



U.S. Agency for  
International  
Development

Bureau for  
Global Health

# SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

## West Africa: Football Players Urge *Game Plan* Against HIV/AIDS

WHEN AFRICA'S EQUIVALENT of the Super Bowl was last held in January 2002, millions of young football (soccer) fans tuned in to cheer on their national teams and to root for their favorite players. At the same time, they heard something unusual: Off the field, their sports idols were urging them to develop a personal *Game Plan* against HIV/AIDS.

The 23rd African Cup of Nations football tournament, hosted by Mali, provided an ideal setting for the launch of an HIV/AIDS education campaign supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) called *Play for Life*. Implemented by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health/Center for Communication Programs and local partners, the project drew on the popularity of football players and a captive audience of young men in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria to deliver important messages about HIV/AIDS.

"It is crucial to reach as many young men as possible because AIDS is hitting African youth hard," said Jane Bertrand of Johns Hopkins University during the *Play for Life* launch. An estimated 8.5 million Africans, aged 15–24, are living with HIV/AIDS—70 percent of the world's total infected youth.

The campaign trained national football players to serve as HIV/AIDS spokesmen, presenting safe sex as desirable and "cool," and offering personalized information about how they protect themselves against the disease. Players discussed the importance of following the "ABCs" of HIV/AIDS prevention (**A**bstain, **B**e faithful, or use **C**ondoms), while individual HIV/AIDS Game Plans were distributed to fans attending matches in Mali and at local sites elsewhere in West Africa. Using football terminology to engage the public, the plans outlined how to recognize and avoid risky, yellow card behaviors, as well as dangerous, red card behaviors.

*Play for Life* also produced bilingual radio and television spots featuring well-known football stars—including Nigeria's Julius Aghahowa—and facilitated personal appearances by players at youth clubs and schools. Players spoke out against discrimination against those living with HIV/AIDS and referred local audiences to local clinics and/or counseling centers for more information.

At a televised ceremonial event during the African Cup kickoff, West African health and political officials issued a call to action to fight HIV/AIDS and presented a copy of the *Play for Life* Game Plan. Afterward, players kicked souvenir footballs emblazoned with HIV/AIDS prevention messages into the audience.

The campaign was successful in reaching a wide audience of young males who respect and imitate their favorite football players. In Ghana, *Play for Life* HIV/AIDS education road shows reached up to 45,000 people in nine communities, while an HIV/AIDS/sexually transmitted infection clinic in Bamako, Mali, saw visits jump by 54 percent in the two months following the African Cup.

Playing at Home  
Beats Playing Away...  
Be Faithful to Your Partner.  
—A *Play for Life* campaign  
slogan aimed at young  
football fans in West Africa.

Photo courtesy of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School  
of Public Health/Center for Communication Programs



A *Play for Life* poster urges football fans to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS.

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USAID and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health/Center for Communication Programs are building on this success through a follow-on activity called *Sports for Life*, launched in mid-2003. *Sports for Life* raises HIV/AIDS awareness and encourages HIV testing and counseling among at-risk youth involved in community basketball, volleyball, and football teams. The campaign, implemented in Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, and Zambia, will be particularly visible during Nigeria's pre-Olympic games in October and November of 2003, when coaches and referees will serve as sports ambassadors for HIV prevention.

*West Africa, October 2003*