
Forests in Mozambique face extinction

Mozambique used to be rich in forests. Nowadays, not only can it not be considered a rich country, but its forests are also at risk of disappearing unless urgent, concrete and radical measures are taken. Several studies in recent years by civil society organizations and academics clearly show that if the present model of forest exploitation continues, very soon we shall have to change our discourse about this being a country rich in forest resources. This wealth we boast about is being cut and exported in a savage and uncontrolled manner.

The great diversity of Mozambican forests is not widely known. Some studies estimate that two-thirds of the country's forests are *Miombo* woodlands, covering most of the northern region and part of the central region. In second place are the *Mopane* woodlands which extend from the Limpopo area to the valley of the upper Zambezi. (1)

Each of these woodlands plays a crucial role for rural communities, who obtain from them products essential for their subsistence, as well as making contributions to their cultural and spiritual welfare.

The main causes of the unsustainable situation of national woodlands are illegal logging, lack of inspections, illegality at all levels, inefficient or inexistent management plans and generalized corruption. Corruption in the forestry sector – fed by an “insatiable demand for timber” from Chinese companies (2) – takes place at all levels. We consider this to be the main cause of the lack of action in the face of so many facts and evidence denounced by civil society organizations, academics, journalists, etc. Multiple denunciations of corruption in the forestry sector have been disseminated by the local media, but little or nothing has been done about them. In February 2013, the NGO Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) launched the report “First Class Connections: Log Smuggling, Illegal Logging and Corruption in Mozambique,” which says that nearly 50 per cent of all the timber sent from Mozambique to China is cut illegally. The report describes several serious cases of smuggling and even alleges participation by the present Agriculture minister in illegal lumber exploitation deals (2). Early this year, we noted a press release from the Cabinet to Combat Corruption saying their investigations acquitted the minister of these allegations. What the investigation was based on, how it was carried out or indeed whether an investigation was performed at all, we will never know. Political powers-that-be are untouchable in Mozambique. Corruption allegations may be public and the facts plain to view, but little or nothing is done with this information. Cases are building up in society's memory and that of the few who still think it is possible to change the country's direction.

The last national forestry inventory was carried out in 2007. Although objections have been raised over its methodology, it is the most recent survey and it is accepted by the government. The inventory reports a deforestation rate of 0.58%, equivalent to an annual loss of 219,000 hectares of forest. A study published in February 2014 by Eduardo Mondlane University (3) concluded that the situation has worsened, to the extent that illegal exploitation has increased by 88% since 2007. This study also estimates that 900,000 cubic metres were cut in 2012 for domestic consumption and international markets, much more than the 320,000 cubic metres licensed for that year.

Besides this illegal and unsustainable exploitation, in recent years we have observed increased investment and interest in plantations of exotic trees under the banner of ‘reforesting the country.’ Some plantations are already established and fully operating, and have caused a number of problems with local communities due mainly to land-grabbing (4).

Unfortunately, many people believe that these projects really are reforesting the country. However, it is important to remember that these plantations have serious negative impacts on biodiversity, water resources, local communities and their land rights. Irresponsibility and the greed for profit are so great that our native forests are in danger of being converted into ‘green deserts.’

ProSavana: creating more opportunities for agribusiness

To make matters worse, new threats have arisen to what is left of our woodlands. The famed ProSavana Programme is one of these, and it affects one of Mozambique’s most important native woodlands: the savannah. Savannahs (known as *anhara* in Angola and *cerrado* in Brazil) are grassy plains with scattered trees and shrubs, isolated or in small groups. They are a typical biome in tropical regions with a long dry season.

ProSavana is an agriculture programme involving Japan, Brazil and Mozambique that is supposed to support agricultural development on a large scale. The programme covers the provinces of Niassa, Nampula and Zambezia in the north of Mozambique. The area called the “Nacala Corridor” is home to four million people, most of whom depend directly on peasant agriculture for their livelihood. The ProSavana Programme plans to occupy more than 14 million hectares, using Brazil’s “knowledge and technical experience” and “generous and disinterested” help from Japan.

The design of ProSavana was decided at the highest level, seeking to replicate a Brazilian agricultural project implemented by the Brazilian and Japanese governments in the *cerrado*. Along with the practice of large scale industrial monocultures (mainly of soya), the project is causing environmental degradation and the near extinction of indigenous communities in the affected areas (5). In spite of the well-documented social and environmental impacts of the Brazilian experiment, ProSavana is being carried out without the knowledge or participation of Mozambican civil society nor of the small farmers to whom it is targeted. The programme neglects family farming and regards agribusiness as the solution for all ills. How can it still be maintained that ProSavana seeks to develop family farming if small farmers themselves do not even know about the aims of the programme? If one of its goals is to combat shifting cultivation, which is practised by small farmers, how can it still be maintained that ProSavana supports small farmers?

For more than two years, nothing was publicly known about ProSavana except for news we received from our international allies. It was through these allies that in April 2013 we finally gained access to a version of the Master Plan (of March 2013) describing ProSavana in general terms. Although it was presented as a development programme, it in no way aims at supporting small farmers or developing family agriculture. On the contrary, the Master Plan is quite clearly designed for supporting agribusiness and everything it implies, as well as for controlling agriculture in Mozambique. We realized the motives behind the exclusion of small farmers and civil society from the process of conception, design and elaboration of this programme. It is impossible for it to support the interests of small farmers since that is not the programme’s goal. The Master Plan reveals the biggest case of land-grabbing in Mozambique and the destruction of our already deforested native woodlands. It anticipates greater instability in the country as well as conflicts over land, water and other resources; all this in order to create opportunities for agribusiness.

Small farmers wrote a letter to the highest authorities of the three countries involved in ProSavana – Mozambican President Armando Guebuza, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe – requesting them to urgently stop and reconsider the ProSavana Programme. The letter was signed by countless social movements and NGOs, including the *União Nacional de Camponeses* (UNAC – National Small Farmers’ Union) and *Justiça Ambiental* (JA! – Environmental Justice). In spite of insistent requests for a reply to the letter, and innumerable declarations by our government representatives about processes of dialogue being under way, and their respect for dialogue, the letter was ignored for a year. There is no dialogue at all!

On June 2, 2014, the “No to ProSavana” campaign was launched. It was followed by the Second Triangular Conference of the Peoples of Mozambique, Brazil and Japan to reiterate our commitment to globalizing peoples’ struggle against the programme. The conference was attended by small farmers, civil society organizations, academics and government officials from all three countries. At the meeting we realized that our governments’ discourse had changed, but not their actions. We still have no access to the documents, we still listen to the same empty discourse: all words and no documentation.

We have repeatedly stated that the problem lies in the original conception of the programme, its goals and development model, which we consider inappropriate. Mr. Augusto Mafigo, a small farmer and president of UNAC, got the message across clearly, simply and without beating about the bush: “We do not want ProSavana.” The conference showed, again, that the people are united in this struggle and that we do not want this programme, for the reasons given. Once again, we denounced the mistaken way in which this programme has been developed. It was also very clear that we urgently need to start an honest and transparent dialogue about how to support and develop family agriculture.

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Justiça Ambiental, JA! - Friends of the Earth Mozambique, <http://ja4change.org/index.php>

(1) “*Levantamento preliminar da problemáticadasflorestas de Cabo Delgado*”, Daniel Ribeiro and Eduardo Nhabanga, <http://africa.redesma.org/publicaciones.php?ID=1963>

(2) First Class Connections: Log Smuggling, Illegal Logging and Corruption in Mozambique, EIA, <http://eia-international.org/first-class-connections>

(3)<http://www.fao.org/forestry/eu-flegt/85805/en/>

(4)The Expansion of Tree Monocultures in Mozambique. Impacts on local peasants communities in the Province of Niassa, World Rainforest Movement, <http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/the-expansion-of-tree-monocultures-in-mozambique-impacts-on-local-peasants-communities-in-the-province-of-niassa/>

(5) UNAC, <http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/main-issues-mainmenu-27/agrarian-reform-mainmenu-36/1321-land-grabbing-for-agribusiness-on-mozambique-unac-statement-on-the-prosavana-programme>

