

A Systematic Review of Priority Areas in Global Sports Policy Research from 2015 to 2025

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ABSTRACT

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The rapidly evolving global sport environment has significantly influenced the priorities of sport policy research. This study re-examines the major themes and priorities identified in the sport policy literature published between 2015 and 2025. A qualitative research approach was adopted, relying exclusively on secondary data. Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and scholarly publications were collected from leading academic databases, including Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, to ensure the credibility and quality of the evidence. The collected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by keyword co-occurrence mapping to identify emerging research trends and relationships among key concepts. The findings reveal that sporting success, governance and policy, and sport participation and public health remain the dominant priorities in contemporary sport policy research. The keyword co-occurrence map identifies sport policy as the central concept connecting the major research themes. The strong association between physical activity and public health highlights the growing recognition of sport as an important instrument for improving population health and well-being. Furthermore, the emergence of sustainability and inclusion as distinct thematic clusters indicates an increasing emphasis on equity, social inclusion, and sustainable sport development. Overall, the review demonstrates a clear shift from traditional performance-oriented policy objectives toward broader societal outcomes. The study concludes that future sport policies should integrate participation, good governance, public health, inclusion, and sustainability to address contemporary social challenges and support long-term sport development.

Keywords: Sport, sport policy, policy priorities, policy dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

Sports have become an important sector in modern society that contributes to individual and social development, economic growth, building national identity and promoting public health. Although in the past, sports were mainly considered as an activity to develop entertainment and physical fitness, today it has become a strategic area of attention in public policy planning. Many countries formulate and implement formal policies for the development of sports, as sports can promote social cohesion, youth development, educational values, healthy lifestyles and international relations (Acquah-Sam, 2021). A sports policy is a set of guidelines, decisions and actions developed by governments, sports organizations and other stakeholders to achieve the desired goals of the sports sector. It is a key tool that determines the direction of development of sports and covers various areas such as expanding sports participation, talent development, promotion of high-performance sports, development of sports infrastructure, development of coaches and officials, sports governance and player welfare (Green & Collins, 2008; Houlihan & Green, 2011). Therefore, the success of a sports policy depends on the priorities it identifies, the ability to implement them and the appropriate allocation of resources.

Due to changes in the global sports environment, the areas of focus of sports policies are also constantly changing. Issues such as the commercialization of sports, the growth of professional sports, international competition, the development of sports science, technological innovation, sports ethics, equity, player safety and sustainable development have been identified as priorities of modern sports policies. Thus, sports policy is considered not only

to achieve competition victories, but also as a systemic development tool that provides wider social and economic benefits (Lindsey & Darby, 2019).

When reviewing sports policies of different countries and international sports organizations, several common priorities can be identified. Among them, increasing public sports participation, developing school and youth sports, identifying and developing talented athletes, supporting high-performance sports, developing sports facilities, strengthening sports administration, financial support and resource management, and protecting sports ethics and athlete welfare are key. However, the way in which these priorities are selected and the importance given to them varies in different contexts, and these differences have become an important topic of sports policy studies.

In the existing research literature, studies on sports policy have been conducted along various dimensions. Some studies focus on sports participation and public health promotion, while others focus on high-performance sports, sports governance, sports economics and sports organization management. However, there appears to be limited review studies that link together the existing literature on the priorities identified in sports policies to identify common patterns, trends and areas of focus. Further literature review is needed to gain an overall understanding of which areas are selected as priorities in sports policy formulation, the rationale behind those priorities and their importance for sports development. This research is important because it systematically reviews the existing knowledge on sports policies, contributes to identifying key priorities in sports policies and understanding their developmental significance. This will enable policy makers, sports administrators, researchers and other sports stakeholders to gain a broader understanding of the areas of policy attention needed for sports development. Therefore, the main objective of this research paper is to re-examine the existing literature on the priorities generally identified in sports policies, categorize those priorities and provide an analytical understanding of their importance in sports development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sports policy is a set of strategic actions, legal frameworks and plans developed and implemented by governments, international sports organizations and other stakeholders to develop, govern, allocate resources and achieve long-term goals in the field of sports. As sport in modern society is closely linked to health, education, social development, economic growth and international relations, sports policy has also become a multi-sectoral policy field that goes beyond sports administration (Hoye et al., 2021). Research on sports policy has therefore also grown significantly in the last decade, with particular attention paid to themes such as sports participation, good governance, high-performance sports, athlete welfare, equity and sustainable development. Providing a basic theoretical foundation for sports policy, Houlihan and Green (2008) point out that sports policy is a public policy area that represents the relationship between the political objectives of governments, economic resources and social needs. According to them, clear objectives, institutional coordination and efficient resource management are essential for a successful sports policy. Expanding on this idea, Houlihan and Green (2011) state that modern sports policy should cover not only international competition achievements, but also broader social objectives such as community development, health promotion and social integration.

One of the most researched areas of sports policy is the development of elite sport. The SPLISS (Sport Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success) model introduced by De Bosscher et al., (2015) identifies nine key policy factors that influence international sporting success. According to this model, financial investment, talent identification, training systems, sports science support, competition opportunities and organizational management are key factors for international success. De Bosscher et al., (2019) then analyzed investment policies in 16 countries and showed that financial priority for high-performance sports is not enough for success, and that effective management of those resources and institutional governance are equally important. Recent research has focused on the relationship between sports policy and good governance. Anagnostopoulos and colleagues (2019) point out that transparency, accountability, democratic decision-making and stakeholder participation are considered core principles of good sports governance in European sports policy systems. Hums et al., (2023) also emphasize that the policy success of modern sports organizations depends on strengthening corporate governance, ethics and accountability. Sport Participation has also become a key policy area in research published since 2015. Eime et al., (2016) point out that increasing population participation in sports is important for promoting public health, developing social relationships and improving quality of life. Rowe (2015) also notes that since sport participation is

influenced by economic, social and cultural factors, these factors should be taken into account when designing policies. The WHO (2018; 2019) action plans have also identified increasing physical activity as a key objective of national sports policies.

Another important trend in modern sports policies is the increased focus on athlete safety and athlete welfare. Mountjoy and colleagues (2016) have highlighted the need for clear policy frameworks to prevent violence, abuse and harassment in the sports environment. Burrows et al., (2025) further highlight that athlete safety should be considered an essential component of a health policy. Vertommen et al., (2024) also analyse the progress of implementing safety policies in international sports federations and highlight the need for further policy strengthening. Sustainability and social inclusion have also been identified as important aspects of sports policy in recent literature. Lindsey and Darby (2019) point out that linking sports policy with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is essential for future sports development. Collins and Haudenhuyse (2015) and Moustakas (2023) also describe sport as a policy tool that promotes social cohesion, equity and social justice.

Overall, the existing literature shows that research on sports policy has moved beyond traditional high-performance sports development to encompass broader policy areas such as good governance, public health, athlete welfare, social inclusion and sustainable development. However, review studies that integrate these diverse research trends and identify key priorities for sports policy are still limited. Therefore, a systematic review of the existing literature on the priorities identified in sports policies, a synthesis of existing knowledge in this field,

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach has been used for this study. A qualitative research approach is a method of analyzing existing knowledge, ideas, interpretations and experiences to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, concept or field (Creswell, 2009). The main focus of this study was to review the existing academic literature on the priorities identified in sports policy, a literature review method based on secondary data sources was used data collection. Secondary sources were mainly used in obtaining data for this study. For this, peer-reviewed research papers, academic books, journal articles and scholarly publications related to sports policy published at the international level were used. In selecting data sources, academic databases such as Web of Science, JSTOR and Google Scholar were mainly used to ensure reliability and academic quality. In these databases, literature searches were conducted using keywords related to key concepts such as sport policy, sport policy priorities, sport participation, international sport policy, sport policy implementation, sport policy evaluation.

Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were used in the process of selecting literature sources framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). Research papers with academic value published in the last 10 years (2015–2025) were prioritized and screened. Attention was paid to selecting only research papers that discussed the objectives, priorities, implementation process and development impacts of sports policies. Also, only research papers with full text available and sufficient information for analysis were included in the study. According to this process, 45 research papers that met the criteria were selected and their contents were systematically summarized and used for analysis. Thematic Analysis was used for data analysis. Thematic analysis is a systematic analytical process used to identify recurring ideas, patterns and main themes in qualitative data (Daly et al., 1997). After reading the selected research papers repeatedly, the sports policy priorities mentioned in them were identified, similar ideas were grouped and main themes were created. This process attempted to identify the priorities that are frequently emphasized in sports policies, their meaning and their contribution to sports development.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, priority was given to reliable and peer-reviewed academic publications in the selection of sources. Attention was also paid to using the ideas and findings of different researchers in the right context. The analysis was conducted based on available literature evidence, trying to minimize the personal opinions or bias of the researcher in interpreting the data. Special attention was also paid to research ethics. Although this study was based on secondary data, correct citations and references were used to protect the intellectual property rights of other researchers. Efforts were made to present the ideas, concepts and findings of other researchers in a way that did not change their original meaning. Also, protecting copyright, transparency of sources and academic integrity were considered as the basic ethical principles of this research. Overall, this research methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of the priorities of sports policy by systematically reviewing the existing academic

literature. The combination of qualitative approach, use of secondary data, and thematic analysis enabled this study to systematically analyze and present existing knowledge on sports policy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sporting Success

The book *Successful Elite Sport Policies: An International Comparison of the Sport Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS 2.0)* in 15 Nations by Veerle De Bosscher et al., (2015) is one of the most influential comparative studies on how countries develop successful elite sport systems. The study used the SPLISS 2.0 model to examine elite sport policies in 15 nations and identify the factors associated with international sporting success, particularly success at the Olympic Games. The researchers compared countries across nine policy pillars that influence elite sport performance. The authors concluded that international sporting success is achieved through the development of a well-organized, adequately funded, strategically managed, and scientifically supported elite sport system. They argued that the most successful nations are those capable of transforming inputs (money, facilities, talent, policies) into outputs (Olympic medals and international performances) through effective governance and coordinated implementation.

The chapter “A Mixed Methods Approach to Compare Elite Sport Policies of Nations: A Critical Reflection on the Use of Composite Indicators in the SPLISS Study” by De Bosscher (2018) explains how mixed methods research and composite indicators (CIs) can be used to compare national elite sport policies. It reflects on the methodology used in the SPLISS (Sports Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success) project, which examined elite sport systems across 15 nations. The key finding of this study is that composite indicators, supported by mixed methods approaches, provide a valuable framework for comparing elite sport policies across nations. However, qualitative analysis is essential to interpret the broader social, cultural, political, and organizational factors that influence international sporting success. De Bosscher et al., (2019) found that prioritization of funding alone does not ensure elite sport success. Countries with diversified funding strategies achieved success across a broader range of sports, while efficient allocation of resources and strategic investment decisions were more important than simply concentrating funding on selected areas. Valenti et al., (2020) research found that specialized coaching is a key factor influencing international success in women’s football. Financial support, human resources, and grassroots activities showed limited impact, while economic development, talent availability, climate, and men’s football traditions significantly shaped women’s football performance outcomes. Houlihan & Zhenga, (2016) found that countries must identify and invest in sports where they have competitive advantages to sustain Olympic success. Maintaining medal positions requires significant resources, creating path dependency, while Olympic hosting challenges and limited medal returns raise concerns for many participating nations.

Policy and Governance

According to the Reiche, (2015) found that Qatar strategically invested in elite sport and hosted major sporting events to achieve both domestic and foreign policy objectives. These investments promoted public health, attracted skilled expatriates, enhanced international prestige, strengthened diplomatic relations, increased soft power, and supported national security. Merkel, (2016) found that sport can function as an effective foreign policy and diplomatic tool by facilitating international relations, promoting national interests, and supporting governmental objectives. International sporting interactions create opportunities for dialogue, cooperation, and influence, although sport diplomacy must consider broader political contexts and limitations. Read et al., 2014 research on the challenges of harmonizing anti-doping policy implementation. Vidar Hanstad & Houlihan, (2015) point out that strengthening global anti-doping policy through bilateral collaboration based on the example of Norway and China. Kayser et al., (2020) research found that the existing anti-doping strategy, based on strict prohibition and punishment, is unlikely to eliminate doping in elite sport.

Instead, the authors argue that a pragmatic approach emphasizing controlled use and harm reduction may offer a more realistic and effective policy alternative. Langenbach & Krieger, (2017) traces the development of the IOC’s environment policy by analyzing the International Olympic Committee Session protocols. Vertommen et al., (2024) research on safeguarding policies and practices in International Federations. Bekker & Posbergh (2022) research focused on safeguarding in sports settings: unpacking a conflicting identity. Lang, (2020) research found that

international sport policy has evolved from addressing gender equality and preventing sex discrimination in the 1970s to focusing on safeguarding athletes from sexual violence and abuse, particularly involving children. However, the study highlights concerns that this narrow focus may overlook other forms of athlete welfare issues. Mountjoy et al., (2020) discussed protection of the athlete: Activities of the International Olympic Committee. Research found that the IOC promotes safe sport by creating an athletic environment that is respectful, equitable, and free from non-accidental violence. The organization has implemented various policies and initiatives to protect athletes' welfare, prevent abuse, and ensure safer sporting environments for all. The majority of scholars have focused on safeguarding policies introduced by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), examining athlete protection (Mountjoy et al., 2020), child athletes (Mountjoy et al., 2015), safeguarding as health (Burrows et al., 2025), sports safety (Mountjoy et al., 2016), Olympic Games environments (Vanwynsberghe, 2015), anti-doping measures (Fincoeur, et al., 2015), good governance (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2019; Hums et al., 2023), policy procedures (de Gymnastique, 2018) perspectives.

Participation and Health

Sports participation promotion policies can be identified as a major research area that has attracted the attention of researchers in the field of sports policy during the period 2015 to 2025. Expanding sports participation among the population has become a major objective in modern sports policies. As a result, governments and sports organizations have introduced policy interventions to increase physical activity of the population (WHO, 2016; WHO, 2018), promote a healthy lifestyle (WHO, 2019), social inclusion (Haudenhuyse, 2017; Chen & Liu, 2020), strengthen social cohesion (Moustakas, 2023; Mountifield, 2025) and provide equal opportunities for sports for different social groups (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015; Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019). Research conducted since 2015 shows that there are several key issues that should be addressed by policies in promoting sports participation. Among them are the development of school sports (Stylianou et al., 2019), community-based sports programs (Whitley et al., 2015), access to sports facilities (Bergsgard et al., 2019), reducing economic (Acquah-Sam, 2021) and social barriers (Taylor et al., 2015), increasing the participation of women and underrepresented groups (Jenkin et al., 2018), and building a culture of lifelong play (Rowe, 2015). Researchers point out that for sports policies to be successful, providing sports facilities alone is not enough, and an integrated approach is needed that considers the social, economic, and cultural backgrounds of the people.

Inclusion and Equity have received a lot of attention in sports participation policy research, especially in the period 2015–2025. Expanding sports opportunities for women, people with disabilities, low-income groups, and people of different age groups has been identified as an important aspect of sports policies. Research has shown that inequalities in sports participation are often caused by lack of facilities, economic constraints, social attitudes, and institutional barriers. Therefore, modern sports policies have focused on allocating specific programs and resources to reduce these barriers (Dudley et al., 2017). Also, during this period, research on the relationship between sports and public health has also grown. With the recognition of physical inactivity as a current health problem, attention has increased on the use of sports policies as a health promotion strategy (WHO, 2019). Research has emphasized the potential of increasing sports participation to reduce non-communicable diseases, improve mental well-being, and strengthen social relationships (Larsen et al., 2025). However, the existing research literature has also identified several challenges in implementing policies to promote sports participation. Although public sports participation is mentioned as a priority in many countries' policy documents (Eime et al., 2016; Misuk et al., 2018), researchers point out that the financial resources, institutional support, and regular evaluation methods required to implement these objectives are insufficient. Therefore, it is important not only to design policies, but also to measure their results and continuously revise them.

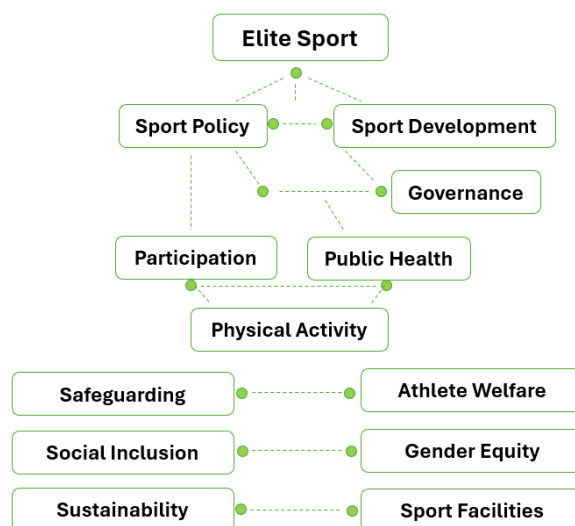
Keywords Analysis

In analyzing research papers related to sports policy published between 2015 and 2025, a keyword analysis was conducted to identify the main concepts of the research area. After analyzing the keywords and titles provided by the authors of the research papers and including keywords with similar meanings in the same category, a frequency analysis was conducted.

Table 1: Keywords that appeared most frequently in sports policy research during the period 2015-2025

Main Keyword	Frequency (N=45)	Percentage (%)
Sport Policy	24	53.3
Elite Sport/High Performance	10	22.2
Sport Participation	9	20.0
Sport Development	8	17.8
Sport Governance	8	17.8
Safeguarding/Athlete Welfare	7	15.6
Physical Activity	7	15.6
Public Health	6	13.3
Anti-Doping Policy	5	11.1
Social Inclusion	5	11.1
Sustainability	4	8.9
Gender Equity	3	6.7
Sport Facilities	2	4.4
Youth Sport	2	4.4
Sport Diplomacy	2	4.4

Source: Literature analysis conducted by the researcher (2015-2025).

Figure 1: Network of Connections Among Key Keywords

Source: Source: Literature analysis conducted by the researcher (2015-2025).

Table 1 shows that the keyword Sport Policy has the highest frequency (n=24), confirming that it is the core concept of this research area. Secondly, the keywords Elite Sport/High Performance (n=10), Sport Participation (n=9), Sport Development (n=8) and Sport Governance (n=8) are the most frequently found. This shows that the main focus of sports policy research during the period 2015–2025 has been on creating a balance between high performance, public

participation, sports development and international competitiveness. Also, the frequent occurrence of the keywords Safeguarding, Athlete Welfare, Public Health and Physical Activity makes it clear that sports policy covers not only competition achievements but also aspects such as athlete safety, human rights and public health promotion. It was observed that, especially in research published after 2020, more attention has been paid to Safeguarding and Athlete Welfare. Research on Sport Participation and Physical Activity has become more robust with a public health approach, especially since the publication of the WHO Action Plan. Safeguarding and Athlete Welfare can be identified as a new policy area that has grown rapidly since 2020. Sustainability, Gender Equity, Social Inclusion and Sport Diplomacy appear as emerging research trends in recent sports policy.

According to the Keyword Network of Connections Map (Figure 1) shows that, sport policy is the central concept associated with all the main keywords. It shows strong relationships with Elite Sport/High Performance, Sport Development, Sport Participation and Sport Governance. On the other hand, Physical Activity and Public Health belong to the same category, while Social Inclusion and Gender Equity can also be identified as separate thematic categories. The overall analysis shows that the main focus of sports policy research during the period 2015–2025 has been built around the themes of Elite Sport/High Performance, sports governance, participation, public health, athlete safety and equality. This confirms that modern sports policy considers sport as a broad policy tool for social development, health promotion and sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the policy area of sporting success, policy and governance and participation and health has become a prominent topic of sports policy research during the period 2015–2025. This research has contributed to the understanding of sports not only as a tool for achieving international achievements, but also as a means of social development, health promotion and equity. Accordingly, the study concludes that future sport policies should integrate public health, participation, good governance, inclusion, and sustainability to address contemporary social challenges and support long-term sport development.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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