

The Systemic Transitioning Strategy of Re-Orienting “Head-Portering” Task from an Objectively “Bad” Job to a Subjectively “Good” Job

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the systemic re-orientation of the “Head portering” task from being an objectively “bad” job to a subjectively “good” job. The purpose was to understand whether such systemic transitioning manifests a business that could be deemed a blessing or otherwise to the socioeconomic development of Ghana. Using a semi-structured interview approach, data was collected from forty head porters and analysed qualitatively. Most of the head porters were found to view the head portering activity as a business which could be deemed a blessing due to its non-stringent requirements as an employment subsector. Most of them were also found to classify their tasks as a job with enhanced job security due to its non-seasonal and non-capital-intensive characteristics, and also, its non-academic certification requirement. It was concluded that the head portering task serves as a subjectively “good” job- engagement pathway for the less-educated youths and thus, serves as a business that helps alleviate unemployment in Ghana.

Keywords: Head portering, Bad jobs, Transitioning, Unemployment, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

The creation of more and better jobs is undoubtedly a solution to reducing unemployment and minimising migration (internal or external) as Clark (2010) argues that most peoples’ well-being will be low when they are unemployed. The focus of internal migration is to seek a better life for oneself; hence migrants move to urban centres for better opportunities (Awumbila & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008; Tufeiru, 2014). This is because the urban centres are associated with concepts like modernisation and socio-economic development (Cyril, Oldroyd & Renzaho, 2013). This line of reasoning is justified by better infrastructure and services, including employment opportunities, health care, and education enjoyed by urban dwellers in comparison with rural dwellers (Rice, 2008; White, 2016). The skewed distribution of resources in developing countries greatly impacts both structured and unstructured businesses of which head portering business is not exempted. Head portering

business has gradually gained recognition in Ghana and is an option for predominantly the less-educated female youth migrants because, as Rose (2003) argues, some people work because they want to earn income (the provisioning motive), irrespective of the persistence of psycho-physio-social challenges.

Primarily, the age category of individuals who engage in rural-urban migration in developing countries such as Ghana has been observed to be from 18 to 24 years (Awumbila & Ardayio-Schandorf, 2008; Tufeiru, 2014; White, 2016). Most of these individuals are adolescents who deny themselves the very pleasures of their adolescent lives and assume hard core roles just to make ends meet as well as support their families back home. A typical business for most of these adolescent migrants is head-load carrying (kayayoo) business. According to Agarwal, Attah, Apt et al. (1997) and Tufeiru (2014), the “kayayoo” business involves conveying goods from one point to another through human effort, for an unregulated fee.

Several studies have focused mainly on the negative psychosocial impact of this business on the individual and the country at large, to the neglect of what this business represents to the adolescent, adult, and the country (e.g., Alatinga, 2019; Opare, 2003). The question to be answered here is, is this job ‘bad’ in all forms, or it could be that although it is seen to be objectively bad due to its many bad features, it may be good subjectively? This is because Knox, Warhurst, Nickson and Dutton (2015; p. 1551 and 1552) note that “subjectivity is affected by workers’ characteristics such as sex, age, ethnicity, qualifications and socio-economic background”. Yet, this notion of subjectivity which can make an objectively bad job be perceived positively by different workers appears unresearched so far as the head portering task is concerned, and thus, represents a gap that needs to be filled. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the dynamics of systemic re-orientation of the head portering task from being an objectively “bad” job to a subjectively “good” job and determine whether such systemic transition manifests a business that could be deemed a blessing or otherwise to the socio-economic development of Ghana. In this regard, the study sought answers to the following questions:

- i. Why do migrants engage in head portering?
- ii. Do migrants perceive head portering as a business?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The growth theory rests on the tenets that productivity and economic growth of a country reside in the desires and wants of the populace. Therefore, economic growth does not result from external factors but from entrepreneurship, knowledge, innovation and technology. Liu (2007) elaborates that the growth theory emphasises the relevance of human capital in the growth process. Therefore, “to account for sustained growth, the modern theory needs to postulate continuous improvements in technology or in knowledge or in human capital...as an engine of growth” (Lucas, 1988; p. 9). It is argued that citizens (e.g., head porters) can enhance economic growth through entrepreneurial activities, using their human capital.

Although limited studies have been done on head porters, there appears to be a significant number of studies on migration. Ackah and Medvedev (2010) conclude that factors that determined rural-urban migration could be broadly categorised into individual and community level factors. Enu (2014) and Aliyev (2008) reported that some factors that motivated migration included employment and access to social amenities like good drinking water, good and quality health care (hospital), good roads, good and quality education, electricity, and entertainment. Also, people migrate to urban centres because of limited income sources, lack of employment opportunities, poor economic conditions, ethnic conflicts, and lack of social amenities in the rural communities (Aliyev, 2008). Beals, Levy & Moses (1976) also posit that one's original locality's income negatively impacted rural-urban migration. Households' own income have equally been reported to positively impact the probability to migrate (Caldwell, 1968). In another study, Machaia (2003) found that rural-urban migration also resulted from unbalanced development. This finding suggests that reasons for migrating are not limited to the individual and community level but rather to a national level where uneven distribution of resources leads to unbalanced development, the same reasons why citizens from less developed countries will migrate to developed ones. Migration networks, i.e., the presence of friends or relatives in the destination locality, is another determinant (Caldwell, 1968; Tutu, 1995).

Unfortunately, the conditions migrants must endure in the urban centres have been observed to be unfavourable. On a rather critical analysis, one would think these conditions should have deterred or discouraged migrants from wanting to seek permanent stay in the urban centres. In the urban slums in Ghana, some of the unfavourable conditions include unsanitary conditions, lack of access to basic facilities like clean water, health services and sanitation, overcrowding and dense population, and unsafe buildings (Owusu, Agyei-Mensah, & Lund, 2008). Based on these unfavourable living conditions, Owusu et al. (2008) concluded that urban slums may be the face of poverty. This view by Owusu et al. (2008) is affirmed in Alatinga's (2019) study which found that although adolescents migrated from the north to the south to escape poverty, the "kayayoo" business did not offer them the kind of lives they expected. Yet, these porters were able to make remittances, and this offered food security for their families.

Rural-urban migration has been noted to have varying effects on the individual and the country at large, despite its negation consequences. As such, contrary to the findings above, Awumbila, Owusu, & Teye (2014) critically assessed the wellbeing of migrants (head porters) juxtaposed the skewed negative perception people hold of migrants. The researchers reported that indeed migrants lived in harsh environments with little social protection. Furthermore, regardless of this state of living, majority of the migrants reported their wellbeing was greatly improved after migrating to Accra. Thus, the researchers suggested that rural-urban migration leads to positive outcomes, contrary to the popular belief that urban slums are breeding spaces of despair and misery. These so-called urban slums provide migrants with hope and opportunities to utilise their capabilities regardless of the challenges they face. Asante (1995) suggested that the remittances of migrants impact the

economic welfare of the country at large and further pushes the country closer to materialising the vision of sustainable development goals. The remittances migrants forward to their households in the rural areas do not only greatly improve the households' welfare but further narrow the welfare gap between the rural and urban communities. This finding was supported by Boakye-Yiadom's (2008) study when it reported that the welfare of internal migrants was enhanced significantly following rural-urban migration regardless of the welfare losses these migrants experienced on the average. For instance, the households of migrants in comparison with household with non- migrants revealed some interesting findings. Tsegai (2005) found that migrant households had higher incomes in comparison with non-migrant households. Similarly, Ackah and Medvedev (2010) found that households with migrants compared with households without migrants tend to be better off. The benefit of rural- urban migration is not restricted to the households of the migrants as it has been reported that migrants, in comparison with non-migrants, have a higher standard of living (Litchfield & Waddington, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study was to examine if head portering business could be considered as a possible microbusiness targetted at dealing with unemployment. To achieve this purpose, forty head porters were recruited from Madina and Kaneshie to respond to a semi-structured questionnaire. The population under study represents a hard-to-reach population (due to the language barrier), as such there is usually difficulty in sampling from such a population using a probability technique (Gile & Handcock, 2010). There was no sampling frame because there is no empirical statistics on female head porters in Ghana (Lattof, 2018). Therefore, the purposive and snowballing sampling technique was used to recruit participants. The semi- structured interview which allowed all respondents to be asked same questions as well as given the opportunity to raise relevant issues was employed. Interviews using the guide lasted for at most 30 minutes due to language barriers. Also, focus groups were used. Ethical protocols of informed consent were sought before interviews began. Participants were assured of complete anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were compensated for their time, through the provision of lunch, and voluntarily participated. Data was manually analysed thematically because the sample size was manageable. After transcribing the recordings, themes and subthemes were inductively developed. In presenting the analysis which were peer reviewed, narratives and quotes from respondents were provided.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Rationale for Migrating to Engage in Head-Portering

One of the objectives of this study was to identify the reasons why migrants migrate to the urban centres. A critical analysis grouped the various reasons for migrating to the urban centres submitted by respondents into three: financial, employment and flexibility factors.

Financial Challenges

Mainly, participants reported that they migrated to join the head portering business in order to acquire enough money to cater for themselves as well as acquire needed items. An individual expressed her opinion as:

"It helps me buy anything I want. In my first week of work, I was told my child was unwell and I was able to gather some funds for his treatment" (Respondent 3).

The responses of other participants sided with this view. For instance, another expressed her opinion as follows:

"I choose this job because it will help me get money to support my livelihood. It is because of hardship, mainly because of the money" (Respondent 8).

Employment

Analysis suggested that others felt the unfair distribution of national resources had led to lack of jobs in the rural areas, hence their reason for migrating to the urban areas. Alternatively, others felt that even in the urban centres, there are limited job opportunities that is why they chose to go into the head portering business. For instance, an interviewee submitted that:

"Well, there is no work in my hometown, so that's why we chose to come down here to be head porters" (Respondent 12).

Another affirmed this assertion with the following response:

"There is no other job for me to do, that's why I chose this job." (Respondent 2).

Flexibility

There is no academic requirement for engaging in the head portering trade. Also, it is not capital intensive and demands no registration. All one requires to engage in this business is physical ability and a head pan, as highlighted in the following comments by a respondent.

"I carefully assessed other options available and settled for the head portering business because it was the only option that suited my capability" - (Respondent 1).

There is high demand for such services due to the nature of the design of markets in Ghana. The trade is not seasonal, as observed by a respondent in the following comment:

"With this job, I work every day because people always come to shop, even on Sundays" (respondent 5).

Additionally, it was seen as a stepping-stone/springboard. For the majority (97%), it is being used for raising capital for petty trading and learning a trade. As was observed, all respondents had been in the trade for barely 6 months and had no intentions of holding on even in the nearest future.

Migrants' Perception of Head-Portering as a Business

Based on their motivations, it was essential to find migrants' characterisation of the head-portering task. Two main recurring themes were echoed by the respondents, namely, economic empowerment and stability.

Economic Empowerment

Although it is reported that head portering business had some major challenges, they equally indicated that it provided them with income to support themselves and their extended families, culminating in financial freedom. This level of financial independence alleviated their burdens. An interviewee had this to say:

“It has really helped us. We get money to cater for ourselves and are sometimes able to send money home to our folks in our hometowns. We can make 100 cedis a day. Sometimes when business is very bad, we make 30, 40 or 20 cedis” (Respondent 2).

Another reiterated that:

“It has helped empower me to meet my daily economic needs. I will encourage them [others] to come and join this profession” (Respondent 3).

This request is not surprising because, on average, many of these head porters, even on a ‘bad day’, earn more than the average daily wage (12.53 cedis, 2021).

Stability

For other respondents, the head portering business offers general stability. Thus, although the business was not their optimum choice, the stability it offered was enough. The demand for their services by patrons, due to the design of Ghanaian markets, provides security to them. Since the trade is not seasonal, the tendency of raising enough funds within the shortest time is high.

DISCUSSION

Human capital can be utilised in several pathways for the benefit of both the individual and the country at large. However, it appears some utilisation of human capital is frowned upon although it greatly impacts the wellbeing of the individual and can be critically assessed to drill out how it can be significantly improved so as to consequently advance the economy at large. It is against this background that this present study sought to explore the head portering business as a possible business avenue for the country at large. This study, thus, critically assessed why migrants engaged in the head portering business, what the business meant to them and the ways forward. It was revealed that the main reason for their migration to the urban centres included financial challenges and unemployment in the rural areas and flexible requirements of the head portering trade. The business, despite its psychosocial challenges, provided the head porters with economic empowerment and stability.

Aliyev (2008), Beals et al. (1976), Caldwell (1968) and Enu (2014) captured a wide range of reasons why migrants migrate to the urban centres. These reasons included lack of social amenities, ethnic conflicts, poor economic conditions, financial challenges and unemployment in the rural areas. The two last reasons identified were affirmed in this study. This suggests that individuals in the rural areas have a poor socioeconomic status and by extension, a rather stagnant socioeconomic development. This not only provides

evidence for the unfair economic structure of the economy, but further highlights the impact of this unbalanced economic structure on the welfare of the individuals. Since the wellbeing of people are enhanced through employment (Clark, 2010), these migrants chose to migrate instead of remaining unemployed. From their recounts, their fortunes have improved, affirming the assertion of Tsegai (2005) and Ackah and Medvedev (2010).

To demean this form of business will be an error. This is because, although the head porters may lose significantly if their services are not patronised, patrons stand to lose significantly if these head porters quit. This further situates the growth theory that economic development centres on entrepreneurship, knowledge, innovation and technology (Lucas, 1988). Arguably, these porters are entrepreneurs since they have identified a problem (poor design of market spaces) and offered a solution. Instead of they being dependent on others, they have chosen to make do with their human capital/labour and that is innovative enough to bring about a steady economic development since they have the provisioning motive for engaging in the trade (Rose, 2000).

Understanding what this head portering business meant to the head porters will provide an understanding of how this job can be improved for the betterment of individuals and the economy. The head portering business did not just empower these individuals; it offered them some form of stability. This finding suggests that the finding of Awumbila et al. (2014) has relevant implication for today's economy. This line of reasoning centres around the fact that, onlookers may consider the head portering business undesirable, but these head porters' wellbeing improved significantly because they had jobs that empowered them economically and provided them with the type of stability and flexibility they needed. This mirrors the assertion by Knox et al., (2015) that workers' characteristics subjectively affected their job quality. These head porters seem happy with their jobs because of their features (women, relatively young, no/low qualifications, from poor socio-economic backgrounds, and mainly from the underdeveloped parts of Ghana).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Head porters provide citizens with valuable services that cannot be dismissed. The findings of this study imply that head portering business may be critically considered as a business in its own right. It is, therefore, concluded that the head portering task serves as a subjectively "good" job-engagement pathway for the less-educated youths and thus, serves as a business that helps alleviate unemployment in Ghana. Thus, instead of considering collapsing the business, what these migrants need is better conditions of service. Therefore, aside from considering a vocational training centre for these head porters, there should equally be a legal framework to regulate their activities as well as protect them from those who exploit them. Since the trade is highly labour intensive, head porters should be encouraged to use trolleys instead of having the loads in pans on their heads. This way, they become 'porters' and not 'head porters' and the risks associated with the business can be minimised. Since the business is legal, a secretariat can be established to formalise their

operations. They can also be encouraged to create a union in order to benefit from a strong voice.

A major limitation of this study was language and semantic barrier. Most of the participants were less educated, as such even posing the questions in the very simplistic form was challenging. As a qualitative study, generalisation is impossible.

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