



Informação sobre Desenvolvimento, Instituições e Análise Social

AGRARIAN CHANGE IN NORTHERN MOZAMBIQUE: A 'NEW' DIMENSION OF RESEARCH IN LIGHT OF THE CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN CABO DELGADO?

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Introduction

It is now three years and a half since violence in the province of Cabo Delgado has erupted. Believed to have started as a religious insurgency, it has turned into an armed conflict, with the first attack targeting government institutions, including a police station in the village of Mocímboa da Praia in October 2017. Then followed small and dispersed attacks to other villages and districts in the coastal regions of the province (Matsinhe & Valoi 2019). "Insurgents" and 'terrorists', as the group is now designated officially, have continued to carry out attacks, sometimes seizing and controlling some districts and villages in the province for relatively longer periods. One of the most recent wave of attacks has occurred between the 24th and 26th of March 2021 in the district of Palma, nearby the major liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in Mozambique led by the French multinational oil company TOTAL.

Since the beginning of the violence, attempts to explain the roots and motivations of the insurgency have been made (Morier-Genoud 2020). From Islamic religious roots (Habibe, Forquilha, & Pereira 2019), some have attributed the cause of the conflict to the condition of poverty and social and economic marginalization and exclusion of the majority of the population, especially young people, who face hard conditions of unemployment. Associated to the latter, others have attributed the conflict and violence to the negative impacts of the resource extractive dynamics characterizing the country and the region in particular over the past decade and a half. Multidisciplinary research teams, incorporating Mozambican and foreign researchers had then been set up and research projects on the matter formulated. Among the emerging projects, IESE's 'Conflict, Violence and Development Challenges in Northern Mozambique' has been a pioneer¹. IESE's project and other initiatives (e.g. the OMR webinar series 'How is Cabo Delgado?') have become the relevant sources of systematic information and analysis over the various dimensions of the conflict about the roots and cau-

ses of the violence in Cabo Delgado as well as its social impacts.

In light of this research context and the different hypotheses that have been put forward, particularly those attributing the conflict to the dynamics of poverty, social marginalization and the resource extraction dynamics, an argument for a 'new' dimension of research in light of the conflict in Cabo Delgado is made. A wide range of information and analysis has been produced, but systematic analysis of broader processes of agrarian change in light of the conflict in Cabo Delgado and their dynamics of change in the northern Mozambique is still scarce, despite references on the relevance of this being made². This paper intends to draw attention to the need to understand the political economy of agrarian change in the region. This implies, to use Bernstein's (2010, 1) words, investigating 'the social relations and dynamics of production and reproduction, of property and power in rural/agrarian societies [in the region] and their historical and contemporary processes of change'.

Why a 'new' dimension of research in light of conflict and violence in Cabo Delgado and how could it be approached?

Since the violence in Cabo Delgado has erupted, there has been much effort to explain its roots and causes. As conflict and violence evolve, the 'jihadist' nature of the insurgency becomes much convincing, judging by the evidence that has been presented so far. I have put forward the argument that investigating the social relations of agrarian production and social reproduction and their dynamics of change over time is a relevant aspect for addressing particular elements of the current dynamics of conflicts and violence in northern Mozambique, and Cabo Delgado in particular. I have also pointed that despite the range of information and analysis over the dynamics of the conflict and violence in the north, systematic analysis of processes of agrarian change in light of this are still scarce. One can easily argue that these aspects of the rural social relations of production and

reproduction and their changing dynamics have already been or are being addressed by a number of researchers in the ongoing research on Cabo Delgado's violence. Such an argument may be supported by the 'multidisciplinary' approach claimed to be deployed from different study groups in the region. I may agree with such an argument, but my concern is if this is the case, judging by the hypotheses that researchers investigating rural/agrarian issues in Mozambique might be formulating, how and to what extent these aspects have been addressed? How addressing them from a political economy perspective may better explain the dynamics at place with respect to the evolution of the conflict and violence in Cabo Delgado?

I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that investigating the political economy of agrarian change in northern Mozambique should be the best way to explain the conflict and violence in Cabo Delgado. Rather, I am fundamentally arguing that investigating historical and contemporary processes of agrarian change is a relevant aspect that can challenge the hypotheses that have been put forward. My special concern is with those suggesting that poverty, unemployment, marginalisation and social exclusion may be the chief causes of the conflict and violence in Cabo Delgado. To suggest such hypotheses, one has to understand how these dynamics of poverty, unemployment and marginalisation manifests in concrete rural/agrarian contexts across the region and what and how processes related to the organisation of production may explain them. These questions have not been systematically addressed yet in light of the conflict and violence in Cabo Delgado. Despite these dynamics being evident in the region, we should, by no means, suggest a meaningful causality. That would be an unfortunate analytical weakness. It is thus important to consider such dynamics but one has to be cautious in relating them with the violent conflicts in rural areas in northern Mozambique.

¹ Under this project, IESE has published a series of reports and papers, and organised a number of seminars and webinars since 2019.

² See for instance, OMR press release on a webinar on the political economy of natural resources in the context of the webinar series 'How is Cabo Delgado'. <https://omrmz.org/omrweb/wp-content/uploads/Economia-Pol%C3%ADtica-dos-recursos-Naturais.pdf>

In questioning this I build upon an argument that conflicts and tensions around the conditions of production and social reproduction are historically determined by the dynamics of accumulation dominating the region and the country more generally, and the class structure these dynamics have created (Muianga 2020). Further, these dominant dynamics have shaped and transformed property and power relations, which, in turn, have shaped the forms and mechanisms to access the resources for production and social reproduction at various levels, from individual households to the community and the national economy more broadly. Bringing in this perspective in light of the conflict in Cabo Delgado may help us understand certainly not the chief roots and causes of the conflict, but fundamentally the systematic violence exerted by the operations of capital and the state in rural settings at various levels of social relations. This violence is mainly reflected in the crises of production and social reproduction that has characterized the region and the country throughout the history, and the failures of various 'development strategies' to address them positively. These crises of social reproduction are, in turn, manifested through the varied livelihoods strategies that rural populations within the region are pursuing in order to guarantee their subsistence. Engaging in a violent conflict may be part of such livelihoods strategies to respond to broader crises of social reproduction at subsistence level as recent evidence suggests.

Recent evidence in particular areas of Niassa and Nampula provinces suggests that crises of social reproduction are facilitating dynamics of recruitment of young people to join the 'insurgence' in Cabo Delgado in the expectation of better wages and living conditions (Forquilha & Pereira 2021). In fact, general crises of social reproduction in the areas investigated have been reported in the past, especially in areas where extractive production dynamics have expanded over the past decade and a half. In districts of Niassa, for instance, investment in large forestry plantations have resulted in land and natural resources dispossession, affecting a variety of people's livelihood strategies (Ali 2020; Ali & Muianga 2016). Despite the evidence, how these crises of production and social reproduction in northern Mozambique may be contributing to fuel the violence in Cabo Delgado is yet to be investigated. The analysis of the dynamics of rural/agrarian production in the region, particularly the dominant ones, should be a point of departure. Given this, a question that may emerge is 'how could this analysis be approached'?

In the context of IESE's project, earlier research has managed to provide some general and particular dynamics and hypothesis over the roots, causes and development of the conflict and violence in Cabo Delgado. Some of this hypothesis have become much more convincing than others as the research has evolved. Given a broader social dimension that the emerging information and analysis has been

revealed so far, one has found it particularly relevant to investigate the fundamental dynamics of rural production and their process of change over time. In fact, from a political economy perspective, any analysis of the different hypotheses that have been suggested must start from the analysis of the processes of production and the relevant classes driving these processes. Relevant questions are: how different classes emerge and develop as a result of the dynamics of production and accumulation at place in rural areas of the northern Mozambique? How the actions of these classes have shaped processes of social reproduction at various levels? How these processes of social reproduction manifest in different individuals, households and communities in various regions? Some of these aspects might have been mentioned in some of the debates suggesting a broader perspective to address the violence in northern Mozambique. However, the current evolution of the conflict in the region may turn it almost impossible to address some particular and perhaps the relevant issues of the dynamics of rural production in the regions directly affected by violence. At this level, as a point of departure, one can resort to the existing data on rural production dynamics at various levels, on poverty and inequality, etc., in order to have a broader picture of the dynamics at place and the relevant social relations of production and reproduction. These data and information may not be enough to confirm/reject some of the relevant hypotheses associated to poverty, unemployment, inequality and social exclusion dynamics that have been put forward so far. In fact, research and debate should be aware of the various dimensions of these factors, as they may reflect different layers/scales of analysis, which run from household subsistence to more general capitalist production dynamics at the level of the region.

Conclusion

This paper has intended to put forward an argument for a 'new' layer of research in light of the conflict in Cabo Delgado. The argument is put forward in light of the ongoing research project on 'Conflict, Violence and Development Challenges in Northern Mozambique', directed by IESE, and the range of information and analysis that has been produced so far. Particularly, attention is paid on the hypotheses attributing the conflict to problems of social deprivation, poverty, unemployment, inequality, and social exclusion. I make the point that a systematic analysis on broader processes of agrarian change in light of the conflict in Cabo Delgado and their dynamics of change in the north is still scarce, despite questions on the relevance of this aspects are being raised. An important aspect worth mentioning is that conflicts and tensions around the conditions of production and social reproduction in rural societies in the northern region and the country more generally are historically associated with the dominant dynamics of accumulation. How these conflicts and tensions over the conditions of production and social reproduction turn into violent conflicts is yet to be investigated. Therefore, the

understanding of the 'agrarian political economy' in the region is an urgent matter for investigation, not only to explain some of the dynamics at place, but fundamentally to give some perspectives as to address them differently may contribute to putting a break on strategies for mobilising and exploring different strategies of recruitment that may contribute to the strengthening of the conflict and violence in the region.

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