

# FOOTBALL IN AFRICA

Observations about political, financial,  
cultural and religious influences

7

A PRE-PUBLICATION OF A PHD RESEARCH  
PROJECT BY ARNOLD PANNENBORG WHICH  
DEALS WITH MONEY, POLITICS AND POWER  
IN AFRICAN FOOTBALL

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This publication is based on a PhD research project in Ghana and Cameroon. I want to thank all the people who assisted me in one way or the other. Special thanks goes out to Batambuh Mutia Jonathan and Amah Cleopas Chi. Without them my fieldwork would surely have been less successful and pleasant. Gratitude also goes out to Prof. Dr. Wouter van Beek (University of Tilburg) and to Helga van Kampen and Edwin van Timmeren (NCDO). Finally, my thanks goes out to Sanne Terlingen who accompanied me during my fieldwork and who took most of the photos printed in this publication.

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Photo: Arnold Pannenborg

Hundreds of school boys show up for the recruitment period of an Elite One league club in Bamenda, Cameroon.

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# // INTRODUCTION

These days sports have become intimately intertwined with development issues. Individuals, organizations and companies are using sports – and football in particular – to achieve development goals, not in the least the UN Millennium Development Goals. But football is not value-free. In Africa the game is influenced greatly by social, cultural, religious, economic and political factors.

Academic research on sports development projects is still in its infancy. Indeed, more research and evaluation is necessary to ascertain which projects work and which do not, and why. This publication, however, is not an evaluation and does not intend to oppose or criticize any project. The goal is to shed some light on the major themes in African football. Whoever wants to set up or strengthen football projects in Africa should be aware of some basic realities and take these into account. The information is mainly based on the author's PhD research and partly on academic literature on the subject.

The most important observations are that (1) the context within which football development projects in Africa operate is more complex than one might expect, and that (2) football in Africa is almost never played for football's sake. The organization of football is vast and complex and numerous powerful men (and a few women) are involved in the sponsoring and running of the game. Many of them are primarily interested in satisfying personal needs. Football is not always about scoring goals on the field of play; it is also about scoring goals in the world of finance and politics.

This publication is divided into six sections. First, the formal and informal organizational structures of football in Africa are highly hierarchical yet work differently from those in the West. Second, mismanagement and corruption in football are a huge problem and conceal the fact that countries in Africa receive lots of money from various donors. Third, football infrastructures at a grassroots level are underdeveloped whereas governments invest in modern stadiums for political reasons.

Fourth, the goals of football development projects may not be the same as those of the ones who play the game. Often, the dream is to start a career as a football player in Europe. Fifth, football is used to bring peace and unity yet the game also leads to violence and fragmentation. The difference between football and politics in Africa is practically non-existent. Sixth, traditional religious beliefs have found their way into the game. This so-called juju or muti sometimes interferes with development projects.

This publication may appear to be critical of the game in Africa. This is not intentional. The information presented is derived from academic research, not from a personal agenda against individuals or organizations. It is wonderful to see that football is so immensely popular throughout the continent. People derive pleasure from playing and watching the game. There are numerous examples in which the game benefits children and adults in personal and societal respects. In order to take advantage of the potential power of football, however, it is important to understand the local context well. This publication aims to explain some of today's realities in African football.

Around one thousand spectators watch an Elite One league match in Bafang, Cameroon.



Photo: Arnold Panembong



Photo: Same Telling

A fan watches his team play at the Len Clay Stadium in Obuasi, Ghana.



**Football development projects commonly work with local partners. This can be an association, a league committee, a club, a village, a school. Whoever sets up a project in Africa should realize that football is organized differently and rather complexly. The official structure of an organization never corresponds to the actual situation.**

Football is the most popular sport in Africa. Each country has millions of supporters, hundreds of thousands of players, hundreds of clubs, and uncountable competitions and tournaments on all possible levels. It is common to see the so-called National Sports Council (NSC) dealing with all sports in a given country. The top body in football is, of course, the football association (FA). Most countries have tried to professionalize the game and have League Boards that oversee the Premier League and the lower divisions.

## COMMITTEES

Let us take Ghana as an example. The Ghana Football Association (GFA) runs football in all possible respects. There is a Premier League Board (PLB) responsible for organizing the Premier League and a Division One League Board (DOL) that runs the Division One. The clubs have their own body, called the Ghana League Clubs Association (GHALCA). Football in Ghana also consists of a second division, a third division, a juvenile league, a women's league, and so on.

The GFA consists of numerous committees, each with its own jurisdiction and responsibilities. Here follows an incomplete list of the committees in Ghana: the Disciplinary, Appeals, Referees, Legal, Finance, Technical and Development, Research and Information Management, Event Management, Football Development, Medical, and International Relations Committee. Each national team also has its own committee: the Black Stars Committee, the Black Starlets Committee, the Black Queens Committee, and so on.

## PRESTIGE

The GFA, PLB, DOL, GHALCA and the committees are all organized in the same manner. The most important person is the chairman, followed by the vice-chairman, the treasurer, secretary, and other members. There are people responsible for marketing, communication, and many other aspects that need attention. Whoever enters an FA's headquarters will notice that dozens of people work there. Every day club officials, referees, players, coaches and journalists visit the premises for one reason or the other.

One of the most important things that I noticed during my research is that positions in football are highly prestigious. An FA chairman prefers to call himself ‘president’ and his presence alone commands the utmost respect. Whoever deals with an FA or a club will learn that no decision can be taken without the president himself. If you want to establish a working relationship with an organization in football, it is vital to know who is in charge. You have to be very careful not to offend anybody.

## BIG MAN

Anyone who holds a formal position will exhibit what Westerners would call ‘arrogant’ behaviour. This does not only apply to FAs but also to committees, league bodies, clubs and even to seemingly insignificant grassroots organizations. There is a strict hierarchy and you do not want to make the mistake of underestimating who is in power. The academic R. Price labelled this the ‘Big Man Small Boy Syndrome’. The Big Man controls and gives orders, the Small Boy obeys and does not dare to speak his mind.

An important thing to realize is that in Africa most relations are characterized as those between a patron and a client. This so-called system of patronage is visible in all levels of football. A wealthy and powerful man (sometimes a woman) takes a position within the FA or a club and then assumes total control. He (or she) uses the FA or club to rally supporters, mostly for prestigious or political purposes. One consequence is that many employees in football organizations are hired as a ‘favour’, not because they have the relevant skills and experience for the job.

**“The Big Man controls and gives orders, the Small Boy obeys and does not dare to speak his mind.”**



A management member of Hearts of Oak waves the flag of his club at the Ohene Djan Stadium in Accra, Ghana.

Photo: Sanne Terlingen

## OBSERVATIONS:

- Be aware that the football structures in any given African country are more complex than you might think. Familiarize yourself with the formal and informal structures. FAs also have regional offices who control football in the area. If your project interferes with official structures, you have to deal with the proper authorities.
- When you want to work with an organization in football, make sure to get an appointment with the person in charge. If you want to collaborate on a communications level, it is not enough to talk to the communications officer. The person on top of the organization (chairman, president) could feel offended.
- Be aware that in Africa the wealthy and powerful people who control football take their positions very seriously and, in return, their status is taken very seriously by others. It is quite common to see that the administrators use football funds for their own travelling, accommodation, dining and other forms of spending of which they think come with the job but which others may find perhaps too luxurious.
- Football clubs are commonly sponsored by wealthy individuals. The phrase 'he who pays the piper calls the tunes' is used to signify that the person who contributes his money makes the decisions. The other executives are only there for 'make-up', as one coach said. Even clubs at a grassroots level often have a rich individual at the helm.
- Know that there are numerous unofficial football events in villages, districts and regions.

Such events are commonly sponsored by wealthy individuals, in many cases with the aim of promoting themselves and their businesses. A lot of prestige and politics is at stake here. It may sometimes be better to support an existing event instead of your own. You may anger powerful people when you start a project that competes with their own events.

## FURTHER READING

This is a classic study of the social-cultural relationship between important and much less important people, which explains the roles in bureaucratic organizations:

- Price, R. (1974). 'Politics and Culture in Contemporary Ghana: The Big-Man Small-Boy Syndrome.' *Journal of African Studies*, 1:2.

This is an account of how the football association in Uganda works:

- Schatzberg, M.G. (2010). 'Les Complexités de la "Démocratie": La Fédération Ougandaise de Football en Tant que "Polity".' *Politique Africaine*, 118.

More about how wealthy individuals organize tournaments for prestigious reasons:

- Manirakiza, D. (2010). 'Football Amateur au Cameroun: Entre Clientélisme Politique et Échanges Mutuels.' *Politique Africaine*, 118.

## INFORMAL TOURNAMENTS IN CAMEROON

Numerous football competitions and tournaments are organized outside the official channels. In Cameroon, informal tournaments called interquartiers are hugely popular and well-attended events throughout the country. Young and old players set up teams in every quarter to compete for fun, prestige and trophies. Also, the Brasseries companies are heavily involved in football. They used to organize the Top Cup competition for young children to develop football at a grassroots level. Schools and universities organize tournaments for children and young adults as well. Former players also form 'veteran clubs' to play football during the weekends, thereby forging social and business networks. And then there are Cameroon's end-of-year matches. Individuals commonly organize matches around New Year involving the best locally-based players and local players who are now playing abroad. For instance, Ajax-player Eyong Enoh and others fly back home to meet family and friends and to play the well-attended end-of-year match in Buea.

# MISMANAGEMENT //



Players of Ghana's top club Asante Kotoko sit in the dug-out at the stadium in Sunyani, Ghana.

Photo: Samme Terlingen

**Several countries in Africa feature prominently on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. Mismanagement happens in football as well. Research by African journalists indicates that corruption and mismanagement ruin the game in Africa. From projects at the top to the grassroots level: everybody will have to deal with this issue.**

Mismanagement and corruption in Africa go by many names: a 'little something', a 'gift', a 'motivation', an 'envelop' or a 'dash'. Most of them refer to eating – indeed, 'to eat' means people using public money for private purposes. Nigerians call it 'sharing the national cake' which tells you that the practice is to some extent legitimized. Indeed, corruption is institutionalized in the majority of African countries. For instance, the government in Cameroon stays in power by allowing their civil servants to use their positions to get rich.

There is really no difference between civil servants and football administrators. A position at the FA, a committee or a club is usually very profitable. All over Africa people fight to get a position in the football scene. The fact is that there are billions of dollars going around in football. There may not be as much money in Africa as there is in Europe, but the commercialization has brought millions of dollars in African football as well.

## PRIVATE POCKETS

Researchers Sugden and Tomlinson argue that it is not corruption in football per se, it is the 'scale of it' that is most worrying. The famous Cameroonian goalkeeper Joseph-Antoine Bell once claimed that 90 out of 100 dollars in football disappears in private pockets. Corruption is bad because it demoralizes the players. For instance, the bonuses that should go to national team players are usually never paid. Corruption is also bad because the money is not spend on developing the game in Africa.

A lot of money is being pumped into African football by companies whose core businesses are mining, agriculture, oil and gas, beverages and otherwise, but also by international sports companies such as Adidas and Puma and by television networks on the continent. There is also money coming in from other types of sponsorships and FIFA development projects. Much of the funds are earmarked for grassroots development but one only has to see the poor football facilities in Africa to notice that the money may be spend elsewhere.



Even the training facilities of Ghana's top club Hearts of Oak are below standard.

Photo: Samme Terlingen

**“The famous Cameroonian goalkeeper Joseph-Antoine Bell once claimed that 90 out of 100 dollars in football disappears in private pockets.”**

## DARK PICTURE

African journalists from an organization called FAIR wanted to know what happens with the money. Their report *Killing Soccer in Africa* paints a dark picture. FA-officials in Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Nigeria, Zambia and other countries are businessmen and politicians who make money and become more powerful from being involved in the game. President Jacques Anouma of the Ivorian FA even refused to explain how his administration spends its money.

One of the main problems with corruption and mismanagement in African football is that the sector lacks accountability and transparency in income and expenditures. The other problem is that most of the top administrators are untouchables. They

simply don't get punished for what they do. The African journalists who researched their FAs accused FIFA of keeping the corrupted in power. When a government wants to investigate malpractices within the FA, FIFA steps in and tells them that politicians are not allowed to intervene in football-related affairs.

## LOCAL LEVEL

Why is this relevant for football projects at a grassroots level? Are FIFA, the FAs and the top clubs not a completely different world? Perhaps. But realize that corruption and mismanagement happens on all levels. There is corruption in the construction of pitches, training centres and stadiums; the transfer of football players; the paying of bonuses and salaries for players and coaches; and much more. These things occur both on the top level and on a local level.

One thing to repeat here is the fact that Africa receives millions of dollars for grassroots football development. But recall Nigerian FIFA executive committee member Amos Adamu who was suspended in 2010 for wanting to sell his vote in return for synthetic pitches in his country. The money (800,000 dollars) was supposed to be transferred in his private account. This is another example which tells you that people abuse the fact that donors want to spend money on football development in Africa.

## OBSERVATIONS:

- Be very careful whom you choose to work with. There are many people who are not interested in developing football but who merely want a 'piece of the cake'. Also important to know is that administrators who were punished for corruption nevertheless often return to football management.
- Accountability and transparency are two words that mean little in African football. Indeed, club owners and administrators often do not feel that they should inform the public about their financial affairs. When setting up a project, be sure to ask for detailed accounts of income and expenditures.
- There is more money in African football than you might think. People look at the sorry state of grassroots facilities and want to construct or renovate pitches, training centres, and so on. There is money to do that. It would be interesting to see if that money could be spend on a grassroots level. This requires research and insights into the practices, politics and organization of football.



## FURTHER READING

Read this classic study on politics, power and corruption in Africa:

- Bayart, J-F. (2009). *The State of Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. Second Edition. Cambridge: Polity Press.

These academic researchers describe the corruption in African football:

- Sugden, J. & A. Tomlinson (2003). *Badfellas: FIFA Family at War*. Edinburgh/ London: Mainstream Publishing.

African journalists from FAIR researched football administrators in eight countries:

- Rukuni, C. & E. Groenink (eds.) (2010). *Killing Soccer in Africa*. FAIR Transnational Investigation. Download the report at [www.fairreporters.org](http://www.fairreporters.org).

Another Cameroonian journalist infiltrated in his country's FA:

- Nang, J-L. (2009). *Desperate Football House: Six mois dans l'enfer de la Fécafoot*. Yaoundé: Inter Press.

Read these works about the situation in Kenyan football:

- Munro, B. (2005). 'Greed vs. Good Governance: the fight for corruption-free football in Kenya.' Paper presented at the 4th World Communication Conference on Sport and Society, November 6-10, Copenhagen, Denmark. Download the paper at [www.playthegame.org](http://www.playthegame.org).
- Adelokun, T. & B. Cullum (2007). 'Chaos in Kenya.' *New African Soccer* no. 7, April.
- Nyamjom, O. (2010). *Foul play! The crisis of football management in Kenya*. Download the report at [www.africog.org](http://www.africog.org).

Read more about FIFA and power politics in Africa:

- Sugden, J. & A. Tomlinson. (1998). *FIFA and the Contest for World Football: Who rules the Peoples' Game?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jennings, A. (2006). *Foul! The Secret World of FIFA: Bribes, Vote Rigging and Ticket Scandals*. London: HarperSport.

## FIFA AND DEVELOPING THE GAME IN AFRICA

Football development projects in Africa are often used for political purposes. FIFA spent millions of dollars on developing football in Africa by constructing offices, training facilities and synthetic pitches. This could very well have been done with the best of intentions. Journalists, among whom Andrew Jennings, nevertheless claim that FIFA president Sepp Blatter is mostly interested in obtaining votes from Africa's football administrators. They say that he cleverly uses the democratic principles of FIFA's voting system. These principles state that all 208 members, great and small, each have one vote. Africa consists of many countries and so the continent is a lucrative source of voting power. FIFA's development projects ('Goal!' And 'Win in Africa with Africa') are used to make friends among African football administrators. These administrators see how FIFA is helping them out in no small way. The question is who they will vote for at FIFA's next presidential election.



Photo: Arnold Paimenborg

Elite one league club Yong Sports Academy takes on Sable Batie at the Municipal Stadium in Bamenda, Cameroon.

**Cameroon is one of Africa's most prominent football nations. The football infrastructure, however, is absolutely below standard and the same goes for the rest of Africa. There is a structural lack of pitches, goalposts, nets, balls, jerseys, boots. Before you start constructing pitches or sending jerseys, there are a few things you should know.**

The stadium in Bamenda (Cameroon) is nothing but a wall around a gravel pitch. Goats walk freely inside the premises. At least six football teams practice here on a daily basis. Making a sliding is a ticket straight to the hospital. A club owner recently spent a lot of money for the refurbishment of the pitch and the stadium. The one who received the money ran away and was later arrested. The stadium actually belongs to the football authorities in the capital Yaoundé. But supporters in Bamenda claim that they refuse to send money.

'Africans play football in the streets,' said Ajax- and Cameroonian player Eyong Enoh in 2010. 'We don't learn football in the stadium. We play at the back of the house, in the street, at school playgrounds.' All over Africa football infrastructures at the grassroots level are almost completely missing. Even the top clubs practice on lousy fields that are not their own. Even these clubs are struggling to get balls and jerseys. But is that because of a lack of money or a lack of management?

## STADIUMS

Most of the money is invested in constructing large structures, such as stadiums and training complexes. Every other year an African country will build or renovate four state-of-the-art stadiums with matching grass pitches as host of the African Cup of Nations. Angola did it in 2010, Ghana in 2008, Egypt in 2006, Tunisia in 2004 and Mali in 2002. These stadiums cost millions and millions of dollars. Many of them were constructed by Chinese firms in exchange for fishing rights or other business contracts.

Cameroon is a good example. The FA and the Ministry of Youth and Sports made a deal with both telecommunications company MTN and Chinese firms to construct and renovate at least ten stadiums. Another example is Ghana, a country that now boasts of four ultramodern stadiums, thanks to the African Cup of Nations. These stadiums are contrasted by the sorry state of the other football centres in the country. There is money alright. The question, however, is whether it is spend wisely.

## POLITICS

First, there is a lot of politics in the construction of stadiums. Of course, politicians benefit from staging international tournaments and are thus prepared to spend money on modern stadiums. The same applies to the location. One prominent case occurred in Cape Town (South Africa) where FIFA's selection of the Green Point Stadium was a bad choice in terms of commercial survival and the development of football at the grassroots level. Ghana constructed one stadium in the middle of nowhere. It is already called a White Elephant because most supporters cannot afford to pay the fare to get there.

Second, local clubs complain about not being allowed to use the pitches and stadiums for practice purposes. Although there are some grass and synthetic pitches in each African country, most players still play on gravel and sandy pitches. Third, Africa suffers from what has been called the 'lack of the art of maintenance'. The stadium in Accra (Ghana) is only two years old but recent reports indicate that the structure is already on a 'slippery slope of deterioration'.

## GRASSROOTS

Africa needs football infrastructures at a grassroots level. Large stadiums are useful a few times a year, but well-maintained training facilities throughout the country are more beneficial to the development of the game. One thing to remember is that poor infrastructures increase levels of intimidation and violence. League centres in villages and small towns commonly lack inner perimeters which makes it easy for spectators to enter the field of play. Violence against the referees, unfortunately, happens on a structural basis.

**"Most of the money is invested in constructing large structures, such as stadiums and training complexes."**

## OBSERVATIONS:

- When you get involved in a project to develop grassroots infrastructure, you should think about implementing plans and organizational structures for ownership and responsibilities. Who will be in charge when you leave?
- A related issue is the question of maintenance. Once a stadium or training complex is set up,



The referee and his linesmen are escorted off the pitch immediately after a match at the Essipong Stadium in Sekondi, Ghana.

Photo: Sanne Terlingen

the infrastructure soon suffers from degradation. Even a famous academy such as the Kadji Sports Academy in Cameroon, set up after the World Cup in 1994, has seen better days. Make sure to have a working plan for maintenance.

- Whether you are getting involved in the construction of infrastructure or whether you simply want to provide teams with jerseys, balls and boots, you need to ask yourself the question if a local person could do the same thing. There are a lot of wealthy Africans who could easily sponsor such projects themselves.
- Constructing infrastructure is not enough. Football demands medical and security personnel, and other specialists. Football authorities do not always hire the best and most professional staff to perform these duties. There is a link between poor infrastructure and non-professional and ill-equipped personnel on the one hand and violence and, sometimes, deaths on the other. When organizing a prestigious match, these issues need to be taken care of.
- One important aspect is that football infrastructures – training facilities, pitches, stadiums – are all attached to plots of land. You will have to negotiate with the owner of the land (the chief) and it is essential to have him bless the field. Pleasing the ancestors is a vital element of success.

## FURTHER READING

More about football infrastructures and politics in Africa:

- Alegi, P. (2007). 'The Political Economy of Mega-Stadiums and the Underdevelopment of Grassroots Football in South Africa.' *Politikon*, 34, 3.
- Alegi, P. (2008). 'A Nation to be Reckoned with': The Politics of World Cup Stadium Construction in Cape Town and Durban, South Africa.' *African Studies*, Vol.67, No.3.

More about intimidation and violence in African football:

- Igbinovia, P.E. (1985). 'Soccer Hooliganism in Black Africa.' *International Journal of Offender*

*Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 29, 2.

- Burnett, C. (1998/99) 'Understanding Soccer Violence as a Sociological Phenomenon in the South African context.' *Journal for Research in Sport, Physical Education and Recreation*, 21, 1.

This study deals with the background of South Africa's biggest-ever football disaster:

- Alegi, P. (2004). 'Like Cows Driven to a Dip': The 2001 Ellis Park Stadium Disaster in South Africa.' *Soccer & Society*, 5, 2.

## VIOLENCE AND DISASTERS IN AFRICAN FOOTBALL

Violence on the football fields in Africa is very common. With a few exceptions, violence is not organized but rather spontaneous. Most of the anger is directed at the referee and the players, coaches and officials of the opponent team. There are towns in Ghana where away teams never leave without a few bruises, or worse. The general rule is that you cannot win away matches. There is so much pride and politics involved that losing a home match is not an option. This is true for top league matches as well as village matches. Good infrastructures and security personnel are mostly absent in the villages, increasing levels of violence. Sometimes things get out of hand. Two of Africa's worst stadium disasters happened in 2001, first in South Africa, then in Ghana. Every year many supporters die in stadiums in Africa. Researchers argue that inadequate infrastructures, contempt for spectator safety on the part of the administrators and non-professional security personnel are the prime causes. Mismanagement worsens the situation (people are allowed in when the venue is already full). Sound management practices and well-trained personnel could do much to alleviate these problems.



Photo: Sameh Terlingen

Medical personnel is ready to assist any injured player during a match at the Len Clay Stadium in Obuasi, Ghana



This ball boy dreams of playing for a major club home or abroad one day.

Photo: Sanne Terlingen

**Football projects in Africa deal with a multitude of issues: unity and peace, women's rights, HIV/AIDS. The game is seen as the ideal way to realize the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. In Africa itself the ideas about football are quite different. Football players and their families usually think of one thing only: how to get to Europe to jumpstart a professional career.**

Jan Mulder and Abdelkader Benali travelled to Africa in 2010 for a television series about football. In Ivory Coast they followed a young football player to his parental house. They wanted to see the living conditions and meet the player's family. But the visit undoubtedly had an unforeseen side-effect. The player and his parents were under the impression that the foreigners were going to take him to Europe. Why else would a television crew walk into their humble residence?

When you ask older players about their early years, they all say that their fathers didn't want to see them playing football. It was not considered a proper career which would lead to respect and a decent salary. Times have changed. Now that Didier Drogba, Samuel Eto'o and Michael Essien earn millions of dollars a year, playing football is an acknowledged route to wealth and fame. Ask any young player what his dreams are and he will say that he wants to become the new Drogba or Eto'o.

## MUSCLE DRAIN

The goals of football projects can be very different from those of the players themselves. Projects are usually aimed at making life better for Africans in Africa. In football, however, everybody wants to make his or her life better somewhere else. The so-called 'muscle drain' is enormous: thousands of African players leave the continent to find employment in Asia, the Middle East, the United States and Europe. Some researchers call the trade a form of 'exploitation' and 'neo-colonialism' by the West. On the other hand, a family or village can definitely profit from a player's career.

The trade in African players is so great that there are thousands of football academies on the continent. Some of them will make the players go get an education to prepare themselves for a life outside of football. Most of the academies are illegal and are run by dubious characters who want to make a quick buck. A lot of players are also transferred through the clubs. Researchers argue that the trade is killing football in Africa. Indeed, local leagues have lost much of their popularity due to the exodus of players.



The rich and famous players of Ghana's national team leave the military airport in their private vehicles after having played a World Cup qualifier in Sudan.



**“The goals of football projects can be very different from those of the players themselves.”**

## **BIG BUSINESS**

Why is it important to know all this? Because the trade in African players is big business. Since there is a lot of money to be made, you will see many powerful individuals contracting or supervising young football talents. You and your project are thus operating in a context where money and power come together. In countries such as Ghana and South Africa it was discovered that club officials and football administrators conspire to sell as many players as possible. They all take their share of the profits.

The results are that many young players find themselves at the mercy of unscrupulous agents. Researcher Poli argues that most African players end up in the lower leagues in Europe and elsewhere. Some of them were cheated and now live their lives in the streets of Europe's major cities. The situation is that there are projects in Africa that inform young players about the dangers of HIV/AIDS whereas the same players do not know anything about signing contracts. Football may be an important tool for development but there are many issues in the game itself that need attention.

## **OBSERVATIONS:**

- Keep in mind that the goals of your project are most likely very different from those of the people you are working with. While you want to provide some support in, say, education, they may think that you are their ticket to Europe. So be aware that their expectations of the project may not be the same as yours.
- Familiarize yourself with the context you are in. The trade in African players is booming and numerous Africans are involved. Usually they are businessmen or politicians, so be careful not to get in the way of such powerful individuals. They can make life very difficult.
- One rule on the player transfer market is that young players are more valuable than older players. Cheating with ages is widespread and several researchers and African journalists claim that it hinders the development of the game in Africa. Be careful if you are training young players. They may be older than you think.
- Some managers of football development projects have tried to avoid entering these prestigious and political environments by setting up two teams. One team consists of boys and girls who just want to play for fun; the other team consists of young talented players whose dream is to have a football career. Only the latter team operates in a field where the political and financial stakes are high.

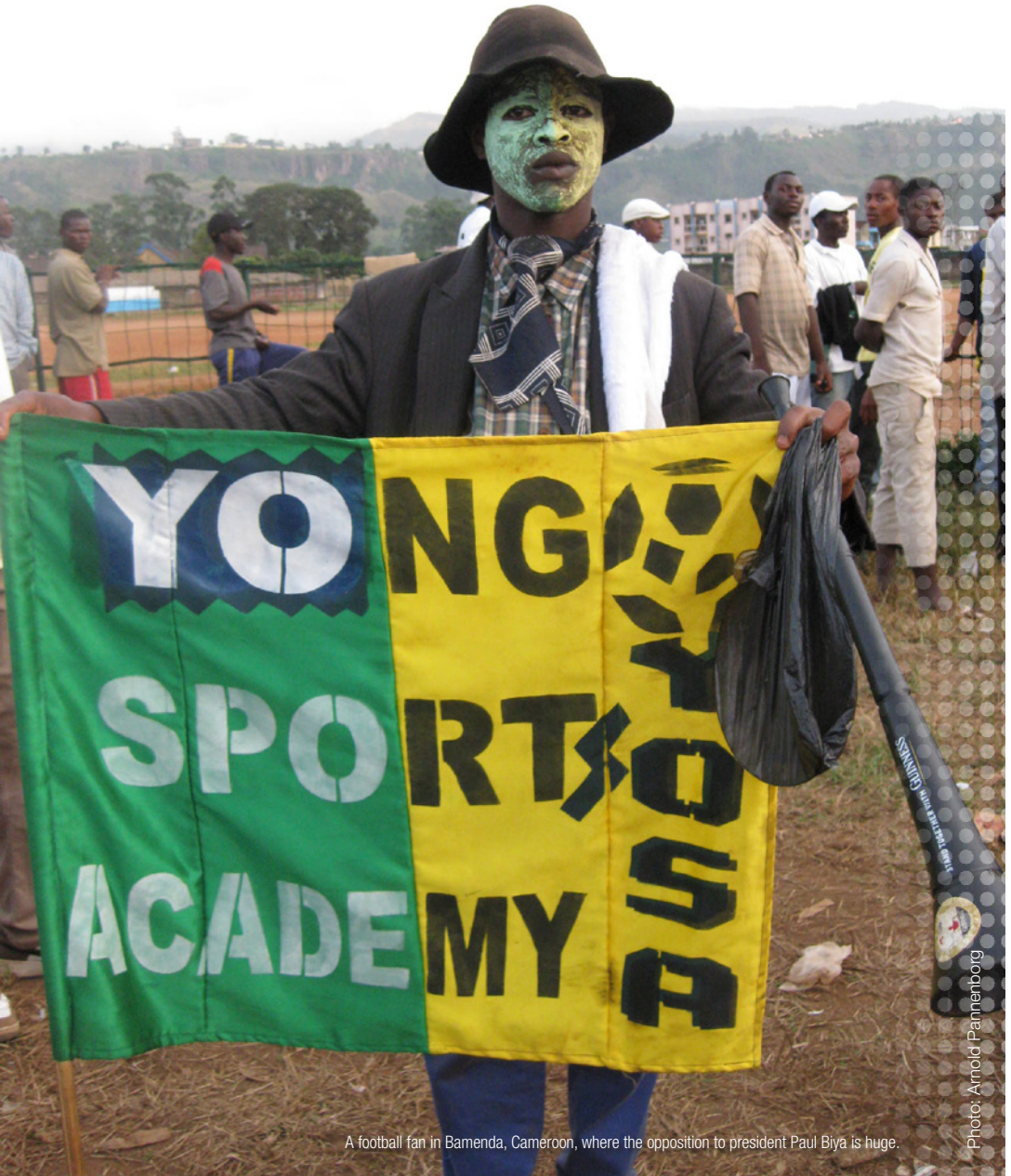
## FURTHER READING

The works below all deal with the exodus of African players:

- Lanfranchi, P. & M. Taylor (2001). *Moving with the Ball: The Migration of Professional Footballers*. Oxford: Berg.
- Bale, J. (2004). 'Three Geographies of African Footballer Migration: Patterns, Problems and Postcoloniality.' In: Armstrong, G. & R. Giulianotti. *Football in Africa: Conflict, Conciliation and Community*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
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## THE FOOTBALL PLAYER AS A POPULAR ICON

Football stars like Didier Drogba and Samuel Eto'o have become global icons. They transcend their role as mere footballers and are seen as symbols of the entire nation. In countries with political and economic difficulties these stars can lift the spirit of the people. Researcher Poli, however, argues that such icons receive a disproportionate amount of media attention in their respective countries. He says that the media are responsible for creating a 'one-sided' image of African players in European competitions. The fact that some African players are leading a homeless existence in major European cities hardly ever appears in newspapers. Nevertheless, many football stars take their role as icons seriously. They are aware of their status and behave as role models for young people in Africa. Didier Drogba, for instance, is an ambassador for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Samuel Eto'o is setting up a football academy in his native country. He has also sent ambulances to Cameroon. The Nigerian Nwankwo Kanu set up the Heart Foundation.



A football fan in Bamenda, Cameroon, where the opposition to president Paul Biya is huge.

Photo: Arnold Pannenberg

Football unites divided countries and helps bring peace to war-torn countries. At least, that has been the message in the media. But football in Africa can equally lead to divisiveness and violence. The game's power to divide is related to its strong link to ethnicity and politics. Whoever sets up a project in Africa should realize that football is definitely not always played for football's sake.

Numerous football projects aim to bring some sort of unity and peace in violent places in Africa. Football is said to have the power of healing. Liberia and Ivory Coast are the two most cited examples. When Liberia's Lone Stars played an international match, so the story goes, the rival factions laid down their guns and sat side by side in the stadium. Didier Drogba, the captain of the Ivorian national team, organized a match in the rebel-dominated city of Bouaké and pleaded his countrymen to stop fighting.

The situation in Liberia and Ivory Coast is still precarious. From the scarce research on this subject it can be concluded that the power of football should not be overestimated. Researcher Armstrong argues that football brings a sense of peace for the duration of 90 minutes only. The game does not change existing power relations, infrastructural underdevelopment, and massive unemployment. Whether Drogba's contribution to peace was as decisive as people say it was, is debatable as well.



Photo: Sanne Terlingen

Powerful men often bypass the coach in selecting players for the team for prestigious and political purposes.

## BLACK STARS

Another example comes from Ghana. President Kwame Nkrumah used the national team as a vehicle through which to spread his nationalistic and pan-Africanistic ideology. The Black Stars won the African Cup of Nations in 1963 and 1965. After Nkrumah was deposed in 1966, the national team slumped into misery for several years. He also created a club named Real Republikans. Instead of promoting his ideals, the club caused a rift between the government and the Ashanti people. This division is still alive in the violent encounters between Hearts of Oak and Asante Kotoko.

So be aware that the power of football may not be as great as you might think. In fact, a word of caution is in order here. Football in Africa is predominantly determined by ethnic factors. Ethnicity is a very complex concept, which was proven again by the outbreak of violence after Kenya's 2007 presidential elections. All of a sudden, one of Africa's most popular tourist destinations had fallen into the 'ethnic trap'. But experts already feared such a thing might happen one day.

## ETHNIC GROUPS

The most successful and widely supported clubs in Africa belong to specific ethnic groups. Cameroon is a notable example. Some of the major ethnic groups – Béti, Bamiléké, Bassa and Duala – all have their own clubs. Matches between these clubs are always tense and violent because Cameroonians see them as a mirror of political life. Whoever wins the match also 'wins' in the political domain. Football in Cameroon has actually worsened the animosity between these ethnic groups.

Do not think that these things only happen in top-level football. I once heard a story about a Dutch researcher who was asked to officiate a match between two villages. At first sight there was nothing at stake, except maybe a bit of pride. Who would win or lose did not seem to matter. But it did. There were a lot of (political) disagreements between the two villages and both parties desperately wanted to win. The researcher understood the context and managed to end the match in a 0-0 score.

## VIOLENCE

If it is argued that football brings peace, then it is only fair to state that football brings a lot of violence too. The best example in recent times were the World Cup qualifiers between Algeria and Egypt in 2009. The tension became so great that

even politicians made comments denouncing the opponent. Rocks were thrown at Algeria's team bus in Egypt. When the decisive match was played on neutral ground (Sudan), thousands of policemen and military personnel were called up to keep the peace.

Football equals politics in Africa. The phrase that 'sports and politics don't mix' was once called 'hypocritical' by a Nigerian Minister of Sport. It is rather the other way round: football is the perfect political tool. Africans understand this very well. Football is the continent's most popular sport and whoever attaches his name to the game becomes famous as well. We all know the example of George Weah, World Player of the Year in 1995, who participated in the presidential elections in Liberia.

## TOURNAMENTS

The political impact of football is especially visible during high-profile tournaments. South Africa hosted the 1996 African Cup of Nations after the end of apartheid. Dictators also know the value of such events. Sani Abacha, Mobutu Sese Seko and Idi Amin all cashed in on football's positive image. One of the worst cases happened prior to the African Cup of Nations in 2010. The politically motivated decision by the Angolan government to organize group matches in the contested enclave of Cabinda backfired horribly when the Togolese team bus was ambushed by rebels.

**“Research in Liberia has shown that football brings a sense of peace for the duration of 90 minutes only.”**

## OBSERVATIONS:

- When setting up a football project, you may want to inform yourself of the political and ethnic context. Which political party is in power? Which ethnic groups have political power? What is the situation in the area where your project is based? These are issues that may directly or indirectly influence your project.
- Football in Africa is used by governments, ethnic groups and political parties to gain and maintain power. You may operate in a region where opposition to the government is great. Football development in such regions is often neglected or hindered by those in power. It would be wise to inform yourself of the 'political reputation' of the region.
- Powerful people – businessmen, politicians, and so on – often interfere in football-related matters for political reasons. For instance, they tend to impose their will on the team's line-up. This happens on all levels. You will probably come into contact with individuals who want to use the project for their own private purposes.
- A consequence of the mixing between football and politics is that administrators commonly

lack long-term strategies with regard to the development of the game. Be aware that short-term interests are often considered more important than long-term plans. This attitude may affect your project.

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## FOOTBALL AND ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN CAMEROON

For years the Bamiléke and Béti ethnic groups have lived in mutual disagreement and hatred towards one another. President Paul Biya hails from the south of the country and is considered a Béti. Researchers argue that the Béti run political life through a system of patronage, favouritism and corruption. The Bamiléké are famous for their entrepreneurial spirit and have taken over many economic activities in the country. The Bamiléké criticize the Béti for taking over the government and hence political power and the Béti fear the Bamiléké for their economic strength. Matches between teams belonging to these groups commonly lead to violence. Foudre d'Akonolinga (Béti) and Aigle Royal Menoua (Bamiléké) were pitted against each other in the semi finals of the Cup of Cameroon in 2008. When Aigle Royal emerged victorious, Béti supporters of Foudre attacked Bamiléké residents in Akonolinga with stones, bats and machetes and plundered and set on fire numerous Bamiléké shops in the area. The bloody clashes lasted for almost a week. One Bamiléké man was killed, several were wounded and dozens fled town.



Photo: Same Telingen

A spiritual adviser or malam calls upon the spirits at his house in a town in Cameroon.



**Africans are deeply religious. Most of them are either Christian or Muslim and it is common to see players pray before the start of the match. There is also a widespread belief in witchcraft, sorcery and magic. This so-called juju or muti is widely used in football matches. Whoever wants to set up a football-related project should be aware of these spiritual practices.**

First of all, juju is not limited to the top leagues and national teams. A Cameroonian professor in cultural anthropology told me a story about a football match between two primary schools in 2002. Both teams had hired a witchdoctor to perform juju. Soon after the match started, pupils of one school invaded the pitch and sprinkled a sort of oil near the goalpost. Everybody understood what they were doing and one journalist wrote that the children were seen as ‘heroes’. Pupils of the other school then ran onto the pitch and threw a coin inside the goalpost.

It does not really matter which team won. The point is that primary school children not only knew about juju but also participated in these spiritual practices. One witchdoctor (or jujuman, spiritual adviser, malam, sangoma) later told me that it all makes very much sense. “These children learn about juju from a very young age,” he said. “They see the players of the big teams performing juju on the pitch and immediately want to copy what they are doing. That’s why these beliefs will never cease to exist.”

## BELIEF SYSTEM

Juju is known under many names. But whether one calls it juju, muti, gris-gris, wak, witchcraft, voodoo, magic, ‘ways and means’ or ‘African electronics’, it comes down to the same thing. Juju is a belief system whereby specialists use plants, herbs, fetishes, animals, spirits and rituals to attain certain goals. There are different forms of juju in football. A concoction – containing for instance the head of a cat, a needle and a piece of paper with the names of the opponent team players – may be buried on the pitch or near the entrance to the stadium. Spirits too may appear on the pitch to disrupt play.

Juju is considered an African secret. It is aimed at weakening the opponent team to give one’s team more chances in winning the match. Juju brings luck to one team and bad luck to the other. When one team finds out the type of juju of the other team, they can prepare themselves and neutralize the other team’s juju. That is why people are often reluctant to talk openly about it. Also, they tend to see everybody as spies; people who are trying to find out their juju.

## SPOILING THE HOTEL

Juju is also a very serious affair. The most important rule is that nobody is allowed to come near the stadium before a match. The same goes for training grounds, team buses, hotels and so on. They often feel that officials and supporters of the opponent team will come and spoil the pitch or the hotel. That is why most clubs hire supporters who guard these places at night. A friend once forbade me to go to the stadium the night before an important match. The following day he told me that supporters of the home team had burned torches near the stadium. When supporters of the opponent team tried to get inside, there were fights that lasted for hours.

Many Africans and Westerners alike feel that juju works against development. They argue that players would rather undergo spiritual rituals than to train hard to improve their football skills. Some Africans are embarrassed by their continent's 'primitive' and 'backward' beliefs. No wonder that football administrators do not want to see juju in football. Clubs are regularly fined for using juju during league matches. The African football federation CAF once forbade the use of juju during the African Cup of Nations. But will such measures work when even top administrators are known believers?

## PSYCHOLOGY

It is difficult to say whether juju works. One witchdoctor in Cameroon sees himself as a psychologist who brings the team together and gives the players confidence. "There are few psychologists in Africa," he explained. "Here we use collective rituals. Sometimes I wake the players at midnight to sing songs. It brings the players together." Players throw prepared objects inside the goalposts. "When an attacker throws a coin he will open the goalpost. When he scores a goal he will believe that the juju worked." In short, whatever else juju does, it fulfils an important psychological function.

**"Children see the players of the big teams performing juju on the pitch and immediately want to copy what they are doing. That's why these beliefs will never cease to exist."**



The goalkeeper of Asante Kotoko waves his white handkerchief, a known juju talisman at the stadium in Sunyani, Ghana.

Photo: Samne Terlingen

## OBSERVATIONS:

- Juju is considered an African secret. Players, coaches and officials commonly deny that they are into juju and claim that they are Christians or Muslims and only pray. The fact is that the majority of football teams are in one way or the other involved in these spiritual practices. Do not let anyone tell you otherwise.
- Witchcraft is an expression of jealousy and hatred. Unrest among players within your team may be the result of witchcraft and juju. A popular player who has sustained an injury may think that his team mate on the bench was responsible because he wanted to play himself. Also, an injured player commonly prefers to visit a traditional doctor.
- Be aware that juju is a serious affair and that most supporters strongly believe in it. As a manager or coach of a football project, you should be careful in forbidding your players to use juju. First, juju is said to work on a psychological level and as such has a function in football. Second, defeat may be attributed to your refusal to employ juju which could lead to problems.
- Well-intended football projects such as FIFA's construction of synthetic pitches in Africa may find cultural practices to stand in their way. You should be aware of some of the basic beliefs in juju and ask yourself if they could hamper the progress of your project.
- Much of the violence in African football is juju-related. Foreigners are not immune to such violence. I was once almost attacked by supporters who thought that I was hiding 'juju' in my camera. One German coach in Cameroon told me that he was beaten unconscious because his players were openly using juju. He had to be escorted by policemen and went straight to the hospital.

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Photo: Arnold Pannenberg

The players of Asante Kotoko perform prayers before stepping onto the pitch in Sunyani, Ghana.

## HOW TO RECOGNIZE JUJU

- Players jump over the wall of the stadium before the match;
- The team bus drives straight onto the field;
- Players refuse to change in the dressing room;
- Players enter the field wearing the wrong colour jerseys;
- Players refuse to shake the opponent's hand;
- Teams start the match with ten players each;
- Players urinate on the pitch (to counter juju);
- All the players line up side by side between the goalposts;
- Players throw something into the opponent's goalpost;
- The goalkeeper hides something inside his goalpost;
- Players hit the poles or crossbar several times during the game;
- Players wear white handkerchiefs, necklaces and other 'talismans'.

## JUJU AND SYNTHETIC PITCHES

FIFA is constructing offices, training facilities and synthetic pitches all over Africa. Are such synthetic pitches resistant to local culture? Evidence from Swaziland and Ghana indicates that the answer is negative (and the lesson to learn is to always take into account the local context). The expensive artificial pitch in Swaziland has been heavily damaged by teams performing juju rituals. The burying of concoctions ruined the pitch almost beyond repair. Similarly, the new 'astroturf' in Tema (Ghana) soon led to violence. The teams in the Premier League all play their matches on grass or gravel pitches and asked the FA for approval to practice in the Tema Stadium the day before a match. But supporters and officials of Tema Youth became extremely violent every time an opponent dared to come near the stadium. Why? Because they feared that the opponent would bury concoctions inside the stadium. Violent encounters were common practice for almost two seasons. Tema Youth finally relegated in 2009 because the FA deducted six points for fielding an unqualified player. No Premier League club has since used the synthetic pitch.



Photo: Same Teeling

A ball boy watches a Premier League match at the Essipong Stadium in Sekondi, Ghana.

The year 2010 (Twenty Ten) was a magical time for African football. For the first time ever the World Cup was held on African soil. Numerous development projects were initiated in the slipstream of the tournament. One of the main questions is whether and in what ways South Africa – and the rest of the continent – benefited from organizing the world's biggest sporting event. There were said to be major economic gains. Profits of a few billion dollars and the creation of 159,000 new jobs in South Africa would be direct benefits. There were said to be 'indirect' gains in the sense that Africa would finally get rid of its image as a continent held back by war, corrupt leaders, HIV/AIDS and poverty. Instead, Africa was able to present itself from a positive angle.

Several studies, however, already indicated that hosting major tournaments such as the World Cup and the Olympics hardly ever leads to financial gain. South Africa too was forced to lower its expectations. First, the organizers had to lower the number of foreign visitors. Second, the World Cup did not create as many jobs as was expected. Third, the costs of hosting the tournament turned out to be much higher. Fourth, South Africans who wanted to run Bed & Breakfasts and who wanted to sell merchandize and food in front of the stadiums found out that FIFA owns the World Cup and as such completely dictated every commercial activity. Whether the image of South Africa and Africa has improved remains to be seen.

What about the infrastructural legacy of Twenty Ten? Ten ultramodern stadiums were built in nine cities as well as many pitches all over South Africa. Also, roads, public transport and airports were improved significantly. Journalists and researchers, however, questioned the long-term benefits of such infrastructural projects. From the African Cup of Nations in Ghana we learnt that the maintenance of football stadiums is a major problem in Africa. Journalists Milikowski and Hoekstra, among others, questioned the sustainability of Cape Town's Green Point Stadium in this respect.

It is still wonderful that a country in Africa won the right to host the World Cup. It may have increased the popularity of the game in Africa even more. Time will tell whether staging such a tournament will have contributed to the development of South Africa and Africa in general. Maybe the overall lesson is that football indeed has the potential of stimulating development in Africa but that we should not overestimate the power of the game. More research is needed in this respect, which will certainly also benefit the potential success of football development projects in Africa in the future.

## // ALL OBSERVATIONS

- Be aware that the football structures in any given African country are more complex than you might think. Familiarize yourself with the formal and informal structures. FAs also have regional offices who control football in the area. If your project interferes with official structures, you have to deal with the proper authorities.
- When you want to work with an organization in football, make sure to get an appointment with the person in charge. If you want to collaborate on a communications level, it is not enough to talk to the communications officer. The person on top of the organization (chairman, president) could feel offended.
- Be aware that in Africa the wealthy and powerful people who control football take their positions very seriously and, in return, their status is taken very seriously by others. It is quite common to see that the administrators use football funds for their own travelling, accommodation, dining and other forms of spending of which they think come with the job but which others may find perhaps too luxurious.
- Football clubs are commonly sponsored by wealthy individuals. The phrase 'he who pays the piper calls the tunes' is used to signify that the person who contributes his money makes the decisions. The other executives are only there for 'make-up', as one coach said. Even clubs at a grassroots level often have a rich individual at the helm.
- Know that there are numerous unofficial football events in villages, districts and regions. Such events are commonly sponsored by wealthy individuals, in many cases with the aim of promoting themselves and their businesses. A lot of prestige and politics is at stake here. It may sometimes be better to support an existing event instead of your own. You may anger powerful people when you start a project that competes with their own events.
- Be very careful whom you choose to work with. There are many people who are not interested in developing football but who merely want a 'piece of the cake'. Also important to know is that administrators who were punished for corruption nevertheless often return to football management.
- Accountability and transparency are two words that mean little in African football. Indeed, club owners and administrators often do not feel that they should inform the public about their financial affairs. When setting up a project, be sure to ask for detailed accounts of income and expenditures.
- There is more money in African football than you might think. People look at the sorry state of grassroots facilities and want to construct or renovate pitches, training centres, and so on. There is money to do that. It would be interesting to see if that money could be spend on a grassroots level. This requires research and insights into the practices, politics and organization of football.
- When you get involved in a project to develop grassroots infrastructure, you should think about implementing plans and organizational structures for ownership and responsibilities. Who will be in charge when you leave?
- A related issue is the question of maintenance. Once a stadium or training complex is set up, the infrastructure soon suffers from degradation. Even a famous academy such as the Kadji



Sports Academy in Cameroon, set up after the World Cup in 1994, has seen better days. Make sure to have a working plan for maintenance.

- Whether you are getting involved in the construction of infrastructure or whether you simply want to provide teams with jerseys, balls and boots, you need to ask yourself the question if a local person could do the same thing. There are a lot of wealthy Africans who could easily sponsor such projects themselves.
- Constructing infrastructure is not enough. Football demands medical and security personnel, and other specialists. Football authorities do not always hire the best and most professional staff to perform these duties. There is a link between poor infrastructure and non-professional and ill-equipped personnel on the one hand and violence and, sometimes, deaths on the other. When organizing a prestigious match, these issues need to be taken care off.
- One important aspect is that football infrastructures – training facilities, pitches, stadiums – are all attached to plots of land. You will have to negotiate with the owner of the land (the chief) and it is essential to have him bless the field. Pleasing the ancestors is a vital element of success.
- Keep in mind that the goals of your project are most likely very different from those of the people you are working with. While you want to provide some support in, say, education, they may think that you are their ticket to Europe. So be aware that their expectations of the project may not be the same as yours.
- Familiarize yourself with the context you are in. The trade in African players is booming and numerous Africans are involved. Usually they are businessmen or politicians, so be careful not to get in the way of such powerful individuals. They can make life very difficult.
- One rule on the player transfer market is that young players are more valuable than older players. Cheating with ages is widespread and several researchers and African journalists claim that it hinders the development of the game in Africa. Be careful if you are training young players. They may be older than you think.
- Some managers of football development projects have tried to avoid entering these prestigious and political environments by setting up two teams. One team consists of boys and girls who just want to play for fun; the other team consists of young talented players whose dream is to have a football career. Only the latter team operates in a field where the political and financial stakes are high.
- When setting up a football project, you may want to inform yourself of the political and ethnic context. Which political party is in power? Which ethnic groups have political power? What is the situation in the area where your project is based? These are issues that may directly or indirectly influence your project.
- Football in Africa is used by governments, ethnic groups and political parties to gain and maintain power. You may operate in a region where opposition to the government is great. Football development in such regions is often neglected or hindered by those in power. It would be wise to inform yourself of the 'political reputation' of the region.

- Powerful people – businessmen, politicians, and so on – often interfere in football-related matters for political reasons. For instance, they tend to impose their will on the team's line-up. This happens on all levels. You will probably come into contact with individuals who want to use the project for their own private purposes.
- A consequence of the mixing between football and politics is that administrators commonly lack long-term strategies with regard to the development of the game. Be aware that short-term interests are often considered more important than long-term plans. This attitude may affect your project.
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## COLOPHON

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