensional ecosystem integration, which links sport participation with innovation capability, startup readiness, tourism development, SME participation, and human capital development.

It is increasingly positioning sport not just as a social activity, but also as an economic infrastructure that supports entrepreneurship ecosystems, tourism flows, innovation-oriented development, and workforce transformation. International sporting platforms, including Formula 1 Bahrain, IRONMAN 70.3 Bahrain, and BRAVE Combat Federation, play a role not only in tourism and international visibility

but also in supporting hospitality sectors, event entrepreneurship, sports marketing, fitness industries, digital sports media, coaching enterprises, and SMEs.

The result also resonates with key findings from entrepreneurship ecosystem literature that highlight institutional coordination, policy integration, entrepreneurial culture, innovation capability, and cross-sector collaboration as critical factors for sustainable enterprise development (Isenberg, 2011; Stam, 2015). Instead of a fragmented NGO-led sport-for-development model which leads to limited or indirect economic outcomes, Bahrain presents a more integrated leadership-driven approach connecting sport participation to entrepreneurship development, employability enhancement, startup pathways, tourism economy, and sustainable economic diversification.

On the other hand, the benchmarking result also implies a series of important considerations. First, while Bahrain's leadership-driven and more centralized approach to sport and entrepreneurship ecosystems may allow stronger coordination and faster action, long-term sustainability could require deeper institutionalization, broader private-sector integration, and stronger longitudinal measurement of outcomes related to entrepreneurship development and SMEs. As the benchmarking analysis is inherently more qualitative and interdisciplinary, the result is an evidence-informed synthesis rather than an attempt at quantitative scoring and ecosystem ranking.

Another key finding is that smaller emerging economies like Bahrain can also benefit from integrated sport and entrepreneurship ecosystems, which emphasize institutional coordination, youth innovation, employability enhancement, and private-sector participation. Taken together, the benchmarking comparison of Bahrain with international and regional cases suggests that there is a broader international shift from a fragmented and relatively narrow S4SD initiatives toward more integrated, entrepreneurship-oriented, and innovation-driven sport ecosystems, which are embedded within broader national economic transformation objectives.

In this evolving international context, Bahrain is increasingly a more coordinated and leadership-driven model where sport is not simply a social-development tool, but rather an integrated platform that supports entrepreneurship ecosystems, employability enhancement, SME participation, innovation capability, tourism economy, and sustainable economic transformation within the context of an emerging economy.

This study also supports and contributes to the literature by enhancing the development and innovation ecosystems agenda by intersecting it with sport-for-development and economic diversification in emerging economies. A majority of the Sport for Development literature has focused on sport-for-development within social inclusion, peace-building, youth-development, and health-development (Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe, 2015; Lindsey and Darby, 2018). However, this paper has taken a slightly different view that sport may potentially operate as an enabler, accelerator, platform, and an enabler for national transformation objectives to become SMEs as an innovation ecosystem and sustainable entrepreneurship.

The juxtaposition and the Bahrain case, specifically, highlight that there has been a transition or an intersection of sport ecosystems into entrepreneurship-oriented, employability, start-up-ready, enterprise participation, innovation-driven, and innovation enablers for tourism economies and long-term economies. This would be deemed in the context of innovation, business-entrepreneurship, and innovation literature as developing and embracing systemic, institutional, and sustainable competitiveness capabilities (Isenberg, 2011; Stam, 2015). In short, the study bridges some of the essential gaps and challenges by providing a sustainability dimension or perspective to sport-for-development through a deeper look at innovation, business and entrepreneurship systems and agendas. In this direction, this study somewhat deviates and provides an intersection and linkage to an existing Sport-for-development literature that has tended to be overtly weighed on towards a social-development system, through providing evidence and space for an entrepreneurship-ecosystem perspective, taking this system beyond social, cohesion, and behavioral literature and narratives to one that could potentially interlink with entrepreneurship, innovation, and business-entrepreneurship development systems in a nation or local economy. Therefore, and contrasting existing literature, this study positions sport ecosystems beyond cohesion and behavioral mechanisms as a systemic entrepreneurship, employability, and human-capital development ecosystem mechanism that could also be seen as a long-term sustainable-development tool for emerging countries that are grappling with the dual challenges of structural-economic diversification as well as development.

In this view, Bahrain provides a leadership-oriented case and role model of a sustainable entrepreneurship ecosystem where sport is no longer social or a diplomatic activity but an innovation and economic diversification system through sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation.

## 6. Discussion

## 6.1 From Sport-for-Development to Sport-Led

### Entrepreneurship Ecosystems

Another significant implication is how this paper has reconceptualised the role of sport from a linear, top-down social-development instrument to a more multidimensional entrepreneurship ecosystem that can influence innovation capability, workforce transformation and sustainable enterprise participation. While there has been an increasing body of sport-for-development research in recent years, this strand of the literature has often placed greater emphasis on social inclusion, peacebuilding, community development and other social outcomes rather than a more in-depth focus on entrepreneurship outcomes, startup ecosystems, employability pathways and economic participation (Peachey, Schulenkorf and Hill, 2019; Svensson and Hambrick, 2019).

The study's findings therefore reiterate some of the earlier literature on the positive contribution of sport participation environments towards entrepreneurial mindset formation through the development of leadership skills, resilience, teamwork, adaptability, communication skills and innovation capability (Ratten, 2020; Maleté et al., 2022). These competencies also align with some of the emerging entrepreneurship ecosystem literature which foregrounds the importance of entrepreneurial culture, workforce adaptability and agility, innovation readiness and human capital formation as critical drivers of enterprise development and sustainable competitiveness (Isenberg, 2011; Spigel, 2017).

Unlike the existing sport-for-development literature, which tends to downplay entrepreneurship outcomes and approaches as secondary or more indirect, however, the findings from this study begin to suggest that sport ecosystems may be starting to play a more important role as institutional platforms that can support a range of outcomes relating to startup readiness, employability enhancement, innovation capability and SME participation. This would represent an important theoretical expansion from some of the earlier literature on sport-for-development.

Crucially, Bahrain's model shows how sport participation can be institutionally linked with entrepreneurship education and training, workforce development, tourism economies, innovation ecosystems and private-sector involvement. Through an array of initiatives linked to entrepreneurship education, sports tourism and event entrepreneurship, fitness industries, digital sports media and youth leadership development, Bahrain is increasingly carving out a place for sport ecosystems within broader entrepreneurship and sustainable enterprise development frameworks.

Compared to many NGO-led, decentralised sport-for-development programmes which have been

criticised for implementation fragmentation, weak economic linkages and limited government coordination (Lindsey et al., 2019), Bahrain has shown comparatively higher levels of institutional coordination between sport ecosystems, entrepreneurship development, education systems, tourism sectors and national diversification strategies. Sport participation is therefore beginning to form part of a broader entrepreneurship ecosystem rather than an isolated social-development programme.

## 6.2 Leadership-Driven Sustainable

### Entrepreneurship Model

One of the key themes of the study is the creation of a leadership-driven sustainable entrepreneurship model within Bahrain's sport ecosystem. Previous literature often points to the challenges of fragmented governance, inconsistent funding structures, and institutional disconnects as key bottlenecks which limit the scalability and long-term sustainability of sport-for-development initiatives worldwide (Peachey, Schulenkorf and Hill, 2019; Lindsey et al., 2019). By contrast, the central leadership model in Bahrain may allow for higher levels of strategic alignment between sport initiatives, entrepreneurship ecosystems, innovation-focused development, and economic diversification priorities.

The research results indicate that leadership concentration may play a positive role in entrepreneurship-focused development by:

- improving institutional coordination,
- enabling policy integration,
- enhancing ecosystem scalability,
- accelerating implementation,
- and achieving multidimensional strategic alignment.

This is in line with innovation ecosystem literature that points to the role of coherent governance frameworks and cross-sector partnerships for sustainable enterprise development (Stam, 2015; Spigel, 2017). Leadership can be seen less as a form of governance and more as a driver of ecosystem integration that connects sport participation to entrepreneurship development, SME engagement, tourism economics, employability, and innovation capacity in the Bahraini context.

It should also be noted that Bahrain's model is a reflection of a more widespread trend of moving away from fragmented project-based interventions toward more ecosystem-oriented integrated development strategies. Sport can thus play an important role in connecting and contributing to sustainable enterprise participation, employability, and innovation-driven economic transformation through a coordinated ecosystem approach.

In this way, the study also contributes to the entrepreneurship ecosystem body of knowledge. The

research results help to establish that sport ecosystems can be institutional infrastructures that support the building of entrepreneurial capability, startup culture, workforce transformation, and sustainable enterprise development in emerging markets. In this way, the thesis extends sport for

### 6.3 Sport as Economic Infrastructure and Innovation Platform

The final contribution of the study involves the repositioning of sport as economic infrastructure and innovation-oriented development architecture. Previous literature has frequently approached sport as supplementary to broader economic systems, with social outcomes given priority over enterprise participation and innovation capability (Schulenkorf, 2017). In contrast, this study has found that sport ecosystems are contributing to entrepreneurship ecosystems in diverse ways through tourism economies, event entrepreneurship, sports marketing industries, digital sports media, wellness economies, coaching enterprises, and startup-oriented business activity.

International sporting platforms, including Formula 1 Bahrain, IRONMAN 70.3 Bahrain, and BRAVE Combat Federation, were shown to not only support international visibility and tourism activity but also to generate impacts in terms of entrepreneurship stimulation, hospitality sectors, event management industries, sports marketing enterprises, digital innovation ecosystems, fitness industries, and SME participation. These findings are consistent with prior sport entrepreneurship scholarship which has suggested that sport-related sectors have an increasingly strong role to play in terms of generating innovation-oriented enterprise development opportunities and private-sector participation (Ratten, 2018; Ratten, 2020).

Specifically, the findings also showed that sport ecosystems may contribute to economic diversification in the following interconnected ways:

- supporting tourism economies,
- stimulating event entrepreneurship,
- encouraging startup participation,
- creating SME opportunities,
- strengthening employability pathways, and
- enabling innovation capability among youth populations.

In the context of Bahrain, the study has shown that sport is increasingly functioning as an economic infrastructure that supports private-sector participation and entrepreneurship-oriented economic transformation in ways aligned with the Bahrain Economic Vision 2030. This builds on and extends previous literature by providing an understanding of the role of sport in terms of supporting not only social and behavioral outcomes,

development literature to the extent that it conceptualizes sport ecosystem-based leadership as a sustainable entrepreneurship and economic diversification mechanism rather than only a social inclusion outcome.

but also innovation-driven growth and sustainable economic participation.

### 6.4 Sport-Based Social Entrepreneurship and

#### Inclusive Economic Participation

Findings also relate to growing theoretical dialogues regarding sport-based social entrepreneurship and inclusive forms of enterprise participation. Conceptual work on social entrepreneurship and social enterprises is becoming increasingly focused on models that leverage a commitment to social value-creation with principles of economic sustainability and innovation-driven growth (Dees, 1998). In the context of Bahrain, sport-based initiatives are increasingly addressing a nexus of youth empowerment, entrepreneurship education, employability, leadership development, and innovation capacity-building within economic participation ecosystems.

Programs related to youth leadership development, entrepreneurship education, and sport participation, for instance, have implications not only for creating a capable workforce and inspiring startup culture but also for wider social inclusion and human capital development outcomes. In this sense, existing research has suggested that sport-based social enterprises may offer a low-threshold mechanism for youth engagement, social participation, and entrepreneurial skill-building among at-risk or marginalized youth (Svensson and Hambrick, 2019).

Crucially, the growth of sports-related SMEs, coaching academies, wellness enterprises, sports tourism services, fitness startups, and digital sports media platforms also provides an example of how sport ecosystems may be leveraged not only for social empowerment but also for more sustainable enterprise participation. This intersection of sport entrepreneurship and social outcomes thus provides a mechanism for sport ecosystems to contribute to more inclusive forms of entrepreneurship and equitable economic participation.

On the other hand, however, this finding also indicates areas for important structural reflection. Although Bahrain's sport ecosystem represents an example of stronger sport-entrepreneurship integration than most sport-for-development efforts, questions remain about the long-term sustainability of entrepreneurship in the sport ecosystem and the degree to which entrepreneurship is institutionalized, the private sector is involved, the ecosystem is diversified, and longitudinal entrepreneurship outcomes are measured. Literature on sport for

development has frequently bemoaned the lack of longitudinal evaluation for economic outcomes and sustainability in program development (Peachey, Schulenkorf and Hill, 2019), indicating a gap for future inquiry into startup survival and SME growth

### 6.5 Youth Employability, Startup Culture, and Human Capital Development

The research also underscores an emerging link between sport ecosystems and employability enhancement, startup culture and human capital development. Entrepreneurship ecosystem literature has begun to note that long-term enterprise development relies on factors such as innovation capability, workforce adaptability, entrepreneurial culture and human capital development (Isenberg, 2011; Stam, 2015). In the context of Bahrain's entrepreneurship ecosystem, sport participation settings are increasingly a source of entrepreneurship and employability-related transferable skills such as leadership, resilience, communication, teamwork, adaptability, discipline and strategic thinking.

Crucially, entrepreneurship education initiatives like INJAZ Bahrain further enhance the connection between sport ecosystems and startup readiness through entrepreneurship mindset, financial literacy, innovation capability, leadership development, and workforce readiness. Studies have shown that entrepreneurship-focused educational programs have a positive impact on entrepreneurial intention, innovation orientation and employability among young people (Hashimi et al., 2021).

This shift reflects a more general change in perceptions of employability from being associated with traditional education and employment routes toward an understanding of ecosystem-based experiential learning environments that support entrepreneurship-oriented workforce transformation. The findings therefore point to a role for sport ecosystems in facilitating startup culture development by creating ecosystems that nurture innovation capability, entrepreneurial confidence, leadership skills and private-sector engagement among the youth.

This role can be especially valuable in GCC economies that aim to reduce reliance on public-sector employment and increase entrepreneurship-led economic diversification.

### 6.6 Theoretical and Policy Contributions

The study's theoretical contribution is threefold. First, the study offers an example of how sport-for-development literature may be interlinked with entrepreneurship ecosystem theory, sustainable entrepreneurship scholarship, innovation-oriented development perspectives, and employability

rates, as well as long-term employability outcomes of the sport ecosystem.

### 6.7 Youth Employability, Startup Culture, and Human Capital Development

discourse. While previous scholarship has drawn on these literatures to inform the conceptualisation and analysis of sport and sustainable development in the context of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Al-Maadidah, 2020; Chell, 2021; Griffiths, 2021; King, 2020, 2021), these different theoretical traditions have not been explicitly linked together, leading to a level of conceptual fragmentation and limited transdisciplinary research. The study's findings address this gap by showing how sport ecosystems may simultaneously support entrepreneurship development, innovation capability, employability, social inclusion, SME participation, startup readiness, and sustainable economic transformation.

The study's findings also respond to specific calls made within entrepreneurship ecosystem literature for more context-specific, institutionally grounded, and path-dependent analyses of how emerging economies integrate entrepreneurship and innovation, and human capital development within broader national transformation agendas (Spigel, 2017). In this way, the study repositions sport as economic infrastructure and an entrepreneurship-oriented development architecture to build on previous sport-for-development scholarship that has traditionally been rooted within the social-development framework (Beutler & Horton, 2021; Jafar-Alaoude & Samier, 2020; Nicholson et al., 2011; Spaaij, 2015).

The study's policy contribution is that it points to the fact that governments may be able to increasingly benefit from integrating sport ecosystems within a broader entrepreneurship, tourism, education, innovation, and workforce development policy agenda. While previously, sport has largely been treated as a peripheral recreational sector, policymakers may now be able to start looking at sport ecosystems as strategic economic infrastructure that can help drive economic diversification, startup culture, tourism economies, SME participation, and human capital development.

The findings further suggest that smaller emerging economies, in particular, may be able to benefit from integrated, leadership-driven sport ecosystems that place specific emphasis on (a) entrepreneurship education, (b) youth innovation, (c) startup pathways, (d) employability enhancement, (e) tourism economies, and (f) private-sector participation. In this regard, within the context of national transformation in a smaller emerging economy context, Bahrain represents a nascent example of how sport ecosystems can contribute not only to social

development but also to sustainable entrepreneurship, innovation capability, and economic diversification simultaneously.

### 6.8 Concluding Insights

Taken together, the results point to a noteworthy international shift from isolated sport-for-development efforts towards more holistic entrepreneurship-focused and innovation-based sport ecosystems as part of a more comprehensive national development strategy. As part of this emerging dynamic, the Bahrain example shows the potential for sport to play a variety of reinforcing roles as:

- an entrepreneurship booster,
- innovation enabler,
- employability facilitator,
- SME growth accelerator,
- tourism economy enhancer,
- and a sustainable transformation ecosystem.

Instead of framing sport as a social-development factor, the Bahrain approach showcases the increasingly viable role of leadership-anchored sport ecosystems for supporting entrepreneurship growth, startup culture, innovation capacity, inclusive economic inclusion, and sustainable national competitiveness in emerging markets.

## 7. Conclusion and Policy Implications

### 7.1 Summary of Key Findings

The systematic literature review and comparative benchmarking study provide evidence that the strategic role of sport in sustainable development, entrepreneurship ecosystems, and innovation-based economic transformation has evolved over time, particularly when contextualized within Bahrain's leadership-driven model. By reviewing and synthesizing insights from sport-for-development, sustainable entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystems, employability, and economic diversification research, the study identifies existing cross-disciplinary debates regarding the multi-dimensional potential of sport ecosystems as vehicles for youth empowerment, entrepreneurship development, SME engagement, innovation capacity-building, and sustainable economic progress (Ratten, 2020; Stam, 2015).

The evidence suggests that global sport-for-development practices have shifted towards adopting entrepreneurship and innovation-based ecosystemic approaches embedded in national-level transformation agendas, in comparison to previously fragmented, project-based, and socially oriented paradigms of youth development. The study found that while traditional sport-for-development frameworks focused on key dimensions, including social inclusion, personal development, and community engagement (Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe, 2015), a sport ecosystem can also be an entry

point to address employability and career readiness, entrepreneurial mindsets and start-up readiness, SME engagement and participation, tourism and creative industries, and innovation-based workforce transformation. These findings are supported by entrepreneurship ecosystems research, which emphasizes the importance of institutional linkages, entrepreneurial culture, human capital development, and innovation capacity as key catalysts for sustainable enterprise creation and growth (Isenberg, 2011; Spigel, 2017).

### 7.2 Bahrain as a Leadership-Driven Entrepreneurship Ecosystem

Situated in this context, Bahrain can be seen as an example of a leadership-driven sustainable entrepreneurship ecosystem in which sport is being embedded into national economic diversification, entrepreneurship development, and innovation-oriented growth. As opposed to many decentralized sport-for-development initiatives with fragmented governance structures and minimal links to the formal economy (Lindsey et al., 2019), Bahrain showcases relatively higher levels of coordination between sport ecosystems, entrepreneurship initiatives, educational systems, tourism economies, and national development plans. Of particular note is how Bahrain's evolving sport-entrepreneurship landscape suggests how sport may take on more roles in the future as an economic infrastructure underpinning entrepreneurship ecosystems, SME participation and startup culture, tourism development, innovation capability, workforce readiness, and sustainable enterprise participation. For instance, international sporting events like Formula 1 Bahrain Grand Prix, IRONMAN 70.3 Bahrain, and BRAVE Combat Federation are playing roles not only in generating international exposure and tourism activity but also in event entrepreneurship, sports marketing industries, hospitality sectors, digital sports media, fitness economies, coaching enterprises, and private sector engagement. Similarly, INJAZ Bahrain also plays a role in the entrepreneurial mindset development, financial literacy, employability improvement, leadership capability, and startup readiness among young people (Hashimi et al., 2021).

### 7.3 Theoretical Contributions

In terms of theoretical contributions, this study helps bridge the gap between sport-for-development literature and entrepreneurship ecosystems by taking a wider lens on the innovation capability, employability enhancement, startup readiness, SME participation, and sustainable economic diversification dimensions. Social-development outcomes have been frequently discussed in isolation from entrepreneurship ecosystems, innovation

capability, and broader economic transformation narratives (Peachey, Schulenkorf and Hill, 2019). In addressing this gap, the study adds to ongoing calls within entrepreneurship ecosystems scholarship for more inclusive and institutionally embedded perspectives that interrogate how emerging markets are seeking to integrate entrepreneurship, innovation, youth development, and sustainable growth within broader national transformation and development discourses (Stam, 2015; Spigel, 2017).

#### 7.4 Policy Implications and Recommendations

Policy implications: Policy may need to shift to incorporate sport as an ecosystem supporting entrepreneurship, tourism, education, innovation, and workforce development rather than being considered only a recreational or social-development sector. Sports policy could increasingly consider sport ecosystems as an infrastructure for supporting startup and SME development, private-sector participation, sports tourism economies, innovation ecosystems, and broader economic development strategies for promoting innovation-oriented and entrepreneurship-oriented economic transformation.

Recommendations: Recommendations based on this study's findings include:

1. Create university-sport entrepreneurship incubators that connect sport participation and development with startup incubation, mentorship, and training programs oriented around innovation-focused and entrepreneurship-focused enterprises and business development;
2. Create startup accelerators focused on sports that support youth-enterprise development and entrepreneurship within the fitness economy, sports technology, digital sports media, event management, and wellness industries;
3. Encourage stronger partnerships among universities, SMEs, entrepreneurship support organizations, sports federations, sport incubators, and private-sector partners focused on improving entrepreneurship outcomes and employability;
4. Evolve youth enterprise programs that are tied to sport and sports ecosystem participation to include a stronger emphasis on financial literacy, entrepreneurial mindset, leadership and youth development, and innovation skills;
5. Create sports innovation hubs and communities of practice that support sport-linked entrepreneurship ecosystems and startup development in sports tourism, sports technology, digital media and platforms, wellness, and event entrepreneurship;
6. Increase the incorporation of entrepreneurship-focused education in sports programming and youth leadership development focused on improving startup readiness and workforce flexibility;
7. Encourage higher levels of SME participation and involvement in sports tourism, sports hospitality, sports events, sports marketing, sports coaching businesses, and digital sports platforms and SME development;
8. Create longitudinal research and evaluation frameworks for measuring the impact of entrepreneurship outcomes, startup sustainability and success, SME development, and employability.

#### 7.5 Sustainability and Long-Term Considerations

Sustainability/long-term considerations: In particular, the findings may suggest the possibility that smaller and emerging-economy countries could experience increased benefits from sport ecosystems that place a greater emphasis on leadership, institutional coordination, and entrepreneurship development, innovation, youth leadership development, employability, and private-sector and SME participation. However, in the long term, the potential challenge could be with sustainability, deeper institutionalization, and the need for broader diversification and evaluation of enterprise and innovation outcomes in sport ecosystems. A large proportion of sport-for-development research and practice has been criticized for failing to implement long-term economic impact evaluation and long-term sustainability assessment (Peachey, Schulenkorf and Hill, 2019), and future research directions may thus require stronger longitudinal studies on enterprise sustainability, startup survival, SME scalability, and employability and workforce impacts of sport ecosystems.

#### 7.6 Limitations and Future Research

Notwithstanding the contributions of this study, there are limitations that are noteworthy. Given its interdisciplinary and qualitative nature, the review may not be directly comparable across different contexts. Similarly, entrepreneurship-oriented sport ecosystem research is still relatively nascent within the GCC context. Thus, future research might consider longitudinal and comparative studies examining the sustainability of entrepreneurship within sport ecosystems, innovation outcomes, employability trajectories, and the development of SMEs across various emerging economies.

#### 7.7 Final Conclusion

In sum, the study's findings suggest that sport ecosystems are gradually transforming into

purposeful entrepreneurship and innovation infrastructure with the potential to drive sustainable economic diversification, youth enterprise participation, employability enhancement, SME development, and innovation-based growth. In this regard, Bahrain stands out as an example of how leadership-driven sport ecosystems can play a role in promoting sustainable entrepreneurship and competitiveness beyond social-development outcomes.

In a broader sense, this study contributes to emerging discussions regarding the positioning of sport not only as a development intervention but as a comprehensive economic and entrepreneurship ecosystem in the context of emerging economies. In this way, the Bahraini model can be seen as a way in which sport can be leveraged as a strategic mechanism for promoting sustainable entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystems, SME participation, employability, and economic diversification in the wider GCC and developing world.

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