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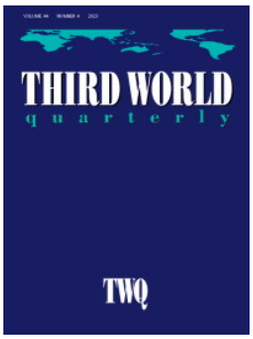

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Nation-state strategies for human capital development: the case of sports mega-events in Qatar

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ABSTRACT

The paper makes an original contribution to knowledge in three ways. First, through interviews with experts in Qatar, we uncover the role major sports events seek to play in the development of Qatar's indigenous population. Our findings show that, alongside seeking to achieve various international objectives, these events are also intended to have a positive impact on the state's human capital development at home. Specifically, in this regard, there is a desire to use sports events to address issues related to the health of Qataris, and to try to engage citizens in a process of maturity, whereby they are encouraged to confront the outside world, and become less reliant on the state. Second, our paper adds to understanding the role of aspirations, motivation and ambition in the human capital development process, which, as we show, is an area to which a growing literature is devoted. Third, the paper is the first academic analysis to provide insight into how sports events can be used in an attempt to overcome the 'resource curse', referring to the evidential long-term human capital development deficiencies that are commonly experienced by natural resource-rich states across the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, Qatar has invested heavily in 'sports mega-events' (henceforth 'SMEs'), culminating in the country's hosting of the 2015 International Handball Federation (IHF) World Handball Championships, the 2019 World Athletics Championships, and the Middle East's first Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup, staged in November and December 2022. To date, research on these investments has focused on the opportunities and challenges that staging SMEs presents to Qatar in foreign policy terms. Many scholars, for instance, have argued how these events act as instruments of 'soft power' – vehicles through which Qatar looks to carve out an attractive international identity that expresses notions of modernity, progress and leadership (Grix *et al*. 2019; Al Thani 2021). Similarly, others have situated these events as part of an attempt at regional hegemony, one

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that seeks to cement Qatar as a vital Middle Eastern hub for political and cultural exhibitions, events and discussions (Brannagan and Grix 2014). Finally, some have examined how SMEs have come to damage Qatar's reputation, most notably through global critique of the state's human rights record (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015, 2018; Reiche 2015; Brannagan and Rookwood 2016; Millward 2017).

With only minor exceptions (see Al-Emadi *et al*. 2017, Al-Emadi, Sellami, and Fadlalla 2022), however, few scholars have investigated the impact SMEs seek to have on Qatar in domestic terms. Given this, our article makes an original contribution to knowledge in three ways. First, through interviews with experts located within Qatar, we uncover the role SMEs seek to have in the development of Qatar's indigenous population. In doing so, our findings show that, alongside seeking to achieve various international objectives, these events are also intended to have a positive impact on the state's human capital development at home. Specifically, in this regard, there is a desire to address issues related to the health of Qataris, as well as to try to engage citizens in a process of maturity, whereby they are encouraged to become less reliant on the state. Second, our paper adds to understanding the role of aspirations, motivation, and ambition in the human capital development process, which, as we show in the next section, is an area of growth in the literature; in doing so, we offer one of the few examinations of government-led aspiration management in the context of an Arab state. Finally, the paper is the first analysis to provide insight into how SMEs can be used in an attempt to overcome the 'resource curse', referring to the human capital deficiencies that are commonly experienced by natural resource-rich states. Consequently, although our paper focuses on Qatar, its findings have relevance to natural resource-wealthy states located across the Middle East, Asia and Africa, many of which experience such developmental anxieties.

The remainder of the paper unfolds as follows. In the next section we highlight the importance of efficient human capital development for the contemporary nation-state. Following this, we present crucial background information on Qatar. We then discuss our chosen methods, providing details on our interviews with Qatari experts. We then present our findings; in evaluating our findings, we also offer a critical appraisal of the challenges the state faces by choosing to use SMEs for these specific human capital endeavours.

Human capital development

'Human capital' refers to 'the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being' (Keeley 2007, 29). 'Human capital development' centres on how state leaders can increase the value of their populations for national benefit (Fincher, 2007). In the same way that economic capital can be invested for future growth, so too can investments in human resources lead to growth in other forms of (economic, social, political) capital. For national leaders, a high-quality pool of human capital is a vital driver of a state's present and future performance in areas related to education, business, finance, technology, healthcare and science. This is because, for any state wishing to be successful, the quality of human resources available comes to influence their productivity, efficiency, innovation output, and thus their performance in key markets (Weymouth and Feinberg 2011).

While human capital has always been important, in the contemporary epoch, it has taken on added significance. With the increasing presence of neoliberalism and the growth of

highly competitive, capitalist markets, governments the world over have come to align with the 'competition state' model – the deliberate restructuring of state-led strategies for the pursuit of economic growth and global competitive advantage (Cerny 1997). A key facet of the competition state is the successful development of human capital, exemplified by the myriad of indexes in existence, such as the Global Competitive Index, the World Economic Forum Global Human Capital Index, and the World Bank Human Capital Index. Such indexes spur competition between states by ranking countries against one another on their levels of education and healthcare, and how effectively these sectors contribute to 'the productivity of the next generation of workers' (Human Capital Index 2020, 1). This, in turn, has ensured that talent has become the most sought-after factor of the production process, with competitive advantages lying with those who are able to create the very best human capital (Popova and Petrov 2019). This is something that has not been lost on many emerging, Global South states – such as Singapore, South Korea, and Hong Kong – who have in recent years excelled in various human capital indexes, reflecting their desire to bolster their human capital as part of a broader, strategic developmental agenda (Maitra 2016).

In seeking success in this regard, we identify three key factors that underlie the effective bolstering of human capital. The first relates to the level of education, training and skills of one's workforce. Weymouth and Feinberg (2011, 143) refer to this as 'public investment competitiveness', denoting governments' investment into human capital formation and the subsequent endeavour to produce a workforce that exhibits multiple skill levels. Vital to this is the quality of education on offer, and just as important is ensuring citizens have access to such provisions (Fincher 2007). Moreover, the positive impact higher education has on a state's scientific advancement is vital to achieving higher rates of national workforce productivity (Dissou, Didic, and Yakautsava 2016). It is because of this that Sabadie and Johansen (2010, 242) argue that states looking to develop their human capital should aim to achieve the 'national knowledge triangle' – that is, the complementary advancement of national education, innovation and research. For Pan (2011), such an aim helps explain why Asian states such as Japan, Singapore and China have been so keen to send state-funded students to study in Western universities, not only to bolster their individual education, but also to gather the knowledge and experience required for the emulation of successful modernisation back home.

The second factor relates to the impact of health and well-being on human capital. A healthy population not only keeps national healthcare costs down but also has a significant impact on the readiness of citizens to achieve 'high efficiency, flexibility and innovativeness' (Rađenović and Krstić, 2017, 105). This is particularly so amongst youth populations, with research indicating that poor health can be correlated with lower skill and knowledge attainment in children, incapacities that go on to negatively impact their prospects across their life cycle (Palermo and Dowd 2012). Furthermore, a well-educated and healthy population is not only significant to domestic production output but also crucial in the decision-making process of international investors, workers and students, and thus comes to have a positive impact on attracting foreign direct investment and global expertise into one's national economy (Lonska and Mietule 2015).

The third and final factor relates to 'aspiration capital', which recognises that ambition is significant to the success of 'developed and developing postmodern economies' (Douglass 2010, 6985). Roy et al. (2018) note how research has recently started to point towards how 'non-cognitive' traits can impact a nation's human capital advancement. 'Socioemotional'

attributes such as self-esteem, motivation, persistence and ambition are shown to have an impact on educational uptake, as well as health and labour market outcomes (see Mocan and Tekin 2009). A more inspired and ambitious workforce helps create a more talented, health-conscious and entrepreneurial population, in turn producing a more productive society (Lim 2018). Without an inspired or ambitious workforce, the potential of a population can suffer, regardless of the level of opportunities that are available to them – note, for instance, how research indicates that those who enjoy successful careers tend to demonstrate higher levels of employment aspirations during their school years, compared to those who showcase lower characteristic levels as youths (Schoon, Martin, and Ross 2007). Thus, the way individuals come to think about, and define, their life aspirations can have a significant impact on national human capital development.

In the coming sections, we look at how Qatar seeks to utilise its staging of SMEs for human capital development at home, but first we provide crucial background information on the state.

Qatar

Qatar is a sovereign state, located in the Arabian Gulf, one that is governed as an 'absolute monarchy' – referring to a form of governance within which the monarch holds supreme monocratic authority. The Emir is Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who has ruled over the state since 2013. As of February 2023, Qatar's total population stands at 2.982 million (Qatar Ministry of Planning and Statistics 2022). The capital city, Doha, is the state's most populated area, housing 2.277 million of the state's population (Qatar Census Report 2020). Crucial to note is that a staggering 89% of Qatar's total inhabitants are expatriate workers, the majority of whom come from some of the poorest countries in South Asia in their quest to take advantage of the abundance of predominantly blue-collar employment opportunities across the Gulf (Snoj 2019). The presence of such a large expatriate population means Qataris find themselves a minority in their own country, accounting for a mere 313,000 of the state's total inhabitants (Snoj 2019). Latest figures suggest that 51% of Qataris are female and 49% are male (Qatar Ministry of Planning and Statistics 2022). The official language of Qatar is Arabic, although English has become the *de facto* second language, due to the fact most Qataris receive some form of English education at school. Islam is the dominant religion amongst Qataris, with the vast majority adhering to the Sunni doctrine of Islam.

Economically, Qatar records high levels of national wealth, with its nominal gross domestic product (GDP) per capita currently the 7th highest in the world (at $82,887), and its GDP at purchasing power parity standing at $113,675 (see International Monetary Fund 2022). According to the US Energy Information Database (2021), Qatar has proven oil reserves in the region of 25 billion barrels, and on average the state produces 1.3 million barrels per day (b/d), making it the 15th largest exporter of crude oil worldwide. Furthermore, according to Dourian (2020), the state is currently the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG), exporting almost 80 million metric tons per year. In line with most of Qatar's rich neighbours, the state's wealth has allowed the government to repel any serious calls for wider democratic participation through offering a comprehensive welfare system which is informally exchanged for political support. Through this, the state attends to all the basic needs of its citizens from cradle to grave. For instance, a well-paid job in the public sector is guaranteed to all Qatari high school and university

graduates; no citizen is required to pay tax or utility bills; primary, secondary and higher education costs are fully subsidised; and all Qatari citizens are eligible to receive a plot of land and an interest-free loan of up to QR850,000 (approximately $233,000) towards its development (Kamrava 2013).

In looking to ensure the continued welfare of its citizens, Qatar has been engaged in seeking to achieve its 'Qatar National Vision 2030' (henceforth 'QNV'), a nation-building project launched in 2008 with the objective to turn the state into 'an advanced country by 2030, capable of sustaining its own development and providing for a high standard of living for all of its people' (QNV 2008, 2). Guided by two iterations of the Qatar National Development Strategy (henceforth 'QNDS') (2011–2016 and 2018–2022), the state's blueprint for achieving the QNV, Qatar's nation-building project is built on four pillars: *economic development*; *human development*; *social development*; and *environmental development*. The former, in part, helps explain why Qatar – through its sovereign wealth fund, the Qatar Investment Authority – has strategically invested in a myriad of high-profile ventures overseas, with acquisitions including Harrods, J. Sainsbury, Porsche, Heathrow Airport and the French Ligue 1 football club Paris Saint-Germain (Brannagan and Reiche 2022). Such investments help stimulate growth in new global markets, and thus assist the state in its desire to move away from its reliance on natural resource revenues, which form the majority of the state's annual income and spending.

The three other pillars of the QNV relate to developments at home. The human pillar – which concerns this paper the most – exemplifies the state's desire to ensure the 'development of all its people to enable them to sustain a prosperous society' (QNV 2008, 11). In this regard, the QNV argues:

> Qatar's progress has depended primarily on the exploitation of its oil and gas resources. But the country's hydrocarbon resources will eventually run out. Future economic success will increasingly depend on the ability of the Qatari people to deal with a new international order that is knowledge-based and extremely competitive. To meet the challenge, Qatar is establishing advanced educational and health systems, as well as increasing the effective participation of Qataris in the labour force. (QNV 2008, 13)

The need for Qatar to meaningfully address such human capital challenges is exemplified by the Human Capital Index (2020), which ranks states based on their ability to mobilise the economic and professional potential of their citizens, and measures the level of capital each state loses through poor population education and health. While other emerging states such as Singapore (ranked 1st) and South Korea (4th) presently dominate this index, Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates (43rd), Bahrain (46th) and Qatar (49th) have found themselves performing less well on such metrics.

Evidence of Qatar seeking to addresses these human capital challenges can be found in the establishment of Education City, a 14 square kilometre campus on the outskirts of Doha which hosts overseas branches of some of the world's leading universities, including Georgetown, Northwestern and University College London. In seeking to raise the educational attainment of the state's citizens, Education City looks to play a vital role in developing a 'knowledge economy' in Qatar, and to provide nationals with 'excellent training and opportunities to develop to their full potential' (QNV, 2008, 13). Further investment includes that which Qatar has made in its healthcare provision, including in the Hamad Medical Corporation, 'the main provider of secondary and tertiary healthcare in Qatar and one of the leading

hospital providers in the Middle East' (Hamad Medical Corporation n.d.). 'Combining innovative research, top-class education and excellent clinical care', the Hamad Medical Corporation looks to 'provide the safest, most effective and compassionate care' to patients (Hamad Medical Corporation n.d.). It is in the context of Qatar's efforts to achieve the QNV human development objectives that we analyse the role of SMEs. Before doing so, we first present our chosen research design.

Research design

This paper draws on qualitative data obtained as part of a wider study, that took place between 2015 and 2020, into the impact SMEs seek to have on the lives of Qataris – that is, the 11% of Qatar's overall population who can be classed as 'indigenous Qatari citizens'. Two types of qualitative methods were employed. The first type of data collection included 14 semi-structured interviews with policymakers, academics and public service personnel located within Qatar's political, cultural, educational, tourism, health and sports sectors. Only two of these interviewees were Qatari nationals/citizens themselves, but through their employment, all were believed to have what was considered a high level of knowledge of the socio-cultural changes taking place within Qatar, and sport's role/impact in this regard. All interviewees were over the age of 18, nine were male and five were female. Ethics approval was awarded by Loughborough University, UK, prior to any data collection. All 'experts' were – at the time of interview – at the level of 'manager' or 'director' within their respective organisation, and had lived and worked in Qatar for at least 12 months prior to being interviewed. Each interviewee was required to sign a consent form. Due to confidentiality agreements written into the consent form, the names and exact organisations of our interviewees have been hidden.

The second form of data collection was document analysis, and specifically the analysis of policy documents. We only analysed documents that were available in English, and that we could directly access from an official Qatari state website. We only included in our final sample those documents that were published from 2008 onwards – when the QNV was introduced – and those that covered any aspect related to the QNV's human development pillar. In total, 11 official state documents were incorporated into our final sample.

After transcribing our interview data, we then subjected our transcripts and documents to a thorough thematic analysis. This saw us adhere to the following five-stage process, suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. We read and re-read our data until we had become familiar with the breadth and depth of the content we were dealing with.
2. We then set about creating initial codes. Working through our data, we pinpointed what we thought were any key points/aspects/issues – these were then colour-coded using highlighter pens, and each highlighted passage was marked with a few words of text that briefly captured the key points of the highlighted passage.
3. Once all data had been coded, we then progressed towards the identification of themes. Here, we sorted all the various codes into categories, with consideration towards how various codes could be combined to form overarching themes and sub-themes.

4. We then looked to ensure that each theme consisted of coherent data that came together meaningfully; we also ensured that each theme was significant and unique in its own right (relative to the other themes). Once all the codes and themes had been through this review process, we were left with a list of themes and their corresponding sub-themes.
5. Once we were satisfied with our thematic map, we then went about defining and further refining our themes. Here we focused on defining and refining the essence of each theme. By the end of this stage we able to provide a concise account of the content and significance of each overarching and sub-theme. Upon completion of this step, we then felt in a position to start writing up our findings.

Findings and discussion

Two themes emerged from our thematic analysis. The first related to the intention of the Qatari state to draw on the use of SMEs to confront the high prevalence of obesity and diabetes amongst Qataris. The second focused on the evidential desire to use SMEs to address resource curse deficiencies, and, in doing so, overcome Qataris' reliance on the state. We discuss each theme in turn.

Qatar's national health crisis

The first theme to emerge from our analysis centred on the instrumentalisation of SMEs to meet the challenges of Qatar's national health crisis. Vital in this respect is the need to address the state's rising rate of lifestyle diseases, particularly obesity and diabetes. The Qatar Public Health Strategy 2017–2022 identifies how, at present, 70.01% of Qataris are 'overweight', 41.4% of whom can be classified as 'obese', while 17% of Qatari adults suffer from diabetes; additionally, amongst Qatar's under-18 population, 32% of boys and 33% of girls can be categorised as either 'overweight' or 'obese' (World Bank 2021). According to the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook (n.d.), these figures situate Qatar as the world's 15th most obese nation per capita, while it is the world's 14th highest placed country in terms of population diabetes prevalence (World Bank 2021).

In identifying why these lifestyle diseases are so prevalent amongst Qataris, several reasons have been provided. Some point to citizens' relative lack of educational attainment in explaining the existence of such health concerns (Ali *et al*. 2014): as we discuss further below, many Qatari males fail to obtain a university degree, which may go some way towards explaining the high rates of obesity and diabetes amongst nationals, particularly given how research points to a link between high education attainment and positive lifestyle choices (Devaux *et al*. 2011). Furthermore, some have pointed to the growing wealth of Qataris, coupled with the ever-increasing presence of fast-food restaurants, which have become part and parcel of everyday life across the Arab world (Al Nohair 2014): Christos *et al*. (2015) locates how an emergent trend amongst Qataris is the adoption of a 'Western' lifestyle, one that includes an excessively high-calorie and fat-rich diet. Combined, these issues are expected to continue to increase the prevalence of obesity and diabetes in Qatar, thus stressing the growing 'need for prevention and treatment intervention strategies' (Awad *et al*. 2022).

A point raised by our interviewees, however, was that the state's health concerns were also the product of Qataris' general physical inactivity. In 2019, Chrismas et al. found that

83% of Qatar's population participated in little or no physical activity, and 63% failed to engage in any physical activity whatsoever; more recently, the Qatar National Physical Activity Report (2021) found that 63.3% of Qataris between the ages of 16 and 64 years reported doing no physical activity whatsoever, while 86.2% of women aged between 45–64 years reported no engagement in any form of vigorous exercise. Furthermore, only 39% of Qatari youth engage in any form of either 'moderate' or 'vigorous' physical activity (Chrismas, Majed, and Kneffel 2019). Some have argued that this lack of desire to engage with physical activity is the result of the state's searing climate, with temperatures in the summer months exceeding 40°C, while in the cooler months they rarely drop below 15°C (Ali *et al*. 2014). Adding to this, findings from our analysis highlighted that there may also be a cultural link to Qataris' general lack of desire to engage in physical activity, as one interviewee from Qatar's health sector explained:

> So they've gone from being hot and hungry and lean in the desert, to a society of plenty and valet parking … we have a McDonalds on every corner now … and if you go back to the Bedouin culture, one of the key sort of drivers is that if you're wealthy and a big man, you ride the camel … if you're not, you walk! So, to be seen on the side of the road walking, your peers will brand you with terms like 'peasant'! So … being seen walking is a 'bad thing' as opposed to be seen walking as a 'good thing' … is what really lies behind this. There's very definitely a cultural link there and that comes in things like … you know, we really struggle with car parking because people just don't want to park terribly far from the front door because they don't want to be seen walking across the car park because once again the big man gets the prime place in the car park. So that sort of comes into all sorts of aspects when we talk about physical inactivity.

Consequently, we can argue that, at least in part, Qataris' general lack of desire to engage in low-exertion activities potentially stems from long-inscribed cultural norms and behaviours, derived from specific forms of Bedouin symbolism. If this is the case, such cultural traits would have been consciously or unconsciously passed on through generations of Qataris, and thus could be aligned to the kind of health-related socialisation impacts found throughout the world, such as the direct effect parents' consumption practices have on their children's long-term eating habits (Etelson *et al*. 2003).

Nonetheless, Qataris' general lack of physical activity has prompted state authorities to seek ways to increase national levels of engagement in sport and fitness in an attempt to confront Qatar's health crisis. Charged with achieving this, the QNDS 2018–2022 (2018, 141) sets out to 'enhance healthy nutrition and physical activity for all age groups'. From our data, it would appear state authorities seek to enhance physical activity levels through two specific means. The first centres on the attempt to instil a greater sporting interest amongst Qataris by staging SMEs and creating a long line of athletic role models who can help make sport and physical activity appeal to national citizens. This was supported by the QNDS (2011–2016, 200), which argues that 'sports excellence is integral for generating interest in sports and building national pride …. National sporting heroes can inspire Qatari youth to participate in sporting activities and motivate them to adopt a healthy and productive lifestyle …' (QNDS 2011–2016, 2011, 200). Discussing this goal in more detail, interviewees from Qatar's media and health sectors explained:

> one thing we haven't touched upon when we talk about sports generally in society is the health crisis that the Gulf and other wealthy nations suffer from, you know, rates of obesity and rates of diabetes, so building a sports culture, that's also one of the reasons to try to save the lives of

> Qataris by preventing a lot of deaths from these lifestyle diseases by making society healthier by encouraging exercise through more interest in sports.
>
> So there's a whole world of reasons why bringing the World Cup to Qatar makes sense on a number of levels. On the physical activity side, it can only help, and they're doing a lot of work … to promote a cultural-watching sport [society] and for participating in sport … people on the field running around getting sweaty then become role models ….

The desire to implement a 'sports culture' in and amongst Qataris through the use of SMEs resonates with Grix and Carmichael's (2012) 'virtuous cycle of sport' model. This model depicts the dominant assumptions underpinning the discourse of a majority of states' elite sport policy rationales. The model holds that elite success on the international stage and/or the successful staging of SMEs leads to increased global prestige for nation-states, which then cultivates a collective sense of (national) identity amongst a state's population, which, in turn, generates a greater interest in sport and physical activity participation, thus fostering an overall healthier populace. The larger number of individuals participating in grassroots sport also contributes to a bigger 'pool' of talent from which national leaders can choose the athletic stars of the future, thus ensuring continued elite success. The process then starts all over again.

The second – and highly related – strategy in this regard was the desire to construct purpose-built sports facilities that could not only be used for hosting SMEs, but in the future could be opened up to Qataris. For example, in recognising that 'for people to engage effectively in sports and physical activities, Qatar must ensure adequate access to sports and recreation facilities that provide an enriching learning environment', the QNDS 2011–2016 (2011, 199–200) goes on to argue how 'modern, accessible and appropriate sporting facilities are crucial to the long-term investment Qatar is making in developing a society that is both physically fit and nurturing of elite competitors'. The intended dual role of these facilities was further pinpointed by one interviewee who suggested that 'when you speak to sports bureaucrats [in Qatar] … they often talk about the 'trickle-down effect' where these [elite] training facilities and venues are eventually opened to the population in various shapes and forms'. Accordingly, we suggest Qatar has joined the plethora of nations – such as Brazil, South Africa and China – whose leaders claim their investment in SMEs may lead to a sports infrastructure legacy, where facilities constructed for specific events are justified by their wider post-tournament utility, to stage future sporting competitions, to support national professional athletes and teams, or for the long-term benefit of public health.

Of note, however, is that in Qatar, such facilities are largely introduced to Qataris in a relatively unique way: through the state's organisation of its 'Qatar National Sports Day'. Taking place on the second Tuesday of February each year, the Sports Day is an official national holiday that sees all public and private organisations in Qatar close in a bid to encourage citizens to engage in various sports activities in order 'to promote an active lifestyle nationwide and highlight the important role of sport in creating a healthy community' (Qatar Olympic Committee, 5 February, 2022). The significance of the Sports Day to those Qatari authorities who are charged with overseeing the state's health agenda was demonstrated by one interviewee located within Qatar's sports sector:

> there are huge health concerns, as there are in most countries, and … if you take the whole Qatari National Sports Day, for them it's more than just a national sports day … in fact one minister was talking about trying to turn Qatari Sports Day into Qatari 'Sports Week' if not Qatar 'Sports Month' – you know, he wants every day to be Qatar Sports Day! You know, we really

> want to drive up our participation in sport because it's good for the population, because it's good for us and it's just good for people in general … we want them to engage in sport because it's also good for our national health levels.

One significant sports facility that is opened to Qataris during the National Sports Day is the Aspire Zone, Qatar's 'Sports City', which is a state-of-the-art, 250-hectare sports complex, with facilities that include one Olympic-sized swimming pool, a 50,000-all-seater football stadium, two five-star hotels, ASPETAR – the only FIFA Medical Centre of Excellence in the Middle East – and the world's largest indoor multi-purpose athletics dome (Brannagan 2017). Since Qatar's staging of the 2022 World Cup, the National Sports Day has also come to include the opening and use of World Cup stadia – for example the Education City Stadium, which during the National Sports day in 2023 staged several women's and girls' football competitions, and various other sporting and physical activity challenges. The Education City campus was also opened for the running of public sports activities for school children and families, all as part of an attempt to encourage a life-long desire to 'embrace sport and healthy, active living' (Qatar Foundation, National Sports Day 2023 n.d.).

Hypothetically, if Qatar is successful in promoting greater levels of physical activity in its national citizenry, and thus does make strides towards addressing its rising rate of lifestyle-related diseases, the state would go on to develop what has been called 'human capital soft power', referring to a state's effective capabilities, expertise and reputation in areas such as education, health, science, technology and business (Holyk 2011, 227). Internationally, successfully overcoming high obesity rates would certainly place Qatar in a unique symbolic position of leadership as one of the few to have strategically designed and implemented an effective set of policies that confronts a vital contemporary concern, one experienced not only throughout the Arab, Latin American and Asian continents, but also in a growing number of other regions. And, domestically, successfully tackling such issues would also help the state develop its human capital in other areas, such as extending the performance and lifespan of its workforce. This is supported by the Qatar National Physical Activity Report (2021, 16), which clearly states the belief that 'employees who are more physically active … incur lower medical costs, exhibit less absenteeism, reduce disability expense, and are generally more productive'. Additionally, any positive societal change in health behaviours would also go some way towards saving state expenditures on healthcare treatments – indeed, collective healthcare expenditures and indirect productivity losses cost Qatar in the region of $60.7 million per annum (Chrismas, Majed, and Kneffel 2019), while it is estimated that Qatar's combined government and private healthcare expenditures will rise from $5 billion in 2020 to $6.5 billion by 2025 (Fitch Solutions, 15 April 2021).

Nonetheless, the potential for Qatar to achieve human capital development through SMEs and sporting facilities is, at least in the short term, challenging. This is for three reasons. First, previous research has highlighted a distinct lack of evidence linking SME hosting and increases to national sport participation rates; evidence suggests it is only those who are already heavily engaged in sport who tend to become inspired to further their participation through the viewing of athletic competition (Weed, Coren, and Fiore 2009). For Qatar, therefore, where the culture of watching sport on television and via the internet takes precedence over active participation, the ability of SMEs to effect much change in the short term is for now thus unlikely. This is particularly so amongst Qatar's female population – indeed, out of the 28,290 citizens registered to a sports federation/club in 2020 (that is, less than 10%

of all Qatari citizens), 92% were male, while only 8% were female (Qatar Report 2021, Sports Sector). Second, research has shown that when it comes to inspiring sports participation, the performance of one's nation during elite competition is also a crucial factor. Qatar is, in many ways, a relatively new state when it comes to elite sports competition, which, coupled with its small population, has resulted in only occasional moments of sporting success; its failure in this regard was arguably most prominently shown during its staging of the 2022 World Cup, where the men's national team failed to gain a single point, becoming the first and only World Cup host to lose all three of its opening group games (*Al Jazeera*, 29 November 2022). Finally, Qatar's familiar practice of naturalising so many of its elite athletes may also become a serious challenge when it comes to attempts to inspire its citizenry through the production of role models (see Reiche and Tinaz 2019). A recent report identified how, for example, 10 members of Qatar's national men's football team at the World Cup carried 'temporary mission passports' – that is, 'documents that confer citizenship for the purposes of sports competition', but do not lead to full-citizenship rights beyond one's elite sports participation (Foreign Policy, 16 December 2022). Consequently, if we are to follow the belief that 'national' sporting heroes can have – at least some – positive impact on sports participation uptake, then how Qatar's use of naturalised foreign athletes impedes this process, as well as broader understandings of Qatari national identity, remains to be seen (also see Griffin 2019).

Confronting the 'resource curse'

The second theme to emerge from our analysis centred on the desire of Qatari authorities to use SMEs to avoid the potential development of the resource curse, referring to the trend that states that rely heavily on natural resource wealth tend to experience a lack of economic growth in the long run in comparison to non-resource rich countries (Ross 1999). The inability of resource-rich states to keep pace with non-resource-reliant economies stems from two interrelated tendencies. The first, which occurs at the state level, is the belief that the presence of such high quantities of readily-available affluence leads to dysfunctional state behaviour, overambitious budgetary policies, and the substitution of national human capital advancement with foreign experts who, in many cases, demonstrate a greater capacity to fill key positions, but crowd out opportunities for local talent development (Gylfason 2001). The second, which occurs at the individual level, relates to what can be called the 'resource curse mentality', whereby states such as Qatar that exchange generous resource-wealth subsidiaries for political support fail to instil amongst their national citizens ideals of 'hard work, discipline, and risk-taking', leading to a disconnect in the 'work–reward relationship', and an over-burdening reliance on public sector employment at the expense of private sector advancement (El Beblawi 2011, 188).

Underlying anxieties about the resource curse occurring within Qatar were evident amongst several interviewees. One interviewee went so far as to suggest that the 'biggest challenge' facing Qatar on the domestic front centred on the debate around local citizens 'managing with so much wealth so quickly … and questions about the long-term social implications of that'. In explaining this 'concern' in more detail, two interviewees from Qatar's education sector suggested:

> these countries in the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] are all, I think, suffering from this kind of concern about their people. This concern that young people are perhaps disinterested and suffer from a kind of malaise where they don't really have clear goals and life hasn't been taxing enough and as a result they haven't had to push forward with the kind of determination and ambition and goal setting that they want youngsters to have. I mean there are more girls going in search of secondary education than the young men … you have a lot of high school-educated young men in Qatar rather than university educated when they certainly could afford to go to university.

> when you have such inordinate amounts of wealth that is readily available, and when you have a state that pumps money into the economy … then that has consequences, that encourages a certain sense of entitlement … [this] mentality is alive and well in the sense that you expect the state to perform many of the functions that other states don't perform … and to give you certain entitlements, you know, that otherwise it wouldn't.

Evidence of the early formation of a resource curse – generated largely by Qatari citizens' so-called 'resource curse mentality' – arguably lies most predominantly in existing statistics on nationals' participation in higher education and the labour force. On the former, and a point picked up by one of the above interviewees, relates to the general disinterest amongst Qatari males to attain university-level qualifications. In 2018, for example, 68% of Qatari females enrolled in university, while only 8.5% of Qatari males enrolled in some form of higher education institution (Planning and Statistics Authority Education Report 2019). This is despite the fact Qataris rarely fail to secure state sponsorship to attend university. One interviewee located in Qatar's education sector explained how the lack of Qatari males attending university was down to the fact that they were more likely than their female counterparts to secure public sector employment or inherit a company from their fathers directly after high school, and thus failed to see the benefit of obtaining 'some obscure [university] subject' if offered 'a very convenient life straight away'. The desire to work in the public sector stems from the much higher salaries Qataris can expect to receive than those offered in the private sector – it is this that accounts for the fact that 81% of all employed Qataris work in the public sector (Qatar Labour Force Survey 2019), and for those 0.3% of Qataris who are unemployed, over half remain so due to their refusal to work in the (lower paid) private sector (Benmansour 2017; World Bank 2021).

It is due to the above trends that Qatar's leadership are – in the words of one interviewee – looking to take national citizens through something of a 'maturity process', encouraging them to start running 'their own country', and to rely less heavily on state subsidiaries, public sector salaries and expatriate labour. In seeking to achieve this, Qatar has invested heavily in education, including the establishment of Education City, as mentioned in previous sections. Such an investment seeks to strongly support and develop a 'knowledge economy' in Qatar, with the hope of ensuring the 'effective participation of Qataris in the labor force' (QNV 2008, 13). Alongside this, the state has also rolled out a localisation strategy – similar to those seen in other places with high expatriate populations, such as Singapore and Malaysia – known as 'Qatarisation', a strategy that has sought to open up private sector opportunities for Qatari nationals, as part of an overall attempt 'to provide 50 percent or more of Qatari citizens with meaningful permanent employment' (Qatar Foundation, Qatarization, n.d.). To achieve this, the Qatari government provides nationals with the support they need to secure private sector employment, including training, recruitment planning, scholarships, and internship opportunities (Qatar Foundation, Qatarization, n.d.). However, as Baber (2015) notes, this policy has had limited impact, in part due to the fact that private sector employers

have not been adequately subsidised for employing nationals, while, simultaneously, state support for Qataris to work in the public sector has largely continued.

According to interviewees, Qatar's investment in SMEs act as a further mechanism through which to achieve its goals in this regard. Indeed, one interviewee claimed the state's staging of the World Cup sought, in part, to 'soften up' some of the dominant habits of Qataris as part of a 'master plan' to place nationals in a position 'where they have to face up to the outside world'. Two additional interviewees from Qatar's sports and education sectors explained:

> You know … if Qatar is going to survive it needs its nationals, and there's relatively few of them, to outperform their bigger peers, and sport … and education and health, etc … but sport is one of the ways that they can build that national pride … and that 'culture of excellence' is probably the words I'm searching for.

> So I've often thought that, you know, at least investing in sports might be glamourous, might be expensive, but the fact is that … this is trying to give these young people some kind of … outlet and engaging an interest which at least could be considered positive and beneficial to society and for themselves … it is one of those ways in which they're trying to … they're worried about their young people, they're worried about all these lethargic youngsters who want a lot but don't want to do a lot.

Given the above comments, it would appear sport is viewed by Qatar's leadership as one 'outlet' through which to instil into Qataris notions of 'pride' and 'excellence', traits that are perhaps considered to be absent as the result of a resource curse mentality. This is supported by the QNDS 2011–2016 (2011, 197), which argues how 'involvement in sports from an early age helps build character and discipline in children that can be applied in other aspects of their lives'. The belief in sport's ability to foster such traits is, of course, not uncommon. World-beating athletes are regularly held up as national role models who optimise notions of determination, excellence, courage and hard work, and, when successful in sporting terms, are said to 'fill' or 'fuel' their fellow countrymen with pride and excitement, thus influencing how people feel about themselves, their community and their country (Karkatsoulis, Michalopoulos, and Moustakatou 2005). Additionally, the staging of SMEs has – on some short-lived occasions – been found to generate what Kavetsos and Szymanski (2010, 160) call 'economics of happiness', fostering forms of national pride amongst host populations, as well as optimism and a desire to be part of something challenging, stimulating and ambitious.

This is not to suggest, of course, that sport and the staging of SMEs are guaranteed to foster such traits. Indeed, as scholars have reminded us, the level of impact sport has in this regard is exceedingly complex, and is dependent on forms of personal self-efficacy, how important athletic 'role models' are perceived to be in the minds of national audiences, and, more importantly, the value and interest sport bears for individuals and societies (Weed, Coren, and Fiore 2009). Nonetheless, in the case of Qatar, a 2015 survey did find that 97% of Qataris felt the World Cup fostered personal and national pride, while 86% were 'excited' about the state's staging of the tournament (SESRI Report 2015, 7–15). The key for Qatari authorities is to harness the pride exhibited by its citizens in hosting the World Cup and transfer it into personal and progressive aspirational and motivational change.

Thus, Qatari authorities hope that their investment in SMEs will go some way to breaking free from the so-called 'resource curse mentality' and begin to build on their citizens' stock

of human capital. Most crucially, by developing its own indigenous expertise, Qatar would reduce its strong reliance on the need for expatriate workers in the future. This is important, as the emergence and progression of young, highly qualified professionals in strategically important sectors has been shown to be vital to a state's ability to maintain long-term excellence, while for those who fail in this regard, evidence shows this leads to a loss of competitive advantage in international markets (Popova and Petrov 2019). Furthermore, much in the same way successful athletes positively promote their homelands, the ability of states to produce a long line of world-leading experts in specific fields leads others to judge one's 'domestic performance' in positive terms, whereby the accomplishments of a nation's people become linked back to the aptitude for effective state planning and institutions (Blarel 2012, 30). And finally, for a state such as Qatar, which needs to diversify its economy away from a reliance on hydrocarbon revenues, minimising the reliance of Qataris on the state – and on public sector employment – and encouraging them to excel in the private sector is crucial to the state's economic future.

Conclusion

While the importance of human capital development is clear, there has been little research in this regard on natural resource-rich states burdened by the so-called 'resource curse'. This article has sought to contribute to this literature by analysing the case of Qatar, which, as shown, suffers from low human capital development due to its immense wealth. This paper outlines the Qatari strategy to combat this: the focus is on the use of SMEs both to promote physical activity among citizens and imbue them with the aspirations, motivation and ambition necessary to function in a competitive global economy. The rationale behind the Qatari strategy and the methods used (large-scale sporting events) appear commonsensical.

If we take previous research as a guide to whether the Qatari strategy is likely to be successful, however, the outlook is not positive. The extant literature on 'trickle-down' effects from major sports events and their ability to inspire mass participation, and the literature on the impact of role models on the same, suggests there is no clear causal relationship between watching sport and participating in physical activity. In addition, and paradoxically, perhaps, Qatar's investment in SMEs – and in particular the World Cup – may in fact impede the state's desire to avoid the resource curse at least in the short term, and specifically its drive to achieve Qatarisation. This is because the organisation and implementation of SMEs has added to Qatar's already abundant need and desire to find and secure both high- and low-level skills from abroad, thus crowding out opportunities for domestic talent.

However, most previous research has been carried out on either democracies or 'emerging states' and not specific resource-rich states. Qatar's massive investment in SMEs has run in parallel to its large-scale investment in education (eg Education City), which is a unique dual investment in human capital that may well pay dividends in the future. On the back of staging the World Cup, it is expected that an additional 'influx of business opportunities' will be generated in the years to come (Kaplanidou et al. 2016, 4104), and it is clear that part of Qatar's strategy must be to ensure that a percentage of these newly-created jobs will contribute to Qataris' stock of human capital rather than continuing to rely mostly on expatriate labour.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Paul Michael Brannagan is an international relations scholar, specialising in the study of sport. His research primarily focuses on the ways in which national governments seek to invest in and use global sport and major sports events to achieve certain political and/or economic objectives. To date, his research has centred most specifically on sport in the Middle East, with a particular focus on the state of Qatar and its staging of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Through this, he has uncovered the crucial role sport seeks to play in achieving Qatar's long-term political and socio-economic development goals. His analysis of Qatar, as well as other states such as Brazil, China, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Costa Rica and Fiji, has added to understandings of how small, medium and large countries the world over look to draw on global sporting forms in order to achieve key domestic and international objectives. Outside of sport, his work has also contributed to key mainstream international relations debates, with specific reference to the popular concept of 'soft power'.

Jonathan Grix is a global leader in the field of sport and politics and has published widely on the politics of sports mega-events, governance and sports politics. He focuses in particular on why governments invest in sport and the rationale for hosting sports mega-events, leading a number of funded projects on the UK, Brazil, Russia, China, South Korea and emerging states. His work on the use of sports mega-events as part of states' soft power strategies has been widely cited. In addition to the above, he has also published on research methodology, including the highly successful *Foundations of Research*, which is in its third edition and has been translated into a number of languages, most recently Chinese.

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