
Mozambique: Letter-Response to Portucel and ORAM

In response to an article that was published in WRM's bulletin, Missão Tabita and WRM received letters from the plantation company, Portucel, and the organization, ORAM. The letters claimed that the article was untrue; however, neither Portucel nor ORAM could prove that the information published was not true.

Missão Tabita is a Mozambican civil society organization of a religious and humanitarian nature. The organization wrote an article that profiles **rural communities' perceptions of the impact that Portucel's industrial plantations have on their lives**. The article was published in WRM's electronic bulletin ([available here](#)). It was written using information gathered from meetings and interviews with members of communities affected by Portucel, in Ile and Namarroi districts in Zambezia province; as well as from direct observations made in the field.

Missão Tabita and WRM received letters from Portucel ([available here](#)) and ORAM ([available here](#)) demanding the right to respond to the article, supposedly because it was not true. However, neither Portucel nor ORAM were able to support their claims and prove that the article presents false information.

ORAM accuses the article's authors of insinuating that it received money from Portucel, which it vehemently denies. However, a mere fragment of the article talks about ORAM, wherein it reads: *“Well-versed in trickery, Portucel started a collaboration with the Rural Association for Mutual Aid (ORAM, by its Portuguese acronym), whose job is to demarcate lands. This was the entity that demarcated the proposed dam construction area, claiming that it was to irrigate agricultural products. The people we interviewed only spoke of ORAM, without knowing that this was a maneuver by Portucel.”* This sentence in no way expresses that ORAM has any kind of financial relationship with Portucel, nor that it has received any money from the company, directly or indirectly.

The previous sentence does refer to the fact that ORAM was in some way involved in the demarcation of communal lands in some of the communities affected by Portucel, including the communities where there are plans to install small dams. ORAM's letter confirms this information.

In regards to the project to build small dams to promote vegetable crops, the communities that were contacted have the perception that ORAM is working in partnership with the company—which according to ORAM is not true.

The relationship between Portucel and ORAM is not clear to the rural communities that were interviewed. On countless occasions, the communities confuse the actions of these two entities; this confusion is fueled by the misinformation that characterizes Portucel's actions.

ORAM's and Portucel's letters do not respond at all to the myriad issues addressed in the article, nor do they add new contributions to the issues discussed therein; they are merely descriptive letters of the work carried out by both entities. Thus, for example, they mention Portucel's Social Development Program, which supposedly is *“one of the pillars of value that the company shares with local*

communities, supporting them in their economic and social development.”

Over the years, since Portucel's entry into communal areas in Zambezia province, we have received information from several affected communities about: promises of jobs in exchange for giving up their lands and *machambas* (agricultural plots); promises to build schools and health centers; and promises to improve access roads and to open up water wells. All of these promises were made in the context of community consultations, one of the steps required by law to obtain the Right to Use and Exploit the Land. It was because of these promises, and the enormous pressure that they say they felt, that the vast majority of community members gave up their lands to Portucel. Many claim that they did not give up their lands of their own free will, but rather were pressured by the company to give up their lands; and to this day, they are far from seeing their lives improved. They are unable to say whether this pressure—which they report was mostly from local leaders and structures—took place with Portucel's knowledge. However, the promises were made by the company, and the local government was present at all times.

The information that Missão Tabita publishes comes from ongoing work with affected communities; its aim is always to transmit the communities' perceptions and feelings as faithfully as possible. **The negative impacts of Portucel's plantations in rural communities are visible.** These communities are still poor. They have difficulties in accessing water. There are no schools in good condition nearby, nor health centers in good condition. They do not have galvanized roofs on their homes. So where is this life improvement? That improvement that caused them to give up their lands—their only wealth!

Missão Tabita is not the only one that continues to denounce the visible negative impacts or the absence of positive impacts of Portucel's plantations. There are several studies by other non-governmental organizations regarding the same complaints and situations. There is a whole process to try to resolve these issues with the company, which refuses to accept responsibility for the problems—thus exacerbating the rural communities' discontent. Meanwhile, the company spends time and resources on a Social Development Program that the supposed beneficiaries themselves are unfamiliar with, and in which they do not see a big positive impact—because that is not what was promised to them.

The communities that Portucel calls strategic partners, for the most part, are not aware of the company's Social Development Program. Nor are they aware of the complaint mechanism, and therefore use it very little. **People continue to feel wronged and deceived.** Missão Tabita stresses that some people have been harmed from the loss of their *machambas* and crops since the beginning of the project. According to members of the communities that we interviewed, the “negotiation” of the transfer of community land is done individually. The company negotiates directly with owners, to give them about 1500 meticales (about US \$24) for the work of clearing their *machamba*—which is done by the owner and contracted family members. This work is not payment for the *machamba* itself, but for the work of clearing the land and the *machamba*, which they themselves gave up to the company. Is this the promised employment?

So far, the company justifies the issues communities raise as stemming mostly from a lack of information and communication between the company and the communities. Missão Tabita believes that this analysis is **a gross simplification of communities' concerns, considering that many are simply not interested in seeing their way of life altered. They do not want to live surrounded by eucalyptus trees; and they have no notion of the negative impacts that this kind of plantation will have on their *machambas*, in terms of water availability, use of pesticides, etc.**

Missão Tabita, Mozambique

An organization whose main objective is to seek peace and social justice, promoting human rights—including the right to land and natural resources, particularly for rural communities that directly depend on them.