

# Project Management in Football – A Case of Obama Cup

**By Brian Wesaala**

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**ABSTRACT:** Obama Cup is an annual football tournament themed *Tackling Unemployment through Sport*. It has been held in Kenya and Botswana (FFA Cup). The competition brings together teams from the corporate sector, academia and local communities providing a networking platform for players and fans alike. For the 2019 edition, the Football Foundation for Africa (FFA) collaborated with PMI Kenya and PMI Switzerland to deliver a two days project management workshop (Skills for Life). The workshop drew participants from tournament stakeholders, including the organising committee, participating teams, sponsors and partners. The aim of the workshop was two-fold. First, to equip participants with project management skills to improve their personal and professional lives. Secondly, introduce project management best practice in the running of football events and programs. Similar workshops are envisioned to create a more strategic engagement between football and project management practice. Introducing project management best practice in football is a sure way of promoting growth in the industry and ultimately creating opportunities for youths in Africa. This paper aims to demonstrate the role of project management in the delivery of sports events (tournaments) while empowering young people with project management skills to address the issue of youth employment through sport.

## Introduction

The sports industry has experienced remarkable growth over the last decade, with its total value now estimated at over \$600 billion (KPMG and Confederation of Indian Industry, 2016). The sector has especially thrived in Europe and the United States, where it continues to be an active contributor to socioeconomic growth and development. The sports industry is complex, with business activities ranging from ticket sales, sponsorship, merchandising to media rights and more. Digital transformation and the push for gender equality are also impacting the sports industry on an unprecedented scale.

It is, however, worth noting that not all sports disciplines are represented equally in the global landscape. One such sport is football, which is by a wide margin the world's most popular game, and its popularity is forecast to grow. This sentiment is supported by a survey that was done before the

2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, and the findings indicate that roughly 43 per cent of the world's population said they were very "interested" or "very interested" in the sport (Nielsen, 2018). The football industry is equally dominant when analysing industry finances.

In Africa, football is not only the most popular sport but has been described as being omnipresent and millions of Africans, mainly young people, actively follow the game globally. Despite this fact, Africa has failed to harness the power of football, which can play a significant role in driving the continent's social and economic growth.

Even with football being a multibillion-dollar industry, the African football industry lags far behind the European football industry, and lately, all other continents seem to be progressing much faster than Africa. The lack of progress has been attributed to, among other things, poor governance, the migration of players abroad and low quality of local competitions. The sport in the continent has failed to attract the needed professionalism not only in its management and administration but even more detrimental among football players across the amateur and professional levels.

As a result, thousands of footballers remain unemployed or underemployed. The low levels of education exacerbate this situation observed among footballers in the continent. A 2016 report by FIFPro noted that in Africa only about 27 per cent of professional and semi-professional football players pursue an education beyond high school. The lack of educational attainment reduces their chances in the job market, exposing them to substandard quality of life compared to their peers in other industries (FIFPro World Players Union, 2016). It is the realisation of this fact that led to the creation of Obama Cup.

## Obama Cup

Obama Cup is an annual football tournament themed *Tackling Unemployment through Sport*. The competition brings together teams from the corporate sector, academia and local communities providing a networking platform for players and fans alike.

The football competition was first organised following the death of Alan "Obama" Onyango. Alan met his untimely death on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2015 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He had crossed the border to Tanzania in search of employment after failing to attain the same in his native Kenya, a predicament of millions of youths in the continent today.

The inaugural Obama Cup was held in January 2016, and since then the tournament has grown from 5 participating teams to 16 in the last edition held in March 2019.

Obama Cup was born out of a need to see more youths (footballers) make the transition from school to employment or business a reality. To achieve this, the event organisers thought it fit to use football as a way of building this vital bridge. Football players from the academic institutions and community teams have easy access to their counterparts in the corporate sector and vice-versa. The one-day tournament encourages interaction between participants both on and off the field of play in a bid to address linkage challenges that usually exist between employers and Africa's youths.

Sports people already possess valuable skills that can be used in the workplace. However, many of them are rarely aware of these skills and how they can package themselves to be more attractive in the workforce.

A recent report by Adecco group lists the following competencies as occurring naturally in majority of athletes: analytical, resilient, passionate ambassadors, positive disruptors, creative thinkers, persuasive communicators, business-minded and natural publicists (The Adecco Group, 2019). Further, the Sport2Work manual developed by Sport for Development in Africa (S4DA) and local organisations in Ethiopia, identified eight employability competencies that can be acquired through sport: communication, leading a team, decision-making, co-operation, goal orientation, self-responsibility, self-discipline and adaptivity & creativity (Sport for Development Africa, 2017).

## Project Management in Football

A *project* is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result. *Project Management* is the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements (PMBOK Guide Sixth Edition, 2017 ). Linkages have been made between project management and football, mainly referring to the team/goal-orientation of both professions. In his paper, *Without Sports, Project Management would be hard*, Michael Leser (2010) uses various sports analogies from (American) football to deliver some key best practises for project managers to follow and demand from their Project Management Offices (PMOs).

Bilal Khan (2016) asked a couple of critical questions concerning project management and football. Can sporting values and philosophies be implemented in a company? How can a manager inspire from a sports coach or trainer to manage his team? He aimed to explore what football can teach us about project management, bearing in mind the similarities between the two fields. He outlined the following:

- “Being organised with a good plan is half the battle won” – Planning
- “Teamwork triumphs over individual celebrity status” – Resource Management
- “Identifying Problems on time” – Risk Management

- “Playing the game correctly on and off the pitch” – Stakeholder Management

The relationship between project management and football is not a new one, but one that needs to be exploited further to fuel the growth of the football industry, which can contribute to social and economic development. Growth in the African football industry made possible by project managers.

### PM Knowledgeable Youth

In March 2019, the Project Management Institute Education Fund (PMIEF) announced a refreshed strategy *Helping Youth Fulfil Their Goals*. The need to have a more significant impact and provide increased value informed their change in focus. Whether by design or coincidence, the Obama Cup 2019 organising team was already working to incorporate project management training into their event. A two-day *Introduction to Project Management - Skills for Life* workshop preceded the one-day football tournament.

The Obama Cup organising committee targeted players/officials drawn from the participating teams as well as other tournament stakeholders including sponsors, partners and suppliers who were invited to send participants to the workshop. The workshop attracted a total of 20 participants.

The workshop had two primary goals. First, to equip participants with project management skills to improve their personal and professional lives. Secondly, introduce project management best practice in the running of FFA events and programs and the African football industry in general. As PMIEF has recognised in the Strategic Overview released in March: “project management helps young people plan, learn, think critically, solve problems, communicate effectively, organise, collaborate, be creative and get things done. These qualities directly correspond to the skills and competencies that outside researchers say are critical for youth to succeed.” This is what the workshop envisioned to attain.

With the popularity of football among Africa’s youths and the proliferation of football programs around the continent, the sport provides a great platform to equip young people with project management skills. One of the challenges PMIEF is facing is having to focus on multiple audiences. This situation has hindered its initiatives from having a real impact. Football can help to mitigate this issue due to its ubiquitous and unifying nature. Also, by focusing on grassroots football, we can transform an industry from the ground up, delivering the needed growth that can change lives.

Another challenge that PMIEF has faced is scaling. Again, football through the many projects and programs across the African continent can provide a platform to achieve scale and reach millions of young people. The convening and multiplier power football is globally acknowledged and

recognised. Corporates in Western countries have harnessed this power to grow their businesses, while in Africa, politicians have been the primary beneficiaries of this phenomenon. Project Management education can achieve the same by embedding itself into football development programs, events and other facets of the sport from amateur through to professional levels.

Project management knowledgeable youths within the football industry will form the foundation upon which the industry can grow sustainably. They will be better placed to manage their careers in the sport and beyond. Further, the same persons will be able to make a valuable contribution to the administration and management of football on the continent during and after their playing careers. With time, the migration of African players will no longer be referred to as “muscle drain”, but “brain drain” just like all other professions.

Initiatives such as Obama Cup also benefit from having project management expertise within their set up as they seek to create lasting impact in the society. Events provide us with a powerful platform to influence society. We can use sports events as a catalyst to achieve our desired goals, such as growing our businesses or reducing the unemployment rates among young people. However, for this to happen, a calculated approach is required.

### PM for Impactful Sports Events

A sports event such as Obama Cup is a unique combination of products, services and results. Tournaments are, therefore, ideal candidates for project management. As noted earlier, major sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup, The Africa Cup of Nations and the FIFA Women’s World Cup represent what we refer to as mega projects. The scale and complexity of these projects make them prime case studies for research to maximise revenues, deliver value to audiences and ensure lasting socioeconomic benefits. An essential component of these events is social responsibility and legacy planning, which are usually part of the project. These projects are generally well-resourced owing to their magnitude and the organisations involved. *Too big to fail.*

However, not all sports events can fall into this category. Numerous competitions are organised at all levels in the football sector, drawing thousands of participants, fans and other stakeholders. Football enthusiasts, business people and politicians hold these competitions hoping to tap into the game’s popularity to drive various agendas. In most cases, the objectives of these tournaments are short-term and the projects under-resourced. This shortcoming provides an opportunity that project managers can exploit to create more impactful sports events delivering value to participants and communities.

Using the project management framework to organise events is one way we can ensure competitions deliver lasting value. Andrew O'Loughlin (2018), in his book *Creating Influential Events*, outlines seven elements for impactful events: Purpose; Play; Awe; Flow; Shared and Shareable; Communitas; Impact. Formal project management provides a framework that organisers can use to incorporate these elements from the pre-project (business case and benefits management plan) through to benefits realisation of impactful sports events.

Obama Cup's purpose is to connect participants to training and employment opportunities in line with its theme, *Tackling Unemployment through Sport*. Even though the tournament has grown since its inception in 2016, demonstrating its success, it has been difficult to measure its impact. For this reason, the organisers thought it fit to introduce project management to manage the delivery of the tournament's goals better.

### Creating Shared Value (CSV)

In a bid to maximise value and societal impact for stakeholders, Obama Cup seeks to have a closer working relationship with sponsors and partners. The goal is to move beyond the reputation-driven CSR initiatives to shared value creation, which requires greater collaboration between business and society. One way of achieving this is to bring the football community up-to-speed with corporate practices top among them being formal project management.

The opposite can also occur where through football, corporates can be introduced to project management. As mentioned earlier, the *Obama Cup 2019 - Skills for Life* workshop participants drawn from sponsor/partner organisations. Even though most were engaged in projects at different levels, few had had a formal interaction with project management. They expressed their appreciation for the training and an eagerness to learn more and develop their expertise in the area.

Following the workshop, three members of staff from our main sponsors, OTB Africa, joined PMI (Kenya Chapter) with a view pursuing certification and adding project management to their skillset.

For the Obama Cup organising committee, this is a welcome development as it ensures better communication and coordination with these main stakeholders during the project cycle of our events. Obama Cup looks to guarantee sponsors to derive maximum value from their participation. For this to happen, it is vital that they have insights, skills, and resources that cut across profit/non-profit and private/public. Project management helps us towards achieving this.

### PM for Sports Infrastructure Development

Africa's infrastructure deficit is widely acknowledged in the continent's quest to industrialise and provide employment for its growing population. However, sports infrastructure is rarely mentioned

as an area requiring investment despite its massive potential to stimulate employment creation while delivering lasting social benefits to communities. Power, water and transport are rightfully higher up on the priority list of most governments and development agencies.

In the recent past, we have witnessed project management failure in the African football scene. Kenya was set to host CHAN 2017 while Cameroon was to host AFCON2019. Both countries proved unprepared, and the tournaments were moved to Morocco and Egypt, respectively. Although other factors are usually cited, for instance, Kenya (lack of government support) and Cameroon (insecurity) a closer look at the happenings inside these federations reveals classic cases of project management failure in the development of the required infrastructure.

Further up the field, we have a case of Chile. Backed by aggressive project management standards, the South American country was able to deliver four new stadiums in less than a year after being awarded the FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup in 2008. Using PMI state-of-the-art PMI standards and cutting-edge technology, the project team was able to deliver on time and within budget (atypical of the sports industry).

These cases highlight the urgent need to apply project management standards in the delivery of sports infrastructure, more importantly, at the grassroots level. There is an urgent need to develop high quality (safe and sustainable) sports facilities in Africa to increase accessibility to sport for the youthful population. These facilities provide meeting points for members of a community, areas that can foster a sense of community, thereby reducing social isolation. As permanent features in public spaces, they will also provide employment boosting socioeconomic growth.

## Growth areas to watch

### The Internationalisation of Football

According to Investopedia, "Internationalization is the designing of a product in such a way that it will meet the needs of users in many countries or can be easily adapted to do so...products that are internationalised often must be localised to fit the needs of that country's users." Further, and in an economic context, internationalisation can refer to a company that takes steps to increase its footprint or client base outside of its country of domicile and into international markets. This definition is more akin to what is currently happening in the football industry.

The internalisation of football is mainly happening from Europe with European football associations, leagues, clubs and other sports businesses venturing out of their countries of domicile into new markets, mostly in China, United States, India and Africa. The move is a cause for excitement in the

target markets as it represents an equivalent of foreign direct (FDI) investments in other traditional industries. With investment comes growth.

However, the impact in Africa so far has been patchy with foreign investors adopting a light approach when considering investments in the continent. They point out a lack of readiness and poor organisation of the African market as the main reasons for their tactic. This situation represents an opportunity for project managers to come in and help structure the industry and injecting the needed professionalism in carrying out externally-funded projects and programs.

## Digital Transformation

We are living in an era of exponential growth fuelled by digital transformation that transcends almost all sectors of our societies. Football has not been left behind, and we see a lot of progress in the sport when it comes to digitisation. Digital transformation in the football industry is characterised by the proliferation of social media, which drives fan engagement, the explosion of data, etc.

There is an urgent need to harness this data for the development of the industry and not to merely seen as consumers in this globalisation phenomenon. As things stand, African football is now competing in the same spaces as leagues and clubs in the developed world. Again, critical and structured thinking is required in adopting and implementing digital strategies within the sports arena to make sure they work for the African football industry. For example, how can we combine the power of social media and football to drive positive changes in our communities?

Data on African football and sports, in general, is almost non-existent. Despite acknowledging the popularity of the sport and its potential to drive positive socioeconomic change, it is difficult to measure progress on the same. The urgent need to quantify the industry is an area where technology could play a significant role and represents large-scale projects.

## Women's Football

Women's football is growing at a tremendous rate. The recent FIFA Women's World Cup 2019 was the biggest in history in terms of participation and viewership. FIFA and UEFA have recently launched strategies to develop the women's game. Women's football in Africa is also growing, albeit at a slower pace compared to other parts of the world. Women's football development presents another opportunity for project managers to come in and lead various projects and programs.

Women's football is also a great avenue to drive social change in the quest for women empowerment and gender equality as participation in sport can enhance physical, mental and social status. Women's football development programs can, therefore, be coupled with project

management training, and other capacity building programs, for a more significant impact at an individual and societal level.

## Conclusion

There is an urgent need for Africa to provide opportunities for a growing and increasingly youthful population. The sports industry holds enormous potential when it comes to the socioeconomic development of Africa. Football, in particular, can be used as a vehicle to drive positive social change in society due to its popularity across the continent. Obama Cup is just one initiative among thousands around the continent that can benefit from project management best practice.

Individuals, as well as organisations involved in the football industry, can profit significantly by incorporating formal project management in the running of their affairs, be it events, infrastructure development, digitalisation strategies, sport development programs, etc. At the same time, those involved require training and education to boost their capacity to deliver on the enormous potential that the continent holds in sports and beyond.

As the PMIEF Strategic Overview points out, the qualities that one develops through mastering project management directly correspond to the skills and competencies that are critical for youths to succeed. Further, youths, especially those engaged in sports such as football already possess specific skills that predispose them to be good players not only on the field but in the work environment. Project management education can be an intentional connection, bridging social competencies, from sport to work as it is what helps us to get things done.

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