

Mozambican Women Make the "Green Zones" Bloom

By Medea Benjamin and Kevin Danaher

We can hear her deep voice booming across the fields as we approach through parched rows of corn and beans. Rosa Macamo, the president of this 400-acre farming co-op, is explaining to some foreign visitors how the Green Zones — farm belts surrounding the city — were organized.

"The men were off in the mines in South Africa or working in Maputo. We couldn't farm the good land out in the countryside because the bandits were killing too many people. So we women started farming this sandy soil around the city. It's difficult, but we weren't about to let our children starve."

The more than 200 agricultural co-ops that make up the Green Zones around Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, are unique in that they are 85-90 percent women. Most of the work and most of the leadership is handled by peasant women. Rosa uses her own life to illustrate the deep personal changes taking place among the women.

"A few years ago, my idea of banking was to dig a hole, put my money in the hole, and dig it out whenever I needed to use some. Now I handle all the bank transactions for this cooperative which has 63 families. Because we have learned to read and write and do accounting, we can run our own affairs and not depend on outside experts. This is a powerful thing for the people."

Women working in a vegetable garden in the Maputo green belt.



The southern African nation of Mozambique was a Portuguese colony for centuries. After a long and bitter struggle led by the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), Mozambique became an independent nation in 1975.

But the Portuguese left the country in a state of utter poverty: there were only 80 doctors in this country of 14 million, 40 percent of children never reached their fifth birthday, the majority of Mozambicans were illiterate and lacked the basic skills needed to run a business or work in industry. This was because the Portuguese settlers had monopolized all business and nearly all the skilled trades. To top it off, when most of the white settlers fled, they destroyed whatever they couldn't drag off with

them. They put the torch to farms, killed animals, sabotaged machinery, burned repair manuals; in short, wrecked an economy that was already severely underdeveloped.

The new FRELIMO government was committed to building a new nation that would raise the standard of living of the poor majority. One of the government's main concerns was stimulating agricultural production and repairing the farms damaged by Portuguese farmers when they fled. Of necessity, the government took over the majority of the abandoned farms, turning them into state farms. FRELIMO also encouraged the creation of *machambas do povo* (peoples' farms), cooperatives in which people collectively worked the land and sold their produce to the state.

But these cooperatives suffered from fatal flaws. Faced with a scarcity of funds, the government put its resources into state farms and left the cooperatives to go it alone. Many peasants were coaxed into forming co-ops with the promise of a tractor or other government aid, only to be bitterly disappointed when no help arrived. Between 1977 and 1981, a mere 2 percent of agricultural investments went to the co-ops.

In 1982 the Green Zone cooperatives united into a federation called the General Union, serving as an umbrella group to represent all the co-ops. The General Union is an independent, non-governmental organization. By 1987 the fragile handful of groups had mushroomed into a strong movement

of 210 co-ops, with 11,500 members (95 percent of whom were women), producing over 2,600 tons of food a year.

Benefits and Obstacles

Celina Cossa is head of the General Union. A co-op member herself, she was elected president of the Union in 1982. "The reason for the tremendous growth of this movement," explains Celina, "is that we have managed to offer concrete benefits to our members. These benefits are not so much in wages—many of the co-ops are still too poor to pay wages—as they are in goods and services."

The co-ops provide many social benefits that individual farmers can seldom afford. Co-op members can take advantage of literacy programs and specialized training. Their young children attend well-staffed daycare centers where they get the best of care and two meals a day. By 1987 the co-ops in the Maputo Green Zones had constructed 43 daycare centers—with 1,366 children attending—and 40 adult education centers.

One of the greatest obstacles facing the co-ops is nature itself. Much of the soil around Maputo is either clay or sand. Walking through some of the co-ops is like walking along the beach. It is a wonder they can grow anything at all!

The land is very expensive to irrigate, and many co-ops lack the capital to dig deep wells. So they are heavily dependent on rain, and the rains are fickle. During the 1980s, there have been several years of drought and one of severe flooding.

But the biggest obstacle is the war being waged against Mozambique by the South Africa-sponsored Mozambique National Resistance or MNR. Many areas in the country, including some of the best agricultural lands, are not producing because guerrilla attacks have made normal life impossible. Even a few areas of the Maputo Green Zones are not safe at night: people farm their land during the day and retreat to secure areas at dusk.

"Were it not for the war," says Celina, "we could expand more into other areas of the country. But the war hasn't stopped us completely. We're not sitting with our arms crossed. We've organized seminars to meet with peasants from other areas and learn from each other. We don't want to grow alone. We know that if the cooperatives around the country were united and produced

more, we'd all benefit. So our objective is to build stronger ties with the other peasant groups."

Women Retain Control

While co-op membership is open to all, the vast majority of co-op members are women. This is because food production is traditionally women's work, since it's considered the woman's responsibility to feed the family. Men have also had more work options in the past, including factory labor in the city or work in the South African mines.

Men initially belittled the cooperatives, joking that anything run by women had little chance of success. They thought women were only good for raising children and taking care of the house, but not capable of running a business. "But now they've changed their tune," laughs Celina Cossa. "They see the results and want to join. They see women who are carpenters and bricklayers, women who meet with foreign delegations and government officials. I'm not saying we've managed to solve all our problems—far from it. But we have proven to the men that we're at least as capable as they are."

Foreign Aid

This does not mean that the co-ops are ready to "go it alone." Aside from the need for technical assistance, they also need foreign assistance for capital-intensive projects like digging wells and installing irrigation systems. The co-ops get little financial assistance from the government, since the government itself is so strapped for funds, but it does get assistance from the United Nations (especially the Food and Agriculture Organization and UNICEF) and the Scandinavian governments. Norway, for example, is helping to pay the costs of building 100 houses for co-op members. Other foreign aid is used to pay for machinery and spare parts, seeds, fertilizer and fuel.

Rosa Macamo, president of the Josiah Tongogara Cooperative, says her co-op is in desperate need of a tractor, and that the General Union has only two tractors to share among them. Meanwhile, U.S. AID is selling very modern tractors and trucks to the bigger private farmers. "We're the ones who really need the help," Rosa insists. "So why are the farmers who are already wealthy getting all the trucks and tractors?"

But while the Green Zones make broader social use of foreign aid than do the individual private farmers, Celina cautions that they, too, have made their share of mistakes. "I can't say that 100 percent of the money we've received was well spent. Maybe about 80 percent, but that's not bad. Sure, we should strive for more, but that will come with time. Even the big companies make bad investments. We have to view our mistakes as an essential part of the learning process."

That is why it was so important for the women in the Green Zones to organize in the General Union. For through that federation they were able to negotiate with the government—not as poor, illiterate peasants but as a strong, influential organization. But for the success of the Green Zones to spread to other parts of Mozambique, one essential ingredient is missing—an end to the war. If Washington would use its considerable leverage on South Africa to end the war, the example set by the women of the Green Zones could be replicated throughout Mozambique. □

© Institute for Food and Development Policy / Food First / March 1988.

The National Council of Negro Women/International Division is working in partnership with the General Union of Cooperatives to build a management training center in order to increase the economic efficiency and productivity of the member cooperatives. The center will provide standard courses on management (training of leaders), planning and organization, book-keeping, agriculture and animal husbandry, and irrigation techniques. The center will serve the Maputo, Gaza and Inhambane Provinces of Mozambique.