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## What Works

### **Tackling HIV: Grassroot Soccer uses the world's most popular sport to battle a deadly virus**

By Corey Binns

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Stanford Social Innovation Review  
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015  
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516  
Email: [info@ssireview.com](mailto:info@ssireview.com), [www.ssireview.com](http://www.ssireview.com)



## Tackling HIV

Grassroot Soccer uses the world's most popular sport to battle a deadly virus by Corey Binns

"My uncle abused me sexually," a female soccer coach tells a group of adolescent boys and girls in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, a city with one of the highest HIV rates in the country. "I never told anybody because I was scared and didn't understand what was happening. ... I have been living with HIV for 10 years now."

Thus begins another series of Grassroot Soccer workshops, which tap into soccer's phenomenal popularity in sub-Saharan Africa to educate kids about HIV. After telling their personal stories about how HIV has affected them, Grassroot Soccer coaches lead their students through 20 hours of educational and trust-building activities. The whole program takes place around a soccer ball.



Two Grassroot Soccer students show off their armbands at a graduation ceremony in Zimbabwe. Using the international language of soccer, program graduates learn about HIV and its prevention.

"We're having fun dealing with a very sad thing," says Tommy Clark, the organization's co-founder. A retired professional soccer player, he is also a pediatrician and former research fellow in HIV prevention at the University of California, San Francisco.

"The popularity of soccer in Africa is like football, basketball, baseball, and video games [in America] rolled into one," explains Clark. But not any soccer star can teach the program. Clark finds that kids in the organization's flagship programs in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, and South Africa

know and care more about local soccer players than celebrities like David Beckham.

"By using the local soccer stars we have found something that resonates deeply with our target audience," he says, citing Grassroot Soccer adviser and Stanford University psychologist Albert Bandura. In his classic studies, Bandura shows that people imitate role models whom they admire and respect. Clark's team trains local soccer players to lead the Grassroot Soccer activities and to talk openly about their own tragic experiences with HIV. "It is so powerful for these kids to see local heroes modeling the very behaviors we are preparing [them] to adopt."

The organization's adolescent audience is at high risk for contracting HIV. Of the 29.4 million people in sub-Saharan Africa living with HIV/AIDS, 10 million are between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. And of these infected people, 3 million are under 15 years of age.

But Grassroot Soccer helps adolescents protect themselves against the disease, finds a 2004 study conducted by Palo Alto, Calif.-based Children's Health Council. Graduates of the program feel better informed about the disease, more knowledgeable about how to find help, and more supported by their communities, the firm discovered. For example, the study showed that the percentage of kids who believe condoms can prevent the transmission of HIV increased from 49 percent to 71 percent over the course of the program. Clark's own study on the power of professional soccer players to teach kids about HIV appeared in the peer-reviewed journal *AIDS and Behavior* in June 2006.

Even children who don't participate in a program learn about the disease. "The message quickly disseminates through communities," says Anne Marie Burgoyne, chair of the organization's board of directors and director of the Draper Richards Foundation, one of Grassroot Soccer's funders. "If a portion of kids in a school go through the curriculum at their local soccer club, they end up teaching their classmates. There's a ripple effect."

### On the Ball

Grassroot Soccer works with schools, youth groups, and local soccer clubs to teach groups of children in after-school programs and soccer camps. After coaches tell their own stories, they use a playful 120-page curriculum to educate kids



about the biology, transmission, and prevention of HIV. The soccer-themed activities also help students speak more openly about HIV and AIDS, resist peer pressure, and understand how gender roles can put people at risk for contracting HIV. The games keep kids engaged as they learn about the disease.

In one game, called My Supporters, the children stand in a circle. One child holds a soccer ball that represents HIV behind his or her back. When the group is told to step away from the child with the ball, they discuss how lonely that child must feel and how they can combat the stigma of HIV in their community. They then name teachers, parents, and religious leaders in their community who support them when they feel alone. As the students go through this and other activities, they galvanize as a group and build a community of trust, Clark says.

The program culminates with a well-attended graduation ceremony, often at a professional soccer game or tournament. Teachers, parents, and other community members come to support the graduates, and local television stations often cover the event. Graduates then teach their peers about HIV. “The real work begins after graduation as the students walk away with their diplomas ready to put their newfound skills and confidence into action,” says Clark.

## Team Effort

Because of soccer’s popularity across Africa and the high rates of adolescent HIV transmission there, Grassroot Soccer feels a lot of pressure to expand. Yet Clark and his colleagues conclude that the best way to expand their program is not to build their own organization. Instead, they share their techniques with existing organizations.

“We decided to become a ‘software’ company, providing our program to others through partnerships where expert trainers work with local trainers to ensure they have the skills to deliver the program at a high level and then provide ongoing technical assistance,” Clark explains.

Grassroot Soccer gives its partners training, a program of activities, and systems for monitoring and evaluation. For example, Grassroot Soccer does not normally test kids for HIV. But when a partner organization wanted to test adoles-

cents and provide treatment and counseling, Grassroot Soccer modified a program to prepare kids for this potentially frightening event.

Working with local partners has allowed the organization to scale quickly and relatively inexpensively. Independently, Grassroot Soccer can educate about 3,000 children per year. But with partners such as Mercy Corps, the Center for Communication Programs at Johns Hopkins University, and the Zambian Ministry of Education, the organization graduated 30,000 students in 2007. Clark expects many more graduates in 2008 as the total number of trainers and partnerships build over time. The partnerships also allow Grassroot Soccer to implement programs in additional countries—including Ethiopia, Liberia, and Sudan—without overtaxing its own human resources.

To maintain high standards, Grassroot Soccer chooses its partners carefully. Clark says an ideal partner provides a group of enthusiastic and experienced trainers, has access to a popular local soccer team, and commits to monitoring and evaluating its activities. Grassroot Soccer staff members also conduct regular follow-up visits.

Because partners have considerable control over the program’s execution, some Grassroot Soccer board members worry that the organization’s brand will become diluted. “[They] feel that it is vital to be well branded so the Grassroot Soccer ‘seal’ becomes synonymous with quality,” says Clark. “Others feel that this is less important and that letting local organizations brand themselves gives more local ownership.”

The organization’s seal already has other positive associations. As a participant of CBS’s *Survivor: All-Stars*, Ethan Zohn, one of Grassroot Soccer’s founders, wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the organization’s logo in front of more than 20 million viewers each episode. Since the show aired in 2004, people who learned about the program from seeing Zohn’s T-shirt have flooded the organization’s office with e-mails, phone calls, and donations.

Clark and his colleagues know that their message is most effective when a student becomes a teacher, as is the case with the majority of program graduates. In a 2006 survey of 342 Grassroot Soccer participants in Botswana, 90 percent of graduates educated at least one person about HIV/AIDS, and the average graduate talked to three or more people about the disease. After participating in a Grassroot Soccer program at Botswana’s Tlhabologo Primary School, one young student teacher interviewed in a focus group reported on his new student, his dad. “I quizzed my family on the quiz questions. My father said that he did not feel comfortable talking about HIV/AIDS, but I tried to help him.” □

## BE A GOOD SPORT

- Play off existing passions
- Use local athletes as role models
- Let students be teachers
- Partner with complementary organizations