The Embassy of Sweden in Mozambique considers that there is a need to assess the impact of development and poverty reduction policies ‘from below’, and to regularly consult local populations. On that basis, a series of five “Reality Checks” will take place in the Niassa Province (Districts of Lago, Majune and Cuamba) in the period 2011-2016.

While quantitative data yield valuable information about the mapping and profile of poverty over space and time, qualitative data are necessary in order to better understand the dynamics of poverty and the coping strategies of the poor. Each Reality Check will be published in the form of one Annual Report and three Sub-Reports. This Brief presents the main findings from the 1st Reality Check 2011, and represents a ‘baseline’ for the subsequent studies.

NIASSA PROVINCE

The Niassa Province is characterised by a volatile history, and was for years the most isolated and poorest province in Mozambique. While there have been recent improvements through significant reductions in the consumption based poverty rate, social indicators on education, health etc. are still below national averages. Moreover, poverty and well-being are unequally distributed – not only between the different districts under study but also within them. The economic situation in Niassa may change significantly in the coming years, with the on-going commercial forestation, prospects for coal and mineral mining and tourism. Care must be taken to secure that these economic developments will be environmentally friendly, create local employment and be pro-poor.
THE COMMUNITIES
The selected communities in Lago, Majune and Cuamba share formal political/administrative context by being part of the five-tier structure of Provincial and District Government, Administrative Posts, Localities and Villages. Cuamba is also part of an overlapping Municipal structure, with a complex division of responsibility.

At the same time, traditional structures in the form of traditional authorities, a matrilineal kinship system and religious institutions are still very much intact, and have a strong influence on the organisation of the community as well as on individual families and households. However, there are also important differences between the communities:

Lago has traditionally been a relatively isolated community depending on subsistence agriculture and fishing. The community is currently in a process of considerable change, primarily as a result of the improved road built from the district capital Metangula in 2008. This has not only set in motion enhanced economic activities particularly in fishing, but also processes of increasing inequalities between the poor and the better-off.

Majune is located in the interior of the Province; has traditionally depended on agriculture, subsistence fishing and hunting; and became ‘connected to the outside world’ through the improvement of the National Road in 2006. However, this has not instigated much change as Majune lacked the basis for a diversified economy. An emerging lack of faith in the relevance of education for securing employment and income may have negative implications for longer term development prospects.

Cuamba is the urban hub of the province and is well connected in terms of roads and railways, but the poorer parts of the urban and semi-urban population still primarily depend on agriculture. Informal economic activities are fiercely competitive and yield limited returns. A relatively large proportion of the households have access to formal employment, reducing vulnerability to sudden changes.

INSTITUTIONS AND POWER RELATIONS
While informal institutions are central for people’s daily lives and inter-relations, they look to the State institutions for solving problems in education, health, energy, transport, infrastructure etc. There are considerable differences in the extent to which informal and formal institutions are consulted by the populations in Lago, Majune and Cuamba – indicating differences not only in accessibility and quality (‘good governance’) but also in the degree of trust in these institutions.

The State has related to the importance of traditional authorities by incorporating them into their areas of responsibility through ‘overlapping institutions’, resulting in a degree of mutual dependence. For the poor, access to public institutions is inhibited by lack of education, poverty and social marginalisation. They tend to relate to traditional institutions and their extended family to establish vital social relationships and receive support at times of crisis. The better-off have easier access to public institutions both in the communities and by being more mobile and having better options for relating to the institutions located in the District or Provincial capital.

Agriculture is the key economic sector in all three communities. There is generally a low level of technology and limited use of fertilisers, but
productivity varies between rainfed and inundated machambas. The better-off households are characterised by also having alternative sources of income. While people look to ‘the market’ for outlets for their products, the State is considered important for investments through the ‘7 million MTn’ scheme – widely seen as central for development but also as unjustly distributed. The Districts on their part argue that the funds are best spent on infrastructure and projects with potential for employment creation.

SOCIAL MOBILITY
The population in Lago, Majune and Cuamba distinguish between 2-4 levels of poverty and 1-3 levels of well-being in their respective vernacular. Each category is defined with reference to the combination of material poverty and social relationships – with the latter being seen as key for the options for social mobility.

Some families are ‘ultra-poor’ and destitute, and have never managed to establish the necessary social relationships and acquire the necessary resources for upward social mobility. These households depend on external support to survive, either from their extended family, from local systems of redistribution and support, or from public systems of social protection. While most poor families are seen as ‘victims’ of their own conditions (or ‘structural oppression’), people also define some households as ‘lazy’ and hence less eligible for pity and support.

Most families are seen as ‘transitional’ poor. They may work hard, produce sufficient crops and earn sufficiently to fulfill their basic needs, but are still vulnerable and may see their fortunes change rapidly as a result of sudden shocks such as loss of income or illness. Their challenge is to re-establish themselves as viable social units by mobilising external social relationships and alternative sources of income. This is often difficult in the current socio-economic context, particularly for female-headed households.

The better-off households are generally identified as those who have economic means and ‘do not depend others’. Some are part of ‘fortunate’ families with members who have employment and access to land, fishing boats etc. Others have managed to exploit new economic opportunities, either because they already possessed some resources that could be expanded with new marketing options or because they had relationships that could be mobilised to access credit – including the ‘7 million Mt scheme’.

The upcoming Reality Checks will follow a selected number of Focus and Panel Households, in order to ascertain the processes of upward and downward social mobility, the main forces behind social change and the relevance and quality of public institutions.

SOME PRELIMINARY POLICY IMPLICATIONS
The Provincial and District Governments have a broad approach to their development and poverty reduction efforts, based on public policies and Mozambique’s poverty reduction plan PARP III.

The situation as regards poverty and well-being is characterized by a relatively small group of ultra-poor, a majority of ‘transitional’ poor and a relatively small group of better-off. It is necessary for policies and interventions to focus on social protection measures for the very poorest. Current public interventions reach a very small proportion of the eligible population, at the same time as there are a number of locally based systems for social protection. The options for linking the two should
be assessed. Policies and intervention for economic development must be focused on businesses and individuals in a position to create employment. In addition to investments in infrastructure, improved access to credit will be important. The most serious issue of inequality is that of gender. Interventions to inform women about their rights and key legal instruments, gender-sensitive interventions for women empowerment involving key socio-cultural institutions such as traditional authorities and religious organisations, as well as women-targeted credit schemes for small-scale enterprises are all relevant.

The current governance strategy is to decentralise and strengthen the District level. The District has a pivotal role in development and poverty reduction. It is important that enhanced transparency and accountability in the form of more pro-active and open forms of dissemination of information is emphasised. Currently the position of local government is negatively influenced by (mis)conceptions about their role and responsibilities in the communities. The on-going efforts of civil society to build the capacity of citizens to monitor the performance of Local Government should be continued and extended.

In agriculture, increased emphasis must be given to improve technologies, primarily through enhanced access to extension-services. The importance of secure and predictable incomes for poor farmers must be emphasised by the commercial agricultural and forestry sector. Diversification of employment and income opportunities is key to development and poverty reduction. Young people are in a particularly vulnerable position. Traditional sources of employment are often saturated, and efforts are necessary to support new and alternative sources.

Sweden has been a long-term partner in the Niassa Province and focused on a wide spectra of activities including support to the Provincial Government and support to the public sector (good governance, electricity, roads), the private sector (Malonda Foundation) and civil society (SCC/PASC and ESTAMOS).

There are still communities in Niassa that are isolated. Roads are central for development, both for economic activities and trade and for access to social services such as health and education. However, the development effect will depend on the presence of economic activities that can be expanded and commercialised. Electricity is central for development, and considerable investments in grids have been made – even though two of the three study sites are still not connected. While key for the development of economic enterprises and social institutions, electricity is costly and has a relatively low priority among poor households. Alternative energy sources are required.

The ‘Reality Checks in Mozambique’ is implemented by ORGUT in association with AustralCOWI and the Chr. Michelsen Institute on behalf of the Embassy of Sweden in Maputo.

More information about the Reality Checks and published reports can be found at www.orgut.se

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