

# The Development of a Community Sports Sector in the Gulf: a Driver for Youth Empowerment.

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REVITALISING **MULTILATERAL** PERSPECTIVE AND POLICY SERIES

ANALYSIS

*By Dr. Sebastian Sons – Middle East Expert*

In recent months, Saudi Arabia's ambitious investments in sports – with a particular focus on football – raised tremendous international attention. In December 2022, Portuguese superstar [Cristiano Ronaldo](#) was transferred to Saudi football club Al-Nassr, followed by a number of other stars such as Karim Benzema, Jordan Henderson, and Sadio Mané. Within months following the Ronaldo deal, stadium attendance had jumped from 8,000 to 10,000, as had TV ratings, while the number of Instagram followers of his new club had risen [from 850,000 to more than 9.7 million](#) in a matter of days. In general, the revenues of the Saudi Pro League are estimated to quadruple from the current [USD 120 million by 2030](#). Ronaldo alone is expected to earn USD 214 million per year under his contract until 2025, making him the [best-paid soccer player](#) in the world. In general, stars from Europe's top leagues are attracted with gigantic salaries: Benzema is said to earn more than [USD 4.6 million](#) – per week – and by July 2023, the total transfer fees amounted to around EUR 287 million – without the astronomical salaries. Since 2021, Saudi Arabia has

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invested more than [USD 6.3 billion](#) in sports, including football, [Formula 1](#), [golf](#), [winter sport](#), and [tennis](#). It is estimated that the value of Saudi Arabia's sports event industry is growing by [8% per year](#), rising from USD 2.1 billion in 2018 to an estimated USD 3.3 billion by 2024.

Through those investments, the kingdom aims to raise global awareness, enhance economic diversification, and provide the young national population with entertainment. Certainly, the kingdom's sports strategy replicates specific elements of other Gulf states, such as Qatar or the United Arab Emirates (UAE), that started investing in their sports industry years ago. Qatar's long-term efforts to position itself as a global hub for sports mega-events became obvious in hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2022. Against this backdrop, sports investments have emerged as a key driver for the Gulf states' nation branding and their respective business models. In this regard, they are promoting "[niche areas](#)" in order to safeguard their respective business model of [economic statecraft](#).

Despite the fact that the Gulf states' recent sports investments are oftentimes criticised as "sportswashing", they are much more than that: they also need to be considered as a fundamental driver for youth and female empowerment and social mobilisation. On a socio-economic level, sports investment aims to create future jobs for nationals. Hence, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Gulf states invest heavily into community sports activities in order to establish a local sports infrastructure. For them, sport is a driver for human development in times of fundamental social transformation. On a domestic level, Gulf states need to motivate their people to intensify physical activities to overcome serious health issues and civilian diseases. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, [18.7% of the population \(aged 20 to 79\)](#) suffered from diabetes and more than 50% from obesity in 2019, which is the main motivation behind the kingdom's drive to encourage an additional [40% of the Saudi population](#) to regularly exercise sport by 2030.

The health care system needs to be relieved, and sport is to be seen as both a symbol of social agility and part of the national identity. The other Gulf states face similar challenges: over 40% of the Qatari population does not engage in sports, and one in five suffers from diabetes. [In Bahrain, the figure is 11.3%; in the UAE, 16.4%; and in Kuwait, as much as 25%.](#) The global average is only 8%.

In Saudi Arabia, thus, community sports programs have been developed in recent years, offering individuals yoga courses or fitness training. The state is attempting to centralise and regulate such sports offerings with the establishment of the Sports for All Federation (SFA) in 2018, which engages in driving community sports in the kingdom and have thus introduced a number of sports events and activities. For instance, local running groups such as the [Jeddah Running Community](#) or the [R7 Run Club](#) in Riyadh can register on the SFA platform to gather new members. [During the Corona pandemic](#), courses were held to raise awareness of physical exercise (“Move to Game”), walking and jogging festivals (“Step together”), or training courses for women (“Women’s Fitness Festival”), among others. In 2022, the [first Riyadh Marathon](#) took place, which attracted more than 10,000 runners. The number of participants increased in 2023 to [15,000](#).

Since the Saudi leadership addresses women in particular as an important target group of its identity and economic policy, female sports have become strategically important: in previous times of strict gender segregation, young women and girls were denied the opportunity to participate in sports. Official gyms or running tracks for women did not exist, nor did opportunities to play ball sports like football at universities, local clubs or schools.

However, times have changed. Female sports have now become a social trend: in February 2023, for instance, the kingdom sent its first female tennis team to an [international tournament](#) in Sri Lanka, and in 2019, 24 women with and without

intellectual disabilities became the first female athletes from Saudi Arabia to compete at the [Special Olympics World Games](#). In particular, in the education sector, the introduction of school physical education for both boys and girls is intended to promote physical activity at an early stage of development, and create social awareness for physical and mental health through sports.

In the case of Qatar, the World Cup inspired and accelerated its engagement to identify sports as an instrument for social cohesion and human development. Already back in 2004, Qatar founded the Aspire Academy: a state-of-the-art centre for training young athletic talent, which established a network for talent scouting in Africa and Asia. The academy quickly developed into an internationally recognised centre for talented players from all over the world, and offers top standards in training theory.

The aim of these efforts is to improve the level of domestic sports and to develop global talent. As part of the "[Football Dreams](#)" program, a scouting system was set up between 2006 and 2016 that focused on promoting and scouting young talent in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Under the umbrella of the Qatar Foundation, several efforts to promote community sports have been introduced in recent years. In 1995, the Qatar Foundation was founded by then-Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and his wife Sheikha Moza bint Nasser al-Misnad.

In terms of sports development, the foundation has been engaged in its National Sport Day, which was established in 2012 and aims to raise awareness for physical activity and a healthier lifestyle in order to reduce civilian diseases such as coronary heart disease and diabetes. For instance, [cardio, conditioning, and weightlifting sessions, yoga sessions, sports tournaments](#), as well as [high-intensity interval training sessions](#) have been offered by Qatar Foundation and its partners. Founded in 2010 as an initiative in preparation for the World Cup, "Generation Amazing" (GA)

forms another flagship project in Qatar's sport initiatives: Under the umbrella of the World Cup's organisation committee, the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC), the GA initiative was promoting training courses and empowerment of football talents from Qatar and organising several activities such as mini matches, football table tennis, and quizzes for male and female youth. In terms of school education, GA initiated the [Generation Amazing Youth Festival](#) in 2019.

Since then, several hundred participants from a variety of countries such as Qatar, Oman, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, India, the Philippines, Nepal, Italy, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Brazil organised football tournaments. As part of those events, topics such as gender equality, refugees and sports, mental health and sports, financial literacy, digital storytelling, and the social impact of football were discussed. Both prior to and during the World Cup in 2022, Qatar intensified its football-related activities; in November 2022, Qatar organised the [GOAL 22 and Generation Amazing Festival 2022](#), which was designed as an international school exchange program by bringing together school groups from the nations participating in the World Cup in workshops and football tournaments. From October 2022 to January 2023, Qatar Foundation also organised "[The Children's Art Exhibition, Reesha: We Welcome the World to Qatar 2022](#)," which took place at the Qatar National Library and showed children's artistic work related to football and the World Cup, as well as the exhibitions "[Goaaaal! How Football Kicked off in Qatar](#)" from November 2022 until February 2023, and "[Is It a Beautiful Game?](#)" exhibition located at Northwestern University in Qatar from August to November 2022.

The [UAE](#) undertook similar measures to promote community sports: the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives regularly organise sports courses for young people, and women in particular are to be encouraged to take up sport, as demonstrated by the hosting of the UAE Women's Football League, the Abu Dhabi Women's Run, and the Dubai Women's Cycling Tour. Such initiatives can

be seen as identity-building measures that proclaim sport as part of the national social contract, and define the physical mobility of individuals as the epitome of performance and loyalty to political leadership in times of social transformation.

The continuous efforts of Gulf states to promote community sports also provides an interesting option for European stakeholders to enhance people-to-people dialogue with Gulf societies through sports. By establishing closer networks with Gulf stakeholders with a particular focus on community sports, economic interests could be linked with cultural and sportive dialogue formats.

Under the [EU Work Plan for Sport \(2021-2024\)](#), joint community sports activities could be promoted by organising European-Gulf running events or football matches. As outlined in the EU's "[strategic partnership with the Gulf](#)", sports could also serve as an exchange platform to bring people together. In particular, joint sports activities including Gulf nationals, European participants, and migrants from Asia and Africa residing in Gulf states could make societies more cohesive and promote social inclusion.

The controversial debate about structural violence against labour migrants intensified during the World Cup in Qatar and has created public and political tensions between European governments and Gulf states. Therefore, inclusive sports events could assist in overcoming such tensions and promote social relations between Gulf and migrant communities as well as Europe. Furthermore, in times of [regional reconciliation](#), the emergence of a regional sports culture and industry also offers opportunities for regional dialogue facilitated by European institutions. Cross-border community sports events and tournaments could further promote regional integration and enhance cultural understanding.

Such a commitment could also help Europe to build up personal and institutional networks and thus contribute to regional détente. Finally, despite growing efforts to

promote community sports, countries such as Saudi Arabia are still in dire need of comprehensive programs for sports education in terms of qualified male and female teachers and trainers, as well as state-of-the-art curricula. Still, a vast number of sports teachers is lacking inside the kingdom. Against this backdrop, exchange programs and joint workshops between Gulf states and Europe in the field of sports education and capacity development could be launched to better address those shortages.

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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