

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
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HOW WE ENVY THE WORLD CUP
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You may wonder what a Secretary-General of the United Nations is doing writing about football. But in fact, the World Cup makes us in the UN green with envy. As the pinnacle of the only truly global game, played in every country by every race and religion, it is one of the few phenomena as universal as the United Nations. You could even say it's more universal. FIFA has 207 members; we have only 191.

But there are far better reasons to be envious.

First, the World Cup is an event in which everybody knows where their team stands, and what it did to get there. They know who scored and how and in what minute of the game; they know who missed the open goal; they know who saved the penalty. I wish we had more of that sort of competition in the family of nations. Countries openly vying for the best standing in the table of respect for human rights, and trying to outdo one another in child survival rates or enrolment in secondary education. States parading their performance for all the world to see. Governments being held accountable for what actions led them to that result.

Second, the World Cup is an event which everybody on the planet loves talking about. Dissecting what their team did right, and what it could have done differently -- not to mention the other side's team. People sitting in cafés anywhere from Buenos Aires to Beijing, debating the finer points of games endlessly, revealing an intimate knowledge not only of their own national teams but of many of the others too, and expressing themselves on the subject with as much clarity as passion. Normally tongue-tied teenagers suddenly becoming eloquent, confident, and dazzlingly analytical experts. I wish we had more of that sort of conversation in the world at large. Citizens consumed by the topic of how their country could do better on the Human Development Index, or in reducing the number of carbon emissions or new HIV infections.

Third, the World Cup is an event which takes place on a level playing field, where every country has a chance to participate on equal terms. Only two commodities matter in this game: talent and team work. I wish we had more levellers like that in the global arena. Free and fair exchanges without the interference of subsidies, barriers or tariffs. Every country getting a real chance to field its strengths on the world stage.

Fourth, the World Cup is an event which illustrates the benefits of cross-pollination between peoples and countries. More and more national teams now welcome coaches from other countries, who bring new ways of thinking and playing. The same goes for the increasing number of players who between World Cups represent clubs away from home. They inject new qualities into their new team, grow from the experience, and are able to contribute even more to their home side when they return. In the process, they often become

heroes in their adopted countries -- helping to open hearts and broaden minds. I wish it were equally plain for all to see that human migration in general can create triple wins -- for migrants, for their countries of origin, and for the societies that receive them. That migrants not only build better lives for themselves and their families, but are also agents of development -- economic, social, and cultural -- in the countries they go and work in, and in the homelands they inspire through new-won ideas and know-how when they return.

For any country, playing in the World Cup is a matter of profound national pride. For countries qualifying for the first time, such as my native Ghana, it is a badge of honour. For those who are doing so after years of adversity, such as Angola, it provides a sense of national renewal. And for those who are currently riven by conflict, like Côte d'Ivoire, but whose World Cup team is a unique and powerful symbol of national unity, it inspires nothing less than the hope of national rebirth.

Which brings me to what is perhaps most enviable of all for us in the United Nations: the World Cup is an event in which we actually see goals being reached. I'm not talking only about the goals a country scores; I also mean the most important goal of all -- being there, part of the family of nations and peoples, celebrating our common humanity. I tried to remember that when Ghana played Brazil in Dortmund on 27 June. Of course, I can't swear I entirely succeeded.

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