

Vale's Coal mine in Mozambique: overdevelopment and social reorientation

Ethnographic research shows some of the dynamics and dilemmas that occurred in Moatize, Mozambique, due to a development project carried out by Brazilian firm Vale

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From corn to coal, the village of Moatize, in Mozambique, has had its way of life remodeled due to the inauguration of a coal mine by the Brazilian firm Vale. Field researches conducted by Mozambican professor [Anselmo Panse Chizenga](#) for his Master's and PhD research at the Sociology Graduate Program at UFRGS show the ways of living prior to the arrival of the company cannot coexist with the new ways of existence and of social dynamics brought about by the implementation of the Vale mining company's development project, and this situation leads to a series of challenges to the mining project.

In 2015, Anselmo was in the region for his master's research *Mineração e conflito ambiental: disputas em torno da implantação do megaprojeto da Vale na bacia carbonífera de Moatize, Moçambique* (Mining and environmental conflict: disputes over the implementation of Vale's megaproject in the Moatize coal basin, Mozambique) and analyzed the dynamics of conflicts surrounding the installation of the coal mining project by the Brazilian firm Vale. During his PhD studies, the researcher returned to Moatize in 2018, and, from March to July, he carried out an ethnographic study to identify the operationalization strategies of the mining project and its contestation. The result of this study is the thesis *Os mundos que o "desenvolvimento" (des)integra: dinâmicas do lugar induzidas pela mineração da empresa VALE S. A. em Moatize, Moçambique* ("The worlds "development" (dis)integrates: dynamics of place induced by Brazilian firm VALE S.A.'s mining in Moatize, Mozambique"), defended in 2020, under the guidance of Professor [Jalcione Pereira de Almeida](#). The doctoral thesis unveils the paradox of the "overdevelopment" caused by the multinational in the village by means of introduction and induction of new practices which eliminate the former ways of living of that community.



Children fishing on the banks of the Rovúbue river - Photo: Anselmo Panse Chizenga

According to Anselmo, Moatize is a typical rural village with long-established subsistence practices that make insecure those who are used to urban cities. There used to be cattle raising, fishing, and production of building materials around the Zambezi River and its affluents. However, miners who started to settle in the region had more modern practices, so there is a continuous conflict between urban and rural practices. The professor explains how growing corn and extracting charcoal, despite being economic activities, govern local life. "Maize is the mainstay of food in that region. They produce a polenta called *chima*. When they welcome the new day, for instance, they offer polenta. It is something interesting to be observed since, for the mining to occur, it is necessary to cease not only the corn cultivation, but also a whole set of practices which go with it," he says. Even though this example seems to be a tiny detail, Anselmo emphasizes the food the community abundantly had at hand started to be bought in the market. This shift on how that community has presently having access to the cereal is one of the impacts brought by the mining company. "Not necessarily the entire population is employed so that they can buy corn, what's the point of having charcoal if you can't have food?" asks the researcher.

Quantification and Qualification of Life

The impacts on the lives of Moatize residents began to be felt even before the company arrived in the area, when the community's ways of living began to be measured. Anselmo explains the company collected and analyzed socioeconomic data for the region: "This process aims at finding out whether the development project is viable or not. So, the socioeconomic profile of the population and how they lived were already known to Vale, so that those lives came to 'have a price', mediated by prospective indemnities that would be granted". The sociologist adds that all practices in the region are then reconsidered, and have new assisted ways of being done, and now include technical courses to qualify workers. "For example, poultry breeding started to be assisted; they used to have free-range chicken farming before, but not for trading, nevertheless it was necessary to improve the farming due to market values," he explains. According to the researcher, the population is being uprooted from the way they used to live, everything is now remodeled in a direct relationship with the market in order to achieve development. However, those people – who were already farmers or poultry breeders – were prompted into the new world of large-scale production, which ends up also becoming a process of disidentification, or negative identification. In this sense, there is an "overdevelopment", as mining already comes with an agenda, a well-charged notion, and institutes itself at the expense of other practices, which can, paradoxically to the idea of development, become a gap in life of that population: "Some agendas mining brings do not match the local demand".

Day by day, residents of Moatize begin to question the ways of life brought by the mining company. The professor says the urban ideal is very attractive in its first phase. A brick house, newly painted, with tap water and a shower looks great and attracts people. "They say: 'Look, we can have this, it doesn't just happen in the capital...,'" he emphasizes. On the other hand, following the example of the brick house, he explains that people soon realize new responsibilities accompany the joys of urbanism, such as electricity and water utility monthly payments. And there is also this conflict between the new world and the old: would wattle and daub houses be considered of poor quality? "The region's inhabitants are beginning to see that, deep down, as one of my interlocutors said, a brick house does not stop hunger," says Anselmo.

He reports that several interlocutors have been developed their contesting agendas, about hunger, the way of planting and raising animals, the market logic and how it used to be. He also reports, however, the agendas are not homogeneous: each one develops theirs based on their needs and desires. While one person criticized the supposedly better quality of masonry houses, others, younger, reported they wanted to take a shower, they could not stand getting water in a bucket anymore.

Despite not working specifically with gender issues, the sociologist draws attention to the importance of women in this contested scenario. "I remember a woman was about to receive compensation, so she said: 'I have to avoid upsetting that man, otherwise he might keep the money and leave'. These codes exist and usually occur at many levels," he reports.

The professor also explains that the role of these ethnographic studies and professionals is "to bring other elements to the civil debate, to give suggestions, to serve as a consultation". He summarizes the context of Mozambique saying that in some places the State control is almost absent; despite this gap, people do have specific ways of seeing public health, basic education. "So, it's interesting to observe that when the State finally arrives, it already comes with its order. Usually, when these isolated communities are identified to have natural resources, they attract state interest and a compelling desire to implement a certain project, and these people are their first victims," he says.

While living in Porto Alegre, Anselmo had the opportunity to follow up a debate on the installation of a coal mine near the capital. Inevitably, he ended up getting involved in some way and remembered the conflicts observed in Mozambique comparatively to the actions of the Brazilian multinational Vale. He points out there is a common civil debate in African countries about these development proposals coming from abroad: whether the projects that arrive and those that already exist are national priorities or simply a priority for some lobbyists. "This cooperation project has deep down great interests, but in addition, on a daily basis, it has no trivial effects", the sociologist reaffirms. Anselmo explains, however, that all international cooperation with countries in Africa cannot be viewed in a negative way. He himself came to Brazil to do his graduate studies at UFRGS thanks to one of these cooperation projects, as a beneficiary of a scholarship obtained in 2014.

Regarding the discussions surrounding the mining project near Porto Alegre, Anselmo recalls he learned from geologists at UFRGS that the coal present in the mining site is of low quality and thus has a low market value. The sociologist even participated in a lecture with engineers who supported the project: "The engineers' goal was to recruit us to embrace a proactive intervention in order to make this mining possible". He says that, as someone who had previously worked with this theme in Moatize, he got immediately identified with the issue, and startled with how alike justifications are – 'that charcoal will always have more value than the people who live there, in an ideal of quantification and qualification of life'. "In the end, these resources end up having more value than any other way of life, than the subject, whom public policies reduce to nothing to make these investments possible," he concludes.

Translated into English by Leila Rosane Kommers, under the supervision and translation revision of Elizamari R. Becker (PhD) – IL/UFRGS.

