



# Moving players, traversing perspectives: Global value chains, production networks and Ghanaian football labour migration



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 7 March 2013

Received in revised form 20 June 2013

Available online 29 August 2013

### Keywords:

Global value chains

Global production networks

Football

Migration

Football academies

Ghana

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the production and transnational export of Ghanaian football labour. It does so via a cross-disciplinary approach that utilises perspectives rooted in the sociology of development (global value chains) and economic geography (global production networks). The article is underpinned by two central arguments. Firstly, it contends that the GVC framework is useful in accounting for how Ghanaian players are produced and prepared for the international market, identifying the key agents and agencies involved, mapping the geography of production and export and assessing the institutional context within which the trade operates locally, nationally and internationally. The second draws on the GPN perspective to argue that while Ghanaian football labour migration remains a process contoured by uneven asymmetries of power that favour actors, stakeholders and entities in the global North, there are currently segments of the production–export chain where power is much more diffuse and some benefits are captured in the global South. The paper draws on interview data and observations gleaned from four periods of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana between January 2008 and June 2011.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the publication of Bale and Maguire's (1994a) groundbreaking collection on the transnational migration of athletic talent, the movement of sports labour around the world has become a focus for critical research within the social sciences of sport. Much of the resultant scholarship has interpreted the migration of athletic labour as a process that both contributes to and is a consequence of the unevenness of globalisation in the field of sports and far beyond (Bale and Maguire, 1994b; Bale and Sang, 1996; Klein, 2006a, 2006b; Lanfranchi and Taylor, 2001; Magee and Sugden, 2002; Maguire, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1999; Maguire and Falcoux, 2011; McGovern, 2002; Milanovic, 2005; Poli, 2010a; Taylor, 2006). Research on the place of Africa in what has become a global market for football labour has further contributed to our knowledge of the dynamics that contour the migration of sports labour (Bale, 2004; Cornelisen and Solberg, 1997; Darby, 2000, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2010, 2012; Darby et al., 2007; Darby and Solberg, 2010; Mukharji, 2008; Pannenberg, 2010; Poli, 2006, 2010b). Perhaps more importantly, in a context where Africa receives passing treatment in the literature on economic globalisation (Gibbon and Ponte, 2005; Harrison, 2010) and is considered either marginal to or completely absent from 'the global' (Ferguson, 2006), this work

touches broadly on the impact of and responses to globalisation on the continent.

This article extends our understanding of sports migration in novel ways by examining the production and transnational export of Ghanaian football labour via a cross-disciplinary approach that utilises perspectives rooted in the sociology of development, global value chains (GVCs) and economic geography, global production networks (GPNs). The study is underpinned by two central arguments. Firstly, it contends that the GVC framework is useful in accounting for how Ghanaian players are produced and prepared for the international market, identifying the key agents and agencies involved, mapping the geography of production and export and assessing the institutional context within which the trade operates locally, nationally and internationally. The second draws on the GPN perspective to argue that while Ghanaian football labour migration remains a process contoured by uneven asymmetries of power that favour key actors and stakeholders in the global North, there are currently segments of the production–export chain where power is much more diffuse and some benefits are captured in the global South.

The article is divided into four parts. The first (Section 2) outlines the key features of global value chain (GVC) and global production network (GPN) research and assesses its utility as a cross-disciplinary framework for the study of sports labour migration generally, and the transit of African football talent abroad specifically. The second (Section 3) conceives of the production and export of Ghanaian football players as a GVC and describes the

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structures that facilitate this process, maps the space through which these players move and details the institutional context within which their migrations take place. The third part (Section 4) assesses the value of GVC and GPN approaches in making sense of how production and export is governed and where benefits might accrue and by whom. While acknowledging that the trade continues to be contoured by uneven asymmetries of power, this section accounts for segments in the production–export chain where power is much more diffuse and some benefits are captured locally. This is exemplified in the final section (5) which focuses on Right to Dream, a football academy that has not only emerged as one of Ghana's primary producers of football migrants but has also recently begun to extend its organisational mission by engaging in 'development' focused activities. The paper draws on empirical evidence gleaned from four periods of multi-sited ethnographic field work in Ghana between January 2008 and June 2011. This field work was focused around football academies, formal and informal, and involved observations and interviews with key actors including general managers, technical directors, coaches, teaching staff as well as academy recruits. The sample of respondents for this study included a range of other stakeholders including officials and coaches from local clubs, former migrant players, licensed and unlicensed player agents and a number of well-informed local journalists.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Fusing chains and networks: a theoretical frame

Much of my earlier work on the out-migration of African football labour (Darby, 2000, 2002, 2007a, 2007b), was informed to varying degrees by Immanuel Wallerstein's and Andre Gunder Frank's classic analyses of the asymmetrical nature of global development (Wallerstein, 1974, 1979; Frank, 1969). This allowed me to argue that the export of football labour from Africa to Europe was underpinned by colonial and neo-colonial exploitation, uneven global flows, domination and dependency, deskilling and impoverishment. The broad thrust of these analyses remains valid in understanding the macro-level. However, recent developments in the regulation of international transfers and further insights into the ways that the trade in African football labour is structured and operates in the local context (Darby et al., 2007; Pannenburg, 2010; Poli, 2010a) raise questions about the extent to which core-periphery perspectives can fully capture the social, cultural and economic complexities of talent identification, production and distribution. The field-work in Ghana on which this article is based has uncovered segments of the trade that do not fit with interpretations that paint it as uniformly characterised by dependency, underdevelopment, impoverishment and exploitation. All of this makes adhering to and applying a rigid core-periphery framework to a dynamic, multi-faceted process problematic because it constrains us to think about the trade *only* in terms of one-directional economic exchange between a dominant, powerful core and a weak, dependent periphery while also overlooking how local actors respond to global processes.

This paper argues that GVC and GPN perspectives offer significant potential in theorising the trade in Ghanaian football players in ways that account for structural constraints but also acknowledge practices and processes that challenge core-periphery dynamics within the global football industry. The former represents a useful heuristic device for organising data and accounting for the key anatomical features of the trade while the latter is

valuable in making sense of the networks and relations of power that contour sports migration and determine where value might be captured. Considering the mobility of African football players in these ways is not entirely novel. Poli (2005) has tentatively explored how the trade in African players might be considered as a global commodity chain and he subsequently advocated a network centred approach to understand the place of Africa in the international football transfer market (Poli, 2010a). The point of departure of this paper though is its detailed empirical focus on Ghanaian football and the fusing of chain and network analysis. Before turning to this, it is first necessary to provide a brief overview of the GVC and GPN frameworks and highlight their potential as a cross-disciplinary framework in making sense of sports migration.

The literature on GVCs, originally referred to as global commodity chains, is vast and it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive review. Nonetheless, some brief conceptual ground clearing is required. The concept of commodity chains first emerged in world system analyses of global trade and capital flows prior to the 19th century undertaken by Hopkins and Wallerstein (1977, 1986). In an oft-quoted definition, they describe commodity chains as 'a network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity' (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1986, p. 159). The concept gained considerable traction through Gereffi and Korzeniewicz's (1994) seminal work on more recent linkages between organisations in the global economy that facilitated the production, distribution and consumption of a diverse range of commodities. The term *commodity chain* has since been replaced by *value chain* to reflect value adding processes as a commodity or product is brought from conception to consumption (Gibbon and Ponte, 2005). The GVC perspective essentially identifies and seeks to analyse the key elements of global production specifically the *input–output structures*, or technical components of production; the *institutional structures* within which the chain or sectors of the chain operates and the agents, agencies and policies that impact on production and export; the *territoriality* or space through which the chain operates; and the *governance structures* or relations of power between 'lead firms' and other entities in the chain (Gereffi, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2001).

The GVC framework has been applied to an increasingly diverse range of industries, commodities and products over the last decade (Plahe, 2005). However, beyond work by Korzeniewicz (1994), Maguire (1999), Nadvi (2008), Nadvi et al. (2011) and Lund-Thomsen (2013), it has not been used in a sustained manner to account for global processes in sport. With the exception of Klein's (2011, 2012) recent work on the transit of Dominican baseball talent to the United States, discussed shortly, the GVC approach has also largely been overlooked in studies on sports migration. Considering athletes through the sort of mechanical language applied to inert commodities such as agricultural produce, clothing or electrical components requires caution. The risk is that the migrant sports person is portrayed in a distant and reductionist manner rather than as a sentient, social actor whose ambitions in, relationship with and mobility through sport are shaped by the exercise of agency as well as the broader structural context that they find themselves embedded in. Nonetheless, the GVC perspective is useful as a skeletal framework that helps to structure our view of the production of athletes for export across international borders. While they are not inert objects, in modern professional sports, athletes are not only central in the production of the commodity but are *the* core commodity that is produced. As Brackenridge (2010: 3) observes, young people either in or on the cusp of professional football are 'both worker, a unit of labour, and as commodity, to be traded in international markets'.

The GVC framework is not used uncritically in this article. Indeed, its limitations in allowing us to move beyond a descriptive, top-down, structural account of Ghanaian football talent have

<sup>1</sup> This research was conducted as part of a broader collaborative project with Alan Klein, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-000-22-2617) which compares and contrasts the role of Ghanaian football and Dominican baseball academies in facilitating the export of sports labour from the developing world to the developed.

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