



THE USE OF FOOTBALL DIPLOMACY FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFRICA: THE CONFEDERATION OF AFRICAN FOOTBALL HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study reviews football's role as a diplomatic tool for achieving socio-political development and conflict resolution in Africa. Specifically, the Paper extensively reviews and assesses the contributions of the Confederation of African Organized Football (CAF) tournament to African development and conflict resolution. The paper identifies that football significantly impacts on politics, diplomacy, conflict resolution, and even peacebuilding. Organized tournaments have been found to have been used by African countries to express both pleasure and displeasure through participation and boycott of the tournament. CAF organized football tournaments have also been used to punish a country by banning from taking part and fines. It was also highlighted that there has been a remarkable decline in violent conflict across Africa in the past decade. However, this has not always been equated to peace achieved through the roles played by football stars as peace ambassadors. The paper recommends football as a tool for diplomatic relations. Football has also been seen to be one of the greatest tools in promoting bilateral diplomatic relations among the nations in Africa and globally. Football diplomacy transcends cultural differences and creates opportunities for alternate avenues for overcoming hostilities, official dialogue and inter-group relations, uniting separate nations through a love of football.

Keywords: Football, Diplomacy, Socio-Political, Conflict Resolution

Introduction

Sport is the one area of human activity that has remained largely above the fray of all human divisions in colour, race, religion, and status, among others. The world is coming around to realize that sport can do what no other human activity has achieved in history – bring about global peace, friendships, justice and equity in human affairs, even temporarily during the events. Can that situation be sustained beyond competition periods (Odegbami. 2022). Since the United Nations' goal of maintaining international peace and security, states looked for other ways to legitimize their superiority peacefully and the use of sports as a tool of soft power is one. It is for this reason that sports can be considered one of the most exciting modern phenomena—modern because, in its current form, it was born no longer than 150 years ago, exciting because it wins the interest of



millions of people (Kobierecki, 2013). Among all the sports, however, football seemed to have taken the lead as a tool for Diplomacy, Socio-Political, and Conflict Resolution. States have used various diplomatic tools over the years to enhance positive relations among nations. One of such tool is football. International relations and football have become increasingly intertwined. Conceptually, diplomacy is the conduct of relations between sovereign states with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means and football has become increasingly compatible. Football diplomacy is associated with governments employing sports-people to amplify a diplomatic message or with states using sporting events to enhance their image among the global community, to cool tensions in flagging diplomatic relationships, or simply to test the ground for a possible policy change (Ramesh & Ernst , 2020).

Diplomacy has been described as a complex and often challenging practice of fostering relationships worldwide to resolve issues and advance interests. Diplomacy has the widest meaning comprising of four main tasks; Firstly, diplomacy has to determine foreign policy objectives in light of the power available to a state. Secondly, it must assess the objectives of other states' foreign policies in light of their power to pursue those objectives. Thirdly, it must determine the extent to which these different objectives are compatible with each other. Finally, diplomacy must employ the means suitable to the pursuit of its foreign policy objectives (Jay , 2014). Diplomacy comprises spoken or written communication by representatives of states (such as leaders and diplomats) intended to influence events in the international system (Trager, 2016). Diplomacy is the main instrument of foreign policy representing the broader goals and strategies that guide a state's interactions with the rest of the world. International treaties, agreements, alliances, and other manifestations of international relations are usually the result of diplomatic negotiations and processes. Diplomats may also help to shape a state by advising government officials (Ronald, 2006).

According to Ditcher (2014), much has been documented about the impact of sports on politics, diplomacy, conflict resolution, and even peacebuilding. Popular sports events and platforms have been used to amplify political messages, pacify tensions in flagging diplomatic relations, and break the ice over nuclear stand-offs. For example, the recent *détente* between North and South Korea, where the Olympic Games were used to signify a renewed intent for nuclear negotiations, is one of many examples. However, sports diplomacy research and narratives have been highly state-centric, focusing mainly on the impact of sports on interstate relations. In the African context, where many governments fail to serve as legitimate representatives of the people and where states are often captured by elite enclaves, well or ill-elected, it is important to note the impact of sports, particularly football, at the grassroots level (Danyel, 2014).

Sports diplomacy has been in existence for decades; however, many states are hesitant to acknowledge its crucial function in foreign relations. Even as many states partake in international sports, its influence has been growing very slowly. It came of age in the post-World War I when it caught the attention of politicians and governments as a channel to conduct international relations. Pierre de Coubertin, the father of modern Olympic Movement, the most recognized and legitimate international sports events, “foresaw the importance of sports in international relations” (Rojo-Labaien, 2014). He promoted the Olympic



Idea when he stated; "...sport competitions should substitute wars, and the youth from around the world instead of fighting (Ditcher, 2014).

At the 1966 World Cup, Ghana led an African boycott in protest against only one slot allocation to Africa and Afro-Asia at the global football fiesta. Nigeria led the protest of the African boycott of the 1976 Montreal Olympics. Nigeria also led the resistance to the USA's call to boycott the 1980 Moscow games in protest against Russia's invasion of Afghanistan. The Apartheid ended and a black prisoner became President of South Africa was influenced largely by the power of Nigeria-led deployment of sport to fight racism. It is now most instructive and revealing that in 2021, despite the unprecedented crisis, conflicts and pandemic in the world, every country participated in the world cup.

Globally, football events are being used for various diplomatic and political goals. Sport is a multi-dimensional field, the vast of which includes Athletics and other games. Since the United Nations (UN) goal is maintaining international peace and security, states looked for different ways to legitimize their superiority peacefully, and the use of football as a tool of soft power is one. For this reason, football can be considered one of the most exciting modern phenomena (Australian Government, 2013) Football has become the singular most influencing factor in unifying the human race across the globe. This has made it to receive unprecedented global attention and sponsorship. Thus, football has become a phenomenon influencing world peace, economy and social relationship development. It has also made virtually all the countries of the world appreciate the developmental role of football hence, invest substantial fortune of the nation's wealth on sports development.

Ditcher (2014) noted that football as a tool of diplomacy came of age in the post-first World War when it caught the attention of politicians and governments as a diplomatic tool.. From Nazi Germany to Communist Russia, from capitalistic United States to apartheid South Africa, football has personified the ideologies of political policies in the 20th century. As we enter the 21st century, football is no longer framed in the East vs West, Authoritarian vs Democratic battles lines that made for compelling stories in the past century. Instead, football has become an essential part of the toolbox for every country's public diplomacy. Football events hosting numerous foreign visitors can impact a country's relationship with foreign publics on scales that public diplomats could only hope to reach through their own strategies and projects (Yahya, 2022).

Football as a political tool in Africa

Some of the CAF-organized tournament has been used by African nations to achieve certain political and diplomatic gains, thus indicating the relationships between football and politics. According to Qingming (2013), football is a political and diplomatic game where politics parodies sport and vice versa. This means that football as a form of diplomacy can be used to heighten confrontation when relations between two nations are poor, or if relations start to improve, football can also create and accelerate diplomatic momentum. Chehabi (2001) gave notable examples of football and politics colliding at work in the Olympics boycotts of the 1970s and 1980s. Similarly, the Football War between Honduras and El Salvador, and Ping Pong Diplomacy between the US and China in the 1970s.



However, first we must understand how football diplomacy can be used to carry out a country's foreign policy. The 1966 World Cup offers a clear example of Africa using sport power and bloc voting to push for greater representation, and it speaks to the potential of Pan-Africanism to shape the continent's integration into the global community today. Nelson Mandela once said: "Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does." For Africans in the 1960s, soccer was a unifying vehicle that helped them advance a regional agenda in the new world order that followed a wave of African nations declaring independence (Yahya, 2022).

FIFA, which was established in Paris in 1904 by soccer officials from seven European countries, did not envision Africa as integral to the sport—as shown by its decision to allocate fifteen of the sixteen team slots in the 1966 World Cup to countries in Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean. That left almost thirty countries across Africa and Asia competing for one slot, sparking great discontent, with some arguing an injustice was being placed on already disadvantaged countries. In response to FIFA's decision, Africa boycotted the tournament. When Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah tapped Ohene Djan, Ghana's Football Association president, to lead the fifteen-nation African boycott, three things happened: It brought African soccer to the fore, laid the foundation for Sub-Saharan Africa and newly independent nations to flex global influence, and forced FIFA to open more qualifying spots for non-European countries.

Ultimately, the boycott displayed the growing importance of the African regional bloc in the geopolitical sphere. One of the important factors that contributed to Africa's effectiveness in boycotting FIFA was Pan-Africanism, the movement to unite and mobilize everyone of African descent (including Black people in the United States, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean) in the pursuit of shared goals such as eliminating racism and colonialism. In the spirit of collaboration around a shared experience, Nkrumah, considered a founding father of Pan-Africanism, exercised grassroots soccer diplomacy and reinforced the idea among African leaders that solidarity would be the key to improving representation and inclusion.

African Football Diplomacy

In Africa, the impact of CAF in the organizing of tournaments and the use of sport for diplomacy and international relations cannot be overemphasized. Before the establishment of the Confederation of African Football (CAF), African states have, over time, been using sports to promote their ideas and to express their displeasure over issues; despite their strategic use of sports, international relations studies have shown that they did not use it as a deliberate diplomatic tool, but it was purely coincidental. However, during the first edition of the African Cup of Nations CAF, for the first time, used football as a tool for diplomacy. The maiden edition was to be played by four founding nations Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and South Africa. However, South Africa was under the apartheid regime, and CAF saw this as an ample opportunity to intervene, by making it as a pre-condition for participation of the South African team to present a multi-racial in its national team. This did not go well with the Apartheid regime, which refused and was disqualified from participating in the competition. This gave the Egypt national team an advantage in the final and eventually won the first-ever tournament (Riordan, James and Kruger, 1999).



Africa's inability to compete in military power beckons the need to acquire and use soft power, such as football, to gain international prestige. "South Africa's success in the bidding process to host the FIFA 2010 World Cup is a remarkable achievement. It signaled their arrival as credible powers and the new order of things in international sports and the international system.

In contexts where freedom of expression is limited, political apathy is rampant, or common voices are marginalized, Africans are increasingly turning to football to engage in covert conversations regarding their struggles, aspirations, and vision for peace in the next few years should be interesting ones for these countries. For Africans, football is a celebrated sport and intimately connected to sociopolitical realities. From the successful presidential candidacy of former football player George Weah in Liberia to the rise of Egypt's professional footballer Mohamed Salah as one of the most influential figures on the continent, to France's World Cup victory being celebrated by many as a "win for Africa," the ostensibly apolitical space of football is often a home for political conversations (Simon, 2019).

In the days leading up to Egypt's presidential election in March, the internet was replete with images and memes endorsing Mohamed Salah for president. When the election results were released, it appeared that over 1 million Egyptians voted for Salah in a serendipitous and relatively uncoordinated act of protest, making him "the surprise runner-up." While many may dismiss these acts as facetious jests, it does not negate the reality that Salah has become Egypt's most unifying and significant public figure. His influence cuts across class, religion, and politics, which are highly divisive factors in Egyptian society since the revolutionary events of 2011. His moderate yet visible practice of Islam is admired by even the most radical religious actors, his patriotism and generous donations are praised by secularists and nationalists alike, his skill and successes abroad a source of pride for the youth, and his modest rural upbringing resonates with the masses struggling to maneuver their way out of poverty and alienation. At a time when political repression has almost entirely stifled opposition and produced a leadership deficit in the country, he has emerged to fill a void and restore national pride (Höglund, Kristine, and Ralph, 2008). Another example of the interconnectedness of football and politics is the victory of George Weah, Liberia's footballer-turned-president. Weah's victory was equally celebrated by anti-establishment advocates desperately awaiting a chance for new actors to penetrate the political landscape and by marginalized youth who played a pivotal role in running his campaign. When Weah was criticized for not being educated enough to run the country after losing in the 2012 elections, he went back to school and earned a university degree, setting a noble example for youth across the nation.

Morocco's magical run at the 2022 World Cup, where it became the first African nation to reach the semifinal, was celebrated across the continent. What brought Morocco to that moment was talent and the Pan-African movement that opened doors for African nations' inclusion in global institutions like the Fédération Internationale De Football Association (FIFA). Africa's advancement today is still tied to Pan-Africanism. And with the upcoming 2024 Paris Olympics and 2026 World Cup in North America, African nations have an opportunity to collectively lobby for permanent representation in institutions, including the Group of Twenty (G20) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). They'll be able to combine the modern media spotlight of these global events with a model established nearly six decades ago (Deneysel, 2023).



The Use of Football for Dispute and Conflict Resolution in Africa

Football has also been used as an alternative tool for dispute and conflict resolution in Africa; several such instances can be seen from a careful analysis of the impact of the CAF organized tournaments, and the historical development of football diplomacy. Sports institutions can also be used as a public communication tool, and respected football figures could serve as peace ambassadors who can reach out to the public in times of tension and promote the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and diversity. The Ivory Coast example is still fresh in our memories. However, the country was blessed with a squad that could match anything on the African continent; despite having lost twice to Cameroon in qualifying, they remained agonizingly close as they took to the pitch in Sudan that evening 2002. Yet, while Ivory Coast's footballing stars stood on the verge of history, back home, the country teetered on the edge of something dark that is a civil war that began in 2002 had divided the country, with President Laurent Gbagbo's government controlling the south and a rebel faction known as The New Forces of Ivory Coast, led by Guillaume Soro, controlling the north (Murray, 2011). The civil war came to an end when Didier Drogba, a football player, transformed his nation's future. Drogba is credited with bringing peace to Côte d'Ivoire by ending a 10-year civil war. On live television, moments after leading his nation's team into the 2006 World Cup, Drogba fell to his knees and begged warring factions to disarm (Serena, 2009).

Sports institutions can also be used as a public communication tool, and respected football figures could serve as peace ambassadors who can reach out to the public in times of tension and promote the values of tolerance, mutual respect, diversity, and unity both on and off the field. More resources should be diverted towards sports institutions, especially those that prove to be effective catalysts for inclusion and hope. Politics in Africa and other places manifests itself from the upper echelons of government down to everyday social interactions. It can often trigger intense emotion and violent divisions. Of the many avenues available to bridge different divides in Africa, few things, if any, can channel collective and positive efforts more than football. If peacebuilding and sustaining peace are about inclusion, amplifying marginalized voices, and transforming otherwise violent scenarios into non-violent conversations, then taking advantage of the spaces football creates is essential (Craig, 2013). Football in Africa has been used to achieve several prominent international relations in the Scio-political relations; this is a role the CAF has achieved through several tournaments.

To discuss the impact of football on the socio-political life of Africa, we need to ask what meaning the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) has for the continent today? The competition was established at the high noon of decolonization in the mid-20th century with Pan-African ideals of unity and cooperation at its heart. The tournament in Egypt is the 32nd edition. That's a whole lot of football, but has the tournament fulfilled the aspirations of its visionary founders of African solidarity and autonomy? Look critically at the tournament's history, and you'll find a story of a beloved and venerable African institution that has bent to pressures imposed on it by Europe and that too often serves to enrich local elites at the expense of the ordinary football-lovers that make the competition so special (Houlihan, 1994).

The grassroots significance of sports is particularly relevant from a peace-building perspective, given that peace, like a tree, tends to grow from the bottom up. There has been a remarkable decline



in violent conflict across Africa in the past decade; however, this has not always been equated to peace. As Johan Galtung noted, there is a difference between negative peace, or the absence of physical violence, and positive peace, the absence of both physical and structural violence. Negative peace is unstable and is often beset by frequent conflict relapses, fueling inconspicuous forms of oppression and unanswered legitimate grievances. In these contexts, football has become an avenue for expression and dialogue that challenges existing state structures and paradigms and ultimately enables peaceful aspirations to find a home. Take, for example, the case of Egypt, where military and ruling elites have stifled all avenues for authentic political dissent and participation. In the act of defiance, youth are shifting political conversations to unconventional platforms. (Eden, 2019). Heather Dichter (2020) noted that the potential of football to orchestrate social transformation is often underestimated. Its unique impact in Africa stems from its relatively apolitical space, less influenced by political subversion, censorship, and venality. Attempts to deploy football within a sustaining peace framework should seek to strengthen sports institutions, while simultaneously protecting their autonomy from state control and exploitation. Closer attention should be paid to the conversations and movements manifesting from football institutions to forecast political scenarios and gain a sense of popular opinions and aspirations (Arnaud & Riordan, 1998).

Conclusions Recommendations

Football diplomacy transcends cultural differences and creates opportunities for alternate avenues for overcoming hostilities, official dialogue, and inter-group relations, uniting separate nations through a love of football. More specifically, football diplomacy involves representative and diplomatic activities undertaken by football officials on behalf of and in conjunction with their governments. The practice of football diplomacy is facilitated by traditional diplomacy and uses football official and sporting events to engage, inform and create a favorable image among foreign publics and organizations and to shape their perceptions in a way that is (more) conducive to the sending government's foreign policy goals. If traditional diplomacy is the means to a state's foreign policy ends, footballs diplomacy is one of the means to the means of those ends. More and more diplomatic institutions are turning toward football.

The grassroots significance of sports is particularly relevant from a peace-building perspective, given that peace, like a tree, tends to grow from the bottom up. There has been a remarkable decline in violent conflict across Africa in the past decade; however, this has not always been equated to peace. There is a difference between negative peace, or the absence of physical violence, and positive peace, the absence of both physical and structural violence. Negative peace is unstable and is often beset by frequent conflict relapses, fueling inconspicuous forms of oppression and unanswered legitimate grievances. It is in these contexts that football has become an avenue for expression and dialogue that challenges existing state structures and paradigms and ultimately enables peaceful aspirations to find a home. Take, for example, the case of Egypt where military and ruling elites have stifled all avenues for authentic political dissent and participation. In an act of defiance, youth are shifting political conversations to unconventional platforms Arnaud, (P. & Riordan J. 1998).



To achieved positive diplomacy and unity both on and off the field. More resources should be diverted towards sports institutions, especially those that prove to be effective catalysts for inclusion and hope. Politics in Africa and other places manifests itself from the upper echelons of government down to everyday social interactions. It can often trigger intense emotion, and violent divisions. Of the many avenues available to bridge these divides in Africa, few things, if any, can channel collective and positive efforts more than football. If peace building and sustaining peace are about inclusion, amplifying marginalized voices, and transforming otherwise violent scenarios into non-violent conversations, then taking advantage of the spaces football creates is essential (Gary and Richard, 2004).

There is much evidence that if football is given greater attention, the following important objectives could be achieved:

- i. Political objective: Rather than the use of violence or weapons peaceful political objectives could be achieved, as in the case of South Africa apartheid, and Ivory Coast, where one-word statement by a football star brought an end to a civil war of several years (Höglund, Kristine, and Ralph, 2008).
- ii. Football as a tool for diplomatic relations: Football has also been seen to be one of the greatest tools in promoting diplomatic bilateral relations among the nations in Africa and globally. This research finding identifies that football, in particular, is not just a spare-time leisure activity. It is no longer a simple team sport to be played in the context of one's private life. It is also a social, political, cultural and diplomatic issue, bearing in mind that today football has eventually conquered not only Africa but the entire world.
- iii. Football and socio-economic development: The research also discovered that football and economics cannot be separated. Football has always provided a unique opportunity and has contributed significantly to the development of the national economy of the hosting nation through trade, commerce, and tourism, as in the case of Egypt, which hosted the last AFCON tournaments.
- iv. Football for peacebuilding and national integration: The marriage between football, peacebuilding and national integration cannot be overemphasized. Football has been seen to be the world's best means of communication; it is impartial, political and universal. Football unites people within and outside continent of the world, young or old, players or fans, rich or poor. The game makes everyone equal, the game has tremendously impacted on peacebuilding, national and international unity, and youth empowerment that has ultimately transcend to national developments.

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