

# **‘Life without Sports’: Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 on South African Society from a Football Lens**

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## **Abstract**

Currently, the world is grappling with COVID-19’s effect on the health, social, financial, economic, political and cultural sectors. However, the spread of this pandemic has struck hard other industries such as the sporting industry. This has resulted in the cancellation and suspension of events and gatherings in various sporting codes across the globe. The sporting industry has unprecedented socio-economic effects for the broader population. Football as a sporting code includes ‘big money’ earned from major international events, match attendance, broadcasting and lucrative sponsorship deals. South Africa’s football is thus also generating ‘big money’. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, all associated football events and gatherings in South Africa were halted for a lengthy period of 5 months, spelling catastrophe for society’s socio-economic activities. This chapter relied primarily on desktop research to capture up –to-date information on football during this pandemic using content analysis. The authors observed that the socio-economic benefits accrued from football were on a downward spiral threatening jobs, social inclusion, entertainment, revenue generation, charitable and community activities. Consequently, the

continued spread of COVID-19 presents a significant risk to the football sector's survival and its socio-economic benefits for society.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, sporting industry, football, outbreak, matches, revenue.

## 1 Introduction

*Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else can. Sport can awaken hope where previously there was only despair (Mandela 2000).*

These are the famous words articulated by Nelson Mandela the former president of South Africa, liberation hero, Nobel laureate and celebrated global icon who fought against the apartheid regime. To him, sports had a profound meaning which transcended beyond the field of play as epitomised through providing hope to those who were in a state of hopelessness and bringing together (unity) dissimilar groups of people from diverse ethnic and racial divides. Sports according to Mandela meant that the entire world could be changed and unified into a better and peaceful global sphere for all. Furthermore, these words largely resonated with sporting events that transpired soon after the democratic dispensation of South Africa in 1994. Global mega events like the Rugby World Cup (1995) and the African Cup of Nations (1996) that took place on South African soil inculcated a culture and practice of unity in a nation that had largely been divided and embroiled in the shackles of the malignant, divisive, discriminatory and segregatory system of apartheid. Consequently, sports played a pivotal role in uniting a broken and fragile society and moreover, it transformed the racial divides and healed the wounds of the past. These sublime events laid the foundation for South Africa's transition and belief in the existence of a unified social system to cater for all. It is in this moment that Mandela's popularity grew resulting in the idea of *Madiba Magic* capturing the imaginations (Lodge 2003) of a society that had long been divided by apartheid that generated resentment and animosity against one another. It is through the power of sports that differences of ideologies and

beliefs were put aside for the common goal of addressing the ills of the past by paving the way for forgiveness, unity and peace.

However, in recent times the entire world has come to a standstill which has been largely characterised by mayhem and panic due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has witnessed the halting of activities in a myriad of sectors including the sporting industry (Mtshazo 2020). Global mega events such as the first Tokyo Olympics in 2020 (Pearson 2019) were part of the major spectacles that were adversely affected by this crisis. With respect to football<sup>1</sup>, events of immense proportions and importance such as the World Cup qualifiers were postponed to 2021 (Mtshazo 2020). Meanwhile, continental tournaments such as the Euro 2020 finals and Copa America were postponed to 2021 whereas the 2020 African Cup of Nations to be held in Cameroon was suspended indefinitely and the Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Nations League Finals (CONCACAF) was also postponed. The Big Five Leagues in Spain, England, Germany, France and Italy were suspended (Colluci, Cottrell and Sethna 2020) in fear of the pandemic. This expanded to other football leagues: UEFA federations, Americas, Oceania, Asia and Africa (Colluci, Cottrell & Sethna 2020). However, football has resumed without spectators, after a few months since its suspension with the Big Five leagues kick-starting the world's most watched and beautiful game.

In May, Germany was the first country amongst the Big Five Leagues to do so while other European big leagues in Spain, England and Italy resumed in June. However, in recent times the resumption of football has spread across the entire globe. This has evidently seen the intensification of football activities between the months of June and July across different leagues in Europe and the entire globe, bringing an end to the suspension of the sport. Meanwhile, in the African continent, Tanzania and Burundi were among the first countries to restart their football leagues in June (TRT World 2020) followed by Morocco, Tunisia and Zambia (Mbewa 2020). In the context of South Africa, football resumed on 8 August after a long five-month hiatus (Jackson 2020). The postponed Nedbank Cup kick-started the

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<sup>1</sup> The word football and soccer are going to be used interchangeably in the chapter. Football is particularly a term used in the UK while soccer is a popular term in the US. Both terms describe and define the same sporting code.

resumption of matches coupled with a packed line up of PSL and GladAfrica Championship matches to end the season. However, the recommencement of football has witnessed matches being played behind closed doors with no fans/supporters. Additionally, teams have been mandated to adhere to strict hygiene and health practices (Jackson 2020) to ensure the safety of players, match officials, technical staff and broadcasters to mention a few.

The main thrust of this chapter is to explore the under-researched phenomena of sports, pandemics and its impact on societies. The chapter draws on the central role occupied by sports in society with a specific focus on participation, growth, transformation and development. However, recent developments through the outbreak of COVID-19 has changed perceptions of the relevance and experiences have questioned the survival of sporting activities through the lens of sporting codes, athletes/players and society. Sporting codes like football were halted through profuse usage of nomenclature such as ‘postponement, cancellation and suspension’ as part of the precautions to curb the spread of the virus. Therefore, the main argument of the chapter is hinged on the assertion that such drastic actions are not a common feature and the decision to do so clearly showed the nature, extent, seriousness and the threat imposed by COVID-19 on football players, management teams, staff, match officials and everyone involved in this sporting code. Conversely, such a stance did not take into consideration the impact of this pandemic on societies. This has ultimately paved the way and provided an impetus for scholarly debates and engagements on the impact of pandemics on sport from a societal perspective. Therefore, building on this notion and premise, this chapter seeks to interrogate the experiences and challenges of a sport absent South African society as a result of the pandemic.

South African football in recent years has experienced development and enjoyed marketable and profitable growth due to the popularity of the Premier Soccer league (PSL) as purported by Stander and Van Zyl (2016) and Koortzen and Oosthuizen (2012). Moreover, the fan base of PSL teams has grown exponentially over the years, making it one of the most popular football leagues across the African continent. Significant strides made by the Premier Soccer League (PSL), South African Football Association (SAFA) and other actors in growing and expanding football in South Africa are under threat due to the impending cataclysm imposed by COVID-19. Moreover, popularity of football has grown beyond the borders of the country as evidenced by the hosting of major global events such as the World Cup

(2010) and continental events like the Africa Cup of Nations (1996). However, the outbreak of this pandemic threatens to reverse some of the gains made thus far in the football sector in South Africa. Under the lockdown regulations in South Africa, football resumed under alert level three after intensive negotiations between the Ministry of Sport, South African Football Association (SAFA) and Premier Soccer League (PSL) to ensure that health and safety compliances will be prioritised while amateur football is expected to continue under level one. Such developments have provided an impetus for the chapter to examine the impact of COVID-19 on society from a football perspective using the socio-economic paucities imposed by this virus culminating into a crisis of severe magnitude with disastrous consequences. To do so, this chapter presents and analyses the findings from internet sources that include newspapers, blogs, different news network reports, government reports particularly, from the Ministry of Sport, Arts and Culture, Premier Soccer League (PSL) and South African Football Association (SAFA) and any other information deemed relevant for discussion.

The chapter is divided into five parts. The first part begins by discussing the theoretical framework underpinning the chapter with a focus on the correlation between sports and society. The second part presents vast literature on the global popularity of football which places it as one of the most popular sports in the world. The third section provides a historical analysis of the establishment and growth of football in the context of South Africa. It traces the introduction of the sport in the country from the 1800s till the end of the apartheid era up to present, focusing on the challenges and successes associated with the growth and popularisation of football. In the same segment, an analysis of the legacy of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa and the potential of South Africa to host continental tournaments in its shores such as the Africa Cup of Nations (1996), Africa Cup of Nations (2013) and the African Nations Championship (2014) is offered. The fourth part provides a short synopsis on the methodology. The primary focus of this chapter is discussed in the last section which presents the findings and analysis of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on South African society from a football point of view.

## **2 Sports and Society: A Theoretical Perspective**

The theory underpinning the chapter is functionalist theory which is one of

the most widely used theories in investigating the phenomena of sports and society. Functionalism has been largely credited for providing exponential and vast explanation on the role and functionality of sports in society. It is an ideal theory for the chapter provided the recent turn of events that has witnessed the suspension, cancellation and postponement of sporting activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic with dire social consequences. The theory is informed by the works of different scholars such as Auguste Comte (1851), Herbert Spencer (1860), Emile Durkheim (1873/1914), Talcott Parsons (1966) and Robert Merton (1949; 1956; 1968), Jarvie and Maguire (1994). Society as purported by functionalism is a structure of interrelated fragments that works in harmony with the sole purpose of maintaining stability (Mooney, Knox & Schacht 2007). Additionally, the purpose of functionalism is to provide a leeway for partnership and support of different entities in order to achieve societal necessities (Lv 2015). According to Levin (1991: 76), ‘functionalism begins with the idea that any stable system (such as the human body) consists of a number of different, but interrelated, parts that operate together to create an overall order’.

In relation to sports, functionalism offers a thorough social institutional analysis whereby there is a recognition that social systems are embedded within the sporting fraternity as evidenced in interactional platforms between different individuals and group actors (Delaney & Madigan 2009). The main idea of functionalism is to understand how sports contributes to the overall societal system amongst different groups and individuals. There is an assumption that sports can yield positive development and results in social systems through shared values and agreements. For example, functionalism through sports offers societies benefits such as maintaining social systems, achieving goals and promoting social integration (Lv 2015). In the context of South Africa, Hill (2010) argues that most literature and publications on sports in the country have never focused on the discernments and viewpoints of society and therefore, the chapter has adopted functionalism as a theory to understand the ambiguities of pandemics on sports from a societal perspective.

### **3 ‘The world’s most beautiful game’: Global Popularity of Football**

Football has a long history (dating back 2 000 years to China, Rome and

Greece), however, the rules of association football (modern football) were developed and codified in 1863 in England in juxtaposition with the English Football Association (FA) (Potter 2010; Dietschy 2013). The rules of the game remained stable after the 1880s (with the term ‘soccer’ emerging during this period in England) (Potter 2010) and the professionalisation of the sport played a significant role in ensuring that play continued to evolve over time (Kitching 2015). In 1904, the representatives from the football associations of Switzerland, Sweden, Spain, Netherlands, France, Denmark and Belgium came together to form the Federation International de Football (FIFA) in order to give football an international organisation and appeal (Giulianotti *et.al.* 2019). Consequently, this resulted in the development and evolution of the sport which has continued to take place throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Kitching 2015). The growth of football into a global phenomenon was experienced in 1930 in the first ever World Cup competition played between 13 national teams in Uruguay (Taylor 2006).

Football is considered the most popular sport in the world, and its importance is evidenced in 2002 FIFA World Cup was watched by over a billion television viewers worldwide (Hoffman *et al.* 2002), while the 2014 World Cup in Brazil was watched by an estimated 3.2 billion (FIFA 2014) and the 2018 World Cup in Russia was watched by 3.572 billion (which is half of the worlds’ population) (FIFA 2018). The popularity of football as a sporting code around the world has witnessed even the participation of spectatorship of different genders (particularly women) and different age groups over the years. According to Biscaia (2016:3);

*Soccer, in particular, is perhaps one of the greatest phenomena in terms of its attraction for hundreds of thousands of occasional spectators of every age and gender, who come together in soccer stadiums around the globe every week to watch the games.*

The game attracts a lot of viewership from spectators on the field (attending match day in stadiums) and off the field (broadcasting in television and other different digital platforms). Moreover, football has experienced humongous growth over the years resulting in football clubs across the globe being transformed into lucrative brands (Şener & Karapolatgil 2015). In recent times, financial position of football clubs has been identified as a key factor that influences the performance of teams (Şener & Karapolatgil 2015).

This includes the purchasing of teams by wealthy owners accompanied with lucrative media rights (Pifer *et al.* 2017), the building of new big stadiums, technical team successes, lucrative transfer market of popular players, player efficiencies, commercialisation of products and competitive cup competitions across the globe (Şener & Karapolatgil 2015). These different development strategies to grow the sport have contributed immensely to revenue generation by football clubs through streams of sponsorship, broadcast rights and match day ticket sales (Deloitte Football Money League Report 2015).

Taking a closer look at the African continent, football is greatly influenced by a myriad of factors in the political, economic, religious, cultural and social spheres and this has also made football the continent's most common sport (Pannenberg 2010). Furthermore, the sport is characterised by millions of supporters, thousands of professional players, the establishment of football clubs, countless leagues, cup tournaments and competitions across all levels (Pannenberg 2010). Despite the growth of the sport in the continent, no event has surpassed the region's hosting of the first ever World Cup in 2010 in South Africa. The occurrence of 'Football Olympics' bolstered the potential of the continent to host mega events, catapulting South Africa as a dominant force in terms of hosting major competitions. Consequently, it is imperative to trace the historical establishment of football in South Africa up to present, augmenting its suitability as a point of destination for hosting the entire world in a football feeding frenzy of immense proportions.

#### **4 From its Establishment in Colonial Times to Hosting Mega International Events: The History and Growth of Football in South Africa**

The growth of football in South Africa was largely influenced and popularised by working class British soldiers, who were brought into the country to partake in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 (ACCORD 2010). It is from this onset that football activities commenced amongst the different races such as the Africans, Indians, Coloureds and Whites (ACCORD 2010). According to Bolsmann (2010), provincial football organisations were formed in South Africa in the 1880s to early 1890s. Van de Merwe (2010) contends that since its introduction in South Africa, football has always been impacted upon by the prevalence of politics till the end of apartheid. This is

evidenced in the racial divisions and segregation of the sport as epitomised by what transpired in social activities in the country. An earlier history of the sport provided by Parker (1897) traces the introduction of the sport in the Natal region between 1870 and 1880 resulting in the formation of several clubs (e.g. the Natal Wasps Football Club and Pietermaritzburg County Football Club) as reiterated by Hebert (1980) and Gibson and Pickford (1906) in the area and this defined this region as the ‘the home of the game in South Africa’ (Hill 2010). Subsequently, this led to the growth of the game in other regions such as Johannesburg, Cape Town and eventually the entire country (ACCORD 2010).

Football was institutionalised in South Africa in 1892 with the formation of the Football Association of South Africa (FASA) dominated by whites (Alegi 2004b; van der Merwe 2010). This laid the foundation for the establishment of other football bodies by different races such as the South African Indian Football Association (1903), the South African Bantu Football Association (1933), and the South African Coloured Football Association (1936) (Ngidi 2014). The continued divisions of the sport along racial lines paved the way for the ban of South Africa from FIFA related events such as the World Cup from 1930-1962 and from 1966 to 1992 respectively (van der Merwe, 2010). Meanwhile, this did not deter the growth of the sport locally with the 1930s being characterised by the introduction of cup competitions such as the Bakers Cup (1932), the Suzman Cup (1935) and the Godfrey South African Challenge Cup (1936) that were played in the presence of supporters and crowds based in Johannesburg and Durban (Alegi 2004b). Moreover, the sport became popular amongst black Africans through the formation of teams and franchises such as Orlando Pirates (1937) and Moroka Swallows (1947) increasing attendances in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban in the late 1930s and 1940s (Alegi 2004b).

The period of the 1950s to 1960s was earmarked by politics and race (highly characterised by increasing political tensions between Africans and Whites due to the apartheid social system) that cascaded onto the football field (Bosmann 2010; Alegi 2004b). Consequently, such events in the history of the sport subsequently brought together discriminated races in the form of Indians, Coloureds and Africans to unite in solidarity against the prevalence of apartheid in sport through the formation of the South African Soccer Federation on 30 September 1951 (Ngidi 2014; Alegi 2004b). In 1959 the National Professional Football League (NFL) was founded by eleven clubs

based in Pretoria and Johannesburg (Oates 2008) to expand the popularity of the sport. However, it is during this period that apartheid grew in strength (with white football establishments and administrators in support of this system) adversely affecting South Africa's participation in international football with continuous bans from FIFA (Bolsmann 2010). International football was not in support of the racialisation of the sport in South Africa and thus in 1961, FIFA suspended (Rademeyer 2014) the predominantly white Football Association of South Africa (FASA) even though this was for a temporary period as it was reinstated in 1963 (Field 2010; Sengupta 2019). However, in a bizarre twist of events, FIFA again re-imposed the ban the following year, lasting until 1992 when the country was allowed back into international football (Field 2010) due to prevailing tranquility that would put an end to apartheid in 1994. These tumultuous times gave birth to the popularity of racial integration of professional soccer from 1961-1966 and the growth of the anti-racist South African Soccer League. Ultimately, this paved the way for the rise of football players from segregated and discriminated races into township heroes (Alegi 2004b).

In an effort to gain entry into international football, South African white administrators (during the period of the late 1960s to 1977) endeavoured to reorganise the sport along 'multi-national' (Rademeyer 2014) lines and present a picture to the international football community (especially FIFA) of an all-encompassing and non-divisive racial footballing structure (Bolsmann 2010). Unfortunately, this did not work, slowly leading to the demise of white-privileged football in South Africa (Bolsmann 2010). According to Alegi (2004b), the 1970s and 1980s witnessed significant changes taking place football wise in the world which contributed extensively to the transformation of the beautiful game. Such momentous events within the football fraternity had a huge influence on transmuting the sport in South Africa. Moreover, the broadcasting of football on televisions had a bearing on the popularity and growth of the sport igniting its commercial boom combined with substantial increments in sponsorships. This move paved way for top and professional players to start earning a living through wages (Alegi 2004b). The political landscape during this period was also undergoing transformation widely led by the African National Congress (ANC) which was calling for a negotiated end to the apartheid system and regime. In the same trajectory, hostile football associations were calling for an end to the divisions that existed within the sport. Calls were made for the formation of a

single body (Alegi 2004b) that would cater for all races while putting an end to the dominance of one race in all spheres and facets of life that transcended beyond the field of play. This ultimately resulted in the formation of the National Soccer League in 1985 (Oates 2008; Alegi 2010) that represented the ideologies and principles of non-racialism within the football community. This laid the foundation for the establishment of the South Africa Football Association in 1991 which brought together the different races: Whites, Indian, Coloureds and Blacks to form one union that represented all (Alegi 2004b; Alegi 2010; van der Merwe 2010). The organisation still exists currently and has played a pivotal role in the growth and transformation of the sport in the country.

The 1990s provided a ray of hope to a country that had long been highly characterised by apartheid which segregated and dictated social activities along racial divides and this was the norm in sporting codes such as football. The Confederation of African Football (CAF) laid the foundation for the re-entry of South Africa back into its membership in the Federation of International Football Association (FIFA) in 1992 (Alegi 2010; van der Merwe 2010). Locally, football was growing in stature. The Premier Soccer League (PSL) one of the most prestigious and important club leagues came into being in 1997, growing and developing the sport into a competitive and lucrative league in the country and outside its borders (Oates 2008). In the same decade, South Africa hosted the African Cup of Nations in 1996 and took part in its first World Cup in 1998. This was followed by the hosting of the World Cup in 2010 by South Africa, highlighting the country's potential to host global mega events of this magnitude.

#### ***4.1 Africa Joins the Rest of the World in Hosting Mega International Football Events: The Legacy of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa***

The world football governing body took a significant decision on 15 May 2004 (Gründlingh 2006; Swart, Bob & Turco 2010) that would change the history of Africa's capacity (developing countries) to host mega-events through awarding South Africa the right to host the 2010 World Cup. Nelson Mandela wept tears of joy and told the audience in Zurich in 2004 that 'I feel like a young man of 15' (Alegi 2004a), expressing his happiness over the hosting of the first World Cup in Africa. All of South Africa, vented

concurrent wild merriment of the big announcement of the hosting of this competition in their country (Alegi 2004a). This was the first major global football tournament to be hosted on the shores of the African continent for the first time in its history of the sport and tournament (Swart & Bob 2012). De Aragão (2015) argues that hosting mega events have traditionally been a privilege of developed nations, but since 2008 developing countries have successfully obtained the right to host those international competitions. In essence, hosting of this competition was loaded with political, economic and symbolic significance for a democratic and globalizing South Africa (Alegi & Bolsmann 2010).

By hosting this tournament, South Africa accrued infrastructure, economic, tourism and social benefits associated with holding a mega-event of this magnitude. Extant literature exists on the benefits accrued by South Africa in hosting the 2010 World Cup socially, culturally and economically (Chukwuebuka & Chinedu 2014; Ferreira 2011; FIFA 2010; Cohen 2012; Luginaah & Otiso 2010; Du Plessis & Venter 2010). During this period jobs were created for local people especially through building of new infrastructure and the renovation of existing infrastructure. This marketed and put South Africa on the map as a tourism destination for the entire world during the hosting of the event and after. Several sectors in the arts, information technology, culture, transport and security benefited immensely from the promotion and development of the country's hosting of this mega international event (Chukwuebuka & Chinedu 2014).

#### ***4.2 Hosting Football Events on African Soil: Zooming in on South Africa's Hosting of African Football Tournaments***

Apart from hosting a mega event such as the World Cup in 2010, South Africa has hosted continental tournaments such as the Africa Cup of Nations (1996) which it won after beating Tunisia 2-0 in the final. In 2013, the country hosted another leg of the Africa Cup of Nations and unfortunately it could not replicate the heroics of 1996 as it was knocked out of the tournament in the quarter finals. In the following year (2014), South Africa hosted the African Nations Championship, a tournament introduced by the Confederation of African Football (CAF) to promote local players based in Africa who were plying their trade in local clubs within the continent. This tournament again proved South Africa's reputation and prestige for hosting

tournaments of this magnitude. Moreover, the two tournaments in 2013 and 2014 once again showed the whole world the glimpse of stadiums that the country had benefited from as a result of hosting the whole world in its shores (World Cup 2010). Locally, football has grown exponentially over the years and this has boosted revenue through corporate sponsorships, broadcasting and fan base. Most importantly, football has seen a surge in a number of South African players having the opportunity to play for international, regional and local teams. However, these enormous milestones that have put South Africa on the map globally in the past years though the football community hangs in balance since the advent of covid-19. This has also expanded to the socio-economic sphere which looks bleak due to the absence of football in this difficult time.

## **5 Synopsis on Methodology**

During the writing of this chapter, authors competed with a rapid twist and turn of events due to different and ever-changing adoption strategies to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on football and the entire sporting world. Consequently, the significant changes that have occurred and continue to take place due to the pandemic, have had a bearing on sports mainly on football, resulting in the quest to constantly update information on football activities and events. In keeping up with the latest trends and new information, the study relied on desktop research and analysis using secondary data through internet searching for news and articles from reliable websites in the form of newspapers, blogs, different news network reports, government reports from the Ministry of Sport, Arts and Culture, reports and records from the Premier Soccer League (PSL) and South African Football Association (SAFA) reports and any other information deemed relevant. Moreover, the chapter also adopted an historical approach in the collection and analysis of past and present literature on football in South Africa from a societal perspective. The COVID-19 pandemic is currently a topic with a vast influx of information and therefore, reliable sources were used in gathering information for the writing up of this chapter.

## **6 Impact of Covid-19 on the Socio-economic Sphere of South African Society: A Football Perspective**

Sport in South Africa is one of the most popular activities from an involve-

ment and consumer standpoint (Baller 2015; Department of Sport and Recreation 2014). In particular, football plays a combined social and commercial role in boosting the local production and providing satisfactory experiences for its consumers (that is the millions of football supporters across the entire nation) (Stander & Van Zyl 2016). The popularity of this sport has paved way for its lucrative benefits for the supporters, football players and football clubs over the years. This has buttressed the status of South Africa as a ‘football loving country’ locally, regionally and internationally. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 is threatening the gains made so far from the growth of this sport in the country. Soon after the government declared COVID-19 a national disaster, the South African Football Association (SAFA) followed suit by suspending all football related activities in the country (Makhaya 2020) to protect the health of all football loving fans, players, staff in football clubs (coaches and technical staff), journalists, sponsors, workers in football community activities and initiatives and other sectors that are involved in the football fraternity. Furthermore, the absence of football for five months due to the pandemic imposed a humungous crisis on this sport in a scale never seen before (Said 2020) with a long lasting impact in the foreseeable future. The pandemic has threatened and affected a majority of the people’s livelihoods (Ray 2020) and this has presented a multiplicity of challenges for football as a sporting code (Thebus 2020). The following section presents the socio-economic challenges to South African Society imposed by COVID-19 from a football perspective taking into cognisance the different actors in the sport such as supporters, communities, players, football clubs, match officials, broadcasters, journalists and media and Premier Soccer League (PSL) among others.

### **6.1 Job Losses**

The biggest consequence of COVID-19 has been its negative impact on job losses across all sports. With respect to football, one of the impacted are the football match officials (referees and other officials in particular) who are not permanent employees within the footballing industry (Makhaya 2020). Consequently, failure of football matches unfolding means that match officials are not able to earn a living and their livelihoods are under siege, undermining their efforts to feed their families and pay bills through income derived from football (Makhaya 2020). Apart from match officials, the livelihoods of other indirect beneficiaries such as caterers, grounds staff,

media, vendors, security personnel and other industries affiliated to the footballing industry have been greatly affected as well by this turmoil imposed by COVID-19 (Ray 2020). Lack of football activities means a majority of these groups have lost substantial finances usually accrued from match day activities. Zooming in on the media, freelance journalists working on a part-time basis have also been directly affected by the halting of football activities. This has resulted in retrenchments, no work and salary cuts for media personnel within the national broadcaster, South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) with some being slapped with non-renewal of contracts by their employees (Gleeson 2020). Meanwhile, several radio stations have also axed some of its reporters especially in the sports category (Gleeson 2020). The massive jobs losses and income in the footballing industry is reflective of the overall socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on South African Society.

## **6.2 *Dwindling Social Cohesion***

The apartheid era in South Africa was vastly characterised by racial divisions that aggravated tensions even in sporting codes such as football (as highlighted in section 3 of the chapter which focused on the history and growth of football in the South African context). Therefore, in the post-apartheid era, sport has been viewed as an opportunity for promoting unity, peace, forgiveness and addressing the ills of the past to bring about positive social change across the divides of geography, gender, class and race (Engl and Potgieter 2015). Sport over time has been used as a catalyst to stimulate reconciliation, nation building and above all social cohesion (Shongwe 2012). Football fans<sup>2</sup> across the races have merged together to create a bond highly influenced by the support and love for their teams and this is the founding principle that informs the idea of a united nation and collective (Shongwe 2012). Moreover, football has been used as a networking tool amongst supporters ranging from the working class to youths in urban areas (Luginaah and Otiso 2010). Unfortunately, the outbreak of this pandemic has shattered the existing networks established between different groups of people in the football fraternity. It is from such events that the characteristics of social cohesion emerged, witnessing the power of sport as a unifying factor. Social football usually played by football fanatics in the form of small children,

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<sup>2</sup> The word fans and supporters will be used interchangeably in the chapter.

youth and adults have diminished due to the pandemic. It is from such events that different groups of people were able to discuss business, network, relax and create an avenue for social exchange (Luginaah & Otiso 2010). The unavailability of competitive matches in stadiums coupled with the lockdown regulations have dealt a heavy blow to football from a social perspective. Moreover, this has seen other lower leagues in Amateur football in South Africa halted with a staggering loss of R1 billion (Arends 2020). This has had a detrimental economic and social impact and furthermore, it has destroyed the principle of social cohesion that unites people in sporting events like professional and amateur football despite their indifferences.

### **6.3 Entertainment Deprivation**

The popularity and growth of football in South Africa has also acted as a source of entertainment for passionate fans across the country. However, in recent times fans were subjected to a football blackout (Dube 2020) for a period of five months due to the outbreak of COVID-19. This resulted in the withdrawal of football being screened on television and the non-attendance of spectators at football matches during match day. For the first time ever since the dawn of democracy in 1994, fans were subjected to football shutdown. A large proportion of fans in football are vividly viewed as the consumers of the beautiful game although the exact number is not known (both on screen and off screen in stadium attendances) (Adonis 2011; Onwumechili and Akindele 2014). As a result, South African society is now enduring football deprivation as a source of entertainment. This has dealt a heavy blow on avid fans across the country who enjoy the entertainment provided by this great game with societal, financial, and possible mental health consequences. Even though football has returned after a lengthy absence, fans are still not permitted to go to stadiums with live matches being played behind closed doors. Instead they are now being broadcasted for the first time in empty stadiums due to the pandemic. The entertainment side of the sport through interaction of fans during matches coupled with *vuvuzela* loud noises from cheering supporters is still a far-fetched reality in the present and in the foreseeable future. Consequently, future studies should be done to examine the mental health challenges imposed on supporters (entertainment consumers) and football players (entertainers) due to the suspension of football related activities due to the COVID-19 crisis.

#### **6.4 Depreciation in Revenue Generation**

Football over the years has been steadily built into a lucrative business and hence its identification as an industry. In the context of South Africa, commercialisation of football through profitable sponsorship deals has grown its popularity. Large corporations such as Nedbank, MTN, Vodacom and Absa amid others (Adonis 2011; Onwumechili and Akindes 2014) have provided the platform for the glorification of football as a viable business sector. This has paved way for football clubs to generate revenue and unfortunately all of this has been ceased due to the outbreak of the pandemic. This has brought some football clubs on the brink of economic collapse and a calling for the cutting of salaries to keep the football clubs afloat. In support of this notion, recent developments in the football fraternity have seen long standing historic clubs such as the 99-year-old Bidvest Wits being sold. Reasons cited are that the owners were greatly affected by the economic recession taking place in the country due the pandemic and other economic causes, paving the way for a thorough reconsideration of their interest and appetite for the sport (Said 2020). The everyday operations and the payments of players and staff is the biggest economic fallout for these clubs during this difficult time. For instance, most of the football players' contracts expire in June, an indication that their right to social security hangs in the balance. As a result, the business end of football for the both the clubs and the players (revenue generation) is threatening the survival and future of football in South Africa. The situation has been intensified by a lack of live matches in stadiums where some form of revenue mostly for the PSL is generated in gate entrances through the sale of match day tickets. Football clubs such as Amazulu declared at the end of April that they were no longer able to pay full salaries to their players and staff despite having sponsors such as Spar and the PSL grant of 2 million (Said 2020). This is largely due to the slump in business experienced by the owners who rely on other streams of income from their businesses (Said 2020). Another conundrum confronting the football fraternity in general is the fate of fans who had already bought season tickets to watch their favourite teams. Whereas, the large corporation who are the major sponsors have also felt the pinch as a result of the economic stagnation imposed by COVID-19. Traditionally, these corporations use these sponsorship deals to market their business and boost their clientele coupled with their corporate social responsibility mandate.

Even though football has resumed in South Africa, the damages in terms of huge revenue losses have already been experienced.

### ***6.5 Loss in Broadcasting Revenue***

In the context of South African football, Supersport is the only contributor to the revenue mainstream in relation to broadcasting (Mtshazo 2020). The PSL signed a big and lucrative broadcasting deal with Supersport in 2007 worth 1.6 billion Rands (Long 2020), giving leeway for the broadcaster to secure the PSL international sports broadcasting rights (KickOff 2011). Even though Supersport promised to continue paying the PSL revenue from broadcasting, there is still another difficult dimension for broadcasters in different media houses whose fate is hanging in the balance (Makhaya 2020). Business has slumped due to the impact of the pandemic on broadcasting, subsequently resulting in less audiences in terms of listenership, readership and viewership (Makhaya 2020). Gumede (2020) asserts that if the football season is not completed, the PSL is at the risk of losing R200 million because its largest share of revenue (approximately 60%) comes from broadcasting rights. Seemingly, a small percentage of its revenue is generated from live match tickets (Gumede 2020). Additionally, the current economic woes experienced in the country due to the pandemic have added another dimension (the question of affordability) that can result in the potential cancellation of subscriptions by viewers for the Supersport Channel as a consequence of job losses for millions of people in the country across different sectors of the economy (Said 2020). Since the advent of the pandemic, substantial financial losses related to broadcasting revenue generation have been experienced, derailing the financial status of both the PSL and football clubs and this led to job losses and non-renewal of contracts.

### ***6.6 Collapse and Loss of Sponsorship Deals***

The issue of sponsorship has been identified in the on-going discussion but not at a broader scale. This section provides a detailed discussion. The PSL has been identified as the seventh biggest earner amongst football leagues in the world due to the enormous revenue generated from sponsorship deals (Long 2020). Sponsors in South African football have over the years greatly assisted with the development and growth of the sport from grassroot level

(scouting of young talent) up to the pinnacle (professional level) of the sport. However, in recent times not only have the sponsorship deals been frozen, some are on the brink of collapse due to the economic turmoil caused by the outbreak of the pandemic. So far, the biggest sponsorship deal to collapse is the ‘pulling out’ of Absa from its 16-year relationship with the Premier Soccer League (PSL) since 2004 in the Absa cup and since 2007 in the Absa premier league (Mbewa 2020 and Sibembe 2020). Even though Absa had signed a new deal with the PSL, it cited financial constraints due to the uncondusive economic climate taking place in the country as part of the reasons for ‘pulling out’ of backing the PSL financially (Sibembe 2020). The economic dividends enjoyed by the PSL over its partnership with Absa has come to an end leaving it during these trying and tumultuous times with no sponsor. Over the years, Absa has managed to assist the PSL to growth the South African league into a very competitive and marketable franchise in the African continent and on the global stage (Mbewa 2020). The prevailing circumstances have left the league without a sponsor, a heavy blow to football supporters, footballers and football clubs. The passion, competitiveness and financial reward of the league has already been diminished by the pulling out of Absa. The PSL has to go back to the drawing board to find a new sponsor while contending with the financial fallout imposed by COVID-19.

### ***6.7 Suspension of Charitable and Community Activities***

Apart from providing entertainment for supporters across the globe, football is also viewed as a humanitarian and development tool (Manzo 2011). Several Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have over the years implemented a number of projects in relation to football as a development tool through a combination of sporting activities (UNODC 2018; Giampiccoli and Nauright 2019) that fosters social change and assists vulnerable and marginalised groups. One such initiative in the context of South Africa has been the Grassroots Soccer initiative that has been working with youths in the country. Soccer as a sport has in the process been used as a tool to develop and teach the youths about behavioural change on health-related issues such as HIV/AIDS, violence, drug abuse, crime and life skills (Jack 2018; UNODC 2018; Wigglesworth 2020). Such prudent football driven development initiatives that are positively impacting the lives of youth have been put

on halt due to the pandemic resulting in high rates of violence and crime since lockdown. Consequently, this has derailed the progress made in changing the lives of youth who are deeply engulfed in poverty and unemployment. This success of these community driven initiatives is under threat due to the continued spread of the disease ultimately resulting in persisting implementation of lockdown regulations.

Additionally, several PSL clubs have over the years been heavily engaged in community charitable programs through corporate social responsibility initiatives to support and develop communities. They have reached out to vulnerable and marginalised groups such as children, women and the less fortunate. Moreover, sponsors in conjunction with clubs have played a crucial role in making some of these development initiatives a reality and dream come true for the impoverished and disadvantaged in society. This assistance has extended to the playing field where some PSL teams conduct tournaments to promote social cohesion in a consolidated effort to grow the sport amongst the youths. All these initiatives by NGOs and the PSL in collaboration with sponsors which brings positive change, have been halted in the midst of this pandemic negatively impacting socially-driven change programs.

## **7 Conclusion**

As iterated in the introductory remarks, the main aim of the chapter is to make a contribution to the under-researched phenomena of pandemics, sports and their impact on societies. In doing so, the chapter has reflected on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on South African society from a football perspective. It has been established that sport has played a pivotal role in promoting social cohesion in a country with a long history of racial subjugation and divisions stimulated and entrenched by the apartheid system. The chapter has argued that the outbreak of Covid-19 has had a negative impact on the wider society in South Africa in terms of enjoying the benefits of football through providing a source of livelihood, entertainment, social cohesion and associated benefits accrued from charitable and community events through football development initiatives by different actors. Moreover, the impact of this crisis has cascaded over to the entire football fraternity through the loss of jobs, sponsorship, revenue and broadcasting rights.

Further, the chapter holds the view that sport in South Africa tran-

scends beyond the field of play. It provides an avenue for positive development in vulnerable and marginalised communities. It is a beacon of hope for a better future amongst the youth. An end to football activities through this crisis has the potential to destroy the progress that has been made thus far in promoting positivity in society from a socio-economic perspective. Therefore, the chapter further argues that a halt in football activities has catastrophic socio-economic consequences for the entire football community in South Africa. The delay in resuming football activities has diminished and possibly rescinded the growth and popularity of the sport amongst supporters, football players, football clubs, sponsors, media fraternity and broadcasters.

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