‘Giving back’ through mobility trajectories: motivations for engaging in development encounters in Ghana among transnational youth

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ABSTRACT

Literature on diaspora engagement in development activities has centred on the contributions of migrating adults to the ‘homeland’, which range from private transfers to single households, to community development projects. While such studies often focus on the impact of such activities on the country of origin, relatively few have focused on what transpires during development encounters and how this affects migrants’, and especially young people’s, motivation to engage transnationally over time. This paper combines migration and development, transnational migration studies and second generation ‘returns’ literature, to address these gaps. It studies the motivations of transnational youth to engage in development encounters, which they referred to as ‘giving back’, in the context of their mobility trajectories. Drawing on 17 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in the Netherlands and accompanying young people during trips to Ghana, we show that giving back contributes to a sense of purpose that connects them transnationally. Young people’s expectations of giving back were embedded in community narratives, which framed this as a means to ‘become successful’ in culturally valued ways. While young people sometimes encountered unexpected surprises, emotions experienced during development encounters led to learning that ultimately resulted in enhanced intentions of transnational engagement.

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Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, scholars and policy makers have shown renewed interest in the idea of migrants as development agents for their countries of origin (Skeldon 2008; Faist 2008; Sinatti and Horst 2015). A remarkable increase in remittance flows in the early 2000s gave rise to the celebration of migrants’ transnational engagements. These optimistic views inspired a boom in empirical studies around the migration and
development nexus and comprehensive policy frameworks on co-development. Yet, while much attention has been paid to the contributions of the diaspora to the ‘home-land’, which range from private transfers to single households, to community development projects, less attention has been paid to what transpires during ‘development encounters’, as a space where transnational actors meet through development work (Riddering 2020). In fact, most scholars privilege the perspective of the country where migrants are living and rely on their verbal accounts. Exceptions include Mazzucato and Kabki’s (2009), Lampert’s (2010) and Lamba-Nieves’s (2018) studies, which – through a multi-sited research design – not only shed light on the opportunities but also the challenges and tensions migrants face when setting up community development projects. Hence, their detailed analyses across multiple localities reveal a more complex story.

Most studies on diaspora engagement in development focus on types of projects and impacts in the country of origin, with relatively little investigation into what motivates investing time, energy and resources in collective transnational development activities over long-term commitments. Previous work on migrating adults has pointed out that their development efforts are driven by emotional attachments, moral obligations to family and community, the desire to return and the ability to maintain a sense of dignity in the face of discrimination in the country of residence (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1992; Mazzucato and Kabki 2009; Lacroix 2014). While these studies have enriched discussions on the role of migrants as transnational actors, they do not often address the evolving nature of transnational engagement (Levitt and Waters 2002) within and over generations.

Even less has been researched about the motivations of young people, who are increasingly seen as an ‘untapped’ resource by governments in the Global South (Mahieu 2019). Differing from the community-oriented development activities of migrating adults, young people generally support development at a broader level (Singla, Fabricius, and Holm 2011). An emerging body of literature on second generation ‘returns’, which predominantly focus on older members, refers to the skills, resources and knowledge they bring ‘back’ to the country as a whole. This type of transnational engagement is mainly attributed to negative experiences in the country of residence, and is framed by return migration (Potter 2005; Reynolds 2008) or institutionalised programmes as part of diaspora policies (e.g. Mahieu 2019). Charitable activities organised by young people themselves remain under-researched (Robertson, Harris, and Baldassar 2018, 209). This paper addresses these gaps by focusing on young people’s motivations to engage in development encounters in the context of their mobility trajectories, defined here as the physical moves over time and space between where young people reside and their or their parents’ home country (Mazzucato 2015).

Drawing on 17 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with young people of Ghanaian background who were born in Ghana or the Netherlands and have engaged in at least one international move (i.e. short trips and/or migration) to or from Ghana, this paper combines migration and development, transnational migration studies and second generation returns literature, to explore how ‘giving back’ contributes to a sense of purpose that connects young people transnationally. ‘Giving back’ here refers to activities and projects set up by participants, aimed at supporting ‘those in need’ such as street children, orphans and ‘poor’ residents of rural villages in Ghana.
We use this notion as it was invoked by participants themselves, regardless of their country of birth. We acknowledge that it carries normative assumptions about different groups (locals vs. the diaspora) involved and can mask imbalances of power. That said, it serves as a meaningful starting point for our analysis, as participants both used it and questioned it.

Understanding the motivations of young people to engage in development encounters in Ghana requires embedding such notions and encounters within their mobility trajectories. To do this, we first study the ‘giving back’ narrative in the country where young people live. We show that this narrative is created and celebrated in spaces that participants inhabit in the Netherlands. Ghanaian-background peers, parents, religious leaders and the wider Ghanaian community in the Netherlands significantly shape young people’s drive to be engaged transnationally. In a second part of the paper, we analyse young people’s lived experiences of ‘giving back’ when they travel to Ghana, which sometimes put their transnational engagement to the test. We show here that young people’s motivation fluctuated over time. In a third section we investigate how participants followed up on their development activities once they returned to the Netherlands. We find that even in cases where participants faced significant challenges, they expressed a renewed sense of purpose following their activities in Ghana. The emotionality of young people’s engagement plays an important role in the encounters between those that ‘give back’ and the intended ‘beneficiaries’. The sometimes seemingly contradictory emotions experienced during moments of giving back set in motion a learning process. This involved imagining alternative ways of engaging in development encounters as worldly and reflexive individuals (Horst 2018, 1353) and resulted in enhanced intentions of transnational engagement.

Giving back discourse

The Ghanaian diaspora, and the Dutch-Ghanaian community more specifically, is an interesting case to study giving back as both entrepreneurship and charity are part of a socially desirable and honourable culturally embedded narrative among Ghanaians. For example, the value of an entrepreneurial spirit is promoted by Ghanaian churches, and especially Pentecostal congregations (van Dijk 2012). These churches have grown immensely popular over the last few decades and proliferate within Ghanaian migrant communities in the Netherlands. They stimulate believers to engage in entrepreneurial activities by emphasising wealth and success through a prosperity doctrine. Ghanaian churches in the Netherlands also support development projects organised by churches and non-governmental organisations in Ghana. Yet religion is rarely explicitly foregrounded in studies that focus on diaspora engagement, with some notable exceptions (Borchgrevink and Erdal 2017; van Dijk 2012).

The Ghanaian state approaches migrants’ remittances as an important resource for the development of the country. In response to this, Ghanaians abroad increasingly appropriated the term ‘diaspora’ and represent themselves as groups acting in the interest of their homeland (Nieswand 2009). Generally, Ghanaians abroad are highly associational (Mazzucato and Kabki 2009) and it is common for them to mobilise resources to improve socio-economic conditions in regions of origin. They form Hometown Associations (HTAs) or more informal groups of migrants from the same region who work together
for their community abroad and at home (Mazzucato and Kabki 2009). These efforts earn respect for migrants from their home communities and reassert their membership to them (Mazzucato and Kabki 2009; Henry and Mohan 2003). Working for home communities entails many activities in which discourses of giving back are propagated (Nieswand 2009). These include fundraising events in the country of residence during which migrants’ duty to contribute to the development of the homeland is stressed, requests for donations or other forms of support and an official public ceremony in which donations are handed over by one party to the other. As formalised and repeated practices, they convey values about what it means to be a ‘good’ member of the Ghanaian diaspora.

Diaspora engagement in migration and development literature more broadly is often characterised through remittances and HTAs (de Haas 2010; Faist 2008; Mazzucato and Kabki 2009). As migrants operate outside of established institutional structures, they are considered to be embedded in the local community and better able to maximise developmental benefits (Østergaard-Nielsen 2009). Collective remittances, which are mobilised through HTAs, have therefore been strongly encouraged by governments in both countries of origin as well as countries of residence and international organisations, resulting in co-development initiatives. These publicly funded development projects involve migrants as ‘actors of development’ and here too the language of ‘giving back’ is used (Sinatti and Horst 2015).

Much of this literature, however, analyses the range of contributions made from abroad, and relies on self-reported accounts of development projects. Some multi-sited studies focus on what transpires during moments of giving back. They problematise the notion of presumed embedding in local community, showing the power dynamics between diaspora and non-migrants in origin countries. For example, Mazzucato and Kabki (2009) followed simultaneously the different sites in which HTAs operate, which allowed them to observe that migrant-funded projects, which were presented as successful by migrants, were not always successfully completed. Similarly, Lampert (2010) observed that migrants’ homeland contributions often benefitted the local elites more than local communities, and Lamba-Nieves (2018) shows that tensions between internal, international and non-migrants contributed to changing transnational partnerships over time. Following these examples, we look at giving back as taking place across entangled spaces to shed light on the ‘messiness’ of development encounters (Wright 2012).

Yet the above-cited literature focuses almost exclusively on migrating adults. Mainly relying on retrospective accounts of adults or older young people, research on next generations finds that they are motivated to ‘give back’ by negative experiences in the country of residence, prompting a search for ‘belonging’ (Potter 2005; Reynolds 2008). While Potter and Reynolds focus on ‘return migration by next generations, other studies that consider shorter trips, find that young people’s motivations to give back are embedded in their ambitions in the country where they reside. Darieva (2016), for example, shows how young diasporic Armenians link homeland volunteering to their career aspirations. Our analysis contributes to literature on young people’s engagement with an ‘origin’ country by focusing on young people of both the first (migrating) and second (post-migration) generation who engaged in giving back activities during trips to Ghana.
Moreover, we approach their motivations to ‘give back’ as evolving over time and through mobilities. Much previous research considers motivations retrospectively, through interviews, or considers them to be perennial facts of the lifestyles of those living abroad (Page and Mercer 2012). In contrast, recent literature on international volunteering and humanitarianism more generally has emphasised the shifting emotionality of ‘development work’ (Cheung Judge 2020; Fechter 2019). Along these lines, Kleist (2020) draws on the concept of ‘affective circuits’ to address the social repercussions of transnational recycling for hometown development. She shows that both feelings of frustration, in response to beneficiaries’ perceived passive attitude, as well as feelings of reward, enhanced migrants’ desire to engage with the community of origin. This work highlights the generative role of emotions: they can trigger individuals to engage in development encounters and can produce connections and disconnections between people (Wright 2012, 1115). Using the notion of ‘comparative confrontation’, van Geel and Mazzucato (2020) describe how young Dutch-Ghanaians’ experiences of being confronted with poverty during homeland trips, engendered strong emotional responses that broadened their horizons. We adopt this term to highlight how emotions are experienced within the complex social and structural relations in which these individuals are transnationally embedded. We aim to bring out the processual nature and emotionality of transnational engagement by including interviews and observations throughout the mobility trajectory – before, during and after development encounters.

**Methodology**

This study is part of the Mobility Trajectories of Young Lives (MO-TRAYL) project (www.motrayl.com), which examines the relationship between youth mobility trajectories and young people’s life chances. Data for this paper were collected from January 2018 till October 2019 by following young people of Ghanaian background between 14 and 25 years old through their mobility trajectories. This included tracking young people’s ‘giving back’ activities through a multi-sited ethnographic research design, in which their everyday experiences were studied in both the Netherlands and during their trips to Ghana. In the months following the ‘official’ end of fieldwork (from October 2019 till May 2020), the first author participated in several online follow-up events that were relevant for the research.

Sampling criteria began with having a Ghanaian background, meaning participants’ parents were born in Ghana, irrespective of their own place of birth. Other selection criteria were that 1) participants needed to have made at least one international move, including both migration and/or shorter trips; and 2) have attended secondary school in the Netherlands. Though not a selection criterium, participants largely identified as Christians and belonged to diverse denominations, including Pentecostalism and Methodism, and expressed their identity as Christians on social platforms. Those who were involved in giving back were at the upper end of the age range. It is important to note that two-thirds of the participants were female and that young female participants dominated the spaces in which notions of giving back circulate, but the scope of the study does not allow us to investigate gender as a factor. Participants were recruited through foundations led by young people of Ghanaian background and local organisations, ‘Ghanaian’ churches, a visual storytelling project organised by the first author, and snowball
Interviews were usually conducted in English, Dutch or a mixture of both. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Maastricht University’s Ethics Committee. We approached informed consent as a process (van Geel and Mazzucato 2018), which meant that the first author regularly reminded participants of her position as a researcher, the purposes of the research and stayed attuned to any desire to withdraw from the study. To ensure anonymity we use pseudonyms for participants and obscured any identifiable details.

As part of a multi-sited and collaborative project, we used a variety of qualitative methods. The first author was based in The Hague, where most of the participants lived, to maximise the opportunities to participate in young people’s everyday activities. Participant observation was conducted at events on diaspora and development, board meetings of youth-led foundations and in meaningful locations such as recreational spaces, churches, parties and homes. The field researcher also accompanied participants during three trips (two months in total) to Ghana, which included volunteering in the giving back activities that three youth-led foundations had organised in 2018. Additional methods included life history interviews, transnational network mapping and mobility trajectory mapping, as well as semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with volunteers and community leaders involved in youth foundations beyond the main sample.

While the total sample consists of 36 participants, this analysis draws on the perspectives and experiences of 25 participants who shared the motivation to give back to Ghana. Four participants led foundations or one-off projects, and 12 participants supported their activities as volunteers and board members. Participants engaged in diverse volunteering activities, including fundraising, donating supplies to schools and clinics, and visiting orphanages. Foundations had an official organisational structure, with a leader/director, a board that fulfilled different positions and a group of volunteers. They typically relied on funds from private donors such as peers and fellow church members, facilitated by young people’s transnational networks. While some initiatives were organised by officially registered NGO’s, they typically operated outside the professional development establishment.

The analysis for this paper was generated by our inductive coding process, guided by the question: ‘what motivates young people to engage in development activities in Ghana and how does this change over time?’ We conducted a diachronic analysis by structuring the emerging themes according to where they arose during the mobility trajectory and how they evolved throughout the course of the trajectory, starting from the place in which participants live, to the sites of their development interventions and encounters, and back. The analysis follows this structure through three vignettes, which together show the full diversity of factors shaping the shifting sense of motivation observed across our sample.

Motivations to give back

In this section, we present these three vignettes, each illustrating factors that emerged in our data about young people’s motivation to give back to Ghana through their mobility trajectories. Through the first vignette, we trace how this narrative gains strength by exploring how notions of giving back are celebrated in transnational settings, including
peer groups, religious communities and the wider Ghanaian community. The second vignette recounts young people’s lived experiences of giving back, highlighting the unexpected surprises that they encountered. Finally, the third vignette illustrates how these experiences resulted in a renewed sense of purpose that enhanced young people’s transnational engagement.

**Tracing the giving back narrative**

**Vignette 1: giving back as an obligation**

‘Do we as (children of) immigrants have the responsibility to go back to Ghana to give back and share our skills?’ This question was central to a panel discussion that formed part of an event called ‘Our Culture’. Nana foundation organized this event to raise money for street children in Ghana and motivate young people to ‘give back’ to the country, while exposing them to the beauty of ‘Ghanaian culture’ through cultural artifacts, fashion and music. In line with their objectives, Nana had invited the first author and well-known young Ghanaian-background figures in the Ghanaian community, including a youth minister, artist, and gym owner, to share their perspectives on the topic as panel members. By the time the event started, the room was packed mostly with Ghanaian-background peers. Tina (23), the director of Nana, opened the event by sharing an anecdote of the ‘bad’ living conditions of street children in Ghana, which she observed while roaming the streets of the capital city during one of her most recent trips together with one of her friends. This experience inspired Tina to start her own foundation and encourage Dutch-Ghanaian peers to spend their trips to Ghana in more meaningful ways by being of service to people in need. Tina’s introduction was followed by praise and worship performances by members of a Christian youth gospel band among others. While the event was dominated by young people, several speakers stressed the crucial role of parents in facilitating young people’s connection to Ghana during the panel discussion. Without this, they explained, young people would lack the sense of responsibility to contribute to Ghana’s development.

This vignette is one example of the intersecting ways in which parents, Ghanaian-background peers, the wider community and religious actors shape young people’s transnational engagement. The narrative that is constructed in the process celebrates notions of giving back, giving young people a sense of how they could draw on this to fulfil their ‘obligations’ as Christians and young people in the diaspora, and become successful in culturally acknowledged ways.

Growing up, parents’ stories about hardships they faced in Ghana planted the seeds for the interest in giving back among participants, both those who were born in the Netherlands as well as those born in Ghana. They instilled a sense of responsibility in them for the sacrifices they had made to escape the set of conditions in Ghana. Akosua, an artist, coordinator of an accelerator programme for young Dutch-Ghanaian entrepreneurs and one of the Our Culture panelists, argued that parents should make their children feel connected to Ghana and responsible for the country’s development. Joshua (25), who was born in Germany in an asylum centre and moved to the Netherlands at the age of two, shared in an interview that his father often ‘reminded’ him that he would be selling ‘pure water’ (water in sachets) if the family would have never moved to Europe.
and instead stayed in Ghana. Joshua explained, ‘Not everyone that moved from Ghana to the Netherlands comes from a rich family … Many parents [migrants] have 3–4 jobs, a lot of them are cleaners. At least try to make your parents proud.’ Many other participants described having had similar interactions with parents. This sense of parental hardships has been identified as a key factor motivating migrant-background youth to take full advantage of the ‘vast array of opportunities’ in the country of residence (Sanghera and Thapar-Bjökert 2012).

Young people’s trips to Ghana reinforced their parents’ stories and the perceived need to give back to the country. Like many other participants, Angelina (22) described being confronted with unpleasant living conditions and poverty: ‘When I was younger, I saw children my age roam the streets. I would be sitting in a nice car and we have a house in Ghana. But those children were walking on streets in ugly clothes.’ This example of comparative confrontation engendered emotional responses, heightening young people’s awareness of their own privileges (van Geel and Mazzucato 2020) and prompting a sense of solidarity with the beneficiaries of development projects (Wright 2012). This experience also applied to those who were born in Ghana, like Tina. She made four trips to Ghana since moving to The Netherlands at the age of 12 and shared with the audience at Our Culture how her observations during one of her trips moved her to action. Tina elaborated on her experience of comparative confrontation in an interview:

[I had] the opportunity to come here. We didn’t have that much money in Ghana … So, sometimes it was hard, just being there [during her second trip to Ghana] and experiencing kids on the street selling, living on the street … It’s just heartbreaking that they have to go through that life.

Although comparative confrontation appeared to reinforce negative stereotypes about Africa/Ghana as poor, participants simultaneously highlighted Ghana’s potential and their ability to harness this. For example, Rachel (19), who studied nursing, developed her ideas around giving back – starting a day care for functionally handicapped children – with Ghana’s changing landscape in mind:

Ghanaians don’t just live in poverty. I actually thought that when I was younger … Ghana is slowly becoming more modern. There are shopping malls behind our house [in Ghana] now … I thought a medical day care would work better [in this context].

Beyond these individual experiences, well-known figures in the Dutch-Ghanaian community promoted the notion of the diaspora as potential agents of change back home, which appealed to most participants. In line with language that is commonly used in diaspora engagement policies, participants saw themselves as being in a favourable position to contribute to the development of their ‘homeland’ due to their experience of being (partly) educated in the West as ‘Ghanaians’. Not surprisingly, young people’s giving back activities were often in line with their educational background and career aspirations. Migrant-background youth consider development work to also be useful for their professional future (Darieva 2016). The idea of young people as ‘development agents’ dominated the Our Culture event described in the vignette, as reflected in the call to action directed to the younger generation. Like a motivational speaker, gym owner and panelist Michael, who built a school and is an alum of a government
funded acceleration programme that supports start-ups in Ghana, encouraged participants to turn their ideas into concrete plans and connect with people who possess the knowledge and skills for support.

While diaspora development discourse emphasises ‘knowledge transfer’ within the context of return migration (Sinatti and Horst 2015), the organisers of Our Culture rather put emphasis on young people’s (regular) visits to Ghana, which appeared to be in line with most of participants’ experiences. For example, Jill, a 21-year-old Law student, got her first taste of giving back by assisting one of her friends during a charitable activity in Ghana. She expressed in a later interview that her interest in giving back to Ghana, more specifically in the field of human rights, was strengthened through her experience of being surrounded by like-minded young individuals at the Our Culture event. Similarly, Daniel (14), who joined his siblings to the event and was among the youngest participants, clapped enthusiastically in response to Michael’s ‘speech’, which made some audience members grin. After the panel discussion, Daniel shared that Michael’s motivational words inspired him to consider giving back to Ghana, a country he has visited twice, upon completing high school.

In fact, peer relationships facilitated young people’s transnational engagement. While countless HTAs have been established by Ghanaian-background migrating adults in the Netherlands over the last couple of decades (Mazzucato and Kabki 2009), participants generally referred to giving back to Ghana as a trend among young people. For example, Alberta, a 19-year-old European Studies student, noticed a proliferation of new youth-led charities operating in Ghana on Facebook: ‘Last week I saw something about premature babies, which is unique. But there are also a lot of small foundations doing similar things. Maybe it is something typically Ghanaian, to want to make a name for yourself.’ As shown elsewhere, transnational engagement, including development work, can offer diasporans the opportunity to claim a higher social status (Kleist 2020; Mazzucato and Kabki 2009). Observing the tendency of newly-founded organisations to ‘reinvent the wheel’, Alberta even came up with the idea to draw on her knowledge of the non-profit sector, her study interest, in creating an overview of all the Dutch-based foundations operating in Ghana. It was through social media that participants often found out about charity activities led by peers and were induced to show their support. Although Tina embraced the opportunities that social media offered to promote her foundation, she critiqued some of its unintended consequences: ‘It has become a trend that people [African-background youth] go to Africa and give stuff out because we are so poor’, Tina said with a sarcastic smile. She added that she wanted ‘Nana foundation to be all about genuine love and support, no type of fakeness [and] doing things for your personal agenda.’ Although Tina contributed to the ‘trend’ by organising the Our Culture event, as reflected in the high number of youth attendees, she questioned some of her peers’ ‘sudden’ interest in giving back at the same time. Hence, the popularity of giving back brought to the fore the tension between altruism and self-interest (Henry and Mohan 2003).

Participants also often highlighted their moral obligation as Christians to help those in need. For example, because it would be a calling, Tina felt she was obliged to give back to Ghana and does not have control over this. Several years ago, Tina had attended a prayer event organised by a friend, youth minister and one of the speakers at the Our Culture event, to help her solve some personal issues she was experiencing. During the gathering,
Tina was called to the front by a guest pastor who told her it was time for her to ‘move past her problems’ and respond to God’s calling: ‘helping people in Ghana’. Religion also influenced the Our Culture event, as reflected in the choice of performers (e.g. a Christian band) and the choice of speaker and the topics he discussed (e.g. the role of Ghanaian churches in the development of Ghana). Other participants, like Eric, referred to their religious upbringing and the influence of the church. Eric (25), who grew up in the Netherlands and made five trips to Ghana, pointed out that young people may learn about this Christian principle in church. Yet, according to him, only those ‘who have grown into their relationship with the Lord act upon this.’ Together with Joshua, a close friend of his and a small group of friends, Eric organised a Christian convention to raise money to help build a school in Ghana on behalf of a Dutch church association. Similarly, several other participants partnered with churches, both in the Netherlands as well as in Ghana. Religion can thus play an important role in mobilising diasporans for ‘development’ in the ‘origin’-country (Borchgrevink and Erdal 2017).

As the examples have shown, young people’s motivation to give back to Ghana is embedded in community narratives. Parents, well-known figures in the Ghanaian community, peers and religious leaders/mentors all frame this as a way to act as ‘good’ children, members of the Ghanaian diaspora, peers, and Christians, respectively. Following young people’s mobility trajectories, the next section discusses the unexpected surprises that participants experienced while performing this role through development encounters in Ghana, which both tested and enhanced their motivation to be transnationally engaged.

**Lived experiences of giving back**

**Vignette 2: unexpected surprises**

Shortly after launching her own foundation, called Tellen’s Restoration Wellness, Ellen (25), who is born in the Netherlands and had made more than ten trips to Ghana, started preparing herself and a team of volunteers, consisting mostly of friends, for Tellen’s first project in Ghana. They would donate medical supplies to three carefully selected clinics in the country and give trainings on first aid to nurses working there. Ellen needed to pitch her project to prospective clinics, which proved to be very time-consuming. To make the process go smoother, one of Ellen’s friends connected Ellen to a Ghanaian politician, who had offered to select clinics and arrange visits to them. As Ellen imagined worst case scenarios, which made her feel nervous about carrying out the project, the politician’s support lifted some weight off her shoulders. Whilst in Ghana, Ellen’s project appeared to be well-received: pictures appeared on Tellen’s social media pages of Ellen shaking the hand of the politician and a series of articles was published on her work by several Ghanaian news platforms.

Ellen’s initial excitement, however, was quickly overshadowed by feelings of anxiety on the second day of the project. As I was talking to Ingrid, one of Ellen’s friends and fellow volunteers, on a bench outside of the clinic we would visit, a big white car passed by with Ellen sitting in the front. When we approached Ellen, she revealed with watery eyes that she was exhausted and had cried all morning. The politician had promised to arrange her transport but let her down, causing her to arrive late and lose trust in him.
Ellen’s emotional breakdown was the result of accumulated stress from months of intensely preparing for the project, and this particular obstacle was the final straw, leaving her wondering what she got herself into. Although Ellen seemed not in the mood to give the first aid training, she managed to pull through with the support of her friends and was reminded of the relevance of her work. After completing the training, which took the form of a semi-quiz, Ellen demonstrated how to bandage a leg. The group of nurses gathered around her in a circle, paying close attention to Ellen’s instructions and enthusiastically documenting the process with their phones. Ellen, who was visibly more relaxed now and comfortable in her role as ‘expert’, then handed over the donations together with her team, which was followed by expressions of gratitude.

As the vignette shows, participants not only faced opportunities but sometimes also encountered challenges that tested their sense of motivation. Ellen was devastated after having to deal with ‘broken promises’. Although her heavy emotions threatened to overshadow her planned activities, her friends managed to cheer her up, ending an intense day of giving back with a relaxing dinner and lots of laughter at Ellen’s place. Following a similar setback, Joshua, who had invested significant time and effort into organising a fundraising convention with a group of friends to help build a school in Ghana, needed to cope with that challenge alone. During his trip to observe the school building progress as the project leader, Joshua learned that most of the donated money was misused by the builders of the school and ended up being wasted, which triggered feelings of anger and confusion. As his friends could not join him on this trip, Joshua faced the struggle of having to inform them about the failed project. Mazzucato and Kabki (2009) noted that the failure of migrant-led development projects is not uncommon but rarely reported.

Aside from ‘broken promises’, some young people experienced difficult collaborations with Ghanaians in Ghana, which provided an alternative source of stress and often exacerbated hierarchical distinctions between young people raised and educated in the West and Ghanaians living in Ghana. For example, the Ghana-based members of Nana’s team were expected to carry out preparatory tasks in Ghana, but sometimes failed to do so in the eyes of the Dutch-based team members. In one example, upon the group’s arrival to visit an orphanage, it turned out that the staff members of the orphanage had not been informed about the visit and regretted this as most orphans (the intended beneficiaries) were not present. The Dutch-based team members did not shy away from openly expressing their dissatisfaction with the performance of the Ghana-based team members, resulting in tense interactions between the ‘teams’. While Ellen did not appear to face such issues with volunteers based in Ghana, tensions occurred at times between some of the intended beneficiaries and Dutch-Ghanaian volunteers. Irene (25), for example, got into an argument with one of the nurses at a clinic after she commented on the nurse’s ‘wrong use’ of a bandage. Irene later classified the nurse’s response as ungrateful as she did not seem open to her ‘advice’. Emotional responses can indicate how status divisions are (re)produced in development encounters (Wright 2012).

Rather than becoming disillusioned following challenges, participants also derived positive feelings from giving back. For example, Ellen visibly lit up when the nurses praised her expertise and efforts. Young people also received validation for their work in the online world from members in their transnational networks. Like in Ellen’s
case, it was common for participants to notice coverage of their activities in the news, which they then shared with their social media followers. The visibility of diaspora-led development projects in local media has also been reported in other studies (Mazzucato and Kabki 2009, 233–24; Asiedu 2005, 5–6).

The attention that young people’s giving back activities attracted in Ghana should be understood in relation to the country’s diaspora discourse, which presents the diaspora as a group that acts as key developmental resources for their ‘compatriots’ in Ghana (Nieswand 2009, 20). Participants themselves also actively promoted their work in Ghana, which was reflected in their heavy use of communication technologies. For example, much like other uses of ICT to allow global participation in ‘homeland’ activities (Mazzucato, Kabki, and Smith 2006), participants shared pictures on their online platforms and made (live) videos to enable others to follow their giving back activities closely and show how funds from donors were being used. During Nana’s visits to schools, Tina’s Ghana-based fiancé recorded the whole happening – from traditional dances performed by school children for the team, to the ceremonial handing over of the donations. In the car on the way to the next destination, a school in a remote village, Tina and Emily, a fellow team member and friend, kept repeating how the performance touched them and exceeded their expectations. Tina attributed her strong sense of motivation to situations like this among other things.

These experiences of giving back sometimes contrasted with the way in which young people were treated in the Netherlands. For example, while Joshua had felt undervalued and stigmatised because of his ethnic and racial background in the Dutch educational system, the development project he had contributed to was praised in Ghana and even appeared on national news. Realising the valuable contribution he could make to the country’s development significantly shaped Joshua’s sense of motivation. For marginalized youth, such trips can thus imply the temporary suspension of the classed and racialized boundaries that mark their position in the country of residence (Cheung Judge 2020). Several other participants on the other hand, regretted their inability to give back to Ghana as members of the diaspora. Nancy (23), who has not made any trips to Ghana since she moved to the Netherlands at the age of 12, dropped out of school because of her experiences with racism, which further delayed her dream of donating to the school she had attended in Ghana. Like for many other participants, her understanding of ‘success’ was tied to the idea of making positive impact in the lives of those back home.

Furthermore, participants gained inspiration from situations where they had been able to reduce power imbalances. Being immersed in the giving back activity through face-to-face interactions with beneficiaries were cited by many as crucial for surpassing distinctions between ‘those in need of help’ and themselves as ‘privileged visitors’. While acknowledging structural power imbalances, such affective moments thus often seemed to disrupt a ‘helping’ hierarchy (Cheung Judge 2020). For example, while Angelina visibly performed separate tasks as the ‘helper’ throughout one of the first activities of her project in Ghana, a football tournament for residents of ‘poor’ villagers, she actively participated in her next event, a visit to a centre for street children. She played games with some of the children there and ended up chatting with a young lady, who shared some deeply personal issues with her. Reflecting on this experience, Angelina enthusiastically
noted that it was her ability to connect with them on an emotional level that allowed her to make ‘real’ impact.

Similarly, connecting with beneficiaries (young people at an orphanage) on a deeper level was an ‘eye-opening’ experience for Tina:

We tried to talk to them about what they want to do in life. In the beginning it was hard … They were kind of intimidated … One of my team members was like: I think we should talk about ourselves first … From there, they opened up … They had big dreams but the resources are not there. It was kind of inspiring to see because we were going there to help them but they helped us. They opened our eyes.

This and other accounts of young people’s experiences of giving back throughout their mobility trajectories, show that there was often a mismatch between their expectations and reality, both positive as well as negative. This shows the often-overlooked contradictory emotional processes that are at work during moments of giving back, which were often seen as providing the ‘catalyst’ for transformation (Cheung Judge 2020) and provide more realistic insights into the phenomenon. Rather than fixed, young people’s sense of motivation thus sometimes fluctuated, in varying degrees, in response to development encounters.

**The ‘aftermath’: a renewed sense of purpose**

**Vignette 3: impact-building**

A year after the Our Culture event, the second edition took place in a hotel’s conference room with catwalk stage. Different from the previous edition, Nana now specifically targeted young people who were running NGO’s or were thinking of starting an NGO. In true TEDx style, Tina, Angelina, Ellen and Julie, founders of charities operating in Ghana, gave pitches about their experiences of starting and managing charities. ‘You have to know why you started an NGO. It’s a long-term commitment. If you have that [commitment], I believe there is nothing that let you give up’, Ellen concluded her pitch. Attesting to the idea of giving back as a long-term commitment, Nana organized a third edition of Our Culture despite the pandemic. ‘We can’t let corona get us out.’ This time, the event took the form of a three-part Instagram live question and answer session with young people who engaged in giving back activities in different countries, including Ghana, the Netherlands and Suriname. While the audience was strongly encouraged to send in questions, Tina had also prepared questions herself, which highlighted her experiences in the field of giving back and desire to deepen her knowledge of the topic. One of Tina’s core questions was about ‘impact building’. In response to a speaker who stressed that people should not become dependent on help, Tina said: ‘I love the fact that you guys said that “we want to help people on the long-term”. I noticed that sometimes – and we are all guilty of this - we do donations and after that we leave, and we don’t know what goes on after that. It’s very important that you follow-up and check up upon [sic] people.’

Although participants’ sense of motivation fluctuated throughout their mobility trajectories, they expressed the wish to draw lessons from these development encounters. These encounters were informed by narratives in the Dutch-Ghanaian community and reflected upon once participants returned to the Netherlands. In fact, despite the
challenges that threatened their sense of motivation, participants generally saw giving back as a long-term commitment, as reflected in the vignette. Here, it is important to not only consider the dynamic nature of ‘motivation’ but also the role of the community in shaping the ways in which participants perform motivation. For example, during *Our Culture*, young people shared their willingness to cope with challenges associated with giving back, which showed the apparent self-less character of young people’s engagement. Religion appeared to be an important factor that helped them stay motivated along the way and was even considered a ‘calling from God’ by participants like Tina as mentioned in the first analysis section. Aside from religion, it was their ‘love for Ghana’ that would have enabled them to turn their challenges into learning opportunities, as reflected in Joshua’s words:

> Experience is key. You grow from it. I’ve learned … that you need a certain approach when it comes to these type of projects in Ghana, with particular Ghanaian people. You need to be on the ground … I still have a heart for Ghana, for many years now already.

In combination with the vignette, this quote highlights several things. First, like many other participants, Joshua expressed feeling a ‘love’ for Ghana that endures despite any difficulties, an ongoing engagement. *Our Culture*, Nana foundation’s annual event, captures this sentiment as its name suggests an endless focus on a ‘shared culture’. In doing so, young people clearly distinguished themselves from the figure of the ‘distant stranger’ (Fechter 2019), the archetypical white, ‘privileged’ humanitarian object. Second, however, similar dynamics were at play as in the predominant academic analysis of ‘North-South’ volunteering accounts. These have been criticised for reinforcing neocolonial relations and producing ‘otherness’ (Cheung Judge 2020).

Like Joshua, participants pointed out the need to adjust their approach to giving back following development encounters, which was often rooted in an understanding of Ghana and the majority of Ghanaians in terms of essentialized difference. For example, participants frequently invoked references to a specific ‘Ghanaian’ way of behaving, which were illustrative of larger problems facing the country such as passivity and corruption (Kleist 2020). Considering the widespread belief that people ‘just wait’ for resources, which are then misused for personal gain, it was not uncommon for participants (‘givers’) to express a sense of distrust towards the ‘receivers of help’ and collaborators and in turn question the effectiveness of their efforts. ‘We all know how our country Ghana is’, Ellen said mockingly in reference to the challenges she faced, which captured a more general sentiment shared by many participants. This shows the importance of being located in the West in order to become an agent of ‘development’ in the eyes of participants (Mercer, Page, and Evans 2009, 143).

Precisely because some participants learned that their efforts were not as impactful as expected – or may even be counter-productive – they expressed feeling increasingly motivated to break the dependency relationship between them and ‘receivers’ that was perpetuated through the act of charitable giving. This was related to feelings of frustration regarding beneficiaries’ perceived reliance on financial support and reflected in their requests for donations long after the development encounter had occurred. As Tina admitted during *Our Culture’s* live Q & A session perceived dependency also played a role in young people’s lack of follow-up action. Moving from sporadic charitable donations to building social service facilities, participants believed they could tackle
this issue and make a lasting impact. For example, Loretta (21), a Nana member, decided to donate ten percent of the revenue of her online clothing business to Nana in order to realise the foundation’s plan of building a skills centre ‘that helps to create jobs for the local population.’ Similarly, Eric, who studied business, came to see development issues as entrepreneurial opportunities. Diverse understandings of development emerged in response to disillusionment with or critique on their own efforts, which nurtured young people’s aspirations and plans for future development encounters.

In line with their renewed sense of purpose, some participants questioned their ability to determine who to give back to and how to do so. For example, Maame (23), one of Nana’s team members, emphasised the need to avoid making assumptions about what to give and to improve collaborations with Ghanaians. In her view, one way of achieving this is by avoiding reproducing ‘Eurocentric-thinking’:

When we organized the [first edition of] Our Culture, I kind of knew that we’re not better than them [Ghanaians in Ghana] but that tone was there. ‘We’re schooled here so let’s bring our knowledge there’ … When I came here [Ghana] I noticed that this is not always the case.

Instead, participants acknowledged that the success of their development encounters relied on their ability to access ‘local’ expertise. This shows the importance of physical proximity in the context of delivering development (Mercer, Page, and Evans 2009, 144) and opens up decolonising possibilities. Participants often became aware of the limitations of their knowledge after being confronted with the reality that their help did not address an expected need. For example, Tina regretted donating supplies to her mother’s old primary school because it appeared to be well-resourced compared to other schools she had seen. Instead, Robert, one of Nana’s local partners and a speaker at the online version of Our Culture, advised Tina to shift her attention to the rural areas, which she willingly acted on. ‘Ghana is not all about Kumasi or Accra … People [are] snapchatting and chilling [in the cities], but have you gone to the village and experienced life over there?’, Robert pointed out, to which Tina nodded her head. Unlike hometown associations that tend to target specific hometowns or regions (Mazzucato and Kabki 2009), participants rather engaged in development efforts in a broader range of localities. Hence, young people’s experiences forced them to rethink some of their ingrained assumptions about giving back, resulting in intentions for more regular and intense transnational engagement with Ghana.

**Conclusion**

Using a multi-sited research design, this paper has examined how the motivations of young people to engage in development encounters in Ghana evolve throughout their mobility trajectories. We showed that young people’s expectations of giving back were embedded in diasporic community narratives, which framed this as a means to ‘become successful’ in culturally valued ways (Fumanti 2010; Henry and Mohan 2003). Participants, including those born in the Netherlands and those born in Ghana, shared the experience of travelling to Ghana and being confronted with poverty. Consequently, it was common for them to discuss ways of giving back to their or their parents’ country of origin and motivate each other to bundle forces. Aside from peers, parents, well-known figures in the Ghanaian community, and religious actors in the Netherlands all
actively contributed to the narrative on giving back by referring to young people’s moral duties as Christians and privileged members of the diaspora. Taking into account young people’s embeddedness in social structures thus forms the basis for understanding of why young people invest time, energy and resources into giving back. Rather than being determined by their ethnic background, as is often emphasised in research on diaspora development, we show that transnational engagement is shaped by youth culture, religious culture and development encounters that occur throughout their mobility trajectories.

While organising giving back activities, young people sometimes encountered a mismatch between their expectations and the reality, both positively and negatively, bringing to the fore the emotionality of development work (Wright 2012; Cheung Judge 2020). Young people faced challenges such as broken promises of local actors and difficult collaboration with Ghanaian team members. In their attempt to make sense of these experiences, young people often exacerbated hierarchical distinctions between them – young people raised and educated in the West – andGhanaians. While acknowledging that locals are not monolithic in their reception of diasporans (Reed 2015, 7–8), a fruitful avenue for further research would be to investigate the perspectives of the intended beneficiaries or collaborators in the country of origin (Mazzucato and Kabki 2009). Here, particular attention could be paid to the role of discourses and practices of blackness and race in Ghana and the ways in which locals and diasporans negotiate their way around these (Pierre 2012). This also helps to decentre diasporic development networks and put Africa more at the centre of analysis (Mercer, Page, and Evans 2009).

However, rather than becoming disillusioned, young people also derived inspiration from beneficiaries’ expressions of gratitude, praise from the wider community, and from situations in which they felt they had succeeded in reducing power imbalances between them as givers and the receivers. In fact, young people showed a renewed sense of purpose following their giving back activities. Although they had experienced constraints, participants drew learning opportunities from their experiences by gaining a deeper understanding of the complex, hierarchical relationships in development work (Mercer, Page, and Evans 2009) and their own positionalities as young people raised and educated in the West. Acknowledging the limits of their approaches and knowledge as reflexive and worldly individuals (Horst 2018), often in interaction with other peers such as during Our Culture events, they imagined their current giving back activities as the first steps in larger plans that required more intensive transnational engagement with Ghana. A follow-up study, several years from now, could shed further light on the temporality of giving back: young people’s transnational engagement may increase or decrease depending on the stage in their life course (Levitt and Waters 2002).

Importantly, young people’s transnational engagements did not necessarily imply that they sought to permanently move to their or their parents’ country of origin, as is emphasised in studies on diaspora engagement (Østergaard-Nielsen 2009), which tends to overlook the significance of shorter trips (Mazzucato 2009). Their frequent mobility between the Netherlands and Ghana and multi-sited embeddedness was rather a resource that allowed them to develop their own pathways in a transnational context. By taking into account young people’s mobility trajectories, this paper aimed to contribute to a more
detailed understanding of the multifaceted factors that shape young people’s motivation to engage transnationally and how this changes through their experiences.

Notes
1. Descendants of the Africans who were enslaved (members of the ‘old’ diaspora) are also increasingly approached as potential development agents by the Ghanaian state. African Americans and Jamaicans, for example, have contributed to community-based development and made long-term investments in Ghana – particularly those who have chosen to settle in the country (Reed 2015, 7).
2. In two cases (exceptions), participants had mothers who were born in a neighboring country.

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