



legacy of a programme that had promised to bring wealth and employment to the most impoverished region in the country. On the other side stand maize fields that surround the homes of local small-scale farmers who, like the majority of Mozambicans, still rely on subsistence farming for survival.

The plantations were the initiative of the Swedish government-funded Malonda programme. One of the first foreign-investment initiatives in the Niassa region, it ushered in a large-scale pine and eucalyptus forestry project managed by the Chikweti company (a subsidiary of the Swedish investment firm GSFF).

*‘The contracts just ended... We were 80 people, now we are 4’*

Malonda promised a win-win situation with job creation and community-based development, as well as a healthy return on investment for GSFF’s shareholders (which included the Lutheran churches of both Norway and Sweden as well as Dutch Pension Fund ABP).

Chikweti began planting trees in 2007; it quickly became embroiled in disputes with small-scale farmers; according to a study by the Mozambican Ministry of Agriculture and the National Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry (DNTF), the company had illegally occupied 32,000 hectares (320 square kilometres) in the Niassa region.

‘At first people resisted [Chikweti’s plantations], and there were many quarrels,’ recalls Nconda, the traditional leader – or régulo in Portuguese – of a village, whose name he shares. At 69 years old, Nconda looks to be in good health as he sits with his daughter-in-law, Delinda, ripping kernels of maize – the primary form of sustenance in the region – from shanks in his front yard. A key figure in approving the land lease, he remembers how anger boiled over when Chikweti took land that had not been ceded to the company, in the middle of local farmers’ planting season. In April 2011, peasants from the Licole and Lipende villages uprooted and cut down 60,000 pine trees and destroyed some equipment.

The initial anger subsided ‘when [Chikweti] began clearing the land and planting – there were more jobs for the community and their image began to change for the better.’

Nconda encouraged his daughter-in-law to work at the plantations that now border his village. ‘But after the first labour-intensive months, the work dried up and tensions began to rise again. The employment was needed just for certain seasons. People began to get frustrated by just sitting at home and waiting for more work, so they made fires [arson] in the plantations.’

## IDLE LANDS

Soon, scandal hit. In June 2013, an audit of the Malonda Foundation showed striking irregularities. The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) found that \$32,000 in counterfeit cheques had been embezzled at the Niassa office, and immediately withdrew its investment. But half of the total \$9 million pledged between 2010 and 2013 had already been paid out. In 2014, Green Resources – who claim to be Africa’s largest forestry company – acquired GSFF and absorbed Chikweti into their portfolio, which already includes plantations in Tanzania and Uganda.

Four years since the change in ownership, anger over Chikweti’s actions has given way to frustration at Green Resources’ absence.

What Mussa wants to know is simple: ‘Just tell us what is happening!’ He squats on a small wooden stool outside his home in Mapudje village, briefly unwrapping his one-year-old son, who has malaria, from a thick cloth to observe his pallor. Behind them, the morning sun highlights the wide regimented rows of pine trees that cover the undulating hills; the plantations stretching far into the horizon until they meet a single, unforgiving inselberg.

Like so many of his fellow farmers, Muusa bought into Chikweti’s rhetoric and ambitious employment schemes. He feels frustrated that he was persuaded to give up his land for work on the plantation, only to see his employers vanish. He has been waiting years for an explanation from a forestry company representative.

‘The contracts just ended,’ says Maskuini, a régulo of Liconhile village, who says the temporary nature of the jobs for which he traded his land were not made clear. ‘We were 80 people [who worked on the plantations], now we are 4.’

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## SHUTTING OUT THE LIGHT

As the conifers grow, a new problem arises. Kauguanha, a village leader who farms maize fields that border the plantations, says many people have seen their yields decrease as the pine trees block out ever more sunlight. 'The shadow can affect one or two hectares of land; sometimes the only area a family has to grow crops on,' he says.

These impacts exacerbate food insecurity in a region where 43 per cent of children aged 0-5 years suffer from chronic under-nutrition. According to a UNAC report published in August 2016, the plantations have also depleted water resources and affected the local flora and fauna in the area.

*The National Peasants Union of Mozambique describes community consultations 'as part of the grooming strategy for communities to give up their land'*

Green Resources have a chequered record elsewhere in Africa: a 2015 investigation by the Swedish TV channel, TV4, exposed how the firm had forced people off their farms to make way for the Kaching plantation in Uganda.

But the company are promising transparency, better communication – and even jobs in the near future. They say they are planning to harvest and re-plant in northern Mozambique during 2018; work which will require seasonal workers from the local community.

'As our trees are beginning to mature, and business moves forwards, we expect to be in a position to offer such work annually,' says Emma Shephard-Walwyn, the Acting Environmental and Social Governance Director at Green Resources.

'At this stage, we cannot give firm numbers on how many workers we will need. We inform the community leaders if we are seeking seasonal or permanent staff, and individuals are given all the relevant information when signing their contracts with the company.'

The firm is also paying into two 'social funds' aimed at compensating local communities for lost land. One provides \$5 per hectare per year for land that has been planted but is reduced to \$2 if vandalized; the second provides communities with \$1 per hectare, less than the price of a local cup of coffee.

When Green Resources do begin to recruit in the Niassa region, there will be no lack of demand.

'For us there are two options: farming here or working for a company like Green Resources,' explains Alberto, an 18-year-old from the area of Chimbonila. 'We do not read or write and we can't get a job in Lichinga [the regional capital].'

In the absence of competition, permanent employees can expect to receive \$60 per month: Mozambique's base level of minimum wage for the sector.

This year's harvest may provide a willing workforce, but it will also force Green Resources to answer some uncomfortable questions from local communities. Eleven years since the forestry companies planted the first tree in this remote corner of Mozambique, they will find people much more savvy when it comes to exploitation and misinformation.

*Nils Adler is an Anglo-Swedish journalist with a background in social anthropology.*

To read **New Internationalist's** original reports from Niassa, go to [nin.tl/MozambiqueForests](http://nin.tl/MozambiqueForests) (<https://nin.tl/MozambiqueForests>)

Pictures: Pascal Vossen



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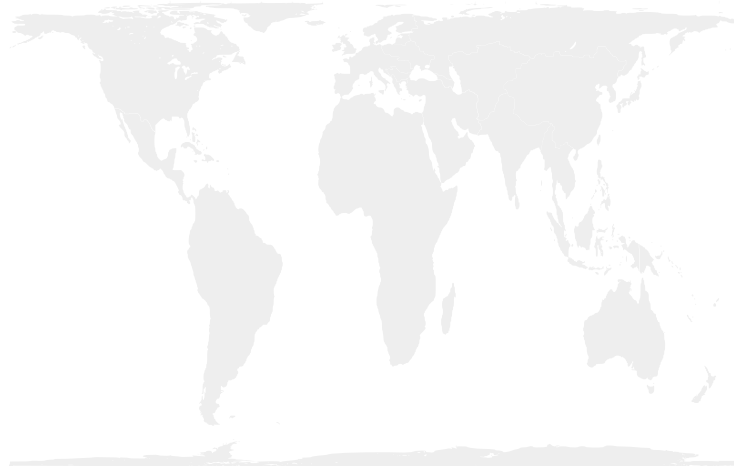


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