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The Janus face of development brokers across migration borders

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Abstract
Employing an ethnographic approach, I analyse the agentive practices of a codevelopment project named *Africoop*, showing how it navigates the migration-development field by blending egalitarianism rights-based concerns with hierarchical political authority, foregrounding economic neoliberalism and translating development. *Africoop* advocated for migrants rights and opened up opportunities for social mobility and also reproduced gender asymmetries and power relations among Italian donors and Ghanaian recipients. By examining the organisational level of brokerage and the career trajectories of the main leaders, I unravel how social nets, aspirations and biographical paths are interwoven to reconfigure the brokers' representativeness and accountability across migration borders.

KEYWORDS
codevelopment, Italy-Ghana, brokering development, market-state fault lines, social mobility, gender power relations

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article presents an in-depth study of a codevelopment project called *Africoop*[1] involving Ghanaian migrants to Italy. It looks at the arena of migration-development discourses and policies (Glick Schiller, 2012) to explore how

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[1]All the names of the organization and interviewees are pseudonyms.
Although I use many materials that are also available in publicly available sources, I have decided to take a more cautious approach to the disclosure of my data in accordance with the new European privacy regulation legislation.

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migrant commercial entrepreneurs committed to development have embodied the market, translated development and political repertoires and become development brokers (Bierschenk et al., 2000, 2002; Lewis & Mosse, 2006; Marabello, 2012). Investigating codevelopment through a brokerage lens is potentially insightful. On the one hand, it allows us to observe the neoliberal proliferation of intermediaries in the public arena, a trend that sets the stage for the *return of the broker* (James, 2011; Lindquist, 2015) as a phenomenon and theoretical issue of renewed significance. On the other hand, by researching codevelopment practices and trajectories, we can analyse the multifaceted features and layers (e.g. market forces) of development brokers in order to call into question power relations, resistance and negotiation among states, corporate actors and citizen across migration borders.

Although there is no single, unambiguous definition of codevelopment (Daum, 1998; Grillo & Riccio, 2004; Lacroix, 2009), it comprises the range of initiatives migrants enact to foster development and social inclusion in both migration sending and receiving countries by mobilising various social, economic and institutional actors. In considering codevelopment, it is crucial to recall that migrants' micropractices occur in specific places and historical moments and are conditioned by the larger forces through which the world is produced. In Europe, codevelopment has been pursued within different institutional frameworks (Sinatti & Horst, 2015) involving a variety of subjects and targets (Daum, 1998; Marabello, 2013; Nijenhuis & Broekhuis, 2010; Østergard-Nielsen, 2011). Multiple subjects participate in codevelopment, including local state institutions, civil society groups, international organisations and migrant associations. Codevelopment thus represents a complex arena in which multiple authorities coexist and the state–citizen relationship is enmeshed in ideas about engaging the diaspora in development and sometimes, as in this case study, market logics.

In this article, therefore, I analyse the agentive practices of *Africoop* as a development broker (Bierschenk et al., 2000, 2002; Lewis & Mosse, 2006; Marabello, 2012), shedding light on the way this organisation navigated the migration and development field by blending egalitarianism rights-based concerns with hierarchical political authority, foregrounding economic neoliberalism (James, 2011) and interacting with actors possessed of unequal degrees of power, divergent interests and different political idioms. Building on Koster and Van Leynseele (2018), I approach brokers as assemblers of institutions, corporate actors and resources as well as translators of ideas belonging to the entrepreneurial diaspora (Marabello, 2013). I thus show how *Africoop* empowered (albeit temporarily) Ghanaian migrants in Italy—a setting where migrants are positioned as subaltern subjects—by gazing into the Janus face of its brokerage across migration borders.

With the aim of demonstrating ethnography's potential for revealing the complexity of development brokerage in the migration-development arena, I analyse how the Ghanaian diaspora involved in this codevelopment project navigated market and social fault lines and competed with other political authorities by creatively intertwining the personal and the public, the moral and the political across borders, history and local contexts (Kleist, 2013) I explore the leaders' biographical trajectories and *Africoop*'s gender and power relations to more closely observe the brokers' accountability and impact as agents of change. However, examining the individual and organisational level of brokerage also reveals the way translation, mediation and power relations are embedded in shared and contrasting values and ideas of status, power and development. My analysis thus seeks to illustrate how these irreconcilable points of view mesh and coexist (James, 2011; Koster, 2012), suggesting that self-interest and personal gain are often subject to sudden change in the periods of societal transformation or governmental transition in which brokers thrive (Koster & van Leynseele, 2018). By ethnographically considering both the individual and organisational levels, I seek to provide a dense understanding of the unbounded sites of contemporary brokerage while revealing how power relations and frictions shape, encapsulate or foster brokerage practices.

The paper is organized as follows. First, I briefly review the notion of brokers in the anthropology of development by retracing the literature that inspired my own research and presenting its methodological choices. Next, I introduce the *Africoop* project in the national political context of Ghana and Italy, paying attention to relations between state, diaspora and entrepreneurialism. The ethnographic data are organized into two sections: the first presents a biographical portrait of the careers of two individual brokers, while the second focuses on the entrepreneurial

organisation's brokerage practices. The findings are simultaneously presented and discussed in a way that intertwines ethnographic description and interpretation.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There is a longstanding tradition of brokerage, clustering around questions of political and economic relations and transactions during both colonial and postcolonial times. In anthropology, the classic figure of broker emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as part of decolonisation processes and modernisation theory to then fade out by the late 1970s and return in the neoliberal era (Lindquist, 2015). At first, the broker was seen as a mediator in the colonial encounter between the encapsulating and encapsulated societies, a setting in which the clear power differential strongly limits brokerage actions (Gluckman et al., 1949). However, several other authors analysing postcolonial situations—such as Mair (1968), Boissevain (1974) and Cohen and Comaroff (1976)—have underlined that power configurations are actually more varied and unstable than this idea of brokerage would suggest and pointed out that greater political fragmentation leads customary and modern elites to swing between competition and alliances. In this landscape, brokers acquire more room to manoeuvre and specific traits in terms of networking people and mediating meanings for political gain.

This latter perspective is fruitful for analysing development, an arena in which the mobilisation of political resources often interferes with strategies aimed at securing external aid. Between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1990s, anthropology focused on development brokers analysing the way local intermediaries cultivated trust so as to intercept funds from important donors and ensure development resources were channelled exclusively towards the brokers' own town, such as the case of Santiago de Los Caballeros (Gonzalez, 1972). And yet Carola Lentz (1988) found that, in the Amerindian mountain community she studied, migrants who had mastered development jargon succeeded in completely reformulating the project proposed by outside actors, using their ability to manipulate local political institutions so as to circumvent the interests of the settled population. Finally, development brokerage was deeply analysed by Bierschenk et al. (2000, 2002) who showed how, in the West African context, development brokerage constitutes a political resource for local authorities, especially in terms of decentralised aid. Despite their varying findings, all these authors clearly describe the features, career and upward mobility of development brokers and showing that these actors must have certain rhetorical, organisational and relational competences.

The notion of development broker I employ is rooted in the above-mentioned work and later conceptualisation by Olivier de Sardan (2005), but at the same time my definition is enlarged to encompass the mediation and translation of meanings enacted by the diaspora organisation heading the *Africoop* project. Lewis and Mosse (2006), inspired by Latour's philosophical thought, have broadened the scope of Olivier de Sardan's analysis to think of development brokers not only as interfaces in the development apparatus but also as translators who act in making the development world. By adopting this multifaceted conceptualisation of development brokers, I will show how a codevelopment project—implicitly asked to serve as a 'collective development broker'—managed, translated and realigned itself in relation to the contradictory requests made by supranational organisations, local contexts of migration, local elites and market logics and idioms. By analysing the development brokerage of *Africoop* and its leaders, I reveal that a development broker 'has the capacity to construct and purvey meanings concerning a variety of relationship and interactions' (1976: 89) and, in so doing, becomes a tightrope walker along the fault lines of the state and market. Following Koster and van Leynseele's (2018) argument that '*brokers are connective agents who actively bring together the different elements of the development assemblage they operated in and are targeted by*' (2018: 808), I describe how *Africoop* assembled institutions and citizens as well as corporate actors, forms of capital and idioms across migration borders. Through its development brokerage, did *Africoop* challenge gender asymmetries and power inequalities? How did the leaders' careers follow complex trajectories of personal and collective gains? How did this

codevelopment initiative manage and negotiate its interactions and activities in the arena of migration-development policy and rhetoric?

Africoop emerged in the invited space (Cornwall, 2004) of national and global institutions and became a broker dealing in forms of capital as well as visions of development and social and political lexicons across Italy and Ghana. Referencing the notion of invited space coined in the literature on participation and democratisation, Koster and van Leynseele (2018) underline that '*these invited spaces require bureaucratic and technocratic repertoires of mediation and build on forms of community based organisation for channelling resources*' (2018: 809). *Africoop* perfectly reflects this characterisation in that it was formed as part of a celebration of migrants' remittances and endorsed by global policymakers (e.g. at the European level).

I aim to contribute to the development debate with a more nuanced and ethnographically grounded understanding of power across countries and historical contingencies. Furthermore, with its longitudinal and empirical study of codevelopment involving citizens across migration borders, this research can offer insights for the current debate on citizen aid (Fechter & Schwittay, 2019).

3 | METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

This article is based on long-term anthropological research carried out from 2007 to 2016. My project ethnography (Mosse, 2004) combines an actor-oriented approach with fieldwork in several Italian and Ghanaian towns and villages involved in the codevelopment project and semi-structured interviews with 57 key organisation members, the Italian and Ghanaian office of U.N. affiliated agency representatives, project beneficiaries and local Italian and Ghanaian state institutions. A multisited ethnography of this arena hosting multiple actors sheds light on transnational brokerage by examining the setting in which brokers take positions and achieve results or lose power, thereby helping us to see the various actors with whom brokers negotiate, the legitimacy or representativeness they enjoy and their degree of autonomy. In 2007, I worked as a consultant for the think-thank[2] in charge of monitoring the MIDA Ghana-Senegal programme. After 6 months of applied research, I shifted to the role of academic researcher to carry out 2 years of ethnographic longitudinal analysis (Bloch, 2017) between 2007 and 2013 charting the rise, growth and end of the project. To shed light on the brokering practices and meanings through which Ghanaian migrants are drawn together in making and remaking the world they inhabit as well as the unexpected effects of codevelopment engagement, I also draw on some informal communication with long-term fieldwork contacts up to 2017.

While *Africoop's* legitimacy derived from development discourses, its engagement was shaped by its leaders' and members' biographical trajectories and experiences as well as their interactions with the local or national state, both concrete and imagined. *Africoop* broker-members were frequently seen as filling the gaps between political office holders and the population as well as between patrons and clients. In this study on the transnational brokering practices of an entrepreneurial diaspora committed to development, I propose to analyse the contested character of this perceived 'gap-filling' role in which resources, representativeness and ideas of development were enmeshed with self-interest, aspirations Appadurai (2004) and uncertainty. I thus explore *Africoop's* participation in and organisation of events, narratives and political lexicons using life histories, an approach that often allows an in-depth analysis of experiences, changing views, sudden changes in plans, expectations and perceptions (Yarrow, 2008a, 2011; Bellagamba, 2012). Indeed, biographies allow us to uncover diverse migratory experiences and access the deeper understanding of people's lives that emerges from them (Biörkman, 2021; Camenisch & Muller, 2017). All such accounts engage with repertoires of individual and collective meanings to explore tactics, hazards and power relations.

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[2]Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI) https://www.cespi.it/it

3.1 | Africoop in the migration-development arena

In 2002, the Italian office of an intergovernmental organisation affiliated with the United Nations (U.N.) supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a set of codevelopment initiatives involving Senegalese and Ghanaian migrants in Italy. Under the name Migration For Development in Africa (MIDA) Ghana-Senegal, this project sets up a network of migrant associations, third-sector organisations and local authorities (regions, provinces and municipalities) to technically support and cofinance income-generating projects. After several workshops and consultations with local actors, the intergovernmental organisation solicited submissions of entrepreneurial proposals that would engage West African migrants' social networks in the host and origin countries. *Africoop*—selected from among 82 applicants (IOM, 2006)—was established as a non-for-profit cooperative business in May 2006 by members of the Ghana National Association in a northern Italy town. Their vision was to found a diaspora-owned company aimed at promoting development in Ghana through commercial and social activities. Important international bodies such as the U.N. presented this case as a best practice for codevelopment.

The cooperative was nonprofit, adopting a fair-trade certified supply system for imported agro-foods and implementing development projects in the health and renewable energy sectors. Specifically, it imported fair-trade fruit from Ghana and exported Italian wine and a few types of cold cuts to Ghana, targeting new elites and expats as consumers. The cooperative was seen as enjoying impressive commercial growth, employing 11 people and reaching over € 4 million in sales in the first 3 years. In 2010, *Africoop* was the victim of fraud by one of its main customers, causing irreversible financial damage and internal conflict that led to its closure. The *Africoop* project was built on newly established beliefs about business-led solutions as a conscientious, inclusive and responsible way to achieve international development goals. Such beliefs were widely expressed in several policy documents worldwide (e.g. UNDP, 2004; World Bank, 2005) and underpinned initiatives such as the U.N. Global Compact and UNDP Growing Inclusive Markets Initiative.[3]

By promoting *Africoop*, local Italian authorities and international bodies continuously asserted these beliefs in their discourses and rhetoric.[4] In addition, the company used a social cooperative model, suggested as the most appropriate for '*sustainable income-generating activities for the community with a pro-social character*' (Ceschi, Stocchiero, 2006: 21). The fact that *Africoop* was a social cooperative granted it significant legitimacy in the Italian setting, as this business model was very common in its local context (Borzaga, 1996). Meanwhile, this business model based on principles of mutual-aid, solidarity and democratic decision-making allowed the project to combine its entrepreneurial features with development goals, idioms and narratives.

Although Ghana began privatising its state-owned enterprises in the late 1980s as part of a shift led mainly by foreign investors (Appiah-Kubi, 2001), the image of the private sector as an engine of growth and development and source of solutions to social problems did not emerge in the country until the 2000s (Amponsah-Tawiah & Dartey-Baah, 2011; Kragelund, 2004). Ghana has maintained a postcolonial royalty payment system called 'development tribute' linking private enterprises to local authorities (African Peer Review Mechanism, 2005), and it is in the framework of this system that local political authorities—chiefs—manage economic and political capital and that companies' social engagement is conceptualised locally.

In this market-led development scenario, *Africoop* came to represent the Ghanaian entrepreneurial diaspora engaged in development at a transnational level. As businessmen committed to development, *Africoop* members—as migrants—displayed their 'indigenous knowledge' of both Ghana and Italy to connect up people and networks. In so doing, they opened the international market to Italian players and brokered resources in both entrepreneurial and social contexts. In applying the concept of 'indigenous knowledge', I refer to Yarrow's (2008b) argument that chiefs, elites and development workers mediating between Western and indigenous knowledge in Ghana possess a twofold

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[3]For the UN Global Compact, see https://www.unglobalcompact.org/; for the UNDP Growing Inclusive Markets Initiative, see http://www.growinginclusivemarkets.org/.

[4]See "When investment is not just about economics" for an article about *Africoop* in its magazine cfr. Pandya, 2006.

identity and combine distinctive signs—such as traditional clothing and western status symbols—and Big English (Hasty, 2005) by mixing erudite spoken Western language with Ananse stories and proverbs and technocratic language. Yarrow suggests that the opposition is contextually mobilised by actors and notes that, in Ghana, it is indigenous knowledge that has had the most currency and widest circulation among development workers, chiefs and the communities hosting development projects and also newspapers and radio reports.

I extend this argument to analyse how *Africoop* represented itself as embodying the indigenous knowledge of both migration contexts. From this perspective, *Africoop* bridged meanings about and representations of development players across the two countries while translating the business model of social cooperative into a migrant NGO in the Ghanaian context. As part of this translation process, the coop was able to build consensus through the repertoires of development by maintaining a degree of autonomy, as I show below in describing its brokerage practices. Capturing the social scientific category of diaspora, however, it alternatively referred to itself mainly as a diaspora expert in the countries of both origin and destination. The cooperative asked the then-President of the Ghanaian Association in Italy (COGNAI) to be a member of *Africoop*, thus displaying a dual loyalty and achieving a high degree of representativeness through community-based mobilisation at the local and national levels in Italy.

In Ghana, there has long been intense political tension between state institutions and diasporic groups around migration. When Kufuour became president in 2001 thanks in part to support from Ghanaian citizen abroad, he launched a string of initiatives and policies aimed at fostering domestic development by involving diasporic communities. Beginning with his inaugural speech, he invited diaspora groups to re-invest their skills, transnational contacts and economic resources in the homeland, painting a picture Ghana as home and emigrants as compatriots and addressing Ghanaian migrants to Western countries as development agents. Ghana's postcolonial state has recognized dual citizenship for emigrants, experimented with databases of the biological and personal data of Ghanaian migrants or citizens of Ghanaian origin (the transatlantic diaspora) and promoted development policies; however, inefficiently implemented, these projects have framed migration and development as a policy spectacle (Kleist, 2015) symbolically connecting diaspora groups to the homeland and controlling migration. Italy has no national codevelopment policy, and in spite of the policy framework established by the new Italian co-operation law,[5] the state provides little guidance on a number of issues that are crucial to migration.[6] In contrast, local governments in the several northern Italian regions that have come to host Ghanaian migrants since the 1980s have been decisive in designing codevelopment policies.

3.2 | Sketching biographical trajectories

In the invited space of migration and development, *Africoop* became a transnational development broker translating and mediating resources and ideas within the neoliberal framework that shapes the parameters and opportunities of development. How did *Africoop* leaders inhabit this neoliberal frame at the personal level? How did organisational and personal levels interact in brokerage dynamics? Contemporary studies of brokerage have shown that personal and institutional ties may be rather tenuous (Lindquist et al., 2012) and that it is analytically fruitful to consider various scales. To explore how *Africoop* brokerage played with and displayed the intertwining of the personal and public, I focus first on the biographies of leaders and then on the organisational level, examining the status shifts, aspirations and contested tactics *Africoop*'s main representatives deployed to empower Ghanaian migrants in Italy and Ghana.

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[5]Law 125/2014.
[6]https://www.oecdilibrary.org/sites/414fc592en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/414fc592-en

3.3 | Obeng

Obeng joined *Africoop* and began supervising its activities in Ghana when a former leader was ostracised from the codevelopment project and local Ghanaian association for nontransparent dealings. The Ghana National Association chose Obeng as the new leader for his reliability and high level of education; these traits[7] were considered crucial for the acquisition of new entrepreneurial skills as well as maintaining relations with both local and national institutions and the supranational organisation that cofunded the codevelopment project in the initial phase.

The first time I met Obeng, we spent 2 hours talking in the kitchen of his home. We retraced his migration experience from its beginning at a Vatican meeting he took part in as the secretary of the Catholic bishop, a relative of his. Obeng left Ghana, his university programme and a good job to move to Italy in the hopes of becoming a successful entrepreneur. To come to Italy, he put his trust in a person he met at the Vatican, but the promised job turned out to be only low-paid work in the country's south. The disappointment and intense isolation he suffered in that small rural town drove him to reach out to Ghanaian contacts in various Italian regions, and he eventually moved north. There, he lived a harsh life, working informal jobs and sleeping in abandoned buildings before finally securing blue-collar work in a local industrial plant. After 2 years, he decided to follow a friend's advice and, with the friend's help, moved again, this time to a medium-sized town in Emilia Romagna inhabited by numerous Ghanaians linked by strong solidarity networks. In this town, he found a job as a warehouseman that paid better than past jobs in Italy had. This financial stability allowed him to marry, have children and develop close relationships with many other Ghanaian migrants through participation in the local migrant association. Thanks to his good reputation, he was asked to serve as a leader of the *Africoop* entrepreneurial project, and he accepted this new role with all its uncertainties.

> 'As a warehouseman I earned more than I am earning with *Africoop* and I work more than before but this work is what I have always wanted to do. Right now in Ghana I have meetings in the Accra hotels with politicians, diplomats, business man and in Italy as well I can meet famous people, politicians and journalists or people like you who ask me for interviews … As a warehouseman I never could have this chance. Now I can go back to Ghana, to my family and my uncle being proud of myself as migrant'
> (Interview, June 2008).

Obeng was in charge of the entrepreneurial growth of *Africoop* on the Ghanaian side, and so he frequently travelled back and forth from Italy to Ghana. Economic uncertainties and his lower wages as an *Africoop* employee were compensated by business relationships and enhanced status. This element of Obeng's story embodies the upward social mobility assumed to derive from brokering (Bierschenk et al., 2002; de Jong, 2018) and reveals the paradoxes of transnational migration (Nieswand, 2011). Obeng described how the types of commercial products *Africoop* traded allowed it to connect with businessman, diplomats, high-level state officials and expats in Ghana as well as large retailers, high-level bank officers and politicians in Italy. Obeng's trajectory and aspirations clearly illustrate how migrants' mobility across Italian internal borders is also caught up with shifting status (Schuster, 2005) and social prestige. Moreover, thanks to his *Africoop* role, he was also appointed as chief of development (*Nkosuhene*) (Bob-Milliar, 2009) in the Apam district, and under this mantle of traditional authority, he brokered resources and political space to achieve a reputation as a trusted businessman. The positions of 'successful migrant' and 'trusted businessman' are very common elements in political careers in contemporary Ghana (Lentz, 1998; Marabello & Pellecchia, 2017).

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[7](Fieldwork journal n. 2), 2009.

3.4 | Alex

A 52-year old Fanti man, Alex, was *Africoop*'s president. He began university at Legon, and there he became involved with several Christian student groups but without ever formally joining any. In the 1980s, as a child of the Ghanaian elite pursuing plans to live in Europe, he dropped out of university to fly to Switzerland and, when his tourist visa expired, moved to southern Italy. He soon settled in Emilia Romagna, obtaining housing thanks to a Catholic organisation and actively participating in local life through the church committee. He changed jobs several times, working as a carpenter, in ceramic factories, and finally as a storekeeper until he became a successful entrepreneur as the head of *Africoop* and, more recently, a trade union employee. He was elected president of the local branch of the Ghana National Association, running it for almost 20 years and thereby coming to be recognised as a community leader by association members and local Italian institutions. Local institutions in Emilia Romagna often solicit the participation of migrant associations in civic initiatives, granting such associations a role in governing migrants and their needs at the local level by setting up consultation bodies populated by foreigners even though these migrants are not entitled to vote in Italy.

Over the years, Alex has always been involved in local political debates over migrants' rights issues, for instance, by sitting on the migration-related committee of a local state institution and local trade union. Moreover, as a trade union leader, he strengthened his negotiating skills and ability to represent a group while learning to effectively exert social pressure, focusing on migrants' rights in Italy and development goals in Ghana. Indeed, Alex's involvement in *Africoop* strengthened his already influential voice in Italian public space. As a transnational development broker and successful entrepreneur, Alex has used his personal position to address the inequality of migrants in Italy, speaking out against racism, the gangmaster system and violence against migrants illegally recruited into agriculture work without rights, social services or decent housing.

In the shifting Italian landscape, migration as a political issue is mainly framed as a matter of emergency response, and migrants navigate differential inclusion in the larger society. Thanks to his transnational broker position, Alex gained legitimacy with local and national state institutions, economic actors and supranational organisations. He was thus able to translate claims for rights into an idiom that proved 'palatable' (Demir, 2015) for an Italian audience. He was the leader invited to talk to national and international conferences and events organized by the UN and its affiliated agency on the diaspora's role in development, but he was also invited to events aimed at enhancing the internationalisation of Italian companies. In the invited space of migration and development, Alex slotted himself perfectly into the position between institutions and communities in the host country, however, but he did not use this position for personal gain or to establish patron-client relations. Indeed, when Alex was asked to recommend Ghanaian women for an Italian banking office job associated with the project, he circulated the information widely throughout the town and Ghanaian associations to find the right people for this well-paying and unexpected job for migrants rather than treating it as a favour for him to disburse. Moreover, he used his broker position in the arena of migration and development to empower Ghanaians in Italy, deploying his neoliberal 'successful entrepreneur' identity to address the political concerns of migrants in Italian society. Alex translated ideas of development across local, national and international levels. In so doing, he brokered streams of capital and gained trust from very different economic and social actors while gaining a position from which to speak for migrants in the Italian context. Alex's particular position can be linked to his biographical choices and aspirations as well as to the specific local context of migration.

As development brokers, Obeng and Alex elevated their personal status and, by virtue of being recognised in the public sphere as engaged entrepreneurial diaspora actors, they were able to improve the social mobility and labour conditions of Ghanaian migrants in Italy. Thanks to the codevelopment project, Ghanaians in Emilia Romagna gained visibility and opportunities to access unanticipated jobs (in banking, as *Africoop* members and labourers, as nurses for private medical services) and higher education (the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia devoted a number of scholarships to second-generation migrants for a Master's degree in Business and Administration).

Both of the brokers are well-educated compared with the level of most Ghanaian migrants in Italy. It should be noted that, from the 1980s onward, southern Europe became a new destination Ghanaian migrants, drawing mainly emigrants from urban centres who held high school or university degrees (Manuh, 2006); from the late 1990s onward, they came mainly from rural areas, lacked formal education (Riccio, 2008) and tended to be younger, as a consequence of family reunification.

Moreover, both of their social nets were embedded in Catholic networks, which helped them to create multiple relationships in Italy at the local, national and transnational levels. Indeed, following the advice of an Italian *Africoop* partner, Obeng and Alex met a very important Cardinal in Ghana—now the Prefect for Integral Human Development office at the Vatican—who for some time was in the running to be elected as the first black Pope.[8] *Africoop*'s Catholic connections and orientation shaped its position at the national and transnational levels, for instance, as described below, by channelling the resources of an Italian market player towards a Catholic Hospital in Ghana.

Although both of them navigated precarious and uncertainty, the coop leaders embodied, assembled and performed ideas of migrants as responsible for the development of their country of origin. Through status shifting and mobility across Italian internal borders (Schuster, 2005), they strengthened their social networks, displayed mixed loyalties (De Jong, 2018) and filled gaps in the state-market relationship, finding various ways to reuse their broker positions after the codevelopment project ended.

When *Africoop* folded, Obeng moved back to Ghana and strategically deployed the relationships and contacts he had cultivated to open a new (but short-lived) import–export company.[9] In recognition of his influential voice, an Italian left-wing party invited Alex to run for national office in a position that, if elected, would have made him Italy's first-ever black-skinned member of parliament.[10] Burdened by personal debt and exhausted by the uproar surrounding *Africoop*'s closure, however, he declined the invitation to participate in electoral politics, paradoxically preferring to remain temporarily unemployed. Banking on the renewed trust and support from Italian local authorities, the project's economic and social partners and the U.N. affiliated agency that had initially funded *Africoop*, Alex then attempted (ultimately unsuccessfully) to create a new, hybrid economic organisation more explicitly focused on development cooperation.

3.5 | Brokering development and representativeness

The polymorphous *Africoop* project offers an opportunity to delve more deeply into brokerage, exploring how entrepreneurial individuals—Obeng and Alex—empowered or supported the contextualised communities they brought together.

In this section, I describe organisational level brokerage to argue that *Africoop* was not a mere pawn in the global discourses of the migration and development field but rather a skilful development broker and translator (Lewis & Mosse, 2006). By analysing organisational brokerage, I show how *Africoop* succeeded in speaking out for migrants' rights and creating opportunities for social mobility; at the same time, however, it also displayed a Janus-faced nature, reproducing power asymmetries in terms of both gender inequality and the development relations between Italian donors and Ghanaian economic capital recipients. Speaking directly to the theme of this special issue, I present some ethnographic vignettes drawn from participant observation and interviews to look more closely at the accountability aspects of *Africoop* brokerage. Specifically, I show how the organisation performed its representativeness and monopolized the flow of goods and information in order to maintain a space of decision-making for itself.

Thanks to its entrepreneurial character, *Africoop* was able to represent the market as an opportunity for social change, simultaneously facilitating migrants' engagement and women's empowerment. At least at the level of

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[8]https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/03/01/pope-benedict-cardinal-peter-turkson-africa/1957701/
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/11/pope-resigns-live-reaction
[9]Fieldwork journal n. 12, 2016.
[10]Personal comunication 2013, fieldwork journal n. 13, 2017.

member's and supporter's narratives, enrolling women as organisation members and/or beneficiaries was framed as a strategy for pursuing gender equality as defined by international and national institutions. When I asked Alex if *Africoop* had felt any pressure from the U.N. affiliated agency or Italian partner to involve women, he said:

> We need to demonstrate that we believe in progress, in taking care of community needs, in gender equality and social development. Progress, development and equal opportunities are related to our mission and commitment as diaspora. The women are important in our community, we take care of them, and when it is necessary, we speak on behalf of them. *Africoop* is an enterprise, and we would like to buy some palm oil from a women's group in the Volta Region. Also in the village, we enrol a number of women as farmers and workers. Through business, we want to export development and gender equality to Ghana (Interview, April 2009).

Shifting the focus from discourse to concrete action, however, the picture appears somewhat different. The project to buy palm oil from the women's group was never actually initiated, and the female workers in the village of G. S. were paid very low wages, half the daily amount paid to (male) farmers. *Africoop* women—*socie*—were related by kinship and affinity ties to the male members. Although formally entitled to do so, the women did not actively participate in decision-making processes. Gender equality was asserted as a predominant development narrative, but the organisation leaders merely reproduced the discourses of development agencies and Italian institutions by bringing their wives into the cooperative in a sort of formal, rather than substantive, gender equity. Women, on the other hand, explained their participation in development by referencing ideas of marriage and family, relationships depicted as having been acquired through migration. These elements can be seen in the following extracts from interviews with Magdalene and Shelley:

> Africoop belongs to the Ghanaian community of the town where I have always lived in Italy, my husband has an important role in the community. Naturally, I had to become a 'socia', especially when they asked for women's participation. I am very proud to be part of the project; I feel I am doing something for my people here and in my country
> Our leaders said that we are the diaspora, and as such we need to do something for women if we want to become a trustworthy organisation in Italy (Interview, January 2009).

> My husband signed me up and paid the money to allow me to become an Africoop 'socia'. I think that it is a good initiative, I am happy to do something for my people in Ghana but I help my husband whenever I can. He was unlucky at first in Italy, but now, through the project, he is able to become an entrepreneur, an important man with a good job. He was so happy when the project started. He had the opportunity to meet politicians, entrepreneurs, the Italian Prime Minister and the former president of the U.N. ... It seems unbelievable to have such a chance in Italy, where the people run when they see you. When they see black people they hold on to their bags tightly ... I have to support my husband to enable him to enjoy a good reputation in the community – it is important to demonstrate that your wife supports you (Interview, March 2009).

The women legitimised gendered political asymmetries and formulated a context-appropriate explanation for their participation in the codevelopment initiative. In the town where *Africoop* was established, local Italian state institutions depicted the Ghanaian family as a site of cooperation and harmonious relations between genders and generations and as essentially nuclear. This romantic if not downright stereotypical representation has been highly influential in the Italian political debate on family composition to date. The multiple elements it deploys (naturalisation of the nuclear family, overlap between family and household, and the presumed cooperative redistribution of resources within it) not only conceal existing ties but also generate a specific social representation that

Ghanaian groups recognize as particularly highly regarded in Italy. Wifely respect and helpfulness thus took on increased value in relation to the Italian cultural landscape as well as the Catholic context.

Furthermore, research examining postcolonial developments in African gender politics finds that the conjugal role has been used in politically strategic ways in recent Ghanaian history (Mama, 1995; Newell, 2005; Van Naerssen et al., 2015). Viewed in this light, *Africoop*'s concrete practices did not enact gender equity. Instead, they tended to translate these values into political repertories that proved effective in both countries. Indeed, in brokering and enmeshing ideas on gender relations from both the Italian and Ghanaian contexts, *Africoop* tactically strengthened its representativeness without effectively fostering social change or impacting gender power relations. In terms of the power asymmetries that *Africoop* reinforced in the course of brokering resources and ideas of development, I show that the organisation's representativeness and ideas of belonging as well as its strategic distance from local Ghanaian political authorities allowed it to carve out a space for itself as well as to monopolise the flow of goods and information.

In Ghana, *Africoop* engaged and negotiated with local chiefs over land for a plantation and brokered resources from an international NGO and a private company for a photovoltaic infrastructure. In addition, it brokered a 'philanthropic' investment from a large-scale Italian retailer involved in building an emergency ward for the Catholic hospital in Apam. In Italy, this initiative was labelled corporate social responsibility (CSR), earning *Africoop* and the retailer partner an Ethic Award. By negotiating to secure land for rural economic investment and arranging philanthropy reframed as CSR and development-oriented goals more specifically, *Africoop* managed to gain recognition as a development broker. The organisation was active in translating and enmeshing idioms (Demir, 2015) and also in carrying out negotiations with Ghanaian local-traditional political authorities—namely, chiefs, who are recognized in postcolonial Ghana as well—in deciding how funds would ultimately be used. As Alex described:

> We represent Ghanaian migrants who have worked to save up this money, and now we have found a funder who might help us build a photovoltaic system with the capacity to illuminate not only the building but also the school and street. But we certainly cannot tell the donors that we are going to illuminate the chief's house. They want to know what we do with the money; let us know and we will talk with the donors to understand how to proceed (Interview, April 2008).

In this case, the political representatives in question were local chiefs. In its efforts to maintain an autonomous space for deciding how resources would be used, the cooperative employed well-known development language to carefully distinguish the role of broker from that of donor. According to *Africoop*, the most effective way of relating with local political authorities was to retain decision-making power for itself. *Africoop* cited this decision-making power as a way to acknowledge local authorities while preserving the investment in development. The village chief instead described *Africoop*'s decision-making power as wider in scope and tending to reproduce asymmetrical donor-recipient dynamics as part of a development plan designed by western actors, here embodied by migrants.

> … they decided to build a solar plant to give light to the village (…) They showed me what they thought of doing and they asked me whether we would like that kind of energy (…). They decided everything on their own. (Interview with Nana K., May 2008).

The construction of this solar energy plant was not negotiated between the company and the chief, and neither was its impact on the local community evaluated. In fact, only 2 years after the plant had been built, the government installed electricity lines in the area. The cooperative decided on its own, channelling donations from a public campaign and private capital from an Italian bank to the project without consulting the specific needs of the Ghanaian village in question. In mediating among the Italian and Ghanaian contextual resources deriving from private capital streams, *Africoop* took a more mundane and capitalist goal and embedded it in a typical top-down development model clothed in the rhetoric of sustainable development.

This project helped *Africoop* enhance its credibility in Italy even though it was presumably engaged in development in its country of origin. Moreover, it is worth recalling that development has become a new resource for political authorities in Ghana, a resource they use to reinvent their role by refashioning development discourses and more generally, controlling resources, knowledge and registers of political action (Kleist, 2011). Yarrow (2008b) specifically notes that political authorities have succeeded in framing development as a new economic and discursive resource, incorporating an idea of 'indigenous knowledge' into relations with international actors and thus presenting themselves as new and committed 'modernizers'. He finds that a variety of actors insert themselves as 'mediators' between these manifestly distinct ways of knowing, that is, 'indigenous' and 'western' forms of knowledge. Extending Yarrow's argument, I suggest that migrants embodying such 'indigenous knowledge' in the arena of codevelopment compete with chiefs and local political authorities in Ghana while acquiring opportunities to empower Ghanaian migrants in Italy and gain recognition as representative and accountable actors.

Finally, by brokering development across Italy and Ghana and representing itself as a mediator and member of communities across borders and the 'indigenous knowledge' of both contexts, *Africoop* was able to mediate political relationships at the national and transnational levels. Specifically, the organisation was invited to major conferences on migration and development held at the U. N. headquarters in New York and Geneva and took part in the 2008 Venice Forum 'Migration from National, European and Global perspective' where, alongside European politicians and institutional office holders, the *Africoop* leader spoke right after British Prime Minister Tony Blair. The migrants involved in this project, recognising the sphere of codevelopment as offering them an opportunity to negotiate their roles in both the society of origin and that of immigration, deployed the 'competence' and 'benevolence' they had acquired by virtue of living elsewhere as well as their ability to broker knowledge and resources. In Italy, thanks to their brokerage and entrepreneurialism, as mentioned above, the *Africoop* board was invited by national state institutions and government entities to mediate in promoting the internationalisation of small- and medium-sized Italian enterprises, thereby generating new chances for social inclusion, migrant participation and upward social mobility.

On the Ghanaian side, the organisation members likewise developed credibility in the eyes of governmental and political institutions. *Africoop* as a development broker moved along the blurred border between state and market: It even created a brand called MIDCO (Migrant Initiatives for Development in the Country of Origin) to access an ethical-trade market niche by brandishing itself as an example of migrant engagement in development and loyalty to the country of origin. In doing so, *Africoop* as a representative of the entrepreneurial diaspora was able to speak out in Italy, showing how migrants seen as subaltern subjects can be part of the country by mediating resources, chances and aspirations.

4 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, I have analysed the agentive practices of a codevelopment project named *Africoop* erected in the invited space (Cornwall, 2004) of supranational and national institutions. I have shown how *Africoop* inhabited the indistinct fault lines of state-market relations by brokering private capital, ideas of development and personal networks through the mobilisation of a Ghanaian diasporic community. *Africoop* became a development broker by assembling institutional discourses and grassroots practises as well as cultural expectations circulating in both Italy and Ghana, taking advantage of the fact that contemporary Ghanian society celebrates an ethos of self-entrepreneurialism. Furthermore, by embodying the dual 'indigenous knowledge' of both contexts, *Africoop* was able to present itself as representative and accountable in the arena of development. As such, it competed with political authorities and civil society actors to direct resources and information. This case thus illustrates how Janus-faced brokers act in plural and contradictory fields by mobilising moral imaginaries of commitment and loyalty that are reinforced and translated in the entrepreneurial idiom of development. In the local Italian context, *Africoop* asserted a space for migrant visibility and helped migrants garner both recognition and social mobility by gaining access to the national and transnational public sphere. At the same time, however, I argue that *Africoop* reproduced both gender

asymmetries and power inequalities among Italian donors and Ghanaian recipients, blending social hierarchies and rhetorics of empowerment to step into the migration-development arena as a broker.

By observing the organisational level of brokerage and the career trajectories of the two main leaders, I have examined the interweaving of personal biographies, social position and choices. However the two leaders' careers cannot be seen as a linear process of status advancement; rather, they navigated the uncertainty surrounding the project's end with very different values and behaviours. This fact allows us to deconstruct the recursive image of broker as untrustworthy actors wholly focused on maximising individual gain (Lindquist, 2015: 9) and instead suggest a more nuanced approach that looks at the frictions and contradictions among which brokers emerge and act.

By tracing the emergence, growth and end of the project, I have attempted to widen the temporal window of analysis in a way that also reveals status shifts and the unexpected effects of brokerage beyond the life of the codevelopment project itself. I have shown how personal aspirations and networks were moulded in the codevelopment project in an effort to combine the model of a social enterprise, the entrepreneurial ethos of development and migrants' claims. Lastly, as a social enterprise born out of a migrant association, *Africoop* is a rare case for deconstructing the false dichotomy of grassroots do-gooders versus self-interested economic actors.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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