

## If Development Were Soccer

If there were a prize for global organizations most tainted with corruption, FIFA, the International Federation of Football (Soccer) Associations, would be a strong contender. For years, its board members are said to have demanded, received, and dished out bribes for purposes such as vote buying and selling rights to host the World Cup. The “crony culture” inside FIFA has reportedly caused huge losses—about \$100 million in one instance alone when an exclusive deal with a marketing company went belly-up. These acts have spawned investigations, books, and blogs seeking to expose the organization,<sup>1</sup> but FIFA appears to have warded off serious reform. Its current boss has been in charge for 14 years and part of FIFA for 38. He ran unopposed in the last election, in part because

his two rivals were disqualified for foul play. His predecessor had been at the helm for 24 years.

In several respects, FIFA’s inside dealing and lack of transparency, as well as the longevity of its aging leadership, is reminiscent of the poor governance of many developing countries. This state of affairs is associated with malaise and dysfunction, misuse of public resources, poor public service delivery, and entrenched inequities.

But the state of soccer, far from being a basket case, is vibrant and thriving.

Precise numbers are difficult to establish, but soccer has well over a billion supporters worldwide. Many of these tune in every week on radio, TV, and, increasingly, the Internet. More than 700 million are estimated to have watched the final games of the World Cup in 2006 and 2010, across all six continents. It is easily the world’s biggest sport.

While growing up in Mwanza, Tanzania, listening to commentary of English league games on a crackly BBC shortwave transmission was the highlight of my week. Today, walk through East Africa’s bustling neighborhoods or rural

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, *FIFA’s Dirty Secrets*, a three-part investigative series by BBC Panorama at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00wfl8t> and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11841783>; Andrew Jennings, *Foul: The Secret World of FIFA: Bribes, Vote Rigging and Ticket Scandals* (London: HarperSport, 2007); and David Yallop, *How They Stole the Game* (London: Constable, 2011).



**As a powerful development tool, sport inspires change, delivers hope, and unites communities around the world.** | Photo: Pernille Baerendsen

communities on weekends, and you will likely see animated men and (increasingly) women listening to a duel between national rivals or watching Chelsea play Arsenal or Barcelona take on Real Madrid. You will see much of the same across large parts of Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In many cases, these are communities that have no electricity and low incomes, but some entrepreneur will have rigged up a generator and an improvised satellite dish, and be turning a tidy profit charging entrance fees.

It's not only about relaxing in front of the TV. Soccer is among the most common topics on social media, radio call-in shows, and street corners. Crotchety pundits, hip pre-teens, and nerdy economists alike pore over team statistics to discern patterns, debate choices, and predict outcomes. It is public engagement interspersed

with politics, business, and local drama, but soccer remains at the core. And soccer evokes great emotion. When there is a crucial goal or save, observe the poetry of celebration rituals or the slow-motion implosions of defeat among both players and fans. It's quite an experience.

Why does soccer work? Why, unlike so many badly governed public agencies, NGOs, and projects, is soccer so powerful, lively, and engaging?

Could it be that soccer has got something so right, that it doesn't much matter that its state of supra governance is somewhat shambolic? And if that is indeed the case, might it provide useful insights for how we think about development in countries where the intractable problems of supra governance will not be sorted out soon?

Soccer and development, while very different, have several features in common. I'll highlight



**Two women wear T-shirts advocating a peaceful referendum as they watch men wave a southern Sudanese flags outside a polling station in Juba during voting on January 9, 2011, on the first day of a week-long independence referendum.** | AFP Photo: Phil Moore

four. Both have purposes or goals to score. Both have rules and conventions of how things are to be done. Both have someone deciding whether conduct is right, imposing sanctions for foul behavior, and judging the final outcome. And both have actors who need to be motivated and focused to deliver.

But each handles these features very differently.

### **In Soccer, Success Is Clear and Simple**

Soccer isn't called the "beautiful game" for nothing. Players display enormous skill when dribbling, passing, and making daring dives and gravity-defying turns. Fans love these moves, and TV screens replay some of the best ones over and over, so that viewers can study the skill and savor the moment. Papers speak of the teams that play

the most entertaining football. But all this skill is aligned toward a very simple and very clear purpose: to score more goals than the other team. Sure, a lot of other statistics are collected, such as the number of passes, number of fouls, percentage of possession, ages of the players, and so forth. The artistry is fun and appreciated, but what matters is how it contributes toward the purpose. What counts is the final score.

The incentives are well aligned too, in the short and long term. You win the game, you celebrate, your team gets three points. Everyone involved—the players, the managers, the owners, the spectators—understand this. In the long term, those points and goals add up, and you move up the league table or on to the next round of the competition, until you win the cup. The better you perform, the more likely you are to earn a better salary.

In development, there are also goals and purposes. While some are clearer than others, too many development initiatives suffer from three kinds of problems. First, they try to do too many things at one time. Indeed, many things contribute to whether humans can flourish. They cannot be encompassed in a single, narrow goal. When an initiative tries to do all the important things—to be *comprehensive*—it tends to get distracted, pulled in many directions, and energy and focus dissipate. Ultimately, this means that it fails to reach any of the important goals in any meaningful sense, and over time falls under the weight of its own elaborate design or is difficult to sustain at scale. I have seen this in the education sector in Tanzania, for example, where programs have tried to initiate reforms with teachers and books and infrastructure and curriculum and pedagogy and examinations and finances and governance and gender and HIV/AIDS and environment, all at the same time. Doing it all would be difficult even where there is great institutional depth. To try to do so where this is not the case can be downright hubris.

Second, because the achievement of goals can take time and require several steps, there is a tendency to develop many interim markers of progress. Hence, it is common to find a plethora of input, process, and output targets, as well as corresponding indicators. These are lined up in a linear sequence, implying that A will lead to B, which shall lead to C. But the proliferation and labor of keeping track of these, meant to be signposts toward achieving the ultimate goals, can become so consuming that one ends up spending an inordinate amount of time on them, losing sight of the goals, or worse still, conflating the interim markers with the measures of success, even where they do not effectively contribute to the achievement of the goals that matter. This would be the equivalent, in soccer, of players focusing

so much on the number of passes, height of their headers, speed of their runs and the like, that no one remembers the score.

Third, even where development initiatives manage to keep a clear-eyed focus on the goals that matter, the incentives are not aligned to reward success. Put differently, there are no consequences. One gets funded for the cost of the *inputs* of the project, not the *outcomes*. Staffs are paid salaries for undertaking activities, writing proposals and reports, and moving money rather than achieving results. So while, in theory, the achievement of goals should matter, in practice, they do not. The metric for rewarding performance is often poorly related to attainment of goals and rarely determinative of what you actually receive. The health worker who toils nine hours a day delivering quality care is likely to be paid the same as a colleague who is absent and discourteous. And whether a project gets renewed, or a ministry receives more budget, or a country receives more aid is determined largely by factors other than its track record of attaining goals. In soccer, one also faces some of these challenges, particularly in the short term. But the yardstick of winning games and progressing up the league table is never far away; it quickly concentrates the minds of wayward souls.

## Soccer Has Clear Rules

Over the years, soccer has developed an extensive set of rules and conventions. For a newcomer, these can be quite bewildering. What exactly is an offside? Why is it a handball when the ball touches an arm in some instances and not in others? Which offenses deserve yellow or red cards? But for those who have grown up with soccer or engage actively with it, these rules make sense, for they have evolved organically, with relatively few changes at a time. Importantly, while people argue over the interpretation of rules, and human error

is not uncommon, the rules themselves are known to everyone and not renegotiated while playing the game. Players and managers are expected to follow the rules, and that's largely that.

In development, particularly in developing countries, the relationship between the game and its rules is tenuous at best. In recent years, often in response to donor pressure, several countries have undergone reform. These have produced a raft of new laws, regulations, and institutions. Many of these, such as anticorruption laws and agencies, ethics commissions, and public-expenditure management systems, are meant to strengthen governance. In Uganda, for example, so many laws and agencies were created, with overlapping mandates, that no one could quite keep track, and a new body had to be created to coordinate the other new bodies. The problem is that all this impressive rule-making bears little connection to how people go about their daily business. It's not that people lack respect for the rule of law. But how a rule comes about, and the manner in which it can be and is enforced, makes all the difference. Ironically, in many cases, the zeal for reform appears to have led to "too much too fast," preventing change from taking root.

When poorly established, rules fail to fulfill their key function, which is to provide credible and predictable guidelines with which to conduct affairs and adjudicate differences. Observe, for instance, a negotiation between government and donor representatives on the Performance Assessment Framework (PAF) for General Budget Support (GBS). There is constant haggling over the small details: whether a report gets published, which civil society should be around the table, what constitutes adequate accountability, and so forth. Not only do the goalposts keep changing, but also many of the basic rules. If soccer were development aid, before the whistle blows,

there would be drawn-out negotiations on the definition of a penalty, a task force established to appoint the referee, and a manual drafted on how to procure the whistle. That this is frustrating, wastes time, and generates ill will is bad enough. Worse still, it disrupts the flow of achieving development, draining it of creativity, motivation, and a clear-headed strategy.

## **Soccer Has Independent Referees**

Like most professional sports, soccer has independent referees. The principals are the teams, but it is the referees who are fully in charge on the field, responsible for making the game flow, upholding the rules, and serving as impartial judges of conduct. Referees are not immune from undue influence and corruption, but on the whole, they need to play their roles ably—because they have little wiggle room to do otherwise. The value of independent referees in soccer is taken as a self-evident truth; no one would even think about proposing that a professional game be played with refereeing by a player from one or both the teams.

Yet, in development, where the stakes are arguably higher than most games of professional soccer, that is precisely what happens much of the time. In many countries, the executive branch of government is to be held in check by the parliament, but its ministers themselves are members of parliament. In Tanzania, for instance, about a fifth of parliament is in the cabinet, and at least another third have key appointments in the boards of government agencies. Elsewhere too it is not uncommon for heads of state to confer plum assignments to members of parliament—the very ones who cook in the kitchen then assess the quality of the food. One possible exception is the role of supreme audit institutions, whose independence is often constitutionally enshrined. But here, too, their powers are limited to stating





**Protestors kiss soldiers during a demonstration against former Tunisian leader Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally on January 20, 2011, in Tunis.** | AFP Photo: Martin Bureau

findings and giving advice to the very cadre they investigate. Among NGOs and donor agencies, the independent auditors and evaluators still need to be appointed by the ones that they will assess, and that fact is usually not lost on those who are hired. In soccer, it's simpler. Teams do not get to hire their referees.

One of the most palpable illustrations of this sort of conflict of interest is in the structure of the aid relationship. Donor agencies and recipient governments play multiple roles. They determine the basis of the partnership, the content of the program, the rules of the game, the assessment of progress, and the consequences of performance. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness calls this “partnership” and “mutual respect.” Fair enough, except that, having been involved in planning the menu, shopping for ingredients, cooking the meal, and establishing the standards for review,

both parties have a clear self-interest in having the dinner look good. Assessments, therefore, while noting an obligatory set of gaps and areas for improvement, tend to be done through rose-tinted lenses with little rigor about actual impact.<sup>2</sup>

Even where reviews are fair and balanced, the consequences are limited. Governments and NGOs want cash to spend. Donors need to exercise the imperative to disburse because moving money is a large part of the measure of success. Third parties, such as watchdog groups and journalists, try at times to offer independent viewpoints, but with difficulty because they have only limited access to

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, William Savedoff, Ruth Levine, and Nancy Birdsall, *When Will We Ever Learn? Improving Lives through Impact Evaluation*, Report of the Evaluation Gap Working Group (Center for Global Development, 2006), available at [http://www.cgdev.org/files/7973\\_file\\_WillWeEverLearn.pdf](http://www.cgdev.org/files/7973_file_WillWeEverLearn.pdf).

information. In these circumstances, unlike in soccer, the real outcomes get fudged. And the real losers end up being the very ones who development was meant to have served.

## **Soccer Is Radically Transparent**

Assessments of outcomes don't get fudged in soccer, in part due to the clarity of goals and rules and the independence of the referees—and also because the game is radically transparent.

It's hard to play soccer in secret. Soccer is played on streets and open fields. Everyone can watch and bear witness. For the big games, that involves not only the 60,000 people at the stadium, but also millions more watching on TV. Cameras capture every move, so that disputed calls

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## **There is a growing appreciation of the role of experimentation and the value of failure among writers of development.**

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(or actions that happen behind the referee's back) can be replayed from different angles, in slow-motion, to establish the truth not only for the experts but for everyone. This means that everyone can have an informed opinion about the game—the manager's strategy, the players' performance, the referees' calls, the fans' behavior—and the increasing opportunity to voice it through social and traditional media.

Because the players and managers know this, they know they need to do well and to play it right. Players who seek individual glory but do not help the team win are quickly exposed. Managers cannot continue to field favorite players or their

cousins who fail to perform, for the wrath of the fans will be upon them. Referee decisions are constantly scrutinized, and every error or seemingly partial call faces the harsh light of day. How well teams do, the final score, and the league table are open and updated in real time; they cannot have errors for long because the "crowd" will quickly point them out. Importantly, transparency in soccer constitutes public or shared (rather than private) knowledge, allowing collective responses and pressure. This sort of deep public transparency fosters accountability like nothing else.

The field of development is also moving toward greater transparency, aided by the proliferation of technologies that make it easier to collect, store, analyze, visualize, and share data; and by pressure of citizens from India to Kenya to Brazil, demanding their right to know. The Open Government Partnership,<sup>3</sup> a unique multilateral effort involving 50-plus countries, launched by Presidents Obama and Rousseff in 2011, is a reflection of this turn. But there is still a long way to go before governments achieve the transparency of a game of soccer.

Public service is a misnomer in most developing country contexts because it has little public orientation and even less service. Several recent studies, for example, show that absenteeism of public servants is widespread in health and education. Despite establishing client service charters and much capacity building, there is little responsiveness toward clients in both central and local governments. This can go on because, unlike soccer, there is no public witness, and the officials know that they can get away with it. Performance is not directly observed or replayed on video, whether it is malpractice by a tax official or the quiet dedication of a head teacher. Assessments

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.opengovpartnership.org](http://www.opengovpartnership.org).

are discussed behind closed doors, at best with a few stakeholders, and tend to meander into process and protocol where nothing is quite straightforward.

In contrast to soccer, the data collected in development are also not as revealing. First, the quality, especially of administrative (as compared to survey) data, is unreliable. Officials compiling data have little incentive to get it right, and the data do not go through the quality assurance and crowdsourcing checks that soccer enjoys. Second, data are often locked up in a few cupboards or on hard disks, with access restricted to a few, and a nightmare to obtain for others. Where data are made public, they tend to be in non-machine-readable formats that are harder to mash, map, and analyze. Third, the data rarely give a clear indication of the aspects that matter, such as learning outcomes or quality of care or levels of satisfaction. Fourth, it is usually not easy to compare one entity with another. Say that I find out that 1 out of 12 women dies in childbirth in my community. How do I make sense of it unless I know the rates in the neighboring communities and other countries? Like in soccer, meaning is rarely absolute; it comes from the ability to compare.

### **Soccer Is Open and Responsive**

Soccer's regulatory apparatus and data are impressive, but what excites most people is how the game is played. How does a player know what to do, how to play, how to help her team score goals, and prevent the other team from doing the same? No doubt, managers do a lot of strategizing, studying of opponents, planning of tactics, and practicing of "set-pieces," such as corners and penalty kicks. But unlike development, there is no fixed plan with steps charted out in the form of a log frame. No manager tells a player to follow a script line by line because she understands that a game is fluid,

dynamic, and unpredictable.

In soccer, the point is not to devise a plan that anticipates every possible move of the other team in great detail, but to coach players on how to read the signs and respond skillfully and quickly. Surprise and unpredictability are constants as each team tries to catch the other off guard and do something different. It takes an open architecture way of doing things—a constant risk-taking, experimentation, and adaptation that requires an intelligent reading of constraints and opportunities as well as the ability to respond with agility. What works, what connects, what moves the ball forward is quickly recognized, not least of all from the cheers of the fans. This sort of feedback is crucial to testing players and ideas. In the soccer marketplace, who and what works quickly will rise; what and who doesn't will be expediently set aside.

Save a few feigned dives and injuries (that are punished, should the referee catch them), the energy is focused on playing ball and winning the game. There is no time to offer explanations and excuses, or to passively wait for someone else to do their part. Everyone chips in, takes responsibility, takes initiative, and works to score goals. Everyone searches for opportunities to make things happen rather than reasons to explain why they did not.

In development, the inability to continually interpret feedback and adapt is a great limitation. Instead of developing sensitive antenna and intelligent response capabilities to deal with uncertainty, developers try to figure things out at the outset (for example, by undertaking situation analyses) and then devise plans with as many fixed markers as possible. It is almost as if the response to the dynamism of context is to establish absolute certainty, to say that "we will establish every aspect so carefully and in such great detail, that whatever else happens doesn't



matter.” If soccer were development, the manager would tell Player A, at the outset, things like “ignore all else that is happening; at minute 37, from the left back position, pass the ball on to Player B on the far right side, who will then head it on to Player C,” and so forth. In trying to play it like that, whether that particular move makes sense or a better opportunity is missed is not even a consideration.

The other problem with fixed pathways is that experimentation and improvisation are discouraged. Tinkering, trying things out, making unorthodox connections, falling and failing, and trying again and again until it works are not traits rewarded by development managers or funders. Yet this sort of approach is common not only in soccer but also in a great many innovation hubs in Silicon Valley, theaters in Mumbai, and among makers of articulate toy cars using twigs and discarded flip-flops in Sumbawanga. In soccer, a manager understands that success comes from an intelligent and creative unleashing of human agency. In development, success is too often misconstrued to require a straitjacketing of agency. The good news is that this is changing; there is a growing appreciation of the role of experimentation and the value of failure among writers of development.<sup>4</sup> But the bureaucracies and incentive structures of governments, NGOs, and aid agencies have a lot of catching up to do.

## Conclusion

I have argued that the vitality of soccer derives from the clarity of its regulatory framework; a clear alignment of goals, success, and incentives; and the open-architecture nature of its play, in

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way To Fight Global Poverty* (Public Affairs, 2011) and Tim Harford, *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011).

**Libyan girls flash the “V” sign from the porthole of a small ship as they arrive to Banghazi port coming from the devastated Libyan city of Misrata, on April 18, 2011. A ferry rescued almost 1,000 people from the city.** | AFP Photo: Marwan Naamani

particular the space it fosters for an improvising human agency. Soccer as a metaphor for international development may come across as frivolous, except that the features that make soccer work may be essential to motivating and realizing success in development. These same features seem to drive innovation and growth in industry and business, and increasingly in some of the most interesting parts of academia. Perhaps when it comes to solving complex challenges in any sphere, *play* may be just the verb we need.

This viewpoint also suggests that, as with soccer, getting a few key things right about the core aspects of development may matter more than sorting out the intransigence of its supra governance. For a great game of soccer, and possibly for development, everyday governance and incentives writ small matter more than the election of officials who hand out the trophies. Observe the young people who play soccer every day, how they think, how they make their moves, how they make the game flow. Observe the intensity and delight in their play. You will know that they’ve got something deeply right.

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