



Global Development and Environment Institute
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Growing Resistance: The Rise and Fall of Another Mozambique Land Grab

By Timothy A. Wise*

The rice fields of Xai-Xai, three hours up the coast from Maputo, are vast, coming into view as we descended onto the alluvial plain from the villages that dot the hills above. They stretch across the plains toward the Indian Ocean as far as the naked eye can see, in the flat green monochrome of a rice plantation. Mozambique was one of the leading targets of large-scale agricultural investment projects, widely denounced as “land-grabs” by critics. Community resistance had prevented most such projects in Mozambique, including ProSAVANA, the controversial Brazil-Japan initiative, which was slated to be the largest land grab in Africa. As I’d seen in the field, it seemed to grow not crops but only rumors, threats, government proclamations, and community resistance.¹

Like ProSAVANA, this project had its share of those too. A Chinese company had gotten a 50,000-acre concession to grow rice on this colonial-era farm and the Chinese had been accused of land-grabbing, of taking community members’ land without authorization and without warning.² The company had developed 17,000 acres of its own rice fields, rehabilitating the colonial-era irrigation system.³ And it had trained about 70 local farmers to grow rice on contract on a portion of the company land. Heavily promoted by Mozambique’s president at the time, Armando Gueuza, the rice was on the market under his recommended brand name, “Bom Gusto” – Good Taste.

A Mozambican colleague, who studied large-scale agricultural projects, had encouraged me to stop looking for ProSAVANA, stop searching for phantom investments. “Go to Xai-Xai,” he advised. “You’ll find a real land-grab.”

Indeed, I did.

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I found a sprawling rice plantation and plenty of community resentment – from contract farmers, about the lousy terms of the contracts; from farmers who had given up prime land close to their communities only to be given land miles away; from women who had lost their land but successfully fought to get it back, and who were still fighting for compensation. I also found another failing land grab, begging the obvious question: Why not give good land to poor food producers instead of foreign investors?

But land-grab accusations aside, the Wanbao Africa Agriculture Development Limited (WAADL) promised what large-scale foreign investment in agriculture might offer to a poor, hungry, underdeveloped country like Mozambique.⁴ Here was desperately needed capital investing in largely unused fertile land, rebuilding productive infrastructure and bringing in modern agricultural practices.⁵ Wanbao was training local farmers in its modern farming methods and setting them up as contract farmers with a stake in the project. What's more, the project wasn't growing cash crops, it was growing food. And it wasn't growing food for its population back in China, as the land-grab stereotype suggested, it was growing rice for the domestic market.⁶

What's not to like about a project like that?

What's Not to Like

Well, at the beginning there was a lot not to like if you were a farmer using the lands allocated to the Wanbao project. Some 7,000 farmers had moved onto the irrigated lands along the Lower Limpopo River in the 1980s after the state farm ceased operations. The irrigation infrastructure had been installed by Portuguese colonial rulers, producing rice and other cash crops.⁷ With independence in 1975, many colonial farmers fled, some destroying infrastructure on their way out. The new government, following the nationalist development policy prescriptions of the times, tried to turn the Xai-Xai irrigation scheme into a state-run operation. Most such initiatives, in Mozambique and many other countries, have failed, as Joseph Hanlon and Teresa Smart argue in their recent book, *Chickens and Beer*. They point not simply to the inefficiencies of state-run farms but to difficulties inherent in plantation agriculture in Mozambique, from the colonial era to today's foreign-investor-driven farms.⁸

It was no surprise that farmers moved onto the irrigated lands once the state abandoned the centralized farm. In fact, farmers there told us they were encouraged to do so by the local government, which even built a small bridge to facilitate community access. Many crossed that bridge and began farming rice, maize, and vegetables, or grazing their cattle, taking advantage of the poorly maintained but still-functional irrigation ditches through which water from the Limpopo River still flowed.

Many of the land conflicts I saw in Mozambique seemed to happen on land that had been former state farms. That was not an accident. It was partly a failure of Mozambique's government to understand its own land law. The post-revolution land law was one of the most cherished achievements of the independence struggle, which had as one of its rallying cries, "Free the Man, Free the Land!"

One of the most progressive in Africa, the law recognizes the land rights of peasant farmers whether or not they can show formal title, as long as they can show they have been farming the land for ten years or more. That applies not only to community or village land, it applies to estate land for which the government holds the formal land title. This is, admittedly, a gray area in land governance, as even the squatters were aware they were squatting and could be removed. But the Land Law gave them occupancy rights.

I'd seen this confusion in my meetings with ProSAVANA officials. When I recounted to them the story of one farmer I'd interviewed in Monapo who had been kicked off his land by a South African farmer who'd been given the land by the government, the Mozambican official told me it was state land, that the farmer had no right to it. I pushed back, citing the land law, but he was insistent. Later, a land-rights lawyer sighed when I told him the story. He said he spends a lot of time trying to educate government officials – local, state, and national – about the Land Law's recognition of peasants' land rights. He told me he'd be surprised if 30% of them know the law.

No surprise, then, that government agriculture officials, seeking foreign investors, give big concessions of state land to foreigners. No surprise either that hungry farmers will have moved onto idle state land, since the same Land Law recognizes the obligation to farm the land, to use it or lose it. And no surprise, I suppose, that those investors come right in with their bulldozers to plow up farmers' crops.

Beating back the bulldozers

That is exactly what the Chinese did on the irrigated lands in Xai-Xai, producing immediate charges of land-grabbing by local farmers. After a small Chinese "friendship farm," started

in 2007 on just 750 acres, had failed to take hold in Xai-Xai, the Wanbao scheme took over in 2011. New Chinese financing supported new management, with the Wanbao Grain and Oil company running the project and contracting the farming to four Chinese farming groups.⁹ They got a 50-year lease on 50,000 acres in Xai-Xai, under the Lower Limpopo Irrigation district (RBL for its Portuguese name), which had been founded in the colonial period.¹⁰ The plan was to invest \$289 million in the project, with financing from the Chinese Development Bank under a fund for cooperation with Portuguese-speaking countries.¹¹ Wanbao also pursued a concession in the nearby Chokwe irrigation district on 15,000 acres.¹² The initial goal was to increase rice productivity to meet domestic demand in Mozambique.

The companies wasted no time. The bulldozers were there by early 2012. Gizela Zunguze, Gender Coordinator from Justica Ambiental (JA), the Friends of the Earth affiliate in Mozambique, took us to meet some of the farmers affected by the project. JA had been supporting community efforts to get



Farmers in Xai-Xai were moved onto land far from their homes outside the 50,000-acre Wanbao concession.

their lands back for five years. Remarkably, nearly all grabbed land had been returned, but it had taken a long time and affected farmers were still waiting for compensation for lost crops and other damages.

In the dusty courtyard under the shade of a mango tree in the neighborhood of Brutela, Meldina Matsimbe told us she and other farmers had gone down to their lowland fields in January 2012 to find tractors opening roads and irrigation ditches across their fields, planted in maize, cowpeas, and vegetables. “They plowed right through ripe maize,” Matsimbe told us in Changanana, the local language. Two other women from the village nodded. There had been no consultation with the community, no warning, no environmental impact assessment, as required by Mozambican law. Just the sudden appearance of Chinese tractors clearing land for roads and irrigation ditches. Wanbao officials there said they had been given the land, that it was unoccupied.

With JA’s support, the community protested to the company and the local government authorities. The bulldozers stopped, and the RBL irrigation district authorities acknowledged taking that particular land was a mistake. Matsimbe, a widow raising children and grandchildren, said they returned most of the land, some 250 acres used by about 60 families in the community; 12 acres still had not been returned. Gizela said JA could get no help from the local government. The central government had awarded Wanbao the concession on this former state farm, and the local authorities were not going to intervene. Neither the company nor the local authorities responded to demand letters for compensation.

What did they eat that year after their crops had been destroyed?

“We had nothing to eat,” Matsimbe said. “We had to ask our neighbors for food.”

Angelica Moyane, tall, strong and fit, told us a similar story in the neighboring village of Kana Kana. One Sunday in July 2013, she recalled, a tractor came in unannounced and plowed under the community’s fields. “Mama” Angelica grew lettuce, maize, onions, and cabbage in the lowlands, sharing irrigation with neighboring farmers.

“We could not even identify our own farms after the Chinese came through,” she said. Mama Angelica said she’d had half her land in garlic, a productive cash crop. It was all wiped out, along with the ripe crops of some 500 other farmers who had food planted there.

Maria Gabriela, another Kana Kana farmer, shook her head. “They destroyed everything. The Chinese themselves were eating our crops as they destroyed them.”

Gizela said JA found Mama Angelica and other farmers camped outside a government office in Xai-Xai demanding answers. The two of them went to the fields, took photos. They persuaded the local administrator to return with them the next day, and the conflict almost erupted in violence. When an RBL technician came to the land ahead of the administrator, Mama Angelica and other farmers surrounded him, farm tools in hand. Someone took the keys from his car so he couldn’t flee. Mama Angelica said he was scared. He told them he was sorry and he would get them their land back.

Wanbao withdrew its machines a few days later and farmers returned to their ravaged fields.

As in Brutela, the company offered no compensation for the destroyed crops, so crucial to small-scale farmers who live from one harvest to the next. They had to restore the land themselves from the tractor damage.

“We lost crops. We had to buy seeds,” said Mama Angelica ruefully. “I have not gone back to garlic.”

Taking it to the streets

The company eventually backed off after JA and a local NGO helped the communities submit a formal petition to get all land back and get compensation for their losses. They organized a march from the communities past the Wanbao offices and through the town on May 20, 2014, to present their petition. Gizela said the protest was tense, with some 400 angry community members marching toward the provincial offices behind a “No to Wanbao” banner. Placards, most hand-written, demanded an end to land-grabbing. “We demand respect for our rights,” read one woman’s simple plea.

At one point the police stopped the march, telling organizers they didn’t have a permit. Gizela told us things could easily gotten out of control. “If JA hadn’t been there, there would have violence,” she said. “Farmers were very angry.” After a three-hour standoff, the marchers were allowed to proceed as long as they stayed off the major road through town. When they reached the government offices, Mama Angelica presented the petition to the governor’s representative.

Gizela said they never got a formal response to the petition, but the company land-grabbing slowed, at least in that area. Still, the local government went after some land in Baixa Fome the next year, some of the same land Wanbao had taken and returned. Rosa Maringue, a farmer and traditional healer in the village, told us that six tractors suddenly cleared their fields.



Community protest march in Xai-Xai May 20, 2014

“We wanted the government to tell us why our land was being taken, what were we supposed to do, where were we supposed to go?”

The community forced their latest invaders to withdraw, and they again were left to assess the damage. While it was encouraging to hear that community members had mobilized to assert their land rights and get back their farms, it was difficult to celebrate those victories. These women were worn out from the struggle. Sure, they had their land back, but that land lay in the lowlands, far from their homes. They traveled hours a day to farm it. Wanbao had the best irrigated land. And while some local farmers had access to irrigation, they told us the company managed the water for its own benefit, sometimes flooding their fields with no warning and damaging their crops.

Worst of all, as each community resisted the land grab, Wanbao just moved on and grabbed land from another community. JA was clearly worn out too. Gizela said the farmers could certainly take pride in resisting this land grab, but their hard lives were no easier now.

I was told that Kana Kana means “don’t be doubtful” in Changana, but it was hard not to have doubts about these valiant farmers’ prospects with a government so blindly committed to giving away its best irrigated land to foreigners.

Failure to Yield

The other thing not to like about Wanbao was that it seemed to be failing. In April 2017, the only rice being produced was by contract farmers and some Indians who were subcontracting land from the company. What had happened to this model farm?

Like most such stories, this one is both complicated and simple. It’s complicated the way all agricultural development can be complicated, and not just because of the land rights issues. The Chinese came in with their technology, equipment, and know-how, but none of that worked quite as well in the flood plains of Xai-Xai as it had back home. One long-time rice farmer, who remembered the colonial era, told us their plows didn’t work well in the local soil, and they were uninterested in learning from local farmers like him why that might be true. Their high-yield rice varieties produced decent yields but the rice they sold in the domestic market wasn’t as tasty to locals as other available varieties.

Wanbao’s contract farming got mixed reviews. The company had formed the Association of Farmers and Irrigators for Agri-Livestock Development and Mechanisation in Xai-Xai (AR-PONE) in 2007 to facilitate the training of local farmers. The group was dominated by members of the local political elite eager to get a piece of the project.¹³ Wanbao trained 68 local farmers, and got the more successful of them producing on 5-10 acres each.¹⁴ But they ran the outgrower scheme as a commercial operation, charging for services like plowing. They provided credit but required a 50% up-front cash payment that was difficult for many farmers to afford.¹⁵ Farmers were obligated to sell to the company. And they paid a fixed and low price for the farmers’ rice, regardless of market prices. After the remainder of their loans were taken out of the proceeds, farmers had small profits. Some farmers were satisfied with the arrangement, we were told, but many were not.

Boavida Madonda of Chimbonhanine, a community in the lowlands, was not. A muscular and relatively prosperous farmer in his fifties, Boavida complained that Wanbao paid well below market prices, was unreliable in getting seeds and inputs to them on time, and even expected farmers to arrange their own transportation to get seeds and fertilizers to their farms.

“It really isn’t worth it,” he said. In addition to his Wanbao rice land, he has another 50 acres, which he plants in maize and other food crops. He has a good herd of cattle. He says he wouldn’t care if the project failed. “It was better before. I was my own boss. We had enough to eat.”

In any case, the contract growers represented a small share of the area’s farmers, most of whom were on the outside looking in. Sure, some got jobs on the farm; at its peak in 2014 Wanbao employed about 2,700 people.¹⁶ But much of its technical staff came from China. Few Mozam-

bicans gained technical skills through of the project, and in theory that is supposed to be one of the benefits of bringing in foreign expertise. Some 2,000 Mozambicans may have worked for the company, as farm workers or in construction, maintenance, or company kitchens.¹⁷ But Gizela said they worked without contracts and few came from the villages.

A final complication, not unique to Wanbao's Chinese owners, was cultural. Most couldn't speak Portuguese let alone the local language. And they mostly didn't think they needed to learn. The arrogance locals complained about reminded me of so many stories I'd heard over the years about U.S. agricultural development experts who came with all the answers, asked few questions, and ended up walking away wondering why their projects didn't work. Or just left blaming the local farmers and authorities for their backwardness. Wanbao's project leaders seemed to have an emerging-market hubris every bit as blinding as that of their colonial predecessors.

Another failed land-grab?

Those are some of the complicated reasons the project was struggling. The simple reason was it had run out of money. Wanbao itself was a grain trading company, not a farming operation. It had brought in four Chinese agriculture companies to do the farming, with financing from the Chinese Development Bank. In 2013, just as Wanbao was bringing more of its acreage into production, floods destroyed 12,500 of the company's 17,000 acres of rice.¹⁸ The company blamed the government for poor maintenance of the irrigation system, which they said had worsened the flood damage.

No matter, the Chinese government canceled a loan in 2015 after concluding that the flood risks were too high to keep farming on this flood plain. A World Bank official I spoke with confirmed the assessment, saying that no lender with any sense would put money into such a risky project. It is an open question whether climate change is the reason the risks have increased since colonial times, when the land seemed to have been profitably irrigated and farmed. But for now, this was a flood-prone large-scale rice plantation with no capital. Climate change added insult to injury when a 2016 drought slowed the recovery from the flooding.

When I returned in October 2017, Wanbao still had not secured financing and its farming operations were at a standstill. The company said it was still buying and processing rice from its contract farmers, but Boavida reported that he hadn't been paid for his last harvest and he was quitting the project. Gizela said the company store was still selling a small amount of rice, but the Wanbao offices were closed. The company still claimed it was looking for financing, and we heard rumors the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation might step in. The Chinese government continues to show interest in investing in Mozambican agriculture, and that could include new financing for Wanbao. But the project seemed to be failing.

"In Mozambique we are good at creating zombies," added her JA colleague, Vanessa Cabanelas, "projects that have political support so they live on beyond the point when it makes any sense."

So now, after all the promises, government support, and conflicts, this model farm might fail.

That would be a victory of sorts, but a hollow one, a successful defense against land-grabbing. But what would the community have to show for another failed project? Gizela was quick and firm when I asked her what the community wants: “Give all the land back to the communities.”

Let farmers grow food

Lost in Wanbao’s struggle to finance the project and make it viable, and the Mozambican government’s continued commitment to it, was an obvious question. Wouldn’t the land feed more hungry Mozambicans if the company left and local farmers were organized to grow rice and other food crops on this irrigated land?

I’d seen exactly that, in fact, in Marracuene, just two hours down the highway toward Maputo. There I saw 7,000 farmers, mostly women, organized into 19 cooperatives, use rehabilitated colonial-era irrigation to grow food and cash crops year round. Those women-led coops, affiliated with the National Peasant Union of Mozambique, were growing food for their families and communities while improving the land with the adoption of intercropping and other agro-ecological practices. The farms were more resilient in a changing climate. They had even improved a local variety of maize, through careful seed selection, and grew enough of a surplus that they maintained seed banks in case of drought, flood, or other emergency. Those had come in handy after the 2016 drought, when many farmers lost their crops and with them their source of the next year’s seeds.¹⁹

Instead of giving all the best land and infrastructure – particularly irrigation – to foreign investors who then displace local farmers, why not give the land to those farmers? Help them organize into marketing cooperatives, and water use associations to maintain the irrigation system. Help them get credit. Provide crop breeders to work with them (not around them)

to improve the quality of their seeds instead of displacing their seeds with commercial varieties. Help them plant a diversity of crops, not just rice or maize, to diversify their diets and improve their soils. All of which will help them prepare for the next flood or drought.

Gizela told me in October 2017 that was exactly what JA and the communities are trying to do. She said they had formed a farmers association, submitted bylaws to register the group with the government, and they were awaiting approval. As soon as the farmers association is formally registered, they will petition for a collective land title to 750 acres of irrigated land for their 300 members. Mama Angelica is expected to be the president of the association, with Meldina as vice-president. As in Marracuene, the vast majority of the members are women.

“If the associations are registered and the farmers have collective rights to some land, maybe the land-grabbing can stop,” Gizela told me. She asked for contacts in Marracuene so she could take Xai-Xai farmers there to learn from their experiences.



Angelica Moyane, whose crops were destroyed in July 2013 by Wanbao

Endnotes

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