The Effects of Player Exodus on the Local Sports Systems in Developing Countries: A Case Study of the Ghana Glo Premier League

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The increase in player exodus from sports leagues in developing countries to wealthier leagues in developed countries is an important concern in the discussion of the standard of sports leagues in the sending countries (Bale & Maguire, 1994; Thibault, 2009). This research is inspired by literature on labor migration in relation to sports, (e.g., Maguire & Pearton, 2000; Magee & Sugden, 2002; Darby, Akindes & Kirwin, 2007; Hallinan & Jackson, 2008; Elliot & Maguire, 2008). The series of complex interdependent processes such as economics, history and culture that influence the motivations of sport migrants are identified and discussed in light of developing countries (Elliot & Maguire, 2008). The paper provides a background on player migration from Africa in general, and soccer players from Ghana in particular, to Europe, and identifies the roles played by these interdependent processes as well as the role of player agents, clubs and club managers.

The migration of players over time can have adverse effects on donor nations (Elliot & Maguire, 2008). Therefore the objective of this research is to investigate the increasing phenomenon of sports talent migration in an increasingly interdependent world (Bale & Maguire, 1994) and its effect on sports systems in developing countries. Using the elite men’s premier soccer league in the West African country of Ghana (i.e., the Glo Premier league), the research seeks to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1: What are the factors underlying the departure of stars from the domestic leagues in sending countries?
Research Question 2: What are the adverse effects this phenomenon has on the sending countries such as the deskilling of the domestic leagues (Elliot & Maguire, 2008)?
Research Question 3: What are the some of the measures that can be taken to help control this phenomenon and its effect on the sports systems in developing countries?

Although different migration theories such as human capital theory and the world system theory address the process of labor migration, this study dwells mainly on two theories of migration: the neoclassical theory (Massey, Arango, Kouaouci, Palegrino & Taylor, 1993) and the dependency theory (Bale & Maguire, 1994). The neoclassical theory looks at migration as an outcome of a decision making process based on needs and income maximization of individual players, whilst the dependency theory takes into consideration the global sports system as operating largely but not exclusively within the confines of multinationals or organizations dominated by the first world nations (Bale & Maguire, 1994).

Considering the varying interdependent factors of migration by elite players, this research seeks to unveil the effects that the exodus of the Ghanaian players has on the elite domestic league in Ghana. Possible solutions to control this phenomenon are also suggested.

The study employs a qualitative methodology which involves sixteen semi - structured interviews with key members of: (a) the Ghana Football Association (GFA); (b) clubs in the elite football division of Ghana; and, (c) corporate sponsors of the domestic league. First, these interviews investigate the views and perceptions of these stakeholders and administrators on the factors that influence players’ decision to migrate from the local league Second, the impact the exodus has on the domestic league in Ghana is examined. For instance, the views of these administrators allow the identification and analysis of how player migration affects patronage, marketing and the standard of the local games and the league in general. The stakeholders are asked to share their views regarding the challenges that the domestic soccer league in Ghana faces due to the loss of soccer talents to the bigger leagues. Third, measures that could be undertaken to address some of these major challenges are solicited. The interviews are conducted in December 2010 and January 2011. Data will subsequently be analyzed and results will be presented.

Theoretically, this study enhances the understanding of the complex and varying interdependent factors inherent in the decision by elite players in developing countries to migrate to wealthier leagues in developed countries, and the social and economic effects this player exodus has on local sports systems. From a practical standpoint, this research will help to examine and develop measures and strategies which sports administrators from sending countries can put in place to curb or reduce the increased negative effects of this phenomenon. Findings from this study may also assist policy makers and stakeholders to institute constructive policies as possible measures to the various effects the migration of elite players has on the sports systems in developing countries.