One pass, one touch: scoring for life
HIV Prevention through football in the Eastern Cape
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Introduction

by Dr. Christiane Kulle, GIZ South Africa Country Director

The universal language of football is a suitable tool to improve the youth’s perspectives throughout the world. Since 2007, this has been proven by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the programme Youth Development through Football (YDF) in South Africa and nine other African countries. Among YDF’s partnerships, the cooperation with Volkswagen of South Africa that aims at supporting the youth in the Eastern Cape stands out. It is a great example of GIZ’s ambitions to further involve the private sector in development partnerships. This tool makes it possible to work with the private sector in addressing developmental challenges, such as HIV and AIDS in the VW partnership. It highly increases the sustainable impact of the YDF approach as all stakeholders, namely the public sector, the private sector and the civil society are working together for one cause. By telling stories ‘from the field’, this brochure showcases the fruitful cooperation in South Africa between GIZ and Volkswagen.
Youth Development through Football in the Eastern Cape
Interview about the beginnings of the partnership between YDF and VW

Gerald Guskowski, the Project Manager of Youth Development through Football (YDF), recalls the first steps of the cooperation with Volkswagen, points out the connection between football and a healthy workforce, evaluates the progress that has been made so far – and looks into the future.

Gerald, GIZ and VW have been working together to implement the YDF approach in the Eastern Cape since October 2009. Who came up with the idea of cooperation? How did everything start?

All of the major NGO partners of YDF in the Eastern Cape have a strong focus on HIV prevention. In 2007 GIZ and Volkswagen had already another successful cooperation in this field. Therefore, I started exchange with Dr. Alex Govender, Head of the Medical Staff at Volkswagen of South Africa, and the idea of a new Public Private Partnership in the field of football and HIV prevention was born. In addition, people discussing the cooperation between the German province of Lower-Saxony and the Eastern Cape like Yorck Wegjans and Hannes Rohrbuch contributed substantially to the project design and concept. Later on, Weza Moses and Dr. Carsten Knies from Volkswagen of South Africa finally initiated the project launch.

Which role does transport play in bringing an approach like YDF to the people?

Transport is important everywhere, but especially in a province as vast and rural as the Eastern Cape. You have to bring the coaches to the people and a team to play against another team. Nevertheless, in my opinion the crucial element is something else: Volkswagen knows about the importance of a healthy workforce. Sport as such supports healthy lifestyles and in a province with one of the highest infection rates world-wide, HIV prevention becomes essential. Therefore, the support to sport in combination with HIV prevention supports healthy communi-

ties that in turn provide a healthy workforce. In addition, particularly in the South African context, the involvement of a company in the development of the communities the workforce is coming from becomes important and crucial. This is in fact a kind of expected CSR (corporate social responsibility) that leads to sustainable business development. Volkswagen has recognised this importance and therefore engages in the above topics. Therefore, Volkswagen becomes an ideal partner, aiming for the same objectives like us – enhance the use of football for social development and HIV prevention in particular.
The Eastern Cape was one of the first South African provinces where YDF tools were being implemented. Why was this region targeted?

On one hand it is one of the poorest South African provinces with one of the highest HIV-infection rates. On the other hand, the Eastern Cape is a base of some of the stronger and more experienced partners in the field of sport for development, to mention NGOs like Umzingazi and Isikwemo or the provincial Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture. Last but not least the willingness of Volkswagen to cooperate with us on the further development of the approach was an important factor as well. Sport for development is a very new tool in development cooperation and therefore it is best to develop tools and instruments around existing strongholds and to spread success models afterwards.

After two years of cooperation, are you satisfied with what has been accomplished so far? And how is the programme’s sustainability guaranteed?

The YDF project was visited by the EU Commissioner for Development, Andris Piebalgs during 2011. He said that sport for development makes a big impact on young people and that this impact is visible by talking and engaging with the young people involved. Therefore, it is a highly useful investment. In this sense, I do see a huge spread of activities covering a big part of the Eastern Cape and I am happy to see the impact when engaging with the girls and boys involved. I know about substantial challenges in this province but this project is a success and provides a good example for a Public-Private Partnership.

The sustainability is guaranteed by the involvement of Volkswagen and the provincial authorities, e.g. the Department of Health and the Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture. They will ensure a continuation of this successful programme.
Wheels of Change

Introductory note by Nonquzetsha Matsha
Chairperson VW Community Trust
Director Corporate & Government Affairs, VWSA

Volkswagen Group South Africa (VWSA) is the biggest private sector employer in the Eastern Cape. This automotive industry giant, which is situated in Uitenhage, has already shown itself to be a caring corporate citizen with a distinguished history of ploughing back into the communities in which it operates. For VWSA, running a profitable business goes hand-in-hand with investing in its communities. This is done not only for charitable goodwill, but in recognition of the spirit of Ubuntu and the knowledge that “we are because you are”.

The major socio-economic challenges facing the Eastern Cape are poverty, education, HIV/AIDS and youth empowerment. VWSA has had a long standing partnership with GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) and in 2008 there was an opportunity of entering into a Public-Private Partnership with them on a special project. The Ubuntu Soccer Bus project was aimed at equipping and empowering youth of the Eastern Cape in the area of HIV/AIDS education and life-skills.

The Ubuntu Soccer Bus project has reached out to 130 schools in Eastern Cape both rural and urban districts namely: Casuadu, Chris Hani, Buffalo City Metro and Nelson Mandela Metro.

The project has empowered 520 local young people from the community-based organisations, local football associations and even educators who were trained as coaches in Youth Development through Football (HIV/AIDS) Toolkit curriculum. Their responsibility is to roll-out the programme to the learners, even beyond the partnership term. Through the coaches, the programme has reached to over 15 000 learners between the ages of 12 to 16 years. Once learners have attended 12 training sessions, they graduate and receive a certificate of attendance.

VWSA has enabled the success of this project through their contribution of two Volkswagen Crafters for the duration of the project. The Crafters have been used to transport the coaches to schools and communities. VWSA has also provided major support to the project through its office (Community Trust office) and the project co-ordinator who assisted in established the Steering Committee, providing a secretariat, building relationships with local schools through education district offices and providing support to the implementing partners.

I trust that the stories in this brochure will help you better understand VWSA’s involvement with their surrounding communities.
Development Partnership for Change

Introductory note by MEC Xoliswa Tom

Building strong partnerships is indispensible in bringing about sustainable development. As a Department, we remain totally committed to fulfill our responsibilities and to contribute to initiatives aimed at maximizing the potential of sport, as a valuable tool, for sustainable development. The Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture is pleased and full of pride for teaming up with GIZ and Volkswagen to implement the Ulutha Soccer Bus Project in our province, Eastern Cape. I believe that the Ulutha Soccer Bus Project has been a very suitable approach to reach the disadvantaged youth of the Eastern Cape, which is enthusiastic about sport and soccer in particular. This partnership is proving that we can go beyond the use of sport for leisure and physical activity but also to advance healthy and responsible lifestyles among the young people. There is no doubt that this partnership brings valuable contribution: using the popularity of sport to mass participation, attracting the youth both as active participants and spectators whilst providing lifeskills and promoting HIV awareness and prevention. This is another demonstration that sport has the ability to connect people and communities closer to government programmes and services.

I am sure that you will enjoy the stories contained in this brochure and they will certainly empower and inspire you. The Ulutha Soccer Bus Project shows once again that as a team we can achieve more.
The Eastern Cape is the second largest of South Africa’s nine provinces. Its administrative capital is Bhisho, but a large part of the almost seven million inhabitants lives in or around the regional economic centres of Port Elizabeth, East London and Mthatha. It was formed in 1994 out of the “independent” homelands of Transkei and Ciskei, as well as the eastern portion of the Cape Province. The Eastern Cape, where Nelson Mandela was both born and grew up, is one of the least developed provinces in South Africa. This is largely due to the extreme poverty found in the former homelands, where subsistence agriculture predominates. The situation is further influenced by high HIV infection and unemployment rates. The two major industrial centres, Port Elizabeth and East London have well-developed economies, based on the automotive industry. One of the biggest private sector employers in the province is the German car manufacturer Volkswagen. Since 1991, the company builds cars in Uitenhage, 35 km northwest of Port Elizabeth.
The Ulutsha Soccer Bus Project
Uniting football and life skills education in the Eastern Cape

Since October 2009, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and Volkswagen of South Africa have been coordinating the Ulutsha Soccer Bus Project in the South African province of the Eastern Cape. The goal of this cooperation is the improvement of the youth’s perspectives through education on life skills and HIV/AIDS by using football.

GIZ contributes to the partnership with the Youth Development through Football (YDF) project that has been running in South Africa and nine other African countries since 2007. While YDF brings in technical support and its experience in sport for development, Volkswagen mainly assists with the regional coordination of the project, the knowledge of the company’s Health Unit and the production of the “YDF Manual on HIV Prevention” that was published in October 2011. But the car manufacturer, based in Ulsterhage near Port Elizabeth, also provides two Soccer Buses that guarantee the wide outreach of the project.

The two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) Lemoshoi and Imvumvo have been selected to implement the YDF approach in the Eastern Cape. Every day, their coaches and life skills facilitators visit schools in the region with the Soccer Buses and integrate education on life skills and HIV prevention into football exercises. The programme targets youths between the age of 12 and 15 because statistics show that the risk of HIV infection increases substantially in this age group. Currently, the activities are being implemented in four districts of the Eastern Cape: Amatole, Chris Hani, Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality and Cacadu. Apart from the daily programme, the project also includes Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) events that encourage the population to find out its HIV status and to get further advice about how to live as HIV positive or to keep the negative status.

In order to achieve a sustainable impact and to reach out to many communities by using an existing network, the provincial authorities have been included in the Ulutsha Soccer Bus Project. The Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture of the Eastern Cape has joined the efforts of the programme in the province.
and assists in the selection of coaches who get trained in the YDF methodology and carry the knowledge back to their local communities. The Department of Health sends nurses to the VCT events while the Department of Education is involved by encouraging the schools to participate in the activities.

Tumie Maneli, Special Projects co-ordinator of VW, monitors and assists the NGOs. The 30-year-old is responsible for the Ulutsha Soccer Bus Project and explains that sports is a powerful tool to develop and support the youth: a popular team sport like football even more so. Games can actually portray very well what HIV is, what it does in your body, what the risks of getting infected are and how one can mitigate those risks. The YDF approach shows the youths that they have choices. And every choice will have an effect on their lives.

Volkswagen is aware that the high HIV-infection rate of the Eastern Cape’s population is strongly affecting the company’s workforce. The Ulutsha Soccer Bus Project is one part of VW’s policy to support a healthy lifestyle that leads to a healthy workforce. The YDF activities in the Eastern Cape complement to the company’s HIV prevention policy. VW’s employees are being sensitized with HIV prevention at the factory and pass on the message to their peers. Their children are now reached by the YDF programme which makes it easier for both parents and children to talk about HIV and AIDS.

With Volkswagen being one of the world’s largest car manufacturers, it seemed only consistent that the company would also contribute to the YDF programme by providing vehicles. In June and November 2010, the keys of two VW buses were given to Umsinga and Isitsoke. Since then, the so called Ulutsha Soccer Buses (Ulutsha means ‘youth’ in IsiXhosa) enable the coaches of the NGOs to reach out to a larger number of schools and communities.

Khulise Tumie Maneli, who acts as VW’s coordinator for the programme in the Eastern Cape, recalls the long journey of the buses. “They were produced as VW Crafter panel vans in Germany and shipped to Johannesburg, where they got converted into passenger buses and registered as such. After being hailed across our country, they received their prominent colourful design here in Uitenhage.”
“Driving the project to success”

Interview with Vusumzi ‘Den’ Gqikoma

Vusumzi ‘Den’ Gqikoma is the driver of the Ulutha Soccer Bus in Port Elizabeth. Since February 2011, when the 37-year-old started working with the NGO Umgungu, he has driven several thousands of kilometres and became an important member of the project.

Den, as the driver of the Soccer Bus, do you feel like being the king of this project?

Well, I would not use the word ‘king’ (laughs). But to me, the transport of the volunteers and life skills facilitators from school to school is a very high responsibility. It is like driving the lives of those people, because once they get on the bus it’s my duty to bring them safely to the school.

And you are the one who makes the implementation of the life skills lessons possible in the first place by taking the staff to the schools.

Yes, it’s true. One could say that I’m basically driving the project to success. Nothing could happen if I was not taking the volunteers and coaches to the schools. Besides that, my job is challenging because it is not finished when we get to the destination. For example, if we arrive at a certain school, I have to organize everything: make sure that the life skills facilitators have got their classrooms and their kids. At the same time I have to go to the sports field to set up the sports facilities correctly. I need to ensure that everything is running smoothly. And you have to remember: we’re dealing with youth which sometimes doesn’t make it easier. Quite a challenge – but I like it!
How do you get along with your bus? Does it feel like a second home?

It’s very comfortable to drive and it has never given me any trouble. Actually, I was offered to drive a different bus, but I said that this one is mine. I can feel it in my heart and I’d like to keep driving it. But I wouldn’t go as far as calling it my second home because most of the time I’m observing the life skills sessions and do not stay in the bus.

Do your passengers behave well on the bus?

I would say that I encounter the normal challenges: plastics, chocolate papers or empty bottles are sometimes left in the bus. Nevertheless I keep telling the volunteers and life skills facilitators that they need to ensure that the bus is clean when they get off. But apart from this, they are behaving excellent and we’re all having a good time!
Umzingisi
Addressing critical issues through sport

The Umzingisi Foundation is a non-governmental organisation based in Port Elizabeth. Umzingisi is isiXhosa and means ‘perseverance of a goal against the odds’. The NGO was founded in 2007 by Nick Mould and Qondakete Sompando, who intended to use the power of sport as a tool for development in the disadvantaged communities. Since the beginning, Umzingisi has been operating in townships and rural areas around Nelson Mandela Bay and Cacadu districts.

“Initially, we focussed more on direct benefits of sport like improved health, improved emotional well being and improved life skills such as teamwork, leadership, decision making and communication,” explains Nick Mould. But as he and his young team noticed that there was a huge need for life skills education within the township communities, Umzingisi moved more into using sport to talk about critical issues such as HIV and AIDS. “With a severe lack of role models, absent fathers and many parents being wiped out by AIDS, the kids in our township communities are more in need than ever of good quality guidance and support delivered by strong role models!”

Within the cooperation of GIZ and VW, Umzingisi acts as the implementing NGO that integrates the YDF methodology in its curriculum and trains coaches in the approach.
Improvements in knowledge and awareness

Interview with Nick Mould, Director of Umzingwi’s Foundation

HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns and programmes have been running for many years in South Africa. In your eyes, what makes this sports approach so unique and effective?

Kids struggle to pay attention and listen when they are being lectured to in a classroom by people they struggle to identify or relate to. Using a mixture of sport and fun interactive exercises allows us to engage the kids’ attention and is far more successful in allowing them to remember the key messages because they can visualize the exercise that relates to it, so it is no longer just a fact that is easy to forget. What is also important is that the exercises are delivered by people they can relate to who are both from their communities, popular and role models – local sports players are often the perfect people as they are looked up to and respected by the community.

Have you been able to measure the impact of the programme?

Does it substantially decrease of the infection rate of young people?

Unfortunately we do not have any long term studies or results to prove that it does over the long term as it is still a relatively new teaching method. However, our immediate post intervention surveys certainly prove that there is a knowledge and awareness increase, so it proves that the children are retaining the information so we would hope that they are applying this. The University of Johannesburg is also conducting impact studies that has reported positive, immediate impact.

Does the programme indirectly also affect the rest of the community’s HIV awareness?

We believe so. As part of our curriculum we set homework assignments for kids to go and spread the messages they are learning with peers and family members, so they are imparting their newly acquired knowledge on others. We also know that our method of intervention certainly attracts more interest from the community because it is so visual – people are much more interested to see what is going on when you are delivering the sessions on a soccer field as opposed to in the classroom.

Besides HIV/AIDS, what do you regard as other important social challenges in the areas where Umzingwi is active?

We have the impression that alcohol and drugs are becoming increasing issues as well as just general morals and values which seem to be deteriorating.
Up to today, what has been achieved by implementing the life skills programme? What are the positive changes so far?

With the HIV/AIDS curriculum there are definite improvements in knowledge and awareness of the kids we work with in regards to the topic, which we obviously expect to lead to lower infection rates in the future. With regards to the general curriculum we have recorded improved sensitivities to social issues, better understanding of the individual’s role in improving societal issues and generally improved self esteem and emotional well being of the kids.

Umzingai is sub-contracting Imvomvo. What is the structural framework of this partnership? How does it work on a daily basis?

The current relationship with Imvomvo is that we trained them in our curriculum and how to run the programme and they are then replicating our programme in Amathole and Chris Hani. We have granted them use of one bus and are giving them the necessary funding to run the programme.
Pride and Prizes in Salt Lake

When Bernelen got ready for school this morning, the 14-year-old girl already knew that this was going to be a special day for her and many of her classmates. Like any other day of the week, she was wearing her burgundy uniform when walking down to the long-stretching bunglow of Van der Kemp Primary School in Salt Lake. Located on the outskirts of Port Elizabeth, the settlement’s name refers to the Mission Salt Pan that lies flat below the small houses which resemble matchboxes and seem to slowly crawl uphill. The people here are part of the coloured community of the area, Afikiasans being their mother tongue. A large part of the people here is living in poverty and is highly affected by drug abuse, crime and HIV,” explains Hannah Clare, the Project Manager of Umningi. Though everything seemed to be normal in Salt Lake this morning, Bernelen knew that at the end of the day she will look at her parents with a satisfied smile on her face and feel quite a bit prouder than when she crossed the doorstep in the morning.

For about three months, the 7th graders of Bernelen’s school have been visited every Friday by the life skills coaches and volunteers from the Umzingani Foundation. Today, the girls and boys who participated in all ten sessions receive official certificates. Bernelen’s friend Elizabeth carefully holds on to the piece of laminated paper while she explains that HIV is an everyday topic in Salt Lake. “I hear about people dying from AIDS almost every day. I don’t know of anyone close to me being infected, but you cannot see if one is positive or negative. Only a test can show the status.” Bernelen, sitting next to her, impresses with precise knowledge about mother-to-child transmission and methods to prevent it. Whenever she wants to emphasize a point, she lifts up her voice and quickly slides her palms against each other creating a clapping sound. Now, the 14-year-old feels confident with HIV and AIDS topic. “If a friend who carries the virus comes to me, I know what to do. I can help by taking her to the clinic so that she gets her medicine.” she says. “This programme has made me so much wiser!” Both girls enjoyed the soccer exercises and Bernelen recalls that “sometimes I already figured out by myself how a game related to HIV and AIDS before the coaches could explain it.”

The teacher of the class looks satisfied at the children who have just received their certificates. “I very much appreciate Umzingani’s programme. And the kids loved it too. Not surprisingly, the attendance on Fridays was fantastic,” she says with a smile and continues more seriously: “The fact that the coaches come from outside of the area is great. A large contribution to the effectiveness of the programme. Their role as sports coaches and almost
friends leads to an openness among the youths that we as teachers cannot reach. But such an environment is a prerequisite when talking about HIV. Its transmission and how to prevent becoming infected with the virus."

After a final group picture of the proud children and coaches has been taken, the Ulusaba Soccer Bus turns out onto the streets and disappears behind the corner. Kyle and his friend Keenan are sad that the programme is over. Both boys love playing soccer and enjoyed the varied and exciting sessions every Friday. Keenan says that he has heard much about AIDS at church, where they pray for the sick. But during the life skills programme he and his classmates learned about the disease while playing and laughing. That made it much more fun.

In the afternoon, when the sun illuminates the salt pan from a shallow angle, a handful of children who showed extraordinary dedication during the life skills programme leave school with new sports bags that they received during the graduation ceremony. But the students carry home much more figuratively those bags are filled with knowledge about HIV, about the right behaviour that prevents becoming infected and about the choices they have – moreover how to take control of their own lives.
“Here I am: a role model!”

Interview with Ntombovulo “Ntsho” Masala

Ntombovulo ‘Ntsho’ Masala is a life skills facilitator who joined Umzingis in 2009 and gives sessions at schools around Port Elizabeth five days per week. As she is a qualified YDF Instructor, the 24-year-old also passes on her knowledge about the integration of life skills education into football to other coaches throughout the Eastern Cape.

Ntsho, when you visit a school for the first time, you always begin your sessions with so-called ‘coaches’ stories’. What does that mean and how do learners respond to it?

In the ‘coaches’ stories’, we tell the students about how HIV and AIDS have affected our own lives. The idea of this tool is to show that everyone in our country has had such an experience and that it is possible to talk openly about that – fighting stigmatisation of HIV and AIDS. During those sessions, many kids build up sympathy towards us, some start to cry. When time goes on, they share their stories with us.

What is your story?

I’ve been affected by the epidemic as I lost a family member due to AIDS. But I also explain that my sister lives with HIV and she is healthy and beautiful as ever. I want to make clear, that carrying the virus does not mean that you cannot be part of our community anymore. I really struggled when I was growing up, but here I am today: a life skills coach and a role model.

Servicing as such a role model, do you experience a change in the children’s attitude towards HIV and AIDS during the programme?

Yes, very much. Many kids don’t have any knowledge about HIV and AIDS. They believe the myths that are being told on the streets. But after a few sessions most of them understand what we are here for and they are keen to learn about HIV.

AIDS is a topic that scares our society off. People don’t want to talk about it. How do others react to your job?

That’s a real challenge! Many people stigmatise us coaches. They say we’re not able to teach about HIV prevention if we’re not infected. But it is none of their business to know about our status. Whether I’m HIV positive or negative, I don’t have to tell anyone! When we set up a VCT (Voluntary Counselling and Testing) camp, people always ask: did you
test? Are you using a condom? I don’t care too much about this; I’m doing this job because I’m convinced that it is the right thing and I love it.

Has it become routine for you to talk about sex to kids that are 12 to 14 years old? Is it easy?

I feel very comfortable with it and the fact that we’re playing soccer makes it fun for the kids. We play games, we mingle together. The youths will laugh, but at the end they answer our questions and remember what they have learned. When I was in school, there was no one talking to us about this.

What do you regard as your personal achievement as a coach?

It makes me happy to see that I am successfully reaching out to the Afrikaans speaking community although my own mother tongue is Xhosa. We are communicating in English, which is a second language. In the beginning there have been many problems in understanding each other, it was quite tough. But more than ever, this has shown me the power of soccer. The sport has its universal language and me and my colleagues use it to teach about HIV prevention. Overcoming that language barrier was a great achievement!
Imvomvo
Strengthening the community through sports

Mbantsane is one of five townships that surround East London. With approximately 400,000 inhabitants, the settlement ranks among South Africa’s largest townships. Its unemployment rate is estimated at 42 percent. Social ills such as the spread of HIV, crime and drug abuse have added to the tough living conditions that prevail in the impoverished area.

These circumstances strengthened Thoko Mnyeni’s decision to found the Winter Rose Active Community Club (ACC) in 2001. “I wanted people to become physically active, to come out of their homes,” explains the former netball coach. She helped to initiate several sports teams in order to promote healthy living and to fight the lack of agency found especially among the youth of the township. The community strongly embraced this offer and soon the ACC was transformed into a non-governmental organisation named Imvomvo. “In isiXhosa this word describes the liquid found in the Aloe plant which grows in our region,” explains Thoko, who serves as the Director to the NGO. “According to indigenous beliefs, Imvomvo strengthens the plant and also gives energy to the people. As we liked this image of building strength and our idea was the empowerment of the people, we gave the organisation this name.” Today, Imvomvo’s Winter Rose ACC serves as a community centre that includes a sports field, a pre-school, a vegetable garden and sewing facilities. The organisation unites different sports codes, which is best visualised by the soccer goals that stand between the two rugby goalposts at Winter Rose – with the scoreboard listing cricket categories like wickets and overs.

Since November 2010, Imvomvo is acting as a partner to the Port Elizabeth-based Umzingisi Foundation and currently implements YDF tools and Umzingisi’s life skills curriculum in eleven schools in Mbantsane, Duncan Village and Tshabo. Thanks to the Uthala Soccer Bus which they were provided by Umzingisi, the coaches are also able to travel as far as Queenstown in the neighbouring district of Chris Hani. Imvomvo’s sport activities have been supplemented with the YDF Toolkit and its life skills education.
A slight spring breeze blows from the east across a green sports ground in Mdantsane’s Zone 15, a few kilometres away from East London. The banana trees behind the touchlines sway in the wind and children’s voices from the nearby pre-school create a peaceful but lively atmosphere. Behind the grey concrete walls that limit the ground of the Winter Rose Active Community Club, the lives of Mdantsane’s inhabitants do not always appear as bright and easy. The township suffers from crime, drug abuse and unemployment. A high HIV prevalence rate leads to families being torn apart and adds to the precarious living conditions.

Despite the difficulties that the community faces, this Monday morning is packed with passion, joy and excitement. Two girls’ teams – one group wearing blue, the other one dressed in bright red jerseys – practice headers, ball passing and shots on the goal. The movement creates a constantly changing pattern on the otherwise calm field. In the centre of the turmoil, a ball man wearing a Bafana Bafana shirt gives instructions. He blows his whistle and assembles the ‘Blitz’ in a circle to explain further exercises. His passport identifies him as Luandza Krakwa but everyone just calls him ‘Shaikas’.

“When I was young, my playing style reminded my soccer coach of the famous Orlando Pirates player Shakes Gwabeni,” he clarifies. Since 2008, the father of three boys has been employed by Imovo as a life skills coach and a soccer coordinator. But more than that, the 30-year-old serves as a role model to the youth he
works with. He notices that the children look up to him; they often ask him for advice when they struggle at home or at school. Shakes himself has experienced troublesome years when he was young. He became father for the first time at the age of 17, the mother of the child being 16. “I don’t want those kids to go through this,” he says with a low voice while looking towards the youths. Shakes points out that apart from poverty, which affects a large part of the community, South Africa’s young population is increasingly exposed to sexual behaviour: “We need to reach them before they make mistakes and inform them that their current life can be absolutely normal without having sex.” And with a determined gesture he adds: “In order to stop stigmatization of HIV positive people, we need to erase the image that AIDS is a monster that you shouldn’t come close to.”

Usually, the coaches take the Ulutsha Soccer Bus to the schools for the life skills sessions, but today the girls were brought to the Winter Rose sports grounds for a special training. The “Raid”, 7th graders from Sakhile Senior Primary School are being coached by Shakes’ colleague Bandle. As a warm up game, the teenage girls sit on the covered ground in pairs. Two girls start chasing each other and as soon as the one being chased sits down next to a pair, the roles switch. Screams and laughs wake up even the sleepy ones and after a few minutes the group is energized and gets started with the soccer exercises. During a short break, 14-year-old Inkag expresses how she feels about learning about HIV and AIDS while practicing soccer exercises: “Before the life skills coaches came to our school, I didn’t know much about HIV. I had been told that it was transmitted by eating food from someone who is infected with the virus. Now I know that this is a myth, I am aware of the real risks. And I know how to prevent getting infected.” Her classmate Alikhona adds: “We learn how to make right decisions while playing soccer. That’s a lot of fun!”

One day before: Shakes, Bandle and their colleague Songs load soccer balls, cones and bibs onto the Soccer Bus and drive to Nkululeko Senior Primary School, located in Zone 2 of the township. When the colourful bus turns onto the school grounds, the children leave their classrooms and come running outside. A few minutes later, the boys and girls have been divided into groups and start their exercises. “The goal of today’s session is that the children understand how HIV is being transmitted and how the human body reacts when it is weakned by the virus.” Inkag says. Fundiso ‘Zoe’ Tom, the Programme Manager of Innova. In order to visualize the consequences of an infection, Songs designates one girl to take over the role of a human that doesn’t carry the HIV. The other 20 children form a circle around her and attempt to throw a soccer ball, symbolizing infections, at her body. But a boy, representing the girl’s immune system, tries to prevent her from being hit respectively getting sick.
When the girl is touched by a ball coming from a classmate who has been previously defined as being infected with HIV, the boy is hindered by others. Thus, the immune system fails in fighting off other viruses. As soon as the girl is being accompanied by another girl that symbolizes the treatment with antiretroviral drugs (ARVs), the HIV is still affecting her, but the immune system improves its defence function again. Throughout the game, Songs stops the action and explains the roles of the children and how the movements relate to HIV and AIDS. Despite the seriousness of the message, the children are lively and active through shouting, laughing and jumping. They are enjoying every moment of their precious time with the coaches.

When the Imxomvo crew boards the bus again, the students ask curiously about next week’s programme. For the 7th graders of the school, Mondays are good days.