

***What's missing from 'What's missing'? A reply to C. Cramer and N. Pontara, 'Rural poverty and poverty alleviation in Mozambique: what's missing from the debate?'***

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INTRODUCTION

Mozambique has undergone some dramatic changes in recent years. The government concluded a 17-year-old civil war in 1992 and held democratic elections in 1994. Following the adoption of structural adjustment policies after 1987, the government eliminated subsidies on food and consumer items, pledged its support for emerging markets, and has now sold most state companies to private investors. These changes have generated much interest among researchers and policymakers, particularly with regard to their impact on the countryside, where the majority of Mozambicans live and work. Recent studies have focused on the most appropriate rural development strategy for Mozambique now that the war has ended, or examined ways to alleviate the widespread poverty that still exists in rural areas. Other work has analysed the structure of agrarian relations or how to ensure food security. Additional research has criticised the government's on-going policy of encouraging and granting land concessions to private investors. It claims that the policy lacks transparency and fails to consider the rights of local communities.

In an article in a recent issue of this journal, Christopher Cramer and Nicola Pontara (1998) contest some of the claims regarding rural development, poverty alleviation and the features of rural relations in Mozambique. They argue that the 'official literature' treats smallholders as a homogeneous mass, who survive by using family labour to

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produce from their own small plots. As a result, solutions to rural poverty privilege the allocation of land to smallholders over the growth of wage labour connected to large agricultural businesses. The potential of commercial farms to contribute to poverty reduction is overlooked, while policymakers invest in unrealistic notions about equitable, secure smallholders with access to arable land. In contrast to the prevailing view, Cramer and Pontara argue that the peasantry is internally differentiated. This differentiation continued to exist during the socialist period and during the war between the government and the externally financed opposition movement, Renamo. The differentiation derives from unequal landholdings and also from access to wage labour, on which the poorest sectors in society greatly depend. Given that the Mozambican government has now allocated much land to commercial companies, research should thus be directed at the opportunities that might be offered by the availability of rural wage employment. In addition, rural to rural migration offers other opportunities for work in the countryside, but the literature has largely ignored it.

Cramer and Pontara have addressed a number of compelling issues that Mozambique faces in its current transition. They draw our attention to several significant features of the rural landscape, such as the importance of wage labour and the existence of rural to rural migration. They also reinforce current work on differentiation in rural Mozambique. As this reply will demonstrate, however, Cramer and Pontara have engaged in a very selective reading of a limited number of sources, and neglect other work in order to strengthen their own claims about wage labour in the countryside. Moreover, they use an incorrect figure to support their assertion that land has been allocated to commercial agricultural companies, and do not examine evidence that might modify their position on the opportunities that these companies offer. Finally, their juxtaposition of wage labour against the security of land tenure threatens to polarise the debate into simple either/or dichotomies. I suggest that the reality of the countryside is more complex and multifaceted. Rural peoples pursue overlapping and redundant strategies as a hedge against economic insecurity. Access to land, the pursuit of wage labour, beer brewing, migration and local trade comprise just a few of the multiple strands in the project of survival and accumulation. The opportunities that are available, the choices that are made, and the particular circumstances of each individual (status, gender, age, etc.) combine to differentiate regions, communities and households, one from another. Researchers need to

acknowledge the sources and objectives of these strategies and listen to those who pursue them. Simultaneously, decisionmakers must evaluate more critically the potential effect of all policies on the dynamic of agrarian relations in Mozambique.

CRAMER AND PONTARA'S CRITIQUE OF THE 'OFFICIAL LITERATURE'

Cramer and Pontara begin their argument by criticising what they see as the prevailing view in the existing literature that 'the access of rural households to cultivable land is considered the critical factor in the survival of the rural poor' (p. 103). They argue (p. 103):

Most of this literature is based on an archetype of the African peasant smallholder, conceived as a stable family which produces on a small scale, virtually entirely from the labour inputs of family members, and which consumes a significant proportion of its own farm output, having no access to other sources of consumption.

In a summary of their critique, they claim that 'the literature' shares an 'antipathy to larger-scale farming' and instead favours approaches that would lead to an equality of landholdings and broad homogeneity among the rural population. Explicitly or implicitly, they argue, these objectives are rooted in an 'assumption that small is workable and beautiful in Mozambique' (p. 114).

Not only are these assertions overstated and dismissive, but also they are levelled against a small and highly select number of sources. 'The literature' most often cited by Cramer and Pontara (which they also refer to variously in the article as 'the official literature' (p. 108), 'official policy statements' (p. 102), 'official documents' (p. 114) and the 'mainstream current literature' (p. 125)) is mostly drawn from just three sources – the Poverty Alleviation Unit in the Ministry of Planning and Finance (1995; 1996); the Land Tenure Center, University of Wisconsin, an NGO funded by USAID previously based in the Ministry of Agriculture (Myers 1994; West and Myers 1996); and the joint Ministry of Agriculture/Michigan State University (MOA/MSU) Food Security Project, another USAID funded programme (Mozambique, MOA/MSU 1994b; Tschirley and Weber, 1994).<sup>1</sup> The criteria for choosing six articles and reports from these three sources and having them stand in as the 'official literature' is not clear. One possibility is that all the sources refer to 'poverty' and the 'rural poor'; another is that they all emanate from various government ministries

and therefore could be said to be representative of official government policy regarding the rural areas. But other reports share these characteristics and these have not been mentioned.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the claim that these sources represent 'official policy statements' is seriously compromised by the words and deeds of government ministries. If it is true that some voices in government and in non-governmental organisations argue that a homogeneous peasantry stabilised on the land would be a 'Good Thing' (p. 113), it is equally the case that many current initiatives are directly antithetical to that goal. As Cramer and Pontara know, the Mozambican government is conceding land to national and local government officials, and former Portuguese settlers.<sup>3</sup> It is also forming joint ventures with some of the largest national and international companies. It has established approximately four state bodies to value, assess, survey and prepare land for privatisation. At the very least, these actions suggest that the government has multiple, contradictory and conflicting 'official' policy positions on what to do with the peasantry. Policy objectives that are based on the 'assumption that small is workable and beautiful in Mozambique' (p. 114) may represent one institution or one voice within the state, but they are not the primary nor even the prevailing voice at the moment. These contradictions between statements and actions, and conflicts between and within ministries, need to be acknowledged and explained. They complicate the debate and help to explain the policy inconsistencies.<sup>4</sup>

Even if we accept the rather questionable assertion that these three sources represent an emerging 'mainstream or current literature' on Mozambique, their various positions have been misinterpreted by Cramer and Pontara. For reasons of space, I shall focus on the material produced jointly by the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) and Michigan State University (MSU). Regarding the MOA/MSU work, Cramer and Pontara rather selectively concentrate on the claims made by two reports emanating from the MOA/MSU research, while ignoring all the rest of the working papers that MOA/MSU has produced (Mozambique, MOA/MSU 1992a, 1992b, 1992c; 1994a). They conclude from the two documents they survey that MOA/MSU favours a policy that promotes an egalitarian and therefore stable countryside. The project is against policies that might lead to the rise of a rural proletariat, for such a situation could bring political instability. As Cramer and Pontara write (p. 113):

The assumption (by MOA/MSU), clearly, is that the larger farms, whose existence is won at the expense of the emergence of a class of landless wage

labourers, are not just sometimes inefficient and prone to low levels of labour intensity, but are inherently inefficient and politically destabilising.

This statement disregards the historical patterns of production that exist in Nampula (as opposed to Cramer and Pontara's research site of Chokwe), where MOA/MSU has done the majority of its studies and that help to explain its concern with smallholders. Worse, Cramer and Pontara misunderstand MOA/MSU's position with regard to 'larger farms'. During the colonial period, contract farming arrangements characterised most production in the 'cotton belt' of Nampula. Smallholders (internally differentiated according to status and income) produced raw cotton on their own plots for sale to commercial companies, who then processed and exported ginned cotton to markets abroad (Isaacman 1985; Pitcher 1993, 1995; Isaacman & Chilundo, 1995; Isaacman, 1996). After independence, the state tried to perform the duties that the private companies had previously executed, but when its efforts failed to maintain production, the government partially returned to the pattern that prevailed at the end of the 1960s – a period of high outputs. It formed joint ventures with national and international companies to process cotton purchased from rural producers (Mozambique MOA/MSU 1992b; Pitcher 1996; Strasberg 1997). This policy choice and the MOA/MSU's apparent support for it may be 'political', but the policy also has some historical justification since contract farming by smallholders dominated the rural economy of Nampula in the past.

In addition, much of the MOA/MSU work neither objects to the existence of JVCs nor considers them 'inherently inefficient'. In fact, even before the JVCs had become fully operational, MOA/MSU authors stated that while they lacked information on the relationship between companies and smallholders, 'Nonetheless, the companies constitute the only dynamic and capitalised agents in the region and, as such [are] well placed to provide services and stimulate development in the smallholder sector' (1992b: 2). In a 1994 working paper, the MOA/MSU team continued to claim rather blithely that the different economic effects that JVCs were having on the economy of Nampula 'may represent a significant source of growth potential for the regional economy' (1994a: 27). In interviews with smallholders, the MOA/MSU team found that the majority of smallholders desired more off-farm income opportunities. The team surmised that the joint-venture cotton companies were well placed to generate wage labour opportunities as well as to have indirect effects on economic growth (1994a: 27). Subsequent working papers by MOA/MSU reinforce their earlier

optimism about the benefits and opportunities provided by JVCs (Strasberg 1997).<sup>5</sup> Thus, at least with regard to the existence of larger farms and the prospects they hold for generating wage labour, there is overlap between MOA/MSU perspectives and the views of Cramer and Pontara.

#### THE ARGUMENT BY CRAMER AND PONTARA

The most convincing reason that Cramer and Pontara have chosen to draw on selective reports by these three sources is that these reports serve as convenient straw arguments for their own counter-claims. The sources help Cramer and Pontara to construct and, in many ways, to simplify a debate about smallholders in order to carve out their own position. Cramer and Pontara's argument rests on a number of assertions. First, they claim that the countryside is really rather more complicated and differentiated than 'the literature' states. Aside from the differences between large commercial enterprises and the peasantry that have been pointed out, there is also much differentiation within the peasantry – a process that even the socialist period and the war did not thwart. Not only is this differentiation derived from inequalities in land holdings, which the 'official literature' frequently notes, but also it stems from migrant labour and wage income, depending on what part of the country one is examining. In particular, Cramer and Pontara are critical of research and policies that overlook the vital importance of wage income to the poorest sector of the peasantry, frequently women. There is thus no cause for continually treating the peasantry as homogeneous or ignoring the role of wages.

The recognition that the peasantry is internally differentiated and that the contribution to this differentiation comes from multiple sources cannot be emphasised enough. Cramer and Pontara are absolutely correct to focus on this neglected but critical aspect of agrarian relations. However, their analysis almost errs too much in the other direction by presenting rural poverty alleviation as a choice between either land or wage labour. They could have strengthened their claims greatly by addressing some central questions and citing additional sources. For example, what is the relationship between landholdings and wage, migrant or off-farm labour? Are there additional ways that rural peoples gain an income? What is the connection between social status and economic wealth? What are the regional variations in differentiation and sources of income? Cramer and Pontara disregard work on the colonial and the contemporary periods (including a large

survey by MOA/MSU) that has addressed several of these questions.<sup>6</sup> In addition, recent work to which Cramer and Pontara may not have had access prior to publication examines these issues (JSAS 1998).

Their second assertion is related to the first: since there is wage labour, we should pay attention to who is providing it and under what conditions. They find the failure to examine these issues 'disheartening' (p. 131) for two reasons: first, the scale of land that has been allocated to joint ventures and other commercial enterprises has been huge. Using a figure that they claim is taken from West and Myers (not Myers and West as cited), they note some 40 million hectares have been allocated by the government to private interests. Second, given the fact that many people, especially women, are already employed as seasonal and permanent labourers on commercial farms, policy and research ought to recognise and address their circumstances. Both of these points are extremely important. Mozambique is changing rapidly. The number of requests for land has jumped since 1992, and the degree and conditions of wage labour on operating commercial farms in Mozambique today have been largely ignored.

Yet these observations require clarification and qualification. Cramer and Pontara twice refer to the allocation of '40 million hectares', but give an incorrect source for this figure, which, on closer inspection, is itself incorrect. The figure is *not* from a 1996 article by West and Myers, but from a 1994 article by Myers (p. 610).<sup>7</sup> By 1996, West and Myers claim that only 20 million hectares have been 'granted in concessions', acknowledging in a footnote that a 20 million hectare concession by the government was cancelled (p. 29 and fn. 6). However, returning to the sectoral breakdown of land concessions by Myers in his 1994 article (p. 610), it appears that only about 4 million hectares have been 'allocated' at the national level for agricultural purposes, a significant revision of the earlier figure. Regarding provincial level concessions which may be substantial, Cramer and Pontara do not supply any figures or make any reference.

Moreover, there is an additional difficulty regarding the interpretation of these 'concessions'. Whether we are talking about 40 million or 4 million hectares, these numbers do *not* refer to land allocated but to requests made. Examination of Series III of the *Boletim da Republica* (which weekly publishes those requests made at the national level) shows that many requests are 'em tramitação', which basically means 'under legal consideration' or 'in process' (1986–98). Many requests have not yet been granted, and therefore researchers must be very careful about claiming that companies are already in operation. It is

possible that we are dealing with a much smaller number of interested commercial companies eager to take land from peasants or willing to provide wage labour than Myers, West and Myers, or Cramer and Pontara claim. None of these qualifications are pointed out by Cramer and Pontara.

Finally, since Cramer and Pontara are quite critical of those perspectives that present smallholders in pitched battle against large commercial interests, the burden is on them to determine exactly what interests are requesting land and what their characteristics are. Apart from their brief mention of Lonrho and several *privados* in the Chokwe area, they do not detail the characteristics of those requesting and receiving land. Examination of the *Boletim da República* and a careful reading of newspaper accounts suggest that only in limited cases are the requests from companies with the capacity and financial viability of Lonrho, in spite of clear policy preferences in favour of large companies. Instead, many requests come from former Portuguese settlers, potential new arrivals from South Africa and Zimbabwe, and an emerging group of Mozambican businessmen. Before we start arguing about the progressive potential of companies, we need to find out a lot more about who they are, what kind of capital they have and what they are prepared to offer. Several newspaper articles have already commented that some of the land that has been granted has gone to speculators, some to companies that are undercapitalised, and some to people who have no intention of using it for what they claimed when they made their application (Sixpence 1997; *Mozambiquefile* 1997; Lopes & Bié 1998). At the provincial level, some concessions have been granted without any analysis of their future viability at all (Myers *et al.* 1993; Kloock-Jenson 1997). These findings suggest that the potential of these investors to provide the kind of wage labour opportunities to which Cramer and Pontara refer is also questionable.

#### REDUNDANT STRATEGIES AND VOICES OF PROTEST IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

The discussion of land brings us back to the thorny question of its importance to the livelihoods of rural peoples. Perhaps, as Cramer and Pontara argue, too often the current research has assumed that land will alleviate poverty. And perhaps this assumption has rested on 'traditionalist premises' as O'Laughlin claims (1996). But it seems worthwhile to remember that what greatly informs the debate about land in Mozambique are the voices of protest emerging from the

countryside against the land requests and allocations.<sup>8</sup> In the peri-urban zones around Maputo, Beira, Quelimane, Nampula and other towns, *deslocados* who arrived as long ago as 1984, and residents who are native to the area, are finding that land they may have been farming for over a decade is suddenly and inexplicably conceded to a former Portuguese settler, or a government official or a white farmer from South Africa. Within areas that have been irrigated or are known to be suitable for cotton, tobacco and maize, rich as well as poor smallholders have been shunted aside as others have moved in, waving their newly purchased titles.

The conflicts over land are not invented; they are rooted in complaints about the fairness and the transparency of current allocation procedures. And desire for land is historically grounded in a perennial insecurity about economic survival as well as dynamic cultural interpretations about the symbolic meaning of land. Cramer and Pontara cite Chingono's depiction of the war economy as a 'vicious market fundamentalism' and assert that 'Thus, it is highly misleading to assume that the war had the effect of stifling differentiation or any stimulus to wage labour demand' (p. 129). Yet, there is also evidence that the destruction of commercial establishments, warehouses, agricultural tools, processing equipment, transport vehicles and local fairs in provinces such as Zambezia and Nampula, left many rural peoples with only their hands and their land on which to survive (Mozambique, MOA/MSU 1992b).<sup>9</sup> Currently, many rural people stay on and seek land because they lack the confidence to rely solely on wages. Exploitative and repressive company practices under colonialism, an unreliable state and threats to security on state farms after independence, and high inflation during the early 1990s, have reinforced the uncertainty associated with wage labour. Given Mozambique's past and the unfolding present, it really is no wonder that rural peoples have so vehemently contested the concessioning process.

If agricultural production and company wages constitute two potentially important sources of income, they certainly do not exhaust the list of wealth generation by rural inhabitants. At least from the colonial period, rural peoples in Mozambique have pursued redundant, overlapping economic strategies to spread the risk of economic uncertainty. These strategies are differentiated by region, by gender and by age. Women and men may market cash crops such as cotton, tobacco or cashew to rural traders or companies, depending on what area of the country they are in. Women may sell food crops such as

cassava, beans and maize, and buy fish or cooking oil in return; while men sell animals and distilled alcohol to purchase bicycles and radios. In local markets, young and old households trade hand-crafted pots and homemade beer. Economically active men and women may migrate to other districts, provinces and countries for work. The diversity of these strategies is rooted in local conditions, local knowledge and creativity, but also such redundancy is a rational response to historically ingrained, economic insecurity (van den Berg 1987; Bowen 1989; JSAS 1998). Any development strategy that the Mozambican government adopts has to appreciate that rural households engage in multiple strategies to construct their livelihoods.

Cramer and Pontara draw our attention to the biases and oversights in *some* of the literature on smallholders in Mozambique. They bring to the fore several significant features of the rural landscape, such as the importance of wage labour and the existence of rural to rural migration. They reinforce current work on differentiation in rural Mozambique. However, in order to prevent the debate from polarising around simplistic stances, as has so often occurred with previous issues concerning Mozambique, it is important to acknowledge that there are multiple voices and complex, tangled positions informing the debate. The pressures that the countryside in Mozambique is facing do not lend themselves easily to either/or approaches such as wage labour versus land, companies versus smallholders. Rather, the challenges are fluid and intricate, historically derived and differentiated by region, by method of production, by status and by economic position. Future research needs to recognise and disaggregate this complexity.

#### NOTES

1. The Land Tenure Center, University of Wisconsin was formerly based in the Ministry of Agriculture, and is now located at the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane. Myers and West were former associates of the Land Tenure Center. The article by Tschirley and Weber (1994) is based on research they conducted as members of the research team of the MOA/MSU Food Security Project.

2. Notably absent are references to the Pre-Program of Agricultural Development and the National Program of Agricultural Development, two documents formulated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fishing, which contain the government's agricultural strategy. The Pre-Program, a preliminary version of the National Agricultural Development Program, was first implemented in 1992 and subsequently revised (Mozambique, Ministry of Agriculture 1992; Mozambique, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries 1995). Following comments and criticisms of the Pre-Program from local communities, producer associations, agronomists and government officials, the final version of the National Agricultural Development Program was approved by the Council of Ministers in 1998 (Miguel 1998).

3. For a list of requests and authorisations, see the weekly statements in Mozambique, *Boletim da República* (1986–98).

4. Government support for private investment and a preference (not always realised in practice) for large commercial businesses in agriculture, industry, tourism etc. is reflected at the institutional level and in policy statements. Within the Council of Ministers, the Inter-Ministerial Commission for Enterprise Restructuring (CIRE) was established in 1991 to oversee the privatisation process. In 1992, the government created the Technical Unit for Enterprise Restructuring, within the Ministry of Planning and Finance, to organise and coordinate the privatisation of most of the large state companies. Units within the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Tourism handle the privatisation of small and medium sized companies. Provincial privatisation bodies are responsible for coordinating the sale of companies that operate on a provincial level (see UTRE 1998). For a list of investors and the sale prices of former state companies, see the biannual report of the Technical Unit for Enterprise Restructuring (1998). Through the Investment Promotion Centre, the Ministry of Planning and Finance seeks foreign and national investors to purchase state-owned companies or to finance new, mostly large-scale commercial ventures. For a list of planned and pledged investment projects see their reports (1998). Very few of the sales of former state farms in agriculture have been to smallholders.

Speeches, papers and interviews by government officials also reveal a strong orientation towards commercial businesses and the private sector. Moreover, Maputo's vigorous press has maintained a running criticism of the effects of an agricultural policy that appears to favour the private sector. In addition to the Pre-Program and the National Program of Agricultural Development, see the speeches by the prime minister and the minister of industry, commerce, and tourism at the Third Private Sector Conference in Mozambique (Mozambique, Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Tourism 1997) and the following articles for insights into policies and criticisms of their impact (Mozambiquefile 1997; Miguel 1998; Nhancale 1998; Domingo 1998).

For early scholarly criticism of the adoption of privatisation and market principles see Hanlon 1991; Bowen 1992; Saul 1993; Plant 1993. Even in the early 1990s, Bowen had already noted a split in the Frelimo party between those who supported 'the creation of a national bourgeoisie and the interests of private capital', and those who favoured continued regulation as well as helping to 'revive what might be described as the "family sector"' (p. 271).

5. Other researchers are more sceptical of the JVCs. For a critical analysis of the relationships among cotton companies, the state and producers, see Pitcher (1996); and for a detailed study of different cotton production arrangements in Mozambique and a discussion of alternative approaches, see Fok (1995).

6. The following historical work documents the growth and existence of differentiation, from the south to the north of the country: First (1983); van den Berg (1987); Head (1980); Vail & White (1980); Pitcher (1995); Isaacman (1996). Van den Berg provides an interesting study of the interaction between wage labour and agricultural production. For a discussion of the peasantry under Frelimo and documentation of the failure of a state farm to provide an adequate wage labour income, see Bowen (1989). MOA/MSU conducted a survey of 343 families in 1991, their findings provide the basis for a discussion of the multiple strategies that households pursue to make a living (1992c).

7. I also cited this incorrect figure before discovering it was wrong (Pitcher 1996: p. 56).

8. These protests at the very least seem to have provided the initial basis for much of the criticism by West and Myers as well as those currently working with the Land Tenure Center and the Nucleo de Estudos da Terra, now based at the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane.

9. I found supporting evidence for declines in wage labour and other sources of income in fieldwork in Nampula (1994 and 1995) and in Zambezia (1998).

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