



# Guardians of the Game

by Todd Tuell



The facility built in the Khayelitsch Township outside of Cape Town, South Africa, benefited more than 6,000 youngsters in its first year of operation.



**HERE ON THE EVE** of the FIFA World Cup, the eyes of the world turn towards Brazil in anticipation of watching the world's most popular sport. This is an event that brings fans together every four years. But FIFA, the world governing body of soccer, realizes this sport can offer much more than a celebration of sportsmanship, athletic achievement, and passion for this game. It can have a lasting legacy in people's lives.

It is easy to consider it just a game. Only the most talented few can ever hope to compete professionally and earn a living playing a sport. Through its Football For Hope Movement, however, FIFA believes communities can harness the power of soccer to make a positive impact on the world and improve the lives of people in the poorest and most disadvantaged areas.

To support these Football For Hope programs, FIFA launched its "20 Centres for 2010" campaign during the last World Cup in South Africa. "20 Centres for 2010 was the social initiative of the 2010 FIFA World Cup," explains Federico Addiechi, head of corporate social responsibility at FIFA. "It was the decision back in 2007 that was taken by FIFA to leave a lasting legacy in the African continent by providing it an infrastructure which would help them address education and public health issues with the aid of football."

The goal in building these 20 centers was much more than offering young kids a place to learn to play soccer. These new centers, which are spread across the entire continent from Mali to Ethiopia to South Africa, include classrooms, health clinics, libraries, and computer labs. These are the vital facilities necessary to make health and educational programs a reality in areas that previously had none.

But soccer is the common thread to all of the centers. It inspires the kids to show up. "It's a great way to bring young people together in any community. More importantly, it's a brilliant way to create role models," says James Donald, managing director of Grassroot Soccer, a FIFA partner in South Africa.

These centers provide children and young adults the opportunity to learn skills both on and off the field. These programs are making cultural changes in each community as these kids return to their homes and neighborhoods. "Football can change things socially," explains Souadou Diabate, head of FIFA's partnership in Mali. "The centre will still be running in 20 or 30 years. It's going to touch a lot of people."

Each center includes a 40-by-20-meter soccer field as well as buildings for education and public health. But Africa is a huge continent with very

diverse needs. Each of the 20 soccer locations is unique. FIFA understands that it will not work to simply make a single one-size-fits-all blueprint of a center. Mark Warren of Architecture for Humanity, the organization that coordinated the design and construction of these facilities says, “What we wanted was 20 unique, different designs that fit the environment and the community needs.”

Understanding those community needs is key. To be successful and to ensure these centers continue operating for 20 or 30 years and beyond, FIFA partners with established charitable organizations with workers who understand the unique challenges facing each location. The challenges range from literacy and unemployment

from very treatable illnesses. This center brings soccer, education, and personal development skills together for young women to improve their social status.

Individuals with special needs are targets of severe discrimination in Namibia. FIFA partners with Special Olympics Namibia to help children with disabilities not only train and compete in athletics, but also to provide them education to help overcome social and employment barriers in the community.

But it all starts with soccer.

For one glorious month this summer, fans will be thrilled and entertained as they cheer on the best players and teams the world has to offer



A boy heads the ball at a Football for Hope festival site in Alexander, South Africa.

to nutrition and HIV/AIDS awareness.

Each community owns its center. They are involved from the very beginning. Having that involvement ensures that the community will work to make the programs successful.

In Mali, gender inequality is a serious social challenge. This center is located in Baguinéda, a rural area where 40 percent of girls do not attend school. Without an education, most have very poor job prospects and additionally end up suffering

as they face off against one another. As heroes are discovered and one team rises to the top, remember it's not just every four years that soccer can touch our lives. Soccer is changing the world every day. 

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