

Between social footprint and compliance, or “what IBAMA wants” Equinor Brazil’s social sustainability policy

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Abstract: This article analyzes an “Environmental Education Project” run by the Norwegian state oil company Equinor targeting poor women in the seafood processing industry along the coastline adjacent to Equinor’s offshore Peregrino field in Brazil. The project is a prerequisite for Equinor’s operating license, as required by Brazilian federal environmental authorities. I analyze the broader sociopolitical territory within which the project is implemented, how it is discursively framed and institutionally implemented within Equinor Brazil, and how this conjoins with the Brazilian state’s regulatory framework. I argue that Brazilian legislation and the hands-on approach of authorities uphold Equinor’s commitment to the project and bolster Equinor’s CSR practitioners’ capacity to defend it within the corporate organization. The analysis demonstrates how national legislation and political context shape international oil and gas companies’ approaches to CSR.

Keywords: Brazil, CSR, environmental management, Equinor, fishery, oil and gas, social sustainability, women.

In June 2018, a group of about 20 women gathered at a handicraft and agricultural fair in Campos do Goytacazes, a northern coastal oil-hub city in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The women were selling cakes and meat pies, straw mats, embroidered tablecloths and kitchen towels, figurines made of seashells, and other products typical of regional handicraft traditions. While other stalls at the fair identified the vendors as belonging to an agricultural cooperative or a *quilombo* (protected communities descended from African slaves), the women found

shade under a somewhat differently decorated party tent, one bearing the logo of the Norwegian oil company Statoil (now Equinor), whose majority shareholder is the Norwegian state.

The women are part of a long-term environmental education project financed by Equinor, aimed at women making a (very meager) living in the processing chain of artisan fishery. The project, called PEA FOCO (Environmental Education Project Strengthening Community Organization/ Projeto de Educação Ambiental Fortalecimento da Organização Comunitária),



provides education in environmental governance, civic and political rights, and gender issues, and seeks to enable the women to pursue alternative and supplementary livelihoods. Participating at the fair with homemade handicrafts is an example of the latter. The project is not a voluntary CSR (corporate social responsibility) project, but a prerequisite of the Brazilian state for Equinor’s operating license in the offshore Peregrino field in the Campos basin.¹ While the project itself is run by a contracted Brazilian consulting firm called TRANS FOR MAR, Equinor is the project owner. Equinor Brazil reports on the project to the federal agency IBAMA (Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources/ Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis),² a subdivision of the Brazilian Ministry of the Environment. If IBAMA were to be unhappy with the project, it could lead to a potentially toilsome embroilment between Equinor and IBAMA and to delays in future licensing processes, as well as a hypothetically worst-case scenario (though politically unlikely) of jeopardizing Equinor’s current operating license.

The Peregrino field, Brazil’s most developed offshore field, is located approximately 70 kilometers off the coast of the state of Rio de Janeiro (region Norte Fluminense). Equinor has been present in Brazil since 2001 and started production in the Peregrino field in 2011 (Equinor 2020).³ The Peregrino field is Equinor’s largest operation outside Norway,⁴ and the company has expanded its Brazilian portfolio substantially during recent years. In 2018, Equinor Brazil was singled out as a separate business area because the increasing scope and complexity of Equinor’s Brazil operations required a more autonomous management structure.

The PEA FOCO project has been running since 2011. In 2016, it won Equinor’s internal SSU (Safety and Sustainability) award as the best social sustainability project among all projects worldwide. PEA FOCO is also positively viewed by Brazilian authorities, which since 2011 have obliged oil companies to develop projects ben-

efiting different disenfranchised social groups in impacted onshore communities. At the time of field research, the projects in the Campos basin (in addition to Equinor’s project) included projects targeting fishermen (Petrobras), youth (Chevron), and *quilombola* communities (Shell), as well as an environmental observation laboratory (Petrório).

This article seeks to understand the sociopolitical and socio-territorial context surrounding the PEA FOCO project and the dynamics characterizing the relationship between Equinor and Brazilian authorities. To that end, I will address three main interrelated research questions: What are the main contextual characteristics of the region where the PEA FOCO project is embedded? How is the project conceptualized by the different actors involved—Equinor, IBAMA, the consultancy, and project participants? And how does the fact that PEA FOCO is a legal requirement impact the way it is operationalized and conceptualized within Equinor?

The article is based on four fieldwork trips to Rio de Janeiro and the Campos region in the period 2017–2019, where I conducted participant observation and unstructured interviews with employees in Equinor’s Rio office, in IBAMA, and with the women and consultants in the PEA FOCO project.

Analytical facets of CSR

Approaching CSR practices and discourses through an ethnographic lens allows us to unpack how this policy field is discursively constituted, contextually conceptualized, and practically enacted under different circumstances and in different locations. CSR can best be seen as “an evolving and flexible and overlapping set of practices and discourses” (Dolan and Rajak 2016: 5) that are undercut by the assumption that corporations somehow stand in a relationship with and have a responsibility to society. What this relationship and responsibility consist of is, however, one of the core issues of discordance both within the research community and

out in the “real world.” The concept originated from the United States as a management model set in the particular North American ideological, political, and financial context, where the rationale was to align profit maximization with social expectations (Gjølberg 2010: 204), for example through philanthropy. During the past decades it has spread throughout the world and beyond the business community, and in the process has been adapted to different political, cultural, and institutional contexts and ideas of governance (Gjølberg 2010).

Researchers have deployed a wide variety of perspectives to frame different subsets of CSR research, ranging from “the business perspective” on how CSR can contribute to securing “the bottom line” to a “societal perspective” that investigates CSR’s role and effect. While the former perspective, that is, “the bottom line,” dominated the first phase of CSR research, increasing focus has been placed on how it impacts communities and societies (Brejning 2012: 1; see, e.g., Rajak 2011; Welker 2014).

The literature on CSR has frequently considered the voluntary—as opposed to mandatory—aspect as one of its defining characteristics (Banerjee 2008: 60; Van Aaken et al. 2013: 352). However, the flexibility of CSR as a concept and practice implies that it has also been taken to encompass other dimensions of business practice faced with externally defined parameters, such as labor regulations and environmental standards (Brejning 2012: 1). Moreover, the introduction of mandatory CSR provisions in several countries has prompted researchers to question the voluntary characteristic of the concept and call for theory development that encompasses both its voluntary and mandatory dimensions (Gatti et al. 2017; Waagstein 2011).

Noting that there is no precise definition of the CSR concept among academics, Maria Gjølberg argues that “defining CSR is not just a technical exercise, but a normative and an ideological exercise as well” (2010: 205). Researchers are thus faced with the fact that conceptual clarity of the concept presents itself as an issue on two levels; both as regards theoretical defi-

nition of CSR for the purpose of analysis, and what kind of actions, guidelines, and policies public authorities, corporations, CSR practitioners, and others define as CSR in any given empirical context. Comparative discussion thus requires “a working definition of the concept” (Waagstein 2011: 465). For the purpose of the analytical focus of this article, I apply a broad theoretical definition of CSR that encompasses both voluntary and mandatory initiatives and regulations that go beyond the corporation’s core undertaking, and invoke and/or allude to the corporation’s responsibility vis-à-vis society. This working definition allows me to situate this study within the CSR literature, at the same time, it allows for incorporating ethnographic findings that reveal diverse emic interpretations of whether the PEA FOCO project is regarded as CSR or not.

The reason for applying this broad definition is that the case presented here represents a modality of CSR that goes beyond definitions of the concept as voluntary initiatives with an ostensible social- and community-oriented purpose, insofar as it is first, compulsory, and second, emerging from the historical development of environmental licensing practices in Brazil. Within IBAMA there was some discordance as regards to whether these policies were conceptually defined as something different from CSR (e.g., as an evolving legal and institutional trajectory of environmental licensing processes), or whether it was framed and discussed as part of various modalities (including “orthodox” voluntary CSR) in which oil and gas (O&G) companies engage with local communities. From an etic perspective it thus makes sense to discuss this case in relation to the CSR literature precisely because it illustrates the heterogeneity and context-specificity of business-state-society relations and regulations in practice, and of the malleability of the ethos that corporations have a commitment to society and adjacent communities. The case also illuminates how Equinor Brazil conceives of the project as a “hybrid”; both as regards their “social footprint” (speaking to the idea of CSR) and “compliance”

(speaking to the idea of complying with mandatory environmental licensing standards). Thus, even though the project is mandatory, it cannot be considered exterior to the “traveling idea” of CSR (Gjølberg 2010: 205) neither emically nor etically.

Hevina Dashwood and Bill Buenar Puplampu argue that “when assessing a company’s commitment to CSR principles it is important to ‘unpack’ the firm and analyze its internal dynamics” (2010: 192). The analysis reveals that Equinor Brazil’s company structure and hierarchy harbor and engender heterogeneous rationales and perceptions within the corporation regarding the role and importance of the PEA FOCO project. Inquiry into these dynamics reminds us that we must also unpack the dynamics between the corporation and the regulatory bodies it relates to. Limited ethnographic research has been conducted on the interface between international O&G corporations and their host state (see Welker 2014 for the mining sector). However, as this study shows, internal and politicized dynamics in the host state influence how CSR policies are formulated and negotiated within the corporation. Such a multi-layered and multi-processual perspective allows us to take into account a broader panorama of factors that shape the field where CSR policies are crafted in a given locality and temporality.

CSR in Brazil

The encounter between extractive industries in so-called developing countries is characterized by different factors than that of extractive industries operating in so-called developed countries (Hilson 2012). Faulty state structures, weak judicial architecture, corruption, fragile civil societies, and the countries’ weak economic strength vis-à-vis the companies they are hosting, are among the factors that spur companies to set the terms for their own engagement (Hilson 2012). Therefore, CSR efforts made by O&G companies in developing countries have frequently been illusory or even deceiving. A

major obstacle is the lack of national regulations and regulatory bodies, with the implication that citizens do not have institutions they can hold accountable (Hilson 2012: 133). Consequently, Gavin Hilson argues that “for CSR to be effective in any location, there must be a foundation of robust regulations and enforcement in place for it to *complement*” (2012: 136, emphasis in original). Assuming that Hilson here understands efficiency as equivalent to “complying with stated goals,” CSR has to work in tandem with a state order; it cannot function efficiently in an institutional and judicial vacuum. That is not to say that CSR practices in so-called developed countries do not also raise questions of accountability and power, but a case can be made for there being additional layers of challenges present in so-called developing countries.

Several factors of Hilson’s analysis hit the mark for Brazil. Corruption, large gaps between decision makers and civil society, enormous social inequalities, a judicial and political system saturated with elite and corporate power, and a long history of environmental destruction provide ample space for unaccountable corporate action. Concurrently, Brazil is one of the world’s major emerging economies, often referred to as the BRIC countries.⁵ It has a long history of O&G industry that has fostered the establishment of a national expertise, institutional and judicial norms and structures, as well as public attention to the extractive economy. While mainstream media is decidedly “business friendly,” Brazil also has a long history of “counterforces” to corporate and elite power—social movements, civil society organizations, and progressive intellectuals. These are, however, unevenly distributed across Brazil’s enormous and heterogeneous territory and are constantly fighting an uphill battle.

Brazil has a lengthy and bleak record of corporate space for loopholing social and environmental concerns. But the country also has a relatively established “CSR movement,” as the Brazilian literature coins it, which grew out of the post-dictatorship-cum-neoliberal (and increasing poverty) era of the 1990s. This CSR

tradition has traditionally and predominantly been characterized by corporate philanthropy, emanating from the industry itself (de Oliveira 2010; Duarte 2010). But Brazil has also been in the forefront of the Latin American continent in adapting certification, accountability, and reporting practices associated with international CSR practices, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) (Duarte 2010: 356). Christopher Moon, citing the work of Jose Antonio Sanchez-Rodriguez, lists a “CSR timeline” in Brazil, consisting of “1960s–1970s: ethical approaches, limited impact, influenced by Christian values. 1980s: political approaches, influenced by re-democratization. 1990s: integrative approaches, concern with social problems. 2000s: instrumental approaches, growing adherence of companies to CSR practices” (Moon 2019: 5). Moon furthermore suggests that a new era can be added to the timeline: “2010s: values-based approaches, increasing recognition of the urgency of tackling the UN SDGs [sustainable development goals] and the new mindsets required such as those of eco and social entrepreneurship” (Moon 2019: 25).

While the features indicated above reflect tendencies within industry-driven CSR, environmental licensing legislation, which the PEA FOCO project analyzed in this article is part of, has grown out of a process of policy development within the Brazilian state, influenced by national and international concerns with nature conservation and environmental protection.

In the 1970s, Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and environmental licensing had already been created in state laws in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Santa Catarina (Dias, personal communication, March 2020). At the federal level, EIA was established in 1981 as part of a National Environmental Policy (Política Nacional do Meio Ambiente) enabling environmental impact assessments of industry and infrastructure projects (Dias 2017: 20). In 1990, a resolution was passed that specified the criteria for licensing processes tied to mineral extraction, and in 1994, an additional resolution was passed for the oil and gas in-

dustry (Dias 2017: 276–277n52). In 1986, the National Environment Council (CONAMA; O Conselho Nacional do Meio Ambiente) established a standard guide on how to do EIA (Dias, personal communication, March 2020).

Enforcement of environmental licensing processes in the O&G sector were relatively slack until Petrobras’s monopoly ended in 1998. However, with the subsequent influx of foreign companies in the O&G sectors, the necessity to establish more clearly defined guidelines and procedures emerged (Dias, personal communication, August 2019).

Moreover, in 1997, CONAMA Resolution 237 was passed, which is the main norm that regulates environmental licensing in Brazil until today. CONAMA 237 establishes, for the first time, that the licensing of offshore oil and gas is the exclusive responsibility of IBAMA. This made it necessary to form technical teams at IBAMA specifically working with licensing the oil and gas industry.

Another important driver for these processes was the 1998 law on environmental crimes that stated that oil companies without an environmental license could be prosecuted criminally. These three factors combined (end of Petrobras’s monopoly, CONAMA 237, and the law on environmental crimes) contributed to the advance of oil licensing in the late 1990s (Dias, personal communication, March 2020).

An interesting feature of the present case is therefore that the current regulatory framework set by IBAMA is a piece of state legislation whereby a so-called developing country is attempting to regulate and concretize international O&G companies’ responsibility toward their host communities and Brazilian society, and to create a state-sanctioned system for regulating and monitoring how they manage this responsibility. As such, it can therefore be conceptualized as a part of what Dirk Matten and Jeremy Moon refer to as “implicit CSR”: “corporations’ role within the wider formal and informal institutions for society’s interests and concerns. Implicit CSR normally consists of values, norms, and rules that result in (mandatory

and customary) requirements for corporations to address stakeholder issues and that define proper obligations of corporate actors in collective rather than individual terms” (Matten and Moon 2008: 409).

As we will explore, this policy is, however, contingent upon deeply political processes and struggles inside the Brazilian state. Consequently, current legislation and enforcement capacities are vulnerable to political change and volatility. Indeed, as this article is written, current president Jair Bolsonaro is very vocal in his quest for removing environmental and social “obstacles” to corporate free reign. This includes underfunding and attacking state institutions responsible for regulating and overseeing such concerns, including IBAMA. But before we learn more about IBAMA’s role in setting the agenda for environmental licensing processes, let us first get a fuller picture of the Campos region where these policies are unfolding.

Industrial development in the Campos region

Oil was first discovered in the Campos Basin in 1974 and production started in 1977. In 1997, extraction and production of oil was opened to foreign companies with the passing of Law no.9.478/97, also known as the Oil Law. This ended the monopoly of Petrobras, the Brazilian state oil company, which had been in effect since the full nationalization (excluding distribution) of the Brazilian oil industry in 1953 (de Medeiros Costa et al. 2015: 5).⁶

The 1997 Oil Law introduced the payment of royalties and “special participation”⁷ to municipalities near oil camps (Neto et al. 2008: 184). The region, previously marginalized from capitalist investments in Brazil, not only suddenly received a large influx of revenue, but also a disproportionate share (in relation to other regions) of private direct investment attracted to O&G activities and industrial development. This set off a “war between places” (*guerra de lugares*) as the different municipalities competed

for additional industry-related investments from foreign and domestic capital (Neto et al. 2008). The result has been a fragmentation of the regional territory, as the different municipalities design their own development strategies to attract investments. The influx of royalties, rather than going to social development for the benefit of the general population, has to a large extent been channeled into infrastructure facilitating industrial development (Neto et al. 2008).

Industrial and extractive activities in the region have had multiple effects on local livelihoods. Fishers complain about the impacts of the oil fields in the form of encroachment on marine space, exclusion from safety zones, increased circulation of large vessels, and seismic activities (Petrobras 2014: 166). The habitat created by the oil platform pillars as well as waste from the platforms have pushed fish away from natural habitats. The safety zones, with a radius of 500 meters, bar fishers from access to these new marine habitats. If they do enter the zones—and some do because of the potentially high reward—they run the risk of being boarded and fined by the Brazilian Navy.

Fishers have an additional problem even closer to home: the Porto do Açú Industrial Complex in São João da Barra municipality. Covering 130 km², the complex constitutes the largest industrial investment in Latin America. The building phase of the port was marked by tense conflict, involving land appropriation, house demolitions, and violent forced removals. The port, now in operation, is still heavily contested because of the trail of broken promises of local employment and economic opportunity left in its wake, and because it has barred fishers from access to their best shrimp fishing grounds as well as to the port traditionally used for rest, off-loading, and refueling.

The Campos region has thus, since the turn of the millennium, become a space for far-reaching transformation as a consequence of diverse industrial development. It has experienced an investment and royalty “rush,” but without political structures or political will to invest the money in social development. It has become a

site of expectations and increasing frustrations, as traditional livelihoods are crowded out and increased opportunities for education and work fail to materialize.

Licensing O&G activities

The impact area for the Peregrino field stretches from the city of Niterói north of Rio de Janeiro to the northern border between the state of Rio de Janeiro and the state of Espirito Santo. As a condition for their licenses to explore and to operate, O&G companies must run projects in selected communities along the coastline. PCAP projects (Compensation Plan for Fishery Activities/Plano de Compensação da Atividade Pesqueira) tied to the license-to-explore, are short-term compensatory projects aimed at mitigating potential economic loss in fishing communities caused by exploration activities. PEA projects (Environmental Education Projects/Programa de Educação Ambiental) are tied to the license-to-operate. These are long-term environmental education projects, aimed at both educating vulnerable citizen groups about the impacts of O&G activities and enabling them to participate in political and public decision-making processes. The companies are also to organize social communications projects informing coastal populations about their presence and activities.⁸

The regulatory underpinning for PEA and PCAP projects is the Nota Técnica CGPEG/DLIIC/IBAMA N° 02/10, the Technical Note elaborated by IBAMA setting the guidelines for conditions tied to the licensing process. The rationale for the PEA projects is formulated as “the necessity to develop formative processes to aid qualified intervention of certain social groups in decision-making processes [related to] the costs/benefits emerging from the exploration of natural resources” (IBAMA 2010: 5, author’s translation from Portuguese). In other words, the aim of PEA projects is to mobilize socio-politically marginalized groups and enable them to engage with the direct and indi-

rect consequences of O&G activities. Before we venture into the details of Equinor’s PEA FOCO project, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the institutional setting within the Brazilian state where these policies were conceived.

IBAMAs contested politics

IBAMA’s main office is located in the capital city of Brasilia, but the technical division responsible for the oil and gas sector is located in Rio de Janeiro. The O&G division is the only subdivision located outside Brasilia. Many of the current generation of senior technicians entered IBAMA in a broad public servant recruitment process in 1999. Within the Brazilian academic and political landscape, a number had a progressive background with studies in social and environmental sciences during the years of conservationist struggle of the Amazonia, the murder of Chico Mendez,⁹ and the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

In 2002, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won the presidential election for the Workers’ Party (PT; Partido dos Trabalhadores). This coincided favorably with the ambitions of the incoming technical staff, who were eager to develop a more comprehensive and substantive framework for the environmental licensing process than had previously been the case. Under the first Lula government (2003–2006), the Rio office was shielded from external pressure from the industry and from adversarial political interests. The directorate for IBAMA is politically appointed, which in a Latin American context means that political pressure and directives are filtered downward according to the ambitions and interest of the person in charge—as well as the ambitions and interests of those who put him or her there. Under the first Lula administration, the government appointed directors who shared the Rio office’s ambitions for a renewed and strengthened environmental licensing procedure and who allowed them to develop their internal organization and knowledge base. Consequently, the Rio office consolidated itself

as a highly knowledgeable and tightly knit division, with little overturn in personnel and close knowledge of the O&G industry.

With the second Lula government and the subsequent Dilma Rousseff government, internal political struggles hardened. On several occasions, new directors were appointed that had interests and ambitions adverse to the Rio office, and more political pressure was “filtered down.” The Rio office had by then, however, consolidated sufficiently to manage to stand their ground, or as one senior technician formulated it: “many times I thought that it was over, but we are still here.” Nonetheless, the battle to maintain their space and leverage is ongoing. In 2017, the director’s seat of the Rio office was moved to Brasília, because the Brasília main office thought that the Rio division was becoming too autonomous.

The Rio-based IBAMA team’s strategic vision is founded in critical environmental education: an intellectual and ideological tradition that emerges from conservationist struggles in the past and the tradition of popular education (*educação popular*)—often associated with the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire. In the first decade of the millennium, the Rio division started to develop and test politically how a new strategy for environmental licensing could be developed that incorporated these ideas into formal policy. Eventually, this strategy was formalized in the Technical Note referred to above.

The companies initially put up resistance to IBAMA’s new clout and strategy. However, as one IBAMA employee expressed, “it helps a lot to have legislation that is strong and not only on paper. [The O&G companies] started out with a lot of resistance, but now they have fallen into the fold.” One of the analysts stated that the big difference between how O&G companies behave in Brazil and in other developing countries is the existence or not of state regulation. “If you do not have state regulation, the companies only do voluntary projects: ephemeral projects without a base. But IBAMA has the possibility to demand something that is sustainable in the long run.”

Before IBAMA developed the current environmental licensing strategy, the companies were used to doing “things without criteria,” as one technician put it. Moreover, Petrobras had a long history of dispensing “white elephants” and paternalistic gifts and trinkets to local communities,¹⁰ and it was therefore of crucial importance for IBAMA that companies did not reinforce this patronage model. The Technical Note outlined that the companies had to communicate consistently that the projects were a legal requirement. All branding, promotional, and educational material—written or audio-visual—was required to include the phrase: “The realization of the [name of the project] is a means of (indemnization, mitigation, and/or compensation) required by the environmental licensing process, led by IBAMA” (IBAMA 2010: 29, author’s translation from Portuguese).¹¹

The analysts agreed that, had state regulations not been in place, the companies would not have carried out projects of such scope and focus as they now had to. This was a matter of both will and capacity. “They have the money, but not the theoretical or methodological tools,” one IBAMA employee commented. “They would rather do social responsibility projects.” The companies thus had to be brought to heel with regards to following the theoretical and methodological guidelines of the strategy. It was not the companies themselves that developed the projects. Rather, they made a public call inviting consultancies to submit projects in alignment with IBAMA’s Technical Note. IBAMA participated in selecting the project, and the final project plan was developed in cooperation between the consultancy, the corporation, and IBAMA. Although IBAMA could not determine the size of the companies’ budgets spent on PCAP and PEA projects, they could assess whether the budgets were realistic considering the projects’ scope and ambitions. IBAMA also had close contact with the consultancy (and the corporations), and regularly visited the projects in the field.

Equinor was considered one of the better, if not the best, O&G companies in terms of their

handling of the environmental licensing process. Equinor worked “in alignment” (*alinhado*) with IBAMA instead of engaging in “posturing” as some of the larger companies did (with Petrobras being considered the most challenging company to work with, being bureaucratically sluggish and reluctant to submit to IBAMA’s authority). PEA FOCO was also considered best practice in terms of ongoing PEA projects. One of the analysts qualified this statement, however, commenting that Equinor had been very lucky with the consultancy, and that theirs was a rather small, cheap, and easy project to handle. In response to my attempt to tease out more details about their views on Equinor’s performance, one technician was evidently reluctant to dispense praise, stating that the companies (in general) were “merely following the law.” This comment illustrates IBAMA’s eagerness to entrench the idea that these projects were legal obligations to the Brazilian state and society, not contingent upon the companies’ good will. One technician commented that the companies (without specifying which) were reluctant to start the projects, but once they went well and were positively evaluated, they were very eager to “appropriate it,” that is, to pass it off as “their brain child.” For that reason, as stated above, IBAMA was very cautious that the companies did not use the projects for corporate branding and publicity, neither toward the broader public or vis-à-vis the local “stakeholders,” such as in the communities where the project operated. This illustrates how the environmental education projects, albeit mandatory, reverberate with the practices and ideas associated with CSR, both within the corporations, the public, and the state, in spite of the IBAMA’s intention to draw a sharp conceptual line between legal requirement and voluntary CSR practices.

The PEA FOCO project

Equinor’s PEA FOCO project covers nine different fisher communities: Atafona, Açu, and Quixaba in the municipality of São João da

Barra; and Barra de Itabapoana, Barrinha, Gargaú, Guaxindiba, Lagoa Feia, and Sossego in the municipality of São Francisco de Itabapoana. In 2014, and at the behest of IBAMA’s recommendation—or rather requirement—Equinor also integrated a PCAP project for a previous and unsuccessful exploration in the Juxia well (block BM-C-47¹²). In practice that means that the PEA FOCO project (now also integrating the PCAP project) is scheduled to continue until production in the Peregrino field ends.

In 2014, the women formed a registered association called AMA PEA FOCO (Association of Women supported by PEA FOCO/Associação de Mulheres Apoiadoras do PEA FOCO). The association’s judicial status allows them to solicit representation in formal municipal consultative councils and to solicit audiences with political bodies. Through the association, they collectively discussed and voted for establishing two communal industrial kitchens in the two target municipalities. The kitchens are funded by Equinor as part of the project, but formally belong to AMA PEA FOCO. The kitchens thus have multiple functions responding to the dual aims of PEA and PCAP: to function as organizational and mobilizing meeting spaces (in alignment with the purpose of collective empowerment of marginalized groups); and to enable the women to develop cooking and organizational skills to strengthen their economic livelihoods (in alignment with the purpose of mitigating potential economic loss due to O&G activities).

PEA FOCO and women in the region

The PEA FOCO project has been developed and is run by a contracted environmental consultancy, TRANS FOR MAR, which specializes in sustainability projects in the coastal region. TRANS FOR MAR has three people employed as field staff with combined backgrounds from popular education, the arts, and environmental governance studies. The company also has one administrative coordinator and one didactic/

pedagogic coordinator. All TRANS FOR MAR staff are women.¹³ Two local women from the project work as administrative assistants. The project also hires other professionals as needed (e.g., cooks to hold cooking classes).

The PEA FOCO project is neither couched nor conducted as a politically partisan project; rather, it is explicitly non-partisan. However, its pedagogical design takes inspiration from the tradition of popular education and critical pedagogy in Brazil. A key tenet of this tradition is that subaltern groups must develop knowledge about the structural conditions for their marginalization, learn to think of themselves as political, acting subjects, and develop collective emancipatory strategies in order for social transformation to occur.¹⁴

Women in the seafood processing sector on the Norte Fluminense coastline are decidedly marginalized. Historically a sugar cane plantation region, the area is culturally conservative with patriarchal, racialized, and religious social ideologies marginalizing women of color and low socio-economic status in particular. The political apparatus is dominated by elite family dynasties that thrive on patronage and clientelism. Corruption and unresponsive public institutions are, as in most of Brazil, the norm rather than the exception.

Labor in the seafood processing industry has historically been regarded not as “proper work,” but rather as women “helping” their husbands alongside their household duties. These perceptions remain to a large extent.¹⁵ Consequently, female fishery workers have not had any occupational class identity nor any form of representation or social organization. They have no bargaining power vis-à-vis the owners of the processing facilities. Women’s salaries are substantially lower than that of male fishers and, not least, than the profits reaped by re-vendors. The officially recognized Fishermen’s Colonies (Colonias de Pescadores), which organize and register male fishers in the public fishermen’s registry, had neither registered female fishery workers nor acknowledged them as such—until the PEA FOCO project started to push for

it. Being on this list entitles fishers to economic compensation during the spawning period when fishing is forbidden¹⁶ as well as pension and health coverage.

The spatial design of the area itself accentuates women’s marginalization: villages are scattered over long distances and public transportation is extremely neglected. Consequently, women are generally physically immobile and hindered from gaining access to public institutions, social arenas, and knowledge about the outside world. Female illiteracy is high, especially among elderly and middle-aged women. Many dropped out of school early either to work in the fishing industry to help sustain family or because of early marriage and/or early pregnancy (which still is prevalent). Public education in the area has also been, and to a certain extent still is, poor. Moreover, the absence of a regional tradition for popular social organization has further contributed to low political awareness and few arenas for collective mobilization.

PEA FOCO and women’s lives

This panorama represents the context as well as the justification for the PEA FOCO project. The comprehensiveness of female seafood workers’ marginalization was not lost on Equinor’s Brazilian SSU-consultant, who referred to it as “modern slavery.” In 2011, the PEA FOCO project started with a year of door-to-door mobilization in the nine project communities (conducted by the consultancy), aimed at identifying and recruiting women in the target group. Subsequent phases included the formation of village nucleus and popular educators in each of the target communities as well as the diffusion of the educational and pedagogical content of the project. In keeping with the tradition of popular education and popular mobilization in Brazil, TRANS FOR MAR staff has formed close social and personal ties with the women. In addition to regular workshops, meetings and events both at community and municipal levels, as well as in the city of Campos, the project

staff conducts regular house visits. The underlying rationale for this proximity is the need to be close to the women's social realities and life worlds; the project facilitators cannot act as distant come-and-go external consultants.

Throughout the years, several hundred women have participated in events organized by the project. At the moment there is a "hard core" of around 35–40 women who participate in events at the municipal level and many more who participate at the local "nucleus" level.

The project has had a transformative effect on many of the women's lives. It has provided them with a broad array of new knowledge and information and become an arena where they get social support for personal growth. One of the participants in her fifties, who makes a living from river fishing, filleting fish, and selling food products from her home, words it like this:

I got to know the project through a colleague, and we started to attend meetings together. I wanted to go and see what it was about. I knew that [the oil companies] are extracting our oil and gas, and I went to the meetings and understood more about it. Through the project, I learned about my rights and then I started to ask questions—my husband said that I had become a busybody. Through the project I get support and learn how to resolve things.

Although the project as such does not proselytize "gender equality," it has increased gender awareness and self-confidence as well as fomented occupational class identities. Many of the women said that they had never thought of themselves as workers before. Therefore, they had not contemplated that they deserved labor rights and social entitlements as well. Several of the women told stories of how they had experienced radical transformations in their lives, such as daring to speak up in a group for the first time, no longer following conservative religious doctrines in the communities, and abandoning abusive labor relations. The current main

coordinator in the field, a strong-willed, kind-hearted woman in her late fifties with a long history of engagement with popular sector communities, has become an important supportive figure for many whose lives are filled with the usual tragedies that befall women living in poverty: illness, death, domestic violence, severe economic problems, material deficits, children who fall into misfortune, and abuse and neglect by political and public institutions. As PEA has evolved into the association AMA PEA FOCO, TRANS FOR MAR has helped them petition municipal authorities for better or missing public services as well as the Fishermen's Colonies and the Ministry of Fishery in order to be included on the Fishermen's Registries. The latter has been of particularly great symbolic importance for the women in addition to its economic significance.¹⁷ Moreover, AMA PEA FOCO has been able to get elected for one seat and one deputy seat as representatives for civil society in two municipal councils (health and environment). While these minor victories are unlikely to have a significant impact upon political and gendered inequalities in the region and in the larger picture, for the women involved it does represent a politics of hope (Appadurai 2007) insofar as it has provided them with a space to collectively articulate grievances and formulate claims. There are however evidently also deep tensions between the significance that the project has for the women involved, and the larger structural and political landscape that these policies form part of. This aspect will be further discussed toward the end. For now, we will leave the dusty fishing villages in the Campos region, and return to Rio de Janeiro, where we will see that there are also tensions between different ways of perceiving and conceptualizing the project within Equinor.

Negotiating PEA FOCO

The 2016 SSU award that Equinor Brazil received for the PEA FOCO project is discreetly on display in the slick and shining lobby of its

Rio de Janeiro office building, located near Praia do Flamengo in the upscale Flamengo area. Disciplined staff is working quietly in large, spacious and modern office spaces with a stunning view of Sugarloaf Mountain and the Guanabara Bay on the edge of Rio de Janeiro. In all respects, this office space and the communities where the PEA FOCO project is unfolding are worlds apart.

The PEA FOCO project falls under the responsibility of the social performance consultant.¹⁸ In 2015, this desk was downsized from three persons when the slump in oil prizes made Equinor’s Oslo office instruct the Brazil office to cut costs. The social performance officer reports to the head of Sustainability, Security, and Emergency response. That person in turn reports to the vice president of SSU (Safety, Security, and Sustainability) in Brazil’s autonomous country board known as Development and Production Brazil (DPB).¹⁹ The head of SSU in turn reports to Equinor Brazil’s CEO.

The long-term presence of socially committed CSR staff with an acquired understanding of local issues is vital to ensure the long-term management of projects. Staff with a technical/managerial approach may not understand local complexities or have a sufficiently qualitative methodological understanding of how best to engage with local communities (Frynas 2005: 591). In that respect, Equinor Brazil has been lucky, or perhaps wise, when picking staff to handle their Social Performance portfolio. In the course of my field research, there have been two different persons in charge, Thomás and Sarah.²⁰ Both had previous experience from community consultancy and were commended both by TRANS FOR MAR staff and the women for having a genuine understanding of and interest in the nitty-gritty details of developing a project embedded in such challenging and complex socio-political realities. As one TRANS FOR MAR employee said: “The difference between Equinor and other companies is that you can discuss process with them, not just result.” Another positive trait mentioned was the level of trust between the company and consultancy, in stark contrast to Brazilian energy companies.

Moreover, Equinor was more reasonable when negotiating contracts and budgets than other O&G companies and, in general, respected the consultancy’s expertise and let them do their work.

Marina Welker (2014) remarks that CSR officers are often viewed with suspicion by their co-workers. Constituting one of the “ameliorative disciplines” (alongside, e.g., environment, health, and HR [human resources]) they often have to fight for their legitimacy and justify their existence more than those in technical and managerial areas (Welker 2014: 41). While I have no reason to believe that Equinor’s SSU staff was viewed with suspicion, it was evident that they found themselves in a betwixt-and-between position where they had to mediate between “the project out there” and “corporate realities in here.” A lot of “translation work” went into transforming the qualitative aspects of the project into corporate molds.

At our first meeting, Thomás told me that the SSU department had developed a new strategy after the 2015 budget cuts. At the time, they had a project called Women of Gamboa, also working with female seafood workers. However, this project was voluntary, and the person sent from the Norway office to steer budget cuts had not agreed to keeping it.²¹ The CSR desk was downsized from three people to one person and only the mandatory projects remained. “The others were not related to the company’s corporate growth strategy,” Thomás said.

The centrality of the trope and rationale of “the business case” in relation to CSR has been thoroughly explored in the literature (Trebeck 2008). Equinor’s Brazil SSU department had over previous years worked deliberately to make “the business case” for their projects more visible to the board. Thomás’s then superior commented that:

When I got the position, I saw a [social sustainability] strategy without a direct connection to the company strategy. We had to make building blocks. And we also have to link it to Brazil Roadmap 2030

... the company's ambition, the pillars, are to create value to communities and to act with transparency. That is the line of action that the social investment strategy should be linked to—everything should be connected.

Consequently, the SSU team elaborated a comprehensive document linking IBAMA's demands with Equinor's own guidelines, values, and strategies, featuring an elaborate flowchart showing how these synergized with the goals and purposes for PEA FOCO. Neat numerical tables summarized the achievements of the PEA FOCO project in the field.

Somewhat puzzling is the fact that the SSU department had to "justify" and enumerate a state-sanctioned mandatory project. I suggest that this reflects the hegemony of corporate cognitive models that require "legibility" (Scott 1999) in the form of condensed numerical and schematic depictions of the world. Qualitative "stuff" becomes anomalies and empty signifiers once it reaches the boardroom; or, as one of the SSU staff formulated it:

We have to make performance indicators for each project. We have a lot of good projects: what are the indicators for that; how can we show the leadership? We do not convince people [within Equinor] with perceptions, we have to present numbers: how many women trained; the kitchens; number of meetings. When you go there to see for yourself: see Tomás with the women, how they hug him and cry—you see that they are happy. But for those who are not in the field [e.g., the board], you need numbers.

I suggest that the necessity to make legible the synergies between Equinor's values and strategies and PEA FOCO's existence and achievement also reflects an organizational set-up where each department has to justify and defend its budget in competition with other units. In that process, "the social area" has to de-

fend their existence shoulder-to-shoulder with, for example, the unit in charge of "core activities," such as exploration and drilling. It then makes sense that for a corporate gaze searching for legibility, such a document represents a "truth claim" that makes the social budget more difficult to challenge. The strategy worked, as it were. In the 2018 budget, the SSU department got what they asked for from the board, I was told.

The boundaries of responsibility

In conversations with Equinor staff, PEA FOCO was discursively framed within vexing rationales. I was told that "we need to have a social footprint" and that they wanted to leave something with "lasting value," in contrast to assistentialist and philanthropic donations. I was also told that the project's rationales fit well with the two internal sustainability pillars: to create local value and to act with transparency. Because, it was explained, "when we do work in the communities, it creates local value [e.g., it leaves material and social resources in the communities]. And when the women go to public institutions with their demands, that creates transparency."

However, at other times, Equinor staff stated quite bluntly that the rationale was, above all, corporate not altruistic. Orthodox CSR speech was recurrent in our conversations: "to achieve the social license to operate," "compliance," "business strategy," and "mitigating expectations." One interlocutor commented that: "The purpose is to build trust, to build relationship. Of course, there is no such thing as a free lunch. We do this because we want to do good, but also because we hope that in the future, they do not challenge us. It opens doors, builds relationships, so in the future we can get their social license to operate."

The company was fearful of running into problems with local communities, and they had procedures in place for how to deal with any issue that might arise. For the company, public

relations involve a constant boundary-making process (Appel 2012) where expectations are mitigated, claims kept in check, and social grievances averted. This is not to say that the individual staff’s “moral orientation” (Trebeck 2008: 350) was not genuine, or that the importance—or desire—of leaving a “social footprint” is not incorporated into Equinor’s business philosophy. However, it points to the corporation’s *raison d’être*—to keep doing business—which serves as a “metacode” (Rottenburg 2009) that triumphs and frames supplementary rationales.

Equinor’s corporate self-understanding is founded upon self-reassurance about the possibility of doing business with a clean conscience. However, what it means to have a clean conscience evidently depends on what you consider your responsibility. Upon being asked where, in his opinion, a company’s responsibility starts and ends, one of the managers responded that “the simple answer is that it starts with compliance. What you need to do. PEA and PCAP are compliance. And then you might want to do other things that are not compliance, other projects.”

What the manager points to is the distinction between what in corporate lingo is referred to as “have to have” and “nice to have.” Voluntary projects fall into the category of “nice to have.” PEA FOCO, however, was defined as “compliance.” It follows from the parameters of measuring compliance that the yardstick for the project’s success was IBAMA’s stamp of approval, though for the staff involved, it clearly also mattered that the project went well.

PEA FOCO’s status as a matter of compliance was codified and condensed into the phrase often uttered by all parties involved: “what IBAMA wants.” However, as we learned above, “what IBAMA wants” was part of a broad and contested political struggle that reveals the heterogeneity of the Brazilian state as well as IBAMA’s fragile clout. These dynamics expose that as much as O&G companies try to pose as a-political market actors in countries such as Brazil, they are nevertheless deeply engaged in vexing and contested power relations within the Brazilian state and society.

Concluding thoughts: The politics of compliance

This article has explored the socio-territorial and sociopolitical context for the PEA FOCO project; a context that is also the justification for IBAMA’s ambition to oblige O&G companies to contribute toward the betterment of the social and human development along the Norte Fluminense coastline.

In and of itself, the PEA FOCO project has had significant personal importance for many of the women involved, and it has also contributed to raising the question of women’s status as fishery laborers in their families and communities. Albeit modestly, and with great difficulty, it has also provided the women with a venue for advocacy vis-à-vis local political bodies. In the larger picture, however, the project forms part of a broader context of deep structural inequalities shaping the encounter between the international oil and gas sector and marginalized fishing communities (Quist 2019). In such a perspective, the project can be read in light of Elana Shever’s (2010) highly critical account of how Shell in Argentina “used gendered practices and affective techniques both to quell opposition to the company’s operations and to foster individual and collective—but not corporate—responsibility for human health and welfare” (Shever 2010: 28). The project also raises highly complex questions of how to analyze the fact that O&G companies are mandated by one central state body to empower marginalized groups’ ability to critically engage with the O&G companies themselves—as well as local political bodies and state institutions—yet in a context where all parties involved strive to appear apolitical and a-partisan.

IBAMA seemed well aware of these paradoxes. However, their point of departure appeared to be a pragmatic realization of the fact that the O&G companies were there to stay. It is thus preferable to nudge them into recognizing the larger socio-territorial context within which they are operating, and to make them engage with the communities that are affected by their

productive and economic presence. It is also preferable that the state is in charge of designing and coordinating strategies for mitigating some of these impacts, instead of leaving it up to the corporations themselves. Through IBAMAs progressive-developmental gaze, it hence made sense to make corporations contribute with a grain of sand to strengthen those groups who suffered the most from Brazil's democratic, social, and civic deficiencies.

Christina Garsten and Kertin Jacobsson (2013) discuss CSR as a post-political form of governance. However, I suggest that IBAMA's environmental licensing process, as a modality of mandatory CSR policies, or what Matten and Moon (2008) referred to above as "implicit CSR," constitutes a tacit politicization of CSR. However, the risk is of course that these projects serve as lightning rods for more critical discussions about O&G companies' direct and indirect role in reinforcing the very same problems that the projects are intended to mitigate. Such discussions are beyond the scope of this article. But as we have seen, the tension between the PEA FOCO project's significance for the women involved, and the structural and political context within which it is embedded, is evidently deeply present.

It is pertinent to ask: does Equinor's "best practice" social performance in Brazil reflect something particular about the "Nordic model"? (See Introduction to this special issue.) Without having done comparative fieldwork in non-Nordic companies operating in the same business environment and being subjected to the same regulations, it is difficult to make a conclusive argument about there being something particularly "Nordic" about Equinor Brazil's project management. However, the research material indicates that Equinor Brazil has run the PEA FOCO project in a manner that reflects that the organization readily accepts the Brazilian state's regulations as well as comprehending its rationale. Moreover, research material also indicates that Equinor Brazil is trying to run the project in a conscientious manner, not only for the purpose of ticking a "compliance box."

However, the material also suggests that it is IBAMA's institutional, legal, and political clout that upholds PEA FOCO's space within Equinor's organization. As the termination of the Women of Gamboa project indicates, the corporate bottom line as well as criteria of legibility levied upon formulations of corporate strategies means that "nice to have" projects stand on unstable ground. The bottom-line rationale for the PEA FOCO project within the corporate matrix is thus its status as a mandatory project, individual CSR staff's personal engagements in the project notwithstanding.

The case also raises questions concerning the circumstances under which host states have maneuvering space for steering CSR policies of O&G companies operating in their country, and what is required to enforce these policies. As this case attests, this space is contingent upon a host of contextual factors, actors involved, and political conjunctures. As I have shown, IBAMA engages in a two-front struggle: to nudge the companies into accepting their authority and demands, but also to maintain their space in the midst of political struggles for control of the state. This case thus illuminates the deeply political dimension of CSR as a relation of power both within the state and between the state and corporations. However, the present research suggests that corporations can, if sufficient institutional and political power is in place, be pushed into committing to long-term projects where the state has a say in defining objectives and methodologies (as opposed to voluntary "philanthropy"). However, the quality of the follow-up (as opposed to "ticking a box") evidently also depends on institutional set-ups and management inside the corporation. Equinor Brazil's SSU staff has worked closely with IBAMA to make sure that they are complying with "what IBAMA wants" in qualitative terms also. It remains to be seen what will happen with Brazil's environmental licensing process and the PEA FOCO project should IBAMA lose their clout in the future. That would be a litmus test for whether Equinor's stated desire to leave a social

footprint, and their apparent concern for the women involved stretches beyond the politics of compliance.

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Notes

1. The companies have to run a PEA project for as long as the fields are in production. The concession period for the Peregrino field currently extends until 2040.
2. IBAMA manages environmental licensing processes for offshore projects and projects that extend across state borders. Oil and gas projects are handled by IBAMA's subsection the Directorate of Environmental Licensing/General Coordination for Environmental Licensing of Marine and Coastal Enterprises (Diretoria de Licenciamento Ambiental/ Coordenação Geral de Licenciamento Ambiental de Empreendimentos Marinhos e Costeiros).
3. An overview of Equinor Brazil's operations can be found at <https://www.equinor.com/no/where-we-are/brazil.html>.
4. The Peregrino field is co-operated with the Chinese company Sinochem, but Equinor holds the operating license.
5. BRIC is an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, and China.
6. The oil and gas industry in Brazil is regulated by the National Regulatory Agency of Petroleum, Natural Gas and Biofuel (ANP) (Agência Nacional do Petróleo, Gás Natural e Biocombustíveis).
7. Special Participation (*participação especial*) is a special payment deducted from the gross revenue of the extraction and production operation (Neto et al. 2008: 184n67).
8. Equinor has a 24/7 “hotline” community members can call with questions and concerns as well as a corporate email. I have been informed that these venues for contact are hardly ever used. They also sporadically visit the Fishermen's Colonies and organize events for fishers, such as skin cancer screening. In 2017, Equinor and Shell started up a joint voluntary CSR project called Mar Atento (Attentive Sea) in order to train fishermen in offshore emergency response, e.g. in case of oil spill accidents. I do not have qualitative data on this project.
9. Chico Mendez was a Brazilian rubber tapper, trade union leader, and an environmental and human rights activist who was assassinated by a rancher in 1988.
10. Petrobras has a long track record of spending money on corporate social responsibility in

various forms, also in the form of different long-term sponsorships. For example, they have financed the large-scale Tamar turtle conservation project since 1983. However, what was meant by “short-term philanthropy to communities” was exemplified to me as, e.g., donating a truck, but not funds for maintenance and a driver.

11. Both Equinor and TRANS FOR MAR made constant references to IBAMA and “what IBAMA wanted” in their interaction with the women, and its logo was printed alongside that of Equinor on all material involved in the project.
12. Equinor, “Campos Basin,” <https://www.equinor.com/no/where-we-are/brazil/bacia-de-campos.html> (accessed 27 July 2020).
13. The administrative coordinator, with a degree in social sciences, has a long history of consultancy, including for IBAMA and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The didactic coordinator is a university professor with a PhD in Environmental Education.
14. See, however, Welker 2014: chap. 4, for a discussion of participatory approaches as diluted critical education.
15. Traditionally women have not ventured out onto the open sea, but have engaged in river fishing and collecting crabs in the mangroves; they are the backbone of the local processing industry through filleting fish and rinsing shrimps and crabs.
16. This period is set to three months for salt-water fishing and four months for river fishing. The compensation is the equivalent to a minimum salary per month.
17. These victories are also fragile, e.g. some of the women who were added onto the Fisherman’s Registry, suddenly disappeared from the list. It was not known if this was accidental or simply sabotage on the part of the Fishermen’s Colony.
18. See Equinor, “Brazil,” <https://www.equinor.com/no/where-we-are/brazil.html> (accessed 27 July 2020) for additional voluntary projects and sponsorships in Equinor Brazil, which this person also is in charge of.
19. These units were restructured in 2018.
20. Pseudonyms.
21. The project took place in a community defined as part of the Peregrino impact area, but not in one of the target communities allocated to Equinor by IBAMA.

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