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KATY CHANCE: Fifa has a quieter, gentler social side

KATY CHANCE
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Katy Chance

AS WE speak there is a football tournament happening in Alexandra township, in Jo burg's northern suburbs. It's being played in what is, officially, the 11th stadium of the 2010 Fifa World Cup. Unlike the others, this stadium is temporary, but the effects of its tournament may last longer than the infrastructure improvements triggered by the main event.

The week-long football festival is organised by Football for Hope, Fifa's social development arm, in alliance with streetfootballworld, which uses football as the medium for social change around the world — not around the World Cup.

The players are all children from disadvantaged areas around the world, making the Alex festival a global affair. However, they're not playing because they're good footballers; they have been selected because of their work in their community. They are role models and Fifa is simply a platform for their stories.

It's hard being a cynic sometimes, though goodness knows I try. Meeting Federico Addiechi, Fifa's head of corporate social responsibility, however, is a salutary lesson about how even the vaguest preconceptions before an interview can turn on you quicker than unsalted butter on a sunny Sandton afternoon.

Addiechi was instrumental in introducing Fifa's social responsibility strategy five years ago, when they launched Football for Hope. All Fifa's "bid books" now include two chapters on social investment and environmental protection; cognisance of and compliance with them are mandatory.

At least 0,7% of Fifa's revenue goes to social responsibility, a figure Addiechi modelled on the 2002 Consensus of Monterrey decision that developed countries should target 0,7% of their GDP for "official development assistance" to developing countries. In the last four-year cycle, Fifa's social investment was about 25m.

Football for Hope's five focus areas are health promotion, antidiscrimination and social integration, "peacebuilding", children's rights and education, and the environment.

Peacebuilding sounds like something the copywriters came up with over lunch.

Not if you're a soccer-mad Rwandan child still coming to terms with genocide, I'm told. Not if you play football in informal fields near the border of Cambodia and Thailand where 4-million live land mines lie in shiny wait.

Much of Football for Hope's work includes what Addiechi calls the remnants of war.

It has projects in more than 50 countries working with 100 nongovernmental organisations, about five of them in SA. Football for Hope is building five community centres here: one is completed, one is under construction and the others will be finished by 2012, after which there will be a further three years of operational support.

Can this be reconciled with the notion of Fifa being a bit of a bully, of it sweeping into town as the world's largest, richest travelling sports show, which browbeats silly women wearing orange dresses and dictates what can be imbibed by fans?

Addiechi is too polite to shrug. Argentinian by birth, he has lived in Zurich for 20 years and can graciously articulate his position in six languages.

"Our social investment is not about image change or image returns; we just have a responsibility to do it. We are not saviours of the world and don't claim to be. As for negative press, it is difficult to fight preconceptions and in our area, frankly, it's not our concern. Corporate social responsibility is not done for reward or recognition. Very few members of the media around the world even ask about it."

Early rumour-mongering — not by the South African press — included an article claiming Fifa would prevent the free distribution of condoms during the World Cup and disagreed with SAs HIV policies, which, Addiechi smiles, is the complete opposite to its health message to children the world over.

But he knows that good news seldom makes the news and doesn't get "too mad" about the social side not getting coverage. "We're not fighting for headlines and, really, we're too busy to care. Fortunately we don't measure our success by how many lines we get in a paper."

So I'll leave it there.

- Chance is social investments editor.

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“Quality in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer gets out and is willing to pay for. A product is not quality because it is hard to make and costs a lot of money, as manufacturers typically believe. This is incompetent: Customers pay only for what is of use to them and gives them value. Nothing else constitutes quality.” - Peter Drucker

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