

African Soccer Goes Global

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For many developing countries in Africa, exporting talented athletes into European soccer leagues allows them an opportunity to showcase African talent on a global level. In "Give Us Your Best and Brightest," Devesh Kapur and John McHale reveal how African players are finding a career in soccer and also as an escape from the economic realities they face back home.

What does a country lose when a significant fraction of its skilled workforce leaves? For one thing, those remaining behind (TRBs) may be made worse off. The world of sports is perhaps the most visible area in which human talent is globally mobile.

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The more competitive a sport and the more money at stake, the more openly countries and teams appear to access the global pool of talent without the fear of nationalist backlash.

In cricket's last World Cup, ten of the 14 teams had foreign coaches and training staff — something that would have been unheard of even a decade ago. U.S. professional sports — baseball, basketball and ice hockey — reflect a similar migration of talent.

The contentious debates regarding the effects of this system on African soccer seem to parallel the opposing views on the effects of human capital flows on the source countries in general.

International teams

In the 2002 World Cup, Senegal pulled off a dramatic victory when it beat favored France. Every member of the Senegalese team had played in European leagues — the most competitive (and lucrative) in the world — while abstaining from joining their national team until a new French coach was hired.

All ten nominees for the 2001 African Footballer of the Year played in international leagues outside Africa. And by the mid-1990s, more than 350 African footballers had migrated to first and second division European leagues.

Doubling figures

At the start of the new millennium, this figure had more than doubled to 770 — and an additional 145 Africans were also playing in the lower reaches of European leagues.

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Many others had joined leagues in Asia. When African countries play each other, their biggest problem is coordinating their star players' national and club commitments, as national teams are often composed entirely of players who have contracts with international leagues during regular season play.

Africa's potential bounty of relatively cheap soccer talent has attracted a large network of agents, who are either talent speculators or venture capitalists dealing in human capital.

In the absence of regulatory systems similar to those in Europe, these agents frequently offer positions to boys as young as 15 or 16, with contracts that contain confusing stipulations as to agents' percentages of salaries and transfer fees.

Maintaining ties

Still, the export of African football talent is not a process solely initiated and driven by European interests — and African players are not consistently duped into signing exploitative contracts.

The lure of European football is extremely enticing for African players, and many perceive making it in Europe as one of the few opportunities to escape the harsh economic realities of life in many parts of the African continent. And some of the best players continue to give time and money to their national team and their country of origin even after moving overseas.

Migration-contingent talent?

The dominant European view is that African soccer has benefited from the export of its skilled talent, and that the recent success of African national teams is migration-contingent. Besides helping their bank balances, playing in the world's most competitive leagues has enhanced these players' individual and team skills.

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Thus, African countries can rely on players who have not only improved their own skills, but also transferred better playing techniques to their home-based compatriots.

Moreover, much as the brain drain might enhance expected returns to education, the possibility of playing in Europe and striking it rich ensures that young African soccer players will try even harder, thereby creating a stronger talent pool in Africa.

The visibility of the most prominent European-based Africans has made a significant contribution to the popularity of soccer within the continent. If anything, according to this viewpoint, the migration of elite talent has had a positive impact on the game in Africa.

Impact on the game

Others are more pessimistic, however complaining that the "expropriation" of Africa's playing resources is actually undermining the development of the game on the continent.

The loss of talent lowers the standard of the game in local soccer leagues, so attendance, gate receipts and media interest all go down.

The future of African teams

African national teams suffer too, plagued by the difficulties in procuring player releases from European clubs. African critics charge that Europe's "de-skilling" of African football is another manifestation of exploitation comparable to the economic imperialism of the colonial period. Both the Confederation of African Football and Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) have tried to remedy the situation.

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For example, the African Club Champions League was established in 1997 to provide top-level club competition as well as to create the administrative structures and economic incentives necessary to encourage players to remain with African clubs.

However, such measures are unlikely to prevent European clubs from continuing their recruitment practices. In recent years, a number of the top ones have established training schools and academies in Africa, in some cases even acquiring stakes in clubs.

Many within both Africa and FIFA fear that arrangements such as these will soon multiply and become but a front for the systematic draining of the domestic African game.