Implications of Monoculture Tree Plantations in Mozambique: The Case of Portucel Mozambique

In the last ten years, Mozambique has been the target of several investments from various sectors that are acquiring lands, both cultivable and non-cultivable, to develop numerous activities—including agribusiness, tree plantations, mining, etc. The discovery of mineral resources, the ease with which foreign investors acquire lands, the abundance of fertile lands with access to water, the illicit enrichment of a few elites, the lack of policies protecting the most vulnerable social classes, the ingenuousness and low education levels of rural communities, and bad application of the Land Law—among other things—are some of the many reasons that attract private investment to Mozambique. This leads to land grabbing and expropriation.

In this environment, industrial tree plantations are gaining more and more ground in processes of land acquisition and dispute. This has led to serious conflicts with communities, who reach the point of organizing to burn plantations in order to express their dissatisfaction (1).

Portucel Mozambique is a company belonging to what was once the Portuguese group, Portucel Soporcel, now called The Navigator Company. It owns large areas of tree plantations, and focuses on producing and selling paper and other wood derivatives. The first phase of Portucel's project in Mozambique involves setting up 60,000 hectares of new eucalyptus plantations in the central provinces of Zambezia and Manica (2). The Portuguese company has a "reforestation" plan that aims to cover 356 thousand hectares by 2026. The investment in eucalyptus plantations and paper and energy production in Mozambique—financed by the World Bank's International Financial Corporation (IFC)—amounts to 1.7 billion euros, equivalent to 2.3 billion dollars.

The company was incorporated in April 2009 and obtained the Land Use and Exploitation Rights (DUATs, by its Portuguese acronym) for some 356 thousand hectares. Around 183,000 hectares are located in Manica province—encompassing Barue, Manica, Mossurize, Gondola and Sussunenga districts—and some 173 thousand hectares are in Zambezia province—encompassing the districts of Ile, Mulevala (at that time an "administrative post" or district subdivision) and Namarroi. In the areas for which the company has obtained DUATs, there are approximately 24 thousand families—13 thousand in Zambezia province and 11 thousand in Manica province (3).

In the areas were Portucel operates, agriculture is the main subsistence and income-generating activity for the local population, and it involves almost all members of the nuclear family. People practice agriculture manually on small family plots, using a crop association system and local varieties. Agricultural production occurs mainly in drought conditions, which is not always successful given the high risk of loss, due to the soil's low capacity to store moisture during the growing season (4). In this context, the main production system is crop association: such as cassava, corn and nhemba or boere beans; or mapira (a species of sorghum), corn and nhemba beans; or both associations together; and, to a lesser extent, almond growing.

The company's land occupation model (called mosaic) and acquisition of the DUATs (Land Use and Exploitation Rights), as well as the impacts it has already begun to cause in the areas where it

operates, have not gone unnoticed (5); and they have warranted several analyses and studies by various academic entities, research institutes and civil society organizations. Interestingly, the results and conclusions of these analyses indicate that Portucel has breached the law through its actions, and that it has harmed several families by encroaching on fertile lands that were suitable for agriculture (6).

For example, the civil society organization, Justiça Ambiental—in its 2016 study on the land access process, and the rights of local communities in the areas occupied by Portucel in Socone, Ile district, Zambezia province—concluded that: (i) community consultations intended to acquire DUATs evince legal breaches, due to having been poorly conducted; community members did not understand that by giving up their land parcels, they would only receive payment for the work of cleaning up these plots; (ii) community members' dissatisfaction is clear, given the high expectations generated by the countless promises made during community consultations; this is exacerbated by communities' vulnerable situation of poverty, which makes them easy to persuade; (iii) the communities visited feel that Portucel's arrival has limited their access to land, and placed them in a situation of greater vulnerability and food insecurity; (iv) it is not clear what kind of employment would be offered, which in most cases forces community members into short-term, precarious jobs with unstable wages (7).

Meanwhile, a 2017 study carried out by the research institution, Rural Environment Observatory (OMR, by its Portuguese acronym), in Namrroi, Zambezia province, entitled “Plantações florestais e a instrumentalização do Estado em Moçambique” (Tree Plantations and the Instrumentalization of the State in Mozambique), confirmed that Portucel's actions have caused: (i) a decrease in the productive area of nuclear families; (ii) a decrease in the amount produced and in the productive structure, indicating potential risks of food insecurity; (iii) decreased security of land possession for nuclear families and future generations; (iv) imbalance in the labor market, underemployment and unemployment, and wage dependency; (v) social class differentiation at the community level, promoted by the non-inclusive development characteristic of this kind of activity. Moreover, another legal analysis, by Justiça Ambiental, suggests that the company obtained the DUAT prior to the community consultation (8).

Furthermore, the "mosaic model"—which the company supposedly implements in the process of land occupation—is believed to be problematic. In addition to increasing the distance that villagers must travel to collect firewood and other timber resources, as well as surrounding people's food plots with eucalyptus, this model leads to a reduction in families' productive area, and thus, a decrease in agricultural production (9).

Against this backdrop, it is the government's responsibility to intervene immediately to safeguard local communities' rights, and to ensure it attracts foreign investments to the country in a responsible and rational way—without jeopardizing local families' livelihoods, or the sustainability of natural resources and the environment in general. Thus, in August 2017, Justiça Ambiental officially requested the intervention of Mozambique's Ombudsman—in order to establish legality, justice and the rights of communities affected by Portucel Mozambique's operations.

Justiça Ambiental, https://ja4change.wordpress.com/

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(2) Banco Mundial financia com 1,7 MME projeto da Portucel em Moçambique (World Bank provides 1.7 billion euros in financing to Portucel's project in Mozambique), Octuber 2013, http://noticias.sapo.pt/internacional/artigo/banco-mundial-financia-com-1-7-mme-projeto-da-portucel-em-mocambique_16824131.html
(3) A Portucel Moçambique (Portucel Mozambique), http://www.portucelmocambique.com/Publicacoes-e-Documentos
(4) MAE – Ministry of State Administration (2005). Profile of Ile district, Zambezia province, Republic of Mozambique.
(5) A model that Portucel adopted, which entails—in theory—gradual access to land, after communities provide their consent. This is the result of a negotiation process between the company and the population living in the areas encompassed by the DUAT. The plantations are subsequently installed in the areas ceded, voluntarily, based on the mosaic model (Portucel, 2016 cited by Bruna, 2016).
(6) Bruna, N. (2017): Plantações florestais e a instrumentalização do estado em Moçambique (Tree Plantations and the Instrumentalization of the State in Mozambique). Maputo: Rural Environment Observatory, http://omrmz.org/omrweb/publicacoes/or-53-plantacoes-florestais-e-a-instrumentalizacao-do-estado-em-mocambique/ ; Machoco, R.; Cabanelas, V. E; Overbeek, W. (2016). Portucel – O processo de acesso à terra e os direitos das comunidades locais (Portucel: the process of acquiring access to land and the rights of local communities in Mozambique). Maputo: Justiça Ambiental, http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/recommended/portucel-the-process-of-acquiring-access-to-land-and-the-rights-of-local-communities-in-mozambique/; ADECRU, Plantações florestais da Portucel ameaçam a segurança alimentar nas comunidades do distrito de Namaroi, na Zambézia (Portucel's Tree Plantations Threaten the Food Security of Communities in Namaroi district, Zambezia), https://adecru.wordpress.com/2016/07/01/plantacoes-florestais-da-portucel-ameacam-a-seguranca-alimentar-nas-comunidades-do-distrito-de-namaroi-na-zambezia/ ; Jornal Verdade, Camponeses de Chiuala-Honde revoltados com a Portucel (Chiuala-Honde Peasants Angry at Portucel) , 2013, http://www.verdade.co.mz/economia/38305-camponeses-de-chiuala-honde-revoltados-com-a-portucel and Jornal Verdade, Portucel - mais um caso de conflitos de terra (Portucel – Another Case of Land Conflicts), 2013, http://www.verdade.co.mz/ambiente/42243-portucel-mais-um-caso-de-conflitos-de-terra

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(8) Bruna, N. (2017): Plantações florestais e a instrumentalização do estado em Moçambique. Maputo: Rural Environment Observatory, http://omrmz.org/omrweb/publicacoes/or-53-plantacoes-florestais-e-a-instrumentalizacao-do-estado-em-mocambique/
(9) Idem (8) y Machoco, R.; Cabanelas, V. E; Overbeek, W. (2016). Portucel: the process of acquiring access to land and the rights of local communities in Mozambique. Maputo: Justiça Ambiental, http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/recommended/portucel-the-process-of-acquiring-access-to-land-and-the-rights-of-local-communities-in-mozambique/