

Human development in Iraq: Between structural improvement and persistent development gaps (an analytical reading of human development reports)

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Abstract

This research aims to determine the extent of people's participation in development, considering them both the means and the end, and to identify the most significant achievements in 2025 within the framework of human development in Iraq, based on the calculated index. According to the choices available to individuals, which are based on indicators (living a healthy and long life, acquiring education and knowledge, and enjoying a decent standard of living), Iraq was classified among the countries with high human development for 2025, after having consistently ranked in the middle of the indicators in reports for many years, despite the challenges facing these indicators.

1. Introduction

Achieving sustainable human development in Iraq aims to build a prosperous economy and a cohesive society that provides its members with better opportunities to realize their economic, social, and human aspirations. This is achieved through investment in human capital and strengthening trust between the state and its citizens.

Since 2003, Iraq has faced significant challenges that have impacted its human development trajectory. These challenges include deteriorating security conditions, escalating economic and health crises, and the ineffectiveness of development policies and plans, coupled with the limited role of the private sector and the continued dominance of the public sector. These challenges have negatively affected employment levels, basic services, and the outcomes of education and healthcare, contributing to widespread poverty and social inequality.

The research also examines the impact of a fragile economic structure and its reliance on a single primary resource, and the resulting effects on the labor market and high unemployment rates, particularly among youth and women. Furthermore, it discusses the impact of climate change on exacerbating development gaps between governorates, emphasizing the importance of adopting comprehensive and effective policies to promote social justice and achieve balanced and sustainable human development.

Given the economic and social challenges facing Iraq, such as the fragility of its economic structure, its reliance on rentier resources, and high unemployment rates, the trajectory of human development in Iraq has been negatively impacted. This raises the question of Iraq's ability to achieve comprehensive human development.

The significance of this research lies in the importance of human development as a crucial pillar of overall development, and the need to identify the challenges hindering its progress in Iraq. This will contribute to providing a model that supports decision-makers in formulating the most effective policies to achieve human development.

This research aims to analyze the reality of human development in Iraq and the Arab countries, with a particular focus on examining human development indicators in Iraq during the period 2015–2025. It also seeks to study the challenges and gaps that impede the achievement of human development and to offer proposals that may enhance its realization in Iraq. Based on these objectives, the research hypothesizes that declining economic performance and reliance on rentier resources, coupled with high unemployment rates, weaken human development indicators in Iraq and limit the achievement of sustainable human development.

2. Method

The research adopted the descriptive analytical approach by describing the reality of human development in Iraq, analyzing its indicators, studying the challenges that hinder the achievement of human development, and proposing a model that helps achieve it in Iraq, in addition to the treatments that suit it.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Concept of Human Development

Following the succession of economic crises that have plagued developing countries in particular, and the accompanying rise in social costs, the situation has negatively impacted people, their activities, and their productive capacities. This is a result of countries adopting ready-made prescriptions that have forced them to follow liberal economic policies, imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which are not compatible with their needs and are termed "economic reform and structural adjustment policies." Therefore, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has focused on the human aspects of development, increasing human well-being, and expanding human resources and skills (Faraj Al-Saeed, 2021).

The 1990 UNDP Human Development Report defined human development as "the process of expanding people's choices." According to economist Amartya Sen, freedom of choice is the core of human well-being. This is characterized by enhancing people's ability to achieve higher levels of health, knowledge, self-respect, and the capacity to participate actively in social life. Sen also emphasizes that the standard of living is not measured by individual income and consumption of goods, but rather by human capabilities, that is, what an individual can do. Expanding these capabilities means freedom of choice (Abu Al-Nasr, 2017). The choices emphasized by the concept of human development include living a long and healthy life, acquiring knowledge, and accessing the resources necessary to provide a suitable standard of living (Abdel-Daem, 2017).

The concept of human development is not limited to these choices alone, but extends to broader options, including political, social, economic, and cultural freedoms; self-respect; empowerment; opportunities for creativity and productivity; and the guarantee of human rights, among others (Human Development Report, 2025).

Human development has two aspects: first, building human capacities to improve health, knowledge, and skills; and second, enabling people to utilize their acquired capacities during leisure time for productive activities in the cultural, social, and political spheres. Therefore, income is only one of the goods, and while an annual increase in national output is a necessary condition for human development, it is not a sufficient one. What is essential is that development serves the people (Klarin, 2018).

3.2. The Human Development Index (HDI)

Human development indicators are measured using metrics that include per capita income, education, and human capital. Countries with higher rankings on this index have higher levels of education, longer life expectancies, and higher per capita gross national income than those with lower rankings. HDI is classified on a scale of 0–1.0, where 1.0 represents the highest level of human development (Human Development Index, 2018). Based on this classification, human development indicators are divided into four levels: very high human development, with an HDI value ranging from 0.8 to 1.0; high human development, with an HDI value ranging from 0.7 to 0.79; moderate

human development, with an HDI value ranging from 0.55 to 0.7; and low human development, with an HDI value below 0.55.

Most developed countries have a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.8 or higher, placing them in the very high category. These countries enjoy stable governments, widespread education, good healthcare, high life expectancy, and strong, growing economies. The world's least developed countries (LDCs) have low HDI scores, below 0.55. They suffer from numerous structural problems, weak development institutions, and a host of social, political, and economic challenges. These countries face unstable governments, widespread poverty, limited access to healthcare, a declining education sector, low incomes, low life expectancy, and high birth rates. The HDI helps the United Nations identify countries in need of assistance, particularly the least developed countries.

The United Nations has held four conferences to assess the least developed countries and develop appropriate strategies to lift them out of their low status. The Human Development Index (HDI) was first launched in 1990 and has been published annually since, with the exception of 2012. According to the Human Development Report 2025, Switzerland ranked first in the very high HDI category with a score of 0.962, followed by Norway in second place with 0.961. Belarus ranked 69th with a score of 0.801, followed by Bulgaria with 0.799, and Iraq in 126th place with 0.712. At the lowest levels of human development, Tanzania ranked first with a score of 0.549, and South Africa was at the bottom with 0.385, out of a total of 193 countries.

3.3. The Reality of Human Development in the Arab World

Arab countries have witnessed remarkable progress in the latest Human Development Report as a result of improved indicators in health, education, and income. Arab countries have advanced to the first level, which is very high, such as the United Arab Emirates, which ranked first in the Arab world and 26th globally, while Bahrain followed in second place in the Arab world and 35th globally. The rankings of Arab countries in the 2022 Human Development Report and the size of their indicators can be illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Ranking of Arab Countries According to the Human Development Index 2025 Report

Country	Global Rank	Arab Rank	HDI Value	Human Development Level
United Arab Emirates	15	1	0.940	Very High Human Development
Saudi Arabia	37	2	0.900	Very High Human Development
Bahrain	38	3	0.899	Very High Human Development
Qatar	43	4	0.886	Very High Human Development
Oman	50	5	0.858	Very High Human Development
Kuwait	52	6	0.852	Very High Human Development
Algeria	96	7	0.763	High Human Development
Jordan	100	8	0.754	High Human Development
Egypt	100	9	0.754	High Human Development
Lebanon	102	10	0.752	High Human Development
Tunisia	105	11	0.746	High Human Development
Libya	115	12	0.721	High Human Development
Iraq	126	14	0.712	High Human Development
Morocco	120	13	0.710	High Human Development
Sudan	176	16	0.511	Low Human Development
Yemen	184	17	0.470	Low Human Development

3.4. Human Development in Iraq Between Reality and Indicators

3.4.1. The Reality of Human Development in Iraq

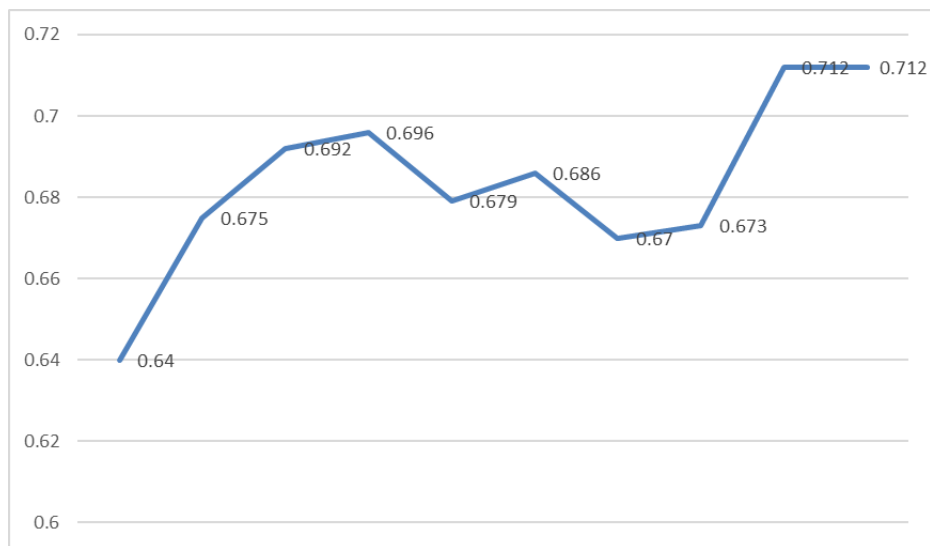
For the first time in its history, Iraq has reached the ranking of countries with high human development after years of lag in the middle of the reports. This lag was a result of its failure to keep pace with human development indicators compared to other Arab countries. Iraq achieved 126th place globally and 14th place among Arab countries. This improvement is a result of the development of indicators and their increased value compared to previous years. Iraq's progress in the Human Development Index can be reviewed in Table 2.

Table 2. Iraq's Ranking in the Human Development Index (2010-2025)

Year	Index Value	Change Amount
2010	0.640	-
2015	0.675	5.40
2018	0.692	2.50
2019	0.696	0.57
2020	0.679	-2.40
2021	0.686	1.03
2022	0.670	-2.30
2023	0.673	0.45
2024	0.712	5.79
2025	0.712	0.00
Index Growth Amount	0.72	-

* **UNDP Human Development Report (2015-2025).**

Table 2 shows that the Human Development Index (HDI) in Iraq witnessed a notable improvement during the period mentioned, achieving a positive change rate of (5.4) in 2015. However, by 2020, it had experienced a negative change of (2.4) as a result of the global health crisis (COVID-19). This decline was largely due to a decrease in GDP to (4.7%) and a decline in the oil and non-oil sectors by (13-4.4%). The private sector also experienced a decline in activity due to reduced government investment spending, which significantly impacted this already struggling sector. Following economic improvement and increased global oil demand, Iraq's HDI improved by (1.03). However, the index declined again in 2020 with a negative change of (2.3) due to an increase in the multidimensional poverty index (Rasheed et al., 2026). Therefore, it can be concluded that the increase and progress in Iraq's HDI is attributable solely to improved income levels, rather than improvements in other indicators. In 2025, Iraq's ranking improved, placing it among countries with a high Human Development Index (HDI), reaching 126th globally with a score of 0.712. This improvement followed a rise in the index score compared to previous years. Figure 1 illustrates the development of Iraq's HDI during the period 2010-2025.

**Figure 1. The Evolution of the Human Development Index in Iraq 2010-2025**

3.4.2. A Statistical Overview of Iraq in the Human Development Index in 2025

Table 3 presents comprehensive set of indicators related to the position of Iraq in the Human Development Index for 2025, including: population in terms of number and its division according to region, as well as human development in terms of the equality factor and the percentage of the population living in poverty, as well as the health index in terms of government spending and personal expenditure, education, economy, work, access to basic services, and statistical capacity.

Table 3. Iraq Development and Economic Indicators

Population					
Total Population	Urban Population	Rural Population	Refugees as % of Population	Refugees by Country of Origin	
44,179,350	71.12%	28.88%	0.81%	325,485	
Human Development Index (HDI)	Total Loss in HDI due to Inequality	Poverty Rate by National Poverty Line (% of Population)	NA		
0.670	19.70%				
Health					
Domestic General Govt Health Expenditure (% of GDP)	Out-of-Pocket Health Expenditure (% of Current Health Exp)	Life Expectancy at Birth (Males)	Life Expectancy at Birth (Females)	Prevalence of Undernourishment (% of Population)	
1.98%	51.35%	68.81 Years	72.97 Years	37.50%	
Education					
Gross Enrolment Ratio (Primary)	Gross Enrolment Ratio (Secondary)	Gross Enrolment Ratio (Tertiary)	Gender Parity Index (Primary)	Gender Parity Index (Secondary)	Gender Parity Index (Tertiary)
108.69%	53.92%	16.16%	0.84	0.75	0.60
Economy					
GDP Growth (%)	Trade (Million Dinars)	Public Debt (% of GDP)	Inflation Rate	Tourism Revenues (% of Exports)	
10.50%	38,750,804.10	55.35%	4.53%	1.89%	
Labor					
Labor Force Participation Rate (15+)	Unemployment Rate (Ages 15+)	Unemployment Rate (Ages 15-24, Females)	Unemployment Rate (Ages 15-24, Males)		
41.34%	13.74	62.61%	21.59%		
Access to Basic Services					
Basic Drinking Water Services	Sanitation Services	Internet Access	Electricity Access	Renewable Energy Share	
98.36%	99.97%	60.00%	100.00%	0.32	

***The sources include the UNHCR, World Bank World Development Indicators, UN Population Division, ILO, World Bank SDG Database, WHO, UNESCO Institute for Statistics Database, IMF, Central Organization for Statistics Iraq, and the OECD.**

3.5. Human Development Indicators in Iraq (2015-2025)

3.5.1. Average Life Expectancy at Birth

According to the World Bank, life expectancy at birth is the average number of years a newborn child is expected to live, assuming the prevailing mortality patterns at birth continue. Life expectancy at birth is considered one of the most important indicators of health status in both developed and developing countries. It is also an indicator of a country's demographic situation or stage of development. Furthermore, life expectancy is linked to a country's level of human development, as it is a key component reflecting the country's health status (Saleh, 2021). The development of this indicator in Iraq can be illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Index of Life Expectancy at Birth in Iraq (2015-2025)

Years	Index value males	females
2015	67.878	71.993
2016	68.101	72.152
2017	68.177	72.318
2018	68.429	72.486
2019	68.565	72.652
2020	67.22	69.34
2021	66.7	70.4
2022	68.81	72.97
2023	70.4	74.1
2024	70.5	74.2
2025	68.8	72.4

*** UNDP Human Development Report (2015-2025).**

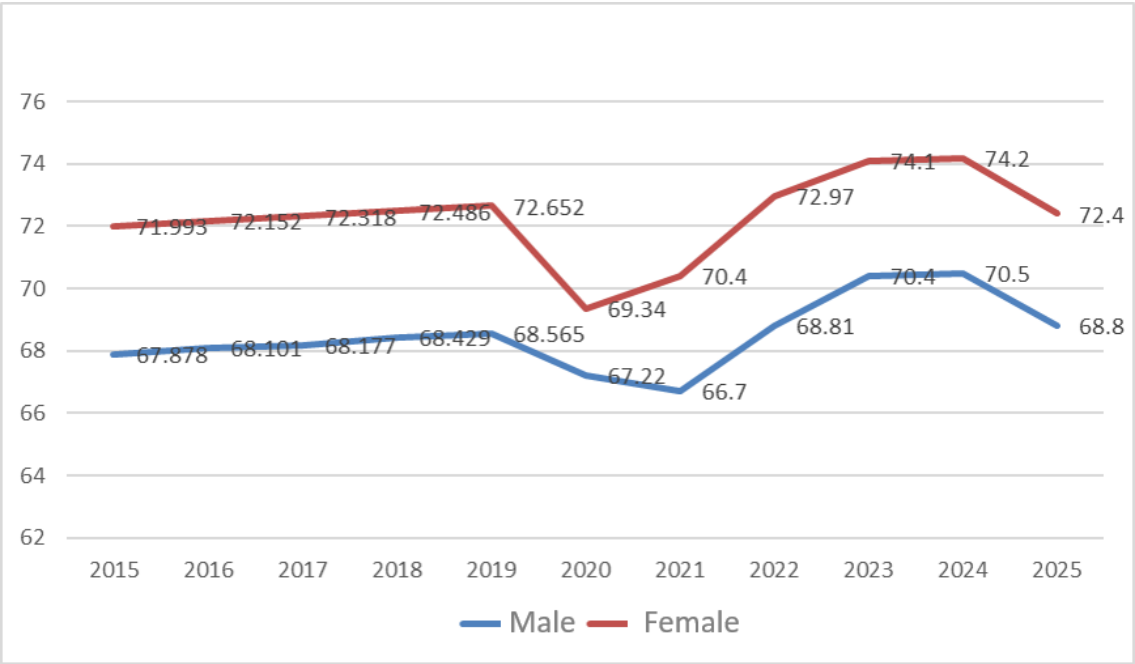


Figure 2. Index of Average Life Expectancy at Birth in Iraq (2015-2022)

It is noted that this indicator witnessed development from the beginning of 2015 until 2019, after which it declined as a result of the global health crisis (COVID-19), which significantly impacted the value of this indicator in all countries. Furthermore, the decline in the health situation and attention to healthcare following the crisis led to a decrease in the value of this indicator in Iraq in 2021.

3.5.2. Expected Years of Education

This refers to the average number of years an individual is expected to spend in education. It encompasses the use of formal and non-formal educational opportunities throughout an individual's life to promote continuous development and improvement of the knowledge and skills necessary for work and self-actualization (Mohammed, 2025). The development of this indicator in Iraq can be illustrated in Table 5 below. The table shows that the value of this indicator has developed in Iraq, but at low rates.

Table 5. Indicator of Expected Years of Education in Iraq (2015-2022)

Years	Index value males	females
2015	11.4	9.6
2016	11.4	9.6
2017	11.9	10.0
2018	11.9	10.1
2019	12.1	10.3
2020	11.4	10.1
2021	12.1	10.3
2022	12.1	10.4
2023	11.5	12.1
2024	11.8	12.4
2025	12.1	12.7

*UNDP Human Development Report (2015-2025).

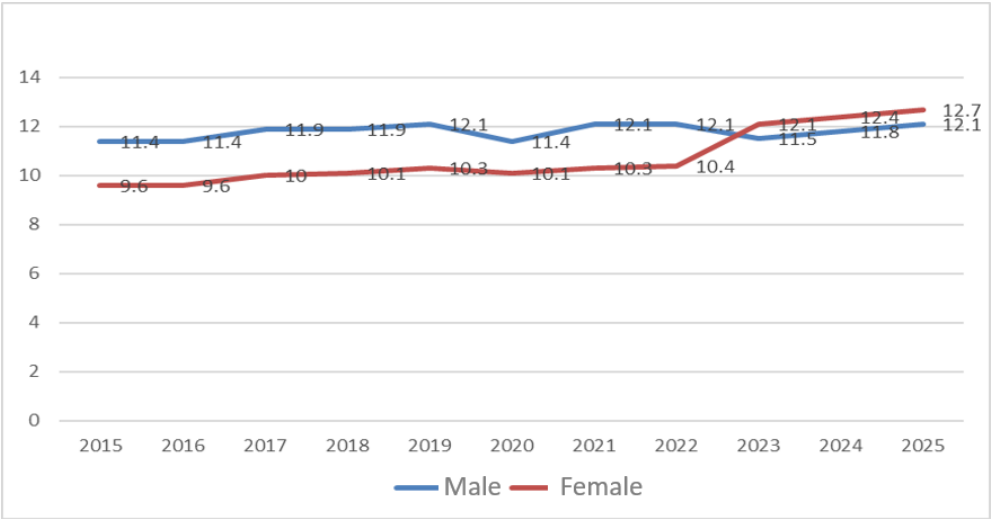


Figure 3. Indicator of Expected Years of Education in Iraq (2015-2022)

3.5.3. Gross National Income Per Capita

This refers to the average per capita share of national income, calculated by dividing the total national income by the population. Table 6 illustrates the evolution of per capita national income in Iraq.

Table 6. Per Capita National Income in Iraq (2015-2025)

Year	Value \$
2015	4440.10
2016	4334.40
2017	4759.30
2018	5646.70
2019	5671.90
2020	4295.20
2021	4868.50
2022	6520.70
2023	5965.30
2024	6073.60
2025	6030.40

*UNDP, Human Development Report (2015-2025).

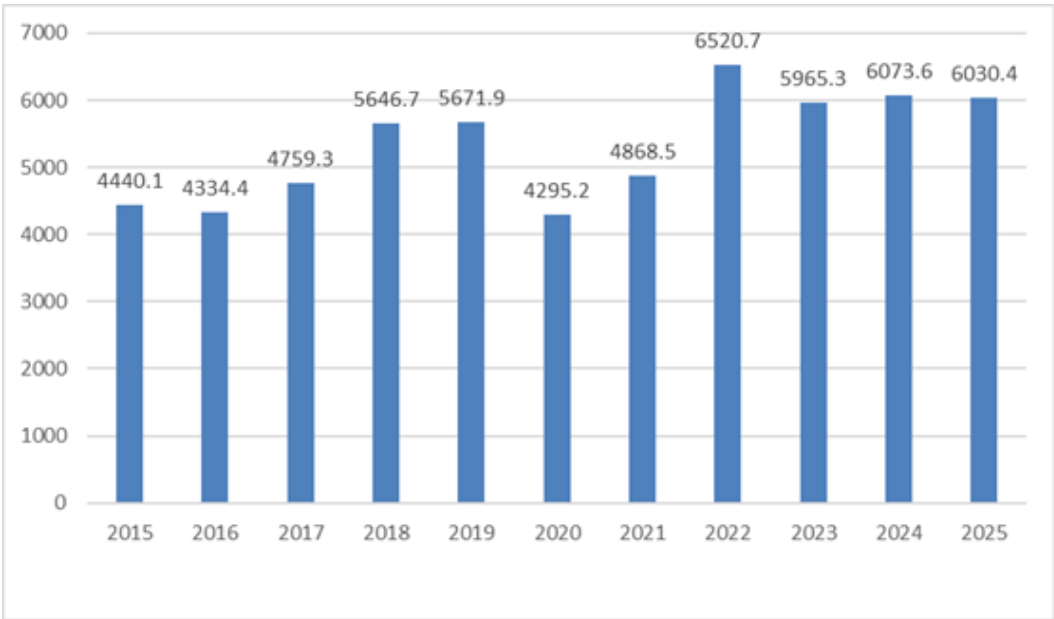


Figure 4. Per Capita Share of Gross National Income in Iraq (2015-2021)

As can be seen from the figure above, the average per capita share of national income has improved since 2018, particularly after its decline due to the financial crisis that affected the Iraqi economy and the government's austerity measures following the drop in global oil prices. This improvement has boosted Iraq's ranking in the Development Index compared to other indicators, indicating a positive impact on Iraq's progress among nations.

Life expectancy at birth has also seen a slight improvement due to an increase in live births amidst population growth. This is attributed to increased health awareness among some segments of Iraqi society and the government's growing focus on healthcare. Regarding education, the expected annual increase is driven by a higher student enrollment rate than the number of teaching staff. Despite this slight improvement, the education sector continues to suffer from a shortage of teachers and school buildings, despite high population density and a lack of schools. National income and per capita income have risen due to the rentier nature of the economy, which relies primarily on oil revenues and the rise in global oil prices. This has placed Iraq within the category of middle-income countries. Based on the above, the value of the Human Development Index in Iraq has been steadily increasing within the limits of medium human development as a result of the slight improvement in the indicators (health, education and income).

3.6. Challenges Facing Human Development in Iraq and Ways to Address Them

3.6.1. Challenges Impeding Human Development in Iraq (Iraq National Human Development Report, 2025)

3.6.1.1. Weak Economic Diversification and the Dominance of the Oil Sector

The excessive reliance on oil revenues is one of the most prominent challenges facing human development in Iraq. This has led to a limited contribution from other productive sectors to economic activity, negatively impacting employment opportunities and sustainable development, and making the Iraqi economy more vulnerable to external fluctuations related to global oil prices.

3.6.1.2. Inefficiency of Government Institutions and Weak Governance

The human development process faces institutional challenges, including weak government performance, complex administrative procedures, widespread administrative and financial corruption, and limited coordination among development institutions. This reduces the effectiveness of development policies and their ability to achieve their objectives.

3.6.1.3. Mismatch between Education System Outputs and Labor Market Requirements

The education system suffers from a clear gap between its outputs and the needs of the labor market. This has contributed to high unemployment rates among graduates and a weakness in the skills and knowledge required for modern economic activities, thus reducing the ability of human capital to contribute to economic and social development.

3.6.1.4. High Unemployment and Poverty Rates

Unemployment and poverty are among the most prominent obstacles to human development in Iraq. Limited job opportunities and declining productive activity lead to lower income and living standards, as well as widening the circle of social deprivation and reducing access to basic services.

3.6.1.5. Deterioration of Infrastructure and Basic Services

The health, education, housing, water, and electricity sectors continue to suffer from structural challenges that affect the quality of life and levels of social welfare. This is directly reflected in human development indicators and individuals' ability to develop their potential and productive capacities.

3.6.1.6. Population Growth and Demographic Pressures

Rapid population growth leads to increased demand for public services, employment opportunities, and infrastructure, placing additional burdens on government resources and hindering efforts to sustainably improve human development indicators.

3.6.1.7. Security and Political Challenges

Security disturbances and political instability at various times have hampered the implementation of development programs, weakened the investment climate, and reduced opportunities for economic and social development, negatively impacting human development levels in the country.

3.6.1.8. Weak Investment Environment and the Private Sector

The private sector continues to face numerous obstacles related to regulatory procedures, weak financing, and inadequate infrastructure, limiting its ability to create jobs and stimulate economic growth that supports human development.

3.6.2. Addressing the Challenges and Development Gaps in Human Development in Iraq

Improving human development indicators in Iraq requires adopting an integrated development model based on economic reform, human capital development, strengthening social protection, improving health services, establishing the principles of good governance, and reducing spatial disparities. This will ensure the achievement of sustainable and inclusive human development capable of responding to current and future challenges. The following are the most important axes for addressing these challenges that hinder human development in Iraq (National Human Development Report in Iraq, 2025).

3.6.2.1. The Economic Axis

Enhancing human development in Iraq requires adopting comprehensive economic reforms aimed at diversifying the production base and reducing dependence on oil revenues. This can be achieved by supporting the private sector and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), stimulating local and foreign investment, and expanding the applications of the digital economy and the green economy. These measures will contribute to achieving sustainable economic growth, increasing employment opportunities, improving income levels, and enhancing social welfare and long-term economic stability.

3.6.2.2. The Educational Pillar

Developing education is a fundamental pillar for promoting human development. This involves modernizing curricula to align with scientific and technological advancements and labor market needs. It also requires improving the quality of vocational and technical education and training, strengthening scientific research and innovation, and expanding opportunities for lifelong learning and skills development. These measures contribute to building a qualified human capital capable of increasing productivity, enhancing competitiveness, and supporting sustainable development pathways.

3.6.2.3. The Social Pillar

The social dimension is a fundamental pillar of human development. It focuses on strengthening social safety nets for the most vulnerable groups, reducing poverty and unemployment rates, and empowering women and youth to actively participate in economic and social activities. It also aims to consolidate the principles of social justice and equal opportunities for all members of society, thereby contributing to improved living standards, enhanced social cohesion, reduced social disparities, and the achievement of comprehensive and sustainable human development.

4. The Health Pillar:
This pillar aims to improve the quality and expand the reach of health services, develop health infrastructure, enhance preventive and primary healthcare, and ensure equitable access to health

services. This will positively impact population health, increase life expectancy, and improve quality of life.

3.6.2.4. The Institutional Pillar

This pillar focuses on promoting good governance, transparency, and combating corruption; developing institutional performance and digital transformation; and improving public resource management. This contributes to increasing the efficiency of government institutions, enhancing the effectiveness of public policies, and achieving more sustainable human development.

3.6.2.5. The Spatial and Environmental Pillar

This pillar focuses on reducing development gaps between governorates, developing infrastructure and basic services, promoting environmental sustainability and natural resource management, and expanding renewable energy projects. This will achieve spatially balanced development and preserve resources for future generations.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that Iraq made notable progress in its Human Development Index between 2010 and 2025, rising from 0.640 to 0.712 and entering the high human development category for the first time; however, this achievement was driven mainly by increased oil revenues and per capita income rather than balanced improvements in education and health, which continue to face significant quality gaps. Persistent dependence on oil, fluctuations in global prices, high unemployment and poverty especially among young people and disparities between governorates remain major obstacles to sustainable human development. Therefore, achieving long-term progress requires comprehensive institutional and structural reforms through economic diversification into sectors such as industry, agriculture, tourism, and the digital economy; greater and more efficient investment in education, health, infrastructure, and social protection; alignment of education and vocational training with labor market needs; stronger support for the private sector and job creation; improved governance, transparency, anti-corruption measures, and digital transformation; and the integration of environmental sustainability, renewable energy, and efficient natural resource management into national development policies.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors in this publication declare no conflict of interest regarding the title, data, location, and results of the research.

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Supplementary Materials

This study does not include any supplementary materials.

Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. AI were used only to improve readability and language under strict human oversight; no content, ideas, analyses, or conclusions were generated by AI.

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