

# NGO brokers between local needs and global norms: Trajectories of development actors in Burkina Faso

Cultural Dynamics

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## Abstract

Local NGO brokers in Africa and beyond negotiate and mediate between (inter)national donors and potential beneficiaries within their communities. They translate local needs into development projects to make them suitable for international donors. This article looks at two main conditions that influence their work: First, windows of opportunity, which open and close according to structures and institutions beyond their sphere of influence; and second, their personality and skills. Based on two case studies from Burkina Faso, this article offers insights into biographies and life stories of such brokers where engagement leads to a distinguished lifestyle that contains aspects of cosmopolitanism and distinctiveness.

## Keywords

broker, Burkina Faso, development, life trajectories, NGO

## Introduction

In Burkina Faso, as in many countries in West Africa and beyond, numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and development associations<sup>1</sup> have recently been created that involve a whole range of brokerage activities by their founders. These NGOs and development associations have become an economic branch of their own and a major employment market. In many urban environments, they are the only alternative to the limited job offers in private enterprises, the vast sector of trading and the most sought-after civil service. The creation of these organisations is related to a twofold crisis: the persistent high rate of unemployment and the state's inability to provide basic services and satisfy its citizens' needs. This article examines the ways in which individuals make

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a living by founding such organisations and what it entails to be a broker, in other words their personal or individual pre-conditions and possible ‘typical’ life trajectories.

Scholarship on development brokers has examined how they negotiate and mediate between potential beneficiaries and specific target groups within their (often rural) local communities on the one hand and potential donors such as the state or foreign donors, ranging from the World Bank to smaller national NGOs, on the other hand (Bierschenk et al., 2000, 2002; Brüntrup-Seidemann, 2010; Fechter, 2019; Jacobs, 2014; Koster and van Leynseele, 2018; Mosse, 2005; Mosse and Lewis, 2006; Neubert, 1996). These brokers recognise local needs and translate them into development projects to make them suitable for globally operating donors. In fact, they also often ‘create’ these needs and formulate them in accordance with available funding. Due to their ability to navigate the space between the state, NGOs and local communities and to channel resources (money, infrastructure, material, knowledge, etc.) within this space, these individuals can be understood as brokers that connect the local and global contexts (see introduction to this special issue). In this role, development brokers translate literally, technically and rhetorically between their social environments, whose needs they pack into development projects, and international donors, who have their own rules and regulations for executing and administering projects (Stirrat, 2000). Because of these conditions, NGOs in Burkina Faso often resemble enterprises when their founders blend ideals of ameliorating different target groups’ living conditions with creating pertinent job positions for themselves and some employees, often friends or family members. Such creative solutions are the result of strategic decisions of members of global development institutions, the national government and the Burkinabe citizenry. Thus, NGO founders are not mere representatives and multipliers of the civil society but also entrepreneurs and employers, businesspersons and brokers. The development broker thus acts at the interface between politics and economics. As such, this picture of civil society comprises aspects that differ significantly from those propagated by the organisations that promoted the founding of NGOs in the so-called Global South and that have financed them ever since, such as the World Bank and other international donors of different scopes. Whether and the extent to which these measures strengthened civil society in Africa is a question scholars intensively discuss (see, e.g. Bruhns and Gosewinkel, 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999; Daniel and Neubert, 2019; Ekeh, 1994; Haberson, 1994; Lewis, 2002; Osaghae, 2006).

My findings are based on 7 months of fieldwork in Burkina Faso between 2016 and 2018. I am interested in biographies, strategies, narratives and lifeworlds of Burkinabe citizens who founded their own NGOs. With very few exceptions (Hilhorst, 2003; Kalfelis, 2020; Lashaw et al., 2018; Michael, 2004), actor-centred anthropological research on NGOs is still rare as the focus is usually on structural analyses and questions of success and failure.<sup>2</sup> My empirical data derive mainly from participant observation and biographical interviews with different development actors. I conducted interviews with the founders and staff of NGOs and development associations, attended several meetings, and spoke to some beneficiaries. In doing so, I engaged more closely with two NGOs – one in Banfora, in the west, and one in Ouahigouya, in northern Burkina Faso. I was interested in their organisational development, their motivation and strategies for acquiring money and the working conditions and lifeworlds (Jackson, 2012, 2017) of their founders and staff. I observed the active role of these founders as well as their

entrepreneurial skills and sense of economic activity. My contribution to the debate on development brokers highlights two often-overlooked aspects: First, the biographies that foster becoming a broker and the trajectories that evolve out of this position; and second, a particular lifestyle that emanates from these activities. Brokerage serves as an analytical tool to illustrate that, in the development context, these activities enable social mobility for some, while enhancing economic inequality and power imbalances for others.

The article is divided into three sections and starts with the two conditions of successful brokerage: The first is windows of opportunity. I explain how I define these in the development context and how they play out in the NGO boom. The second condition is the personality and skills of development actors. In the second section, I give general insight into the challenges of this working environment, its most recent developments and its perception within Burkinabe society, which leads to issues of moral ambiguities. In the third section, I introduce two development brokers who have outstanding personalities, remarkable skills and obligations. Their biographies and the trajectories of their NGOs are closely intertwined and their work entails several moral ambiguities. I conclude by tracing the specific lifestyles that emerge in this working context, which I characterise as distinct and cosmopolitan.

## **Windows of opportunity for brokerage**

Although it is difficult to define success and failure in NGO activities, two conditions seem to be decisive for them regardless. Yet, successful brokerage and the successful implementation of a development project are not necessarily the same. The first condition is set by other actors, not by the brokers themselves. Brokers highly depend on windows of opportunity that are created and changed by structures far beyond their sphere of influence; they are set by (inter)national politics and periodic modifications change the brokers' working conditions. In Burkina Faso, as in many neighbouring countries, NGOs intervene in areas such as health, education and poverty reduction, because the state does not provide these basic services. These interventions are not limited to basic services, but extend to raising awareness about topics such as women's empowerment, protecting children's and youth's rights, and the environment. Yet another area of NGO activity is capacity building through training in agriculture. Ultimately, the state seems more content with the existence of the NGOs and development associations than with that of private commercial enterprises, although one is not always clearly distinguishable from another (Lewis and Schuller, 2017: 635).

Most African countries implemented the structural adjustment measures that the World Bank imposed from the 1980s onwards. These measures reduced the state apparatus, led to the privatisation of state-owned companies and greatly reduced young people's opportunities to find secure employment in the civil service. The idea that private entrepreneurship, that is, the number of small and medium-sized enterprises, would almost automatically increase as a result, is to some extent true, but it fell far short of expectations. In Burkina Faso, these measures started in the 1990s, because Thomas Sankara's government (1983–1987) opted for a political programme based on 'self-reliance' that had clear hints of socialism. It refused any guidelines set by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Later, under president Blaise Compaoré (1987–2014),

Burkina Faso adopted the structural adjustment measures (Harsch, 1998, 2017), which led to a youth unemployment crisis that has increased in urgency ever since. This is especially true for Burkinabe university graduates. Formerly, a diploma guaranteed academics would be recruited as civil servants after graduation. This ended when recruitment was drastically reduced and wages were frozen (Calvès and Schoumaker, 2004). What was once regarded as ‘society’s educational elite has turned into today’s image of university graduates as potential troublemakers and future unemployed masses’ (Birzle and Ludwig, 2015: 147). In 2014, the unemployment rate for university graduates was nearly 25% (Institut National de la Statistique et de la Démographie, 2016: 8), which resulted in dissatisfaction and desperation of young people and led to social upheavals. That year, the youth expressed their discontent with the highly frustrating labour market in several riots, an escalation of their long-standing complaints about the government’s general inability to create job opportunities for them (Hagberg et al., 2017: 65–67). Furthermore, the high rate of youth unemployment is rumoured to be one of the reasons that terrorist groups in the Sahel could successfully recruit new members of late (De Bruijn and Both, 2017: 789–790).

In line with these attempts to fight for a democratic political order, the World Bank promoted further measures during the 1980s to reduce the state’s influence and strengthen civil society. It proposed the creation of NGOs (Lewis and Schuller, 2017: 635) and associations for self-help, encouraged the state to legalise them and promised subsidies for development ‘from below’. It encouraged civil society actors to join forces in these organisations. Unlike in the private sector, numerous NGOs and development associations were founded within a short time. Since participation has become one of the most important principles in development, NGOs are extremely relevant partners in contemporary international cooperation (for a critical analysis, see, e.g. Aziz and Kapoor, 2013) and are indispensable for implementing measures designed by donors from the so-called Global North. In 2019, 321 NGOs and development organisations were duly registered in Burkina Faso, about 50 of them local organisations. In 2017, their estimated investment was 130.27 billion XOF (~200m EUR).<sup>3</sup> Thus, a specific momentum emerged from the World Bank’s incentives, which launched a competition for funding in this sector that further increased the country’s external dependence. As my findings show, the Burkinabe civil society is not simply the passive recipient of development aid and donations, but has organised itself in such a way that it benefits from these measures. As a result, the founders of NGOs and development associations are resourceful entrepreneurs (Röschenthaler and Schulz, 2016) who benefitted from the opportunities that the donors’ policies offered, became entrepreneurial and created jobs for themselves and many others.

## Personality and skills of NGO brokers

Personality is the second decisive condition for setting up and maintaining NGO activities and becoming a successful NGO broker. Through their own agency (Ortner, 2006: 144) and abilities, brokers make use of the aforementioned windows of opportunity set by others. I will first refer to general tasks and challenges of NGO work, before going into the latest tendencies of professionalisation, the perception of this kind of work in

Burkinabe society and the pervasive problem of moral ambiguities that arise in this context.

### *Requirements, tasks and challenges*

For a better understanding of the typical tasks and requirements of NGO actors, it is helpful to shed light on the set-up of these organisations (for a brief overview, see Knodel and Spindler, 2018: 45–47). Most NGOs begin as one-person operations, in which the founder is responsible for many, if not all, aspects in addition to translating the rhetoric of international development cooperation into local contexts. They have to plan and execute projects, and tackle budget-related tasks such as accountancy, financial planning and acquire funding from various levels, for example, individuals, enterprises, ministries, embassies or international sponsors. They give the NGO a name that suggests trust and potential. They are responsible for documenting everything in forms and photographs because, as one founder of a development association stated as she showed me the huge number of pictures on her laptop, ‘What hasn’t been photographed, didn’t happen’ (interview, Banfora, in May 2016).

NGO brokers regard themselves as part of civil society and interpret their responsibility as identifying societal deficits that the state fails to recognise, let alone remove, because of their sheer number. To point out the deficits that the state is responsible for, NGO brokers have to be creative and strategic in how they formulate them and whom they address for financial and/or infrastructural support. This depends heavily on the project’s target group, for example, women, orphans, farmers, the elderly or prisoners. An NGO’s target group may change from one project to the next, although they face pressure to select one or two fields in order to be efficient and credible. Additionally, it is very difficult to earn a living within an NGO as donors often do not pay for labour costs, projects are limited in time and the future of these structures is often uncertain. Thus, some actors continue to dedicate their time and energy to an NGO merely hoping for future payment and a permanent position. In the meantime, they have to hold other jobs to make a living, which requires creativity and flexibility, too.

NGO brokers have to handle discursive tensions when addressing possible donors: They have to present the target group as vulnerable and in need of support, yet present themselves as highly qualified, reliable and capable of administrating the project. They are entrepreneurs whose reputation and networking abilities are more than decisive for securing their own job and those of their employees for whom they are responsible. Their ability to build up personal trust among both donors and the local community determines their long-term success. I witnessed brokers’ omnipresent effort to secure resources and strengthen their network first-hand when I attended a monthly meeting. I had accompanied this NGO’s work for 3 weeks and held several conversations with its founder and president, when, during one of their meetings, they projected a list of people and their new responsibilities and positions onto the wall. To my surprise, I had been put in charge of foreign relations without my knowledge. Of course, I could not object in this situation without openly offending someone who had spent a lot of time and shared plenty of knowledge with me. This was an impressive example of how flexible and pragmatic NGO brokers are in broadening potential resource-relevant networks.

### *Professionalisation and competition*

The economic branch of development is becoming increasingly professional, competitive and neoliberal. Founding and setting up a development association is easy at the beginning. Long-term maintenance and successful leadership are more difficult, though. This leads to competition between the brokers as well as between the brokers and the government, which is also looking for good ideas to set up projects and cooperate with donors. This competitive setting adds to development brokers' vulnerability and the ongoing instability of their positions (see introduction to this special issue). It also results in a hierarchy of development associations and NGOs according to the scope of their activities as well as the reputation and image of their project partners and donors; some become big players, while others permanently struggle to keep their organisation afloat. As the number of NGOs is permanently growing, competition and the question of legitimisation are becoming more important and resulting in a professionalisation of the whole domain (Lewis, 2016: 90). Thus, this once informal sector is meanwhile showing indications of formalisation and bureaucratisation as well as the tendency towards NGOisation, which some researchers view critically (Saunders and Roth, 2019: 141).

As the competition for resources among NGOs is constantly increasing, development actors feel the need to work on their performance, especially regarding the paper work they have to do and their public relations. Therefore, NGO brokers have to be creative, flexible and versatile and participate in specific trainings that help them make their NGO more trustworthy, efficient and credible. Most of them persistently increase their knowledge and become increasingly qualified. Many brokers are impressive examples of life-long learners who constantly expand their resource pool. These trainings fuel the industry's growth, as they require people to teach the courses and share relevant information and knowledge. Often this means paying for a training without knowing if it will ever be rewarding in the future. One of my female interlocutors was like a walking archive. Whenever we met, she carried several bags of papers, documents and certificates that proved all the trainings she had attended ranging from nursery and cooking competitions to hydraulics engineering and well maintenance. The same is true for the prepayment of activities. These development actors have to be willing and financially able to pay out of their own pocket for the first projects in order to build their network and to promote upcoming project proposals. In the introduction to this special issue, we highlighted the high costs and investments some brokers make in order to maintain or prepare their future activities. Another promising way to improve one's public image and perception is cooperating with artists and other public personalities, so that both sides can mutually benefit from each other's reputation.<sup>4</sup> Such alliances have proven successful, as one such alliance led to the latest upheaval and dismissal of the former president, Blaise Compaoré, who was forced to resign his post and flee the country in 2014 because of a national uprising.

### *The perception of local NGOs in Burkinabe society*

NGOs regard themselves as part of a civil society that is responsible for spotting deficits that the state is unable to either notice or remove. As such, they focus on local and

general needs. As one development association founder put it: ‘The state is unable to provide everything [we need]. It also takes civil society that points to deficits and then asks for support to remove them’ (interview, Banfora, in May 2016). Development actors refer to a vision or imagined future that they want to realise together with the state – although this relationship comes with certain frictions. In this imagined future, the state will be able to fulfil the needs of its citizens. Until then, NGOs have to support it. For this reason, they consider it fair that the state provides them financial and infrastructural assistance because they are working towards the same overall aim.

Burkinabe citizens are aware of the numerous NGOs in the country, but they claim that few actually work well and correctly. Many NGOs are inactive or have a reputation for being corrupt or serving very few individuals instead of the official beneficiaries. An interviewee estimated that roughly 8 out of 10 NGOs only work to earn money for themselves. The insolence of some ‘development actors’ is expressed in stories that circulate about families that masqueraded as an orphanage when potential donors came to visit: the father pretended to be the director of the institution, the mother the secretary and their own children together with some children from the neighbourhood pretended to be the orphans. Mistrust describes the perspectives of all of the involved actors: NGOs are mistrustful towards the state and vice versa. Citizens mistrust NGOs, and NGOs mistrust each other. International donors mistrust local NGOs and often spend just as much money monitoring a project as they do implementing that project.

The huge number of NGOs results in jealousy and competition for limited resources. Some NGOs complain about others’ bad practices that spoil the sector’s reputation. They call them untrustworthy and only interested in money, say that they would only attend trainings that include per diem payments, and label them unwilling to invest any prepayment despite being able to. Some interlocutors summarised the brokerage activity of NGOs: good NGOs work for the development of the society, bad NGOs work for their own benefit. NGOs on the other side claim that in order to function and be effective they need a population that is capable of understanding and appreciating the NGO’s work. This is a rather complex requirement that may leave one wondering who is responsible for the creation of this population – if not members of the civil society themselves.

### *Moral ambiguities and how to handle them*

One crucial point for evaluating NGOs is their initial motivation to set up the organisation. They will be judged on their vision and whether they had reasonable objectives. Another criterion is the name (and logo) of an NGO. When I showed two friends a long list of NGO names in order to know whether any of them sounded familiar to them and whether they could tell me something about their activities, they automatically judged them based on their names. They insisted that the name reveals a lot about the seriousness of an initiative. For example, the name *Valorisation des Ressources Naturelles par l’Autopromotion* (Enhancing the Value of Natural Resources through Self-Promotion) was considered unserious, because of the expression ‘self-promotion’. My friend wondered what it actually meant and supposed that it was just used to sound important, but did not inform about the actual goal. The name *Association de Soutien aux Enfants en Circonstance Difficile* (Association for the Support of Children in Difficult Circumstances) was also suspicious.

'Do not all children in this country have a difficult childhood?' one of my friends asked succinctly. The name *Association Femme 2000* (Women's Association 2000) served as proof that people create something today and forget about it tomorrow. My interlocutors assumed that the members had named their association after the year of its founding, which shows no vision for the future. Even less appreciative was the judgement of *Association des Amis de Blaise Compaoré* (Association of Blaise Compaoré's Friends). It was unclear what would happen to this NGO once Blaise Compaoré was no longer president. My friends called this a cheap strategy to win money. Another development association I know changed its name from 'Association' to 'Foundation' because they thought it sounded more resilient. Unfortunately, it learned that a foundation has to pay higher taxes and thus it ultimately kept the name association.

Indeed, many citizens complain in a very generalised way about the lack of credibility, mismanagement and fraud in relation to NGOs. The various training opportunities offered by experienced members of civil society and NGOs promote openly normative and idealistic claims, such as: (1) The motivation to create an NGO has to be intrinsic, coming from inside the community or group. When it is imposed from outside, activities will stop as soon as financial support ends. (2) The NGO's administration must avoid monopolising power as well as shifting from common objectives to individuals' objectives. (3) It has to guarantee transparency.

This tricky situation of NGOs is related to their official doing good, which is also part of their narrative. At the same time and in contrast they are creating and maintaining jobs for themselves and their network of family and friends. A credible balance between altruism and self-interest is of great importance to every development broker (Fechter, 2012). A reputation as being trustworthy and reliable is one of the biggest challenges and part of brokers' indispensable moral capital. This almost paradoxical situation is made of two intertwined aspects that are characteristic of many brokers (see introduction to special issue): NGO brokers empower their communities and the groups of beneficiaries to take hold of international donor funding. However, they are also individual profiteers of this position in a social, economic and often even political sense as will become clearer in the next section. In a country with high unemployment, especially of young and well-educated people, working in an NGO can be a strategy to get out of passivity and the difficult status of waithood (Honwana, 2014: 30–32). Founding a development association is one strategy for entering the labour market in Burkina Faso. Many actors first try to become civil servants. If they are unsuccessful, they invest in commercial activities, but the advantage of development associations, over private enterprises, is that they do not have to pay taxes. Well-educated people have the option to set up a development association or to volunteer (Prince and Brown, 2016: 12–13, 18–19), and wait and hope for opportunities to use this structure for rewarding projects. Later, they hope, they may be able to broaden and strengthen their network, to get in touch with international donors from Europe, Asia or America – to become a broker.

## Biographies and trajectories of brokers

In terms of the second condition for successful brokerage outlined in the last section, the biographies of development brokers (see introduction to this special issue) have largely

been ignored although their trajectories are strongly intertwined with the history of their NGOs. Becoming a broker is one important step on their career ladder. It grants them more prestige, and allows them to accumulate more representative positions and responsibilities within their communities and beyond. This section introduces two brokers, who are important development actors. By looking closely at their career paths and biographies, I shed light on how the history of their organisation and their life stories are connected. Next, I highlight possible lifestyles that emerge out of broker activities in the development sector. Successful development brokers have a very strong sense for the starting point of their NGO. They are able to cite their vision and easily recall a key moment in their lives that serves as the beginning of their commitment and as a founding myth of their association: a personal encounter with the neediness of a certain peer group becomes a very effective narrative over time.

Burkinabe often differentiated between good/successful and bad/unsuccessful NGOs, but it is also important to consider the social and economic backgrounds of their founders. Some development actors live in precarious conditions and truly depend on the income they can generate through the association without any solid economic basis. This is often true for people who try to use their commitment as a first career step after their university degree. In such cases, creativity and weakness as well as insecurity go hand in hand. Other development actors get involved in the domain, but have safe positions as civil servants (Shivji, 2007: 30–31), as the two following examples will show. They have to balance their job or quit in order to become a fulltime broker, which is often a risky decision. Survival in this context requires a lot of tactics and strategies that could change at any given moment depending on the dynamic field of international development. This situation requires resilience – a capability to persist and to offer resistance against all odds.

### *Two successful development brokers*

This section briefly introduces two development actors, who are successful brokers (names have been changed): Salamata Kaboré is a very religious, Muslim, Burkinabe citizen between 40 and 50 years old who grew up in Ivory Coast and came to Burkina Faso for her final secondary school examinations. She is the founder and president of her own development association headquartered in the western part of the country, and which operates nationwide. She is a civil servant in the field of education. She created her association in 2008 and works with children (orphans, girls affected by unwanted pregnancy, street children), women (the most vulnerable, widows), elderly people and prisoners. Her association's office is located right next to her house. It consists of two rooms with technical equipment, benches and documents. Our first interview was conducted at her desk, but when I came to speak to her again, she always worked in her courtyard in an extraordinarily beautiful garden – and this seemed to be the place where most visitors would expect her. The office building was a strong symbol for her association's seriousness and potential because S. Kaboré had paid for the land, materials and construction work out of her own pocket.

She founded her first association at the age of 15 when she was still in Ivory Coast. Her father's business went bankrupt and she set up the association back then to deal with

the sudden suffering of the former female employees, whom she wanted to empower. Her next associations engaged in Islam, and later in the environment. She says that she has helper syndrome that she inherited from her mother, who took care of people suffering from mental illness. S. Kaboré studied philosophy at the University of Ouagadougou and worked at different places before she settled down with her husband in the town where I met her. In 2016, she was enrolled in a master's programme in project management. S. Kaboré was dynamic, restless, involved in a multitude of tasks and always on mission.

Although her professional work and associative engagement concern overlapping fields, she emphasised that these two fields should be kept separate. This proves difficult in practice, as she is sometimes invited to the same event as a representative of her service 1 day and as a representative of civil society the next day. She has been officially recognised and appreciated as an expert on multiple occasions: she is a spokesperson for Muslim women on a national level and was invited to the US to be honoured for her engagement for street children.

Her Muslim faith is one of her main motivations, she said. She has travelled to Mecca twice: once as a pilgrim and once as a guide for other pilgrims. Her house is full of Islamic decoration and outside of her home she dresses in the style of a pious Muslim, always wearing a headscarf. Interestingly, some women who regularly come to S. Kaboré's courtyard to ask for advice or participate in a micro-credit group wear a headscarf too, even though they are not Muslims. Others come explicitly to pray in her courtyard. She privately organises Islamic training for young women, the name of her association is easily identifiable as having Islamic roots and most members seem to be female Muslims. Member meetings end with prayers and benedictions. She is guided by Islamic values such as sociability and community and thinks that they are crucial for nation-building processes. With the help of influential Muslim proponents, she acquires financial support from Arabic and Muslim countries.

Financial support also comes from partners in France and Italy as well as family members in Switzerland. During my stay, she successfully submitted a project proposal and received financial support of 6100 EUR from the Ministry of Finance to aid women in the production of shea butter. She also purchased two hectares of land, where she plans to build an orphanage. Nevertheless, she labels her association as small and complains that bigger structures are always, as she said, favoured when it comes to granting funds, which hinders the development of smaller associations. After accompanying her from one place to another for a whole day, I told her exhaustedly: 'Not everyone is able to do, what you are doing'. She replied with a smile and great sincerity: 'That's true, it is a gift (*French: don*)'.

The second development broker whom I present is Vincent Sawadogo. He is the founder and president of his NGO that engages mainly in agriculture in the northern part of Burkina Faso. Although he died in October 2017, I was able to talk to his son, who took over the management several years ago, and to many of V. Sawadogo's (former) colleagues. He was highly educated when he started to attend to the farmers' concerns. He grew up in a rural environment during colonial rule, became a teacher and later counsellor and school principal. His first political engagement in a youth organisation gave him his first opportunity to travel abroad, to Bamako in neighbouring Mali. As colonial

rule was ending in the late 1950s, plans emerged to restructure the educational system and V. Sawadogo was invited to France for professional training. There, he was introduced to the concept of development and decided to dedicate himself to this project. Educating the children of farming families was one of many challenges after independence. V. Sawadogo innovated the education sector and enabled the rural youth to improve their education and training.

Due to climate-related issues in the post-independence period, young Burkinabe farmers increasingly emigrated to the neighbouring coastal countries with better working conditions. The droughts of 1968 to 1971 reinforced this trend. The population constantly grew, but the harvest was insufficient. People hungered while the environment deteriorated. V. Sawadogo constantly communicated with French experts and received an invitation to continue his training in Paris. However, he concluded that the knowledge he acquired there did not match the lived realities of the farmers whom he was trying to support. As I read in his biography (see below), he then started his own investigations, using anthropological methods and interview techniques, going from one village to another, searching for the farmers' understanding of what had changed over the years and why, and what could be done to make the youth stay and improve the living and working conditions. Through these exchanges, he and his interviewees subjects (re)discovered a long-standing system of solidarity, once well established in the local communities, that is based on a specific organisation of groups, wherein the members support each other. From then on, this idea formed the basis of V. Sawadogo's activities and he co-founded the movement of indigenous knowledge, re-evaluating traditions and eco-farming long before it officially emerged.

He founded his association in 1967 and it was later recognised as an NGO. Over the years it became a large enterprise with many employees. From its headquarters in northern Burkina Faso, it expanded its activities all over the country, becoming one of the most important farmers' organisations in West Africa and later part of a transnational programme that received international acclaim. In 1977, V. Sawadogo received his doctorate from a French university with a thesis on precisely these traditional farmers' groups. Much later, a Burkinabe novelist published a biography about his life and achievements. He is said to have brought many innovations and changes to behavioural patterns and food habits to the region. He held several official positions during his professional life and received many (inter)national distinctions.

In the 1990s he accepted a candidationship as mayor in his town, endorsed by the Minister of Agriculture of the then-ruling party. They both profited from this arrangement, as V. Sawadogo finally held an influential political position and the minister was assured support from numerous farmers in his own province of origin. Although his colleagues and friends were well aware of V. Sawadogo's long-standing political ambitions, they claim today that they opposed his candidationship. They might have had different motivations but, in retrospect, they seem to be right to a certain extent. They reason that this decision weakened the NGO and was the beginning of V. Sawadogo's problems. After his legislative period his mandate was not prolonged and his name did not reappear on the ballot – possibly because his enormous popularity frightened the government. Disappointed, he switched to another party and asked his followers to join him. The Minister of Agriculture threatened to put an end to the NGO and inner tumult unsettled

the organisation. Subsequently some of his big development projects ended. This might have been due to the minister's influence or the withdrawal of international donors, who did not approve the political engagement of NGO brokers, which they deem to be contradictory or even condemnable.

Becoming NGO brokers was an important step on the career ladders of development actors such as S. Kaboré and V. Sawadogo. It helped them receive prestige and accumulate representative positions and responsibilities <within and beyond their communities. S. Kaboré is a spokesperson for the Muslim women on a national level, while V. Sawadogo became mayor of his town. But their position as a broker does not prevent them from losing fame and fortune if they do not measure up to the different expectations that come with prestigious tasks. V. Sawadogo's case is particularly telling in this respect: he started as a civil servant in education, switched to becoming a part-time development broker, changed to a successful full-time broker at some point, and then became a politician, lost his mandate and remained a renowned though weakened NGO broker for the rest of his life.

These two case studies illustrate crucial aspects of brokerage within the development sector. Most prevalent are private investments as prepayment, the entrepreneurial character of the organisations, the cultivation and damage of the founders' image, credibility and sincerity that enable and guarantee work-relevant networks as well as their embeddedness in certain religious and economic backgrounds (see introduction to this special issue) that, in turn, inspire, empower and promote these organisations. These founders' relationships to their community members exhibit aspects of patron-client relationships (Gazibo, 2012; Paine, 1971) but also of a (morally superior) role model. The intertwined profession and commitment as well as the inseparability of the private and public person is remarkable. The entrepreneurial character of the second NGO is further underlined by the fact that V. Sawadogo handed his NGO down to his son at the family's request and not to an employee or long-time companion. Employees reported to me that as V. Sawadogo's son had previously worked in the free market economy, he initially found it difficult to get started, and he likely perceived the new responsibility as a challenge at least at the beginning.

### *Lifestyle: cosmopolitanism and distinctiveness*

Some of my interviewees, especially the big players with successful projects and several years' worth of work experience, are impressive personalities, who are outstanding in what they do, how they act and even how they dress (from chic to individualistic). They are often charismatic, powerfully eloquent and articulate; they have huge networks (see also Yarrow, 2008) and have travelled extensively outside of Africa. Their regular interact with European, Middle Eastern or American cooperation partners and their journeys to these countries lead to a cosmopolitan way of life that contrasts with the community in whose name they operate.

The successful brokers that I encountered played the role of outsiders to their respective communities with regard, for example, to their education, religious devotion and migratory history. This means that from the outset they were not fully part of their communities. S. Kaboré is a so-called *Diaspo*, as she grew up in Ivory Coast and came to

Burkina Faso for her final school year. As most *Diaspo*, she has a slight sense of superiority and is convinced that her background puts her in a good position to affect positive change to the country, although, as she puts it, the ‘mentalities are not the same’. Her piety underlines her trustworthiness. The situation is similar for V. Sawadogo, whose educational and economic background was also very different from the group for which he advocated. A PhD-holding teacher, fluent in French, who travelled to France several times and worked exclusively in education as a civil servant, he was socially distant from the peasants that he supported. Despite the physical closeness, one cannot ignore the difference in the standard of living and conduct of life between V. Sawadogo and the people who later joined his NGO.

Furthermore, these brokers’ semi-professional dedication to development often leads to a reinterpretation of their social role within the private context. They do not feel the need to adhere to the social obligations that are binding for others. For example, when it took too long to find where a distant colleague was celebrating their wedding reception, S. Kaboré left the group with the statement: ‘I am campaigning for human rights. I just cannot waste my time with such insignificant actions’. She preferred to go home and recover before leading an awareness campaign for youth on sexual education and unwanted pregnancy. Given the Burkinabe context where maintaining good social relations and greeting even distant acquaintances is a serious obligation, this dismissal is noteworthy.

Taken together, social conditions, personality and biographies form the basis for understanding development brokers. The broker position results in a cosmopolitan and distinctive lifestyle that is supported by accumulated privileges, capacities and resources. Successful brokerage in the development sector promotes social mobility and the emergence of local elites. Astrid Bochow links her case study of young professionals working in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention to the discussion of an emerging middle class in Africa:

The case of Botswana shows how HIV/AIDS politics and international aid brought forward a proliferation of new professions and professional opportunities. As volunteer campaigners for HIV prevention, educated urbanites were most often motivated to save their nation, siblings, friends, and parents from death. Their transition from volunteers to members of politically relevant professions was made possible by the government’s deployment of enormous sums of domestic and international funding . . . But their activism does not disrupt existing social hierarchies. On the contrary, activism on behalf of (unfortunate) fellow citizens in the name of social justice enables educated professionals to pursue new modes of social differentiation in their everyday lives. (Bochow, 2018: 170)

In line with this analysis and with reference to Rossi (2017), I would critically state that with development interventions – and against the development paradigm – the target community is divided into experts/consultants/aid workers and beneficiaries/participants/the poor (p. 16). Thus, brokerage partly reinforces social division and power imbalances and enhances social differentiation and economic inequality, instead of eliminating them. In this context, it is worthwhile to reflect on parallels between the role of these brokers and that of African go-betweens and intermediaries during colonial times (see Márquez García, this issue).

## **Conclusion**

I conclude with two insights that relate to the specificities of brokerage in the development sector. Creating NGOs is a competitive business, which is about entrepreneurship, convincing performance and flexibility, creativity and openness to new trends without appearing indiscriminate. Founders' ability to establish personal trust on both sides – donors and the local community – contributes to their success in the long run. In creating opportunities to legalise NGOs and development associations, the state has succeeded, without much effort, in ensuring that at least some young people are integrated into the job market. By requiring associations to register and regularly renew their licences, the state even earns fees. Through the development brokers' activities, forms of engagement have emerged that are different from those envisaged by the World Bank and from what is understood as civil society in the so-called Global North. Hence, with their promotion of NGOs, international developmental players have contributed to the emergence of remarkably unexpected and unintended effects that brokers have generated.

This article's findings resonate with many of the aspects in the introduction to this special issue, as reaching beyond existing scholarship on brokerage: a focus on life stories, biographies and religious as well as economic backgrounds, hierarchies and networks, investments, vulnerability and moral ambiguity. I will conclude with highlighting important similarities across my empirical data. Both ends of the developmental chain require brokers to communicate with each other to achieve goals. The beneficiary community greatly profits from the NGO packing its concerns into project proposals written in the language of the international donors and that follow the appropriate project logic: good arguments, clear sub-goals in appropriate time frames, evidence of successfully completed previous projects, and clear tables with detailed cost statements. The representatives of international NGOs from the so-called Global North need these brokers as contact persons, as translators and mediators, linguistically, rhetorically and for their internal institutional logic, and as individuals whom they can trust to be capable of implementing their projects on-site. These brokers have to handle distances geographically, culturally and concerning power, lifeworlds and modes of work. Interestingly, it seems as if the most obvious and most visible changes resulting from international cooperation on a personal level is achieved in the brokers' lives. Their emerging life trajectories and lifestyles can be regarded as a condensed picture, a prism of the interventions as well as the frictions they have to negotiate and the gaps they have to bridge along the way.

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## Notes

1. In October 2015, under a transitional government (2014–2015), the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation (*Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale et de la Décentralisation*) adopted the new law Loi N° 064-2015/CNT (Le Conseil National de la Transition, 2015) that differentiates between Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) and Development Associations (DA) based on criteria, such as the scale of activities, budget and certain financial obligations. International DAs have always been permitted to become NGOs if the scale of their activities grows; the former law forbade this for national DAs (Droit-Afrique, 1992). A certain hierarchical relationship between the two forms is inherent in this division.
2. For authors that have studied expatriates in the field of development, see, for example, Fechter (2007) and Mosse (2011).
3. According to the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Development / Directorate-General for Cooperation (*Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et du Développement (MINEFID) / Direction Générale de la Coopération (DGCOOP)*).
4. A prominent example is the *Le Balai Citoyen* movement (Romelot and Verriere, 2018).

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