
[Portucel in Mozambique: The Reality Behind the Discourse of “Sustainable Plantations”](#)

The company, Portucel, considers its thousands of hectares of plantations in Mozambique to be “sustainable,” despite serious problems and conflicts with and among local communities. The so-called “sustainable forest development of Africa” translates into a harsh reality on the ground.

Communities in the province of Zambezia, Mozambique—in particular in the Ile, Namarroi and Mulevala districts—have been living and using the land in a sustainable way for centuries. This system enabled practices and processes which in turn maintained peaceful and functional relationships between communities and the environment.

Mozambique is currently experiencing the dilemmas of a development model based on the extraction of resources. **Land is becoming an asset in service to capitalism, and it is expropriated from the local population.** In regards to tree plantations, since 2000, **more than 600 thousand hectares of land have been placed in concession to produce pine and eucalyptus in Niassa, Nampula, Zambezia and Manica provinces. These plantations are mostly controlled by two large companies: Portucel** (controlled by The Navigator Company of Portugal) and **Lúrio Green Resources** (controlled by the company, Green Resources).

In 2013, the government of Mozambique committed to granting around three million hectares of land in concession to companies that promote tree monocultures in Niassa—with the goal of making the country the **second largest pulp producer in Africa**, after neighboring South Africa. It is clear that investing in tree plantations is a priority for the Mozambique government, regardless of their impacts. Due to the reduction in cultivation areas in the regions where these projects take place, the concessions have led to social unrest, forced resettlement and localized food insecurity.

And yet, at the 2019 annual meeting of the New Generation Plantations platform (PNG by its Spanish acronym)—an initiative by conservation organization, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), to promote the industrial expansion of monocultures—**Portucel referred to these plantations as a group of “sustainable plantations that support rural prosperity, with an inclusive and shared approach.”** Meanwhile, this so-called “sustainable forest development in Africa” translates into a harsh reality on the ground.

The Fight Against Invasions of the “Machambas”

On July 14, 2018, the organization, MISSÃO TABITA, was informed of a conflict between Portucel and the communities of Mugulama in the Nanretete area of Ile District. A Nanretete community member and resident said that “Portucel technicians came to Nanretete to inform the community about **cemetery mapping**. Company representatives asked the community the following questions: “Where are the remains of people buried, and what is the cemetery registration procedure?” All of this took place **without any consent from the communities in the locality**. An indignant community member asked, “What is this, if the cemetery is a sacred place where the dead are buried, and the ending place of our lives?” While that question was being asked, the leader of the

community and the company technician ordered entry into the cemetery to take photos. The community reacted so strongly that they even wanted to hit the technician in response to this action and the company's attitude.

MISSÃO TABITA verified that this kind of activity was merely beginning in the community of Nanretete, to later continue in the communities of Namacubo, Intiticoni, Naume, Mualua and Napua—where other issues arose: **armed threats from suspicious people, and communications from Portucel announcing agreements with communities that had been reached in bad faith.**

The communities we passed through also **requested support in their struggle against the company's invasion of the *machambas*, the word used to refer to lands for food production in Mozambique.** This invasion sparked more attention in the communities, since agriculture is the basis of their survival. We also spoke with the Neves community chief, from whom we obtained minimal information about the company's objective—which is to expand eucalyptus plantations. He also stated that the company's team visited his office many times; they would go to **pressure him in order to secure the company's entry into other areas.** Because he resisted, they looked for a way to corrupt him, offering him an amount of money that he did not disclose to us; and they explained that they would first map sacred spaces to avoid destroying them.

Portucel's Construction of Small Dams on Rivers that Pass Through Communities

In July 2019, MISSÃO TABITA received an alert in the communities about the construction of **small dams on rivers that go through the communities.** One of the people affected by the incident said: "Suddenly a group came to measure *machambas*, with the guarantee of securing the peasants' land; and we accepted because they argued that in the event that a company came to take over our lands, we could produce the DUAT documents (Land Use and Exploitation Rights). They gave us safeguards and appealed to good conservation. A few days later, white people came with the head of the Ile administrative post (headquarters) and agricultural technicians to a meeting called by the local leader. **They did not ask for the community's opinion at the meeting.** They just said that they want to build a dam on the Nakope River in the community of Hamela, on my land, to irrigate vegetable crops to benefit the community—thereby affecting 34 families. At the meeting, they said that the people who will be affected will leave their lands, and they didn't tell us what our fate will be. Now, I am an orphan. I have children to take care of. I am not happy, because I don't know where I'm going to go. I wouldn't want to leave my ancestors and go live a dubious and uncertain life. They can't leave me on land that doesn't produce anything, because I live thanks to the *machambas*, which is the land that sustains me."

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 Portucel's scheme.

The Process of Accessing Land, and the Rights of Local Communities

Information about how DUATs are assigned to Portucel is not in the public domain, because the legal compliance for that process is unknown. And it is necessary to bear in mind that a significant portion of the lands in question belonged to the local communities (the respective owners of the DUATs). In the areas where Portucel located, agriculture is the main subsistence and income-generating activity for the local population—involving practically all family members. They practice agriculture manually

on small family farms using a companion planting system based on local varieties.

Portucel Mozambique has about 2.3 billion dollars of financing from the International Finance Corporation (IFC)—the private arm of the World Bank—to establish eucalyptus plantations for the industrial production of pulp and energy in Mozambique. According to the IFC, Mozambique was chosen to implement this project due to the strong cultural affinity and its strategic and favorable geographic position relative to Asian markets. According to project information that is available in the Environmental Impact Assessment Reports, the installation of eucalyptus plantations in Zambezia and Manica provinces will be done gradually. In Zambezia province, an estimated 2,000 hectares will be planted the first year, gradually increasing to cover an area of around 120,000 hectares of eucalyptus after 12 years. Meanwhile, in Manica province, an estimated 1,500 hectares will be planted the first year, with the same gradual increase reaching about 126,000 hectares after 12 years.

Several community members expressed **feeling pressured by local leaders into accepting Portucel’s entry, and the consequent transfer of land.** However, they do not know whether Portucel was aware of this local pressure. According to the interviewees, Portucel Mozambique convinced the communities to relinquish their *machambas* to the company, through **promises of employment and technical training.** Meanwhile, communities complained that **the promised jobs ended up being short and precarious,** and that the wages ranged from 80 to 100 *meticales* per day (between US \$1.25 and \$1.50). The compensation criteria used for the communities—whose rights to the land were transferred over to Portucel—are also not in the public domain.

“We greatly lament this, because we didn’t receive what they promised us. The people who work [for the company] don’t stay on; they work for a few days. And that’s the reason we are not happy with Portucel,” vents a community member from Socone Administrative Post (headquarters).

All of these verified cases contradict what Portucel publicly stated in its document about land access procedures, in which it said that “in the event that communities and families are not interested in the Portucel Mozambique project, the company will seek an alternative area, rigorously rejecting any act of pressure or coercion on the part of its collaborators.”

According to members of interviewed communities, negotiations to transfer community land are done on an individual basis. The company directly negotiates with the owner of the *machamba*. This negotiation also covers the cleaning of the *machamba*—which is done by the owner and hired family members, who receive about 1,500 *meticales* (about US \$24) for this work.

“At first, they said that whoever wanted to work should hand over their *machamba*, and we did not waste much time. I gave up two and a half hectares, and we only worked for one month because it took a month to cut down the trees. They gave us 1,500 *meticales* per person for the job. I did not receive any money for the *machamba*, but rather for the work we did on my own *machamba*. Now I don’t have anything to do but stand around. The leader himself handed over his *machamba*, and now he is sitting at home. I produced corn, *jogo* beans, *bóer* beans and cassava in my *machamba* to support my family. I have six children, and I also live with my wife and mother-in-law,” said one community member.

So far, the company has attributed the communities’ concerns, to a large extent, to a lack of information and communication between the company and the communities. MISSÃO TABITA believes that this analysis is **a gross simplification of the communities’ concerns, considering that many people simply have no interest in changing their way of life, do not want to live**

surrounded by eucalyptus trees, and have no idea about the negative impacts that this kind of plantation will have on their *machambas*—in terms of water availability and use of pesticides, etc.

Even though the company is only in the initial process of implementation, there are already **land conflicts**. The Mozambique government must urgently address this situation with special attention, as it constitutes a threat to the survival of rural communities, and especially those of Ile, Namarroi and Mulevala districts. Most members of the communities contacted **do not have the slightest knowledge about the project**, the amount of area it will use, the potential social and environmental impacts, or the details of the type and number of jobs promised; nor do they know what kinds of changes to expect in their ways of life. There is visible discontent, due to the **high expectations generated by countless promises** made during the community consultation. The company is tempting and “fishing” government officials with money; they are therefore in favor of the company.

Our struggle to defend the environment and to preserve water sources—the main source of food for humankind—must be constant, because the privatization of water sources is a growing problem throughout the world. Water is a basic human right, and even though water management is necessary and in the public interest, this vital resource should not be property.

When a dam is built, the river dies!

Water is life!

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An organization that seeks social justice, human rights and the promotion of communities' rights to use the land. The organization works in collaboration with Justiça Ambiental! on the issue of communities who lost their rights and who are affected by large eucalyptus plantations in Mozambique.