



# The multiple meanings and uses of South–South relations in extraction: The Brazilian mining company Vale in Mozambique

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## ABSTRACT

South–South relations have raised hopes of a new development geography – one based on solidarity and more horizontal partnerships among countries in the Global South. In recent years, however, many of these aspirations have proven far-fetched. In the case of Brazil, the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro may even suggest that the South–South hype is now over and done. However, empirical accounts of the engagement of Southern, emerging market-based multinationals across the Global South, such as that of Brazil's mining corporation Vale in Mozambique, remain scarce. One missing perspective in defining South–South relations is the agency of other actors beyond emerging powers' governments. This article therefore goes beyond the pre-eminence of the Brazilian state. Instead, it analyses how South–South relations have been signified and used by two critical actors in the context of Vale's extractive operations in Mozambique: first, the professionals involved in corporate responsibility projects and second, the Mozambican power elites. There is a range of analyses of South–South ties, the imaginaries and hopes associated with them, and their practical possibilities which change according to the expectations, demands, and interests of different actors. We observe that Brazilian professionals in particular have built on specific cultural framings and imaginaries associated with South–South relations to claim a distinct vision and practice of corporate responsibility. Taking note of the prominent role played by Mozambique's ruling party Frelimo, we further demonstrate how Mozambican power elites have harnessed, through gatekeeping practices, the country's commodity-spurred architecture of South–South relations to reaffirm political power and amplify individual economic interests. In light of Vale's current withdrawal from Mozambique, we posit that our analysis provides a timely opportunity to reflect on the multiple makings, and implications of South–South engagement, the controversies linked to the role of Brazilian capital in Africa, and Mozambique's development through extraction.

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## 1. Introduction

Leveraged by the favorable winds of the commodities super-cycle in the 2000s, the advent of Brazilian mining multinational Vale S.A. in Mozambique seemed to reveal a significant shift marked by greater international prominence of emerging Southern powers and their firms (Van Agtmael, 2007; Casanova, 2009; Cuervo-Cazurra & Ramamurti, 2014). Since 2011, as the culmination of a process started in 2004, Vale – currently one of the world's

largest mining companies – has explored mineral coal at its Moatze concession in the central Mozambican province of Tete, reportedly Africa's largest coal deposit with reserves estimated at 2.4 billion tons (Mining Technology, 2020). The project's combined sum of approximately US\$ 8 billion is the biggest investment by a Brazil-based firm on the African continent to date (Rossi, 2013) and included the development of an integrated mine–rail–port logistic infrastructure known as the Nacala Corridor. When announced, it also represented Mozambique's largest foreign direct investment (FDI) since independence in 1975 (UNCTAD, 2012). Vale's engagement, while business-oriented and extraction-focused, held multiple ideational promises for both sides of this South–South relationship. For Brazil, it symbolized the country's revamped global status as an emerging world power animated by a strengthened economic and diplomatic power, with Africa as its natural, affinity-connected sphere of influence (see Seibert

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& Visentini, 2019). For Mozambique, a fellow Portuguese-speaking country recently devastated by more than a decade of civil conflict (1977–1992), Vale's engagement raised hopes of a new development geography based on more investments and partnerships with the emerging powers (see Alden & Chichava, 2014; Alden et al., 2017). Taken together, these developments seemed to reveal the empowering alternatives offered by the forging of South–South ties by the end of the 2000s.

Over the years, however, many of these aspirations proved overly far-fetched. Particularly since the mid-2010s, Brazil's struggling economy and political turmoil, the revelation of the *Lava Jato* (Car Wash) corruption scandals, and the election of President Jair Bolsonaro – privileging anti-globalist postures and connections with politically conservative governments in the West – have halted many of the country's foreign initiatives in and with the Global South (Casarões & Farias, 2021). Mozambique, on the other hand, has been grappling with a “hidden debt crisis” that has deteriorated relations with the traditional donors (Cortez et al., 2021) along with a lingering home-grown “jihadi” insurgency in its gas-rich province of Cabo Delgado (Morier-Genoud, 2020). Meanwhile, Vale, celebrated in the 2000s as an icon of Brazil's successes, reached the end of the 2010s with a liability for two major catastrophes, caused by dam bursts at the Brazilian iron ore extraction sites of Mariana (2015) and Brumadinho (2019). As a result, the company was subjected to increased civil society contestation, alongside a more volatile mineral commodity market (Cezne, 2019). In early 2021, after ten years of extractive operations, the company announced a roadmap to sell its assets and withdraw from Mozambique, alleging a strategic move to streamline operations and a commitment to end coal production driven by climate change (Vale, 2021).

Accordingly, much of the Brazil–Mozambique South–South hype appears to be now relegated to the past, signaling the end of a cycle (Alencastro & Seabra, 2021). Yet detailed, empirically backed accounts of the engagement of emerging market-based multinationals on the African continent remain scarce, including Vale's presence in Mozambique. In addition, the firm's ongoing withdrawal presents a timely opportunity to critically reflect on its overall trajectory in the country.

In this article, we propose to account for these dynamics by shedding light on how other actors beyond emerging powers' governments have acted to shape and define South–South relations using a case of (coal) extraction. By exploring different meanings and uses of South–South relations in Vale's engagement in Mozambique, we seek to enrich and expand the scope of analysis. Moving away from the pre-eminence of the Brazilian state as both an essential driver and qualitative benchmark in these relations, we look at the meanings and uses of South–South relations by first focusing on the personnel involved in corporate responsibility projects and second, on the Mozambican power elites. We demonstrate a range of discursive articulations of what South–South ties entail, their imaginaries triggered, and their practical possibilities. In other words, there are various distinctive *meanings in use* of the “South–South”, which foreground diverse practices and kinds of logic that change according to expectations, demands, and interests of different actors. In doing so, we follow Holzschleiter (2014) in taking a “pragmatic, actor-based, and action-oriented approach to discourse that privileges the ‘in use’ dimension . . . in which agents actively construct, re-negotiate, and transform intersubjectively shared interpretations of reality” (p. 147). We analyze, in addition, practices understood as expressing what actors consider possible, and their ways of going about doing things in trivial and non-verbal ways (Hönke, 2013, p. 30). This allows us to stress the various meanings and practices of the “South–South” beyond the well-known official Brazilian take on South–South cooperation

traditionally attributed to the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) governments.<sup>1</sup>

First, we consider more specifically the experiences of the Brazilian and Mozambican “corporate responsibility professionals” managing and implementing projects in the territories impacted by Vale's extractive operations in Mozambique. These projects include activities linked to Vale's community relations, impact assessment procedures, and sustainability visions. These actors, operating at the interfaces between corporation and local societies, illustrate important ways in which promises to social responsibility and local development are translated into practice (see Kemp & Owen, 2013). Moreover, they highlight how and to what extent Southern firms claim to implement distinct visions and practices of business–society relations. Second, by scrutinizing the “Mozambican power elites”, we demonstrate how key actors inside or linked to the ruling party Mozambique Liberation Front (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*, Frelimo) have rhetorically strategized on the idea of a special South–South relationship linked to Vale's advance into the country to reaffirm political power, while pragmatically amplifying specific economic interests. We focus specifically on the administrations of Mozambican President Armando Guebuza (2005–2015) and the heyday of Mozambique's commodity bonanza – the period where the articulation of a range of unifying bonds between Frelimo and Vale can be best observed (see Macuane et al., 2018). Across these two analytical categories, we demonstrate how different notions of South–South relations are mobilized for specific interests and have political and practical effects.

Our argument stresses two types of continuity that stem from this specific set of South–South relations set around Vale's presence in Mozambique. First, we observe how a deep-seated cultural narrative of Brazilian exceptionalism in Africa persists as a stubborn signifier to relations across the South Atlantic and continue to mold perceptions and practices on the ground, including those enacted by corporate actors. As such, we hold that such assertions of exceptionalism are by no means exclusive to the PT governments' foreign policy narratives but instead draw on broader cultural imaginaries of Africa and Africans long ingrained in Brazilian sociological thought (Freyre, 1986; Dávila, 2010; Ribeiro, 2020). Second, for the other type of continuity, we note how Vale's engagement in Mozambique, along with the architecture of South–South relations that made it possible, has been signified and instrumentalized to enable Frelimo's continuation and perpetuation in power, and the pursuit of particular elite interests.

In doing so, this article reflects on the multiple meanings and uses of South–South relations in extraction. By focusing on the array of elements that make up Vale's coal mining operations in Mozambique, we look at “extraction” as a set of activities implemented to remove and sell large amounts of natural resources, usually through exports and with no or limited processing (Svampa, 2012, p. 45). This also includes the logistical infrastructures, technical resources, policies, labor, and value chains that support these objectives. Within the extractive industries, which can cover miscellaneous activities such as oil and gas exploration, farming, logging, and fishing, among others, this article approaches the mining sector more specifically. In this vein, we engage with critical insights on resource extractivism, particularly works that study unequal resource geographies through the concept of “gate-keeping”. While the literature on enclaves has stressed sites of extraction, whilst integrated into global production networks, as

<sup>1</sup> While often associated with the political left, it is worth clarifying that the “PT governments” or “PT administrations” (2003–2016) – led initially by Lula da Silva and subsequently by his successor Dilma Rousseff – consisted of a range of heterogeneous organized interests and political-ideological standpoints, including links with private sector actors and social movements, among others (see Braga & Purdy, 2018).

socially thin and causing extreme forms of socio-economic marginalization in local environments (Côte & Korf, 2018; Lesutis, 2019a), gatekeeping stresses strategies of keeping control over resource flows by political elites (Cooper, 2002; Hönke, 2018; Dorman, 2018). It allows us, paradoxically so, to understand South–South relations as a mixture of connecting and dis-embedding.

This article draws on primary data from two field visits to Mozambique, conducted in June 2018 and between October and December 2018, which included the country's capital city Maputo, the central province of Tete, where Vale's Moatize coal concession is situated, and a trip along the Nacala Corridor's extension, involving stops in Nampula and Nacala. In addition, we also rely on data from a research trip to Brazil in April 2019, with interviews held in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Brasília.<sup>2</sup> For the “corporate responsibility professionals”, our material comprises interviews with a former Brazilian executive who oversaw operations at Vale Foundation (the company's social responsibility branch) and two Mozambican community relations supervisors at CLN (Vale's logistic concessionaire on the Nacala Corridor), as well as with a manager and employee of a Vale-commissioned, Brazilian consultancy firm involved in community relations projects. For the Mozambican power elites, we draw on public speeches delivered by Mozambican President Guebuza and research interviews with a Mozambican civil servant at the Tete province government, a Tete-based official of the opposition party Renamo, and business representatives at the Confederation of Economic Associations of Mozambique (CTA). These are complemented by an interview with Brazil's former Foreign Minister Celso Amorim (2003–2010) and the insights from specialized literature on Brazil–Africa relations and the extractive industries in Mozambique.

This article is structured as follows. First, we provide a short introduction to Vale, contextualizing the firm's international expansion and extractive operations in Mozambique. Accounting for its “capitalism of linkages” with the Brazilian state, we reiterate how Vale's move into Mozambique was embedded in discursive promises to revamped and empowering South–South relations. Second, the article discusses how this investment has been approached by the existing literature on Brazil–Africa relations. We observe that, while this scholarship has increasingly problematized this relationship and accounted for the engagement of corporations alongside state actors, there remains an excessive focus on the Brazilian state as the main agent and qualitative reference in analyses of who uses, and how, the trope of “South–South” relations, and shapes South–South relations. Building on insights from the critical literature on resource extractivism, we thus suggest shifting the angle of vision to include the role of corporate professionals and local power elites as two important yet under-appreciated actors in shaping the notion of South–South relations as well as the outcomes of South–South entanglements. Lastly, we analyze, respectively, how these actors have rhetorically signified and used South–South relations in a context of natural resource extraction. As such, we account for how they advance their own South–South narratives and the resources these narratives offer for practical action. We conclude by reflecting on the implications to Mozambique of Vale's current withdrawal and providing further directions for research in light of current political trends and challenges in both Mozambique and Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> The research on which the article is based draws on findings from one of the authors' larger doctoral study on Vale's extractivism in Mozambique, which is supported by 40 interviews, six focus groups, and a number site-specific visits, including to Vale's coal mine, resettled communities in Moatize, and the coal export terminal in Nacala-a-Velha (see Cezne, 2021).

## 2. Vale S.A. and the projection of Brazilian exceptionalism in Africa

Vale S.A. – prior to 2007 known as *Companhia Vale do Rio Doce* – was founded in 1942 as a state-owned enterprise. In 1997, in the wake of a series of neoliberal policies adopted by the Brazilian government, the company underwent privatization (see Baer, 2003). Yet, as Lazzarini (2011) remarks, it remains associated with the Brazilian state by a persistent “capitalism of linkages”: the government owns a number of “golden shares” that entail veto rights on the firm's strategic affairs, and the state-owned Brazilian National Development Bank (BNDES), through its equity-holding arm BNDESPar, is among the firm's shareholders (Vale, 2020a). This capitalism of linkages can also be associated with Vale's status of a “national champion”: a firm that is deemed strategic for the advancement of national interests and thus benefits from favorable policies and legislation, public loans, and diplomatic backing (Hennart et al., 2017).

While in the early 2000s Vale's operations were largely centered around iron ore extraction in domestic environments, the advent of the 2000s' commodities super-cycle pushed the company to outward expansion (Vale, 2012; Erten & Ocampo, 2013).<sup>3</sup> Vale's growing market value and strong role in the iron ore extractive economy coupled with a strategy to diversify its mineral portfolio supported an ambitious growth and internationalization strategy (see Casanova, 2009). In a major move in 2006, Vale acquired the Canadian mining enterprise Inco, then the world's second largest nickel producer, expanding operations to mining sites in Canada, Indonesia, and New Caledonia (Vale, 2012). Between 2001 and 2013, Vale's net profits went from US\$ 1.3 billion to US\$ 22.9 billion and its stock price rose by 1500% (Folha de, 2016). Currently, among extractive and logistic operations, processing refineries, and joint ventures in the energy and mining sectors, Vale oversees activities in 25 countries across five continents (Vale, 2020b, pp. 42–43). In 2020, Vale was Brazil's largest corporation, accounting for more than 10 percent of the Brazilian stock exchange index, and the world's fifth largest mining company by revenue as well as leading iron ore and nickel producer (B3, 2021; Johnston, 2020). In many ways, Vale epitomizes the increasing importance of firms from emerging markets in the contemporary global economy and, particularly against the favorable prospects of the commodities super-cycle, it was an important cornerstone of the “Brazil rising” story.

Africa is a terrain vital for understanding these dynamics. The 2000s commodity boom has led to a renewed search for extractive frontiers on the continent – a process that commentators have widely termed the “new scramble for Africa” (see Carmody, 2017). As stated by Vale's former CEO Roger Agnelli (2009): “a rapprochement with Africa brings the possibility of access to yet untouched sources of natural resources” (para. 4). At the same time, particularly under the PT administrations of Lula da Silva (known as Lula) from 2003 to 2010, the continent was deemed crucial for Brazil's international strategy to attain long-held aspirations of global importance and influence as a world leader of the Global South (Seibert & Visentini, 2019). These expectations were tellingly captured in the case of Vale's investment in Mozambique, conveyed through discourses around Global South solidarity and the strength of Brazil's connections to and affinities with Africa (see Marshall, 2015; Rossi, 2015). Appealing to the firm's Southern and Brazilian origins, this provided a vital discourse and strategic device to positively frame Vale's investments in Mozambique.

As President Lula would declare during the official visit to Brasília by Mozambican President Guebuza in 2007: “The Brazilian

<sup>3</sup> The so-called commodities super-cycle refers to a period that contemplates most of the 2000s and early 2010s. It was marked by peaking mineral prices triggered, in particular, by China's rapid economic rise (see John, 2018).

businessmen share our optimism in relation to Mozambique. The investment by the *Companhia Vale do Rio Doce* in the Moatize coal exploration project is an example of this potential" (Lula da Silva, 2007, p. 2). In our interview, Brazil's former Foreign Minister Celso Amorim justified Brazil's diplomatic support for Vale's pledges in Mozambique in similar terms, stressing the many South–South affinities his country shares with Africa: "Brazil has a great interest [in Africa]. Brazil has the largest Atlantic coast in the world and in the South Atlantic the confrontation is directly with Africa: 'confrontation' in a geographical sense. Economically, the opportunities are enormous. The experiences are similar".<sup>4</sup> At the helm of Vale's venture into Mozambique, the firm's CEO Agnelli also resorted to analogous narratives, hailing the many commonalities across the two sides of the South Atlantic: "Brazil is a country with African blood and many cultural links, in addition to similar soil and climate" (as cited in Terzian, 2016, para. 18).

Dávila's (2010) historiography of Brazil in Africa from the 1950s to 1980s provides important clues to understanding the cultural origins and implications of such discursive framing. The author appraises and explains Brazil–Africa relations through the cultural foil of *lusotropicalism*, a concept laid out by the renowned Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre and rooted in Brazilian social thought on identity formation and race relations. According to Dávila, *lusotropicalism* holds "that Brazil was the product of the fusion of Portuguese and African peoples, shaped by a supposed special proclivity of the Portuguese to extend civilization into the tropics and to soften racial lines through miscegenation" (p. 11). Particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, Dávila (2010) observes how these ideas have shaped the thinking of Brazilian diplomats and intellectuals who molded policy and sought to establish diplomatic and economic ties with an increasingly independent portion of Africa. Throughout his work, he remarks on two cultural legacies of *lusotropicalism* in Brazilian sociological thought and, consequently, on Brazilian depictions and framings of Africa: the notions of "racial democracy" and "tropical technology". The former projected Brazil as racially mixed and harmonious, characterized by intimate and cordial relations between whites and blacks, thus inspiring visions of Brazilians as racially and culturally close to Africans. The latter emphasized in turn the applicability of Brazilian approaches, services, and industrial products to African realities in light of similar (tropical) geographic conditions and development challenges (see also Cabral, 2016). On the brink of Africa's decolonization, this set of beliefs has provided a sense of mission: it propelled Brazilians into building connections with the continent as a means to cultivate a positive, differentiated national self-image of Brazil as a racially mixed and industrially emerging "tropical" power.

We build on Dávila (2010) and other related historical works on Brazil–Africa relations (see Arenas, 2010; Ribeiro, 2020) to argue that *lusotropical* legacies continue to influence contemporary Brazil–Africa encounters. As the above narratives evoking Brazil's cultural and geographical appropriateness to engage with Africa demonstrate, such ideas have continued to mold and offer a seductive discursive signifier to the South–South story that Brazilians, including political and business leaders, have told in recent years. In doing so, we add nuances to a largely normalized understanding in the literature on contemporary Brazil–Africa relations that draw a tight causal nexus between these discourses and the PT's government international strategy, as well as related readings that see a capture by large Brazilian multinationals of supposedly public framings for private interests (Nogueira & Ollinaho, 2013; Garcia and Kato, 2015; Moldovan, 2018). While emphatically vocalized

during the PT administrations, the Lula presidencies in particular, *lusotropicalism*-imbued narratives on Brazil's exceptional qualities in Africa are by no means restricted to this period only. They have a pre-life that dates back to African decolonization and, as we shall argue below in our analysis, they continued to shape corporate visions and practices on the ground.

### 3. Researching Vale in Mozambique: moving beyond the Brazilian state

Broadly speaking, the literature on international relations and development studies on the emerging powers in Africa has overwhelmingly emphasized the role of state actors in developing – and claiming – these connections (see Alden, 2005; Taylor, 2014; Van der Merwe et al., 2016). As Bergamaschi and Tickner (2017, p. 7) remark though, the "state" is frequently approached from mostly one side of the South–South relationship: often through the eyes and practices of the emerging powers themselves, sidelining or ignoring altogether the role of African governments. Furthermore, the private sector has been taken into account, but emphasis has been on how corporate engagements are intertwined with state interests and foreign policy priorities of their home governments, assuming a smooth state–business symbiosis within a "trade follows the flag" logic (see Casanova, 2009; Hennart et al., 2017).

This has been no exception for the case of Brazil, where scholars have called attention to the tight state–business relations shaping a "corporate turn" in contemporary Brazil–Africa relations, and how construction and natural resource firms were central to these dynamics, including through linkages of election campaign finance and subsidized finance lending with the Brazilian government (see, for example, Moldovan, 2018; Dye & Alencastro, 2020). Among the abundant work on Brazil–Africa relations (see Freitas Barbosa et al., 2009; Saraiva, 2010; Dávila, 2010; Cabral et al., 2016; Scoones et al., 2016; Seibert & Visentini, 2019), including an established literary subset on Brazil–Mozambique encounters (Rossi, 2015; Garcia & Kato, 2015, 2016; Amanor & Chichava, 2016; Alden et al., 2017; Nogueira et al., 2017; Achar, 2022), the focus on the Brazilian state remains prevalent, as Dye and Alencastro (2020) underscore in a recent analysis.

As such, discussions about Vale in Mozambique have been underpinned by similar readings. Considering that the connections between the Brazilian state and Vale have been reflected through a matching capitalism of linkages, it is not surprising to observe that the Brazil–Africa scholarship taking note of the firm's engagement in Mozambique stresses the key role of the Brazilian state in the process. While in the 2000s, initial commentaries about Vale's then emergent investment were colored by the promising post-Western prospects that the moment inspired (Saraiva, 2010; Stolte, 2012), the tone of research became increasingly critical by the mid-2010s. In the wake of a growing number of country-specific and field-based works, scholars have drawn on Vale's insertion in Mozambique to problematize the "Brazil in Africa" story altogether. Against this backdrop, many have noted that the Brazilian government has deployed the idea of a special South–South relationship defined by solidarity, partnership, and brotherhood in the pursuit of geopolitical and commercial interests in tandem with its national champions (Garcia & Kato, 2015; Scoones et al., 2016; Moldovan, 2018). Alongside the ProSAVANA program, a rural development initiative aimed at sharing practices linked to Brazil's tropical agribusiness experience with Mozambique, Vale's engagement has been criticized for exporting to Africa controversial patterns linked to agricultural and extractive activities in Brazil: marginalizing small-holders, endangering land tenure and food security, and infringing on human rights (Cabral & Leite, 2015;

<sup>4</sup> Interview, Mr. Celso Amorim, former Foreign Minister of Brazil (2003–2010). Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, April 2019.

Scoones et al., 2016; Coelho, 2017; Durán & Chichava, 2017). By contrasting discourse and practice, many of these studies naturally conclude that the benevolent, affinity-nurtured South–South discourse furthered by the Brazilian state was inherently contradictory and did not manage to live up to ideals, particularly when commercial interests were at stake. Still, a considerable amount of these critical readings remains heavily slanted towards the Brazilian state. They either assume its centrality in forging these engagements, in many cases through converging state–business articulations, or regard its rhetorical pledges to special South–South relations as a qualitative benchmark against which empirical events on the ground are evaluated.

Only a few studies are an exception and started to re-direct attention away from the Brazilian state as the main or only speaking agent (Shankland & Gonçalves, 2016; Milhorance & Bursztyn, 2017; Waisbich, 2020). Drawing on social movement theory, they highlight how transnational advocacy networks connecting Mozambican and Brazilian civil society – experiencing similar struggles across similar socio-economic landscapes – have advanced their own South–South cooperation and solidarity narratives to strengthen resistance against Vale and the ProSAVANA project, hinting at South–South discourses from the ground up. The article at hand welcomes and expands on such perspectives to broaden the scope of analysis beyond the Brazilian state's uses of the “South–South” notion.

Apart from the scholarship that speaks to Brazil–Africa relations and uses of a “South–South” discourse discussed above, a distinct strand of literature proves useful for such an endeavor. It examines Vale's role in Mozambique in dialogue with critical approaches on the extractive industries. Here, studies have often employed the concept of “enclave”, understanding large-scale mining arrangements as spaces that generate exclusionary patterns of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005) and trigger the neoliberal “grabbing” of land and natural resources, all while fencing off investments from the surrounding social fabric and creating “socially thin” environments (see also Ferguson, 2006; Côte & Korf, 2018). On this account, scholars have questioned the ability of Vale's resource extractivism to improve livelihoods, promote development, and respect human rights in local contexts (see Mosca & Selemene, 2011; Kirshner & Power, 2015). The unequal and exclusionary consequences of Mozambique's mining boom have been assessed and discussed in the context of Vale's project-induced dispossession practices, the firm's Cateme rural resettlement in particular. Critical geographers and anthropologists in particular have described the precarious social and material conditions experienced by the Cateme residents, highlighting the uneven socio-economic relationalities co-constituted by Vale's extractivism (Wiegink, 2018, 2020; Lesutis, 2019a, 2019b). Furthermore, in addressing the displacement affair through the prism of corporate social responsibility (CSR), policy and academic works have also outlined a number of failures with respect to the observance of human rights in the development of Vale's Moatize Coal Project and the Nacala railway (HRW, 2013; Abelvik-Lawson, 2014; Van der Ploeg & Vanclay, 2018), stressing also the empirical relevance of project professionals to understand local outcomes in extraction settings. In this article, we attempt to shed further light on these uneven geographies of extraction by bringing to fore the perceptions and experiences of such professionals, shaping the meanings in use of South–South relations

Other relevant works within this critical corpus of literature have situated Vale's presence in relation to broader power dynamics in the Mozambican political economy (Castel-Branco, 2014; Buur, 2014; Macuane et al., 2018). Such accounts attest long-held Africanist and Development Studies insights on the role of global capital flows, particularly within large-scale natural resource extraction, in consolidating the power of a small elite while expos-

ing local populations to hardships (German, Schoneveld, & Mwangi, 2013; Soares de Oliveira, 2015). Relatedly, scholars have shown how taming transnational investments for local content formation and economic diversification has been extremely challenging in Mozambique (Hansen et al., 2016; Dietsche & Esteves, 2018; Monjane, 2019), among other reasons due to revenue capture by elites.

Taken together, these observations reveal how Mozambique's political economy has been centrally shaped by what Cooper (2002) conceptualizes as “gatekeeping” strategies. Through “gatekeeping”, governing elites use their positions to “narrow the channels of access [to the state]” (Cooper, 2002, p. 6), thus maximizing and reaffirming political and economic power by controlling key nodes of capital movement and directing relations with the outside world. As evidence from Mozambique indicates, and proponents of the concept reiterate (see, for example, Hillbom, 2012; Dorman, 2018), contexts of natural resource dependency are particularly prone to gatekeeping politics, reinforcing national elites' disposition to centralize control as revenue derives from exporting a limited number of commodities, all while discouraging the diversification of the economy. Avoiding sweeping categorizations of African states as “gatekeeper states”, this article understands gatekeeping as a practice (see also Hönke, 2018) deployed by Mozambican political elites alongside, and often in conjunction with, Brazilian corporate and state actors. The role of gatekeeping strategies has often been forgotten in the rush to explore Africa's new relations with the BRICS (Dorman, 2018, p. 318). In this article, we hence deploy gatekeeping specifically to show how Vale's investment, through claims to more equal and developmental South–South relations, was used by key Mozambican elites – as gatekeepers – to produce and sustain political power, while also leading to specific meanings in use of the “South–South”.

Against this backdrop, within the Brazil–Africa literature, we build on the need to further unpack the complexity of South–South relations. We also heed the insights from critical research on (Vale's) extraction to single out the importance of problematizing such dynamics by considering the role of project professionals and local power elites amid geographies shaped by exclusion and “gatekeeping” politics. We add to these literatures by showing how imaginaries and significations of South–South relations effectively function through the role of mineral extraction and the references that project professionals and Mozambican elites make to such connections in their social-political contexts. For project professionals, through the angle of corporate responsibility, we particularly stress how collective imaginaries about the “South–South” extend down well-beyond the (Brazilian) state to the people who are the executors of investment projects. For the Mozambican elites, while analyses have long documented the role of “gatekeeping” modalities in the logics of extractivism across and beyond Africa, we complement such interpretations by capturing how such “gatekeeping” has been furthered by using notions of South–South relations and by embedding it within Mozambique's South–South investment architecture.

We develop the above argument by focusing on the “in use” dimension of discourse conceptually: subjects create meaning “as the authors of narratives and, consequently, as active and deliberative constructors of social reality” (Holzscheiter, 2014, p. 153). More specifically, we look at their discursive practices of representation (what people say about South–South relations, and what they claim to do in their name, based on interviews, policy documents and press statements) and triangulate these with empirical evidence on Vale's extractivism in Mozambique (projects implemented, non-verbal interactions on the ground observed, scholarly findings, press reports) (Neumann, 2012; Hönke, 2013, pp. 30–31). Hence the material analysed consists of speeches, programmatic text, and interviews with key corporate professionals and political

elites in Mozambique and Brazil, providing insight into the perceptions and dynamics emerging from South–South transnational encounters as they are (re)made and implemented. In semi-structured interviews, corporate professionals were asked to describe and reflect upon encounters in the context of project implementation and the workplace, which was complemented with observations of practices gauged from reports as well as direct observations. In the case of political elites, we trace how they approached and sought to shape relations with Vale and the Brazilian state, using interviews as well as available reporting and secondary literature. To paraphrase [Holzscheiter \(2014, p. 144\)](#), this allows us to observe how intersubjective meanings of South–South relations are created, sustained, transformed and, accordingly, become constitutive of – and thus used in – a socio-material reality shaped by natural resource extraction.

#### 4. Revolutionizing Africa? The meanings and uses of South–South relations by corporate responsibility professionals

“I was going to revolutionize that [sic] Africa”,<sup>5</sup> declared a former Brazilian Vale executive in an interview for this research while recalling his plans and visions for Mozambique. In charge of Vale Foundation – the firm’s social responsibility arm (see [Vale, n.d](#)) – in the late 2000s, as the firm was preparing to start its extractive operations in Mozambique, he recalled his plans and visions for the country. He shared how he wanted to “replicate well-succeeded experiences from Brazil in Mozambique”, explaining that “Brazil had a humanitarian notion of contributing to development”. Speaking in hyperbolic terms and referring to Mozambican peasants’ rudimentary agricultural methods and tools, our interviewee went on to say that, in many ways, Vale was bringing technologies of a “Brazil of 200 years ago” to rural communities. He described that they had introduced simple instruments such as bullock carts, cisterns, ox marking paint, and antiparasitic drugs. Adding to his rural development visions for Mozambique: even “amid all that poverty”, our interviewee recalled the area’s considerable agricultural potential, recollecting how common it was to spot impeccable corn cobs in the markets of Tete – a sign of the region’s exceptional soil. This was regarded as an issue that could very well use Brazilian expertise and capital to develop, building on Brazil’s successful tropical agribusiness experiences and technologies. “Africa is the Brazilian Central-West”, he claimed, alluding to Brazil’s savannah-like zone (known as *cerrado*), which is biophysically similar to Mozambique’s central and northern parts.

Many of these rural technologies, as suggested by the former Vale executive, were galvanized through the so-called Knowledge Stations: a model managed by Vale Foundation and transplanted from its Brazil operations, offering expertise-transfer and livelihood promotion schemes to the displaced populations (see [Vale, 2015](#)). The establishment of a Knowledge Station had a special appeal in Vale’s above-mentioned Cateme rural resettlement, destined for people whose livelihoods were linked to agricultural activities. Referred to by residents as the “Model Farm” (Fazenda Modelo), the project had initially provided training courses, educating the resettled population, through demonstration fields, on how to adapt farming practices to their new living environment and increase productivity through enhanced inputs.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as [Lesutis \(2018\)](#) remarks, the Model Farm promoted methods that relied on intensive use of chemical fertilizers and considerable water irrigation for a population that could not afford the fertilizers and in an area with a shortage of water. Consequently, many had soon lost

interest in the training courses and, following management issues involving Vale Foundation in Mozambique, the Model Farm has ceased its activities in 2015. The project’s poor performance has been exacerbated by management issues and made worse by a constant “buck-passing” game between corporate and public authorities (see [Lesutis, 2019a](#); [Wiegink, 2020](#)).

The above meanings in use’ illustrate how, for the Vale executive, the social construction of reality actively draws on repertoires based on imaginaries of landscape similarity between Brazil and Africa. The South–South link is therefore constituted and posited as a “natural” transfer belt, predicated on the possibility of reproducing “appropriate” Brazilian (tropical) models in their entirety in Mozambique (see also [Shankland & Gonçalves, 2016](#); [Amanor & Chichava, 2016](#)). Yet, in the actual sites where such representations of the “South–South” became manifest, projects were often oblivious to the existence of different – at times incompatible – economic, cultural, and geographical realities. In line with what the above-discussed literature on Vale’s project-induced displacement in Mozambique has found, the transfer of supposedly fitting technologies was overshadowed by a range of shortcomings: a lack of detailed understandings of local contexts, an underestimation of technical and management challenges, and an inability or unwillingness to take community demands into account. As [Lesutis \(2019a, p. 118\)](#) proposes, such deficiencies can be seen as further accentuating the enclavization of the dispossessed by entrenching class differences, exclusions, and socio-economic marginalization.

More directly involved with project implementation on the ground, other Brazilian professionals with whom we spoke, particularly at a Brazilian consultancy firm advising Vale on social impact procedures, revealed a more comprehensive understanding of Mozambican local contexts. Those who had previously worked with Vale in Brazil acknowledged that their accumulated experiences with large-scale extractive projects were relevant to their work in Mozambique. Yet awareness was also expressed that, in spite of tropical and developing country-based similarities, there were also considerable political, economic, and social differences between the two realities. “You cannot just take a model from there and place it here”, as argued by a Brazilian social worker in the referred consultancy firm.<sup>7</sup> Instead, often in management or supervisory roles, these Brazilian professionals tended to frame their main contributions around capacity building prospects, particularly so by underscoring the hiring and training of a Mozambican “corporate responsibility” workforce. This was seen as a relevant undertaking given the novel business dynamics brought by Vale’s investments to the country. To quote the consultancy firm’s manager: “We have always guaranteed a large presence of Mozambicans and, deep inside, we have capacitated a lot of people in social methodologies and with regards to good corporate practices”.<sup>8</sup> On this account, it was subsequently noted that many director and manager-level positions in social departments at Vale, its logistic concessionaires, or other companies across the country, including multinationals such as Total and ENI involved in Cabo Delgado’s natural gas industry, are nowadays filled by Mozambicans, and that many of whom had started at or worked with the referred Brazilian consultancy. In this regard, we can observe how “in use” discursive formulations produce the South–South encounter as an instance that contributes to responsible corporate governance: not only in the context of Vale’s engagement but in the realm of Mozambique’s extractive industries more broadly – even if these dynamics, paradoxically so, contribute to generate and legitimize spaces of exclusion and accumulation elsewhere (see [Wiegink, 2020](#)).

<sup>7</sup> Interview, social worker, Diagonal Consulting. Tete, Mozambique, November 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, manager of Mozambique projects, Diagonal Consulting. Remote communication, April 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, former Vale executive. São Paulo, Brazil, April 2019.

<sup>6</sup> For a critical perspective on the implementation of demonstration fields in Mozambique, see [Gonçalves \(2020\)](#).

Besides the formation and training of a local workforce dedicated to corporate responsibility, it was common to hear from our Brazilian research participants about the cordial nature of the relations with their Mozambican counterparts. As put by the earlier quoted social worker: “Our contact here with Mozambicans is wonderful. People are very, very [sic] receptive and welcoming”.<sup>9</sup> Yet, narrating in a field study her experiences as a Brazilian “mega-project” functionary in Mozambique, Rodrigues (2015, p. 89) notes how the Brazilian workforce in Tete generally knows little about the Mozambican reality and culture, is white, and comes from a position of privilege in the country of origin. However, she goes on, imaginaries of Brazil as a “racial democracy” consistently shaped the tone of discursive representations. As such, Brazilian professionals would often evoke their country’s racial mixture and African roots, along with the existence of a common language, as factors that contributed to more respectful, horizontal, and amicable professional and everyday interactions with Mozambicans. In our own interviews conducted with Brazilian project functionaries both within and beyond the realm of corporate responsibility, this positive differentiation was particularly stressed in comparisons to dynamics at Chinese and Indian firms and exemplified by interactions such as mixed work lunches and weekend outings between Brazilian and Mozambicans (see Cezne, 2021, p. 182).

Among the consulted Mozambican corporate responsibility professionals, some have indeed agreed that speaking a common language brought positive qualitative differences to work relations, facilitating their ability to learn and implement projects. Expressing his appreciation for Brazil’s South–South engagement with Mozambique of which he saw himself as a product, a Mozambican community relations supervisor at Vale’s coal logistic concessionaire (CLN) on the Nacala Corridor described: “Brazil’s image in Mozambique is positive, not only because of soccer and soap operas. I am a product of this cooperation. ... This aggregates an entire technical and professional know-how: a major gain in human capital that contributes to the country”.<sup>10</sup> Others, however, have expressed different viewpoints. Rebutting Brazilian claims to cordial (race) relations, a Mozambican community relations professional working for CLN at the Nacala-a-Velha port shared how he regularly came across comments from his Brazilian superiors and co-workers that denoted “a sense of entitlement as well as racial and moral superiority”.<sup>11</sup> In this vein, resonating with other perspectives shared by local workers at Vale’s mining site, Mozambicans have also described interactions with their Brazilian counterparts in terms of racial prejudices, lack of trust, and difference. As tellingly put by a Brazilian journalist who had followed Vale’s operations in Mozambique: “We [Brazilians] are perceived as just as rich as Europeans are perceived [in Mozambique] . . . . The poorer as well as black side of Brazil is not represented”.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, discursive representations of South–South links, understood as meanings in use, not only carry promises of development (for instance, capacity building and technical transfers). As suggested by Holzscheiter (2014, p. 154), they also code the “trivial” details of interpersonal encounters between actors, seen here through the role of cultural signifiers – the notion of “racial affinity” in particular.

From executive to implementation levels, the above analysis demonstrates how Brazilian professionals’ meanings in use about “South–South” relations converge in evoking a certain moral behavior and commitment towards Mozambicans, which are often por-

trayed in terms of Brazil’s exceptional qualities to operate in Africa and alongside Africans. In general, there is a claim to serving higher aims than merely performing a business activity. This speaks to our argument that the projection of an affinity-based South–South discourse has less to do with a capture of public narratives by corporate actors and more with the lasting influence of a “lusotropical” cultural framing which *continues* to mold Brazilian imaginaries of Africa and Africans. For the Vale executive, ambitions to “revolutionize Africa” were inspired by views of transferrable models, where Brazil – and the firm as its principal representative – stood ready to help, imbued with a sense of “humanitarian” mission and baggage of tropical technologies and solutions, deemed suitable and applicable to Mozambique. For project implementation professionals, notions of special South–South relations revolve around affinities, cultural closeness, and cordial interactions that underpin their emphasis on local training, capacity building, and hiring. However, such visions, as argued, hinge upon “racial democracy” imaginaries, reflected by presumptions that Brazil’s miscegenation leads to racial tolerance and co-existence – with Vale’s investment in Mozambique offering a stage upon which such projections became interpreted, at the workplace and beyond.

This demonstrates how lusotropical attitudes, supported by visions of Brazil’s exceptional position in the tropics as the miscegenated product of Portuguese and African peoples, continue to hold sway and signify contemporary Brazilian South–South discourses and practices in and towards Africa and Africans, from micro to macro levels, and regardless of the significant obstacles to more equal relations. Thereby, if on the one hand the “South–South” unfolds as teleologies of connectivity (through technical transfers, capacity building, and cultural affinities), it also constitutes enclaves of extraction marked by intricate racial and social inequalities, on the other hand. To reiterate one of this article’s original propositions: just as the “South–South” connects, it also dis-embeds.

## 5. Preservation in the face of transformation: The uses of South–South relations by Mozambican power elites

Frequently, depictions of multinationals in Africa have portrayed local governments, ruling elites, and bureaucracies across the continent as unprepared or corrupt, subjugated to neo-imperial or neo-colonial looting practices (for some examples of this treatment, see Van de Walle, 2001; Moyo, 2009; Burgis, 2015). Yet African Studies scholars have long disputed and recalibrated such assumptions. Rather than an unequally tilted relationship opposing mighty foreign multinationals and weak African states, this literature has shown how foreign actors often adjust to African countries’ pre-existing patterns of politics and businesses and do so in harmony with ruling elites’ interests (see, for instance, Whitfield, 2009; Harman & Brown, 2013; Mohan & Lampert, 2013; Soares de Oliveira, 2015; Hönke, 2018).

This insight is relevant for better understanding the uses of the “South–South” notion and the making of Brazil–Mozambique relations through focusing on the Frelimo political elites. The aforementioned notion of gatekeeping, provides a particularly productive perspective to unpack these dynamics, emphasizing the ways in which ruling elites act to maximize and control the (resource) economy (Cooper, 2002; Dorman, 2018, p. 312). Avoiding sweeping categorizations of African states as “gatekeeper states”, we emphasize gatekeeping as a practice (see also Hönke, 2018) deployed by Mozambican political elites in articulation with Brazilian corporate and state actors. We add to conventional understandings of gatekeeping by showing how such dynamics functioned through a distinct discourse of South–South relations: in Mozambique, South–South relations were signified and used

<sup>9</sup> Interview, social worker, Diagonal Consulting. Tete, Mozambique, November 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, CLN community relations supervisor. Nampula, Mozambique, November 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, CLN community relations supervisor. Nacala-a-Velha, Mozambique, December 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, journalist at BBC Brasil. São Paulo, Brazil, April 2019.

to enable what we interpret as Frelimo's "transformative preservation", and thus continuity, as Mozambique's ruling force.

The Mozambican political context is characterized by the highly centralized dominance of a single party: the Mozambique Liberation Front (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*, Frelimo), often referred to among scholars as the "party-state" (Sumich, 2010; Bertelsen, 2016). Frelimo has led Mozambique to independence from Portugal in 1975, becoming the first and thus far the only ruling party in the country. Accordingly, across the Mozambican political and economic scene, Frelimo's dominance offers a degree of unparalleled leverage to actors who are either part of or revolve around the party: the Frelimo grandees (i.e. former Mozambican presidents and influential party figures) and groups of interest in their orbit (Sumich, 2008), the urban middle class that has historically formed the party's social basis and makes up the government's bureaucracy (Sumich, 2016; Brooks, 2017), and the domestic private sector linked to (and dependent on) the state for access to businesses (Hanlon & Mosse, 2010). With Frelimo as the central node, this web of actors forms and sustains a "power elite": a tight group bolstered by a context of highly centralized power that is "drawn together through a range of unifying bonds" and "shared material interests" and that rotates "between the interlinked centers of power and wealth – the party, state, economy and international agencies" (Sumich 2008, p. 115). Within this configuration, we focus more specifically on the administrations of Mozambican President Armando Guebuza (2005–2015), who governed Mozambique at the height of its commodity bonanza and when, as a result, gatekeeping practices entangled with uses of "South-South" relations have been particularly evident (Macuane et al., 2018).

The coal from Tete, where Vale's Moatize mine is located, has long nurtured optimistic development prospects and was deemed an important pillar of Frelimo's socialist project in the wake of independence in 1975 (see Mittelman, 1981; De Souto, 2013). To unlock coal's potential in particular, the establishment of a cooperation agreement with East Germany is illustrative in this regard. The agreement entailed technical collaboration to manage the then state-owned coal producer CARBOMOC as well as training Mozambican technicians at German universities and mines, in a process where the coal extracted in Mozambique was permuted for the assistance received (Schubert, 2020, pp. 7–9). In line with Mittelman (1981) and Schubert (2020), it should be noted, at the time, how an "East-East" transnational articulation forged through extraction has provided Frelimo with a crucial instrument to vest its project and rule with legitimacy in a newly decolonized Mozambican state.

The advent of a "South-South" architecture in Mozambique's international relations in the decades to come can be interpreted in a similar fashion. Whereas the civil war, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and Mozambique's subsequent dependency on Western donors had put expectations on hold for a lengthy period, a renewed sense of possibility re-emerged on the heels of the 2000s' commodities boom (Orre & Rønning, 2017). The coal from Tete, in the aftermath of Vale's arrival, became the bedrock of Mozambique's mining industry and, as such, inspired once again optimistic projections about the country's future.<sup>13</sup> For example, a Tete province public official described the momentum represented by Vale's arrival as a "development breakthrough",<sup>14</sup> which symbol-

ized according to him a shift from post-conflict, Western aid dependency to a path of resource-driven investment based on more plural partnerships with an emerging power. With Frelimo in control of the gate and holding the reins of the story, Vale's investment has offered a pragmatic opportunity to depict the country as in imminent transformation – and of Frelimo as the enabler of this transformation.

An official ceremony to lay the founding stone of construction works at the Moatize mine in 2009 illustrates this point further. President Guebuza asserted in his speech: "Vale takes to the world a message that, despite the [2008 financial] crisis, Mozambique is a country for the future and a country to establish longstanding and sustainable partnerships" (as cited in Mangwiwo, 2009, para. 13). Later on, at the inauguration of the mine in 2011, Guebuza suggested that the firm's coal extraction puts the country on a privileged path to development with the opening of more jobs, increased income, and economic growth (Tete Province Government, 2017). Praising Mozambique's South-South relationship with Brazil in a visit to Brasília in 2009, Guebuza commended the Lula administration for the "enormous opportunities" it brought to Mozambique in terms of public and private investments (G1, 2009). Tellingly, the Brazil trip ended with a tour of Vale's Carajás mining complex in the Amazon, the world's largest iron ore site, to understand how the firm goes about its operations and to verify in loco the benefits it created to the region (Macauhub, 2009; Itamaraty, 2009).

Although many of these declarations may come across as standard political parlance, they also reveal Guebuza's strategic signification of and relating to Vale's investment in Mozambique. Against a backdrop of growing business links with Brazil, Guebuza built on notions of special South-South relations in order to both, signal, for external audiences, Mozambique's openness for businesses, while internally epitomizing a sentiment of Mozambican empowerment through growth, jobs, and development from Global South partners. Through the lens of a meanings-in-use approach, such narratives reflect power-laden constructs under the control of dominant actors who decide what and how to narrate (Holzscheiter, 2014, p. 153). Guebuza's discursive practices demonstrate representational force to keep the gates of new mining frontiers at the intersection of the internal and external, demonstrating the ways in which significations of the "South-South" served to validate new directions of capital flows into the extractive sector.

Besides its utility for discursive validations of the possibilities associated with Mozambique's commodity-spurred momentum, the Vale case also illustrates how South-South relations have been used for the pursuit of market opportunities and material interests by the Mozambican power elites. Representations of the "South-South" cannot be dissociated from practical possibilities (Holzscheiter, 2014, p. 159). The range of unifying bonds that have emerged between Vale and key Frelimo figures are revealing in this regard, particularly during the Guebuza years. "Buoyed up by aid and trade", as the Africa Confidential (2009) describes in an article titled "Pax Guebuzzana", Guebuza's presidency can be credited for trying to modernize the economy and giving a more technocratic profile to the government. Nonetheless, according to Hanlon and Mosse (2010, pp. 7–10), it also increased central control and expanded businesses in which Guebuza, his family, and close associates had personal interests. The Guebuza administration has not only acted to centralize and monopolize access to rents, but Guebuza himself – through direct and indirect connections – became a key player in the country's extractive economy (see Macuane et al., 2018, pp. 428–434). If, on the one hand, the Guebuza government was able to harness new economic opportunities, legitimized through a South-South narrative, this went along with new configurations of gatekeeping. As Monjane (2019) has shown, "Vale quickly realized that its success could be assured if it got close to the incumbent government" (p. 195). As illustrated below, gate-

<sup>13</sup> While environmentally controversial due to its high carbon content, coal continues to play a crucial role in the global energy mix. The mineral has reached peaking price levels at the turn of the 2010s owing to increasing demand and industrialization needs by countries such as China and India. For a recent analysis, see Gellert and Ciccantell (2020). We thank one of our reviewers for calling attention to this point.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, public official at the Department of Geology and Mines, Tete Province Government. Tete, Mozambique, October 2018.



keeping allows to capture the respective rearticulation of relations between Vale and branches of government, including distinct meanings in use of “South-South relations” shaping possibilities for action.

In the Nacala Corridor connecting coal mine to port, for instance, the Mozambican investment group Insitec, owned by Guebuza’s protégé Celso Correia, sold its shares (which were held for less than a year) to Vale in 2010 in a transaction that enabled the mining firm to become a major shareholder in the corridor’s rail and port concessions (Africa Confidential, 2011; USAID, 2018, pp. 15–21). For Vale, developing the corridor meant expanded export capacity and, among mining companies, an exclusive transport system to ship its coal. For Insitec, it “bought CDN [the Corridor’s rail and port concessionaire] without paying for it, kept it without investing any funds and has now sold it on at a massive profit” (Africa Confidential 2011, para. 20). Amaral (2016) calls attention to the fact that, shortly after the deal with Vale, Insitec acquired Mozambique’s largest engineering firm CETA, which became responsible for the construction and repair works at Vale’s aforementioned Cateme resettlement site, among other projects in Moatize and along the Nacala Corridor. A trivial yet telling detail is that Cateme’s Armando Emílio Guebuza High School bears the name of the former Mozambican President Guebuza (Vale, 2012, p. 341). Further, beyond notable Frelimo figures such as Guebuza, senior party members and interest groups have benefited from Vale’s investment – as well as from the coal industry more broadly – in a number of ways: as shareholders in local companies involved in consortiums with foreign investors, from the sale of infrastructure concessions, and through the award of service provision contracts for the mining industry, typically in non-core segments such as cleaning, catering, and transportation (Hanlon & Mosse, 2010; Hansen et al., 2016; Orre & Rønning, 2017; Monjane, 2019).

Accordingly, to concur with Hillbom’s (2012) assessment of gatekeeping in resource dependent African states, power elites are interested in the development of some kind of private sector but lack the incentives to instigate and carry out entrepreneurial and developmental efforts on a larger scale. Moreover, in Mozambique, large private sector coalitions such as the Confederation of Economic Associations of Mozambique (CTA), due to its political ties with and origins linked to Frelimo, “represents the interests of a few politically well-connected people rather than the majority of the businesses within the country” (Monjane 2019, p. 179). Thus, in an interview with CTA business representatives, their account of Vale’s investment in Mozambique largely echoed the broader, power-laden scripts uttered by key political players such as Guebuza:

Vale is from Brazil and the resources belong to Mozambique, there has to be a good relationship between the two countries, which diplomatically they call South–South cooperation, both are in the Southern hemisphere. At the end of the day I say it is a win–win relation with gains to both parts.<sup>15</sup>

The above illustrates how actors with privileged access to nodal points in the Mozambican political economy use overlapping discursive tropes – meanings in use – to signify the “South–South”.

In this context, alternative uses of South-South relations in the Mozambican context are rare, as are the abilities of opposition groups to mobilize resources and exert leverage. A study by Macuane (2018) points at the high Frelimo-membership rate among firm owners in Mozambique: based on data from 2012, across all company sizes, 33% of owners had declared affiliation to Frelimo, whereas only 1% were associated with other political

parties (Macuane, 2018, p. 18).<sup>16</sup> As a Tete-based Renamo representative put it in one of our interviews, the South–South encounter between Mozambique – that is, Frelimo – and Brazil (through Vale) is a “complicit relationship”: “the money enters in the pocket of the boss [government] and the boss leaves the population in disgrace”. The South–South reality is here portrayed as an uneven structure featuring agents engaged in mutually beneficial yet exclusive and exclusionary political geographies of extraction. That is, to reiterate our proposition once more, as a mixture of connecting and dis-embedding. Along with Frelimo’s quasi-monopoly over the political system and the economy, Renamo’s deprivation from Mozambique’s resource windfall is one of the causes of a growing animosity and intermittent clashes from 2013 between government forces and Renamo guerillas (Muchemwa & Harris, 2018; also Pitcher, 2020). Hence Frelimo’s control over the gate epitomizes highly asymmetrical domestic power relations, resulting in extractive capital accumulation that “jumps over” local socio-economic landscapes (see Côte & Korf, 2018).

Yet, despite the point just made above, relations, including “South–South” ones, between Mozambican elites and the outside world are not necessarily asymmetrical. The above highlights how the articulation of South–South relations is imbued with reconfigured practices of gatekeeping. The significations and uses of the “South–South” in extraction by the Mozambican power elites suggest a strong ability to direct and shape outcomes and what they signify. Vale’s investment, as seen from the Guebuza period, has been vested by specific symbolic contours and instrumentalized for particular – at times personal – political priorities and interests, at the expense of wider developmental and societal concerns. In this vein, we maintain that Pitcher’s (2006) reading of Frelimo’s “transformative preservation” is still valid to understand these more recent dynamics. By building new national identities around neoliberal constructs and articulating new coalitions with domestic and foreign actors, Frelimo has been able to restore its legitimacy and navigate the transition from socialism to neoliberalism in the past – therefore preserving itself in the face of transformation. Its uses of South-South relations, we argue, follow a similar pattern. To invoke once more our argument of continuity: the party’s preservation and hence continuation in power is discursively and pragmatically molded relative to Mozambique’s broader evolving international relations: from the East–East to the South–South (and beyond), with local political elites actively shaping the meanings in use of South-South relations.

## 6. Conclusion

This article argued for extending attention from emerging powers’ states to other actors that make up South-South relations. In doing so, we highlighted the variety of meanings and uses that configure the articulation and operationalization of transnational links set within and across the Global South. These dynamics were perceived through the engagement of Brazil’s mining corporation Vale in Mozambique, offering much needed understandings of how South–South relations are imagined, practiced, and manipulated in settings shaped by natural resource extraction. We paid attention to two critical actors within this entanglement: the professionals involved in corporate responsibility projects and the Mozambican power elites. Through the former, we captured how corporate aspirations and commitments to responsibility are framed and translated into practice, while the latter revealed the

<sup>16</sup> Macuane (2018) draws this data from a 2012 survey conducted by the Mozambican Ministry of Planning and Development, based on a sample of 761 firm owners. 16.4% of the respondents have not answered the specific questions about political affiliation, whereas roughly 50% of the sampled universe of firm owners has not responded to the survey.

<sup>15</sup> Group interview with CTA representatives. Maputo, Mozambique, June 2018.

prominent role played by Mozambique's ruling party Frelimo and key political actors, such as former President Guebuza, in the country's resource economy, and the active shaping of the meanings and practices of South-South relations.

Our argument stressed two types of continuities. First, we observed the *continued* influence of narratives about Brazil's tropical and racial exceptionalism in signifying Brazilian perceptions and understandings of South-South relations with Africa and Africans. Tellingly so, we noted how such imaginaries and framings, far from being constricted to foreign policy discourses, have been mobilized by Brazilian corporate professionals to project distinct visions and approaches to social responsibility and capacity building on the ground. Second, we contended that Mozambique's commodity-driven South-South relations have been pragmatically harnessed and instrumentalized to support Frelimo's "transformative preservation", and thus *continuity*, as the country's only ruling force, all while key party figures such as Guebuza and surrounding interest groups have acted to explore market opportunities and secure economic gains in a highly centralized political landscape. In this regard, we highlighted how practices of "gatekeeping", framed through a South-South discourse, have not only been embedded within but have also centrally shaped contemporary extractive encounters in Mozambique, amid seemingly transformative international development geographies.

Against this backdrop, the article hinted at the many cracks, contradictions, and vulnerabilities linked both to the role of Brazilian capital in Africa and to Mozambican agency in the context of an extractive mode of development. For one, we underscored how South-South attempts to policy and technical transfers, in emphasizing similar and converging realities, have overlooked differences and remained oblivious to local conditions of possibility. In this vein, we added to and reinforced interpretations of how the type of development emanating from Vale's investment and Mozambique's extractive sector more broadly has been unequal and elite skewed, replicating socio-economic patterns that have long and historically marked Africa's extractive industries and encounters with the outside world, amid colonial, North-South, or South-South conjunctures. Throughout the article, we thus emphasized the dual, ambiguous nature of South-South links: as both instances of connecting and dis-embedding.

Currently, as Vale prepares its withdrawal from Mozambique after ten years of coal extraction, the South-South dreams that it triggered – filled with a sense of positive change and possibility – seem to have eroded. Over the years, the winding down of the commodities super-cycle, fluctuating coal prices, the detrimental effects of mining to local environments, sub-optimal job creation, and revenue mismanagement, among other factors, contributed to frustrate many of the anticipated enchantments of new South-South infrastructures (see more broadly Harvey & Knox, 2012; Hönke, 2018). Meanwhile, attention among Mozambican power elites has shifted to other development dreams, most notably linked to the natural gas industry in Cabo Delgado. However, these dreams have been followed by nightmares as the region succumbed into a protracted conflict, powered by a "jihadi insurgency", that has intensified and grown in complexity in recent years. This article can help to account for some of these turns and twists as the conflict's root causes are increasingly traced to the growing political centralization, inequality, and marginalization resulting from Mozambique's late mineral resource momentum.

Paradoxically, the climate emergency and consequent "green energy transition" also suggest that Mozambique's prime resources – natural gas and coal – face a declining long-term demand (IEA, 2021), adding to the country's political and economic uncertainties. On top of that, as Vale leaves and the insurgency brings uncertainties to the development of the gas industry, this begs the

question for Frelimo of where the rents will now come from. To quote Mozambique analyst Joseph Hanlon's (2021) telling assertion: "Frelimo think that its 'blue bag' of cash to hand out will be constantly refilled, but Vale is a harsh reminder that time is over" (para. 3). Some hard thinking is thus required about how to deal with tumbling resource rents in the years and decades to come. Characterized by little transparency and conflicting information, Vale's withdrawal also raises doubts about the fate of Mozambique's extractive infrastructures and, more importantly, how and by whom unresolved liabilities towards the affected populations will be addressed (Hercog et al., 2021).

On the other side of the South Atlantic, Brazil's resolute swing to the far right, epitomized by the election of President Jair Bolsonaro, meant that previously celebrated ideas of South-South cooperation and solidarity have been discontinued at the expense of a more anti-globalist posture, shifting Brazilian foreign policy to accommodate ties with politically conservative governments in the West. While this has made our move beyond the Brazilian state essential in order to capture the continuities of the uses of South-South relations, it may just as well imply that we may need to recalibrate back towards the Brazilian state. Some pertinent questions can be asked: What does this mean to overall South-South relations? How is Africa framed and fit into Brazil's radical right projects? Do lusotropical-imbued frames of Brazil's exceptionalism on the continent continue to hold sway? We hope that this article can provide some conceptual and analytical clues to not only engage with these emerging research puzzles but also to do so while deciphering how South-South relations are signified and practiced by multiple actors, in terms of both continuities and discontinuities, in an ever-changing world.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Eric Cezne:** Investigation, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. **Jana Hönke:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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