



A community meeting about the Portucel land grabs.

Will our peasant and family agriculture system survive this unjust rush to grab our land?

By Anabela Lemos

The land grab of multinational companies has intensified in the global south, particularly in Africa over the last decade.

A WORLD BANK REPORT SAYS “over the past decade, over 70% of agricultural land acquisitions by multinational corporations for large scale investments have occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, Sudan and Mozambique”.

The World Bank analysed all land allocations in Mozambique between 2004 and 2009 larger than 1000 hectares. They found that 2.7 million hectares of land were allocated to investors during this period. This study also concluded that close to 50% was not fully used or not used at all.

So how are these allocations being made? How is our government leading this process? Why are communities complaining of land grabs and land conflicts all over our country if our land law is considered so protective of communities’ land rights?

“Lords of the Land”

IN MOZAMBIQUE, ALL LAND BELONGS TO the state. The state alone can approve the right to use and benefit from the land. Local communities’ land is protected by our land law, by customary law and by our constitution. Customary law land “ownership” is fully accepted and respected. There are no vast areas of free land in Mozambique. Local communities occupy most of our country and they depend entirely on their land, for agriculture and natural resources.

By 2010, Justica Ambiental (JA: Mozambique Friends of the Earth) and UNAC (the Mozambican National Peasants’ Union) had received so many complaints from local communities that they decided it was urgent to better understand and discuss existing cases of land conflicts and land grabs. This led to the launch of a report in 2011, called “Lords of the Land”, which presents a number of cases of land grabs.

Deceived by false promises

THE STORIES ARE HEARTBREAKING: stories of injustice, stories of a forgotten people, stories of land grabbing through false promises and building false expectations of better lives, of access to better healthcare, schools and other basic services. Stories of our government

protecting the interests of its investors, not its people.

Mozambique has a population of about 25 million. About 70% live in rural areas and are directly or indirectly dependent on their land for subsistence farming and other natural resources such as water, and forest products. Losing their land means losing their livelihoods.

Two major players are Green Resources a Norwegian company, which has acquired 264,898 hectares of land in three provinces for monoculture plantations and Portucel a Portuguese company, with 356,000 hectares in two provinces.

There are at least 24,000 peasant families living on the land that was allocated to Portucel, through a process which was not made public despite requests for information. The majority of this monoculture plantation are eucalyptus, an exotic tree which consumes a lot of water.

A member of the Hapala community affected by Green Resources plantations, describes a typical process:

“they arrive in two cars, out of which come five white people. They begin to measure the land. After 4 days, they leave and take some soil samples with them. When they return back from Maputo, they already have the authorisation for the project. Then they meet with the communities and inform us that they are going to work with eucalyptus trees on a 50 year contract”. Then they go on to claim it will bring development through job creation, providing basic services such as schools, clinics and transport. Communities’ lives will be so much better.

There are community members who stated that some received only 20 meticaís (4 South African rands) as compensation for leaving their land. The company clearly explained they are not paying for the land because this is illegal in Mozambique. They are paying compensation for the fruit trees and crops each family had. Is there any fruit tree in Mozambique that costs only 20 meticaís? Is it legal then to deceive these people into giving away all they have in exchange for empty promises and 20 meticaís?

“They even took the sun away”

THE FEW COMMUNITY MEMBERS WHO resist moving from their homes or giving up their land find themselves surrounded by the plantation. In the beginning it feels like nothing has changed. But as time goes by and the trees grow they realise that their land, it is no longer productive. The eucalyptus trees have grown so much that the sun no longer reaches the family crops. The soil is no longer as fertile as

it used to be. Water has become scarce. They are forced to leave after all.

As one community member, from Socone district, affected by the Portucel plantations, said “Where I was, I have already left my land, because they surrounded me with eucalyptus, and it is now an unproductive land. Before they arrived it was very fertile. They even took the sun away”.

What is happening in Mozambique is a crime against basic human rights. Most rural communities do not even know their own rights, and those few who know their rights and resist are intimidated and have nowhere to go and no one to complain to. Communities are overwhelmed with meetings where investors come with government representatives to their land to explain how much better their lives will be now that a project is coming. Many of these community members do not speak Portuguese fluently and do not read or write Portuguese. They rely solely on what a bunch of fancy consultants tell them



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and either don't comment much or opt for the better lives they are being promised. Most do not understand what exactly is expected from them, what is their role in the charade and end up agreeing to things they cannot even explain. They do not know they can say NO!

Foreign investors need assistance and counselling to acquire land in Mozambique. It is a complicated process. They need to be well connected to government officials to buy in to the idea and facilitate the process. Unfortunately, this is not difficult because there are too many eager to help. It is very common to find former government staff working for these companies.

Last year UNAC, together with Grain (a NGO which supports small farmers and social movements) released a report stating that “around 1.5 million hectares in land in Nacala Corridor have been taken from farmers (peasant) and handed over to foreign investors”.

Cash crops displace food

IN A COUNTRY WHERE PEASANT FAMILIES produce the vast majority of the food, it is

very problematic to take their land away to give to investors for cash crops and export commodities. Any dream of food sovereignty in the near future is killed. Poverty is increasing, no matter what the fancy numbers may say. In the rural areas, poverty is everywhere, and it is painfully visible.

In addition to the increased interest in monoculture plantations, there is yet another very problematic programme – a triangular programme between Mozambique, Brazil and Japan, supposedly aimed at the integrated development of competitive and sustainable agriculture in the Nacala Development Corridor (NDC). It's called the “ProSavana”.

The ProSavana Programme is allegedly based on the priority need to eradicate poverty and to promote economic, social and cultural development in our country. These were and have been the main arguments used by the Government of Mozambique, to justify its choices in the direction of foreign direct investment (FDI). The intention of the programme is to allow agribusiness companies to occupy around 14 million hectares for commodity crops which will be exported to Japan and other countries.

In May 2013, more than 20 civil society organizations, including social movements, farmers, environmentalists, religious congregations, families and communities of the Nacala Development Corridor, signed and submitted to the Presidents of Mozambique and Brazil and the Prime Minister of Japan an “Open Letter to Urgently Halt and Reflect on the ProSavana Programme”. We did not receive any answers. None of the governments responded to the concerns and demands in the letter.

By 2014, civil society in Mozambique was divided. Some believed it was possible to humanise the programme. Seven organisations, including JA, which form the “No to ProSavana Campaign”, continue to openly and publicly resist the programme. There are huge potential environmental impacts. It will transform our peasant families into cheap labor. It will destroy small scale agriculture as we know it. And it will keep Mozambique and Mozambicans eternally dependent on foreign markets, on foreign “aid” and therefore on foreign interests.

Our peasant agriculture and native seed systems face serious risks of disappearing. We cannot accept this. We cannot allow it!

A luta continua

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