



# Dialogue Online

*"The elders sit under the big tree and talk until they agree... talking until you agree (or agree to disagree) is the essential (essence) of the traditional African concept of democracy..."*  
*Julius Nyerere*

## Addressing the Resource Curse in Northern Mozambique

*By Ineke Stemmet, SALO*



Image: ["The landscape of northern Mozambique"](#) by [International Livestock Research Institute](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)

Northern Mozambique has been experiencing an escalating conflict since October 2017. The insurgent group operating in the area is called Al-Sunnah Wal-Jamaa (ASWJ), Ansar al-Sunna, or by locals as Al-Shabaab (with no known links to the Somali-based terrorist group).<sup>1</sup> In 2020, more than 570 violent incidents were recorded. An indication of further intensification occurred in early 2021 - on 24 March insurgents seized the town of Palma in Cabo Delgado, killing dozens of people, including foreigners.<sup>2</sup> Thus far, nearly 700,000 people have been internally displaced in the provinces of Cabo Delgado, Niassa and Nampula - a figure that is expected to rise to 1 million by June.<sup>3</sup> The conflict has killed more than 2600 people.<sup>4</sup> The reasons for the conflict include religious extremism, structural social and economic marginalisation of the area, youth unemployment, longstanding poverty in the context of a rich natural resource base, the fragmented political situation in the country, and the weak state.<sup>5</sup> (For more background on the conflict, see SALO's previous publications here: <https://www.salo.org.za/update-on-the-security-situation-in-northern-mozambique-by-ineke-stemmet-salo/> and <https://www.salo.org.za/mozambique-terrorist-insurgency-an-uncoordinated-response-to-a-looming-regional-crisis-by-fowzia-davids-and-lindiwe-mthembu/>).

## The resource-conflict nexus

In recent years Mozambique has discovered rich natural resources in the country and the North in particular. Since the discovery of natural gas in Cabo Delgado, the province is now home to the three largest liquid natural gas (LNG) projects in Africa: the Mozambique LNG Project worth \$20bn, the Coral FLNG Project worth \$4.7bn, and the Rovuma LNG Project worth \$30bn.<sup>6</sup> The resource-conflict nexus, which is generally understood as the role that natural resources play in different types of conflict, is thus an appropriate lens for investigating the conflict in Mozambique. Numerous academic work has correlated conflict with natural resources. Two main theories are found within this line of thinking. Firstly, that an abundance of resources is correlated to different types of conflict. This is known as the resource curse.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, that a scarcity of resources goes hand in hand with conflict.<sup>8</sup> The former applies to Mozambique.

## The resource curse

There are several reasons why an abundance of resources could form part of the causes of a conflict. Three of these reasons will be investigated in this opinion piece. The first is that resource abundance affects the motivations and actions of state actors.<sup>9</sup> Abundant resources galvanise conflict as competitors and the ruling elite are attracted to its potential income and act on the basis of greed.<sup>10</sup> The second is that resource abundance could be harmful to a country when it creates grievances for its citizens. This happens when natural resources are dispersed unequally.<sup>11</sup> The third reason is that the state will have less incentive to create good economic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.salo.org.za/mozambique-terrorist-insurgency-an-uncoordinated-response-to-a-looming-regional-crisis-by-fowzia-davids-and-lindiwe-mthembu/>

<sup>2</sup> South African Government News agency. 29 March 2021. Available: <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/concern-over-deadly-mozambique-attacks>

<sup>3</sup> Africa News. 2021. Mozambique: Cabo Delgado displacement could reach 1 million, UN officials warn  
Available: <https://www.africanews.com/2021/03/23/mozambique-cabo-delgado-displacement-could-reach-1-million-un-officials-warn/>

<sup>4</sup> IOL. New clashes in Mozambique three weeks after Palma jihadist attack. 16 April 2021. Available:  
<https://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/new-clashes-in-mozambique-three-weeks-after-palma-jihadist-attack-69a04dc1-67ba-4e04-8bc5-d5284909345b>

<sup>5</sup> Will Marshall. 2021. Global Risk Insights. April 19. Available: <https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/04/the-political-economy-of-mozambiques-faceless-insurgency/>

<sup>6</sup> Rawoot, I. 2020. Gas-rich Mozambique may be headed for a disaster. Al Jazeera. 24 February. Available:  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/2/24/gas-rich-mozambique-may-be-headed-for-a-disaster>

<sup>7</sup> Lujala, P., Gleditsch, N. P., Gilmore, E. 2005. A Diamond Curse? Civil War and a Lootable Resource. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 49(4): 538-562.

<sup>8</sup> Nillesen, E. & Blute, E. 2014. Natural Resources and Violent Conflict. *The Annual Review of Resource Economics*, 6: 69-83.

<sup>9</sup> De Soysa, I. 2002. Paradise Is a Bazaar? Greed, Creed, and Governance in Civil War, 1989-99. *Journal of Peace Research*, 39(4):395-416.

<sup>10</sup> Le Billon, P, 2001. The political ecology of war: natural resources and armed conflicts. *Political Geography*, 20:561-584.

<sup>11</sup> Humphreys, M. 2005. Natural Resources, Conflict and Conflict Resolution. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 49(4): 508-537.

policies, strong democratic institutions, or invest in its citizens as it is dependent on natural resources for income and power.<sup>12</sup>

### **Mozambique's resource curse**

The first reason for a resource curse - competition over potential outcomes - should be analysed in the case of Mozambique. It is known that the insurgent group is using illicit trade and criminal activities to fuel its efforts and has been involved in the smuggling of natural resources since its inception to generate income.<sup>13</sup> Some analysts have been adamant that the motives of the insurgents are mostly driven by greed.<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup>However, the general consensus is that the conflict is more complicated than this. There have not been many indications that the main goal of the Mozambican insurgents is to tap into the natural resources in the area out of greed alone.<sup>16</sup> The academic literature on the resource curse re-establishes this in the greed-grievance nexus.<sup>17</sup> Most conflicts are not driven by greed alone and often has other grievance-related causes that drives conflicts.

The second reason for a resource curse, as mentioned above, is the idea that abundant resources work as a catalyst towards conflict due to grievances resulting from the unequal distribution of resources. This applies to the conflict in Northern Mozambique. Joseph Hanlon writes that: *"The insurgents are primarily Muslims from the coastal zone of Cabo Delgado, recruited by local fundamentalist preachers with a basically socialist message - that Sharia, or Islamic law, would bring equality and everyone would share in the coming resource wealth."*<sup>18</sup> The profits from the extraction of natural resources in the area have flowed mostly to Mozambican political elites and foreign investments, while the promised benefits and opportunities to the community have largely not materialised. <sup>19</sup> As such, natural resources are an important driver in the conflict as the insurgents seek to correct the perceived unequal distribution of resources in their communities by acting as a replacement to the state.<sup>i</sup>

The third reason does not directly apply to Northern Mozambique. Natural resources were discovered in Northern Mozambique relatively late, however, the weak democratic institutions and lack of investment in the North have been in place for much longer. The natural gas reserves in the North were only discovered in 2011.<sup>20</sup> In Mozambique as a whole, economic structures have only been changing in the last ten years or so, from being dependent on aid to turning towards resources as its primary source of income. <sup>21</sup>

Despite this, the Northern parts of Mozambique have a history of a weak state presence and lacklustre institutions. The area of Cabo Delgado has been marginalised for many years and is currently one of Mozambique's poorest regions. It has the highest illiteracy rate in the country of 67%, a history of economic

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<sup>12</sup> De Soysa, I. 2002. Paradise Is a Bazaar? Greed, Creed, and Governance in Civil War, 1989-99. *Journal of Peace Research*, 39(4):395-416.

<sup>13</sup> Hanlon, J 2018. How Mozambique's smuggling barons nurtured jihadists. BBC News. 2June. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-44320531>

<sup>14</sup> Gerber, J. 2020. 'ISIS' warns SA: Steer clear of Mozambique conflict. News 24. 2 July. Available: <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/isis-warns-sa-steer-clear-of-mozambique-conflict-20200707>

<sup>15</sup> Martin, I. S. 2021. Priest insists insurgency in Mozambique is based on economics, not religion. CRUX. 19 April. Available: <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2021/04/priest-insists-insurgency-in-mozambique-is-based-on-economics-not-religion/>

<sup>16</sup> Will Marshall. 2021. Global Risk Insights. April 19. Available: <https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/04/the-political-economy-of-mozambiques-faceless-insurgency/>

<sup>17</sup> Humphreys, M. 2005. Natural Resources, Conflict and Conflict Resolution. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 49(4): 508-537.

<sup>18</sup> Hanlon, J. BBC News, Mozambique Palma attack: Why IS involvement is exaggerated. April 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56773012>

<sup>19</sup> Will Marshall. 2021. Global Risk Insights. April 19. Available: <https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/04/the-political-economy-of-mozambiques-faceless-insurgency/>

<sup>20</sup> Bas van Beek, Jilles Mast, Marianna Takou en Alexander Beunder. The curse of natural gas in Mozambique. Down To Earth Magazine. Available: <https://downtoearthmagazine.nl/the-curse-of-natural-gas-in-mozambique/#:~:text=Gas%20discovery,Cabo%20Delgado%2C%20Mozambique's%20northernmost%20province.>

<sup>21</sup> Bruschi, F. 2012. Mozambique at a turning point: From aid dependence to development effectiveness? GREAT Insights, Volume 1, Issue 10. December 2012. Maastricht: ECDPM. Available: <https://ecdpm.org/great-insights/africa-turning-point-mozambique-case/mozambique-turning-point-aid-dependence-to-development-effectiveness/>

marginalisation, and high unemployment rates.<sup>22</sup> Instead of the government protecting the local citizens, it has forcibly displaced coastal fishing and agricultural communities to make space for extractive industries.<sup>23</sup> Protests against these moves have been met with force.<sup>24</sup> Further, the government did not adequately respond to the humanitarian crisis in the area due to the cyclones that hit Northern Mozambique in 2019 and 2020.<sup>25</sup> As such, abundant natural resources did not *lead* to a weak state and the neglect of democratic institutions, as this was prevalent in Mozambique before it became a resource-rich area. However, it did add to the anti-state sentiments which form part of the drivers of the current conflict.

### **The way forward**

The danger of the resource curse in Mozambique is that it could fall into a vicious cycle. This has implications for the future of Mozambique's democratic institutions and the conflict. Natural resource abundance and dependence on recently discovered resources will entrench the current resource curse in the North of Mozambique. The potential income to be generated from these resources will be a further deterrent for the government to implement strong and democratic institutions and to invest in the local communities. Furthermore, the current resource extraction will marginalise the local populations even further. Gas drilling in the area threatens another environmental disaster as it releases greenhouse gases and sulphur dioxide, and causes soil erosion.<sup>26</sup>

The conflict in Mozambique should not be addressed by military means alone without addressing the underlying causes. As such, the Mozambican government should be held accountable by the international and regional communities to invest in the building of strong, democratic institutions to address the grievances of the people in the local communities such as unemployment and illiteracy. These communities should also be protected from further marginalisation due to the expansion of natural resource extraction.

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<sup>22</sup> USAID. Building Community Resilience in Cabo Delgado. 6 February 2020. Available: <https://reliefweb.int/report/mozambique/building-community-resilience-cabo-delgado>

<sup>23</sup> Will Marshall. 2021. Global Risk Insights. April 19. Available: <https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/04/the-political-economy-of-mozambiques-faceless-insurgency/>

<sup>24</sup> Justin Cronjé. 2020. Feature: Mozambique insurgency a result of years of marginalisation and discontent. Defence Web. 5 October. Available: <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/featured/feature-mozambique-insurgency-a-result-of-years-of-marginalisation-and-discontent/>

<sup>25</sup> Will Marshall. 2021. Global Risk Insights. April 19. Available: <https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/04/the-political-economy-of-mozambiques-faceless-insurgency/>

<sup>26</sup> Martinez-Alier, J and Bond, P. 2021. Was the Cabo Delgado massacre a curtain call for Mozambique's methane capitalism? Counter Currents. 3 April. Available: <https://countercurrents.org/2021/04/was-the-cabo-delgado-massacre-a-curtain-call-for-mozambiques-methane-capitalism/>

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<sup>i</sup> This is based on the statements by the insurgents made available to the public. It is not possible to know whether this is necessarily true and whether their motives are indeed to rectify inequality, especially given their brutal conduct towards civilians thus far.