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## Rubber Tree Monoculture Plantations in Communal Territories in Mabu, Mozambique: Concession of Injustices

At the foot of Mount Mabu, in central Mozambique, the expansion of rubber tree monoculture plantations by the company Mozambique Holdings has restricted Manhaua communities' access to their own territory. This process of expansion has occurred by means of systematic abuses, thus depicting the contrast between the different ways the local population and foreign capital relate to the environment where they find themselves.

### **The communities in Mabu (1)**

Mabu is a locality of the Tacuane administrative outpost, in the Lugela district, Zambézia province, Mozambique. It has the same name as a local mountain, Mount Mabu, a place bearing spiritual importance for the surrounding communities. In recent years, the mount has become internationally known owing to the great biodiversity it harbors, since it is covered by the largest remaining tropical forest in southern Africa.

The population of Mabu is spread across the communities of Limbue, Namadoe, Nangaze and Nvava, and mostly belongs to the Manhaua people. According to the locality's administrative head, the population of the four villages numbers more than 10,000 people, but the figure is an overestimation, according to local leaders. Such communities are vividly connected to the territory where they live, and their living conditions to a large extent directly reflect their relation with the physical environment where they find themselves.

Practically every house is made of wattle and daub or adobe blocks, with grass roofs and earthen floors. The main source of energy is gathered firewood or locally produced charcoal. Practically all the water is obtained manually from streams, wells or the river. There is no electricity or internet distribution. Only a minority of households have small solar panels with the capacity to charge the batteries of small devices (mobile phones, radios, torches). Some families own bicycles and only small minority have motorbikes for personal transport and for goods.

Communities' basic foodstuffs come from agricultural production on *machambas* (small cultivated plots), whose area in general is under 1 hectare per household. Among the main crops one finds cassava, corn, beans, sweet potatoes, rice and peanuts, complemented by game, fish and wild fruits. The set of implements used is modest, normally limited to hoes, shovels and machetes, while production does not rely on fertilizers or other inputs from outside. As far as possible, families carry out crop rotation, so that by remaining fallow the soil may recover part of its natural fertility. It is worth mentioning that the Mozambican NGO Justiça Ambiental (JA!) is working to support the families' organization into associations with a view to improving their land management and agricultural system.

Almost all local residents devote themselves to agriculture, working as families or individually. Given that most labor is employed in subsistence, there is a low level of trade and therefore a small flow of

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goods between the communities and the seat of the district in Lugela, which is more than 45km from the locality of Mabu in the small center of Limbue community – a challenge in itself. Only a very small part of what is produced constitutes a surplus that can be sold at market.

One aspect of life in Mabu similar to other communities, small or large, African or not, is the extra burden shouldered by women. As well as actively participating in the cultivation of the *machambas*, they are also in charge of all domestic work, which involves preparing food, caring for children and spending a long time fetching water and firewood, activities that they carry out with children, especially girls. However, the space occupied by women in communal decision-making spheres is practically nil. Similarly, girls are less likely to attend school, a fact reflected in their lower rates of literacy and knowledge of Portuguese, the country's official language. Another challenge mentioned during the discussions was the relatively high incidence of early marriages, of girls aged 12 to 14, for example.

But there is also another problem that has been directly impacting the lives of Mabu's communities, pointed out by the dwellers with whom WRM and JA! spoke. It is the scarcity of plots available for cultivation, hunting and gathering, and the consequent increase in the distances to the machambas, which implies more time and energy spent in transit. Among the factors that intensified this problem – as well as bringing new ones – is the arrival of Mozambique Holdings, a foreign company producing latex, and the resulting establishment of its rubber tree monoculture plantation.

Mozambique Holdings LTD: foreign capital with a Mozambican name

The Mozambique Holdings Ltd (MHL) group is an India-based conglomerate that set up in Mozambique in the early 1990s. It has become one of the country's largest private groups. (2) In 2020, its business dealings surpassed US\$100 million, with operations in Mozambique, India, USA, China and the United Arab Emirates. The group has activities in various sectors, with subsidiaries in the automotive, pharmaceutical, apparel, real estate, mining (coal and limestone), energy (concessions for hydroelectric power plants), water supply and irrigation industries, among others.

The group's tentacles reached the locality of Mabu in 2013, when it acquired a 10,000-hectare land concession from the old tea company Madal SARL. Since then, through its subsidiary Agro-Industrial e Chá de Tacuane LDA, the group has been implementing a rubber production pilot project, having replaced the old tea-growing areas and cleared new ones to make way for rubber tree monoculture. Latex extraction actually began in 2021. Its main destination is nowhere to be found on the company's website. One possibility is supplying rubber for the automotive industry, particularly for the Indian vehicle manufacturer Mahindra, of which MHL is the distributor in Mozambique.

## **Access to land, violence and fear**

The arrival of the corporation strongly impacted the territory and the lives of Mabu's residents. Problems of several kinds have gone hand in hand with the expansion of rubber tree plantation.

The first has to do with respect for the land. Back in colonial times, a large land concession in Mabu had been granted to foreign capital in the form of the old company Madal, in a process that certainly disregarded any opinion of the local population. However, profound crises rocked the country during the civil war (1977-1992) and several business ventures were abandoned. Since then, government plans to reactivate tea and cotton production in Mabu for the international market have not taken hold. Abandoned by these business initiatives, part of the lands under concession started being used by the surrounding communities to produce for self-consumption and to reside. This was entirely

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legitimate, since the control of these lands should never have left the hands of the local population, if one agrees with traditional peoples' right to self-determination.

With the arrival of Mozambique Holdings in Mabu, once again the area of the old concession went over to the control of foreign capital despite the occupation and use of at least part of the lands by local communities. The local population is no longer permitted to use the lands located inside the concession. As if the sudden loss of access were not enough, the company has been employing truculent and abusive methods. According to local leaders heard by WRM and JA! (and already partly documented) (3), there are reports of: confiscation of hoes; persecution; destruction of machambas; burning of corn barns; expulsion from areas already prepared for cultivation; burning of leftover wood for the local population not to use it as firewood, among others. In one of the cases, a member of the Nvava community was beaten supposedly by Indian foremen linked to the company for using an internal path to return from a funeral in Namadoe community. (4)

Note that one is dealing here not only with preventing people from farming the land, but even from passing through the area granted to the company. For example, it was reported that a family – husband and wife plus a 16-year-old daughter – was followed and slapped in the face to prevent them from transiting! As if that were not enough, the security guards ripped the woman's and the girl's top, leaving them bare breasted, once again evincing the consequences of the structurally different oppression suffered by women.

In the case of Limbue community, blocking people's passage is particularly serious, considering that the only road to access the community goes through the plantation. By restricting or constraining the free transit of members of the community, the company increases the isolation of the community vis-à-vis the rest of the district. All this goes on under a shroud of fear, threats and a common perception among the members of the community that they do not have rights or recourse in the face of the abuses in question.

It even sounds like irony, but far away from Mabu, in another language the (Indian) owner of Mozambique Holdings exalts the "Mozambican ethos and cultural psyche", saying that out of *gratitude* to the country, his company gives back and evolves "in harmony with this ethnic and cultural diversity". (5)

It is also worth highlighting the fact that so far the company states it has planted just 1,000 hectares with rubber trees and has not yet reached the target of its pilot project, which is disturbing, since the plantation has already reached the entrance to the seat of the locality.

## **Lack of transparency and environmental irregularities**

The coercion and the restrictions regarding access to land imposed on local dwellers lead one to another question: the lack of transparency in relation to the land use concession to the corporation. Despite requests made by Justiça Ambiental to the Ministry of Land and Environment, the information about this process and the community consultation process has not been made available, raising doubts about the legitimacy of the concession. (6)

The same applies to information regarding the venture's environmental conformity. When visiting the locality, one notices that the expansion of the plantation has taken place in the wake of the felling of the native vegetation. Furthermore, in many places the fields are planted right up to the edge of water courses, with no riparian forest remaining. Also, the absence of any kind of environmental impact assessment – a legal requirement in Mozambique – begs the question: how or even whether

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Mozambique Holdings obtained the environmental license to establish its monoculture plantations in Mabu.

## **Illusory expectations, sub-employment and precarious work**

Another problematic dimension of the venture relates to labor relations. Residents report that the situation is a far cry from the expectations generated at the time when the transfer of the concession to Mozambique Holdings was announced, both in terms of the number of jobs and of their quality.

Anselmo Matusse, who investigated the company's working conditions, paints a picture of abuse, involving 12-hour work days and unattainable daily tasks/targets, resulting in pay checks at the end of the month nowhere near the minimum wage. (7) He also reported that the company did not supply tools, as well as making workers compulsorily buy shoes and meat from it in order to dock the amount they cost from their pay.

## **Contrasts and contradictions**

What one sees in Mabu is a contrast that reveals the power asymmetry between Mozambique Holdings and the communities, and the completely different logics of relating to the land. To Mozambique Holdings the land is a mere substrate for a plantation with one million rubber trees – many of which replaced the local biodiversity – treated with synthetic fertilizers and agro-chemicals brought from far away using fossil fuels to produce a commodity that will be exported, and resulting in profits that will go to foreigners who probably will never set foot there. Based on the facts, little does it matter for Mozambique Holdings if its business forces local dwellers to seek other places to pursue their subsistence activities under more precarious conditions.

For the Manhaua communities, the land is the source of practically all their food, water, shelter (houses) and energy (firewood), obtained through an autonomous management system for many generations. Beyond literally ensuring the communities' physical existence, the land is also a place where their beliefs, customs and knowledge are perpetuated, transmitted and shared in their own language from generation to generation.

This article does not aim to romanticize the way of life of the communities of Limbue, Namadoe, Nvava and Nangaze, but rather to emphasize the impacts of industrial plantations on their territories. The arrival of Mozambique Holdings in Mabu is yet another example, among so many others, of how corporations that need land for their tree monoculture plantations simply ride roughshod over communities no matter how long they have been on their territory. Question: what has been the benefit for the dwellers of Mabu? Who decided to grant part of those lands as a concession without any consultation or participation of the communities?

From the communities' point of view, the logic of prioritizing a company by restricting the population's access to the land is absurd in and of itself. Additionally, Mozambique Holdings makes the situation even worse due to the abovementioned abuses and violent methods. If the objective of the concession in Mabu were to bring economic and social benefits for Mozambicans – and not to generate profits for a private company – then encouraging communities' ongoing initiatives to improve living conditions would make much more sense. What is inconceivable is that communities such as those in Mabu be forced to accept that the fate of their lands – and, therefore, theirs too – gets determined by outsiders.

## **Justiça Ambiental (JA!), Mozambique, and the World Rainforest Movement (WRM)**

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(1) The information presented in this section was obtained by means of a visit paid by WRM and JAI in October 2022 during which many conversations with dwellers of Mabu were had. These were confirmed by the [data of the latest census and of the most recent official information bulletin of the Lugela district](#) to which it was possible to obtain access..

(2) Mozambique Holdings, [O nosso legado](#); Mozambique Holdings, [Visão partilhada, ambição unificada](#).

(3) [Justiça Ambiental, 2021](#).

(4) [Justiça Ambiental, 2020](#).

(5) [The Business Year, interview with José Parayanken](#).

(6) [Justiça Ambiental, 2021](#).

(7) [Anselmo Matusse, published in Verdade Online](#).