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## Poorly designed youth employment programmes will boost the insurgency in Mozambique

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A jihadist group referred to as Al-Shabab has waged a war against the Mozambican state and its allies since 2017, with devastating consequences for the civilian population. The insurgents mostly recruit among local youth, and have been able to capitalise on young people's frustration with the political and economic system – being seen as feeding the clientelist machine of the state and party elite and therefore will end up being counterproductive in countering the insurgency.

## Key messages

- The insurgency of the Al-Shabab, in the northern province of Cabo Delgado cannot simply be explained as a youth revolt, even though there is a strong youth component in it.
- This is a war of a new generation. It is fed by the tensions and contradictions of the extractivist society of northern Mozambique that the post-independence regime has perpetuated.
- The insurgency mobilizes based on local perceptions about exclusion and marginalisation, in a clear anti-state and anti-Frelimo discourse. Some youth in the north speak of the insurgency as an opportunity for income.
- Measures to roll out youth employment schemes as a counter-insurgency measure, run the risk of being counterproductive if perceived as yet another mechanism to favour youth and other clients of the Frelimo party and the state elite.

## Summary

A jihadist group locally referred to as Al-Shabab (meaning “the youth”) has waged a war against the Mozambican state and its allies since 2017, with devastating consequences for the civilian population. While its origins are far more complex than simply a youth rebellion, the insurgents mostly recruit among local youth. They have been able to capitalise on young people’s frustration with the political and economic system, dominated by the ruling party Frelimo, which many locals see as privileging their own clients from other parts of the country. Any programme that ends up being seen as feeding the clientelist machine of the state and party elite will therefore end up being counterproductive in countering the insurgency.

## Youth and the party-state system

Mozambique appeared to democratise as the first multi-party elections were held in 1994. But the ruling party Frelimo has won every election since and maintained a clientelist party state system. Evidence from research shows that over the past thirty years, the political system has produced and reproduced political, social, and economic inequality and large parts of the population have been at the margins of economic growth.

Youth continue to be under-represented in the political system and with serious challenges in terms of access to resources. Without any formal youth representation in the political system, the main political parties (Frelimo, Renamo and the Democratic Movement of Mozambique, MDM) operate within-party quota practices to address representation of different social groups. In the case of Frelimo these quotas, to some extent, shape the way

different groups (liberation war veterans, women, youth) are represented in state governance structures. With a clientelist logic, these systems function less as channels of substantive representation, and more as mechanisms to ensure that the most party-loyal cadres of each social group, including youth, are rewarded with opportunities.

## The extractivist North, the jihadist young, the dissatisfied youth

The lifeworld of young people in Cabo Delgado, as the rest of northern Mozambique, is shaped by the political economy of the extractivism (extractive activities and industries) throughout history. Foreign demands and capital have forced through processes of extraction in which the locals have engaged in and become divided over: extraction of slaves, ivory, forced production of cotton and compulsory labour on colonial plantations – many of which were turned into state farms after independence. In the 2000s, new investments flowed into the country for the extraction of timber, fauna, rare minerals, and precious stones. Most poignant of all have been the expectations for enormous investments and income from the offshore natural gas deposits. Unfortunately, extractivism has tended to produce wealth for foreigners and only a few Mozambicans in the national elites, while successive regimes have failed to create welfare and institutions of governance.

Youth in the north are deeply imbued with scepticism against the regime ruling over the situation that produces wealth for some (in the south/Maputo), but exclusion and marginality for many (in the north). The last national household survey (2019/2020) shows the northern provinces are the poorest, and that measured in relation

to real consumption in Maputo City, the four northern provinces decreased more in 20 years than the rest of the country. Cabo Delgado dropped most of all. On average, real consumption in the households of Cabo Delgado is merely a quarter of that in the capital.

Since 2017, Mozambique has faced an insurgency in the northern region by the radical religious group locally called as Al-Shabab – or sometimes ‘machababo’ (“the youth”). The militants are motivated by strong religious convictions, and leaders of the group appear to have been inspired by radical Islamist teachings from travels and education abroad. Their scant propaganda focusses on sharia and the establishment of a caliphate in Africa. Thus, the insurgency cannot be seen as a “youth revolt” as such. Still, there are three main reasons to see a very strong youth component in it.

First is demographic. Most of the members and soldiers of the group are young men and some women who have been recruited locally and abroad. They may initially have been influenced by older religious ideologues, but there is no evidence of older leaders or organisers of the movement. By contrast, the most powerful leaders of the ruling party are still the liberation war veterans, and the average age of its 19 Executive Commission members was 68 years in 2022.

Second is that this war is entirely cast in a 21st century frame. By contrast, the ruling Frelimo regime, as well as the main opposition party (Renamo), grew out of the liberation war against the colonial power, and the following political, military, and ideological conflicts in the global Cold War context, as well as the regional context of Apartheid aggression – both of which were merged in the civil war of 16 years (1976–92). Both the Frelimo regime and the opposition tend to frame their legitimacy claims in relation to these past struggles. This harking back fails to appeal to youth who have huge problems that 48 years of independence failed to resolve.

Third, and most importantly, our field studies in the north reveal that the insurgents are appealing successfully, albeit opportunistically, to the grievances felt by youth there – and this has attracted recruits from within and outside of Cabo Delgado. Some young were influenced by the hearsay or propaganda and started seeing the insurgency as an opportunity to earn a living as a soldier, or to “be someone” (young male soldiers have, for instance, been rewarded with both wages and “wives”). Furthermore, in addition to religious rhetoric, the insurgents share statements that reflect the anger felt by youth of Cabo Delgado and the surrounding provinces. They have seen a resource boom come and wane, but conditions for the majority remain equal to, or worse, than at any time in their lives. They have also observed the enrichment of key people in the party-state elite.

Al-Shabab has mobilized an anti-Frelimo/anti-State narrative, claiming the misery and vulnerability of youth are caused by the infidel Frelimo leaders and their government, that they are corrupt, and steal the resources of the North

(and Muslims) to the benefit of the South (and Christians), in cahoots with the international companies. Their rhetoric appears crude, but it has proved effective. A few may be enticed to join the insurgency, while many others may feel the criticism is closer to their own observed and lived experiences than the “resource optimism” of the state and investors.

### **Supporting a future for youth takes political change**

The Government of Mozambique, supported by Mozambique’s many donors, have attempted to address the challenges of the youth. It has a National Youth Policy laid out in a “white paper”, and the State Secretariat of Youth and Employment in charge of design and implementation of youth policies. A core part of policy is the specific youth employment schemes, with the three main ones being the Youth Initiatives Support Fund (FAIJ), Emprega and +Emprego (in English: employ/more employment). These are relatively new, especially in Cabo Delgado, making it difficult to evaluate their impact on youth there. However, all depend entirely on donor funding, creating doubts about government ownership. In addition, the funding is geared towards “entrepreneurship” and a skills development suitable for urban and educated youth, which make the programmes difficult to access for most of the rural youth.

Unlike FAIJ and Emprega, +Emprego is a youth employment programme that specifically aims to stem the insurgency. Its €4.2 million budget is funded by the European Union and aims to increase economic opportunities for the youth of Cabo Delgado. +Emprego assumes that armed violence in northern Mozambique is directly linked to the lack of economic opportunities. In practice +Emprego translates this to providing training for the province’s youth, so that they get skills for the natural gas industry and its value chain. Its theory of change states:

The inclusion of local workers in the opportunities generated by investments in the natural gas sector can also result in well-being and social justice for local communities and for the province as a whole, currently subject to attacks by insurgents, and therefore it should be effectively supported and encouraged.

Hence, the programme appears to presume that another version of an extractive industry is the future, and that somehow, that extractive future will not reproduce the divisions, inequality, and poverty of the past. The natural gas industry has been slow in developing and remains in jeopardy, not least due to the insurgency – and few jobs have materialised so far. More problematically, like so many donor-funded programmes, it addresses the socio-economic challenges well, including gender issues, but fails to address the problems associated with the political regime and relations of power. Among the questions that many youths



in Cabo Delgado will ask: Who are the people that benefit from the programmes – are they from the province, or are they southerners? Are they the most educated or talented, and those who have money or family contacts in the party? What about the many who never received good schooling? Will these opportunities be captured by the privileged few? It is not merely facts, but the perception about answers to these questions that matters.

It is difficult to design a good youth support programme in Cabo Delgado. For one, it is unlikely to reach the young individuals that are most likely to join the insurgency, but it is quite likely that the funding opportunities will be captured by the relatively privileged, and worse still, that it may benefit people who are close to the party and state elites. Also, it is likely that a competitive programme will end up – despite all good intentions – to reinforce the socio-economic and political inequalities that created support for the jihadists in the first place.

### Policy recommendations

- Extractive activities of the future should be designed to improve capacities to build welfare and institutions locally. If investments in extractive industries are perceived as serving and enriching foreigners and the national elites only then further investment in extractive industries is bound to perpetuate the pattern of conflicts.
- The government must address grievances in the northern regions by creating and enacting long-term solutions, and not merely rely on military counterinsurgency. The rhetoric of the young people involved in insurgency is not merely promising a religious order, they are also recruiting based on their criticism, and armed action, against the present social order in northern Mozambique.
- Donor-supported programmes to create employment or other opportunities for the youth must go beyond ‘window dressing’ and be at a scale that positively impacts young people. They must also be understood and perceived to be genuine attempts at improving the situation for millions of youths in waithood.
- Government and agencies’ youth programmes that are designed to combat the insurgency must be designed with measures that avoid them serving the clientelist machinery of the national state or party-elite.
- Youth employment schemes and funding must be protected from being abused by the elite. The government, donors, and agencies must ensure that there are protective measures built into these schemes and funding, or risk increasing the frustrations that the insurgents’ recruitment relies on.

### Further reading

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+Emprego mission statement at <https://maisemprego.org.mz/projecto/emprego/>

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