

Interview with Professor José Negrão, Hero of Mozambique's Poor

Dr. José Negrão, Professor of Development Economics at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique, and founder of Oxfam partner Cruzeiro de Sol (Southern Cross), speaks about the revolutionary Land Law that has secured land and opportunity for thousands of impoverished Mozambicans.

In central Mozambique, Oxfam America-supported organizations are building dynamic partnerships between small and commercial farmers. Five years ago, peasants without a written title were unprotected from private sector claims to their land. Today, because of a revolutionary Land Law that was passed in 1997, peasants can not only lay claim to their land, but negotiate their terms of business. Both parties benefit—small farmers bring to the table their land, resources, and labor, while private investors invest their capital, market access, and technical expertise.



Dr. José Negrão speaks with Oxfam America about the 1997 Land Law that has created opportunities for thousands of farming families in central Mozambique.

By: Sergio Silva/Oxfam

The Land Law is the foundation on which this opportunity is built.

Dr. José Negrão, Professor of Development Economics at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique, was a key player in the Land Forum which advocated for the passage of the law.

Dr. Negrão is also the founder of Oxfam partner Cruzeiro do Sul (Southern Cross).

The organization has been at the forefront of lobbying the government, the private sector, civil society actors and international donors to embrace and practice development strategies that benefit the poor. The organization played a key role in providing intellectual and technical leadership for the Land Campaign.

We interviewed Professor Negrão, and asked him about the Land Law:

[Oxfam] How did you get involved with the Land Law?

[Negrão] It was around 1990, more or less, when the civil war peace agreement was being discussed. At that time the first thing we saw was the Dominglatura [the urban elite] mainly in Maputo, started realizing that the war was more or less over.

So they started to grab land in order to do business. For example, [they did business] speculation with white Zimbabweans, with white South Africans, and God knows whoever else would come. So at the time of the peace agreement [it was in 1992], we started foreseeing problems of scarcity of land in the countryside, not because all of the other land was being used, but because land with infrastructure was being allocated to new people, not in the field, but to ministers, foreign ministers, these kinds of people.

Everyone [government officials and businessmen] became very afraid because of the resettlement of about five million Mozambicans who had been refugees in neighboring countries, and also internally displaced people. They were returning to their land.

At this time, the World Bank came up with a proposition, which was when structural adjustment programs were very strong in Africa. The World Bank came up with the same proposition they did with every other program in the 90s, by titling every single family. The meaning of it was that they did not recognize communal rights, just individual rights, titling families and not communities. That was the bank's proposal. They assumed that this type of titling was something feasible.

I should tell you that, at that time, just ten percent of the land in Africa was titled. Titling is really very complex, because it is a process.

Just for you to have an idea, and for the readers in the US to have an idea, in my country, we have not been able- until today- to issue an identity card for every single citizen. Can you imagine the titling of land for each

family? It would mean three million titles, it would be an unending process. It would be impossible, but that was the proposal of the World Bank.

The government came with a proposal called "zoning." This means [the government would issue] a specific area for the private sector, another area for small holder, another area for state reserves like nature reserves, another area for towns, etc.

I was working at the University, and wrote a paper saying this plan was not feasible and that it was a mistake. The proposal of the government was one hundred years old. It was the same proposal of the Portuguese settlers, from the end of the 19th century when they created native reserves. The proposal was to keep the dualistic idea that small holders would keep being small holders and that they would not become entrepreneurs, and they looked to small holders just like employees of the private investors.

Why not think of the transformation of the small holder, individually or collectively? It can be done.

So that was the main point, and I tried to criticize that position, of zoning by property, and not zoning by the potential of the land to be used for agriculture or cattle breeding. I believed that there was a possibility for collective titling, and not just for individual titling.

The main point was that even if we agreed, technically it was totally impossible to do it. The World Bank tried to do it [private titling] in Ghana, and in ten years they spent something like 50 million dollars, and they have been able to title just 10 percent of the families.

The point is, what is the alternative? And that's the moment when I came up with an alternative.

Why does the State only recognize the rights of land occupancy, the rights of the people, only when they have a written title or a piece of paper? Why doesn't the State also recognize the oral testimony of these people? That's the way they [the majority of rural Mozambicans] work here.

I can give you an example. Less than five percent of marriages in Mozambique are official. Ninety percent of the people are married based on customary, oral ways of doing it. Why doesn't the State recognize the oral method?

Several civil society organizations read the paper. When they read it, I started receiving calls, and when it came to the press, several people called me, and said "we are interested in developing these ideas." And that was the moment when it started.

A lot of organizations followed suit, and we went to the Parliament and won. It was a lot of lobbying. More than 50,000 people in this country were conducting a land campaign.

One day I woke up, and I said "I'm afraid!"

I'm not supposed to have 50,000 people behind me. It's incredible! Even today there is always someone that recognizes me, and says, "Wow, this is the person that was involved in this thing. I was not expecting it. The movement was much bigger than any initiative on my side, the movement was theirs.

The message was to orient to the demand. It was not supply driven, but demand driven. They said "this is what we want!"

[Oxfam] How was the Land Law disseminated? Were there many obstacles?

[Negrão] Oh, no, there were no obstacles. Nobody was against it. But also there was not very much interest on the side of the State to disseminate it. So what we did was to disseminate it by ourselves all over the country. We just fed local organizations with the materials that they required from us. So in each place was a different organization doing the dissemination under the umbrella of a big movement.

If you asked the people today, "Do you know the Land Law," they would probably say no. But you can ask the question in another way: "Are you afraid that someone will take your land from you?" They will say "No, nobody would take the land from me." That's clear for them. They know that our rights are assured by this law. They don't know that it's a law, but if there wasn't a law then they would be afraid.

[Oxfam] What are some of the other benefits of the Land Law?

[Negrão] The main thing is that it's clear that the people get land security, that they have the possibility to do something with it. And this something starts with becoming organized and then creating their own capital-the knowledge that they have about how to do things- like training programs and so on. When people become conscious that they have these rights and that they have possibilities and that they are acquiring more

knowledge, that's the most important thing. It is the movement in itself and the dynamics that are important. They believe in themselves, they are not fatalistic about the future. That is the most important thing that I see.