

Africans' Status in the European Football Players' Labour Market

Raffaele Poli

This essay makes a dual attempt to understand the manner in which the European football players' labour market is structured as well as the status held by players recruited from Africa. Firstly, it outlines the major changes since the implementation of the Bosman law in 1995, which led to an explosion in salaries paid to the footballers playing in well-off clubs of major leagues. This huge growth in stars' revenues reflects the emergence of an ever-increasing economic gulf separating clubs of the G-14 organization, a lobby which groups together 18 clubs among the richest in Europe, from the rest of the European clubs. The essay then goes on to examine the viability of Jean-François Bourg's theory of the existence of a 'segmented' labour market in European professional football. The latter part of the essay concentrates on African players' status through a statistical analysis of their presence in 78 professional and semi-professional leagues of UEFA member countries, which reveals that, in comparison with migrants of other origins, Africans are more concentrated in the lower levels of competition. Indeed, in the context of an economic polarization and of a 'segmented' labour market which needs a constant renewal and circulation of players, African footballers are particularly sought after, not only because of their value as footballers, but also because they allow the clubs' recruiters to make substantial financial savings through a form of wage dumping.

The Post 1995 Salary Explosion and the Dualization of European Football

The International Federation of the Associations of Professional Footballers (FIFPro), which groups together the unions of players from 40 countries, in existence since 1966, was not recognized by either FIFA or UEFA prior to 1995, when the Bosman law came into force. With this decree the status of players within the system of professional football was raised significantly. In the first place, while ruling that all players whose contracts have expired are free to sign a new one with another club without payment or any compensation to the original club, the Bosman law provoked a massive increase

in the amount in salaries paid to players. In many cases, the money saved by the clubs in the payment of these compensations was reinvested in salary budgets in order to attract players. According to Gianpaolo Monteneri, former director of the players' status department of FIFA, 'from an economic point of view, after the Bosman law, the direction of capital flows in professional football has considerably changed. Instead of circulating between clubs, more and more money ended up in players' or the agents' pockets.' [1] Moreover, in the major European leagues, the new cash profits generated by the sale of television rights equally contributed to a strong increase in salary. In France, for example, the gross salary expenditure of the League 1 clubs almost trebled from the season 1995/96 to 2001/02. [2] During the same period, a similar growth in the total amount of wages occurred in German Bundesliga clubs, while in the English Premiership and Italian Serie A clubs the gross salary expenditure increased almost fourfold (see Figure 1). [3]

In Italy, according to the income declaration for the year 2000, 85 players figure among the 500 persons having earned the most money in the entire country. With a revenue of 12 million euro, Alessandro Del Piero, ranked thirteenth, followed closely by his former president Giovanni Agnelli, eleventh with 13.5 million, and was actually ahead of the prime minister and president of AC Milan, Silvio Berlusconi, who declared 8.3 million euro and was ranked 24th. Players of Inter Milan, Ronaldo Nazario Lima, Javier Zanetti and Christian Vieri declared more income than their president Massimo Moratti, as did the captain of AS Roma Francesco Totti when compared to the club's president Franco Sensi. [4]

According to the classification of the best paid players in the world established by the bi-weekly *France Football*, a ranking that takes into account not only the salaries and premiums paid by clubs but also the incomes generated by sponsors, the top 20

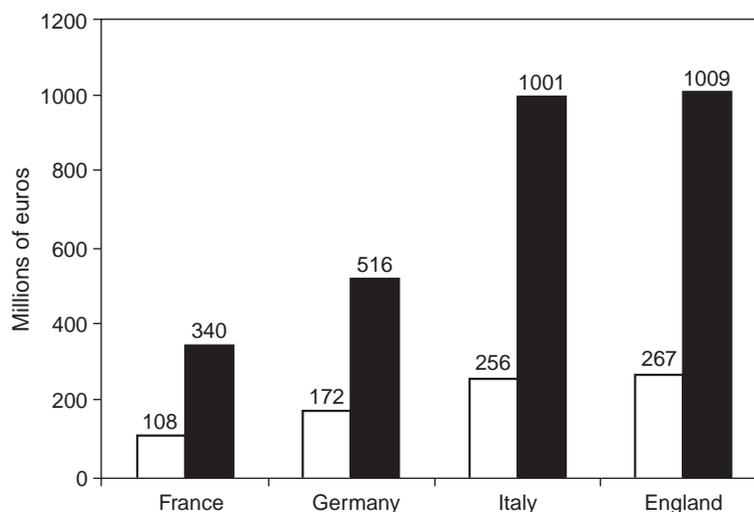


Figure 1 Gross salary expenditure growth from 1995/96 (white) season to 2001/02 (black) in French, German, Italian and English top level divisions

includes 18 players that are members of clubs belonging to the G-14.[5] These players in 2002 earned 178.7 million euro, of which 121.6 were paid by the clubs (68 per cent) and the remainder by the sponsors. In some cases, the remuneration by sponsors was higher than that of the clubs. This was notably the case of David Beckham, who earned 15.2 million euros, of which 8.4 were paid by sponsors (55.3 per cent). This type of player, who earns more by marketing their image than by playing soccer ensuring additional income to the clubs, is the exception to the rule. In many cases, the clubs, even the richest ones, pay out salaries that cannot be sustained in the long term. According to the amount published in the monthly *World Soccer*, the 20 clubs having the biggest turnover in Europe, for the season 2001/02 spent on average 58.2 per cent of their total income on the players' salaries (1.54 billion euro out of a total of 2.64). In certain cases (SS Lazio Rome, Inter Milan FC et cetera), the amount spent on salaries was even greater than the club's total income. In France, in 2001/02, an average of 69 per cent of the annual income of the first division clubs was spent on the payment of players' salaries. In Italy, this rate was 90 per cent, in England 62 per cent, and in Germany 49 per cent. In these four countries, in comparison with the season 1995/96, the ratio between the turnover of the clubs at the highest national level and the expenditures in players' salaries increased from 52.75 per cent to 67.5 per cent.[6]

On 5 November 2002, in order to deal with the increase in salaries paid by clubs belonging to the G-14, the organization concluded a kind of 'stability pact' by agreeing on the introduction of a salary cap for the season 2005/06 stipulating that the global salary budget of the clubs cannot exceed 70 per cent of the total turnover.[7] However, up until now, this decision has had little effect on the star players if we consider that the average income of the 20 best paid players in the world has risen from 7.94 million euros in 2002 to 8.93 million in 2003.[8] An ever-increasing economic gulf separates the players of the major European clubs from the vast majority of professional footballers in the world.

Players' Salaries: the Reflection of a Dual Labour Market

The average net annual remuneration by players in the top leagues for the season 2002/03 was 709,000 euro in Italy, 634,000 euro in England, 340,000 euro in Spain, 310,000 euro in Germany followed by 225,000 euro in France. In Belgium, according to an investigation conducted on 77 premier league players, the average net income per annum was situated at around 60,000 euro.[9] For a given country, the disparity existing at the same competition level is also remarkable. This is reflected in a pioneering work conducted by Jean-François Bourg in 1989 on this issue. Through the case study of French professional football, he defined the sport labour market as being 'segmented' and 'dual'. According to his study, 'a strong dispersion characterizes the distribution of income'. In fact, for the 1987/88 season, 'the highest hundred incomes account for the half of the total amount of distributed salaries, while representing only 15 per cent of the total number of team members'. As a consequence, 'the players of the lowest ten percent receive only 3 per cent of the total salary

mass'.[10] The calculation of the 'inequality coefficient', measured by the division of the total amount of the 10 per cent of the highest salaries by that of the 10 per cent of the lowest ones, indicates, by 1987 already, the existence in the football players market of a gap (13.33) twice as great as the one existing in the male working population in France as a whole.

With the explosion of the top salaries and the stagnation of the lower ones, the gap characterizing the employment market in football increased year by year. In Italy, the players of the fourth competition level, the C2, earned on average for the season 2001/02 more than ten times less than their colleagues playing in Serie A (see Figure 2).

According to the statistics given by clubs, the five most important teams of Serie A during the 2003/04 season spent on salaries more than double the amount spent by the other 13 clubs (421 million euros against 186.9).[11] The gulf separating the best paid players from the lowest paid ones, as well as the absence of a 'middle class' of player, is clearly illustrated by the next graph produced from data provided by the Italian Football League. In fact, 34.4 per cent of the footballers employed by Serie A clubs were situated in the lowest salary class, while 29.6 per cent were situated in the highest one, which implies that 64 per cent of the players occupied positions belonging to these two extremes (see Figure 3).

With regard to the second level of competition, the graph representing players' salaries takes a more linear form. Indeed, in Italian Serie B a restricted number of footballers earn a very high salary, while a majority of players belong to the lower salary classes (see Figure 4).

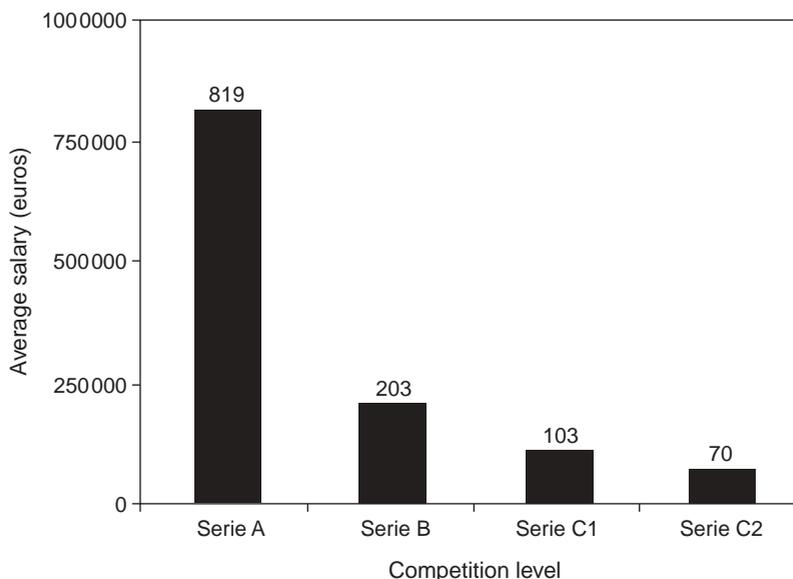


Figure 2 Average salary in euros of footballers playing in Italy according to level of competition (2001/02).
Source: Calcio 2000, no. 65, May 2003

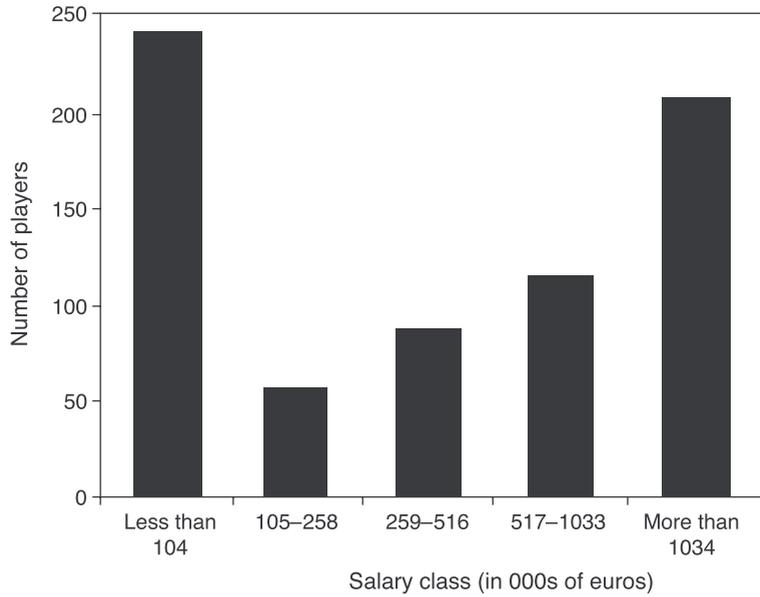


Figure 3 Number of players in the Italian Serie A according to salary class (season 2001/02). *Source:* Italian Lega Calcio

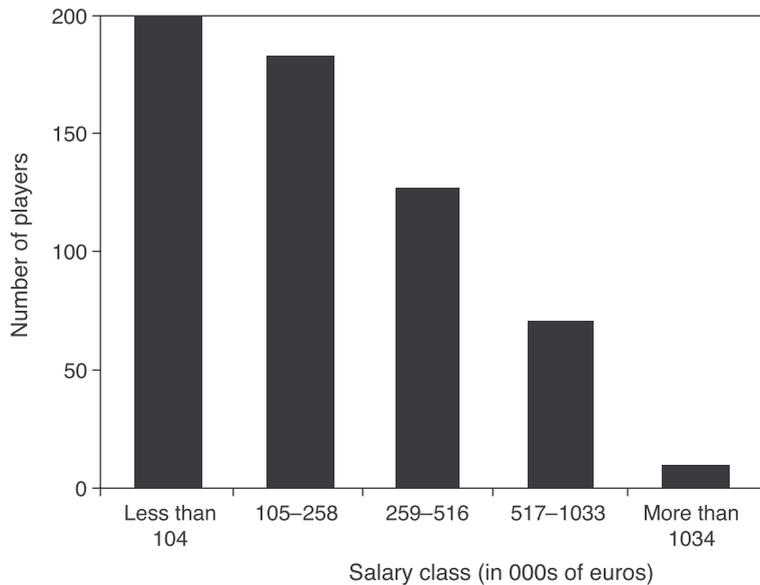


Figure 4 Number of players in the Italian Serie B according to salary class (season 2001/02). *Source:* Italian Lega Calcio

Everywhere in Europe, over the past few years, the number of players without employment increased in a spectacular manner. In England, at the end of the season 2002/03, 586 players did not have a contract for the following season. The head of the players' Union, Gordon Taylor, declared, 'our job is to help them all to find a club, but I would be happy to find a job for even two thirds of them'.^[12] According to Jean-François Bourg, since 1974, the creation of football academies in France is a strategy devised by the clubs 'to increase the supply of workers in order to influence negatively the labour price'.^[13] According to him, 'the surplus amount of workers is not a simple conjectural imbalance, it is, rather, necessary to the smooth running of the sport system which needs a constant circulation of players'.^[14]

Outside Europe, the situation is even more dramatic. The vast majority of African clubs find themselves unable to pay their players' salaries and thus are not in a position to stop them migrating. For example, players of Coton Sport Garoua, one of the best-managed clubs of Cameroon, which have won the Cameroon championship four times since 1997, earn less than 400 euros per month.^[15] In Latin America, the situation is no less critical. In 2002, Chilean players organized a general strike reclaiming payment of their salaries. After three weeks during which competition were stopped, the Confederation of South American Football Associations (CONMEBOL) lent \$250.000 to the Chilean Federation, which was then distributed to the clubs. In 2001, in order to restart the championship, the Argentinean Federation had to intervene to reimburse, by means of 18 monthly payments, the \$50 million of salary backlog due to the players.^[16]

The International Migration of Footballers in UEFA Countries: A Quantitative Approach

In a previous statistical analysis, I studied the squads of 78 professional and semi-professional leagues affiliated to the UEFA in order to determine the number of foreign players having been recruited by the 1,358 teams taking part in these championships.^[17] It thus transpired that 5,334 players moved internationally 'with the ball' and found themselves abroad during the 2002/03 season.^[18] This figure refers only to players based outside their country of origin whose migration is directly linked to a recruitment operated by a foreign club.

Concerning the geographical origin of these migrants, the footballers from Eastern European countries were the most represented abroad in the UEFA federations (1,586, 29.7 per cent), followed by Western Europeans (1,532, 28.7 per cent), Africans (1,046, 19.6 per cent) and Latin Americans (902, 16.9 per cent). The main exporter country was Brazil, which, with 509 footballers playing for European clubs, contributed 9.5 per cent to the total amount of the migrants 'with the ball' in UEFA countries. After Brazil, we find players from Serbia Montenegro (275), from France (259), from Argentina (244), from Nigeria (193), from Ukraine (145), from Croatia (136) and from Cameroon (125). Regarding the receiving countries, most of the foreign professional players were based in England: 718 migrants 'with the ball' played in clubs from the Premiership to the Third Division in 2002/03 season, which

Table 1 Foreign players per team in the most ‘abroad orientated’ top European leagues (season 2002/03)

League	Number of clubs	Number of foreign players	Foreign players per team
English Premiership	20	320	16.00
German Bundesliga	18	239	13.28
Russian Professional FL	16	196	12.25
Scottish Premier Division	10	118	11.80
Belgian Jupiler League	18	212	11.78
Portuguese Super Liga	18	210	11.67
Greek Ethniki Katigoria	16	147	9.19

represents 13.5 per cent of the total amount of foreign players in UEFA leagues. Behind England, the most internationally orientated professional leagues were German (510), Italian (374), Portuguese (349), Belgian (306), French (305) and Spanish (195) ones. In terms of the rate of foreign players in squads, Premiership clubs, with on average 16 footballers recruited abroad per team, had the highest score (see Table 1).

In order to measure the importance of foreign players’ presence according to the competition level, a correlation was measured between UEFA ranking position of countries and the rate of players having moved internationally ‘with the ball’. A positive correlation between these two variables exists, which indicates that the recruitment of players abroad is directly linked to the level of teams and championships (see Figure 5).

Nevertheless, if we take into account the variable of players’ origin, it appears that the regression is not always linear, such as in the case of Africans. It is to this perplexing question to which I shall turn in the remainder of the article.

African Players’ Situation: An Over-representation in less Well-off Leagues

If the total amount of players recruited by professional clubs outside their country of origin diminishes according to the level of competition, the degree of this decrease differs depending on the continent of origin of the players. For example, from a five level hierarchy of European leagues elaborated from the UEFA ranking, [19] it appears that, in contrast to Latin American counterparts, for example, whose relative percentage presence diminishes constantly from 24 per cent in the first level to 11 per cent in the last one, players recruited in Africa are comparatively more numerous in the last four levels of competition than in the first one (see Figure 6).

The relative over-representation of African players in the last four levels of European competition indicates the need of less well-off clubs to recruit ‘low cost’ players abroad. This occurs also in the context of a strategy based on speculation, in which financially weak and middle-ranged European clubs aim to buy young footballers in Africa in order to resell them at a higher price to richer clubs.

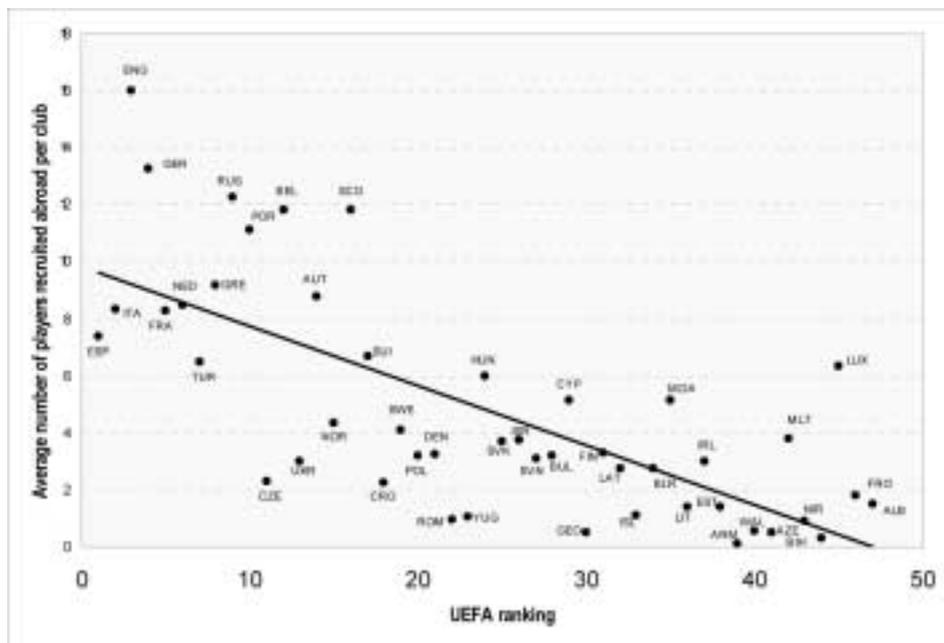


Figure 5 Correlation between UEFA ranking country position and abroad recruitment of players

The comparison between the following two maps shows geographically the over-representation of Africans in less well-off European football leagues, such as in Eastern European ones, in comparison to the total amount of players recruited abroad.

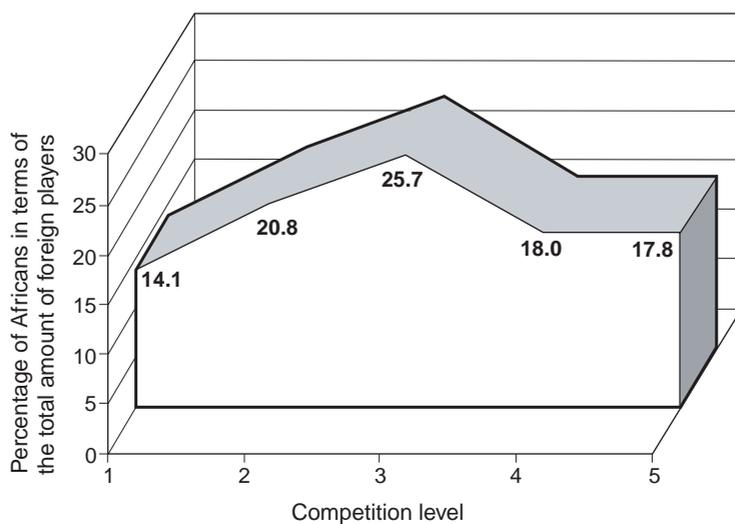


Figure 6 Percentage of African migrants in terms of the total amount of foreign players according to the level of competition (season 2002/03)



Figure 7 Number of players recruited abroad per team in UEFA countries (top national division) and total amount of migrants

The relative over-representation of African players in less well-off European Leagues such as in Romania (53.3 per cent of the players recruited abroad came from Africa), Malta (52.6 per cent), Belgium (43.4 per cent), Switzerland (33.7 per cent) or Albania (33.3 per cent), supports the hypothesis of the rule of 'low cost' labour force filled by players of this origin. The interviews carried out with eight Cameroonian players[20] playing professionally for Swiss clubs during the 2002/03 season confirmed that African players at the start of their career very often suffer from different forms of discrimination. The first type of discrimination intervenes in labour market access because of the frequent existence of quotas limiting the presence of non-communitarian players in European clubs while the second kind of discrimination is situated at the level of labour stability. In fact, African footballers are very often pushed to sign short-term contracts allowing European clubs to separate themselves easily from players if they do not find satisfaction with them. Discrimination has been also observed in terms of payment of salary. Timothée Atouba, for example, received from the first European club for which he played, Neuchâtel Xamax, only a third of the sum stipulated in the contract that he signed. Only after one year, could he manage to obtain two thirds of the sum, almost 3,300 euros per month. During this year, the club officials and his agent met his complaints with threats to send him back to Cameroon.



Figure 8 Percentage of African migrants in terms of the total amount of foreign players according to country (top national divisions) and total amount of African migrants 'with the ball'

Comparison between the Six Most Represented African Countries: Different Degrees of Poor Integration

Regarding the six African countries that provide the most players to European clubs,[21] different models of migration exist according to the competition level in which these footballers play. At one extreme, the Nigerian migrants are very numerous in the lower divisions, while at the other extreme Moroccans migrants are concentrated in the higher divisions. Economic criteria in the country of origin must be taken into account if we wish to understand these divergences. While Nigerian players wish to play abroad whatever the cost, Moroccans prefer to stay at home if the recruiting club does not offer acceptable conditions. Among the other nationalities, the Cameroon footballers tend to follow the Nigerian model being well represented at all levels of competition, while the Senegalese, Ivorian and Ghanaian migrants are situated in between these two models while being comparatively more concentrated at the intermediary level. A significant correlation has been measured between the GDP per capita of the countries of origin of the migrants and the level of competition of the clubs by which they are employed (see Figure 9).

An even stronger correlation exists between the GDP per capita and the average age of African players in Europe, which indicates that the migration is directly linked to the

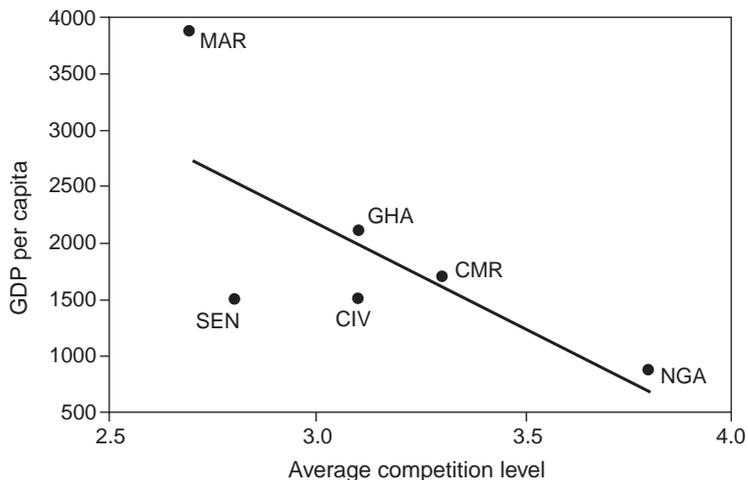


Figure 9 Correlation between the average competition level of migrants from the six most represented African countries and their GDP per capita

economic situation of the country of departure. The poorer a state is, the younger are the players going abroad seeking better living conditions (see Figure 10).

Among the six cases analysed, Moroccans represent an exception. In fact, their average age of migration is higher than that of the footballers of the other countries. Two arguments explain this difference. On the one hand, the Moroccan professional clubs, in contrast to the vast majority of Sub-Saharan ones, have the potential to offer good wage conditions to the best players, which does not generally encourage them to leave at a very young age. On the other hand, the cost to transfer Moroccan players is

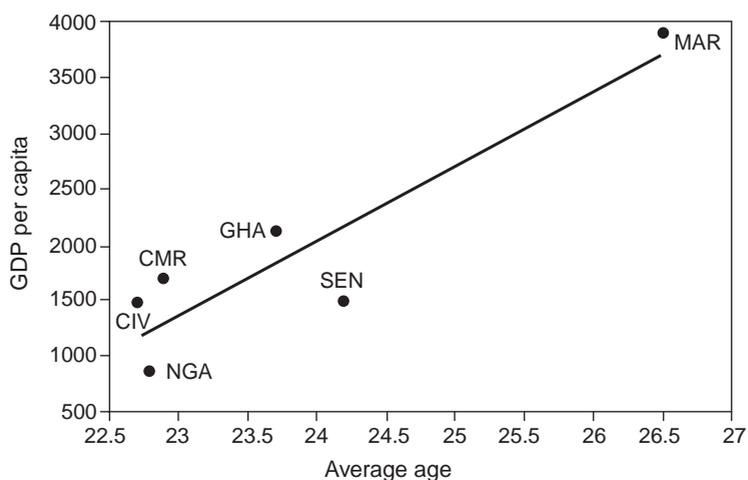


Figure 10 Correlation between the average age of migrants from the six most represented African countries and their GDP per capita

also higher, which means that the European clubs prefer to recruit them once that they have acquired enough experience, rather than to suppose on a hypothetical future progression, as is very often the case of players coming from Sub-Saharan countries.[22]

Conclusion

This essay underlines the importance of economic criteria to explain the general poor status of African footballers in the European players' labour market. Indeed, comparatively more clubs of lower divisions, which cannot afford to pay high salaries, employ African players in Europe. Moreover, they are very often transferred with the intention to be consequently re-transferred to a bigger club in order to make a profit. In this speculative strategy, stimulated by the increasing gap separating the rich clubs of the major leagues from the rest of the teams, Africans players are very sought after because of their reiterative commercial value. At the same time, to fully understand the dynamics leading to the development of the recruitment of African players we have to go beyond the economic criteria, taking into account historical and social reasons. In fact, to make African players' migration possible, European clubs and players' agents groups needed to set up transnational networks. These are very often indebted more to socio-historical criteria than to financial ones. For example, if Kolo Touré was transferred from the Ivory Coast to Arsenal, it was because of the personal links existing between the manager of the English club, Arsène Wenger, and Jean-Marc Guillou, who owns the football academy in which Kolo Touré has been trained. Besides, it was not a coincidence if the Frenchman Guillou chose the Ivory Coast, a former French colony, to realize his project.

Another reflective example showing that economic criteria do not explain all mechanisms of the recruitment of African players is furnished by the Romanian case. As mentioned, Romania is the UEFA country where Africans are relatively the most represented in terms of the total amount of players recruited abroad 'with the ball'. If we deepen the analysis, we discover that most of African footballers playing in Romania come from Ghana. A further investigation indicates that a former Ghanaian national team coach, Petre Gavrila, is Romanian. This makes possible the transfer of Ghanaian players from Africa to Eastern Europe. Indeed, after his time in Ghana, Gavrila became a player agent and he created a 'Euro-African' training centre in the Romanian town of Busila.

Like Gavrila or Arsenal, a greater number of European clubs and players' agents groups are interested in creating or financing football academies in Africa, or in concluding partnership agreements for player transfers with African clubs or academies. The transnational networks set up for the training, recruitment and transfer of African players are almost always controlled from 'above'[23] and serve the needs of the European football economy more than the African one.

Under these conditions, as John Bale and Paul Darby have pointed out, the African 'muscle exodus' inhibits the development of African football or, at best, creates dependent development. This is a situation that we usually find in other economic sectors.[24]

The functioning of the football players' transfers system in the 'global sports arena'[25] has many similarities with the export of raw materials from Southern to Northern countries, which largely benefits the latter. As in the world economic system in general, the unfairness of the mechanism regulating African players' migrations is manifest, but nobody has shown any real urge to change this. Though FIFA introduced rules to prevent the transfer of players under 18 years old and elaborated a mechanism of solidarity to protect the work of nursery teams through the payment of fees, it did not give itself the financial means to effectively enforce the juridical changes.[26] European football federations and Governments want to protect national players and make access to the national players' labour market difficult for Africans by quotas limiting their presence. European clubs want to save money by salary dumping or generate profits by continuous player transactions. For a variety of reasons, as argued in the essay, African players lend themselves perfectly to these kinds of speculation strategies.

On the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, African clubs hope to improve their conditions by partnership agreements with European clubs or players' agents and, in the fight for their financial survival, accept the worst terms of exchange. Moreover, African football federations and Governments see players' exodus as a possibility to reintegrate more competitive players in national teams in order to obtain top international results. Because of that, they tend to favour the migrations instead of supporting local development of the game. The price that is being paid has been the personal failure of a very important number of young players. Most of them come to Europe 'with the ball' but are unable to integrate themselves into the professional football circuit. Thus, they end up by finding themselves in very precarious situations.

Notes

- [1] Interview with Gianpaolo Monteneri, 29 July 2003.
- [2] *France Football*, no.2978, 6 May 2003, 13.
- [3] *Deloitte & Touche Annual Review of Football Finance* (hereafter *DT Football Finance*), July 2003, 14.
- [4] *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, 18 Jan. 2003, 12.
- [5] *France Football*, no.2978, 6 May 2003, 6–10.
- [6] *DT Football Finance*, July 2003, 14.
- [7] *World Soccer*, July 2003, 21.
- [8] *La Lettre du Sport*, no.275, 9 May 2003, 4.
- [9] *DT Football Finance*, July 2003; *France Football*, no.2978, 6 May 2003, 13; *Sport/Foot Magazine*, no.26, 25 June 2003, 26.
- [10] Bourg, 'Le marché du travail sportif', 150–1.
- [11] *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, 29 July 2003, 12.
- [12] *France Football*, no.2984, 17 June 2003, 46.
- [13] Bourg, 'Le marché du travail sportif', 156.
- [14] *Ibid.*
- [15] *Cameroon Tribune* (Yaoundé), 21 Nov. 2003.
- [16] *FIFA Magazine*, Feb. 2003, 42–3.
- [17] Poli, *Les migrations internationales des footballeurs*, 157. Main sources used are Internet sites <www.eufo.de> and <www.soccerassociation.com>, and the annual review *A-Z del Futbol Europeo*. This review, edited in Spain, contains a large number of statistics on players' career paths.

- [18] Lanfranchi and Taylor, *Moving with the Ball*, 273.
- [19] The first level of the hierarchy includes top divisions of England, Spain, Italy, Germany and France. In the second level, we find top leagues of the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Turkey and Greece. Inferior leagues of the countries mentioned above are ranked from the third to fifth level, as well as top divisions of the countries that have not been inserted in the first two levels.
- [20] Players interviewed included Timothée Atouba and Hervé Tum (FC Basle), Augustine Simo (FC Zurich), Jean-Pierre Tcheutchoua (FC Aarau), Armand Deumi (FC Thun), Samuel Ojong (Neuchâtel Xamax FC), Achille Njanke (SR Delémont) and Frédéric Ayangma (FC Bulle).
- [21] Players from Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, Ivory Coast and Morocco represented in the 2002/03 season 58.7 per cent of the footballers recruited by European clubs in Africa.
- [22] Poli, 'Des migrants à qualifier. Les footballeurs africains dans quatre pays européens', 143–64.
- [23] For further details on this point, see Smith and Guarnizo, 'The Locations of Transnationalism', 3–34.
- [24] Bale and Sang, *Kenyan Running: Movement Culture, Geography and Global Change*, 229, and Bale, 'African Footballers and Europe: Migration, Exploitation and Postcolonialism', 14; Darby, *Africa, Football and FIFA.*, 236, and 'The New Scramble for Africa', 217–44.
- [25] Bale and Maguire, *The Global Sports Arena*, 289.
- [26] Amadu, Chamas and Noemi, 'Kids never came back', 175.

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