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History Repeats as Farce: Giving Away Land Without Consultation in Mozambique

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In late April 2015, the Mozambican government began a process of community consultations on the grand [ProSAVANA land project](#) in the country's coastal Nacala Corridor, widely denounced as a "land grab" by opponents. Those consultations were immediately repudiated by community members, who said the meetings violated a host of Mozambican laws on access to information and consultation with affected communities.

Most egregiously, perhaps, the consultations came, not in advance of the project, but fully six years after Brazilian investors first heard the plan's pitch, two years after the project leaked to the general public, and at a time when land conflicts are erupting across the Nacala Corridor.

Now, ProSAVANA's controversial history is repeating itself as farce. The Mozambique Council of Ministers is considering a massive project along the Lurio River in northern Mozambique without consulting the estimated 500,000 affected people in the project area.

Lurio River Valley: the next ProSAVANA?

I'd been told about the Lurio River Valley project by an official at the Agriculture Ministry last December. (See my [previous article](#) for more.) He had just finished telling me that ProSAVANA was largely a failure, that investors weren't interested, and that the launch of the project had been badly handled. I hoped that this indicated a change of heart on the part of the government in terms of its commitment to these controversial large-scale land projects, but no—the official then brought out the detailed Lurio River Valley Project proposal and proudly sang its praises.

The project remains shrouded in secrecy—even now, as the Council of Ministers considers approving it. The only public information is a brief PowerPoint presentation given in January 2014 to a select group of investors, development agencies, and government officials. The two-inch-thick project proposal I saw at the Ministry of Agriculture has not been made public.

The Lurio River project is enormous, as large as any ProSAVANA initiative. With a budget of US\$4.2 billion, it includes two dam projects and a series of agricultural development schemes covering more than 240,000 hectares (some 600,000 acres). Plans include building irrigation infrastructure to support a mix of large, medium, and smaller farms growing a wide variety of crops—cotton, corn, sugar, ethanol, and livestock.

According to [an analysis](#) by the Mozambican research group [Acção Académica para o Desenvolvimento das Comunidades Rurais](#) (ADECURU) and the international social-movement organization [GRAIN](#), the

proposed project area would affect some 500,000 people across nine districts in three northern provinces. The report estimates the Lurio River project would displace 100,000 people, as it crosses some of the most densely populated regions of rural Mozambique.

ADECRU researchers visited eight of the affected districts in early May. Residents and community leaders reported that not only had they not been consulted about the project, they had never heard of it.

ADECRU asked the government for a copy of the project proposal, in accordance with Mozambique's information laws, but they had not received a reply by May 13, 2015. The group issued a [joint press release](#) that day with GRAIN denouncing the secrecy of the project and the lack of consultation, and calling on the Council of Ministers not to approve the project.

Is history repeating itself? Wasn't one of the fatal flaws of ProSAVANA the project's secrecy and belated consultations with affected communities? Mozambique's progressive land laws call for public access to information and prior consultation with the populations most impacted by the project. Some investors have followed those laws, and many have found communities willing to work with them. Many have not.

In my December visit to the northern Nampula Province, I saw repeated cases of villagers losing their land to an outsider with no warning. In some cases, they simply found fences constructed across their land, even on land to which they had legal title. Others could not find any documentation to indicate the identity or nationality of the farmer threatening their land nor the mapping of the land he or she had been given.

With the Lurio River project, ADECRU's investigations could not even identify the investors involved, though they uncovered a consortium created to manage the project, the Companhia do Vale do Rio Lurio (CVRL). Two of the principals are the Mozambican company TurConsult, with a history of hotel and tourism development, and AgriCane, a South African sugar company that also consults on large-scale projects in Africa. No one has yet identified any other foreign investors or the sources of any possible development funding from international donors, though one of the dam projects may involve the World Bank.

Consent critical

Free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) is a sacred principle in international human rights. Affected parties must be informed prior to the initiation of a project, and they must give their consent in a process free of coercion or intimidation. The principle is enshrined in nearly all the guidelines and standards developed in recent years, such as the Committee on World Food Security's ["Guidelines on Responsible Agricultural Investment"](#) and the ["Nairobi Action Plan on Large-Scale Land-Based Investments."](#) Many were under discussion at the [International Land Coalition](#) conference I attended in Dakar, Senegal.

What makes a large-scale agricultural development project a land grab is the lack of consent. On the Lurio River project, the Mozambican government has chosen not to provide information in advance of approving a large-scale project, and it has failed to consult or inform the affected communities—never mind get their consent.

The belated consultations on ProSAVANA are scarcely any better. ADECRU and the Nampula Episcopal Commission on Justice and Peace [denounced the recent consultation process](#) as manipulated and in violation of the country's information laws. The two groups monitored 24 of 38 scheduled consultations and found community members excluded and intimidated, meetings stacked with government officials, and information on the [new Master Plan](#) not readily available. The consultations did not involve the many affected communities envisaged in the project plan.

Large-scale foreign land projects remain controversial even when they are introduced in accordance with the law. When these projects ignore the principle of free, prior, and informed consent, they are bound to generate serious conflict. Look for more such clashes in northern Mozambique if the Council of Ministers approves the Lurio River Valley Project.

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