Sport governance and community empowerment: Insights from an international systematic review

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Abstract: Sport governance has a significant impact on community development at three levels: local, national, and global. The change of the paradigm in governance sets transparency, participation, accountability, and collaboration among stakeholders as the cornerstones for sport to effectively strengthen the community. The purpose of this study is to present a systematic literature review (SLR) of international studies conducted over the last two decades investigating the nexus between sport governance and community empowerment. The existing literature on governmentality in sports remains fragmented and requires systematic integration. The SLR follows the PRISMA protocol and includes publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science between 2006 and 2025. The study identified different governance structures that enable communities to have power and contribute to community development, as well as drivers and barriers to the implementation of inclusive governance principles. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that sustainable and transformative sport governance for community empowerment ultimately depends on the integration of participatory, context-specific, and multi-sectoral approaches supported by robust collaborative practices. These insights offer practical guidance for policymakers, sport organizations, and researchers in advancing sport-based community development and refining governance frameworks.

Keywords: Collaborative governance, Community empowerment, Network governance, Sport governance, Transformative governance.

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, sport has become a means of social interaction and education that strengthens social solidarity. Geeraert [1] and Hoye [2] contend that sports can significantly broaden participation and foster community capacity, particularly when governing structures embrace inclusivity, accountability, and participatory practices. This perspective indicates that sport governance is evolving from a regular mechanism to a vehicle for community empowerment.

Such development mirrors a broader transformation within international sport governance, where organizations increasingly prioritize integrity, transparency, and collaboration, which are now widely regarded as core principles, although interpretations differ [3].

Effective sport governance also requires the harmonization of policy prescriptions with SDGs, especially SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), to create strong institutional structures for resource allocation and stakeholder engagement across the entire organization [4].

In well-planned form and execution, public sports policies are capable of developing social cohesion and local integration through socioeconomic, cultural, and gender perspectives [5]. The joint efforts of government organizations, business sectors, and sports organizations are essential in enhancing the potential of sport as a tool for sustainable development [6]. Gender-inclusive sports policies are needed to promote safety and affirmation for all women and sex and gender minorities. This includes

promoting an inclusive approach, expanding access to community and youth sports, and advocating for gender equality [7].

Sports can lead to social transformation by promoting equality, inclusion, and collective identity. Integration is promoted in society by mitigating discrimination and encouraging social mobility [8]. The Global Sports Governance Observer [2] found that only around half of all international federations reach acceptable levels of overall inclusion in public participation and diversity. Notable corruption, conflicts of interest, disparities in resource allocation, and inadequate protections for athletes and coaches continue to be major challenges in many countries [9].

Good governance has implications that transcend organizational efficiency, ranging from civic participation to the protection of marginalized communities' rights and the economic development of local communities [10, 11]. Collaborative governance allows for the integration of efforts from various stakeholders, which is essential for addressing the diverse challenges faced by sport organizations [12].

Similarly, bad governance reinforces exclusion, undermines public confidence, constrains grassroots creativity, and may even contribute to new patterns of inequities with respect to access to sports facilities, programs, and resources [1]. While the normative and policy aspects of this relationship are reasonably well understood, a comprehensive mapping of the empirical associations between sport governance and community empowerment is lacking. The modern literature is more concerned with organizational performance, global standards implementation, and anti-corruption initiatives. Research on the overall impact of governance on community capacity building, civic voice strengthening, and social and economic inclusion across varied social and geographical contexts is limited [3].

Although prior SLR studies have emphasized the significance of governance research in elite sports, the majority of research has focused on elite sports or federations. Topics such as sport for development, the role of grassroots organizations, and community-led empowerment have received little attention. Furthermore, alternative governance interventions in the Global South, war-torn regions, and among indigenous peoples and other subaltern groups are frequently underrepresented within the more mainstream academic discourse [1, 9, 13, 14].

Moreover, there is a paucity of research focusing on critical factors that facilitate sustainable and equitable inclusive community empowerment, e.g., success criteria, key players' roles, obstacles, and governance operational mechanisms [10, 11].

To fill these large knowledge and evidence gaps, this systematic literature review (SLR) study aims to address four fundamental questions:

1. What are the main international research trends on how sport governance changes to support community empowerment?
2. What models or systems of sport governance are used to drive community empowerment in different countries?
3. Which drivers and barriers determine the successful transition of sport governance toward community empowerment?
4. What are the remaining gaps in the field of sport governance for community empowerment, and what recommendations might inform future research?

This study draws on a multidisciplinary viewpoint of sport management, public policy, sociology, and community development research to offer a more evidence-based strategy for empowering sport governance. Using a systematic review of global literature from the past 20 years, this study will assist researchers, sport organization leaders, and policymakers in developing effective, fair, and sustainable governance models. The findings of this study can help mainstream inclusive governance methodologies, inform trust-building activities in the field, and guide contextualized measures of success for sport-led community empowerment, i.e., local pathways aligned with global standards and imperatives.

By analyzing governance models, exploring the drivers and barriers, discussing the roles of critical actors, and offering avenues for future research in a reflexive manner, this study underscores that sport governance is an emerging field that is not only defined by its static structures but also characterized by

local adaptations and collaborative endeavors permeated by sustained theoretical innovation. This emphasizes the contribution that this study may offer to presenting the state of knowledge and the potential paths forward for more inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive governance systems for community empowerment.
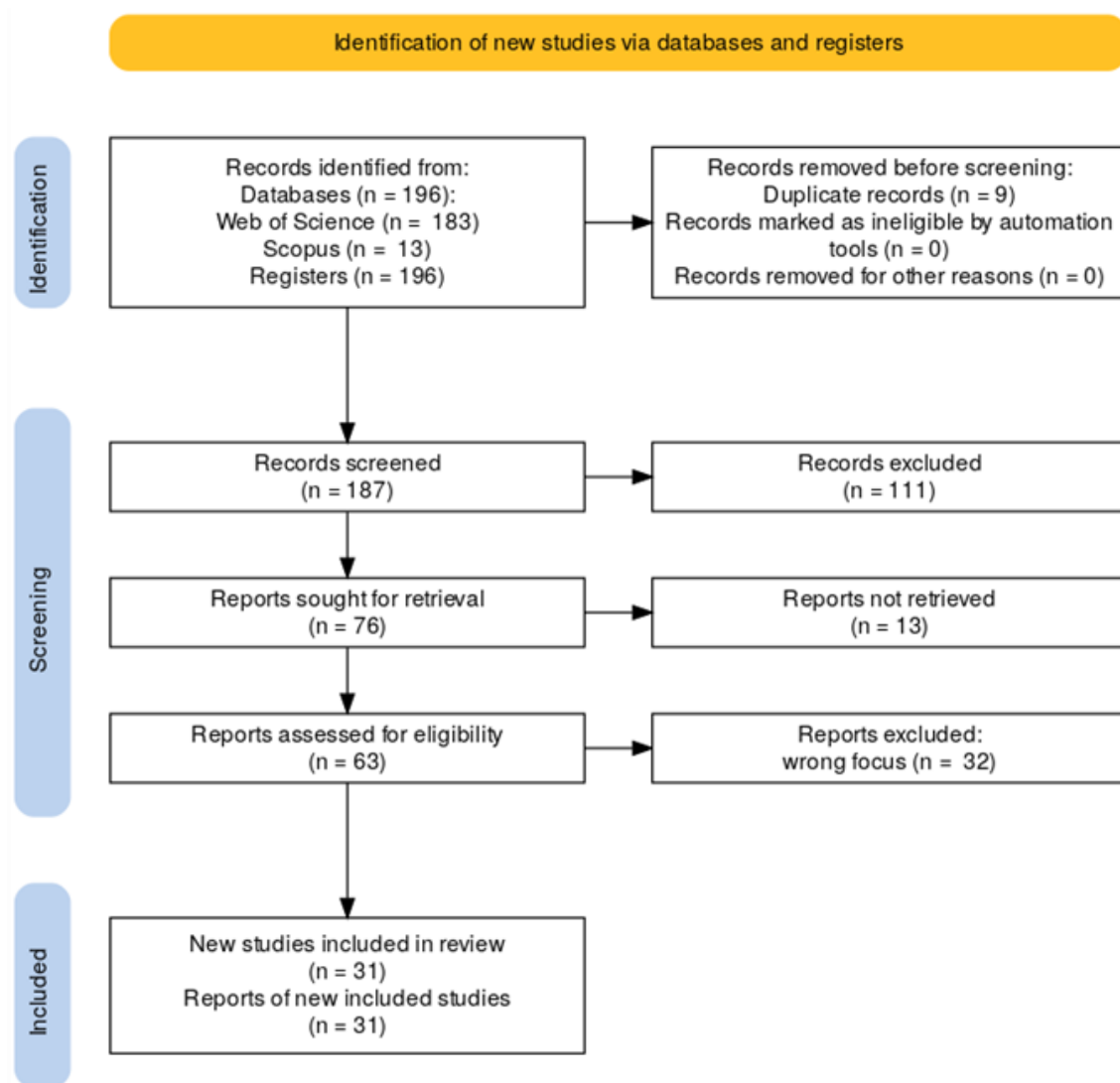
2. Method

This study undertakes a systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesize global sport governance research that contributes to community capacity building. An SLR is the most appropriate method for systematically evaluating and organizing the breadth of scholarly work in this field, allowing for the identification of critical knowledge gaps based on accepted practice [15, 16].

To facilitate transparency and methodological consistency, this study follows the PRISMA guidelines, the original PRISMA 2009 framework [17], and the recently updated PRISMA 2020 [18]. It ensures that every step in the process is documented, organized, and traceable to all researchers and academic readers.

The searches were performed in two major academic databases, such as Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), based on their ability to gather peer-reviewed journals. These sources provide access to a vast array of articles directly related to the themes of sport governance or community empowerment.

Explode is the function used for the main search terms and their derivatives linked by Boolean operators. Some keywords are as follows: "sports governance" OR "collaborative governance" OR "transformative governance" OR "network governance". Associations similar to community empowerment include: "community empowerment" OR "community engagement" OR "social inclusion" OR "capacity building" OR "community development". Associations similar to sport include: Sport*. Keywords were combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR) to widen and deepen the search. The search was also performed using synonyms and related terms in reference to international and local terminologies that are used in the literature (depending on the database).

The inclusion criteria were as follows: peer-reviewed articles published between 2006 and 2025; (2) English publications; and (3) empirical or conceptual studies examining the interface between sport governance and community empowerment, whether at the policy, organizational, or community practice level. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria were as follows: articles that exclusively describe sport as recreation or achievement that do not encompass governance or empowerment; (2) editorials, opinions, and gray literature to appear in peer-reviewed journals; and (3) reports that do not present data or discussions related to community empowerment with sport governance.

Figure 1.
PRISMA flow diagram.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were also guided by the four key steps of the PRISMA flow diagram [17, 18] as shown in Figure 1.

- Identification: The number of titles found in the exploratory process was 183 for WoS and 13 for Scopus, yielding 196 items across all databases.
- Screening: Nine duplicates were eliminated, and 187 articles were screened based on the initial criteria. Of the 187 articles, 111 were excluded because they were in the wrong publication category, did not have abstracts, or were inaccessible.
- Eligibility: We assessed 76 articles for eligibility, and 63 studies met the inclusion criteria.
- Inclusion: Based on the team review and validation discussion, 31 articles were subsequently chosen for final analysis.

The extracted key data included authors, year, study location, governance model, driver and barrier factors, roles, gaps, and recommendations.

Thematic synthesis [19] was adopted for data synthesis, along with narrative content analysis. This

process involved organizing the data into key themes using manual coding (i.e., principles of effective governance, community participation, governance challenges, and empowerment outcomes). For the analysis, a database was created that included both induction and deduction to identify overarching patterns, similarities, and differences within the context and develop an integrative framework applicable for use in different domains and regions.

3. Results and Analysis

Research Question 1: What are the main international research trends regarding how sport governance evolves to support community empowerment?

Table 1.
Distribution of Articles by Publication Year.

Years of publication	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
2006-2015	6	19.3
2016-2025	**25**	**80.6**

The time range of the articles in this study reflects a significantly greater scholarly interest in sports governance and community development over the last decade. From 2006 to 2015, only six articles (19.3%) were published, suggesting that this research area remained relatively new and underdeveloped. However, between 2016 and 2025, 25 articles were recorded (80.6%), illustrating a growing awareness of the applicability of governance approaches within sport and its impact on community development. This steep curve is perhaps integrated with and influenced by global dialogue on a wide range of topics, such as sustainable development, social inclusion, and participatory governance in sport. The higher concentration of studies in the latter time frame further underlines how ideas around empowerment, networks, and governance innovation have shifted more toward policy and academic discourse.

These findings signal a clear rise in research over the last decade, emphasizing both the growth in the maturity of this field and an increased interest among scholars and policymakers in connecting sport governance with community development agendas.

Table 2.
Distribution of Articles by Country.

Country	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Author
United Kingdom (England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland)	6	19.3	McNiven and Harris [20]; Panton and Walters [21]; Kelly [22]; Aitken [23]; Ferguson, et al. [24] and Koutrou and Kohe [25]
United States	3	9.7	Hu and Shu [26]; Legg and Karner [27] and Jones, et al. [28]
China	3	9.7	Gao, et al. [29]; Xinze, et al. [30] and Chen, et al. [31]
Australia	3	9.7	Filo, et al. [32]; Misener and Mason [33] and Misener and Mason [34]
Canada	2	6.4	Scherer, et al. [35] and Hayhurst and Giles [36]
Tonga	2	6.4	Keane, et al. [37] and Henne and Pape [38]
Comparative studies in mixed countries	4	12.9	Girginov, et al. [39]; Moustakas, et al. [40]; Schlesinger and Doherty [41] and Watson, et al. [42]
Malawi	1	3.2	Wagstaff and Parker [43]
Germany	1	3.2	Wolbring, et al. [44]
France	1	3.2	Lopez, et al. [45]
Belgium	1	3.2	Marlier, et al. [46]
Sweden	1	3.2	Blomqvist [47]
South Africa	1	3.2	Kadagi, et al. [48]
New Zealand	1	3.2	Wheaton, et al. [49]
Indonesia	**1**	**3.2**	Fauzi, et al. [50]

Analysis of the distribution of publications demonstrates that research is concentrated in a few countries, particularly the UK, where the proportion of papers generated is the highest (19.3%). This indicates a rich heritage of studies on sport governance in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, where critical terms such as policy development, community empowerment, and governance reform have been thoroughly explored.

The United States, China, and Australia contribute the same proportion (9.7%), indicating that sport governance and community empowerment are becoming popular research areas in both Western and non-Western regions. While US literature tends to focus on governance innovation and league management, Chinese scholars are predominantly concerned with the fine-tuning of governance networks, and community sport and event legacies are of considerable interest in Australian studies.

Canada and Tonga contribute a lesser proportion (6.4% each), demonstrating the role of developed countries alongside small island nations in this subject matter. The Tonga perspective is particularly intriguing because it illustrates the difficulties that tiny states face in sport governance due to resource constraints and cultural issues.

Comparative or multi-country studies (12.9%) also provide additional value to the field by enabling cross-national comparison and identification of common problems and different governance responses. The remaining countries, comprising Malawi, Germany, France, Belgium, Sweden, South Africa, New Zealand, and Indonesia, each contributed 3.2%. Not only does this highlight an emerging trend of the "internationalization" of sport governance research, but the scarcity of research in this area also shows the literature's underrepresentation of many nations in the South.

The data indicate a geographic bias in this study, with a higher proportion of studies found in Anglophone countries and Europe and lower representation in Africa, Southeast Asia (except for Indonesia), and Latin America. This represents a constraint as well as an opportunity: extending empirical research into underrepresented areas would not only widen the evidence base but also make governance models more applicable to varied community empowerment challenges.

Research Question 2: What models or systems of sport governance are used to drive community empowerment in different countries?

Table 3.
Governance Model/Approach in Articles.

Governance model/approach	Author(s)
Community-based/community-led governance	Panton and Walters [21]; Ferguson, et al. [24]; Koutrou and Kohe [25]; Jones, et al. [28]; Xinze, et al. [30]; Misener and Mason [33]; Misener and Mason [34]; Scherer, et al. [35]; Hayhurst and Giles [36]; Keane, et al. [37]; Moustakas, et al. [40]; Wagstaff and Parker [43]; Wolbring, et al. [44]; Marlier, et al. [46]; Blomqvist [47]; Kadagi, et al. [48]; Wheaton, et al. [49] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
Networked and Collaborative Governance	Koutrou and Kohe [25]; Panton and Walters [21]; Jones, et al. [28]; Gao, et al. [29]; Filo, et al. [32]; Keane, et al. [37]; Moustakas, et al. [40]; Schlesinger and Doherty [41]; Wolbring, et al. [44]; Lopez, et al. [45] and Marlier, et al. [46]
Participatory Governance and Decision Making	McNiven and Harris [20]; Aitken [23]; Legg and Karner [27]; Hayhurst and Giles [36]; Keane, et al. [37]; Moustakas, et al. [40] and Kadagi, et al. [48]
Capacity-Building Approaches	Keane, et al. [37]; Girginov, et al. [39]; Schlesinger and Doherty [41] and Marlier, et al. [46]
Event Leveraging Models	Misener and Mason [33]; Girginov, et al. [39] and Lopez, et al. [45]
Cross-Sector, Intersectoral, and Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration	Ferguson, et al. [24]; Xinze, et al. [30]; Marlier, et al. [46] and Kadagi, et al. [48]
Inclusive, Equity, and Diversity-Oriented Governance	Legg and Karner [27]; Scherer, et al. [35]; Henne and Pape [38] and Wolbring, et al. [44]
Public–private partnerships and co-management	Panton and Walters [21]; Kadagi, et al. [48] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
Models of Sport-for-Development and Social	Kelly [22]; Aitken [23] and Hayhurst and Giles [36]

Inclusion	
Grassroots and Community Club Models	Moustakas, et al. [40] and Blomqvist [47]
Policy innovation and targeted policy design	Hu and Shu [26]; Chen, et al. [31] and Henne and Pape [38]
Resource sharing and partnership approaches	Ferguson, et al. [24] and Filo, et al. [32]
Tourism and Place-Based Models	Scherer, et al. [35] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
Health Promotion and Sports Poverty Alleviation	Xinze, et al. [30] and Chen, et al. [31]
Empowerment-Based and Mentoring Approaches	Wagstaff and Parker [43]
Critical Pedagogy and Alternative Sport Programs	Wheaton, et al. [49]
Governance structures and leadership models	Hu and Shu [26]
Historical Governance, Institutional Development, and Diplomacy	Watson, et al. [42]
Certification and quality assurance frameworks	Schlesinger and Doherty [41]
Gender Mainstreaming and Human Rights-Based Approaches	Henne and Pape [38]

Table 3 shows a significant cluster around community-based/community-led governance and networked and collaborative governance. Community-led arrangements prioritize co-production, local stewardship, and place-specific decision-making and can be found in a variety of localized contexts [22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 33, 35-37, 40, 43, 44, 46-49]. Meanwhile, in networked and collaborative governance models, inter-institutional links between public service bodies, clubs, non-government organizations (NGOs), and private actors are institutionalized in such a way as to align resources and responsibilities [26, 29, 37, 40, 44-46]. These two clusters suggest a shift away from top-down steering to metagovernance and network governance, in which empowerment is generated through negotiated coordination as opposed to hierarchical delivery.

Participatory governance and decision-making approaches emphasize the role of people in city-making, where community voice is more formal than just consultation and may include rule-making and oversight [20, 23, 27, 36, 37, 40, 48]. Capacity-building approaches enhance skills, leadership, and evaluative capacity to maintain collaboration [37, 39, 41, 46]. Cross-boundary collaboration appears to be realized through cross-sector, intersectoral, and multi-stakeholder collaboration as well as more formal public–private partnerships and co-management, which are often backed by resource sharing and partnership approaches that pool facilities, expertise, and finance [24, 30, 46, 48]. To expand access while localizing (empowerment anchoring), these approaches meet a confluence of public, private, and civic resources, reflecting an adaptive response to the dependencies connected with resources.

Equity and context play a crucial role in integrating fairness and rights demands into everyday governance practices, such as inclusive, equity, and diversity-oriented governance, as well as gender mainstreaming and human rights-based approaches [27, 35, 38, 44]. Sport-for-development and social inclusion models relate participation to broader social effects [22, 23, 36], and tourism and place-based models use local legacy and visitor economies to sustain community gains [35, 50]. Event leveraging models transform short-term events into long-term legacies [33, 34, 39]. Policy innovation and targeted policy design, health promotion, and sports poverty alleviation provide specific tools and service logics to interpret empowerment [26, 30, 31]. Finally, the input of models such as grassroots and community club models, governance structures, and leadership models, critical pedagogy and alternative sport programs, certification and quality assurance frameworks, and historical governance, institutional development, and diplomacy provides texture, from micro-institutional fixes to critical and historical lenses that question who writes the rules and who wins [26, 40, 41, 47, 49].

When these models of sport governance, freighting community power, are compared, several patterns are apparent. Community-based governance and collaborative and networked approaches are the most prominent. Both bring decision-making closer to people, but they operate in slightly different ways. Community-led governance emphasizes grassroots ownership and ensures that local voices

inform culturally specific programs [25, 30, 43]. In contrast, collaborative and networked governance link communities with governments, non-government organizations (NGOs), and private actors to form coalitions that pool resources and knowledge [21, 25, 29, 41]. Together, they demonstrate how the field is shifting from top-down control to more open arrangements in which communities and institutions share responsibility.

These are supplemented by participatory and capacity-building methods. Collaborative structures only create opportunities for engagement, and participation and capacity-building ensure communities' ability to engage. These methods focus on building capacity, fostering confidence, and seating local groups at the table [23, 37, 46]. This underscores the fact that empowerment is not just about bringing people into decision-making spaces but also enabling them to participate fully.

Emphasis is also required on equity, diversity, and rights. These aspects expose those who remain marginalized, even within participatory frameworks. Gender mainstreaming and human rights-based governance, for example, underscore that empowerment cannot only be about participating in sports but should also entail justice and inclusion for groups frequently excluded from sports [27, 38]. By doing this, these groups serve as a reminder that collaboration is insufficient on its own and that hierarchies may become more entrenched in the absence of a clear focus on equity.

Strategies such as event leveraging, tourism governance, sport for development, and critical pedagogy are less common but more useful. These strategies demonstrate how sport governance may be connected to wider objectives, including economic development, cultural conservation, or social education. For example, event-offer investigates the effects of a temporary sports event on making permanent change [39, 45]. Touristification and placemaking connect sport programs with themes of local history and communal identification [35, 50]. In contrast, critical pedagogy insights recast sport as a vehicle for educating and empowering through reflection and discussion [49].

Collectively, these models suggest that there is no single "best" form of sport governance for community transformation. What matters is how these differences are mixed with local developments. The trend is evident that governance is shifting toward community control, stronger partnerships, and greater inclusivity. At the same time, new models innovatively broaden the field by making sport governance an extension of culture, economy, and social justice. The takeaway is that empowerment works best with a combination of approaches that prioritize community voices, collaborative structures, equity principles, and context-specific innovation.

Research Question 3: Which drivers and barriers determine the successful transition of sport governance toward community empowerment?

Table 4.
Drivers and barriers to the success of sport governance transformation.

Category	Clustered Factor	Author(s)
Driver	Political Will and Policy Support	Koutrou and Kohe [25]; Panton and Walters [21]; Ferguson, et al. [24]; Chen, et al. [31]; Hayhurst and Giles [36]; Girginov, et al. [39]; Lopez, et al. [45] and Kadagi, et al. [48]
	Government funding and commitment	Gao, et al. [29]; Xinze, et al. [30]; Chen, et al. [31]; Filo, et al. [32] and Blomqvist [47]
	Community Engagement and Participation	McNiven and Harris [20]; Panton and Walters [21]; Kelly [22]; Aitken [23]; Hayhurst and Giles [36]; Wagstaff and Parker [43]; Wolbring, et al. [44] and Wheaton, et al. [49]
	Local leadership and ownership	Aitken [23]; Xinze, et al. [30]; Misener and Mason [33]; Scherer, et al. [35]; Moustakas, et al. [40]; Marlier, et al. [46] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
	Volunteer Engagement and Activism	McNiven and Harris [20]; Koutrou and Kohe [25]; Kelly [22]; Jones, et al. [28]; Misener and Mason [33]; Keane, et al. [37]; Girginov, et al. [39]; Moustakas, et al. [40] and Blomqvist [47]
	Trust Building and Relationship Development	Gao, et al. [29]; Scherer, et al. [35]; Keane, et al. [37]; Moustakas, et al. [40] and Marlier, et al. [46]
	Cross-Sector and Partnership Collaboration	Panton and Walters [21]; Aitken [23]; Ferguson, et al. [24]; Jones, et al. [28]; Keane, et al. [37]; Wolbring, et al. [44] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
	Capacity Building and Skills Development	Aitken [23]; Keane, et al. [37]; Girginov, et al. [39]; Schlesinger and Doherty [41] and Wheaton, et al. [49]
	Cultural Relevance and Inclusion	Legg and Karner [27]; Hayhurst and Giles [36] and Moustakas, et al. [40]
	Resource Sharing and Integration	Gao, et al. [29]; Chen, et al. [31]; Filo, et al. [32]; Misener and Mason [33] and Marlier, et al. [46]
	Leadership commitment and support	Legg and Karner [27]; Keane, et al. [37] and Watson, et al. [42]
	Advocacy and International Collaboration	Henne and Pape [38]; Watson, et al. [42] and Wolbring, et al. [44]
Barrier	Funding Limitations and Cuts	McNiven and Harris [20]; Koutrou and Kohe [25]; Kelly [22]; Aitken [23]; Ferguson, et al. [24]; Jones, et al. [28]; Chen, et al. [31]; Filo, et al. [32]; Misener and Mason [33]; Keane, et al. [37]; Girginov, et al. [39]; Schlesinger and Doherty [41]; Wolbring, et al. [44]; Lopez, et al. [45]; Marlier, et al. [46]; Blomqvist [47]; Kadagi, et al. [48]; Wheaton, et al. [49] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
	Governance Rigidity and Institutional Resistance	McNiven and Harris [20]; Aitken [23]; Hu and Shu [26] and Schlesinger and Doherty [41]
	Policy Gaps and Misalignment	Koutrou and Kohe [25]; Legg and Karner [27]; Wolbring, et al. [44] and Kadagi, et al. [48]
	Cultural and Social Barriers	Koutrou and Kohe [25]; Legg and Karner [27]; Xinze, et al. [30] and Hayhurst and Giles [36]
	Resource scarcity and inequality	McNiven and Harris [20]; Xinze, et al. [30]; Moustakas, et al. [40] and Scherer, et al. [35]
	Conflict of Interest and Stakeholder Disputes	Panton and Walters [21]; Ferguson, et al. [24]; Hu and Shu [26]; Keane, et al. [37] and Marlier, et al. [46]
	Limited community engagement and low participation	Gao, et al. [29]; Lopez, et al. [45] and Blomqvist [47]
	Volunteer Burnout	Filo, et al. [32]; Misener and Mason [33] and Moustakas, et al. [40]
	Legal and regulatory constraints	McNiven and Harris [20] and Hu and Shu [26]
	Bureaucratic delays and administrative burdens	Xinze, et al. [30] and Schlesinger and Doherty [41]
	Infrastructure and Facility Limitations	Kelly [22]; Blomqvist [47] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
	Power imbalances and inequality	Hayhurst and Giles [36] and Henne and Pape [38]
	Historical Legacies and Discrimination	Scherer, et al. [35] and Watson, et al. [42]

The course of sport governance toward substantive community empowerment is determined by a complex interplay of drivers and barriers, each of which impacts multiple institutional, socio-cultural, economic, and political scales. A cross-cutting overview of clustered evidence demonstrates that political will and policy support are universally claimed to be the foundational drivers. A combination of committed political actors, progressive policies, and sustained advocacy can foster innovation where resources meet local needs [25, 39, 45]. However, the extent to which policy can realize these goals heavily depends on government funding and commitment. At the state level, sport for inclusive and sustainable development can be translated into organized, permanent investment plans and arrangements for funding inclusive sports. This approach facilitates the emergence of new infrastructures, relationships, and capacity development opportunities, as demonstrated by Gao et al. [29] and Xinze et al. [30].

Responsive governance reform is based on deep community engagement and involvement. When the voices of local people (including youth and marginalized groups) are brought to bear in outcomes at various management levels through the governance process, the results will be more pertinent, sustainable, and equitable [36, 43]. This, in turn, is intimately connected with local leadership and ownership, especially when influential individuals and grassroots non-state organizations are advocates for sport for development because they help move from policy vision to practical delivery [46, 50]. Volunteering also reinforces activism by directing social capital toward bureaucratic logjams or funding shortages [33, 37]. Trust building and relationship development help build the relational glue needed for persistent, cross-sectoral, and stakeholder collaborations [29, 35].

Collaboration across sectors and partnerships can advance development through resource integration, knowledge sharing, and coordination, particularly where roles and accountability are assigned [21, 23]. Capacity building and skill development of leadership, technical, and management competencies are consistently identified as four cornerstones of professionalized and dynamic sport organizations [39, 41]. Additionally, being culturally relevant and inclusive means that governance systems reflect the lived experiences of various communities, as well as their values and hopes, which enhances participation and equity [35, 40].

However, barriers that obstruct equitable transformation remain. Funding restrictions or cuts are reported more frequently than any other barriers, limiting the sustainability and scaling up of projects as well as the potential for inclusivity in both high- and low-income settings [44, 46]. Existing dynamics, such as entrenched bureaucracies and rigid legal frameworks, can hinder participation and open innovation initiatives [26, 41]. Policy gaps and misalignments have resulted in fragmented delivery, compromising synergy [27, 48] and stifling reform efforts.

Cultural and social barriers, such as exclusionary norms, discrimination, or limited participation among vulnerable groups, restrict the reach and scope of sport governance [30, 36]. Resource-constrained and uneven socioeconomic landscapes, often found in developing settings or in slums and underserved urban or rural areas, pose even greater barriers to access and sustainability [20, 40]. Challenges such as conflicts of interest, stakeholder disputes, volunteer exhaustion, legalities, bureaucracy, and infrastructure also add complexity and might increase fragmentation and dropout risks [32, 33]. Lastly, power distribution lines, historical discrimination traits, systemic factors, and the physical locations in which organizations work make it difficult to develop as a collective [35, 38].

A comparative approach highlights strong interdependencies. A driver, such as funding, leadership, or involvement, can become a potent barrier if it is lacking or not maintained properly. Thus, it is important to build and maintain effective relationships among governance partners, invest in cultural competency, and have long-term policy commitment. The documented evidence in the literature signifies that further research is needed to better understand the long-term sustainability of inclusion and empowerment interventions, particularly in non-Western and resource-constrained settings, and it should focus more on informal governance mechanisms, intersectional drivers of exclusion, and rural access.

In summary, the most important facilitating factors for good sport governance and community

empowerment are strong political will, adequate funding, active stakeholder participation, and culturally savvy partnerships. The persistent challenges include resource shortages, institutional inertia, policy silos, volunteer wear-out, and social exclusion. Policy development and scholarly endeavors must focus on addressing these issues through contextually situated policy design, participatory innovation, and a type of rigorous, comparative, longitudinal inquiry that is expanding in its field of vision to avoid reifying current power relations.

Research Question 4: What are the remaining gaps in the field of sport governance for community empowerment, and what recommendations might inform future research?

Table 5.
Research gaps and recommendations.

Category	Clustered Theme	Author(s)
Gap	Lack of longitudinal impact studies	Koutrou and Kohe [25]; Panton and Walters [21]; Kelly [22]; Aitken [23]; Ferguson, et al. [24]; Legg and Karner [27]; Jones, et al. [28]; Xinze, et al. [30]; Chen, et al. [31]; Filo, et al. [32]; Misener and Mason [33]; Misener and Mason [34]; Scherer, et al. [35]; Hayhurst and Giles [36]; Keane, et al. [37]; Henne and Pape [38]; Girginov, et al. [39]; Moustakas, et al. [40]; Schlesinger and Doherty [41]; Wagstaff and Parker [43]; Wolbring, et al. [44]; Lopez, et al. [45]; Marlier, et al. [46]; Kadagi, et al. [48]; Wheaton, et al. [49] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
	Limited comparative and cross-cultural studies	Koutrou and Kohe [25]; Hu and Shu [26]; Jones, et al. [28]; Keane, et al. [37]; Henne and Pape [38]; Schlesinger and Doherty [41]; Watson, et al. [42]; Wolbring, et al. [44]; Lopez, et al. [45]; Marlier, et al. [46] and Blomqvist [47]
	Lack of Policy Integration and Evaluation	Kelly [22]; Aitken [23]; Xinze, et al. [30]; Chen, et al. [31]; Moustakas, et al. [40] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
	Underexplored Power Dynamics	Panton and Walters [21]; Filo, et al. [32]; Hayhurst and Giles [36]; Keane, et al. [37] and Moustakas, et al. [40]
	Underrepresentation of marginalized or minority groups	Legg and Karner [27]; Scherer, et al. [35]; Wolbring, et al. [44] and Blomqvist [47]
	Limited Evidence in Rural or Under-Researched Contexts	Jones, et al. [28]; Gao, et al. [29]; Misener and Mason [33]; Scherer, et al. [35] and Watson, et al. [42]
	Challenges of Sustainability and Scalability	Kelly [22]; Hayhurst and Giles [36]; Marlier, et al. [46]; Blomqvist [47]; Wheaton, et al. [49] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
	Limited evaluation of specific governance areas (e.g., DEI and certification)	Legg and Karner [27]; Schlesinger and Doherty [41] and Wagstaff and Parker [43]
Recommendation	Conduct longitudinal and comprehensive studies	Panton and Walters [21]; Kelly [22]; Aitken [23]; Ferguson, et al. [24]; Legg and Karner [27]; Jones, et al. [28]; Gao, et al. [29]; Xinze, et al. [30]; Chen, et al. [31]; Misener and Mason [33]; Misener and Mason [34]; Scherer, et al. [35]; Hayhurst and Giles [36]; Keane, et al. [37]; Henne and Pape [38]; Girginov, et al. [39]; Moustakas, et al. [40]; Schlesinger and Doherty [41]; Wagstaff and Parker [43]; Wolbring, et al. [44]; Lopez, et al. [45]; Marlier, et al. [46]; Blomqvist [47]; Kadagi, et al. [48]; Wheaton, et al. [49]; Fauzi, et al. [50]
	Strengthening policy integration and governance capacity	Kelly [22]; Aitken [23]; Hu and Shu [26]; Xinze, et al. [30]; Chen, et al. [31]; Moustakas, et al. [40]; Marlier, et al. [46] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
	Expanding comparative and cross-cultural research	Koutrou and Kohe [25]; Jones, et al. [28]; Keane, et al. [37]; Henne and Pape [38]; Watson, et al. [42] and Marlier, et al. [46]
	Promote inclusive and community-led governance	Legg and Karner [27]; Misener and Mason [34]; Scherer, et al. [35]; Hayhurst and Giles [36] and Moustakas, et al. [40]
	Enhancing Sustainability and Partnership Models	Kelly [22]; Misener and Mason [34]; Marlier, et al. [46]; Blomqvist [47] and Fauzi, et al. [50]
	Addressing Power Dynamics and	Panton and Walters [21]; Filo, et al. [32]; Hayhurst and Giles

	Equity Issues	[36]; Keane, et al. [37] and Henne and Pape [38]
	Rural and Under-Researched Contexts	Jones, et al. [28]; Gao, et al. [29]; Misener and Mason [33] and Scherer, et al. [35]
	Improving monitoring, evaluation, and data use	Girginov, et al. [39] and Lopez, et al. [45]
	Fostering cross-sector collaboration and capacity building	Ferguson, et al. [24]; Chen, et al. [31]; Keane, et al. [37]; Girginov, et al. [39]; Wolbring, et al. [44]; Kadagi, et al. [48] and Fauzi, et al. [50]

The first and most frequently cited gap stems from the absence of evidence of longitudinal outcomes that "capacity building" inevitably translates to more sustainable community empowerment. On the other hand, weak feedback not only restricts the ability of governments to steer and adjust networks adaptively, but they are also less accountable [51]. Similar short project cycles and a lack of follow-up monitoring make it difficult to track changes in capacity-building, development endowment for participation, or civic voice from events organized for community clubs, equity schemes, and grassroots programs [27, 34, 39-41, 45, 46].

The second cross-cutting gap includes policy incoherence and weak evaluation mechanisms. Orchestration across departments, levels of government, and implementing partners has been less clearly delineated from a collaborative governance perspective, leading to jurisdictional gaps, fragmented service provision, and varied standards [23, 29-31]. This institutional or practical gap weakens consistency and development, a critical issue in event-driven circumstances [46] and multi-actor partnerships [21].

The third gap is the structural vulnerability and economic viability risk. Resource dependence theory clearly demonstrates the way in which programs are "held hostage" by relying heavily on grants, singular funders, or project-based payments [52]. Long-standing financing constraints appear to be short-termist and do not encourage multi-year planning for community contributions, based on the attention this structure has received in Scotland, Australia, and Belgium [20, 32, 46] even in the face of public health threats, i.e., society under the shadow of Covid-19 [50]. An action or implementation gap with obvious governance consequences.

The fourth gap is related to capacity and skills. The capacity and skills gap in leadership, network management, monitoring, and evaluation impedes the effectiveness of collaborations that universities value. Brokering, boundary spanning, and facilitation are needed for coordination and learning in (network) governance [53]. The cited studies have also identified issues with governance capacity, role clarity, and evaluation capacity at cross-sectoral partnerships [28, 37, 41, 48]. This is a gap in pragmatic or methodological research.

As for the fifth gap, the literature shows signs that equity, power, and representation are skewed. Inclusive governance is not a "one size fits all" approach and should at least consider intersectionality, disability sport, Indigenous leadership, and community veto or voice, with countless initiatives being at risk of tokenism or ignoring local agency [35, 36, 38, 44]. This is a theoretical, empirical, or epistemic instrumental gap with implications for legitimacy.

The sixth gap can be considered a site-specific "blank." Model transferability is hampered by the rarity of cross-country comparisons, non-Western histories, and rural or understudied settings [28, 29, 42]. This is an empirical/methodological omission in the vein of low external validity.

Ultimately, the final gap is linked to domain-specific silences that occur in cycles, where event-based planning to legacy often misses continuity [45], certification or quality moves faster than our knowledge of its equity consequences [41], and neglect continues in both digital inclusion or data use and governance routines [29]. These are pragmatic and assessment deficiencies with distributional implications.

4. Recommendations and Strategic Directions

To address these research gaps, (longitudinal) mixed methods were evaluated within program

delivery and legacy planning [27, 34, 39, 45]. This theoretically operationalizes adaptive meta-governance: strong indicators facilitate iterative steering and accountability, namely, through the use of common indicators and data sharing agreements, while some risks relate to administrative burden, particularly on small agencies, which is addressed by tiered reporting and capacity support.

For policy fragmentation, the suggestions focus on multilevel pacts or covenants to synchronize instruments and roles of players and institutionalize boundary-spanning tasks [23, 30, 31]. This provides a basis for the forward defense of flexible firm structures and emphasizes planning good coordination processes into planning and budget cycles. In high-income country settings, inter-agency agreements can be formal and occur through intermediary NGOs or joint platforms in lower-income and rural settings. Risks include bureaucratization and process fatigue. Common outcome frameworks and co-design protocols can address these issues.

The literature encourages diversified revenue strategies, multi-year budgeting, and partnership-based resource pooling in relation to finance [20, 32, 46, 50]. The "Right to Dream" (RDT) program indicates that buffering dependence can be achieved through the combination of public grants, private sponsorship, social enterprise, and community contributions. High-income systems can depend on sponsorship or corporate social responsibility (CSR), whereas under-resourced settings may focus their support on pooled funds, facility-sharing models, and micro-enterprises. The risks involve "mission drift," and governance safeguards (public-value compacts and transparency clauses) are vital in this regard.

Suggestions for bridging capacity gaps involve leadership pipelines, governance training, and evaluation literacy of community leaders, volunteers, and officials [37, 41, 48]. This aligns with prior research on collaborative public management, which indicates that skills, trust, and facilitation are essential to network performance. While small organizations might require mentoring consortia, large federations could provide continuing professional development (CPD) and shared services. The risks include turnover and volunteer burnout, and the facilitators include recognition systems and role clarity.

For equity and power, this study recommends community-driven and rights-based designs, intersectional analysis, Indigenous-led evaluation, and inclusive policy instruments [27, 35, 36, 38]. In theory, this "anchors" networks in democracy and fights the capture of the elite. In practical terms, meaningful participation requires time, facilitation, and resources. There is a risk of tokenism. Formal decision rights, disaggregated data, and grievance mechanisms are some of the enablers.

Contextual gaps are addressed through comparative, cross-cultural, and rural delivery models, as well as decolonial or historical methods to extract non-Western trajectories [28, 29, 42]. Multi-site approaches and consortia may enhance external validity from a methodological perspective. The risk is the emergence of superficial comparisons, and this issue can be mitigated with shared core measures and detailed descriptions.

Domain-specific fixes relate to historical governance over and above events [45], the impact assessment of certification with a focus on small-provider equity [41], and data-centric decision-making and digital inclusion for action planning and monitoring [29]. These guidelines are essentially directly transformed into governance practices and procurement or funding requirements.

This study identified three major gaps: (1) evidence and evaluation over time, (2) policy integration and coordination, and (3) financial sustainability. These are the most cited weaknesses and come with a well-defined set of recommendations, namely longitudinal monitoring and evaluation, multi-level compacts, and diverse finance. Additional key research domains include the equity impacts of certification, disability and Indigenous governance, rural systems, and non-Western histories, with the recommendations being more aspirational than operational.

There is a clear agenda framework. Policy reforms require capacity-building and embedded evaluation; funding strategies require governance guardrails to avoid mission drift; equity goals rely on both participatory design and data infrastructures. Governments may explore institutionalizing legacy governance post-event, intersectional and Indigenous-led evaluation, and place-based digitally enabled

models that braid public, civic, and private resources.

For policy-supported longitudinal and interoperable monitoring and evaluation, multilevel governance compacts must be codified with clear decision rights and inclusive, rights-based requirements (e.g., participation and disaggregated data) to be embedded in the funding criteria. For starters, boundary-spanning capability should be developed, leadership development should be prioritized, and investment in shared services should be made to lower compliance costs for small providers. Meanwhile, research should focus on comparative cross-cultural rural/informed awareness, intersectional designs, rigorous certification, and evaluation of legacy mechanisms. These steps align metagovernance steering with collaborative delivery and learning systems. It is more likely that sports governance will consistently deliver equitable and lasting community empowerment.

5. Discussion

The systematic literature review (SLR) on the transformation of sporting governance toward community empowerment indicates that this field is dynamic and fast-growing. Since 2016, the volume of published papers in this area has grown significantly in response to heightened international interest in inclusive and collaborative mechanisms. This trend has been particularly noticeable among studies published in journals on sport management and development. The literature provides evidence of a clear direction toward more collaborative forms of governance, where state and non-state actors co-produce outputs. Borrowing from metagovernance and network governance perspectives, this study emphasizes that community engagement should reach far beyond tokenistic consultation; it needs to position local voices in decision-making processes and assure cultural contextualization and sustained involvement. As noted by Aitken [23], Wagstaff and Parker [43], and Wolbring et al. [44], others, these practices are key to maintaining legitimacy and a license for the long term.

The literature on sport governance shows a trend of cross-sectoral coverage and impact. Except for Malawi and Tonga, where there is noteworthy sport-related work in underdeveloped nations, the majority of contributions and empirical research originate from countries with a developed research infrastructure and sports policy framework. These instances are more concerned with attempts to adapt or create forms of community governance that are sensitive to local conditions. Network governance theory can elucidate the various forms of interaction and interdependence that coexist in diverse national contexts. Nonetheless, this study highlights persisting disparities, with unevenly distributed knowledge production and policy development often benefiting the Global North and dominant sport organizations. This raises important questions about whose viewpoints shape the governance image and what local contexts are of academic interest.

Sectoral interaction, particularly between private and corporate partners, is another important aspect. However, this study concludes that private actors would make a major contribution through financial capital, and marketing and technical support can extend and enhance sport programs [28, 29, 39]. Resource dependence theory is also used to analyze tensions in the balance between using external resources and ensuring that commercial imperatives or shorter-term objectives do not abandon public value. Stakeholder priority contradictions are exposed, as are the challenges (and at times the struggle) of creating open governance agreements that safeguard the social value-adding goal of sport initiatives.

However, there are still limitations. Policy shortcomings and misalignments between levels of governance undermine coherence and alignment [25, 27, 44, 48]. The literature also underscores the critical grounding functions of local leaders, elders, and cultural ambassadors in governance within a particular culture and society, especially in indigenous or rural settings [35, 40]. The exclusion of these actors can lead to low levels of participation and trust, illustrating tensions between rationalization and local adaptation. This implies that individuals in charge of making and implementing decisions should ensure that governance systems are participatory, inclusive, and flexible. Such consolidation should prioritize mechanisms to promote a relevant, effective, and internalized community definition, foster increased cooperation across sectoral boundaries, and outline context-specific policies.

Complementary evidence from indigenous and community-based innovation studies further

supports the view that governance arrangements, rather than participation alone, shape empowerment outcomes. Large-scale mappings of village enterprise and rural social innovation research consistently highlight the centrality of local ownership, public policy contexts, institutional management, and governance as organizing dimensions of community empowerment across sectors [53, 54]. Empirical studies also indicate that empowerment is strengthened when community-based initiatives are locally owned and supported through collaboration and enabling local government policies, while co-creation and knowledge-sharing mechanisms help address structural constraints faced by marginalized groups [55, 56]. Collectively, these findings reinforce the interpretation that sustainable empowerment depends on coherent, context-sensitive governance systems capable of mobilizing local knowledge and resources over time, an insight that is directly relevant for understanding persistent empowerment gaps in community sport governance [57, 58].

6. Research Agenda

Building on these gaps and neglected areas, the research agenda highlights high-priority issues across conceptually, methodologically, empirically, and contextually different domains. There is an urgent need to develop models, either through editorial analytics of metagovernance and resource dependence theory or other theories capable of conceptualizing grassroots dynamics and power asymmetries in multi-level sport policy interactions. Methodologically, a shift from qualitative single case studies to mixed methods, participatory action research, and longitudinal designs is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of governance processes and long-term effects. Empirically, more attention should be given to understudied regions to identify factors influencing community empowerment and the effectiveness of governance reforms. Contextually, priorities include sector variation, such as youth, disability, gender, and indigenous sport, and understanding how informal leaders, such as elders and cultural brokers, drive program effects. Scholars in public administration, social sciences, anthropology, and management should collaborate on cross-disciplinary research. Additionally, novel methodologies utilizing digital platforms and big data analytics for monitoring governance networks are proposed.

7. Conclusion

In sum, this study offers a textured overview of the research domain by outlining its conceptual bases, empirical regularities, and persistent challenges. This study's findings indicate that sustainable, transformative sport governance for community empowerment relies on participatory, context-specific, and multi-sectoral approaches built on collaborative practice and theoretical advancement. Despite significant advancements, certain theoretical, methodological, and geographical inconsistencies remain. Future research agendas must consider this while respecting practical imperatives and the notion of fair, genuine participation. Further research and policy formulation are needed to fully realize the transformative power of sport governance and sustain its influence on diverse communities worldwide.

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