
The World Cup of Football and the World Cup of Life

Much of the world's population –especially males– will spend the coming weeks glued to the TV as the FIFA World Cup unfolds. While many are fully aware that this is no longer a mere sporting event, but rather a massive globalized business in which the players are little more than disposable gladiators at the service of big corporations, they are still drawn to keep watching, celebrating the victories and suffering the defeats as if they were their own.

Perhaps this is because football is one of the very few domains in the world today that appears to offer equal opportunities to all, where 11 men from one country are pitted against 11 men from another, and the economic, political or military power of their respective nations off the field have no bearing. In a world dominated by the powerful –in the South as well as in the North– this sense of equality that characterizes football is almost unique, and perhaps what is most compelling about this international championship. After all, this is a contest in which the countries of the so-called Third World have emerged triumphant more often than the countries of the industrialized North: Brazil has won an unprecedented 5 World Cups, Argentina 2, Uruguay 2, Germany 3, Italy 3, England 1 and France 1. Final score: South 9 – North 8.

But while the fictional world of the World Cup moves forward, awakening hopes, joys and heartaches, the real world continues to develop on a playing field that is overwhelmingly uneven, where economic, political and military power prevail and “fair play” is notoriously absent.

Take the case of Ecuador, one of the teams that sparked rising expectations after its first two games in Germany. In real life, Ecuador the country has been taking a thrashing for years. Of course, the referee – in this case, the government – has usually only red carded the representatives of the people, while national and international corporations are shown a yellow card at the very most. It has punished the people for non-existent fouls and offsides, but turned a blind eye to blatant penalty fouls by the business sector. The equivalent of FIFA in this case –the World Bank and International Monetary Fund– have permanently sanctioned Indigenous, Afroecuadorian and poor players, while obliging successive referees to impose rules that favour the business team. The results can be illustrated in scores like the following:

Oil companies 10 – Indigenous peoples of the Amazon 5
Forestry companies 8 – Forest peoples 3
Shrimp farming companies 5 – Afroecuadorians in mangrove regions 2
Oil palm companies 6 – Indigenous and Afroecuadorians 1
Tree planting companies 5 – Indigenous and Afroecuadorians 3

In every area, the Ecuadorian people are losing. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the goals scored by the people – including a few stunning goals – have been relatively recent. In the meantime, the business sector has scored very few goals in recent years, and has been forced onto the defensive. The referee has even occasionally begun to hand out penalties to business players (as in the recent case of the Oxy oil company, whose contract in Ecuador was cancelled) or to overlook fouls committed by the people (like another recent case where local communities cut down

eucalyptus trees on a plantation owned by the Japanese consortium Eucapacific). Even "FIFA" itself appears to be looking the other way.

It is also worth noting that the Ecuadorian team's fans slogan is "Yes we can!", and that the chant shouted by its fans is "Let's go Ecuadorians, tonight we have to win!" Interestingly enough, the same slogans and chants were used in the demonstrations to overthrow the president. On the final night of the demonstrations, protestors took to the streets shouting "Let's go Ecuadorians, tonight he has to fall!" And the president fell. Gooooaaaaa!

Ecuador has now been eliminated from the World Cup by England, but in the match for life, the people are moving in an increasingly organized formation towards their opponents' side of the field and scoring some remarkable goals. Playing from behind, the Ecuadorian people are gradually narrowing the score. A team of indigenous, mixed-race and Afroecuadorians, men and women, elders and children. Playing the game by their own rules. And most importantly of all, fuelled by their hopes in the possibility of victory. As they say: Yes we can!