

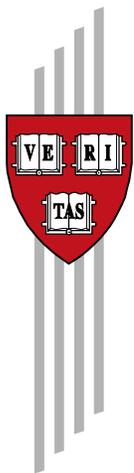
Can Africa Compete in World Soccer?

Matt Andrews

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Matt Andrews

Harvard Kennedy School

Abstract

In March 2021, the Confederation of African Football’s President, Patrice Motsepe, insisted that “An African team must win the World Cup in the near future.” This visionary statement is infused with hope—not just for an African World Cup victory but for a fuller future in which African men’s soccer competes with world soccer’s elite. This paper asks if there is any chance of this happening. It suggests a simple method to assess how a country competes as both a ‘participant’ and a ‘rival’ and uses this method to examine how Africa’s top countries compete in world soccer. This analysis points to a gap between such countries and the world’s best, which has grown in recent decades—even though some African countries do compete more over time. The paper concludes by suggesting that Africa’s hope of winning the World Cup is not impossible but demands more active work, focused particularly on ensuring top African countries compete with more high-quality competition more often. The conclusion also suggests that the research approach might be relevant beyond a study of African soccer. It could particularly help shed light on how well African countries compete (as participants and rivals) in the world economy.

Introduction

In March 2021, the Confederation of African Football's President, Patrice Motsepe, insisted that "An African team must win the World Cup in the near future."¹ This visionary statement is infused with hope—not just for an African World Cup victory but for a fuller future in which African men's soccer competes with world soccer's elite. What, I wonder, is the chance of this happening?

Not much, if one goes by the history of such predictions. Brazil's great player Pelé made a similar claim in the 1970s, positing that an African team would win the World Cup by 2000. It never happened. Ghanaian legend Abedi Pele predicted an African win at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.² It also never happened. And Nigerian playmaker Jay Jay Okocha noted that an African win was imminent and "could even be in" the 2014 tournament in Brazil. This also never happened.

This history prompts a simple question: Why has African soccer not lived up to prior hopes of competing to win? I see three potential answers to this question: (i) Africa's hope of competing with the world soccer's elite will be satisfied at the right time, which has not yet come;³ or (ii) This hope is too passive, and will not happen if left 'to time' and not given more active attention; or (iii) This hope is unrealistic and will never happen.⁴ One cannot tell which answer is correct without a reality check of how well African countries compete now and how this has changed over time. Such analysis can show how close the continent's soccer community is to realizing its hope of winning, if and where it needs more work, or if it is chasing an impossible dream.

This paper offers a modest effort at such reality check, assessing how well Africa's most successful soccer-playing countries compete in world soccer. I start by asking what it means to 'compete', suggesting a simple method to assess how a country competes as both a 'participant' and a 'rival' in world soccer. I then use this method to examine how Africa's top countries compete in world soccer. This analysis points to a gap between such countries and the world's best, which has grown

¹ AFP (2021).

² Abedi Pele and Jay Jay Okocha's comments come from Collett (2009) and Wasim (2014).

³ I draw on Fromm (2010, p.22), who describes hope as, "like a crouched tiger, which will jump only when the moment for jumping has come" and says, "[T]o hope means to be ready at every moment for that which is not yet born, and yet not become desperate if there is no birth in our lifetime."

⁴ I draw on what Fromm (2010, p.22) says hope 'is not': "It is neither passive waiting nor is it unrealistic forcing of circumstances that cannot occur."

in recent decades because Africa's top teams enjoy weaker quality competition than elite teams in places like Europe. There are signs that some African countries are competing better over time, but these gains are likely to hit a ceiling without improvements in the quality of competition.

I conclude by suggesting that Africa's hope of winning the World Cup is not impossible but demands active work and a new strategy, focused particularly on ensuring top African countries compete more often with elite world competitors and in elite competitions, to develop a sustained habit of winning such contests. The conclusion also notes that my approach might be useful to African policymakers working outside of the soccer arena. In particular, I recommend that it could be valuable to assess how African countries compete (as participants and rivals) in the world economy, and if these countries are competing enough to realize their national visions of transforming from low or low-middle income economies into 'winner' high-income ones.

What does it mean for countries to compete?

People interact all the time, as individuals and in groups—including large groups like countries. This interaction is 'competitive' when all those involved try to achieve a goal that only one or some can achieve. These competitive interactions manifest in discrete events, or contests, like a 90-minute soccer match played between two teams; and in longer processes, or competitions, like the World Cup soccer tournament in which many teams play many matches over many months.

Most competitors aim to achieve as much as possible from these interactions; trying to win matches, advance through tournaments, and even win titles. A few competitors win more than others in most competitions, however. In soccer's World Cup Tournament, for instance, 8 European and Latin American countries have shared the 21 titles to date and featured in 74 of the 84 semi-finalist positions. Only two countries from North America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania have made the semi-finals, even though these regions comprise 82 percent of the world's people.⁵

⁵ These countries are the United States of America (in 1930, when they beat Belgium and Paraguay but lost to Argentina in the semi-final) and South Korea (in 2002, when they first beat Poland and Portugal and drew to the United States, then beat Italy and Spain in the round of 16 and quarter-final—but lost the semi-final Germany).

Studies explore why some countries win more than others, often listing attributes of winning nations as keys to ‘competitiveness’.⁶ In respect of international soccer, these attributes are often about the country, its soccer playing community, how it engages with other countries, and how it manages and administers national teams and their interactions with teams from other nations. I do not intend to further this work here and probe why African countries succeed or fail. Instead, I ask a simpler question that should precede such work: How well do African countries compete in world soccer, and what does this suggest about their hopes of winning in the future?

What it means to ‘compete’

I started my inquiry asking what it means to ‘compete’, finding a common definition that emphasizes ‘taking part in a contest or competition’.⁷ This channels the Olympic Creed’s advice that “the important thing” in competition “is not winning, but taking part.”⁸ It might sound like a salve to offer someone who has just lost a contest, but it also refers to the challenge every aspiring competitor has of gaining and retaining access to contests and competition—or competing as a participant. Competitors who fail in this challenge—and do not get to ‘take part’ in competitive interactions—are excluded from other gains of competing. As a result, any study on how well a country competes should start by asking how it ‘competes as participant’, with a simple approach to such assessment examining how many contests and competitions the competitor ‘takes part’ in, the quality of the competitors they face, and the quality of competitions to which they are able to gain and retain access (especially if they can interact with ‘high-position’ competitors and in ‘high-position’ competitions that offer the most reward and prestige).⁹

⁶ See Barreira and Da Silva (2016), Gásquez and Royuela (2016), Peeters et al. (2019), and Rintaugu et al. (2012).

⁷ From the online Cambridge English dictionary (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/compete>).

⁸ See Torres (2006, 2011) and Reid (2015).

⁹ The idea of high-position competitors and competitions comes from the work of Hirsch (1976) on ‘positional goods’. These are scarce goods that confer prestige on those who access and retain them. As defined by Schneider (2007, p.62), “part or all of the satisfaction derived from possessing them is the enhancement of social status due to the fact that such satisfaction is possible only for a minority.” In respect of competition, in the spirit of Marginson (2006) on inter-university competition, I hold that some competitors and competitions are scarcer than others, and thus more prestigious. In world soccer, ‘high-position’ competitors are elite countries with the biggest audiences. ‘High-position’ competitions are Continental and World Cup Tournaments accessed every few years by only the best competitors.

Definitions of the word ‘compete’ go beyond ‘taking part’ in a contest or competition, however, and refer more aggressively, to “striving consciously or unconsciously for an objective” or “being in a state of rivalry.”¹⁰ This approach resonates with the Olympic Motto’s emphasis on being “faster, higher, [and] stronger” –or simply better—than others¹¹ and relates to the challenge of winning relatively more than other competitors—or ‘competing as a rival’. Many might view this as the more conventional approach to evaluating how effectively countries compete. It is possible to assess such by looking at a country’s winning rate, especially against high-position competitors and in high-position competitions, and at the reputation or positional prestige the country has earned by ‘competing as rival’ (which generates respect and even fear in opponents).

Indexes to assess how a country competes

Acting on these ideas, Table 1 outlines a simple method to assess a country’s performance in competing as both a ‘participant’ and a ‘rival’ in world soccer. It lists key characteristics I associate with competing as ‘participant’ and ‘rival’ and questions to probe how well a country competes on both aspects: In reflecting on a country’s ability to ‘compete as participant’, I suggest asking how regularly it participates in competitive matches, what quality its opponents are, and how often it competes against high-position competitors and in high-position competitions (like the World Cup but also continental events like the European Championships and Africa Cup of Nations Tournaments (AfCoNs)); To capture how a country ‘competes as rival’, I ask how often it wins (as successful rivals do) overall, and how often it wins against high-position competitors and in high-position competitions; and how other countries rate it as a rival (what I call its positional prestige).

The table also suggests variables to use in answering these questions (which I discuss in more detail later). The method I propose involves identifying data to score each variable and aggregating these scores into two indexes: one for how well a country competes as a ‘participant’ and one for how well it competes as a ‘rival’

¹⁰ From the online Merriam Webster dictionary (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compete>).

¹¹ See Torres (2006, 2011) and Reid (2015).

Table 1. A method to assess how a country competes as ‘participant’ and ‘rival’ in world soccer

<i>The focus of an index of how well a country competes as a ‘participant’ in world soccer</i>		
<i>‘Competing as participant’ characteristics</i>	<i>Question to probe how well a country competes ‘as participant’</i>	<i>Key variables to reference</i>
Regularity of participation:	How many international matches does the country play?	Matches per year
Competitor quality:	What is the quality of the country’s average competitor?	Average competitor rating (percentile)
High-position competitors:	How many high-position competitors does the country play in?	% Elite competitors
High-position competition:	How many high-position contests does the country play in?	% Possible Continental Finals Tournament matches % Possible World Cup Finals Tournament matches
<i>The focus of an index of how well a country competes as a ‘rival’ in world soccer</i>		
<i>‘Competing as rival’ characteristics</i>	<i>Question to probe how well a country competes ‘as rival’</i>	<i>Key variables to reference</i>
Winning rate:	How often does the country win?	% Points per match
Winning rate vs high position competitors:	How often does the country win vs high-position competitors?	% Points per match vs. high-position competitors
Winning rate in high position competitions:	How often does the country win in high-position competitions?	% Points in Continental Finals Tournament matches % Points in World Cup Finals Tournament matches
Positional prestige:	How do other countries rate the country as a competitor?	Average percentile rating (based on Elo scores)

Source: Author’s original work.

How well do African countries compete in world soccer?

I used the method alluded to in Table 1 to analyze records of Africa’s most prominent soccer playing nations and a selection of the world’s leading soccer-playing countries, in each of the past five decades, based on data from historical repositories of international soccer matches—including the Elo ratings database used to develop national rankings.¹²

I identified Africa’s top soccer playing nations based on average FIFA rankings in the past 5 years, including countries competing in the World Cup Tournaments in the 2010s. The sample is Algeria, Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia. The smaller sample of the world’s top countries was identified by selecting all the World Cup Winners since 2000 and European countries who have reached recent World Cup semi-finals. The sample is Brazil, Croatia, England, France, Germany, and Spain. I looked at data per decade to get a sense of average competitive performance over a period of time—where countries can compete in multiple tournaments and contests and build a pattern of ‘competing’—rather than at one

¹² I drew on the Elo ratings database (<https://www.eloratings.net/England>) (See Gásquez and Royuela (2016)) as checked against Mart Jürisoo’s database (<https://www.kaggle.com/martj42/international-football-results-from-1872-to-2017/activity>). A few differences existed between the two, with Jürisoo’s sometimes including fewer matches (particularly in earlier periods). I included these few contested data points (opting for the potential bias of having a few incorrect matches included instead of excluding matches that did exist but were hard to verify).

moment in time (which does not capture the sustained capabilities of a country). I started with the 1970s because a number of African countries only obtained sovereignty in the 1960s and world soccer saw major modifications in the 1970s (including expansion of continental and World Cup tournaments and greater formal inclusion of Africa into the latter, through dedicated slots).

Calculating ‘competing’ index scores

I first calculated an index score to capture how well each country ‘competes as participant’. The index is straightforward, calculated as the equally weighted sum of scores on five variables. The first variable, ‘matches per year’, shows—as a percentage—how close a country came, on average, to playing a full calendar of internationals per year, over the decade.¹³ The second variable, ‘average competitor rating’, is the percentile rating of the average competitor a country faced in any period, based on Elo scores (which reflect a country’s record, as provided in the Elo database).¹⁴ The third variable, ‘% elite competitors’, captures the share of top 10 percentile, high-position competitors a country faced in all the matches it played in a period.¹⁵ Variables four and five show (as percentages) the share of possible Continental and World Cup Finals Tournaments matches a country played in, per period, to capture how effectively a country gained and retained access to high-position competitions.¹⁶

Table 2 summarizes the ‘compete as participant’ analysis for England and Nigeria between 2010 and 2019. Both countries played a full calendar of matches in the period (averaging 12 or more per year), but England had more high quality and high position participation. England played against better competitors (with the average opponent ranked at the 86th percentile, 16 points

¹³ Based on my analysis of international playing patterns, I define a full international calendar as twelve matches (one a month). As such, I use 12 as a reference point for a 100 score. I calculate the ratio of games played to this reference point and multiple by 100. For example, a country with 6 matches a year scores 50 ($6/12*100$). I cap the score at 100, so countries with more than 12 matches a year do not get credit for the additional contests.

¹⁴ The Elo rates countries based on wins, losses, or draws, given quality of opposition, if fixtures are at home or away, competition quality, goals scored and goal difference (See Gásquez and Royuela (2016) for a full description).

¹⁵ I use Elo scores to identify these elite countries. The top ten percent of countries at any time tend to be countries scoring 1800 and above on the Elo scores, so I used 1800 as the floor score of an elite country.

¹⁶ If five matches were played in a World Cup Finals Tournament where seven matches were possible, for instance, the score would be 71. If zero matches were played in that tournament, the score would be zero—indicating a failure to even gain access to the tournament (whatever the reason).

above Nigeria’s average competitor). England also played against a greater share of elite countries (with 49 of 119 matches involving countries in the world’s top decile, compared with 20 of Nigeria’s 127 matches). England also gained and retained access to more Continental and World Cup Finals Tournament matches (playing in 8 of 14 possible European Championship matches and 14 of 21 possible World Cup matches, compared with Nigeria’s 19 of 37 possible Africa Cup of Nations (AfCoN) matches and 10 of 21 possible World Cup matches). In sum, England achieved a ‘compete as participant’ index score of 71 compared with Nigeria’s score of 57.

Table 2. How did England and Nigeria ‘compete as participant’ in world soccer, 2010 and 2019

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>England score</i>	<i>Nigeria score</i>
Regularity of participation:	Matches per year	99	100
Competitor quality:	Average competitor rating (percentile)	86	72
High-position competitors:	% Elite competitors	41	16
High-position competition:	% Possible Continental Finals Tournament matches	62	51
	% Possible World Cup Finals Tournament matches	67	48
Overall	<i>Overall ‘compete as participant’ index score:</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>57</i>

Source and notes: Author’s original work. All scores out of 100. Index is the summed average (with equal weightings).

I also calculated an index score to show how well each country competes as ‘rival’. Again, the index is simple, calculated as the weighted sum of scores on five variables. The first variable, ‘points per match’, shows how many points a country ‘won’ per match (where 0 points are given for a loss, 1 for a draw, and 3 for a win, as per soccer norms). The next three variables also capture how many points were won in matches against elite competitors (as defined earlier) and in matches in high-position tournaments (continental and World Cup Finals). I weighted these scores when calculating the index to indicate their prestige and scarcity (with elite and Continental winning rates weighted at 1.25 their value and World Cup winning rates weighted at 1.5 their value).¹⁷ The final variable shows a country’s percentile position in world rankings, given its average Elo score, which I take as a measure of its reputation—or positional prestige—given past performances.

Table 3 summarizes the ‘compete as rival’ analysis for England and Nigeria between 2010 and 2019. England has a higher % points per match (in general) and a much higher % of points per match against elite competitors (where Nigeria only scores 30 percent of its possible points as

¹⁷ These matches are more valued with World Cup Finals Matches are watched by about 2.5 times more viewers than European Championships and nearly ten times more than AfCoN matches. These matches all gain more viewers than ordinary matches, apart from matches between or against elite opponents.

compared with England’s 68 percent). Interestingly, Nigeria scores more points in its continental tournament matches (‘winning’ 68 percent of the points on offer in its AfCoN matches compared with England’s 54 percent in European Championships), but England scored more of its possible points in World Cup Finals Tournaments (43 percent as against 27 percent). Finally, England has a higher positional prestige than Nigeria, given its record. Rated at the 97th percentile, England is a rival feared by all, whereas Nigeria, at the 82nd percentile, is a rival that is probably not feared by about 20 percent of potential global competitors. This difference in how the countries ‘compete as rival’ shows in the overall index score as well, where England registers 76 and Nigeria 60.

Table 3. How did England and Nigeria ‘compete as rival’ in world soccer, 2010 and 2019

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>England score</i>	<i>Nigeria score</i>
Winning rate:	% Points per match	68	57
Winning rate vs. high position competitors:	% Points per match vs. high-position competitors*	68	30
Winning rate in high position competitions:	% Points in Continental Finals Tournament matches*	54	68
	% Points in World Cup Finals Tournament matches**	43	27
Positional prestige:	Average percentile rating (based on Elo scores)	96	82
Overall	<i>Overall ‘compete as rival’ index score:</i>	<u>76</u>	<u>60</u>

Source and notes: Author’s original work. All scores out of 100. Index is the summed average of the scores (with various weightings). I use a *1.25 times rating and a **1.5 times rating to give more value to these win rates.

These index scores suggest that Nigeria is lagging England in its record of competing in world soccer. One could simplify the message of how far behind this is by summing the difference in indexes into one cumulative ‘gap’. In the case of these two countries, this would be 30 (14 +16). This is a large gap, considering Nigeria’s scores are only 57 and 60 (or a combined 127). Nigeria would need to increase its score to 157 to close this gap, which is the same as saying it needs a 23 percent improvement on its current situation. England only reached a recent World Cup semi-final, however, so getting to the final—and winning the final—probably demands even more.

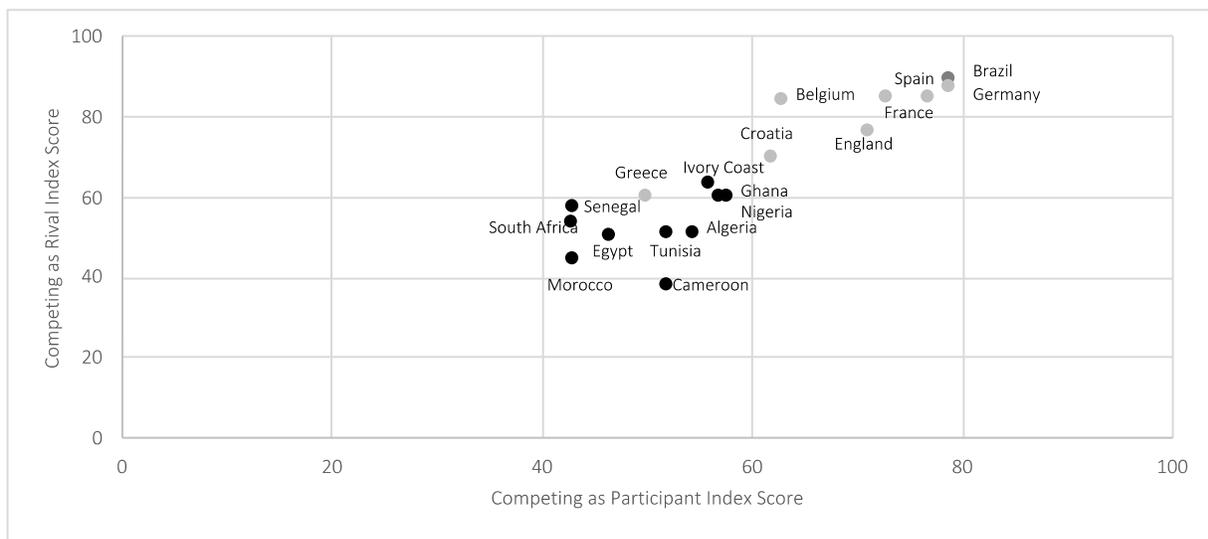
Such analysis is illuminating, as it offers a sense of how realistic it is to think about whether a team like Nigeria can realize Africa’s hopes of competing with the world. One should remember, however, that the two index scores need to be seen as more interactive than a single index score allows, given that ‘rival’ scores are contextualized by the ‘participant’ scores. What I mean is that England’s superior rival score was achieved at a higher level of competitive participation than Nigeria’s, given stronger competitors and a larger share of matches against elite opposition and in

high position tournaments. As such England’s better rival score should be weighted more than Nigeria’s—or at least we need to find a way of showing that it is different.

Charting country performances shows Africa’s lagging standing

Visuals are an effective way of showing the interactive nature of the two indexes. As a result, I use a charting approach to illustrate how countries performed in the two samples (of African and elite teams). The chart is show in Figure 1, which plots 2010 to 2019 participant-rivalry positions of all the countries in my two samples (African and world elite). This approach reveals the two-dimensional difference between countries, with the chart showing England (71, 76) up and to the right of Nigeria (57, 60). Such a two-dimensional difference equates with a two-dimensional challenge for Nigeria; if it wants to catch up to England (a recent World Cup semi-finalist), it needs to improve its performance as participant and as rival (not one or the other). Nigeria will not close the ‘competing gap’ with England by just playing better at its current level of participation or improving the quality of its opponents and continuing to lose in 70 percent of its encounters with these high-position competitors. It needs to both compete with high-quality opponents more regularly and learn to beat those opponents more regularly.

Figure 1. How Africa’s top countries compete, based on performance between 2010 and 2019



Source: Author’s original work.

Interestingly, the top African countries bunch together with Nigeria in the center of Figure 1's chart—where 'compete as participant' scores and 'compete as rivals' scores ranged between 43 and 58 and 38 and 63, respectively. This block is separated from the set of elite countries, who recorded participant and rival scores in higher ranges (between 62 and 79 and 76 to 90, respectively). This infers that elite African soccer playing countries compete 'in the middle' of the world soccer-playing community, at about the level of Greece (which is added for reference) and well below the levels of Brazil and Germany, France, Spain, Belgium, Croatia, or England.

Unfortunately, countries in this global 'middle' are unlikely to win the World Cup, which means that Africa's top competitors do not yet compete well enough to realize their continent's hopes of winning the world title. This is not to say that an African country will not beat a global competitor now and again—Ghana beat competitive Czech Republic and United States teams in the 2006 World Cup tournament and won against Serbia and the United States at the 2010 World Cup event. The evidence does, however, infer that African teams are highly unlikely to beat top teams repeatedly, which is what a country requires to contend with the world's best—Ghana lost to Italy and Brazil in 2006, for instance, and to Germany and Uruguay in 2010, which limited its progress in both tournaments to the second round and quarterfinals. The reality of Figure 1 is that a country like Ghana, competing as a 60 rival at a 57 participant level, cannot expect to regularly carry the day against countries competing as 87 or 89 rivals at participant levels of 79 (like Germany and Brazil). Countries like Ghana may have lucky days and win occasionally, but nothing more.

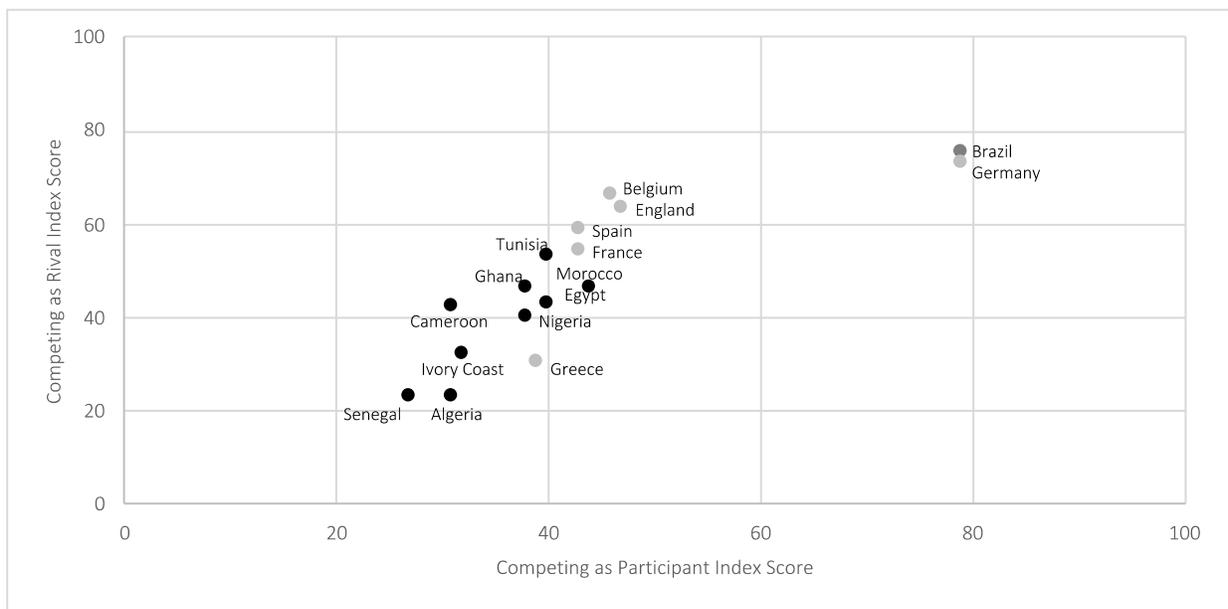
A deeper analysis of the scores helps explain this situation a little better, showing that all of Africa's top soccer playing countries lag the global elites in much the same way as Nigeria differs from England: The African nations play lower quality opponents than the world's top soccer playing nations (performing worse as participants) *and* have worse winning records (as rivals) whenever they play high-quality competitors. We see the lower quality opponent issue in the difference in average opponent ratings from Ghana and Senegal (whose average competitors score at the 70th and 62nd percentile of global ratings) and Germany and Brazil (whose average competitors are at the 86th and 89th percentile). This difference in participation quality manifests further in the fact that only 12 and 8 percent of Ghana and Senegal's matches are against elite countries, compared

with 45 and 53 percent for Germany and Brazil. The lag in ‘rival’ capabilities at the highest-level is demonstrated in the different win rates against elites (the kinds of countries one must beat to win world titles): Ghana and Senegal have much lower win rates against these elite opponents (22 and 8 percent) than Germany and Brazil (at 56 and 75 percent).

Has Africa gone backwards?

Whereas Figure 1 shows that African countries lag world elites today (given 2010-2019 data), pessimists might argue that Africa’s competitors have fallen further behind global elites in pursuing the hope of winning over the past generation (since Pelé predicted an African win by 2000). This argument could draw on the differences in African country positions in the international field now (illustrated in Figure 1) as compared with the 1970s (shown in Figure 2).

Figure 2. How Africa’s top countries competed, based on performance between 1970 and 1979



In comparing Figures 1 and 2, it should be apparent that most countries improved their scores since the 1970s—generally moving to the right and up in the charts. This was largely because of a global expansion in international competition that allowed more participation in more high-quality

encounters (which was like a rising tide that lifted all boats) and because of improvements in the general quality of play (and number of high or at least higher quality countries), which some see as a result of the growth and dissemination of soccer know-how across the globe.¹⁸

The European elites shown in the chart have improved their positions more than the countries from Africa, however, widening the gap between the two sets of countries. The 1970s gap was narrowest between France and Tunisia, who had almost the same participant scores (43 and 40) and rival scores (54 and 53), indicating similar competing records and capabilities.¹⁹ Morocco and Egypt had comparable scores to Tunisia at the time, suggesting at least three African nations were ‘close’ to European contenders. The narrowest gap in the 2010s was three times the size, between Croatia (with scores of 62 and 70) and the Ivory Coast (at 56 and 63). Ghana and Nigeria were similarly close (but still relatively far) from Croatia. Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt—the closest African contenders in the 1970s—lagged Croatia by much more at this time, having fallen backwards in the pack of African chasers (with Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt scoring ‘compete as participant’ scores of 52, 43, and 47 and ‘compete as rival’ scores of 51, 50, and 44 in the 2010s).

In trying to explain why the 1970s contenders have fallen behind, I began looking at Tunisia’s experience in relation to that of France (the country it was closest to in the 1970s). I started by noticing that Tunisia was poised to challenge world soccer’s elite in the late 1970s. It had won 50 percent of its matches in the decade, including one 1978 World Cup Finals Tournament game (where it was the first African team to win a World Cup match, three goals to one, against a highly rated Mexican team, and where it also tied the global powerhouse German team) and came fourth in the 1978 AfCoN Finals Tournament (beating Uganda, drawing to Morocco and Congo, and losing in the play-offs to eventual champions Ghana). Unfortunately, it faltered thereafter, experiencing a 1980s drop in both its competitive participation and winning record (playing in only one AfCoN tournament in the 1980s, and failing to qualify for World Cup Tournaments until the late 1990s). As Figure 3 shows, it has recovered incrementally since the 1980s, gradually growing its participant

¹⁸ See Krause and Szymanski (2019) for a discussion of ‘convergence’ in global soccer.

¹⁹ Tunisia had a better record competing in high-position tournaments, playing in one AfCoN and one World Cup Tournament, compared with France who qualified for only one World Cup in the period. Tunisia also fared better than France in their 1978 World Cup efforts, although both failed to advance from the group stages.

and rival capabilities to become a perennial threat in African competition (competing in over 70 percent of potential AfCoN Finals Tournament matches since 2000, winning one of these competitions and finishing fourth in two).

Figure 3. Tunisia’s progress since the 1970s

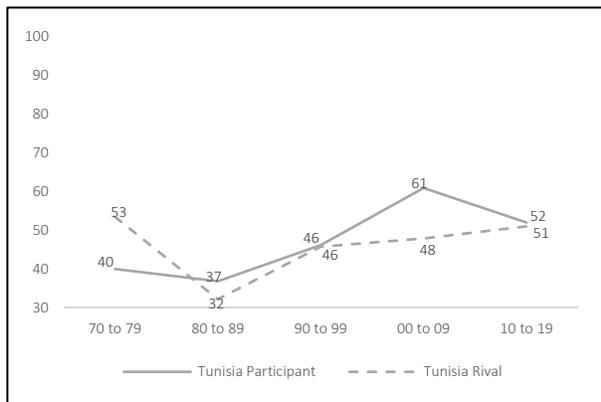
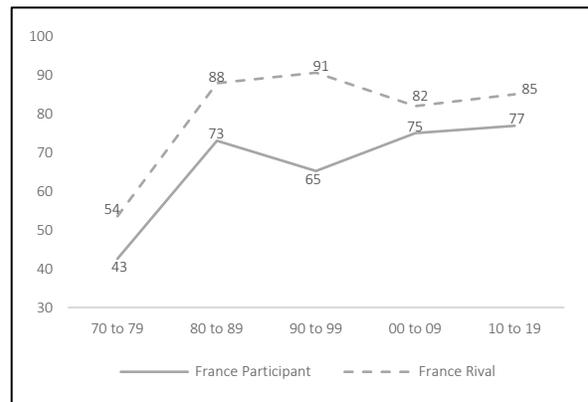


Figure 4. France’s progress since the 1970s



Source: Author’s original work.

Tunisia’s current participant and rival scores (52 and 51) reflect its standing as one of Africa’s elite competitors. Given such standing, it has represented Africa in four of the last six World Cup Finals tournaments. It won only one match in these events, however, against Panama in 2018, and has proved to be a weak global competitor (playing only 8 percent of its matches in the 2010s against elite nations and winning only 18 percent of the points in these contests). In contrast (as shown in Figure 4), France started with similar promise in the 1970s and saw steady improvement thereafter, with growing participant and rival scores in most decades. It now competes as a 77 participant, 25 points higher than Tunisia, where it records an 85 rival score (compared with Tunisia’s 51 at the lower participant level). In short, France has become a world power, recording strong results against high quality competitors (competing at all the last seven World Cup Finals Tournaments, winning twice, and coming second once, with 43 percent of its matches in the 2010s played against elite teams, where it won 67 percent of possible points).

Observers of Tunisia’s up and down journey over the last few decades credit its 1970s performance to a ‘golden generation’ of players the country enjoyed at the time (including Mokhtar Dhouib, Néjib Ghommidh, Raouf Ben Aziza, and Tarak Dhiab), who they say gave it some

World Cup winning potential. Without them, it might be argued, the country should now be satisfied to be a regional power instead of a genuine global contender (competing at a level below elite nations and happy to just qualify for World Cup Tournaments). Interestingly, France's rise in the early-to-mid 1980s was also credited to a golden generation (including a group of players—Tigana, Platini, Giresse, and Genghini—who made up what some called the 'magic square'), but when this ended a new golden generation emerged²⁰ (to win the 1998 World Cup) and when they moved on another emerged²¹ (to win the 2018 World Cup).

This contrasting experience suggests that countries do not get to compete successfully at the highest levels by depending just on 'time' and 'talent' (saying, "maybe someday we will be lucky enough to have another golden generation"). It seems to take more active attention, and a strategy to build the capabilities to compete over time (akin to what some call 'making your own luck'). Hints of such a 'make your own luck' strategy emerge from the experience of France, which exited the underwhelming early-to-mid-1970s focused on 'playing up' against high caliber opposition (to build its ability to compete at such level). The national team endured forty matches against countries in the top decile of world competitors (what I have called 'high-position competitors') in the six years between 1976 and 1983, with more than half of these being non-mandated friendlies. It engaged in another 34 of these contests between 1984 and 1989. This focus on quality competition helped increase the French 'compete as participant' score from 43 to 73 in one decade and was a key reason the country also became a formidable rival at the new high-level of competition (with studies showing that soccer teams get better by playing 'up' against strong opposition, and regress when playing 'down').²² Most importantly, France seems to have developed a culture of playing quality competition and has retained its high participation and performance levels over time, relying less on one generation of players and instead building capabilities to compete consistently (and develop and attract new sets of golden generations, from wider pools of players—often with dual nationalities, especially hailing from Africa).

²⁰ Including players like Zidane, Henry, Trezeguet, Thuram, Blanc, Pires, Vieira, Deschamps, Petit, Desailly, and Lizarazu.

²¹ Including players like Lloris, Hernandez, Umtiti, Varane, Pavard, Pogba, Kante, Matuidi, Griezmann, Mbappe, and Giroud (the eleven who started in the final match of the 2018 World Cup Finals Tournament).

²² Folgado et al. (2014)

In contrast to France, Tunisia played only 13 matches against high-position countries in the 1970s and 1980s and has not increased its exposure to such opposition in ensuing decades.²³ Adding to this, Tunisia's 'average competitor rating' has declined through time—with this average rating dropping from the 73rd percentile in the 1970s to the 68th percentile in the 2010s—compared with the French score which has held constant at high levels (the 87th percentile). This weaker competition appears to be a fundamental reason why Tunisia has not grown its 'compete as participant' scores and why it struggles to 'compete as rival' with elites (with its elite win rate declining from 25 percent during the golden generation to 18 percent in recent decades, well below the French rate of 67 percent, which rose from 57 percent in the 1970s).

'Lower quality competition' is also the most apparent explanation for the disappointing records of Egypt and Morocco (illustrated in Figures 5 and 6). As with Tunisia, they were poised to become world contenders in the 1970s but failed to capitalize on this potential. Instead, they both settled for a schedule of lower quality opposition (like Tunisia) that they regularly beat (with overall win rates of 64 percent for Egypt and 58 percent for Morocco). Such a strategy has kept both countries among Africa's elite but also ensured they are a good distance away from the world elite.²⁴

To demonstrate the gap with world elites, one should consider that Egypt participated in nine of the last twelve AfCoN Finals Tournaments, winning four and coming second once, but lost all three of the matches it played at the World Cup Finals Tournament in the last thirty years (when it played in 2018). Morocco, similarly, took part in ten out of the last twelve AfCoN Finals Tournaments, coming second once, but won only one point from its three World Cup matches as an African representative in 2018 (where it lost to Iran and Portugal but drew with Spain). It is another country to boast a 'golden generation' as the reason for success in the late 1980s and into the 1990s but has been in steady decline since (as evidenced by its failure to qualify for four of the five World Cup tournaments in the 2000s and 2010s). Drops in Morocco's 'compete as participant' and 'compete as rival' scores shown in Figure six illustrate the country's decline.

²³ Tunisia's '% Elite competitor' scores for the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s are 10, 13, and 8 percent.

²⁴ Egypt and Morocco both have '% elite competitor' scores of below 10 percent (compared with 30% and above for elite European countries) and 'average competitor ratings' of 67 percent and 66 percent respectively (both lower than that of Tunisia and twenty points below that of France).

Figure 5. Egypt’s progress since the 1970s

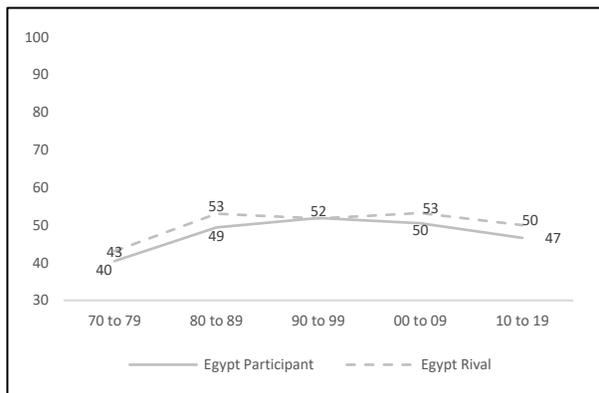
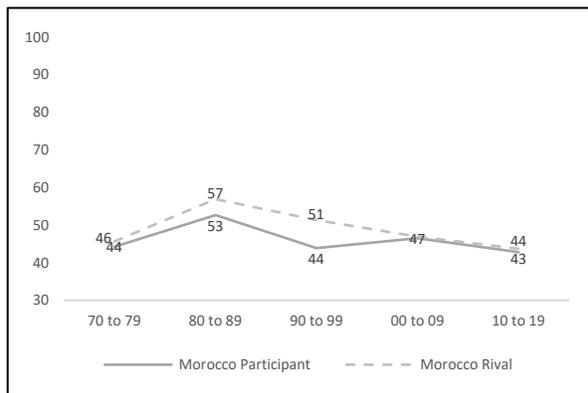


Figure 6. Morocco’s progress since the 1970s



Source: Author’s original work.

Some African teams have advanced, but face limits

Other top African countries have seen more positive progress in their ‘competing’ records since the 1970s. Figures 7, 8 and 9 show the examples of Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Nigeria, for instance (and Appendix A briefly describes other important cases—of Algeria, Cameroon, Senegal, and South Africa). The three countries shown here are now the ‘closest’ African competitors to Europe’s leading nations, with Croatia and Belgium being most proximate to them (though further than France was to Tunisia in the 1970s).

Figure 7. Ivory Coast’s progress since the 1970s

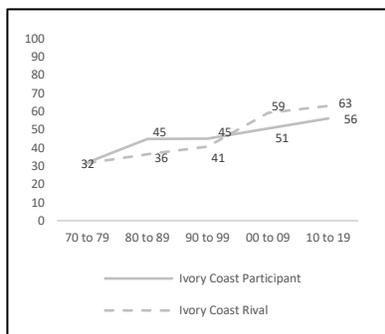


Figure 8. Ghana’s progress since the 1970s

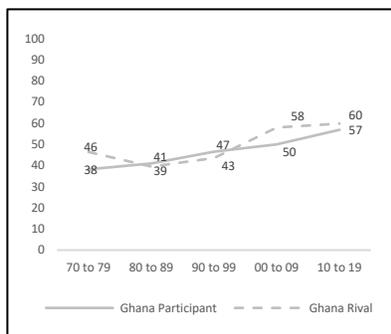
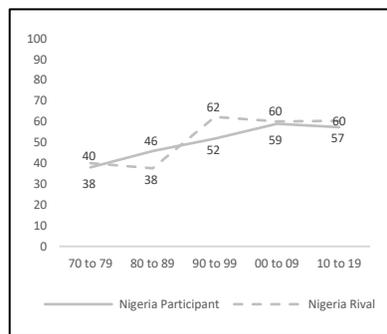


Figure 9. Nigeria’s progress since the 1970s



Source: Author’s original work.

All three of the African countries saw gradual but consistent improvements in both ‘compete as participant’ and ‘compete as rival’ index scores over the last fifty years, lifting these scores into the high 50s and lower 60s in the 2010s. These gains were largely achieved by improving intra-continental results. All three countries ramped up their ‘% Possible Continental Finals Tournament matches’ scores in recent decades, for instance, as reliable qualifiers for AfCoN Tournaments (with the Ivory Coast, Ghana and Nigeria playing in 15, 14 and 11 of the last 16 events, and in 75, 64 and 51 percent of possible AfCoN matches in the 2010s—up from 31, 38 and 42 percent in the 1970s). The countries play in more AfCoN matches because they qualify for most tournaments and have a high winning rate in these events (scoring 63, 62, and 68 on ‘% Points in Continental Finals Tournament matches’ in the 2010s). These records translate into winning moments as well, with the three countries sharing four AfCoN championships, seven runner-up places and 12 other semi-final slots in the last 16 events. Such success also plays out in strong records representing Africa at the World Cup Finals Tournaments, where the countries have held 7 of the last 16 African World Cup slots, with high scores on ‘% Possible World Cup Finals Tournament matches’ since the 1990s (for Nigeria) and the 2000s (for Ivory Coast and Ghana).²⁵

All three countries had a ‘golden generation’ at some time in this period, whose impacts peaked for Nigeria in the late 1990s and between about 2006 and 2012 for Ghana and the Ivory Coast.²⁶ One can see the effects of these generations on the ‘compete as rival’ scores in all cases; these rose from 38 to 62 between the 1980s and 1990s in Nigeria, and from 43 to 58 and 41 to 59 in Ghana and the Ivory Coast between the 1990s and 2000s. These ‘rival’ gains were greater than the ones evidenced in examples of other golden generations; like Tunisia (in the 1970s) and Morocco (in the 1980s), shown in Figures 3 and 6. More impressive, perhaps, is that the ‘compete as rival’ scores do not seem to be declining in the wake of these golden generations in the same way as they did in Tunisia and Morocco. Nigeria’s ‘rival’ performance dropped slightly in the 2000s (from 62 to 60) but has held at about the same level for two decades after the golden generation

²⁵ Nigeria played in 38, 21, and 47 percent of possible World Cup matches in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. Ghana and the Ivory Coast did not qualify for these contests in the 1990s but played in 28 and 21 percent of the matches in the 2000s and 38 and 29 percent of the matches in the 2010s.

²⁶ These included (for Nigeria) Rufai, Keshi, Okafor, Okechukwu, Oliseh, Ekoku, Yekini, Amokachi, Amuneke, Ikpeba, and Finidi George, and (for Ghana) Essien, Mensah, Muntari, Emmanuel Addoquaye Pappoe, Pimpong, Paintsil, Gyan, and Boateng, and (for Ivory Coast) Drogba, Yaya and Kolo Touré, Zokora, Eboué, Gervinho and Kalou.

(in which the country's teams have proved a dominant force in AfCoN tournaments and represented Africa in 4 out of 5 World Cup events). 'Rival' scores continued improving into the 2010s for Ghana and the Ivory Coast partly because the golden generations were still playing (with one group taking Ghana to the 2010 World Cup Tournament Quarter Finals). Teams from both countries have continued where these generations left off, however, competing in all three AfCoNs since 2014 and achieving strong results (with the Ivory Coast winning in one of their appearances and Ghana coming second and 4th in two of their efforts).

Such observations promote confidence in these countries' continued improvement and suggest they may be the ones to carry Africa's hopes of winning the World Cup forward. One caveat, however, is how long it will take for them to achieve this goal. The three countries have gained about 20 points on the two index scores over thirty to forty years, achieving levels of about 60 in both cases. Their target, given my work, is a score of at least 70 on either or both indexes (with World Cup semi-finalists and finalists exceeding 70 points on at least one index).²⁷ Assuming past trajectories, the three African contenders will reach such scores in the 2030s or 2040s (unless they have another golden generation that facilitates a bigger jump in a shorter time). Such patient progress over long periods is difficult and requires a lot of consistent improvement.

A second caveat relates to whether the three countries in question (or others) can reach the level of global elites using their current improvement strategy. As discussed, this strategy seems centered on becoming intra-continental powerhouses (by dominating African competition, especially in AfCoNs). There are limits to how much more the countries can improve their AfCoN appearance and win rates, however, which are likely to manifest in a 'competing improvement ceiling' (or may already be doing so). Such ceiling is easy to convey mathematically, given that the countries cannot increase their 'competing as participant' index scores much beyond the current rates (around 60) by just continuing to do better in intra-continental tournaments. If Nigeria played in and won every AfCoN game possible in a ten-year period, for instance, but kept its performance

²⁷ The only exception to this rule, given my calculations, is South Korea in 2002. The country made a World Cup Semi-Final with index scores in the 60s.

on other variables (like ‘Average competitor quality’ and the ‘% Elite competitors’) the same, its ‘compete as participant’ index score would only increase to about 64 (not the magic 70).

It is impossible to increase this participation score without ramping up the quality of competitors, playing more elites, and playing in a higher % of possible World Cup matches (which requires more than qualifying, which Nigeria does consistently, but winning matches to progress beyond the group stage and into play-off rounds like the quarter and semi-finals). These variables can only be improved if the countries engage more intercontinental competition, and especially high-position international competition. This strategy is obviously associated with a risk of scoring lower ‘competing as rival’ scores, as more matches against tougher competitors could yield lower win rates (especially when win rates against elite countries are as low as they are in the three African countries—currently at 23, 21 and 30 percent for the Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Nigeria).

The countries will have to learn to win more high-quality match ups to improve their rival scores beyond mathematical ceilings as well. If Nigeria does not do so, and continues focusing mostly on its African performances, it will hit a ‘compete as rival’ ceiling of about 66 (with 100% of its AfCoN points). A country like Nigeria needs to build winning capabilities outside of Africa to break through this ceiling and reach the levels common to World Cup winning countries (especially given that two out of the five variables in the ‘compete as rivals’ index are sensitive to win rates against elite competitors or intercontinental opposition played in World Cup Finals Tournaments, and one captures a country’s global—not African—reputation, which depends on such results).²⁸

This new strategy—playing better quality countries more often—is demonstrated in Table 4’s contrast between 2010s index scores of the three African countries and recent World Cup semi-finalists, Belgium and Croatia. Both European countries scored relatively lower than their African counterparts on the ‘% Possible Continental Finals Tournament matches’ and ‘% Points in Continental Finals Tournament matches’, but they registered much better performances on the variables associated with playing better quality opposition—including intercontinental countries like Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Uruguay, and the United States (which helps scoring on

²⁸ The relevant variables are ‘% Points per match vs. high-position competitors’ and ‘% Points in World Cup Finals Tournament matches’ and ‘Average percentile rating (based on Elo scores)’.

‘Average competitor rating’, ‘% Elite competitors’, and ‘% Points per match vs. high-position competitors’). These superior results are why the two European countries achieve marginally better ‘compete as participant’ index scores and significantly better ‘compete as rival’ scores (of 70 or above, in the territory needed to compete for a world cup and be a perennial member of the global elite) than the African contenders. The European competitors also have much more opportunity to keep improving their competing index scores, given that they are working with all the variables in the table (not just the intra-continental performance variables apparently emphasized, implicitly perhaps, by African countries).

Table 4. Comparing Africa’s top scoring countries with the closest elite countries, 2010 and 2019

Variable	Africa’s top located countries			The ‘closest’ European elite countries	
	Ivory Coast	Ghana	Nigeria	Belgium	Croatia
Matches per year	100	100	100	100	100
Average competitor rating (percentile)	69	70	72	80	82
% Elite competitors	8	12	16	27	28
% Possible Continental Finals Tournament matches	75	64	51	38	54
% Possible World Cup Finals Tournament matches	29	38	47	57	48
<i>‘Competing as Participant’ Index Score</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>61</i>	<i>62</i>
% Points per match	64	52	57	73	68
% Points per match vs. high-position competitors*	23	21	30	43	33
% Points in Continental Finals Tournament matches*	63	62	68	60	52
% Points in World Cup Finals Tournament matches**	39	38	27	83	57
Average percentile rating (based on Elo scores)	85	82	82	94	94
<i>‘Competing as Rival’ Index Score</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>84</i>	<i>70</i>

Source: Author’s original work.

Beyond the mathematics of index construction, further statistical evidence suggests (but does not necessarily prove²⁹) that countries who dominate their regional competitors are less likely to prevail in World Cup competition than countries that regularly face high-quality opponents (and work out how to consistently win points in such contests). This evidence involves simple correlations³⁰ that show variables associated with intra-continental performance have a positive

²⁹ Any statistical analysis is likely to be sensitive to sample selection, for instance, and my sample here is limited (especially in size but also variation). The interaction of variables is also something that would need better treatment (either in designing the statistical work or interpretation). At time of writing, my data set is not developed enough for this kind of analysis, but that is where the work will progress.

³⁰ I calculated correlations between various variables and the ‘% Possible World Cup Finals Tournament matches’ played and ‘% Points in World Cup Finals Tournament matches’ for a sample of twenty countries over five decades. The sample covered the ten African countries and seven elite countries, plus Greece, South Korea, and the USA.

but small relationship with current or future World Cup success,³¹ whereas variables associated with high-quality competition have positive, large relationships with World Cup success.³² My interpretation of such statistics is that the relatively better continental successes of Table 4's African countries in the 2000s and 2010s³³ gave them less competitive preparation for their 2010s World Cup performances than the higher share of games Croatia and Belgium played against high-quality opposition in the 2000s and 2010s (which helped both countries build the capabilities to progress further in the 2010s world tournaments, to semi-final and final matches, than their African counterparts).³⁴

The message arising from such comparisons is (once again) that African countries hoping to win the World Cup—and become global soccer elites—should focus more on ensuring they are playing higher-quality, high-position, inter-continental competition than just dominating intra-continental competitors. As in the case of France (already discussed) this was a direct focus of Belgium's strategy in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, when it emerged from European minnow to global competitor. The country failed to qualify for any World Cup or European Championship matches in the 1960s but developed a reputation at the time as the 'world champion of friendlies'—because of a rigorous schedule against better teams, many of whom were among the world's best (with 57 percent of their opponents enjoying better Elo scores than they did, and 34 percent classified as 'elite' opponents). The Belgians lost 60 percent of these matches, but learned from the experiences, continuing to play 'up' against a high percentage (53) of elite teams in the 1970s

³¹ The correlations were low for variables capturing intra-continental participation and performance: '% Possible Continental Finals Tournament matches' and '% Points in Continental Finals Tournament matches' enjoyed a 0.39 and 0.29 correlation with '% Possible World Cup Finals Tournament matches' and a 0.36 and 0.27 correlation with '% Points in World Cup Finals Tournament matches'.

³² The correlations were high for variables capturing the quality of competitors: 'Average competitor rating', '% Elite competitors', and '% Points per match vs. high-position competitors' were highly correlated with '% Possible World Cup Finals Tournament matches'—at 0.63, 0.65, and 0.68—and with '% Points in World Cup Finals Tournament matches'—at 0.62, 0.61 and 0.82. Similar correlations were evident when I lagged the variables, asking for instance if a country's '% Elite competitors' in one decade was related to its '% Points in World Cup Finals Tournament matches'.

³³ In comparing the two groups, it is clear the African countries had better intra-continental performance. The three African nations played in 10 (Ivory Coast), 10 (Ghana), and 8 (Nigeria) of the 11 AfCoN Finals Tournaments since 2000, achieving (cumulatively) 2 first, 5 second, 5 third, and 4 fourth place finishes, winning a combined 60 percent of all possible points. Croatia and Belgium participated in 5 and 3 of the 6 European Championships played between 2000 and 2019, reaching three quarterfinals (but nothing more) and scoring less than 50 percent of the possible points.

³⁴ The African nations played in a combined 24 World Cup matches in the 2010s, winning 6, drawing 6, and losing 12. Ghana reached the 2010 Quarter-Final. Croatia and Belgium played in 22 matches, winning 15, drawing 2, and losing 5. Croatia came second in the 2018 World Cup Finals Tournament, when Belgium finished third.

(some in European and World Cup tournaments, where they were starting to qualify and perform relatively well) and into the 1980s (when 57 percent of contests were against elite countries). Belgium's teams improved their winning record against these elite countries in this period, from 40 percent in the 1960s to 67 percent in the 1970s and 75 percent in the 1980s, and saw this new-found winning capability translate into greater 'compete as participant' and 'compete as rival' scores and performances. Its 'compete as participant' scores increased from 35 to 71 and its 'compete as rival' scores rose from 41 to 66 in under two decades, with these gains manifesting in new abilities to compete as evidenced in participation in three European tournaments in the 1980s and in all six World Cup tournaments from 1980 to 2002, a second-place finish in the 1980 European Championship, and 4th place finish in the 1984 World Cup. The country's teams went through some lean years in the 2000s but managed to maintain participant and rival levels at higher rates than they were prior to the 1980s. The teams have recently resumed building on post-70s gains, with a new (and more diverse) golden generation emerging as one of the world's top 'rivals' in the 2010s (with a quarterfinal and semifinal achievement in the 2014 and 2018 World Cup Finals Tournaments).

Conclusion

I introduced this paper recounting the prominent narrative that an African country will one day win the soccer World Cup. I reflected on how this narrative fosters 'hope' for soccer lovers across the continent, but wondered if such hope was warranted, given that predictions of future victory have been made and not met for 50 years. This history of disappointment led me to offer three ways to think about the hope of an African nation one day lifting the World Cup trophy: (i) It will be satisfied at the right time, which has not yet come; (ii) It is too passive, and will not happen if left 'to time' and not given more active attention; and (iii) It is unrealistic and will never happen.

The Belgium and French examples encourage me to reject the last idea, that this hope is unrealistic and will never happen. The rise of both countries from European strugglers to global contenders over the last sixty years demonstrates that countries can close 'competing gaps' through time and build their capabilities to compete as both participant and rival and challenge the world's best.

Such examples should feed the hope that some of Africa's leading soccer-playing nations may indeed become World Cup winners in future, rising like Belgium and France have. This injection of hope is especially relevant for those countries that have achieved consistent 'competing' improvements in recent decades (like the Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Nigeria, but also countries like Algeria, Cameroon, Senegal, and South Africa—discussed briefly in Appendix A). It should also inspire Africa's historic contenders, like Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, who are not competing as close to the frontiers of global competitive possibility as they were in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s but remain consistently dominant continental competitors.

The examples of Belgium and France and my analysis of the way African countries have progressed as competitors over the past fifty years also leads me to reject the first idea proposed, that Africa's hope of winning will be satisfied at the right time, which has not yet come. I say this knowing that some observers might interpret improvements over the last few decades as suggesting that countries like the Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Nigeria are on pathways to compete at the highest levels and will reach such status in the 2030s or 2040s if we just 'let time' take its course. I see weaknesses in this argument, however, given limits of the implicit strategy African countries seem to be relying on to improve their propensity to compete. As argued, this strategy emphasizes dominating intra-continental opponents and winning regional tournaments (like the AfCoN). While establishing countries as top contenders in Africa and helping African countries move from low-level performers to 'the middle' of global soccer's field (as shown visually in Figure 1), such strategy will not suffice if these countries want to become high-level global contenders. They simply cannot keep improving enough to reach the levels of 'competing as participant' or 'competing as rival' without proving themselves against better opponents more regularly than they currently do. They will max out attending world tournaments and perhaps beating one or two top teams in such, but never be good enough to win such matches as consistently as is required to be a true global force.

This perspective resonates with observations Melanie Krause and Stefan Szymanski have made about the challenge Africa's top soccer-playing countries have of escaping the equivalent of a 'middle income trap' in global soccer.³⁵ They argue that low-level countries can improve their

³⁵ Krause and Szymanski (2019, pp.2995-2999).

competitive performance rather easily, mimicking the past best practices of the world's best countries against weaker or similarly weak regional competitors (where I stress the best practices as being 'past' because they can only be copied if they have been documented and shared, which takes time). However, countries find this strategy limited when they achieve 'middling' status (as the African countries in this sample have): It simply does not help them compete with the world's best countries, which requires that they be the authors of new best practices (having the kind of advanced talent mobilization and innovation facilitation capabilities found in high-level countries). Krause and Szymanski argue that these capabilities tend to emerge as 'technology transfers' when middling teams play against "the world's best teams on a regular basis" but note that countries in regions like Africa "have fewer opportunities [for such contests, or] to hone their skills against the world's top national teams" given their focus on (mostly) playing against regional teams that are not globally competitive.

Reflecting on such views, I find myself agreeing with the second idea proposed to think of the hope of African countries winning world titles and becoming world elites: It is a valid hope, that can be realized, but is currently too passive, and will not happen if left 'to time' and not given more active attention. The active attention I propose is for Africa's leading countries to ramp up the quality of their competitors and competition to learn and build the kinds of capabilities needed to win more often against the world's best (who they seldom currently play and commonly lose to when they do play, apparently without learning why and how to do better 'next time').

The quality of competition will improve to some degree when Africa sees its number of positions in the World Cup Finals Tournament expanded in 2026 (where Africa will have nine representatives, up from the current allotment of five).³⁶ More World Cup Tournament slots will likely only increase the quality of average competitors and '% Elite competitors' slightly, however (as there are only three guaranteed matches at each World Cup tournament, which Africa's contenders seldom progress beyond). It is also instructive that these few, irregular World Cup

³⁶ The politics of regional allotments is important to recognize here. Europe and Africa have about the same number of countries (54 and 55), but Europe has always had many more slots at the World Cup Finals Tournaments (13, instead of Africa's 5). The adjustment in 2026 will add four slots to Africa, but Europe will also gain—another 3. These slots allow countries opportunities to play the world's best teams and will give more African and European teams such opportunities (but potentially also dilute the 'high-positionality' of the World Cup tournament).

Finals Tournament appearances have not proven sufficient to help Africa's top contenders learn how to beat the world's best (in fact, the perennial African participants in these tournaments seem to win less over time against top opposition).

As such, African countries intent on challenging the world's best need to develop their own strategies of scheduling matches against these high-position countries—just like Belgium and France did in the 1970s and 1980s. This is necessary even if playing 'up' more often comes with a risk of losing more regularly. This seems to be a required risk for any country wanting to become a competitor at the highest levels of competition (like a 'desirable difficulty' one embraces to learn new things³⁷) and one that should itself be managed (by emphasizing learning and capability building through high-level competition and developing methods to rebuff criticism of failure).

The words of Antonio Conte, the former Italian player and current manager of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, help to explain why this new capability building strategy—and its risks—are important. Consider my own adaptation of a recent statement he made about his club's efforts to be more competitive:³⁸ "We [in Africa] have a lot of space for improvement, to be a [continent] with aspirations to win. [But] To use the verb 'to win' is more simple than winning because to win you have to build something important, be solid ... Then you're ready to win. Otherwise you have to hope [passively, on 'time' and the 'luck' of maybe one day having another golden generation]."

As I conclude, I wonder if African countries should embrace such view in thinking about its development policies beyond the field of soccer. Countries on the continent compete with the world in many other domains, including economics, and governments and leaders are constantly predicting or promising that their nations are on the verge of becoming global contenders (just as they insist the continent's teams will win the soccer World Cup). I read such statements in the many national vision documents that exist across the continent, with selected examples committing (among other things) to: Make Kenya and Malawi industrialized and technologically driven middle income countries by 2030; Establish Nigeria as one of the world's top twenty-countries (by 2020); Turn Gambia into a competitive, dynamic middle income country; Ensure

³⁷ See Bjork and Bjork (2011).

³⁸ Hytner (2022).

Uganda becomes a 'competitive upper-middle income country' by 2040; and Transform Egypt and Mauritania into globally active high-middle to high income societies by 2030.

What chance is there of any of these visionary things happening? Are the 'hopes' fostered in such vision documents unrealistic promises that are unlikely to come to pass, or are they likely to materialize but only 'in time' (which is yet to come), or are African policymakers being too passive in their efforts to make these hopes real? A reality check exercise like the one conducted here could help answer such questions and guide Africa's economic policymakers as they tackle the difficult challenge of trying to make visionary hope real and improve the way countries on the continent compete 'as participant' and 'as rival' in the world economy.

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Appendix A

The paper's main text did not show the 'competing' progression of four of the African countries from my sample. I provide figures to illustrate those journeys here, first for Cameroon (in Figure A1) and Algeria (Figure A2) and then for Senegal (Figure A3) and South Africa (Figure A4).

Figure A1. Cameroon's progress since the 1970s

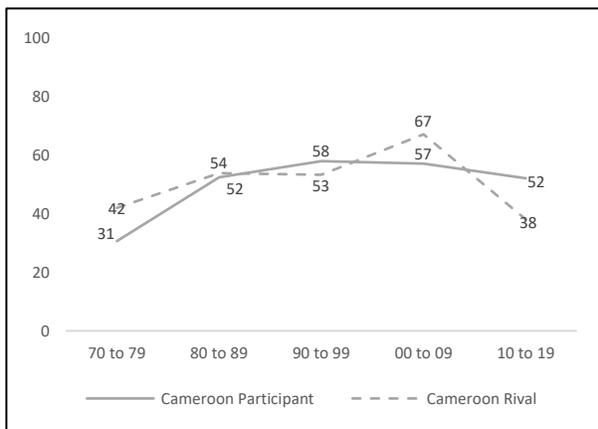
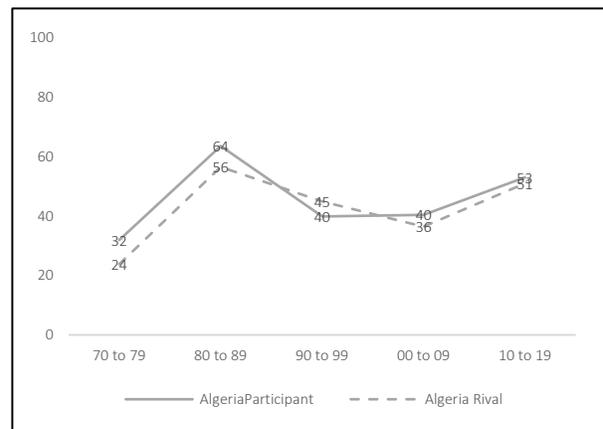


Figure A2. Algeria's progress since the 1970s



Source: Author's original work.

Figure A3. Senegal's progress since the 1970s

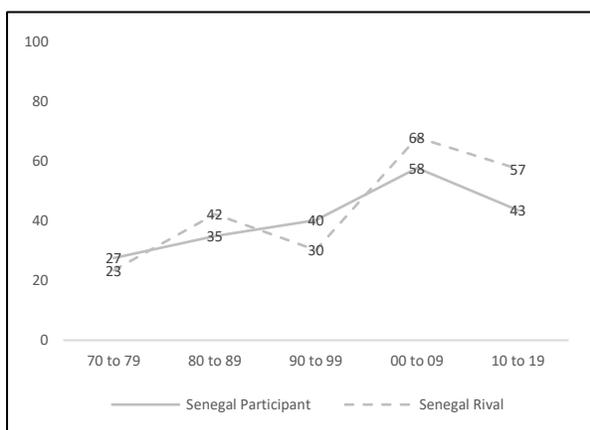
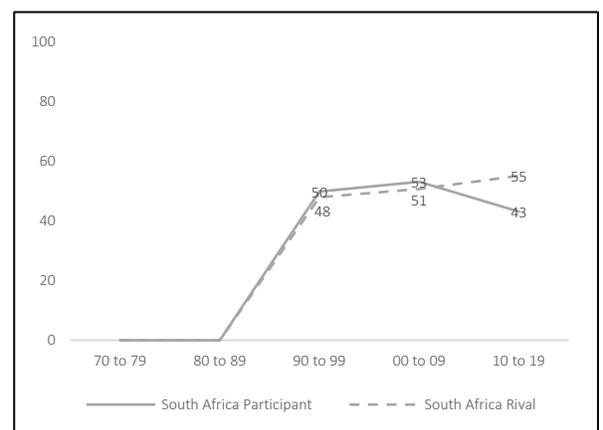


Figure A4. South Africa's progress since the 1970s



Source: Author's original work.

A primary observation in reviewing these progress charts is that every African story is different. Countries have progressed in different ways when it comes to competing in world soccer. It also seems that most of the countries have relied on ‘golden generations’ to progress.

Cameroon’s golden generation emerged out of the surprising team that reached the World Cup quarterfinals in the 1990 World Cup Finals Tournament. Cameroon qualified for the next three World Cup tournaments, peaking as both ‘participant’ and ‘rival’ in the early 2000s (when they won two AfCoN championships in succession and progressed to the quarter finals of the next two). The country’s status as a rival diminished in the 2010s, but it held onto the gains it made as participant. Improved results at the end of the 2010s (including a 2017 AfCoN championship) suggest the country’s competing scores might rise again in the future (though they are relatively low (at 51 and 38) compared with countries like Nigeria and the Ivory Coast).

Algeria’s first golden generation was in the 1980s when the country improved both its ‘compete as participant’ and ‘compete as rival’ scores. This group reached the 1982 and 1986 World Cup Finals Tournaments and won the 1990 AfCoN. The country’s fortunes dipped in the 1990s and 2000s, however, after the golden generation moved on, but recovered in the 2010s as another golden generation appeared to have emerged (playing in two World Cup Finals Tournaments, reaching the World Cup second round in 2014—narrowly losing to Germany after beating South Korea and drawing to Russia—and winning the African Cup of Nations tournament in 2019). As with Cameroon, it is likely that Algeria’s competing scores will continue improving in the 2020s, with a lot of space to grow given their relatively low 2010s levels (52 and 51).

Senegal was arguably the weakest country in my sample in the 1970s, with participant and rival scores of 27 and 23. They improved on both these low scores in the 1980s and continued strengthening their ‘participant’ record in particular in the 1990s (qualifying for three out of five AfCoN tournaments between 1990 and 1999) even though they struggled to win points in these events (winning only three and drawing two out of eleven matches). This implicit strategy of playing ‘up’ for much of the 1990s helped establish the national team as one of the continent’s most competitive ‘participants’ in the 2000s and 2010s and also stood as an investment that ultimately generated significant growth as a ‘rival’. The country played in nine of the eleven AfCoN tournaments since 2000 and qualified for two world cups (causing its ‘compete as participant’

score to increase from 40 to 58 in the 2000s and to stabilize at 43 in the 2010s). It achieved one runner-up, one fourth place and two quarter-final AfCoN finishes in the 2000s and reached the 2002 World Cup quarterfinal (remarkably beating France and drawing to Denmark and Uruguay in what is Africa's best performance in the World Cup to date). It has been less successful in the 2010s, but is still one of Africa's main 'rival' countries (scoring 57 on the 'compete as rival' index, up from 23 in the 1970s). Observers expect a lot from Senegal in the 2020s, given its rich performance as participant and rival in the last few years of the 2010s (when it qualified for three AfCoNs and the one World Cup Tournament, achieving runner-up status in an AfCoN and narrowly missing the second round at 2018's World Cup where, as Africa's top achiever, it beat Poland and drew with Japan).

South Africa did not compete in the 1970s and 1980s because it was banned from international competition. In the 1990s, it emerged as an African contender with relatively high participant and rival scores of 50 and 48. These were earned largely because of two successful appearances in the AfCoNs (where it finished as champions and runners-up in 1996 and 1998) and an inaugural qualification for the 1998 World Cup Finals Tournament. The country maintained its level of participation in the 2000s by playing in all the possible AfCoN tournaments and one World Cup event, and held its 'compete as rival' scores steady in this period as well. Interestingly, the 'compete as rival' score increased in the 2010s while the 'compete as participant' score declined. The growth in rival scores reflects an increase in the country's average winning rate (from 52 percent in the 2000s to 56 percent in the 2010s). The decline in participant scores reflects a drop in the quality of competitor faced (with the average opponent's ranking decreasing from the 72nd percentile in the 1990s to the 68th percentile in the 2000s and the 64th percentile in the 2010s, and the '% Elite competitors' dropping from 17% to 11% to 4% in the same period). When combined, the story of South African soccer seems to be that it is playing easier teams from the region and beating these teams more often than before—but with less apparent intention of competing outside of Africa or at the highest level in the world.