

**Between the devil and the deep blue sea:  
women's access to land and water  
in Chókwè irrigation scheme**

Roberta Pellizzoli

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Roberta Pellizzoli, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Women's Access to Land and Water in Chókweè Irrigation Scheme*

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In the current debate on agrarian change, gender and rights to land access and use in Africa, four issues emerge with particular strength: (1) the gendered impact of neo-liberal reforms; (2) agrarian transitions and the diversification of rural livelihood strategies; (3) the implications on gender equality of the “re-turn to the customary” in defining systems of access to land; (4) the re-thinking of the conceptualization of rural household in the broader discussion on individual or collective land rights. At the same time, several authors have drawn their attention to the political discourse of different actors of development, underlining the frequent use of a de-contextualized and a-historical approach to the issue of gender relations in the land debate, that creates “mythical” solutions on-size-fits-all. Therefore, the concept of gender equity is losing its political weight and is becoming a technical tool used to support policies of poverty reduction and economic growth that do not take into consideration the specificity and the historical complexity of the context.

Within this broader approach, the paper intends to analyze possibilities and constraints to land access and land use of rural women in the irrigation scheme of Chókwè in Mozambique, trying to pinpoint political, economic and social dynamics that impacts on gender relations in the area.

The irrigation scheme of Chókwè, built by the Portuguese colonial administration in the 1950s, after independence in 1975 was nationalised as the “granary of the country”. Between mid-80s and the beginning of the 90s the state industries and the cooperative sector collapsed and, in the wake of the introduction of the Programme of Economic Rehabilitation, land began to be redistributed in the form of a concession between the private and the family sector. Lack of investment in the technical management of the pumps and drainage system and the floods of 2000 in southern Mozambique brought the irrigation system of Chókwè to a state of severe degradation. Analyzing the current political, economic and social dynamics in the area, the paper argues that rural women in Chókwè are those losing out in the current situation of big private investors entering the irrigation scheme in the neo-liberal market and of the governing bodies criticizing the lack of efficiency in the agricultural production of the smallholders and, in practice, putting them at risk of expropriation. Constrained access to agricultural inputs, technologies, training, and credit, a local history of sustained male migration towards South Africa, lack of control of the process of informal commoditization of land and water, high rates of HIV/AIDS in the area undermining food security, absence from decision making process at the local level are all factors that increase the risk for women of a third wave of expropriation. Though rural women in Chókwè are locally well organized in smallholders associations, the paper – based on current field research in the area – argues that the lack of connection with women’s movements at the national level, and the absence of proper gender

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> EADI General Conference “Global Governance for Sustainable Development”, held in Geneva, 24-28 June 2008

analysis by the government institutions involved in the revitalisation of the irrigation scheme is another example of the gap between a high level and rhetorical commitment to gender equality and practice in Southern Africa – a gap that has to be challenged by the states acknowledging that gender equality is a value that should be promoted in itself and not just seen as a shiny jewel box with nothing inside.

### ***Regadio de Chókwè: a history of expropriation***

Historical perspective is needed in order to understand the dynamics that characterize current gendered socio-economic relations in Chókwè irrigation scheme since the establishment of the public company that at present manages access to and use of water – and, indirectly, access to and use of land – in the scheme, namely the Hidraulica de Chókwè - Empresa Publica (HICEP).

#### *The colonial period*

A project elaborated in the 1920s by engineer Trigo de Morais, the irrigation scheme fed into the necessity, for Portuguese colonialism, to control its possessions through occupation and to stimulate crops plantations such as sugar and cotton.

However it was only at the beginning of the 1950s that the construction of the canals and infrastructures for the scheme started and 4 years later the first settlers arrived from Portugal to begin irrigated agricultural production in the so-called Colonato do Limpopo (Hermele 1988: 37).

The Mozambican peasantry that used to occupy the area at the time of the installation of irrigation infrastructure had their land allocated according to customary rules – it was nevertheless a very differentiated peasantry, whereas the richest soils by the Limpopo river were occupied by the traditional chiefs and families close to them; farther lands were used for grazing and for distribution to new households. Migrant wages, mostly from South African mines, constituted a very important part of the economy of the area, with specific consequences from a social and gendered perspective. In fact, migrant wages provided the better-off with capital to invest in agricultural production and the poorest peasants with a very important part of their livelihood, in part fuelling an already existing social stratification. At the same time, the migration of young men, besides being an important rite of passage to adulthood, created a deep gendered division of work, with women in charge of household agriculture, that is to say of the productive and reproductive work (Valá 2003: 60).

Conflicts between the managers of the Colonato, Portuguese colonos and the local peasantry sharpened in this period because of the forced recruitment of Mozambican workers for the construction of the infrastructures and because of the process of expropriation of land that affected

2000 families that was to be transformed in an irrigation scheme. Only a small number of families, and particularly those linked to customary structures, received two hectares of land back, on probation, when the Brigada Tecnica de Fomento e Povoamento do Limpopo (BTFFPL) started the distribution of irrigated plots in 1954. While the colonialist ideology stressed the success of the irrigation scheme as a model both for pacific coexistence between black and white colons<sup>2</sup> and for the development of agriculture, already at the end of the 50s social – in particular conflicts between the colonos and those expropriated that were occupying the *sequeiro*, rain-fed lands, economic and management problems - such as, for example, the scarcity of inputs and water - started to undermine the productivity of the scheme and over one-third of the *colonos* left the scheme before 1974 (Hermele 1988: 43).

### *Rise and fall of the “socialization of the countryside”*

The contradictions in the management of the irrigation schemes and the conflicts in the area did not disappear at independence: as soon as Portuguese settlers left Mozambique, local smallholders occupied irrigated lands, while FRELIMO oscillated between freezing the situation it was with the Colonato, promoting collectivisation and allowing a sort of “mozambicanization” of the scheme, though still on probation.

This uncertain situation eventually came to an end in 1977 during the third FRELIMO congress that, in the framework of a socialist strategy of development, established the creation of state farms, cooperatives and communal villages and, in setting its priorities for agricultural production, the congress designated the Limpopo valley, and in particular the area of Chókwè, the bread-basket of the nation. The Congress coincided with a major flood in the region, an event of which FRELIMO took advantage expropriating the smallholders that were resettled into communal villages and consolidating the nationalisation of the scheme, putting it under the control of a state enterprise, the Limpopo Agro-Industrial Complex (CAIL). In this context it is important to note that in the guidelines that FRELIMO provided in 1979 for the implementation of nationalisation programmes, the “efficiency and productivity” discourse - that became official in 1983 with the planning of the “Operation production”<sup>3</sup> - played a very important part in endorsing forced removals of colons and peasants on probation from the scheme.

The CAIL, that at the time managed more than 36,000 hectares of land in the irrigation scheme, aimed at turning former smallholders and subsistence farmers cultivating rain-fed plots in the

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<sup>2</sup> Since 1959, in fact, Mozambicans were assigned land as *colonos*, with equal rights and duties. The probation system, though, remained in function (Hermele 1988; Valá 2003)

<sup>3</sup> “Operation Production” aimed at identifying unemployed persons in urban areas and relocate them for work in farthest rural areas. While in principle it was based on a voluntary basis, in practice coercion was used by government officials.

proximity of the scheme in farms and cooperatives labourers without access to irrigated land for subsistence agriculture (Hermele 1998: 49): with the cooperative and state farm sector as the engine for rural development, the subsistence family sector was completely marginalized. At the same time, from a gender point of view, this lack of support to family production was counterbalanced by an attempt to employ women in the state agricultural sector, in full concerto with FRELIMO agenda for the empowerment of women. After a short period between 1979 and 1980 where the CAIL had an increase in agricultural production, from 1981 the situation worsened and the Ministry of Agriculture admitted that all the state farms were in a disastrous economic situation. Scholars have singled out several reasons to explain the failure of the CAIL, such as the scarcity of the state investment in the cooperative and family sector (Bowen 1989: 357), poor maintenance of infrastructures, lack of inputs and technical expertise, the disinterest of the peasants for collective forms of production (Valá 2002: 16), increasing conflicts over land (West and Myers 1996), and the escalation of the war between FRELIMO and RENAMO.<sup>4</sup>

In 1984, the Fourth FRELIMO Congress moved from large-scale and capital-intensive agricultural development towards a “reorganization” of the state sector that brought to a redistribution of former state farm’s land to smallholders of the family sector and to private companies. Following the Fourth Congress’ directives, the government put in place a programme of reforms that included a general liberalisation of commercial activities in order to stimulate production and a renewed emphasis on economic pragmatism: scarce inputs and resources were to be channelled to those able to use them efficiently.

In Chókwè, the factors outlined above and the new directions in FRELIMO agricultural policy brought in 1984 to the complete restructuring of the CAIL, that was divided into 10 state farms of roughly 2,000 ha each, while part of the remaining irrigated land was distributed between smallholders and private producers. A new directorate was established in Chókwè for the coordination of the four agricultural sectors: state farms, cooperatives, private and family sector. Parcels in the family sector were around 0.5 ha, while private farmers, mainly former peasants on probation or colons in the Colonato, as well as Portuguese farmers that stayed in Mozambique after independence, had an average of 8 ha. The criterion that was used for the distribution of land between the family and the private sector was the “capacity to be productive farmers”, which related more with wealth, status, local connections and kinship relations than with equipment or specific expertise (West and Myers 1996: 43). Between 1985 and 1986 more land was distributed between the two sectors, also through lotteries. This created uncertainty about parcels’ allocation and rights to land: some had their parcels revoked after a new round of distribution, some received

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<sup>4</sup> State farms, often located in areas of strategic importance and producing export crops that were crucial to the national economy, were a specific target for RENAMO’s strategy of destruction (West and Myers 1996: 34-35).

water contracts but no title over land, others were told that their rights were temporary. Other beneficiaries were large private commercial investors and two joint-ventures between private companies and the government. By 1987 private companies, the new category of “private farmers” and the joint-ventures had received 36% of the best irrigated land (Pitcher 2002: 110).

These changes in the agricultural policy had to be read in the framework of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) that the Mozambican government agreed with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in 1986 and the consequent Programme of Economic Rehabilitation that called for measures such as the removal of price controls in the food market and the privatisation of state enterprises. The implementation of the SAP also brought in Chókwè four donor-sponsored “peasant projects”<sup>5</sup> aiming at supporting associativism in the family sector through providing extension services (mainly training and technical assistance) and supplying agricultural inputs. The impact of these projects, though, was minimal, due to organisational and technical problems and to the lack of training and experience of the extensionists officers that were assigned to the projects.

In the same period the Mozambican government opened negotiations with the French Agency for Development in order to develop a plan for the rehabilitation of the infrastructures in the irrigation scheme and for an institutional reform aimed at creating new bodies for the management of the scheme and for the resolution of conflicts over irrigated land exacerbated by title insecurity.

In the 1992, the irrigation scheme was again at a stalemate: the National Irrigation Development Master Plan set out by a team of experts under the State Secretariat of Agricultural Hydraulics identified a series of main problems, such as the poor conditions of the hydraulic structures and the drainage system and the consequent abandonment of a large part of irrigated land; market constraints; health hazards for the local populations and for the cattle; water consumption problems and the steady progression of the salinisation of the soils whose costs of reclamation were considered to be very high. It also considers problems arising «from the macro-economic and social changes, institutional reforms, the changeover from an authoritarian economy to a market dominant one, restructuring of the production system» (GoM 1992). According to the Master Plan, the liberalisation of agriculture and services caused a market paralysis of the institution which was responsible for the administration of operation and maintenance of the irrigation scheme. Even though, in theory, operational and maintenance operations should be covered by users of irrigated lands by means of a water tax «of course these people refuse or fail to pay the tax as long as the water distribution and drainage system isn't working properly. Lacking credit and outside aid, the institution has more or less suspended its activities» (GoM 1992).

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<sup>5</sup> The donors involved in the support to the family sector were the Mozambique and Nordic Agricultural Program, the French Project to Support Family Agriculture, the World Lutheran Federation Project and UNIFEM/UNDP.

In 1993 the programme of rehabilitation was nevertheless finalized, a Unit of Implementation of the Project (UIP) was established and a Technical Council agreed on maintaining the same land structure as before while creating an updated cadastre of water users. In 1995 researchers studying the area stressed the risk for smallholder to be “swallowed up” by the private sector in a process of natural selection (Valà 2003: 135), with the only alternative for them being a policy of subsidies and support to smallholder agriculture from the Mozambican government, an alternative that anyway was not viable for a state that was going through a second transition towards multiparty democracy and that had its hand tied by the inevitable adhesion to neo-liberal market principles.

*New actors, new interests: the irrigation scheme after 1997*

The year 1997 seemed to be a landmark for the development of an irrigation scheme that, for its size and for the availability of water, had the potential to be the breadbasket of the nation but that was never so. A decree established the creation of a new management body, the Hidráulica de Chókwè – Empresa Pública (HICEP) and of Water Users Association (WUA), and in October the new Land Law was passed.

The Law 19/97 confirms state property of land and gives Mozambican women and men equal rights of access to land, trying at the same time to create a formal system of land titling in order to attract private investment. At the same time, though, in a specific context such as that of the biggest irrigation scheme of the country, the changes in terms of securing smallholders’ land rights brought by the land reform had to be integrated in a broader project of strengthening processing and commercialization possibilities, rural extension services, availability of inputs and resources, protection of a threatened eco-system that clearly calls for a substantial involvement of the ministry of Agriculture in terms of economic support.

The rehabilitation of the main canals of the scheme continued with the support of French Cooperation; at the same another relevant process was on the way, with the big commercial enterprises starting to divest from the irrigation scheme and returning the land that they occupied to the state. It is interesting to note that while part of this land was at the time redistributed between farmers of the private sector (those with more than 4 ha of land), the best irrigated land is still registered in the name of the state in the cadastre held by the HICEP: in 2007 part of that land has been conceded to a South African-Zimbabwean company that is cultivating rice and maize and is planning to cultivate sugar cane, allegedly for bio-fuel production. As happened after the divestiture of the state farms and the simultaneous liberalisation of the economy, the recent divestiture of the big private sector contributed to the emergence of new actors with a specific interests in investing over valuable resources such as irrigated land.



The project of rehabilitation of the irrigation scheme was violently stopped by the floods that in February 2000 severely affected the whole province, with hundreds of people killed and many more having their houses completely destroyed; the irrigation scheme suffered severe damages too and in some cases the rehabilitation works were completely nullified.

In May 2002, with rehabilitation works of the main canals still on the way and with every farmers directly involved in the cleaning of the secondary canals, the Statute that regulates the functioning of the irrigation scheme was approved by the ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.<sup>6</sup>

The Statute establishes that the HICEP has management and financial tasks over the distribution of water; it is in charge of maintenance activities (of the main canals); is responsible for the administration of the irrigation scheme – that now covers roughly 22.000 ha, to which 8.000 ha of land that for various reasons cannot be cultivated should be added - and of technical support to Water Users Associations. These are in charge of the management and the direct distribution of water in the Association's area; they have to organize maintenance work of the secondary and tertiary canals and they participate to the administration of the scheme with HICEP. As for the land rights over parcels in the irrigation scheme, it is established that they follow the 1997 Land Law so that every farmer should have, upon approval of his or her WUA, a title deed. Nevertheless, the use of land in the irrigation scheme has to be consistent with the principle of the intensification of agricultural production. The Statute also establishes that every farmer will be charged with a water fee twice per year, unless he proves that he has not received the water that he was supposed to. If a farmer does not comply with the payment of the water fee, his access to water will be suspended; if he or she accumulates more debts, a specific Council will be set up to decide upon the expropriation of the irrigated parcel.

It is interesting to note how the HICEP, though – as the Statute establishes – in charge only of the distribution of water, has *de facto* the right to decide over expropriation of land for those who do not pay the water fee. The management of the HICEP appears in fact quite worried about the economic sustainability of the irrigation scheme and is planning an increase of the water fee, from 550 Mtn per ha/per season to 850 Mtn per ha/per season, even though further increases are not excluded since it has been calculated that in order to cover all the rehabilitation, maintenance and management expenses the fee should rise up to 3500 Mtn.<sup>7</sup> While my informer was well aware of the impossibility, for the majority of the farmers of the familiar sector and for many of those of the private sector, to pay such a fee, he insisted that smallholders are not efficient nor productive in their farming and that cultivating maize, beans and vegetables in the irrigation scheme /the main

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<sup>6</sup> Diploma Ministerial n. 58/2002, Boletim da República, I serie – número 18, 1 de Maio 2002

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Roberto Lumbela, coordinator of the Water Users Associations, HICEP, 27 November 2007. Note that 1 euro corresponds to 35 Mozambican meticaís (mtn)

crops for the familiar sector) is just a waste of water: «having a plot in the irrigation scheme is like living in a luxury villa: you have to deserve it and care for it», told me my informer, stressing that land should be given to those that are able to efficiently work it – by efficiently meaning that the whole production in the irrigation scheme should be destined for the market and not used for family subsistence. When confronted with the fact that the majority of farmers of the familiar sector does not have access to means of production, fertilizers, pesticides, income for hiring tractors or to pay for casual labourers to help with farming activities, he said that farmers should not expect to receive support or subsidies from the state because this can not happen and suggested that the WUA should look for a partner that would provide them with all they need, and for whom they will do contract-farming, creating a joint-venture.

As we will see in the next section, this “efficiency” vision for the development of the irrigation scheme is being challenged by former cooperatives’ members.

### **A (brief) account of associativism in Chókwè**

As we have seen, an understanding of the dynamics of the irrigation scheme would not be complete without taking into consideration the importance of associativism and cooperativism in Chókwè.

Cooperativism in Mozambique dates back to 1911 (Adam 2006): while at the beginning cooperatives were mostly used by Portuguese farmers in order to negotiate credit and reduction of import tariffs with the State, after 1944 the colonial administration supported the creation of cooperatives of indigenous better-off farmers that served for the purpose of broadening the social base of the regime.

In Chókwè the first cooperative, Cooperativa Agrícola do Limpopo (CAL), was created by the BTFPL to facilitate and support farming labour of the members, Portuguese and Mozambican colons and those farmers on probation that, on request, obtained authorization from the BTFPL. The CAL, that was in charge also of rural extension services, of the commercialisation of the production and of water and energy distribution, was supported in the fulfilment of its tasks by the Associations of Water Users of the Colonato do Limpopo. The participation to the Associations, that were recognised legal status, was mandatory for all the farmers that had a parcel in the irrigation scheme: the main objective of this hierarchic system was to enable farmers in Chókwè to manage the scheme, both from a technical and economic point of view, with a limited intervention from the colonial administration.

After independence, the creation of state farms and cooperatives was functional to the plan of “socialisation of the countryside” for agricultural development through industrialization and mechanization of the production, whereas the family and private sector was marginalized. Chókwè,

with the establishment of the largest state farm in the country, was a paradigmatic model for the implementation of FRELIMO agrarian policy. The simultaneous creation of cooperatives, starting from 1977-1978, was initially quite successful, with small-farmers voluntarily joining them: through cooperatives, in fact, farmers had access to irrigated land, to inputs and means of production that were also used on their individual parcels and to a monthly salary that was intended as an incentive for investing more hours of work in the cooperative fields. The holistic strategy of consolidation of the cooperative system included an education programme in order to overcome high rates of illiteracy, training courses to enhance production, a particular attention to the involvement of women, technical assistance from nearby state farms, a payment in kind in proportion to the amount of work cooperative's workers did – as stated in the 1979 Cooperative Law. Work norms and obligations were also introduced, such as that members should do whatever was needed in the fields, five hours a day, five days a week but, according to Wardman (1985: 300), these conditions were hardly respected. Wardman (1985) and Valá (2002) stress the lack of proper technical know-how as a main factor affecting the poor production in cooperatives; other relevant factors were the lack of inputs and means of production at the right time of the year (cooperatives, in fact, were supposed to hire tractors and machines from state farms, that had to finish their work before providing them, so that often cooperatives were not able to plant the crops before the beginning of the rain season); lack of technical assistance that brought to a deterioration of machinery; lack of a system for commercialisation: with state farms, cooperatives, family and private sector harvesting the same crops at the same time of the year, the local market was not able to absorb it and this discouraged the cooperativists that started to dedicate more and more time and work to their individual plots for household subsistence.

In an attempt to overcome the production crisis in cooperative agriculture, the Ministry of Agriculture set up a Union of Cooperatives that was in charge of coordinating agricultural activities, selling the surplus produce and cope with organisational problems. The Union had (and still as) an elected President and is composed by a General Assembly that comprise all cooperative's Presidents;<sup>8</sup> in this hierarchical structure there are also a Management Commission – with a President – and a Production Manager: the success of these cooperatives, stresses Wardman (1985: 301) depended very much on the character of the President and of the other in charge with responsibility tasks, and on how much authority they wielded. This proved to be a problem in many cases, with the President not being able to actively involve the members of the cooperative in planning and management. Technical constraints, scarce possibilities to access the market, demotivation of the members due to a fragile leadership, the lack of support from the state, stable

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<sup>8</sup> Many cooperatives have had or have a woman President, but the President of the Union has always been a man

patterns of migration of young and adult men and the consequent process of social differentiation – in the specific historical and socio-economic context of Chókwè – brought the cooperative model in the socialist state to an irreversible crisis.

At the beginning of the 1990s the “peasant projects” funded by international donors supported also the creation of “Casas Agrárias” in order to sustain former cooperatives, whose members were still working the same plots than before, with technical assistance and extension services. In 1993 the four “Casas Agrárias”, and the former cooperatives were transformed in farmers’ associations within the Project of Support to Agriculture for the Family Sector coordinated by the Ministry of Agriculture (Valá 2002: 20). The farmers’ associations of Chókwè, still grouped in the Union of Farmers’ Associations of Chókwè and members of the National Union of Cooperatives, are now – with the support of Spanish Cooperation - in the process of applying for legal status in order to overcome the risk to be “swallowed” by the Water Users Association since – as managers of the HICEP stated - «there is no need for two different kinds of Association in the irrigation scheme, they should all work together».

The WUA, an experiment of “associativism” created from above, were established with the main aim to support HICEP in the management and maintenance of the irrigation scheme through the involvement of all the members, be them of the familiar or private sector. HICEP and researchers such as Valá (2002: 27) consider that the WUA can have a positive impact on farmers’ commercial production and, in the long run, on the reduction of rural poverty, in particular in a situation where no support from the State can be expected. They stress the relevance of the first joint-venture agreed between the pilot-WUA and the Japanese cooperation for a project of support to rice cultivation.<sup>9</sup>

The official establishment of the WUA created a conflict between HICEP and the former cooperatives, as HICEP tried to dismantle the new associations. The members strongly opposed to this possibility and they asked to participate to the WUA as association and not as individual farmers. This strategy was linked to the necessity to reduce the risk of land expropriation for those farmers that are not able to pay the water fee. Given that many of them, especially widows or single mother that do not have access to other income and cultivate just maize and some beans for their own consumption, do not have access to a regular form of income and often experience difficulty in paying the water fee (or do not pay at all), the Union of Farmers’ Association decided that it would cover the debts of its member, that would then refund the Union when they will have some money available. While this strategy is actually working and no farmers belonging to the association had

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Roberto Lumbela, coordinator of the Water Users Associations, HICEP, 27 November 2007. Interview with Salim Crompton Vala, 11 November 2007. The project aims at exporting Japanese rice cultivation techniques in Chókwè and to provide the farmers with a machine for processing. In an interview with the engineer responsible for the project he said, though, that he had «never tasted such a bad rice [as Chókwè rice]» and that he knew that «Mozambican farmers does not like to work. Maybe if they had more wives they could work in the field».

his or her land expropriated, the possibility that the water fee will rise in the near future will jeopardize it, because the budget of the Union – coming mainly from the commercialisation of production cultivated in the communal plot – will not be able to sustain such an increase.

From the interviews that I made to the members of the farmers’ associations, it appears that many of them – and women in particular - do not know about the existence of the WUA and have never been asked to participate to their meetings (even though membership is automatic for every farmer). The expectation that WUA can have a relevant impact on the reduction of rural poverty appears, in this context, still quite naïve or, at least, it should be clarified what HICEP means with the term “Association” and how it intend to promote farmers’ participation. Similar experiences in South Africa have shown that while WUA are central to the efficient management of the water projects – and are also seen as a form of local governance - «they have been ‘captured’ by men despite policy provisions to reinforce the participation of women» (Hemson 2002: 20). It seems that the WUA in Chókwè are going towards the same directions, with no women President and no women in the Board of the WUA; while the farmers’ associations, whose member are – as can be seen in the tables below – mainly women, risk to see their capacity of negotiation with the HICEP diminishing with the likely increase of the water fee.

<b>Association<sup>10</sup></b>	<b>Ha</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Ha/Member</b>	♂	♀	<b>% ♀</b>
<i>21 de Maio</i> (1983)	80	78	1,02	1	77	99%
<i>IV Congresso</i> (1983)	24	24	1	5	19	79%
<i>Josina Machel</i> (1977)	89	117	0,76	17	100	85%
<i>Casa Agraria</i> (1999)	45	76	0,59	10	66	87%
<i>Zonas Verdes</i> (2001)	19	22	0,86	10	12	55%
<i>Agropem</i> (1986)	50	51	0,98	16	35	69%
	307	368	0,83	59	309	84%

<b>Water Users Association</b>	<b>Ha</b>	<b>Water Users</b>	<b>Ha/WU</b>	♂	♀	<b>% ♀</b>
Nelson Mandela	326	484	0,67	258	226	47%
Armando Guebuza	459	481	0,95	339	142	30%
Eduardo Mondlane	423	150	2,82	113	37	25%
Samora Machel	127	207	0,61	117	90	43%
Maria Guebuza	262	200	1,31	117	83	42%
Gajane	534	429	1,24	340	89	21%
Cocotive	40	26	1,54	11	15	58%
Nhongane	50	15	3,33	13	2	13%
Produtores Cereais Macarretane	300	14	21,43	13	1	7%

<sup>10</sup> This table considers only the farmers association that are supported by the Spanish Cooperation project in the process of acquiring legal status.

Combatentes da Luta de Liberação Nacional	30	12	2,50	9	3	25%
	2551	2018	1,26	1330	688	34%

### Women and land in Chókwè irrigation scheme

In a relevant essay Bridget O’Laughlin (1995) analyzes the gendered consequences of male labour migration and of state farms and cooperative system on Mozambican households in the Southern part of the country. With male migrant workers withdrawn from farming activities, women were in charge of most of the farm labour, included ploughing and caring for cattle (1995: 82).

Male migration created an instability in conjugal relations that came to be strictly intertwined with the undergoing process of social differentiation and the nature of women’s work: their possibility to become “productive” farmers depended on what kind of household they belonged to (O’Laughlin 1995: 82-83) and with the relations that they maintained with a migrant husband or son. Remittances from migrant labour were crucial for women to rent a plough or to hire seasonal workers for planting or harvesting. Other women continued to “wield the hoe” in their plot or were employed as casual labour on plantations.

At independence, 30% of household were headed *de jure* by women, and much larger was the number of those *de facto*. These numbers are reflected in the composition of cooperatives of the Gaza province, where the two third of the members were women: while this was clearly strictly linked to the gender composition of the rural population of the area, it has also to be considered that for many women, in particular those living on themselves, getting older and not able to sustain their own farming, cooperative membership brought to increased livelihood security. When the cooperative system proved to be economically unsustainable and the Mozambican agricultural policy turned to the smallholder model, poorest women without a regular cash income were not able to keep on with the intensive labour (weeding, canals cleaning) that irrigated land requires – that is, they were not able to become productive farmers, and they encountered many difficulties in raising money to pay the irrigation fee.

Not surprisingly, the only group of women that benefited from smallholder farming were – and still are – those living in a household where the husband is himself a farmer (often a former migrant) or those with a migrant husband sending money back home. It seems then that improving women’s access to irrigated farming and providing them with a title deed is ineffective if the economic, political and social gendered dynamics are not explored.

The analysis of the conditions of the women members of the farmers’ association is not very different from that of O’Laughlin: the most successful farmers – according to the productivity

criteria of HICEP – are those (and they are a minority) who have a husband living with them and providing the household with a regular source of income that is then in part invested in agricultural activities or those whose husband is a former migrant worker or a former combatant now helping in the field. These households often have two plots in the irrigation scheme (one registered in the name of the husband and the other in the name of the wife) that are used for commercial production, and they are also able to successfully look after a third plot in the rain-fed area outside the irrigation scheme, where they have a more differentiated production for household consumption. Usually women do most of the work in the field – except using the tractor or animal traction – while men are responsible for the commercialization of the crops. Notwithstanding the unchallenged unequal gender relations in the household, both spouses of these successful, interviewed separately, always claimed that they «decided together» and they certainly were those with more assets. Single mothers, divorced or widowed women were, not surprisingly, those who struggled more with the farming and they claimed that this was due to the fact that they had no one from the family helping them and that they «had to do all the work». A common concern, in fact, was about the fact that the youngsters do not like to work in the field and are not willing to help. These women mainly cultivate maize (that does not require intensive work) and beans, very few are trying to start cultivating rice, but they claim that they would never sell it to the factory because they do not pay much, so they prefer to keep it for them rather than «spend all my money for 25 kg bag of rice in the shop!».

In other African case studies (Vijfhuizen 1998; Zwarteveen 1997) it has been showed that it was very difficult for women to be given an individual parcel of land in an irrigation scheme while, given its political and socio-economic dynamics Chókwè can be considered a peculiar case – not unique in Mozambique, though. In Vijfhuizen (2001: 89-121) analysis of Massaca irrigation scheme – located in the Maputo province, in the Southern part of the country – it is shown how women, that were the 70% of the members of a 144 ha scheme built by a development project of the Italian Cooperation, were losing control over their irrigated lands to the advantage of men, both from the local community and from outside. In a context of growing commercial value for irrigated land, the fact that women were not able to access to, or control, other forms of income and had therefore scarce access to farming inputs and resources, made very difficult for them to raise enough money to pay the water fee – meaning that many of them (especially widows, divorced women and single mothers) were forced to rent or sell the irrigated parcel and return to rain-fed agriculture. Stressing the importance of access to irrigated land for women's livelihoods and for households' food security in rural areas, Vijfhuizen (2001: 114) considers that – notwithstanding land's potential for commercial agriculture – the management of the irrigation scheme, in the re-organization of the

scheme - has to consider the social value of that land too: «there is more to irrigated land than mere soil» .

Researches carried out since the 1980s analyzing the gender dynamics in African irrigation schemes, such as that of Dey (1981) and Carney (1988) on Gambia, Carney and Watts (1991) on Senegambia and Zwarteveen (1997) show the marginalization of women and call for individual or property rights in order to increase productivity and to the household benefit.

In Chókwè it seems that the problem for women is not accessing land, but the use that is made of it and the factors that influence this use: lack of time and financial capacity to acquire new skills in farming, to differentiate crops, to commercialize them; the amount of productive and reproductive work that has to be carried out by women; the high rates of HIV-AIDS infection in the area that reduce women's livelihoods possibilities (O'Laughlin 2006). Women of Chókwè hold a title for their plot, but this is not sufficient against the risk of landlessness: land tenure security in Chókwè depend on the individual (and group) capacity to meet the criteria of productivity of the irrigation scheme management, but no conditions have been created for women small-farmers to improve the use that they make of land.

## **Conclusions**

This situation has to be read, and discussed, in the context of the increasing awareness of the importance of promoting and supporting women's rights and gender equality policies in Africa. This is reflected, for example, in the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2001), in the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on Women's Rights (2003) and, for Southern Africa, in the Gender and Development Declaration of the Southern African Development Community (1999) that was elevated to a Protocol in 2007. The Rwandan Parliament is that with more women MPs in the world (48%), the South African and Mozambican ones have reached the strategic 30%, other countries in Southern Africa are close to it thank to their electoral systems and party quotas.

In Mozambique the importance of the empowerment of women was recognized by the FRELIMO back in the 1970s, when women were involved, on a equal basis, in the movement (included in the liberation war first, and in the civil war after 1976).

The women's movement has always been strong, both with the Organization of Mozambican Women (Sheldon 2002) and with several civil society organizations that promote and support women's rights; the debate on these issues is very well articulated, with a strong link between women working in the academy – very often feminist activists themselves – and the social



movements; nevertheless it has always been, and it is even more now, stronger in the urban rather than in the rural areas.

In 1994, with first multiparty elections, FRELIMO introduced a 30% quota, and in 1999 a Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Welfare was introduced – though, it has to be noted that it came at a time when other countries in Southern Africa (Geisler 2004: 116) had begun to abandon women's ministries and department because were considered inefficient national machineries that did not support gender mainstreaming. Several laws has been approved by the Mozambican government protecting and promoting women's rights and a new Law on violence against women is being discussed.

The 1997 Mozambican Land Law grants women equal rights to men: they can access and use land and gain a title document, and they can inherit land; customary norms and practices, that can discriminate against women, are recognized as long as they comply with the constitutional non-discrimination principle. Though it has been praised as an excellent reform in its guaranteeing the equal status of women, the law has also been criticized because it is based on the assumption that through secure tenure rights women will become more efficient producers, that is, it does not challenge the gendered bias of the neo-liberal agenda and its tendency to rely upon unequal power relations between men and women (O'Laughlin 2007).

But the situation of the women of Chókwè is yet another example of the gap between discourse and practice, between a high level commitment towards the promotion of gender equity and agricultural policies and strategies as well as development projects that do not take into consideration the gender dimension of the context, depoliticizing the concept itself of gender mainstreaming, turning it into a technical tool rather than in a instrument that can challenge unequal gendered power relations.

Women are socially differentiated strategic actors and their needs, strategies and opportunities vary a lot in the different contexts and this calls for a multidisciplinary gender analysis, especially in such a crucial field such as women's rights in accessing (and using) land.

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