

Oxfam in Mozambique: early years

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In 2012 Robin Palmer, formerly adviser on land issues for Oxfam GB, but also with a wealth of experience in Southern Africa, hit upon the idea of a book on Oxfam's experiences in Mozambique over the previous 30 years. It was not intended as a self-congratulatory piece but as reflection on programmes of work and the relationships they were based on over a period of massive change in Mozambique and not insignificant change in Oxfam. He invited many of us who had worked there for Oxfam to contribute but sadly, although most were keen to do so, most lacked the time to actually deliver their contributions, so the book has yet to happen. Having been stimulated by his invitation to revisit my experiences, I thought they were at least worth sharing. What is offered is a final draft. It has not been polished for publication and any errors or omissions there may be have gone uncorrected. For these, I apologise.

I had two periods working in Mozambique. Both times I was employed by Oxfam, both times I was involved full on in working on responses to the multiple emergencies created in part by the weather but far more by the impact of the war. Over time the experiences blended into one set of memories. However, re-opening the box in response to the invitation to contribute to this book has not just reminded me that the two experiences were quite distinct but also prompted reflections on how I myself might have changed during and between the two periods, reflections of course mediated by the person I have become in the twenty eight years since I first arrived in Mozambique.

Background

I had started a history degree in 1972, for little better reason than to avoid having to make any career decisions. The bit I enjoyed most was the so-called 'expansion of Europe' and the historical and current resistance to it, within Europe as well as in the rest of the world: resistance as culture as well as politics and war. By great good chance, whilst browsing in the African Studies Library one sunny afternoon, I came across the work of Amilcar Cabral and acquired a series of understandings, methods and values, which guide me to this day. More practically, this led to windswept afternoons leafleting against CIA and South African intervention in Angola and good contacts with the tiny office of what, in the aftermath of the uprising in Portugal, had become the Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Information Centre (MAGIC). Through them, I applied on graduation in 1976 to go to Mozambique as an unqualified teacher at the International School in Maputo. Fortunately, their standards were, by then, higher than this and I was left to think a bit less impulsively about how to combine my personal and political interests with a useful way of earning a living, a process helped by a study trip to Guinea Bissau in 1977. I became interested in new and effective approaches to primary healthcare, which combined some limited demand for external technical support with a real need to engage with and empower people. So I chose nursing as a way into developmental healthcare. Sheffield was one of a very few centres which offered a shortened course for graduates. It also had an active and

independent Southern Africa Solidarity Campaign, kept going in large measure by politically minded academics involved in the Review of African Political Economy. These provided an excellent and highly educational insight into many then current debates, not least stories from Dar es Salaam of comradely but also highly critical debates about Frelimo's approach to rural development.

On qualification, I could not find the work I was looking for in Africa and instead worked for two years in a rural health programme in Amazonas, Brazil. The work itself was unspectacular but its setting and its political context - the end of the dictatorship, the union opposition, liberation theology and the birth of the Workers' Party - was amazing. In the process, I met Oxfam for the first time or, to be more exact, I met staff from the Brazil office, highly engaged with the social movements they were funding and, I later discovered, not entirely typical of the organisation as a whole. The job finished, some months spent working in London and wondering what to do next, and then Oxfam are looking for a Portuguese speaking nurse to work in Mozambique. In fact, they have promised the Mozambique government that one will arrive soon and, as I am the only one they can find, my lack of awareness of the differences in dress code between Oxfam Manaus and Oxfam Oxford does not count against me. Even better, they need an interim country representative and I am able to recommend Julian Quan, a friend, political colleague and, like me, someone interested in combining work and solidarity. He gets the job. In February 1984, we get on the plane to Harare together.

Arrival 1984

We had two different jobs to do, although part of his included responsibility for me. Both jobs were very short term - mine because it was assumed the 'emergency need' I was there to respond to would pass, Julian's because Oxfam were in the process of looking for a longer term, 'official' country representative but they needed someone on the ground straight away, in part to demonstrate to the Mozambicans that they were serious about working there. However, we were also sharing many of the same experiences. For both of us it was our first experience of emergency relief work and of exposure to the aid industry en masse. Most immediately, it was also our first experience of Mozambique.

It is worth remembering the extraordinary reality we found. Laurenço Marques, often described as the most beautiful 'European' city on the Indian Ocean, had been abandoned in a hurry by its Portuguese residents at independence. The sudden exodus stripped many businesses of all their skilled staff and left the incoming government, which had been planning to nationalise only the most strategic industries with the challenge of trying to sustain a raft of small businesses up to and including a twenty person 'fine patisserie' bakery. Some of the largest buildings in the city had been deliberately rendered unusable, with cement poured down the lift shafts. Somewhat desperate attempts to keep things going were further thwarted by the sabotage of imports by foreign agencies, including the CIA; by acute shortage of foreign exchange; by food shortages created by failed collective agriculture policies followed by drought; and, finally by the interruption of transport links caused by the war. Throughout my time in Mozambique, the road North became impassable somewhere between Maracuene and Xai-Xai. Road and rail transport to South Africa was subject to frequent, if usually brief, disruptions. All of this we knew about at some level

thanks to the often excellent debriefings offered by returning cooperantes through MAGIC, but the reality was still a shock, not least as all the above were exacerbated by Ciclona Domoina, a full force tropical storm, which hit Maputo just weeks before we arrived.

Early days included waiting at the airport for a non-existent official welcome and equally non-existent public transport before being offered a lift into town. A surreal couple of nights in the five star, if quite dilapidated Hotel Polana, then the only foreign currency hotel in town, was followed by a few nights in a strange Christian Council of Mozambique bungalow, sharing the fridge with a complete cow's head which was being saved for some special meal. We finally found refuge in the IVS house, which, in both its social atmosphere and advanced dilapidation, was reminiscent of the Brixton squat Julian had just left behind. Dilapidation was everywhere. There had been a shortage of building materials for a long time; shortage of fuel, shortage of public transport, shortage of food and drink, empty shops and empty restaurants. Power cuts were frequent. Water only ran for a few random hours a day, requiring the prompt filling of buckets if water was to be there for cooking and washing.

None of which detracted much from the atmosphere of the place. People went about their business even if there was little business to do. Poor families, working families had been rehoused in the colonialists' apartments, where, without gas or electricity they cooked on charcoal on the balconies. A walk through the cement city at night had the smells and many of the sounds of an African village and walking at night was quite normal. Not only was there little practical alternative, but violent crime was virtually unknown. In fact, after years of the often random and violent 'justice' of the colonial era, Mozambican society was incredibly orderly. Laws were strictly enforced but, usually, fairly and generally adhered to. The response to the cyclone, which had caused massive damage across Southern Mozambique, had, according to the first hand accounts of the cooperantes who had participated in its aftermath, been astounding. Something like three hundred lorries worth of utensils, clothes and building materials were collected from the citizens of Maputo to distribute to those whose homes had been destroyed, none of which could have been really 'surplus', none of which could be easy to replace.

The attitude to 'foreigners' was also unique in our experience, then or since. A few Portuguese remained there along with a fairly small diplomatic community and a very small business one, which all seemed to keep themselves to themselves. Otherwise, everyone was there because they had been invited by the government and, it was generally assumed and accepted, were there to help the country. Such foreigners were privileged, not least with access to the Loja Franca, but, with the exception of a small number of UN staff and - perhaps, I have no idea - the upper echelons of Eastern block military personnel, did not live conspicuously more luxurious lives than their Mozambican counterparts. Nearly all were embedded in Mozambican institutions and, as such, they not only had Mozambican counterparts but, normally, Mozambican bosses as well. Not that the cooperante community was that homogenous or indeed harmonious. There were sizable groups of technical expats sent as part of official bilateral aid from many communist countries, whose integration with Mozambican society or willingness to co-operate with or socialise with Western 'comrades' varied considerably. There was a large community of Chileans, living in exile from military

dictatorship, taking some pleasure in sending letters home with the return address of Avenida Salvadore Allende. There was a very varied mix of Western cooperantes, some selected by volunteer agencies like IVS, most selected through whatever solidarity channels existed in their countries of origin, according to criteria which might demand certain levels of conformity to current Communist Party doctrine.

A general leftist and anti-imperialist consensus amongst these groups and between cooperantes and Mozambicans served fairly well for day to day civility but often ran into difficulties as things got more specific. Despite general respect, at least in public, for the somewhat puritanical line of Frelimo on sexuality, the politics of gender, relating both to policy and practice, was an area of widely differing views. There could also be strong differences of opinion as to the appropriateness of the various technical expertise on offer. The Fourth Party Congress, meeting in 1983, had strongly criticised the priority given to high input modern agriculture, as promoted, not surprisingly given their own policy choices, by Eastern block donors, and voted to prioritise small scale peasant production instead. Samora Machel himself called a meeting of all foreign staff at the Central Hospital in Maputo and told them they had been invited not just to co-operate with Mozambique but to co-operate with each other. Cooperantes with the 'personal is political' approach, common amongst Western leftists, were told politely but firmly that Mozambique was not using scarce foreign exchange to bring highly qualified people to the country just so that they could feel right-on as they stood in a bread queue for hours on end. Could they please employ a servant to do that and get back to work?

This, then was the most unusual mix into which we arrived. We received a warm welcome from the few very engaged but ultra-overworked officials responsible both for broadening Mozambique's international co-operation and in the new department of Calamidades Naturais. We were received with somewhat more suspicion by some of the other cooperantes, who perceived Oxfam to be part of a charity sector, associated with ruling class discourse, which did not adequately challenge the power relations which created poverty. However, we had been given some fairly clear direction in Oxford. Our new colleagues in Mozambique were expecting us and had a broadly similar idea of our roles. It was up to us to make it work.

Work 1984

My job was to assist the Mozambican Health Service respond to a situation of widespread hunger and displacement around the town of Vilanculos in Inhambane province. Several years of poor rains, followed by full drought in 1983, had caused widespread malnutrition with, according to Oxfam's first field assessment in December 1983, the deaths of 'thousands of people'. The situation was made worse by a rapidly worsening security situation in the area and also a slowness in sounding the alarm. Local officials, it seems, feared that they would be blamed for the disaster so that, for example, the local director of health altered the figures on deaths recorded that he returned to the Ministry to try and make them look more 'normal'. By the time of Oxfam's first visit an energetic and highly competent Mozambican doctor, Igor Vaz, had already been sent to the district to back up the less well qualified permanent team of paramedics. The World Food Programme had started shifting bulk cereals to the area using the Cinq Juin, a sea-going Seycheloise landing craft. Widespread famine was by then in the past but the Health Ministry and its local staff and

volunteers were still learning on the job about a number of second level interventions - nutritional surveys, food planning for large populations, identification of at risk groups, the supply and preparation of special foods for the most vulnerable, issues of water supply and sanitation to the large encampments of displaced people - and it was with these issues that I was expected to help.

Getting to Vilanculos looked like it was going to be a problem until we discovered that the EEC (as was) was now flying special foods into the area from Swaziland and the plane might be able to take not only me but also the Landrover we had bought for Vilanculos hospital. The agent, a sweating white businessman stepped off the plane to say how pleased he was to meet Oxfam, here was his card and he could meet all our needs. Then, seeing me frowning at the Johannesburg address, he quite understands our possible reluctance to deal with apartheid South Africa and, without a bat of an eyelid, hands us the card for his Swazi subsidiary. Anyway, he got me on the plane and up to Vilanculos, a beautiful small town, previously (and subsequently) a centre of the Mozambican tourist industry and boasting, as the centre for all visitors, the then nationalised Hotel Dona Ana, right on the Indian Ocean. It was the strangest but in many ways the most pleasant of places to work on famine relief. I swam in the sea most mornings before going to work. Most basics, as everywhere else in Mozambique, were in short supply but here some very sorry rice might be served with fresh lobster. The hotel management were very friendly, seriously trying to learn the tourist trade which they hoped would provide for their futures, and listening with the greatest respect to the lengthy harangues from the expropriated ninety year old Dona Ana, who still made regular visits to tell them how 'her' hotel should be run. The hotel was also the centre for nearly all visitors to the town - an East German Gas Exploration team, aid workers, government officials, journalists, the truck drivers from the very occasional out of town convoys. It was a good place to find out what was going on.

In the period since the last Oxfam visit and in a way which I learnt to be absolutely typical of what happens in emergency responses, the situation had moved on. A team of about six people from the (West) German Red Cross, financed and supplied by the EEC had arrived essentially to do my job, and were ensconced in the hotel in a frosty proximity to their fellow Germans. Unlike myself, however, their work was fairly independent of that of the Ministry of Health. In addition, within my first days there, a small team from the Irish NGO Concern arrived and started talking about setting up health programmes. Other delegations of aid people, donors and journalists came and went. The fact was that Vilanculos was in a good location, it was safe, it had a good airport (built for tourism) and was probably the nearest place to Maputo where the visiting 'International Community' which a desperate government was trying to attract could safely be taken to be shown the 'Mozambique Emergency'. All of which contributed to a certain bewilderment on my part as to what was going on and what my role in it was going to be. Fortunately, I had been well received by my colleagues at the local hospital, had been able to visit the various camps of displaced people with them and, subject to all the permutations of what might happen with all the other agencies, begun to work out with Dr Vaz what I could usefully do.

However, within a few weeks situation changed again with a visit from a high powered team from the International Committee of the Red Cross, along with the leader of the German Red Cross team and accompanied, for his first visit to

Vilanculos, by Julian. ICRC can work how they want outside war zones. In war zones, their ethos requires them to work on all sides of a conflict. There was some history, the details of which I do not know, about this not having happened during the liberation war and the Mozambican government clearly felt that ICRC should be able to do humanitarian work on the government side without concerning themselves too much about working with 'armed bandits'. I also have no idea - on this issue as well as on many others - on how well the district administrator was briefed by Maputo on the many delegations he had to host. In any case there seemed to be pressure to show that the 'safe area' around Vilanculos was bigger than was usually assumed and the delegation, including Julian, was taken to a settlement, Macovane, that I had not visited myself. Near there it was attacked. A number of Mozambican soldiers in its escort were killed as were two young 'soccoristas' of the Mozambican Red Cross who had left secondary school in Inhambane to act as volunteer health workers in the emergency. The delegation had to walk the 20km or so to Inhassouro, the next town up the coast from Vilanculos, from where they got picked up by an overloaded light plane the following morning and flown back to Vilanculos. There, and later in Maputo, the arguments began. ICRC blamed the government, declared that the area was not a safe place to work and not only refused to work there themselves but encouraged the German Red Cross and Oxfam to pull out too. The German Red Cross did, thus removing the legal basis for the EEC funded special foods flights to continue as European rules required that such aid be received by a European NGO. We were less sure. We felt that the normal safeguards, which in our limited experience seemed to work, had been stretched by the politics of the occasion. We were worried about the impact of the end of EEC flights on food security, not least as the UNDP ship was due for some maintenance in the near future. We worried that if Oxfam joined a general exodus, this would undermine Mozambique's wider efforts to secure new sources of international support for its precarious situation. We understood the dispute as a power struggle for who had the authority to define and manage the response to the emergency, an authority we thought should belong to the government.

We therefore decided that I should stay. In fact, partly because we thought it appropriate and partly to clearly distinguish Oxfam from this other manoeuvring, Julian wrote to the District Administrator thanking him for his efforts in trying to protect the delegation of which he had been part and paying tribute to the two young Mozambican volunteers who had been killed. Despite some reservations from Oxford, which had a strong preference for Oxfam to decide on its own plan of work rather than implementing the plans of others, we became the temporary implementing agency for the EEC airlift, thus guaranteeing some security of the supply of special foods as well as allowing us to persuade the EEC to provide some 'recovery' supplies such as seeds, tools and material for making safer wells. This meant that, beyond anything else, my presence alone ensured that this material could be delivered. I felt like a character from a Graham Greene novel. All that was essential was to be sober enough - just for one moment every week - to get to the airport and sign a plane's cargo manifest.

For some of the time, there was little else I could do. The security situation got worse and for some weeks it was impossible to get out of town to do my work in the camps of displaced people. There were other forms of pressure too. One evening, as the person on-duty with access to the Oxfam provided hospital Landrover, I was called

out of the hospital and asked to go and pick up a woman in the middle of a highly distressed labour 'just beyond the airport'. As my 'guide' kept wanting me to go further than he had originally said, I became suspicious and refused to go on. The following day enquiries were made and no such 'patient' existed. Another time I thought I could at least do some work in Inhassouro and set off there by boat only for the boat to break down and us need to walk the last ten miles through what was contested - although, fortunately, on that day completely empty - territory. Risky convoys were sent to try and meet the food needs of outlying settlements, which sometimes led to the death of drivers I had been eating with in the hotel. Most dramatic of all was taking off in the very last of the light in an Antonov cargo plane, packed with wounded soldiers, as I took two sick children from the war orphans' camp down to hospital in Maputo.

At other times, it was possible to see and do more. One very impressive sight was the district political leadership taking the considerable risk of visiting every main centre in the district to hold meetings to discuss the situation and, if memory serves, to discuss key issues in preparation for some big meeting - possibly of Frelimo's Central Committee - due to take place in Maputo. I witnessed the well attended meeting in Vilanculos itself. It lasted three days and involved a lot of people having an often critical say. On another occasion, the labourers unloading food from the ship were unhappy with their conditions and stopped work. The matter was dealt with by the young first secretary of the party branch through open air discussion between him and a large group of workers, with no hint of security or of coercion.

Another time I went with a small escort to another part of the district where the main recent change in population had been the arrival of large numbers of 'prostitutes', rounded up in Maputo as part of Operacao Producao, and sent to the countryside where it was assumed they would become self-sufficient farmers. During my time in Mozambique I heard a number of first hand accounts of this operation, organised by subsequent national President Guebuza, being used by middle ranking power brokers to settle personal scores. On this occasion however, there must have been some truth in the accusations as the incomers were certainly not doing much farming and there was a near epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases in the community. I went there to conduct a nutrition survey of the children. The commander of the escort, a young lieutenant from military intelligence, came to find three deserters who were known to be there, which he did by going unarmed to their houses and telling them to come back with us.

Security improved and it was possible again to visit the camps of displaced people. Progress had been dramatic. Displaced health workers had built new health centres. Displaced teachers set up classes under the trees. The local government had organised the digging of good quality wells. At our instigation, tools and seed had been provided via the EEC. Our nutritional surveys no longer raised concerns. One day I arrived to find a troupe of traditional musicians playing and people dancing. Life had come again to Pambara and my role as an emergency resource was redundant. This had been foreseen for some time. The EEC had found some other organisation to take over their operation and the Ministry of Health wanted me to go to Tete to work with health workers there in preparation for what was feared would be a return of food insecurity there later in the year.

Tete, thanks in part to the hospitality and existing contacts of IVS volunteer Dr. Kate Gingell, was considerably less stressful than Vilanculos. Work with the provincial and district health authorities went more or less as planned. As in Vilanculos, our presence on the ground allowed us to 'leverage' - in the modern parlance - more assistance for the province, in this case a one million ECU supply of seeds to aid famine recovery in the province, for which the EEC - this time the Harare office - again needed a European NGO partner on the ground to go with the planning and logistical work already being offered by a Harare based NGO called German Agro Action. Later in the year, this led to Oxfam hiring an agronomist, Tony Winch, to stay in Tete and see this programme through.

I left Mozambique, after about six months in total, once the seed programme had been agreed. It had been a truly incredible, if sometimes very frightening, experience. It introduced me to many things I had not known before: primarily war, but also a first hand view of the 'international community' responding to a crisis with all the attendant issues of power, confusion and competition. In part through my own experience and partly through listening to Julian, I began to see the practical connections between such issues and the work of local embassy staff and of the media. At that time, the impact of such shenanigans on the Mozambican structures we worked with was still relatively limited. Even if the Nkomati accord and the decisions of the Fourth Congress were going to change things irrevocably, day to day Mozambique was still in socialist, if not in full blooded revolutionary mode. Although there were instances of insensitivity, of abuses of power and frequent issues of capacity and/or competence, most of the state institutions we worked with seemed committed to improving the lot of the poor and this was visible in relationships between the government and the governed at local level, particularly in Inhambane. The National Health Service was incredibly well organised, well motivated and effective given both the human and financial resources available to it. It was a real privilege to work in it and learn from it. It represents an historic achievement and an example of what can be done in practice through well-organised, well-directed hard work which needs to be remembered both in Mozambique and by the development community in these neo-liberal and policy obsessed times.

Another reflection concerns the relative situation of Mozambique and Zimbabwe. For people travelling to and from Mozambique, Zimbabwe was at that time both a land of plenty and of extremely limited post-independence social change. Even in 1987, I remember white secretarial staff in our main supplier in Zimbabwe not simply being horrified that a well qualified black assistant operations manager was going to be paid more than them but actually being surprised that others did not agree with them. In rural areas it could be hard to imagine that any political change had taken place at all. On the other hand, it was hard to watch the well protected, well supplied Zimbabwean escorts on the convoys rolling through Tete on their way to Malawi without comparing them to the state of their Mozambican counterparts and wondering if Zimbabwe's caution was not understandable. Certainly Zimbabweans, like the Oxfam director Peter Nyoni, who came to Tete for the first time were visibly shocked at the level of destruction they saw: they had assumed claims of Mozambique's difficulties to have been part of the propaganda of forces resisting change. It is interesting to note, especially in the light of subsequent developments, that it was commonly thought at the time that the slow pace of change in Zimbabwe and the brutality of the suppression of dissidence in Matabeleland were both connected to Mugabe's

experience of Mozambique and his determination to avoid the same sort of economic dysfunction or disruption by externally supported dissidents.

Between Times

I left Mozambique in August 1984 and did not return until late in 1986. It was not a hugely stabilising time for me. My second stint abroad had spelled the death knell of a long term relationship. Returning to Sheffield, becoming active in civil rights groups at the time of the miners' strike and witnessing much tension and some violence may or may not have been the best way of dealing with some of the unresolved feelings from what had been a quite harrowing time in Mozambique. It is also worth mentioning that Oxford, having played a very positive and supportive role when I was in Mozambique, provided nothing in the way of continuing support. Various promises made (by more senior staff than those participating in this retrospective) that I would be 'looked after' on my return turned out to be meaningless. The tone of the cursory post contract interview with personnel did not encourage me to be open in exploring my personal responses to what I had experienced, and I was anxious to avoid saying anything which might damage my chances of future employment.

I did however keep in touch with Oxfam and early in 1985, after they had made what was then their largest promises of support to any programme ever, was asked to open a Tigray and Eritrea office in Khartoum and to monitor what was done with Oxfam's aid and to assess the changing situation and needs of those parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea not in Ethiopian government hands. I spent about six months there, briefly revisited Brazil, and was then rehired by Oxfam to act as the representative of an Oxfam, SCF and Band Aid consortium exploring (and, for the time being, rejecting) the possibilities of working with the Sudanese Relief and Rehabilitation Association in supporting civilian populations in SPLA controlled areas of South Sudan out of Kenya. During this last contract Oxfam finally acted on a long understood realisation that emergency responses were a fairly permanent feature of its work and I'd been hired on a two year contract as one of its first 'permanent' emergency field staff. This meant that I was already under contract when conditions deteriorated again in Mozambique and was available to be moved there later in 1986 to support Oxfam's response to the new emergencies.

Although I had the same sympathies for Mozambique and its resistance to apartheid aggression (not least in the still incompletely explained death of Samora Machel just before I returned), my experiences in 1985 and 1986 inevitably shaped how I went about my work on my return. First, I was now much more (and more comfortably) part of Oxfam. I had been working - and continued to work in Mozambique - directly for them, rather than being on loan to local agencies. I was also much more familiar with the politicisation of international relief work from the perspectives of its impact on local regional politics, on domestic politics elsewhere (both the Bandaaid phenomenon but also, for instance, watching US Evangelical Fundamentalists seek to exploit the Ethiopian famine); on the use of emergency situations to promote perceived national political interests (for example as part of the cold war¹); and on the often acute inter-agency politics as organisations fought for positions of leadership and market/funding share in any given emergency situation. Above all, however, I

¹ See for example Paul Valley 'Famine: Russia and US on collusion course', The Times, June 4th 1985

witnessed, in Ethiopia and particularly in Eritrea, the impact of evident and effective commitment to meeting civilian needs on the political and military course of a civil war. Although they were clearly linked to the political/military movements in their respective areas, the Eritrean Relief Association and the Relief Society of Tigray had a distinct role not only in providing emergency assistance to their civilian populations but in introducing new ideas and practices into civil life. Hence my colleague John Morton, then working for Oxfam in the Red Sea Hills in Sudan, found nomadic groups still following EPLF influenced ways of conducting collective meetings even when they were on the Sudan side of the border. I therefore returned to what I still saw as the frontline of the war against apartheid somewhat more of an organisation man but also more convinced than ever of the political as well as the humanitarian necessity of engaging with and supporting affected civilians, which after all was a lesson I had first explored when studying the experiences of the PAIGC and of FRELIMO in their respective liberation wars.

Work 1986-1987

In the mean time, back in Mozambique, Oxfam had made slow progress in developing its programme. Stephen Johnson had completed two years as country representative and left. Julian Quan again stepped in as a temporary replacement whilst Rosie Fieth, who had been VSO's representative in Tanzania, was recruited. For Oxfam, the main priority was the long term development programme in Cabo Delgado on which progress had been very slow and difficult and it was with that in mind that Rosie was recruited. The government too wanted Oxfam to concentrate on such work and to demonstrate new methodologies for supporting development at community level. However, the emergency had never completely gone away and Oxfam had continued to make modest inputs both in response to government requests and through the work of Ian Bray in Chicualacuala. In July, the government asked for help with the consequences of a rapidly worsening security situation in Zambezia and Julian visited the province alongside a representative of World Vision. Soon after her arrival, Rosie visited Niassa and, with concerns about the food supply in Lichinga itself, started a small emergency agricultural support programme there. In November Tony Vaux and I, both part of the Disaster's team, accompanied Rosie on visits to Tete and to Zambezia. Rosie and I then went back to Northern Niassa and, having already greatly increased our response, I was sent back to the Mozambique office on a sort of secondment at the beginning of 1987 and visited Zambezia and Southern Niassa.

To various degrees, all of these visits by these different combinations of people, found a similar combination of circumstances consisting of

- an absence of outright famine but a widespread insufficiency of food which, in the context of the disruptions caused by the war, was clearly going to get worse
- many thousands of people displaced by the war in each province, often in situations of complete destitution caused by fleeing empty handed during night attacks, often highly traumatised by their experiences, in which lack of clothing and not knowing what had happened to family members were common problems
- many very consistent stories of MNR abuse of civilians, including conscription of children, rape, murder and threats against entire populations

but stories too of indiscipline, poor morale and, sometimes, abuse by government troops

- a variable response by local authorities, but always inadequate in terms of resources and sometimes too in apparent commitment to the problems of the affected populations
- a marked reluctance by the 'international community' and news media to respond to or report on the increasingly desperate pleas for help from the Mozambique government, or to investigate what was happening on the ground

By contrast Oxfam felt quite well positioned to try and respond not just with its own emergency programme but to do so in a way which sought to stimulate understanding of the emergency and greater support from other sources. The Disasters' Department had been reorganised and upgraded as a result of the crises in the Horn of Africa. It was more aware of the range of potential roles in responding to emergencies. It was confident of its capacity to raise resources. This capacity and its attendant confidence, as well as the situation on the ground, led Oxfam to commit to a major effort, far greater than all its previous efforts in the country, in response to the Mozambican government's pleas for more aid. This response was shaped over a number of months but consisted of two major new programmes (in Zambezia and Niassa) as well as occasional work in other provinces; support for DPCCN's roles as co-ordinator and lead agency; lobbying for greater support from and co-ordination with other agencies, both in Maputo and internationally; involvement in UK and UN level appeals; efforts both in-house and through the media to raise interest in and explain the causes of the Mozambican emergency. We even had a Blue Peter appeal, producing some two million T-shirts.

The Zambezia programme consisted of a very large purchase and distribution of cloth along with support for DPCCN's transport capacity in the province, the purchase of a large number of seeds and the planned acceptance from other donors of supplementary food rations for use by the provincial health service. Julian Quan was rehired on a short-term contract and opened an Oxfam office in Quelimane, being replaced later by a series of very short term appointees before the arrival, later in 1987, of Guy Mullin from Oxfam's office in Pemba. Julian arrived, delayed I think, on a flight from the UK, had a single evening of briefing from me in Maputo and then flew to Quelimane to receive, almost immediately, the first cloth which, in the absence of other reliable means of transport, was being flown in from Harare. From that point it was supposed to be made up into small bundles, along with needle and thread, so that people could make their own clothes. In the circumstances on the ground, this proved to be impractical but fortunately Julian was able to find a clothing factory in Quelimane which was working well below capacity because of lack of cloth. There were some problems with the monitoring and control of distribution, but generally the cloth programme was seen as a success. The same could not be said of the seed programme. Delays in the seed purchase, due I believe to problems of testing and certification, meant that they arrived later than expected in Beira and then joined the long backlog of goods waiting to be shipped up or down the coast. At the last minute, some were distributed and planted in Sofala. Very little got to Zambezia in time for the planting season. The supplementary foods did even less well. The EEC offered to send us 300 MT, I think, of milk powder and six months later someone flew out to a meeting with me and local EEC officials in our office in Maputo to evaluate what we had done with it. 'Nothing', I said, 'it is still in the fucking

docks in Antwerp', thus bringing to an end one of the shortest meetings of my life. We had however been able to substitute it with foods bought locally, so that we were at least able to supply some of the needs to the local health service.

Zambezia was a strange place to visit. To begin with Oxfam had no accommodation so we used to stay in a luxury hotel which, because it was designed for an air-conditioning system that no longer worked, was incredibly hot and uncomfortable. The city had a fairly militarised air and was full of Tanzanian troops. We had reasonable relations with the local DPCCN most of the time but otherwise there did not seem to be a huge interest in the plight of the deslocados amongst the local authorities. It was clear that the political situation was more complicated than we had previously experienced elsewhere. I remember talking to a former district administrator, later working for the Mozambique Red Cross, who explained how slow they had been to take the problem of 'bandidos armados' in their district seriously: how essentially, they had been both politically and militarily complacent.

Niassa was more welcoming, not least because so few outsiders took any notice of the province's problems. This was partly because it was far away and hard to get to and partly because there was not a lot of credibility in Maputo given to the provincial government's figures: a problem which on closer examination was as much to do with the lack in that province of any experience or advice on how to document emergency situations. In fact, chronic neglect combined, particularly in 1986, with the almost complete failure of the province's main long distance transport link - the railway to Nampula and Nacala - had created a situation of extreme fragility which took only the lightest of extra knocks to push into disaster. When Rosie Fieth first visited in late 1986, there had not been a train in months, there was not even a functioning locomotive on the Niassa section of the line, there was virtually no fuel for any purpose, no inputs for the mechanised state farms to function, no trade goods to encourage peasant farmers to grow and market their surpluses. Both the military and much of the political leadership were demoralised and doing little to alleviate the situation, leading to considerable resentment in the general population. Thus, a combination of increasing lawlessness, some MNR activity in the South of the Province and poor rains led, by the end of 1986, to a potentially very serious situation across much of the province. An outright famine was unlikely, but there was a very widespread insufficiency of food and a complete lack of viable plans for resolving the problem of the lack of food in the medium term. The situation was particularly bad in some districts in the South in which MNR had been active and which were completely cut off from national or international transport networks. Thus, in Maua, for example, some 25,000 people were cramped into a small and only partially secure area in and around the town itself, working tired land with inadequate seeds and tools and little protection against the theft of crops. The town had not been supplied for over two years so there was a shortage of everything that anyone might want to trade any food surplus for.

Our response 'aims to save life in the short term and to ensure agricultural production in the medium term, both by providing agricultural inputs and by encouraging, through the provision of clothes, soap etc. a feeling of a return to normal amongst a population traumatised by war' (Proposal for an integrated relief programme, Niassa, Oxfam (GB), March 1984). It had some similarities to the 1984 seed programme in Tete in that we partnered the Norwegian NGO Redd Barna in a way which allowed

them to access Norwegian Government funds. They then took responsibility for the external purchase of goods, trucking them to Malawi and then putting them on the train to Cuamba. There they were received by Oxfam/DPCCN. Some distributions of food, tools and seed were made there, most was then shipped by air to Maua, Metarica and Nipepe. Originally, we had planned to use Airserv, the American aviation NGO, to do this but it turned out to be cheaper and politically more sensitive to support LAM in chartering a couple of old DC3s from South Africa to do the job. After all, as the managing director of LAM told us with a smile when we explained the philanthropic background to Oxfam's activities, LAM was a 'non-profit' operation too. Oxfam opened a small office in Cuamba in the person of Charles Fox, a not particularly revolutionary Swedish ex-cooperante. Charles had nonetheless won an award for 'Emulacao Socialista' at his last place of work, something I had failed to do in Vilanculos where the slogan 'Punctuality is the symbol of socialist emulation', hung on a banner above the front door of the hospital, did not really play to my strengths. Overall everything worked very well. Interestingly enough the multinational Lonhro was trying to do something similar - supporting the regeneration of the tea plantations they had taken over in Gurue, Northern Zambezia, also by air from Cuamba and supported by some gentlemen who were supposedly ex SAS. I am pleased to be able to report, at this current time of fetishisation of the private sector, that our logistics operation ran considerably more smoothly than theirs. Perhaps that had something to do with our efforts to engage with people locally. It was the practice then for major local employers to support teams in the local sporting leagues and, despite some subsequent criticism from Oxford, I used my discretionary funds to allow the equipping of some joint Oxfam/DPCCN teams. To me it was part of promoting 'a feeling of a return to normal'. Charles was also keen but perhaps misread our priorities. For months after, it was far easier to get scores for the ladies' volleyball team out of him than any information on official distributions of aid.

If these programmes, and some lesser activities elsewhere, were the reason for being in Mozambique, most of my actual time was spent in the office in Maputo. I remember it as the most extended period of seriously hard work I have ever done. The working day could easily be sixteen hours long and days off were very rare. Part of it was trying to organise things and people to support our programmes. As much as interacting with other agencies, trying to shape and encourage a greater response to Mozambique's calls for aid, trying to steer such responses to support local institutions rather than replicate them, trying to give our understanding of the causes of the emergency. All of this took place in a city and a country which was visibly changing. Southern Mozambique was a bit more secure than two years previously. The results of the Nkomati accords and the economic reforms were visible on the streets and in the restaurants. Social divisions were a bit more visible, along with disputes about the ownership and occupancy of those abandoned city apartments. The emphasis was on reconciliation and on business recovery rather than class solidarity and fiscal probity. Survival and moving on, rather than revolutionary alternatives, were the priorities of the day. Nonetheless when I was stopped and fairly abruptly questioned by an armed patrol on the night after a South African special forces attack in the city, I still felt able to suggest to the soldiers that they should not let that outrage affect how we all behaved to each other on the streets of Maputo. I have often wondered since then where or when else in the world I would have felt safe enough to make such a point to some understandably edgy soldiers. Soon after then,

in May or June, I left, only to return for a brief reflection on the programme at the end of the year.

Reflections

What were we trying to do? What did we achieve? Was it all worth it?

One theme that stands out very clearly from the writing at the time, and which is relevance to the themes of celebrating peace and reconciliation in this book, is that of solidarity with Mozambique in the face of South African aggression. Although there are numerous comments about government 'errors' and some about the mistreatment, in one form or other, of civilians by government agencies including the military, the overall tone of all the Oxfam documents of the time is one of respect for what the government was trying to do for the welfare of its population and recognition of some encouragement on their part for Oxfam to pioneer more bottom up methods. The fact that the MNR as a military force was created by the illegal regime in Rhodesia and then taken over and supported by South African intelligence both before and after the Nkomati accords was almost universally accepted not just within Oxfam but by the British Government and, in a successful effort to avoid pressure from some of Reagan's more extreme supporters that the US should back the MNR, by a detailed US State department study too (the Gersony report). The line between what can be seen as legitimate tactics of war, such as the attempt to starve enemy populations through siege, be it of a city such as Troy or of a country as in the Battle of the Atlantic, and war crimes and terror is one which has been argued about and frequently re-drawn throughout history. Attacking economic targets, even if there is 'collateral civilian damage', is acceptable to many. By most definitions, however, the MNR's frequent and deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure, especially of hospitals and health posts which were the symbol of FRELIMO's most effective social intervention, would count as terror. Indeed, when Julian, by then experimenting with journalism, interviewed some supposed MNR 'representatives' in Kenya in late 1984, they were quite clear that attacking emergency work in Inhambane had been an important part of their efforts to discourage international aid from reaching Mozambique. Nor, and unlike many of the organisations with which Oxfam had explored possible collaboration in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan, did they at that time make the slightest pretence of having civilian run programmes through which international support could be channelled to local populations. When mass suffering is the tactic of a war and the main purpose of that war, certainly as far as its main protagonists and supporters were concerned was to defend the monstrosity of apartheid, then, in our view and excepting the particular value and role of the ICRC, neutrality is not an option for an organisation with humanitarian values. In such a context, humanitarian values – that people are of equal value independent of race, gender or creed - are not themselves neutral and need to be defended. You have to help the victims but also do whatever else can legitimately be done to frustrate such a programme. That at least was my view and I think it was shared by everyone else working on Oxfam's programme for Mozambique at that time.

Where then does this argument leave us when a now legal RENAMO (the MNR's Portuguese language name) were not far from winning the first multi-party elections in 1994? I don't know, perhaps other contributions to this book can help enlighten us. The fact of that result, however, does not, I think, change the most salient facts

outlined above but I really did not keep in close enough touch with what happened between 1987 and the end of the war and the elections. It is not that myself and others had been entirely uncritical of FRELIMO. To return to the arguments of FRELIMO's critics in Dar es Salaam in the early 1970s, who were also critical of the programme of forced villagisation in Tanzania, the party's approach to peasant agriculture and to the rights of peasants to organise their own space had always been problematic and this was re-inforced by the Eastern block supported investment in state farms (albeit mainly on existing commercial estates) after independence. The Fourth Congress in 1983 rejected this approach and sought to replace it with a far more farmer-friendly one but, because of the war, it is unlikely that this reform was that noticeable in many parts of the country. The quality of party leadership at local level was very variable. Some people I worked with were completely inspirational, many were very impressive, but it was also not unusual to find people either not interested in or not good at their job and, occasionally, people with very authoritarian behaviours who were clearly enjoying having power over others. It did not seem that there were that many effective checks on the behaviour of the worst, or indeed that much recognition of the efforts of the best. Above all, there seemed to be a wide gap between the senior leadership and the experience of those - both civilian and military - who bore the brunt of the war. On many occasions I saw teachers, health workers, junior officials, sergeants etc., especially amongst the displaced, desperately struggling to make things work with few signs of interest or support from those in power. I was so concerned with this that I raised the issue through solidarity channels in London and met the MAGIC president, Lord Gifford, to discuss it. Although very clear he had no intention of basing his response on any pressure from Oxfam, he did take the issue seriously and subsequently visited Mozambique and raised it on a political level. As it happened I bumped into him at Beira airport. He had been largely reassured. Indeed, there was nothing other than the raising of a concern that the British solidarity movement could or should have been able to do. I am, however, not sure he should have been. I think it is likely that, whilst alternative voices could (and still can) be articulated and be influential, the shift in the political leadership from socialism to both personal and policy accommodation with neo-liberalism was, by then, probably irrevocable. My own understanding of the first multi-party election result is that it reflected more how unpopular FRELIMO had become, rather than any committed support for RENAMO.

Another major issue of that period was articulated by Joe Hanlon in his book 'Who Calls the Shots?', in which he accuses international NGOs of being modern day missionaries, undermining local efforts, demanding greater engagement with a country's problems and thus preparing the ground for renewed foreign domination. At the time, I gave the book a quite critical review in the Review of African Political Economy. Quite apart from the fact that, following mutual surprise at the smoothness of their co-operation at the time of the Lancaster House agreement, the British and Mozambican governments needed no help from Oxfam to develop their relationship, I was aware of how strenuously we had tried to support local structures, in particular DPCCN, and encourage other agencies to do the same. Each and every aspect of Oxfam's response was discussed and agreed with the relevant Mozambican authorities, be it at national or local level (although the process could be complicated where these two did not agree). However, reflection on what has happened with the aid business over the following twenty five years make me more sympathetic to Jo's arguments. It can certainly be argued that we opened a door which perhaps made it

harder for the government to monitor and channel the work of foreign aid agencies in future. It was also the case that just being there and meeting our immediate and, in the context of the size of what we were attempting, non-negotiable needs for staff, vehicles, accommodation and, perhaps most visibly, preferential access to air transport, we contributed to a change of relationship between Mozambicans and those who came to 'help' them. However, given the scale of the humanitarian suffering and of the government's appeals for assistance, it is hard to see how some such change could have been avoided. It was also the case that many other changes were taking place in Mozambique and in its relationships with the outside world over the same period.

In fact, our closeness to DPCCN; our acceptance of the prime role of CARE International as its designated 'capacity builder'; our failure to mount and supervise our own programmes or to choose which areas of the country were 'strategic' for Oxfam rather than for DPCCN were all criticised in an Evaluation of the Oxfam Programme in Mozambique by John De Coninck in June 1989. Although I had by then left the agency and was not interviewed for the evaluation, this was the end product of my first experience of the output of the new world of monitoring and evaluation, which was just being systematised within Oxfam. It was not that well handled. There was no explanation of what was being set up or why. It felt like being policed. The first set of fairly peremptory questions were based on Oxford having got hold of the wrong end of the stick on a document written six months previously concerning issues which were no longer priorities for us. Much of the evaluation was in the same vein, not seeming to understand what we had been trying to do and therefore evaluating something different. Its understanding of the circumstances faced was fairly bizarre - for example criticising us for not basing our agricultural inputs in Maua on advice from technical services in the district which did not exist. Likewise, they seemed thrown by the lack of baseline studies against which to conduct a 'proper' evaluation, even as they seemed to accept that the time and facilities for such exercises did not exist. I remember at the time it reminding me of UNICEF's emergency response to a drought in Tete in 1983, which was so meticulously planned and monitored that the relief goods turned up just in time to alleviate a subsequent drought in 1986.

However, they did make some valuable observations about the problems that had been faced in attracting and keeping suitable staff with whom to manage the emergency. There is much internal stuff that might be discussed here, but for its doubtful wider interest and, sadly, the absence of one of the key people who could explain her view. For me, the two more generalisable points are that we spent nothing like enough time talking to each other and making sure everyone was clear as to what was being done and how. This was particularly the case with staff accompanying the programmes in the provinces, about the situations they might encounter. Neither they, nor their closest partner DPCCN, were given clear enough guidance as to their respective roles. Thus, when problems arose in local work with DPCCN and other local bodies, as they inevitably did, it was not clear how they should be dealt with or by whom and at what level. I am not aware of any direct corruption involving Oxfam material, but I am aware of three instances - in Vilanculos, Quelimane and Cuamba - of authorities using donated goods to support their own priorities - supporting public OMM (Organisation of Mozambican Women) events (twice) and to pressure a population to return to their village when they did not want to. Were these actions

acceptable? Not really. Understandable? Perhaps. Different responses from different levels of Oxfam were, however, confusing for the Mozambicans and created tensions and difficulties within the team.

For me, the lack of written clarification of our work and relationships at local level was most starkly illustrated by our attempts to help DPCCN by allowing the commercialisation of some of the 2 million T Shirts supplied through the Blue Peter appeal. Given the lack of clothes to buy in Mozambique, even by those with money, this commercialisation had always been part of the plan and in Maputo an effective distribution scheme was worked out with the Directorate of Social Action. Others were for free distribution in the provinces but the same issue of lack of goods to buy, and in particular the lack of anything to offer in exchange for agricultural produce, existed. There was also a problem in places where branches of DPCCN had just been set up that there was no money allocated to it in provincial budgets, even for them to pay their wages. The idea of commercialising some of the shirts in order to raise money for DPCCN expenses therefore seemed ideal. However, although conversations were noted and figures agreed, a combination of my naivety, rushed visits and lack of elementary writing and copying tools meant that no formal written agreements were produced and signed and no agreed audit trail created. This, as the evaluation pointed out, created a situation which made both corruption and unfounded accusations of corruption very easy. It possibly encouraged local officials to believe that any Oxfam oversight was not going to be rigorous and created conditions for what became quite unsatisfactory relationships between Oxfam and local officials in future.

Sadly, a genuine emergency response often involves ad-hoc arrangements made in a hurry and often on the basis of incomplete or inaccurate information. Mistakes are happen frequently. I would argue that in the circumstances described above, the Oxfam team made fewer than others. The most common organisational response is to try and systematise the process - carry out detailed surveys, anticipate and plan out potential problems. The trouble with this approach, as the UNICEF programme in Tete illustrates, is that your response may have very little sense of 'emergency' in it. Help may arrive far too late. To me, a good response will always depend on having both experienced emergency staff and good local partners. We did, in the main, have good local partners but I have often thought that, at the end of my time in Mozambique which was also when I left Oxfam, I had only just about learnt the job. The problem was that at that time there was not the sustained investment in emergency staff to offer anyone viable conditions for a long term commitment. Like many others before me, I came, I worked myself to exhaustion, I left. I believe that since then Oxfam has tried harder to support and hold on to experienced emergency staff. It also does more emergency preparedness work with local partners in areas of potential crisis, so that an emergency response, if it is ever needed, can be routed through them. These are both helpful steps in my view, although I do not believe it is possible to be prepared for every possible emergency scenario.

For ordinary Mozambicans, if not necessarily for their now largely wealthy rulers, 'a luta continua'. I have not had the opportunity to go back and travel the country in peace. I would love to be able to do so. I would like to revisit places and people and ask them for their reminiscences of this time and of the strange young foreigners who were so serious on their behalf. If I did so, I would make every effort to hire local

language translators to facilitate communication. Back then (and it is still the norm in many agencies), we were so proud of our fluent Portuguese, that we never invested in having experienced local language interpreters, working for us, helping us communicate directly with the people we were trying to help, who, in the main, did not speak Portuguese. In a programme which handled material worth well over 10 million pounds (phrased like that because some went through the books of other agencies) and which tried to understand and respond to desperate experiences of violence and loss, this now looks to me to be an amazing oversight.