

# POST- RIO 2016 OLYMPIC GAMES: REFLECTIONS ON TRACK AND FIELD MANAGEMENT IN KENYA

By

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## ABSTRACT

*Kenya's athletics faces an unprecedented crisis because of her global success, expectation and administrative failures. Ahead of the Rio Olympics the country was constantly in the news for all the wrong reasons as the target of a media campaign to expose alleged doping in Kenyan training camps. As if that was not enough, two Kenyan officials were expelled from the 2016 Olympics amid a new anti-doping controversy followed by allegations of a stolen kit meant for athletes. Several officials were arrested after the Rio Olympics and others suspended by IAAF from Athletics activities. This article seeks to highlight issues that ail track and field management in Kenya; threats to Kenya's reputation; consequences of spoilt reputation; strategies to clean up her image; exodus of athletes from Kenya to other countries; and push factors for athletes moving away from Kenya.*

*Key Words: Athletics, Kenya, Olympic Games, Management, Pull and Push Factors, Doping*

## INTRODUCTION

Kenya has earned a great reputation as an athletics powerhouse. This was evident in the World Athletics Championships in 2015 when against all odds, Kenya emerged as the number one nation ahead of the US, Jamaica, Great Britain, Germany and Russia, among others (BBC 2015). However, since attaining that peak performance of 7 gold, 6 silver and

3 bronze medals to stand atop of the world, Kenya's athletics has had to contend with unprecedented crisis because of global athletic success, expectation and administrative failures. Immediately following the World Athletics Championship three senior athletics officials from Kenya, including the late Isaiah Kiplagat, David Okeyo and Joseph Kinyua, were provisionally suspended by the IAAF, after being accused of subverting the anti-doping processes and potentially diverting sponsorship funds from Nike (Gibson, 2015).

Ahead of the Rio Olympics, Kenya was constantly in the news for all the wrong reasons as the target of a media campaign to expose alleged doping in Kenyan training camps. As if that was not bad enough, two Kenyan officials were expelled from Rio Olympics amid a new anti-doping controversy followed by allegations of a stolen kit meant for athletes (Njororai, 2016, 2017; Omulo, 2016).

Added to all these was the chaotic run-up to the games that saw some top athletes almost missing their flights to the Rio Olympics. A U.S.-based athlete travelled to Rio without a Kenyan passport and he received his accreditation on the eve of his race leading to a very miserable execution on the track. Despite all the controversies, the Kenyan athletes turned in a performance that was the second best compared to all the previous performances at the Olympic Level by winning six gold, six silver and one bronze medals and ranking second behind the USA in track and field (Njororai, 2016, 2017;

Omulo 2016). In 2015, World Athletics Championships, Kenya ranked first beating USA, Russia, Germany, Britain and Jamaica in medal counts. However, since 2016, high profile athletes have failed drug tests, a number of administrators allegedly stole attire meant for athletes, and several officials were either banned from the sport or arrested thus raising questions about the integrity of Kenyan runners and the whole management structure (Gibson, 2015; Phillips, 2018). Success in track and field events for Kenyan athletes hides inefficiencies and errors – both of omission and commission – by those charged with the responsibility of administering the country’s track and field programs (Njororai, 2003, 2004, 2007a, b, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2017; Omulo, 2016). According to Leftie and Olilo (2016),

“A veteran coach expelled from the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro for impersonating an athlete has exposed the shameful depths of mismanagement that has seen the Kenyan team hurdle from one crisis to another. This emerged as the Sunday Nation (Kenya) on Saturday learnt that morale at the Team Kenya camp in the Brazilian city is at its lowest after weeks of problems including chaotic travel arrangements, inadequate training kits, questionable allocation of slots in the Olympic Village and doping-related bribery allegations against a top official”. (<https://www.nation.co.ke/news/The-scandal-of-Kenya-s-Rio-Olympics/1056-3343980-kvao27z/index.html>).

It is clear that Kenyan athletes excel in spite of the poor management of the sport in the country. Some of the key manifestations of failed leadership include the following:

1. Poor leadership structure that allows the same people retain a grip

on leadership positions. Recycling the same leaders for too long makes it difficult to new entrants with fresh ideas to make inroads into the organization. This cuts out new and fresh ideas to propel the athletics forward.

2. Accusations of corruption and partiality in selecting athletes for international assignments.
3. Lack of proactive action on doping control and education. This has seen many athletes failing drug tests or failing to appear for testing.
4. Absence of a proper monetary compensation structure for athletes who represent the country in international competitions. The reward system is ad hoc, erratic, and therefore unpredictable from one event to the next. This makes it hard for athletes to plan around it.
5. Instability at the secretariat, which is the nerve center for any successful organization.
6. Poor management of sponsorship contracts and the resources meant for developing the sport. Indeed stealing of athletes’ training and competition kits is common, and sponsorship moneys are occasionally diverted to personal use.
7. Lack of support for other organizations that identify, nurture and provide avenues for young talent such as schools, colleges and universities (Njororai, 2003, 2016; 2017).

Kenya’s reputation for athletic talent and hard work in jeopardy

Kenya is one of the countries where athletics is highly regarded and when the summer Olympic Games take place, Kenyans watch with great interest. It is also during these

Games that the nation puts away its persistent political bickering to root for her athletes on Olympic duty. Before departure for the games, the President of the nation hosts the team delegation and officially hands to them the official flag as a way of commissioning them to embark on an enormous patriotic mission to represent the nation with honor. It is a patriotic duty! Over the years, the athletes have lifted the name of Kenya high and her national anthem is heard regularly, with pride, in various track and field host stadiums around the world. However, even as the athletics success has earned a positive image for Kenya, as individuals, athletes have also earned reasonable compensation from their sweat. It is therefore not easy for Kenya to lose its reputation as the source of athletic talent as many aspiring athletes grow up knowing that they can make a decent living out of their athletic endeavors. This burning desire to escape from poverty and the rewards that the emerging athletes earn from their effort, combine to ensure that the pipeline of talent will continue to bring to the fore many other potentially successful athletes (Njororai 2003, 2004, 2007a, b, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2017). However, the biggest threat to Kenya's talent producing pipeline and athletics reputation is the desire to use drugs in an atmosphere of fierce internal, as well as external, competition. The national sports administration has to be extremely diligent in handling doping tests. This must go hand in hand with education (Njororai, 2016, 2017). The consequences of not doing so are severe: Kenya could, in future, find herself suspended from international competitions. This would not be without precedent given Russia's ongoing tribulations. The good performance at the Rio Olympics made up for the negative publicity over doping control procedures and the absence of the required law at the time. Efforts should be made to clean up the image of the sport and Kenyan

athletes to avoid crossing swords with the world anti-doping agency (Njororai, 2017).

## EXODUS OF ATHLETES FROM KENYA TO OTHER COUNTRIES

According to the IAAF's (2010a) list of Kenyan athletes who changed national allegiance, five athletes (27.8%) moved to Qatar, three (16.7%) to Bahrain, three (16.7%) to France, three (16.7%) to the USA, two (11%) to Finland and one each to Netherlands and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Eight athletes (44%) therefore moved to the Arabian Gulf countries of Qatar and Bahrain. The data exclude athletes who moved to these countries before they had formally registered with Athletics Kenya, so according to Okoth (2005), more than 40 athletes had in fact moved to Middle East countries compared to the eight reflected on the IAAF (2010a) list. It is curious to note that only three (16.7%) athletes moved to an English-speaking country. Given that Kenya is an English-speaking, one might have expected that the Kenyan athletes would have preferred to move to another English speaking country (Njororai, 2012). This movement of Kenyan athletes therefore goes counter to the trend where former colonial powers like the U.K., France and Spain tend to reap the benefits of their former empires (Connor & Griffin, ). France's relationship with former colonies entails both language and citizenship rights, which encourages athletes and soccer players from West Africa to move to Europe. With the absence of historical and cultural ties between Kenya and countries such as Qatar, Bahrain, France, Finland, Netherlands and Bosnia and Herzegovina, there should be other pull/push factors for Kenyan athletes other than colonial ties (Njororai, 2012). Consequently, the movement of Kenyan athletes in the past 20 years can be situated within the global dynamics of economic inequality, commercialization and

professionalization of sports, which, have led to athletic talent moving from regions of surplus to those of deficits or those willing to pay more for the services (Musumba 2009a, b; Mynott, 2005; Njororai, 2012).

Maguire (1999) and Magee and Sugden (2002) developed typologies to categorize the migrant athletes. Maguire's typology included mercenaries, settlers, nomads, cosmopolitans, pioneers and returnees. This categorization was based on interviews with athletes drawn from soccer, basketball, cricket and rugby. This typology was very close to that developed by Magee and Sugden (2002) after interviewing soccer players in England. Their typology of migrant athletes included mercenary, settler and nomadic cosmopolitan, ambitionist, exile and expelled. One can argue that the categories applicable to Kenyan runners over the years include mercenary, nomadic cosmopolitan, settler, returnee and ambitionist. These categories are not mutually exclusive, however, as they overlap in some instances. Njororai (2012) expounds on each of the applicable categories follows:

(1) Mercenary: A mercenary athlete is one who is motivated by their earning capacity and who migrates for reasons of economic reward. This motivation for financial gain could be on a short-term basis (Love & Kim, 2011; Magee & Sugden, 2002; Maguire, 1999). The careers for athletes are short. It is therefore prudent to maximize the opportunity to earn as much as possible so as to invest in their future. The athletes from Kenya who moved to Bahrain and Qatar did so based on financial grounds and therefore could qualify as being mercenary (Njororai, 2010; 2012).

(2) Nomadic Cosmopolitan: According to Magee and Sugden (2002), athletes who fall in this category include individuals who are motivated by a desire to experience different nations and cultures. Maguire (1999)

explains that this group of athletes is motivated by cosmopolitan engagement with migration where the desire is to seek new experiences. The nature of the athletics circuit involves athletes moving and competing in different countries around the world (Njororai, 2010). Athletics agents have therefore strategically set up camps for their athletes to train and stay while on the competition circuit, which qualifies them as nomadic in lifestyle (Njororai, 2012).

(3) Settler: This category of athletes is composed of those who move to another country to compete and continue to stay beyond the end of their athletic careers (Love & Kim, 2011). Indeed, Maguire (1999) describes this group as sports migrants who subsequently stay and settle in the society where they perform their labour. Examples of Kenyan-born athletes, who moved to settle and represent other countries including Wilson Kipketer (Denmark), Bernard Lagat (USA) and Lorna Kiplagat (Netherlands) (Njororai, 2010). While these athletes moved to settle in their adopted countries, the ones who moved to Bahrain and Qatar only represent these countries and spend their time in Kenya and the international athletic camps set up by their agents (Njororai, 2012).

(4) Returnee: This group of athletes may move to compete in another country, but after some time are obligated to return to their homeland. Such athletes give-in to the lure of home soil, which overcomes any of the advantages of staying in the host country (Love & Kim, 2011; Maguire, 1999). The case of Leonard Mucheru, although isolated, is a typical example. He moved to Bahrain in 2003 and returned to Kenya in 2007 after being stripped off his Bahrain citizenship (Mbaisi and Toskin, 2007; Njororai, 2012; Sharrock, 2007).

(5) Ambitionist: This category transcends a number of categories. However, three dimensions characterize athletes in this

category: (i) the desire to achieve a sport career anywhere, (ii) the preference for playing in a certain location as compared to elsewhere and (iii) the desire to improve one's career by moving to a higher-quality league (Love & Kim, 2011). This category is similar to that of the settler, although the ambitionist athletes venture into new countries with a desire to elevate themselves and, more importantly, to continue to excel in athletics. The success and longevity of Bernard Lagat, who represented Kenya at the 2000 and 2004 Olympic Games and subsequently represented the U.S.A. at the 2008, 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games, is a clear example of an individual exhibiting an ambitionist character. If he had remained in Kenya, it is doubtful if he would have even made the team for the 2007, 2009 and 2011 World Athletics Championships, yet he won medals for the U.S. team at some of these events.

#### ATHLETE MIGRATION: PULL AND PUSH FACTORS

The athletic labor flow to the affluent countries from other countries perceived to be on the periphery of modernization has to be situated within the framework of inequality, especially the financial compensation of an individual athlete (Simms and Rendel, 2004; Thibault, 2009; Wheatcroft, 2006). Countries lacking the requisite sporting culture and those that are richly endowed with resources now have the option of importing already proven talent with mercenary ambitions and paying them as the case is for Qatar and Bahrain or offering opportunities that are life-transforming (Njororai, 2012). These countries have wealth and sporting infrastructure, that is far more attractive than other countries that have oversupply of talent like Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria. Qatar and Bahrain are especially very aggressive in

recruiting athletic talent given the lack of home grown talent. Success in International Sport competitions is a great marketing tool. Success in sport gives a country global visibility, which attracts economic opportunities such as investors and tourists. This creates a situation where athletes from countries with a high concentration of talent are motivated to move to new nations to cash in on their athletic ability, which has become a commodity for sale to the highest bidder (Njororai, 2012). One of the major net exporters of athletic talent is Kenya, which ranks highly on the track and field performance index at the global level, despite the supposed economic, political and cultural constraints in its development endeavor (Njororai, 2012).

The unbalanced nature of global wealth and sporting corporate power has created movement of sporting talent from less rewarding clubs to higher paying clubs and now nations. When Kenyan athletes move to other countries, they may do so on a permanent basis (change of citizenship), on transitory basis (i.e. short-term basis for training and preparation for competitions) and on marital grounds (Njororai, 2010). However, those going to the Gulf States change citizenship, names and even religion (Wheatcroft, 2006) and receive monetary compensation (Njororai, 2010).

But even as athletes are pulled from Kenya by the prospects of financial rewards, career advancement and opportunities to compete on the world stage, there are also other organizational factors that push them to move abroad including poor administration. For example, poor and potentially embarrassing administrative lapses were evident before and during the Rio Olympics, including:

1. Two track and field officials were expelled from the Games over claims of doping and falsification of accreditation documents;

2. Non-accreditation of team officials including coaches at the Rio Olympics
3. An administrative lapse saw the world javelin champion without an air ticket to the Games – where he eventually won a silver medal;
4. A sprinter with dual citizenship was almost disqualified for initially being accredited using a US passport rather than a Kenyan one, and;
5. Part of the official kits went missing and athletes had to do with the bare minimum.

All these lapses and the shenanigans that occur during team selection for international competitions are quite frustrating, especially for up and coming athletes. The principal avenue for a young athlete to make a breakthrough is by winning selection to the national team or getting a ticket to an international meeting. When these opportunities are uncertain, some athletes have turned to looking for alternative countries desperate for the global recognition sports champions bring.

The other push factor for Kenyan athletes is the sheer number of talented runners jostling for limited opportunities at home. Rules

restrict the number of entrants to compete for a country at most international events, normally to a maximum of three. Such restrictions offer only the best a guarantee of making it into the team. These factors have contributed to some athletes choosing to run for other countries. Certainly, the countries they move to offer better monetary compensation. These include Bahrain, Qatar, the US, France and the Netherlands. For athletes, whose work-life span is very short, generous compensations outweigh any risks of moving abroad. Also the right to dual citizenship allows an athlete to run for another country and still have access to all the privileges of being a Kenyan citizen. Most runners who end up in the Gulf States do it for short-term monetary benefit. But those who seek opportunities in Western countries such as the US, France, and the Netherlands do it for longer term goals such as uplifting their families. Other benefits, attractive especially for young athletes, include the ease with which they are selected to run in global competitions. This translates to guaranteed monetary rewards. Many get more freedom to choose where to train and live. They therefore end up running for a foreign country but continue to live, train and invest in Kenya.

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