Winning the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) 2012 is something millions of people across Africa are dreaming of right now as the continent’s most prestigious football tournament gets underway in Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. As nations join together in solidarity, spurring on their teams they should not forget that they are already winners...against AIDS.

Africa has been at the epicentre of the epidemic since it was first discovered on the continent over 30 years ago, and Africans have been at the heart of the response. In recent years, the scale up of efforts across the whole of Africa have produced astonishing results. In every corner of Africa today babies are being born without HIV, even though their mothers are living with the virus. In Botswana, in Kenya, in Gabon and in Equatorial Guinea, families are now able to protect their children from HIV.

This is an incredible achievement and one which was unthinkable just 15 years ago.

The total number of new HIV infections dropped by more than 26% in Africa since the peak in 1997, and AIDS-related deaths are steadily decreasing as access to lifesaving medicines expands across the continent.

But can Africa continue its winning streak and ensure that fewer and fewer people become infected and that no more people die from AIDS?

For the first time in the history of AIDS, Africa has the best chance now to protect women, men and children everywhere from new HIV infections and to keep people living with HIV alive—this must now be the ultimate goal for Africa.

It’s an exciting moment to seize. New discoveries and new approaches are offering the opportunity to dramatically change the course of the epidemic. We know we can use antiretroviral medicines to prevent as well as treat AIDS—these are the same medicines that have been keeping people living with AIDS alive for more than a decade—in poor countries as well as rich ones.

For the continent most affected by the epidemic, I believe Africa and its leaders can take charge of the response and find ways to secure the resources needed to make zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero-AIDS related deaths a reality in every country. Africa has to look for and seize every opportunity to do so.

Take the Africa Cup of Nations 2012 as an example, it provides an exceptional opportunity to mobilise and re-energise Africans against AIDS as millions tune in and turn up to support their teams.

As the 16 nations participating in the tournament prepare to make their supporters proud, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) is supporting an innovative AIDS awareness campaign by the Foundation of the First Lady of Gabon, Madame Sylvia Bongo Ondimba which is a true example of her leadership and commitment to the AIDS response.

The campaign, “CAN SANS SIDA” (CAN without AIDS, www.cansanssida.com), will use the enormous popularity and outreach that football has across Africa to spread the word that zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths is possible in Africa, and that by protecting a new generation from HIV infection.

Africa can and will change the course of the global epidemic.

I believe in Africa, and I believe that Africa can win against AIDS. Now join us and make ending AIDS in Africa a reality.