
Standing in resistance: communities unite against the impacts of eucalyptus tree monocultures in Mozambique

In many provinces of Mozambique, rural communities are experiencing great insecurity and suffering after losing their land to large eucalyptus monoculture projects. One of the most emblematic cases is that of communities affected by Portucel Mozambique, which has held a 356,000-hectare concession to grow eucalyptus trees in Zambézia and Manica provinces since 2009 (1). Faced with the loss of their land and deteriorating living conditions, communities from the districts of Ile, Mulevala and Namarroi are raising their voices to demand their lands be returned to them.

In September 2025, members of these communities came together to share their experiences resisting monoculture plantations. Also present were representatives from communities in Lugela district (affected by Mozambique Holdings plantations), from Nampula province (affected by Green Resources plantations), and Manica province (affected by Portucel plantations). In many of the communities that participated in this gathering, there is an overwhelming feeling of outrage – as well as a determination to stop monocultures from being replanted on their lands (2).

Loss of traditional lands and dignity

For thousands of families in central and northern Mozambique, land is more than just a physical space: it is life, culture, identity and survival. Portucel, a subsidiary of Portuguese paper and pulp group The Navigator Company, arrived in this region 15 years ago; since then, many families have lost access to their machambas (agricultural fields), grazing areas, forests and water sources. Today, these families struggle to secure even one meal a day, since without land there is no agriculture, and therefore no food or income.

As one peasant woman who has been affected by eucalyptus plantations in the community of Pareie recounted: "We used to harvest corn, beans, cassava. Now we don't even have space to plant. We are having a very hard time."

Men, women, and young people said they were tired of living "surrounded by eucalyptus trees," with no space for their traditional subsistence activities like family farming, hunting, gathering, and grazing. Ever since Portucel began its operations in the region – with the promise of promoting "sustainable forestry investments" – thousands of hectares of community lands have been turned into eucalyptus plantations. According to local populations, this has led to more impoverishment of families, as well as environmental degradation, water scarcity and the loss of cultural identity.

Monoculture plantations constitute an act of territorial violence and an erasure of culture, as they impose a new kind of relationship with the land; this radically changes the lives of people who end up living surrounded by a single species of plant. The resistance of communities to these plantations is a cry for justice – for a model of development that respects human dignity, traditional knowledge and the right to land.

"We are not against development. We are against a model of development that excludes communities, that robs us of our future, and that destroys our land," says José Manuel, community leader from Namarroi.

Empty promises and non-existent development

Company representatives, together with local authorities, convinced communities to give up their land by promising to build schools, create jobs, set up health clinics and promote local development. However, most of these promises never materialized.

The few job opportunities in land preparation, planting and tree felling are temporary and precarious, and they do not compensate for the loss of land. Meanwhile, communities are increasingly less autonomous economically, and they have a diminishing capacity to decide about their future. The gap between what was promised and what actually happened deepens people's outrage and the sense of injustice.

Furthermore, what is the point of development that uses land to produce "riches" for a few families on another continent, by undermining the capacity of people to produce their own food? Development for what and for whom? Machambas may not fit the conventional image of development that governments and companies have, but the wealth they generate (read: food) goes to the people, even if it does not show up in the ledgers of governments and administrators.

Thirst, hunger, and lack of resources

Since they consume huge amounts of water, the large-scale eucalyptus plantations in this region have reduced the availability of this resource for communities (4). The flow of rivers and the level of wells has drastically decreased, and some of these sources have even dried up. Women are responsible for fetching water, and they must walk long distances every day, often with their children on their backs. Furthermore, the lack of access to land has led to a silent food crisis: malnourished children, an increase in diseases, and dependency on foreign aid. In short, life has gotten worse.

"Our machambas have disappeared. We no longer have space to grow cassava, corn or beans. The company said it would bring development, but it only brought trees that we cannot eat", laments Maria André, a peasant from the village of Mugulama-Pareie, in Ile district.

Voices silenced and rights ignored

Some of the community consultations prior to the installation of the Portucel project were not carried out properly – with haste, manipulation and a lack of clear and accessible information. Many community leaders were pressured to sign documents without clearly understanding the consequences. Today, communities feel that their rights have been violated.

As one member of the community of Mutaliua underscores: "Communities were not properly consulted. There was manipulation, a lack of transparency, and an absence of free, prior and informed consent, as required by law."

Reclaiming the land

In light of this situation, the communities who gathered together articulated a concrete demand: We

want our land back. We don't want to suffer anymore. The land is our inheritance, it is where we bury our ancestors. Without land, we have no future.

This demand is a cry for help. The communities are demanding that the government and local authorities acknowledge the mistake and begin a process of land restitution, or fair compensation, with the direct participation of affected populations.

Some communities have decided that, as the eucalyptus trees are harvested, they will go back to planting food crops on the lands that the company usurped.

What communities are demanding

These communities have the following demands: end the expansion of eucalyptus plantations in areas that are used communally; immediately return lands that were granted to Portucel in violation of the Constitution; and support the restoration of degraded lands and the promotion of sustainable livelihoods.

The situation in areas occupied by Portucel Mozambique reveals a crisis of human rights and social justice. The communities are currently living in a situation of extreme vulnerability, while their lands are serving interests that do not bring them any real benefit. Returning lands to the communities is not just an issue of economics, but of dignity, justice and survival. It is urgent that their demands be heard and that concrete solutions be adopted. True development is only possible with the participation of communities; true development must respect them and guarantee their right to land.

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References:

- (1) [For more information about the impacts of Portucel plantations](#)
- (2) [For more information about the exchange of experiences among communities](#) [in Portuguese]
- (3) As Missão Tabita explained in its article, Portucel in [Mozambique: the reality behind the rhetoric of "sustainable plantations,"](#) published in 2020:
- (4) WRM, 2020. [What could be wrong about planting trees?](#)