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# Sport, Skills, and Workforce Development for Inclusive Economic Growth: Lessons from the Oil Industry

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Across Africa, policymakers face growing pressure to strengthen pathways from education and training into meaningful employment. This issue is particularly important given the continent's large youth population, evolving labor markets, and the increasing demand for adaptable workers capable of responding to technological and economic change.

At the same time, industries undergoing rapid technological and economic transformation are experiencing significant workforce competency gaps linked to the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) (Di Battista et al., 2023; Rikala et al., 2024). In sectors such as oil and gas, workforce adaptability, communication, leadership, and problem-solving are increasingly recognized as essential components of long-term economic resilience and productivity (Abor & Karimu, 2023; Abudu & Sai, 2020; Pegram et al., 2020).

While policy discussions often focus on formal education and technical qualifications, less attention has been given to the role of non-formal learning

environments in developing employable skills. Elite sport represents one such environment. Participation in high-performance football can foster a range of transferable competencies, including teamwork, leadership, decision-making, emotional regulation, and strategic thinking, which may support transitions into professional sectors beyond sport. Recognizing competencies developed through non-formal learning environments may therefore provide new opportunities for strengthening workforce development and employment pathways across Africa.

This policy brief draws on a two-phase study conducted in Ghana examining how competencies developed through elite football can support workforce integration within the downstream oil industry (Lavallee & Lavallee, 2024). While the oil industry provides the empirical case, the findings speak more broadly to questions of education, employability, and workforce development across African economies. The brief offers evidence-based insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and employers seeking innovative approaches to youth transitions, non-formal learning, and human capital development.

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## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

The study employed a mixed-methods, two-phase research design focused on skill development and transfer from elite sport to the oil industry in Ghana.

Phase 1 used a structured visual assessment approach to evaluate the relevance of sport-derived skills in the workplace. Forty-six male participants currently employed across a wide range of roles in Ghana's downstream oil industry, and with prior experience in elite football, were asked to assess the usefulness of specific skills developed through sport. Instead of traditional surveys, visual diagrams representing degrees of overlap between sport and industry skills were used to improve response quality and engagement.

Phase 2 involved in-depth qualitative interviews with 14 participants from the same population. These individuals held diverse roles, including leadership, operations, regulation, and business development. Interviews focused on understanding how skills acquired in sport were adapted and transferred into professional contexts, and what factors facilitated or hindered this process.

The research was underpinned by the theory of functional social support, examining how environmental and interpersonal factors influence skill transfer.

## 3. KEY INSIGHTS

### **Elite Sport functions as a site of skills development.**

The findings demonstrate that elite football can serve as an important environment for developing competencies relevant to professional employment. Participants identified strong overlap between skills developed through sport and those required within the case study industry, particularly in collaboration (98%), communication (96%), leadership (85%), and planning (82%).

These competencies are increasingly important in contexts characterized by operational complexity, technological change, and high-performance demands. The findings therefore suggest that learning acquired outside formal educational settings can contribute meaningfully to workforce readiness and economic participation.

### **Transferable competencies support workforce adaptability.**

Participants consistently highlighted decision-making (80%), risk management (74%), negotiation (67%), and emotional intelligence (65%) as valuable in their professional roles. The ability to respond effectively under pressure, collaborate within teams, and manage uncertainty was viewed as particularly important within the downstream oil sector.

These findings reinforce broader discussions across Africa concerning the importance of transferable and employability skills alongside technical qualifications.

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Developing adaptable workers may become increasingly important as industries continue to evolve under the pressures of technological change and economic diversification.

**Social and organizational support facilitates successful transition into industry roles.**

The transfer of competencies from sport into employment was not automatic. The interview participants identified several factors that supported successful transition into industry roles:

- Mentorship and role models helped individuals navigate unfamiliar professional environments.
- Structured onboarding processes enabled participants to connect sport-derived competencies with workplace expectations.
- Continuous learning opportunities allowed individuals to combine transferable skills with technical expertise.
- Organizational cultures emphasizing teamwork and collaboration eased adaptation into professional settings.

These findings highlight the importance of support structures in helping individuals translate competencies developed through non-formal learning environments into sustainable employment pathways.

**Alternative pathways can contribute to economic development.**

The integration of former athletes into skilled employment demonstrates how non-traditional talent pathways can contribute to workforce resilience and economic development. Expanding recognition of competencies acquired through sport may help address labor shortages, diversify recruitment practices, and improve employment opportunities for young people.

Although this study focused on Ghana's oil industry, the findings may have broader relevance for African economies seeking innovative approaches to education-to-employment transitions and human capital development.

#### **4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Recognize sport as a non-formal learning environment.**

Policymakers, educational institutions, and employers should recognize elite sport as a valuable site of competency development. National workforce and education strategies should acknowledge that transferable skills acquired through sport can complement formal qualifications and support employability.

**Develop cross-sector partnerships.**

Governments, sports organizations, universities, and industry stakeholders should collaborate to create clearer pathways from sport into employment.

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Partnerships could support career guidance, competency recognition, mentorship schemes, and transition programmes for retiring athletes.

### **Strengthen employability and transferable skills programs.**

Educational and workforce development initiatives should place greater emphasis on competencies such as teamwork, communication, leadership, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. Integrating these skills into training programmes may better prepare young people for increasingly dynamic labor markets across Africa.

### **Establish structured transition and mentorship programs.**

Employers should develop onboarding and mentorship initiatives that help individuals translate competencies developed through sport into workplace contexts. Programs involving mentors with experience across both sport and industry may be particularly effective in supporting long-term integration and retention.

### **Promote inclusive and diverse workforce pathways.**

Future policies and programs should consider how similar opportunities can be expanded across gender and sporting contexts to ensure broader accessibility and inclusion. Recognizing multiple forms of learning and experience may help reduce

barriers to employment and strengthen social and economic participation.

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