

****Racism, bonding and national identification in African Football****

Article. Depetris-Chauvin, E., Durante, R. & Campante, F. (2018). Building nations through shared experiences: Evidence from African football. *American Economic Review*, 110, 1572-1602

Link. [Building Nations through Shared Experiences: Evidence from African Football - American Economic Association](#)

Aim. Many African nations are very diverse, with strong ethnic identities that can sometimes lead to conflict. The article aimed to explore whether shared experiences, specifically successes in international football (soccer), could help strengthen a sense of national identity and promote unity. The core idea is that a shared positive experience – like cheering for the same team – can make people feel more connected to their country and less focused on their ethnic group.

Method. Researchers analyzed survey data from across sub-Saharan Africa, combined with records of football matches and conflict events over several decades.

Key findings. The research found a consistent pattern: when a national team won important matches, especially against rivals, people were more likely to identify as citizens of the nation first, rather than primarily with their ethnic group. This wasn't just about feeling good; it translated into increased trust between people from different ethnic backgrounds within the same country. Crucially, simply playing a game, or losing the game, didn't have the same effect. The impact went beyond attitudes. Countries that narrowly qualified for the Africa Cup of Nations tournament experienced a noticeable decrease in ethnic conflict in the months that followed. This effect was particularly strong in areas where the government had limited presence or where ethnic groups were politically marginalized, suggesting that shared sporting experiences can sometimes fill a gap in traditional nation-building efforts. Having a diverse team also seemed to amplify these positive effects. While the effects are generally small and temporary, the research suggests that national sporting achievements can create opportunities for dialogue and progress towards lasting unity.

Limitations. Obviously, a football win isn't a magic bullet – it won't solve deep-rooted political or economic problems. Furthermore, the study didn't find that sporting success led to increased trust in politicians or the government. The research also doesn't account for the possibility that strengthening national identity can, in some cases, lead to conflict with other nations. However, the findings offer a glimpse into the potential of shared experiences to foster social cohesion in diverse societies.