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Micaella Rogers

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Community liaison officers and the brokerage of corporate-led socio-economic development in South Africa's Just Transition

Micaella Rogers 

Centre for African Studies, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

Correspondence: micaella.rogers@gmail.com

South Africa's Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP) requires private renewable energy firms to invest 1% to 1.5% of project revenue in local socio-economic development. In this article I examine how these obligations are enacted in practice by focusing on community liaison officers (CLOs), corporate employees tasked with mediating between Independent Power Producers and host communities. Drawing on social field research in the Northern Cape, I argue that the outcomes of the REIPPPP's social investment model are shaped less by formal procurement rules and more by the discretionary brokerage of CLOs. Positioned inside the corporation yet embedded in local communities, CLOs translate policy mandates, negotiate competing expectations, and materially shape socio-economic development priorities. However, their agency is structured by corporate risk management and compliance imperatives. While CLOs enable locally responsive and relational forms of engagement, they also stabilise a conservative and depoliticised development agenda. By locating the broker within the corporation itself, I extend brokerage theory and offer a grounded account of how socio-economic development outcomes and corporate legitimacy are co-produced within South Africa's just energy transition.

O Programa de Aquisição de Produtores Independentes de Energia Renovável (REIPPPP) da África do Sul exige que as empresas privadas do setor das energias renováveis invistam entre 1% e 1,5% das receitas dos projetos no desenvolvimento socioeconômico local. Neste artigo, analiso a forma como estas obrigações são postas em prática, centrando-me nos responsáveis pela ligação com a comunidade (CLOs), funcionários das empresas encarregados de mediar entre os Produtores Independentes de Energia e as comunidades anfitriãs. Com base em investigação de campo social na Província do Cabo Setentrional, defendo que os resultados do modelo de investimento social do (REIPPPP) são moldados menos por regras formais de aquisição e mais pela mediação discricionária dos CLOs. Posicionados no interior da empresa, mas integrados nas comunidades locais, os CLOs traduzem mandatos políticos, negociam expectativas concorrentes e moldam de forma concreta as prioridades de desenvolvimento socioeconómico. No entanto, a sua ação é estruturada pelos imperativos de gestão de risco e conformidade da empresa. Embora os CLOs possibilitem formas de envolvimento sensíveis às necessidades locais e baseadas nas relações, também consolidam uma agenda de desenvolvimento conservadora e despolitizada. Ao situar o mediador no seio da própria empresa, alargo a teoria da mediação e apresento uma descrição fundamentada de como os resultados do desenvolvimento socioeconómico e a legitimidade empresarial são coproduzidos no âmbito da transição energética justa da África do Sul.

Keywords: REIPPPP, corporate social responsibility, CSR, public procurement, development brokers, renewable energy transition, conscious capitalism, public procurement

Introduction

The Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP) is South Africa's flagship initiative for renewable energy deployment. Since its inception in 2011 the programme has attracted substantial private investment whilst contributing to the diversification of the national energy grid. However, one of the more notable features of the programme is the consideration it gives to socio-economic development criteria.

The REIPPPP requires Independent Power Producers (IPPs) to contribute to the social and economic advancement of the communities where they operate, positioning them as socio-economic development (SED) actors. While the REIPPPP monitors the spend by IPPs on a quarterly basis, IPPs are granted discretion as to the nature and structure of their SED projects. This institutional arrangement creates a distinctive form of corporate-led socio-economic development: one in which firms are simultaneously infrastructure providers and local SED actors.

At the centre of this arrangement is the community liaison officer (CLO), an employee tasked with mediating between company and community. CLOs occupy a unique position. They are corporate employees yet typically recruited from the host communities in which SED projects are located. They manage grievance processes, facilitate consultations and increasingly play a central role in conceptualising and overseeing SED initiatives. Their position resonates with anthropological accounts of development brokerage (Lewis and Mosse 2006; Lindquist 2015), but with a significant departure: rather than operating between donors and communities from outside the firm, CLOs broker from within the corporation itself. This in-between position, as both an employee of the corporation and representative of the community, provides a new lens through which to understand the fragmentation in both the SED landscape and in corporate decision making.

Existing analyses of the REIPPPP within South Africa's just transition literature tend to treat IPPs as unified actors, focusing on aggregate impacts or system-level governance dynamics (McEwan 2017; Müller and Claar 2021; Wlokas et al. 2017). While recent scholarship has begun to examine localised effects (Morar 2019; Sunday 2021), little attention has been paid to the internal processes through which development decisions are made and negotiated. In this article I shift the analytical focus inward. I examine the everyday decisions and negotiations that animate development on the ground, offering a granular account of how IPPs' roles are enacted through brokerage.

I draw on four weeks of field research I conducted in South Africa's Northern Cape Province in 2024.¹ In this time I met with decision makers and external stakeholders to understand how IPPs navigate their roles as SED actors under the REIPPPP framework. My fieldwork comprised 18 semi-structured interviews with employees from 10 IPPs across Prieska (Pixley ka Seme District Municipality) and Upington (ZF Mgcawu District Municipality).

By foregrounding the lived realities of CLOs, I offer insight into how brokerage unfolds within the REIPPPP's SED projects and how examining it provides a unique vantage point for considering the potential of and the constraints on corporate led socio-economic development.

The role of the community liaison officer

South Africa's REIPPPP was established to accelerate renewable energy generation while advancing local socio-economic development. The programme embeds social and economic development obligations directly into the procurement framework for private power producers, requiring that 1% to 1.5% of project revenue must be invested in socio-economic development initiatives in the communities surrounding the energy projects. Since the REIPPPP's inception in 2011, R3.5 billion has been allocated to socio-economic and enterprise development projects by IPPs (DMRE 2023). This is the equivalent of over 2% of the GDP of the Northern Cape (the province where a significant majority of such projects are located).

This deliberate positioning of IPPs as SED actors is consistent with South Africa's Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act which, along with Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment, formalised expectations that South African companies ought to contribute to national socio-economic development and transformation projects.

This repositioning of corporations as SED agents has been widely analysed. Scholarship on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and "shared value" initiatives highlights how firms increasingly frame social investment as aligned with long-term commercial interests (Porter and Kramer 2011). This framing is exemplified by the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) of 2000. The UNGC's ambition, as then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, articulated it, was to

“unite the power of markets with the authority of universal ideals” and to “reconcile the creative forces of private entrepreneurship with the needs of the disadvantaged.”

Critical accounts caution that such discursive shifts may depoliticise development by presenting corporate involvement as technocratic and consensual, obscuring underlying asymmetries of power (Tsing 2000; Rajak 2011). Rajak’s (2011) study of mining-sector CSR in South Africa, for example, shows how SED initiatives can be used by corporations as a tool to manage corporate risk while entrenching community dependence on the corporation.

Such critiques often portray corporate socio-economic development as strategically coherent. They tend to assume that firms act through clearly defined objectives and stable institutional routines. However, my fieldwork with IPP decision makers in the Northern Cape suggests a fragmented and improvised reality. Rather than a seamless execution of technocratic plans, SED decision making was frequently marked by negotiation and improvisation.

Plant managers described frustration with their responsibility to administer economic and socio-economic development obligations. One former solar plant manager, from one of the first solar power plants in Prieska, spoke with me at length and exemplified this sentiment. A white, English-speaking South African engineer from Johannesburg, he expressed pride in the SED projects his team had delivered. However, he repeatedly emphasised the uncertainty and institutional unpreparedness that shaped their disbursement decisions. As he described the early operational period:

And then next thing you’re operational and now you have these ED/SED [economic development/socio-economic development] obligations coming at you like a fire hose [...] And you just don’t have that much time to put like a framework in place and build it up [...] And then those very loose generic frameworks go out the window, and you basically just start trying to figure out how you can meet the reporting obligations [...] We were always rushing to spend the money in time for the reporting quarter, or the financial year, which leads to then rushed decision making [...] it’s in a realm we know nothing about; we have zero, like, skills around it; like, businesses are terrible at this kind of thing. Absolutely terrible at it. (Former Prieska solar plant manager, 2024 interview)

This sense of being structurally unprepared for SED delivery was echoed by other managers. As one economic development manager—a black, English-speaking man based in Cape Town and responsible for solar plants across South Africa—reflected:

I can’t blame those people, those companies that just say “compliance first” [...] I’m not saying that it’s wrong to do the groundwork yourself [evaluate the most effective SED projects]. I’m just saying that it’s a lot of effort to expect IPPs to do that. And we’re not necessarily good at it. (Solar plant economic development head, 2024, interview)

Far from embodying technocratic precision, IPPs frequently experienced SED obligations as an unfamiliar domain layered onto energy infrastructure operations. Decision making was shaped less by strategic coherence than by efforts to reconcile compliance requirements with limited internal expertise.

However, this ambiguity did not appear to produce corporate withdrawal. Instead, IPPs developed adaptive practices to manage the gap between formal requirements and lived realities. One example concerns the “preliminary needs assessments” required during the REIPPPP bidding phase.² These assessments, typically conducted by external consultants using publicly available data, are intended to guide future SED planning. In practice, however, managers viewed them as already outdated by the time SED projects became operational. As the economic development manager quoted above explained:

Needs assessments are done during the bid phase, or even pre-project or pre-feasibility study [and] those needs assessments *should* inform future economic development plans. But what I’ve realised is that [...] a lot of times the data is outdated. And by the time that the project actually gets [started], you can’t work with a five-year-old or ten-year-old needs assessment. (Solar plant economic development head, 2024, interview)

As a result, many IPPs replaced formal assessments with ongoing community engagements—often through quarterly “town hall” or *imbizo*-style meetings—to recalibrate development priorities. These meetings allowed IPPs to supplement static, outdated data with iterative, relational knowledge drawn directly from community members. This meant that SED project priorities were formed in response to shifting local dynamics and in a more responsive and democratic process than that imagined by regulation.

That there is such a gap between formal policy design and practical implementation resonates with Mosse’s (2004) argument that development frameworks often perform a legitimising rather than operational function. They create an appearance of coherence and rationality, even when implementation is fragmented in practice. Mosse emphasises how actors sustain these representations through a focus on “compliance.” By contrast, my findings suggest that IPPs often engage more deliberatively with policy goals. Managers and staff often sought to reinterpret policy goals in locally responsive ways, even as they navigated reporting pressures and institutional constraints.

Understanding how this adaptation occurs requires paying attention to the internal structure of IPPs. Rather than unified actors, IPPs operate through dispersed centres of decision-making. Offshore head offices (often based in Europe) prioritise legal compliance and risk management. National or regional offices oversee operational implementation from towns hundreds of kilometres away. And, at SED project sites, community liaison officers (CLOs) serve as the primary interface between company and community.

The role of the CLO is mandated by the REIPPPP to “facilitate understanding and communication” between the community and the company and to lead “grievance management” on the company’s behalf (IFC 2019, 54, 57). However, in practice, they play a far greater role. In addition to managing community consultations, CLOs (and their respective teams) have increasingly been obliged to take responsibility for both the conceptualisation and execution of SED projects.

On a day-to-day basis, CLOs function as the primary interface between corporate SED projects and surrounding communities, with responsibilities including administrative and relational tasks. A typical day may begin with opening the SED project office and completing monitoring and evaluation documentation. This is often followed by site visits to local schools or other beneficiary institutions to review progress on SED commitments. CLOs may also meet with ward councillors³ to align expectations or attend community meetings where they explain SED project decisions, respond to concerns and account for implementation timelines.

Between these interactions, CLOs are tasked with the groundwork of socio-economic development initiatives. They are responsible for identifying potential SED projects and beneficiaries, drafting concept notes, coordinating small contractors, monitoring progress on infrastructure upgrades, and reporting these activities to IPP management. The role of the CLOs has in effect evolved as IPPs’ response to the REIPPPP’s ambiguity and the felt unpreparedness of the other decision-making centres.

The work done by CLOs is both administrative and deeply interpersonal, requiring them to navigate the social fabric of the community whilst simultaneously navigating and representing the company’s priorities. As a result, the role of the CLO offers a valuable vantage point from which to understand corporate led development brokerage.

Crucially, this work involves ongoing exercises of discretion. Decisions about which SED projects to prioritise, which stakeholders to engage and how to interpret community needs are rarely mechanical applications of policy. Rather, they entail a situated social calculus shaped by relationships, local histories, competing expectations and practical constraints. These discretionary spaces reveal the agency of CLOs as well as the contestation and pragmatism that structure SED project implementation.

In the remainder of the article, I interrogate the sites of CLOs' discretion and the decision-making framework within which CLOs work. I do that to construct a composite image of SED-project decision making in practice.

Community liaison officers as brokers and assemblers

The concept of brokerage, and the figure of the development broker, have become central to contemporary analyses of how development interventions are negotiated and enacted on the ground. Analysts describe development brokers as individuals or organisations that facilitate, negotiate and translate between different actors and interests in SED projects (Bierschenk et al. 2002; Lewis and Mosse 2006). They are often local NGOs which facilitate international funder or donor engagement, but conceptually they can also include a wide range of actors, including consultants, community leaders and government officials.

Brokers are often conceptualised in dualistic terms: either as opportunistic fixers exploiting gaps between policy and practice, or as altruistic intermediaries facilitating the provision of resources to marginalised groups. Bierschenk et al. (2002), however, emphasise the inherent complexity of brokerage, highlighting how brokers operate in fragmented political landscapes and must balance shifting alliances and expectations. Lewis and Mosse (2006) further frame brokers as translators as well as mediators, reshaping and sometimes subverting external policies to fit local realities.

Brokers' roles are marked by moral and operational ambiguity as they navigate the "spaces of uncertainty" between top-down mandates and local needs (Lindquist 2015). Their effectiveness, and their legitimacy, depend on their ability to maintain trust with multiple parties often whilst reconciling competing demands.

Although brokerage is widely recognised as a central mechanism in development practice (Lewis and Mosse 2006; Lindquist 2015), brokers embedded within corporate structures remain underexplored. In the context of South Africa's REIPPPP, CLOs exemplify a distinctive form of brokerage: they navigate between community needs, corporate priorities and state mandates, exercising real discretion even as their agency is circumscribed by broad institutional logics. However, their corporate identity introduces a dynamic not otherwise explored in brokerage literature.

CLOs hold their identity as both members of their community and representatives of the company involved in SED-project decision making. When asked about how CLOs decided which projects to implement, it was common for them to invoke their identity by reiterating "I am a member of the community" (Prieska wind farm CLO, 2024 interview; Upington solar farm CLO, 2024 interview) before explaining a project choice they had made.

CLOs invoked this identity as important in explaining that they felt a personal responsibility to the community and that they were also well placed to understand the needs of the community. One CLO from a solar farm in Upington explained:

We know the communities. We know the actual "being from Upington," "being local" and being, you know, from the same racial groups as the beneficiaries of this IPP project [as defined] from the government side; [so] we have an idea of what is a typical need [...] [One] can actually go to the community and, as a framework, you say "I'm a Coloured, I'm from this area, I expect you guys maybe have the same problem" and then go into the job. (Upington solar farm CLO, 2024, interview)

This invocation of local identity operates not only as a source of practical knowledge but also marks a boundary, distinguishing CLOs from head office staff and consultants who are often outsiders, and doing that with reference to a combination of race, language or geography. CLOs believe that their community embeddedness, and their resulting identity, are part of why they were hired for their role. Consequently, CLOs lay a claim to authority and trust that other actors lack.

However, this identity is not static. CLOs selectively foreground different aspects of themselves depending on the institutional setting in which they operate. In engagements with community members, "being local" becomes their primary claim to authority and legitimacy. In engagements

with corporate management or regulators, they emphasise technical competence and procedural compliance. The same CLO quoted above noted how he would tailor his language when describing SED projects to IPP management, for example by playing upon the role of other NGOs and by noting their concern with “Collaboration. That’s the big, big, one single word that the IPPs love.”

In interactions with government actors, CLOs often reference their IPP’s corporate identity as being efficient and transparent. This fluid movement between identities is not incidental but constitutive of their brokerage role. Their authority derives precisely from their ability to inhabit and shift between these positions, translating expectations across domains that operate according to different logics.

CLOs’ agency emerges in their efforts to iterate and enhance SED project designs in response to lived realities, enhancing their approaches to community impact beyond what is strictly required by compliance with the REIPPPP standards. For instance, another CLO, also from a solar farm in Upington, observed that recipients of bursary support struggled with the transition from school to university. Drawing on his own experiences and local knowledge, he introduced a mentoring programme to provide additional support for these students and formally monitored their progress to assess the success of the initiative. Similarly, a CLO at a wind farm in Prieska leveraged their corporate network to help beneficiaries of their enterprise development programmes to expand their businesses beyond the local community and into other towns.

These examples describe actions taken by CLOs without their being obliged to do so by any formal requirement, and they demonstrate the discretionary space within which CLOs operate. Rather than simply executing compliance obligations, they adapt their activities in response to local realities. That they have such agency aligns their statuses with what the literature on brokerage describes as the status of brokers and emphasises the adaptive practices of actors operating between multiple institutional logics (Lewis and Mosse 2006). CLOs do not merely enact external mandates but creatively translate them, assembling relationships, knowledge and resources in contexts marked by uncertainty and fragmentation (Koster and van Leynseele 2018). In doing so, they shape the substantive content of “community development” under the REIPPPP, meaning that programme outcomes are co-produced through their judgement and networks rather than determined solely by policy design.

However, it is important to note the limits of CLOs’ agency. Most CLOs described instances where their initiatives were constrained by company priorities, compliance processes or limited budgets. In some cases, community demands—particularly around employment—could not be met, requiring CLOs to defend company positions and retreat into the role of official spokesperson for the corporation. As one Prieska CLO—a man also from the local community—described:

They [the community] say “no you must give us work” [...] and they start with the unrest and stuff. But obviously, our case is very clear. We have a contract with the national government, we have our beneficiary communities. [...] so I had to handle it. (Prieska wind farm CLO, 2024, interview)

Such encounters highlight the structural logic of the CLO role. When community demands exceed what the company is able to provide, CLOs become the practical mechanism through which corporate boundaries are communicated and enforced.

The dynamic of CLOs’ roles is further nuanced through CLOs’ engagements with external stakeholders. One major concern during the initial design of the REIPPPP was that IPPs’ SED projects might overlap, creating inefficiencies and redundancy (Eberhard et al. 2014). However, this issue has been mitigated through proactive coordination efforts by CLOs. Across both Upington and Prieska, IPPs collaborate with neighbouring IPPs to avoid SED project overlap, align development goals and, occasionally, pool resources for larger, more impactful such projects. One CLO from a solar plant in Upington described the process:

We say for this financial year, “what are you guys [the other IPPs in the area] focusing on?” “We’re gonna focus this year on better education.” “Okay, can we not focus maybe on health for this year

and let the other IPP focus on another programme?” because we have these Monday CSI [Corporate Social Investment] meetings to update one another on our programmes. (Upington solar farm CLO, 2024, interview)

That they engage in such coordination demonstrates the capacity of CLOs to facilitate collective action and to maximise SED impact through inter-IPP cooperation. Moreover, although this efficiency is not inherent in the organising logic of IPP corporations, it does play a role in reinforcing the legitimacy of private sector actors as neutral, efficient providers of SED, sometimes at the expense of their broader accountability.

The consequence of this dynamic is most clearly seen in the relationship between CLOs and local governments. In relating to government actors, CLOs tended to lean into the corporate dimension of their identity. A consistent narrative describing how CLOs viewed their role in IPP SED projects is as “efficient executors” for meeting community needs. This self-definition is framed against an implicit comparison to the government. CLOs and personnel in local IPP offices tended to characterise government actors as inefficient, corrupt or even as risks to their respective companies’ reputations. This perception is sometimes based on direct experience. For example, a windfarm CLO from Prieska described how incoming politicians would try to redirect SED project scope to suit their own respective new agenda. However, the belief that the government was a risk seemed, more often than not, to be received as common sense, and it results in a general reluctance to partner with government for SED project implementation. As one former plant manager of a solar plant in Prieska put it:

I think part of the reason the [REIPPPP requirement framework] is structured the way it is structured, like, to not mince my words, is because they were trying to circumvent corruption. Yeah. So, they sort of say, “No, we get the companies to deploy it [...] and then we can also give the report to show that it’s clean.” Whereas if it was going into this opaque government municipality pot? Well, we’ll never know what it’s actually getting used for. (Former Prieska solar plant manager, 2024 interview)

CLOs often justify this exclusion by appealing to a presumption that the private sector functions more efficiently and transparently than the government does. As one CLO put it:

[T]here’s a lot of corruption. We’ve seen it before, if this company does their own thing, you know, government must just monitor their success [...] I saw a lot of progress when I was doing it that way, without government interference [...] But as soon as government [joins] it becomes a mess. (Prieska wind farm CLO, 2024 interview)

This rhetorical stance of “neutral technical actor” is itself a tactical resource that legitimises corporate intervention whilst narrowing the field of accountability and participation. By excluding local government and positioning themselves as neutral technical actors, CLOs reinforce a discourse that corporations are best equipped to address development challenges even though it is CLOs who facilitate the engagement.

CLOs’ capacity to move between community insider and corporate representative is central to their brokerage role. While the flexibility deriving from that capacity can enable context-sensitive, impactful interventions, it remains circumscribed by institutional capacity and corporate interests. CLOs consequently fulfil a fragmented but also multifaceted role, mediating not just between company and community, but also between the possibility of socio-economically transformative interventions and the reproduction of corporate legitimacy.

In the following section I explore how tensions between meeting demands for socio-economic development and ensuring IPPs’ corporate legitimacy both enable and constrain the space within which CLOs operate and can inadvertently channel development approaches into narrowly defined, depoliticised forms.

The institutional limits of CLOs' agency

Despite the central role CLOs play in project design and implementation, the landscape of IPP-led socio-economic development is marked by a striking uniformity. Rather than reflecting the diverse needs and priorities of host communities, there are clear themes and structures across IPPs' SED projects. This uniformity reveals that CLOs' agency is ultimately bound by organisational hierarchies and overriding corporate logics. In this section I interrogate the limits of CLO influence in the face of corporate risk aversion. In doing so, I ultimately recontextualise CLOs within IPPs to offer a conclusion on IPPs as SED actors.

When discussing SED-project selection, an overriding factor for all IPPs was that they took a risk-averse approach to such development. While often not overtly stated, it became clear that IPPs were hesitant to consider any project or partnership that might be perceived as controversial or partisan. As one economic development manager explained, "We prioritise education because it's a value that we [the IPP] have. And it's also not political. If you invest in education, you're not going to have any pushback or riots (Johannesburg solar plant head of economic development, 2024 interview). This risk-averse orientation to decision making sharply circumscribes the field of possible SED interventions. As a result, despite the nominal processes of consultation and community engagement, the actual distribution of SED projects is remarkably consistent across renewable energy sites: projects providing education and healthcare predominate, with typical initiatives including new school facilities, clinics, classroom air conditioning, school Wi-Fi installation, bursary provision and support for soup kitchens and old age homes. Accomplishment of such projects is achieved by a range of methods, from one-off donations to ongoing funding for salaries or operations, but all such disbursements are ultimately calibrated to meet quarterly expenditure commitments and imperatives to report compliance with the REIPPPP's obligations.

One pertinent example occurred when I asked a CLO from a solar plant in Upington (2024 interview) what she saw as the most pressing challenge in her area. Without hesitating, she answered: "The young people here feel like civil society has nothing to do with them. That's why there's crime. They don't see a future, or a reason to care." She described her ambitions for youth mentorship programmes and community leadership initiatives aimed at addressing this long-term erosion of social belonging. Yet she faced a practical impasse. Such interventions unfold slowly, produce diffuse and uncertain outcomes, and risk entanglement in politically sensitive debates about crime and governance. By contrast, sponsoring school fees or installing air conditioners at a local school offered immediate, tangible and easily reportable results. The latter kinds of projects align more comfortably with organisational expectations for demonstrable impact within annual reporting cycles than do those which the above quoted CLO preferred.

In addition to illustrating IPPs' risk aversion, the above contrast illustrates how corporate-led SED creates a temporal compression of such development: IPPs prioritise interventions that promise visible, short-term outputs over those that might bring about structural engagements, the effects of which are gradual, relational and hard to measure.

This story is emblematic of a broad pattern. Despite CLOs' deep community ties and improvisational skill, the scope of their influence is sharply bounded by the formal structures and risk priorities of the respective IPPs that employ them. The outcome is a conservative, institution-led SED agenda. While short-term, low-risk SED projects address genuine needs, the framework for their prioritisation within IPPs is shaped less by participatory identification of community priorities and more by internal corporate imperatives of risk management and reputational protection. That this is the case resonates with critiques by McEwan et al. (2017), who highlight how socio-economic development interventions led by external institutions often reproduce existing power structures and fail to catalyse substantive socio-economic transformation.

Given the above, it becomes evident that CLOs help stabilise an SED regime that is responsive enough to appear embedded in IPPs' host communities, yet cautious enough to avoid political entanglement or transformative ambition. While CLOs are able to exercise agency at the margins,

the SED agenda is largely predetermined by corporate risk aversion and compliance logic. In essence, an examination of CLOs' roles and the constraints on them brings us back to Lewis and Mosse's (2006) argument that brokers sustain SED systems by making externally imposed frameworks workable. Put differently, CLOs exemplify how brokerage can reproduce, as much as mediate, the institutional power structures within which SED interventions are conceived.

Conclusion

The REIPPPP's design has elevated IPPs to central roles in community development, positioning CLOs as crucial brokers at the intersection of corporate and local worlds. By considering the everyday work of decision makers within IPPs, I have sought here to broaden the scope of the brokerage literature by situating the figure of the broker within a private sector corporation. While much anthropological writing on brokerage has focused on NGOs, consultants and community intermediaries, I have highlighted in this article how corporate employees themselves become assemblers—positioned between community and other company actors, enacting and delimiting the possibilities of socio-economic development. I have shown that corporations are internally fragmented in that their SED interventions are animated by multiple, sometimes conflicting, centres of decision making. CLOs, as brokers, operate within these interstices, exercising discretion and responding to local realities. However, their agency is always shaped and ultimately bound by the risk logics and institutional priorities of their employers' respective corporate structures. In that respect, I have striven in this article to extend the critiques of the myth of "rational planning" (Mosse 2004) by showing how the appearance of order and coherence is sustained through ongoing negotiation and adaptation.

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Notes

- 1 This research was conducted through and funded by the Centre for African Studies at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies. Research ethics approval number: SSH_OSGA_AS_C1A_24_031.
- 2 The REIPPPP bidding phase refers to the competitive procurement rounds through which private developers submit proposals to generate and supply renewable energy (RSA 2011–2013). Successful bidders enter into Power Purchase Agreements with Eskom and Implementation Agreements with the government.
- 3 Ward councillors are elected local government representatives responsible for a defined geographic area (ward) within a municipality in South Africa.

ORCID

Micaella Rogers—<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0039-2828>

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