

'Transformation' from above

SA soccer: appearance and reality

This is part two of a series on the state of South African soccer. **Dale T. McKinley** examines the transformation of soccer and looks at what the administration set out to do and what it has achieved (or rather not achieved).

By the late 1990s, it was clear that, despite the unification of divided soccer bodies, and South Africa's national teams' admirable performances on the African continent and global fields, the transformation of soccer had barely got off the ground.

It was not surprising then, that Sifa (SA Football Association) focused its 'transformation' on what was the 'easiest' target - administration. In the words of twice CEO of Sifa, Raymond Hack, apartheid's "administrative abnormalities" were systematically removed through a "natural progression of inclusion and synthesising administration".

It did not take long to implement this kind of administrative transformation and on paper it looks impressive. It included:

- A 24-member National Executive Committee (NEC) designed to manage and oversee all aspects of the game;
- 18 separate committees and sub-committees of the NEC;
- 11 full-time staff members dedicated to soccer 'development' and 4 full-time staff for soccer 'education';
- 52 soccer regions across the

country and 3 club/amateur leagues;

- 5 national teams (Men: Senior, U-23, U-20, U-17; Women: Senior).

However, this impressive set-up has taken a few developmental steps backwards from what was on offer a few years ago.

STEPS BACKWARD

Over the last three years, Sifa's Under-14 and Under-12 teams for boys as well as the women's Under-19 team have been dumped. During the same period the executive and a number of committees expanded. In other words, more national top-heavy bureaucracy was introduced while national team opportunities for the youngest players, amongst whom soccer development is most needed, have been reduced.

For any administrative 'transformation' to have a positive effect outside of the immediate bureaucracy, it has to be matched by transformation at the grassroots level. But like so many of our state agencies and departments over the last decade, Sifa's transformation focused on a range of impressive-sounding developmental and educational frameworks and plans and programmes.

A prime example is the 'Youth Development Policy Framework' which invokes 'nation-building', 'Ubuntu' and the 'African Renaissance' as a means to "encourage mass participation, identify talent, educate and develop, encourage play, manage resources and ensure participation at national and international level".

This framework makes a long list of plans and promises. These include firstly, Talent Detection: "Sifa will employ scientific processes, systems, measurement, principles, models and tests to detect and develop talent." Secondly, Facilities and Equipment: "Sifa will establish development centres in all regions that comply with international standards." Thirdly, Schools of Excellence: "The Sifa/Transnet school will be retained and strategies put in place to ensure it runs at maximum capacity." And finally, Schools: "SAFA will assist with all relevant technical development and provide guidelines for football development".

Like all bureaucrats who take themselves too seriously, top-level Sifa officials have claimed that they have delivered on this, and other, 'transformational' programmes. Unfortunately, the reality is that while there have been certain improvements in, for example, the number of coaching and player training courses as well as competitions taking place at community and school level, the whole transformation promised (and desperately needed) has not happened.

Long-time soccer administrator and former Sifa Director of Football



Development, Zola Dunywa, admitted that Safa is, “still struggling to implement” the ‘Youth Development Policy Framework’ that is the centrepiece of soccer transformation. The ‘transformation’ of soccer has masked serious structural deficiencies. What we see looks impressive but what lies behind is another matter.

GOVERNMENT FAILURE

Across the soccer landscape from politicians, players, trade unionists, journalists, fans and sports enthusiasts, there is consensus that South African soccer has been in a ‘state of crisis’ for some time.

Even the government recognised its own failure to carry through with its mandate to transform the sporting landscape. In a 2006 speech to the National Assembly, the Deputy Minister of Sport and Recreation, Gert Oosthuizen, admitted: “Sport is still being trivialised in our country... we need three things; resources, resources and more resources... What we need is: infrastructure organisation, programmes, facilities, equipment and kit; and, finance that underpins

both infrastructure and human resources... we have the smallest budget of all national government departments.”

No surprise then, that in 2006 the government pushed through the Amendment to the National Sport and Recreation Act, which, “seeks to empower the minister (of Sport & Recreation) to issue guidelines or policies to promote the values of equity, representivity and redress in sport and recreation”.

Three years on however, the abdication of public sector support and involvement in soccer, has ensured the absence of ‘accessible and affordable development programmes’ in schools and communities.

When ex-national coach and Safa Technical Committee member, Ted Dimitru, organised a soccer development workshop for schools in Soweto over three years ago, he found that, “most schools can provide only two footballs for their teams that are used for training, as well as matches on gravel pitches without proper goalposts and equipment”.

Dimitru also noted: “Incredibly, the education department is providing

schools with tennis balls, badminton equipment, cricket bats, rugby balls, etc, despite the fact that the large majority of schools do not have the facilities or the traditions for such sports... the teachers involved in school football have never been offered any basic instruction on coaching”.

It does not take a developmental expert to figure out that the situation is far worse for schools and communities in far-flung small towns and rural areas.

Instead of taking charge and driving through public development programmes, national government handed over its mandate to under-capacitated and under-financed local governments, the private sector, as well as to the corporatised, for-profit, governing soccer body, Safa. For soccer infrastructure in smaller, local community stadiums which are owned by municipalities, this has meant, according to Trevor Phillips (ex-CEO of Premier Soccer League) that, “there has been hardly any investment in them for the last ten years”.

SOCCER IN CRISIS

When it comes to development programmes on the ground, it appears that top Safa bureaucrats are the only ones who believe their propaganda. Whether it is the sad state of grassroots infrastructure, the pathetic financial and human resources allocated to grassroots development and women’s soccer, or that it has taken Safa over two years to replace its Director of Development with a new ‘Technical Director’ (men’s under-20 national coach, Serame Letsoaka), the facts speak for themselves.

When appointing Letsoaka in March this year, Safa noted that he would be responsible for, “... coming up with development plans and programmes embarking on full-

scale grassroots football development". How else can we read this than as confirmation of developmental failure?

Many agree. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) has stated that South African soccer is "in a crisis", where players have "lost basic technical skills". Soccer journalist, Barend-Batho Kortjass, has said that, "this country has had no systematic development of players. All we have done is hold a jumble sale of wrong ideas, chance taking and cutting corners in the hope that things will fall into place. Instead of falling into place, things have fallen all over the place..." According to Trevor Phillips, "no one is running development programmes... they don't exist".

The obvious problems of a lack of strategic vision, committed practical management and financial support surrounding soccer development, combined with the failure of the public sector to invest funds for development programmes, has produced a situation in which soccer development is a financial hostage to the corporate sector. The result is that while the elites of South African soccer are into self-promotion and the blame game, 99% of soccer players at the amateur level, are being cheated out of their hopes and dreams.

SEA OF EGOS AND MEDIOCRITY

Since 1994, the decline of South African soccer has been huge. From a global ranking of 16th in 1997, the national men's team is now ranked 77th in the world, just below Uzbekistan and Trinidad & Tobago.

Continentially, Bafana Bafana is no longer able to claim it is amongst the top-quality national sides. Most national teams have performed

weakly in continental and global competitions. The ironic exception is a privately-sponsored, South African 'street kids' side which won an international competition in Germany in 2006.

The situation off the field has been even worse. Including the new national men's team coach, Brazil's Joel Santana, there have been 15 coaches at the helm of Bafana Bafana since South Africa's readmission into international sport over 14 years ago. When previous coach, Carlos Perreira took over in 2006, Cosatu said: "The coach is taking over a ship that has ground to a halt. The poor performance of the national squad reflects the deeper crisis running from the premier soccer level down to the amateur level".

Safa's priorities in dealing with the crisis are shown by the fact that even though it announced an R87-million profit for the 2005-2006 financial year, its annual soccer development budget only stood at R3-million, while ex-coach Parreira received from R12 - R20-million per annum from Safa.

For the no-nonsense Phillips, it is clear where the problem lies: "Safa's preoccupation has been navel-gazing... 80% of funds spent by Safa go towards administrative costs... I thought 2010 would be a catalyst, but Safa is endemically corrupt and institutionally incompetent".

In a similar vein, another ex-Bafana Bafana coach, Carlos Queiroz (now Portugal's national coach) fired this comment at South African soccer officialdom: "One of the problems is that they think they are much better than they really are... they think the world champions are the only ones above them. The trouble is there is nothing there..."

Matters have been made worse by widespread public perceptions

that top soccer officials are little more than a group of money-grubbing egoists whose main purpose is to ensure that they remain comfortable in their well-paid bureaucratic positions.

Such perceptions are not without cause. Many of the same faces have remained at the helm, in various positions, since the early 1990s. Also sponsorship deals have seen some of the same individuals receiving huge payouts.

Further, it is no secret that the billions of rands in public expenditure on stadiums for the 2010 World Cup have greatly benefited those at the top of South Africa's soccer world. The result is that a status quo approach has been institutionalised in the administration and management of the game.

One of the most repeated slogans on South African television and radio soccer programmes is "for the love of the game". Paradoxically this captures the shocking state of the "beautiful game". Simply put, those who have the privilege of being in charge of soccer have forgotten why they are there.

The much-loved South African soccer star, Pule 'Ace' Ntsoelengoe, put it best: "Soccer in SA needs to go back to where it was... the love of the game needs to be restored, especially in the administration. Soccer fans want to see us serve much better than we do today. The challenge is not how much money I leave behind when I die but to leave a legacy for my children and the youth of this country." LB

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