

**Exploring the multi-level processes of legitimacy
in transnational social enterprises**

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ABSTRACT

Transnational entrepreneurship has emerged as a form of migrants' participation in the social, economic, and political lives of both their countries of origin and of residence. Leveraging increasing evidence about migrants' involvement in transnational social enterprises, we examine the multi-level processes through which organizational legitimacy is molded by transnational entrepreneurs to reflect country-level institutional settings, and how organizational-level legitimacy affects entrepreneurs' social status. We longitudinally examine the multi-level processes of legitimation in a transnational social enterprise operated by Ghanaian migrants across Italy and Ghana. We analyze secondary and ethnographic data for two years, observing how transnational social enterprises harvest moral and pragmatic legitimacy from the institutional contexts in which they operate. We study how entrepreneurs construe their social status through pragmatic legitimacy obtained from their transnational ventures, and their institutional environments inspired by micro- and meso legitimacy reconfigurations. We discuss theoretical implications for social and transnational entrepreneurship and practical contributions for policy-making.

KEYWORDS: legitimacy; entrepreneurship; social entrepreneurship; transnational entrepreneurship; migrants; ethnography; Ghana; Italy.

HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine the multi-level processes through which organizational legitimacy is molded by transnational social entrepreneurs
- Drawing on legitimacy perspectives, we analyze secondary and ethnographic data for two years
- Transnational social enterprises harvest moral and pragmatic legitimacy from the institutional contexts in which they operate
- Entrepreneurs construe their social status through pragmatic legitimacy obtained from their transnational social ventures
- Institutional environments are inspired to change by micro- and meso- legitimacy reconfigurations

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1. INTRODUCTION

As globalization continues to impact markets and societies in advanced and emerging economies, migration remains a challenge for scholars and policymakers through its multi-faceted, interlinked impacts on development, poverty, and environment (European Parliament, 2018; UNFPA, 2004). Many globally transformative processes and developments are conceptualized within transnationalism (Vertovec, 1999), defined as “the multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states” (ibid., p. 447). As a result of transnational linkages, new ways of conducting business activities have emerged, such as transnational entrepreneurship (Elo & Freiling, 2015)—defined as cross-border entrepreneurial processes initiated by migrants embedded in at least two social and economic arenas (Drori, Honig, & Wright, 2009). Studies demonstrate several positive outcomes of transnational enterprises: fostering international trade (e.g., Rauch, 2001), foreign direct investments (e.g., Gillespie et al., 1999), the development of an entrepreneurial culture in their country of origin (e.g., Saxenian, 2002), and job creation in host and home countries (e.g., Portes, Haller, & Guarnizo, 2002).

Moving beyond for-profit transnational entrepreneurship, an increasing number of migrants¹ are engaging in transnational social entrepreneurship, which involves using some form of commercial activities and business principles within dual social fields (i.e., home and host country), with the goal of solving development problems in the entrepreneurs’ countries of origin. Transnational social enterprises may be born out of individual migrants’ initiatives (e.g., Reyes, 2015; Timson, 2015; Greenhalgh, 2015), as well as out of public policy initiatives designed to sustain international development (e.g., Froy & Pyne, 2011). Transnational social enterprises

¹ Our focus is on South–North migrants and not South–South or North–South migrants. Therefore, we specifically deal with international migrants (and not domestic migrants) and focus on diaspora entrepreneurs acting between developing-country (home) context and a developed-country (host/residence) context (Elo, 2016).

operate across multiple institutional settings and represent new forms that emerge within a wider context of cultural, societal, ideological, and political dynamics, and appeal to a wide array of stakeholders at multiple levels (e.g., Rana & Elo, 2017; Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011). Given the multiple social actors, social contexts, institutions, and structures across which transnational entrepreneurs operate (Drori et al., 2009; Terjesen & Elam, 2009), the key issue of how they establish legitimacy for their companies remains an open question that we address in this study. To date, the literature has analyzed how nascent firms build legitimacy by either converging towards dominant institutional logics and beliefs in the macro-environment (which we define as a “macro-to-meso” legitimacy) (e.g., Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Fisher, Kotha, & Lahiri, 2016; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002); or alternatively through managerial agency, for instance engaging in strategic behaviors or using rhetoric and storytelling (which we define as a “micro-to-meso” legitimacy) (e.g., Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). The context of transnational social entrepreneurship offers the opportunity to apply these views in a novel way.

Transnational social entrepreneurs’ embeddedness in multiple institutional environments molds their understanding of themselves and their environment and imprints what is perceived as permissible (cf. Kogut et al., 2002). Transnational entrepreneurs are thus required to carry out commercial and social business activities by maintaining institutional relations (e.g., personal and business networks, political-economic structures, and dominant organizational and cultural practices) in home and host countries (cf. Yeung, 2002). Thus, we ask the following research question: *How is organizational legitimacy molded in transnational social enterprises to reflect the expectations of different institutional environments in entrepreneurs’ home and host countries?*

While attempting to legitimize their ventures, transnational social entrepreneurs overcome challenges related to their membership in two settings (home and host countries). For instance,

they may face costly “institutional acculturation,” i.e., exposure to and adoption of host country institutional roles and relationships (Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011). They must redefine their understanding of the home country business environment, or of their identity and social status—particularly after a prolonged migration period without frequent visits to their country of origin (Portes, 1999; Riddle, Hrivnak, & Nielsen, 2010; Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011). Thus, transnational entrepreneurs “are not simply passive adherents of institutional constraints” (Drori et al., 2009: 1003) but, rather, maintain embedded agency to facilitate organizational activities in given institutional contexts (e.g., Drori et al., 2009; Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011), engage multiple actors, and mobilize diverse resources to change social structures and perceptions (cf. Griffin-EL & Olabisi, 2018). Thus, our second research question is: *How do organizational-level legitimation processes affect individual legitimation and social status of transnational social entrepreneurs?*

Based on ethnographic research and combined management and anthropological perspectives, we examine a case that fits with recent trends in transnational social entrepreneurship. We focus on an enterprise established by blue-collar Ghanaian migrants in Italy who become social entrepreneurs through the initiative of a sponsored program to sustain migrants’ engagement for the development of their home countries. We study, qualitatively and over two years, the organizational processes of legitimation for this new venture, highlighting its complex unfolding rooted in micro-to-meso and macro-to-meso processes across multiple institutional settings.

Our study contributes to the theoretical understanding of the legitimization processes for newly established (transnational) social enterprises. Moving beyond previous research, we not only show that organizational legitimacy in transnational social enterprises is formed by harvesting legitimacy from the dual institutional contexts in which they operate (macro-to-meso legitimacy) but also that organizational legitimacy is accrued by transnational social entrepreneurs, who

construe their social status in these institutional contexts (meso-to-micro legitimacy). In addition, we find that these micro and meso legitimacy reconfigurations can bring about change in the entrepreneurs' institutional environments (micro-to-macro and meso-to-macro inspiration). Given the increasing relevance of transnational social entrepreneurship, our work has important practical implications for the sustainability of these initiatives, both those started autonomously by migrants, or sustained by policy support measures (e.g., Froy & Pyne, 2011; Soda & Bartolini, 2018).

The paper is organized as follows. First, we highlight the idiosyncratic issues of legitimation for transnational social enterprises and review the relevant literature on legitimacy of new ventures. Next, we introduce our interdisciplinary research design, followed by presentation of findings from our inductive analysis of field materials. We conclude by discussing results, highlighting key contributions to literature, and providing recommendations for policymakers.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The issue of legitimacy for new transnational social enterprises

To understand legitimacy for newly established transnational social enterprises, we need to consider their characteristics: (1) social entrepreneurial activities (2) operated across borders (3) by migrants who maintain embeddedness in at least two different social and economic arenas.

As social enterprises, they adopt commercial activities and business principles that generate revenues to achieve social goals (Doherty, Haugh, & Lyon, 2014). Social enterprises intrigue scholars as emergent hybrid organizations that must appeal to multiple audiences in business and social sectors to develop and maintain legitimacy (Battilana & Lee, 2014), thereby obtaining resources to evolve into a sustainable organization (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006). Studies on emergent social enterprises suggest that resource-rich actors shape social enterprise

paradigms and schemas (Nicholls, 2010; Lounsbury & Strang, 2009), which legitimize and influence social enterprises' goals, target market, and management principles (Dart, 2004).

As social enterprises operating across borders, transnational social enterprises likely tackle global social challenges by adopting international missions and operations (Zahra, Newey, & Li, 2014; Zahra et al. 2008), often being 'born global' (Oviatt & McDougall, 2005). As international entities, they engage in institutional pluralism (Kraatz & Block, 2008), obtaining legitimacy and resources by adapting to requests from different country institutional frameworks simultaneously (Kerlin, 2010; Zahra et al., 2008). Adaptation is required because different countries attach different meanings to the term "social enterprise" (e.g., Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Kerlin, 2013; Karanda & Toledano, 2012). In developing countries, especially in Africa (e.g., *The Economist*, 2010), this remains a poorly understood concept due to political, social, and cultural factors, and the collective understanding of the responsibilities of public, civil society, and international organizations (e.g., poverty alleviation as dependent on charity and grants from non-governmental organizations [NGOs] and development agencies) (Karanda & Toledano, 2012; Urban, 2008). In addition, what is considered an appropriate commercial transaction or a social mission success can be seen as a social construct, tied to political beliefs and powers, and developed by actors using different languages and practices (e.g., Dey & Steyaert, 2010; Parkinson & Howorth, 2008). International social enterprises face multiple (sometimes conflicting) pressures from global stakeholders (e.g., U.N. agencies) to respond to global social problems, and pressure to respond to local social demands from home- or host-country stakeholders (e.g., governments and communities) (cf. Hudson, 2001; Husted & Allen, 2006).

Lastly, transnational social enterprises are operated by transnational entrepreneurs, who are migrants enacting networks, ideas, information, and practices to explore and exploit business

opportunities in their origin and host countries, thus embedded in at least two institutional environments (Drori et al., 2009). Studies have suggested that transnational entrepreneurs are bifocal (Vertovec, 2004), i.e., able to focus on and compare their home and host societies to enact transnational entrepreneurship activities (Patel & Conklin, 2009). We argue that transnational entrepreneurs are key in the legitimation processes of transnational social entrepreneurial practices, given their ability to navigate dual country-level institutional contexts through “complex and dynamic use of culture for reconstruction of action” (Drori et al., 2009, p. 1008-1009).

In light of these considerations, we expect that constructing legitimacy in the context of transnational social enterprises will involve processes among the institutional settings in different countries (macro-level), the social enterprise (meso-level), and the transnational entrepreneurs who engage in understanding, reproducing, and acting on the institutional settings in which they are embedded (micro-level). We examine how the previous literature on organizational legitimacy can offer insights into a theoretical understanding of these multi-level complexities.

2.2. Legitimacy as a multi-level social process

Legitimacy has been defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Three main categories of legitimacy have been identified: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive, based on self-interest, normative approval, and expectations, respectively (Suchman, 1995). The socially constructed nature of legitimacy implies that the criteria for conferring it to an entity will be shaped by, and vary in, geographical and historical contexts. However, in transnational contexts, legitimation is more complex due to the dual background conditions and institutions within which it is constructed (cf. Hudson, 2001).

Because legitimacy is a problem in the construction of social reality, and is thus a collective process framed within a taken for granted system of norms, values, and beliefs (Johnson et al., 2006), it involves mediating individuals' perceptions and behaviors to explain and support the existence of a certain social entity (Berger et al., 1998; Johnson et al., 2006). Suddaby, Bitektine, and Haak (2017) refer to legitimacy-as-perception "as a cross-level sociocognitive process that works through the interaction of individuals' cognition and supra-individual social processes." (p. 463) In the literature about newly established social enterprises, the role of entrepreneurs in the construction of organizational legitimacy has, for instance, focused on the use of rhetoric and narratives (e.g., Parhankagas & Renko, 2017; Ruebottom, 2013). However, the understanding of actions between the "micro" and the "macro" has been, to date, largely overlooked in the empirical literature (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Herein, we argue that the organizational-level legitimization process entails recruiting and motivating actors—specifically entrepreneurs—at the micro level (see Bitektine & Haack, 2015). With social entrepreneurship, this is a relevant gap because focusing on the process of actor engagement is necessary to explain why individuals "buy in" to explanatory arguments for legitimating new practices. In addition, it is relevant because entrepreneurs make decisions based on their interpretation and reinterpretation of their positions *vis-à-vis* social entrepreneurial endeavors: individuals evaluate how to invest their time, and the anticipated benefits including status (Bitektine, 2011). How transnational entrepreneurs' harvest explanatory arguments to legitimize social entrepreneurial practices, and how they interpret their position and power are relevant to understand how they engage in legitimizing their social ventures.

3. METHODS

3.1 Empirical setting

We draw on a qualitative, in-depth study of a transnational social enterprise for which we use the pseudonym *Africoop*. This case has rare and unique qualities, making it an appropriate setting to build theory about poorly understood processes (Eisenhardt, 1989).

A not-for-profit cooperative aimed at promoting development in Ghana through commercial and social activities, *Africoop* enlisted migrant members of the Ghanaian Association in a city in Northern Italy within a program that we refer to as “Migration and Development.” This program was carried out by the Italian office of an intergovernmental organization affiliated with the United Nations (U.N.) supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The commercial side of *Africoop* focused on importing Ghanaian agro-food products, exporting Italian products, and managing a small plantation in Ghana. Commercially, it demonstrated impressive growth, employing 11 people and reaching over €4 million in sales in the first 3 years (although operating at a loss). Socially, the cooperative had a non-profit orientation, adopting a fair-trade certified supply system for imported agro-foods, and implementing development projects in health and renewable energy. Important international bodies like the U.N. presented it as a best practice for co-development. At the end of its third year, *Africoop* was the victim of fraud by one of its main customers, causing an irreversible financial loss and internal conflict, which led to its closure the next year. As detailed later, we explore the complex legitimacy processes in this transnational social entrepreneurship through multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) by tracking entrepreneurs and their ventures in different home and host-country settings. Below, we describe the Ghanaian and Italian contexts in our study.

3.1.1 The Ghanaian migration context in Italy

Ghanaians started to migrate to Italy during the 1980s, after the military coups d'état in Ghana

(1981) and subsequent economic downturn. Migration in the '80s was characterized by flows of educated asylum seekers leaving urban areas of Ghana (Manuh, 2006); the late '90s saw family reunification as well as young, primarily unschooled male economic migrants from rural areas (Riccio, 2008). The Ghanaian government formally recognized dual citizenship for migrants in 1997, allowing emigrating citizens to extend and maintain citizen rights in exchange for commitment to Ghanaian development (Owusu, 2000). In 2001, President Kufuor allowed the articulation of a new ruling class also championed by what the government defined as diaspora citizens. Since then, several measures to recognize Ghanaian migrants abroad, such as overseas associations, and accompanying political discourse, generated a social construction of the diaspora as an opportunity for Ghanaian development (Mohan, 2006). This process was influenced by local traditional political authorities, namely the *chiefs*. In fact, while many chiefs were migrants, they often tried to establish close relationships with emigrants to attract investments and resources for the development of their local community (Kleist, 2008; Nieswand, 2008).

Most Ghanaian immigrants in Italy settled in the north where most industrial opportunities occur. About 11,000 Ghanaians reside in the region where the cooperative was founded with almost 50% of migrants living in the province of the city where *Africoop* was established (Caritas Migrantes, 2018). This territory is particularly relevant to Italian immigration, with the second largest number of resident foreign citizens (12% of total residents) (ISTAT, 2018). The region's high immigrant population can be explained by efficient migratory chains and employment markets, and is accompanied by a generalized perception of immigration as a resource for economic development (Davoli, 2010; Marabello, 2013).

3.1.2 The Ghanaian context for social enterprises

Historical and political developments in Ghana had a notable influence on state–business relationships. A British colony until 1957, Ghana later developed into a one-party state with military *juntas* until early 1990s. The state–business relationships during that period were characterized by strong anti-capitalist discourse, state-led industrialization, poorly designed privatization programs, and corruption (Kragelund, 2004; Kraus, 2002). The privatization of state-owned-enterprises started in the late 1980s, mainly led by foreign investors (Appiah-Kubi, 2001).

In Ghana, the image of the private sector as an engine of growth and development, and solutions to social problems emerged only in the last decade (Amponsah-Tawiah & Dartey-Baah, 2011; Kragelund, 2004). The country maintained a post-colonial royalty payment system linking private enterprises to local authorities, called a “development tribute” (African Peer Review Mechanism, 2005). This system underscores the scaffold by which companies’ social engagement is locally conceptualized, and highlights the cognitive differences between companies and socially oriented organizations, such as public or not-for-profit organizations or NGOs. The meaning of social entrepreneurship is still in search of an appropriate social construction in the country (*The Economist*, 2010).

3.2 Research design

One author had access to the field because she had been recruited as a consultant anthropologist to evaluate the larger program “Migration and Development.” At that time, *Africoop* had been selected as a program participant and was starting its activities after a first preparatory year. The anthropological approach toward fieldwork was inspired by the “new anthropology of development” (Olivier de Sardan, 2007, 2016), which emerged in the 1980s² by viewing

² This subdisciplinary approach originated with the Manchester School (1950-1960) where methodological innovations and new research themes were introduced by Claude Mitchell (1969) with social network analysis and

international development projects as arenas for actors' actions, representations, and translations, and studying gaps between development programme policy and its implementation in the field. The researcher engaged in a "development project ethnography" (Lewis & Mosse, 2006; Mosse, 2004), to understand how a project works and how success is construed—rather than whether a project has succeeded. This approach combines diverse ethnographic techniques and a rigorous triangulation and recursive iteration among different groups of research interlocutors allowed to explore discrepancies of social norms and practices in a specific arena (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 1997). Ethnography, a "social practice concerned with the study and representation of culture" (Van Maanen, 2011: 219), aims to get as close as possible to the subjects' social context (e.g., everyday life, conversation) with prolonged interrelations between the researcher and the local population or social group (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The objective is to produce *in situ* contextual and transversal knowledge grasping the actors 'point of view,' practices, representations, and attributed meanings through intense and continuous effort to collect and keep records. Ethnography does not entail a standard methodology for data collection or textwork, thus making it open to a relatively improvised and situated model of social research (Van Maanen, 2010). Ethnographic anthropological inquiry, such as what we use in our study, from the outside, has been perceived as mysterious, fascinating, and subjective (Olivier de Sardan, 2015). We acknowledge that this method has advantages and disadvantages. In this study, ethnographic grounding allows closeness to micro and meso data, assisting with managing perspectives and theorizing about social and organisational processes without falling into a culturalism trap. In addition, following *Africoop*'s transnational entrepreneurs across spaces through a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), allowed us to investigate their world while acknowledging that their

Max Gluckman (1956; 1958), who focused on interactions among actors in different social worlds. Manchester School influenced African studies, social and cultural anthropology, and migration studies (Olivier de Sardan, 2007).

local realities were produced elsewhere and were constructing aspects of the system (e.g., macro-theoretical concepts and narratives) itself (Marcus, 1995; 2012). On the other side, ethnography is characterized by a non-linear process of knowledge-making and co-production of reality between the ethnographer and those being studied (Mauksch et al., 2017). Because “the researcher can never be ‘free’ of culture, discouse, or existing theory” (Watson, 2011), the ethnographer, (i.e., a *bricoleur*), tries to maintain a reflexive balance between involvement and detachment, and engages in reflexive ethnographic writing, so that the content can be situated and appreciated in context (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008).

Attempting to bridge methods and epistemologies for an interdisciplinary dialogue and disentangle the vagueness of anthropological data production, we describe how the ethnography was produced and newly interrogated by the authors with different disciplinary backgrounds.

3.2.1 Data collection

Negotiations to access the fieldwork were based on the anthropologist’s previous knowledge of the Ghanaian context as a development consultant and researcher for an NGO, Ghanaian National Institutions, and an academic institution³, as well as the initial consult for the “Migration and Development” programme. When data collection began, the anthropologist first tried to understand the company by collecting secondary data and obtaining primary retrospective accounts from company representatives and external stakeholders. She then collected data during an 18-month ethnographic field study, consisting of 15 months in Italy and 3 months in Ghana. The fieldwork followed the development of *Africoop*, mainly taking place in Italy during this period given the evolution of the organizational structure and social networks of the venture and its entrepreneurs.

³ Fieldwork research in Sefwi Wiawso under the supervision of the University of Siena and Ghana Museums and Monuments Board.

Due to the dialogical nature of ethnographic fieldwork, the anthropologist made sense of her position in the “field” as influenced by features and circumstances that could impact the identity politics within fieldwork (Olivier de Sardan, 2015), such as gender, nationality, age, previous experience in Ghana, and professional position with respect to the project. In particular, before the ethnographic fieldwork she was, for six months, a consultant in charge of evaluating *Africoop* as part of the “Migration and Development” program. She later continued the fieldwork as an academic researcher, and therefore had to re-negotiate her position and to clarify the widening of her interest towards the community and the practices of co-development, well beyond the company and the program. In addition, the visibility gained by *Africoop* during time at national and international level influenced the supposed power unbalance between the anthropologist and the entrepreneurs. One company leader, with whom the researcher maintained significant contact after the company’s failure, acted as a gatekeeper during the fieldwork. Building trust relationships with other cooperative members and the Ghanaian community involved in the programme in Italy took place slowly over time, via participation in several formal and informal activities of *Africoop*: for instance, daily work-related company activities; monthly meetings of the Ghanaian association; social dinners and events; religious gatherings (e.g., Holy Masses); institutional project activities. She also participated in national and international workshops and conferences where *Africoop* members or other subjects involved in the program “Migration and Development” had been invited to speak. Data were collected via of participant observation, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, and secondary sources, as summarized in Table 1. Participant observation took place mainly in the relevant major cities where the company was operating in Italy and Ghana, as well as peripheral cities and towns. Field observations were recorded in notebooks shortly after observation sessions, usually within 2-3 days. Field notes included thick descriptions of what the

anthropologist saw, heard, did, thought, and felt, accompanied by her reflections and interpretations. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 57 key actors, such as partners, employees, customers, and suppliers; members of Ghanaian associations; cooperative members' relatives; politicians; and policymakers. In fact, whereas *Africoop* entrepreneurs were key informants, other interviewees were selected as the inquiry developed to provide a deeper understanding of the context. Ethnography is based on a structured partiality and incompleteness in research designs (Marcus, 2012) that is constantly readjusted and enlarged to produce consistent knowledge of the subject. Some of the most relevant informants were interviewed longitudinally; other interviews were carried out collectively. Many of the biographic interviews were conducted in the final phase of fieldwork, after having established trust and gained preliminary insights through participant observations, and having clarified her interest in expanding the research beyond the company. Depending on the informants' preferred language, the interviews were conducted in Italian, English, or Twi (Akan)⁴ and, when possible, were recorded and transcribed. Additionally, extensive secondary data were available from several sources (e.g., documents from the Chamber of Commerce; media; other researchers; international organizations) covering *Africoop* activities contributing to the understanding of these entrepreneurs' practices. These extensive data allowed us to follow the entire life of the *Africoop* initiative, from implementation to its (unexpected) end.

-----*Insert Table 1 about here*-----

3.2.2 Analyses

⁴ The choice of interview language depended on the interviewee's educational level and the social context in which the interview was conducted, with the goal of avoiding power dynamics due to the researcher's use of language. The researcher was assisted by a translator (external to the project) but considering her experience within the Ghanaian context she could follow the information exchange during the interview in Twi language.

In this study, the ethnographer followed the principles of development project ethnography (Lewis & Mosse, 2004; Mosse, 2004) to investigate migrants' practices of co-development through a social enterprise, not to pursue the paper's focus (i.e., legitimization processes in transnational social enterprises). To study our research questions, we retrospectively interpreted ethnographic field materials by applying an interdisciplinary perspective. Our empirical approach entailed a collective, interdisciplinary analysis and interpretation of extensive data, requiring us to select relevant information from hundreds of pages of documents, field observations, interviews, and interpretations, and to derive a conceptual framework to explain observed processes. To explain the investigated legitimization processes with theory, we followed a two-stage process.

First, like previous studies (Evered & Louis, 1981; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), we adopted a dual-researcher approach: an "outside" researcher not exposed to the field experience revised the data with the ethnographer, complementing her interpretation. Data were divided according to their reference to institutional contexts of relevance (e.g., international, Italy, and Ghana) and were ordered chronologically mirroring *Africoop's* development. The anthropologist, using ethnographic analytical techniques, carried out first-order coding to note themes and patterns in events and informants' accounts. The process used descriptive, observational data, often rendered through analytical codes using informants' words (Agar, 1980). The "outside" researcher engaged in first-order coding independent from the ethnographer by reviewing field notes, interview transcripts, and secondary documents, generating descriptive accounts in the form of quotations, excerpts, and memos for each category (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The two researchers then compared their coding systems to define relevant, common categories according to their own (disciplinary-driven) points of view. Working as a team, they developed an account of *Africoop's*

story and first-order coding categories, together with selected ethnographic segments of field notes or interview transcripts⁵ that represented identified categories.

Second, all authors met for intensive sessions of data analysis and theory building. The team agreed to use legitimacy as the theoretical lens to explain the observed processes of organizational legitimization and individual status enhancement. Data were formally organized according to two dimensions: levels (micro, meso, macro), and temporal-spatial phases of *Africoop* transnational development (Italy, Ghana, return to Italy). The team examined the data and discussed ways to approach legitimacy, building on previous literature; it concluded that the data drew on two broad frameworks to handle legitimacy—process and perception (Suddaby et al., 2017). Within each, we noted the independent, relevant social processes of legitimacy and status attainment occurring primarily in the micro and meso levels (Johnson et al., 2006)—this became evident in our discussions with the ethnographer. Next, the two researchers involved in first-order coding discussed patterns of convergence and divergence in the identified dimensions, engaging in axial coding—the search for relationships among concepts to summarize them into a limited number of conceptual themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) able to explain the legitimation processes of interest. These findings were again discussed with the full team. Categories and themes are shown in Figure 1 and detailed in the Findings section, supported by evidence in the online supplementary materials (Table A1 in Appendix, keyed to Figure 1). Albeit challenging, this analysis fits anthropological research methodology: ethnographic materials are recursively submitted to several cognitive and interpretative investigations (Ellen, 1984). We experimented with presenting our empirical study by enhancing our anthropological research, yet providing stratified data triangulation, i.e., collected from several informants (e.g., members of *Africoop*, suppliers, clients, employees) and

⁵ All excerpts of interviews and secondary data will be in English; translations from Italian and Twi language are ours.

sources (e.g., primary and secondary data). Indeed, our study presents detailed accounts of events and actions, which were analyzed by multiple researchers to construct linear, more detached, and interdisciplinary a-posteriori findings (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Drori & Honig, 2013).

-----*Insert Figure 1 about here*-----

4. FINDINGS

Using our empirical interpretation procedure, we developed a model of multi-level and multi-sited processes of legitimization in transnational social enterprises (see Figure 2). We now discuss each part of the model, reporting on key excerpts from our field notes.

-----*Insert Figure 2 about here*-----

4.1 At the outset: Emergence and set up of the initiative

To launch the “Migration and Development” program, the U.N.-affiliated organization in Italy sought migrant communities to engage in the emerging program. The Ghanaian Association in a Northern Italian city was targeted to take part in this capacity-building process, suggested by local institutions and social scientists as a reliable association already active in both local and transnational cooperation (Stocchiero, 2004). After several workshops and consultations with local actors, the “Migration and Development” program was launched, issuing a call for entrepreneurial projects that could engage migrants’ social networks in host and origin communities, specifically targeting West-African communities in Italy. *Africoop* participated in the call for proposals and was selected, together with another 11 projects, from the total of 82 submissions (IOM, 2006).

4.1.1. Macro-level aspirations: Morally legitimate models

In our analysis, we noted two second-order themes emerging as macro-level frames that represented the system of norms, values, and beliefs reported in macro-level discourses of external stakeholders, such as the U.N. agency, other international and local policymakers, and local

businesses. These macro-level “aspirations” represent the sentiment among prevailing institutions in *Africoop*’s environment when established, to which the company aligned to obtain legitimacy.

Migrants as key development actors. Numerous materials for the “Migration and Development” program promote the idea that “equipped with their competences, new ideas and expertise gained abroad, migrants can be a tremendous asset for the development of their countries of origin... They bring a new vision and represent ‘forces for change’” (IOM, 2004, p. 2). Thus, the project aligns with the celebration of migrants for development (e.g., through migrant associations, remittances, etc.) endorsed by global policymakers (e.g., European Commission, 2005) and the U.N. (e.g., Global Forum on Migration and Development)⁶. Whereas migrants may face difficulties and prejudice in their host countries (Griffin-EL & Olabisi, 2018; McLaren, 2003), these proclamations convey enhanced capabilities and status with skills, and financial, social, and professional resources that circulate between their host and home countries to promote social and economic development (IOM, 2006).

Poverty alleviation through market-based solutions. The *Africoop* project was built on newly established beliefs about business-led solutions as a conscientious, inclusive, and responsible way to reach international development goals and solve pressing poverty issues globally (Dart, 2004; Margolis & Walsh, 2003). Such beliefs were widely disclosed in several policy documents worldwide (e.g., UNDP, 2004; World Bank, 2005) and underpinned initiatives like the U.N. Global Compact or the UNDP Growing Inclusive Markets Initiative.⁷ Our data show that the U.N. agency and other local Italian authorities promoting *Africoop* continuously disclosed these beliefs in their discourses. For instance, the U.N. agency chose the title “When investment

⁶ <https://gfmd.org/>

⁷ For the UN Global Compact, see <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/>; for the UNDP Growing Inclusive Markets Initiative, see <http://www.growinginclusivemarkets.org/>.

is not just about economics” for an article about *Africoop* in its magazine (Pandya, 2006). 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), helping benefit society while being an economically viable solution.

4.1.2. Micro-level aspirations

The voices of the migrants involved in *Africoop* take a relevant space in our analyses. The cooperative’s establishment was accompanied by emerging individual ambitions and aspirations to improve professional and social status in Italy. This was not based on selfish ambition or social mobility but, rather, combined individual and group aspirations (Appadurai, 2004).

Enhancing socio-economic status. The biographies of *Africoop* leaders and of some partners are particularly insightful. For instance, its president, A.T., dropped out of university to follow his dream of migrating to Europe, although his family in Ghana was well-off. Arriving in Switzerland, he moved to Southern Italy when his visa expired. After re-obtaining a working permit, he held various jobs, employed as a carpenter and a worker in ceramic factories and warehouses. He was an active member of the Ghanaian Association, serving as president for almost 20 years. For him, the chance to become an entrepreneur with *Africoop* was seen as a sacrifice in terms of time and effort, with a concurrent cost of leaving a salaried job. However, as he described it:

As you know, I emigrated because I wanted to live in Europe, and I was very lucky to arrive in Italy more than 20 years ago. Now, thanks to Africoop, we have become businessmen, and we believe that our sacrifices—the price of migration—should go to benefit those who couldn’t leave, those that had no chance to migrate (A.T., president, interview)

The biography of the deputy-president O.N. shows similar difficulties. In Ghana, his family had a good standard of living; he attended the university and worked as the secretary of his uncle, a Catholic bishop. He was offered a “good job” in Italy by one person in the network of this uncle, and he enthusiastically accepted. After migrating, he discovered that the job comprised home

cleaning and maintenance, with unexpectedly poor working conditions. After quitting this job, he worked as an agricultural seasonal worker for four years, then moved to the North of Italy as a blue-collar worker. Despite poverty and precarious living conditions, he never went back to Ghana, ashamed of emigrating and his socio-economic condition in Italy—that of a blue collar factor worker. As these short biographies show, “becoming entrepreneurs” for *Africoop* leaders corresponded to social mobility, including changes in status (Schuster, 2005) in Italy and Ghana.

Other cooperative members described their participation as deeply linked to work-status aspirations. This emerged as particularly important for women, even if their membership in the enterprise was described as a more “bounded” choice due to their social position within the Ghanaian Association and the wider co-ethnic community:

(...) when it was decided to create the cooperative we, who always guided the Association, could not stand back, we had to give the example and become members. I do not work with the cooperative but I hope it will grow, I am grown up and tired of my work in agriculture, maybe I could help them, even if I do not speak Italian (S., partner, interview)

The entrepreneurs’ professional aspirations always emphasized knowledge gained through migration and the sense of solidarity and pride to do something for and with other Ghanaians. Migrant entrepreneurs participating in *Africoop* identified themselves not as “ordinary” migrants but as *diaspora*—implying specific competences and an experience of detachment from their own country, which provided them with a different point of view about practices, habits, modes that represent an obstacle to development, cross-cultural competences and transnational ties:

We need to tackle poverty, we need development, we need to change to a better life but if you live always in Ghana you don’t see what is wrong... (A.T., president, interview)

In Italy, local institutions use the term “diaspora” instead of “immigrati” (immigrants) or “extra-comunitari” (from outside the E.U.) that in current discourses have acquired pejorative connotations. *Africoop* participation was seen as a chance for Ghanaians to acquire a better social

status, corresponding to a vision of engaged diaspora working to develop the country of origin. *Africoop* leaders show how individual and collective aspirations are intertwined and represented.

4.1.3. Meso-level implementation

The organizational-level processes that characterize *Africoop*'s establishment can be described as combining the macro- and micro-level aspirations described above (see Figure 2). This combination occurs by harvesting macro-level aspirations and directing them in consistent narratives about the organization; and pushing micro-level aspirations through experimentation.

Harvesting and directing macro-level aspirations. *Africoop*'s creation was rooted in morally legitimate models (Suchman, 1995) about migration for market-based solutions for development advocated by international organizations (Dart, 2004). In this regard, it is interesting to note that the prevailing institutions in which *Africoop* operated were equally valuing the social (i.e., migrants for development) and commercial (i.e., entrepreneurship) sides of the company, so that our data did not illuminate any specific tension in regard to this dimension of “hybridity” in this social enterprise. *Africoop* entrepreneurs conveyed macro-level aspirations through organizational story-telling (Nicholls, 2010; Lounsbury & Strang, 2009) to gain moral and pragmatic legitimacy from stakeholders (Dart, 2004; Bitektine, 2011). For instance, the company was described as a “transnational social enterprise which finds in the ethic business the essence of its work in Italy and Ghana, of its presence on the market with a proprietary trademark and its product brands” (Bellavia et al., 2008, p. 26). The *Africoop* website and other visual symbols, such as the company logo or the brand logo of one of the core products (fair trade fruit), displayed the colors of Ghana's flag—green, yellow, and red, with the text in black; the website contained photographs of individuals, leaders, and fragments of official statements by Ghanaian politicians. These choices of explicit or implicit communication (Duranti, 2009) built on a sense of national

belonging in an easily accessible symbolic language were aimed at constructing a broad consensus about the engagement of *Africoop* in concrete projects for Ghanaian development. In the Italian context, *Africoop* as a social cooperative enterprise made the business model highly legitimate for three reasons. First, the model is widely diffused in the Italian context where *Africoop* was established (Borzaga, 1996), as recognized by Ghanaian counterparts who repeated sentences like “you Italians believe in cooperatives and make many social projects” (field journal n. 3). Second, the form is acknowledged as particularly apt to work as a development actor because it is based on the participation of individual and organizational members based on principles of mutuality, solidarity, and democratic decision-making. Being established in a cooperative or associative form was one of the evaluation criteria for the “Migration and Development” call for proposals (Ceschi & Stocchiero, 2006). Third, because *Africoop* began as a project to sustain and mobilize the Ghanaian community, its cooperative nature allowed its recognition as a community enterprise, something used in the organizational narratives of entrepreneurs: “*Africoop* is engaged as ‘community enterprise’ besides institutions, private citizens, companies, associations, and cooperatives, in some actions of decentralized cooperation for the empowerment of community and of beneficiaries” (Bellavia et al., 2008, p. 27).

Africoop’s legitimacy gained after inception was manifested in the resources and networks established during that time. The start-up of the company was financially supported by the Italian U.N. agency, the city, and the Ghanaian members, and, later, from financial partners in form of equity and loans⁸. The cooperative was established by nine Ghanaian members and progressively enlarged to include not only individuals participating either as supporting or working members (25

⁸The cash contribution brought at inception was ≈35,000 Euro, while later contributions amounted to ≈280,000 Euro.

Ghanaian citizens)⁹ but, also, organizational members such as two Ghanaian Associations, the city, a local cooperative, and two financial institutions. At establishment, *Africoop* was managed by the leaders of the Ghanaian Association, with a board of directors composed of five Ghanaians. Three years after founding, the board of directors added other Italian and Ghanaian members from two important local cooperatives and a Ghanaian Association of another city.

Pushing micro-level aspirations through experimentation. *Africoop*'s migrant entrepreneurs designed the initial business model broadly to reflect participants' different skills and ambitions. According to its mission statement registered at the Chamber of Commerce at foundation, the cooperative aimed to promote fair trade and develop the Ghanaian and other developing countries' cultures in Italy; the same document reported a wide range of activities to achieve this mission besides importing and exporting food and cultural products (e.g., promotion of sustainable tourism; cleaning services and building maintenance; concierge services; call center; waste collection; social assistance and integration services favoring immigrants; education on international development). Only during the first year did the entrepreneurs decide to focus their business on the import—export of agro-food products, which presented the most feasible and fastest-growing commercial opportunity. Because none of the cooperative members had direct work experience in this domain, the “Migration and Development” program sponsored their attendance at two intensive training courses on business plan development and agro-food market management. We conclude that during the first phase in Italy, the implementation of *Africoop* activities followed an emergent pattern, driven by the combination of macro- and micro-level aspirations.

⁹ Of these, most (≈80%) were male. Besides a few young members who arrived in Italy at the end of the '90s, most were first-generation Ghanaians, who arrived in Italy during the '80s and '90s and had resided in Italy for a long time. Some had recently obtained Italian citizenship. All had a secondary school degree and were employed as blue-collar or temporary non-qualified workers. Women members were mainly married to partners and arrived in Italy with a family residence permit. Thus, the composition of *Africoop* reflects general patterns of Ghanaian migration to Italy, which was characterized by long-term employment in unskilled industrial contexts, mainly in SMEs, long-term residence and family reunion, and relatively infrequent travel between home and host countries (Stocchiero, 2008).

4.2 Moving transnationally: Reconstructing legitimacy in Ghana

In *Africoop*'s second phase, activities began in Ghana. After only a year, *Africoop* established an operative subsidiary in Ghana called *Afrital Ltd.* The company focused on importing and exporting Ghanaian and Italian agro-food products across the two countries, and managing a small plantation in Ghana. Exports from Ghana included ethnic food, to be marketed in African shops in the North of Italy; and fair-trade labeled fruits, to be sold with a specific company brand in large retail stores in three cities in the region. To accompany the sales of fruits, the company, with the support of an Italian university, created and launched a new label-guaranteed certification system to certify that the products adhered to a set of guidelines regarding the engagement of migrants in initiatives for the development of their countries of origin. In the second year, the company started to import Italian products (e.g., wine, Parma ham) to Ghana, selling them through new distribution chains to Ghanaian elites and foreigners residing in the country. Simultaneously, the company established a plantation in a small village, catering to the national market. From the social viewpoint, the commercial activities of importing fruits were based on a fair-trade supply system. In addition, *Africoop* implemented several development projects in Ghana: e.g., it built a photovoltaic plant in the village chosen to establish the plantation to provide light to the main road, the elementary school, and the chief's building. Other Italian companies and NGOs acted as financial partners, suppliers of materials, and communication experts. As another example, the company supported a large Italian retailer willing to donate to health improvements in Africa and recommending an emergency room in a rural village, supported through a collaboration with an Italian university. The Italian retailer received an important prize for this initiative of corporate social responsibility.

In Ghana, *Africoop* drew on morally legitimized models of migrant engagement for development and poverty alleviation from Italy and reinforced by Ghanaian authorities. Also,

individual entrepreneurs revised their aspirations, combining them with macro-level ones (Johnson et al., 2006) and influenced the implementation of organizational-level activities.

4.2.1. Macro-level aspirations

Migrants as key actors for development. Ghanaian institutions also embraced ideas and discourses connecting migration and development. They mirrored views in a globalized world, involving a plethora of actors, such as governments, supra-national bodies, businesses, NGOs, and migrants (cf. Shore and Wright, 2003). In 2001, the new Ghanaian President Kufuor launched a set of initiatives to foster domestic development by involving migrant communities. Beginning with his inaugural speech, he invited migrant groups to re-invest their skills, transnational networks, commitment, and economic resources in the homeland. He explicitly addressed Ghanaian migrants in Western countries as development agents and asked for their help in rebuilding the country. Kufuor's discourse celebrated the patriotic, successful, and devoted migrant and, as noted by Kleist (2013), articulated non-resident Ghanaians "as a part of a transnational Ghanaian nation" (p. 11). However, although Ghana actively drafted policies to integrate migration and development in the 2000s (e.g., dual citizenship, database of biological and personal data for transatlantic diaspora, development interventions), most of these were never implemented, and some did not succeed as expected, remaining largely symbolic (Kleist, 2013).

Africoop's entrance in the Ghanaian sphere benefited from values and norms related to migration for development. This was observed in field accounts from local cooperative employees:

The Government in Ghana is always ready to cooperate for development, also when it needs help or assistance. For example, there was this project of the European Union that regarded vocational training and employment (...) The president of Africoop was contacted and he came here to discuss with the Government and the interested ministers. I was with him; they were very open and said, 'when we need to carry out a project, if it is promoted or regards migrants, we are always ready'" (S., Afrital employee).

4.2.2. Micro-level aspirations

From migrants to “big men”. For *Africoop* leaders and members, the chance to “return” to Ghana in a better socio-political situation than that of simple migrant or expatriate motivated individuals to participate. First, *Africoop* members wished to be recognized as representatives of the engaged diaspora, and thus were required to demonstrate competence, benevolence, and unselfishness acquired from living elsewhere. In so doing, they strategically alternated between emphasizing diasporic identity and a sense of belonging to or detachment from countries of both emigration and immigration. For instance, one leader of another Ghanaian association in the cooperative, reported:

“We believe that every Ghanaian citizen is an ambassador; we agree with all the activities promoting the image and development of our country. We raised funds to give to the Minister of Health in Ghana for the fight against malaria. In that period, we established objectives together with the Ministry and even went to Ghana to hand over the money raised by us, emigrants proud of being able to do something for our country” (GhanaOther leader, interview).

By acting as “ambassadors” and raising funds for the government, these migrants imagined how to reconfigure their status in Ghana. Because they had the capacity to collect and distribute capital by exploiting relevant social networks, they envisioned a role as brokers of economic capital and interpreters of Italian and international development language and expectations.

An informative illustration of this process is the case of *Africoop* deputy president O.N. who, for a long time, felt ashamed to return to Ghana because of his migration history in Italy. In *Africoop*, he led the activities carried out in Ghana, and this radically changed his status:

“I work a lot, very much, with Africoop, and my salary is lower than the one I gained as a warehouse worker. But now, in Ghana, I meet politicians, diplomats, businessmen, and also in Italy I receive requests for interviews, I meet politicians, VIPs, and people like you who are interested in Ghanaians, who I would never been able to meet otherwise. Now I can proudly go to Ghana to visit my family and my uncle” (O.N., deputy president, interview)

Africoop entrepreneurs were gradually presented by the national Ghanaian media as the successful Ghanaian diaspora in Italy, emphasizing their hard work as businessmen and their commitment to homeland development. In the Ghanaian context, these entrepreneurs were seen as producing wealth, establishing important social and political relationships, and thereby gaining the

characteristics of “big men” who are able to leverage social, economic, and political capital as well as skillfully craft their public image (Lentz, 1998; Marabello, 2013) to legitimize and validate their endeavors. The accrued “bigness” of *Africoop* members is exemplified by insights about the leaders of the Ghanaian headquarters. As the ethnographer discovered, the first company-appointed manager selfishly managed the company’s affairs, behaving “like a rich person... but with the money of the community” (A.T., president, interview): for instance, renting expensive cars and not presenting receipts for expenses or writing good reports. He was fired by *Africoop* and ostracized by the entire Ghanaian Association. Subsequently, the deputy president O.N. became the manager of Ghana activities. This person had a recognized role and C.V. built by professional experiences in Ghana, and was asked to join the council of the village elders where the development projects were implemented. The “bigness” of *Africoop* entrepreneurs was not only built on their migrant status, nor on their wealth relative to local Ghanaians. In fact, *Africoop* members appeared genuinely interested in advancing their status in Ghana, but not through inappropriate wealth display. They leveraged the cultural capital acquired in Italy (Bourdieu, 1986) and in *Africoop* to create micro-level perceptions of validity that diffused to the meso and macro levels in Ghana and beyond (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Nonetheless, they constantly downplayed their political power, instead emphasizing their activities as commitment and sacrifice.

4.2.3. Meso-level implementation

Translating the organizational template. In Ghana, the concept of social enterprise was not well developed when *Africoop* entered the local market (e.g., *The Economist*, 2010). To carry out commercial operations in Ghana, the entrepreneurs opened *Afrital Ltd.*, thus decoupling the organizational structure to adapt to the local institutional requirements. This local branch was in charge of managing the import–export operations and plantation production, while *Africoop*

retained a space for social entrepreneurial activities. In this way, they drew on accepted meso-level institutional properties of institutional validation and legitimacy while attempting to change the Ghanaian institutional environment (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). As highlighted by one employee, this was manifested in the narratives used by the company to promote its local identity:

In Ghana, Africoop is known only for social projects, whereas Afrital is known only in business environments (S., Afrital employee, interview).

Afrital was opened after obtaining commercial agreements with local suppliers and identifying personnel and operational premises, mainly based on personal and kin relationships. The interviews with local employees illuminated the relationship between *Africoop* and *Afrital* as characterized by local employees' representations of what is a prestigious and productive job according to Western standards, and of potential opportunities for social and international mobility. However, work relations were not based on contracts but on trust relationships, adhering to a model of dependence that was legitimized by working codes accepted in the local context:

I do not have any written contract with Afrital. I believe that Africoop makes the best choices; it cannot happen that we do not agree with Africoop projects. They know what is good for us and what we have to do (J., Afrital employee, interview).

Brokerage of economic and social capital. We observed brokerage practices implemented by *Africoop* related to social and commercial business aspects. The entrepreneurs approached local actors in Ghana by defining their role as brokers of economic capital collected in Italy (e.g., donations, grants, profits), being accountable to donors about its appropriate spending in Ghana:

When we talk to the chiefs, we discuss our projects and listen to their requests, but we say to them that we need to talk to our donors for a final decision. We are responsible for development resources and investments on behalf of our people in Italy and our Italian interlocutors. Members of the diaspora know the countries, the cultures and the development needs, the chiefs know the donors' power (O.N., Africoop deputy president, interview).

Africoop allocated economic resources in Ghana based on consults with local political (e.g., government officials delegated by the District Assembly or individual politicians) and non-political figures (e.g., religious authorities). In part, these entrepreneurs built networks and

partnerships with socially influential figures in Ghana because of their cultural, social, and political knowledge of the context. They knew, for instance, that they had to be acknowledged as development actors by authorities in Ghana, both at national and local levels (e.g., village chiefs), or that they had to follow specific traditional rituals (e.g., offerings libations to “ancestors” when the plantation’s land rental contract was signed). Once formal recognition had been obtained, however, the entrepreneurs autonomously decided the forms, modes, and entity of investments, which were then proposed as a limited set of possibilities to political authorities and the council of the elders in the targeted villages. This weak participatory mode of relating and negotiating, based on blocked negotiations with village chiefs, was justified by *Africoop* representatives’ supposed expertise by virtue of living abroad and the need to curb hoarding or misuse of resources.

On the other side, the networks established by these entrepreneurs were emerging as a result of available contacts, suggested by other stakeholders both in Italy and Ghana. We exemplify this with the choice of establishing a contact with an important Ghanaian Catholic cardinal, resident in the Central Region, who could endow credibility and access to information and other networks:

For the project of the hospital (...), we took some information and decided to do this project. Africoop had already a relationship with Cardinal T., I don’t know what type of relationship; but he was for sure the best person to contact before starting the project: he knows what are the needs of people, he could guide us and tell us in which villages to implement our projects, help us, and facilitate our task. In fact, it is difficult to find all the necessary information for a project if you don’t have a contact with an important person that knows the places and the people to which you have to talk (S., Afrital employee, interview).

4.3 Growing transnationally: Feedback loops to Italy

Africoop’s engagement in Ghana generated feedback loops with entrepreneurs’ social status and *Africoop*’s activities and legitimacy in Italy. Specifically, the entrepreneurs drew on the legitimacy established at the individual- and company-level in Ghana, to renew their micro-level aspirations, revise the company’s goals, accrue further legitimacy for it, and finally generating “inspirational” shifts in the Italian institutional context. It should be noted that, although our model is represented

chronologically, accounting for the temporal dynamics of the company's lifecycle, these processes were characterized as continuous and dialectical in the transnational domain of activities.

4.3.1. Micro-level aspirations

Enhancing socio-economic status. Participation in *Africoop* provided its entrepreneurs with opportunities for a new type of prestigious work to establish relationships with economic and political institutions in Ghana and in Italy. Despite long working hours and low wages with respect to the Italian labour market, members of *Africoop* enjoyed being part of an enterprise that offered access to public and political events, for instance, involving Ghanaian authorities visiting Europe, Italian politicians, representatives of supra-national organizations; and contacts with private businesses, such as those interested in entering the Ghanaian market. We observed many occasions in which *Africoop* entrepreneurs were invited to present their project, such as at events organized by U.N. agencies (e.g., the *Key Migration Issues Workshop Series: Contributions of Diasporas* held in New York, 2006; the *Global Forum on Migration and Development* held in Geneva, 2007), public-private partnerships (e.g., the Venice Forum in 2008), and the Italian Parliament (in 2008). As a clear example, the former U.N. secretary general Kofi Annan (a Ghanaian), present in Italy for Luciano Pavarotti's funeral asked to meet with *Africoop* entrepreneurs (Il Giornale, 2010). Both Ghanaian members, many dressed in elegant typical Ghanaian clothing, and their Italian partners were guests at this formal and emotionally charged event. Annan made a brief speech in English pointing to *Africoop* as a perfect example of a "triple win" initiative (i.e., improving the living conditions of migrants while contributing to development of both home and host countries) (Stocchiero, 2009). After this introduction, he switched to speaking Twi language with the leaders of the cooperative until he made a final remark and left.

In the Italian context, where it is difficult to access public space, and at a historical moment when Ghanaians were abruptly brought into the spotlight as victims of violence¹⁰, the opportunity to participate in *Africoop* was filled with aspirations for social mobility in their host country:

[My husband] was unlucky in the first period in Italy, but now, through the project, he can become an entrepreneur, an important man with a good job. (...) He (...) [met] politicians, entrepreneurs, the Italian Prime Minister and the former president of the U.N. (...) It is unbelievable to have such a chance in Italy where the people run away when they see you; when they see black people they hold on to their bags tightly. (S., Africoop member, interview)

Africoop migrant entrepreneurs engaged and educated Italian audiences about the Ghanaian context or development institutions by displaying cross-cultural and social competences, for example, in dealing with Ghanaian political, economic, and religious counterparts. In doing so, *Africoop* members built strong networks that could be transformed to economic capital—and thus pragmatic legitimacy—during the final period of *Africoop*, after the fraud that ended the company:

The recent economic crisis and the mistakes almost made us close down; we came very close to losing our jobs. It was terrible (...). Now we're in contact with a person who is helping us understand how to transform the enterprise, how to transform its debts and avoid closing down. Fortunately, during these years we have done a lot of good, and we built strong relationships, so now everybody is trying to find a way to help and to advise us. (A.T., president, personal communication)

The biographical trajectories of the cooperative leaders demonstrate how participating in *Africoop* changed their status. At the time of *Africoop*'s failure, the president unsuccessfully tried to save the company; he subsequently returned to salaried work as a cultural mediator. However, he remained involved in local political debates over migrant rights issues; for instance, he was on the migration-related committee of the local state institution (Provincia). Through these experiences, he achieved a status as a migration expert, with knowledge in migration law and residence permit procedures, negotiation skills, and the ability to represent a group engaged in exerting social pressure. His economic well-being also improved, signaled by his purchase of a

¹⁰ In the initial years of field research, several violent crimes were committed against Ghanaians: a hate crime targeting a group in Castel Volturno (Repubblica, 2008) and violence against a young boy in Parma (Corriere della Sera, 2008).

slightly larger house with a garden. He acquired a position in the Italian public space, shown by being requested to be a candidate for the regional administrative elections and to take part in national political activities for a left-wing political party. We believe this was important because, in Italy, institutional political positions are rarely provided to immigrants or those with dual citizenship. Indeed, *Africoop* aided his integration in Italy and augmented his social capital and prestige among Ghanaian migrants. Likewise, *Africoop*'s deputy president acquired competences and social capital in the business domains in Italy and Ghana, demonstrated by the fact that, as soon as he heard about *Africoop*'s failure, he started his own company in the same business sector.

4.3.2. Meso-level development

Combining micro- and macro-aspirations. Our analyses of *Africoop* data show that, building on the experience and legitimacy accrued by establishing meaningful activities in Ghana, *Africoop* gradually shifted its original business objectives from import–export of fruits to a role of broker between Italy and Ghana. For instance, an Italian agro-food company contracted with *Africoop* to export its products in Ghana (e.g., wine and juices) in an attempt to penetrate the larger African market. *Africoop* leveraged its migrant entrepreneurs' cross-cultural competences, knowledge of the Ghanaian market, and accountability in Ghana as a source of competitive advantage and an assurance of appropriate spending of financial resources in Ghana:

Often some organizations in Italy ask us: “We’d like to do something to help Ghana”(…) and so we tell them what can be done, how to invest their money in Ghana so that it won’t be wasted or stolen. (O.N., deputy-president, interview)

Africoop was increasingly seen as a company capable of mobilizing important economic resources and entrepreneurial activities targeted to African communities in Italy. For example, several instances in our field materials show that *Africoop* was envisioned by the Ghanaian community as a replicable model to solve important needs of Ghanaian immigrants in Italy, such as to create job opportunities for Ghanaian women who often face exploitative working conditions.

In another example, one bank that financially supported *Africoop* became the main bank for Ghanaians and migrant communities where the cooperative was founded (Davoli, 2010).

The shift in the espoused company objectives reflected the progressive change of micro-level aspirations of *Africoop* entrepreneurs towards a more “political” role in migrations and development. Three years after establishment, company presentations (e.g., PowerPoints at conferences, website, leaflets) emphasized the role of migrants in host and home countries:

Africoop project is born with a reciprocity purpose, aiming at involving Ghanaian migrants as active agents of their own economic and social development within the community in which they actually live and (...) in Ghana. Africoop is the the first social cooperative promoting the competences of Ghanaian migrants residing in [name of the city] (Africoop company presentation)

Africoop’s website listed its entrepreneurs’ and company achievements, as well as speeches about development, information, and news on migratory policies and Ghanaian migrants in Italy.

In sum, the company’s transnational engagement reinforced the legitimacy it had acquired in Italy by being consistent, present, active, collaborative, and capable of exercising authority over migrants in Italy. In turn, the company legitimized these Ghanaian migrants in Italy to be recognized by local institutions as a social and economic resource, thereby enabling them to claim rights and become political actors instead of being perceived as solely subaltern subjects.

4.3.3. Macro-level inspiration

Migrants help shape policies of development and migration. As *Africoop* activities unfolded, Italian political and economic stakeholders increasingly and consistently proposed *Africoop*’s mediation for both developing projects requiring international cooperation and policies to foster internationalization of Italian enterprises. In addition, local institutions in the region where *Africoop* was founded asked cooperative members to express their opinions on local immigration policies. In the name of engagement with the country of origin and development, *Africoop* became a representative of migrants’ rights in Italy. U.N. agencies presented *Africoop* as a best practice

for co-development through a market-based approach; international broadcasts (e.g., CNN and RAI) devoted time to the case. These impressive results led to a bottom-up “inspirational” impact on macro-level institutions and discourses about the role of migrants in development:

The visibility of Africoop products in the local supermarkets has changed the way that people look at migrants. Now you don't see migrants as someone who needs services but someone who brings services and new initiatives. This experience has helped us to discover another level of cooperation with them, especially at an entrepreneurial level (C.A., local politician, in Pandya, 2006: 9).

Local government authorities and trade unions considered replicating *Africoop*'s model with other migrant communities from Sub-Saharan Africa and Albania living in the province (Pandya, 2006), holding this initiative as a best practice inspiring other similar commercially viable schemes to benefit migrants and their countries of origin (IOM, 2006). Importantly, these authorities continued to legitimate this project even after the failure of the company.

Overall, our analyses highlighted that transnational social entrepreneurs draw on their affiliated organizations to engage in micro-to-macro and meso-to-macro legitimization processes as development brokers and political actors by finding room to maneuver and negotiate with macro-level institutions, engaging their repertoires of discourses and perceptions of legitimacy.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we study a transnational social enterprise operating between Ghana and Italy to shed light on how transnational social entrepreneurs build organizational-level legitimacy for their companies by drawing on cultural contexts; and how organizational-level legitimation can be accrued by transnational entrepreneurs to change their socio-economic status. We provide empirical documentation of the social processes of legitimacy formation at multiple levels of a transnational social enterprise, adding to social entrepreneurship literature (Dacin, Dacin, & Matear, 2010; Dacin, Dacin, & Tracey, 2011; Saebi, Foss, & Linder, 2019), legitimacy theory (Johnson et

al., 2006; Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Suddaby et al., 2017), and transnational entrepreneurship literature (Drori et al., 2009; Carmichael, Drori, & Honig, 2010). Below, we discuss our contributions to these streams of literature.

First, this study enhances the understanding of legitimation processes for social enterprises (Dart, 2004; Nicholls, 2010; Ruebottom, 2013), especially newly established ones (Shepherd et al., 2019; Suddaby et al., 2017). Previous literature has shown that social enterprises can establish organizational legitimacy, marshalling and mobilizing resources from a variety of commercial and non-commercial stakeholders (Jokela & Elo, 2015; Tracey et al., 2011). Our study suggests that social enterprises operating across borders build legitimacy by harvesting commercial and social demands that are salient to stakeholders in different countries, according to country-level institutional environments (Desa, 2012; Zahra et al., 2008). Organizational-level legitimacy in the social enterprise that we study is established both on moral and pragmatic legitimacy accrued from macro-level institutions in Italy and Ghana: *Africoop* entrepreneurs, like entrepreneurs in previous studies, harness values and discourses from relevant institutions in different cultural environments and direct them through organizational cultural work. Specifically, we found that *Africoop* entrepreneurs harvested highly institutionalized neoliberal concepts at the macro-level—e.g., social entrepreneurship for poverty reduction (e.g., Dart, 2004; Dey & Steyaert, 2010; Sutter, Bruton & Chen, 2019) or migration for development (e.g., Faist, 2008; Mohan, 2008)—and directed them at the meso-level through narratives and rhetoric, according to different cultural understanding in Italy and Ghana. We qualify our contribution by highlighting the contextual nature of legitimacy processes linked to national-level institutional environments, thus providing a better understanding of the relationship between macro-level socio-cultural context and meso-level features (Saebi et al., 2019), and of the relationship between organizational culture (e.g., narratives) and institutions

(Giorgi, Lockwood, & Glynn, 2015). However, beyond this obvious harnessing of macro-to-meso legitimacy, we show that social entrepreneurs also draw on individual aspirations to carry out organizational work. The core activities of *Africoop*, its markets, activities, and methods were determined not solely by the macro-level institutional sphere that framed and supported this entrepreneurial initiative but also by the micro-initiatives expressed by its transnational migrant entrepreneurs who desired improved status in their home and host countries. These findings advance previous studies depicting a heroic representation of the social entrepreneur, focusing on individual-level altruistic values and ethical behaviors (Dacin et al., 2011; Dey & Steyaert, 2016); institutionalized narratives that often frame social entrepreneurship activities (Dacin et al., 2010; Dart, 2004; Nicholls, 2010; Lounsbury and Strang, 2009); or a fixed or stable value system framing social entrepreneurship (Dey and Steyaert, 2012; Nicholls, 2010). We challenge these assumptions, arguing that social entrepreneurship occurs in dynamic, unpredictable environments, where legitimacy transitions shift the objectives of the organization, often at operational actors' insistence. This is an important insight for policymakers and practitioners because social entrepreneurial activities may not be suitable for replication or franchising; rather, they represent unique blends of factors yielding individual micro-legitimacy and status attainment. Through these combinations of macro-level and micro-level aspirations, *Africoop* entrepreneurs could personally reap organizational legitimacy to build pragmatic individual-level legitimacy and advance their status. These insights can speak to scholars interested in entrepreneurship as emancipation (Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009); marginalized individuals (such as migrants in host countries) become social entrepreneurs who can increase their status beyond financial success, disrupting the status quo and changing their positions in the social order in which they are embedded. In addition, because we ultimately show that micro-processes may invoke status attainment flowing upwards,

through the macro- levels of institutionalization, we illuminate the emergent nature of institutionalized social entrepreneurship and means through which micro-level processes may lead to macro-social transformations (Saebi et al., 2019; Tobias, Mair, & Barbosa-Leiker, 2013). Thus, our analysis shows that micro-level processes play an important role in the outcome of institutionalization.

Secondly, our study contributes to legitimacy theory by describing the multi-level unfolding of the process of organizational legitimation (Suddaby et al., 2017). Entrepreneurs play a key role. As our findings show, entrepreneurs morally and pragmatically legitimize their firms by harvesting and directing macro-level aspirations into organizational work to define its goals and activities. In addition, entrepreneurs can “hook” onto organizational-level legitimacy to gain pragmatic legitimacy for themselves, thereby able to improve their status. We underline that this is a dynamic process that unfolds during the venture’s life cycle (Fisher et al., 2016), through emerging combinations of entrepreneurs’ micro-level aspirations with macro-level aspirations derived from institutional norms (cf. Giorgi et al., 2015). Thus, we provide empirical support for legitimacy as a social process (Johnson et al., 2006) while highlighting the individual’s role in forming legitimacy at the organizational and institutional levels (Bitektine, 2011; Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Suddaby et al., 2017). Notably, this legitimacy formation at the pragmatic level is likely to vary among constituencies, and may be very difficult to direct from a macro level.

Thirdly, our study contributes to the literature on transnational entrepreneurship (Carmichael et al., 2010; Drori et al., 2009; Elo & Freiling, 2015): more specifically, to the scant literature on transnational social ventures (e.g., Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011; Rana & Elo, 2017). We add to this literature by investigating how legitimacy is molded in transnational social ventures, acknowledging that previous scholars have shown that transnational engagement can create a

social field in which migrants and non-migrants can (re)negotiate social status, citizenship, power, and identity (Nieswand, 2008). Like studies on the involvement of migrants in for-profit transnational entrepreneurship (e.g., Gillespie et al., 1999; Riddle et al., 2010), our findings show that transnational social entrepreneurship represents an opportunity to improve migrants' status and pave the way for new forms of their political participation in home and residence countries. However, our results should be qualified in that these opportunities might be limited to those self-selected, socially active migrants who risk becoming social entrepreneurs and participate in sponsored initiatives (e.g., Faist, 2008; Nieswand, 2008; Riccio, 2011). Finally, we examine an aspect often omitted—transnational entrepreneurship from/to the African continent (e.g., Mayer, Harima, & Freiling, 2015; Ojo, Nwankwo, & Gbadamosi, 2013). These environments are unique and increasingly important, given challenges and opportunities given by a young population, resource endowments, and persisting poverty rates. Overall, whereas reaching a better understanding of African transnationalism is a key component of social science (Carter, 2010; Marabello, 2018), we specifically contribute to the understanding of multi-level aspects of legitimacy in transnational entrepreneurship.

From a policy perspective, we know that programs to engage migrants in transnational social entrepreneurship may be facilitated assuming the effectiveness of social business initiatives led by migrants as key agents of development for their homelands (Faist, 2008; Gillespie et al., 1999; Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011; Riddle et al., 2010), while at the same time serving migrants' inclusion and social mobility in their home and host countries (Grillo & Riccio, 2004; Mercer et al., 2008). However, policymakers should be aware of several potential issues with these programs. First, there is a need to question to what extent social entrepreneurship has emancipatory and elevating power and should be viewed strictly as something “good,” ethical, and worth advocating

(Dart, 2004; Dey & Steyaert, 2016). Private business and entrepreneurial endeavors are increasingly seen as a means of promoting socio-economic wellbeing and growth (Dart, 2004; Margolis & Walsh, 2003), fitting the neoliberal agenda, which attempts to address global social and political issues, including intractable problems such as eradicating poverty in developing countries, using a market logic focusing on individual agency, and self-management (Dey & Steyaert, 2016; Sutter et al., 2019). Within such logics, policymakers should acknowledge the risks of generating stereotypes and proffering quick solutions for specific policy target groups—such as migrant entrepreneurs (Verduijn & Essers, 2013). In this study, many of *Africoop*'s social entrepreneurs failed to fully gain their desired social mobility, returning to their previous blue-collar status and lacking any substantive advancement socially or materially. Second, and likewise, delegating social initiatives to migrants is anchored in a neoliberal approach that vests responsibility for social and economic development, potentially creating problems of accountability and sustainability (Faist, 2008; Marabello, 2013). For instance, the initiatives implemented by *Africoop*'s entrepreneurs focused on symbolic and uncontested areas of community development (e.g., health-care, local infrastructures), in small, rural villages, therefore assuming a strong ceremonial and symbolic dimensions rather than being effective, relevant, and sustainable (Nieswand, 2008)¹¹. Third, migrant entrepreneurs should not be assumed to have the resources to interpret cultural knowledge and behavioral rules in their home countries. For instance, after living abroad, often with few or no return visits, they may not have a complete understanding of home country institutions and business environments, or of their identity and social status (Portes, 1999; Riddle, Hrivnak, & Nielsen, 2010; Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011). A

¹¹ For instance, after only two years, the photovoltaic plant was out of order because of inadequate maintenance and battery replacement; soon after, the government intervened with an electrification plan that provided public electric light to the village, making the photovoltaic plant not useful. Similarly, we found that after two years, the emergency room was not used because of lack of resources to sustain the running costs.

banal culturalism assumes that African migrants understand the African “home culture,” which misunderstands the social stratification, power dynamics, and historical processes that characterize the African continent. Similarly, unreasonable assumptions may underlie attempts to encourage social entrepreneurship despite insufficient entrepreneurial experience or social networks within the appropriate class (e.g., having humble origins in the home country and being required to interact with influential actors). Fourth, social enterprises, while being described or appearing as an inclusive and collective, might be particularistic groups—for example, in terms of the participation and representation of people based on gender, education, or ethnic affiliation. Similarly, migrant engagement in transnational entrepreneurship may be dominated by well educated, often wealthy individuals who wish to be incorporated into the elite in both sending and receiving countries rather than challenging the unequal power relations characterizing them (Faist, 2008; Itzigsohn, 2000; Riccio, 2011). In sum, they may become part of the problem, rather than of the solution. Finally, our study demonstrates the contingent nature of organizational work in transnational social enterprises, both due to migrants’ heterogeneity and the specificity of their home cultures and environments. This suggest that policymakers should carefully evaluate the replication of these initiatives with different migrant groups or countries.

5.1 Limitations and suggestions for future research

As any other work, this paper has limitations. First, focusing on a transnational social enterprise acting between Italy and Ghana, we recognize that several peculiarities might characterize the socio-political context, the self-selected migrant group, and the international program that supported *Africoop*. However, we believe that the complex levels of action, plurality of actors, and cross-country activities make this case a privileged context in which to observe legitimation

processes in social entrepreneurship. Second, because ethnographic research produces deep insights and several interpretations rather than definite versions of events (Geertz, 1973), we do not claim that our interpretation is superior to others. The extensive, long-term longitudinal field data collection, significant secondary data, and feedback received from presentations of the findings ensure the reliability of our results and challenges to our understanding of the analyzed case and practices in a transnational social enterprise. Indeed, from a methodological viewpoint, we believe that the ethnographic method in this research responds to calls to expand the scope and rigor of methodologies in entrepreneurship research (McDonald et al., 2015), social entrepreneurship (Mauksch et al., 2017), and international business studies (Welch et al., 2011). Future studies should further investigate social and transnational entrepreneurship through this approach, accounting for culturally situated entrepreneurial practices (e.g., Alasuutari, 1992; Watson, 2011) and providing critical management and organization analyses (Watson, 2011).

We believe that future studies could build on the findings provided by this study to further investigate micro-meso-macro unfolding processes of social entrepreneurship (Saebi et al., 2019). In particular, we believe there are significant opportunities for scholars willing to adopt challenging interdisciplinary perspectives that provide more fine-grained and nuanced understanding of the entrepreneurial processes in cross-national social ventures.

EXHIBITS

Table 1 – Data sources

N. pages	Description
520	Transcripts of semi-structured interviews, lasting from 30 to 90 minutes each: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 12 interviews with <i>Africoop</i> entrepreneurs (Italy) (3 longitudinal interviews) - 4 interviews with representatives of Ghanaian migrants' associations (Italy) (of which 1 collective interview) - 12 interviews with employees of <i>Africoop</i> and <i>Afrital</i> (Italy and Ghana) (of which 2 collective interviews) - 3 interviews with suppliers and clients of <i>Africoop</i> (Italy) - 20 interviews with relatives of <i>Africoop</i> entrepreneurs (Italy) - 6 interviews with politicians and policy-makers (Italy and Ghana) (of which 1 longitudinal interview)
438	Field notes from participant observation in Italy and Ghana
45	Secondary data retrieved from medias: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Newspapers (e.g., Sole 24 Ore; Gazzetta di Modena; La Repubblica – Italy; The Statesman – Ghana) - Magazines (e.g., Altreconomia; Vita; Nordiconad periodico – Italy) - Diaspora blogs (e.g., Afronline) - Online news and websites (e.g., CNN “Inside Africa” interview transcripts; RAI; Reggio 2000 – Italy) - <i>Africoop</i> website - Website of the International Organization for Migrations - Websites of international conferences inviting <i>Africoop</i> delegates - Websites of the Major and Province of the Italian city where <i>Africoop</i> was established
606	Secondary data retrieved from publications: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Book edited by Bellavia, Mccharty, Messoria, and Ogongo (2008) - Doctoral dissertation by a third researcher (Davoli, 2010) - Working papers on Migration for Development program (Ceschi and Stocchiero, 2006; Stocchiero, 2008) - Migration for Development project reports (International Organization for Migration, 2006, 2004)
15	Secondary data retrieved from the Chamber of Commerce

Figure 1 – Data structure

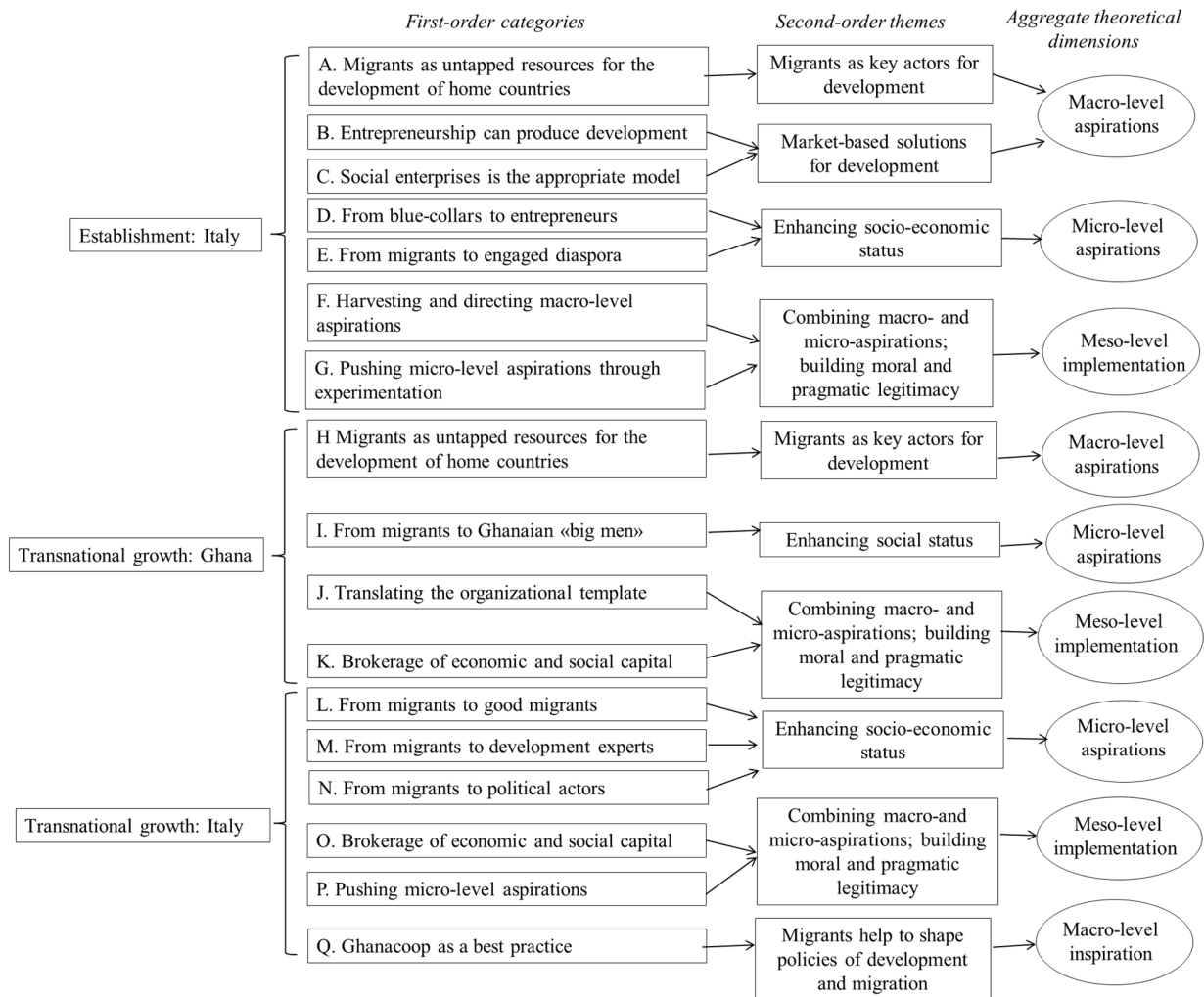
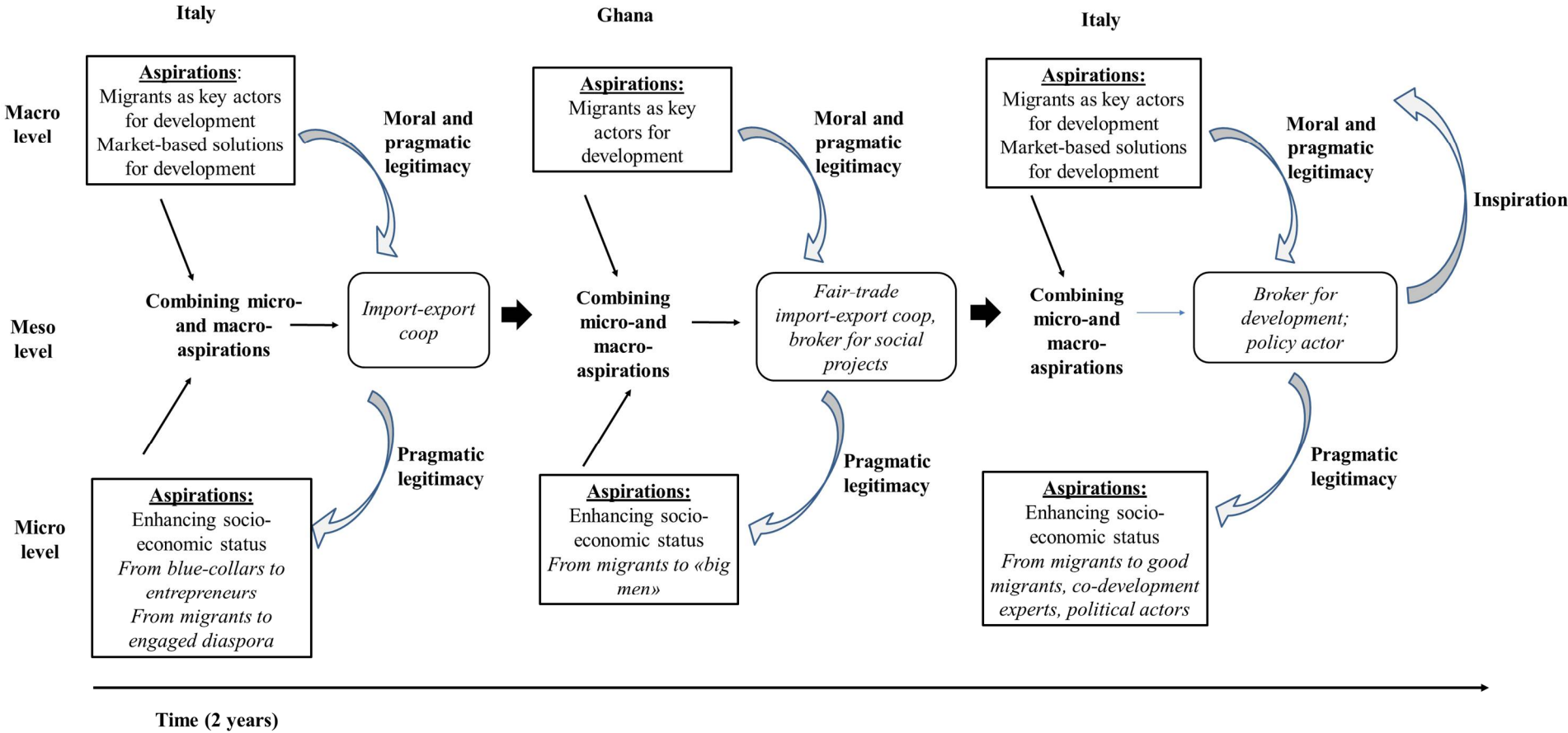


Figure 2 - A multi-level process of legitimacy in transnational social enterprises



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ON-LINE SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

APPENDIX

Table A1 – Additional supporting data

Second-order themes and first-order categories	Representative data
<i>Aggregate theoretical dimension:</i>	
Establishment - Italy: Macro-level aspirations	
<i>1. Migrants as key actors for development</i>	
A. Migrants as untapped resources for the development of home countries	A1. “While brain drain is one of many factors contributing to under-development in parts of Africa, it is an important element that needs to be addressed through policies and sustained programmes that facilitate and harness the development potential of migrants” (IOM, 2004). A2. “Diasporas could stimulate development by activating and reinforcing the political, economic, social and cultural ties between migrants and their countries of origin and destination. Working with other stakeholders, migrant associations could serve as partners in co-development projects that used migrants’ human and social capital in their countries of origin, created opportunities for migrant re-integration in countries of origin and improved integration of migrants in countries of destination” (IOM, 2008)
<i>2. Market-based solutions for development</i>	
B. Entrepreneurship can produce development	B1. “The project ”[<i>Africoop fruit brand</i>]” (...) is a valid example of a tangible intervention in the dramatic African reality, where African people is the leading actor, in suggesting the way to sustainability. This is a project that involves different levels, because it sustains the local economy, it favors integration in Italy, and offers high-quality products. A virtuous circle” (GDO Week Ethic Award, 2006) B2. “The project is focused on activities started by groups of migrants with an entrepreneurial character – and therefore productive, income-generating and sustainable in time – which at the same time have a clear social vocation and a direct social impact” (Ceschi & Stocchiero, 2006)
C. Social enterprises as the viable model	C1. “Within the <i>Africoop</i> value system, it was very important to use the social cooperative model as the social form upon which founding all the business plan. The values of mutuality and solidarity that are found in the cooperative model are the same that guide the action of the Ghanaian community in building new and sustainable forms of solidarity through the social enterprise” (Province of Italian city, 2006) C2. “What is remarkable about <i>Africoop</i> is its objectives – to use its profits to help develop the migrants’ community of origin, providing employment and alleviating the poverty” (IOM, 2006)

Second-order themes and first-order categories	Representative data
<i>Aggregate theoretical dimension:</i>	
Establishment – Italy: Micro-level aspirations	
3. <i>Enhancing socio-economic status</i>	
D. <i>From blue-collars to entrepreneurs</i>	D1. “I arrived in Italy in 1988 and I was just an immigrant; or, to be precise, I was a clandestine (...) Now I am a leader of the Ghanaian community in Modena and the president of a transnational enterprise committed to development. It is a big step to become entrepreneurs and development actors, we are immigrants but we are the diaspora (...) We are not only and simply migrants, we produce labour, we are integrated in the local and social context (...). We are respected, now we are not just “immigrati.” (A.T., president, interview)
	D2. “Now I work for <i>Africoop</i> , I am a partner of the cooperative (...) I work a lot, also on Sundays, but even if it is tiring I feel like I am doing something important. In fact, since the beginning, I wanted that also my wife and my son became partners (...) we hope that when <i>Africoop</i> will grow they will be among the new employees” (D., partner, interview).
E. <i>From migrants to engaged diaspora</i>	E1. “ <i>Africoop</i> belongs to the Ghanaian community of [name of Italian city]. My husband is the president of the association and he has an important role within the community (...) I am very proud of being part of the project; I feel I am doing something for my people here and in my country” (R., partner, interview 2009)
	E2. “There is a strong belief, the idea of linking up once again with the country where you were born, the willingness to make a difference in your village of origin and the consciousness of a responsibility towards the community where you come from,” says <i>Africoop</i> president (IOM, 2006).
<i>Aggregate theoretical dimension:</i>	
Establishment – Italy: Meso-level implementation	
4. <i>Combining macro- and micro-aspirations; building moral and pragmatic legitimacy</i>	
F. <i>Harvesting and directing macro-level aspirations</i>	F1. “It [<i>Africoop</i>] is showing that by combining the knowledge, passion and commitment of migrants with institutional and government backing, migrants can make a life-changing difference at both a social and economic level to the development of their country” (Pandya, 2006: 4)
	F2. “ <i>Africoop</i> has been chosen for the “Migration and Development” program because of the strong ethical characterization of the business model” (Partner Bank representative, extracted from the CD “Migration and Development” Ghana/Senegal, 2008.
G. <i>Pushing micro-level aspirations through experimentation</i>	G1. “How did you decide in the Association about how to divide the roles in <i>Africoop</i> ? (ethnographer)” “After we closed the agreement with the municipality, we went to the Association and asked who wanted to try this opportunity. We needed someone that could speak good Italian and English, who could write well in English, somebody good... We made this announcement for three times during the assemblies. This proposal was welcomed with perplexity, there was interest but nobody wanted to start with the project” (A.T., president, interview).

Second-order themes and first-order categories	Representative data
<p><i>Aggregate theoretical dimension:</i></p> <p>Transnational growth – Ghana: Macro-level aspirations</p> <p>5. <i>Migrants as key actors for development</i></p> <p>H. <i>Migrants as untapped resources for the development of home countries</i></p>	<p>H1. “When you go to Ghana you can see some traditional chiefs spending money to buy BMWs instead of using it for the community. They are our political authorities, they have an important role especially in the rural areas, but it is clear that it is crucial to spend money in the right way” (A.T., president, interview).</p> <p>H2. During the interview with the IOM representative in Accra in charge of following <i>Africoop</i> project in Ghana, he highlighted that the engagement and management of diaspora was a central issue for the Government, even if they had recently cancelled the Ministry of Tourism and Diaspora and were re-organizing these activities (field journal n. 4)</p>
<p><i>Aggregate theoretical dimension:</i></p> <p>Transnational growth – Ghana: Micro-level aspirations</p> <p>6. <i>Enhancing social status</i></p> <p>I. <i>From migrants to Ghanaian «big men»</i></p>	<p>I1. “In Ghana, especially where we built some things, people are very grateful, you see it when we arrive there” (O.N., deputy president, interview).</p> <p>I2. “The Government in Ghana is always ready to cooperate for development, also when it need a help or assistance. For example, there was this project of the European Union that regarded vocational training and employment (...) The president of <i>Africoop</i> was contacted and he came here to discuss with the Government and the interested ministers. I was with him; they were very open and said, ‘when we need to carry out a project, if it is promoted or regards migrants, we are always ready’” (S., <i>Afrital</i> employee, interview)</p>

Second-order themes and first-order categories	Representative data
<p><i>Aggregate theoretical dimension:</i></p> <p>Transnational growth – Ghana: Meso-level implementation</p> <p>7. <i>Combining macro- and micro-aspirations; building moral and pragmatic legitimacy</i></p> <p>J. <i>Translating the organizational template</i></p>	<p>J1. “In Ghana, <i>Africoop</i> is known only for the social projects, whereas <i>Afrital</i> is known only in the business environment (S, <i>Afrital</i> employee, interview)</p> <p>J2. “<i>Afrital</i> and <i>Africoop</i> are almost the same thing. More or less like you and your mother. We think about <i>Africoop</i> as the mother; we as children do what <i>Africoop</i> decides. Each organization has its own rules and I think that we cannot put them under discussion. Instead I think that we can discuss on the projects and on the ideas that we have to improve the business. <i>Afrital</i> is not strong enough to stand alone, we receive everything from <i>Africoop</i>, we depend on it” (P., <i>Afrital</i> employee, interview).</p> <p>K1. “We know what’s good for them and what they need, so before laying out a feasibility plan we ask, we get information, we talk to people, but then we decide what is best for that community” (O.N., deputy president, interview).</p> <p>K2. “I decided to accompany them [<i>Africoop</i>] in Ghana, to see my land, my village. We took some agreements and they started their project, after a while they decided to build a solar plant to give light to the village (...) They showed me what they intended to do and they asked me whether we would like that kind of energy. After a while they left with some people that built these kind of plants and went to [name of village](...). I thought it was a good idea, but they just invited me, and decided everything on their own. Now the batteries should be changed, they should change them, they promised it, but still haven’t done it” (Nana K., chief of village, interview).</p>
<p>K. <i>Brokerage of economic and social capital</i></p>	

Second-order themes and first-order categories	Representative data
<i>Aggregate theoretical dimension:</i>	
Transnational growth – Italy: Micro-level aspirations	
8. <i>Enhancing social status</i>	
L. <i>From migrants to good migrants</i>	L1. “The people working with <i>Africoop</i> have many opportunities, they meet many important people... we need to find a way to do something more and give the possibility to other people to do such a job (Mr G., <i>Africoop</i> partner and manager of Ghanaian Association in another city, interview).
M. <i>From migrants to development experts</i>	M1. “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 building [the chief’s house, a local symbol of the community] ... They want to know what we do with the money; let us know what the board decides and we will talk with the donors to understand how to proceed” (A.T., president, interview)
	M2. “On May 11th, 2006, a delegation led by the assessor of the Province Alberto Caldana (...) presents the moving phenomenon in New York, at the UN (...) The CNN dedicates a report to <i>Africoop</i> and to the miracle realized between Italy and Ghana (...). In 2007 the ex UN secretary general Kofi Annan (...) comes to [name of Italian city] (...)and claims that he wants to meet the managers of <i>Africoop</i> ” (Il Giornale, 2010)
N. <i>From migrants to political actors</i>	N1. “I am trying to do like the people from <i>Africoop</i> ... they are very good, they have many relationships, once they brought Romano Prodi at a meeting” (Nana K., chief of village, 30 May 2008). N2. On the 18th December 2008 <i>Africoop</i> President receives an invite to present <i>Africoop</i> experience to the Italian Chamber of Deputy, the formal occasion was the launching of the book co-authored by Stephen Ogongo, Enrico Bellavia, Thomas McCarthy and Enrico Messor. (Field Protocol, 19 December 2008). N3. The leader of <i>Africoop</i> officially participated to the manifestations and strikes against racism held in Locri on March 1 st 2008 (field notebook n. 6).

Second-order themes and first-order categories	Representative data
<p><i>Aggregate theoretical dimension:</i></p> <p>Transnational growth – Italy: Meso-level implementation</p> <p>9. <i>Combining macro- and micro-aspirations; building moral and pragmatic legitimacy</i></p> <p>O. <i>Brokerage of economic and social capital</i></p>	<p>O1. “Thanks to the network of contacts and the trust we built up throughout these years in Italy, we received help when we needed it” (A.T., president, personal communication)</p> <p>O2. “Fundamental to its success so far is a rainbow of partnerships. In addition to IOM, the cooperative has the backing of the municipality of [name of the Italian city], a local cooperative bank, and the branch of the umbrella organization of Italian cooperatives. By also teaming up with [name of a private company], now merged into [name of company], Italy’s largest fresh produce group (...) (Pandya, 2006: 4)</p> <p>O3. “The donors want to know what do the organizations that receive their money do with it. They are not an international organization but people that want to participate to the development of our community” (L., leader of Ghanaian association).</p> <p>O4. “We didn’t know the African market. We haven’t penetrated it. We thought that it was a reciprocal knowledge, helping them with their product in Europe, them helping us to access their market. We started this adventure. I call it adventure but I am sure it is going to be a sustainable project economically” (Pandya, 2006: 9).</p> <p>O5. “At first we thought we’d do some kind of social projects. But gradually we realized that it is better to construct something strong, something economic which will last long and which during years, will help the economy of the country. Our hope is that we create job opportunities for Ghanaians who remain in Ghana and who want to come to Europe so that we can combat the migration situation in our country” (A.T., president, in Pandya, 2006: 4).</p>
<p>P. <i>Pushing micro-level aspirations</i></p>	<p>P1. “We entered in <i>Africoop</i> as a ‘supporting partner’ (...) We started our collaboration slightly more than one year ago, when we thought about doing a promotion about <i>Africoop</i>’s products and collect money for the Ghanaian Ministry of Health to fight malaria (...) Since then we had interest and desire to collaborate (...) and this year we decided to promote <i>Africoop</i> in the region [name of another Italian region], because it is not known over there (...) and decided to become partner of the cooperative” (S.K., manager of another Migrants’ Association, interview).</p> <p>P2. “... if we build another enterprise like <i>Africoop</i> in another sector for our women, we could really make a progress (...) Look, those that work in <i>Africoop</i> have many opportunities, they meet many important people. We have to find a way to do something else and give the opportunity to others to have a job like that” (Mr. G., member of the Ghanaian Association, interview)</p>

Second-order themes and first-order categories	Representative data
<p data-bbox="159 172 555 197"><i>Aggregate theoretical dimension:</i></p> <p data-bbox="203 204 797 268">Transnational growth – Italy: Macro-level inspiration</p> <p data-bbox="203 274 797 338"><i>10. Migrants help to shape policies of development and migration</i></p> <p data-bbox="241 344 595 373"><i>Q. Africoop as a best practice</i></p>	<p data-bbox="824 344 2080 408">Q1. “<i>Africoop</i> has opened the door to similar, commercially viable schemes to benefit migrants and their countries of origin” (IOM, 2006)</p> <p data-bbox="824 414 2080 507">Q2. “Both the local authorities and one Italian cooperative trade union now want to apply the <i>Africoop</i> model to other migrant communities from Sub Saharan Africa and Albania living in the province” (Pandya, 2006: 9)</p>