

MINISTER SACKED IN STATE FARMS POLICY CLASH

THE RECENT sacking of Mozambican Agriculture Minister Joaquim Ribeiro de Carvalho is a result of the conflict between the government's efforts to use simple means of farming and the former Minister's insistence on mechanised agriculture.

When President Samora Machel sacked him he said Ribeiro had "tried to block the process of creating communal villages." Perhaps what was most important he "systematically gave priority to technology, disregarding the people's initiative and contribution. The family farm, which constitutes the principal source of agricultural production in our country has been disregarded."

Agriculture in Mozambique has come full circle. Before independence three years ago, Frelimo stressed the importance of communal villages and making the best of the efforts of the ordinary farmers.

But with independence, the small Portuguese farmers who fed the cities abandoned their farms and fled. Faced with hungry cities and thousands of abandoned hectares, the Ministry of Agriculture made what seemed the only possible choice; opting for highly mechanised state farms.

But a short-term expedient became a compulsion; all other sectors of agricul-

ture were ignored. Objections grew within Mozambique, but the agriculture ministry remained single-minded.

Mozambican agriculture is divided into three sectors. The plantation sector produces sugar, copra, tea, and sisal. It is still largely foreign-owned; in July this year Mozambique accused the Sena Sugar Company of sabotaging sugar production and took over the company. The second group are the ordinary farmers, who grow most of the cassava, millet, beans, maize (Mozambique's largest crop), and cashews (the largest export).

The third sector was the medium-size farms of the *colons* which produced the food for the cities. These farms had the best land, were often irrigated, and sometimes had tractors. Generally they were worked by colonist families, with the help of forced and hired labour. But virtually all the colonist farmers abandoned their land and returned to Portugal at independence three years ago.

The Machel government decided that the only way to bring this land into production quickly was to organise it into state farms and mechanise as much as possible. State farms took over the bulk of the colonist land (about 100,000 ha) and now control 80% of rice, vegetables, and citrus fruit.

Last year, Mozambique imported £20

million-worth of agricultural equipment, including 1,200 tractors, 50-100 combine harvesters, and pumps and irrigation equipment. The tractors were needed to replace lost equipment – before independence there were 4,500 tractors working in Mozambique but by early 1977 there were only 2,500 left. The rest were either destroyed by the departing Portuguese or broken down for lack of spare parts and mechanics.

Virtually all the new machinery went to state farms. But there were few trained operators and no repair facilities. The Portuguese rarely trained Mozambicans for any skilled jobs. They provided virtually no education, and literacy is less than 10%, creating a problem which complicates all of Mozambique's development efforts. So use of machinery was extremely inefficient.

In the huge Limpopo state farm, the 49 combine harvesters covered less than half the area they were supposed to. There was a massive mobilisation of city people, including President Samora Machel, to go to the Limpopo to cut rice. But not all rice was harvested.

Despite its inexperience, Mozambique has not apparently made any serious mistakes with its imports. The machinery is reasonably suitable and, for the most part, is working. But lack of operating experience means several years of learning ahead before the new equipment can be used to its full potential.

It also became clear that the machinery would not, as was hoped, pay for itself quickly through reduced food imports.

There was wide support in the country for the original decision to stress state farms. But the failure to digest the first large machinery order led to considerable rethinking. Also, combine harvesters were rapidly becoming a luxury Mozambique could not afford. The sharp reduction in the number of Mozambican miners in South Africa (down from 118,000 in 1975 to less than 40,000 now) and the closing of the border with Rhodesia caused severe foreign exchange problems.

State farm advocates are pressing for another big machinery order this year and for a big expansion of the state farms. In fact, machinery imports this year will be less than one-third of last year. And the almost single-minded concern with state farms drew increasing criticism within Mozambique. The peasant sector includes at least 2 million ha – vastly more than state farms – and most of the population. Frelimo's policy – successfully introduced in the liberated areas – has always been that people in communal villages must form the basis of agriculture. Yet, the ordinary people were being ignored.

Four months ago a new National Commission for Communal Villages was set up. It reports directly to the President and was created to give the prominence to communal villages that the agriculture Ministry refused to give. In June, the third National Agricultural Congress warned against "preoccupation" with

machinery. It called for the spreading of "appropriate technologies" such as animal traction, better ploughs, and improved storage facilities, all of which make the best use of ordinary efforts at the lowest cost. And so last month, Ribeiro was removed as Minister because "he does not consider man as the determining element of development."

As in many parts of Africa, ordinary Mozambicans live in scattered farms and in very small settlements. Only by bringing them together into larger villages can the water, roads, shops, schools, health services, and political organisation that are basic to development be provided.

In Mozambique, communal villages are also seen as a way of encouraging shared production. Initially, this has involved small communal plots with cash crops to pay for the new facilities, and the sharing of improved implements between family farms. Eventually, this will lead to the formation of co-operatives and form the basis of a socialist society.

Significant improvements are possible in ordinary agriculture, partly because it was badly distorted by colonial policy. Ordinary people were forced to grow cash crops, particularly cotton. And most men did forced or wage labour – in the mines, on plantations, or on the roads. This meant that often there was not enough labour available for families to grow sufficient food, which led to poor agricultural practices.

There are very few tools. For example, in most areas the only tool for soil preparation and weeding is the *enxada*, a short-handled hoe. Animal ploughing is used in some areas and could spread to others. Except for cotton, crops were never cultivated to make them suitable for ordinary farming. And there is a desperate shortage of grain storage facilities.

All of these problems are now being tackled. The new commission is working with TBARN, the Appropriate Technology Centre at the Institute for Scientific Research in Maputo, on inexpensive cement grain stores and other devices. The Belgian FAO expert killed on July 22 this year by Rhodesian troops was one of the experts working on improved maize seeds.

Learning from the mistakes made in other countries – and in Mozambique itself – the Communal Villages Commission will ensure that all new villages are well planned before they are set up. They will have water, be near a road, and have enough land not only for proper agriculture, but also to grow fuel.

Financial help will be available to co-operatives to purchase improved implements, draught animals and grain stores.

If as much money had been put into improved marketing, seed supply, and grain storage for the family farms, it is likely that the ordinary farmers could have produced a larger surplus than the state farms. To be effective, however, the communal village programme must have the commitment and understanding of government and political structures.

Until now, some sections of the administration and some foreign advisers have played down communal villages and openly laughed at appropriate technology. The only answer, they said, was mechanised state farms. Will the sacking of Ribeiro end that attitude?

Mozambique has already made many of the same agricultural mistakes as other developing countries before it. But it seems to be learning quickly. As Lopes Tembe, head of the Limpopo state farm, commented: "All these problems are natural when you are growing up. A child falls down – it is part of growing up" ●