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Kicking around in Liberia: a case study of Millennium Stars FC

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ABSTRACT

This is a case study of a 15-year project involving a grassroots football team from Liberia, Millennium Stars FC. Formed in 1997, during the Liberian civil war, football allowed them to distance themselves from and deal with their recent past. On a three-week tour to the UK in 1999, it gave them an opportunity to make connections to another part of the world. It continues to give them a sense of worth and a way to contribute to rebuilding. Football helped them not only rebuild their own lives, but to contribute to shaping a vision for Liberia's new peace-time identity.

Grassroots football has been in increasing use in the last three decades as a component of DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration) programmes with child soldiers in civil conflicts. Non-governmental organisations particularly have found that football more than other sports appears successful when applied in a variety of cultures and contexts.

While empirical research is still scant, within the environment of SDP (Sport for Development and Peace) it is also acknowledged that 'football for peace' has shortfalls, limitations and negative as well as positive results. Benefits include factors such as increasing individual self-confidence and team spirit, appreciation of the 'other' and allowing children to re-claim their lost childhoods; while disadvantages include reinforcement of destructive macho stereotypes, creation of unrealistic expectations and the risk of isolating crucial peace-building work from the mainstream.

The story of Millennium Stars forces us to look beyond short-term rehabilitation. Liberia had 14 years of war, but more than 160 years of suppression and oppression. A study of Millennium Stars FC's history shows that the fundamental role for any grassroots project in Liberia, using sport or not, must be to tackle extreme poverty by creating long-term trust, opportunities, and social bonds at the most basic community level.

CHAPTER 1

1.1. Introduction

The aim of this investigation is to look at the possibilities of football for reconciliation, but also as a means of individual and community development in Africa. One suggested shortcoming of studies of sport and development projects has been a lack of deep analysis. I hope to add depth with a case study over 15 years of Millennium Stars FC, a grassroots football club set up in Liberia in 1997, and still running in the present day.

Millennium Stars began in Gbangaye Town, a slum in Monrovia, as little more than a regular kick-about for young teenagers living locally with nothing to do after the end of the war. In 1999, however, they toured the UK, in a project devised by local non-governmental organisation (NGO) Don Bosco Homes and UK NGO CAFOD (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development) to draw attention to the plight of child soldiers in Liberia and highlight the potential for unification that football brought.

From 2000 to 2003, Millennium Stars struggled to build on the attention and investment they received and hoped to receive as a result of the tour, until war erupted again and drove them apart. They re-started the club in late 2004, not just to play in the national Liberia leagues, but also with an aim to pass on their learning to younger players. In 2008-09, they were involved in plans for a second trip to the UK, with original members bringing their own youth team, but the project was scrapped because of the global recession. Their continuing efforts to run a grassroots soccer academy were highlighted by visits from Adrian Chiles¹ and a BBC crew filming for Sport Relief in 2008, and by Paul Robson, son of Sir Bobby Robson², in 2010, when Millennium Stars were one of the teams to benefit from huge donations of football shirts to mark the passing of Sir Bobby.

I will ask two questions in this study, based on the two distinct eras in Millennium Stars FC history: The first is: *What was football's role in peace-building in an immediate post-war context?* Although with hindsight, it can be seen that there were several false starts in the peace process during this period rather than actual peace, at the time it was believed that war was finished in 1997.

Secondly: *What is football's role in promoting peace and development in a long-term context?* The second question is more about the relationship between extreme poverty and conflict – if one leads to the other, is it enough just to reconcile the soldiers? What, if anything, can be done to promote change through sport? What are the opportunities for education – and social education – as well as building long-term social capital, and providing opportunities for livelihoods?

For the purposes of this paper, I will leave out an in-depth appraisal of SDP (Sport for Development and Peace) projects as that information is available elsewhere. Instead, I will concentrate on presenting a case study of the Millennium Stars FC in their context.

The case study is derived from personal knowledge of the team and its history from 1997 to the present day; a written history and background and overview of significant events in their story, written by player/organiser Christian Neh in 2009³; formal interviews with members of the team about their experiences and about the significance of their time with Millennium Stars that I

¹ Football presenter on ITV, formerly on BBC television.

² Sir Robert William "Bobby" Robson was a well-known English football player and manager. He played nearly 600 matches and scored more than 100 goals, and later managed Ipswich Town, Barcelona, Newcastle United and England, among others. He died on July 31, 2009, aged 76.

³ Christian Neh, *Brief History of Millennium Stars* (unpublished 2009)

conducted in January 2008 and in August 2011. I will focus on material gathered from four individuals – Christian Neh, Prince Momo, Nusee Cooper and Abraham Clarke – all members of Millennium Stars since 1997, participants in the UK Tour in 1999, and organisers of new Millennium Stars since 2004.

I also have access to interviews conducted with Millennium Stars in 1999, shortly before their UK tour. This is unpublished material and focuses heavily on the experiences of various team members as soldiers and victims of the war in Liberia from 1989 to 1996. Some of this interview material contains sensitive information relating to several boys' experiences as child soldiers. As these interviews were conducted when the subjects were children, that 15 years have passed since the recordings were made and that the circumstances of the individual and the context of the country have vastly changed, I think it is important the subjects of those interviews remain anonymous.

I also have a variety of cuttings and published materials from the time of the 1999 UK Tour, from various sources including national UK newspapers and the internet, and from publicity around the 2008 and 2010 visits by Adrian Chiles and Paul Robson.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

My analysis of the case study of Millennium Stars will focus on three perspectives in the study of sport, as identified by Grant Jarvie in *Sport, Culture and Society*.⁴

The first deals with the functions of football – what was Millennium Stars for? The second deals with the symbolic interaction of individuals with their sport – What does or did football mean to them? The final part deals with historical sociology – What change was attempted, by whom and how, within what historical context, and what succeeded or failed?

It is also illuminating to consider the symbolic role of George Weah, Liberia's most famous citizen, who – while the Liberia war was at its height in the mid-1990s – was thought by many the world's best footballer, and later crowned African Player of the Century⁵, and who is the only player in history to be voted African, European and World Player of the Year simultaneously (in 1995).⁶ Later he was the self-appointed player-manager of the national soccer team, Lone Star, and provided kit and transport from his own pocket. Later still he ran for President of Liberia in 2005 and is campaigning for the Vice Presidency in the next election in October 2011.⁷ What were or are the expectations placed on him? How did his example help or hinder reconciliation or long-term development?

This paper is guided by Jarvie's⁸ explanation of the role sport plays in creating cultural and national identities to show the role football played in the national psyche of Liberians as demonstrated by members of Millennium Stars, as they sought to envision a new Liberia focussed on football success. As Jarvie says: "Sport often provides a uniquely effective medium for inculcating national feelings; it provides a form of symbolic action which states the case for the nation itself."⁹

By documenting the history of Millennium Stars and by investigating their own perceptions of themselves and their activities during that history, I hope to shed light on what part they have played

⁴ Grant Jarvie, *Sport, Culture and Society*. (Oxford, Routledge, 2006) pp414.

⁵ George Manneh Oppong Weah <http://www.liberiansoccer.com/George%20Weah.htm>

⁶ George Manneh Oppong Weah <http://www.liberiansoccer.com/George%20Weah.htm>

⁷ Brumskine-Siakor: another dream ticket <http://www.1847post.com/article/brumskine-siakor-another-dream-ticket>

⁸ Grant Jarvie *Sport, Nationalism and Cultural Identity* in Lincoln Allison (ed.) *The Changing Politics of Sport* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1993)

⁹ Jarvie, *Sport, Nationalism and Cultural Identity*, p74

– either with success or failure – in affecting social change. Millennium Stars FC seems to have the potential to be both an end in itself – as a means of democratising Liberian football and making it a better way for young players to come through to strengthen the national team – but more importantly a means to an end – reintegrating child soldiers, building social capital and strengthening civil society to help democratic Liberia re-build, grow, and develop: how football has been their way of playing a part in the imaginative creation of a new Liberia¹⁰ - building community, civil society, social capital.



¹⁰ Jarvie, *Sport, Culture and Society*, p328

CHAPTER 2

2.1. Millennium Stars history

Millennium Stars' story splits easily into two parts. The first part takes them to the UK on a successful tour, then back to Liberia and to apparent split as the war re-starts. The second part tells of the Stars' re-birth, and their continuing struggle to set up a humanitarian project in their home city to work with disadvantaged children like themselves through football.

In 1996, the war was over, or so people thought, and all everybody wanted was a return to normality. Survivors separated from their families by the fighting were coming back together, finding out who was still alive, looking for ways to bring in a few dollars, and waiting for schools to re-open. A bunch of lads living in the Gbangaye Town area started getting together on the Gbangaye Town field to play football.

Gbangaye Town is an urban slum in Monrovia south of 24th Street, Sinkor, bounded to the east by Cheeseman Avenue and to the west by the road known locally as 'Airfield Shortcut' that heads directly from Tubman Boulevard to James Spriggs Payne Airfield. Once off the paved road, Gbangaye Town is quiet and self-contained, like a village in the interior. It has its own video club, mosque, casino, town square and town chief, all on an intimate scale. At the north end is the Gbangaye Town field – a large rectangle of sandy scrub land, frequently washed away down the westward slope during the rainy season. Adjacent walls form the limits of the pitch.

The group of friends would gather several times a week to train and play with other lads they met there and a few mates they called in from other nearby neighbourhoods. The local people were still wary – a group of teenage boys getting together for any reason triggered alarms bells. The war had turned society upside down. Children became the aggressors and adults had to do their bidding. If you were a healthy teenage boy, people thought you must have been a fighter.

Whether fighter or not, all had stories about the horrors the war had brought. Millennium Stars Goalkeeper Nusee Cooper¹¹:

"I was five years old when rebels attacked a local church where my family and I had gone to seek refuge. We had to walk for about nine hours [to get away].

"The journey was tough because we had no food or water. Children lost their lives trying to cross a swamp, while others drank from streams that had corpses at the top. We managed to survive without drinking any water along the way, because my mom made a wise decision not to drink from streams on grounds that she did not trust their sources. I think it was just a divine intervention. We needed his blessings, as anyone could easily be killed only because of tribal differences or how they spoke. Our survival was actually at the mercy of their perception.

"The journey continued, and then came my toughest moment as a child after seeing several dead bodies. It was the time when I was to witness the killing of my mother who was accused of being a Mandingo woman. This was far from the truth, but there was no means of defending her. My uncle tried to talk, but was ordered to leave.

"We left in tears and waited for the sound of the gun, to be sure of her death, but God was there to perform his miracle. According to my mom, she was given a cup of cane juice.¹² This was done to

¹¹ Nusee told me this story several times over the years. In 2011, I got him to write it down.

¹² Locally produced alcohol from fermented cane sugar.

prove that she wasn't a Mandingo.¹³ She failed because she never drank cane juice. They all rejoiced and said: "You see da Mandingo woman, en I told your!" She said all she could see was total darkness. The gun was again pointed at her, but by then their commander had arrived and he said, 'Hey, my man, stop. That woman is innocent.' The guy declined [to kill her] and she was eventually set free."

Football provided the only bright spots during the previous seven years. One of football's famous sayings is that when Liberia played at home during the civil war, the guns fell silent.¹⁴ George Weah was playing in Europe for AC Milan and was named World, African and European Player of the Year in 1995. He was supporting the Liberian national team, Lone Star, out of his own pocket and they qualified for their first ever African Nations tournament in January 1996. South Africa, back after the apartheid ban was lifted, was host. Lone Star got off to a tremendous start, beating Gabon 2-1 in their first game, and only went out of the tournament on goal difference.

Then in April 1996 came an infamous chapter in the war in Liberia – a rampage of looting, killing and terror known as "April 6," which began on that date but lasted for a month.

But later that year, if you were playing in bare feet on the sandy uneven surface at Gbangaye Town, it was much better to cast your mind back to January 1996 and imagine you were Kelvin Sebwe or Mass Saar Junior banging those two goals in against Gabon.

Christian Neh – striker coach and organiser of Millennium Stars from the beginning wrote a history of the team in 2009:¹⁵ "Because football is widely played across the country and remains the nation's number one passion, as it was so often used to soften tensions between belligerent forces during the war days. The effect the game has had on the sporting populace has meant that most growing youths would relish playing soccer now more than engage in any harmful habits."

Boots were difficult to come by in 1996 and so were footballs. So the team would organise a clean-up, collecting rubbish and generally tidying up round Gbangaye Town to raise some cash for equipment. It didn't do their image with the locals any harm either. The Gbangaye Town housewives appreciated their efforts and one of them said she'd ask her son to coach them as he was a few years older than them and a decent player.

This was Mulbah Kpaiwolo, who had attended the Catholic Don Bosco Technical High School¹⁶ and at age 17 was on the fringes of a Don Bosco sponsored football team, Bosco United Sports Association (BUSA). Although the Gbangaye Town group already had a coach, they were still only turning up for fun a couple of times a week. Mulbah gathered them together at Gbangaye Town Field on January 7, 1997, to launch the new team, to be named "Power from Heaven" in the spirit of thanksgiving for the end of the hostilities and trust in a better future to come. The players all agreed to a code of conduct – no drink or drugs, respect for each other and the coaches and to be serious about training.

As Fr Joe Glackin, a Motherwell-born priest of the Salesians of Don Bosco, later told it, Mulbah asked him for a ball, and told him about the team, their training sessions and the friendlies they were organising against other neighbourhood teams.

¹³ Mandingos are Muslims, so in theory, wouldn't be able to drink alcohol.

¹⁴ **Minnesota's Liberians debate whether to mourn or celebrate**
http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2003/07/28_schmitzr_liberiansoccer/

¹⁵ Christian Neh, *Brief History of the Millennium Stars* (2009) unpublished

¹⁶ The school was one of the projects run by the Salesians of Don Bosco, an international Roman Catholic missionary order, founded by Italian priest Fr John (Don) Bosco, that specialised in working with children. They also ran several parishes and were beginning to work with street children and ex-child soldiers, which work later became NGO Don Bosco Homes (DBH).

The Scottish priest had been in Monrovia since the early days of the war and had created an *ad hoc* NGO called Don Bosco Homes (DBH) to deal with hundreds of streetkids and ex-child soldiers who were living rough and fending for themselves. DBH had outreach workers and night shelters in town, but it was the homes they ran that gave the NGO its name – around a dozen kids would live with a house parent while DBH worked with bigger international NGOs to locate a parent or suitable guardian for them.

In July 1997, Fr Joe was heading down the coast to visit the DBH set-up in Buchanan with a press officer from the Catholic aid agency CAFOD, who had previously volunteered with the Salesians for a year in the Don Bosco school and the youth centre where the first Don Bosco hostel was. The talk moved to CAFOD's tentative plans to organise something big for the Millennium, then less than three years away, and they conversation began to centre on the possibility of taking the team to the UK for a nationwide tour.

Personally, Fr Joe had never had much time for football previously, but could see the potential now. In an article written at the time¹⁷, he said: “In a world that seems so divided and torn by suspicion and doubt it is becoming more and more important to find ways of bringing peace and reconciliation without the aid of experts. And believe it or not football for some people can do just that. Through its high profile, its world-wide appeal and the demands of the game itself can make it an instrument of reconciliation.”

Somehow the team gathered something was being planned for the turn of the century and they astutely re-named the team Millennium FC, which later became Millennium Stars FC.¹⁸ They remember it as a time of great excitement: “a life-time opportunity for many of the lads who haven’t had such glorious chance to lift a foot outside of Liberia more so to a place as highly glamorous as the UK.”¹⁹

During 1998 and early 1999, the Millennium Stars FC touring squad took shape. Christian Neh said: “As the name of the team spread across the community of Gbangaye Town, it attracted more people from other communities thus increasing the number of players. Not only did this numerical strength grow in personnel, the reflection was also seen in the results on the pitch as the team swept aside opponents in its initial few matches winning handsomely. This boosted the morale of the team and attracted lots of youths from other localities.”²⁰

The 17 players who flew to London in September 1999 were joined by two Catholic youth workers from the Archdiocese of Monrovia and two young leaders from the Catholic schools network who were to act as team spokesmen.

¹⁷ http://www.salesians.org.uk/html/millennium_stars.html

¹⁸ The similarity of the team's new name with the name of the second largest diamond in the world, the Millennium Star, is purely coincidental. However it is striking, since the connection between Liberia and blood diamonds through Charles Taylor is well known. Equally serendipitous is that in 1999, the year of the Millennium Stars FC UK football tour, the owners of the Millennium Star, De Beers, decided to stop all outside buying of diamonds in order to guarantee categorically the conflict-free status of De Beers diamonds, effective from 26 March 2000.

See <http://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/221/47059.html>

¹⁹ Neh, *Brief History of the Millennium Stars*

²⁰ Neh, *Brief History of the Millennium Stars*

2.2. The 1999 playing squad with their tour squad number and playing position, and tribe

1	Nusee Cooper,	goalkeeper	Kpelle	Currently studying for a degree in Accountancy
2	Saah Tamba	centre back	Kissi	
3	Prince Momo	centre back	Kpelle	Currently playing for George Telegraph in India
4	Kunta Varney	fullback	Vai	Currently playing for Invincible Eleven, one of the most celebrated teams in Liberia
5	Moses Barcon	fullback	Bassa	Currently playing with Gedi & Sons in Liberia
6	Abraham Clarke	centre midfielder	Bassa	Currently playing with a second division team in Liberia
7	Zay-Zay Kollie	midfield	Loma	Currently playing for LISCR FC, Liberian Premier League Champions, and called into the Lone Star squad in 2010
8	Togar Thomas	centre midfielder	Bassa	Currently studying in Malaysia
9	Bob Kpaiwolo	defender	Loma	
10	Teku Nahn	midfield/striker	Mende/Kpelle	Currently playing for Barrack Young Controllers in Liberia and called into the Lone Star squad in 2010
11	Forkpah Sumo	midfield	Loma	Currently playing in India
12	Emmett Glassco	striker	Bassa	
13	Nostelda Thorpe	winger	Kpelle	
14	Mulbah Kpaiwolo	striker	Loma	
15	Vasco Kaba	fullback	Bassa	
16	Christian Neh	striker/winger	Grebo	Currently playing for LPRC Oilers in Liberia and studying
17	Morris Kermue	winger	Kpelle	Currently living in the UK

CAFOD saw the three-week tour as a development education project to teach young people in the UK about the impact of war and poverty on young people, through the experiences of members of the team as ex-child soldiers. The tour would begin in London, then circle the UK anti-clockwise, via the North East of England, central Scotland, North West England and North Wales, before finishing back in the South East of England.

Matches were arranged in each location as well as visits to leading professional football clubs in the area, their academies or stadiums – including Arsenal, Middlesbrough, Newcastle United, Celtic, Albion Rovers, Motherwell, Manchester United, Everton, Liverpool, Wimbledon and Reading. The predominant desire of the visiting Liberians was to make friends, so they were accompanied by youth groups and school pupils in most areas, who planned part or all of their local itinerary. They had a day's coaching at the Bobby Charlton Soccer School in Manchester, and Liberian internationals Chris Wreh and Mass Saar Jnr added extra flavour to the visits to Arsenal and Reading, where they were playing professionally.

Millennium Stars played seven 11-a-side matches against schools, diocesan teams, a team of African refugees, and a CAFOD Select XI and won them all. The tour was a phenomenal media success and CAFOD collected 69 'hits' on TV, radio and in print during the three weeks. As much as possible, the players spoke for themselves in media interviews. A major highlight was a feature on BBC TV's flagship children's news programme Newsround. CAFOD won Best Public Information Campaign by an NGO at the One World Media Awards 2000. Afterwards, CAFOD produced Kick Start a youthwork resource pack about Millennium Stars and football, featuring exercises on Identity and Teamwork and a video made from black and white shots of Millennium Stars in Liberia.

The tour was also making news in Liberia. On their return, the Millennium Stars were greeted as conquering heroes. The Catholic Bishop met them at the airport and blessed them. They were set up in a house formerly occupied by Catholic missionaries, with the intention of turning it into a football academy.

Excerpts from emails from Fr Joe were printed in an article in the Catholic Times newspaper at the time:²¹

October 13, 1999: "Excitement still running high here, every practice session still draws huge crowds – especially since some of the boys announced in a radio interview that the academy would be opening in six months' time!"

October 26, 1999: "Millennium has a double page spread in two of the major papers today. ... I was out in Virginia to say Mass for a group of elderly women. At the end of Mass, 10pm, one of them got up and gave a big speech about the Millennium Stars, how proud they all were, how they used to follow all the news on the radio and generally how great it all was. I really don't think I have worked out the effect the trip has had on so many people. ... Almost all the boys are in school. In the end the schools were fighting to give them scholarships so it's worked out well."

January 9, 2000: "The under-10 tournament was a big success with the final match broadcast live on the radio. Seventeen teams took part and the final on Christmas Eve was great. Almost by accident, we've now got a U-8 team because they were around all the time. ... Along with the U-13 team there are now five teams in a loose federation. ... The 17 community teams associated with the child protection work have all been reactivated in Monrovia, Kakata and Buchanan which means: making sure they are a community team – right age, regular practice etc.; giving some input to them and the community on child rights; collecting information for action on abuses going on. In addition, all the schools have started football teams, which to date is another 20-something self-supported teams. I also have 12 of the Millennium originals living at a house we have, as the start of an academy – all of them go to school, and have some kind of responsibility in a community setting. I noticed the other day that the whole Millennium squad – half of whom were not on the tour – are able to talk about all the experiences as if they had all been there."

The dream of the Academy was not to be. Fr Joe decided to leave the priesthood and leave Liberia; Mulbah got the chance to go to the USA and ended up living in Norway, and with these connections gone, Millennium Stars were asked to move out of the beach house. By 2003, with rebel soldiers once again marching on Monrovia, the Stars were scattered to various parts of Liberia, and as refugees in Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana.

Christian Neh²² remained behind in Monrovia but lost his brother to a random mortar attack. He said: "In June 2003 ... people were moving helter-skelter in search of safety and as the rockets fell

²¹ CAFOD Reporting *Young footballers prove they are in a league of their own*. Catholic Times (January 30, 2000)

indiscriminately from all fronts the chances of surviving became slimmer by the day. ... No member of the team was involved in a major disaster, but as the crisis subsided people became disillusioned. ... [A] vast majority decided to abandon the team and concentrate on creating other means of carrying on their lives.” It’s worth pointing out that not a single player went back to the fighting.

2.3. Millennium Stars rebirth

Back in Monrovia in 2004, Moses Barcon, Prince Momo, Nusee Cooper, Abraham Clark and Christian Neh began to re-build the team and the club. A UK contact agreed to provide some financial support towards equipment and soon numbers in the senior team were approaching the 1999 levels of 40 to 50. They also established a set of feeder teams. The senior players not only coached the juniors, but also aimed to inculcate the Millennium Stars spirit: “[T]he [senior] team thought it was about time to get along with its objective – that is creating a place where the talents of young people can be tapped upon, polished and made to glisten for international recognition. Youngsters between the ages 7-12 and 13-15 were brought aboard to bolster the beginners’ level of the team. They were given regular sessions by the bigger lads and this improved their standard of play and provided them more appetite to play soccer.”²³

In 2008, Millennium Stars were invited to enter a junior team in an international football tournament in Co. Durham, UK, in September 2009, which had the backing of the renowned former football manager, Sir Bobby Robson.²⁴ Again excitement spread in Liberia, but the 1999 success was not to be repeated as the global recession hit the project’s main sponsors and the tournament was cancelled. Frustration and disappointment hit the Millennium Stars hard and again many senior players drifted away, but the core decided to keep going, kept alive by the enthusiasm of the young players they were still coaching: “Those staunch members believed that remaining with the youngsters and helping them build the desire to play football at their very best would set the basis for a stronger team. The legacy of the team must live on and the objective [of establishing a soccer academy] must be protected.”²⁵

Millennium Stars continue to be a focus for the media. In 2008, a BBC camera crew accompanying Adrian Chiles for Sport Relief, made a short film shown on BBC1’s *The One Show* about football’s powers for reconciliation and reintegration. George Williams, Head of the Liberian FA at the time, called football a “magical force” for reintegration. He said: “It takes their minds off the trauma of the past and gives them a level of self-esteem.”

In 2010, Paul Robson – son of Sir Bobby – visited Liberia on a CAFOD trip a year after his father’s death, to hand over several hundred football shirts that had been left in honour of his father at the various clubs he had played for or managed.²⁶

Millennium Stars players continue playing for other big teams in Liberia, and in the Far East, as well as getting together to practice or play friendlies as Millennium Stars. They also train younger players at the Gbangaye Town field.

²² Neh, *Brief History of the Millennium Stars*

²³ Neh, *Brief History of the Millennium Stars*

²⁴ *Bobby Robson Supports Consett the World*

<http://www.true-faith.co.uk/tf/features.nsf/0/990725C44E43BCB1802574F90072BAFC?OpenDocument>

²⁵ Neh, *Brief History of the Millennium Stars*

²⁶ CAFOD (2010) *Liberia: Football's Legacy of hope*

<http://www.cafod.org.uk/news/international-news/liberia-football-2010-07-30>

CHAPTER 3

3.1. Analysing the Millennium Stars' legacy

The assessment below follows three of the perspectives identified by Jarvie²⁷ as important for those studying the role of football – its functions, its role in social interaction and its role and potential as a tool for social change.²⁸ I have decided to present Jarvie's perspectives as a table beside comments from Christian Neh²⁹ to compare indicators for the fulfillment of those perspectives by the Millennium Stars and show how Millennium Stars themselves have analysed and understood their actions.

Functions ³⁰	
Grant Jarvie	Christian Neh
Socio-emotional function, wherein football contributes to the maintenance of socio-psychological stability;	They had pasts that they really didn't want people to know about. What happened in the past happened. It was about re-starting their life and moving on. So we just considered everybody as people who were affected by the war and didn't focus on that aspect of who actively fought in the war. Getting to know what each individual did was difficult. We said it wasn't something we would always talk about. We would just let it go.
Socialisation wherein football contributes to the inculcation of cultural beliefs and mores	Because football is so popular in Liberia, it was easy to get people involved. We no longer focus on war, but building a future, building a career, being of service to your community, to develop to be someone who can be counted on in the future. Even though we are night fighting a war, some of them will be tempted to be street children and may damage their own career, wanting to be wayward, or engage in stealing or doing things that are harmful to them, so we try to guide them against that, and we provide tips for them to follow so that they can be good people.
Integrative function, wherein football contributes to the harmonious integration of disparate individuals and individuals and diverse groups;	It was a link, to serve as a point of connection, to bring people together. During the war people were divided, especially young people, forcibly conscripted, there was division, so we thought we would come back together as a unit and do something to pull us together and this idea of establishing a team came to the fore. In spite of different backgrounds, the aim was to focus on friendship. We didn't allow tribal or religious links to interfere with what we were doing. We considered Millennium as one boat that everyone could float in. We put together a team that could bring back the memory of the team that existed in 1997, so we began to work together again as a group.

²⁷ Jarvie, *Sport, Culture and Society*, pp414.

²⁸ Rather than switch between the words 'sport' and 'football', I will use 'football' throughout as it is appropriate to the study, even where Jarvie may have 'sport' in the original.

²⁹ Christian Neh Interview, August 2011. In August 2011, I conducted interviews with five Millennium Stars players by Skype. Each of the five was there from the beginning, took part in the UK tour and is still involved. They were Christian neh, Prince Momo, Nusee Cooper, Moses Barcon and Abraham Clarke.

³⁰ Jarvie, *Sport, Culture and Society*, p24.

<p>Political function wherein football is used for ideological purposes;</p>	<p>Not just sharing as a team, but we decided to take that off the pitch. It spread everywhere we went. We all wanted to see a new Liberia. We wanted to see a new group of people. We used Millennium Stars as a beginning point. We use the same formula we used in the past. But the focus isn't on war any longer. It's about building a career, building a future. It's about acquiring the skill that will make you a better footballer, and things that will make you a role model in society. When we initially started, the idea was to flush out the bad habits, the behaviour that divided us. Young people then were counted as evil-doers or mindless people because of what they did in the war. After the war, there was that stigma. Young men were associated with violence. We wanted a new breed of people, so really the football was all about that and the overriding focus was to get away from the past.</p>
<p>Social mobility functions wherein football serves as a source of upward mobility.”</p>	<p>It's not only about playing football. There are some lads who have potential. Who have a future and can develop into a top professional. We give them encouragement. It's successful because almost the entire team is in school, and most of them have been offered scholarships because of their skills on the field of play, so that burden of school fees is no longer on their parents. Now that we don't have any war, the focus is on building a career, making young people feel that they can be counted on, model citizens for tomorrow, because during the war, it has made people who were less valuable in terms of status in society. We want to make them feel that they could be the next Messi, the next Ronaldo, the next Rooney.</p>

Social interactionism³¹	
Grant Jarvie	Christian Neh
<p>What does football mean to oneself or what place has football played in the individual's biography?</p>	<p>After the war [in 2003], there were a lot of us who felt disenchanted having had in mind that you excel at a certain level, and then you perceive yourself dropping down. That didn't go down well with us, and so we wanted to abandon what we were doing. For me it was a difficult moment, because I felt that maybe we would end up the same way we ended the first time. But as a young man you can't give up. There are times when you have challenges and you have to go through them.</p>
<p>How has one's personal identity been affected by football over time?</p>	<p>2000 to 2003, things went from bad to worse within the republic. Young men were pressured to go back like what happened in the past. Everybody was fighting for survival. People used that as a last resort: "Since I didn't take part in the war in 1990, or since I didn't take part in the war in April 6, I will use the opportunity to do what I can do, it was something that we learned that we all learned up there that fighting wasn't necessarily good. We should try our best to control it, even if we were pressured to do so. And that was something we all promised to stand for. The experience we had from the UK tour and the bond we built over time. That experience changed them as people. We couldn't go back.</p>
<p>To what extent have feelings about football been influenced by a process of interaction with others?</p>	<p>Or we would hold a clean-up campaign to raise funds: beating a drum and cleaning a yard or drainage. In '95 and '96 it was quite difficult to get money, but we still went the extra mile.</p>

³¹ Jarvie, *Sport, Culture and Society*, p25.

How does football form a pattern of association and integration?	We had the opportunity to share the UK experience [with those who didn't go] to make them feel they were part of the trip. And they accepted everything we wanted to share with them. Many of the guys who were involved the first time wouldn't accept [the second time]. They said future had been wasted and they would concentrate on doing different things. They said their future had been gambled with and they didn't want to be members of the team. But we managed to convince them that this is about making ourselves feel happy and making ourselves have hope. No matter the challenges we face, we must pull together.
How do athletes in certain situations reciprocate with and against one another?"	It was a shared endeavour so we were all willing to give whatever was needed to get it going. To play in a pair of boots at that time was too costly, so we had to improvise, so we would tax each member of the team to pay a specific amount of money, so that money would be used to purchase football and jerseys for the entire team. For boots, you had to go that extra mile or play barefoot or in sneakers. Every week \$5 or every month \$20

Social change ³²	
Grant Jarvie	Christian Neh
How has football been affected by the historical period in which it is located?	Football was already known as the thing that brought people together. It's no longer about war. No member of the current junior team ever took part in war. They are aged 17 down. They might have had difficult times and experiences, but none of them took part as active combatants. Off the pitch, we encourage them, we tell them what it is like to be someone successful, what are the things you should do, what are the things you are supposed to avoid in order not to get your future damaged, or not to get yourself damaged. Now that Liberia can play more on international football stage, it's a step forward.
What is the role of the football person in producing change?	What they saw was special was the change of attitude. After the war, young men were counted as reckless, wayward, brutal, these were things associated with young people, but to see a group of young people changed in behaviour, changed in the way of relating to one another. In 2004, we decided now not to only focus on ourselves. We decided to improve people who were younger in the community. People we saw who had the potential for the future. That's when we subdivided the group: we had the senior team, we had the under-19, we had the junior team.
To what extent has football had a part to play in the formation of different forms of identity and/or social division?	Everyone felt there was something special about this team. It made us feel it was a special team. Something we wanted to share with the rest of the community.

Millennium Stars are aware of the active role they have played and understand it, albeit sometimes at a non-verbalised level.

³² Jarvie, *Sport, Culture and Society*, p37

3.2. Millennium Stars and Child Soldiers³³

The civil war in Liberia from 1989 to 2003³⁴ is estimated to have killed 300,000, displaced 850,000, and made use of approximately 15,000³⁵ children as child soldiers,³⁶ some as young as seven. The war was horrific and brutal, and particularly took its toll on the youth of the country. Just under 50% of Liberians are below the age of 18.³⁷ The average adult is expected to have had less than four years' education.³⁸ Only 40% of children are in primary education.³⁹ Illiteracy rates for 2009 in Liberia were over 30%,⁴⁰ while for young people aged 15 to 24, it was 75%.⁴¹

Young people have been considered as both victims and perpetrators of the conflict. Child soldiers were used throughout, by all factions. Programmes for post-conflict reconciliation not only sought to improve conditions for young people, but also to rehabilitate those who took part in the fighting in order to ensure that they didn't do it again. Some projects working with ex-child soldiers or potential combatants have used football as a tool to build peace for more than 10 years, well before the war ended.

Between 6,000 and 15,000 children are estimated to have taken up arms from 1989 to 1997,⁴² many of whom resumed fighting along with new recruits when hostilities resumed in 1999-2000. Ex-President and ex-warlord Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) had a policy of recruiting Small Boy Units (SBUs)⁴³ and Taylor is reputed to have "conscripted, drugged and armed thousands of children" in advance of Operation Octopus, his 1992 attack on Monrovia.⁴⁴ By early 2006 more than 100,000 combatants had been disarmed. More than 10 per cent of those demobilized were children.⁴⁵

War caused major disruption in the lives of the Millennium Stars, as it did for thousands of children in Liberia. Most were infants at the time it started in 1989 to 1991. By the time of the April 6 terror spree in 1996, they were old enough to join in. The reasons for fighting given by Millennium Stars players in the 1999 interviews⁴⁶ fall into five categories: survival, security, revenge, to meet basic needs and forcible conscription:

"The only way you could survive was by joining the fighters. If you didn't join them then you will suffer."

"My mother and my father left me, and a friend picked me up and I was living with my friend. But time came when my friend joined the NPFL, but

³³ Parts of this section – particularly the facts and figures – appeared in my dissertation proposal: *"Kicking against the system": Globalization, football and post-conflict social reconstruction in Liberia.*

³⁴ Considered in some places to be two wars – 1989 to 1997 and 1999 to 2003.

³⁵ Some estimates make it more than 20,000.

³⁶ <http://www.irinnews.org/>

³⁷ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/liberia_statistics.html

³⁸ 3.9 years <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/LBR.html>

³⁹ 2005-2008 http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/liberia_statistics.html

⁴⁰ <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/LBR.html>

⁴¹ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/liberia_statistics.html

⁴² *How to Fight, How to Kill* Human Rights Watch February 2004 Vol. 16, No. 2 (A)

⁴³ Stephen Ellis *The Mask of Anarchy*, (2001) London C Hurst & Co. p79

⁴⁴ Sleh, A et al *Impunity Under Attack: The Evolution and Imperatives of the Liberian Truth Commission*. (2008) The Image Group Press, Silver Spring, MD

⁴⁵ Child Soldiers Global Report <http://www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org/content/liberia>

⁴⁶ Transcripts with the author

each time when I sit down, soldier men come and take advantage of me, so I said: 'I'll join the NPFL.'"

"The fighters on the NPFL side decided to treat my father, bad. They beat him, so I decided to join and pay my father's debts."

"They were forcing people to join because there was no manpower."

"So we started to loot food ... and go and bring it back for our people to get something to eat."

In 1999, several Millennium Stars squad members described their careers as child soldiers. One told of his time serving in two factions and how he became involved with Millennium Stars:⁴⁷

"During the war, it was not my intention to fight. ... I was on the Old Road; that's where we lived during 1990. When it got hot, we left and went across.⁴⁸ ... Later on after they started taking advantage over my people, it got me angry, and the INPFL⁴⁹ – which is Prince Johnson – started treating my people bad and it got me angry and I started to fight for ULIMO-K ... until 1990. Then when I left, I went across the lines to Buchanan and I came to fight for NPFL.

"The leader for ULIMO-K⁵⁰ was Alhaji Kromah.⁵¹ [I was fighting for them] because that's the area I was at. [I decide to join] because of the way they treated my people. ... They grabbed my uncle and said they were going to kill him in front of me, and they started beating my sisters, started treating them bad and it really made me angry.

"The INPFL was doing this, across the bridge. ... It was younger soldiers. The size of me, or above me a little bit. Those were the people that were doing it. I am a man who can get vexed. ... I and them are equal; I and them the same size, so the way they started to treat my people made me to feel very bad, so I left and I went across to Bomi Hills and I started to fight for ULIMO-K.

"When I was fighting for ULIMO-K ... I was with General Dadá. I was the CP commander. I was at the gate. That's the work I only do until it got hot and we went on the front line and NPFL started to attack ULIMO-K. We were fighting with arms. They were on the other side, while we were on [this] side, so they wanted to attack our area, to get our area under their control, but our commander, our head, which was Alhaji Kromah, told us it shouldn't happen and so we started to fight, until [they] called for a ceasefire, and we stopped later on.

⁴⁷ CAFOD/Tim Hetherington, *Millennium Stars interviews* 1999 unpublished

⁴⁸ To Bushrod Island, the part of Monrovia beside the Freeport.

⁴⁹ Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia – a breakaway group from Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Prince Johnson.

⁵⁰ ULIMO split into two factions, under Alhaji Kromah and Roosevelt Johnson. The two factions added K for Kromah or J for Johnson to their respective names.

⁵¹ Former warlord and presidential candidate in the 2005 general election. Now standard bearer of the All Liberian Coalition Party.

“The people we were fighting against, some of them were very old, some of them were young and some of them were above me [in age, but still children]. We even captured some of them alive and we never did anything to them, we carried them over, keeping them in a safe area, because Alhaji Kromah said that whenever anyone is captured on the war front, we shouldn't kill them, we should just put them down⁵² because they are prisoners.

“The other factions were very bad on us, because sometimes when our people leave and go, let's say, to Buchanan, they say they are going on reconnaissance and sometimes they arrest them, and sometimes they kill them, and then we are going to hear the information, so when the time came, Alhaji Kromah say if we catch anyone from NPFL, we shouldn't kill them, but we should keep them and let him come and see the people.

“Kromah was the head for ULIMO-K. He was a Mandingo man. He was good to us. Let's be frank, he was very good to us. Sometimes he came and talked to us good and shared fun, and when he had money, he gave us something.

“The reason why I left was after they called for a ceasefire. ... I couldn't see my mother, I couldn't see my father. So I left there, and I came in town. I heard that my mother, my father, my other family were in Buchanan, so I left and I went to Buchanan and then war got hot there again. And then I decided to start fighting for NPFL too.

“At that time, we were heading for the city. It was in 1996. ... Taylor told us we should come, but we should not intimidate peaceful citizens. ... We should come and complete this mission and everything finish. So we decided to come. And ... the AFL, ULIMO-K, INPFL began to fight against NPFL. When we got to Red Light,⁵³ there was a heavy fight that night. There was heavy rainfall and we fought that night, and at the end NPFL took over the whole of Red Light and that was the base, and that's where we were at.

“We stayed a certain time, and we begin to pick up from that time, and General Jack the Rebel – that was our general – he came and said: ‘Oh gentlemen, we've got to move ahead. We've got to capture the city.’ And we came as far as Old Road and we captured it, and at that time the AFL soldiers went in the barracks.⁵⁴

“I was just like, let's say, a Lieutenant ... Life were too hard with me. And that's the only way... For one example, my people don't have something to eat, you know, so now some time when I fight hard, I go sometimes in the villages and I talk with people and I say 'Oh look, can you please help me?' Sometimes, they gave me foodstuffs that I can carry for my family.

⁵² i.e. keep them safe

⁵³ A well-known junction and market in the Paynesville area of Monrovia.

⁵⁴ Likely, because of where the fighting was coming from, to be the Barclay Training Center in central Monrovia, rather than the official barracks at the former Camp Schiefflin on the main road between Monrovia and Roberts International Airport.

“And what really encouraged us to join again because, for our size, if they come and see us, they say 'Oh we are looking at the other enemies', and they come and grab us and start beating us. That's the ULIMO-K now, the time I wasn't with them.

“[Why did I join NPFL?] For one fact, I had left ULIMO-K already, and the NPFL were forcing people to join because there was no manpower, because they were really killing people on the frontline too much, because most of their children were small small, so they were killing them. So we were the kind of boy [they wanted]. One time I was in the market and they saw me and they said: “Oh, this man, he's good to go.' and just grabbed me and threw me in the truck, and said 'Let's go.'

“Myself, I knew that I was an old fighter, so nothing strange to me, so they took arms and give it to me, and I went on the frontline and decided to fight to come in the city. At that time, I was 12 years old.

“I was feeling bad because that was the first time war came into my country, Liberia, but because of the situation that's what made me to hold a gun. For me to survive and for my family to survive, that's what made me hold a gun.

“When we came through with the NPFL, April 6 broke out. ... After April 6 I was fighting for the same NPFL. On the Old Road. ... I was with armoured division, about 500 men. ... [T]hey have Cobra, they have Armoured Division, they have Black Spear, you know, they have different different divisions. So they have Marines division also, so the divisions were very very plenty.

“Charles Taylor took all the city. He started to loot the city. Like Broad Street,⁵⁵ they have certain boutiques. We started to loot. Video decks, tapes, clothes, but mostly for me ... I was really looting foodstuffs. Like UN Drive Supermarket, we went and looted enough foodstuffs because I wanted my people to have food. So we started to loot food, because one of our [colleagues] from the Marine group, he had a taxi, so we needed to go and pack foods in the car and go and bring it back for our people to get something to eat. We went on for the whole of April.

“When April 6 came, we were already in the city, so ULIMO-K, Lofa Defence Force, NPFL, ULIMO-J, we all came together as one, so we decided to start fighting the AFL⁵⁶ at the barracks to get everything under control, because that's where the Krahn people were, doing some bad bad things, so we were fighting to get the area from them and for them to leave there.

“So we fought throughout and then we called for ceasefire and Taylor said everyone should be disarmed. Some people left and went to Sierra Leone, but I decided not to fight war again because everything was all right.

⁵⁵ The main street in the main shopping area in downtown Monrovia.

⁵⁶ Armed Forces of Liberia – the official army.

“ECOMOG came in to disarm and we started to disarm. Right after the disarmament, that's the time people came right in town. It was the base here on the Old Road, our old spot, that's where we were, and I saw [one of my friends]. [He] came to me and he encouraged me and said: 'Oh, we are having a team. ... I want you because you are a good football player and you cannot fight [any more].'

“Because I feel that I am with a good programme that will make me to forget about war. Don Bosco has really been talking to us about war to forget about war, that I think it's all right now because I was not doing it for my own will, but let's say, for me to live, for I and my family to be together and for no-one to humbug us. That's what we were doing it for, but I think I don't find pleasure in being an armed man. I think I'm someone to go to school and that's what I am concerned about.”

“So we started to play and started to forget about the gun and presently we are playing football for the Millennium team.”

Programmes for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of child soldiers were established in Liberia to assist children and young people to leave fighting forces and return to civilian life on a number of occasions throughout the war, when it appeared that hostilities were over. DDR is generally seen as a three-fold process: Disarmament – children give up their weapons; Demobilization – they are formally discharged from the armed force or group with which they were associated; Reintegration – programmes assist former child soldiers to return to society by offering training or livelihood support.

Prevention of child recruitment in the long term involves ensuring the social well-being of children through access to education and healthcare, as well as engaging in awareness-raising and strengthening of community actions.⁵⁷ The latter part of the process was not seen as a complete success: “According to local child protection agencies ... [t]he disappointment and frustration experienced by children ... during the reintegration period led many to seek to re-establish links with their former commanders – not necessarily in an attempt to become soldiers again, but rather to return to the last person who had provided them with food, shelter and protection.”⁵⁸

It is certain that many boys who had seen and done terrible things were suffering from severe post-traumatic stress that would take more than this cursory treatment to overcome. “[Trauma] shatters the basic beliefs we have about life. ... It may be that the image we have of ourselves is shattered, we may have responded differently in the crisis from how we expected or wanted to behave. ... We have no time to adjust to this new experience. ... In the face of this danger our mind holds onto the memory of the trauma ... probably as a natural form of protection to ensure you never get into that situation again.”⁵⁹

Part of the guidance to overcoming such trauma is to make sense of it by talking it through⁶⁰, and this takes time. While all arms-bearing children were in some way part of the DDR process in Liberia, the numbers and the chaos in the country meant that long-term mental care through counseling was impossible. Football seems to have played the long-term role for many, enabling them to see the

⁵⁷ *Working with Child Soldiers in West Africa* (2006) Save the Children Sweden and Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers <http://www.child-soldiers.org/document/get?id=1171>

⁵⁸ Child Soldiers Global Report <http://www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org/content/liberia>

⁵⁹ *Post-Traumatic Stress: a self-help guide* (2006) Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Trust pp13

⁶⁰ *Post-Traumatic Stress: a self-help guide* p5

positive in their current situation, involving them in physical activity and in a shared public project, and getting them to sign up to codes of conduct that accentuated positive behaviour and kept them away from alcohol or drugs, which may have created further health or psychological problems.⁶¹

However, football can only do so much. The unnamed subject quoted above has recently denied to me he or any of his teammates were ever involved in the fighting – they only said it at the time because it was expected of them – and in the interviews I conducted in August 2011, all subjects name only three players who were combatants, and none of them took parting the UK Tour.

Christian Neh believes that the reason for making up stories about fighting was not to manipulate people, but because it was so close to the truth: “It’s about trying to portray something that almost was. Because a lot of kids were involved in the war, everybody was vulnerable in the crisis, anybody could be conscripted at any time, anybody could be pressured to get involved actively.”⁶² However the same anonymous subject above has been in hospital this year suffering depression, where he was convinced someone was trying to get into his room and kill him.

While the football project was concentrating on rehabilitation and reintegration of troubled youth, it was part of the process to turn a blind eye to the past. But now it seems experiences are returning that were buried but not fully dealt with. However, it is also possible that none of the team did take part in the fighting. Nevertheless they still experienced severe and probably lasting trauma, with only limited treatment.

3.3. Millennium Stars academy

From an early stage, it seems that the Millennium Stars members had the vision of a football academy – a place for ordinary kids to develop football skills and through playing to develop social skills, a place to promulgate an ethos and code of behaviour, and a place to create job opportunities. At one stage, it looked like there was a possibility to have an academy consisting of a building and a piece of land. That possibility was shortlived, but a frequently voiced need is for an academy that produces footballers who can make a living from the game: “To this end there was a unanimous decision within the team to establish a football academy that could serve the purpose of nurturing the latent talents of youths and making it marketable.”⁶³

However, Millennium Stars have continued to run an academy since 1999 on public spaces like Gbangaye Town through coaching of younger teams and through the example they set through their behaviour to younger players. Pen pictures⁶⁴ of two beneficiaries of Millennium Stars Academy show their impact:

1. “Daniel, like most kids in downtown Monrovia, roamed around playing street soccer all day and hanging out with hardened criminals at night. Our regular counsels stress the importance of primary education as a growing footballer plus exhibiting good moral conduct. Today Daniel is a changed person and has vastly improved in his soccer. He’s currently attending the Bethlehem Baptist School on a soccer scholarship and is the most outstanding player in the primary school and on the YMS.”
2. “Gabriel has made a stunning impact in the team since coming aboard. His total composure between the sticks and ability to make wonderful saves

⁶¹ *Post-Traumatic Stress: a self-help guide* pp5 to 12

⁶² Interview with Christian Neh, August 2011

⁶³ Neh, *Brief History of the Millennium Stars*

⁶⁴ Neh, *Brief History of the Millennium Stars*

has so often made him matchwinner in most of the games. He is a lad with much influence on his colleagues and shows true leadership quality on the pitch. He most often goes the extra mile of stressing to his fellow team mates the importance of having education. A friendly and sociable player Gabriel most often shares with his colleagues and even allows outfield players to use his personal boots while he stands in sneakers to man the posts.”

While the Millennium Stars Academy clearly functions, it lacks connections with the outside world, so there is no outlet for the players as they grow. There is no chance to make a living playing football in Liberia – crowds for the top league matches are around the 300 mark⁶⁵ – and it’s more likely that you will be picked for Lone Star if you are playing outside the country, so the Liberian Football Association (LFA) actively encourages Liberian players to leave.⁶⁶ Up to now, there has been no system to nurture grassroots talent; it happens on an ad hoc basis and the LFA does not get involved⁶⁷ although they will help you leave if you make the contacts yourself.

Millennium Stars have been seen as a failure in their own communities because they don’t have the infrastructure of an academy – changing rooms, coaching pitches and so on. Liberian society demands that you have visible assets to prove your worth; words and deeds alone are not enough. If you don’t have your own resources, you have to go to someone who does. A system of patronage exists whereby wealth and power are concentrated in a few, and favours flow down from the Big Man⁶⁸ through connections to lesser figures lower down the strata. It’s who you know, not what you know, as Steinberg⁶⁹ sums up:

“This national system of patronage turned Liberians, Congos⁷⁰ and natives alike, into a fawning and obsequious people. To get anything, you had to know somebody more powerful than yourself, a patron to whom you must show great deference.”

George Weah has been criticised by some of the Millennium Stars for not starting his own academy in Liberia. Weah was a potent symbol for Liberians during the war of the country’s possible future. While all was falling apart in Liberia, one Liberian was acknowledged as the best in the world. There is a much quoted phenomenon that when Weah and the national team played during the war period, members of all factions would leave their weapons and go together peacefully to the football stadium. Perhaps Weah’s success gave the Liberian people a vision not just of temporary peace, but of a new identity of the small nation that could strike it big on a world stage, by taking on and beating all-comers on the soccer field.

It is also a popular perception that the route to a lucrative contract with an internationally well-known club is an easy one. African footballers are now a common sight on European pitches and are seen as role models: Ivorian Didier Drogba (Chelsea) and Togolese Emmanuel Adebayor (Man City/Spurs) are Goodwill Ambassadors for the UN.⁷¹ As was George Weah, until his decision to engage in politics.⁷² While the status of African footballers increases, so do the expectations placed

⁶⁵ Christian Neh interview

⁶⁶ Prince Momo interview

⁶⁷ Prince Momo and Abraham Clarke interviews

⁶⁸ Gary Armstrong G, *The global footballer and the local war-zone: George Weah and transnational networks in Liberia, West Africa (2007)* Global Networks 7, 2 230-247

⁶⁹ Jonny Steinberg, *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York City* (2011) London Jonathan Cape

⁷⁰ Descendants of the returned freed slaves, so called because they were believed to have originally come from the Congo.

⁷¹ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=37365&Cr=UNDP&Cr1=>

⁷² http://www.unicef.org/media/george_weah.html?q=printme

on them at home. According to Poli,⁷³ a disproportionate amount of space is given in local media to the big African stars playing in Europe compared to the local teams, so “millions of young Africans dream of leaving their country by playing this sport.”⁷⁴

The image of easy riches in Europe persists because of the illusion created by the big European games broadcast at the local video clubs, but “the vast majority of footballers from the continent who attempt their chances in Europe fail”.⁷⁵ “Often the African football players’ fate in Europe is not so different from the fate of more ‘normal’ African migrants.”⁷⁶

A lesson for millennium Stars could be in the contrast Manzo⁷⁷ makes between MYSAs and Diambars⁷⁸ – a soccer school set up by ex-football stars of African background or African extraction, including Patrick Vieira,⁷⁹ who wanted “to give something back.”⁸⁰ Both organisations, she says, suggest that they “are more than merely football training academies and/or magnets for European agents and scouts,”⁸¹ but she is concerned that they reproduce “neo-colonial patterns of underdevelopment, impoverishment, and exploitation.”⁸²

“Diambars’ primary aim is the realisation by its graduates of a specific sporting dream, that of securing a lucrative contract with a top European club – like the founding members of Diambars. This is development as globalisation, through skilled labour migration or (as neo-colonial thinking suggests) through the facilitation of cheap labour exports. MYSAs are different because migration doesn’t enter the frame.”

Perhaps a clear route to the lucrative leagues of the North would be of benefit to some individuals, but equally so would be training programmes for referees and physiotherapists and coaches at home, to give them economic possibilities in their own country and contribute to community building. Sportanddev.org, for example, talks of football and livelihoods in terms of kids getting a fair wage for stitching footballs, or of players sending remittances home, but not of finding employment as a player, coach or physio in their own country.⁸³

Involvement in voluntary associations, such as Millennium Stars, lies at the heart of the contribution sport can make to civil society by generating social capital.

Social capital, Jarvie says “has been seen as a way of contributing to social inclusion. Social groups and individuals learn more when they can draw upon the cultural resources of people around them. They learn from each other directly but they also learn to trust that the social arrangements are in

⁷³ R, Poli Migrations and trade of African football players: historic, geographic and cultural aspects in (2006) *Afrika Spectrum*, 3, *The Other Game: the politics of football in Africa*

⁷⁴ Poli, *Migrations and trade of African football players*

⁷⁵ Poli, *Migrations and trade of African football players*

⁷⁶ Poli, *Migrations and trade of African football players* p412

⁷⁷ Manzo, K. (2007) *Learning to Kick: African Soccer Schools as carriers of Development* Impumelelo – The Interdisciplinary Electronic Journal of African Sports

<http://www.ohio.edu/sportsafrica/JOURNAL/Volume2/learntokick.htm>

⁷⁸ <http://diambars.org/>

⁷⁹ Former France international footballer of Senegalese descent, who played for Cannes, Milan, Arsenal, Juventus, Internazionale, and Manchester City and won a World Cup winners medal for France in 1998.

⁸⁰ Manzo, K. (2007) *Learning to Kick: African Soccer Schools as carriers of Development* Impumelelo – The Interdisciplinary Electronic Journal of African Sports

<http://www.ohio.edu/sportsafrica/JOURNAL/Volume2/learntokick.htm>

⁸¹ Manzo, *Learning to Kick*

⁸² Manzo, *Learning to Kick*

⁸³ http://www.sportanddev.org/en/learnmore/sport_and_economic_development/developing_local_markets_through_sport/

place to ensure that learning, through a multitude of mediums including sport, will benefit them both culturally and for employment opportunities.”⁸⁴

The LFA model encourages or even insists on players leaving the country, and runs contrary to this view. Sending players abroad in pursuit of economic gain destroys the benefits of the social capital generated by community teams. The Liberian government has begun to see the benefits of sport for reintegration, but not yet for economic regeneration. At the ceremony to launch the Liberia’s first National Sports Policy on September 16, 2009,⁸⁵ Dunstan McCauley, Chairman of the Sports Advisory Council, told journalists in Monrovia: “We believe that the rift that has existed among Liberians for so long can be healed with the provision of a comprehensive sports program. A program where everybody participates as equals, where individuals respect one another for their abilities and competence, where there is respect for the rule of law and authority will help go a long way in developing a wholesome functioning society.”

The experience of Millennium Stars indicates that a self-directed grassroots sports society is fine as a conduit for aid, or a recipient of charity, but challenges many institutional monoliths, such as the LFA, when it tries to step up to becoming a self-directed agency for change.



⁸⁴ Jarvie, *Sport, Culture and Society*, p333

⁸⁵ *First National Sports Policy Drafted* Liberian Daily Observer <http://www.liberianobserver.com/node/1581>

CHAPTER 4

4.1. Conclusion

It will always be difficult to assess the impact of such initiatives as Millennium Stars, but to give the opportunity to anybody to be part of any team which can be seen as part of a larger team and a yet larger and larger team – as the neighbourhood, the city, the county, the nation, the world – can only be of benefit to the individual. The person imbued with the team ethos, respect for self and others, is a goal worth pursuing. The transformations that take place as a result of such experiences create a desire in that individual to influence his/her environment for the better. The evidence here shows that through football and other means, these are achievable goals, though, as with all things human, success is finely balanced and progress will not ever be certain.

For Millennium Stars, football gave them a way to distance themselves from and deal with their horrific past. It gave them an opportunity to make connections to another part of the world and it gave them the confidence in their own abilities and sense of worth as human beings to attempt to bring about change in their community for the benefit of those they perceived to be struggling like they had.

Football began as a simple reaction to unpleasant situations. Faced with things out of their control, they did the only thing they knew how to do – play football. Over time, the team has taken on much more than just developing players in the game. Football has taken on a symbolic nature, which allows them to contribute not just to the rebuilding of their country, but to shaping a vision for Liberia's new peace-time identity.

Finally, the real point of the Millennium Stars is perhaps in danger of being hidden beneath concerns around child soldiers. Liberia had 14 years of war, but more than 160 years of suppression and oppression of the huge majority of its population. The fundamental role for any grassroots project, using sport or not, in Liberia, as in so many other places, is to tackle extreme poverty by creating trust and social bonds at the most basic community level.

The world-famous Ethiopian runner Haile Gebreselassie said:

“Eradicate poverty. ... This is all that matters in my country. When I am out training I think about this a lot; when I am running it is going over in my mind. As a country we cannot move forward until we eradicate poverty.”⁸⁶

BIBLIOGRAPHY available on request
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⁸⁶ Jim White, 2002, The Guardian:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2002/apr/08/athletics.jimwhite?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487>