

FOOTBALL DIPLOMACY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: ANALYZING THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE (1960-2023)

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the of instrumentation of Sports especially Football, as a tool for National as well as International engagements, necessary for the advancement of the Nigerian State during the specified period. It was observed that, the entity in focus had not committed itself to exploring the advantages it has in the identified endeavour. With huge human resource potentials embedded in the ‘Giant of Africa’, the Nigerian State had rather, politicized the development as well as empowerment of her citizens through football especially from the grassroots level. Analyzing response strategy to the assimilation of football to national life of countries from the South American continent, it was identified that, more ‘ambassadors’ of Nigeria’s economic progress would be commissioned should she provide the level playing ground for talents to thrive towards international engagement. The study adopted the historical method in data collation, processing and presentation.

KEYWORDS: FOOTBALL, DIPLOMACY, NIGERIA, DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

Football, the probably world’s most popular sport, is not merely a game; it is an intensely political and economic engagement with deeply entrenched global governance structure. Football has grown from a sport for growth and partnership to full blown power sports that affects life everywhere on the planet, while making stars out of ordinary people. Becoming a global brand has changed the politics in football as governments across the world seek to partner with it. ⁱ The politics of global football comprise the strategic engagement of power, diplomacy, national identity, commercial interests, and regulatory power, all largely coordinated via supranational institutions, regional confederations, and state actors.ⁱⁱ The politics constitute a domain of high complexity mirroring the intersection of sport and international relations that has made football a vehicle for soft power, national branding, and even geopolitical rivalries.

At the node of world football politics is the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), established in 1904, which is the highest governing body of the sport throughout the world.ⁱⁱⁱ The political authority of FIFA is not only derived from its staging of international tournaments such as the FIFA World Cup but also from its regulation of membership rights, laws, financing systems, and disciplinary action.^{iv} Its organizational structure is federative and involves 211 national associations and six continental associations: UEFA (Europe), CAF (Africa), CONCACAF (North and Central America and Caribbean), CONMEBOL (South America), AFC (Asia), and OFC (Oceania). This structure mimics the United Nations system and embodies the global-local tension between national football associations and the international body.^v FIFA decision-making, particularly with regard to World Cup hosting rights, sponsorship deals, and policy choices, is often shrouded in realpolitik and corporate lobbying.^{vi} FIFA's 2010 host selection of the 2022 World Cup for Qatar, a tiny but wealthy Gulf state without a football heritage, is paradigmatic proof of the intersection of energy wealth, diplomatic clout, and global sports marketing.^{vii} The decision is viewed by critics and commentators as proof of a geopolitics of arrangements by which oil states use football as a tool of sportswashing, a technique of maximizing global reputation while shifting attention away from human rights abuses at home.^{viii}

Besides, the selection and execution of host nations usually signify larger global inequalities. Global South states, such as South Africa in 2010 and Brazil in 2014, have used mega-events to exert soft power and galvanize the nation, but these efforts were financed at the cost of significant social and economic cost, in the form of mandatory evictions and unaffordable public expenditure.^{ix} In both contexts, world football regulation appears to be an expression of neoliberalism in practice, as spectacle, sponsorship, and global media engage to commodify regional cultures.^x At a political and in the context of coalitions and maneuver, continental confederations like UEFA and CAF function not just as sporting unions but also as blocs at the regional level that influence voting in FIFA. Possessing both technical infrastructure and economic potency, UEFA has long dominated football policy globally.

However, newly formed blocs in Asia and Africa, mirroring the global demographic majority of world football, witnessed growth in voices in opposing the Eurocentrism of football administration.^{xi} Thus, the election of Gianni Infantino as FIFA President in 2016, which was overwhelmingly determined by African and Asian votes, marked a geopolitical shift in football elections. Yet, these 'underdeveloped' countries have not been able to maximize the fullest of their potentials in the global football arena, in terms of leveraging their strategic advantage for national development. It is consequent upon the seeming inadequacy of the Nigerian state to utilize her vital position as 'Giant from Africa' to initiate policies that would benefit her citizens at the global level, that is paper is done to shed the spotlight on the urgency of having purposeful directions for managing domestic challenges through external linkages that football provides since the twentieth century.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Football is more than a game. It is an economic engagement, political instrument as well as religious endeavour as peoples 'blindly' and 'wholeheartedly' following the currents of its flow. Behind the idea of entertainment it brings to the people is the financial empowerment it offers to

both citizens as well as countries alike. The cases of the United Kingdom, Brazil, Argentina, etc are cases in point. However, Nigeria has not instituted the desired framework and institutional support to ensure that, she ultimately benefit from her football activities. This would ensure that, she had contributed favourably in diverse ways to the advancement of the ‘game’, but have not sufficiently, benefitted from it to manage the myriad of economic problems in the country. It is against this background that this paper attempts to identify the essential framework and institutional support that would make Nigerian, no just get entertained but also aggregated the benefits accruing therefrom for the onward advancement of the nation-state.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

This section attempts to give a mental comprehension of the concepts to ensure, a worthwhile direction is set for our engagement. While the variables would be clarified in a thematic pattern, Nigeria would be the first to receive attention in this important exercise. When the name, Nigeria is mentioned, it gives a sentimental direction depending on the individuals mindset about the concept. Nigeria is strategically located in West Africa, occupying a prominent position both in terms of landmass and geopolitical importance. The country shares international boundaries with Benin to the west, Niger to the north, Chad to the northeast, and Cameroon to the east, while its southern boundary opens to the Gulf of Guinea, part of the Atlantic Ocean. Geographically, Nigeria lies between latitudes 4° and 14° North and longitudes 2° and 15° East, with a total land area of approximately 923,769 square kilometres. This makes it the largest country in West Africa by area and the most populous country on the African continent.^{xii}

Nigeria, as Africa’s most populous country, holds immense potential in terms of its human capital, which has long been recognized as both a national asset and a development challenge. As of 2015, the country’s population was estimated at over 183 million, with a growth rate exceeding 2.5% per annum, positioning Nigeria not only as the demographic heavyweight of Africa but as a strategic player in global population dynamics.^{xiii} This sheer size gives Nigeria a large labour pool, which—if properly educated, empowered, and engaged—could serve as the engine of national transformation. The demographic composition of Nigeria's population further accentuates its strategic value. More than 60% of Nigerians were under the age of 25 in 2015, representing one of the youngest populations globally.^{xiv} This youth bulge is a double-edged sword: while it signifies a robust workforce and innovation potential, it also presents high risks of unemployment, restiveness, and emigration if not matched with productive opportunities.^{xv} The World Bank has highlighted that despite rising enrolment in education, youth unemployment remains above 30%, especially among university graduates.^{xvi} Thus, the country’s labour market inefficiencies and skills mismatch constitute serious constraints to harnessing its human capital effectively.

The sports sector remains one of Nigeria’s most visible contributions to global human capital, particularly in football. The national football team—the Super Eagles—has consistently qualified for FIFA World Cups since 1994 and won multiple Africa Cup of Nations titles.^{xvii} Beyond the national team, Nigerian footballers such as Jay-Jay Okocha, Nwankwo Kanu, and Victor Osimhen have achieved international recognition, contributing not only to sporting excellence but also to sports diplomacy and national branding.^{xviii} The 2013 AFCON victory and the 1996 Olympic gold

medal in football stand as historic achievements that project Nigeria's human capital onto the global stage. Nigeria's creative and digital sectors also reveal the vibrancy of its human resources. The Nigerian film industry (Nollywood) employs an estimated one million people, making it the second-largest employer in the country after agriculture. It is also the second-largest film industry globally in terms of output, according to UNESCO.^{xix} Nigerian musicians, notably in the Afrobeats genre, dominate African and international charts. Artists such as Burna Boy, Wizkid, and Tems have received Grammy Awards, collaborating with global brands and influencing cultural flows. In the tech ecosystem, Nigeria has birthed start-ups like Flutterwave, Paystack, and Andela, with investments from global venture capitalists and backing from technology giants like Stripe and Google.^{xx} These innovations are driven predominantly by Nigeria's youthful and educated population, particularly in cities like Lagos and Abuja.

Football's economic and infrastructural impact extends beyond the playing field, influencing local and global markets. The sport contributes significantly to national economies through employment, sponsorships, broadcasting rights, and tourism. Major tournaments such as the FIFA World Cup and the UEFA Champions League generate billions in revenue, with host nations experiencing increased investment in infrastructure, hospitality, and transportation.^{xxi} The economic footprint of football is evident in its commercialisation, where clubs operate as businesses, engaging in branding, merchandising, and media rights negotiations to maximise revenue streams.^{xxii} Despite its positive contributions, sport and football in particular also faces challenges, including corruption, financial mismanagement, and issues related to discrimination and inequality. Reports of bribery in football governance, particularly in FIFA's bidding processes, have raised concerns over transparency and ethical standards.^{xxiii}

The Nature and Structure of International Football

Global football is governed by a multileveled system involving supranational organizations, regional confederations, rule-making bodies, legal adjudicators, and national associations. All of them play a crucial role in shaping the rules of the sport, policies, competition structures, and political economy.^{xxiv} These key governing bodies in global football are:

FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association)

Founded in 1904, FIFA is the global governing body of football, responsible for all affairs of the sport, from grass-roots to the organization of every quadrennial FIFA World Cup. It has a unicameral Congress composed of 211 member associations, each with an equal vote.^{xxv xxvi} The FIFA Council (formerly the Executive Committee), which takes charge in between Congresses, directs through strategic decisions, competition oversight, and ethical compliance.^{xxvii} Its organizational framework includes a number of significant permanent standing committees: the Ethics Committee, the Integrity Committee, and the Audit and Compliance Committee—established in the wake of the 2015 corruption scandal to enhance transparency and accountability.^{xxviii} Its revenue model, television broadcasting agreements, sponsorship, and hosting fees, allows it immense financial autonomy and geopolitical leverage in the realm of sports diplomacy.^{xxix}

International Football Association Board (IFAB)

Founded in 1886, IFAB predates FIFA and maintains ultimate authority over the Laws of the Game, with a technocratic and autonomous decision-making structure.^{xxx} Structured to be made up of the four British "home" associations of English, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish football, in addition to FIFA, IFAB requires a vote balance, FIFA has four votes and the home associations four together, to forestall a dominant faction dominating law reform.⁷ This structure guarantees rule purity and uniformity among member associations, safeguarding technical control from politicization.^{xxxii}

Continental Confederations (UEFA, CONMEBOL, CAF, AFC, CONCACAF, OFC)

Six regional organizations fall under FIFA, each governing football in their respective continents. These are UEFA (Union of European Football Associations), CONMEBOL (South America), CONCACAF (North and Central America and the Caribbean), CAF (Africa), AFC (Asia), and OFC (Oceania). These confederations preside over regional tournaments (UEFA European Championship, Copa América, AFC Asian Cup) and manage funds for regional development.^{xxxiii} They are also powerful voting blocs within FIFA's Congress, balancing global governance through continental groupings.^{xxxiii}

Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS)

Based in Lausanne since 1984, CAS is an independent sports arbitration organization.^{xxxiv} Even if not a football organization, its ruling on matters ranging from transfer disputes to doping and financial fair play issues has reshaped football regulation in accordance with legal accountability principles.^{xxxv} The CAS model highlights the tension between regulatory autonomy and external legal oversight in contemporary sports administration.

National Football Associations

Each FIFA member country possesses a national association of football (e.g., England's FA), responsible for domestic league organisation, grassroots, coach accreditation, and international representation.^{xxxvi} While hierarchically subordinate to FIFA and their continental associations, the national associations wield de facto authority over talent streams, domestic commercial deals, and mobilisation of supporters, pillars of the architecture of global football.^{xxxvii} Their alignment with FIFA, such as compliance with global statutes and voting in elections, is central to the federative model's effectiveness.

This multilayered governance ecology, topped by FIFA, IFAB as the rule-maker, continental confederations as regional custodians, CAS as legal arbiter, and national associations as foundation-level operators, presents a complex matrix of authority, accountability, and jurisdiction. Power within the system is channeled through budgets, vote blocs, judicial decisions, and normative power, resulting in a polity in which regional ambitions, legal norms, and political pressures constantly reshape the landscape. The design also reflects broader trends in global governance, marrying hierarchical, federative, and network-based modalities, and seizing football's entwinement with public policy, international law, and transnational capital.

NIGERIA AND INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL

The origin of football in Nigeria is traced to the early 20th century, and its introduction was directly linked to British colonialism. Football as recreation and cultural change, was adopted and became a gigantic part of Nigerian life from virtually the start. Football came into Nigeria at a time of British colonial rule, which had a lasting effect on most Nigerian ways of life, including education, social life, and sports. The inaugural official football match in Nigeria, was between the crew of the British warship HMS Thistle and the Hope Waddell Training Institute of Calabar in June 1904. The Nigerian team won with a 3-2 score, opening organized football in Nigeria^{xxxviii}. This was a turning point, setting a precedent for the establishment of the sport in the country.

Throughout the decades after the first recorded match in 1904, football was adopted, especially in the urban areas of Lagos, Calabar, and Port Harcourt, where colonial power was most effective. Locally, clubs were already emerging as early as 1906, further digging the game in Nigerian society^{xxxix}. Initially, the early clubs were organized with the support of local elites, and expatriates, but popularity eventually filter through to the masses. The Lagos Marine club (founded in 1894), and Ibadan Lions club (founded in 1913), were few of the most vintage Nigerian football clubs (Nigerian Football Federation, 2006). They paved the foundation on which later success was erected since they organized domestic leagues as well as organize the domestic game in Nigeria. The establishment of the Nigerian Football Union (NFU) in 1933 saw its first major Nigeria football tournament take place, Governor's Cup^{xl}. This was a cut-off point to the institutionalization of Nigeria football, and marked an indicator that national tournaments have become institutionalized.

In the subsequent decades following the setting up of NFU, the game became organized. During the late 1940s, football was well established in Nigeria's major towns and was even starting to sprout in rural area towns. During the 1950s, there were over 50 football clubs within Nigeria, and the Nigerian national football team was beginning to place the nation in the global limelight. The growing popularity of football in Nigeria made the nation a lively member of world football. Football in Nigeria was embraced by the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) in 1949, and it played a major role in developing football in Nigeria^{xli}. Nigeria has remain blessed with football, and in 1980, Nigeria won its first continental title, the Africa Cup of Nations, which was hosted in Lagos^{xlii}.

Nigeria's involvement in world football politics has had a number of epochal peaks, both on the field of athletic success, and at the political table of international football leadership. From the high-flying on-field show-stops that raised the nation's international profile, to the leadership positions in continental and international football governance, Nigeria has actively leveraged football as an instrument of global diplomacy, soft power dissemination, and domestic identity formation. The height of Nigeria's global football glory perhaps began with its dominant performance at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, where the country's national under-23 side, took the gold medal in men's football. This historical victory was the first African country to win Olympic football gold, defeating football giants Brazil and Argentina in the semi-final and final respectively.^{xliii} The tournament brought Nigeria into the limelight, rewriting histories regarding African football and giving Nigeria an unprecedented opportunity to prove itself among the world sporting order. As

Nadel noted, Olympic success for African nations like Nigeria is, on most occasions, symbolic of postcolonial pride and geopolitical assertion.^{xliv}

Nigeria's age-grade triumphs also solidified its football credentials and contributed to its influence in FIFA and CAF. The nation possesses a record five FIFA U-17 World Cup titles (1985, 1993, 2007, 2013, and 2015), a record unmatched anywhere in the world.^{xlv} This superiority in young football not only brings with it Nigeria's added prestige but also affords it influence in policy-making and decision making in FIFA's development and talent scouting initiatives. As indicated by FIFA's development plan documents, countries with stable youth development records tend to be included in strategic planning forums.^{xlvi}



ABOVE: Nigeria's Super Eagles, Senior Male National Team.

BELOW: Nigeria's Super Falcons, Senior Female National Team. Source: Channels Tv



NIGERIA AND POLITICAL IMPACT IN THE FOOTBALL ARENA

Politically, Nigeria has held an active and influential role within the Confederation of African Football (CAF) and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). Nigerians have served in key roles within them. Amos Adamu served on FIFA's Executive Committee between

2006 and 2010 on behalf of West Africa.^{xlvi} The fact that he was there signified greater involvement in high-level football governance on the part of Nigeria. There were also the instances of Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) former President Ibrahim Galadima and subsequently Amaju Pinnick, who functioned in CAF and FIFA standing committees. Pinnick's election into the FIFA Council in 2021 was widely regarded as proof of the increase in Nigeria's stature in world football politics.^{xlvi}

Pinnick's ascendancy was more about strategy than symbolism. He played a leading role in pushing for increased African representation on FIFA tournaments and committees. Under his leadership, Nigeria formed part of the broader Pan-African effort to reshape what were perceived as Eurocentric global football governing bodies.^{xlix} This is relevant in terms of the "glocalization" of sport governance Allison and Monnington discuss, whereby local agents seek to make their presence felt within global structures.^l Nigeria has also used football to exert soft power and reinforce diplomatic connections. In this regard, Ndlovu-Gatsheni contends that sport can be a powerful diplomatic tool for African countries, especially in cases where traditional diplomacy channels are limited.^{li} An example of this is when Nigeria hosted major football games like the FIFA U-20 World Cup in 1999 and the FIFA U-17 World Cup in 2009. These events were not mere sporting events but political efforts intended to improve Nigeria's global image, enhance tourism, and draw foreign investment.^{lii}

Further, Nigerian players who have become globally renowned have also served in an unofficial capacity as ambassadors for Nigeria, molding Nigeria's image in football diplomacy around the world. Household names like Nwankwo Kanu, Jay-Jay Okocha, and Victor Osimhen in more recent years have used their role to market African football and have on occasion been approached with ambassadorial positions in football diplomacy and youth development initiatives.^{liii} These players, as postcolonial image makers, help redefine Nigeria's international image from traditional political narratives.

Second, Nigeria's experienced World Cup outings—particularly its Round of 16 shows in 1994, 1998, and 2014—solidified Nigeria's position as among Africa's foremost footballing powerhouses. The 1994 squad, with Rashidi Yekini and Finidi George among others, ranked fifth in FIFA World Rankings of the year—the highest recorded for an African nation.^{liv} Giulianotti and Armstrong are of the view that, such acknowledgements also serve as potent symbols of regional leadership and collective continental pride.^{lv} The Nigerian government had made conscious effort to connect football success with political legitimacy and national unity. Political authority has often poured enormous amounts of money into football at times of national conflict or transformation to channel popular anger and offer national harmony. As Alegi pointed out, African leaders tend to instrumentalize football for regime legitimacy and use the sport as an instrument for global messaging and a national opiate.^{lvi} Nigeria's military and democratic leaders alike have consistently hosted victorious teams at Aso Rock, awarded national honors, and used football to shift focus away from political crises.^{lvii}

In the 21st century, Nigeria's contribution to taking on board the demands for reforms in FIFA administration, equitable allocation of World Cup slots, and CAF financial transparency is a demonstration of its changing role in football politics. In 2022, the approval of increasing Africa's slots in the 2026 FIFA World Cup from 5 to 9+1 (intercontinental playoff) was driven in part by

ongoing pressure from African football administrators, with Nigeria at the forefront.^{lviii} In entirety, Nigeria's heights of global football politics reach beyond pitch achievements to encompass meaningful involvement in governance, diplomacy, and policy-making. With youth dominance, administrative representation, hosting rights, and symbolic athlete-diplomats, Nigeria has carved a remarkable niche in global football order. These accomplishments demonstrate the country's capacity to utilize football as both an instrument of soft power as well as a vehicle of world political standing.

Despite Nigeria's highs in international football, Nigeria's participation in international football politics has also experienced some low points. The low points are characterized by administrative inefficiencies, corruption, political interference, lack of institutional continuity, which has culminated in Nigeria's marginalization in key international football decision-making. Collectively, these issues have undermined Nigeria's consistent representation within the top echelons of international football governance and tarnished its image in FIFA and the Confederation of African Football (CAF). One of the most enduring problems is the recurring crisis in the leadership of the Nigeria Football Federation (NFF). The last two decades have seen Nigeria's football government plagued by factional leadership tussles, court injunctions, and disputed elections.^{lix} The frequent leadership tussles have invariably attracted the attention of FIFA, which has consistently applied threats of suspension and raised warnings over what it perceives as untoward government interference in the affairs of the NFF.^{lx} This instability of governance diminishes Nigeria's image in the international football community and limits its voice in global football politics. As Onwumechili notes, the lack of autonomy and professionalism in the administration of football in Nigeria is a major inhibitor of effective participation in international sports diplomacy.^{lxi}

Political interference also continues to weaken Nigeria's role in football politics. Successive governments have politicized football, interfering repeatedly with the NFF, appointing unqualified political supporters to key positions, or withholding funds during periods of administrative conflict.^{lxii} The interventions of the Nigerian government, though sometimes aimed at restoring stability, have consistently violated FIFA's statutes regarding the independence of member associations, resulting in sanctions or threats of same.^{lxiii} As it is stated in FIFA's policy on governance of national associations, political interference erodes the founding principles of autonomy and democratic governance of football.^{lxiv}

In terms of representation, Nigeria has been grossly underrepresented in key FIFA reform processes. For instance, following the widescale corruption scandals that established the 2015 FIFA governance reforms, Nigeria's voice was noticeably absent from either the drafting of policy master plans or the appointment of reform committees. This absence is symptomatic of the country's lack of strategic diplomacy in global sports politics, an absence also noted by Pielke Jr. in his assessment of involvement in governance reforms at FIFA.^{lxv} The low point was the 1998 and 2010 drama episodes when Nigeria's Military leader, Sani Abacha and President, Goodluck Jonathan, directed the withdrawal of the national team from the AFCON in South Africa as well as international soccer for two years following a poor showing at the FIFA World Cup respectively.^{lxvi} These unprecedented actions, which was later reversed under FIFA pressure, was widely criticized as a breach of FIFA rules and served to underscore the parlous state of Nigeria's football administration.

The crisis nearly led to Nigeria being banned by FIFA, which would have excluded the country from competing in all international competitions and voting rights.^{lxvii} The debacle showed the extent to which political missteps can isolate Nigeria from the global football community.

The inability of Chief Orji Uzor Kalu, a former Governor of Abia State, Nigeria as well as Segun Odegbami, former Super Eagles Captainto successfully contest for FIFA Presidency in 2015, is instructive of the lack of coordination as well as strategic failure on the part of Nigeria Foreign Policy handlers. Notable Football administrators and professionals such as former FIFA President, Sepp Blatter, former International John Fashanu, amongst others, supported Orji Kalu's bid but the obvious ignorance of engaging in football politics at the global stage, was lacking. This could have being used as a springboard to encourage the maximization of Nigeria's huge potentials in the football field.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's future role in world football politics is bright, provided that the country makes deliberate efforts to deepen its internal government, place its technocrats at strategic points, and deploy the tremendous social, political, and economic capital at its disposal in the world football society. Nigeria's population, football tradition, diaspora strength, and political sway in the African region are all great leverage that can be translated into greater participation and representation in the international football governing bodies such as FIFA, CAF, and even the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Nigeria's greatest asset is possibly its huge, youth, and football-loving population. With a population of over 200 million—over 60% under the age of 30—Nigeria has one of the biggest fan bases worldwide.^{lxviii} The nation is thus a sought-after market for stakeholders in global football such as FIFA, UEFA, and multilateral sponsors. As Richard Giulianotti and Roland Robertson noted, massive and passionate crowds of football in the Global South have reshaped the world's football axis, given countries like Nigeria greater negotiating leverage in shaping global agendas in football.^{lxix} By marking this local enthusiasm through a common national blueprint, Nigeria will be able to begin to gain more influence over CAF and FIFA decision-making structures.

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