CHAPTER 3

Does Rationality Travel?
Translating a World Bank Model for Fair Oil Revenue Distribution in Chad

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When there was Oil...

This chapter takes up the example of a highly acclaimed, internationally devised model to promote development in a newly oil-exporting African country. International and Chadian observers have declared the Chadian model to be a spectacular failure (see, for instance, Coll 2012; Miankéol 2010; Reyna 2007; Gary and Reich 2004; Frank and Guesnet 2010; Pegg 2009; Ross 2012). Here, we trace its unfolding in two terrains: first, that of the Chadian government, and, second, that of the population in the oil production zone. Going beyond assessments of success or failure we show that by applying the perspective of translation, the model can be shown to have had (and continues to have) some surprising results. But let us begin with the oil production zone itself.

The first thing the people in the southern Chadian region of Doba noticed in relation to the discovery of oil was that land acquired a new meaning and value. Although a “modern system” of land tenure had existed from shortly after the country’s independence in 1960, rural land was still largely governed by customary law. Under customary law, land is distributed between the lineages that constitute the village. In turn, the head of the lineage redistributes it within the families, under the control of traditional leaders such as village or cantonal chiefs. Hoinathy (2013) has observed that the spatial partition of land was threefold: (1) inhabited zones such as villages and towns with their gardens, palaver trees and markets; (2) fields surrounding villages and towns; and (3) the “bush,” which has been both hunting ground and the place for sacred sites and initiation rites. When oil exploration and the first major construction related to the oil industry began in the late 1990s, the modern system was
introduced immediately within the area by declaring that all unregistered land first belonged to the state. “Unregistered” means land for which people could not deliver proof of official registration or at least prove five years of continued usage. Without such proof, the land fell into the hands of the state and left the rural population with the right of usufruct, which means that they could harvest and benefit from the land, but the right of ownership or distribution was no longer in their own hands.

The introduction of the new order of land use imposed on the oil-extraction region was followed by a construction phase that resulted in what Magrin (2005) perceived as a “densité impressionante” – an impressing density of oil wells, roads, airstrips, electricity centres, pumping stations and underground pipelines with surface electricity where “curiously, an in-between agriculture continues to be maintained” (Magrin 2005, 8). This “curiosity” of in-between agriculture was intended. Instead of having to pay villagers large sums of compensation for an overall resettlement of villages, farms and all related infrastructure, the international oil companies – in an elaborately developed scheme of prices and payment modalities – compensated the farmers for relatively small single patches of land: an occasional tree, a house that needed to be rebuilt, or part of a field. The intention was thus that living, farming, herding or trading should continue just as before, coexisting with oil extraction (Behrends, Hoinathy, and Schareika, forthcoming).

As a result, however, and with the continued extension of oil production, formerly individual or community-managed fields have been increasingly fragmented by oil-related construction. While farmland gets smaller and smaller, the oil-related facilities or “large technical systems” (Behrends, Hoinathy, and Schareika, forthcoming) are becoming increasingly impressive. Cutting a corridor about 100 m in width, the principal pipeline runs 1070 km from the oil production final treatment centre in the village of Komé through the southern savannah of Chad, the northern mountain ranges of Cameroon, and the tropical rainforest in the south of the country to the Atlantic port of Kribi from where the oil is shipped. Between 600 and 1000 wells are linked to this pipeline with a range of secondary pumps and, closer to the final treatment centre in Komé 5 (Esso’s oil base in Chad), with a dense net of secondary pipelines. Each secondary pipeline requires a corridor of approximately 10 m,