

> Thursday, November 18th, 2021

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ICOR/MANAGEMENT & SOCIETY

**RESEARCH
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EMPOWERING CHANGEMAKERS FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

**“HOW VIBRANT MATERIALITY ANIMATES INSTITUTIONS:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A MALAWIAN DAIRY COLLECTIVE
ENTERPRISE”**

BY DOMENICO DENTONI – MONTPELLIER BUSINESS SCHOOL

A joint work with Rob Lubberink (Amsterdam School of Applied Sciences) and Oana Branzei (Ivey Business School)



ABSTRACT

A flourishing literature on materiality and institutions evokes that non-human agents co-constitute institutions. Yet, we still know relatively little about how matter starts to matter in shaping, maintaining or disrupting institutions. On the basis of ethnographic work in a Malawian dairy enterprise, we build on Bennett’s work in political ecology to investigate how materials changing themselves (that is, material quasi-agency) trigger and generate ripple effects (that is, material vibrancy) that, by molding human-matter and social interactions, ultimately shape institutional change. Empirical findings reveal that, triggered by material quasi-agency, two contrasting forces shape institutions. On the one hand, a conditioning force prescribes institutional inhabitants’ practices in rigid, universal and enforceable ways. On the other hand, a deconditioning force pushes the institutional inhabitants towards flexible, idiosyncratic and creative practices. As these two forces interplay, institutions become animated, that is, their change pulsates at the pace of the matter that constitutes them. Hence, this study of vibrant materiality explains how apparently irrelevant phenomena for institutions may instill chain reactions generating disruptive - yet invisible to many - effects at scale.



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