



# Escape to victory: Development, youth entrepreneurship and the migration of Ghanaian footballers



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 October 2014  
Received in revised form 3 June 2015  
Accepted 4 June 2015  
Available online 10 June 2015

### Keywords:

Development  
Entrepreneurship  
Football  
Ghana  
Migration  
Youth

## ABSTRACT

This article contributes to contemporary debates over the resourcefulness and entrepreneurialism of young people in the Global South by exploring the relationship between development and the migration of male youth within the football industry. Drawing on fieldwork in Accra, the paper reveals how young Ghanaians attempt to enact development as freedom through spatial mobility. Significantly, this is coupled with an awareness that their desired spatial mobility is difficult to attain, thereby inducing a sense of involuntary immobility. For some male youth, the solution to this predicament is to invest in their sporting bodily capital and become Foucauldian 'entrepreneurs of self' in the form of a professional footballer. Meanwhile for others, the solution to prevailing economic pressures is to embrace financial risk by becoming entrepreneurs in the form of football club owners, and attempting to profit from the movement of players. The interests of these two sets of entrepreneurs coalesce around the fact that the mobility of footballers is crucial to generating a return on their respective investments. It is argued that the construction of young Ghanaians as responsible for their future life chances, and the growing dissonance between aspirations and the ability to migrate, is a key reason why youth are trying to migrate through football. Problematically, this can foster conditions favourable for irregular migration.

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## 1. Introduction

In August 2011, The Daily Guide Accra newspaper reported that 70 Ghanaian youths had been tricked into thinking they had trials for football clubs in Mauritius (Coe and Wiser, 2011). The Ghanaian Football Association (GFA) and Mauritian Football Association (MFA) both confirmed the story. Individuals claiming to be football agents approached the players after watching them play in Ghana, and pledged to secure trials for the players at Mauritian football clubs in exchange for several thousand Ghanaian Cedis.<sup>1</sup> This money was requested to cover the player's travel costs and the agent's commission. The agents also promised the players 'they could use Mauritius as a hub to transit to Europe' (Coe and Wiser, 2011). Unfortunately when the players arrived in Mauritius they realised they had been duped and there were no trials. Some of the players were subsequently imprisoned for remaining in the country illegally.

The thought of young Ghanaians stranded in Mauritius probably does not conjure the type of imagery usually associated with African football migrants. This is possibly because the incident depicted above constitutes an irregular form of migration, in that 'it includes people who enter a country without the proper authority; people who remain in a country in contravention of their authority; people moved by migrant smugglers or human trafficking' (Koser, 2010, p. 183). Academic studies have addressed the issue of irregular football migration, particularly the plight of young West African footballers who find themselves stranded in European countries (see Donnelly and Petherick, 2004; Esson, 2015; Poli, 2010b), however the majority of scholarly literature has focused on the regular migration of African footballers to Europe. By regular football migration, I mean movement that complies with regulations outlined by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA). This type of migration is directly linked to recruitment between two clubs registered with their national associations, involves a certified agent or lawyer, and players enter a destination country legally (Esson, 2015).

Research on regular football migration has recently undergone a noticeable transformation. Initially, the migration of African footballers was mainly conceptualised in terms of neo-colonial relations and Marxist inspired structural historical theories such as Dependency and World Systems (see Bale, 2004). It was argued

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<sup>1</sup> Ghana's currency is the Cedi. In 2011 when I conducted my fieldwork USD1 = 1.30 GHC.

that the movement of African footballers to Europe was symptomatic of relations between countries within the core (Europe) and periphery (Africa), and indicative of the multifaceted domination of the former over the latter (Darby, 2011). Structural historical theories were and still are somewhat appealing because they can illustrate a basic picture of the global professional football industry, and the migratory patterns of African football players (to Europe). However, these approaches yield top-heavy determinist accounts that are inattentive to the agency of African actors, particularly the players themselves. Furthermore, these approaches often focus on professional clubs and do not consider smaller amateur teams that are strongly associated with irregular football migration (Darby et al., 2007).

A flurry of research has emerged to rectify the limitations in structural historical accounts of football migration. Carter (2013) and Darby (2013) have sought to theorise the migration of African football players using actor network theory and global value chains respectively, while Poli (2010a) has discussed the growing presence of African players in less prestigious but potentially lucrative leagues in the Middle East and Asia. Moreover, scholars have attempted to recognise the importance of broader macro-structural constraints in influencing football related migration while simultaneously foregrounding human agency. For example, van der Meij and Darby (2014) highlight how Ghanaian families play an influential role in preliminary decisions around the internal migration strategies of football-playing family members.

This article extends research on the migration of young African footballers by trying to understand the social conditions and processes that lead to regular and irregular football migration. Through doing so, I demonstrate why the desire to migrate through football has to be understood as an outcome of the way conditions within the football industry interact with those beyond it. I pay particular attention to how this interaction is interpreted by Ghanaian youth and then incorporated into endeavours to facilitate development through the deployment of individual autonomy. The overarching argument is that the construction of young Ghanaians as responsible for their future life chances and, the growing dissonance between aspiration and the ability to migrate, is a key reason why youth are trying to migrate through football. Problematically, this can foster conditions favourable for irregular migration.

The article draws on data collected in Accra during seven months of fieldwork in 2011 in the form of multi-sited ethnography at three amateur neighbourhood football clubs with youth academies (under 12, 14 and 17), referred to here as Austin Texans FC, Barracks FC and Future Icons FC.<sup>2</sup> All three clubs had over 100 registered players across their senior teams and academy. I attended 116 training sessions across the three clubs as well as home and away matches. Alongside participant observation, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with senior team players, coaches and club owners. In addition to the data collected at the clubs, I also spent time and conducted 10 expert interviews at two Premier League football clubs, the Ghanaian Football Association Regional office in Accra (GFA), the Ghana League Cubs Association (GHALCA), the Professional Footballers Association of Ghana (PFAG) and the Right to Dream Football Academy.

### 1.1. Development, youth entrepreneurship and football migration

The first half of the article engages with work reflecting on how the dominant narrow view of development as measurable via

economic indicators fails to consider subjective understandings of development (de Haas and Rodríguez, 2010; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999), and neglects that human mobility is an integral aspect of human development for both intrinsic and instrumental reasons (Bakewell, 2008). I examine how young Ghanaians are responding to being constructed as responsible for their future life chances by attempting to enact development as freedom through spatial mobility. However, a discrepancy between their desire to be spatially mobile and the ability to do so results in a scenario akin to what Carling (2002) has conceptualised as 'involuntary immobility'. This notion of 'involuntary immobility' is used throughout the paper to understand how and why players attempt to be mobile, and to think through how irregular migration, such as the case involving Ghanaian players stranded in Mauritius, can happen.

I bring these insights from the Ghanaian context into conversation with research highlighting how movement is often seen as emblematic of social status, and spatial mobility is often linked to aspirations to attain social mobility (Boyden and Howard, 2013; Gough, 2008; Nyamnjoh, 2013; Porter et al., 2010; Salazar, 2011). This resonates with work on young people in sub-Saharan Africa highlighting the prevalence of what Kalir (2005) has termed a 'migratory disposition' (see Langevang, 2008a; Jua, 2003). A disposition tied to a perception that improving their life chances while residing in the continent is doubtful, and a sense that this situation is unlikely to change significantly in an anticipated future (Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012; Jónsson, 2008; Simone, 2005).

Studies have also found that mobility, and in some cases irregular migration, plays a prominent role in the lives of young people residing in parts of Asia and Latin America respectively (Boyden, 2013; Huijsmans, 2014; Punch, 2015). Bylander (2014) has recently explored how a paucity of local opportunities for social mobility, alongside notions of hegemonic masculinity, has resulted in young Cambodian men feeling pressured to migrate in order to better their life chances. Conversely, youth who opt to remain sedentary encounter negative social judgments and have to find ways to make their relative immobility productive, or at least appear to be so. Meanwhile in Peru, Crivello (2011) has shown how young people and their parents associate migration with the process of 'becoming somebody in life', and with achieving educational aspirations.

The significance of this literature on youthful mobilities in the Global South to this paper on African football migration is the formers commitment to understanding where desires to be mobile, or not as the case may be, come from. In other words, there is an explicit mindfulness that mobility and migration 'is much more than mere movement between places; it is embedded in deeply engrained but dynamic processes of cultural meaning making' (Salazar, 2010, p. 2). This understanding is typically lacking in top down accounts of African football migration that fails to try and understand the local sending context.

The second half of the article explores how the Ghanaian football industry and entrepreneurial practices have come together and formed a vehicle capable of potentially overcoming involuntary immobility. As noted by Jeffrey (2010a,b), a growing body of research has highlighted how global economic change associated with the rise of neoliberal governance has undermined young people's efforts to attain social goods associated with adulthood (see also Honwana and Boeck, 2005). Faced with the double-edged sword of socio-economic insecurity and the restructuring of labour markets, the resourcefulness of young people does not simply reside in their ability to endure hardship. It is also evident in the spatially and temporally specific ways in which they engage with challenging economic conditions and assume responsibility for social reproduction (Berckmoes and White, 2014; Huijsmans,

<sup>2</sup> The names of clubs, owners and players are pseudonyms. All other names are genuine unless stated otherwise.

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