WHITE PAPER

Football as Infrastructure

A Strategic Framework for Ecosystem Development

Reframing Grassroots Football Investment in Africa

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Executive Summary

African football stands at a defining moment. The 2025 Africa Cup of Nations delivered the continent's most commercially successful tournament on record, and, within weeks, its most contested governance crisis. The gap between these two realities is not a paradox. It is a symptom of a football ecosystem that has grown its commercial surface faster than its institutional foundations. 2026 also marks 60 years since Africa boycotted the 1966 World Cup, a move that has since cemented Africa's representation on the global stage, while it remains largely at the periphery of the global football economy, acting primarily as a talent exporter rather than a commercial powerhouse. In yet another FIFA World Cup year, when football once again sits at the centre of global economics, politics, and cultural influence, lies a question that African governments, football organisations, and development stakeholders have not yet answered with sufficient clarity: what is football for?

This white paper presents a framework for answering that question. Rather than viewing football as entertainment or as a commercial product requiring charitable support, the Football as Infrastructure (FaI) Model argues for a fundamental reframing: football should be understood, developed, and funded as critical infrastructure — an ecosystem enabler that drives progress across education, health, employment, climate resilience, and social cohesion.

The FaI Model positions football as foundational to national development, comparable to roads, energy grids, and digital networks. This reframing transforms the investment conversation from seeking philanthropic support to presenting strategic infrastructure opportunities with measurable multiplier effects across multiple sectors. It also transforms the relationship between host governments and governing bodies — from supplicant to strategic actor — by giving governments a framework for understanding what they build, what it is worth, and what return they are entitled to demand.

KEY FINDINGS

- Football serves as an "anchor tenant" in Africa's development ecosystem, attracting engagement and resources that benefit adjacent sectors
- Government should be the primary investor in football infrastructure, with private sector engagement shifting from charity to strategic partnership
- The FaI Model aligns with the African Union's Agenda 2063 objectives for youth empowerment and infrastructure development across five pillars: health, education, employment, climate resilience, and social cohesion
- Implementation requires policy integration, cross-sector collaboration, and new measurement frameworks

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Integrate football infrastructure into national development plans beyond sports policies
2. Establish Public-Private Partnership frameworks for football infrastructure development
3. Develop metrics capturing football's broader societal impact across all five FaI pillars
4. Create institutional capacity for managing football as development infrastructure

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1. Introduction

The persistent challenge of securing sustainable investment for grassroots football across Africa reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of football's role in society. Traditional approaches position football as entertainment seeking commercial sponsors or as a worthy cause deserving of charitable support. Both frameworks inadequately capture football's true value proposition as foundational infrastructure enabling broader development outcomes.

This white paper emerges from critical discussions at the Kenya Academy of Sports Career Fair and Symposium (2025), where frank exchanges about corporate investment reluctance highlighted the need for strategic reframing. The central thesis presented here is that football should be understood, developed, and funded as ecosystem infrastructure — a platform that enables progress across multiple sectors simultaneously.

2. The Current Investment Challenge

2.1 Product Positioning Problems

While there is growing recognition of sport's potential contribution to development outcomes (Darnell & Black, 2011; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011), the infrastructure framework provides a more systematic approach to harnessing this potential at scale. Current approaches to football investment suffer from narrow positioning strategies that limit their effectiveness:

Entertainment Positioning: When presented as entertainment, football competes for discretionary spending against established commercial products. Grassroots football inherently struggles to demonstrate immediate commercial returns comparable to professional sports or other entertainment options.

Educational Product Positioning: Positioning football as education, while more socially compelling than entertainment framing, still categorises it under Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) rather than core infrastructure investment.

Charity Positioning: Appeals to corporate conscience and community responsibility have limited effectiveness, as industry stakeholders note: "corporations don't love sports, and they won't give money out of pity" (Kenya Academy of Sports Career Fair and Symposium, 2025).

2.2 Market Reality

The Football as Infrastructure model addresses these concerns by establishing clear measurement frameworks and positioning sports investment within broader infrastructure strategies. The current positioning creates a fundamental mismatch between what football organisations need — sustained, substantial infrastructure investment — and what corporations are willing to provide: limited CSR allocations or commercial sponsorships with clear return-on-investment metrics.

3. Theoretical Framework

The Football as Infrastructure (FaI) model can be situated within a hybrid theoretical framework that draws on infrastructure-as-development theory, ecosystem theory, anchor institution theory, and public goods/social capital theory, while extending the sport-for-development paradigm. Infrastructure-as-development theory legitimises football as a foundational enabler of societal progress, comparable to transportation or energy systems, by highlighting its multiplier effects across education, health, employment, and innovation (Gratton & Henry, 2001). Ecosystem theory reinforces this by framing football as a systemic platform whose value emerges from interconnected networks of actors and sectors, while Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory underscores how development outcomes are shaped by multi-layered environmental interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Anchor institution theory highlights football's role as Africa's "anchor tenant," stabilising and catalysing wider community and economic activity, consistent with institutional perspectives in sport management (Dowling et al., 2024). Public goods and social capital theory further justify government leadership by emphasising football's non-excludable benefits — such as cohesion, trust, and collective identity — that extend beyond direct participants (Putnam, 2000).

4. The Conceptual Framework: Football as Infrastructure

4.1 Defining Infrastructure

Infrastructure encompasses the fundamental facilities, systems, and services necessary for the operation of a society or community (Gratton & Henry, 2001). These investments are characterised by:

- Enabling Function: They facilitate other economic and social activities
- Network Effects: Their value increases as more users and applications connect to them
- Public Good Characteristics: Benefits extend beyond direct users
- Long-term Impact: Returns are measured in decades, not quarters
- Multiplier Effects: Initial investments generate additional economic activity across sectors

4.2 Football as Infrastructure

The FaI model reframes football not as entertainment or charity, but as critical infrastructure — a foundational system that enables progress across multiple sectors of national development. Football meets all criteria for infrastructure classification:

Enabling Function: Football platforms enable delivery of education, health services, youth development programs, social cohesion initiatives, and economic opportunities.

Network Effects: The more individuals, communities, and organisations engage with football systems, the more valuable those systems become for achieving diverse objectives.

Public Good Characteristics: Benefits include social cohesion, public health improvements, youth engagement, and community development — outcomes that benefit society beyond direct participants.

Long-term Impact: Well-developed football infrastructure generates returns for decades through human capital development, social stability, and economic opportunities.

Multiplier Effects: Football infrastructure investments stimulate activity across education, health, employment, tourism, technology, and media sectors.

COMPARATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE FRAMEWORK

Measures	Roads	Energy	Digital Networks	Football Infrastructure
Enabling function	Connect markets	Power industry	Connect people	Connects communities, enables education, health, and employment
Network effects	More users > higher utility	More connections > stable power	More users > richer platforms	More participants > stronger social impact
Public Good	Broader societal benefits	Universal access improves life	Drives inclusion	Benefits extend beyond players to families, schools, and health systems
Long-term Impact	Growth	Sustained development	Innovations	Human capital, youth empowerment, social stability
Multiplier effect	Trade, tourism	Manufacturing, services	e-commerce	Education, preventive health, employment, tourism, governance

4.3 The Ecosystem Enabler Concept

As an ecosystem infrastructure, football serves as a platform that connects individuals, communities, and industries across boundaries and generations. Its influence extends across formal and informal economies, government programs, grassroots movements, cultural identity formation, and international relations. Research in sport-for-development suggests that properly designed sports programs can serve as effective platforms for delivering education, health, and social services (Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Welty Peachey et al., 2015). The infrastructure framing offers a more comprehensive approach to understanding and systematically developing these capabilities.

5. The Anchor Tenant Model

5.1 Shopping Mall Analogy

Commercial real estate developers understand anchor tenant dynamics: securing a major retailer that draws consistent foot traffic makes the entire shopping centre viable and attractive to other businesses. Developers invest heavily in anchor tenants not out of charity, but because these tenants are foundational to the ecosystem's success.

5.2 Football as Africa's Sports Anchor Tenant

In Africa's sports and development ecosystem, football functions as the anchor tenant. It attracts the most attention, engagement, and resources of any sport. This positioning creates opportunities to build comprehensive systems that benefit all sports and adjacent development sectors.

EVIDENCE OF ANCHOR STATUS

- Highest participation rates across age groups and socioeconomic levels
- Greatest media attention and public engagement
- Most significant international connectivity through competitions and networks
- Strongest emotional and cultural resonance across diverse populations

5.3 Strategic Implications

Recognising football's anchor-tenant status suggests that strategic investments in football infrastructure will generate benefits that extend far beyond football itself. Just as mall developers invest in anchor tenants to benefit the entire property, governments should invest in football infrastructure to strengthen the broader development ecosystem.

6. Government as Primary Investor

6.1 Infrastructure Investment Logic

Governments routinely invest in infrastructure based on multiplier effects, sectoral enablement potential, and contributions to national competitiveness. These investments are evaluated on their ability to facilitate other economic and social activities rather than their direct commercial returns.

STANDARD INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT JUSTIFICATIONS

- Transportation networks reduce logistics costs and connect communities
- Energy systems enable industrial development and improve the quality of life
- Digital infrastructure facilitates innovation and economic participation
- Educational infrastructure develops human capital across sectors

6.2 Football Infrastructure Investment Justification

Economic Facilitation: Quality football systems reduce barriers to youth engagement, health promotion, and social cohesion while creating employment across multiple sectors.

Community Connection: Football infrastructure connects communities across ethnic, political, and class divisions, contributing to social stability and national unity.

Human Capital Development: Football programs teach valuable life skills — discipline, leadership, resilience, and collaboration — while providing alternative pathways to education and employment.

Innovation Platform: Football systems drive demand for sports technology, data analytics, and facility management solutions, spurring local innovation and international partnerships.

6.3 Alignment with National Development Priorities

Government investment in football infrastructure aligns with established development objectives rather than representing sectoral favouritism. Most African governments prioritise youth employment, social cohesion, health promotion, and economic diversification — all areas where football infrastructure generates significant impact.

7. Multiplier Effects in Practice

7.1 Education Sector Integration

School Retention: Football programs motivate students to remain in formal education systems, reducing dropout rates and improving educational outcomes.

Alternative Pathways: Academy systems and sports scholarships create alternative routes to higher education for students who might otherwise lack opportunities.

Life Skills Development: Participation in football develops transferable skills — teamwork, time management, goal-setting, and resilience — that benefit academic and professional performance.

7.2 Health System Enhancement

Preventive Health: Regular participation in football helps address rising rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and mental health challenges, reducing long-term healthcare costs.

Community Health Programs: Football platforms provide effective venues for health education, vaccination campaigns, and wellness promotion.

Health Infrastructure Utilisation: Football programs generate demand for physiotherapy, sports medicine, and fitness services, supporting employment and capacity development in the health sector.

7.3 Employment Creation

Direct Employment: Coaches, groundskeepers, administrators, referees, and support staff represent immediate job creation.

Indirect Employment: Equipment suppliers, media personnel, transport providers, catering services, and security services benefit from football activity.

Skills Development: Football systems provide technical and soft skills training that enhances employability across sectors.

7.4 Innovation and Technology

Sports Technology: Demand for performance analysis, facility management, and broadcasting solutions drives technology sector development.

Data Analytics: Football generates significant data that can be leveraged for insights into community health, engagement patterns, and social dynamics.

Digital Platforms: Fan engagement, administration systems, and media distribution create opportunities for local technology companies.

7.5 Climate Resilience and Environmental Sustainability

Green Infrastructure: Football facilities — designed with solar energy systems, rainwater harvesting, and green space preservation — contribute directly to urban climate resilience, turning venues into active participants in the adaptation strategies African cities urgently require.

Environmental Education: Football's community networks can deliver climate education, waste management campaigns, and environmental stewardship initiatives alongside coaching and health programmes — reaching populations that formal systems frequently miss.

Carbon and Ecosystem Co-benefits: Pitch maintenance and natural surface preservation around football facilities contribute to urban heat island mitigation, biodiversity support, and carbon sequestration — co-benefits measurable within national climate accounting frameworks.

7.6 Tourism and Hospitality

Sports Tourism: Quality facilities attract training camps, tournaments, and competitions, generating revenue for hotels, restaurants, and transport operators.

Infrastructure Showcase: Well-developed football facilities demonstrate a country's capacity to host international events and attract investment.

Cultural Tourism: Football culture becomes part of national identity and tourist attraction, supporting creative industries and cultural enterprises.

7.7 Social Cohesion and Governance

Youth Engagement: Football programs provide positive alternatives to antisocial behaviour, reducing crime rates and social instability.

Cross-Community Connections: Football transcends ethnic, religious, and political divisions, creating platforms for dialogue and cooperation.

Civic Education: Football organisations can serve as venues for citizenship education, democratic participation, and leadership development.

8. Strategic Private Sector Partnership

8.1 Transformed Partnership Model

When the government establishes foundational football infrastructure, private sector engagement shifts from charity to strategic partnership. Companies invest not from obligation but because robust football infrastructure amplifies their other business objectives.

8.2 Sector-Specific Partnership Opportunities

Education Companies: Football programs increase engagement and retention rates for educational initiatives, making them ideal partners for academic technology companies, skills training providers, and scholarship programs.

Health Organisations: Football platforms extend the reach of health promotion campaigns, wellness programs, and medical services into communities that might otherwise be difficult to access.

Technology Companies: Sports environments provide ideal testing grounds for innovation in areas ranging from performance monitoring to facility management to fan engagement platforms.

Financial Services: Football systems create opportunities for financial literacy education, youth banking programs, and the adoption of digital payment systems.

8.3 Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Models

The Football as Infrastructure framework creates ideal conditions for PPP arrangements similar to those used for transportation, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure (Gratton & Henry, 2001):

Build-Operate-Transfer Models: Private companies construct and operate facilities, then transfer ownership to the government after specified periods.

Management Contracts: Private operators manage government-owned facilities, bringing efficiency and innovation while ensuring public access and alignment with development objectives.

Joint Ventures: Shared ownership and operation arrangements that leverage private sector efficiency with public sector development mandates.

Successful football infrastructure PPPs require clear risk allocation, transparent governance structures, and performance-based contracts. Without these safeguards, partnerships risk becoming either financially unviable for private investors or politically unsustainable for governments.

9. Implementation Framework

9.1 Policy Integration

Stakeholder Engagement: Interaction with all relevant stakeholders on the FaI model to support deliberations and understanding of concepts and structure.

Review and Planning: A convergence of ministries, departments, agencies, and units of sports to determine a guideline and roadmap for piloting and implementation.

National Development Plans: Include football infrastructure as a component of broader infrastructure development strategies, rather than limiting it to sports-sector policies.

Inter-Ministerial Coordination: Establish mechanisms for coordination among the sports, education, health, youth, and economic development ministries to ensure that football infrastructure serves multiple objectives.

Local Government Integration: Align football infrastructure development with municipal planning processes to ensure community accessibility and complementary development.

9.2 Cross-Sector Collaboration

Education Integration: Partner with educational institutions to use football facilities for physical education, after-school programs, and community education initiatives.

Health System Coordination: Coordinate with health authorities to utilise football programmes for public health campaigns, fitness promotion, and the delivery of preventive care.

Employment Programs: Integrate football infrastructure with vocational training, internship programs, and small enterprise development initiatives.

9.3 Measurement Systems

Traditional sports metrics inadequately capture the broader impact of football infrastructure. New measurement frameworks should include:

Education Metrics: School retention rates, academic performance improvements, and alternative pathway utilisation among football participants.

Health Outcomes: Physical fitness improvements, reduced healthcare utilisation, and mental health indicators in communities with football infrastructure.

Economic Impact: Employment generation, small business development, and tourism revenue attributable to football infrastructure.

Social Cohesion: Community engagement levels, inter-group interaction, and social stability indicators in areas with football programs.

Governments and development partners should initially implement the Football as Infrastructure model through targeted pilot projects across diverse contexts (urban, peri-urban, and rural). These pilots can generate evidence, refine measurement frameworks, and demonstrate scalable investment models.

9.4 Investment Frameworks

Infrastructure Budgeting: Include football infrastructure in national infrastructure budgets, using evaluation criteria similar to those for other infrastructure categories.

Development Finance: Access international development finance for football infrastructure by demonstrating alignment with Sustainable Development Goals and national development priorities.

Revenue Generation: Develop sustainable revenue models through facility rental, program fees, and commercial partnerships that reduce ongoing government subsidy requirements.

9.5 Institutional Capacity

Professional Management: Develop organisational capacity for managing football infrastructure as development platforms rather than purely sporting venues.

Technical Expertise: Build local expertise in facility management, program development, and impact measurement specific to football infrastructure.

Partnership Management: Develop skills for managing complex partnerships between government, private sector, development organisations, and community groups.

9.6 Implementation and Risk Considerations

Policy Adoption Risk

Governments may struggle to classify football alongside traditional infrastructure due to budget constraints, competing priorities, and political cycles.

Measurement Risk

Football's cross-sector impacts — education outcomes, health improvements, employment generation — require longitudinal data systems that many countries do not yet have.

Institutional Capacity Risk

Successful implementation requires coordination among the sports, education, health, and finance ministries, which may pose governance challenges.

Financial Sustainability Risk

Football facilities often generate limited direct revenue. Sustainable models may require partial public subsidies, similar to those for parks, libraries, and other public goods.

Equity Risk

Without explicit policy safeguards, investments may disproportionately benefit men's football or urban populations.

10. Alignment with African Development Objectives

10.1 African Union Agenda 2063 Integration

The Football as Infrastructure model aligns directly with multiple Agenda 2063 aspirations (African Union Commission, 2015):

Aspiration 1 — A Prosperous Africa: Football infrastructure contributes to economic growth through employment creation, tourism development, and innovation platforms. The alignment with SDG 9 is particularly relevant, as football infrastructure development can drive local industrialisation through construction, equipment manufacturing, and technology sectors.

Aspiration 2 — An Integrated Continent: Football creates continental connections through competitions, player movements, and shared cultural experiences.

Aspiration 3 — Good Governance: Football organisations can serve as platforms for civic education and democratic participation.

Aspiration 4 — Peaceful and Secure Africa: Youth engagement through football provides alternatives to conflict and supports "Silencing the Guns" objectives.

Aspiration 6 — Africa Driven by Its People: Football infrastructure empowers youth and communities while celebrating African identity and culture.

10.2 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Alignment

Football infrastructure contributes to multiple SDGs simultaneously (United Nations, 2015):

SDG 3 (Good Health): Physical activity promotion, mental health support, and preventive care delivery.

SDG 4 (Quality Education): Alternative education pathways, life skills development, and improved school retention.

SDG 5 (Gender Equality): Women's football development and leadership opportunities for female participants.

SDG 8 (Decent Work): Employment creation across multiple skill levels and sectors.

SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure): Football infrastructure directly addresses infrastructure gaps, promotes innovation in sports technology, facility management, and digital platforms, while fostering sustainable industrial development.

SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): Community access to quality facilities and programs regardless of socioeconomic status.

SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities): Community cohesion, cultural preservation, and inclusive development.

SDG 13 (Climate Action): Climate-resilient venue design, environmental education, and carbon sequestration through football infrastructure.

SDG 16 (Peace and Justice): Conflict resolution, social cohesion, and youth engagement in positive activities.

SDG 17 (Partnerships): Multi-stakeholder collaboration and international cooperation.

11. Recommendations

11.1 For African Governments

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

1. Conduct national assessments of existing football infrastructure and its utilisation for non-sporting objectives
2. Establish inter-ministerial working groups to develop integrated football infrastructure strategies
3. Include football infrastructure in national infrastructure development plans and budgets
4. Develop regulatory frameworks for Public-Private Partnerships in football infrastructure

MEDIUM-TERM STRATEGIES

5. Create national football infrastructure development agencies with mandates extending beyond sports
6. Establish measurement systems to track the contribution of football infrastructure to education, health, employment, and social cohesion outcomes
7. Develop professional capacity for managing football infrastructure as a development platform
8. Negotiate international development finance for football infrastructure projects based on their contribution to national development objectives

LONG-TERM VISION

9. Position football infrastructure as a cornerstone of national competitiveness and social cohesion strategies
10. Achieve continental leadership in football infrastructure development as a model for other African nations
11. Leverage football infrastructure for regional integration and international positioning

11.2 For Private Sector Partners

Strategic Repositioning: Evaluate football infrastructure partnership opportunities based on alignment with business objectives rather than CSR considerations. Develop partnership proposals that demonstrate mutual benefit rather than seeking recipient gratitude.

Partnership Development: Engage with government football infrastructure development plans rather than approaching grassroots organisations independently. Develop expertise in measuring business impact from football infrastructure partnerships.

11.3 For Development Organisations

Program Integration: Utilise football infrastructure to deliver education, health, and community development programs more effectively. Partner with government football infrastructure initiatives to achieve program objectives more efficiently.

Funding Strategies: Support government football infrastructure development as a strategic investment to create a development platform. Advocate for the inclusion of football infrastructure in development finance portfolios.

11.4 For Football Organisations

Strategic Repositioning: Articulate value propositions based on the development platform's capabilities rather than on sporting achievement or community need. Develop organisational capacity for managing football facilities and programs as multi-sector development platforms.

Partnership Development: Position partnership opportunities as strategic investments in development infrastructure rather than support for football organisations. Build expertise in managing complex multi-stakeholder partnerships focused on development outcomes.

12. Conclusion

The reframing of football from entertainment or charitable cause to development infrastructure represents more than a semantic adjustment — it fundamentally transforms the logic, scale, and sustainability of football investment across Africa. When viewed through the Football as Infrastructure lens, investment decisions shift from discretionary charitable allocations to strategic infrastructure priorities with measurable impacts across multiple development sectors.

This paradigm shift addresses the fundamental challenge articulated at the Kenya Academy of Sports Career Fair: corporations and other potential investors are reluctant to provide charitable support, but they are actively seeking strategic investment opportunities in platforms that amplify their different objectives. Football infrastructure, properly developed and managed, provides exactly such a platform.

The evidence supporting football's infrastructure role is compelling. Like transportation networks that facilitate commerce, energy systems that enable industrial development, and digital platforms that connect communities (Levermore, 2008), football infrastructure enables progress across education, health, employment, innovation, climate resilience, and social cohesion sectors. The multiplier effects are significant, measurable, and aligned with established development priorities.

Government leadership in football infrastructure development is both logical and necessary. Just as governments invest in roads not to benefit the construction industry but to facilitate economic activity, governments should invest in football infrastructure not to help sports organisations but to enable broader development outcomes. Private sector engagement then shifts from charitable giving to strategic partnership, creating sustainable funding models and ensuring ongoing innovation and efficiency.

Perhaps most importantly, the Football as Infrastructure model aligns with Africa's broader development aspirations as articulated in Agenda 2063 (African Union Commission, 2015) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). Rather than competing with other development priorities for limited resources, football infrastructure contributes to multiple objectives simultaneously — across health, education, employment, climate resilience, and social cohesion — making it a strategic investment in Africa's development future.

The conversation about football investment in Africa has fundamentally changed. Football is not seeking charitable support — football is offering to serve as the infrastructure platform that makes other development investments more successful. Governments that understand this will build differently, negotiate differently, and demand differently. The returns — for their people, their economies, and their institutions — will be different too.

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