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By REUTERS

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ALEXANDRA, South Africa (Reuters) -Sello Mahlangu "loves, lives and breathes football" and says it has helped him keep out of trouble on the mean streets of one of South Africa's poorest townships. Mahlangu, 18, is one of more than 200 disadvantaged children from all over the world who will play in a soccer festival parallel to the World Cup in Johannesburg's sprawling Alexandra township, often associated with violence and grinding poverty.

Through the July 4-10 "Football for Hope" festival, soccer's ruling body, in partnership with the global NGO streetfootballworld, will use the month-long World Cup in South Africa to promote projects helping underprivileged children overcome social problems.

Although three months away from kick-off, the festival, FIFA's flagship social project, has already touched the lives of the youngsters.

"There are many young people who are doing bad things here in Alexandra and I thank God that I am not part of them. Without football I think I would have been doing something like crime," said Mahlangu after the ceremonial launch of the festival on Thursday.

Mahlangu, a member of the local project Play Soccer, is one of the eight youngsters who will form Team Alexandra, competing in the festival with 31 other international teams.

Streetfootballworld Managing Director Jurgen Griesbeck said the teams were selected for their commitment to overcoming social problems from homelessness in London and landmines in Cambodia, to AIDS education in South Africa and integration of refugees in Australia.

"We are talking here about role models, we are talking about people who are champions in their communities, people who are our future," said Griesbeck.

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FIFA is keen to underline that football is more than huge revenues and millionaire players.

"This World Cup is not only about the big stars coming to South Africa.. (the festival) will represent another World Cup of hope, change and opportunities," said the tournament's chief local organiser, Danny Jordaan.

Lebogang Ngwako, 18, coach of the Alexandra team, said it was an honour for the township 10 to host the festival.

"Play Soccer is doing a great job because it takes kids out of the streets...the experience is going to change lives," he said.

(Editing by Barry Moody)

<http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2010/03/25/sports/sports-uk-soccer-world-hope.html...> 25.03.2010