



Integrating Scenario Planning and Stakeholder Analysis to Reduce the Analytical Gap in Forecasting the Future of Iranian Professional Football

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Abstract

The study was conducted using two approaches: intuitive-logic scenario planning and critical stakeholder analysis. The key driving forces identified and analyzed included governmental support policies, private investment, sports infrastructure, social awareness, and media coverage. The research participants included representatives from the government, the Football Federation, clubs, and the media, as well as coaches, players, and fans, all selected through purposive sampling. Scenario planning was carried out using a 2×2 matrix, and stakeholders' strategies were examined across different scenarios. The findings revealed four main scenarios for the future of professional football in Iran. In the most desirable scenario, extensive governmental support and strong investment lead to sustainable development, while in the least favorable scenario, weak governmental support and insufficient investment result in stagnation. In the most desirable scenario, the government and the Football Federation, with scores of 9 and 8 out of 10, respectively, have the greatest influence on achieving developmental goals. Moreover, the strategy analysis indicated that the combined scenario of "sustainable financial support, infrastructure development, and strengthening the role of the media," with a realization coefficient of 0.85 (on a scale of 0 to 1), represents the most effective path toward achieving sustainable development of professional football in Iran by the horizon year 1414 (2035/2036). Stakeholder analysis also showed that the government and the Football Federation have the highest impact on realizing these scenarios.

Introduction

Iranian professional football plays a vital social and economic role, connecting government bodies, private investors, clubs, media, coaches, players, and fans through intertwined networks

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of influence and resources. Yet, the sport faces persistent challenges, including inconsistent policies, weak investment, financial instability, and fragmented governance, all of which hinder its sustainable development and reveal an analytical gap in efforts to shape its future. Traditional forecasting methods have not fully captured the complexity and uncertainty of this system, highlighting the need for an integrated approach that combines scenario planning to explore alternative futures with stakeholder analysis to clarify the roles, capacities, and interdependencies of key actors. This study applies such an approach to examine how government support and private investment shape the future of Iranian professional football by 1414 (2035/2036), aiming to identify strategic pathways for sustainable progress. Ultimately, it asks: how can the interaction among structural drivers and stakeholder strategies reduce the analytical gap in shaping the future of Iranian professional football?

Methods

The research adopted a strategic and exploratory foresight design that combines two complementary approaches. First, we used intuitive-logic scenario planning to structure uncertainties, cluster drivers, and elaborate internally consistent futures via a 2×2 matrix. Second, we applied critical stakeholder analysis to identify interests, power relations, and feasible strategies within each scenario, including alternatives for stakeholders whose initial strategies are misaligned with scenario logics. Participants were purposively sampled and included representatives of the government, the Football Federation, clubs, and the media, as well as coaches, players, and fans. Data came from semi-structured expert interviews and secondary sources. Drivers were coded, clustered, and prioritized using dual criteria—impact and uncertainty (scored 1–10)—leading to the selection of governmental support policies and private investment as the two matrix axes. We then assessed stakeholder influence and goal attainment potential by scenario. To test robustness, we conducted triangulation across sources and used sensitivity analysis to examine how strategy shifts would affect outcomes. Quantitative summary indicators included stakeholder influence scores (government 9/10; Football Federation 8/10) and a scenario-level realization coefficient for the combined strategy package (0.85 on a 0–1 scale).

Results and Discussion

Prioritization yielded five high-salience drivers: governmental support, sports infrastructure, social awareness, private investment, and media coverage. The two most consequential uncertainties—governmental support and private investment—organized a 2×2 matrix that generated four distinctive futures. In each, we evaluated the feasibility and expected effects of stakeholder strategies, explicitly linking power to implementation capacity.

Table 1. Scenario matrix for Iranian professional football

	Supportive policies (A1)	Unsupportive policies (A2)
Strong private investment (B1)	Rapid growth of Iranian professional football	Limited progress with persistent challenges
Weak private investment (B2)	Moderate and incremental growth	Stagnation and systemic decline

Source: Research Findings

Across all scenarios, the most desirable future (A1–B1) emerges when strong governmental support aligns with active private investment. This combination enables modernization of infrastructure, professional training systems, and international competitiveness. In such a setting, the government and the Football Federation play leading roles in ensuring stability and coordination, while effective media engagement can increase public attention and attract financial support. When financial support, infrastructure development, and media cooperation are properly integrated, the overall realization potential of this strategy reaches a high coefficient of 0.85, showing that coordinated policy and investment can support the sustainable development of

professional football. Conversely, when either public support or private capital weakens, as in A2–B1 or A1–B2, growth becomes uneven and fragile. Financial and infrastructural limitations reduce the system's ability to sustain development, while the A2–B2 condition leads to stagnation and decline across governance, infrastructure, and fan engagement.

The stakeholder power analysis highlights how strategic coordination can close the analytical gap. Government and the Federation hold the greatest influence through policy and regulation, while clubs, investors, and media exert operational and communicative leverage that can affect the realization of development strategies. Coaches, players, and fans also contribute to the development of professional football, but they require institutional support to translate enthusiasm into performance and revenue. By integrating scenario planning with stakeholder analysis, this study demonstrates that uncertainties can be converted into clear, context-sensitive strategies. The resulting framework identifies practical pathways—ranging from infrastructure investment and governance reform to media collaboration and talent development—that collectively transform strategic foresight from an abstract vision into an actionable roadmap for the sustainable future of Iranian professional football.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that combining intuitive-logic scenarios with critical stakeholder analysis supports strategic planning for Iranian professional football. Four structurally distinct futures emerge from the interplay of governmental support and private investment, with the A1–B1 quadrant offering the clearest path to sustainable development by 1414. The government (9/10 influence) and the Football Federation (8/10) are the most influential stakeholders, yet durable success hinges on coordinated strategies that also mobilize clubs, media, coaches/players, and fans. The most effective portfolio—sustained finance, infrastructure renewal, and strengthened media coverage—supports the sustainable development of professional football. More broadly, the integrated method integrates uncertainty and stakeholder power into strategic decision-making, thereby helping to reduce the analytical gap in planning the future of Iranian professional football.

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Keywords: football foresight, stakeholder analysis, intuitive-logic scenario planning, professional sport development, strategic policymaking