



# Journal of Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy

Journal homepage: <https://ejournal.upi.edu/index.php/JPESP/index>



## An Assessment of sport talent drain: The continued exploitation of Africa

**Abisha Mugari**

1, 2, 3, 4, 5 Zimbabwe Open University, Churchill Ave, Harare

Correspondence: E-mail: [abishamugari@gmail.com](mailto:abishamugari@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This study was conducted among football players playing their football locally and in Western countries aiming at assessing the views and experiences of stakeholders in the football fraternity. The study found that Africa is the major reservoir of football players who are showcasing their talent in European leagues. African nations are benefiting very little value from their talented football players plying their trade in Western countries. It qualifies to say Africa produces what it does not eat and eats what it does not produce. Therefore, the study recommends Western nations to pay taxes to African nations for every football player plying sporting trades in their countries.

### How to Cite:

Mugari A, An Assessment of sport talent drain: The continued exploitation of Africa. *Journal of Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 5(1), 11-18.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received 16 May 2025

Revised 16 May 2025

Accepted 16 May 2025

Available online 16 May 2025

#### Keywords:

Talent exploitation,  
Remittances, Reservoir,  
colonialists, monetary  
value.

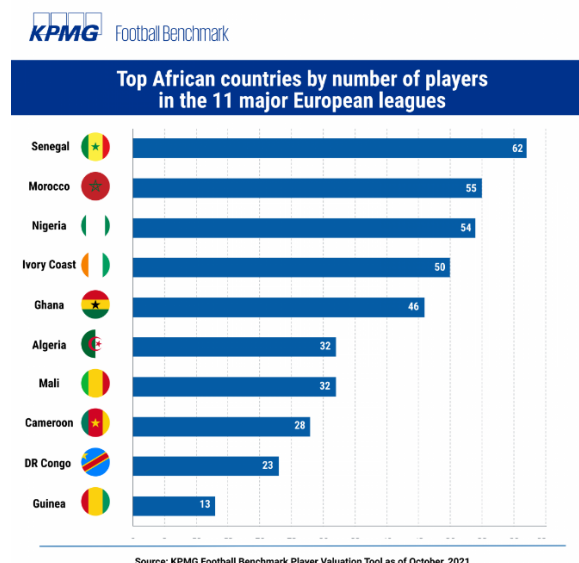
### INTRODUCTION

It is true that African football is far behind European and American football in terms of skills development and showcasing. The theory by Mazrui (2002), that says "Africa produces what it does not consume and consumes what it does not produce", is epitomised and evident enough in the football fraternity. Talented footballers from Africa are quickly whisked off to exhibit their beautiful talents in western countries' football clubs. The interpretation to Mazruwi's theory could be that Africa is a reservoir of talented footballers; it is the mother of football skilled players who are then identified and lured by hefty salaries and lavish lifestyles by rich western

states in America and Europe leaving the Africans enjoying 'lemons while rich states enjoying cherry'. Africa only enjoys the perfected and developed talents of its sons and daughters through watching at European and American soccer on television and other electronic media. It is true that those so called 'foreign based' footballers can adopt a mercenary attitude when they are called back for duty in their home countries in Africa because their coaches from western clubs usually tell these African footballers to safely keep their legs during national encounters in African games like World Cup, AFCON and CAF etc.

In other words, there is a rampant talent-drain of African footballers by western clubs who enjoy the skills and talents of Africans in the sport fraternity and Poli (2008) named it 'muscle-drain'. Another school of thought from a defeated mind-set among African leaders is the pronouncement of 'talent exportation'. They are defending the unfair-talent exploitation of players by comforting the generality of Africans by boasting that Africa has abundant human skills, so we are exporting talents to other countries. This is the 'fallacy of the beard'. It is not a fact. Darby, Akindes and Kirwin (2007) view it as not fair-talent exportation, but a continuation of colonialist and neocolonialist practice by former colonialists. The question is, how much do the African governments officially get as remittances monthly or annually from the exportation of their football players? The deal is just between the clubs, and the clubs are heavily on the weakest negotiation side.

Information at hand by KPMG October 2021 indicates that over 500 African footballers are in the top eleven (11) major European leagues. Their values are enormous in monetary terms. The KPMG player valuation tool releases data that shows that Senegal by 2021 has 62, Morocco 55, Nigeria 54, Ivory Coast 50, Ghana 46, Algeria 32, Mali 32, Cameroon 28, DR Congo 23 Guinea 13 football players, to mention few.



**Picture 1. Top African countries by number of players in the 11 major European leagues**

These figures stand to substantiate clear evidence that some top African nations in the football fraternity are a rich source to European nations in terms of player-supply. This research does not go as far as to find reasons or justification for exploitation by rich nations in the West, but to validate the fact that European leagues thrive with the abundant talents from Africa.



**Picture 2. European leagues by number of African players employed**

Another school of thought is that European citizens continue to enjoy cheery whilst Africans gaggle lemons. These western nations who are enjoying the glamorous skills displayed by African players are not paying official remissions to the player-producer countries, who are African nations.

The monetary values of these players from African countries according to KPMG by October 2021 shows that M. Sala is worth 105.0 million Euros, Sadio Mane^ 80.44 million Euros, Achraf Hakimi 76.11 etc. The monetary values are not enjoyed by African states. For example, in December 2003, Sepp Blatter, president of football's world governing body, the Fédération Internationale de football association (FIFA), argued that those European clubs who had benefited most from the trade in African players had conducted themselves as "neo-colonialists who don't give a damn about heritage and culture, but engage in social and economic rape by robbing the developing world of its best players" and described their recruitment of young Africans as "unhealthy if not despicable" (Bradley, 2003).



**Picture 3. African players by market value**

The top ten African players by market value who have dominated football market to the benefit of Western countries are Mohammed Salah, Sadio Mane, Achraft Hakimi, Edmond Tapsoba, Victor Osimhen, Riyad Mahrez, Wilfred Ndidi, Nicolas Pepe, Franck Kessie and Yousseff En-Nesyri.

The industrialized Western nations dominate the global capitalist system largely by dictating the terms upon which world trade is conducted. As a consequence, they develop and prosper through the underdevelopment of those on the periphery of the global economy. In many ways this encapsulates the nature of European clubs' appropriation of football talent from Africa, (Bradley, 2003). The points raised by some researchers like Darby, Akindes and Kirwin (2007) are an emphasis to the observations that African countries are not enjoying the benefits of being original producers who own those players who exhibit football careers in Western countries.

These foreign clubs are clearly financially stronger than their African counterparts and they use their powerful economic position to dictate the terms on which the trade in football labour is conducted.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with the aim of gaining a deep and comprehensive understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and suggestions from various stakeholders involved in the world of football, particularly regarding the development of African football in a global context. This approach was chosen for its ability to explore the

subjective meanings conveyed by each informant and to highlight the complexity of social and cultural realities that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods.

Data collection was carried out through telephone interviews and individual email correspondence. These two instruments were considered the most suitable for reaching informants located across different countries and time zones in both Africa and Europe. Telephone interviews enabled direct and dynamic interactions, while email allowed informants to respond in a more reflective and structured manner. The combination of both methods ensured a balance between depth of information and ease of access.

The informants consisted of representatives from African and European football clubs, African footballers playing abroad, managers of sports academies in Africa, and sports leadership figures from ten different countries. The informants were selected purposively, based on their active involvement in the football industry and their potential to contribute relevant insights to the objectives of the study.

The data collected were analyzed using a thematic approach by identifying patterns, themes, and categories that emerged from the interviews and email responses. The analysis was conducted inductively, allowing interpretations to be built from the field data rather than being constrained by rigid theoretical frameworks. Data validity was maintained through source and technique triangulation, as well as member checking with several informants to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the interpretations.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal a complex and often troubling reality concerning the role and treatment of African football players in the global football industry, particularly in relation to their involvement in European leagues. Several critical issues emerged from the data collected through interviews and correspondence with players, club representatives, academy leaders, and sports authorities across ten countries.

Firstly, the research confirms that Africa has become a major reservoir of football talent, supplying a significant number of players to European football leagues. This trend underscores the continent's immense potential in developing world-class athletes. However, this contribution is not matched by a proportional return of value to the players' countries of origin. While African nations continue to produce and export football talent to Western countries, they derive very minimal socio-economic benefits from the success of these players abroad.

Secondly, although many African-born footballers express a strong desire to give back to their home countries—whether through investments, mentorship programs, or community development initiatives—there is a noticeable lack of institutional support and legal infrastructure to facilitate this process. Notably, there are no binding international frameworks or bilateral agreements that require Western clubs to remit a portion of their revenues or taxes to the African nations where these players were born and trained. This legal vacuum significantly limits the potential for African governments and sports institutions to claim a rightful share of the economic benefits generated by their athletes abroad.

Another major concern highlighted by the study is the exploitation and devaluation of African players in foreign leagues. Participants reported that many players are subjected to unequal treatment, marginalization, and, in some cases, outright exploitation by football clubs and other relevant authorities. However, due to the economic advantages offered by playing in wealthier Western nations, many athletes endure these hardships as a necessary sacrifice to support themselves and their families.

In response to these issues, several African sports leaders stressed the urgent need for stronger advocacy and policy intervention. They argued that Western clubs should be obligated to return a fairer share of the financial rewards derived from African talent to the players' countries of origin. This could be achieved through structured agreements, improved governance of player transfers, or the establishment of a continental legal body to oversee such transactions.

The study also uncovered evidence of neo-colonial patterns within international football. Many African nations lack the political and economic leverage to negotiate favorable terms or to demand government-to-government agreements concerning player taxation and revenue-sharing. This imbalance perpetuates a cycle in which African countries remain dependent exporters of raw football talent while foreign institutions retain the lion's share of profits and decision-making power.

Finally, the research reveals a disturbing trend of racial abuse and discrimination faced by African footballers in Western leagues. Participants shared personal accounts of racism from club supporters, management officials, and even fellow teammates. These experiences point to a persistent cultural and institutional bias that not only affects the players' well-being but also reflects broader systemic inequities within global football structures.

In conclusion, the study highlights the urgent need for reforms at both the national and international levels. These reforms should aim to ensure that African countries are not only recognized as talent incubators but also as rightful stakeholders in the economic value

generated by their players abroad. Moreover, protective frameworks must be developed to uphold the dignity, rights, and fair treatment of African footballers wherever they may play.

## **CONCLUSION**

The results of this study illuminate the multifaceted and often inequitable realities faced by African football players within the global football ecosystem. Central to the findings is the acknowledgment that Africa has emerged as a primary reservoir of football talent, particularly for European leagues. The continent continues to produce a high volume of exceptionally skilled players who go on to represent top-tier clubs abroad. This phenomenon reflects the richness of Africa's athletic potential and its capacity to shape the global football landscape.

Despite this vital contribution, African nations receive only marginal benefits from the international success of their players. While individual athletes often achieve personal economic success, their home countries rarely share in the financial gains. This is largely due to the absence of institutional mechanisms that facilitate the redistribution of wealth generated abroad. The study found that while many African players express a strong desire to reinvest in their communities, their efforts are hampered by the lack of international legal frameworks obligating foreign clubs to remit taxes or contribute financially to the development of football in the players' countries of origin.

Furthermore, the research revealed that many African players are subjected to various forms of exploitation and disrespect in their host countries. Whether through unfair contracts, limited playing opportunities, cultural alienation, or lack of institutional support, these athletes often face environments that are not conducive to their well-being. However, due to the promise of economic advancement and the responsibility to support families back home, many players endure these adversities in silence. The economic disparity between African and Western countries serves as a powerful motivator for players to tolerate injustice, even at the expense of their dignity and career progression.

Leaders within African sports organizations argue that this system is inherently unjust. There is a growing call for Western football clubs to be legally compelled to share a more equitable percentage of the profits generated by African players. Such redistribution would help fund sports development programs, youth academies, and local infrastructure, ultimately creating a more self-sustaining ecosystem within African football. However, the implementation of such reforms faces significant obstacles, particularly due to power imbalances on the global stage.

The study also highlights the pervasive influence of neo-colonialism in international football relations. African countries, in many cases, lack the political and economic leverage to negotiate bilateral agreements regarding player taxation or compensation for talent development. This inability to assert sovereignty over their most valuable human resources reinforces a dependency model where African countries export talent but import little of the wealth and recognition in return.

Additionally, a deeply troubling dimension of the findings is the persistent issue of racial abuse against African-born players in Western countries. Participants reported being subjected to discriminatory treatment from fans, club authorities, and even teammates. This abuse is not only psychological and emotional but also institutional, as it reflects broader systems of exclusion and marginalization within elite football. Such racism undermines the principles of inclusion and respect that global sport purports to uphold.

In light of these findings, the study suggests that significant structural and policy reforms are urgently needed. These include the development of legal mechanisms that protect African players abroad, enforce fair compensation to their countries of origin, and ensure respectful and dignified treatment in foreign clubs. African nations must also work collaboratively to present a unified front in international negotiations, enhancing their capacity to influence global football governance and to protect their athletes from exploitation and abuse.

## REFERENCES

- Bradley, M. (2003). "Blatter menyerang para penjajah G-14." *The Guardian*, 18 Desember, Warisan Kolonial dan Imobilitas Sukarela." *Jurnal Isu Olahraga dan Sosial* 44 (5): 397–
- Darby, P. Akindes, G. dan Kirwin, M. (2007), *Akademi Sepak Bola dan Migrasi Tenaga Kerja Sepak Bola Afrika ke Eropa*. *Jurnal Olahraga dan Isu Sosial*. Vol. 31 (2) 143-161
- Elliott, R. dan Maguire, J., (2008). "Berpikir di luar kotak: Menjelajahi konseptual dalam Sepak Bola Eropa? Melokalisasi Migrasi Sepak Bola Afrika Sepanjang Kendala Struktural, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723520919820>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2003/dec/18/newstory.sport8>.
- Mazrui, AA (2002). *Afrika Didefinisikan Ulang*.
- Poli, R. (2006). "Status warga Afrika di pasar tenaga kerja pemain sepak bola Eropa."
- Poli, R. (2008), *Jelaskan "pengurusan tenaga" pemain sepak bola Afrika: Teori sistem dunia dan seterusnya*. Universitas Neuchatel.
- Poli, R. (2010). "Migran Afrika di sepak bola Asia dan Eropa: Harapan dan kenyataan." *Sepak Bola & Masyarakat* 7 (2-3): 278–291.
- Ungruhe, C., dan Schmidt, MB (2020). "Mengapa Pemain Afrika Timur Tidak Ada dalam Sintesis Penelitian di Bidang Migrasi Tenaga Kerja Atletik". *Jurnal Sosiologi Olahraga*,