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Who stands to gain? How Moldovans engage with policies promoting the migration-rural development nexus*

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ABSTRACT

In Moldova, migration has become a key strategy for diversifying rural households' livelihoods. The state and international institutions have launched programmes enhancing the migration-rural development nexus by channelling migrants' remittances into investments in rural areas. Drawing on qualitative data, the paper explores how supra/national policies aimed at 'making the most of emigration' are received or rejected by Moldovan farmers. Using a multi-scalar adaptation of the MOA (Motivation, Opportunity, Ability) framework, the contribution illustrates the factors, conditions and processes that influence farmers' participation in the call for rural change at different scales (micro-individual level; meso-community level; macro-structural level), emphasizing their agency.

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Migration-rural development nexus; Republic of Moldova; rural change; rural development policies; social and financial remittances

1. Introduction

The Republic of Moldova is an agrarian country that has become, in the last decade, a somehow paradigmatic case study of the so-called migration-rural development nexus. In ten years, after decades of massive emigration outflows, the international community and the Moldovan government have made this Eastern European country a sort of laboratory to achieve the ambition of 'making the most of migration'.

International organizations such as the World Bank (WB), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have long since celebrated remittances and diasporas as potential leverages for development – including rural development – in sending 'high migratory pressure' countries. As a matter of fact, the international arena has acknowledged migrants as 'development resources' (Nyberg-Sørensen, Van Hear, and Engberg-Pedersen 2002), potential agents of change in their home communities and key players within the migration-development nexus. The latter can be described as the 'coordinated and enabling institutional and discursive measures that promote migrant remittances as a legitimate means of social and

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economic development' (Drbohlav et al. 2017, 527). Bringing together migrants' transnational practices, the international community and the governments of both sending and receiving countries, the migration-development nexus is sometimes understood as a form of globalization from below.

However, scholars have warned about the risks of an unproblematized use of concepts such as 'diaspora' and 'development' (Sinatti and Horst 2015), shedding light on the neo-liberal logic underlying programmes and strategies aimed at 'making the most of migration'. By emphasizing the principle of self-help, governments abdicate their responsibilities and delegate the role of foreign aid providers to migrants (Cingolani and Vietti 2019; de Haas 2010; Faist 2008; Kapur 2004). In the debate on the migration-development nexus, two conflicting views have emerged. On the one hand, the 'neoliberal optimist perspective embraced by the international community, which understands migration as a phenomenon that can actually support development. On the other, the 'Marxist pessimist' view, according to which migration – in a sort of vicious circle – is both the product and the cause of underdevelopment (de Haas 2010; see also King, Povrzanović Frykman, and Vullnetari 2013; Marcu 2014). Despite arising from opposing premises, these dichotomous positions are equal in obscuring the agency of development actors. The 'Marxist pessimist' perspective assumes a consistency in the practices of institutions within the development arena, a view contradicted by the ambivalent and sometimes conflicting positions of promoters and practitioners operating in the field of international cooperation; at the same time, it reduces beneficiaries to passive victims of neoliberalism.[1] Likewise, the 'Neoliberal optimistic' perspective reduces beneficiaries to *homines economici*, rational individuals solely driven by profit maximization and self-interest. The evolution of (im)mobility (Conlon 2011) theories provides insights which disclose the possibility for a more nuanced analysis of the migration-development nexus. In an attempt to bridge the gap between micro-studies focused on the daily experience of migrants and macro-studies aimed at a general explanation of the causes and impacts of migration, researchers have moved beyond the functionalist *vs* historical-structuralist paradigm opposition and have developed frameworks that hold together different levels of analysis and temporalities (de Haas 2021). This allows for illuminating the tension between agency and structure by showing the interplay between migrants' aspirations and desires with broader drivers of migration (Carling and Collins 2018). The conceptualization of mobility as a 'function of people's capabilities and aspirations to migrate within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures' (de Haas 2021, 2) encourages the consideration of the decision to migrate as the outcome of the interaction between individual cognition and emotions on one hand, and social factors with systems of constraints and opportunities in the transnational space on the other. It also invites reconsidering the migration-development nexus transcending the binary question of whether migration is 'good' for development or not by suggesting to explore the circumstances in which individuals and groups can harness migration as a catalyst for rural change and economic growth in their 'home' countries.

[1]The limitations of this perspective partly mirror those highlighted by scholars who have analysed microfinance projects in the development arena from a Foucauldian perspective. While identifying microcredit as a disciplinary power and a governmentality instrument that align with neoliberal ideology by seeking to create self-reliant subjects, researchers questioned the implicit assumption of beneficiaries – and development practitioners – as 'docile bodies', showing how agency (often framed as *resistance*) displays in daily interactions (see Rankin 2001, Lairap-Fonderson 2002).

This entails comprehending beneficiaries' varied response to development policies as outcomes arising from the ongoing interplay among aspirations, abilities, material living conditions, opportunities and constraints of different kinds displaying at different levels (micro, meso, macro).

Drawing on the research conducted within the broader framework of the H2020 project *AGRUMIG-Leaving something behind*,[2] the purpose of the article is to contribute to the current scientific debate on the migration-development nexus in Moldova (See Cingolani and Vietti 2019; Marcu 2014; Stratan and Chistruga 2012) by exploring how supra/national policies aimed at 'making the most of migration' are actually received, resisted, rejected or ignored at the 'ground level' by Moldovan rural households and farmers whose livelihood are deeply affected by (e)migration.[3] Specifically, the contribution analyses – from a qualitative perspective – the interrelated factors, processes and conditions affecting Moldovan farmers' willingness or resistance to taking advantage of those international and government programmes exploiting social and financial remittances for rural development. While the primary focus of the paper is analysing participation in such programmes, insights can be gleaned regarding how development policies may impact (im)mobility choices in the specific Moldovan context.[4] At the same time, the results of the analysis can provide policy makers with indications for the revision of programmes and models.

The data were analysed using the Motivation Opportunity Ability (MOA) framework,[5] a matrix that facilitate understanding how individual motivations underlying decision-making processes are moderated by macro-structural forces (opportunities) and abilities. While the MOA provides a tool for systematic interdisciplinary analysis and cross-national comparisons, it falls short in effectively understanding people's aspirations, desires, intentions and abilities as deeply rooted in social relations and cultural norms. Moreover, the conceptualization of abilities as moderators of motivations may lead to underestimating the mutual relationships between the two.[6] In our study, the MOA was thus adjusted to adopt a less simplistic stance on participation to programmes, incorporating a multi-scalar perspective and considering motivations, opportunities and abilities as reciprocally interacting with each other. In fact, this adaptation allowed 'locating' the interconnected

[2]The project (Grant Agreement ID: 822730) was coordinated by Peter Mollinga (School of Oriental and African Studies-SOAS, UK) and aimed at studying the agrarian sector transformations in countries experiencing socio-demographic change because of massive migration out-flows (China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand). We would like to thank Alexandru Stratan, Eugenia Lucasenco and Vitalie Stirba (Academy for Economics Studies of Moldova and Moldovan National Institute for Economic Research , MD) who made the research possible and actively collaborated to the implementation of the fieldwork activities. We also would like to thank Fraser Sugden and Irina Kuznetsova (University of Birmingham, UK) who participated in two lags of the fieldwork (January and September 2022).

[3]Borrowing the terminology used by Camenisch and Müller (2017), we use *(e)migration* to stress how migration – as it is framed mobility by the institutions dealing with its management – is also emigration from the perspective of sending countries.

[4]Acknowledged as a social process deeply intertwined with broader processes of change, mobility influences and is influenced by transformations in the transnational space impacting different spheres of community life, including economic, political, social, and cultural ones. For instance, policies aimed at rural development to prevent emigration may be destined to fail, as they tend to overlook the capitalist expansion that undermines traditional agrarian livelihoods and fuels urbanization processes which, in turn, shape the ideas about the good life among new generations (see de Haas 2021). As we will see delving into the Moldovan case study, policies to use remittances as a leverage for rural development can foster both return and increased mobility.

[5]The MOA gained momentum in social marketing but has also been extensively adopted by economists to understand consumers' behaviours in several domains, ranging from decision to travel (Hung and Petrick 2012), to food waste (Vittuari et al. 2021). In recent years, it has further found application in studying transit migration (see Syed Zwick 2022).

[6]For instance, knowledge and skills are constantly revisited according to new ideas that may be the product of people's and groups' motivation to improve their circumstances or a specific area of expertise.

factors, conditions and processes informing farmers' engagement in (or resistance to) programmes at the individual (micro), community (meso) and structural (macro) levels (see also Bolzani, Crivellaro, and Grimaldi 2021). Structural forces and processes (e.g. evolving migration governance policies; deficiencies in the national labour market) interact with individual (e.g. age; gender; life-trajectories; typology of farming activity; belonging and attachment to 'the Motherland') as well as with community-level factors (e.g. lack *vs* availability of networks and associations working as 'brokers' of rural development; household's migration experience and care needs emerging in the transnational space; lack *vs* availability of services, infrastructure and facilities in specific country districts) that include culturally shaped assumptions on the role of the state, ambivalent ideas on entrepreneurship and the market economy, views on mobility, culture of emigration.

While acknowledging the still limited results in terms of rural development achieved by programmes fostering the migration-rural development nexus, as well as the neoliberal ideology underpinning the *discourse* (Foucault 1971; see also Grillo and Stirrat 1997) on migrants and their left-behinds as 'agents of development', the present contribution also brings to the surface the agency of farmers by showing the circumstances under which they strategically use the available resources to pursue their personal and family goals.

2. Background

2.1. Mobility from Moldova

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, the newly independent Republic of Moldova has experienced policies of transition towards a market economy consisting of extensive privatizations of state-owned companies, as well as of state and collective farms (*sovkhozy* and *kolkhozy*). In the early '90s, the International Monetary Fund imposed land reform and privatizations as conditions for its adjustment package, and in 1998 the National Land Program was enacted by the then newly-elected Parliament (Piras et al. 2021). The 'share-based' redistribution of the land has established family farms, but private arrangements and informal leasing has allowed the formation of corporative farms, keeping peasant farms marginal. At the same time, land purchasing by few 'leader farms' – that is, entrepreneurial and market-oriented bigger farms – has led land sellers to look for job opportunities in the urban areas or abroad,[7] while the emergence of oligopolistic processing sectors has led to a general lowering of agricultural raw materials prices, to the detriment of small farmers' livelihoods (Spoor 2012).

The loss of jobs, the increasing inflation rate and the impoverishment of large sections of the population that resulted from the dismantling of the socialist planned economy has contributed to massive emigration flows that in three decades have brought nearly a quarter of Moldovans leaving the country (Görlich and Trebesch 2006; Ianioglo et al. 2021; Mogildea 2017).

Although the destination countries are quite varied, Moldova is mainly characterized by a dual 'Eastern' (the Russian Federation) and 'Western' (Europe and the United States) emigration trend (Mogildea 2017). At the beginning of the '90s, the first one

[7]As Spoor (2012, 180) put it: 'In the end, after the agrarian reform, Moldova emerged having a largely bi-modal or dual farm structure, with peasant farms (including the household plots with subsistence activities) on the one hand, and corporate LFEs [*large farm enterprises*] on the other'.

was dominant: Russia was the privileged destination because of a perceived cultural proximity (all Moldovans spoke Russian and somehow identified themselves as part of the history of the former Soviet Union) and because of the relative freedom of movement that Moldovan citizens could enjoy within the former USSR space. At the beginning of the '2000s, though, European countries gradually started to attract more and more migrants from Moldova. Several processes have contributed to the growing Europeanization of the emigration flows. On the one hand, the increasing competition between low-skilled migrants coming from other former Soviet Union countries has led to lowering salaries in Russia; at the same time, the introduction of more restrictive immigration laws and the growing costs of the changing visa regime, have made the emigration to the Russian Federation less attractive (Bloch 2014; Mogildea 2017), though it is still – together with Turkey – a popular destination for the Gagauz ethnic minority (Bloch 2014; see also Keough 2006).[8] On the other hand, the increasing request in Southern European countries for a female workforce to join the 'global care chain' (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003), the availability of seasonal jobs in agriculture and, more generally, of higher salary employment opportunities in Europe have made the West progressively more appealing for Moldovans who decided to leave their country to make a living.[9] Furthermore, since 2014 the implementation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) has eased the visa regime in the 'Fortress Europe',[10] allowing the diversification of migration routes across the Union.

As Bloch pointed out (2014, 455), 'Moldovans are [thus] particularly well positioned to pursue a range of border crossing'. This allowed not only settlement-oriented but also circular migration. Circular, short and long-term mobility have enabled Moldovans coping with the structural lack of opportunities to access employment and financial capital on the national market, becoming a source of income and a consolidated way to diversify livelihood strategies for many rural households.

As of June 19, 2018, the UNDP listed on its website Moldova as the eleventh country in the world for emigration rates. With an exceptionally high number of international migrants and more than one million of its citizens who left for the Russian Federation, the EU countries, North America, Turkey and Israel, Moldova has also become one of the most remittances-reliant nations. As a matter of fact, in Moldova – where agriculture constitutes the backbone of the national economy – remittances make up about 15% of the country's GDP, only 1% less than the share made up by agricultural production (12%) and food industry (4%) together.[11]

2.2. Making the most of emigration to promote rural development

The year 2009 marked a significant turning point for the adoption of policies designed to link migration with rural development. Until that moment, the Moldovan government had

[8]Gagauz Moldovans are an ethnic minority of Orthodox, Turkic speakers. When the Republic of Moldova was established, tensions with the majority of ethnic Romanians arose but in 1995 the government acknowledged Gagauzia (in the South) as an autonomous region and secured Gagauz language rights (Keough 2006). Russia as a popular destination for the Gagauz Moldovans was confirmed by our field research in Moldova.

[9]Although Moldovan emigration to the different countries of the European Union is heterogenous from a gender perspective, the Western emigration trend is more common among Moldovan women, while men tend to migrate more frequently to the Russian Federation (see Mogildea 2017).

[10]Before the implementation of the EaP, a part of the Moldovan population could apply for Romanian or Bulgarian citizenship which allowed them to enjoy free movement within the Schengen area.

[11]https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/moldova-agriculture (last check, 25/04/2022).

not actually managed the phenomenon. However, with the ascent to power of a pro-European political party, a systematic effort was enacted to attract migrants' financial and social resources (Mogildea 2017). Over the past decade, the state and international institutions such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Swiss Cooperation Office, the European Commission and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have launched a number of interventions to promote rural development. Some of these, explicitly enhance the migration-rural development nexus by channelling migrants' remittances in small-scale investments in the agricultural and rural sectors (e.g. DAR 1 + 3-Diaspora Succeeds at Home,[12] PARE 1 + 1,[13] the Hometown Associations incubator, etc.). These initiatives integrate traditional state agricultural policies aimed at supporting farmers' investments (subsidies, grants, subventions, etc.), as well as other international programmes which do not target migrants nor their close relatives, but indirectly boost 'migration money' in rural development initiatives.

Notwithstanding success stories of farmers who managed to start from scratch or to broaden their business activities in the agri-food/agri-tourism domain, the programmes conceived within the migration-development framework seem to achieve uneven results in fostering actual rural development in Moldova. According to the data collected in February 2021 through a nationally representative households survey,[14] the majority of respondents living in rural areas were not even aware of the very existence of such initiatives. This result was further questioned through qualitative research, which delved into how farmers and members of rural households perceive (e)migration, what they expect from both the state and the international community, how they imagine the future of their country and how they make sense of their daily struggle for survival. The insights, perspectives, expectations, and viewpoints shared by the interviewees regarding these issues were crucial in comprehending their decision to either participate or abstain from the programmes that enhance the migration-development nexus.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research context, methods, and data collection

The analysis is based on the qualitative data collected between November 2019 and December 2022 in Moldova by the University of Bologna and the Moldovan National

[12]Based on a pilot implemented by the UNDP, the DAR 1+3 is a programme which has been coordinated by the National Bureau of the Relations with Diaspora, in collaboration with the Moldovan Congress of Local Authorities since 2018. A consortium of a local authority (leading applicant), local hometown association and diaspora associations can apply for funds for local development projects aimed at enhancing local infrastructures, promoting environmental and social protection. The selected projects are then realized using the government funds (1) and resources from the local authority, diaspora, and aid/donations from development partners (+3). https://brd.gov.md/ro/content/diaspora-acasa-reuseste-dar-13; https://www.undp.org/moldova/press-releases/engaging-diaspora-development-their-home-communities-becomes-national-practice-through-%E2%80%9Cdar-13%E2%80%9D-program (last check, 14/01/2023).

[13]Pare 1+1 is a programme coordinated by ODIMM (the national organization for small and medium enterprises). The programme beneficiaries are labor-migrants or their first-degree relatives (with Moldovan citizenship) willing to set-up or develop a business in Moldova with money coming from remittances. For each Leu provided by the migrant or his/her relatives, the state provide 1 Leu more. Introduced in 2010, it has currently become a structural economic policy. It was recently renamed Pare 1+2 after the decision to increase funding from the state. https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/pare-1-2-la-fiecare-leu-investit-din-remiten%C8%9Be-guvernul-promite-2-lei-/32022136.html

[14]The Households survey was coordinated by the University of Bologna (Italy) in collaboration with the National Institute for Economic Research (Moldova).

Institute for Economic Research in the framework of the broader quanti-qualitative research carried out within the above-mentioned H2020 project. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998), the multi-sited research has combined quantitative and qualitative investigation tools to study the transformations taking place in the agricultural sector as a result of the massive migration out-flows that are radically changing the country's socio-demographic features. A nationally-representative survey delivered in February 2021 was followed by informal conversations and semi-structured interviews targeting relevant stakeholders, by participant observation, as well as by focus groups, interviews and ethnographic conversations with farmers and rural households' representatives living in different regions. The last step of the qualitative research involved Moldovan citizens settled in Italy to gain further insights and compare Moldovans' views and perceptions on topics such as migration effects and potential for home countries development.[15]

Formal and informal interviews with relevant stakeholders (e.g. representatives from governmental and non-governmental organizations, officers from international institutions, local administrators, scholars, etc.) were carried out in English and/or Romanian in face-to-face meetings that took place between 2019 and 2022 (details in Table 1). However, 4 meetings were carried out online in 2020 when the global Covid-19 pandemics hampered the possibility to carry out fieldwork activities in presence.

Eleven focus groups (including a pilot to test and review the research questions to be explored with interviewees), as well as 3 ethnographic conversations and 13 in-depth interviews were carried out in Moldova between September 2021 and September 2022, reaching an overall number of 100 farmers and rural households representatives and covering the whole national territory (see details in Table 2), with the exception of the separatist enclave of Transnistria. Small villages (with less than 2.000 inhabitants), including those cut-off from the main routes, and county seats (with about 30.000 inhabitants) were chosen as sites for the interviews and focus groups. This choice allowed achieving a more nuanced picture of the material conditions experienced by our informants, one that could account for the differences in infrastructures and services available for the rural population living in specific areas.

Out of the 11 focus groups, 10 were carried out in January 2022 when Moldova registered a relevant increase of Covid-19 daily cases. The side-effects entailed by the overall situation (e.g. quarantines, school closures) have influenced fieldwork activities, affecting the very possibility for some farmers and rural households' members to attend the meetings. In one case, the research team had to opt for an online focus group; in most of the cases, there were last-minute drop-outs that limited the number of participants, particularly females. As noted by some key actors who supported the research teams in the organization of the focus groups – representatives from farmers' associations and local administrators – most of the women in the community had to cope with school closures and had to take care of children. As a result, the number of participants in each focus

[15]The group of the 17 interviewees includes Moldovans (mainly women) who arrived in Italy at the beginning of the 2000s, youngsters (both those who reunited with their parents when they were children and those who were born in Italy), and representatives of Moldovan associations (one residing in Italy and a returnee who still carries out transnational volunteering activities connecting Italy and Moldova in the field of health). The present contribution is primarily based on the data collected in Moldova, with timely references to insights emerging from the last stage of the research to support our argument.

Table 1. Typology stakeholders per sex.

Stakeholders (2019-2022)	Women	Men	
Governmental institutions representatives (n. 16)	10	6	
International organizations representatives (n. 4)	1	3	
Local administration representatives (n. 5)	3	2	
Scholars (n. 5)	2	3	
Others (n. 3)*	1	2	
Total Women/Men	17	16	
Total Stakeholders			33

Note: *Some informants did not disclose their age. In some cases, the research team could infer interviewees' age; in others, age inference was complicated by face masks.

groups varied significantly and gender balance – a key criterion in the selection of participants – could not be achieved. While 3 focus groups were entirely conducted in Russian, 2 were conducted in both Romanian and Russian, and 6 entirely in Romanian.

Most of the interviews and all the focus groups were recorded with the permission of the participants, then translated and transcribed into English. In addition to verbatim, the research team produced field-notes.

3.2. Profile of the participants

As shown in Table 1, an overall number of 33 stakeholders was reached, including 16 officers from governmental organizations (National Bureau of Statistics; Diaspora Relations Bureau; Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment;

Table 2. Research sites and informants reached per sex.

	Women	Men	
Northern Region			
Cubolta (Sîngerei District)	1	6	
Gordineşti (Edineț District)	5	8	
Soroca (Soroca District)	3	6	
Țaul (Donduşeni District)	1	7	
Nihoreni (Rîşcani District)	1	0	
Gălăşeni (Rîşcani District)		2	
Central Region			
Nişcani (Călaraşi District)	0	8	
Nisporeni (Nisporeni District)	0	6	
Trebujeni (Orhei District)	2	1	
Ungheni (Ungheni District)	3	6	
Logăneşti (Hînceşti District)	1	1	
Drăguşeni (Hînceşti District)	1	1	
Southern Region			
Cantemir (Cantemir District)	3	6	
Cahul (Cahul District)	2	6	
Valeni (Cahul District)	1	0	
Găvănoasa (Cahul District)	0	1	
Goteşti (Cahul District)	0	1	
Colibaşi (Cahul District)	1		
Cotihana (Cahul District)	1	1	
Autonomous Gagauzia Region			
Cioc-Maidan (Comrat District)	0	4	
Congaz (Comrat District)	0	3	
Total	26	74	100

Ministry of Health, Labour and Social protection; Congress of Local Authorities Moldova; National Agency for Agricultural Interventions and Payments-AIPA, Organization for Small and Medium Enterprises Sector Development-ODIMM), 4 representatives from international institutions (IOM, UNDP), 5 mayors and deputy-mayors, and 3 occasional informants from the Third Sector, the civil society and the textile industry.

Interviews with stakeholders provided an opportunity to explore the limits and potentialities of the supra/national rural development policies implemented in Moldova and to unravel the logic underpinning them. At the same time, the stakeholders' perspective provided material for comparison with the expectations and perceptions of farmers.

As confirmed by our informants, 'agriculture is a family matter' in Moldova and almost every family owns land plots inherited by their ancestors, also thanks to the land reform. Focus groups, thus, targeted both farmers and rural household members. Some of the latter can be defined as smallholders, that is, self-provisioning farmers who do not pursue commercialization as the main goal of their farming activities. Unlike respondents of the household survey – who were subsistence peasants – most of the qualitative research participants were market-oriented farmers managing small-medium agricultural enterprises either registered as *Gospodărie Tărăneăsca* (peasant household, a peculiarly Moldovan legal entity) or as limited liability companies. In a limited number of cases (n.3), large companies' owners (with more than 500 Ha of land) participated in group discussions. Informants' age was considerably heterogeneous, ranging from 25 to 75 years old, but most of them were 55–60 years old, somehow corroborating the *leitmotif* that transversally emerged from focus groups and interviews 'only the retirees remain'. All the participants had a direct or indirect experience with migration: while about 30 informants can be defined as returnees who had lived abroad either as temporary or long-term emigrants, four were still circular migrants who resorted to emigration to finance agricultural activities in case of need when the research was carried out. The other participants had an indirect experience of migration, that is their close kins (parents, children, siblings) were or had been migrants who – to some extent – have contributed to the financial support of their left-behind families.

3.3. Data analysis

Social anthropology and economics were combined to provide an interdisciplinary analysis (see Boswell 2008) of the barriers and resources affecting farmers' response to policies for rural development through a multi-scalar adaptation of the MOA matrix. Transcripts and field notes were analysed thematically in several iterations to identify motivations, opportunities and abilities underlying interviewees' participation in programmes. We adopted a loose definition for each thematic core to allow us to encompass the multiplicity and heterogeneity of factors, processes, conditions, abilities, resources and constraints enabling or hampering involvement that gradually emerged from the analysis of the fieldwork material. Thematic cores were conceptualized as follows:

- Motivations: intrinsic and extrinsic reasons that underlie the intention to participate or not in projects and programmes ranging from socio-anagraphic features to political, economic, social, and cultural resources/constraints

- Opportunities: personal, political, economic, natural, infrastructural, social and cultural resources/constraints enabling or hindering the decisions to take/not to take part in programmes
- Abilities: skills, capacities and competences achieved through education and life experience, psychological capital and culture

Further coding enabled the identification of different, albeit interrelated, elements accounting for interviewees' differentiated responses to the state's and the international community's effort to leverage Moldovans' migration as a resource for the rural development of the country. These elements were eventually 'located' at micro (individual), meso (community) and macro (structural) levels.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Between the devil and the deep blue sea: farmers' perspectives on changing migration patterns and the future of the country

All the farmers that participated in our research have had direct or indirect experiences of mobility. In the last decade, (e)migration has been changing and interviewees experience its everyday side-effects. In this regard, participants shared ambivalent views on this phenomenon. On the one hand, they acknowledged its role in saving families – and the country itself – from a complete financial collapse in the aftermath of Independence. They depicted it as a strategy that still today helps to cope with the lack of job opportunities or the need to accumulate money for investments. As one interviewee from the Centre put it: 'If there were no remittances, Moldova wouldn't be here anymore'. On the other hand, interviewees recognized that in the long run emigration has contributed to the development of other countries, at the expense of Moldovan's economy. Informants can indeed seize on their own skin the negative effects of a process that has been going on for three decades. For instance, participants reported that people in Moldova tend to emigrate at an earlier age than in the past. Over the last decade, there has been a growing trend among young individuals to leave the country after completing secondary school, either to pursue higher education in foreign universities or to seek improved job prospects. The majority of them appear to leave permanently; in contrast to the past, where emigrants were expected to leave temporarily to earn money and then return to their hometowns, the younger generations reportedly return 'only for holidays'.

Life course transitions – and, namely, transition to parenthood – affect both the choice to permanently settle down abroad and the possibility for emigrants to financially contribute to their left-behind families. Although emigrants who decide to make their destination country 'home' may still contribute with remittances or loans, these may be used by rural households to cope with consumption needs (e.g. healthcare costs; education fees; house maintenance; unexpected expenses, etc.) rather than for investments, especially when recipients are elderlies.[16]

[16]Younger interviewees, though, are more willing to use family members' remittances and loans for agricultural investment.

> Only elders remained here … I have three daughters, one in Turkey, another is in Russia, and the third in Chisinau. […] We cannot ask the money for investment from our family members, because not all of them are doing well there, they have to raise their children. [Man, Gagauzia, 75 y.o.]

> [*speaking about remittances*] They have to raise their kids. I would say *they* need help. [Man, Gagauzia, 50–60 y.o.]

> Now, all the family moves, and they remain there, they don't send anything back and they don't contribute to the development of the country anymore. [Man, Mayor of a small municipality in the Centre, 40–50 y.o.]

All informants concurred that in Moldova, limited job opportunities exist beyond agriculture. This, coupled with low salaries, high living costs, and inadequate welfare, is recognized as a primary factor contributing to persistent emigration. It perpetuates both youth and brain drain, dispossessing the country of its workforce and – to a broader extent – of its future.

> My son is in Bucharest; he finished his studies there and he found a job there. Now I am old, retired and I have nobody, I tell him to come back to work here in Chisinau and he asks me: 'But, what sort of salary will I have? I would come, but what salary would I have?' And should he come here for 3,000/4,000 lei?! [Man, Centre, 70–80 y.o.]

> Many friends are already settled down in Europe. Only a few of them are thinking about returning to Moldova. [Woman, South, 25–35 y.o.]

> Initially, a part of my family was thinking about coming back, but now they are not anymore. I saw what I saw there, roads paved until the fields, extraordinary infrastructure, subsidies from the state received on time, for all the economic agents during this economic crisis … This all makes me think about leaving the country as well. We are the ones that are still patriots and want to develop this country, but when we see their job … [Man, Centre, about 40 y.o.]

Most of the informants expressed pessimistic ideas concerning their country and deemed the state the main responsible for the harsh conditions faced by citizens (see also Cingolani and Vietti 2019). Their stances often oscillated between condemning the government's corruption or inefficiency and harbouring expectations of 'nanny state' policies, reflecting notions about the state deeply rooted in the Soviet era. As we will show in the following pages, these views partially informed the reception of migration-development policies. Such pessimistic views, however, were not always incompatible with hopes for improvements in the future, especially for those interviewees who were sympathetic to the-then newly elected Pro-Europe Parliament.[17]

> There is not stability … Maybe after the change in the government the youth are coming back home. [Man, North, 40–50 y.o.]

> I have to say that since I came back, there have been some changes, maybe small ones, but there were changes. I would say that this is positive and now with the new government, even despite the difficulties we have – the war, the economic crises – I am optimistic that Moldova will be better. [Woman returnee, representative of an Italo-Moldovan Association, 35–45 y.o.]

[17]In the North-Western districts and in Gagauzia all the more, interviewees were more sceptical about the government in charge and their perception of the future was more pessimistic.

As far as the programmes promoting the migration-rural development nexus are concerned, not all the interviewees were familiar with their very existence. At the same time, those who were aware of the state and the international community's effort to use migration as leverage to promote business had mixed representations and feelings about these initiatives (see also Cingolani and Vietti 2019).

In the next paragraphs, we will present the multi-layered and multi-level interrelated factors, conditions and processes behind choosing participation in – or resistance to – such programmes.

4.2. Motivations. Investing in agriculture to stay or to return

Not only was agriculture presented as a 'family tradition' but also as the only livelihood strategy for those who decide to stay or return. Because of the structural lack of job opportunities beyond agriculture, business in the rural domain is perceived as the only chance to make a living. At the same time, both the state and the international community acknowledged agriculture and agri-business as the foundations of Moldovan development. While presenting state's initiatives to support farmers and discussing about the European programme LEADER,[18] a representative from the Ministry of Agriculture confirmed how rural development is a priority in the government agenda. Migrants – together with youth and women – are considered a privileged beneficiary:

> We want this programme, and broadly speaking all programmes designed for the development of rural areas, to attract young people and migrants, as only by improving living conditions and opportunities, people who decided to migrate may come back. […] In particular, we stimulate the youth, women and returnees to invest. Investments concerning processing, post-harvesting, etc. of agricultural products, which is very important for the development of the small value chains. [Female representative from the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment]

A representative from ODIMM – the public agency carrying out the Pare 1 + 1 – pointed out that 70% the programme-financed projects must be implemented in rural areas. Typically, resources are directed towards investments in agriculture, the establishment of processing factories, restaurants or leisure services in rural areas and towns. A representative from one of the international agencies operating in the country who acknowledged the potential for rural tourism clearly stated that 'the diversification of the rural economy in transition countries like Moldova is an alternative from traditional economies'.

Hence, the decision to return to Moldova or to avoid (re)emigration for themselves or their family members is often connected to the possibility of making a business from a 'family tradition'.

> We grew up in agriculture. We don't know how it is like not to know about cultivation. We grew up in the villages with our parents doing this ever since. [Woman, Centre, 55–65 y.o.]

International projects and programmes such as the Pare 1 + 1 – one of the most popular and the most explicitly migrants-oriented – are meant to sustain this process.

[18]In 30 years, the programme established a network of local action groups operating in rural areas that are actively involved in the development of their regions (http://elard.eu/leader-clld/). Moldova has created a national LEADER network and since 2022, LEADER has become a state programme operating in half of the national territory.

The age of interviewees who applied for the plethora of funds and grants available varied significantly, ranging from 25 to 55/60 years old. For older interviewees who had spent abroad several years, initiatives like the Pare 1 + 1 provided the chance to boost the capital accumulated abroad or to increase investments made through remittances, accelerating the process of return.

> I've lived in Spain, in Catalonia for 10 years. […] when I saw my salary after two days of work, I sort of fell in love with Spain […] After 10 years, I used to say that I didn't need more money, I just wanted to come back […]. I was still living in Spain when my wife started the application, I provided all the documents. [Men, North, 50–60 y.o.]

> I started the project when I was abroad and then, when I was about to complete, I got back. […] I won the subsidies for the projects, and they gave me the funds very quickly, I was very surprised by this, we didn't expect the process to be that quick. It was already a small business of growing rabbits, and with the support of the programmes we increased it. We started from 200 rabbits and now we have 3,000 rabbits. All the meat is sold to the rural pensions. […] My daughter also started a *gospodărie tărănească* and set up a business, she started from scratch financed by PARE 1 + 1. [Man, Centre, 50–60 y.o.]

For younger interviewees, emigration was a strategy that allowed them to raise the initial capital to apply for programmes and start their activities. Some of them still resort to circular or longer-term migration, either their own or that of their partner, to finance their agricultural or agri-food/tourism business activities.

> Our story started like this: we worked abroad, and due to the fact that we wanted to come back home, we thought that we could start something to leave to someone. We started the lavender field, and this is what helped us remain here. This was also our dream, let's say. If we didn't go abroad, I don't think we would have decided to work in agriculture. […] I managed to get funds from the program Women in business. We bought a machine. Moreover, we are part of a local action group, and we won a project in 2020 amounting at 6,500 € and we bought a combine. [Woman, North, 25–35 y.o.]

> I am working in agriculture but seasonally migrating to the Netherlands […] in April this year, I applied [*for PARE 1 + 1*]. I bought a tractor and other equipment you see here. Also, I am thinking of buying the machine I told you about via this program. Now it is a new program, Pare 1 + 2. With a new program, in addition to your 250 thousand Lei investment, the Government will give you 500 thousand Lei. Of course, it is not big money, but it will help the farmers to improve their work. [Man, North, 25–35 y.o.]

Thanksto the dual citizenship regime[19] and the EaP, the possibility to enjoy freedom of movement within the European Union space has allowed some informants to build 'a successful cross-border strategy combining labour abroad with small entrepreneurship at home' (Marcu 2014, 103).

At the individual level, informants of all ages explicitly evoked 'patriotism' and homesickness as the main reasons for choosing not to leave or for returning, echoing the 'no place is like home' refrain. Although negative migration experience may have accelerated

[19]In the early '2000s, many Moldovans applied for Romanian citizenship. Upon Romania's accession to the European Union, Moldovans with Romanian citizenship were exempted from visa requirements for travel within the EU. Meanwhile, long-term migrants (like the ones we reached in Bologna) have started to achieve the citizenship of their destination country.

the decision to come back,[20] some informants pointed out that a sense of belonging and love for their Motherland were powerful motivators that deterred them from permanently leaving Moldova, even in the face of higher salaries and access to better quality welfare services abroad.

> We are the ones that are still patriots and want to develop this country […] I decided to come back home to contribute to the place where I was born, and I grew up. And I am trying to do what I like … [Man, Centre, 25–35 y.o.]

> In 2016 we benefitted from a grant from USAID amounting at 8,500 € that helped me to change the infrastructure of the *gospodărie* […] I was in Italy in Bologna, and I worked, as everyone, as a cleaner for 5 years. The reason why I went there was not to develop the touristic activity at that time, but both my daughters were studying at the academy of economic studies, and I didn't receive the salary for 6 months, hence I really needed to go abroad. I didn't go abroad to stay there to be honest. […] I went abroad only for the money, for financial reasons. What advantage did my family have from me going abroad? The fact that I prevented my daughters from leaving the country. […] we are nationalist, we are attached to our motherland, to our village, to our place. I have never seen a better place than my home, even if I cannot deny that the Italians are very kind people … [Woman, Centre, 55–65 y.o.]

As these lines summarize, some interviewees' feelings of belonging and the will to keep the family united have informed their attitude towards migration-development nexus programmes. They acknowledged them as a support in their struggle to create the conditions for their families to live in their home country. In most cases, though, 'patriotism' intersected with life trajectories and other factors residing at a more intermediate (meso) level, namely the changing extended family's needs. While older interviewees (50–60 years old) often reported the need to care for their elderly parents or to carry on a household business[21] as reasons underpinning the return project, the transition to parenthood or left-behind children's transition to adolescence[22] disclosed younger (25–45 years old) informants' will to invest in agriculture as a strategy to make a stable livelihood in Moldova, one allowing the possibility to raise sons and daughters with the full support of the members of the household.

In other cases, a personal passion for agriculture and rural life motivated the participation in programmes that enabled interviewees to start a business in a sector unrelated to their prior studies or professional experience. For example, a young man (aged 30–40) from the South had resided in Italy for over 10 years, serving as a production manager in a packaging factory. While his family (parents and siblings) established themselves there, he ultimately chose to return to Moldova with his wife and toddlers. Leveraging Pare 1 + 1, he established an 'eco-farm' specializing in organic vegetable production. Despite missing his family, he aspires for his children to grow up in a more natural and healthier environment.

[20] In this regard, some interviewees mentioned harsh working conditions and discriminations in the receiving countries where they had migrated.

[21] In rural Moldova, the younger child was traditionally expected to take care of the elderly parents, in return parents would leave him/her the land and the house. Although this tradition is currently less and less common, some informants evoked it to legitimize their (or their sons/daughters') return.

[22] Although currently parents tend to reunite with their children in the receiving country as soon as their economic conditions allows the reunification process, couples who pursue migration as a strategy to increase household's income may choose circular mobility and alternate in the care duties while children are at the Primary school.

> Before I was abroad, in Italy, and at a certain point, I decided to return home and work in agriculture. Agriculture which is [*being*] in harmony with nature […] It is the freedom to do what you want. […] In 2014–2015 I started to read more books. This influenced my decision to return home. [Man, South, 30–40 y.o.]

Other young people expressed a desire to revive traditional modes of production, viewing them as more genuine and environmentally friendly. The growing emphasis on environmental concerns and healthier dietary choices in Europe and beyond provides the backdrop against which 'old days' practices are being revitalized and renewed. This highlights how concepts of the 'good life' and the aspirations of younger generations, influenced by ideas circulating in the transnational space, can evolve in a manner seemingly contradictory to the trend of younger generations embracing urban lifestyles.

All informants who chose agriculture to stay or to return referred to similar reasons and motivations, though only a part of them actually used the programmes to achieve their goals.

As a matter of fact, the multi-level factors and processes informing motivation synergically interact with those that – following the MOA framework – we included in the set of the Opportunities and Abilities.

4.3. Opportunities: making the most of what is on the plate

At the individual level, specific life chances (e.g. land plots inheritance; an explicit request by children or elderlies to come back to support the household, etc.) or personal conditions may act as catalysts in deciding to involve in programmes. In one case, a disability prevented one young man migrating with his mother and siblings, but he could use his mother's remittances to make investments in the land and make a living in Moldova with his father. While data show that opportunities emerging at the individual level do affect the decision to take or not part in the initiatives fostering the migration-development nexus, the ones residing at the meso (community) and macro (structural) levels are the most relevant.

The possibility to easily exploit natural resources (e.g. land plot proximity to rivers; proximity to rural tourism areas) facilitates rural households' willingness to use remittances and migration money to invest in agriculture. Likewise, the availability of quality welfare services and infrastructures (e.g. paved roads; processing factories; good internet connection) increases farmers' opportunities in the development of business activities in rural areas. The absence of specific infrastructures (e.g. cooling or drying systems, paved roads) may also present an opportunity, as it can be addressed through specific programmes such as the Dar 1 + 3 or through the initiative of a group of farmers pooling their resources together.

> I think that if there are changes in infrastructure, there will be positive effects on return migration and job opportunities, and even on salaries and agricultural business opportunities. […] There would be tourism and other services. As I said, the services infrastructure is not developed, if it was developed, the services sector would develop. For instance, gyms … But even other businesses. [Man, South, 55–65 y.o.]

> I think that we need to cooperate, this is the only solution I can see. If there is a problem that we are all facing, me and the other guy, etc. It doesn't matter that I am from a village, he is from another village, and he is from a third village … Cooperatives of agricultural producers

> exist, some farmers built a storing space for cereals. If there are more than 5 farmers, let them be 10 or 15, there would be more storing places for everyone … [Man, Centre, age not provided]

Information gap emerged as one of the most common elements undermining participation in programmes channelling remittances in rural and agricultural development. Indeed, not all interviewees knew about the existence of such initiatives and lack of information emerged as a pretty common theme during focus groups.

> There were many non-refundable grant programmes in agriculture, but we didn't manage to get any. They didn't help us. [Woman, North, 40–50 y.o.]

> [*speaking about the Pare 1 + 1*] We didn't know. Nobody told us about this. No newspapers about the programme. Local authorities didn't tell us about the programme. Maybe they are not interested in sharing this information. [Man, Gagauzia, 50–60 y.o.]

> [*while another participant was discussing about her experience with the* Women in Business *programme*] I would also like to apply to these programmes, but I don't know them! [Woman, North, 35–45 y.o.]

> [*while discussing about a IFAD programme*] I didn't know about that honestly [Man, South, 50–60 y.o.]. You see, the problem is also about information. [Man, South, 55–65 y.o.]

> [*contradicting another FG participant who was complaining the lack of investment opportunities*] No, this is not true! There have been opportunities in the last 10 years. First of all, there has been this programme, Pare 1 + 1 … […] There are opportunities. The ones who know them, access them, they find them, and they can do, but there are few people who know [*about*] these [*initiatives*]. [Man, Centre, age not provided]

Information gap was confirmed by a representative from ODIMM, the national agency in charge for the Pare 1 + 1 implementation, which is tasked with addressing the problem:

> Given this difficulty to apply and lack of information, we developed 12 business incubators in the country, and we are trying to establish a network of local consults, for instance from the Economic departments of District Councils, that will guide potential beneficiaries in applying for these programmes. [Representative from ODIMM]

In this regard, local associations and professional networks (such as community groups, producers, and farmers/breeders' associations) also play a crucial role. They act as 'brokers of development', that is local social actors (individuals or groups) mediating as an interface between local communities and the development arena (Bierschenk, Chauveau, and Olivier de Sardan 2002; Olivier de Sardan 1995) and operating 'in "invited spaces" of top-down […] interventions where the government is key in setting boundaries' (Koster and van Leynseele 2018, 804).[23] Communities that proved more proactive in leveraging grants and programmes were those with robust 'word of mouth' communication among their members and local organizations actively disseminating available opportunities. These organizations acted as intermediaries, bridging the gap between potential candidates and state or international agencies, occasionally

[23]An in-depth examination of the topic of brokerage in Moldova is beyond the scope of this contribution, as it would deserve a separate discussion. However, for the purposes of our analysis, rooted in a bottom-up understanding of beneficiaries' involvement in projects and programmes, it is crucial to underscore the role they play in shaping diverse responses to the initiatives implemented for promoting rural development and change.

offering training services or assisting farmers and rural households in the application procedures. Rural entrepreneurs and farmers, who concurrently served as public servants in local governments or have played political roles in municipalities, were also acting as brokers between farmers and national or supra/national policies and initiatives.

Other informants were sometimes aware of the existence of grants and programmes for rural development but resisted them despite the possibility to use their or other family members' remittances as a starting capital. They either dismissed them as too complicated, insufficient or even as a scam only benefitting the 'friends and relatives of politicians'.

> EU money for agriculture, or World Bank, wherever it comes from, it didn't reach its final destination. It didn't reach the ones that actually want to do something. […] In that moment you stop migration, when you create conditions for people, and the money should come straight here, not to national agencies, those are mafia, where there is money, there are problems! The money should come directly to the producers, to the farmers … [Man, North, 55–65 y.o.]

> We talked today about grants and programmes for the small farmers. Well, unfortunately, we are not receiving anything. I don't know to whom these grants are going, but surely not to us … [Man, Gagauzia, 40–50 y.o]

> Regarding ODIMM, IFAD, all these programmes have requirements. Let's say you have 200.000 Lei to invest in a 10 Ha orchard. With this money you can almost do nothing. [Man, Gagauzia, 25–35 y.o.]

As we will see in the next section, trust played a significant role. Past negative or deceptive experiences with state subsidies for agriculture may have reinforced perceptions of the state as a bureaucracy-driven entity 'complicating poor people's lives', thus discouraging interviewees' participation in remittances-oriented programmes whose application procedure was supposed to be too complex, time-consuming and expensive. At the same time, assumptions on corruption[24] as a widespread phenomenon informed the wary and suspicious attitude towards programmes and initiatives carried out by state agencies and supra/national bodies. As mentioned earlier, negative perceptions about the state are quite common, but informants who had the chance to participate in projects shared a less critical perspective during the focus groups, occasionally challenging dominant representations. In most of the cases, the presence of farmers' associations or professional networks in the local community, as well as the possibility to ask for advice to fellow citizens who had a direct experience of programmes was a community resource that seems to make a difference in facilitating the participation in such initiatives.[25] Vertical and horizontal networks are a form of social capital not only at home, but also abroad. Migrants' associations in the receiving countries also played a role in 'brokering development' by acting as intermediaries between the diaspora and the development arena.

Other factors enabling or discouraging participation, are related to access criteria and requirements. On the one hand, gender mainstreaming in development (Cornwall,

[24]The data emerging from our research is confirmed by the Corruption Perception Index, published by Transparency International. Scoring 36 on a scale from 0 to 100 where 0 is 'highly corrupted' and '100' is 'highly transparent', Moldova ranked 105th among the 180 countries listed in the Index.

[25]Only in one case, distrust towards community brokers further fueled suspicion, discouraging participation.

Harrison, and Whitehead 2007) has made women a privileged target of specific initiatives, including those promoting youth and female entrepreneurship (e.g. Women in Business). This has led to a rise in women's participation in projects aimed at promoting rural development. Simultaneously, it has officially recognized the previously informal female contribution to farming activities. On the flip side, the requirement to formally register farming/business activities and provide evidence of 'where the money comes from' before applying for grants and programmes made participation challenging for some informants and even prevented others from participating altogether.

> [*commenting a female FG participant experience with the Pare 1 + 1*] Yes, but again, what requirements are there for these programmes? They might ask you from where the money was transferred, etc. […] For instance, I once went abroad for 3 months with my wife and we came back with some money, but now I cannot provide evidence that this money was made abroad anymore. Moreover, we already spent some money, we bought land, planted orchards, etc. We spent a lot of money in orchards, but in the past, there were not such things as *gospodărie tărănească*, as a legal entity, it was more informal. [Man, North, 55–65 y.o.]

> I transferred 7,000 € from Italy to Moldova and I wanted to invest but from the tax service, they started asking me how I made the money, etc. I had the contracts and I showed them everything, it took me much time to provide all the documents. My accountant made all the documents needed. […] It was fine in the end. But they took some commission fees. [Man, Centre, 25–35 y.o.]

According to the representative of a Moldovans' association in Italy, when programmes such as the Pare 1 + 1 were launched in 2010/2011 criteria for application have hampered the participation of most of her associates.

> You know, there was a big mistake at the beginning […] many who sent money to Moldova to their relatives or children … Neither was this transfer registered, nor could they 'prove' this money and now it is the same […] You see, it is the lack of information, because if they knew that money must be sent through the Bank … But the banks … sending money from Italy to Moldova, if you send it through Western Union is one thing, it still costs a little, but if you send it through the bank … [..] I had to pay 50 € [*commission*] for a 200 € [*transfer*], I was shocked, and people do not have … What I experienced, happened to anyone else. So, they no longer use this route to transfer money, they use to send [*remittances*] through buses, which are not tracked. [Female representative of a Moldovans' association in Italy, 50–60 y.o.]

It is important to note that the immigrants reached by this association were mostly women who arrived at the beginning of the '2000s joining the 'global care chain' (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). Care is an informal sector, particularly in Italy. These women typically worked as housekeepers or caregivers and frequently did not have regular employment contracts. Therefore, proving 'where the money came from' was not only expensive but also challenging at the beginning of the '2010s for Moldovan emigrants who had jobs at the margins of the Italian labour market. Although remittances were used to invest in agriculture, in many cases they could not be formally channelled in programmes fostering the migration-rural development nexus.

4.4. Abilities. A knack for survival

When it comes to participation in programmes, psychological capital, personal abilities and skills – individual competences and knowledge – as well as social capacities and culture play an important role.

Hard skills and competences in agriculture were not always a proxy for participation, but eagerness 'to learn more' and implement one's knowledge were common among those who started a business and applied (or planned to) for EU funded grants or programmes like the Pare 1 + 1.

> I studied accountancy. Now I am studying agriculture in the Master program at the Agrarian State University. […] Accountancy is good to know because I am using it to run my business. But studying agriculture is also important because you should know how to work the land. [Man, North, 25–35 y.o.]

> After I came back, I studied how to do organic farming, I studied the legislation. And only after this I started doing agriculture. In 2015 I decided to return home, and in 2017 I returned, but in this period, I was studying and researching this business to be sure I would fit in. […] I am visiting many countries to exchange experiences. Recently I've been to Germany, last winter to Italy, Luxembourg, etc. These trips are covered by grants, and this October, the producers we visited in Germany will come to Moldova. [Man, South, 30–40 y.o.]

> The first education experience was in Poland, we went to Łodź for a week and they taught us how to manage the small business and how to set it up. […] We had a touristic patent when we started, we were the first, pioneering rural tourism. [Woman, Centre, 55–65 y.o.]

Soft skills, such as creativity and perseverance, along with psychological capital – defined as resilience, hope, optimism, and self-efficacy (Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio 2007) – emerged as the common denominators among interviewees who opted to engage in entrepreneurship in the rural sector by taking advantage of 'what was on the plate'. They also functioned as a trigger to enhance material and immaterial resources, including the social capital they had built home and abroad. Consistently with the rhetoric of migrants and returnees as a source of social remittances (Levitt 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011) and innovation, farmers, mayors and representatives of both state and international institutions acknowledged emigration as an experience that had contributed to developing emigrants' skills, as well as their human and psychological capital (see also Marcu 2014).

> The only thing is that those who are migrating to Europe have a change in their mindset. We want to improve our living standards to the level we experienced in Europe. We walked a lot in different European villages and picked some ideas from there. [Woman, South, 25–35 y.o.]

> Anyway, people who migrate change a bit their vision, their perception on things. If people go abroad, they make new opinions, they come back home and implement something [Man, Centre, 25–35 y.o.]

> […] people who lived abroad, saw another lifestyle, and they innovate something here, too. Maybe they implement something here. […] Through subsidies and grants provided by the EU they see something in Europe and then implement it here […] we have two cases in [*name of the town*] of people who built cooling systems with 2,000 tons capacity. This allows them to bargain differently with the intermediaries. 'Do you want to buy it from me at this price? No? Then I'll keep it in my fridge'. [Mayor, Centre, 30–40 y.o.]

> We also noticed differences between first-degree relatives and returnees in terms of businesses and investments. Relatives mainly upgrade their existing traditional small farm, while returnees usually invest in modern technologies like super-intensive orchards or vineyards and innovative businesses, they have new ideas. [Representative from ODIMM]

As Drbohlav et al. pointed out, 'by learning and accepting new values, ideas, behaviours, practices migrants may enrich origin society' (2017, 530). However, it is evident that while this form of cultural capital aligns well with government and international agendas promoting migration-development nexus policies, it may be distant from ideas and values shared at the community level (see also Cingolani and Vietti 2019). For instance, some informants (including more entrepreneurial and market-oriented farmers with no migration experience) lamented a general lack of entrepreneurial culture, which was described as something new by older generations who grew up during the Soviet era.

> Our society would need a bit of a revolution in people's mentality, spirit and way of thinking. Before, in the Soviet system everyone was satisfied because they all worked for the state. The state was the master, do you understand? The state owned the company and my neighbor didn't look at me [*was not envious*] because he knew I was going to work for the state too. […] The state pretended to pay and people pretended to work. [Man, North, 55–65 y.o]

> Even us, as a generation, we were not trained as entrepreneurs. We are learning by doing, we […] understood how it worked after the first problems and failures we have had. In western countries, the entrepreneurial spirit has developed for hundreds of years, and this spirit has been inherited by new generations from old ones, and this spirit is increasing. It cannot develop in 30 years. Even with all the technological changes, the entrepreneurial spirit is developing in time. We are still at the stage of the stick, possibly there are some businessmen here, too. However, as a generation we are trying to figure it out in this new world as blind. [Man, Centre, 45–55 y.o.]

According to interviewees, some peasants managed to keep pace with the economic revolution entailed by the transition process, while others were unable to adapt. Moral assumptions polarizing between 'industrious peasants who made the grade' and 'people who prefer to be employee' or worse – 'parasites living on welfare and social benefit' – emerged while discussing entrepreneurship.

According to informants who championed collaboration and cooperation among small-size farmers, lack of trust at the community level is detrimental to the development of market niches, the expansion of already existing activities and innovation more broadly. Other informants, though, resisted the very idea of cooperation. In this regard, trust – or lack of – plays a key role in providing the basis for cooperation and collaboration.[26]

> We need to associate. Create an association, elect one of us as a president of the association, we can start then a project, buy some land, build a big hangar where we could keep all the production … […] There is a law, there is everything, but we don't do it, as we hate each other, we think 'Why should I make Vasilica or Ionica president? And who am I?' And we all want to be presidents, and we will never do anything like this. [Man, North, age not provided]

[26]We understand trust as a capacity that, far from being innate, individuals and groups develop based on personal and community experiences, as well as cultural variables that shape the relationships where trust bonds are formed.

> Also, the cooperatives in Moldova, I will tell you, they are created by one person with his family or friends, but he is the only actual farmer. If someone shows me that there is a cooperative that is a real one, with different producers, then, I can even leave agriculture! [Man, Centre, age not provided]

A representative from UNDP confirmed the centrality of trust in innovative business, emphasizing the challenges associated with capacity building in this domain due to past negative experiences that have tainted both vertical and horizontal social relations.

> For social innovation you need trust between people, and trust in leaders. We had quite bad experiences in many communities especially during the '90s and 2000s, communities started to implement projects, collected money from people and, in the end, no money, no project, no one guilty for that.

As 'a bet about the future, contingent actions of others' (Sztompka 1999, 25), trust entails risk. In contexts where corruption is perceived as a pervasive feature of the social structure, stratified deceptive experiences can lead to mistrust and distrust. Informants' resistance to structured forms of cooperation through the set-up of registered cooperatives has, thus, revealed how lack of trust can be the product of such negative experiences, but also a collective trait in specific communities where associations and professional networks 'only exist on papers' and do not actually promote social ties between farmers. Individual initiatives are not entirely discouraged, but innovation in a broader scale could be affected.

5. Conclusions

For its 30-year history of circular, long and short-term emigration and a long-standing reliance on remittances, the Republic of Moldova has evolved into a unique laboratory for experimenting with policies that consider migrants and their left-behinds as pivotal in the rural development of their home countries. While acknowledging the neo-liberal ideology underpinning initiatives and programmes that ask citizens (both residents and expatriates) to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions (Beck 1986), this article has sought to move beyond the issue of whether migration is 'good' for development. The purpose was to understand 'how do people engage with policy and what do they make of it' (Shore and Wright 2011, 8) by shedding light on the inter-related factors, conditions and processes influencing Moldovans' active participation in the migration-development nexus. Following an adapted version of the MOA framework, the elements informing farmers' willingness to 'make the most of (e)migration' were grouped into Motivations, Opportunities and Abilities that, in turn, were unpacked and located at different levels: individual (micro), community (meso) and structural (macro). The research results are summarized in Table 3.

From this work, several conclusions can be drawn.

First, beneficiaries are far from being passive policies recipients. Rather, they strategically make use of programmes by exploiting personal, community and national resources. As we have seen, for many of our informants, the possibility to access existing initiatives made the difference, and enabled them (re)shaping their life projects. In this regard, it is paramount to explore people's experiences of participation by analysing the interrelated elements displaying at different levels which underlies their response. This enables the

Table 3. Multi-scalar MOA framework.

	Micro-individual level	Meso-community level	Macro-structural level
M Motivations Intrinsic and extrinsic reasons (including socio-anagraphic features, political, economic, social, cultural resources/ constraints) informing the intention to take advantage of/resist programmes	• Belonging and attachment to the Motherland • Life trajectories • Personal ambitions • Passion for agriculture • Quality of the migration experience • Age • Gender	• Household needs (e.g. parents' ageing, children's transition to adolescence) • Land availability • Perspectives on (e)migration • Patriotism • Culture of emigration • Shared perception on programmes fostering the migration-rural development nexus • Assumptions on the future of the country • Aspirations	• Poor labour opportunities in the labour market (no alternatives to agriculture/ agri-business) • Agriculture and agri-business deemed as foundations of Moldovan economy (e.g. incentives for agriculture) • Rural culture
O Opportunities Personal, political, economic, natural, infrastructural, social, cultural resources/ constraints enabling or hindering the decisions to take/not to take part in programmes	• Specific chances occurring to individuals (e.g. land availability/ inheritance)	• Natural resources • Infrastructures (e.g. paved roads, cooling systems, storages) • Welfare (e.g. quality education and health services) • Professional networks/ local associations working as 'brokers' of development • Availability of information on programmes • Social capital (e.g. vertical and horizontal networks) home and abroad	• Evolving migration policies in the transnational space (e.g. EaP) • Implementation of policies fostering the migration development-nexus (e.g. programmes for rural development through remittances) • Criteria and requirements to access programmes and state subsidies • Trends in policies (e.g. gender mainstreaming; focus on youth)
A Abilities Skills and competences achieved through education and life experience, psychological capital and culture enabling or hindering the decisions to take/not to take part in programmes	• Psychological capital (resilience, hope, self-efficacy, optimism) • Soft skills (e.g. creativity, perseverance, entrepreneurship) • Hard skills (e.g. specific competences in the fields of agriculture and agri-business)	• Rural culture (agriculture as a family tradition) • Trust (willingness *vs* resistance to collaborate/ cooperate with others; trust towards community brokers) • Entrepreneurial culture • Cultural capital	

Note: Summary of the factors, conditions and processes enabling/discouraging participation in programmes.

identification of supporting mechanisms that can translate opportunities, abilities and motivations into concrete possibilities for making strategic life choices.

Second, resistance to taking advantage of programmes and projects only partially stems from a moral clash with the entrepreneurial drive introduced in the '90s in transition countries. Resistance is frequently the result of barriers to access (e.g. information

gap; criteria and requirements for application; lack of local brokers of development) and the product of vertical and horizontal relations based on sedimented distrust and mistrust.

Third, the rhetoric and ideology underpinning the migration-development nexus tend to overemphasize the responsibility of migrants in the rural development process and agrarian change.

While only partially addressing the structural factors producing the harsh conditions faced by the rural population (e.g. state inefficiency; poor job opportunities beyond agriculture; lack of welfare services and infrastructures, etc.), policies that aim to enhance remittances as leverage for home economic growth may paradoxically contribute to increased emigration (a pre-condition for participation), thereby creating a dyscrasia between migrant and non-migrant citizens.

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Data availability statement

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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