

Resisting agrarian neoliberalism and authoritarianism: Struggles towards a progressive rural future in Mozambique

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Abstract

After nearly two and a half decades with a Land Law widely considered progressive, Mozambique is preparing to revise its legal framework for land. Land activists accuse the government of pursuing an authoritarian approach, excluding civil society participation, and falsifying public consultations. The revision would mark a major shift in Mozambique's land policy towards an even more neoliberal framework to allow the transfer of individual land titles. This turning point is a crucial moment for popular movements to mobilize against the consolidation of agrarian neoliberalism and fight for pro-poor land policy that benefits small-scale food producers and rural communities at large. While recognizing different rural and agrarian class formations and interests in Mozambique, I argue that embryonic forms of a cross-class alliance are becoming apparent. As deagrarianization proceeds, the National Union of Peasants (UNAC) plays a key role in mobilizing the rural poor – petty commodity producers, farm workers, fishermen, small agrarian capitalists, and agrarian civil society at large – using left-wing populism to oppose agrarian neoliberalism, which takes authoritarian forms.

KEYWORDS

agrarian neoliberalism, authoritarianism, left-wing populism, Mozambique, UNAC

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Mozambique's agrarian structure, class dynamics, and politics have been shaped by successive and interlocking dynamics of socialism, civil war, a long history of labour migration, and the advent of neoliberalism (O'Laughlin, 1996; van den Berg, 1987; Wuyts, 2001). While the country pursued neoliberal policies marked by a wave of privatization of public assets and capital that began from the late 1980s (Castel-Branco, 2014, 2022; Pitcher, 2002), land remained nationalized. In contrast to the package of neoliberal reforms, Mozambique adopted a land policy in 1995 and Land Law in 1997 that are widely viewed as progressive because they affirm the tenure rights of local communities, recognize customary practices, and promote participatory governance (Cabral & Norfolk, 2016; Hanlon, 2004; Palmer, 2006). Yet despite this legal framework, Mozambique has become a centre of land grabbing, and de facto land privatization has taken place (Bruna, 2019; Fairbairn, 2013; Twomey, 2014), triggering widespread peasant resistance (Bruna, 2022; Chambati et al., 2018; Monjane & Bruna, 2020). Progressive law, it now turns out, is an impediment to the state's plans for the expansion of the logic of capital in the countryside, which promotes commodification.

This is the context in which the government has initiated a process to revise the National Land Policy, which is to lead to an amendment of the current Land Law of 1997 once the Committee for the Revision of the Current Land Policy completes its mandate, originally scheduled for the end of 2022. Land activists accuse the government of taking an authoritarian approach to the process, claiming that the government has excluded civil society from participating in the process and is undemocratically imposing its agenda without adequately consulting the public. A Land Policy Revision Commission has produced proposals that, if successful, would signal a major shift in Mozambique's land policy towards a more market-friendly framework that will allow for the transfer of individual land titles through collateralization, rendering land alienable. As the social base of the peasant movement has over the past few decades been undermined by deagrarianization, the question arises of the potential for cross-class alliances, between peasant-workers, petty commodities producers, and petty capitalist farmers to challenge the advance of agrarian neoliberalism.

This paper traces the trajectory of the Mozambican state's agrarian and land policies over time, leading up to the current process of the revision of the National Land Policy. The government launched a public consultation process in July 2020. This process has been fiercely contested by civil society, including the National Peasant Union (UNAC). I will argue that the revision of the national land policy in Mozambique aims to consolidate agrarian neoliberalism, which is why it is strongly contested by agrarian civil society and beyond. In addition to UNAC, the main agrarian civil society organizations are *Justiça Ambiental/Friends of the Earth Mozambique*, *Fórum Mulher*, *ADECRU* (Academic Action for the Development of Rural Communities), *Livaningo*, *Centro Terra Viva*, and others. Their work and actions essentially take place on the ground, directly with small farmers, mainly the poorest and most vulnerable, in all regions of the country.

Beginning with the adoption of a Washington Consensus-style package, the economic reforms in Mozambique progressed through several phases. First, the neoliberalization of the 1980s and 1990s was characterized by capitalist restructuring through structural adjustment programmes and second, in the 2000s and 2010s, the adoption of policies to incentivize foreign direct investment (FDI), especially in mining and large-scale agricultural programmes. We are now entering a third moment of neoliberalization with an authoritarian turn, in which movements are using the legal and policy provisions of the 1990s to resist the plans of the state to extend privatization and commodification. All this signals a continuation and deepening of neoliberalism. While neoliberalism provokes resistance (Harris, 2003; Lahiff et al., 2007; Stromquist & Sanyal, 2013; Tilzey, 2020), the state's authoritarian turn, characterized by increasing repression alongside undemocratic policy-making, requires new strategies to counter authoritarianism as well as deagrarianization, since the neoliberal policies of the past three decades have directly contributed to deagrarianization, undermining the class basis for resistance in the countryside.

This paper draws on the debate between Henry Bernstein (2020) and Jun Borrás (2020) on the potential of progressive rural politics to confront authoritarian populism. In the context of Mozambique, I ask what are the possibilities for the peasant movement to stop a change in land policy that extends the interests of large capital?

What are the current opportunities to forge alliances between the peasant sector (artisanal miners, farm workers, artisanal fishermen) and small agrarian capitalists¹ and civil society at large to inspire and make headway towards a progressive socialist agrarian agenda for Mozambique? Can the kind of left-wing populism that Borrás (2020) envisages, based on cross-class alliances within and beyond agrarian social movements, advance towards a broad-based socialist agenda? By examining the role and work of UNAC in mobilizing other social forces within and outside the “peasantries” against regressive agrarian policies, the paper draws attention to the complexity of rural class differentiation in Mozambique and its implications for rural politics.

2 | THE BORRÁS AND BERNSTEIN DEBATE

In a seminal contribution which served as a framing paper to a forum series of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (JPS) on “Authoritarian Populism and the Rural World,” Scoones et al. (2017) noted that a new political moment characterized by the rise of diverse forms of authoritarian populism was underway. The authors propounded possible ways of viewing the connection between right-wing authoritarian populism and the rural world (Scoones et al. 2017: 2), exploring how rural transformations over time have contributed to the deepening of regressive national politics in many parts of the world and how rural areas shape and are shaped by these authoritarian and populist politics. The framing paper, the articles in the JPS Forum series, and the concepts of authoritarianism and populism have sparked much debate and contestation, especially in terms of how authoritarianism and populism are conceptualized, how their origins and (re)emergence are explained, and how strategies for confronting authoritarianism and right-wing populism and building alternatives to them are proposed (Bernstein, 2020; Edelman, 2020; Peters & Pierre, 2020).

Borrás and Bernstein, both agrarian Marxists, differ in their views of the prospects for broad alliances in the countryside and by extension how to resist authoritarian populism. Among the aspects on which Bernstein (2020) and Borrás (2020) differ, this article focuses on the issue of the class character of resistance to authoritarian populism and specifically cross-class alliances. For Bernstein “... it is more useful ... to begin with exploring how the class dynamics of capitalism play out in various countrysides, and then investigating whether, how and how much, those dynamics generate (relatively) clear class categories manifested in distinct forms of ideology, identity, and collective political practice” (2020, 8). Therefore, it is crucial to specify what those classes are, their relations with others, and their interests.

According to Borrás (2020), there are “parallels, similarities, and connections” between contemporary right-wing populism and what he calls the populism of agrarian movements. Borrás states that populism is not a “property” of the right alone and that the erosion of right-wing populism requires a reclamation of populism by progressive agrarian social movements. He goes on to say that the similarities and connections between right-wing populism and the populism of agrarian movements lie in their rural social base and that the boundaries between them are porous, blurred, and malleable (2020:5). Borrás believes that it is difficult, but not impossible, to achieve an agenda that defeats right-wing populism and strives for a socialist future. Bernstein's critique is that Borrás's approach to rural politics and authoritarian populism skips over essential questions about the social and ideological dynamics of rural politics. He adds that the approach obscures rather than reveals rural support and resistance to authoritarian populism (2020: 3). Borrás (2020) advocates for a united front of democratic challengers, believing that populism can be harnessed by progressive agrarian movements to defeat right-wing populism and authoritarianism. These positions have long ideological and theoretical roots, reflecting distinct positions on structure and agency.

This paper first discusses the current authoritarian moment in Mozambique, showing the rise of authoritarian politics over time, and in particular, the consolidation of “agrarian authoritarianism” (Monjane, 2021b) now manifesting itself in the form of the state's push to roll back a progressive Land Law. It then outlines rural politics in

¹Although it may seem contradictory that small agrarian capitalists could form an alliance with the peasantry, it is likely that they support a progressive agenda, since they also seek to push back against large capital.

historical perspective, looking at the postindependence period to provide context for current rural politics. The paper highlights the historical case of a cross-class alliance that led to the passage of a progressive Land Law in 1997, when Mozambique was consolidating its neoliberal turn, and in which UNAC played a crucial role. This provides context and helps to understand UNAC's current role in mobilizing forces across different agrarian classes — and the urban middle-class — to defend a progressive rural future, particularly in the current land policy revision process.

3 | RESEARCH METHODS

This paper is based on data collected through a combination of semistructured interviews, participant observation, and discourse analysis. The author has worked closely with UNAC for more than a decade and a half. Between March 2020 and October 2021, the author conducted interviews with UNAC members, leaders, and staff, as well as with the coordinator of the National Land Policy Review Commission and with activists from agrarian civil society organizations involved in the land debate and Mozambican politics. More recently, interviews have been conducted with the former Executive Director of UNAC and a UNAC leader in Nampula Province. The author has also closely followed a collective of several civil society organizations, including UNAC, that have monitored and critiqued the process of revising the National Land Policy. This has included publication of position papers and statements.

4 | AGRARIAN NEOLIBERALISM, AUTHORITARIANISM, AND POPULISM IN MOZAMBIQUE

The world is witnessing a rise of a new wave of authoritarian and populist politics (Chacko, 2018; Babones, 2018; de la Torre, 2018; Halmai, 2019; Scoones et al, 2017) — and Mozambique is no exception. Torcuato di Tella (1965, p. 47) defines populism as a political discourse that “enjoys the support of the mass of the urban working class and/or peasantry but ... does not result from the autonomous, organisational power of either of these two sectors.” For Edelman (2020), authoritarian populism almost always has the following characteristics: (1) a claim to represent or advocate for “the people,” a category typically defined in exclusionary terms; (2) a political base composed of multiple classes; (3) contempt for traditional political and economic elites and their cultural cosmopolitanism; (4) hatred and repressive policies towards stigmatized “others” at home; and (5) distrust of “threatening” opponents abroad. Right-wing populism and authoritarianism are expressed and exercised, among other things, through the rise of a powerful “big man,” who mobilizes the masses for racist, misogynistic, xenophobic nationalist agendas (Belo, 2017; Curato, 2016; Tinha, 2021).

I propose the notion of “neoliberal agrarian authoritarianism” to locate authoritarianism in policy making and policy imposition. Here, populism is used in the ways in which, discursively and rhetorically, policies are presented to the populations by governmental and political elites, often in a paternalistic manner. Just like public law can be “weaponized” to incrementally hollow out democratic rule (Daly, 2019), policies and law can be designed to push neoliberal agendas (Grewal & Purdy, 2014).

In Mozambique, several of these features of authoritarian populism have become evident since the government of Armando Guebuza (2005–2015), a businessman and pro free-market politician (Nhachote, 2012). His period in power was characterized by racial intolerance and attacks on opponents of his neoliberal policies. This is evident in expressions such as “*Moçambicanos de gema* (genuine Mozambicans),” with which he used to spread ethnic and racial chauvinism against non-Black citizens, and “*apóstolos da desgraça*” (apostle of doom) (Jornal Domingo, 2014) to anyone who questioned his policies, especially activists and progressive academics. As Victor Igreja (2015, p. 52) puts it, during the Guebuza administration, “any person who does not belong to the FRELIMO party is accused of belonging to the RENAMO, inciting violence, not being Mozambican through and through, insulting the head of state, having no self-esteem, and not wanting to be rich in an environment of resource scandals.” This administration was

also marked by judicial persecution and direct threats against activists, journalists, and academics, including assassinations (Haysom & Horsley, 2018). Some of these practices have continued in the current administration of Filipe Nyusi (2015 to present), which is now also characterized by militarization and kidnappings. Another new feature of authoritarian populism evident in this and previous administrations is the creation of propaganda groups that use social media to politically lynch opponents, a typical strategy of right-wing populists. An example of this was a group of government-appointed commentators to defend the ruling party's policies and practices, known as G-40 (Group of 40) (Guilengue, 2019). This strategy of character assassination has been practiced by right-wing populists elsewhere (Berti & Loner, 2021).

The masking of interests in capitalist accumulation is a typical feature of populism. The populist claims to speak for the masses against the "other" while still being the one accumulating. Rosário (2014: 2), comparing the political choices and governmental approaches of successive presidencies since the first multiparty elections in 1994, argues that the government led by Joaquim Chissano (1986–2005) was characterized by features of "neopatrimonialism," while that of Armando Guebuza (2005–2015) shows signs of electoral populism. The author goes on to argue that agriculture has been used as a mechanism to consolidate power within the FRELIMO party. This also applies to explaining how agricultural development programmes (like SUSTENTA) have been used populistically by elites as a political weapon in rural areas.

The former is characterised by significant rent distribution by the governing elite to a narrow "selectorate". The latter is manifested by a *paternalistic* and politically mobilising discourse emanating directly from the President and appealing to the broader electorate, particularly the rural population of the central and Northern region of the country, who has been traditionally opposed to the ruling party (*emphasis added*)

As the contemporary world has witnessed an increasing rise of authoritarian politics and a deepening of neoliberalism, itself characterized by a shift in the relationship between the state and the market, recent scholarship has built on these concepts to discuss the extent and impact of populism, authoritarianism, and right-wing politics, as well as their relationship to the countryside. With reference to Latin America, Alonso-Fradejas (2021) posits that the profit motive has led to an alliance between the state and the bourgeoisie and business-orientated classes, whose interests now converge at the expense of the masses yet whose actions are defended as protecting the nation from internal detractors and external enemies. He refers to this as authoritarian corporate populism, which takes the form of a state-business axis that increasingly determines and controls the distribution of resources in its favour. Andrade (2019) has argued that even in modern democracies, authoritarian populism is much more common, with 21st century states adopting what the author calls 'populism from above'.

In the past two decades, various agricultural, mining, and extractivist investment projects more broadly have been proposed and/or implemented in Mozambique, leading to conflicts over land and the displacement of rural farming communities (Rodrigues & Monjane, 2018; Wise, 2016). The scramble for large tracts of land and water constellated initially around the further expansion of sugar and biofuel production and later for mineral and electricity projects (coal and gas) (Castel-Branco, 2014). This was the case in Zambezia, where agribusiness companies like Hoyo-Hoyo and Agromoz expropriated hundreds of local farmers in the 2010s, or in Tete province, where mining companies like Brazilian mining company and Vale and Indian mining company Jindal expropriated land in the same period to make way for coal mining.

According to Scoones et al. (2017: 4), state-led programmes, often supported by international "aid" flows, reconfigure rural areas by using discourses of food security for legitimation. The authors highlight the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa as an example of this. Programmes such as the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition aim to attract more private investment in agriculture and promote industrial agriculture by advancing private control over land and promoting corporate inputs, hybrid and GMO seeds, and large-scale irrigation systems. In some instances, supposedly popular and leftist appeals to the interests of the poor actually advanced

narrow interests of foreign and domestic capital as was the case of agrarian programmes and agribusinesses investments promoted by successive Mozambican governments, particularly during the presidency of Armando Guebuza, as shown below.

Armando Guebuza was also known to have business and economic interests in the agricultural sector, with known investments in agribusiness companies such as AgroMoz Agribusiness Mozambique. The company is a joint venture between the Amorim Group, owned by the richest family in Portugal, and Intelec, owned by Guebuza and his family (AFP, 2015). Guebuza encouraged peasant farmers to grow the cash crop jatropha at the expense of food crops in spite of the lack of a market for it, in part to support his own investments (All Africa, 2012).

Agricultural plans and programmes in Mozambique have sought to assert the primacy of markets and to expand the role of the private sector at the expense of the state. The Strategic Plan for the Development of the Agrarian Sector (PEDSA, *Plano Estratégico para o Desenvolvimento do Sector Agrário*) launched in 2011 is an example of this. PEDSA claimed to support “a thriving, competitive and sustainable agricultural sector capable of providing sustainable responses to food security and nutrition challenges and reaching global agricultural markets” (Ministério da Agricultura, 2011, vii). It openly supported the private sector and partnered with business groups such as the Confederation of Economic Associations (CTA) (Ministério da Agricultura, 2011, p. 11) and established the context in which later programmes such as ProSAVANA and the World Bank-funded Natural Resources Landscapes Management Project (SUSTENTA) were introduced. ProSAVANA was a public–private partnership project between Mozambique, Brazil, and Japan that aimed to develop vast tracts of farmland – originally, ProSAVANA proponents cited 14 million hectares, but this figure was steadily reduced in official pronouncements as contestations increased – in Northern Mozambique. It was one of the most ambitious large-scale agricultural development projects in Africa (Okada, 2015). SUSTENTA is an ongoing World Bank-funded project that aims to integrate small- and medium-scale farmers into global value chain by supporting them with inputs, technology, and finance.

These programmes were top-down, and corporate sector, favouring the capitalist and entrepreneurial classes (e.g. Abbas et al., 2021, 14). Rather than small farmers, they tend to support “emerging” or middle-class farmers. According to Costa Estêvão (2022),² a UNAC member in Nampula, “At first, we supported [it] but we see now that SUSTENTA is not for peasants (*camponeses*) after all. Only the big farmers and the government officials benefit from it. The peasants are exploited by the big farmers.” This statement referred to the fact that the so-called emerging farmers, who have some economic power and relations with the state, are favoured by the government in the allocation of SUSTENTA funds, while the poorest farmers are expected to put their labour at the service of the emerging farmers, as the author observed during a field visit to Rapale district in Nampula in January 2022.

When UNAC representatives and land activists raised objections to the programme at a public hearing on ProSAVANA in June 2015, then Minister of Agriculture, José Pacheco said that the programme was irreversible and “any obstacle that comes up, we will run over it and move on.” (Verdade, 2015). This approach is undemocratic and consonant with the government's authoritarian populist agenda, which has been enforced with cases of intimidation of land activists and “peasants” leaders.

5 | RURAL POLITICS IN POSTINDEPENDENCE MOZAMBIQUE

When Mozambique gained independence in 1975, the countryside had a differentiated rural class structure and proletarianization was already a deeply-rooted process (O’Laughlin, 1996). Knowing and recognizing this agrarian class structure would be key to the implementation of FRELIMO’s agrarian policy after independence. FRELIMO was at the head of a one-party socialist state at the time. According to O’Laughlin (1996: 19), the “central goals of

²Interview with informant, Nampula city, January 2022.

FRELIMO's agrarian policy - accumulation in state enterprises, co-operativisation of peasant production, egalitarian distribution of basic needs through the plan - were compromised not because they were part of a political project alien to traditional peasant culture but because they were defined in ways incompatible with the agrarian class structure they addressed". Because FRELIMO failed to grasp the nature of the agrarian question in Mozambique (Wuyts, 2001) – by not recognizing the differentiation in the peasantry and thus perceiving the countryside in a dualistic manner (large-scale agrarian capitalists and peasantry as homogeneous) – the agrarian policy and practices were hostile to the functioning of competitive markets in land, labour, and commodities in the first 10 years of independence (O'Laughlin, 1996). The author argues that the socialist strategy of FRELIMO, conceived in dualism – urban and rural, peasants and workers, settlers, and Mozambican farmers – was difficult to implement and had disastrous consequences. This was marked by authoritarianism. The agrarian policy and strategy were based on organizing the scattered and dispersed peasant population into communal villages and restructuring their productive activities along collective lines through cooperatives and state farms. This was not without controversy, and segments of the rural population in certain regions in central and northern Mozambique strongly resisted this policy.

The differentiated rural population shaped the implementation of FRELIMO's agrarian policy at the same time that the implementation of the policy shaped rural politics in Mozambique, and because of this dialectical dynamic, there were shifts in FRELIMO's agrarian strategy. O'Laughlin divided these shifts into three phases.

The first phase, from 1975 to 1980, was defined by broad-ranging political consensus around the need for a rapid socialisation of production and residence through the expansion of state-farms, co-operatives, and communal villages. Opposition to FRELIMO was almost entirely based in Rhodesia, and, if anything, promoted a sense of national unity. The second highly contradictory phase, from 1980 to 1983, was defined by FRELIMO's shift to a bureaucratic and hierarchical model of rapid socialist accumulation based almost exclusively on state farms. Goods starvation in rural areas, the stagnation of state farm production, and widening support for the RENAMO opposition movement from South Africa (amongst others) led to a rapid expansion of both the war and parallel markets in rural areas. FRELIMO's strategy in the third phase, beginning with the Fourth FRELIMO Party Congress in 1983, was initially defined as market socialism, but moved rapidly towards increased support for private commercial farming, and the distribution of some state farm land to multinational enterprises, Mozambican commercial farmers and some peasant households. This period was marked by the generalised dislocation of rural people and production by war (1996, p. 3)

O'Laughlin contests accounts (see Bowen, 1993; 2000) that accuse FRELIMO of having alienated the peasantry from their land and cultural traditions and attribute the success of RENAMO, a guerrilla movement supported by South African apartheid regime, to widespread peasant discontent. O'Laughlin shows that while we should not overestimate the opposition of the peasantry to FRELIMO's agrarian policy, the state was not omnipotent but nor was the peasantry passive (1996: 2). This shows the complexity of rural politics at the time and makes it clear that the reaction of the "peasantry" to FRELIMO's policies cannot be explained in simplistic terms.

The counterrevolutionary civil war that broke out shortly after independence in 1975 mostly affected peasants and rural residents. RENAMO received support from sections of the peasantry in parts of Mozambique. Some were forcibly recruited, while others joined of their own free will. O'Laughlin (1996) argues that rural famine, stagnation of production on state farms, increased peasant support for RENAMO, which led to a rapid expansion of the war and parallel markets in rural areas. To counteract this, FRELIMO introduced reforms that combined central planning with the promotion of commercial agriculture under the label of market socialism.

With the launching of Structural Adjustment, FRELIMO negotiated peace with Renamo and international donors and abandoned any pretence of adherence to a socialist agrarian strategy, privatising all state farm land, liberalising markets, and granting large land concessions to foreign capital (O'Laughlin, 1996: 3).

This history established the conditions for neoliberalism. Reforms included the conversion of state farms into cooperatives to stimulate small-scale commercial agriculture (O'Laughlin, 1996: 5). Neoliberal reforms were implemented with the adoption of the Economic Readjustment Programme (PRE) as FRELIMO abandoned socialism. Land remained nationalized, however, and in contrast to the package of neoliberal reforms, Mozambique passed a progressive Land Law in 1997.

6 | A PROGRESSIVE LAND LAW AMIDST NEOLIBERAL REFORMS

The process of revising the land legislation began with the constitutional revision that culminated in the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of 1990. The 1997 Land Law was therefore introduced after the revision of the previous Land Law of 1979 (*Lei 6/79 de 3 Julho de 1979*). The revision of the 1979 Land Law was to “adapt it to the new political, economic, and social conjuncture and to ensure access and security of land tenure both for Mozambican peasants and for domestic and foreign investors” (Preamble, *Lei de Terras, 19/97*). However, all land remained state-owned. According to Article 1 of the 1997 Land Law, ownership of land is an exclusive right of the State enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique, which includes, in addition to all the rights of the owner, the power to establish the conditions of use and benefit by individuals or legal entities. Land, therefore, cannot be sold or otherwise alienated, mortgaged, or encumbered. In addition to occupation in good faith (*ocupação por boa fé*), the law provided for access to land through the right to use and benefit from land known as DUAT, *Direito de Uso e Aproveitamento da Terra* — defined as the right that individuals or legal entities and local communities acquire over land, with the requirements and limitations of the law. The law states that

“the process of titling the rights of use and exploitation of land includes the opinion of the local administrative authorities, preceded by consultation with the communities, for the purpose of confirming that the area is free and has no occupants”

(Article 13, No. 3, *Lei de Terras 19/97*).

The Land Law of 1997 resulted from a cross-class alliance process. Various sectors of society, including the peasant movement, urban-based civil society organizations, NGOs, churches, and academics, participated and influenced the debates and content of this progressive Land Law, which grants fundamental land rights to rural communities and small-scale producers. Surprisingly, even the World Bank praised Mozambique's Land Law “for the way in which it protects peasant rights as well as for the innovative way in which it deals with collective and community tenure” (Hanlon, 2004: 1).

According to Lunstrum (2008), while the neoliberal political and economic reforms of the early 1990s brought about market liberalization, they also created space for contentious debates about land tenure reform and, in particular, land privatization. The World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and many Mozambican elites, including some members of FRELIMO, were concerned that the state had too much power over land and natural resources which, among other things, could discourage private investment (Lunstrum, 2008). The reforms in that political and economic conjuncture opened the door to liberalization, and farmland was clearly on the list of sectors coveted by agrarian capital and the markets. In addition to the threat of privatization, there was also the question of what role the state would play as regulator and what would become of rural and peasant communities (Negrão, 1999; Walker, 2021).

7 | CROSS-CLASS ALLIANCE AND UNAC'S ROLE IN THE 1997 LAND LAW

The adoption of the Land Law in 1997 was the culmination of a “remarkably open and consultative process of law making ... which was followed by an equally remarkable campaign of public awareness to help people understand their new rights under that law” (Palmer, 2004: 11), in what some consider to be one of the most democratic processes in Mozambique in the 1990s (Hanlon, 2004: 1). It was the result of long debates and negotiations between the government and civil society. What enabled this “atypical” process was the pressure brought to bear on the state in the form of a cross-class alliance. The National Union of Peasants (UNAC) played a leading role in the process. UNAC's origins lie in the socialist past of the FRELIMO party, in a critique of the governing party's unwillingness to build an independent peasant organization. Unlike other “democratic mass organizations” created by FRELIMO, which included most social sectors of society, such as women (OMM, Organization of Mozambican Women), teachers (OPM, Organization of Mozambican Teachers), workers (OTM, Organization of Mozambican Workers), youth (OJM, Organization of Mozambican Youth) and others, UNAC was one of the few movements that was created and functioned outside of the control of the party (Negrão, 2003). UNAC expanded over time with evolving strategies at different times: from the transfer of land from unitary cooperatives into cooperatives of individual peasant producers, to the adoption of a market economy in the mid-1980s, to the postcivil war reforms that ultimately gave rise to the Land Law of 1997. Among the classes organized in its member structures are small and medium peasant farmers, rural and peri-urban farmers, that are affiliated to UNAC through diverse associations, cooperatives, and other local forms of organization. According to Isidro Macaringue, UNAC's team coordinator for advocacy and communication, “UNAC has members in all the provinces of the country, but especially in Zambézia and Nampula, due to the territorial extension and demographic situation of these provinces [the most populous provinces of the country], but also due to the dynamism of the movement there, as they have been able to mobilise and form associations in more districts of these provinces” (Macaringue, Isidro Personal Communication, July 18, 2022). As mentioned earlier, UNAC has a differentiated social base, ranging from members with as little as 0.5 ha to those with up to 50 ha of land.

When UNAC was founded in the late 1980s, the country was opening up to the market economy. As Ismael Oussemane, a founding member of UNAC, recalls those driving its formation felt compelled to initiate a national peasant movement “to defend the interests of peasants” that were under threat (interview, March 2018) due to the adoption of neoliberal policies. In the mid-1990s, the movement acquired a more politically oriented strategy and pushed towards the Land Law of 1997 (Diamantinho Nhampossa, interview, December 2021). Currently, UNAC claims to have 150,000 individual members, and according to Isidro Macaringue, coordinator of UNAC's advocacy team, nearly 60% of members are women, as shown in Table 1, which provides statistics on UNAC members by province and gender.

Recently, the movement conducted a census and distributed membership cards, which supports the membership figures. UNAC is arguably the largest membership-based agrarian movement in southern Africa (Monjane, 2021a). Some of its members combine farming with other nonfarming sources of livelihood: domestic workers, sellers of grocery products, tailors, and so on. This differentiation in its social base, however, has not prevented the movement from running successful campaigns.

On class alliances, Bernstein asks about the classes that participate in such alliances, about the nature of inter-class relations, and about their different class interests. UNAC is a broad-based agrarian movement which claims to be a movement of united “peasants.” This falls within Borrás's (2020) definition of populism because it attempts at “rebundling socioeconomically differentiated class and group interests and issues into a more homogenised voice” (2020: 15). It is in reality a movement of classes of labour (Bernstein, 2006, 2010). Members' interests may diverge at certain moments, yet unity has been possible, especially when it comes to stopping major threats to land rights, which does not mean that UNAC official positions are always supported by all members. In the case of ProSAVANA, for example, as some authors suggest, the programme was supported by some sections of the peasantry in Nampula (Wolford, 2021), while official UNAC statements pretended the peasantry opposed the programme.

TABLE 1 Distribution of UNAC members throughout the country, by province in 2017

Province	Name of provincial union	Number of members (collective/individuals)		
		Male members	Female members	Total
Maputo province	União Provincial de Camponeses de Maputo	6,240	11,500,00	17,740,00
Maputo city	União Provincial da Cidade de Maputo	3,500	17,100,00	20,600,00
Gaza	União Provincial de Camponeses de Gaza	2,460	3,104,00	5,564,00
Inhambane	União Provincial de Camponeses de Inhambane	2012	4,559,00	6,571,00
Sofala	União Provincial de Camponeses de Sofala	207	4,059,00	4,266,00
Manica	União Provincial de Camponeses de Manica	5,109	3,406,00	8,515,00
Tete	União Provincial de Camponeses de Tete	7,291	6,865,00	14,156,00
Zambezia	União Provincial de Camponeses da Zambezia	8,350	10,502,00	18,852,00
Nampula	União Provincial de Camponeses de Nampula	17,107	11,633,00	28,740,00
Niassa	União Provincial de Camponeses de Niassa	9,973	10,777,00	20,750,00
Cabo Delgado	União Provincial de Camponeses de Cabo Delgado	2,837	3,167,00	6,004,00
Total		65,086	86,672,00	
Percentage		43%	57%	
Total male and female		151,758		
			%	
Total males		65,086	43%	
Total females		86,672	57%	
Total in general (M+F)		151,758	100%	

Note: According to UNAC Executive Coordinator Luis Muchanga, UNAC is currently in the process of updating this information through the digital platform INARCA-National Survey of Registration and Enrolment of UNAC members. INARCA is a tool developed by UNAC to register its members.

Source: UNAC Secretariat.

Interestingly, UNAC has managed to navigate between engaging with the state, and with the ruling and main opposition party, while also confronting and criticizing the state. This closeness to the state has not put the movement in danger of fragmentation, as was the case with CONAIE Ecuador (Birnie & Cott, 2007), since this closeness to the state is not reflected in the occupation of state positions or the acquisition of material benefits but only in a dialogical perspective.

The ability to do both – navigate between engaging with the state while confronting it – has been a consistent strategy of the movement and has allowed it to maintain its autonomy, and while doing so, it has pursued the interests of its diverse class base. This suggests that UNAC did “left politics,” using the strategy of engaging with the state and its ideological and political opposition (RENAMO, right-wing party), to achieve goals in the interests of the “peasantry.” This is in line with Borrás' characterization of “left-wing populism.”

The interministerial Commission responsible for drafting the 1997 Land Law invited UNAC to participate in the process. This was seen as an opportunity for the “peasants” to bring their concerns about land into the law. UNAC combined this strategy with sending legislators letters and publishing position statements (Nhampossa, 2003). Although involved, UNAC did not control the process. Some of the proposals that it and civil society allies had pursued most vociferously were deleted. When the draft legislation was submitted to the Council of Ministers, it still included many of civil society's demands but two crucial clauses were then omitted before the Council of Ministers submitted

it to Parliament: community consultation and the definition and protection of community land (Nhampossa, 2003). UNAC used various advocacy and lobbying techniques to try to restore these clauses.

Their strategy succeeded because, despite links to some elements of FRELIMO's Central Committee in its early days, UNAC had not identified itself with any political party. After being lobbied by UNAC, both FRELIMO and RENAMO acceded to the demands — perhaps due to concerns about political support in the countryside and also perhaps because UNAC played the parties off against each other. According to Diamantino Nhampossa, “if the proposal was rejected, FRELIMO would risk losing the support of the countryside ... [while] RENAMO had nothing to lose.”

Once adopted, information about rights that communities had under the new legislation needed to be disseminated. A process of popular education known as the Land Campaign (*Campanha Terra*) brought together a diverse range of social actors from religious leaders to associations and cooperatives, nongovernmental organizations, academics, and even politicians and some elements of the private sector (Negrão, 2002). Information was circulated through comic books, audio cassettes, posters, pamphlets on customary rights and women's access to land, theatre, and an aerogramme-like form for registering land conflicts (Negrão, 1999). The campaign was a key part of its push to resist commodification of land despite marketization of the wider economy. UNAC played a key role in making the alliance possible (Cabral & Norfolk, 2016: 26) and was able to do so in part because of its role in maintaining peace in rural communities after the end of the civil war when many of the displaced were returning to their communities. UNAC helped to protect the rights of the returnees and facilitate the reintegration of demobilized soldiers (Nhampossa, 2011).

Two and a half decades later, history is repeating itself, under different conditions. The process of revising the existing national land policy is underway. The conditions under which the present process is taking place are different from those of 25 years ago. Cross-class alliance, even between “competing and contradictory class and group interests” (Borras, p. 5) is necessary if the 1997 law is to be defended and the peasantry is to keep control of its land.

8 | THE NATIONAL LAND POLICY REVIEW PROCESS: PROBLEMS AND CONTESTATION

The revision of the land policy came as a recommendation in the Land Consultation Forum (*Fórum de Consulta sobre Terras*), a platform shared by government, civil society, local communities, the private sector, academia, and other actors to discuss the regulatory framework for land policy and legislation.³ At the initiative of the private sector, represented by the Confederation of Economic Associations (CTA), one of the Forum's recommendations in 2017 was that the government should submit a proposal for a specific revision of the Land Law to allow for the transferability of DUATs (O País, 2017). The then Ministry of Land and Rural Development (MITADER, now Ministry of Land and Environment) was encouraged to prioritize massive titling of individuals with the goals of achieving five million DUAT registrations (MITADER, 2017).

Although land will continue to be state-owned, this revision of land policy marks a significant shift in land governance in Mozambique towards a more market-oriented framework that allows for more flexible transfer of DUATs (Nyusi, 2020).⁴

The state would be able to introduce mechanisms that would facilitate the transfer of land on market terms. According to the draft National Land Policy (2022, p. 23, 29), the government should establish and implement a National Land Classification System that delineates the state's land reserves for appropriate economic purposes. What is at stake in this process is the curtailment of the communities' power over the land so that the state can

³<https://www.fct.gov.mz/por>

⁴Filipe Nhusi, speech at the ceremony to launch the public consultation process, July 2020.

decide what happens to the land. If this succeeds, large agrarian capital will benefit and communities and rural working people will be increasingly economically and politically marginalized.

One of the most sensitive areas in this process is the aspect of land transferability. The transferability of land titles (DUAT) under market terms will favour the concentration of land. As mentioned earlier, under the 1997 Land Law, local administrative authorities' opinion is sought as part of the process of titling the rights to use and exploit land, followed by community consultation to ensure that the area is unoccupied.

The draft National Land Policy allows for the collateralization of land. This means that loans can be taken by offering the DUAT as a guarantee (Hamela et al., 2021) which facilitates the commodification of land. Collateral plays an important role in designing debt contracts, in the provision of credit, and the incentives of lenders to monitor borrowers (Cerqueiro et al., 2016; Feder et al., 1988; Galiani & Schargrodsky, 2011). It is also generally argued that land collateralization helps to stimulate land transactions and attracts investment in a broader sense. By and large, the ultimate idea is that the transfer of land titles in market circuits will increase the exchange value of land, while at the same time encouraging the reallocation of resources into their most profitable use possible (Alston et al., 1996). Only 0.6% of food producers (most of them commercial and emerging farmers) have access to credit in Mozambique today (Hamela et al., 2021, p. 18). To transform this reality, collateralization of land was presented as a way forward. While it can be argued that access to credit might strengthen the position of some smaller farmers, I contend that conversely, this vulnerable position of small farmers might facilitate land grabs by big capital, as banks tend to provide credit to those who can demonstrate access to significant tracts of land.

Activists are concerned with the prospects of land collateralization. According to Abel Sainda member of ORAM,⁵ "As we understand it, this agenda [of collateralization of land] is being advanced by the World Bank, the IMF and USAID to push for deep reforms in the agrarian sector in order to boost business-driven agricultural activities. This will galvanise the emergence of a latifundia class in Mozambique."

9 | CONTESTATIONS

Land activists have challenged the process of revising the National Land Policy from the beginning, as has UNAC, although the level of engagement with the process and reasons for contestation vary. Some argue that the process was rushed and that the current climate in Mozambique does not provide conditions for effective public consultations due to the pandemic and armed conflicts in central and northern Mozambique. The aspect of the exclusion of civil society from the process is another ground for contestation. Contrary to the official claim that the process is democratic, civil society accuses the Policy Review Commission of deliberately excluding its participation and selecting only a few organizations in order to divide civil society (ADECRO, 2020).

Recently, a coalition of more than 30 civil society organizations sent a letter to the National Land Policy Review Commission (CRPNT) expressing their ...

... deep concern about the way this body has conducted the National Land Policy Review process since its inception, adopting and publishing draft review documents of this nature that lack the necessary technical quality and are not the product of genuine, participatory, and inclusive consultation. The public expression of concerns by this group of CSOs reflects their deep frustration at the failure of their persistent efforts to engage in direct dialogue with the CRPNT

(Letter to CRPNT, 2022, unpublished).

These organizations urge the CRPNT to suspend the process and focus on finalizing the diagnostic report, followed by its dissemination, socialization, and validation according to a timetable established by consensus among

⁵Interview via zoom, November 2021.

the key stakeholders in the process (Letter to CRPNT, 2022, unpublished). At the beginning, the process was also accused of having been conducted in an authoritarian manner. According Tomás Vieira Mário,⁶ a land activist who has been very vocal since this process began, the government's authoritarianism is not limited to the land policy review process:

There has been no willingness to listen to opinions from outside [the government corridors]. This process [the review of national land policy] is not the only one that is going on in this undemocratic way. There are many similar and critical processes that take place in the same way and in which civil society is not taken into account, on the contrary, sometimes it is pretended to be consulted ... I am talking in particular about a very critical package to reform the laws on freedom of the press, which are fundamental laws, without which we will not even have space to speak. Even in cases where Parliament shows itself willing to discuss, the government simply remains silent and puts forward completely undemocratic proposals to eliminate freedom of expression. Among other reforms, a review of the mining law is also underway, more or less secretly. In short, I think that we are in a context of authoritarianism manifested on several fronts, in a climate of exclusion and false public consultation, and we [civil society] must look at this debate from this perspective and see how we can confront the situation in a much more vigorous and comprehensive way.

According to a UNAC ally, Justiça Ambiental/Friends of the Earth Mozambique (JA!),⁷ who opposes the revision of the land policy and law, "... the revision of the law should be preceded by a referendum under the terms provided in Article 136 No. 1 of the Constitution, since it is a subject of relevant national interest under the terms provided in that article" (2020, p. 15). Another UNAC ally, ADECRU,⁸ issued a statement repudiating the national land policy review. It considered the process a unilateral decision made by the government to meet the interests of private and neoliberal agendas held by multinationals and major world powers:

The priority of the revision of the National Land Policy is to serve the interests of national and international private companies, large commodity producers and banks with a focus on development corridors to turn them into regions of capital flow and export of primary products to global markets, thus deepening the serious problems related to land grabbing, involuntary displacement and resettlement of millions of people, environmental degradation and socio-environmental conflicts (Justiça Ambiental, 2020).

UNAC has been convincing its septical allies (ADECRU, JA!, Livangingo, Forum Mulher, etc) and the peasantry at large to adopt the strategy of "influencing from within," a strategy not new for UNAC as the case of the Land Law of 1997 shows. UNAC has been making use of space given to them, which is also in line with its current UNAC leadership option to opt for a dialogue rather than a confrontation approach. It is worth noting that the current Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (who was previously Minister of Land and has been a supporter of the revision of the land policy and legislation) presented himself as a friend of UNAC, inviting its leadership to frequent meetings and accepting UNAC's invitations to events of the movement. This is despite the fact that this strategy of rapprochement does not seem to have an absolute consensus within the movement. Some UNAC members raised questions at the UNAC Land and Seed Conference in November 2020 about whether the government was using UNAC's willingness to participate in the land policy review process to legitimize the process, rather than seriously addressing

⁶Tomás Vieira Mário, president of Sekelekani, at a civil society meeting on the national land policy review process.

⁷JA! is a Mozambican NGO that promotes environmental justice and works with rural communities, particularly in areas affected by agricultural, mining, and dam megaprojects.

⁸Academic Action for the Development of Rural Communities (ADECRU) is a Mozambican NGO whose goal is to promote greater participation and interaction among the various national actors for the development of rural communities.

the main concern of UNAC members, which has to do with the transferability of individual land titles under market mechanisms.

Many UNAC members have said in public meetings that they see no need to change the current Land Law. According to Amelia Chilaúle, a small-scale peasant farmer and member of UNAC, “the [current] law does not need to be reformed, it needs to be enforced. Many of the problems we face now have to do with the lack of enforcement of the law” (quoted in Ntauazi et al., 2020). She says this despite the fact that UNAC as a movement has not opposed the revision of the land policy as such.

The government has been convincing the public, especially the “peasantry,” to support the process because supposedly the new policy and Law will provide more security of tenure to small-scale producers and rural communities, for example, by formalizing tenure through titling. UNAC members in a recent meeting with the Commission what would a new law bring that the current one does not and how would its implementation differ from the current implementation of the 1997 Land Law.

10 | AGRARIAN POPULISM AND THE STRUGGLE TOWARDS A PROGRESSIVE FUTURE IN RURAL MOZAMBIQUE

A distinctive feature of rural politics in Mozambique is the active participation of nonrural civil society organizations. While UNAC and other peasant associations have undeniable autonomy and legitimacy to demand a progressive land policy that favours small-scale producers, they do not always have the necessary capacity to stand alone to confront agrarian authoritarianism. The participation of nonrural civil society organizations in Mozambique has gone beyond simply demonstrating solidarity. The involvement of middle-class, urban-based civil society in rural politics, as scholars such as Henry Bernstein (2020) might argue, makes it more complicated to build a cross-class alliance to confront agrarian authoritarianism and right-wing populism. I argue that this complementarity, sometimes contradictory as indeed has often been, has not prevented partnership and alliance in Mozambique. This was evident in the case of the opposition to ProSAVANA and, as we have seen, in the adoption of the 1997 Land Law. In Mozambique, the land question remains a compelling issue for mobilization across classes, even if their interests may differ a priori. In Mozambique, land is critical to the livelihoods of the rural poor and plays a role of social protection for the majority of the population. Defending the rural poor's access to land mobilizes the sympathies of broader civil society, of parts of the state, and even the ruling party, FRELIMO.

UNAC has utilized this widespread sympathy to engage in agrarian populism. In its work of “defending the interests of peasants,” the movement assumes that certain kinds of ideas and values are progressive enough to merit the acceptance of the various segments of the “peasantry,” even without a politically articulated position binding together “the people” (*o povo*) and the majority of “the peasants” (*os camponeses*). Although these assertions have obvious limitations, they can be understood in terms of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (2008) concept of strategic essentialism. Not only were these strategies able to mobilize both the social base of the peasantry and broad public opinion, but they also proved to be “positive” to some extent, challenging agrarian authoritarianism and forcing the state to reconsider its policies.

The debate between Bernstein (2020) and Borrás (2020) allows an interesting discussion of the process of contesting the national land policy review in terms of the class interests of civil society groups contesting the process and in terms of strategies to pave a path towards a possible socialist future. This includes, first, recognizing the problems that plague the countryside and the challenges faced by rural people who, in addition to cultivating their plots of land, engage in wage-labour, including work in large-scale capitalist farms, which the movement claims to fight against, and second, developing strategies to overcome those challenges in practice and in theory.

One of the tasks is to recognize the diversity and heterogeneity in its “composition” and to be aware of the differentiation that characterizes the social base of the rural working people (Borrás, 2020; Shivji, 2017) in Mozambique, namely, poor peasants with little access to land, who many times have to engage in wage labour for the better-off

peasants (this type of work is known in the countryside as “*ganho-ganho*”), rural youth, many of whom are unemployed. The recognition of the existing diversity and differentiation is not a threat to its unity but its precondition.

This suggests that the alliance between different groups, which in principle have different interests because they clearly belong to different classes, is neither easy nor impossible to forge. Borras (2020) calls this “the absurdly difficult but not impossible” agenda, in the case of Mozambique, to stop a regressive land policy. UNAC has made efforts to organize the countryside politically, but many sectors are still beyond UNAC’s reach, even within the “peasantry,” and also in sectors such as artisanal mining, pastoralists, and fishermen, the unemployed in the countryside and peri-urban areas. In short, it is a large group of the working people. According to Pattenden (2018, p. 1040), the frequent combination of wage labour with various forms of petty self-employment that the working people undertake can also undermine the common grounds for collective action. This is partly due to the greater spatial fragmentation across worksites.

11 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper discussed how, in the past, the successful defence of the principles of the Land Law against the onslaught of agrarian neoliberalism in Mozambique has been possible through cross-class alliances facilitated by UNAC. The paper renders support to Borras’ (2020) claim that progressive left-wing populism rooted in anticapitalist agrarian social movements can advance a broad-based socialist agenda. The ongoing attempt to abandon the possibility of collective land titles in order to tie individual titles to the collateralization of land titles as a consequence of revising national land policy says much about the dynamics designed to facilitate the penetration of agrarian capital through institutional adjustments. To achieve this, agrarian authoritarianism and populism are used as methods by the state. Furthermore, the state has progressively positioned itself in favour of agrarian and extractive capital, on occasions using its prerogative of land ownership against the majority of the rural poor. In this article, I have shown that in the face of the advance of agrarian authoritarianism, the unification of progressive forces in society not only is a possibility but there are already apparent embryonic forms. In Mozambique, the transformation of agrarian and land policies and the state’s efforts to catapult a neoliberal agrarian agenda have been exploited by right-wing tendencies within FRELIMO. This has strengthened agrarian authoritarianism and reactionary populism. The current process of revising the National Land Policy provides an opportunity to mobilize and unite progressive forces in society towards an agrarian socialist agenda, although that exercise is not an easy one. The UNAC, as it has in the past and in the present, has the potential to play a leading role in mobilizing other rural and agrarian groups within and outside the “peasantry” by inviting artisanal/small-scale miners, pastoralists, fishermen, farm workers, including medium capitalist farmers, and the unemployed in rural and peri-urban areas to defend a progressive land policy. UNAC and the broader agrarian civil society have used populism to counter neoliberal policies and capitalist agrarian programmes. While I subscribe to Bernstein’s (2020) suggestion that because “classes of labour” have different interests, it is not easy or straightforward that they can be in alliance; I argued that this left-wing populism, has the potential to capture the aforementioned popular strata, and arouse their interest if the “enemy” is clearly identified.

The segmentation of struggles and movements has been very common among Mozambican civil society groups. Historically, struggles in the cities have had little or no dialogue with struggles in the countryside. Unions have had little dialogue with peasant and rural organizations. Similarly, advocates of women’s and gender issues have had very little dialogue with those concerned with housing, transportation, and environmental issues. The first notable exception was the Land Campaign (Campanha Terra), which was one of the few active cross-sectoral groups that built an advocacy and platform to incorporate the views of an agrarian movement, UNAC. After the approval of the 1997 Land Law, the land campaign declined. New challenges emerged for the peasantry, such as the case of ProSAVANA, which shows that there is not likely to be a single moment of conflict, that capital regroupings and social movements must be prepared to confront new struggles. Alliances are therefore crucial. They can be extended to reach crucial sectors within which progressive segments exist, even beyond what we can call popular classes or the

working people: academics and political party actors, including individuals in the leadership of FRELIMO. In a public virtual event, Ms. Graça Machel, the former first lady (1975–1986) and prominent FRELIMO figure, affirmed that “for us, the Land Law does not need to be amended. Amending it would open the door to the privatisation of land⁹”. This suggests that UNAC and the broad progressive agrarian civil society have the opportunity to forge alliances to influence and prevent regressive changes, including within the ruling party. “Solidarity from below” Calvário et al (2020) is the basis of what Borrás (2020) sees as necessary for the construction of a class-conscious left-wing political force as counter-current to right-wing populism. The current moment in Mozambique, which opens the possibility of a cross-sectoral alliance within and outside the “peasantry,” also offers progressive social forces the opportunity to potentially influence the construction of an agrarian socialist agenda in Mozambique.

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⁹Graça Machel in a webinar hosted by the Southern African Trust, July 2022.

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